

THE HURON RIVER

Robert Wittersheim

Over 15,000 years ago, the Huron River was born as a small stream draining the late Pleistocene landscape. Its original destination was Lake Maumee at present day Ypsilanti where a large delta was formed. As centuries passed, ceding lake levels allowed the Huron to meander over new land eventually settling into its present valley. Its 125 mile journey today begins at Big Lake near Pontiac and ends in Lake Erie. The Huron's watershed, which includes 367 miles of tributaries, drains over 900 square miles of land.

The total drop in elevation from source to mouth is nearly 300 feet. The Huron's upper third is clear and fast, even supporting a modest trout fishery. The middle third passes through and around many lakes in Livingston and Washtenaw Counties. Eight dams impede much of the Huron's lower third as it flows through populous areas it helped create. Over 47 miles of this river winds through publicly owned lands, a legacy from visionaries long since passed.

White Lake
Mary Johnson

The Great Lakes which surround Michigan and the thousands of smaller lakes, hundreds of rivers, streams and ponds were formed as the glacier ice that covered the land nearly 14,000 years ago was melting. The waters filled the depressions in the earth. The glaciers deposited rock, gravel and soil that had been gathered in their movement. This activity sculpted the land creating our landscape.

In section 28 of Springfield Township, Oakland County, a body of water names Big Lake by the area pioneers is the source of the Huron River. It is also the headwaters of the Shiawassee, Clinton and Thread rivers. This area is now referred to as the Huron swamp. It may have originally consisted of a grouping of small melt water ponds. The Huron River flows in a southerly direction into the northern part of White Lake Township.

The ice age was waning, the climate was warming, and mammoths began moving northward as the ice receded. They were followed by the Paleo-Indian who were in search of food and clothing. Evidence of their existence here was determined by the discovery of some fluted projectiles, common to their culture. Their trails crisscrossed the township. Known campsites at this period of time were on the shores of White, Lime, Oxbow and Cooley Lakes. The skeletal remains of the Groleau-White Lake Mastodon were discovered in March of 1968.

During the early 1800s, the Potawatomi Indians were inhabiting White Lake. The environment for hunting, fishing and trapping was ideal. In 1830 the first permanent settlers arrived in White Lake and began to share the natural resources with the Indian.

There was a plentiful water supply and the woodland areas provided a natural haven for the animals to live in. Wild strawberries, blackberries, and elderberries to name a few were growing amid the flowers and other plant life. Deer, elk and an occasional bear were hunted as well as smaller game like rabbit and squirrel. Furs and skins were used for clothing or trade, the meat for eating. The swamps and marshes provided a nesting place for ducks and other waterfowl. Fish were abundant; beaver and muskrat were trapped. Indians used the bark of certain willow trees as an analgesic when they were ill. Snakeroot was a tranquilizer, cranberry bark was used for medicinal purposes and Pokeweed berries were used for dye. There was a cranberry bog whose location was near the present Pontiac Lake.

In 1926 a twenty foot dam was built across the Huron River. The waters were dammed up to make Pontiac Lake. A number of pure water springs add to the volume of the lake. As the Huron River exist Pontiac Lake it winds its way to Oxbow Lake. At the point the river leaves Oxbow Lake there is sufficient water fall for the operation of a mill. In the 1850s Erastus Hopkins and son Ralph were the proprietors of a planing and saw mill.

Next the river flows into Cedar Island where it winds westward to Brendle Lake. The river then flows south into Commerce Township.

The Huron River drains 900 square miles of southeast Michigan as it journeys approximately 115 miles from its origin in Springfield Township and flows into Lake Erie.

Byers Homestead

By Glen Ruggles

Two generations of the Byers family have resided at this site, said to be the home of the first white settler in Commerce Township. Abram Walrod came here in 1825 from New York state and built a log cabin in what is now the Village of Commerce. The present early Victorian frame house erected prior to 1850 replaced the log cabin. Now a country store, the barn is believed to have been a blacksmith shop. Other buildings on these grounds include a chicken coop and pantry. Traversed by the Huron River, the area attracted settlers, many of whom came westward via the Erie Canal which opened in 1825. Inhabitants named their village Commerce hoping that its early growth would signal the beginning of a business center. Now a quiet residential village, the community features this picturesque and historic homestead erected by the Commerce Township Area Historical Society.

Huron River in Commerce looking north at Commerce Mill (center) and Byer's farm house (right). This site is just north of Commerce Lake.

The Story of Commerce

Glen Ruggles

The Commerce Roller Mill

Every town and village had a mill. A mill for cutting lumber, grinding flour, processing woolen goods or for anything that could be milled. Every stream in Michigan offered an opportunity. Divert the stream, build a dam, create a mill pond, dig the mill race, create the power, and the wheels would turn. It was an ingenious process, and the millers of Michigan were brilliant. They could foresee great opportunities that others would pass by. And, without the mill, it's doubtful that the farmer would have been as successful as he was. The local mill was similar to the local bank. Often working on a percentage basis, the miller not only processed the farmer's grain, he created a market for the surplus product, whether it was raw corn, feed grain, or whole-wheat flour.

The miller was often the first settler in the area. Oakland County's first mill was built in Pontiac by Colonel Stephen Mack in 1819. The second one was built on Paint Creek in the present city of Rochester during the same year. Both were sawmills. As the population moved west, so did the mills. It was 1832 when Elizur Ruggles built his mill in Milford. In 1837, three years after the formation of Commerce Township, the Commerce Roller Mill was constructed in Commerce Village on the shores of the Huron River.

Joseph and Asa Farr, along with Amasa Andrews, were the builders of the grist mill. While its ruins today are commemorated as a historic site, during its ninety years of commercial activity, it served the farmers and communities of Oakland County. Over the years the mill had many owners. After Andrews and Farr, there was Seymour, Crossman, and Hoover, and a variety of others. By the 1890s, one of Michigan's most famous milling families had purchased the mill and, today, many old-timers still recall Milton Parshall as the village miller.

The mill in Commerce was of the "undershoot" type. Outside the mill, the water was usually harnessed by some kind of wheel. If the water was carried to the top of the Mill wheel, it was called an "overshot"; if the water hit the wheel dead-center at the level of the wheel's axis, it was known as a "breastshot"; and if the water was carried beneath the mill, it was known as the "undershot" kind. This was the Commerce Roller Mill.

From 1918 until its closing in 1926, the mill was operated by Isaac Lutz and his son, George. But selling flour wasn't what it used to be. More modern flouring processes and mass production techniques were winning the market away from the village miller. Naturally, many thought that anything made in a bigger mill was better, and maybe it was. But sometimes, it wasn't any better at all. And, the loss of farmland in west Oakland County tended to further diminish the value of the Roller Mill in Commerce.

As World War I ended and the Roaring Twenties captured the nation's attention, the Mill limped into its final stage, providing whole wheat and white flour, and even shucking farmers' corn. And, although its customers were as varied and distinct as the Orchard Lake Seminary and the Clinton Valley Hospital in Pontiac, its difficulty in competing in a modern and mechanized society would soon force its closing. Isaac's failing health and George's desire to explore new careers gave the Mill its final shove. In 1926, after 90 years of serving the village and western Oakland County, the mill closed.

For 13 years the mill lay in a state of ruin and disrepair until it fell victim to fire in the early morning of September 6, 1939. The Pontiac Daily Press reported that the old structure, “a landmark of the village for more than 100 years”, had caught fire at 1:30 a.m.

“Located at the eastern edge of the village, on the right side of the Pontiac-Commerce Road, the three-story frame building had not been used for ten years. It was owned by the Leroy Pelletier estate and valued at between \$10,000.00 and \$15,000.00. Nothing could be done to save the structure as the fire spread rapidly through the old dry timbers. Walled Lake fire department was called and closed the highway as a precaution in case the walls fell outward. Sparks were scattered over a part of the village but because of the recent heavy rains, started no fires. The nearest buildings were about 250 feet away. The first mill was built in 1837, and replaced by the structure which burned this morning in 1843”.

Throughout the 1940s and ‘50s the site of the mill and its ruins reverted to a more natural state. Overgrown with shrubbery and trees, the area developed into an unofficial nature trail that local residents enjoyed. Perhaps many wondered why there was such a huge dried-up ditch with large chunks of cement and steel jutting out of it. But it offered an unusual view of the Huron River as the shores of the river became overgrown and took on a wild appearance.

