



# History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

[www.LansingHistory.org](http://www.LansingHistory.org)

April 2018

## Upcoming Events

### Aladdin Kit Houses

*Thursday, April 19 - 7:00 p.m.*

*Library of Michigan, 702 W. Kalamazoo St.*

Join HSGL and Dr. Frank Boles, Director of the Clarke Historical Library at Central Michigan University for a discussion about kit houses, and Michigan's own Aladdin Company in Bay City, Michigan. The firm manufactured kit homes from 1907 until 1989. It was big business on a national level, second in sales volume only to Sears Roebuck & Company.

The company's story, though, is more about entrepreneurial endeavor than finance. The firm's founders, brothers Otto and Bill Sovereign, were respectively a lawyer and an advertising agent, neither of whom knew anything about building houses. When a friend began to make money selling "knocked down boats" (kit boats), they decided they could do the same with houses. They "designed" their first house on their mother's kitchen table. Through a piece of financial chicanery (a less kind person would say "fraud"), they placed a tiny ad for the house in one of the nation's leading magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post*. Surprisingly someone actually ordered one, and paid the required one-third down! Soon enough Otto was posting new ads showing the "famous Board of Seven," consisting of everyone then on the company's payroll, carefully reviewing plans for new houses.

The story of Aladdin is the story of American enterprise and vernacular architecture. The Sovereigns knew how to sell a house. They would ultimately sell about 75,000 of them. They also were keenly aware of what would sell to America's emerging middle class and, along with their kit home competitors, defined the houses

that most Americans aspired to own. Spend an evening learning about the Sovereigns and their homes.

The over 350 linear feet of Aladdin Company Papers were acquired by the Clarke Historical Library from an abandoned warehouse in Bay City that had been sold for back taxes. They were processed for public use through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.



### Lansing Police Department: Celebrating 125 Years of Service

*Saturday, May 5 - 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.*

*Lansing Center, 333 E. Michigan Ave.*

The Lansing Police Department invites Lansing residents to stop by Exhibit Halls B & C at the Lansing Center for their 125th Anniversary of Service event, which will highlight the department's history through interactive experiences, displays, guest speakers, and other exciting programming.

The department aims to build upon their legacy of community engagement by educating the region about its storied past and the ways they have evolved to meet the needs of residents. "We'll be celebrating 125 years of service, but we've actually been around a little bit longer, since as far back as 1859. We became officially established in 1893 when we created a rules book to solidify our existence," explained Sergeant Justin Moore of the Lansing Police Department. "Before then, serving the police was more of a political job, but this really brought us into the modern day as an organized public

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## A Short History Of The Short-Lived Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company

by  
*Bob Mainfort*

For many decades, beginning in 1880, Michigan was one of the top two salt-producing states in the country. Salt was an important commodity, as it was used at the table, for preserving food, curing meat, and tanning, and the early settlers of Michigan relied primarily on salt imported from New York

Salt resources were considered so important to the state that an Article submitted with Michigan's first Constitution stipulated that the state was granted "at least one section of land" [about one square mile], "including each [salt] spring." Thus, when Michigan became a state, Congress granted 72 sections to the state as salt lands. Starting in 1838, the state funded several attempts to produce salt from brine, but these efforts were at best only marginally successful.

To encourage commercial production of salt in Michigan, in February 1859 the state legislature passed the Salt Bounty Act, which offered a tax exemption on real and personal property to parties engaged in the manufacture of salt, as well as a bounty of 10 cents per bushel on salt, provided that a firm produced at least 5,000 bushels of salt. This legislation had the immediate intended effect of stimulating salt production. The number of salt manufacturing companies in Michigan rose from only one in 1860, to 23 in 1862, and 67 in 1864. Most of these firms were located in the Saginaw River Valley. During 1864, Michigan salt companies produced salt with an aggregate value of nearly 1.2 million dollars.

Determined to get a piece of the action and unencumbered by knowledge of local geology, some of Lansing's "most energetic citizens" issued a subscription for stock in what was initially called the Lansing Salt Company in November 1862. The group estimated that \$1,000 would be a sufficient "amount of capital necessary to a thorough and practical experiment in boring a [brine] well not including the motor power." Stock shares were priced at \$25 each, and the goal of raising \$1,000 was soon accomplished and actually surpassed. With \$1,800 in hand, an organizational meeting of the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company was held on December 18, 1862, with former mayor John A. Kerr elected president. To his credit, Kerr had some experience with mineral exploration, as in 1858 he and Judge Franklin LaRue had drilled a fairly shallow shaft near Millet in which they located some thin veins of coal. The company's board of directors included William Woodhouse, Theodore Hunter, William Hinman, J. Van Keuren, Harley Ingersoll, John Whitely, William Pinckney, and J. L. Lanterman. The firm announced plans to commence "boring operations" immediately.

