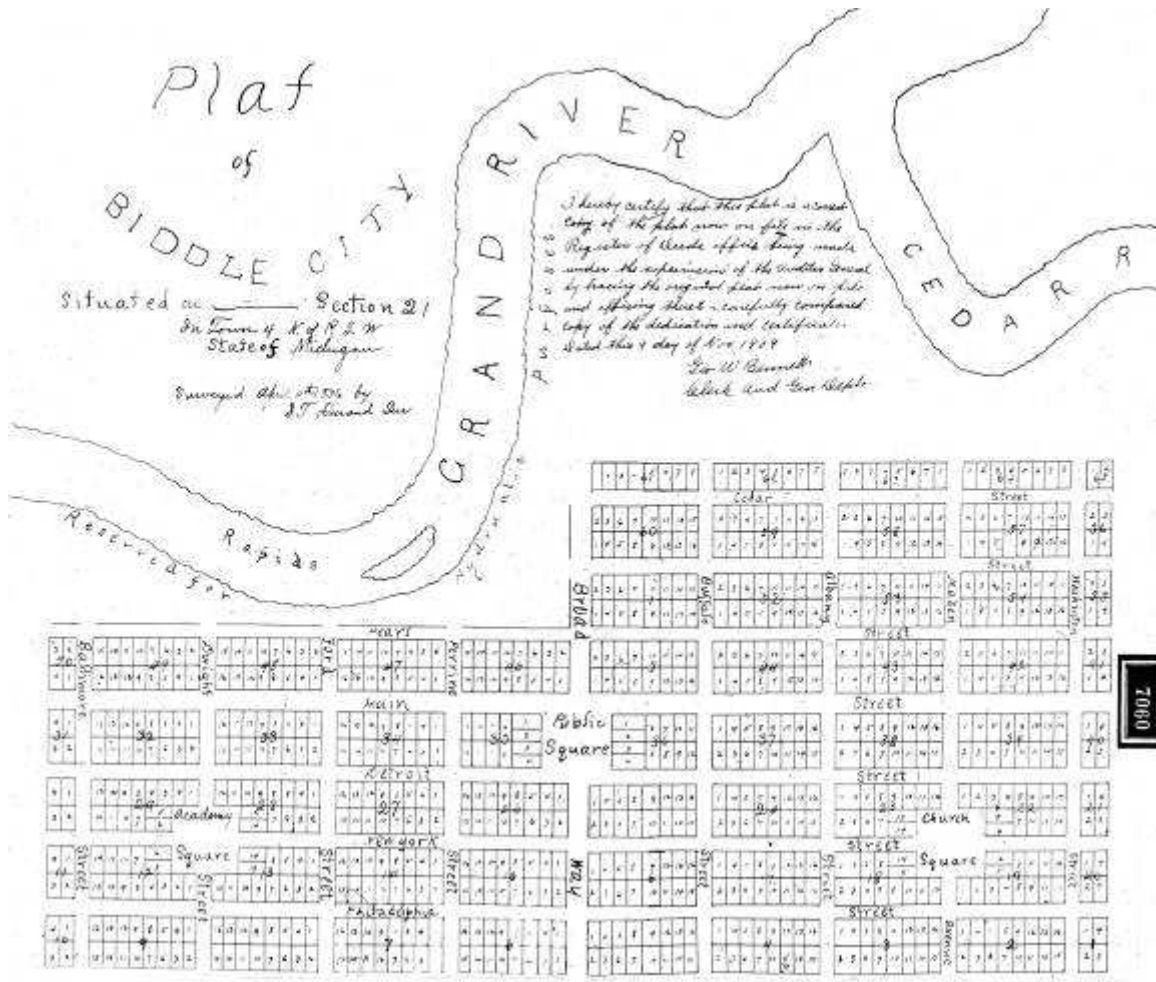


“Phantom City” Platted Within City Limits of Lansing 100 Years Ago

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Editor’s Note: This is the third of a series of articles on the history of Lansing written by J.P. Edmonds for The Lansing Capital News and appearing in each Saturday’s issue of the paper.

By J.P. Edmonds



In these days of additions, plats and subdivisions, probably few people in Lansing know that nearly 100 years ago two men conceived the idea of a “City on Paper,” and actually laid out and platted such a town on land that now lays entirely within the limits of Lansing. The men in whose minds the scheme originated were William and Jerry Ford. The records do not disclose the residence of the early “realtors” but is certain they hailed

from some town in New York, as the street names were mostly taken from cities and localities in that state.

When this phantom city was platted, the town of Lansing had never been thought of, as the plat was filed exactly 10 years before the capital was located here.