In 1980, Commerce Township purchased the mill property from the Boron Oil Company and is preserving it as a passive recreational park for Township residents. In 1983, the Michigan Youth Corps built two log bridges across the river to provide better access through the park.

On April 5, 1984, the Michigan Historical Commission designated the site as historic and, on September 22, 1984, with the erection of a two-posted historic marker, the State of Michigan formally dedicated the ruins of the Commerce Roller Mill.

Looking back at the more than forty years since the Commerce Roller Mill burned to the ground, only the most wishful thinking can conjure up thoughts of it being rebuilt. But there is a comfort in knowing that the ruins of the mill are preserved as a historic site; and a further comfort in knowing that through the preservation the lives and actions of early Commerce Township will be commemorated through the years.

Huron River and the First Known Inhabitants

Charlotte McKeough

No written records exist of the first inhabitants of the Huron River and the surrounding area. However, we do know the location of its headwaters, which is located in Springfield Township, Oakland County, Michigan. From this location the Huron River can be traced southwest to Milford, Michigan.

Archaeologists and anthropologists working with artifacts and other scientific findings have painted a possible scenario that would have taken place about 9,000 years ago along the banks of the Huron River, beginning with the Paleo-Indian (hunters) later joined by migratory Indian tribes. The combination of these two groups would be called Aqua-Planos. A nineteenth century farmer, plowing his field in the Milford area, found discarded spearheads along the Huron River bank. These spearheads were used to confirm the existence of this particular group of Indians in that time period.

Six thousand years ago the Archaic Boreal Indians moved into the Great Lakes region to pursue hunting and fishing on the Huron River. This culture lasted approximately 2,500 years.

During both periods, climatic changes were taking place which started the process of evolution. This period would eliminate animals, game, fish, plant-life, and some tribes, making room for new growth in all aspects of this circle of life-form.

The Woodland Indian period began to take shape. Again, traces of their existence in the Milford area remains elusive.

However, the Wilbert B. Hinsdales' Archaeological Atlas of Michigan places Indian Villages in Oakland County at Walled Lake, Highland, Bald Eagle Lake, Rochester and along the Paint Creek, South Lyons, Lakeville, Kent Lake, Pontiac, Southfield and Grass Lake. Ancient burial grounds have been discovered in Pontiac, Birmingham, Walled Lake, and Novi Corners.

The arrival of French explorers in 1600 was greeted by descendants of the Woodland Indian tribes. These modern day Indians were known collectively as the "ANISHNABEG". They were composed of the Ojibway, elder brother, the Ottawa, next older brothers, and the Potawatomi, the younger brother. These three tribes were the "people of the place of the fire" This loosely organized group spoke similar dialects of the same Algonquian language and shared many cultural beliefs.

The "Anishnabeg" had adapted their lifestyles to this woodland area with its abundance of wildlife, rich soil, stately forest, transversed by rivers and lakes. An outstanding example of their use of local materials, and their craftsmanship is the birch bark canoe. The new arrivals would enjoy many foods that this group of Indians used in their daily lives, such as wild rice, maple syrup, and the "Three Sisters" (corn, beans, squash). The Potawatomies were very helpful to the "Che-mo-ko-man" in raising their wigwams (house).

The Huron River, so the story goes, had a low spot below the Ruggles Mill where Indians and early settlers crossed a huge log affording a good means of getting to the other side. It is believed that the name of Milford derived from this proximity of the fording place.

The sale of the eastern part of the state in 1807 caused a large emigration of Indian tribes from the Huron River and Detroit areas.

Eventually, the Indians were moved, placed on reservations, or perished from the introduction of diseases (ex. Smallpox) by these new arrivals, or became a part of the dominant culture.

However, the Indian Community has survived in Michigan. The 1990 Census of Oakland County listed 3,948 American Indians, which includes the Eskimo and Aleut Indian located in Oakland County.

Huron Valley Indian Education Program provides services for 170 students and their families located within the Huron Valley School District of Oakland County. Some of these families have been involved with the program since its inception. Other families of American Indian descent moved to the area for the same reason our forefathers did. They want to enjoy the beautiful, bountiful woodland area transversed by rivers and lakes that enhances their modern family lifestyle while retaining a closeness with Mother Earth and all that she has to offer.

Peter's Mill, Milford. Historical photo courtesy of the Milford Historical Society

Brighton Area Historical Society

Marieanna Blair

Located several miles from the Hyron River, the village of Brighton would probably not have come into existence had it not been for the creeks which feed into the River. In early spring of 1833, in Brighton Township, Evert and Ruby Woodruff entered 160 acres of Section 34, and by the last day of May he and his family took residence. (Probably a log cabin.) During the summer Evert built an earthen dam approximately ½ mile south of the north section line on what is now known as Woodruff Creek.

In the fall he built a sawmill by the dam from which ran a sluice about one mile long. A three story gristmill, with an undershot wheel, was erected that next year near the end of the sluice. Both mills were supplied with water power from that stream. By 1835, the sawmill was producing lumber for boards to lay two floors in Benjamin Blain's cabin in the northwest corner of the Township.

Woodruff ran the mill until he sold it to Thomas Woulds and Timothy Warner in 1867 who changed the name to Pleasant Valley Mill. However in 1872 this partnership dissolved with Woulds retaining the mill. Henry Nye bought the mill in 1878. By 1934 William Ford owned the deteriorating mill and had it town down. It seems likely the advent of the rail road negated the need for a local saw and grist mill.

Aaron H. Kelly entered 63 acres in Section 6 and 208 acres in Section 7, Brighton Township, in 1833. He soon built a substantial house and then a sawmill in 1837. This mill, operated by water power (upper Ore Creek), was known far and wide in those early days and furnished lumber for many of the first buildings erected in the county. About the last work done by this pioneer mill was sawing a quantity of plank for the Detroit and Howell Plank Road. Further upstream, in Section 5, Rev. Wm. A. Clark, by 1839 had also erected a mill.

It was the summer of 1832 when brothers Almon and Maynard Maltby arrived in Brighton Township. Maynard bought 63 acres of land in Section 31, which became the site of Brighton City. But it was 1834 before the brothers built a dam across Ore Creek in the vicinity of Third Street. This supplied power for the Maltby sawmill. One of their customers was Chester Hazard of Genoa Township. During the winter 1836-37, Mr. Hazard drew whitewood (tulip) tree logs, cut on his own farm, To Maltby's Mill and had them sawed into lumber. It was principally of this lumber that the house was built. This was probably the first frame house erected in Genoa Township.

Prior to the advent of sawmills in the area lumber was drawn by ox team from Ann Arbor or Detroit. A case in point being that of Lewis B. Fonda who, in 1832, entered the W ¼ of the SW ¼ of Section 32. In 1834 he erected on it a frame house, said to have been the first in the county and at that time was regarded as a dwelling of considerable pretension. The timber with which it was built was drawn from Ann Arbor, a distance of 20+ miles, by ox teams.

The advent of gristmills eliminated the tedious hard grinding of grain or the expense of several days' travel to bring it from Detroit or Ann Arbor in order to have flour. Although Brighton Village was centered, in 1840, on the hill where Spencer Road and Rickett Road intersect the Grand River Trail, called "Upper Town", Orson Quackenbush selected vacant land in "Lower Town" to build the Brighton Flouring and Gristmill. I was located a bit upstream from Maltby's Sawmill on Ore Creek. After securing the plot, water rights also had to be obtained before building the dam. Quackenbush's mill saved farmers the long trip to Woodruff's Mill on Pleasant Valley Road, about four miles east of town.

Straddling the stream the location was on low and marshy ground. Moving dirt with a small slip scraper with one h.p. to construct the dam and spillway and form the raceway ponds north of the mill required considerable time and energy. (It seems likely the lumber for the mill was cut by the Maltby Sawmill.) Quackenbush operated his mill for a few months and then sold the mill, including all the property rights, to Rev. Wm. A. Clark. Clark died in September 1841 and his heirs sold the mill back to Quackenbush.

