

**The Land on which WPC Abides – A
Pre-European & Early Grand Rapids
History**

What is some of the history of the
land on which WPC and her
programs abide?

April 10, 2024

Westminster Presbyterian Church,
Grand Rapids, MI

by Daniel VanMeurs

First, thanks to our benefactors,
Florence A. and Minnie Louise Behl

Sisters Florence (1876–1949) and Minnie (1880–1957) were
members of WPC.

Florence from April 1925 until her death in April 1949 –
24 years.

Minnie from January 1913 until her death in October 1957 –
44 years.

Through their bequest they funded three aspects of WPC:

- scholarships for students attending Alma College
- the youth program
- and Westminster Presbyterian Adults

Initial research focused on pre-European history.
Later, researched early Grand Rapids and Kent
County – An Overview.

Anyone have known Native, Indigenous, or Indian family history?

Personal Statement

Digging the Past

People have lived in the Grand River valley for approximately 11,000 years. This is known because of extensive archaeological field work in the Grand River valley and that work continues to uncover clues of life as it was so long ago.

Paleoindian Period, 9,000 BC to 6,000 BC

Archaic Period, 6,000 BC to 2,000 BC

Late Archaic Period, 2,000 BC to 1,000 BC

Woodland Period, 1,000 BC until European Contact

Photo of a leaf-shaped projectile point made of flint or chert



A number of these Paleoindian points have been found in the Grand Rapids area.

(Olson and Holland, pg. 3)

Late Archaic Period – 2,000 BC to 1,000 BC

What appears to be a Late Archaic burial site, now called the **Esler site (20KT156)**, was uncovered during 1965 construction on the west bank of the Grand River south of Leonard Street NW in Grand Rapids.

There are no other known Archaic burial sites on the lower Grand River.

(Olson and Holland, pg.4)

Remains of 7 individuals and 67 related funerary objects were found at the Esler site.

(federalregister.gov, Esler site)

Woodland Period – 1,000 BC to 1802 AD

Lasting for almost 2,000 years, this Period is divided into early, middle, and late.

Early Woodland:

Development of the **burial mound complex** began about 500 BC.

- Workers, perhaps dozens at a time, built great mounds over the group's burial sites;
- Men, women, and children were buried with the grave goods the trade network supplied.

Indian Burial Grounds

In 1874 the Kent Scientific Institute (precursor of the Grand Rapids Public Museum, established 1936) explored 8 groups containing 46 mounds near the river, just below the south line of the City Limits (Hall St).

The Kent Scientific Institute was a successor of the Grand Rapids Lyceum of Natural History, which John Ball helped organize in 1854.

The exploration found remains of human bodies and associated funerary objects – copper implements, pottery jars, drinking vessels, silver trinkets, oval vases or kettles, turtle shell bowels, effigy pipes.

Photo of copper celts (axe heads) and hair pins recovered from the Norton Mound group.
Pins are approximately six inches long



(Olson and Holland, page 5)

The burial grounds at the Indian village below Pearl Street bridge, west side, comprised a grouping of nearly 30 mounds, which in the 19th century were defaced and leveled in the construction of streets.

(Baxter, pg. 15; Wikipedia Norton_Mound_Group)

This is the **Converse Mounds (20KT2)**, southeast of Fulton St @ Seward Ave SW.

The **Norton Mound site (20KT1)** still exist, along Indian Mounds Dr south of Market Ave SW. These are the best preserved mounds in Grand Rapids/Great Lakes area and under the purview of the Grand Rapids Public Museum.

