

Historical Background on Plymouth Township

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In the early nineteenth century, the lure of property, farming, and freedom brought brave and determined New Englanders to the Michigan Territory. The earliest pioneers to arrive in the northwest corner of Wayne County found a lush, heavily wooded expanse comprising a variety of timber and rich, diversified soil. There were numerous springs and brooks and a prime location where two streams – one from the north and the other from the southeast – meet to form the main branch of the Rouge River.¹ The region was also abundant with variations of woodland, avian, and predatory animals² which produced a wealth hunting opportunities for early settlers to obtain meat and hide. The first pioneers to reach Plymouth Township came as early as summer in 1824.³ Many of these initial arrivals purchased property, but moved on to other areas throughout Michigan Territory before settling. The earliest pioneers that began to colonize the region arrived in the spring of 1825.⁴ John Tibbits and George Starkweather were among these initial settlers and have both been credited to be the first to arrive in the township. By late 1825, several colonists were living in the township and had effectually cleared land, raised cabins, and organized for planting crops and erecting barns the following spring.⁵

Dangers for the first settlers were seemingly limited to poor weather conditions and wild animals. Some feared the Native Americans that occasionally wandered through the area, but they were few and relatively harmless. H.M. Utley describes the Native Americans in the region as, “the seedy vagabond variety who never dreamed of taking a scalp and cared for

¹David Clarkson, “Pioneer Sketches,” in *Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan Vol. 1*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 509. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=527>)

² J.S. Tibbets, “Wild Animals of Wayne County,” in *Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan Vol. 1*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 403-404. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=421>)

³ Clarkson, 509. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=527>)

⁴ H.M. Utley, “The First Settlement,” in *Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan Vol. 1*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 444. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=462>)

⁵ Ibid, 445. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=463>)

nothing so much as for enough to eat and plenty of fire-water.” Far more imposing antagonists, however, were the bears and wolves in the area. They were substantial threats to both settlers and their livestock. Unlike the Native Americans passing through the settlements, these predators were aggressive, abundant, and living within the region.⁶

During the spring of 1826, residents began to cut roads as more settlers came to the township. “Neighbors” would come together, travelling up to eight miles, to assist new occupants with cabin and barn raisings. Abram B. Markham, one of the first settlers in the township, aided new colonists with these initial laborious tasks. He owned a seven acre farm where he grew corn, potatoes, and pumpkins that yielded eighty bushels of potatoes and over one hundred bushels of corn per acre in the region’s rich soil.⁷ In the fall of 1826, Markham built the first mill in the township which adeptly ground corn and grain for the residing settlers. That same autumn, Luther Lincoln built the first saw mill in the township located along the Rouge River. Outside of the township, the closest mills resided in Detroit and Pontiac. As such, Markham and Lincoln had monopolized the milling business in town and the surrounding region during the late 1820’s.⁸

A township organization meeting was held in February 1827 at John Tibbits home where a name for the township was to be discussed and finally decided upon. “LeRoy” had been initially chosen⁹ and “Pekin” was proposed as it corresponded to the Chinese theme of adjoining towns, Nankin and Canton.¹⁰ However, it was William Bartow that proposed the name “Plymouth” and it agreed upon by the council¹¹ for its patriotic connotation¹². On April 12, 1827, legislative passed an act with the approval of Governor Lewis Cass that the region “shall

⁶ Ibid, 447. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=465>)

⁷ A.B. Markham, “Early History of the Township of Plymouth,” in *Report of the Pioneer Society of the State of Michigan Vol. 2*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2015), 554-556. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=568>)

⁸ Ibid, 555. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=569>)

⁹ Markham, 559. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=573>)

¹⁰ Utley, 446. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=464>)

¹¹ Markham, 559. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=573>)

¹² Utley, 446. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849470;view=1up;seq=464>)

compose the Township of Plymouth.”¹³ The following May, the first elections of Plymouth Township were held in John Tibbits home. Township officers were elected and later that spring, a military company organized for the town (Markham, 559-560).¹⁴

