

Olde Town History

This area was buried under a massive glacier in the Pleistocene geologic period. The ice retreated about 15,000 years ago, and a vast forest grew over the Michigan peninsulas. Aboriginal people lived here in moderate numbers. Proximity to nearby St. Clair River, Black River, and Lake Huron provided both food and transportation for them. Numerous Indian burial mounds were located near the rivers. The first Europeans to visit the area were the French. They detoured around the powerful Iroquois and discovered the northern part of modern day Michigan first. Fort St. Joseph, whose exact location has not been determined, was built and manned from 1686-1688, then abandoned. In 1701 Detroit was founded. In 1763 the British gained control of French North America. By the end of that century, small farms and an occasional sawmill dotted the southern shores of the St. Clair River.

The earliest permanent settlement of Port Huron is generally dated at 1790. A Chippewa Indian reservation was platted on the south side of Black River in 1807, the boundary running southwest through the proposed district. The population dropped during the War of 1812, due to conflict in the Detroit area. American soldiers founded Fort Gratiot near the base of Lake Huron in 1814. Soldiers from all over the country served at the fort, some stayed and settled nearby. Anselm Petit, the first verified resident, built the first house in Port Huron about 1819 on Court Street, just east of the proposed district. By 1821 Louis Facer operated an inn near Quay Street, and four years later James Cook opened a store and trading house. The town was generally known as Desmond at that time, with perhaps 50 people located close to the Black River, and 377 people in the surrounding area.

Activities in the 1830's spurred growth. The Black River Steam Mill Company built a sawmill on the north side of Black River near Seventh Street in 1833. There were now two or three public houses, one shoe

shop, four trading posts, eighteen dwelling houses, and various shanties occupied by Canadian mill workers. Fort Gratiot Military Road, the first overland route from Detroit, was also constructed at this time. In 1834, the first bridge over Black River was built. Edward Petit platted the first village called Peru, early in 1835. Judge Fortune C. White of Whitestown, New York bought 80 acres south of Black River and east of the Indian Reserve from Joseph Watson, once secretary of the Territory, but then an official in Washington. Daniel Brown Harrington and White platted the Village of Port Huron in the fall of the same year. Edgar White, his 16 year-old son, came in July of 1836 to look over the land. He soon returned east, but by 1849 resided here permanently. Fortune provided the funds for further purchases, while Daniel Harrington managed the land in return for one-quarter interest. White's Plat (which later became Olde Town) developed and the population grew.

In the 1840's, the county had eight of the twenty-one steam sawmills in the state attesting to local economic activity. Land speculation from those outside the community heated up. By 1850 the population was approximately 1500 people. The village of Port Huron was formally organized in 1849, and the city incorporated in 1857. During the 1840's and 50's, Port Huron was a station on the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves traveling into Canada. After the Civil War, many of those families returned to Port Huron and settled. The first families were William O. Rodney, George Kennedy, Eli and Rebecca Buckner. They were sailors, plasterers, chefs, and other trades. The city continued to grow rapidly. It's economy broadened as the lumbering industry declined. Industries included manufacturing, railways, shipbuilding, and others. The Edison family arrived in the spring of 1854 from Ohio. William Pitt Edison was a partner in the livery business and his father, Samuel, had an observatory. The family resided at the Fort Gratiot Reserve. Thomas Alvah Edison spent his boyhood years here, before moving on.

There were many attempts to move the center of county government from the village of St. Clair. When the state legislature met in 1842, Mr. James W. Sanborn, member of the House of Representatives, presented a petition praying for the removal of the county seat. The number of county supervisors increased by 1854, and at the October session Mr. J. P. Minnie, offered a resolution that the county seat be removed to the village of Port Huron. The log courthouse in St. Clair had burnt, but was quickly replaced with a brick structure. A paper was presented October 17, 1861 to the Board of County Supervisors. Port Huron would build a county building if the county seat would move there. Finally, on May 3, 1871 Port Huron was named as the county seat. Not everyone supported this. During the “summer of 1871, Judge E. W. Harris, then Judge of Probate, unaided by any military force, went to St. Clair, took the probate records and moved them to Port Huron.” As the population in Port Huron grew, the political power shifted.

The large Federal Customs Building was constructed just north of White’s Plat. Nine bids were submitted November 1871 for the combined customs and post office. The corner of Water and 6th Street location was purchased for \$5,000. The United States Senate appointed William Hartsuff as Postmaster, and John P. Sanborn served as Collector of Customs. Violation of revenue laws caused a wide variety of seized effects to be offered at auction to the general public: cups and saucers, whiskey, boats, eggs, or even a horse. The border with Canada, the trade in goods; federal government affected the local people. On June 6, 1887, the Port Huron Commercial newspaper stated Port Huron was second only to New York City as a port of entry, with 100,000 immigrants arriving annually. Port Huron served as a gateway to Michigan, the Great Lakes, and the railway network.

