

A DETROIT ARCHITECT'S JOURNAL

A DETROIT ARCHITECT'S JOURNEY TO HELP REBUILD THE MOTOR CITY

MONDAY, AUGUST 8, 2016



Eastside Venice: The Fox Creek Canals

June 12, 2017 - Because of the popularity of this blog entry, we've enhanced it with even more historical data. Enjoy!

While touring Detroit's Eastside, I decided to take Alter Road south until it ends at the Detroit River. I found myself paralleling an old canal, eventually using a sharply curving bridge to cross it. The change in direction placed me parallel to the Detroit river, forced me to pass an abandon marina and ended my journey inside Riverfront-Lakewood Park.



What I discovered was a community where canals and streets are equally woven into the neighborhood's fabric. Like Venice, I found homes with garages that were made for parking a car just as easy as for parking a boat. I found a place where kayaking to the corner store was easier then getting there by car. I found a community deeply connected to Detroit's maritime roots. It's a place where the ease of picturing its past beauty is equaled by the ease of picturing its redevelopment potential.

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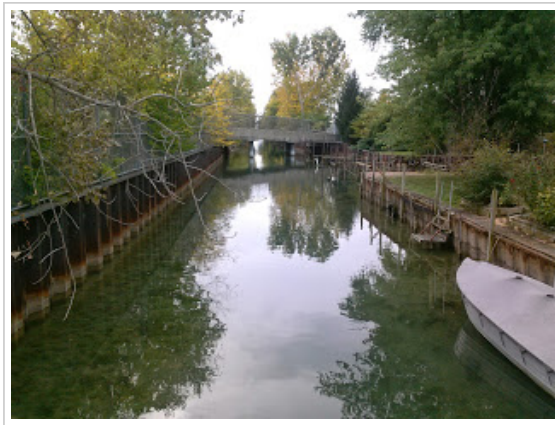


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Burying myself in research, I emerged with a new understanding of how this unique area of Detroit came to be. I hope you find the timeline below enlightening and use it to also discover a part of Detroit that many have forgotten.

1600s

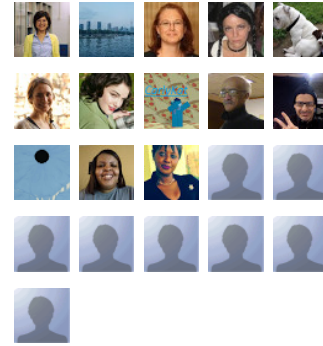
- In 1669, Frenchman Adrien Joilet canoes the Straits of Detroit making him a candidate for being the first non-native to travel through the straits.

- In 1679 the first ship, The Griffon, reaches the mouth of the Detroit River.



Settlements along the Detroit River, circa 1702
(Huron, French, Loup, and Ottawa)

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ABOUT ME



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Rob is a practicing registered architect in the states of Michigan and Pennsylvania. He holds Master degrees in Architecture and Urban Planning from the University of Michigan and a Bachelor of Science in Engineering from Princeton University.

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LABELS

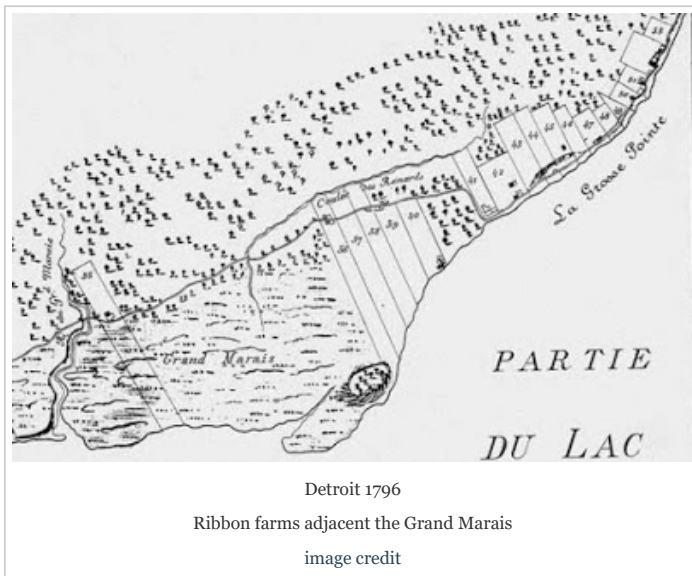
- AFCI (1)
- African Architecture (14)
- African-American Hospitals (1)

1700s

- In 1701, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac steps ashore at what is today Hart Plaza and founds the City of Detroit. He's accompanied by 50 settlers and 50 soldiers. Fort Pontchartrain begins construction.

