



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

June 2022



Woodward at 12 Mile Looking South—March 1930

The Woodward Dream – Before the “Cruise”

by Don Callihan

As a Berkley teenager, with a driver’s license in the 1950s, I spent my fair share of time cruising Woodward between the Totem Pole, just north of Ten Mile Road, and Ted’s Drive-In at Square Lake Road. Cheap gas and an eight-lane highway provided great entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights. However, even before getting a driver’s license, I was fascinated by Woodward. My travels in those days were limited to Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Ontario, but I did not see a single eight-lane highway in any of those places. Woodward was unique.

In addition to providing weekend entertainment for Berkley teenagers in the 1950s and 60s, Woodward also played a major role in Berkley’s development. Its direct route from downtown and to General Motors plants in Pontiac, made Berkley an easy and convenient commute. This ease of access, coupled with Berkley’s other attributes, made it a desirable place to live, and it grew rapidly prior to, and after, the Depression and World War II. But how and when did Woodward become the eight-lane superhighway that it is today?

Woodward’s Beginnings

To answer that question, we must return to those “thrilling days of yesteryear” when Augustus B. Woodward was appointed chief judge for the Michigan territory shortly after the destruction wrought by Detroit’s 1805 fire. To aid in the city’s reconstruction, Judge Woodward devised a new street plan centered on a hub located in the vicinity of today’s Campus Martius Park. He then redirected the major trails that converged in Detroit to that hub, and they became Detroit’s major thoroughfares. The central thoroughfare in his design was the Saginaw trail, which led from Detroit through Pontiac to Flint and on to Saginaw. This trail became Detroit’s main street and Judge Woodward modestly named the Detroit segment after himself. Eventually the name was adopted all the way to a point just north of Pontiac’s downtown.

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In Honor of the Woodward Dream Cruise, during the months of August and September, the Museum will feature an exhibit on Woodward Avenue and how it went from a trail to the superhighway that it is today. Come and see the graphical version of The Woodward Dream—Before the “Cruise.”

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In the nineteenth century, as Detroit’s major trails radiated outward, they became primitive dirt roads. While riders on horseback could traverse these roads with minimal difficulty, carriages and wagons had a much harder time, especially when the roads turned to mud after heavy rains. To remedy the situation, sometime around 1849, the Saginaw Trail became a plank road all the way from Detroit to Pontiac. However, deteriorating wooden planks, and lack of funds to replace them, returned the roadway to its original dirt and mud condition sometime around 1900. Shortly thereafter, automobiles began using the road on a regular basis and, just like the carriages and wagons, got bogged down after heavy rains. With planks no longer an option, drainage ditches were dug, and gravel was put down to stabilize the roadway surface.

The Railroad and the Interurban

In addition to becoming a roadway, the Saginaw Trail was also a suitable place to build a railroad, and the Detroit & Pontiac Railway began operating all the way from Detroit to Pontiac in 1844. Its track ran along the trail’s east side through portions of what are now Royal Oak, Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills. Through a series of consolidations and mergers, the railroad eventually became the Grand Trunk Western Railroad.

In late 1899, yet another transportation option began utilizing the trail when double tracks were extended all the way to Pontiac for the Detroit and Pontiac Electric Line (D&P), an interurban passenger line that utilized self-propelled electric trolley cars similar to streetcars. The D&P eventually became the Eastern Michigan Railway and ended operations in 1931 due to low ridership.

Thus, at the start of the Twentieth Century, on what would become Berkley’s eastern border, there was a gravel road that was Woodward, the double tracks of the Detroit & Pontiac Electric Line and the single track for the Detroit, Grand Haven & Milwaukee Railroad, soon to be the Grand Trunk Western Railroad.

The First Mile of Concrete

As the century progressed, more and more automobiles were using the roads, and roadway congestion became a major problem, particularly on Woodward. More and better roads were needed and the newly formed Wayne County Road Commission, under the direction of Edward N. Hines, decided to pave a one-mile stretch of Woodward Avenue between Six and Seven-Mile roads with concrete in order to test its endurance. The new road opened to traffic in June of 1909. It was the first mile of concrete highway in the world.

This initial mile of concrete roadway showed that concrete could be used successfully for automobile travel, and by September of 1916, Woodward was a paved two-lane concrete highway from Detroit all the way to Pontiac.

The Woodward Dream

While widening Woodward had been discussed since 1913 when the Oakland County Road Commission was established, it was not until the fall of 1921 that plans really began to materialize. Within months, Governor, Alex B. Groesbeck got behind the idea and in early May of 1923, the State Legislature passed the Wider Woodward bill. The bill called for Woodward to have a 110 foot right-of-way. However by the fall of 1923, the number of automobiles in the Detroit area was growing exponentially. To plan for the future, it was decided that Woodward needed to have a 204-foot right-of-way that could accommodate a 4-lane, 40 foot roadway in each direction, a 40-foot center section for streetcar tracks and space on each side for parking, sidewalks and greenery.

Acquiring the right-of-way for the new road was the first step. Problem right-of-way areas were the Village of Birmingham and the Grand Trunk Railroad tracks that ran along Woodward from Catalpa Drive in Royal Oak to south of Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills. Right-of-way for the remainder of the highway was relatively easy to acquire, and initial work began in these areas.

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Renewing Your License Plates

This photo shows the Michigan Secretary of State (SOS) branch office that was located on the northwest corner of Harvard and Woodward in Berkley. The office was phased out when then, SOS, Richard H. Austin, agreed to phase out fee branch offices. They were called fee branches because branch managers were political appointees of the SOS’s political party and received a fee for each transaction. It was expected that a portion of that fee would be donated to the SOS’s reelection campaign.