In 1847, Quackenbush sold the mill to the aforementioned Evert Woodruff, who, two years later, sold the mill to Lyman Judson who owned a large farm on the Grand River Road, just east of the village limits. Judson enlarged the mill, removed the old breast water wheel and installed a French turbine type of water wheel. In 1856 Egbert F. Albright and Chester Thomson bought the mill. These two made other improvements during the next 25 years the mill was owned by them.

The Brighton Mill was periodically sold to others. Up into the 1930s four was being ground at that location. However it was torn down after WW II. The city fathers had decided not to take up Henry Ford's earlier offer to buy the mill and construct a park in the valley south of Main Street.

Although the mill was gone, the sluice damn, which enclosed a quiet pond of stagnant, odorous, mosquito-infested water, was still in existence. In an attempt to reduce the negative qualities of the pond, on a hot night in the summer of 1953, a neighbor provided another small, more direct route for the water. Later that night, with a deep rumble and the "dangdest racket you ever heard", the mill pond was no more. Huge trees that grew in the cool, moist hollow came crashing down, a result of the suddenly released water. The pond on the north side of Main Street was again merely little Ore Creek. The surrounding shallow, marshy area soon made itself known to the nostrils in the warm summer sun. Before long a small control dam was built. A large culvert was installed to carry Ore Creek under the street to the south side of North Street, near where the mill once stood. The formerly pleasant hollow was filled in over the culvert and a parking lot was constructed.

Various community organizations have contributed to the enhancement of the area around the mill pond through the years making it a unique and desirable supplement to the town. Brighton Kiwanians built a gazebo on its shores to commemorate the nation's Bicentennial. Sunday evenings during the summer, hundreds enjoy concerts and the fascinating ambience that results when people play, work and exist together. It has become a gathering place for the community just as the old mill was once the center of activity.

Restorations of mills on the many streams that flow into the Huron welcome visitors. Viewers are given a taste of yesterday and a glimpse of the energy of those who preceded us.

Honey Creek, “Down by yet Old Mill Stream...”

Elizabeth Colone

The little creek, as yet unnamed, meandered from its source in the west to reach the small valley between two hills in what would one day be known as the Village of Pinckney. It widened, deepened and filled until it formed a pond, a living gift, so to speak, waiting for the pioneers to discover it. William Kirtland, founder of the village, bought land surrounding the pond from first settler, Solomon Peterson, in 1835. In 1836 Kirtland built a flour mill, a blessing to the farmers in the area. A dam was built at the east end of the pond to power the mill. The first grist was ground in 1837. Raising wheat for the mill became a popular crop for cash as well as daily bread. The mill was a successful project even though the Panic of 1837 slowed progress and Kirtland moved back to his home State of New York.

The creek moved along, known at various times at Pinckney Creek, Portage Creek and finally as Honey Creek. The mill continued to operate, grinding, albeit slowly, until 1918. In 1920 Henry Ford, of the Motor Company, purchased the mill and waterway to add to his collection of mills and streams. For reasons not clearly known, he razed the mill in 1920 instead of restoring it as he did other properties in southeast Michigan.

The Village continued to grow modestly and the creek and the pond served it in all seasons. I can speak for it from 1923 to 1993. I believe the streams of this kind are priceless. My father, who came to America from a long line of flour millers along the Danube River in Europe, told me that he thought a river or a creek, as opposed to a lake, paralleled life...living and moving as a person going through life, stopping now and then to help, to rest, to reflect, before moving on to this destiny.

The gifts from the streams are priceless. I have enjoyed so many of them: fishing, swimming (at the old dam site), ice skating, ice fishing, rowing, wading or just sitting on the banks. As school children we thrilled to the annual event of ice harvesting on the Mill Pond.

Before Edison brought electricity to the Village, storing ice for the summer season was very important. Ice harvesting was an important industry into the 1920's. As an adult I have read that just as sunshine and rain were necessary to raise crops, two factors were needed for the ice crop...at least twenty-four to forty-eight hours of zero/sub-zero weather and NO SNOW. Miraculously, these conditions were met year after year. At dawn on the first day all available manpower in the Village was ready with teams of horses, bob-sleds, gas-powered saws and ropes. The ice was cut into huge blocks and quickly moved into Stan Carr's ice house on the north bank of the pond, packed solidly in saw dust and harsh hay to keep until warm weather.

Warm weather brought a lot of activity to the pond where the top of the dam served as a diving platform for the old swimming hole. We bought a cottage on the pond in 1944 (now our year-round home) and continued to enjoy all the seasons while raising four sons. As little boys they sailed toy boats on long kite-strings reaching from one side of the pond to the other. One beautiful Sunday afternoon in July of 1947 they “anchored” their boats to come in for dinner. Minutes later we heard screams in the neighborhood and dashed out in time to see the pond disappearing. The dam had burst and, booming like Niagara, the water was rushing off to the east. A small house on S. Howell Street suffered damage as did the pavement. Fish, turtles and heretofore unknown creatures littered the surrounding grounds.

It was several weeks before the excitement died down. The Village Council named a committee to go to Detroit to talk to the powers-that-be at the Ford Foundation about the situation. I was a member of the 3-person

Pinckney

committee authorized to offer the Company \$3,500.00 for the “remains”. The men we spoke to were noncommittal...more like bored. As a woman, I couldn't resist a last word. I asked if they might even consider donating the property to the Village, which would honor it as a memorial to the benefactor. He answered: “The old man is gone and WE at Ford Foundation are only interested in money”.

A local realtor later bought the property but did nothing with it until the late 1980's, when some of the land was sold for a neat little subdivision. The rest has “gone back to Nature” abounding with wildlife, water lily, cattails, peepers and birds, a nice touch of nature that many communities do not have. I think William Kirtland would love it...as we do. Honey Creek goes on to meet the HURON RIVER as always.

The Huron River Bandit
From Pinckney Pathways

His last name was Horton and he operated around the Huron River, many years ago. His family was well known and operated a sawmill and made baskets and crates. Horton had a complex and did not get along with people.

For many years the old Peninsula dam of Dexter was a lovers' lane. There was an isthmus about a quarter mile long between the river and the tail race of the dam. This is now called Camp Newkirk and belongs to the Boy Scouts.

Horton, who was a night prowler, discovered that a number of Dexterites were having illicit love affairs there. These were his first victims and rather easy money as they did not want their affair exposed, but they were soon run out and he had to enlarge his field. Soon there were reports of people being mugged and robbed in various places. In most cases they did not see their assailant. Finally he slipped up. Walter Brass, a tall and powerful man lived about three miles from Dexter on the east river road and used to walk to town at night. Returning home one night, he had just reached the Huron River bridge when he heard someone behind him. He turned and got a blow on the shoulder, instead of the head. He grappled with his assailant who broke away, but not before he was recognized.

While a warrant was being prepared, Horton went to Judge Crane, the circuit judge and pleaded guilty. He was given a sentence in Ionia. Here he was made a fireman in the engine house, from where he made a successful break for freedom. They used dogs to track escaped prisoners then and he was nearly caught but got away by hiding in a hollow log.

The Dexter officers watched the homes of his family and relatives but he hid away in the attic of a cousin. After a week of this the cousin became alarmed and had his hired man take him away in a horse and buggy.

When they got south of Manchester, a carriage approached at a high rate of speed. Horton drew a gun and told the hired man to beat it, if it turned out to be officers in pursuit. But it was a false alarm. Horton went to Chicago and was seen several years later, employed as a sailor on the Great Lakes.

History of the Huron River and Allen's Creek in Ann Arbor

Grace Shackman

“Our river is the most beautiful I have beheld and abounding with the most valuable fish.” This is how John Allen, Ann Arbor’s co-founder, described the Huron River one year after he had settled here. The fact that Ann Arbor is situated where it is, in a scenic and hilly location, is because of the Huron. When Allen and his partner, Elisha Rumsey, set out from Detroit in January of 1824, looking for a good spot to start a new town, they happened along an oak opening on the banks of a river. Finding the spot not only beautiful, but practical since the river could furnish waterpower, food, drink, and transportation, they hurried back to Detroit to stake a claim on 640 acres of this land.

Allen and Rumsey’s land included a stream, which they early on named Allen’s Creek. When they returned from Detroit they set up camp on what is today the corner of First and Huron, now Robby’s at the Ice House, near the creek so they would be able to get fresh water for drinking and washing. Later Rumsey and his wife Mary Ann built a house on this site.

