History of Livonia Villages

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Schwartzburg

This was the first major settlement of Livonia. It was located on Ann Arbor Trail around Wayne and Stark Roads. It is said that at its height, Schwartzburg contained nearly 50 buildings.

The village was named after General John E. Schwartz, who built a sawmill on the Rouge in 1826. The original dam may have been close to Stark Road, but the mill is said to have been located on the hill on the north side of the road just east of Wayne Road.

One of the main features of the village was the bridge over the Rouge on Wayne Road. This bridge was built by Marcus Swift, who was a skilled carpenter as well as a Methodist minister. He led some of the first church services in Livonia. These services, called "Sunday Schools," were held in farmhouses before churches were built in Livonia.

Several businesses flourished in Schwartzburg. An ashery produced lye for soap, and ice was harvested off of the mill pond. The sawmill and brickyard produced building materials which were used as the pioneers moved out of their log cabins into more "modern" dwellings.

A distillery provided liquid refreshments for the many hotels which sprang up on Ann Arbor Trail in Livonia. It probably produced whisky as well as now forgotten pioneer delights such as "pumpkin flip" and hard cider.

The first hotel in Schwartzburg was a red inn built by Benajah Holbrook, who appears to have been the same Holbrook who built one of the first gristmills on the Rouge near Plymouth. A general store, also built by Holbrook, was located next to the hotel, and appears to have been moved west of the village of Newburg in later years. The 1828 house of Schwartzburg's physician, Dr. Wells, was a popular tavern which also housed the first post office in the area. The Cahoon hotel was also located in the village.

Schwartzburg declined rapidly after a great boom in activity during the pioneer years of the 1820s and 1830s. It was overshadowed in importance by the village of Perrinsville, located at Merriman and Ann Arbor Trail. A fire which destroyed the Holbrook hotel contributed to its decline, and the distillery and taverns were probably closed down by a Livonia prohibition law passed in 1853. By the time of the Civil War, Schwartzburg had disappeared off the map, and was quickly forgotten.

Clarenceville

Clarenceville, located at the intersection of Grand River, Base Line, and Inkster Roads, was the site of activity from Indian times. The Potawatomie village of Pojomaka was located in this area, and this village appears to have been the home of Chief Tonquish, who was killed in a confrontation with early settlers in 1818.

By the time that this area was settled by Americans in the late 1820s, the Indians had long since abandoned their old village. The main years of settlement in Clarenceville were between 1824 and 1833.

In 1836, the new village was named Livonia City, in honor of the newly formed township of Livonia, which was created in 1835. The name Livonia appears to have come from Livonia Center, New York, which was the home of some of the township's earliest settlers.

The map of Livonia City shows the beginnings of a prosperous community. The farmhouse of Rufus Beach, the first Livonia justice of peace, appears prominently on the map. Four mill sites on Powers Creek, a branch of the Rouge, powered a sawmill, gristmill, carding mill, and cider mill. The carding mill is interesting to note because it shows the importance of the woolen industry in early Livonia. Sheep farming was common in the first few decades of the township's history, but wolves and coyotes killed too many sheep to make the wool industry profitable in this area. By the late 1800's dairy farming had been taken up by most former sheep farmers.

The Botsford Inn was built only months after the platting of Livonia City in 1836. Grand River Road was an important transportation route throughout the 1800s, and the hotel was one of the most important businesses in the community. The Botsford Inn was known as the 16 Mile House, because it was 16 miles from downtown Detroit.

In the 1840's Grand River was paved with planks during the "plank road craze" of the mid-1800s. Plank roads were built by private toll road companies who laid two or more layers of wooden planks on top of dirt roads in order to prevent wagons and stagecoaches from sinking into the mud.

Livonia City came to be known as Plank Road, Last Stop, and Fourth Gate. Last Stop referred to its location on the Wayne-Oakland county line. The village contained the fourth gate out of Detroit, the other gates being located in Redford Village, Howlett (also known as Greenfield Village), and the Detroit city limits.

The first post office at the village, called Livonia, was opened by James Gunning in 1834. The Gunnings were an important Livonia City family who may have also been involved with the village's several mills. In 1851, the post office changed its name to Plank Road in honor of the Grand River toll road. By 1880, the village had come to be known as Clarenceville because of the Clearcy family which owned the Botsford Inn. In 1881, the post office name was changed to Clarenceville.

The population of Clarenceville, including outlying farm areas, was about 200-300 people. The village included several stores as well as cartwrights, lawyers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and a carpet weaver. A cheese factory and creamery served the several dairy farmers of northeast Livonia. A stagecoach provided transportation to Beech Station in Redford (Beech-Daly near Plymouth), for 50 cents a ride.

