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WADE INTO "A LITTLE RIVER OF MICHIGAN"

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The Huron River: Introduction

"The Huron River is a Well-Behaved, Pretty and Useful Little Stream" is how author William Hoad began his descriptive essay entitled "A Little River of Michigan." In his article from 1950, this retired University of Michigan professor of civil engineering identifies the river as a "youthful stream" with "juvenile characteristics" featured along its unpremeditated course among the hummocks, sometimes almost losing itself in

some little lake or swamp, or perhaps emerging at two or three different points as if uncertain which way to go." Adolescent in Hoad's description, the river has for centuries attracted the reposers, athletes, lovers, friends, environmentalists, and entrepreneurial engineers as it wanders first southwest and then southeast, ultimately reaching Lake Erie.



From vertical file folder *University of Michigan Student Life and Customs*. General: undated.

This site was created by Jennifer Lewis for the Bentley Historical Library, and includes commentary written by Nancy Bartlett.

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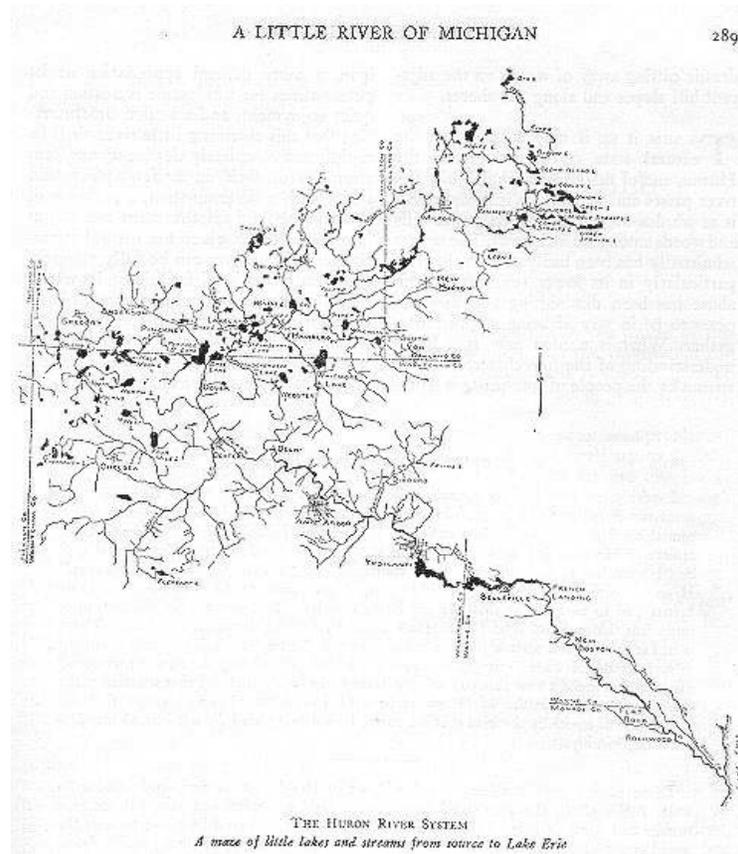
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Geographical Reach of the River

The entire Huron River watershed in southeastern Michigan is approximately 900 square miles, with the main stem of the river stretching 125 miles. Ease of access to the river accounts for much of its appeal. Already in 1830, a promotor of Michigan wrote that "The rivers Grand, St. Joseph, Raisin, Huron, Clinton, Rouge, Kalamazoo, and Shiawasee, interlocking in different parts of the territory, not only irrigate the county in a beautiful manner, but offer unparalleled inducements for canaling, and with comparatively but little expense, as there would be no mountains, nor probably rock strata to cut through."



Map from article "A Little River of Michigan" by William Hoad in **The Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review**, Summer 1950.