The site chosen for Lansing's salt well was located on the east side of the Grand River, just south of its confluence with the Red Cedar River, and easily reached via the old River Street bridge. This location was not selected because it was perceived to have the greatest potential for producing brine, but rather, it seems, because company secretary William Woodhouse and his business partner C. W. Butler owned the tract of land and operated a sawmill there. Waste produced by the sawmill provided a free and readily available source of fuel for powering the drilling apparatus.

"Operations" could not, of course, begin immediately. First, equipment had to be obtained, including \$150.75 worth of metal tubing, and infrastructure built. A typical drill house of the day measured about 16 by 30 feet, with a tower. This structure housed a boiler, a portable engine, and a forge for repairing tools and keeping the drill sharp.

### Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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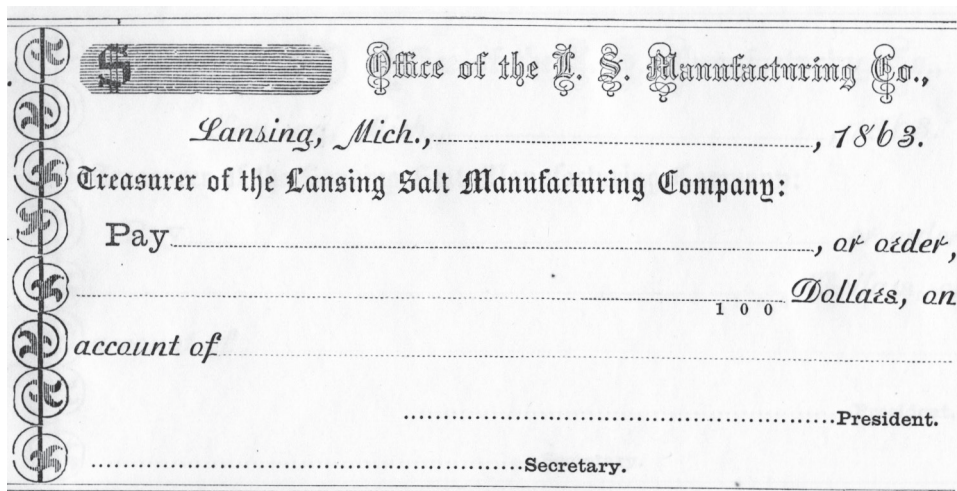
The tower (or derrick), for drawing out the drilling poles, was about 50 feet tall. Boring or drilling was performed with a drill, about three feet long and shaped at one end like a chisel. The drill was screwed into the “sinker,” a round iron bar about 40 feet long and three inches in diameter and weighing about a ton. Attached to the sinkers were two slotted links, or “jars,” that move up and down within each other to increase the force of the drill by allowing it to drop with a sudden jerk. The jars are attached to the drill pole, which is connected by a swivel to a chain that is fastened to an engine.

Everything was in place by the second week of April 1863, and the company announced plans to start drilling on April 13. Thereafter, little would go as hoped and planned. In the early morning hours of May 16, the building housing the drilling works caught fire and burned to the ground. According to the *Lansing State Republican* (owned by the aforementioned Kerr), only a box of tools belonging to the contractors was saved. The following day, the company directors met and, undeterred, decided “to prosecute the work at once,” drilling having reached a depth of about 300 feet. By early June 1863 the company had “repaired damages,” and the contractors, under the superintendence of R. R. Bryant, had recommenced drilling at the well site. Drilling proceeded apace, reaching a depth of 800 feet by the end of July, with the strength of the brine “steadily increasing,” but work was again interrupted when the engine used to power the drill failed and a new one had to be ordered. This caused the *State Republican* to note that the salt company “has