Clarenceville was the largest community in Livonia, but like many other villages in the township, it declined in population after the turn of the century as younger people moved away to the city. In 1901, Clarenceville got its first telephone, but the post office was closed only a few years later. The last blacksmith shop closed in 1919, to be replaced by the village's first car dealership in 1920.

Clarenceville had a new spurt of prosperity in the 1920's as suburban development spread out Grand River. In 1924, Henry Ford bought and restored the Botsford Inn, which was special to him because he first met his wife Clara at a dance party many years before. The old inn was used for his famous square dance parties. One of the musicians to play in the Ford square dance band was Volney Gunning, a member of an old Clarenceville family who was a bass player and dance caller.

Clarenceville survived on maps and in identity as a distinct community up to the time when it was absorbed into the city of Livonia in 1950. The Clarenceville School District perpetuates its memory to this day.

Livonia Center

The community of Livonia Center was first settled in 1832. It got its name from its location in the exact geographical center of the township, at Farmington Road and Five Mile. Up to the time when Farmington Road was taken over by Wayne County in the 1920's, it was known as Livonia Center Road, much like Canton Center Road is known today. Then, as now, Livonia Center was the seat of government for Livonia.

The community prospered after it was established as the town center when Livonia was created in 1835. Several stores were built around the intersection of 5 Mile and Farmington. A steam powered sawmill was built by the Minkley family in the late 1830's, but it burned down around 1846. The mill was rebuilt, and a steam gristmill was later erected at Livonia Center. The cider mill of Lyman Joslin, said to have originally been powered by Bell Creek, was another important Livonia Center business.

The population of Livonia Center was about 50 throughout most of its existence. The settlement also had a blacksmith shop and a tavern, which was run by the blacksmith. This recalls a story in the reminiscences of Volney Gunning in Footpaths to Freeways in which Gunning talks about going to Livonia Center to get his horses shoed but the blacksmith was too "plastered" to do any work. In 1892, John Stabler opened a meat market in Livonia Center.

Two churches stood at Livonia center: the Lutheran Church and the Union Church, used by many denominations. The yellow and green Union Church, now a nursery, still stands on Farmington Road opposite Civic Center Drive.

The Livonia Grange, established in 1874, was the oldest Grange chapter in Wayne County and one of the oldest in the state, the first one having been established in 1871. The Grange, or Patrons of Husbandry, were a farmer's movement of the post-Civil War period. It was an organization, fashioned somewhat like the Masons, which brought together farmers across the country. The Grangers shared knowledge on how to improve farming techniques and also lobbied for fairer railroad rates for farmers and agricultural extension services. The Livonia Grange was active up to the turn of the century, when the Grange Hall was moved and made into an annex onto the back of the Union Church. The hall can still be seen there today.

The main products of the Livonia Center community were apples, cheese, and milk. A cheese factory was established in the village in the late 1800s, and it was bought by Governor Fred Warner in 1909.

Livonia Center has been one of the most important areas in Livonia to this day. Although the old village is gone, the old cemetery and Union Church remain, and the Kingsley house is at Greenmead.

Rough and Ready

Rough and Ready Corners was located at the intersection of Stark and Plymouth Roads. This community was probably an offshoot of the nearby village of Schwartzburg. Plymouth Road became a planked toll road in the 1840's, and a toll gate was located at this intersection.

David McFarlane built a tavern at the corners which was nicknamed the "House of Seven Gables." As was typical of that time, a picture of a current hero was hung on the tavern sign. Zachary Taylor, a hero of the Mexican War at that time, adorned the sign of McFarlane's inn, and his nickname, "Old Rough and Ready," gave the settlement its name. The hotel was known as a station on the Underground Railroad.

The community also included two blacksmith shops, a cooperage and a cabinet shop. The fields near the corners were used to drill recruits for the Union Army during the Civil War. A school was located on Stark Road south of Rough and Ready, which may have been originally been the old Schwartzburg school.

Stark

In 1870-1871, the Detroit, Lansing, and Northern Railroad built its Detroit-Lansing line through Livonia. In 1871, Livonia Station was established at the Stark Road crossing. The village which grew up around it was known as Starville, or Stark. By 1880, the name of the railroad station was changed to Stark. At first, the station served both Livonia Center and Rough and Ready, but the businesses at Rough and Ready were attracted to the railroad, and the older community disappeared.

The population of Stark was 20 in 1881, but grew to 50 by the turn of the century. A steam powered sawmill and a general store were the main businesses in the town. The post office was opened in 1877, was originally called Livonia Station, but was changed to Stark in 1879. The main products shipped out of Stark were the three mainstays of Livonia agriculture: apple cider, cheese, and potatoes.

