

History of Chelsea, 1850-1901

Written for the Child Study Club meeting of Feb. 27, 1945

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The material I have obtained in looking up the history of Chelsea came from two volumes of the History of Washtenaw County, one published in 1881, the second in 1906; scrap books owned by my family, Mrs. E.R. Dancer, Miss Jessie Everett, and Miss Lillie Wackenhut; a paper, "Early Days in Chelsea," written in 1912 by Mrs. George Webster; and true facts I have heard my grandparents, parents, relatives, and friends tell many times.

Chelsea, when platted in 1850, was noted for its hills and ravines. To us who live here now, we can hardly see how the change took place. Main street was a rugged hillside, a deep ravine crossing it about the location of the Freeman block. The south side of Park street was a terrace, the north a steep pitch which in order to be built upon had to be made ground.

Between the McKune house and Palmer's garage was the hardest sand hill anywhere around for teamsters. In fact men, who drove to Flint for lumber, stated that the Main street hill from north of the railroad to Orchard street was the steepest grade they had to make in the entire journey of three days. Teamsters had to unload half of their load, drive to the top of the hill, unload, go back down, load the other half, drive back up, put on the first half of their load, and go on their way.

All who wished to build in the village could not build on the hill, consequently they had to build in the hollows, and where some of the handsomest residences now stand were, 95 years ago, unsightly building spots, so much has the topography of the village changed since it was platted. A pond hole stood where the brick residence now stands on the northeast corner of Middle and East streets. A huckleberry marsh and skating pond have now been filled in and the residences of the Charles Meserves and the Norman Perkins are upon the sites. Land on Middle street east from Main street to the Broesamle residence thence north to the railroad was cut down at least ten feet and the strip of land south from Middle street to Park street was filled in for ten feet.

It is said that the reason our streets are narrow is that the town Elisha Congdon came from had very narrow streets and naturally he thought that it was proper for the west to copy the east in layout out towns.

The land bounded by Orchard, Summit, Congdon, Garfield and other streets were forests, corn fields, and orchards less than 95 years ago. No sidewalks but well beaten cowpaths lead down to the little shops.

The first building erected in the village was the store of Elisha Congdon and was built in the summer of 1849 and stood where the Buick garage now stands. This building was eventually moved to the corner of East and Jackson streets and is now the two family home owned and occupied by Mrs. Mary Eder.

In the spring of 1850 the railroad company built a combination depot and freight house on the west side of Main street, now the present site of the freight house, across the track on the site of the Chelsea Elevator and west was the railroad's wood yard, where thousands of cords of woods were stored for the purpose of firing the wood burning engines. The railroad was single track and was an old strap rail line. The track repairer was the station agent and added to his other duties the function of woodsawyer for the road. The first station agent was a man by the name of Finn. The first shipment of goods from this place was a barrel of eggs on May 2, 1850, and the second two boxes of goods four days later.

At this time Manchester was an inland town and all traffic from or to that place was via Chelsea. Teamsters received 17 cents per barrel and on merchandise back they were paid 10 cents per 100 pounds. A many as a dozen teamsters were doing this work.

The second business building erected in Chelsea after the depot was a brick blacksmith shop on the east side of Main street north of the railroad. This was built by C.H. Wines for Aaron Durand and Newton Robinson. In the same year Asel Harris built a hotel and saloon on the company's land just south of the depot.

In 1851 J.C. Winans moved from Sylvan to Chelsea. He built a barn on his property where the post office now stands. His family lived in the barn until his house was completed. This house was later moved to the lot directly west and is now remodeled and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Weinberg. The same year Mr. Winans built a store building and carried on a general store for 19 years.

D.C. Fenn, Dr. Bancroft, and Asa Blackney built houses. J.L. Harlow erected a wagon shop on ground now occupied by the Vogel and Wurster Dry Goods store. S.D. Brood built a dwelling on the corner of Main and Middle, now the site of Walter Kantlehner's store. Mr. Breed made boots and shoes in his home. Mr. Harlow built a small home which was later purchased by George Wackenhut. The house has been enlarged from the original two rooms and is now occupied by Miss Lillie Wackenhut.

The Congregational church was organized in February 1849 and in 1851 a wooden church was built on land given for the purpose by Elisha Congdon. This building was located just to the west of the present Church. The first minister was Josephus Norton.

