

# The Bicentennial

## An Epilogue

BY EVAN C. MILAN

### A Moment of Pause

A bicentennial is a rare thing to have. Though communities are built on the cutting edge, time often has a dulling effect. Local identities fade, and the communities that once came together begin to segment. But despite the disappearance of many of the villages and frontier towns that sprouted in the early nineteenth century, Ypsilanti has held its edge for two hundred years.

The study of history has changed a lot since the celebrations of 1923 and 1973. The light and celebratory touch that our history was once painted with, was permissible in a world that desired to leave the painful horrors of the past in archives. The world of the twenty-first century is vastly different though. It is through this, at times uncomfortable process, that we may forge ahead together toward our semiquincentennial.

### Our Past

Ypsilanti is like many American towns. In the eighteenth century, the site of our community was already the established home to many. The Odawa, Ojibwa, and Potawatomi made their home on the banks of the Huron River as the Council of the Three Fires. The Wendat people, too, called this land home before American expansion altered the social landscape. As a Northern city, Ypsilanti became a transit station along the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War. By the twentieth century, driven by the chugging machine of progress, Ypsilanti was a city of richly diverse tradespeople.

The Second World War sent the young people of Ypsilanti to the distant battle fields of Europe and into the rough waters of the Pacific. Those women who remained on the home front built the bombers that aided in the liberation of a threatened world. Yet, despite the worlds triumph over fascism, the civil unrest that followed the end of World War II rocked Ypsilanti as it did bigger cities around the United States. The enclaves

that had collectively made up the city, were segregated from one another; renowned community gathering places imposed business practices with racial parameters.

Following an economic downturn in the latter part of the twentieth century, Ypsilanti experienced a renaissance in the last decade before the new millennium. Socially, a push for LGBTQ+ equality led to the passage of the city's nondiscrimination ordinance in 1997. The City of Ypsilanti, in fact, has continued to develop into a proudly diverse community.

A microcosm of the nation around it, Ypsilanti experienced many of the turbulent waves that the early 2020s brought. The COVID-19 pandemic largely shuttered the city, and the shockwaves that rippled through America after the death of George Floyd mobilized Ypsilanti to ask its own questions of accountability of its police force. The businesses that the pandemic initially closed soon found ways to reopen to patrons with modifications to their existing business models; however, business owners and employees found themselves at odds concerning the safest practices to follow during a global pandemic and extreme worker shortages.

As we look back, we know that Ypsilanti exists on land that was taken from the native peoples by the Treaty of Detroit on November 17, 1807. There is documentation of prominent Ypsilanti residents in blackface and redface into the twentieth century. Discrimination has plagued Ypsilanti, as it has in neighboring communities in Metro-Detroit and beyond.

But the people of Ypsilanti have a fierce loyalty to the community that exists today. Ypsilanti is a community that harbors young entrepreneurs and offers its hospitality to all. Our bicentennial allows us a point to come together and celebrate the community in which we currently live, while acknowledging and learning from both positive and painful pieces of our past.

## **A Rough Start**

At its most basic level, the bicentennial is a tick on our community growth chart. And, it was with this thought in mind that conversations began over how to acknowledge Ypsilanti's forthcoming anniversary.

A committee devoted to developing a plan for the impending bicentennial collected and disbanded twice before its third and current iteration. Early meetings of those first two committees set out a basic outline for the events of 2023, before more pressing matters came to the forefront. The onset of the global pandemic brought any bicentennial plans to a standstill before finally dissolving completely. It was not until 2021, over a year after the second committee's last meeting, that interest in the bicentennial rekindled.

Jim Curran, who was then chair of the Ypsilanti Historical Society (YHS) Advisory Board, initiated conversations with longtime board member Nancy Wheeler and me, a newly appointed board member. These early conversations pertained to YHS's involvement with the city's bicentennial.

Mr. Curran passed in early 2021, after to a short battle with cancer. However, in large part due Jim's excitement, I reached out to YHS President Bill Nickels. Bill had been a member of the former bicentennial committee, and, as a longtime resident, former councilman, and leader of the YHS, proved indispensable in reviving excitement for 2023.