Stark survived as a distinct community up to the time when Livonia was incorporated in 1950. The old railroad station was torn down in the 1950's.

Newburg

Newburg was the largest community to lie completely within Livonia. It was a lively town which contained many businesses and which has a long and interesting history.

Newburg's history is actually a continuation of that of Schwartzburg. The post office located at Schwartzburg, known as Nankin, moved to Newburg in the 1830's.

Newburg was first settled in 1819. The community grew up rapidly as Ann Arbor Trail became an important route from Detroit into the interior part of the state. The village got its name from Anthony Paddack, who said that the town was a "new burg" (perhaps in contrast with old Schwartzburg). Although he also is said to have roots in the town of Newburgh, New York.

A hotel at Newburg provided lodging and refreshment for passengers on the Stagecoaches which ran on Ann Arbor Trail between Detroit and Ann Arbor. The village had several stores, including one which was moved from Schwartzburg. The first school was built in 1831, and the cemetery was founded in 1832. In 1834, The Methodist Church was organized, with Marcus Swift as its first pastor. Swift was a famous abolitionist, and his outspoken and courageous views on slavery resulted in the burning of his house by his opponents.

The Tuttle sawmill and Newburg gristmill were located on the Rouge just east of the village. The gristmill burned down around 1890. Nicholas Bovee built a cider mill at Newburg around 1870 which became an important business in the town, producing up to 25,000 gallons of cider a year.

The population of Newburg appears to have peaked at about 300 at the time of the Civil War. Several Newburg residents served in the Union Army. The old cemetery contains several Civil War casualties, but the veterans formed a chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic at Newburg. The G.A.R. (jokingly said to stand for "Generally All Republicans") was the Civil War veterans' group which was very influential in politics in the late 1800s.

The building of the D.L. & N. Railroad ended the importance of Ann Arbor Trail as a stagecoach route. The population of Newburg declined to 150 by 1890, and the hotel was not rebuilt after it burned down in 1896. Newburg continued to be a lively rural community, however, and the rural papers of Wayne County featured lengthy weekly columns on the activities of people and societies at Newburg. In 1899, the D.U.R. built an interurban line through Newburg which connected Wayne and Northville.

Henry Ford revived Newburg from its decline in the 1930's. In the late 1920's, when he started building village industries on the Rouge, he bought the site of the long-gone Bovee cider mill. In 1934, he built a new dam in a co-operative project with the Wayne County Road Commission and P.W.A. In exchange for their assistance, the W.C.R.C., headed at that time by Ford's childhood friends John Haggerty, was given Newburgh Lake for the Middle Rouge Parkway (now Hines Park).

Ford's village industries were part of a fascinating project in which Henry Ford tried to blend industry, rural life, and ecology. He wanted to counteract the migration of rural residents to the city by establishing small water-powered factories on old mill sites. These mills produced small parts for Ford cars, providing flexible work hours for farmers who could work the fields part of the day and make good Ford Motor Company wages for another part of the day. Farmers were encouraged to be self-sufficient by growing small thrift gardens, and many plants provided electric power for their communities. The village industries used total recycling of their waste products and used farm products like soybeans for their raw materials.

At Newburg, local farmers helped in the building of the mill, and worked there after it was completed. The mill produced drills with 30 employees, and during World War II, its production was expanded to parts for Pratt and Whitney airplane engines. During the war the work force was expanded to 64 men in two shifts.

In 1948, the mill was donated to the Wayne County Parks Division after Henry Ford II shut down the village industries. The building is now the headquarters of the Wayne County Sheriff Mounted Division and a county time office.

Newburg has been re-created in the Greenmead Historic Park. The old Newburg-Ann Arbor Trail crossroads has been re-created with the old Methodist Church, parsonage, Geer Store, schoolhouse, interurban station, and bungalow. Although Newburg disappeared with the incorporation of Livonia, it will be preserved as an example of an old-time Livonia village.

Perrinsville and Pikes Peak

Perrinsville, located at Ann Arbor Trail and Merriman Road, was first settle in 1831. Although located just south of Joy Road in Nankin Township, this village had a great influence on the southern part of Livonia.

Perrinsville prospered in the 1840s and 1850s, and succeeded Schwartzburg as the most important settlement on the Rouge in this area. Its church was founded by Marcus Swift, who lived on Warren Road just south of Perrinsville.

The town included several mills, including a sawmill, cabinet shop, wagon factory, and woolen mill. As in the case of Clarenceville, the area around Perrinsville had a flourishing woolen industry before the Civil War, but cattle replaced sheep as the major form of livestock in later years. Other businesses included stores, a hotel, dance hall, and print shop. A post office was established at the village in 1861.