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Harnessing the Power of the Huron



Image from Postcard Collection

For over a century and a half, the Huron River has been used to generate power. The first constructions along the river were sawmills, and later flouring mills, woolen mills, and carding mills were built. The published history entitled *Past and Present of Washtenaw County* claimed in 1906 that "the Huron River is believed to be capable of furnishing more power than any other river in the state." This same publication predicted that "it is extremely probable that within a short period it will be used more than now for the development of electric power, which it is planned to develop by the building of immense dams."

- [Map of Scio Township](#)
- [Birds-eye view of Delhi Mills](#)

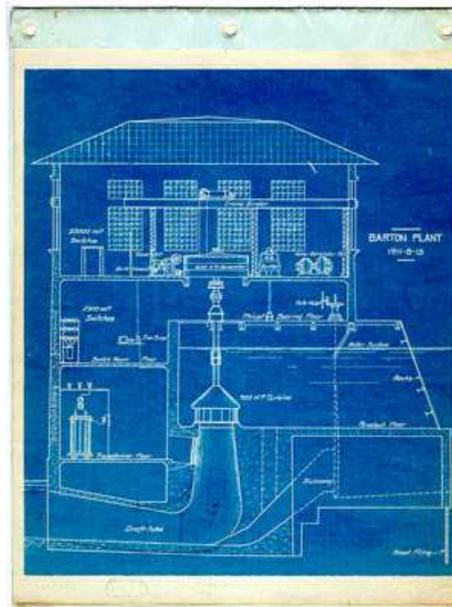
Engineer Gardner Stewart Williams shared this vision of power harnessed along the river's route. As a consultant for the Detroit Edison Company, he prepared a proposal for the



Barton Plant, Eastern Michigan Edison Co., Dec. 1, 1912
from Gardner Stewart Williams Papers

development of the Huron River water powers. His research included a set of measured surveys. By 1910, Detroit Edison, with Williams acting as its agent, had acquired most of the prospective flowage rights necessary for the project. The Huron River development was not completed as planned, but six dams were built:

Dam	Date Built
Barton	1912
Argo	1913
Geddes	1916
Superior	1919
French Landing	1925
Rawsonville (owned by Henry Ford)	1927



Blueprint of Barton plant from Gardner Stewart Williams Papers

The Bentley Historical Library holds a number of maps of Washtenaw County, and more generally of the state of Michigan. These are mostly modern maps of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Author Paul Peck, in his "Landsmen of Washtenaw County," notes that "the settlement of Washtenaw County was irregular." He tracks the pattern, observing that some of it was settled very early, and parts of it were settled after some counties west of it were settled. He attributes this to the lakes and their adjoining swamps, which surveyors nearly refused to survey in the early nineteenth

century. In 1822, Washtenaw County was established as a county, formed from land set off from Wayne County. From 1822 through 1839 various township boundaries within Washtenaw County were formed, changed, and changed again. As of 1839, the county had reached its modern formation of townships.

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Health of the Huron



Wall St. Bridge, Ann Arbor, Mich., collapsed, Aug. 6, 1969

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Huron River's Recreation

University of Michigan Students have frequented the river as a favorite venue for contemplation, intimacy, or camaraderie. Their personal collections are filled with photographs, diaries, and letters alluding to the river. George Washington Pray, a student in the first graduating class of the university, mentions routinely in his diary his frequent walks through the woods of the Arboretum and along the river. In one entry from July 23, 1844 he wrote,



Image from Herman S. Sherman Student Scrapbook

"In the evening I went walking with friend perry. We went through my favorite wood among the hills and valleys about 1 1/2 miles to a beautiful place by the river. On the high bank we could stand and look far off into the surrounding country. The sun was just setting and it gilded every thing around with its golden beams . Before us was the river winding along its shady banks with soothing murmurs and far off stretched scenery diversified with hills and woods with houses and fields all glittering in the setting sun. After enjoying this a little we went down to the banks of the river stripped and went in. After a good play in the water we slowly returned to the University enjoying the cool breezes of the lovely evening."