Both Allen and Rumsey were escaping less than perfect pasts: Allen was in debt, Rumsey had some sort of romantic scandal. For them, starting a new town was starting a new life, but it was also by necessity a business venture. To afford to stay they had to sell their lots, which meant they had to convince others that Ann Arbor was a good place to settle. That the river was one of the town’s draws is seen in the advertisement they placed in the *Detroit Gazette* in June of 1824, saying, pleasantly located on the lower Huron”.

People did respond to Allen and Rumsey’s invitations, and in two years there were enough settlers to support the operation of a grist mill powered by the Huron River. In the summer of 1826, under the direction of George Noyes, almost all the settlers in the county gathered for a mill raising, similar to a barn raising. According to an account in Charles C. Chapman’s 1881 *History of Washtenaw County, Michigan*, “there was a general time of rejoicing that flour could be obtained short of Detroit. The mill was soon in running order and well patronized.” Soon a saw mill was added to the river industries, a big help to home building, and later a woolen mill. Another river industry was the harvesting of ice in the winter, to be used in the summer to keep food cold in ice boxes.

For industries that didn’t need to use water for power, but just for cooling or cleaning, the water from Allen’s Creek could be put to use. In the days when the area around Ann Arbor was still inhabited by wild animals, four tanneries were built on or near the creek in order to use its water to soak their pelts. A foundry used the creek’s water for its sand casting, and two breweries used the creek water to cool their beer.

In the 19th century, the key to a town’s prosperity was the presence of a railroad. Towns vied with each other to get the train to pass through their town; many promising settlements became just a crossroad after the train bypassed them. But, Ann Arbor was blessed with two railroads, the Michigan Central going east and west, put in along the Huron River in 1839, and the Ann Arbor Railroad going north and south, laid along the main branch of Allen Creek in 1878. Both were placed where they were because of the flat bed along the water’s edge.

In the 20th century, the creek and river became less important to Ann Arbor’s industry. Fires in 1904 and 1913 hurt the river mills, and by the 1920’s they had disappeared, the milling industry moving to the west where more wheat was grown. Allen’s Creek became less important as a source of water supply and

disposal after 1885 when the Ann Arbor Water Works Company was set up, followed by the sanitary sewage system in 1893. In 1926, Allen's Creek was put in a pipe underground to mitigate the flooding problem which arose every spring.

Today, the Huron River is still used as a source for drinking water and for water disposal. But it also continued to provide, in a timeless fashion, the beauty that appealed to Allen and Rumsey. Now that the water is not needed as a source of power, the banks can be returned to recreational use. Island Drive, developed in the 1890's, was Ann Arbor's first serious water park. Residents would drive out in their horse and buggies and spend the day there. Today, Island Drive has been followed by a whole string of parks along the river including Barton, Argo, Bird Hills, the Arboretum, Full, Riverside, Furstenberg, Gallup, and Parker Mill. Canoes can be rented at Argo and Gallup.

The newest park area to be developed is Bandermer, on the stretch of river along Main Street, north of the downtown area, which was given up to industry for many years. The Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Department buys land on the river whenever they can, planning to some day have a trail system that would follow the Huron River all through town. When this happens, Residents will be able to walk along the river, just as Allen and Rumsey once did.

“water was clear as crystal, well stocked with fine fish, and good resort for deer. There was a large Indian planting ground, rows of corn. On the banks of the Huron River was an Indian cemetery, many braves and one chief buried there. Nearby is the Detroit Indian Trail, about 20 inches wide, and sometimes as deep as a ponies [sic] knees, on the south side of the river, until it reached a ford about two miles east of Ann Arbor, where it crossed over to the north bank to Detroit”.

Warner Wing

(from the **Michigan Pioneer & Historical Books**, book 27, p. 265)

A History of the Huron River in Ann Arbor

Carol Butz

Transportation

Before white settlement in this section of Michigan, the Indians used the Huron for east-west travel. They canoed up to the headwaters of the Huron, portaged to the headwaters of the Grand River, and followed that stream west to Lake Michigan. In 1608 LaSalle, copying the Indians' canoe transportation, travelled east on the Huron on his return trip to Quebec. His is thought to be the first boat built by Europeans in Washtenaw County.

The heavier, clumsier, flat-bottomed boats of from 5-10 tons used by the white settlers of Washtenaw County to carry furniture, provisions and product could not navigate the Huron above Snow's Landing (present day Rawsonville). Beyond that point all goods and people had to use roads renowned for their seasonal failing. Winstead Stevens recounts a story: "Andrew Nowland claimed that he had plunged into the ooze with his team west of Ten Eyck's tavern (now Dearborn), and did not see his horses or wagon load of provisions again until they reached the bank of the river at Swartzburg Plains, where he noticed the tops of their ears coming up out of the mud."

Difficulties with overland transportation led the citizens of Ypsilanti to try river travel again. In 1833 a boat was built in Ypsilanti and navigated between there and Detroit until it was wrecked in December of 1834 while carrying a load of bricks. Construction of the Michigan Central Railroad along the south shore of the river met the area's need for transportation and brought to a halt any efforts to render the Huron more navigable. While the river itself had proved too shallow for river-borne transport the river corridors did provide a graded site for railroad bed construction that was utilized by the Michigan Central. The Michigan Central reached Ypsilanti in 1837 and Ann Arbor in 1839, providing fast, efficient transportation to Detroit.

The Mill Era

The Huron River, which drops 200 feet from Portage Lake to Rawsonville and 42 feet within the city of Ann Arbor, was particularly useful as a source of water power that early settlers were quick to take advantage of. Allen's Creek and Traver Creek were also utilized as power sources. The early mills primarily served the agricultural interests of the town, providing processing services for farm products and materials for the growing community. Within the first five years of settlement the following mills were built.

- ◆ In the summer of 1824, Robert Fleming built a sawmill on Sec. 25 (N. of Huron River at Gettysburg). Today this is just east of the intersection of Dixboro and Geddes Roads.
- ◆ In 1825 Andrew Newland built Ann Arbor's first saw mill at the north end of N. State Street. The race for this mill was on the south side of the river and must have come from the Allen's Creek race.
- ◆ In August of 1826, George W. Noyes built a grist mill on N. Main Street, run by water from Allen's Creek.
- ◆ During 1829-30, Anson Brown built the flouring mill of Swift and Co. and the dam and race at Argo to power it.

By 1854 Ann Arbor was a town of 4,500 inhabitants. There were no more sawmills along the local river bank but a foundry (Huron St. at Allen's Creek), Lund Paper Mill (Broadway on Huron river) and a woolen mill (Broadway on Huron River) had joined two flouring mills (at Main st. on Allen's Creek and Sinclair's at Broadway on the Huron). Much of the forests of the surrounding area had been cleared and now the need was to mill the grain from agricultural fields and process wool from the sheep that Washtenaw County was producing in increasing abundance.

Electricity

Waterpower was first tapped for electricity on the Huron at the Geddes Power Plant of the Washtenaw Light and Power Company about the year 1884.

In 1905 the Detroit Edison Company began purchasing the water rights, flowage rights and land use for the construction of their proposed dams along the Huron River. Land, rights and power plants were purchased at Geddes, Argo, Osborne, Delhi, Barton, Fosters, Superior, Ypsilanti, Dexter and Belleville by the year 1908. In 1912 Barton Dam construction was started. It was the only "high wall" dam on the river at the time, with a head of 25 feet. Argo Dam was rebuilt in 1913 to increase its head from 8 feet to 14 feet. By 1925 the Edison Company had power plants at Barton, Argo, Superior (built in 1914 and again in 1918), Geddes or Dixboro (built in 1916) and French Landing further downstream (built 1925). Water rights to three more dams were never developed.