After our initial conversation, Bill and I agreed that the most important piece of our bicentennial would be the creation of a book. Our bicentennial book's purpose would be to detail the history of Ypsilanti in the past fifty years; our installment would be a continuation of the stories published in 1923 by Harvey C. Colburn and in 1973 by the Sesquicentennial Committee. The book would be a record that later generations could look back on when discussing Ypsilanti in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

But it was agreed on that there should be events planned for the residents that make up the city. The first meeting of the bicentennial's third committee came in Fall 2021 with only a handful of participants. Though the initial group was small, there was representation from several local organizations including Eastern Michigan University, the Ypsilanti Historical Society, and the City of Ypsilanti. With great enthusiasm for developing a meaningful bicentennial celebration, a three-page list of possible events was drafted up, and our initial group of six quickly grew to twenty-five.

## The Plan Gets Underway

The business of executing a bicentennial celebration was soon at the forefront of committee meetings: the lengthy list of celebration ideas being realistically honed, and a draft budget drawn up, the priority became structure. With the short-term nature of our collective organization, the creation of a 501(c)(3) was deemed excessive. The ideal model for our committee relied on existing within an established organization who could also act as a fiduciary. The passions of the community and its variety of perspectives were exposed through the process. After considering a number of community organizations to function under, it was agreed upon that a commission would be created under the City of Ypsilanti.

After establishing a framework, the earliest efforts were turned to communication. Tom Koch, City Communications Manager, and Maria Skrzyński, Marketing Coordination for Destination Ann Arbor, spearheaded the project of creating a social media presence and community touchpoint to allow the community and the Ypsilanti Bicentennial Commission to remain connected.

With aim to bring greater exposure to the impending anniversary, a presence was made in the 2022 Fourth of July Parade. Though, Bicentennial Commissioner John Gawlas alone bore the responsibility of representing the group, a number of community volunteers stood with John in place of those who were out of town at the time.

It was soon determined that there would be three major components to the Bicentennial: the book of histories, *Love Letters to Ypsi*, and our major events. The book of

histories was developed to tell the story of Ypsilanti in the last fifty years by EMU History Professor John McCurdy, Bill Nickels, and Ypsilanti District Library Head of Acquisitions Sarah Zawacki.

EMU Engage Associate Director and County Commissioner Caroline Sanders developed *Love Letters* as early as our first committee meeting. *Love Letters* was to be an enduring piece for the community to express their feelings for the city we celebrate. Ann Blakeslee and her organization YpsiWrites, a non-profit organization devoted to developing the writing skills of the community, took Caroline's idea and created an accessible community contribution to the bicentennial. Annie Somerville, with her team of Timothy Sabo and Sean Driscoll took on the daunting task of planning the major events that would bring the community together.

In November 2022, as this narrative is written, it is impossible to know how the bicentennial will unfold. As the economic pressures of a pandemic and the growing rift in global relations bare down, fundraising remains a challenge. The initial plan for a years' worth of events had a predicted budget of \$150,000; as the bicentennial year approaches, we are reevaluating the reality of the situation.

With the essays of our book collected, our bicentennial will be honored in in some form. YpsiWrites has collected the memories of Ypsilanti's admirers, and they will be given an archival home. Additionally, with a host of established events held annually, the Bicentennial will doubtfully pass unnoticed.

Today, we celebrate the Ypsilanti that we know: the citizens that reside here and those that hold fond memories of the community that has taken shape in their lifetime. Though our community holds a colorful past, and one that cannot entirely be characterized as pleasant, we are given this opportunity to take pause. We will take this time to consider the community we would like to see take shape in the coming fifty years, one hundred years, and beyond.

### **About the Author**

Evan Milan is a graduate of Eastern Michigan University with a Bachelor of Science in History. Beginning with the commencement of his first semester at the university in 2012, Evan has lived in and around Ypsilanti. Joining the Ypsilanti Historical Society in 2018, he has served on the Board of Advisors since 2021. Evan served as Chairman of the Bicentennial Commission in 2022.