During the 1830’s Plymouth Township was bustling with activity. The township was at its peak geographical size by 1830, but would soon experience significant alterations to its territory that would continue through to the end of the nineteenth century. Plymouth Township consisted of two adjoining regions – Plymouth South containing Canton, and Plymouth North encompassing the towns of Plymouth, Waterford, and Northville. Waterford, also known as Meads Mills, was located on the Rouge River two miles between the towns of Plymouth and Northville. Founded by Dyer and Gannett Ramsdell in March 1837, Waterford quickly developed into a hub of economic activity in the township. A large flour mill was built and stationed on the river and became the nucleus of a budding colony. With three copper shops, a saw mill, a foundry, and the flour mill churning out 200 barrels a day, Waterford was set to become the township’s industrial powerhouse.¹⁵ However, two disasters within a decade would seal the fate of the town. Fire destroyed the first and then a second flour mill at Waterford. While other surviving industries in town continued to on for a few years after, the town’s core was lost without the mill and the growing and competitive industries in Plymouth and Northville drew people away from Waterford indefinitely.¹⁶ Waterford’s demise was an unfortunate loss to stream of the township’s economy and Plymouth Township would suffer further, geographical, losses in 1834 when Plymouth South broke away to become Canton Township and by Northville seceded from Plymouth North in 1898.

The abysmal state of roads presented a major challenge for the early settlers of Plymouth Township. The land was heavily forested and much work was done in 1826 by a few

¹³ Markham, 555. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=569>)

¹⁴ Ibid, 559-560. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=574>)

¹⁵ “Rose-Like Waterford,” *Northville Record* (Northville, MI), April 14, 1899. (Digital copy: <http://www.northvillehistory.org/dtSearch/DTSearch/NorthvilleRecord/1870-1899S/1899-04-14-0001.pdf#xml=http://www.northvillehistory.org/Northville.asp?cmd=pdfhits&DocId=4968&Index=C%3a%5cinetpub%5cwwwroot%5cIDX%5c1870%2d1899S&HitCount=2&hits=db+bae+&hc=21&req=+Waterford>)

¹⁶ Ibid.

hardy men to clear trees away for primitive roads and temporary bridges over the abundant streams in the area. Although A.B. Markham mentions the existence of the Dix Road when he first arrived in the area, most of the other trails were barely passable for those on foot not to mention carts pulled by oxen or horses. According to Markham, it took four days with oxen going through the woods to get to Detroit and back from Plymouth Township.¹⁷ Yet despite the awful conditions of the roads, in 1827 he started “a light team to carry passengers and freight to and from Detroit.”¹⁸

As additional settlers arrived in the township to raise crops or enter the lumber business, the roads slowly improved and farmers pushed for a way to carry large loads of grain and vegetables to markets in the city of Detroit. Too often their produce would be bruised or spoiled as a result of the rough and lengthy trip. The abundance of trees for lumber in the area led to the emergence of wooden plank roads. As early as 1837 the state of Michigan passed an act to incorporate the Detroit, Plymouth and Ann Arbor Turnpike Company which planned to build a plank road from Detroit to Ann Arbor, running through the village and township of Plymouth.¹⁹ In 1848 a general Plank Road Law was passed in the Michigan Legislature allowing for the incorporation of a multitude of private Plank Road companies.²⁰ Roads built in accordance with this law were required to be “two to four rods wide, sixteen feet of which was to be ‘a good, smooth, permanent road, well drained by ditches on either side.’ At least eight feet of the road was to be covered with plank three inches thick.”²¹ On February 26 of that same year, Mr. Noyes gave notice that on a future date he would introduce a bill to incorporate the Plymouth and Detroit plank road company.²² The Plymouth Plank Road was chartered on March 5, 1850 and an advertisement in the *Detroit Free Press* for May 28 of that year announced that books of subscription for stock in the company would be available at various

¹⁷ Markham, 552. (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=566>)

¹⁸ Ibid 561 (Digital copy: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024849463;view=1up;seq=575>)