- A Native American trail connects Fort Pontchartrain and Grosse Pointe. The trail parallels a creek where it eventually connects to the Milk River in Grosse Pointe. The trail would later become Jefferson Avenue.

- In 1712, A group of Native Americans (comprised of Fox, Outagamie and Mascoutin tribes) travel south and lay siege to Fort Ponchartrain. The siege fails after 5 days. They retreat to place near what is today Mariner's Park and the location of Windmill Lighthouse. The French and their Native American allies counter attack and massacre over 1000 Native American warriors over 6 days. The nearby creek becomes known as the Fox Creek.



- French ribbon farms run perpendicular from the Detroit river and across the Fox Creek. Present day street names reflect the farm owners: Moran, Holbrook, Alter. The farms were located on marsh lands known as the Grand Marais (the Great Swamp).

- By 1750, the area is sparsely settled by Native Americans and French Settlers. The Grand Marais is primarily used as public area by Native Americans for trading and treaty signing.

- Two grist mill windmills are located in the Grand Marais at: Connor Creek and Fox Creek (Mariner's Park)

-Who controls Detroit?

1754-1763

The French until the French Indian War/Seven Years War ends

1763-1796

The British until the Americans take over after the American Revolution

Albert Kahn (1)

Ann Arbor to Detroit High-speed Rail (1)

Ashanti (1)

Billboard (1)

Biodiesel (1)

Black History (13)

Boston Edison (1)

Casinos (1)

Cathedral Ceilings (1)

Charles Terrace (1)

Clippert (1)

Coal-fired Residential Boilers (1)

Cornerstone Estates (1)

Demolition (1)

Derby Hill (1)

Detroit Future City (2)

Detroit Historic Homes (2)

Detroit Public Library (1)

Detroit Public LIghting Department (2)

Detroit Salt Mines (1)

Detroit Stars (1)

Detroit Strategic Framework Plan (2)

Dorais Park Velodrome (1)

East English Village (1)

Egypt (1)

Emerald Springs (1)

Ethiopia (3)

Fire Houses (1)

Ford Freeway Bus Loading Stations (1)

Fox Creek (1)

Freemasons (1)

GFCI (1)

Ghana (3)

Golf (1)

Green Building (1)

Guardian Building (1)

Hazen Pingree (1)

HERS Rating (1)

HIghland Park (1)

Highland Park Reservoir (1)

Hines Park (1)

horse racing (1)

Jefferies East (1)

Kentucky Derby (1)

King (1)

M1 Rail Project (1)

Mali (1)

Michigan Central Railway Tunnel (1)

Minnock and Powell (1)

1796-1812

The Americans finally take control until the War of 1812

1812

The Americans briefly surrender to the British during the War of 1812

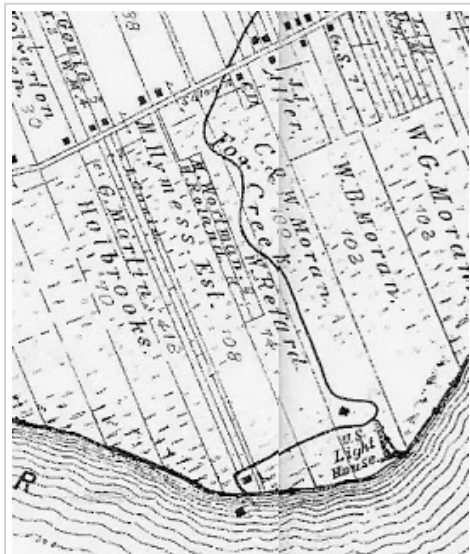
1813

The Americans regain control at the end of the War of 1812

1800s

- Michigan becomes a Territory in 1805.

- With the arrival of the first steam ship in 1818 and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, trade along the Detroit River increases. Detroit's population grows from 9,102 in 1830 to 1.5 million in 1930.



