

# Beginnings

## Ypsilanti, 1823 to 1973

BY JAMES MANN

### Peoples along the Huron

The Native peoples of what is now southeast Michigan were removed from the region in 1819 under the Treaty of Saginaw. In 1820, the land was surveyed, and thousands of acres were put up for sale by the federal government. In 1882, the boundaries of Washtenaw County were defined.

On April 22, 1823, Benjamin Woodruff, John Thayer, Robert Stitts, David Beverly, and Titus Bronson made their way up the Huron River on rafts to a point about one mile south of present-day Michigan Avenue, where they disembarked and chose the site for their new home.

Here, they would start the new settlement of Woodruff's Grove. "From the bank extended a level plain, with scattering oak timber but sufficiently open to offer no serious hindrance to easy cultivation," wrote Harvey Colburn in *The Story of Ypsilanti*. The men began work on a log cabin for the Woodruff family. By August 1824, there were six log houses at the Grove.

Father Gabriel Richard, the representative for the Michigan Territory in the U.S. Congress, urged the building of a road between Detroit and Chicago. The survey for the road followed the Sauk Trail, the route used by Native peoples for generations. This trail passed Woodruff's Grove a mile to the north, on what is now Michigan Avenue.

The road passed the site of the French fur trading post on the west bank of the Huron River, known as Godfroy's on the Pottawatomie Trail. There had been a trading post on this site since 1760. Gabriel Godfroy, Romaine LaChambre, and Francois Pepin registered their claims to the land with the Federal Land Office in Detroit, in 1809. These were known as the French Claims.

The French Claims were each a half mile wide and two miles long running west from the bank of the Huron River to where Hewitt Road is today. The French Claims were

purchased in 1824 by John Stewart, William H. Harwood, and Chief Justice of the Michigan Territorial Court Augustus Brevoort Woodward. A village was platted on each side of the river, in July 1825. Judge Woodward named the village Ypsilanti, after Demetrios Ypsilantis, hero of the Greek War for Independence against the Ottoman Empire.

### The New City Grows

Wooden structures soon lined the Chicago Road on the west

side of the Huron River, as the rate of traffic and westward migration increased. Woodruff's Grove was soon abandoned as the village of Ypsilanti grew in size and population. The first African American families settled in the south end of the village by the late 1830s.

Regular stagecoach service to Ypsilanti began by 1830 and the first train from Detroit reached the community in February 1838. Ypsilanti, no longer an isolated frontier village, was now connected to the world. The depot was located on the east side of the village away from the commercial district.

In 1849, the Michigan Legislature approved the establishment of a teacher training school in the state. The site chosen was Ypsilanti, and it became the Michigan State Normal School, today Eastern Michigan University.

Because most nineteenth-century buildings were made of wood, every city back then had at least one major fire early in its history. The great fire for Ypsilanti occurred on March 28, 1851, in the downtown area, burning fourteen stores, and a lumber yard. New buildings made of brick soon replaced the lost ones. Some of these still stand on the north side of Michigan Avenue, between North Huron and Washington Streets.

A burning issue in the United States during the 1850s was slavery, which divided the nation. African Americans escaping slavery in the American South made their way north by way of the Underground Railroad, an informal network of way stations and routes to freedom. One of these lines ran through Ypsilanti, where escapees found aid and shelter, primarily on the south side of the city among the African American families living there.

Ypsilanti suffered its own divisions during this time, as the two business centers, one



View of Ypsilanti from the roof of the High School building, now Cross Street Village, with the Baptist Church on the left, and the twin towers of the First Presbyterian Church

on Michigan Avenue and the other at the train depot, became rivals. Then, on October 14, 1857, the east side seceded from the west side. The secession lasted four months, when a new city charter was approved on February 4, 1858.

The years of the American Civil War were years of prosperity in Ypsilanti. Despite the national crisis, businesses flourished, new buildings were completed, and life went on. Young men of Ypsilanti and the Normal School enlisted for military service, providing two companies of infantry to the Union Army. As the war neared its end, Daniel L. Quirk and others invested in the building of a five-story woolen mill, expected to produce uniforms for the army. The war ended before work on the building was completed.

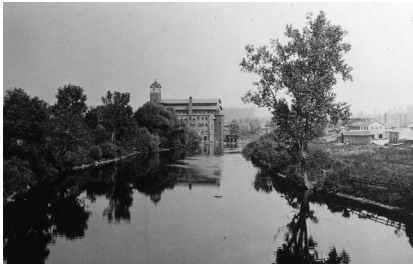
Quirk also invested in the Peninsular Paper Mill and dam to the northwest of the city on the Huron River. The mill began making paper in 1868. In 1870, H. R. Scovill, who had volunteered as a soldier in the Civil War, returned to Ypsilanti and started a lumberyard on what is now Frog Island. That same year, O. E. Thompson acquired the building on the northeast corner of River and East Cross and moved the family business there. This is now known as the Thompson Block.

The largest business building project up to this time was undertaken in 1879 with

the construction of the Union Block on the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Washington Street. The project included moving the Hawkins House Hotel and building the Opera House.