In addition to the political aspects of this system, it was also a difficult system for clients. Tabs and plates for the coming year were not available for purchase until December 1, and had to be on vehicles by February 28 - the date was later extended to March 31.

To obtain new tabs/plates, a blank form had to be completed and taken to the branch office along with cash for the amount due. Naturally there were lines; especially as the deadline approached. The offices were small, so lines went out the door which could be very uncomfortable in February and even in March.

The Berkley branch office was established in 1951 when it was moved from Royal Oak (RO) when James S. Thorburn resigned as branch manager to run for the RO school board. The new appointee, John G. Semann, decided to move the branch to Berkley. Semann was succeeded by John Kronenberg who managed the branch from 1954 until it was phased out in 1974.

The next time you are impatiently waiting in a comfortable SOS branch, think back to how it used to be.

The Woodward Dream—Before the “Cruise”

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Construction Begins

Construction of Wider Woodward started at South Boulevard in the north and moved south and also at Eight Mile Road in the south and moved north. At a ceremony at Woodward and Eight Mile roads on Wednesday, August 6, 1924, Governor Groesbeck activated the first concrete pour and said that this project will “. . . transform Woodward Avenue into a superhighway.” Only six weeks later, in September of 1924, southbound Woodward between 8-Mile and 9-Mile opened to traffic. By the fall of 1925, at least four lanes of Wider Woodward (two lanes in each direction) were open to traffic between Detroit and Pontiac.



Woodward Avenue Looking South From Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills, 1926

Work continued on the northbound lanes in 1926, and by the end of the year, Woodward Avenue was complete with the exception of the stretch occupied by the Grand Trunk railroad tracks and the one mile stretch through the Village of Birmingham. With eight lanes open to traffic in some areas, Woodward was declared the World's first superhighway.

The Birmingham Bottleneck

Obtaining the required right-of-way in Birmingham required the demolition of a large number of buildings and the village did not want to do that. This delayed the project in Birmingham for four years until a compromise was reached in the spring of 1928. Woodward would be widened through the downtown area to 70 feet with the idea of constructing a similar parallel roadway to the east after the Grand Trunk tracks were relocated. Southbound traffic would use the roadway through the village, and northbound traffic would use the future parallel roadway. The 70-foot roadway was completed in the summer of 1928.

After more court battles, the Grand Trunk tracks were relocated to their current location. Now work could begin on Woodward's northbound lanes from Eleven Mile to Lincoln. They opened to traffic on October 24, 1931. The way was also clear for the parallel roadway to the east of downtown Birmingham, but it was never constructed. In the meantime, an additional 1 ½ miles of northbound Woodward, just north of Birmingham, opened to traffic on October 17, 1932.

With all lanes now open to the north and south of Birmingham, eight lanes of traffic were reduced to four lanes through the village creating a severe bottleneck. Woodward commuters and Birmingham's residents suffered through this condition for six years until the village was informed by the state in the fall of 1937 that work would begin soon on a by-pass to be constructed around the downtown. The by-pass would match up to the Wider Woodward roadways that were already in service to the north and south of the village.

The Dream Becomes Reality

Two years were required to complete the bypass and finally, on Friday, November 3, 1939, a ceremony at Maple Road and the new Hunter Boulevard (the name for the bypass as Woodward Avenue continued to run through the center of Birmingham) marked the completion of Wider Woodward from Six Mile Road in Detroit to South Boulevard in Pontiac. As part of the ceremony, State Highway Commissioner Murray D. Van Wagoner and Chief Black Cloud of the Chippewa Indian Tribe smoked the pipe of peace to celebrate the transition of what began as an Indian trail to the new Wider Woodward. The Woodward dream was now a reality.

Surprisingly, Woodward's configuration has only changed slightly in 83 years. The Woodward Avenue/Eight Mile overpass was opened in 1955; the Woodward Avenue/I-696 tri-level bridge was completed in the fall of 1989; the first “Michigan Left Turn” on Woodward—not the first in the state—was instituted in 1963; and right-turn lanes have been added over the years in some locations. Otherwise, with the exception of landscaping and periodic resurfacing, Woodward Avenue is as it was in 1939.

Woodward Gets Its Recognition

On June 13, 2002, Woodward Avenue, from Jefferson Avenue in Detroit all the way to Pontiac, became one of America's 99 National Byways and the only urban roadway so designated. Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta said in announcing the designation, “. . .Byways are roads to the heart and soul of America. They create a sense of pride and connect us to the nation's history and culture. Woodward Avenue put the world on wheels, and America's automobile heritage is represented along this corridor.” The Woodward Dream Cruise commemorates that heritage as does the Berkley Cruise Fest, a parade of classic cars held on the Friday night before the Dream Cruise.

The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and more.

Our New Mug

Our new mug—multiple views below—features restaurants of Berkley's past. Everything from pizza to hamburgers to local mom and pop operations is represented. The primary criteria for selecting these restaurants were that they are no longer in business and that they gained favor with Berkley residents. Restaurants on the mug include Thistles Fish & Chips, The Northwood Inn, Peppy's, Sila's, Dominico's, Nip N' Tuck, and The Spaghetti Company. Of course there were numerous Berkley restaurants that met the criteria, so we randomly chose those included. If you have a favorite that we missed, let us know and we will consider it if we decide to do a second edition.



Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
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Hours:

Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM

Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at
www.berkleyhistory.org

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Make a Donation

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

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The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.