Pikes Peak, only a short distance west of Perrinsville, grew up around Nankin Mills. Nankin Mills, located just south of Joy Road on Farmington Road, shares a common heritage with Schwartzburg. General Schwartz started building the mill in 1835, but the mill lay unfinished for many years until it was finally completed in 1842. After completion of the mill, the area around it developed rapidly. A hotel was built by James Kipp, and Martin Shepard built the Pikes Peak Variety Store in the early 1850's.

The name Pikes Peak comes from Shepard's adventures in the Pikes Peak gold rush before he came to settle by Nankin Mills. The village came to be known as another haven for slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad.

Nankin Mills was rebuilt by Samuel Hardenbergh of Plymouth in 1863. By that time, Pikes Peak had begun to surpass Perrinsville in importance. In 1887, the Perrinsville post office moved to Pikes Peak, where it remained until 1902. Pikes Peak also attracted other businesses, including a blacksmith and print shop.

Pikes Peak was saved from obscurity by Henry Ford who restored Nankin Mills in 1918. He had gone to Nankin Mills many times as a boy, and bought the mill from Floyd Bassett of Newburg. The mill became a village industry which produced screws, stencils, and dies. Henry Ford also built the Nankin Mills school, which educated children from northern Nankin and southern Livonia townships. The school used McGuffey Readers, which Henry Ford had used when he was growing up.

Pikes Peak has disappeared, but Nankin Mills and the old houses on Ann Arbor Trail still mark the location of the village.

Elm

The village of Elm started with the hamlet of Elmwood, located on Plymouth Road near Middlebelt Road. This small settlement probably started with the planking of Plymouth Road in the 1840's.

By 1858 the village was important enough to open a post office, which was called Elm because there was an Elmwood post office already existing in another part of the state.

When the D.L. & N. came through Livonia in the early 1870's, two stations were established in the Elmwood area. McKinney's station, at the Merriman Road crossing, only lasted about 10 years. Elm Station, at the Middlebelt Road crossing, was established at the same time. Elm Station grew into a new village, soon drew away businesses from Elmwood, and the older community soon vanished. Middlebelt Road was known as Elm Road after the village through which it passed.

Soon after the building of the D.L. & N., the state capitol was under construction in Lansing. Stone for the building was shipped through Livonia on its way to Lansing. On Inkster Road at the railroad crossing one of these stones fell off the train and lay in the fields for many years. This stone was dug up several years ago and can be seen in front of the Norton Yard on Inkster Road south of the railroad tracks.

Elm lay in the heart of the lands of the Wilson family, who became famous for their dairy products. In addition to a general store, Elm had a cheese factory, and dairy products were the bulk of the produce shipped from Elm. The Wilsons became rich after Ira Wilson saw the advantage of shipping milk directly into the city by truck, rather than letting the milk spoil while waiting on the railroad loading dock. The Wilsons spent their money to benefit their home town by building the Elm School.

The building of the race track in Livonia after World War II resulted in a great controversy in Livonia Township. The track represented a clash between the old values of rural Livonians, who deplored the introduction of gambling to their community, and the new suburban Livonians, who saw the track as an asset to the new community. Many of the new subdivisions in Livonia in the late 1940's were located in the Elm area, and the suburbanites threatened to secede from Livonia as the city of Elm. The resolution of the dispute between the residents of Elm and the rest of the township resulted in the creation of the City of Livonia in 1950.

Gilt Edge

Gilt Edge is the least known of former Livonia communities. It appeared relatively late, probably in the 1890's, and it is not shown on any maps of Livonia. In the 1870s, a cheese factory was built on Seven Mile near Gill Road in northwest Livonia. In the speech of the time "gilt edge" meant "of the highest quality" or "top notch." Frank Bradley at Gilt Edge was famed as a master cheesemaker, and the brand name of his cheeses befitted his work.

By the late 1890s, the area along Seven Mile in northeast Livonia had grown enough in population that a post office called Gilt Edge was found at the cheese factory. In 1898, the factory's owner, Asa Smith, became the first postmaster. In 1899, Frank Bradley took over the duty of running the post office.

During the first decade of the twentieth century Gilt Edge was a large enough community to get mention in Wayne County's rural paper, the Courier. It was while doing research in the Courier on other projects that I first learned of Gilt Edge. I recognized the family names in the articles as being from Livonia, but it was only recently that I was able to lean where this little community had been located.

In 1901, the Gilt Edge cheese factory was bought by Governor Fred Warner, who owned several cheese factories in Southeast Michigan. Warner was so impressed by the work of Frank Bradley that Bradley was made manager of all of the Warner factories, which were located in over 20 communities in Wayne and Oakland Counties. Gilt Edge appears to have lost its identity as a community by the time of World War I, and became another lost chapter in the fascinating history of rural Livonia.