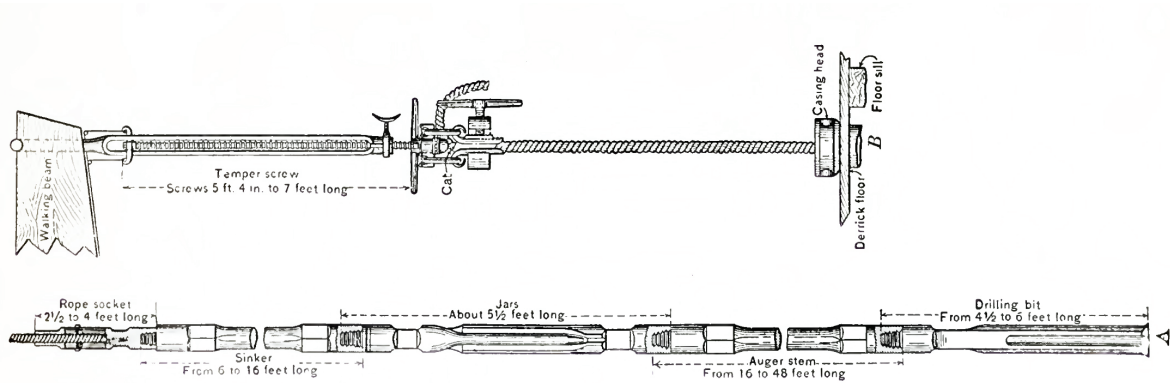
had to contend against a great deal of misfortune, but are not disheartened.” The implied optimism was short-lived, as work was suspended in mid-September, this time for a more serious matter, namely “want of means.” In less polite terms, the company was nearly insolvent, despite having raised nearly the twice the “amount of capital necessary.” The indomitable stockholders voted unanimously to raise additional funds by purchasing more shares in their company, demonstrating that “the utmost confidence is still retained in the success of the undertaking.” By this time the well had reached a depth of 1,000 feet, still without satisfactory results.

A few weeks later, the well was 200 feet deeper, and the company directors voted to proceed another 100 feet. Just before Christmas 1863, the directors met again, and deemed the results to date “so favorable” that they decided to continue boring yet another 100 feet, bringing the depth of the well to 1,400 feet. Notwithstanding the optimism constantly expressed by the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company (as duly reported in the company president’s newspaper), financing continued to be a problem. On January 11, 1864, notice was given that all original stock shares that were “delinquent for unpaid assessments” would be offered for sale to the highest bidder in the following months if not paid. The implication seems to be that some of the shareholders had not yet paid for their stock in full, and that a portion of the capital reportedly raised represented promissory notes.

Near the end of March 1864, drilling ceased after penetrating a bed of solid salt over 100 feet thick. The company claimed that their well was producing a discharge rate of 30 gallons per minute, which if correct, was fairly impressive, and the firm offered spirited estimates of the high salinity of the water issuing forth. With drilling completed, the next step in creating a well was to insert metal tubing, typically eight inches in diameter, into the bored hole, but as had occurred on multiple occasions during the course of the salt enterprise,



Check used by the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company. Image presented courtesy of Forest Parke Library & Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.



Equipment used in drilling operations. Adapted from U. S. Geological Survey Water Supply Paper No. 257.

a problem immediately arose. This time it involved leakage of surface water into the well tubing, which diluted the strength of the brine. This situation often was encountered during early salt explorations, especially with deep wells such as the one in Lansing. To abate the problem, it would be necessary to repack the tubing and line the shaft with brick. Ever the optimists, the stockholders, which by now numbered 66 individuals, began to order the equipment and supplies needed to manufacture salt from brine and touted their vision of Lansing becoming a “great salt manufacturing town.”

On July 16, 1864, the board of directors voted to enlarge the bore of their well “to a suitable size” to “admit successful tubing and packing,” at an estimated cost of \$1,200. The firm publicly announced this decision the following day and reiterated it in late August 1864. It is not clear if this work was ever accomplished. The last reported meeting of stockholders in the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company was held on February 11, 1865. Accompanying the published notice of the meeting was a request for all creditors to present their claims against the company immediately. Presumably the major topic on the meeting’s agenda was disbanding the company. The last check drawn on the company’s account was dated July 5, 1865.

The most obvious cause of the firm’s lack of success was the series of mishaps outlined above, but there were several other factors. Even if Lansing’s brine well had been productive, by 1862 (before the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company had begun drilling) nearly two dozen companies in the Saginaw River Valley were producing salt, and the number more than doubled by

the following year. One key reason for the success of the salt companies in the Saginaw River Valley was that the timber industry there was very strong. Production of salt from brine could be profitable if the necessary fuel was cheap enough, and waste refuse from sawmills was abundant and perfectly suited as fuel. Salt blocks in the Saginaw River Valley typically were operated in connection with sawmills. Thus, salt production was essentially a by-product of the lumber industry, which had long since moved beyond the Lansing area. It is unlikely that a salt manufactory in Lansing could have successfully competed with the established firms with their abundant, readily available fuel. With the passing of the timber industry (around 1895), salt production in the Saginaw River Valley dropped markedly.

