

History Explorer

January

~~September~~ 2008

A publication of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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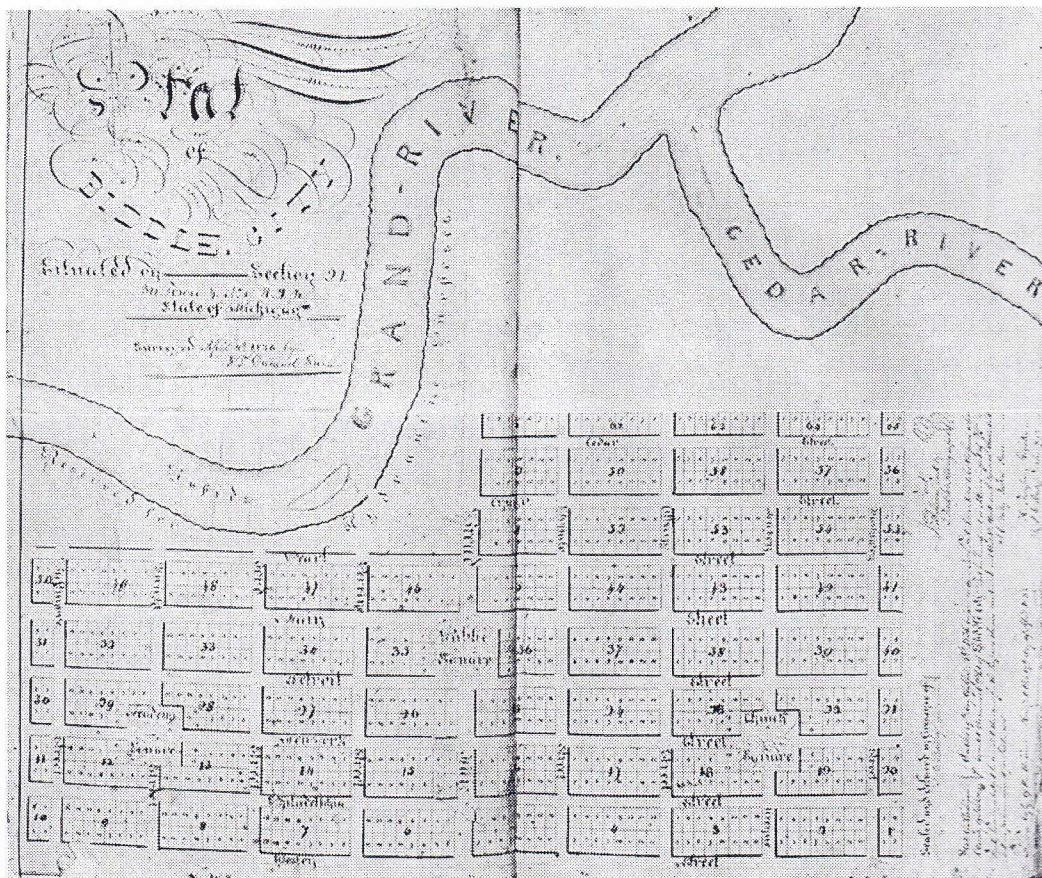
Historic Explorer is published during the months of September to May by the HSGL. Articles and news of historical interest are always welcome.

WHEN LANSING WAS "BIDDLE" CITY

Town Lots at the Junction of the Two Rivers

Sold at High Prices to Strangers.

From the Lansing Journal 11/24/1904



The original recorded plat of Biddle City, 1836

Everyone in this city, it is likely, is more or less familiar with stories that have been current from time to time of frauds practiced in connection with the opening up and settlement of the lands of the great west. Not many, however, who have listened to or read such stories, are aware that there is in their own city's history as

pretty a tale of deception as adorns the annals of any town or country. The pioneers of Lansing were familiar with the story, and from one of them, Hon. D.W. Buck, whose relatives were actors in the little comedy to be set down in the facts in the brief history of Biddle City were obtained.

Continued on Page 2

Join Us...

January 16, 2008: Forest Parke Memorial Archive & Library Tour/Presentation
Local History Reference Librarian David Votta will bring us up to date on what is new in the Local History Room. Learn what materials have been added to local history collection, what improvement have been made to the furniture on the formal room, learn what are the plans for the future and what you can do to help. But most importantly come because you care about Local History.