In the spring of 1852 M.M. Boyd built a wagon shop north of the railroad. This was later bought by J.B. Beissel and was used as a cooper shop. This building is still standing and is north of the Chelsea Elevator's office building.

This same spring Jared Hatch, my great, great grandfather, built a house on Railroad street on the site now occupied by the stone building of the Federal Screw Co. After a number of years Mr. Hatch gave this place to his granddaughter, Mrs. George Crowell, for taking care of him.

At the close of 1852, there were upon the west side of Main street one wagon shop, one store, one hotel, one saloon, one tailor shop, one blacksmith shop and seven dwellings. On the east side of Main street there were one blacksmith shop, one store, one shoe shop and 10 dwellings.

The population was about as follows: Joe Frisbie, wife and son; N. Robinson, wife and apprentice; Jacob Berry and wife; Mr. Samson, wife and son; T.H. Godfrey, wife and son; S.D. Breed, wife and son; L. Winans and wife; Mr. Parkell, wife and son; E. Congdon, wife and 8 children; A. Durand, wife and child; Robert Foster, wife and two sons; M.M. Boyd, wife and apprentice; Ed. Winters; Asel Harris, wife and two sons; Asa Blackney, wife and three children; L.L. Randall and wife; J.C. Winans, wife, daughter and clerk (who was my grandfather, George Crowell); L. Harlow and father; Dr. Bancroft and wife. Making a total of 62 and perhaps a dozen transients.

After the winter of 1853 Chelsea grew by leaps and bounds. That year C.H. Kempf came here and opened a hardware store and tin shop on the ground where the Sylvan Hotel is located. Thomas Godfrey built the Godfrey House. John H. Clark erected the first brick store. A.M. Spaulding built a double store for a general store.

These first store buildings were built of wood, were low and most of them had wooden awnings across the front. These awnings were protection from sun and storm. In front of the stores were wooden walks. As one walked down Main street from Middle street on the east side the road sloped towards the north and near the end of the block

were 17 steps down to the railroad right of way. When farmers came to town and wanted to trade they had to climb 10 steps from the street to the walk and on the west side it was necessary to go down about that many steps to enter the business places.

The Methodist church was organized in 1853 and the first services were held in the Congregational church. The first minister was Ebenezer Steele. The church building was started in 1858 and was completed in 1859. The land for the church was given by Elisha Congdon.

Curran White came here from Lima township in 1855 and at that time the population was 200. Mr. White built a residence on East Middle street, better known as the Negus house and is now owned by Lloyd Heydlauff. In the 1860s, Mr. White and Mr. Negus, his son-in-law, built a planing and cider mill on Madison street, just north of Harrison street on the west side of the street. They ran this mill for many years until it was destroyed by fire.

The first Elisha Congdon's addition to the village was platted in 1855 on July 6th. On July 7, 1855, the land our house is on was deeded to Dewitt C. Hurd and on the 22nd of November of the same year was deeded to George F. Davison. We do not know the exact date our house was built but have reason to believe it was 1857.

Oak Grove Cemetery was started in 1860 and to enter it, it was necessary to go east on Railroad street to a drive about opposite the land to the Henry Merkel farm. Later a right of way was obtained for the present road way and eliminated the railroad crossings.

In 1861 the growth of Chelsea was arrested when the Civil War broke out and nearly all the young men enlisted. Co. K of the 20th Michigan was almost entirely made up of Chelsea men. The men were mustered out in 1865. Several weddings were held in that year, when the young men returned from the war and married the girls they had left behind them during the war.

The first house occupied by Elisha Congdon proved too small for his large family and the house was moved to the site of the Freeman Block and was later moved to its present site on South Main street and is the third house on the west side of the end of the village limits. The house that Elisha Congdon built was burned in 1860 or 1861. He then built the present place now known as the McKune house.

The first bank was established in August 1868. This was a co-partnership between Michael J. Noyes of Chelsea and George P. Glazier of Parma, who came to Chelsea for the purpose of establishing a bank exchange. In April 1871 Mr. Glazier purchased the interest of Mr. Noyes and operated it for nine years. In January 1880 a state bank was formed with S.G. Ives as president and George P. Glazier as cashier. In 1902 the bank moved into the stone bank building at the corner of South and Main streets, costing \$60,000, built in memory of Mr. Glazier who died in 1901.