The name was selected for their new town was "Biddle City" in honor of Major John Biddle who had served in the war of 1812 with some honor and distraction, and who afterwards was connected with the Territorial Government of Michigan at Detroit.

Whether the major ever visited the site of the town named in his honor is quite doubtful, and if he had tried to find it he would have no doubt have experienced the same difficulty as some of the lot purchasers afterwards encountered in trying to locate the new city set down in the wilds of Central Michigan.

Filed in 1836

The original plat of Biddle City was filed April 19, 18736. Foe some reason, it was first recorded in Jackson county of this date, and afterwards filed at Mason on April 6, 1844. The plat is signed by Jerry and William Ford and was acknowledged before J.C. Bailey, justice of the peace. It is also attested under the date of April 11, 1836, by J.T. Durand, surveyor, who was evidently a most excellent draughtsman as the plat is executed in a very artistic manner in India ink and is today as plain and bright as when made although nearly one hundred years have passed away. Anyone interested will find the plat on Page 1 of Liber 6 of the Deeds in Register office, Mason.

The land covered by the plat comprised almost all of the south 1-2 of section 21, all of which now lies within the city limits, and at the present time would be bound as follows: North by the Grand river and Grant Trunk R.R.; east by Bailey st., south by Mt. Hope av., and west by a line ten rods west of Sycamore st. The plat was divided into 65 blocks and each block, except a few small ones into 16 lots. The streets were all laid out at right angles five rods wide, except the main avenue which was seven rods in width, running north and south from the river to what is now Mt. Hope ave.

"Broadway"

This street was called "Broadway" and was almost identical with what is now South Washington av.

The east and west streets called Cedar, Chicago, Pearl, Main, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia and Boston.

The north and south thoroughfares were Washington, Mason, Albany, Buffalo, Ford, Dwight and Baltimore.

The Fords evidently had some excellent ideas as to how a city should be planned as they reserved ample space for public purposes.

In the western part a large space was provided for an “Academy” square. In the center intersected by Broadway was the “Public Square,” and in the eastern part ground was reserved for religious use and called “Church Square”. They also has a vision of future development in a manufacturing sense as all the south band of the Grand river lying within the city was reserved for “Hydraulic Purposes.”

Some of the land so dedicated now comprises Moores Park. At this point the river descended somewhat abruptly forming the rapids. The fact that this water power was afterwards developed leads us to think that the Fords vision was not so faulty after all, even though his city went into discard.

The Fords were good salesmen as soon after filing the plat their agents went through Central New York praising the beautiful country in which Biddle City was located and setting forth the profit to be gained and the harvest to be reaped by all those fortunate enough to get in of the “ground floor” and become an owner of a lot in the wonderful new town.

Enthusiasm High

Many sales were made. One account tells of certain locality in central New York where enthusiasm ran high that 16 young men invested and started west to inspect the town and incidentally to make their fortunes. This company reached Detroit by the canal and lake route and upon arrival there were much surprised to learn that no one had ever heard of Biddle City. A few became discouraged and returned home. Some pushed on through the wilderness arriving at a settlement that is now the city of Pontiac. Some of the party purchased land and settled there, where their descendants still live.

At Pontiac they still could find no one who could direct them to Biddle City, but did find persons who could inform them where the junction of the Grand and Cedar rivers was located. With this information two of the party pushed onwards and finally arrived at a small settlement now Dewitt. Here they found a man who had heard vaguely about the new town. He directed them to another settler, who had established his family on the north bank of the Grand river about five miles west of our present city. They reached the house in the woods late at night and were much please to learn that the settler knew all about the new town and would guide them to it.

Reach High Ground

Early the next morning they started out through the dense woods, and after several hours of hard traveling reached high ground on the north bank of the Grand River near what is now the intersection of Washington av. And Main st. Pointing southward over the low lands lying along the two rivers their guide exclaimed “There gentlemen is Biddle City.”

The promised land was indeed at last reached but oh! what a difference compared to what they expected to see. The season was early spring. The rivers had overflowed their banks and the "beautiful city" with wide streets, public squares, etc., was covered with water.

No doubt the motive in the Ford mind when they conceived this "paper city" was profit. Speculation in western lands was rife. "Wild Cat" banks were the order of the day and every conceivable scheme was resorted to for catching the unwary and separating them from their money. So the Fords only followed the trend of the times. The records do not show that a single purchaser ever took possession of his lot and probably very few ever saw the site of the town. The land was afterward sold for taxes and the plat vacated thus putting an end to "Fords dream," except for the musty old record in the register's office at Mason.

But one advantage ever accrued to Lansing that can be traced to this venture. Every lot buyer lost money invested but some of them recognized the advantages of the new country, purchased land and afterwards were numbered among Lansing's most useful and progressive citizens.