The last published reference to the failed salt manufacturing operation appears in April 1866, at which time the Lansing city council appropriated funds to determine if water from the salt well could be raised to a height sufficient to supply Lansing with water. This proved to be impossible. But the well, rather unproductive, remained, and the property on which it was located was still owned by Messrs. Woodhouse and Butler. In 1869, the “mineral spring” craze swept across Michigan, and in the spring of 1870, the Lansing salt well was reincarnated as the Lansing Mineral and Magnetic Well. Someday its story may be told.

*Acknowledgement* Heidi Butler, Forest Parke Library & Archives, Capital Area District Libraries, graciously provided access to CADL’s collection of material relating to the Lansing Salt Manufacturing Company and scanned the image of the firm’s check that is reproduced here.

## Upcoming Events - Cont'd

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### Lansing Police Department: Celebrating 125 Years of Service...

service organization with a purpose to serve the people. The concept of community policing saw a strong start here in Lansing, one that's been all about making our community a safer place to live over the past 125 years."

The event will give residents a glimpse into the LPD's past and its evolution as a public service entity by showcasing artifacts from throughout the department's storied history, including objects that date back to the 1800s, retired Oldsmobile police cruisers from the 1950s, archival footage from the 1940s and 1950s, past uniforms and weaponry, oil-lit flashlights, and more. Residents can experience kid-centric activities and demonstrations of police technology, and even find opportunities to take a souvenir photograph.

This family-friendly event is open to the public, including free parking and admission, and will be kicked off with an opening ceremony that includes remarks from Mayor Andy Schor, LPD Chief of Police Michael Yankowski, and members of the LPD Board of Commissioners. In addition, a special Memorial Service will be held to recognize and commemorate all LPD members who have fallen in the line of duty over the past 125 years.

Volunteers are still needed to help oversee various historical displays for morning and afternoon shifts. Please contact Justin Moore at 517-483-4658 or [Justin.moore@lansingmi.gov](mailto:Justin.moore@lansingmi.gov) or Angela Matthews at [Angela.matthews@lansingmi.gov](mailto:Angela.matthews@lansingmi.gov) to sign up. For more information visit: <https://www.lansingmi.gov/398/Police-Department>

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### The German Backlash

*Tuesday, May 15 – 7:00 p.m.*

*Library of Michigan, 702 W. Kalamazoo St.*

Sara Kosiba, English Professor at Troy University in Alabama and biographer of Lansing's John Herrmann,

will be featured at a book release party and signing for a rediscovered Herrmann manuscript. Lansing's forgotten author, John Herrmann, pal of Hemingway and grandson of the founder of John Herrmann's Sons, a bespoke Lansing tailor, often turned to his hometown for inspiration in his writing. His recently discovered manuscript *Foreign Born* is a fictionalized account of the anti-German backlash in Lansing during WWI.

In *Foreign Born* Herrmann describes tar-and-featherings and other actions against German citizens who espoused pro-German feelings. Included in the manuscript is a nasty libel trial against the *Lansing State Journal* regarding their description of what led to the tar-and-feathering of a Lansing butcher.

The manuscript was rediscovered by Kosiba, who uncovered it while researching the author's life at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. Kosiba then shepherded the manuscript through to publication. The book release party is free and books will be available for sale.

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### Old Germantown Walking Tour

*Thursday, May 17 – 7:00 p.m.*

*LCC Administration Building, Board Room,  
610 Capitol Ave.*

A companion walking tour of Lansing's old Germantown neighborhood, adjacent to Lansing Community College, will be led by LCC history Professor David Siwik.

When German families immigrated to the United States, they often settled in close proximity, forming "Germantowns" in many communities. Germans who settled in Lansing gravitated to an area along Capitol and Seymour Streets. Many of the new immigrants also started businesses in downtown and Old Town, including such notables as Herrmann's, Kositchek's, and Bissinger's Flowers. Bissinger's was located where the Lansing Community College Administration Building now stands.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing  
P.O. Box 12095  
Lansing, MI 48901

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Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

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