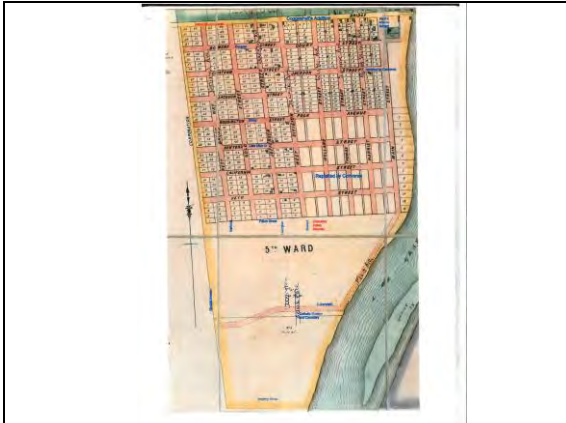


Photo of Fulton at Seward Sts SW,
site of Converse Mounds

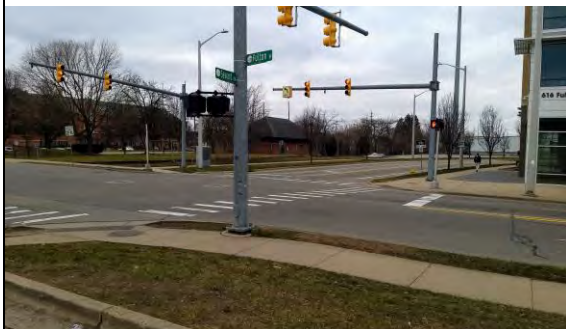


Photo of Buttenworth St at Gelock Pl SW (looking NW),
by site of Catholic Mission & Cemetery



Photos of the **Norton Mound site** – 9 November 2023 tour led by Ron
Yob, Chairman of the Grand River Bands of the Ottawa Indians









Norton Mound site (20KT1)

The Norton Mound group was the center of Hopewellian culture in that area, from circa 400 BC to 400 AD. These mounds were probably constructed in the first century AD.

The name "Norton Mounds" comes from Captain A.N. Norton, who owned this property in the 1800s. The mounds were first excavated in 1874 by W.L. Coffinberry. This excavation revealed numerous burials rich in grave offerings. Further excavations were undertaken by H.E. Sargent in 1915.

In 1936, Mrs. W.B. Stiles deeded the land where many of the mounds were located to the City of Grand Rapids, and the area became a city park (Hopewell Indian Mounds Park). The site was listed on the Michigan Register of Historic Sites in 1957, and declared a National Historic Landmark in 1965.

The site covers approximately 55 acres and is currently closed to the public.
(Wikipedia Norton_Mound_group)

Norton Mound group preserved during I-196 excavation and construction

The Norton Mound group were slated to be destroyed by construction of the I-196 freeway from Grand Rapids to Holland, and salvage commenced in 1963 and 1964, funded by grants from the Grand Rapids Foundation and the National Science Foundation. The freeway plans were subsequently changed and the mounds [mostly] preserved largely through the efforts of the Grand Rapids Public Museum and the local Coffinberry Chapter of the Michigan Archaeological Society.

(Olson and Holland, page 6)

Wright L. Coffinberry's initial exploration in 1874 found 17 mounds in the group. The 3 largest mounds are located near the river, with the other mounds arranged in a curved line behind them. By 1963 only 11 of the 17 were substantially untouched, and 4 had been obliterated.

(Wikipedia Norton_Mound_group)

Remains of 48 individuals and 563 associated funerary objects were found.

(federalregister.gov, Norton Mounds site 20KT1)

The remaining 11 Norton Mound group mounds

The remaining mounds range from 30 feet in diameter and 1.5 feet in height to 100 feet in diameter and 15 feet in height.

Below a series of layers of dirt, ash (probably remains of leafy branches), a mound fill cap, and finally a layer of natural sod, are the burial chambers mostly below ground level.

The largest mound's burial chambers are above the level of the surrounding grade.

The burial pits are shallow and rectangular in shape.

(Wikipedia Norton_Mound_group)

The Hopewell built their mounds to a pattern

There was a central burial pit with the remains of the deceased, along with such exotic trade goods as:
•conch shell dippers;
•copper and flint;
•many finely crafted products made by their own artisans – tools, jars, and pipes.

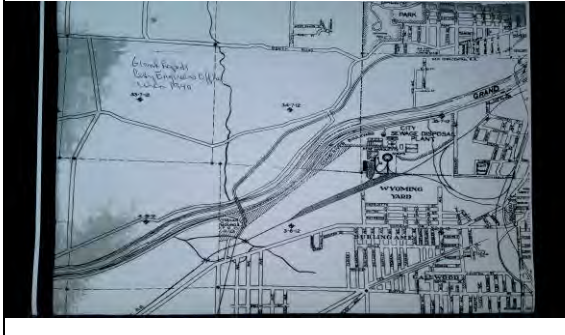
They surrounded the pit with a ramp lined with pine bark slabs and then covered the structure with bark and soil to form the mound.

