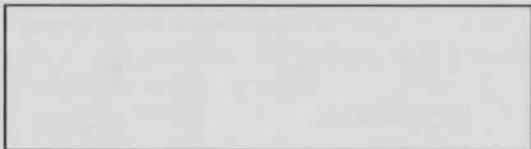


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FROM THE WILDERNESS—BRIGHTON Part 3

Stagecoach companies operating on the Grand River Trail in the late 1830s drove their horses over rutted paths through the wilderness. Following statehood in 1837, Federal funds for road building were reduced. Michigan had to assume the task of opening the interior to settlers. Contracts were given to cut paths through the timber with the stipulation stumps had to be removed or cut short enough to allow passage of wagons and coaches.

Taking the path of least resistance, the Trail often circumnavigated hills and avoided swamps while following surveyed section lines as closely as possible.

In 1847, Detroit was the Capitol of Michigan. To provide a more representative government to the population developing to the west, it was determined the seat of state business should be moved to a more central site. Despite the promotion of several cities as the best location, especially beneficial to their own growth as the Capitol, a wilderness site in Ingham County was selected.

Many congressmen lived in Detroit. To attend to government affairs it was obvious a better highway had to be constructed for the 80 mile route. A better roads program was imperative. The Detroit—Lansing Plank Road Company was one of several given the task of improving this vital link. Sensing an investment opportunity many plank road companies were formed. The Detroit/Howell Plank Road Company was contracted to lay planks three inches thick and eight feet long across stringers which paralleled the road. The cost of construction was ameliorated by the lumber from clearing the road used as the planks. Their investment would be paid off by toll gates sited at strategic locations. An 1859 map locates one south of Ore Creek on the Grand River Trail (south of Cross Street). To avoid the toll some travelers went by the way of Cross Street and followed the path which reached West Main. To alter this practice the gate keeper moved the gate north of Cross Street. Another toll gate was located east of Pleas-

ant Valley Road on Grand River managed by Elihu Russell. (An 1875 map indicates a toll gate on the west side of Academy Drive at East Grand River, perhaps kept by property owner, James Albro, a veteran of the Civil War. Research indicates this to be a very late date for a toll gate.)

Improvement of local trails benefited the several taverns—Dutcher, Bigham, Euler, Dorr, Dean, etc.—serving settlers in the area; who would also benefit with improved transportation of their agricultural products to eastern markets. Their produce and stock would be fresher and could be shipped in larger quantities.

However, rotting planks needed frequent repair, not always in a sufficiently satisfactory manner for the toll payers. Before long gravel was filling in the gaps in the plank roads. Not much later gravel roads were the norm. Railroad construction was the final nail in the demise of toll roads.

Half way between Detroit and the Capitol, with dozens of wagons passing each day, Brighton citizens sensed an improved opportunity for commerce. One of these, Benjamin Cushing, built a two story hotel at the northeast corner of Grand River and Main Street. Food, shelter, beverage and respite for horses made it a very popular stopping site. Commercial and professional borders assured Cushing his hostelry was fully occupied. Among them were a blacksmith, mason, physician and carpenter.

(Compiled by Marieanna Bair from Bill Pless writings; census records; A Brief History of Michigan by John Kern; 1880 Livingston County History by Ellis.)

Additions/corrections requested. 810-229-6402