

## HISTORY OF BERKLEY

*Reference: BRIEFLY, BERKLEY by Shirley McLellan (called S.McLellan: B,B)*

“In the beginning, the land - - - was part of a vast forest and a swamp which rivaled none in the country. It was a terminal hardwood forest with virgin oak, beech, maple, elm and occasional giant pines. Ridges ran through the area, legacy of glaciation, and traces of these terminal moraines remain with us still. The most easily identifiable being the one which extends from east to west along what are now Beverly Blvd and Earlmont Road.”  
*S.McLellan: B,B p.1*

The tribes were “primarily Chippewa and Pottawatomi” but “none made their home” in the area of “Berkley”. There was an Indian Trail from the fort at Detroit going northward to the villages near Pontiac and Birmingham or to cross over to Canada. Even though none of the Indian tribes established villages in this area, they did find an open spot which was sheltered and dry enough to plant gardens of squash and corn which they would harvest in the fall as they returned from making a circuit through Canada or Ohio. The gardens were where Roseland Park Cemetery is now. The Indian women built small earth dikes around their plots to divide one from another and assist in drainage. The gardens were in use for so many years that large trees grew up along the edge of the dikes. The gardens were still very visible, although no longer in use, in the 1880’s when a member of the pioneer Royal Oak **Parker** family had sketches made of the site to preserve a record of Indian activity before they disappeared with encroaching farming. The sketches, unfortunately, have disappeared.” *S.McLellan: B,B p.2*

“During the War of 1812, the soldiers at the Fort in Detroit had built a very poor road from the fort to about where Palmer Park is today. The road was a causeway made of earth and logs felled on the site and piled on top of each other to raise the “road” several feet above the swamp. It had not been kept in repair after the war and rain had washed away the dirt and the logs in many places leaving holes and gaps.” *S.McLellan: B,B p4-5*

At the end of the War of 1812, in 1815 Congress planned to give land in Michigan to pay soldiers for their service. Surveying parties were sent to Detroit where “they were wined and dined and filled with frightening stories about the forest, swamp, wild animals, diseases and hostile Indians.” The Surveyors reported to Congress that not one acre in 100 was fit for habitation so land was opened in Illinois for the soldiers. *S.McLellan: B,B p.3-4.*

“Two early settlers of prominence, knew from experience the government reports had been falsified. One of these was Ephraim **Williams**, a far-sighted man who had managed the American Fur Company Post at Detroit.” In 1817, Williams traveled as far as Silver Lake, near Pontiac and returned to start a settlement there in 1818. “Williams began a one-man letter writing campaign” to convince others that “the forest could be cleared and the swamp drained.” *S.McLellan: B,B p.4*

Lewis **Cass** went with a group of merchants of Detroit to see just what kind of land lay in that great dark forest. They spent a night camping under a great oak tree at what became

the junction of what we now know as Rochester Road, Crooks, and Main Street (Livernois) at the north end of Royal Oak. It is said that he said, "This is indeed a Royal Oak, (referring to the great oak tree that James of Scotland hid in) and that became the name of the township. The group named many of the lakes in what is now Oakland County after members of their party. When they returned in 1819 they set about advertising the wonders of the Michigan Territory and in the first land records of Oakland County you will find the amazing amount of property that this group snatched up.

Lewis **Cass** had a "series of papers" "published in the east", "describing the wonderful terrain north of Detroit where the soil was of such richness, the settler had only to poke in a seed and growth was immediate. The swamp was mentioned in passing, but briefly." *S.McLellan: B,B p 5*

In 1816 the weather was so terrible that it was called "the year with no summer". There was frost and snow every month of the summer and no crops grew. Farmers could not earn a living. The Congress passed a Homestead Act selling the land for \$1.50 per acre. Michigan sounded like Paradise and so they got "Michigan Fever" and started coming in droves. In 1825 the Erie Canal was opened and the big rush was on and Michigan was the place to be.

The Scottish-Irish came. Some of the Pennsylvania Dutch came. "Many walked, hauling their goods in ox-drawn wagons until they reached the port of Buffalo, New York. Here they would embark upon small sailing vessels for the voyage to Detroit. The ships were extremely small and jammed with passengers." "The wait in Buffalo was sometimes lengthy." *S.McLellan: B,B p 6*

At Detroit, the settler went to the land office and selected his land from the map. Most bought farms of 80 acres.

After purchasing their land, they started up the military road with their possessions piled on an ox-cart, or on their backs. By nightfall they generally reached the tavern (located at about Six Mile Road and Woodward Avenue) of **Mother Handsome**, a physically unattractive woman, but a very kind woman with a fondness for the children. Her name was Mary Ann **Chappell**. Many adults wrote of her, remembering how she had calmed their fears of the forest and the Indians while giving them apples for their hunger. *S.McLellan: B,B p 7*

Mother Handsome was the widow of a soldier from the War of 1812. Originally she had a tavern near Eleven Mile Road on the west side of Woodward near what today is Franklin Road in Berkley. She sold before 1829 to Henry **Stephens**. This inn was called The Red Tavern. After selling, she then obtained the land closer to Detroit at Six Mile and the Trail (Woodward Avenue). *S.McLellan: B,B p 8*

Families often found help at Mother Handsome's if they needed a cart and ox to continue their trip. The hardest part of the trip was still ahead of them. The worst part of the road

and the swamp lay from Six Mile Road to the cranberry marshes where Eleven Mile is today. The driver was Diodate **Hubbard**, an early settler of the village of Royal Oak.