Fox Creek and adjacent farms in 1878

image credit

Mistersky Power Plant (1)

Moonlight Towers (1)

National Negro League (1)

Nkrumah (1)

One Woodward (1)

Pennsylvania Hospital (1)

Pennycress (1)

Poetry (1)

Public Housing (3)

Ride-It Skate Board Park (1)

Roesick Stadium (1)

Rogell (1)

RTA (1)

Sealing Duct Connections (1)

Silent Automatic Oil Boiler (1)

Skybridge (1)

South Africa (1)

Substation Architecture (1)

Sudan (1)

Sudan-Sahelian Architecture (1)

Tanzania (1)

The Potato Patch Plan (1)

Theater (1)

Timbuktu (1)

Urban Agriculture (1)

Vacant Homes (1)

Warren West (1)

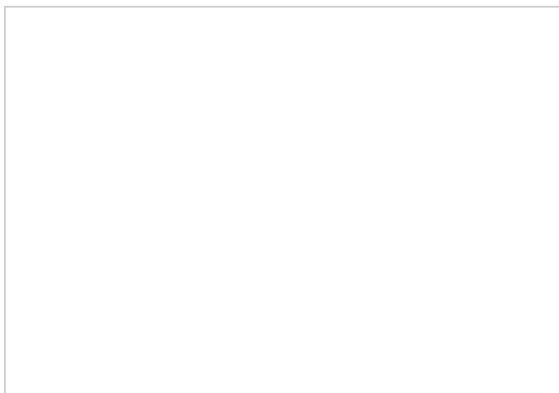
Zanzibar (1)

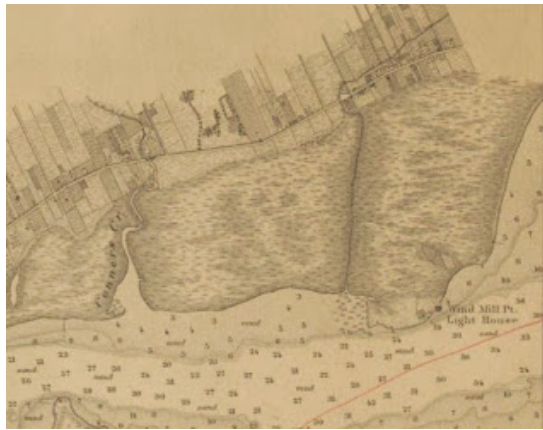
Zimbabwe (1)

- In 1837, the site of an old windmill become the site of Windmill Lighthouse.

- Mud makes Jefferson Avenue particularly difficult to travel by horse. In 1851, private investors are allowed to cover the road between Detroit and Grosse Pointe in planks in return for charging tolls. Now privately controlled, a toll is collected to pass over the Fox Creek bridge.

-A portion of the original plank road, known as Hull's Trace, is visible today between Monroe and Trenton off of US Turnpike Road.





Detroit 1876
image credit

- Grosse Pointe becomes Detroit's foremost summer resort. In 1874, in order to accommodate Detroit's expansion, the draining of the Grand Marais begins. The Grand Marais is found to have a clay bottom. William Moran forms the Windmill Pointe Development Co. He hopes to develop land for Detroit's wealthy to build summer homes. Using drainages ditches, windmill pumps, trash from Detroit and dirt from the river bottom, work begins. Nicknamed, Moran's Folly, the project fails. Subsequent investors are successful.

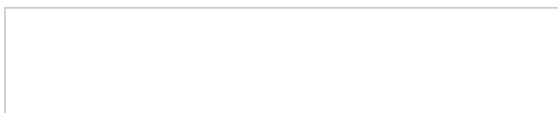


A view of future Grosse Pointe Park and Fox Creek swimmers at the Detroit river. The Windmill Lighthouse is visible at bottom left.
image credit

- In 1876, a road was built from Jefferson Avenue to the Windmill Lighthouse and the lighthouse was rebuilt to meet the increased traffic along the Detroit river.

- In 1880, the Wayne County Drain Commission authorizes the conversion of Fox Creek to a canal.

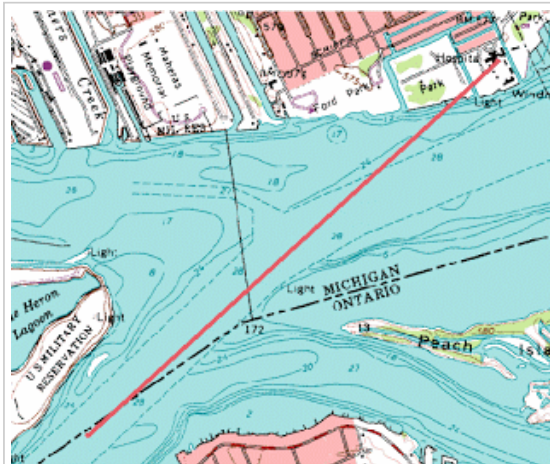
- In 1891, the Jefferson Avenue Railway between Detroit and Grosse Pointe opens. That same year, range towers are constructed near Windmill Lighthouse to guide ships traveling down the Detroit River channel.