¹⁹ LAWS OF MICHIGAN. (1837, Apr 18). *Semi Weekly Free Press (1837-1837)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/559871718?accountid=411>

²⁰ Legislative proceedings. (1848, Mar 23). *Detroit Free Press (1848-1851)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/560022666?accountid=411>

²¹ Philip P. Mason, “The Plank Road Craze: A Chapter in the History of Michigan’s Highways”, *Learn @ Seeking Michigan*, (http://seekingmichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Learn_Statehood_NerdRoom_Mason.pdf, accessed 21 March 2018)

²² Legislative proceedings. (1848, Mar 01). *Detroit Free Press (1848-1851)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/560034354?accountid=411>

locations in the area.²³ The length of the road was estimated to be eighteen miles and would run from the village of Plymouth to Grand River in the city of Detroit where it would merge with that street going into downtown Detroit. Four toll gates were erected at regular intervals with gate No. 4 located at the north end of Main Street in the village of Plymouth. Ninety year old Marcellus L. Kinyon recalled in a newspaper interview in 1940 that he could travel to Detroit in three hours on the plank road.²⁴

All plank roads were subject to decay and the need for constant upkeep and the Plymouth Plank Road was no exception. The Plymouth Plank was in its waning years just as the railroads arrived in Plymouth Township, ushering in a more efficient way to move people and goods from farmlands to the city. In February 1867 a group of prominent citizens of the area met in the woods on Johathan Sheerer's property in the township for the official cutting of the first tie for the Detroit and Howell Railroad (later the Detroit, Lansing and Lake Michigan line.)²⁵ Building bridges and putting down track for this east/west route continued for several years while at the same time the Holly and Monroe Railroad (later the Holly, Wayne and Monroe line), a north/south route was also under construction in Plymouth Township. In 1871 both railroads were complete and area residents could easily travel in comfort to Lansing, Detroit or Monroe. A cattle yard was constructed by the railroad in the Village of Plymouth to contain the livestock from the rural township before they were loaded onto the railway cars.²⁶ Railroad mergers took place over the next few decades and in the final days of the nineteenth century, the Pere Marquette Railway System became the primary railroad serving the Plymouth area.²⁷ In the decade after World War I, Pere Marquette was purchased by the C & O Railroad but both passenger and freight service continued uninterrupted.²⁸ One of the selling points for the 1957

²³ Classified ad 2 -- no title. (1850, May 28). *Detroit Free Press (1848-1851)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/560047898?accountid=411>

²⁴ "Marcellus L. Kinyon, City's Oldest Resident, Celebrates 90th Birthday", *Plymouth Mail*, August 23, 1940, p.1.

²⁵ Special Correspondence of The Detroit,Free Press. (1867, Feb 08). FROM PLYMOUTH. *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/748752041?accountid=411>

²⁶ THE RAILROADS. (1884, Nov 21). *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/561532556?accountid=411>

²⁷ THE NEW PERE MARQUETTE SYSTEM. (1899, Dec 27). *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/563109906?accountid=411>

²⁸ Special to The New, York Times. (1929, Apr 07). PERMITS THE C.&O. TO BUY MARQUETTE. *New York Times (1923-Current File)* Retrieved from: <https://search.proquest.com/docview/104993586?accountid=411>

real estate ads for the new subdivision of Lake Pointe Village in Plymouth Township was that the C & O had three commuter trips daily between Detroit and Plymouth.²⁹ In 1971 Amtrak formed and took over all passenger service from C & O. The C & O became part of the Chessie System and in 1987 was merged into the present CSX Transportation which still provides freight service through the area.

While the railroads served as a way to get both crops and manufactured goods to city markets, they didn't offer great local service to those commuting from home to jobs in the small towns springing up in western Wayne County. This void was filled in 1899 by the Detroit, Plymouth & Northville Railroad, also called the Interurban. Residents of Northville Township, Plymouth Township, Wayne and other communities could travel from Northville to Wayne and change trains for the short commute to either Ann Arbor or Detroit with frequent stops along the way. Trains stopped in the center of the Village of Plymouth every hour. The trip from Northville to Plymouth cost a nickel in the early days of operation and then increased to a dime.