*Pioneers of what is now Berkley:*

**Chappell**, Mary Ann:

Sold the inn, The Red Tavern, located near Franklin Road on the west side of the trail by 1829 to Henry **Stephens**. Mother Handsome was the widow of a soldier from the War of 1812. Originally she had a tavern near Eleven Mile Road on the west side of Woodward near what today is Franklin Road. She sold before 1829 to Henry Stephens. This inn was called The Red Tavern. After selling, she then obtained the land closer to Detroit at Six Mile and the Trail (Woodward Avenue). *S.McLellan: B,B*

Stephens, Henry:

by 1829 owned The Red Tavern

Blackmon, Lymon:

1830 bought two 80 acre grants. His land ran from where Catalpa Drive is today, north to Twelve Mile Road on each side of what is now Coolidge Highway, west as far as what is now Kipling Avenue. He and his sons began to clear the land, built a log cabin and later, a typical Michigan farmhouse with a Michigan basement of fieldstones, with a long ell at one end and a two story wing at the other end. The house stood about where Earlmont Road is today. One half of it remained until recently, and the other portion was sacrificed to the building of Coolidge Highway. Blackmon cut two lanes along the section lines which formed the boundaries of his farm. The lane in front of the house was called Blackmon's Lane, according to custom and later became Blackmon Road.

The family belonged to a little Presbyterian congregation which built a church on Starr Road in Royal Oak at the corner of Crooks Road. The church duplicated one which some of its founding families had attended in the north of Ireland and was known as "The Irish Church".

In 1844 the Blackmon family left this church and joined in founding the First Congregational Church of Royal Oak.

In 1834, Lymon **Blackmon** donated a half acre of land, for the purpose of erecting a school. This land was located at the northeast corner of Coolidge and Catalpa Drive and was given to School District #7 to use as long as a school house stood upon it.

In 1874 Lymon Blackmon and his wife, Maria, now middle-aged, conveyed the farm of 160 acres to a son, Henry, for \$6,000.00 Henry signed an agreement to support his parents during their natural lives in a manner comfortable to their condition in life, furnish them a home on the land conveyed to him. Henry became mentally ill three years later and the conveyance was set aside.

*Ellwood Family:*

1831, late in the year, the **Ellwood** family arrived in Berkley. They came from New York State and the father, Captain Benjamin **Ellwood** (1775-1859), had been a foreman on the Erie Canal. They also owned two 80 acre farms, one north and one south of Twelve Mile Road, extending along the section line which is now Greenfield, east to

Bacon Street. Greenfield Road, although the dividing line between Royal Oak and Southfield Townships, was not developed for many years. It was platted on the maps as "Townline Road."

Cold weather and snow came early that year so the Ellwoods did not have time to put a real cabin up. They constructed a three sided shelter and hung the 4<sup>th</sup> side with skins and quilts, keeping a roaring fire going in front of the open 4<sup>th</sup> side. Snow drifted in and at night, sitting beside their blazing fire, the Ellwoods wrote they stared in fascination at a circle of yellow animal eyes on the other side of the fire, starring back at them.

The Ellwood family served on the District School Board and were active in Township politics. They remained in Berkley until World War I, when the farms were sold for subdivisions.

*Bergen, Elisha:*

1832 took up his grant of land on Eleven Mile Road at Coolidge, now part of Huntington Woods. He was a skilled tradesman, a weaver. He had left his family in the east until his cabin was built and he had established himself. Since Elisha was a highly skilled weaver and a terrible baker, he walked to what is now Royal Oak and bought bread from a farmer's wife. His claim to fame occurred during his first winter in Michigan. As he returned from buying bread one bitterly cold night, and found a small pack of hungry looking wolves, gaining rapidly upon him. He ran. The wolves ran faster. Finally, he ripped off chunks of his bread and while the wolves fought over the treat, Elisha reached his cabin door without his bread.

The **Bergens** remained on their farm for nearly thirty years when Elisha gave up farming and he and his family moved to the Village of Royal Oak.

*1832*

So many new settlers were arriving that a stagecoach line began to run from Detroit to Pontiac, stopping at the Red Tavern. Settlers continued to pour into the area, in spite of the Black Hawk War, and the cholera epidemic.

*Hoagland Family:*

1835 they arrived and built a log cabin on Twelve Mile road near Wakefield, which came to be called "The Pittenger Cabin" after Maria **Pittenger**, a Hoagland daughter, who lived there for a number of years. This cabin was still in existence until about World War I, and was typical of all the cabins built by the early settlers. It was made of logs, plastered with clay between the cracks. It had two floors. The upstairs was originally a loft and later was roughly plastered for two small bedrooms. The two rooms downstairs were for cooking, sleeping and family living. These rooms were whitewashed each spring. In summer, the stove was moved to a shed at the back of the cabin and called the summer kitchen.

*1836:*

The largest number of land sales in the entire nation had been made in Michigan – one and one half million acres.

*Hickey, James and Bethiah:*

1847 the **Hickey** family came from New York State and purchased the land originally owned by Henry Stephens which had by then passed through several other hands. The original 80 acres had lost one acre to the enlarged turnpike and a slice for a railroad right-of-way.

*Cromie Family:*

1877: The Cromie Family purchased 53 acres of the Blackmon farm. It was retained until 1916 when it was sold for subdivision.

*Berkley Schools:*

The earliest records of the Berkley District have been lost.

1867: The District Assessor's record book shows John Stevens as School Assessor and the income of the District School for that year was \$42.86 from the primary fund, \$10.03 in direct school taxes; \$19.60 in dog taxes, and \$28.80 from the primary fund for the second half of the year, showing a total of \$92.09 *S.McLellan: B,B p10*

1834 - 1901 Blackmon School

The first school in the district was built of wood. Never painted, it weathered to a soft gray. One side was for the boys, and the other side was for the girls. The teacher's platform stood at the back of the single room and here also was the desk and the stove. A bucket of water and a dipper, the drinking supply, sat in the corner. *S.McLellan: B,B p 8*