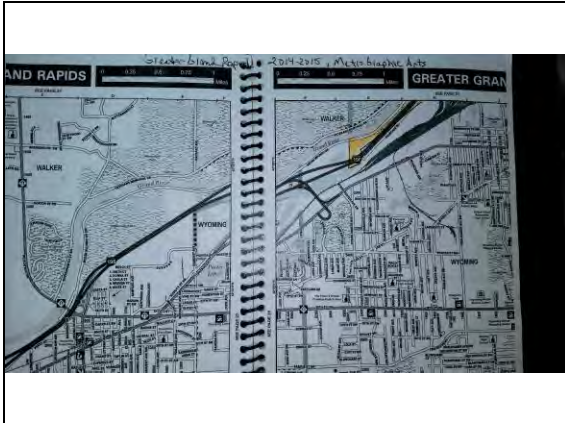
The construction of a single mound, perhaps one every generation, required the labor of several hundred workers. This implies the existence of a support population of several thousand living in the lower Grand River area.

They came together only periodically for the ceremonial activities associated with their burial rites, and probably lived in groups of no more than a hundred in small hamlets scattered along the banks of the Grand River.

(Olson and Holland, page 6)

Maps around the Norton Mounds – circa 1940 and 2014





Human remains and associated funerary objects repatriated

In 2010, the **Public Museum of West Michigan** (Grand Rapids Public Museum) repatriated physical remains of 104 individuals and 796 associated funerary objects to 11 Indian tribes/bands in MI, IN, and OK.

The **Notice of Inventory** notes the remains and objects were from sites in these MI counties: Allegan (2), Berrien, Cass (3), Grand Traverse, Kalamazoo, Kent (6), Montcalm (3), Ottawa (2), St Joseph (2), and Wayne.

Remains and objects were found from unknown date/1869 to 1969.

These repatriations were under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. 3003.

(<https://federalregister.gov/documents/2010/06/28/2010-15576/notice-of-inventory-completion-public-museum-of-west-michigan-grand-rapids-mi>)

The Hopewell were driven out of present-day Michigan by the Mish-ko-tink (Prairie) Indians.

The Mish-ko-tink were exterminated by the Algonquin Nation.

The Algonquin Nation

The **Ojibwe** were hunters and fishermen in northern portion of the lower peninsula;

The **Odawa** were traders of fur, berries, and maple sugar in the central and western portions;

The **Bode'wadmi** worked the fields and grew crops in the south, south of the Kalamazoo River.

The Grand River Valley was occupied by the Odawas.

The Odawa had villages at Battle Point (a few miles up-stream from Grand Haven), Crockery Creek, the Rapids, Plainfield, Ada, Lowell, and other points up-river.

In the late 1600s the Odawa established on the river named O-wash-ta-nong Sipi.

'Far away water', due to the (Grand) river's length of 252 miles.

Note on Indigenous Prehistory

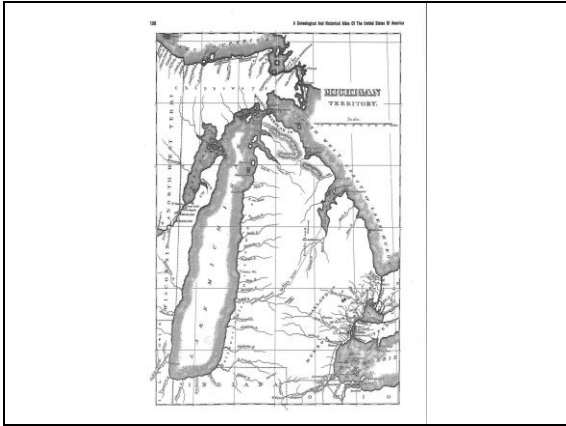
The existence of Native American populations in the Americas has always been of interest to European and contemporary scholars. It should be clearly stated, however, the **native peoples do not always subscribe to academic interpretations of their respective histories and beliefs.** For centuries scholars have been attempting to theoretically explain the origins of American Indians.

