

# The Bicentennial

## A Prologue

BY JOHN McCURDY, BILL NICKELS, EVAN MILAN, AND SARAH ZAWACKI

### The Story of Ypsilanti

One hundred years ago, the City of Ypsilanti marked the centennial of its founding by taking stock of its past. A committee was formed to plan observances and to commission a written history of the city. The local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) was the driving force behind the effort, although the resulting book was truly a community effort. The bulk of the research was completed by DAR chapter historian Helen Jenks Cleary, wife of the founder of Cleary College (now Cleary University), with the assistance of two professors of History at Michigan State Normal College, Carl E. Pray and Florence Shultes. Several DAR members wrote sketches of aspects of the city's past as did many local teachers, ministers, and citizens. Ultimately, the pastor of the First Congregational Church, Harvey C. Colburn, wove the information into a single narrative, which he titled *The Story of Ypsilanti*.

One hundred years later, the City of Ypsilanti again finds itself commemorating a major milestone, and again, it is time for the community to take stock of its past. In late 2021, the Ypsilanti Bicentennial Commission created a history subcommittee and tasked it with producing a history of Ypsilanti. We have answered the commission's charge and the book that follows is the result of our work.

Much has changed since *The Story of Ypsilanti*, both in the city and in the study of the past. Challenges from industrialization and deindustrialization have rocked the community while the city's commerce has shifted from a string of shops along Michigan Avenue to a more eclectic collection of businesses throughout the area. Efforts to save the city's unique appearance led to historic preservation efforts and neighborhood associations, while new community organizations created opportunities for people to come together. Education has remained central to the life of the city, both at the public schools and Eastern Michigan University, although this has also brought challenges of

desegregation and arguments over mascots.

When the history subcommittee first met, we began discussing the best way to capture this complex history and how to present it as part of the bicentennial. We agreed that a printed book should be the result of its efforts, although we decided that a single-author narrative was out of keeping with the diversity of voices and experiences that make up the city today. Instead, we reached out to various members of the community and asked them to each tell a small part of a much larger story.

We also decided not to rewrite the entire history of Ypsilanti. *The Story of Ypsilanti* more than adequately captured the first hundred years of the city, and these efforts were suitably updated fifty years ago by *Ypsilanti Area Sesquicentennial, 1823-1973*. We thus opted to focus on the last fifty years of the city's past with the hope that what it produced would complement, and in some cases correct, the existing histories. The essays that follow are a testament to the complicated place that Ypsilanti was and has become over the last fifty years.

## **Ypsilanti Histories**

In selecting authors for this collection, we were mindful of the rich diversity of Ypsilanti and the surrounding community. As in 1923, several local History professors contributed essays as did local teachers, ministers, and citizens. Unlike 1923, however, the stories of city council members, business owners, and community organizers were included as well. We also made every effort to capture multiple perspectives on Ypsilanti, especially the experiences of people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Not everyone we asked to contribute to this collection wrote an essay. Many emails and phone calls went unanswered and, thus, *Ypsilanti Histories* is incomplete. Various houses of worship, communities, and individuals who should have been included here are, as a result, missing. We are aware of the absence of essays on Ypsilanti Township and the city's Latino residents, for example, and we hope that they will find ways to tell their histories in the future.

The variety of authors has also led to a variety of styles. While some authors researched archival materials and consulted the historical literature, others drew on their personal experiences and memories. Some have contributed images from the archives of the Ypsilanti Historical Society and Eastern Michigan University, while others supplied their own digital pictures. Most of the authors were not disinterested observers but active participants in the stories they relate. The essays are thus a collection of both the triumphs and the failures that have defined Ypsilanti over the last fifty years.

## **Without Whom**

*Ypsilanti Histories* would not have been possible without the generous contributions of time and money from many individuals and organizations. The history subcommittee is

especially grateful to the following for making this book a reality:

The first thanks go to the authors of the essays. Each author was tasked with keeping his or her article to under two thousand words, which was not always easy. The authors spent many hours researching and writing their essays, and they did so without compensation.

We are also grateful to the hard work of the two copy editors, Penny Schreiber and Lisa Mills Walters, who read and edited all of the essays.

Fifth Avenue Press, the publishing imprint of the Ann Arbor District Library, designed the book and produced a printable manuscript, without charge. Rich Retyi and Eli Neiburger worked as liaisons with the subcommittee and they deserve special credit for their generosity of spirit and hard work on this project.

The archives of the Ypsilanti Historical Society opened its doors on several occasions for the meetings of the history subcommittee. YHS also provided several of the photographs that are featured in this book.

Funding for printing *Ypsilanti Histories* came from a variety of sources. The dean's office of the College of Arts and Sciences at Eastern Michigan University provided funds as did the City of Ypsilanti, the Ypsilanti Historical Society, and the Ypsilanti District Library. The Ypsilanti District Library and the EMU president's office also provided money and space to celebrate and promote the publication of this book.

Finally, we are grateful to the people of Ypsilanti for their commitment to preserving the city's history. Some might ask why Ypsilanti wants to commemorate its bicentennial, but the following pages make clear that such a question underestimates the richness of this city's past.

### **About the History Subcommittee**

Members of the history subcommittee are John G. McCurdy, professor of History at Eastern Michigan University; Bill Nickels, president of the Ypsilanti Historical Society; Evan Milan, former chair of the Ypsilanti Bicentennial Commission; and Sarah Zawacki, former head of acquisitions, Ypsilanti District Library.