The entire program of the river contemplated nine plants that would have had a total of 225 feet of head and produced 45 million kilowatt hours annually. Several factors had changed between 1912 and 1925 to cause the abandonment of the original concept:

- ◆ construction costs had gone up by 250% and steam-generated electricity had become economically competitive,
- ◆ regional population growth rendered the water-produced electricity insignificant,
- ◆ water flow in the Huron River had been altered by clearing and drainage of the land so as to accentuate a flood-low flow type of river (i.e. under natural conditions of forestation rainfall is absorbed by the soil and drains gradually into river systems. When the forest was cleared in the Huron drainage basin, rain and melting snow drained into the river more rapidly, creating a fixed situation that could not be retained by the dams. Therefore the water had to be released and could not be used for power production. Rapid seasonal drain-off also meant that less water flowed during dryer seasons.),
- ◆ land development in the regions around Portage Lake precluded water storage in that area.

The use of the Huron River for hydroelectric power production has had long term implications that affect land use today. Because the Edison Company constructed dams that changed the water levels of the river, the company required ownership of water rights of all land abutting the river affected by the water level changes. In some cases, such as at Barton this necessitated the purchase of large land tracts not directly utilized in the production of electricity. A subsidiary company, Huron Valley Farms, was incorporated and a graduate of Cornell Agricultural College was hired to develop the land to advantage. Huron Valley Farms was responsible for the development of Barton Hills as a residential area, the extensive planting of pines near Barton, the running of a model dairy producing certified milk (to demonstrate the multiple uses

of electricity), the planting of a peach orchard at Dexter, and a cherry orchard along Huron River Drive. Another project was the conversion of a farmhouse into a rest home for “Detroit Edison Girls” known as Vivienne Farms. A rebuilt version of Vivienne farms currently serves as a meeting place for Detroit Edison officials. The extensive, largely undeveloped land holdings were still held by Detroit Edison in 1959, when hydroelectric power production on the Huron River was deemed no longer profitable.

Parks

The first meeting of the Parks Commission was held in 1905 and Ann Arbor’s park system was initiated shortly thereafter with three tracts along the river: Island Park, Riverside Park and Glens (part of today’s arboretum). An early goal was to make a park along the Huron from Ypsilanti through Ann Arbor and up to the summer resorts up stream. A 1914 newspaper report mentions a “boulevard system” incorporating, in part, Cedar Bend Boulevard, which was to have encircled the city.

Through the early 20th century much interest was exhibited in the establishment of a park system, and, prior to 1920, Fredrick Law Olmsted visited the city and was engaged to formulate a Plan for Ann Arbor. The Plan, submitted in June 1920, show parallels with the Olmsted Plan for Boston and its extended park system along the city’s Charles River. The Olmsted Ann Arbor Plan shows a series of parks and parkway extending along the river and then south from Barton Pond around the western edge of the city. The Mayor’s message to City Council on May 4, 1925 urges voter acceptance of a proposed purchase “in accord with the City Plant prepared by Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Mass. To link Glen Drive, “The Island” and Riverside Park and give the city control of large river frontage from Geddes to Broadway”.

The writte portion of the Olmsted Plan has been lost for several years and only the one map remains (in the Bentley Historical Collection’s Map File). It would be interesting to see how the current riverfront recreation plan compares with the Olmsted treatment.

In 1959 the Detroit Edison Company approached the City of Ann Arbor with an offer to sell it holdings of over 950 acres which constituted major portions of the Huron River in the Ann Arbor area. Included in the property was the original bed of the river, four ponds created by the dams and extensive holdings above the high water mark along the river. The lands stretched more than five miles beyond the city limits and included large tracts of undeveloped open space lands inside city limits. After four years of negotiation, On September 27, 1963, the city agreed to pay \$400,000 over a five year period to Detroit Edison for all the properties involved. The purchase of the Huron River tripled the land owned by the city for park and recreation purposes.

Huron River in Ypsilanti

Doris Milliman

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.

The Huron River – Lifeline to Ypsilanti

Rochelle Balkam

Nearly every community in Michigan is dependent on its proximity to water and Ypsilanti is no exception. The Huron River has played a major role since prehistoric times. To Native Americans Washtenaw County (which was in their language Wash-Te-Nong) meant “the land beyond”, a reference to the river. Native American settlements were somewhat rare in the county, but the banks of the Huron have provided a wealth of artifacts proclaiming their presence. They made their way along the river and frequently crossed at a natural ford, the current site of the Michigan Avenue bridge in downtown Ypsilanti. Their path took them east from the northern and western part of the state as they made their way to Ft. Malden, in Amhersther, Ontario each season for their annuities from the British government.

Perhaps the first European to see the Huron River was the Frenchman, Robert LaSalle. He was forced to make a journey across southern Michigan on foot when the first sailing ship built on the Great Lakes, the “Griffon” failed to rendezvous with him at the south bend of Lake Michigan in the winter of 1679-1680. No trace has ever been found.

According to Charles Chapman’s History of Washtenaw County, Michigan published in 1881:

The Huron River or the “Giwitigweiasibi” enters into the township in Section 5, flows southeast through Section 4, 9, and 16 and at the southeastern limits of Ypsilanti begins its tortuous course through Sections 15, 22, 23 and 24, and enters Wayne County at the village of Rawsonville. The Seine-like windings of this beautiful stream and the picturesque vallyen through which it flows, earned for it the unrepeatable name conferred by the “simpletongued” aborigines.

It was the French who indirectly gave the river its name. When encountering the Wendat (Wyandotte) Indians with their distinctive “Mowak” hairstyle, they were reminded of the stiff hairs along the spine of the wild boar or Huare-thus Huron.

Another Frenchman, Gabriel Godfroy, who owned one of the original four French claims along the Huron in what is now Ypsilanti, opened an Indian Trading post in 1809. Unfortunately for the Indians and for Godfroy, the treaty of Detroit and the treaty of Saginaw removed the Indians from the area, and he had to move west with them.

The first permanent settlers to arrive were from Ohio. Benjamin Woodruff and several friends arrived in 1823. Their crude lean-tos were within easy access to the river. Within a year, more settlers were arriving at the settlement of Woodruff’s Grove. They came up the Huron by flatboat from Lake Erie and the Detroit River as far as present-day Rawsonville. It was called the “Landing” then, because one had to disembark and travel the rest of the way by foot.

Eventually, those early residents of “The Grove” decided to move closer to the new military road being built from Detroit to Chicago. That road, now Michigan Avenue, crossed the river where the two old Indian Trails, the Sauk and the Potawatamie, had crossed. Within two years the new community had been named by Judge Augustus Woodward after the hero of the Greek revolutionary war, Demetrius Ypsilanti.

The river's bounties were tempered with its risks. In the early years, many residents fell ill with diseases such as ague, cholera and other maladies caused by living near swampy or low lying areas. Some Ypsilantians believed the topography in the Ann Arbor area was more healthful.

The town grew rapidly within those first few years; each of the new industries was dependent on the river. There were mills of every type by mid-century; saw mills, distilleries, grist mills and eventually a chain of paper mills and a woolen mill. The one-piece union suits produced at the Ypsilanti Woolen Mill were considered of such high quality that it was said that one of Queen Victoria's sons would wear no other product. From the river one could see the three-story advertisement of a very well-endowed lady in her woolen underwear.

The playing field now known as Frog Island was, in the nineteenth century, a heavily industrialized area. A millrace had been dug, diverting so much water from the site that two local industrialists nearly came to blows over their water resources. Even though the railroad changed the focus of the industries, the river still provided such diversity as fish for the hotels in Depot Town and "healing power" for Dr. Helen Mac Andrew who bathed her patients in the river behind her octagon house on South Huron Street.

Disasters and twentieth century development changed the river. Floods periodically washed away industries. A boiler explosion destroyed one of Ypsilanti's paper mills at the Superior Road bridge. Difficult economic times in the 1980s kept the dream of building the community of Lowell along the river from being realized. One can still see the sign that marks the First Street, the only one ever platted. Dams were built which provided the waterpower needed to produce electricity and electricity changed the face of the nation.

It was the water that brought Henry Ford to Ypsilanti in the 1930s to dam up the Huron and build his auto plant here. It was a part of Ford's master plan to build small plants in villages all over southeastern Michigan. His dream was that local farmers would work for Ford in their down time. Thus a network of plants was built on many of the rivers in the area.

There are other remnants of the past on the river. Only one paper mill still stands: Peninsular Paper, now part of the James River Paper Company. Few other businesses depend on the river for power. A proposition to expand the use of hydroelectric power was approved by the voters in the county recently. You will still find many who fish its waters, bicycle along its path and enjoy its beauty in all seasons. The river now attracts tourists and visitors by the thousands to Ypsilanti during the Frog Island Jazz Festival each June, to the Heritage Festival each August and to the Festival of Lights each December. The river remains the same; the community changes.

