

History of Chelsea, 1832-1850

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By Rena Walworth

Going back to 1832 when U.S. 12 was an Indian trail, the Indians made a trail from Lake Michigan to Detroit to get their government pay, which was given to them, in those days, to keep them from fighting. They came along a trail which later became known as the Territorial road, and later still as a United States highway.

In 1834 and 1835 and 1840 period, the Territorial road out of Detroit came as far as Ypsilanti and then branched off into two roads, one coming through Chelsea to Chicago, the other branched at Ypsilanti and went southward through Saline, Clinton, and St. Joseph also to Chicago.

The genesis of Chelsea was a combination of three small hamlets in the township of Sylvan that eventually centered in Chelsea. One such hamlet was Pierceville, a small settlement at the corner of what is now Main Street and Old U.S. 12. In 1831-1832 Darius and Nathan Pierce, brothers, came to Michigan from Ontario County, New York, and took up a section of land, 640 acres. Nathan Pierce settled on 320 acres out where the Prudden farm now stands. Darius took up land west (sic) and north of Chelsea on the present location of Dexter Road.

The Pierces were speculators for they bought land in other parts of the country, around Albion and Marshall. Both were elected to the first legislature of Michigan in 1837. Nathan was called "Old Boots" for he always took off his boots when he went into the legislative chamber.

Out on U.S. 12 where Nathan settled, there developed a Post Office, a blacksmith shop, a doctor, a general store. As settlers came in, they made different roads to this settlement which took the name of Pierceville after the Pierces.

Now Darius settled on his land north and east of Chelsea, and a settlement was made on our North Main Street where Letz (sic) Creek is now. He named the settlement Kedron for it reminded him of a place in Ontario County, New York, named after a river in Jerusalem. There was a Post Office, a blacksmith shop, and a store north of the present Michigan Central Railroad tracks.

Another group of settlers from Vermont settled farther south where the present Vermont cemetery is located. Also there was a small settlement of pioneers at Sylvan Center, called so because of the dense woods located there.

It wasn't long before Elisha and James Congdon migrated from the east and took up land north of what is now Main Street. Both Congdons were to figure prominently in the history of Chelsea. Elisha especially wondered about the name Kedron. He wanted the place named Chelsea after the Mass. Town from which he came. Thus it was that on July 20, 1844, Darius Pierce wrote to U.S. Senator Alpheus Phelps of Ann Arbor and asked if the name of the settlement Kedron could be changed to the name of Chelsea. Alpheus wrote to P.O. Dept. in Washington about it, and received the reply that if it were satisfactory to the five families who lived there, the name could be changed. Copies of the letters are filed in the Rackham Bldg.

It wasn't long after the official establishment of the town of Chelsea that the surrounding hamlets moved in, and joined with it. Pierceville families moved into town, bringing the doctor, the store, and the blacksmith shop; Sylvan Center families moved in, bringing with them a storekeeper and a hotel. Elisha Congdon was made postmaster.

McKune House is one of the oldest houses in Chelsea. The Charles Lambert house on S. Main Street is the oldest house. It was built on the corner where the Schneider Grocery store now stands, but it was later moved to its present location.

In 1840 the Michigan Central Railroad began to build westward from Detroit to Marshall. At that time about one mile west of Chelsea was Davidson Station, also called Gunnville after a family who lived there. By 1844 they had built as far west as Chelsea, which was a very hilly little village. Trucksters said that the sandy hill on the main street of the village was the most difficult hill between Jackson and Flint.

In 1850 Elisha and Jim Congdon platted Chelsea, an act which many consider the real beginning of the village. At that time most of the village was located north of the railroad. The brothers had been very influential in getting the railroad to come here in the first place, and donated the land for a station. The little station at Davidson was burned, leaving Chelsea in almost undisputed leadership.

The grandfather of Mr. A.W. Wilkinson came from New York state and built a store on the site where Burg's Drug Store now stands. As other settlers came in, roads were made from their locations, and farmers brought produce to Chelsea to exchange for other merchandise. The merchants had to go to Detroit by wagon for all of their stock at four miles per hour.

Later there was a Congdon store on the east side of North Main Street and a post office where the Buick garage is now. Homes were being built by newcomers, and when a family built a home on the site of the present post office, the home was considered "out of town."

In 1853 there were seventeen families living in Chelsea, making a population of 63 people. There were twenty-one children registered in the local school, and half of them were members of the Congdon families. In 1854 a fair-sized school was erected on W. Middle Street where the John Schenk property now is. This was not a regular district, so the school was known as a "select school." The present school site was donated to the district in 1860 and Elisha Congdon built the first school on it under contract. This was torn down in 1873, and was shortly afterward replaced by the present school building.

In 1878 only a few streets had names: Middle, North, South, East, Park, and Railroad Streets were named. In 1888 plans were made for the erection of wooden sidewalks, so that every street was given a name. In that year Billy Judson was named Postmaster of Chelsea, and President Harrison was newly made president, so the street where the postmaster lived was named Harrison, to honor both president and postmaster.

Oak Grove cemetery was established in 1860. The Congdon brothers, Elisha and James, came to Michigan in 1833 and took up the land on which the village of Chelsea was built. Main Street divided the two farms.