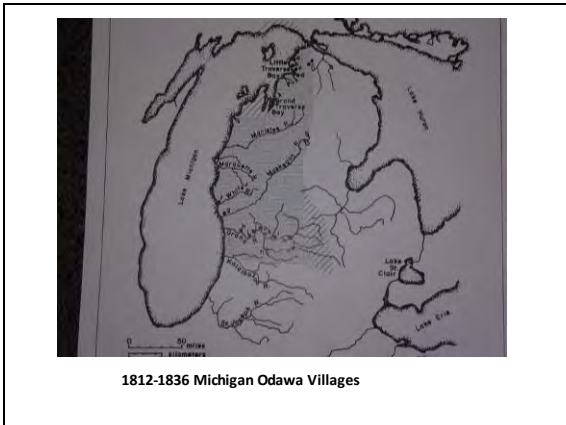
In contrast, it should be remembered that native peoples have formalized traditions which describe their existence in diverse regions. American Indians explain their life and past as an **act of creation rather than as a stage in evolutionary theory.** All peoples have the undeniable right to spiritual interpretations of life and purpose. These beliefs are the very core of Native American societies and must be considered as viable alternatives to continuously changing "scientific" explanations.

(People of the Three Fires, 1986)

1804 the first Europeans arrived – were either with a Mission or fur traders.

1821 there were 50 to 60 Indian huts on the west side of the Grand River.





1812-1836 Michigan Odawa Villages

In 1867, (in the Grand Rapids area,) there were 232 Odawa, Ojibwe, and Bode'wadmi; State-wide there were 3,823 male and 4,185 female Indians.

Indians organized into seventy distinct bands, each with its chief.

Inhabited 179 frame and 821 log houses, erected over 2,000 homesteads.

Personal property valued at \$376,595 (2023 = \$10,759,319).

Cultivated 10,772 acres.

(Grand Rapids City Directory 1867-1868)

Naming Terminology

Indian
American Indian
Native
Native American
Indigenous
First Nations

Treaties between the US Government and Indian Nations

1821 Treaty of Chicago (Treaty 117)

1836 Treaty of Washington (Treaty 205)

These 2 Treaties cover the land on which WPC and her programs abide.

Of the 370 US Government ratified Indian Treaties, none were completely fulfilled by the US Government.

(Preface pg. vii, Jackson, 1880)

Michigan areas covered by various US Treaties



Values and beliefs of Indians

The religious beliefs of the Odawa centered about the natural world, the universal supernatural power which shaped it, and their relationship to its forms and forces.

Odawa beliefs defined the acceptable ways to interact with the elements of their world, and **worship was not separated from daily life**. Everywhere the Odawa went, and each task they performed, required an understanding of a realm beyond their physical surroundings.

Every element in the Odawa world, from rocks and trees to animals and human beings, was made up of two basic parts, the body and the manitou (spirit).

The wise person took no chances and tried to treat all beings in the land, living or otherwise, as though they were kin.

The Odawa used the resources around them and in return offered songs, prayers, and other gifts to perpetuate their close personal relationship with the spirit beings.

(People of the Three Fires, pg. 8)

Communal Living

'The Odawa lived in tandem with nature but also with each other. Their society was first and last communal.

Land was held by the village, not by individuals.

The harvest aimed at supply ing enough food for every one to survive until the next season.

Sharing and reciprocity were their deepest values, balance and proportion their reigning ideals.'

(Bratt and Meehan, pg. 3)

Odawa religion and beliefs

'In the Odawa system, religion was nothing and everything. On the one hand, the Odawa had no equivalent for the Western concept of faith. They recognized no natural-supernatural dichotomy, no impersonal forces, no fixed separations between the living and the dead, the visible and invisible.'

'On the other hand, religion was enmeshed as the tone, texture, and framework of their whole round of life. In the Odawa universe every being and object had, or could have, a spirit – manitou – as well as a body. Manitous were powerful, could readily change form or embodiment, could be used for good or evil, and had to be treated with care and respect.'

(Bratt and Meehan, pg. 3)

Early Indian and European life

'The US Government built for the Indians a mill on the creek, near where it is crossed by the D & M Railroad [Coldbrook by Coit Sts NE?].

The Indians had a village of twenty or thirty houses, built of the lumber sawed by this mill. In 1837, all the ground spoken of above as then a cultivated field, was planted with corn, which the women well hoed. The men fished and hunted. They lived all up and down the river, and through the country, as ever before; and every fall assembled at Grand Rapids to receive pay for their lands.'

(Everett, pg 40)

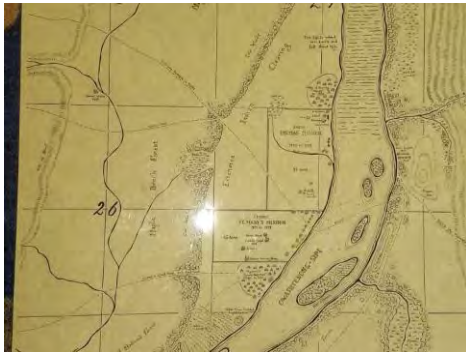
All beyond these Indian and white men's clearings was one interminable forest, the same as before the civilized man had entered upon the lands. In this Valley they lived in peace, and mostly there were in those times confidence and kindness between the different races. But there were some wrongs, more often committed by the whites than the Indians.