Dr. R.S. Armstrong came to Chelsea about the time that George P. Glazier did and entered a partnership in the drug business with Mr. Glazier, which they conducted for many years at the corner drug store.

St. Paul's church was organized on February 2, 1868. The brick church was built in the same year. Rev. J. Schladermund of Waterloo was the first minister and conducted services every two weeks.

The Baptist church was organized on April 28, 1868, at the home of Dr. R.B. Gates. The first minister was Rev. H.J. Brown. A church was built a short time later at the corner of Orchard and Main streets.

The first Catholic Church in the community was built four miles northwest of town and was surrounded by a cemetery which is still there and once in a great while there is a burial. In 1869 the brick church was built on Congdon street and the priest was Father Duhig.

The oldest secret society was Vernor Lodge I.O.O.F. founded on March 31, 1861. Olive Lodge #156 F.&A.M. was founded a short time later. It is said that some of the Chelsea men who were Masons rode a handcar to Dexter to attend Lodge meetings before the local lodge was started.

In the fall of 1869 Chelsea celebrated the opening of Orchard street. The celebration took place in the orchard where Ruth Bacon Fordyce's home now stands. This was an all day affair and closed with fireworks and later dancing in the Congdon house, now the McKune house. Henry Speer built the first house on Orchard street.

In April 1870 a disastrous fire swept away the entire row of buildings on the west side of Main street between Middle street and the railroad. All of the village records were burned at this time. The stores were rebuilt of brick. In 1871 the James Hudler store in the middle of the block was burned, but owing to the splendid construction of the new buildings, just the one store burned.

In 1872 the H.S. Holmes store was started. In 1892 Mr. Holmes took in three partners and the store was called the H.S. Holmes Mercantile Co. In 1914 Mr. Vogel and my father being the sole owners, the name was changed to Vogel & Wurster. The store being established in 1872, it is the oldest department store in the county.

In 1872 the Farmers' club started the fairs. The first one was held that fall on land near the present athletic field. For many years the others were held on the site of the Methodist home. These fairs were very famous and people came from a distance to attend.

In November 1876 the east side of Main street from Middle street to the Chelsea house burned and that side was soon rebuilt with brick buildings.

Chelsea was still using the first little old railroad station and the village's growth warranted a depot more in keeping with the town's advancement. No new depot materialized so in the late 1870s a group of young men decided the town should have a new depot. One dark night a cable was fastened to the depot and when the east bound freight came in and stopped, the other end of the cable was fastened to the train. When the train started the depot went with it and timbers were scattered from Main street to the cemetery. Needless to say Chelsea had its new depot, which was completed in 1880. This depot is the one we are using today.

For many years the Michigan Central Railroad Co. kept two fine lawns between the tracks and Jackson street, west from the depot to Main street and east from the depot to East street. In these lawns were several beautiful flower beds.

During one of the disastrous fires, either 1870 or 1876, Mr. Klein, who kept a saloon, refused to open it up so the fire fighters could refresh themselves. A group of men took the matter in their own hands: They borrowed the drayman's horses, hitched them to the doors of the saloon, started the horses, and the doors were in the street.

It is said that several of the unsightly buildings in the village were eliminated by the use of incendiary time bombs.

The first newspaper was started in 1871 by Andrew Allison and was called the Chelsea Herald. Later it was sold in turn to William Emmert, Thomas Holmes, and T. Mingay. Some time later the Chelsea Standard was started by O.T. Hoover and in 1906 he bought the Herald and combined the two papers.

Among the men who had active parts in the enterprises of the village for many years were Thomas Wilkinson, George Crowell, J.P. Wood, F.W. Hatch, the first school teacher, Loren Babcock, James L. Gilbert, Jabez Bacon, William Bacon, the Tichenors, Elijah Hammond, and many others.

Frank P. Glazier, son of George P. Glazier, started the Glazier Stove Works in 1891 and manufactured oil heating and cooking stoves. As the business grew it was necessary to enlarge the factory. The office building and a store used for mounting and storing of the stoves were in the buildings on the sites of the present Baxter and Alstaeter stores. On Sunday afternoon, February 18, 1894, a fire started in the Glazier office building destroyed the two buildings occupied by the Stove Co., the Congregational church, and the new building, the parsonage, completed in 1890, which stood just east of the church.