ALUMNAE REMEMBER THE RIVER

In 1924, the University of Michigan Alumnae Council undertook a survey of Michigan alumnae. Many of the hundreds of women who responded to the survey recalled the Huron River in response to the question on the last page of the form: "Won't you add a few of the outstanding memories of your college days? We shall be glad to hear of any incident, however trivial, which lingers in your memory."



Dancer by the Huron
 Image from University of Michigan
 Department of Education for Women Record Group



"The discovery that the best way to 'cram' for exams was to cram one's mind full of the peacefulness of drifting down the Huron in canoe and twilight."

"Breakfast on the banks of the Huron, eaten between solemn & earnest statements dealing with such matters as the universe, human progress, socialism, religion, and philosophy."

"Our good times would perhaps seem very insipid and tame to this generation, but we took lots of comfort going up the river canoeing in summer and skating above the dam in winter. The favorite hike was around the old boulevard. Sometimes a bunch of us would get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and watch the sun rise & the birds awakening along the river."



Canoeing on the Huron River, near Ann Arbor, Mich.
Image from the Postcard Collection

". . . a trip up the river in a canoe one June afternoon with a man friend. We talked to hobos along the railroad tracks and obtained some unusual glimpses into their lives. I paddled the entire distance. We each carried a gun and practiced shooting at marks, and before starting home gathered a boatload of water lilies."

"The most memorable events are: 1. Escape from drowning in the Huron River in May 1896, when, according to the practice of those days, a group of students floated down, in flat bottom boats, from Ypsi to Rawsonville. As the river was in flood at that season, the trip was made with great speed but in constant danger of capsizing through the sharp stones and snags. We capsized!"

"At noon we went ashore and ate our lunch on the grass under some trees and the wild flowers were blooming all around us. After lunch three of us Medies took a small boat and went for a row. Anna sat in front and I at the back and our male escort rowed the boat. After we had rowed for some little time and splashed water on each other and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves we decided we would go ashore and go through the pulp mill. Anna's end of the boat first came to shore, she said, "I will jump out and will pull the boat up on the shore," out she jumped took hold of the rope and pulled the end of the boat up in the air while I and my end of the boat were submerged in the water. Our escort played the Hero and rescued me."

[Quotations have been taken from the Alumnae Surveys of 1924 and 1927, which are included in the Alumni Association (University of Michigan) Record Group.]

ANN ARBOR CITIZENS AND VISITORS



[Click to view full drawing]
 Jasper Francis Cropsey Visual
 Materials Collection, 1855-1856.

Along with University of Michigan students, Ann Arbor citizens and visitors have created decades of documentation about their enjoyment of the Huron River.

Jasper Francis Cropsey drew an intimate sketch of the river during his visit to the area in 1855 (at left), at the same time when he was commissioned by the University of Michigan Board of Regents

to make two paintings of the university grounds and buildings. A well-regarded painter associated with the Hudson School of landscape painting, Cropsey was paid a total of \$25.00 by the regents for his work in Ann Arbor.

The Boulevard, Cascade Glen, School Girls' Glen, Lover's Lane, and Picnic Island, were all familiar nameplaces for the Ann Arbor community. Judge Noah Cheever, who had first arrived in Ann Arbor as a student in 1859, printed a small pamphlet entitled Pleasant Walks and Drives About Ann Arbor. "Some of them



Image from George Robert Swain Photograph Series.

will be rather long to designate as walks," He forewarns, "but all who posses a bicycle or a horse or a horse and carriage, can readily enjoy the longest of them." It was not unusual for casual walks to extend for miles, according to accounts left within diaries and letters.



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Huron: History of a Name

The word Huron has had many associations within the area of Michigan. This appellation is French in origin. It was a name attributed by the French to the settlement of Native Americans at the mouth of the river near where the French settled Detroit. Huron therefore came to be associated with the Native American settlement, the river Huron, and even Lake Huron. Native Americans themselves referred to the Huron River as Giwitatigweiasibi.

Other uses of Huron can be found in the book *Michigan Place Names: The History of the Founding and the Naming of More Than Five Thousand Past and Present Michigan Communities*, by Walter Romig (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1986).

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