(Everett, pg. 41)

There were two competing **Missions** on the west bank of the Grand River (Indian land before 1836).

A Baptist 'Thomas Mission' (1825-1835, Isaac McCoy, minister) – south of Bridge St.

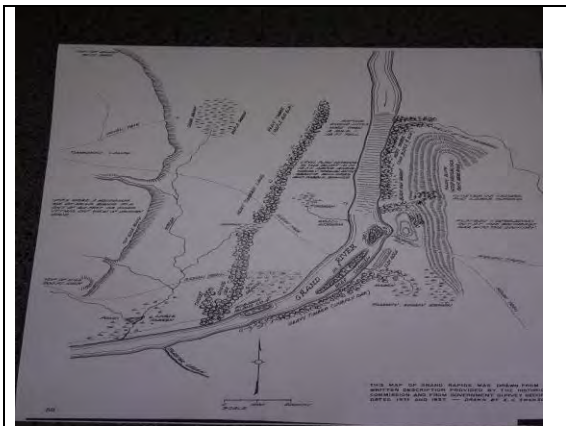
A Roman Catholic 'Saint Mary's Mission' south of Fulton St (1833-1839, Father Frederick Baraga) – by Butterworth St and Gelock Pl SW.



Mission Lands at the Rapids on the Grand River, 1825-1836, Kevin R Finney, 2007

'There had been some kind of a fight between the Baptists and the Catholics over what should happen to the land after the Indians left their village. There had been an Indian presence for many years as there had even been Indian Mounds* located where Phoenix Furniture [528 Butterworth SW] would be until about 10 years ago when GVSU moved in and took over.'

* The Converse Mounds



Trade

Ota'wa means 'to trade'

The Indians traded furs, berries, and maple sugar for dry and fancy goods, ammunition, and whisky.

Beads and whisky were legal tender to an Indian.

During the busy season Indians would camp about the huckleberry swamps and cranberry marshes, pick the berries and then deliver them at Grand Rapids.

Much maple sugar was brought to the Rapids by water.

During the spring Grand River was alive with canoes bringing sugar which had been made by the squaws in all portions of the valley.

For all its impact, fur trading held but a secondary place in the Odawa economy. Farming was their key to survival, while fishing and gathering maple sap and wild food provided crucial supplements.

Fur Prices

In the 1820s fur trading was big business.

Furs commanded about the following prices in trade: Beaver, \$1.25 a pound, weighed by hand, which means that the trader guesses at the weight and paid the Indian accordingly. It is needless to add that the furs never fell short of weight when weighed at the warehouse;

Mink 50 cents to \$1 each;

Smoke skin (buckskin) \$1;

Martin \$1 to \$1.25;

Lynx \$1 to \$1.25;

Muskrat 5 cents each.

Wolf and bearskins were not of much value.

Fashions did not change and the above prices continued for years.

There was such sharp competition in the fur trade that the local traders would not wait for the Indians to bring their furs to market but would often send messengers with goods directly to the Indian camps.

Late in the fall the Indians would separate, and each family would go into camp for hunting and trapping during the winter when the traders in the Rapids would dispatch men for the furs.

Note: the Indians liked that the French would give credit for goods until the fall when they would bring furs. When the British fought the French, the Indians supported the French as the British would not extend Indians credit.

Islands

The Grand River, near current downtown, had 5 islands. North-to-south numbered 1 to 5.

Island number 1 (or 2, based on a documented source) housed the County Jail in 1872. An 'Alcatraz' of sorts!

The Rapids

The Rapids were a mile-long, 300 yards wide with a 18 foot fall, with water tumbling over limestone ledges which could be heard over a mile away.

The Rapids were submerged following construction of numerous dams starting 1835 and flooding the areas upstream of the dams.

The Fish Ladder was installed 1974.

Photo of 1836 GR street names. [Ball, pg 91]



Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids incorporated as a Village in 1838, became a City with a Charter 2 May 1850

Population: 1850 – 2,686, 1845 – 1,510, 1870 – 16,507, 1900 – 82,565.