In 1895 the Glazier Stove Co. bought the property on Railroad street from Main street east. The Harrington and Hawley houses were torn down; the Crowell house was moved to its present site on Congdon street and is now owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Ed Hennon; the Johnson house was moved to the corner of West Middle and Wilkinson streets. Later this house was partially burned, then torn down. After a number of years the Richards home, the site of the present Spring Plant, was purchased by Dr. George Palmer and John Kalmbach and moved to the corner of Madison and Park streets. This house burned several years ago.

In the 1880s Jabez Bacon built a roller skating rink on East Middle street. This building was used for a rink for a short time, then was used for storage space. Later Mr. Bacon had the building made into a residence, which is now the home of his son-in-law and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Schneider.

Leander Tichenor, when he first came to Chelsea, made boots and shoes. Later Mr. Tichenor, who lived in the house north of the Catholic church now owned by Mr. Howard Canfield, had a shop at the rear of his home. In this shop he made very fine row boats. Those boats were made of canvass stretched over a stout wooden frame. It took 10½ yards of canvass for a boat. Mr. Tichenor made from 12 to 15 boats a year and the demand for the boats was always greater than the supply. Mr. Tichenor also raised St. Bernard dogs. Mr. and Mrs. Tichenor celebrated their golden wedding in November 1900.

On March 2, 1886 the burglar alarm in the George Glazier home rang. The Glazier home is now owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. W.F. Kantlehner. Mr. Glazier had had the bank and house connected with this alarm. Mr. Glazier was out of town. Mrs. Glazier and her sister-in-law were home and decided something must be done. They got up and dressed and went down to the bank. They discovered two men were robbing the bank. In some way they frightened the men. The burglars, leaving the loot and their tools behind them, fled, stole a team of horses and a light wagon from a barn on the alley between Orchard and Summit streets, and made their get-away. The team was found on the streets of Ann Arbor about ten o'clock the next morning.

A group of the alumni of the high school held a banquet and program at the McKune House following the graduation exercises in June 1893. The menu consisted of French soup, boiled ham, pickled tongue, chicken salad, salmon salad, olives, pickles, currant jelly, ice cream, assorted cakes, strawberries, bananas, coffee, and lemonade. In June 1896 a second banquet was held at the Chelsea House and the Alumni Association was formed. Officers elected were: Andrus Gulde, president; Mrs. George Begole, vice president; C. LeRoy Hill, secretary; Ransom Armstrong, treasurer. The colors chosen for the alumni were yellow and white.

On Sunday night, January 8, 1899, the Methodist church burned. The present church was built and dedicated on February 25, 1900.

In the late 1890s or 1900 Hawk & Angus and W.A. Boland started to build electric lines or railways, the former from Detroit to Jackson, the latter from Jackson to Detroit. Mr. Boland bought up land for his right of way and the village council gave him a franchise to lay his tracks in the center of Middle street from Wilkinson street to Madison street. He built a power plant on the site of E.J. Bahnmillers feed mill. In the summer of 1901 the tracks were laid from Jackson to the power plant in Chelsea. To beat Hawk & Angus with car service to Chelsea, Mr. Boland ran an electric car drawn by a coal burning engine to Chelsea. All the inhabitants turned out to welcome the delegation. Mr. Boland stated that within ten days we would have regular street car service. This car that was drawn by an engine was the first and last car of the Boland line to run to Chelsea. After many years the tracks were torn up, and the power house burned down one night.

Lettice Smith, the first white child to come to Ann Arbor, married Rev. Thomas Holmes D.D. In 1856 she sailed for Europe to join her husband, who had been there for a year. Mrs. Holmes remained abroad for two years studying oil paintings and languages. In 1877 Dr. and Mrs. Holmes came to Chelsea where he was minister of the Congregational church for a time. They resided in Chelsea many years and their home was at the corner of South Main and Summit streets, now the site of Mrs. C.J. Lehman's home.

Chelsea can boast as a resident a woman who was a pioneer in the professional life for women. She was Dr. Harriet Judd Sartin of Philadelphia and one of the first women physicians in the United States. As a young lady she lived in Chelsea and was Harriet Judd. She married Edward Sartin, who was a well-known engraver.

Chelsea has proved to be one of the greatest shipping points for its size on the Michigan Central. Hundreds of cars of produce, wool, livestock, and stoves have been shipped from here.

Chelsea has had her ups and downs, but through the commonsense and faith of her business people, she has survived the rich years and the lean years.