The Huron River – Part III

Robert Wittersheim

Water power was the key to settlements along the Huron River in the early 19th century. Initially sawmills were needed to produce building materials from the virgin forests near the river valley. Henry Snow built a sawmill in 1824 at Snow's Landing (later Rawsonville). Amariah Ravens added another in 1843. As the land was cleared and farming increased, grist or flour mills were built to process the grains. The last grist mill in this area was owned by Edwin Berrow. It was the victim of a summer flood that took out his dam in 1901.

Woods Creek in Lower Huron Metropark was the site of James Stewart's sawmill until the 1880s. His mill pond was a popular fishing spot for area children and a source of ice which farmers harvested each winter. From the Paw Paw Nature Trail a bit downstream, Abner Johnson built his sawmill in the 1830s. Parts of the dam are still evident today.

The Schultz brothers – Franz, Ferdinand, and Joseph, constructed a grist mill in 1886 near New Boston. Turbines moved the grinding stones for decades after a brief attempt with a water wheel. Electricity now provides the power as the Farmers Grain and Feed Mill continues to operate over a century later.

The Damned Huron

Park E. Gregory

Caleb Marsh came to the area that would become Belleville in 1826 and took up 137 acres from the United States Government, John Quincy Adams, President. Marsh built the first dam on the Huron River in this area just off the end of what is now Church Street in Belleville for the purpose of producing power for a saw mill. He constructed a mill race along the bank which brought the water downstream to just beyond what is now called Denton Road (it was Cemetery Road then) where the mill was built.

By 1835 Marsh had had enough of the milling business and sold the whole works to John Bell Graham for \$547. Graham sold it six years later to James Bell for \$10,000, making a handsome profit.

James Bell built a flouring mill on the left side of Denton Road as you leave town beside the mill race. This mill became known as the Old Red Mill. Bell had built the mill in 1837 even before he owned the land.

(Photo)

Belleville's Old Red Mill 1837-1899

James Bell convinced his brother William Bell to come to Belleville and open a general store. William became the first post master in Belleville in 1845.

The Old Red Mill and the long-and-earth dam served well for nearly sixty years. In 1899 they were torn down after they had been abandoned for some years.

A new dam was built in 1900 across the Huron where it passed through the Denton Road causeway, about 300 yards from where the first dam had been. James Coomer not only built the dam but also a flouring mill nearby. The dam created a pond on the Huron covering 25 acres and was said to supply four hundred horse power. Coomer's luck ran out in 1911 when the mill burned. The mill passed through several owners and may not have been Coomer's at the time of the fire. A grist mill was built in its place but another fire soon took it out. Then in 1915 a spring freshet destroyed the dam.

(Photo)

James Coomer's dam at the Denton Road bridge (1900) washed out in 1915

By the 1920's Detroit Edison was working on the possibility of building a major dam to develop electrical energy. French Landing, a few miles east of Belleville, was selected to build the concrete dam. Surveys

Belleville

indicated that it would create a lake six miles long. It would extend from Rawsonville Road on its west end to the Haggery Road crossing on the east end where the dam would be located.

This would require the purchase by Edison of all the bottom land in the Huron Valley, not easily done but accomplished.

Two more problems became apparent. Denton Road causeway and its bridge would be under water. The Old North Bridge that connected Belleville to Belleville Road would also be under water. A totally new causeway with a new bridge would be built for the Belleville Road connection, the Denton causeway would be built up to above the anticipated water level and the old bridge would be disassembled and used again on the higher causeway.

In 1925 the causeways, bridges, and the dam had been completed and the filling of the lake had begun. Edison would begin generating power May 1, 1925. However fate stepped in and on Monday, April 13, 1925 ten thousand cubic feet of the earthwork portion of the dam gave way “with a roar that could be heard for miles” so stated the newspaper. Property down river suffered much damage but no lives were lost.

(Photo)

Edison dam breached on Monday April 13, 1925 and six miles along Belleville Lake went down the Huron

The winter had been unusually severe and great frozen chunks of lake bottom had been used to construct the earthen portion of the dam. When the frost went out the dike could not hold the pressure and the dam was breached.

Repair began at once and the earthen dike was reinforced with considerable amount of broken concrete. By September of the same year the lake had been filled again and power generation was started.

By the 1960's Edison felt the generators were obsolete and “gave” the lake and dam to Van Buren Township for one dollar. Shortly afterward inspection of the dam determined that it had eroded and was in danger of collapse. The problem was whether to fix it involving millions, or remove it and sell the real estate that would be exposed. The dam was reinforced by actually building a second structure against the face of the old dam. The generating machinery was replaced and power is once again flowing from the power house under operation with a company with experience in power generation. Now it provides a sizeable income for the township.

The Huron River – In the Beginning

Park E. Gregory

For us the history of the Huron River begins in the spring of 1680 when Rene-Robert Cavelier Sieur de LaSalle and party who were crossing southern Michigan on foot came upon the Huron in Livingston County.

LaSalle had built a sailing ship a year before above Niagara Falls with the intention of building a fur trade on the lower Great Lakes. The Griffon, a 60 foot vessel, was launched into Cayuga Creek above the Falls on August 7, 1679 and hauled to Lake Erie where LaSalle and his men began the journey to Green Bay, Wisconsin where an advanced party had a shipment of furs that they had purchased from the Indians ready to be loaded on the Griffon. The Griffon then began the return journey to Niagara under the command of the Dane, Lucas, and a skeleton crew. They were to pick up the iron work for a second ship on the return to Illinois where LaSalle and his men had begun a second ship on the Illinois River near the site that would become Peoria.

That fall soon became winter and still the Griffon had not returned. And now a runner reached LaSalle with the word that the Griffon had never reached Niagara. LaSalle had to consider the Griffon lost and he must return to Fort Frontenac in Canada that is now the site of Kingston, Ontario.

LaSalle picked four men to accompany him along with an Indian guide. The four men were Collin, Dubray, Haunad, and La Violette. They skirted the southern shore of Lake Michigan and arrived at Ford Miami near the site of present day St. Joseph, Michigan. From there they began a trek across southern lower Michigan. The first days of this crossing were through brush with thorns and brambles which tore their clothing and bloodied their faces. By the 28th of March they came upon more open ground and were able to kill game for food. One night they were surrounded by a band of Indians called Wapoos who mistook the LaSalle party for Iroquois. In fear they ran off and LaSalle was not bothered again.

By the first week of April they had found the Huron River near Portage Lake and since two of the men were ill, they made camp and built a canoe using elm bark which they had to loosen with hot water. By the time the canoe was finished, the two men were better and they began their journey down the Huron River. Their progress was slow due to drift wood and fallen trees.

The slow progress was beneficial to the sick men who recovered. In five days they had reached the Belleville area. Having passed through what would become Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Just beyond Belleville the Huron River turns south and it was here, at a place called French Landing, that the decision was made to abandon the canoe and strike out on foot to the Detroit River. At the river a raft was built for crossing. Their journey across Canada to Fort Frontenac was accomplished when they arrived on May 6, 1680.

(Photo)

Statue of LaSalle in Belleville's Victory Park. A gift from Park E. and Edna May Gregory. Sculptor Stephen A. Wroble. Dedicated in 1985.

These were the circumstances that brought LaSalle through what someday would be Belleville. The story of this adventurous trip was not long in reaching France. In fact when Cadillac found Detroit twenty-one years later he brought with him one Jacques Godfroy from LaSalle's home town, Rouen, France. His grandson Gabriel Godfroy was known to the early settlers here. In 1809 he came up the Huron River with Louis de Chambre and Francis Pepin to establish a trading post where Ypsilanti now stands.

LaSalle and his party were without a doubt the first people from the western culture to see Belleville and the Huron River. From the accounts they told of the place, many French people came to settle this area.

