

## **The Huron River – Lifeline to Ypsilanti**

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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.