Port Huron’s first public utility was the Port Huron Gas Light Company, organized in April 1870, by prominent citizens. Five local men held 69 shares while nine men from Ann Arbor controlled the remaining

731 shares. Twenty-two lampposts were installed, the first were lit December 13, 1870. About 50 businesses and homes already used gas, many others waited for service. The lights of Thomas Edison created a sensation in Chicago and New York. Wilbur F. Davidson, proprietor of a dry goods store, installed electric lights during the summer of 1883. By December, the establishment was well lit and attracted large crowds. Demand from fellow merchants led to the formation of the Excelsior Electric Company of Port Huron. It was incorporated February 19, 1884, and locally controlled. The first 25-light dynamo was in Henry McMorran's flour mill. Demand led to a second 40-light dynamo beside the L. B. Forrester mill in 1884. This was the first electric utility in St. Clair County and one of the earliest in the United States. The company also supplied power for Port Huron's Electric Street Railway, under the management of William Pitt Edison. Both he and his younger brother, Thomas Alvah Edison, were stockholders in this company. This may have been one of the first successfully operated electric street railways in the United States. Detroit and other metropolitan cities still operated horse drawn cars on their streets. Port Huron was one of the best-lit cities in the country in the winter of 1886, 65 streetlights: 30 electric and 35 gas lamps in service.

By 1900, the population of Port Huron was 19,000. People were more affluent than those early settlers were. As the population grew, empty building lots became more difficult to find near the center of the city. While much new construction occurred on the outskirts, many city lots were subdivided into smaller pieces. In other cases, older homes burned down or were intentionally demolished. Replacement houses were often much larger and more stylish. In this way, the older residential sections of Port Huron represent an overlap of construction styles from Greek Revival to Prairie Four Square. Many structures are second-generation to the sites they occupy.

The proposed Olde Town Historic District, located next to the downtown Military Road Historic District, played a strong role in the

development of the local community. Businessmen, lawyers, and doctors lived near sailors, railroad men, and telegraph operators. State representatives, mayors, and other influential people called this neighborhood home. The 800 block of Court Street alone was home to three city mayors.

The early decades of this century saw the ascendance of the automobile, and eventually the near demise of the railway. With greater mobility, it became easier to live farther from the center of the city, where it was quiet and the lots larger. The Great Depression had a negative impact on neighborhoods. A number of larger homes were divided into apartments at this time, increasing the population density. The area covered by the proposed Olde Town Historic District was long a highly respected residential neighborhood. However, by the 1970's the area had clearly declined. More homes were subdivided, and population density increased. Gangs and crime became a concern.

The mid 1990's witnessed a revival of sorts due to establishment of the Victorian Inn, Court Street restoration project, rezoning to lower density, police support, and downtown preservation efforts.

Many records were destroyed when City Hall burned in 1949. It was possible to identify the architects or builders of only a few structures in the proposed Historic District. Stephen T. Probett built the house at 713 Wall in 1872, the same year he built City Hall in the Military Road District. He was born in England, came to Detroit when five years old, and Port Huron at eighteen. He first worked in mercantile, contracting and building, then lime and brick manufacturing. He was a city alderman for many years and served as Council President. Loring E. Cady, born 1842 in New York, came to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan in 1855. By the 1880's he left Lexington for Port Huron. He sold his lime kiln to enter the contracting business and built many homes south of Black River. Isaac C. Erb (1855-1947) of Thedford, Ontario, opened an office in Port Huron April

1893. He designed the Presbyterian Church and Victorian Inn. His work outside the District included a number of county and school buildings, including Jefferson School in Port Huron, and Harbor Beach High School. He was Supervisor of Construction under the term of Mayor John B. McIlwain. George L. Harvey designed Mr. Sinai Synagogue (now Community Bible Fellowship), Goulden Chapel addition to Grace Episcopal Church, and the house at 935 Court Street. His work outside the District included the former Desmond Theater, Knights of the Maccabees, White's Art Hall with Wells Butterfield, and supervision of both the Carnegie Library and Michigan National Bank. He also served as Mayor for a time. Charles M. Valentine (1901-1973) designed St. Martin Lutheran Church. His work outside the District included the Wilson Block, Fox Building, Sparlingville Elementary School, Faith Medical Care Facility, and also monastery of the Christian Brothers in Birmingham, Michigan. Harry Harmon (1909–1972) designed the First Congregational Church. His work outside the District included the St. Clair County Library, YMCA, Salvation Army Citadel, and McMorran Jr. Sports Arena. He also designed with Walter H. Wyeth (1887-1970) the All Faiths Chapel attached to the First Congregational Church. Walter was responsible for the St. Clair Inn, Women's Benefit Association Building, Emery L. Ford Estate near Avoca, Sperry's department store, Memorial Recreation Park Stadium, and others. A lack of records makes it impossible to determine the architects of most of the buildings in the Olde Town District.