Structures Along the River
Huron Township Historical Society

As you glance at a Huron Township map you will notice that the large square shape defined by its borders is divided diagonally and roughly in half by the Huron River. The river enters the township near the northwest corner after flowing over the dam (construction of the dam completed in approximately 1924) at Edison Lake. This part of the Huron River is located in Van Buren Township and is near the site of a now extinct town by the name of French Landing. The Huron River travels its tortuous path for miles, finally arriving at the southwest corner. Here you will find a bayou that can be viewed at the base of Middlebelt Road where it meets Huron River Drive. This backwater has resulted from the construction of the Flat Rock dam, located at Huron River Drive and Arsenal Road.

The original Indian residents and hunters travelling the area created trails along the river. There were two main trails, one to the north side of the river and the other to the south. The trails followed the general path of the Huron River along its entire length as it passed through the township. Inevitably, the need arose to cross the river. The Indians would ford the river on horseback or wade across by foot at traditionally used shallow spots.

Fording the river was not always convenient. The river would be swollen in the spring by run-off waters when the snow and ice accumulated in winter would melt. An account found later, an excerpt from the "Log Hut on the Banks" article, told how travelers from Ohio destined to visit the Wyandot Indian Reservation came upon exceptional obstacles trying to cross the river. The severely cold weather had caused the river's waters to freeze along both banks. The ice sheets hampered them entering the river and climbing up the opposite bank. It made the crossing, usually inconvenient and uncomfortable, a potentially life threatening ordeal.

The village of Flat Rock claimed the honor of having the oldest Methodist Episcopal society in Michigan. It boasted of having the oldest church building in constant use until a few years ago, when the building was removed and replaced with a new structure. This church may be properly called the successor of the Huron and Wyandotte mission. This mission was originally organized for the benefit of the Wyandotte Indians, who lived on the reservation along the Huron River. The following account of a visit by the Rev. J. S. Finley to this mission is in his history of the Wyandottes: "Late in the afternoon of Sunday, Dec. 14, 1823, we arrived at the Huron River, on the Wyandotte reservation of eight sections. Here we had a very formidable difficulty to encounter. The river was just fordable and frozen on both sides for two or more rods. We took our tomahawks and cut the ice, then jumped our horses down into the water, got on and rode to the ice on the opposite shore, here we sat on our horses and cut the ice, where the water was more than midsides deep, and I think a colder day I hardly ever experienced.

After staying in the water nearly half an hour we got on the ice. We were not out of the water 10 minutes before our clothes were frozen stiff and then we had two miles to go before we could arrive at any house."

Years later the white settlers to the township took it upon themselves to engineer and construct bridges that would span the Huron River.

The first bridges were, no doubt, constructed of wood. Eventually iron structures were proposed and constructed. Iron bridge construction was much more durable, allowed for wider roadbeds and had greater weight bearing capacities. The type of bridge common constructed in the late eighteen hundreds was the through-truss bridge. The name refers to the manner in which the iron trusses rise to each side and connect to the beam members supporting the roadbed below. An excellent example of a vintage through-truss bridge can be found further upstream on the Huron River near the entrance to Delhi Park (also part of the Huron-Clinton Metropark system).

Two general areas along the Huron River, in Huron Township, have traditionally been used since the settlers began constructing bridges. The first encountered when traveling downstream on the river is the Waltz Road Bridge. The existing structure is the second iron or steel bridge to be constructed at this location. This double-span bridge (painted “Smurf Blue”) is the big sister to the Belleville Road bridge found upstream, separating Edison Lake and Belleville Lake. These bridges share the same construction details and were fabricated by the same company. Both bridges were constructed in or about 1924 and are themselves prime examples of steel truss construction, not commonly found today.

The integrity of the Waltz Road Bridge’s construction was tested very shortly after its completion. A photograph taken at the time of the incident shows construction wagons still sitting at one end of the span. The incident occurred when the earthen dam upstream on the Huron River, constructed to form Edison Lake, collapsed and caused an enormous flood of water. The same photograph taken in 1925 shows the river swollen, nearly touching the metal beams under the bridge.

At the same time the Waltz Road Bridge was constructed (which came under the jurisdiction of the Board of County Road Commissioners of Wayne County) a new “paved” road was built to serve as its approach from the south. Originally, traffic approached New Boston from the south using Savage Road which ran along the river from the old Gentz Farm (located where Gentz Road and Savage Road meet). This section of Savage Road was open until the late 1950’s and is still remembered by many of its residents. The gravel road bed is still evident today, and although overgrown by trees and brush, serves as a shortcut for bicyclists or people walking to town wanting to avoid the Waltz Road traffic.

The bridge that preceded the structure standing today was located in the same spot. What is interesting about the project is that the Huron Township Board and Huron Township residents were responsible for the planning, funding and construction of the bridge.

Huron Clinton Metroparks in Huron Township

Huron Township Historical Society

Dr. Henry S. Curtis was nationally noted as an advocate of outdoor leisure activity. As organizer and secretary of the National Recreation Association, he was assigned by the National Youth Administration, in 1936, to conduct a study of recreational opportunities in Washtenaw County. Interviewing a large cross-section of the population, he discovered the public was limited to one small county park. Lakes suitable for recreational use were being rapidly surrounded by private development. At the same time, local residents overwhelmingly favored creation of extensive public recreational facilities.

Paralleling Dr. Curtis' activities, Professor Harlow O. Whittemore, Chairman of Landscape Architecture at the University of Michigan, had investigated the Huron River Valley and had begun to promote its development for public recreation. Joined by their enthusiasm, Dr. Curtis and Professor Whittemore determined recreational development along the Huron River was the most practical solution to Washtenaw county needs. They saw extending the same plan to include the Clinton River would serve all Southeast Michigan. They envisioned development that would include a series of parks along a loop formed by the two rivers.

Representatives of civic groups and interested citizens from the five counties were invited to confer at the University of Michigan. Their meeting in March 1937, led to establishment of a Huron Valley Committee. The committee proceeded to adopt various resolutions calling for recreational development along the waterway.

In August, membership was enlarged to reflect a newly adopted name, the Huron-Clinton Parkway Committee. Working with the National Park Service, the sub-committee surveyed existing recreational facilities throughout Southeastern Michigan.

Armed with the survey facts, maps, and other visual aids, speakers were booked throughout the five-county region to publicize the plan. In February of 1939 Senate Bill 115 was introduced to state legislature. The bill would authorize establishment of the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority. It was passed by the state legislature and signed into law by Governor Lauren D. Dickenson as Public Act 147. A referendum vote was required in the five concerned counties – Livingston, Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne. Residents were asked to approve an added levy up to one-quarter mill to create, maintain and operate the new park system.

The vote fell in a presidential election year, a heavy turnout and a favorable vote resulted for the Authority by a 2 – 1 margin. On May 15, 1941, the first organization meeting was held. Despite voter approval, the legality of the legislation creating the Authority came into question. On January 5, 1942, the Michigan Supreme Court upheld the validity of the Act and made necessary tax levies mandatory in the five counties.

To help speed land acquisition, the State Legislature appropriated \$1,000,000 in July 1946 to be granted the authority on a matching basis. The new funds helped the purchase of generous acreage along 12 miles of the Huron River between Belleville and Flat Rock (Huron Township) in Wayne County. It is here the development of Lower Huron Metropolitan Park was slated.

In 1958, the Authorities' first swimming pool was built at Lower Huron Metropolitan Park. The park was also expanded by purchase of an additional 960 acres. In 1968 the Authority added two more sites, Willow Metropark and Oakwood Metropark. The new parks would be located along the Huron River in (southern) Wayne County. Willow Metropark contains approximately 1500 acres along the Huron River. It was opened in 1970 as the ninth in the Huron-Clinton Metropark system and the second in Wayne County. The tenth site and Wayne County's third park was Oakwoods Metropark. This park opened in 1975 and eventually grew to encompass some 1700 acres. The park features the Authority's third full-service Nature Center Building.

May – The Huron River

Patricia Quick, Rockwood Area Historical Society

Have you ever taken time to take a really good look at the Huron River? There are places along the shore, visible from the road, that are as pretty a scene as can be viewed in all Michigan. The clouds of red-bud and hawthorn trees, blossoming along the river in the spring, is a sight to behold. The lazy stream in summer, with the large white sycamores, and graceful, pale-green willows, is cooling and refreshing to the eye. In the fall the crimson-red, the purple, brown, and gold of the autumn leaves reflecting in the water creates a scene that any artist would love to paint. Even in winter, the inky blackness of the rushing current between the icy, snow-covered banks is a chilly, thrilling sight.