The years 1889 and 1890 saw the construction of the most noted landmark in the city, the Water Tower, as part of the community's water system. Now everyone could enjoy the benefits of indoor plumbing. This was a time of innovation and progress as sewers were installed, and the Ypsi-Ann, the first interurban system in the state began

operation. The interurban continued in operation into the 1920s. In time, electric lights would replace gas lighting, and a telephone would become part of every household.



**View of the Huron River from Cross Street Bridge with the Woolen Mill of the left and the Scovill lumber yard on the right at Frog Island**

## **Modernization and Industrialization**

The automobile changed society as well as the city of Ypsilanti, as factories opened in and near the city as part of the growing industry. For one thing, almost every convertible top in the world was made in Ypsilanti from the 1920s into the 1950s.

The Ypsilanti Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1920 and asked its members what they believed the city needed. The most popular idea was a new hotel. The Chamber secured property and sold stock to citizens of the city. The Huron Hotel opened on

January 1, 1923.

The year 1920 also saw the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed women the right to vote, hold public office, and serve on juries. The following year saw the election of Estelle Downing to the Ypsilanti City Council. She was the first woman elected to the council and may have been the first woman elected to a city council in the state of Michigan.

Ypsilanti celebrated the centennial of its founding in 1923 with stagecoach rides, displays, and a pageant which portrayed the story of the city.

The 1930s were the years of the Great Depression, during which members of the Ypsilanti community struggled, but persevered. By 1940, the African American community on the south side of the city had established its own business district. Segregation was never the law in Michigan, but it was the practice. Many African Americans owned and operated business along Harriet Street, serving this community. The buildings of this business district were demolished during the 1960s as part of urban renewal.

Just to the east of Ypsilanti, in 1941, the Ford Motor Company began the building of a new factory at its Willow Run site. Ford built the B-24 Liberator bomber, a plane that had a huge impact on the ultimate success of World War II. A new factory needs workers but because the men were off fighting the war, there were not enough of them in Southeast Michigan to fill the need. Women began entering the work force, and more workers were recruited from southern states.

The arrival of these new workers and their families created a new problem because there were not enough houses to shelter them all. Some families lived in chicken coops, while others lived in their cars. Temporary housing was finally built for the workers. These housing units were demolished in the early 1960s.

## Postwar Prosperity and Change

In late 1960, Tom Monaghan and his brother, Jim, bought a pizza store in Ypsilanti called Dominick's and renamed it Domino's Pizza. The business grew from one small store in Ypsilanti to become a billion-dollar business.

One of the great should-have-beens in Ypsilanti is the Greek Theater, which would



The most noted landmark in the city of Ypsilanti, the Water Tower was erected as part of the city water system, of which it is still a part

perform Greek drama and comedy. After years of planning, the theater opened in 1966 with a production of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, with Dame Judith Anderson in the lead role. Bert Lahr came to Ypsilanti to play the lead in *The Birds* by Aristophanes. The two plays were performed on alternate nights for twelve weeks before a total audience of 50,000. While it was considered a success, the theater failed to raise the funds needed to continue and closed after one season.

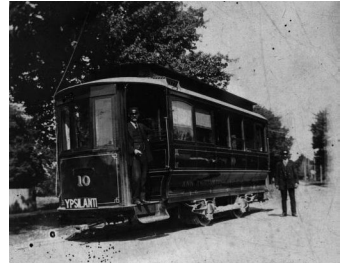
Fear gripped the Ann Arbor Ypsilanti area from 1966 through 1969, as a serial killer abducted and murdered seven young women, including students from the University of Michigan and Eastern Michigan University. This terrible time of fear ended with the arrest and conviction of John Norman Collins for the murder of Karen Sue Beineman, the last of the known victims.

The Vietnam War brought unrest in the 1960s and 1970s to American campuses, including Eastern Michigan University. In May of 1970, student anger about the war boiled over on the EMU campus in response to the murders of four students by the Ohio National Guard on the campus of Kent State University.

Carolyn King was a twelve-year-old girl in 1973 when she tried out for a Little League baseball team. At first, she was turned away because she was a girl, but finally she was allowed to try out for the team. Judged only on her ability, she made the team. But the national office of Little League ordered her removed from the team.



Ypsilanti as seen from Highland Cemetery during the mid- to late-nineteenth century, with the single spire of the First Presbyterian Church on the left, and the steeple of the First Baptist Church near the center, and the Woolen Mills and the Seminary visible as well



The electric Interurban on its first trip

Ypsilanti mayor George Goodman noted the league played on city-owned parks, where everyone was allowed to play. No organization that practiced discrimination would be allowed to use city facilities, declared Mayor Goodman. The city council voted unanimously in support of the mayor. The controversy brought about change to the rules regarding sports and the role of women in sports.

That same year the city of Ypsilanti celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding with a parade and pageant.

### **A Note on Sources**

Evidence for this essay is drawn from *The Story of Ypsilanti* (1923) by Harvey C. Colburn as well as *Ypsilanti: A History in Pictures* and *Ypsilanti in the 20th Century* both by James Mann. The photographs come from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

### **About the author**

James Mann is a local historian and the author of ten books on local history, including *Ypsilanti: A History in Pictures*, *Ypsilanti in the 20th Century*, *Wicked Washtenaw County*, and *Wicked Ypsilanti*.