Biddle City, continued...

In the winter of 1836 two young men traveled through the town of Lansing, Tompkins County, New York, selling to the farmers lots in Biddle City, which they represented as already well started in the new state, and which was located, they said at the junction of the Grand and Cedar Rivers in Central Michigan. They told of the great forests surrounding the village that needed only to be removed to uncover the richest farming country in the world., and they assured the men of New York who had sons old enough to start for themselves that they need but to send the young men to Biddle City where fortunes in timber and fortunes in land found for all.

The Tompkins county farmers became greatly interested: meetings were held – many of them at the home of Daniel Buck, father of D.W. Buck and finally a stock company was formed out of which sixteen men were chosen to go west and make secure the purchase of the rest.

The long trip down was made in the usual way, down the canal, across Lake Huron and so to Detroit, but when the party reached Detroit, however, and inquired the way to Biddle City, no one was found who had heard of such a place. The rivers were known of course, but all the country through which they flowed it was said to be wilderness. Biddle City didn't exist.

Failing of any information at Detroit the party traveled to Pontiac. There was the same ignorance of Biddle City and the same story of the wilderness told. The men became discouraged: three or four abandoned their comrades and the search: they bought land in Pontiac and their descendants are there to this day.

The remainder of the travelers determined to push on, however, until the rivers on which their town was said to be built were found, so they hired guides and slowly made their way south and west into Clinton county, and finally when near where DeWitt now stands they found one settler named Scot, who gave them the first news they had obtained of the place they sought. He had heard of Biddle City vaguely but he told them that west of him there was a home of a settler named William Gilkey who lived near the place where the Cedar empties into the Grand river and he could tell them all there was to tell about Biddle City. Starting once more they traveled to the log cabin of William Gilkey, who was the only settler in all the country round: he lived on what is now known as Stambaugh place, north of Lansing. He told them what they wished to know.

During the preceding winter, he said, two young men from their own state had stayed with him while on a hunting trip in Michigan. At his house they made their plans to have a town of their own; the platted the ground, staked the lots, named the streets and made ready to sell the town, so beautifully done on paper, to the people whom expected top be interested at home.

Mr. Gilkey promised to show the purchasers of those lots the place they were in search of and he did so, taking them through the woods to the point where the R.E. Olds residence now stands, he pointed across the Cedar to where on the opposite side of the river the low land was lying under water, and he said:

“There gentlemen is Biddle City.”

The travelers had not even the satisfaction of feeling that the uncleared land was theirs, for they were told that the site

of the city was a part of the princely tract owned by William H. Townsend of New York.

Mr. Gilkey endeavored to prove to them that they need not be cast down even if the town of their hopes had vanished.


“He told them that they saw the greatest country God ever made,” said Mr. Buck in telling the story. He said “land could be bought at ten shillings an acre: and the timber was of the finest quality in the world; in the end two of them were comforted: Joseph E North and Daniel Buck elected to invest their money since they had come west for that purpose. Each of the gentlemen bought large tracts of lands south of the city; that purchase by Mr. North being known as the ‘North settlement’ at the present time.

The hopes of the others of the party were to badly blighted to allow them to remain on the scene of their disappointment. A Mr. Atwood went to what is now Dansville, while Messrs. Townley, Ludlow and others went to Jackson County and the town of Parma and Tompkin Center bear record in their names that their founders did not forget the home from which they came.

At that time neither Jackson nor Ingham counties were divided into townships, and when the divisions were finally made the settlers named their township “Tompkins” after their home county as the men who elected to remain near Biddle City called theirs “Lansing,” which eventually gave the name to the city itself.

Biddle City, as platted by the hunters, extended from the junction of the two rivers beyond where the Hugh Lyons factory is now situated. The old Christianity estate, now owned by Judge R.H. Person, was part of it and the deeds that passed with that place and others in that vicinity constituted almost the only record of that long vanished paper city.