Two Range Towers

image credit



Aligning the range tower lights from within the Detroit River Channel (see red line) assured ships that they were centered within the channel

image credit

- In 1892, Mayor Hazen Pingree leads a campaign to remove tolls along travel routes between Detroit and Grosse Pointe. By 1896, most of the tolls are removed.

- The first structures built in the Grand Marais were two race tracks: The Detroit Driving Club (1894-1911) and the Detroit Jockey Club (1894-1919). The brick pavers along Marlborough that marked the entrance to the Detroit Jockey Club remain today. Learn more about these tracks by reading the following blog: [The Forgotten Derby Winners](#).

1900s

- In 1903, the Village of Fairfield incorporates in order to petition the Township for funds to pave Jefferson Avenue. After a lawsuit, Fairview wins funding.

- In 1906, Jefferson Avenue is paved in bricks and the Fox and Conner Creek bridges are rebuilt. Tolls are removed.

- In 1907, the City of Detroit begins the process of annexing the Village of Fairview amid concern that sewage dumped into the Fox Creek will contaminate the quality of the City's drinking water. Legislation is written and delivered to Lansing in early 1907. An error in the bill's wording allows Detroit to annex only 2/3rds of Fairview (to Wayburn/Alter). In May 1907, Grosse Pointe Park quickly forms between Grosse Pointe and the new Detroit border preventing the correction of the error. In October 2017, Detroit completes the

annexation of the remaining portion of Fairview.



Postcard postmarked in 1914 depicting view of the Detroit Motor Boat Club, Windmill Lighthouse and steel range towers used for guiding ships (top, center) along the Detroit River
image credit

- In 1907, William Klenk builds a hotel and creates new waterfront housing opportunities by building three canals where the Fox Creek Canal meets the Detroit River. He creates Klenk and Harbor Islands.

- In 1907, the range towers guiding ships along the Detroit River are rebuilt using steel.

- Between 1913 and 1918, the Detroit Motor Boat Club (former location of Klenk's hotel) and the General Aeroplane Company shared the lands adjacent to the Windmill Lighthouse. The General Aeroplane Company would be Detroit's first commercial airplane building enterprise.



Fox Creek 1917
image credit

- During the 1920s, the community of boathouses and house boats along the Fox Creek Canal at Klenk and Harbor Island continues to grow.

- In 1925, the Fox Creek canal is built. It runs from the Detroit River to a point north of Jefferson Avenue where the canal flows into underground pipes that run under Jefferson Avenue.

- In 1930, the Fox Creek Backwater gates are built at Jefferson Avenue near Ashland Street to alleviate flooding problems along Ashland Street. The gates funnel water to an underground sewer which connects to the Connor Creek pumping station. The design captures storm water north of Jefferson Avenue before it flows south flooding areas adjacent the Fox Creek Canal and the Detroit River. The gates

also forces water from the river to flow towards Jefferson Avenue so that it can be used to flush the new underground sewer.



The Fox Creek as it passes under
Jefferson Avenue

- During prohibition, a period which would last from 1917 to 1933, Michigan becomes the primary entry of illegal alcohol. 75% of all illegal alcohol entering the US comes through Michigan. This area along the Fox Creek Canal becomes one of many smuggling points.

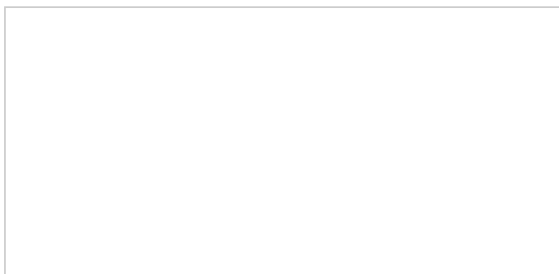
- In 1930, the ship guiding range lights are removed and a new 125 bed US Marine hospital is built at present day Mariner's Park. In order to expand the land area, the City of Detroit's Engineering Department fills in submerged portions of the site.



Postcard of Marine Hospital and Windmill Lighthouse
image credit

- In 1933, the lighthouse is again torn down and the present standing Windmill Lighthouse is built.