Boundaries / area:

1838 – ¾ square mile

1841 – Division Ave (east), Monroe St (south), River (west), Bridge St (north)

1845 – 4 square miles

1850 – East/Eastern Ave (east), Wealthy St (south), Straight Ave (west), Leonard St (north)

1853 – 9 square miles

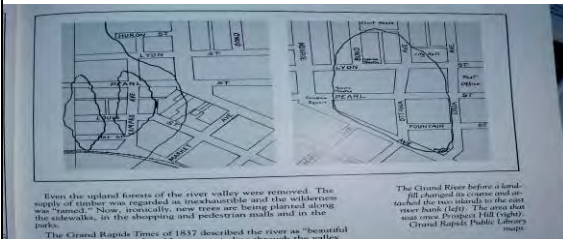
1857 – 10.5 square miles

Prospect Hill

Prospect Hill, a bluff to the east of the river, was leveled and used as fill dirt to fill the east channel of the Grand River between two islands and the east bank of the river.

The Amway Grand Hotel, and buildings a half-mile south to about a mile north, rest on this soil.

Location of Prospect Hill



(Oson and Holland, page 11)

Grand River Canal

Before 1832, until 1852, there was a 81 foot-wide, 5 foot-deep canal on the east side of the river from Coldbrook to Lyon Sts, with a wing dam at the north end.

In 1846 the canal's water powered for 3 saw mills, 2 grist mills, and some minor works.

This canal was built to allow river commerce to bypass the Rapids.

Note: Canal Park and 6th Street Park on east side of river.

Fulton Street Cemetery

Fulton Street Cemetery is the oldest remaining cemetery in the City (E Fulton @ Eastern Ave SE).

First burial date is 6 September 1838, Andrew Haldane (25 yo), brother of William (Deacon) Haldane, father of the Grand Rapids furniture manufacturing industry.

Burials of note: John Ball (1794-1884) & Mary Webster Ball (1826-1883), Joel Guild (1788-1856), and many Civil War soldiers.

The Burying Ground

The southwest corner of Cherry street and Madison avenue was "the burying ground" in the village days of Grand Rapids. [Between 1838 and 1850]



(White, pg 49)

Veteran's Park

What is now Veteran's Park (E Fulton @ Library/Sheldon Sts) was first a Public Square, and later site of the first County Courthouse (1838) which burned to the ground 12 July 1844.

On at least one occasion the Courthouse Square was the site of Federal Annuity payments made to the local Odawa, Ojibwa, and Bode'wadmi Indians in accordance with Treaties of 1821 and 1836.

In 1926 two granite pillars were erected in honor county residents who died in WW I. Subsequent memorials were erected for those killed in WW II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam Conflict.

In 1957 the official name was changed from Fulton Park to Veteran's Memorial Park.

Courthouse Square/Veteran's Memorial Park historical plaque



Indian Payments

The Indians did not join the grown whites in their amusement, but they gave them the best trade they had, for it was cash received from their annual payments.

The Indians as I have said sold their land to the government in the spring of 1836, but did not receive full payment but only a small part. The balance they were to have in equal yearly payments for twenty years. And these payment, or a great portion of them, were to be made to them at Grand Rapids. They were made in the fall and of the time, the Indians received due notice, and all assembled here.

And when all were duly numbered, the amount to be paid was duly divided, each man, woman and child receiving the same amount. The payments were made in silver coin, usually in half dollar pieces, and they often got trusted by the traders in advance of these payments and when not, they usually made purchases to the extent of their means.

So our merchants provided themselves with such goods as they purchased, and soon the Indian's money changed hands, and I fear sometime wrongfully.

(Ball, pgs 102-103)

Westminster Presbyterian Church locations

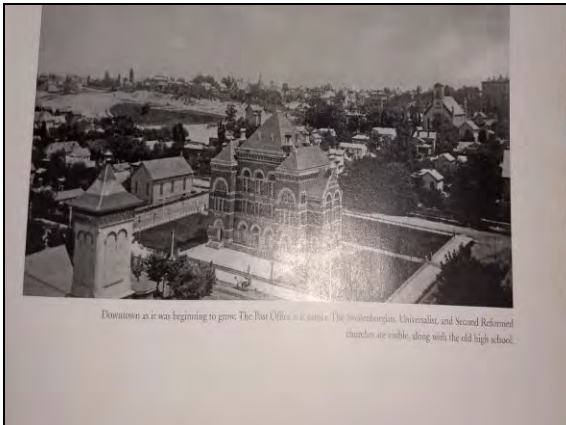
1862-1865 rented the Swedenborg Church building, NW corner of Division @ Lyon Sts.