After making the purchase of their lands Messrs Buck and North returned to New York: in 1839 the latter sold his eastern home and came west with his family, eight sons and two daughters. Mr. Buck did not return himself but sent his son Levi, two nephews, Able Miller and Peter Clark, and another young man, Monroe Packard. The tree settled upon the lands Mr. Buck had purchased, but Clark was a cabinet maker and could not resist the charms of the magnificent timber: he went to Ionia to settle and practice his trade and his grandchildren still live in that locality.

The immense tracts of land north and south of what is now the city of Lansing were owned by James and Horatio Seymour and William H. Townsend, and the names of Townsend and Seymour streets recall that fact to memory. But with the visit of the purchasers of lots in Biddle City ends the romance connected with the time, and the history of the location of the capitol and gradual setting up of the country round is familiar to all and needs not to be rehearsed. 

*Give a Friend a Gift Membership in the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing Today
See Page 5 Details*

President's Corner

by Craig A. Whitford

Jerry's Gifts

Dear Friends:

As most of you know longtime historical society member and trustee Jerry Lawler died on September 14, 2007 following a courageous battle with cancer. Jerry had a tremendous gift for giving of his time and talents. Jerry's positive and "can-do" spirit in carrying out the mission of the historical society will always be remembered. Whether it was placing signs for our cemetery tours or arranging for our annual society dinners – a number of them held within the halls of the beautiful Michigan State Capitol - Jerry was always ready and willing to assist, assuring a successful outcome. His enthusiasm, dedication and guidance will be greatly missed. It was my personal honor to have known and worked with Jerry on a number of projects throughout the years. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his wife, Connie; stepdaughters, Kim Dewey of Okemos and Beth Sandborn of Haslett; stepson, Dr. Michael Sandborn of East Lansing; his brother, sisters and eight grandchildren as well as his many, many friends.

Prior to his death, Jerry made arrangements for his personal local history library as well as his extensive research notes to be gifted to the Capital Area District Library – Forest Parke Memorial Archive & Library in downtown Lansing. Jerry's gift will allow local researchers and historians the opportunity to continue his lifelong work and keep his memory alive.

On the evening of February 13, 2007 a gala celebration honoring the work of Jerry was held in the rotunda of the Michigan State Capitol. The following tribute appeared in the program:

"In 1989, Jerry was named the first Executive Director of the Michigan Capitol Committee, the executive-legislative body charged with the restoration of Michigan's historic State Capitol. As Executive Director, Jerry led an exhaustive award-winning, and highly challenging three-year project to completely restore the building and its grounds. Completed in 1992 to national acclaim, the project won America's most prestigious restoration award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

"In the same year, the Michigan State Capitol was named a National Historic Landmark. Landmark status is



Jerry at the top of the dome


Jerome "Jerry" R. Lawler

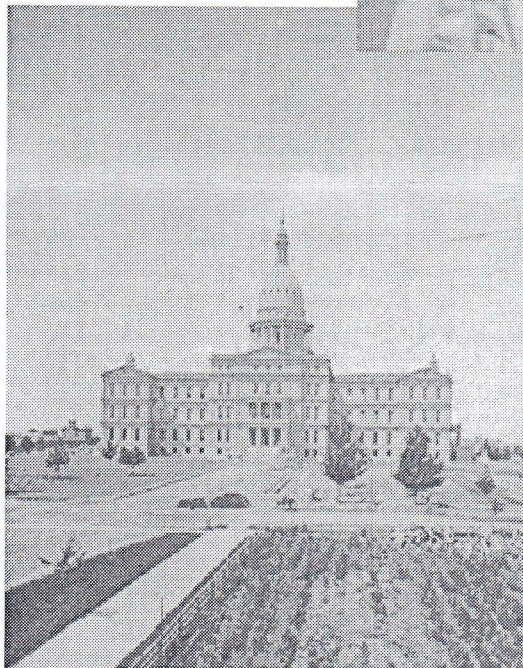
Born: August 2, 1943, Clare, Iowa
 Died: September 14, 2007
 East Lansing, Michigan

America's highest historic designation and is reserved only for our nation's most important historic places. With these two awards, acknowledging both the challenge and success of the restoration and the importance of the building it restored, the Michigan State Capitol became a nationally-recognized leader and benchmark for historic preservation everywhere. To a very great degree, the success of the restoration was due to Jerry's leadership, organizational genius, vision, integrity, and sheer hard work.

