

Huron River in Ypsilanti

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The Huron River played an important part in the history and the industrial development of Ypsilanti and now remains a scenic route through the city with several parks along its banks. At one time the river made it possible to build many dams which provided water power for the mills that were constructed. There were Lumber Mills, Grist Mills and Woolen Mills, all of which provided work for people besides furnishing the products they needed.

Just north of the city the dam for the Peninsular Paper Company was built in 1867, the year the company was organized. The river was quite shallow below the dam as it reached the high banks along River Street in the city. There the river turns to the south where a larger dam was built for the Eagle Mill. This mill had an uneven history and its location became the site for the Ypsilanti Woolen Mill where undergarments known as union suits were made. These suits were knitted of cotton or wool thread and the "Top of the Line" were those made of silk thread. Marshall Field and Company was the largest wholesale customer. Times and styles change and the union suit lost its popularity. The company was remembered for the 15 foot lady painted on the side of the building facing the railroad. Wearing a tight fitting union suit, she was sensational and the company received complaints from passengers on the railroad that the painting was too risqué. There were, however, those who did appreciate the art work and Ypsilanti became famous for it.

From 300-500 young women were employed at the Woolen Mill and it was the mainstay in the local economy. In the early 1900's the company had economic troubles and the business passed into other hands. The large, imposing brick building was torn down in 1933.

Near East Cross Street was the Deubel Flouring Mill, a very lucrative business which was said to be the largest flouring mill in Washtenaw County. It was capable of producing 100,000 barrels of flour a year and many farmers brought in grain to be ground. This large mill was operated by William Deubel and his three sons who also owned and operated two other flour mills further along the river. Another mill was built by W. W. Harwood on the east side of the river south of the Congress Street bridge. Further south, the Cornwell family had a paper mill with machines that manufactured newsprint for the Chicago Times and for some Detroit papers. This mill and others that used water power from the Huron River not only furnished products but also furnished a livelihood for hundreds of residents of the area.

(Photo)

Ypsilanti Underwear Factory

The river now provides recreational activities in the parks along its banks. Near the Peninsular Paper Mill on LeForge Road is Peninsular Park which was renovated in 1987 and now has picnic tables and playground equipment. It is situated at a good fishing spot along the river. Frog Island Park in Depot Town, between East Cross Street and Forest Avenue, is a popular spot in the summer when a Jazz Festival is held there. It attracts hundreds of people to enjoy the many jazz bands that perform. During

the city's Heritage Festival, various events are held on the Island. The Island has had an important place in Ypsilanti's history as it relates to the River. In the 1870's a lumber yard was there and doors, sashes, and blinds were manufactured. At another time, athletic teams from the local high school used the Island as a practice field and now Junior League Ball Teams play there. The Park is connected to Riverside Park by a "Tridge" under the East Cross Street Bridge.

Perhaps the most used park along the river is Riverside, located between East Cross Street and East Michigan Avenue. Hiking paths are laid out along the river and there is a variety of playground equipment as well as picnic facilities. This park is the location for the winter "Festival of Lights" when the trees are decorated with thousands of colored lights and visitors come from many neighboring areas to view this free spectacular event. In August, when the Heritage Festival is held, this park becomes the center of activities. People who work in the area like to bring their lunches to eat under the many trees along the river. Being near the Downtown and the area known as Depot Town, Riverside Park is easily accessible from Michigan Avenue and from Cross Street.

A more recently developed park along the river is one in the Southeast part of the city called Waterworks Park, so named because it is adjacent to a Water Department Building. The area has long been used as a park, but now has a shelter with picnic facilities, a new parking lot and improved and relocated road, and a new ball diamond. This park is accessible from Catherine Street and by a footbridge over the river to Parsons Street.

Early residents often built their homes on the banks along the river, where many stately residences are still being lived in and furnish the nucleus for the city's Historical District. The people who built and who lived in these homes had financial and personal interest in the early banks, the churches and the businesses. Many of these homes had beautiful gardens on the river banks. One of the most outstanding homes on Huron Street was built in the 1860's by Daniel Quirk, Sr. It is a three and a half story mansion with a tower and a mansard roof. There is a carriage house built in the same second empire style as the house.

Photo

*304 North Huron
Daniel Lace Quirk house c. 1860*

Next door to the Quirk House is an Italianate style house built by Asa Dow who came here as a partner with Mr. Quirk in the Peninsular Paper Company, the Underwear Factory and was also president of the bank. Both the Quirk and the Dow houses were built of brick. The Ypsilanti Historical Museum and Archives now occupy the Dow house.

Photo

220 N. Huron

Asa Dow House – Ypsilanti Historical Museum

Another residence in the area is that of Delos Showerman, an early business man who built the house in 1850. It has been the home of other business people, among them the Deubel Brothers, founders of the flour mills along the river. In 1908, Daniel Quirk, Jr., bought the house and had several additions made and in 1927 a large north wing was added to house Mr. Quirk's library of theater arts and circus books. The building is now owned by a law firm.

Space does not allow the mention of the many old homes that line Huron Street on the west side of the river and on River Street east of the river. As the years have passed, the mill and other early manufacturers have disappeared and the auto industry has become the main livelihood for residents of Ypsilanti. The stately homes along the river have remained to reflect another era and the parks serve as recreational areas in this period for more leisure time.