[Over the years the Church of the New Jerusalem (aka the Swedenborg Church) rented their building to many organizations to help with cash flow problems: Second Congregational Church 1852-1856, WPC 1862-1865, Christian Reformed 1870-1872, Free Will Baptist Church 1872-1873, Disciples 1875-1887]

1866-1875 purchased land at SW corner of Division @ Lyon Streets. This land was acquired by the US Government for the new Grand Rapids Federal Building (built 1879).

[See Historic Photos of Grand Rapids, pg 11, Post Office photo.]

1875-present (149 years!) purchased land at 47 Jefferson Ave @ Island/Weston St. SE







WASHINGTON AND STATE STREETS FROM JEFFERSON AVE.



Photo of State St SE from Jefferson Ave SE – facing SE
[February 2024]



JEFFERSON AVE. SOUTH FROM EAST FULTON STREET.

Many streets which radiate out from downtown Grand Rapids at the Grand River follow old Indian trails

Examples:

- Plainfield Avenue NE
- Walker Avenue NW
- Monroe Center/State Street/Kalamazoo Avenue SE**
- Lake Drive SE
- Robinson Road SE
- Butterworth Street SW

***Monroe avenue formerly ran diagonally [NW to SE] across Sheldon, La Grave and Jefferson avenues and connected with State street, which street, many years ago, was the western section of Kalamazoo avenue. It ran diagonally across Morris, Paris and Charles avenue and connected with Kalamazoo avenue at Franklin street, near Eastern avenue. On Henry avenue south of Sherman street, an old house may be seen, fronting toward the street that was vacated.'*

(White, page 49)



Street Trivia and Factoids

1912 Grand Rapids renames many streets and made address changes (800 = 1 mile)

1920 change of many street names

Canal > Monroe Ave NW (1912)

Island St > Weston St (1920)

Fifth St. > Franklin St (1912) > Dr Martin Luther King St (2022)

East St > Eastern Ave (1912)

Ellsworth > Cherry St (1873)

Clinton Rd > eastern end Thornapple River Rd >

Lake St (1873) > Lake Dr (1912)

Detroit and Grand River Rd > 28th St

Ferry > Campau Circle NW

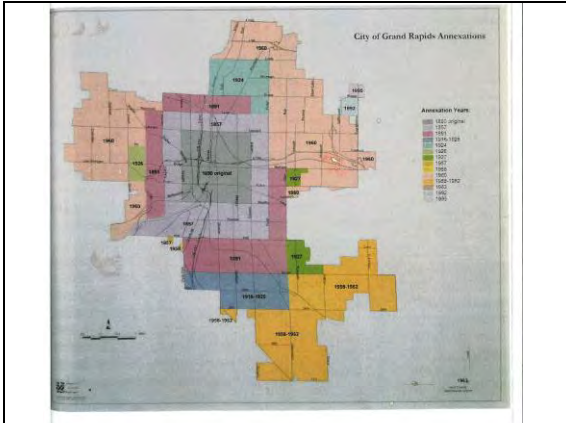
Street naming

LaGrave Ave – when Daniels laid out his addition, he names street after his father-in-law (? William E. LaGrave, 1868-1954)

Louis St and Antoine St – from Louis and Antoine Campau

Lyon St – from Hon. Lucius Lyon

Wealthy St – given by Judge Morrison in compliment to his wife



Census Information

www.census.gov

2020 US Census

Michigan Total 10,077,331

American Indian & Alaska Native

Total 61,261 (0.6%)

Kent County – 0.7% of 657,984

Newaygo County – 1.0% of 50,886

Ottawa County – 0.5% of 286,207

Muskegon County – 0.9% of 176,565

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<https://federalregister.gov/documents/2008/12/29/EB-30899/notice-of-inventory-completion-muskegon-county-museum-muskegon-mi>

The Grand River Bands of the Ottawa Indians is a native sovereign nation with agreements with the US Government dating back to 1795, Ron Yob, Chairman of the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians, personal conversation with WPC Justice Committee, 26 June 2023