"After the restoration, the Michigan Capitol Committee's mission shifted from restoration to ensuring that the capitol stays properly preserved and maintained. The Legislative Council Facilities Agency was created

in 1995 to carry out this mission, and Jerry – in addition to his Capitol Committee duties – was named its first Director.

"In his dual roles, which he maintained until his retirement, Jerry laid the foundation for the policies and procedures – indeed, the very philosophy – that will guide all future stewards of this great building. Preserved for the benefit of generations to come, the Michigan State Capitol stands today not only as a beautiful national treasure and the seat of state government but also as a proud symbol of Michigan and of democracy itself. It is Jerry's lasting gift to all of us and to Michigan." 



The Michigan State Capitol c. 1879

Lansing Pioneers

From the State Republican

May 18, 1901

In the old days the first business house of importance in Lansing was the general store of Bush, Thomas & Lee, built in the spring of 1847 on the east side of the Grand river and on the south side of Main st. Its first head clerk was William Hinman, who came to Lansing from Howell, Mich., while the store was building.

Two days of hard traveing were required for Mr. Hinman to reach Lansing from Howell, a journey which is now made in about an hour and a half. He was obliged to go straight north from Howell into Shiawassee County, and reach the young capital by a round about way. He found the store in which he was to work by far the most prominent building in Lansing, and the general line of goods sold there from this side of Detroit. Across Main Street from the store was a tiny establishment with the overwhelming title "National Hotel." During the summer of '47 a bridge was built at Main Street and soon thereafter another microscopic hostelry appeared on the west side of the river, called the "Michigan House." Work began immediately upon the state house, the site for which had been chosen in a dense forest of beech, maple, oak, ash and elm. All the timber was chopped, none sawed. The capitol grounds had to be cleared, the state was chopping out the line of several streets, and many new settlers were clearing land to build their primitive houses. This circumstance created a boom in axes, and Mr. Hinman says that it was not uncommon for him to sell tree or four boxes a day, each box contained a dozen.

Work was rushed on the new capitol, which would be needed in about 8 months for the secession of the legislature. The state officers lent their assistance, and with axes in their official hands would enter competitive chopping matches. The capitol was made ready for the legislature Jan. 1, 1848, despite the difficulties which obstructive the work. The contractor was a Jackson man named Porter. He purchased a greater part of his material and incidentals from Bush, Thomas & Lee, and by the middle of August his account amounted to nearly \$800. About this time it became apparent to Mr. Hinman that Porter would not fulfill his contract, and none of the firm being in Lansing, Hinman assumed the responsibility of refusing to honor the contractor's orders.

Col. Glenn of Kalamazoo, who was building commissioner, called at the store to ascertain why orders were not filled, and Hinman convinced him that the contract would not be kept. A new arrangement was made whereby Porter gave


up the work. Col. Glenn took charge and secured the debt. Then by tall hustling the capitol was nearly enough finished to serve for the secession of 1848. All the stone used in the construction was taken from the river near the present fair grounds, carried in boats to the foot of River st, and hauled to the site.

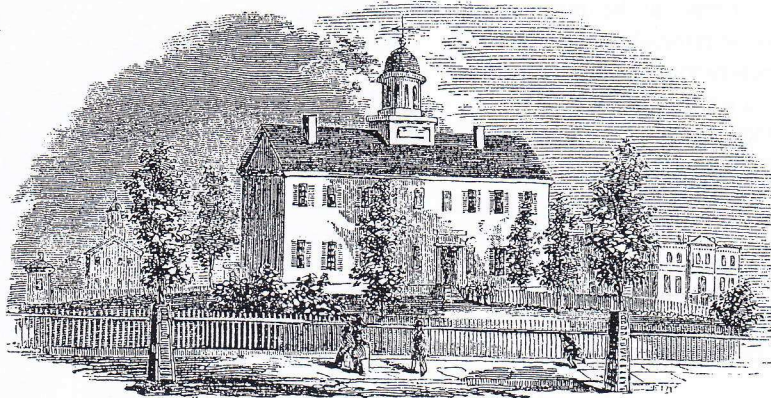
It was hoped that the Benton House would be completed also in time to accommodate the members. Green lumber was rafted down the river from Eaton Rapids, and placed in a kiln which been built near the hotel site. The night before the day set for its removal

from the kiln Mr. Hinman saw from the store a red light through the woods to the west. The citizens gathered hastily, and in sad helplessness watched their embryo hotel transformed into a heap of feathery ashes.