Ask a former student of the U. of M. from anywhere in the U.S.A. or a foreign country about the Huron River. He will appear puzzled for a moment, then will smile as memories of under-grad days, of boating, or merely strolling along the river come flooding back. It is safe to say that even though the Huron River is not significant or important, it truly is a river known 'round the world.

In 1966, two boys digging in the sandy bank at Cara Lane and Huron River Drive found bones and Indian artifacts. A spokesman from the University of Michigan stated that an Indian village could have been located here as early as 500 BC. So you see the river has been in this area for quite some time.

The Riviere Aux Huron first appeared on a map drawn by Joseph Gaspard de Lery in 1749. It is shown on another French map dated 1752. Jean Baptiste Sanscrainte (John Soncrant) came from Quebec in 1765 and settled on the north bank of the river at present day West Jefferson. He sold this property to Gabriel Godfroy in 1796. On early maps you will see the name "Godfroy" on many acres of land throughout this area. Notations on a 1790 map are as follows:

"The Riviere Aux Hurons is navigable for large canoes for 100 miles. There is a portage of 64 chains to the Grand River, thence to Lake Michigan. The Riviere Aux Hurons is a very rapidly flowing stream with a sandy bottom".

It was a land of plenty for the Native Americans. The lakes and rivers provided food and transportation. They journeyed down the river to the British Ford Malden at Amherstburg where they bartered for trinkets and hatchets.

A 1798 church census shows twenty Protestant families and eight Catholic families living along both sides of the river. In 1803 the Office of Indian Affairs sent Jouett to conduct a census of sorts. He reported The Riviere Aux Hurons deep, with gentle current, navigable for large boats for more than twenty miles. In this same year, 1803, Gabriel Godfroy provided a ferryboat for travelers using Anthony Wayne's trail across the Huron River. His tenant farmer Claude Campeau worked the farm and operated the ferry. Mr. Campeau operated the ferry until the War of 1812. The first bridge across the Huron River was hastily constructed by the troops of Gen. William Hull's American Army on July 4, 1812. The soldiers laid additional logs on Anthony Wayne's corduroy road to enable the supply wagons to cross the low-lying marsh at this time. March of 1817 saw a survey party paddling up the Huron. They sought the site of the Indian portage to the Grand River. In his journal, Joseph Fletcher writes of the rain and bitter cold. The survey lists meander posts, claims, types of land, trees and their diameter. Except for the marsh and swampland, the most frequent description reads: "Very good farmland, heavily timbered". Distances were measured in links and chains.

Gabriel Godfroy constructed a new and large toll-bridge in 1817. His tenant farmer, Claude Campau was the "Toll-gatherer". Father Gabriel Richard writes of a Lower Huron Village settlement at this location in 1822. James McCloskey purchased 56 acres on the south side of the Huron River, at the bridge in 1822. He sold this land to Peter Godfroy in 1825. The ownership of the toll-bridge was transferred by grant from Gabriel Godfroy to Peter Godfroy of Monroe in 1825. Peter, in turn, sold this land and the bridge to Jean Baptiste Rousseau (John B. Rousseau) in 1830 with the stipulation that free passage be given to all members of the Godfroy family, their servants and hired hands, and all their horses, carts and carriages. Free passage was also granted to the Mail Stage traveling north and south on the Military Road.

Further upstream, in 1818, a Mr. Chamberlin began the operation of a sawmill. Six families settled in our present Rockwood area. A boat christened "The Experiment" was the first large vessel to ply the waters of the Huron in 1833. It took one week to sail from Ypsilanti to Detroit. After making but one trip it was sold for service on the Rouge River. Various mills sprang up, all along the Huron River. Soon the first scows, large flat-bottomed boats with canvas sails, appeared. They carried lumber and cordwood down the river to Detroit and Toledo. The scows bore the name The Napoleon, The Michigan Flower, The Franklin, The Louisa, and The Superior. A sloop was also christened The Superior. A drawbridge across the Huron River is shown on maps at this time.

The coming of the railroads in the 1850's marked the end of river-boat freight traffic on the upper Huron River. John Strong built various mills near the Chapman Road crossing (Dixie Highway), starting in 1863. It wasn't long before steam barges loaded with apples, cordwood, lumber, and mixed freight plied the Huron River. Traveling at six miles an hour they sailed from Strong's Landing, at the bridge, to Detroit and Toledo. The Alice Strong, The Cora Strong, The Mayflower, and The Ida Burton sailed their way past the swing-bridge at the railroad in South Rockwood and on through the new swing-bridge at the Military Road. Excursion rides were given on The Alice Strong during the summer months, and there were "moonlights" on the Ida Burton, with a fiddler playing for dancing on the deck. It is said that during the winter months, cordwood from Strong's Mill was piled on high ground all along the river, (hopefully above the spring floods). Cordwood was piled all the way from Strong's Landing to the swing-bridge at the Military Road.

Before the days of the automobile, and for a long time thereafter, pleasure boating on the Huron River was a favorite pastime for Rockwood area dwellers. There were boats tied to back-yard trees and docks all along the river. Boathouses clustered the shoreline at both the Dixie Highway and U.S. Turnpike bridges. Ice-skating and sleighing on the river and on the lake were favorite winter sports. During the early nineteenth century dip-netting for clams was a profession for some, and recreation and pocket money for others. The fresh-water pearls were sold to dealers in Detroit. Some sold clamshells to button factories for the manufacture of "Mother-of-Pearl Buttons". The horrible pollution from French Landing and other industries up-river spelled the demise of the Fresh Water Clam in the early 1920's.

The swing-bridge was replaced by a cement bridge in 1930. The interurban bridge and the Dodge Park bridge have come and gone. The expressway bridge was built in 1954. The Dixie Highway bridge was recently rebuilt. The railroad bridges remain. The Huron River, our link to the past, still flows on.

The Huron River – Part V

Gerry Wykes

The abundant fresh water mussel or clam population of the Huron River once provided a resource for an unusual business – clamming. For the first quarter of the 20th century, rivers throughout the state were exploited for their clams that were used to make so-called pearl buttons.

The Huron's clear waters saw a small number of clambers who dragged bars with crowfoot hooks behind flat bottom "john boats" across the clam beds. As a hook tine entered the open shell, the clam closed tightly on it. When the bar was heavy with clams, it was pulled into the boat. Clamming tongs that resembled giant salad tongs were also used to search the deeper waters. Others simply waded the shallows and sand bars collecting clams by hand. Once on shore, the clams were steamed to open the shell and release the meat.

Shell buyers from distant button factories came through this area each season. In 1913 a ton of shells was valued at \$18.94. Sixteen registered clambers from the Huron and Raisin Rivers sold sixty-six tons that year. By World War II, plastic buttons and over-exploitation of the clam beds led to the end of this unique business in our area.

Fresh water pearls were a welcomed bonus when found in the open clams. One pearl the size of a "cherry stone" netted a lucky Rockwood man a tidy sum.

The Huron River – Part VI

Robert Wittersheim

In the days before electric refrigerators, preservation of foods relied on cakes of ice cut from local waterways. John Quick of Rockwood recalls witnessing several ice-harvesting seasons on the Huron River in the early 1920s. “After clearing snow from the frozen river, a heavy wooden beam with an iron spike on its bottom was pulled by a horse to score the surface. Sawyers with five foot ice saws followed the lines to produce the free block 3’ x 2’ x 1’ thick weighing over 300 pounds. Pike poles guided the blocks onto an incline of planks where large tongs pulled them from the water”.

“Bobsleds were loaded on shore with ten blocks before being taken to the ice houses. This was a windowless frame building 20’ on a side with twelve-inch thick walls and doors. Its doors were one above the other so the house could be filled to the top. Horsepower again lifted the blocks via a pulley so they could be stacked inside. Liberal amounts of sawdust separated and insulated each layer”, Quick stated.

Cutting, hauling, and storing ice was an arduous but necessary task. Home delivery of cakes of ice which became common in cities and towns by the early 1900s never did reach out to the country folks. It was rural electrification that spelled the end to the annual ice harvest ritual across America.