³⁰ The D.U.R. (Detroit Urban Railway) absorbed this smaller electric trolley line but interurban service continued until 1924.

The rise of automobile travel was a contributing factor in the demise of the electric railway as well as the improvement of roads in the township. A paved road connected the villages of Plymouth and Northville by the early 1920's. Plymouth Road, formerly the Plymouth Plank road, had been gravel up until 1918 when concrete was approved for the seventeen mile stretch to connect Detroit to Plymouth.³¹

The move in Plymouth Township from farming to residential community started slowly with a population of 624 in 1900³², but picked up speed with several large developments in the 1930s. The Detroit House of Corrections began construction in the Township in 1930. According to the *Plymouth Mail*, "The moving of the prison to Plymouth will bring quite a number of families to

²⁹ May 26, 1957 (page 23 of 139). (1957, May 26). *Detroit Free Press (1923-1999)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1818123589?accountid=411>

³⁰ "Karl Starkweather Tell of Early Days of Trolley Car in Plymouth". (3 Oct. 1947). *The Plymouth Mail*, p18.

³¹ "May Replace Gravel on Plymouth Road with Concrete" (1 March 1918). *The Plymouth Mail*, p.1

³² "Statistics of Population", *The Twelfth Census: 1900*

(<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101067871937;view=1up;seq=240>: accessed 15 Feb. 2018)

this locality and no doubt many of them will find homes in Plymouth where they will find a warm welcome...”³³

The Burrough’s Adding Machine Company plant opened on Plymouth Road in 1938. After going through several name changes, the Burrough Inc. location is the company’s oldest facility in continual use. This manufacturing center was recognized in 1959 by the people of the Plymouth community for providing over 3,000 jobs to area residents.³⁴ Incidentally, the administration building at the Detroit House of Corrections and the Burrough’s plant were both designed by famed architect Albert Kahn.

While the move to the suburbs of western Wayne County began in the decade of the 30’s, the real influx of families to Plymouth Township took place in the 1940’s and later. According to the 1940 Federal Census of Population, Plymouth Township had 2,270 residents. By the 1950 Census, it had increased 117.8% to a total of 4,945.³⁵ Several large subdivisions were developed in the 50’s which helped boost the township’s population to 8,364 by 1960, an increase of almost 70% in ten years.³⁶

Petition drives to incorporate all or parts of Plymouth Township into the City of Plymouth took place between 1955 and 1960. In 1955 the city voted to annex 85 acres of land referred to as the Cassidy property and this passed. At the same time a vote was held to annex the remaining area of Plymouth Township. City residents passed this vote but township residents defeated it by a vote of ten to one.³⁷ Additional attempts to annex the township also met with strong resistance from township residents. On April 19, 1977 the township of Plymouth became the Charter Township of Plymouth. It was roughly one quarter of its original size from 1825. Today the transition from an agricultural community to a residential area with industrial and recreational zones is almost complete. The only remaining farming area is a

³³ “Building Program at Prison Farm is well underway” (25 July 1930) *Plymouth Mail*, p.1.

³⁴ “Famed ‘Citizen’ Gives 3,000 jobs” (22 March 1959) *Plymouth Mail*, p.1

³⁵ “Characteristics of the Population” *Census of Population: 1960*

(<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/imgsrv/download/pdf?id=umn.31951p00704298v;orient=0;size=100;seq=730;num=24-22;attachment=0>: accessed 15 Feb. 2018)

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Citizens Research Council of Michigan. *The Proposed Incorporation of Plymouth Township; an Analysis of the Alternatives*. 1960., p.2 (<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015007549077;view=1up;seq=1>: accessed 20 Feb. 2018)

small portion of land in the far northwestern part of the township. Even that space disappears in future land use maps.³⁸

³⁸ Charter Township of Plymouth. Future Land Use map
(<http://www.plymouthtp.org/Maps/Future%20Land%20Use%20Map.pdf>: accessed 27 Feb. 2018)