The hotel was built a year later, and in 1849 Mr. Hinman rented it, its landlady being the daughter of his senior employer, to whom he was married in 1848. The big tavern was the social center of the new city, and the dining room, 30x50, echoed often to the merry scrape of fiddlers and the rhythm of dancing feet. There also were spread the political banquets in which legislative orators, not an extinct species the, says Mr. Hinman, responded to toasts or raised their voices in convivial song. A memorable supper was one which General Cass celebrated his election to the United States senate. The hospitable old gentleman gave Mr. Hinman \$500, and instructed him, after reserving seats fro the legislators and state officials, to "invite everybody." And everybody came to enjoy the venison, partridge and quail from the surrounding forests, and champagne set out from Detroit.

Some 400 Chippewa Indians lived in this region when Lansing became the capital. Mr. Hinman traded extensively with them, buying their furs and paltries. And be it remembered to the credit of the firm and its head clerk, no firewater entered into the bargains. Chief Okemos came to the store nearly everyday, looking for a new or at least a willing listener to his tales of war and rapine.

To refer again to the oratory of the mid-century, Mr. Hinman says that it was a treat to go to the senate or house when an important measure was to be considered. Among the fine speakers of the old days he recalls Robert McClennan, George W. Peck, Charles Bush, Judge Whipple, A.H. Hanscome, and Senators Littlejohn, McCloud and Crane. 



The Michigan State Capitol c. 1847-1861

The Gift Depot

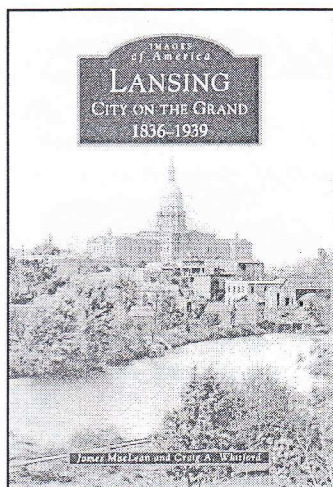
The following gifts will be available for purchase during both of our March programs

1 Give the Gift of History with a membership in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Individual Memberships: \$15/year
Family Memberships: \$25/year

2 Lansing: City On The Grand, 1836-1939

By James MacLean & Craig A. Whitford



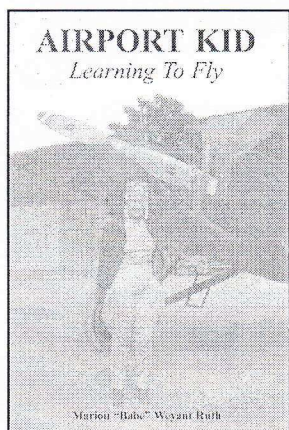
Lansing's history as the capital of Michigan began with a legislative mandate in the 1835 State Constitution, which required that the seat of government be moved from Detroit in 1847. The result – the emergence of a new capital city on the banks of the majestic Grand River – allowed Lansing to cultivate a world-class community based in government, education, the automotive industry and entrepreneurial achievements. This book features more than 200 historic photographs that document the dynamic capital city during its pivotal first century, from the pioneer era to the inception of the Olds Motor Vehicle Company and through the eve of World War II.

\$19.99 (plus tax)

Published by Arcadia,
An Imprint of Tempus Publishing, Inc.

3 AIRPORT KID - Learning To Fly

By Marion "Babe" Weyant Ruth and Craig A. Whitford



The true account of Lansing's most famous aviatrix - Marion "Babe" Weyant, a teenage girl with a passion for aviation and a desire to take flight. Originally written by Babe in 1936, the story traces her adventure from 1931 until soloing at the age of 18 in 1936. Over 150 photographs and vintage news clippings are featured in 96 pages, capturing the excitement of her journey, the pilots she encountered and her interest in aviation which she continues to share.