- In the 1940s, using US government incentives to create housing for veterans returning home from the war, Lakeside Trailer Court opens adjacent to the hospital and lighthouse.





Postcard depicting Lakeside Trailer Court

image credit

- On October 24, 1958, a plane crashes at Ashland Street near the Detroit river. Six (6) crew members are killed, three (3) homes destroyed, 40 homes damaged, and two (2) women treated for burns:

The four-engine delta-winged plane was on a training mission, flying from Lincolnshire, England, to Lincoln, Neb. Crippled, it dived from 45,000 feet, passing over hospitals and schools on its path to the ground. The impact was so hard that searchers dug 70 feet in an unsuccessful effort to find the plane's cockpit. The largest piece of wreckage found was a 6-foot section of wing that landed on a porch.

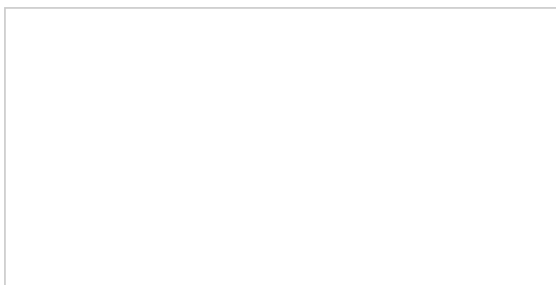


Site of plane crash in 1958

image credit

- Between 1954 and 1960, 70,000 jobs are lost within the greater Jefferson-Chalmer neighborhood. In addition, between 1970 and 1977, the neighborhood loses 37% of its housing.

- During the 1960s as racial tensions increase, Alter Road becomes a symbolic dividing line between the majority African-American City of Detroit and majority White Grosse Pointe Park. Physical barriers are built at cross streets preventing traffic from crossing the border.





The Marine Hospital and Trailer Park grounds in 1949

image credit

- After being converted to a clinic in 1969, the hospital was closed in 1981 with the reorganization of the US Public Health Service into the Department of Health and Human Services.

- In 1982, the hospital grounds were deeded to the City of Detroit and Marina Park opened.

2000s

- In 2004, the Lakeside Trailer Court closes in preparation for a proposed high-end housing development known as "The Point at Belle Harbor". The development never comes to fruition.

-In 2013, the land for "The Point at Belle Harbor" (and the former location of Lakeside Trailer Court) is placed on sale for \$3.9 million dollars. The property includes 400 feet of waterfront and 800 feet of canal frontage.



Mariner Park and the former site of Lakeside Trailer Court today

image credit

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[fileticket=owAuy6_iKi8%3D&tabid=3096&mid=4357](http://www.detroitmi.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=owAuy6_iKi8%3D&tabid=3096&mid=4357)

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POSTED BY ROBERT SAXON, JR. AIA, LEED AP AT 9:17 PM 

LABELS: FOX CREEK

7 COMMENTS:



Professional lady September 7, 2016 at 1:29 PM

Thank you for your very interesting article. I live near Fox Creek and it's nice to learn it's history.

Reply



Professional lady September 7, 2016 at 1:29 PM

This comment has been removed by the author.

Reply



Christopher Conner November 20, 2016 at 11:46 AM

Amazing how a small area of the city could be so representative of all of detroit's rise and fall. It is an interesting area, thank you for the research.

Reply



Jerilyn Taylor-Jones June 9, 2017 at 8:46 PM

Thank you for this History lesson. I grew up in 48215 and went to Keating Elementary located at 797 Dickerson. I have very fond memories of growing up on Algonquin and later Alter Rd.

Reply



Joe Lipari June 11, 2017 at 4:05 PM

I grew up at 4690 Ashland. In 1968, when were 10 years old, my friends and I would ride our biles down to the "River" to fish in the canal under the bridge that curved off of Alter road. Later we would fish in the canal by the marina. This sure brings back fond memories of my youth.

[Reply](#)



Nils Lucander June 13, 2017 at 6:08 PM

I lived on Alter Road near Korte from 1960 to 1968. Attended school at Guyton Elementary. Went to church at St Columba on Manistique and fished and played regularly down at Angel Park. There is a Facebook page for Guyton for those who are interested.

[Reply](#)



Unknown June 14, 2017 at 7:14 PM

Thoroughly enjoyed this article. It brought back a lot of memories. Thanks!

[Reply](#)

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