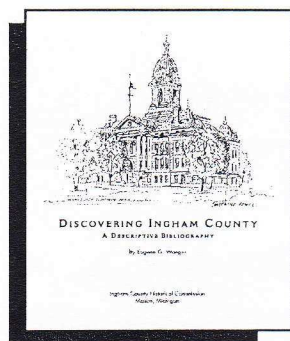
\$20.00 (plus tax)

Published by
Michigan Historical Press, Lansing

4 Discovering Ingham County

A Descriptive Bibliography

By Eugene G. Wanger



This 100+ page edition is a sequel to Mr. Wanger's *INGHAM COUNTY HISTORIES: An Annotated Bibliography for Students, Buffs and Collectors...* "an interesting and useful guide for discovering the history and historical resources of Ingham County, The Capital County of Michigan..." Published by the Ingham County Historical Commission.

\$15.00 (plus tax)

Published by the
Ingham County Historical Commission

HSGL 2008 Calendar

Reserve these historic dates now!

January 16, 2008

Forest Parke Memorial Archive & Library
Tour/Presentation with David Votta

Wednesday, January 16, 2008 - 7:00 P.M.

Lower Level

Capital Area District Library, 401 S. Capitol, Lansing

March 19, 2008

Ladies of the Lights

Wednesday, March 19, 2008 - 7:00 P.M.

Lighthouse historian Dianna Stampfler will share images of the women and their families that accepted the dangerous job of tending to the beacons that protected the shores of the Great Lakes State through readings from journals, logs and autobiographies. She will also include local lore and ghost stories about Michigan lights and keepers.

May 2008

The David R. Caterino Collector's Showcase
Saturday, May 10, 2008 - 10 A.M.- 4 P.M.

Collectors from throughout Ingham County gather to share their collections of photographs, memorabilia and more. There is no charge for displaying your collection of local history artifacts.

Library Galleries, Lower Level

Capital Area District Library, 401 S. Capitol, Lansing

Membership Application

Please accept my New Renewal membership in the *Historical Society of Greater Lansing*. I have enclosed:

\$15 Individual \$25 Family
 \$150 Life or \$_____ Gift

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

Tel: _____

Email: _____

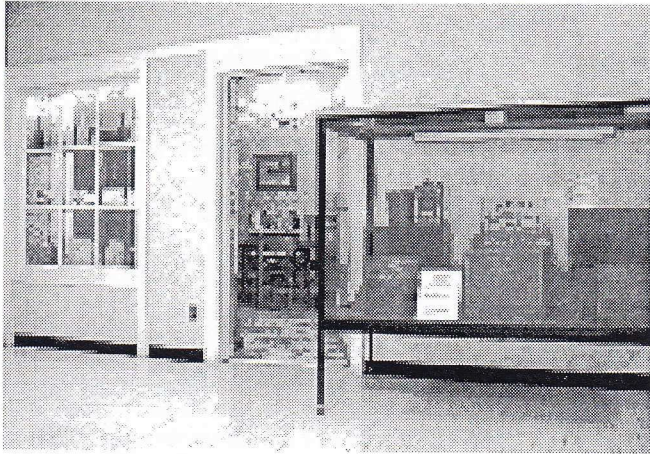
*Historical Society
of Greater Lansing*

P.O. Box 12095, Lansing, MI 48901

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation.

Thank you for your support of our programs and activities.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing



Join us in the Forest Parke Memorial Archive and Library, in the lower level of the Downtown Library of the Capital Area District Library for a tour and a presentation by Local History Reference Librarian David Votta on what is new in the Local History Room. Learn what new materials have been added to local history collection, what improvement have been made to the furniture on the formal room, learn what are the plans for the future and what you can do to help. But most importantly come because you care about Local History.

Forest Parke Memorial Archive & Library Tour/Presentation with David Votta

Join Us... **Wednesday,**
January 16, 2008
7:00 P.M.

Capital Area District Library
401 S. Capitol, Lansing, Mich.



07/08
Bill & Judy Atkinson

97¢
Membership
Renewal
Time

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Historical Society
of Greater Lansing
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