

KALAMAZOO HISTORY



Titus Bronson

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, European fur traders made their way to the area now known as Kalamazoo County and set up trading posts. At the time, members of the Pottawatomie inhabited the area, but by the 1820s pioneers began making permanent settlements in the vicinity. Titus Bronson, the first non-indigenous settler in Kalamazoo, arrived in June 1829 and purchased a large tract of land. By March 1831 the first plat was recorded for the Village of Bronson, which included Jail and Academy Squares, parcels of land that would eventually become Bronson Park. The Michigan and Huron Institute (renamed Kalamazoo College in 1855) was granted a charter in 1833, while *The Michigan Statesman*, a weekly newspaper, which would become *The Kalamazoo Gazette*, was founded in 1835. Perhaps the biggest change for the Village of Bronson happened in 1836 when the name was changed to Kalamazoo, a word derived from the Algonquin language but its true meaning is still debated.

Although Kalamazoo's beginnings involved a peaceful relationship between the settlers and Pottawatomie, it drastically changed when the Pottawatomie were forcibly removed from the area in 1840. Kalamazoo was incorporated as a village in 1843 and trustees were elected to approve the charter. Hosea Huston, a local merchant, was elected as the first President of Trustees. Following incorporation, Kalamazoo experienced a boom in industry thanks in part to being connected to the Michigan Central Railroad in 1846. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Kalamazoo was a leader in celery cultivation and marketing due to an influx of immigrants from Holland, while the paper industry took off as well. Kalamazoo was the site of the Michigan Asylum for the Insane, which opened in 1859 and was the first of its kind in the State of Michigan.



Hosea Huston

From 1861 to 1865, the nation was embroiled in the Civil War, and over 3,000 men represented Kalamazoo County during the conflict. During the late 1860s and 1870s Kalamazoo was connected to the Kalamazoo, Allegan, and Grand Rapids Railroad; The Grand Trunk Railroad; and The Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad. Kalamazoo also made public welfare improvements by creating a municipal well and waterworks. In 1874, the "Kalamazoo School Case" allowed school boards to levy taxes, which led to free high schools in Michigan.

The late 1870s and early 1880s saw more improvements for Kalamazoo. The first telephone line connected the Merrill and McCourtie Mill to its downtown offices in 1878. When sanitary and storm sewers were constructed during the early 1880s, the City Engineers had the foresight not to merge the two.

In April 1884, the villagers of Kalamazoo voted to become a City. The largest village (16,500 citizens) in the United States became the City of Kalamazoo. Banker and entrepreneur Allen Potter was elected the City's first Mayor. The industrial age was upon America and Kalamazoo was in the thick of it. Up to the turn of the century, Kalamazoo was known world-wide for the production of wind engines, carriages, pharmaceuticals, corsets, musical instruments, fishing reels, stoves, mint oils, cigars, playing cards, regalia,



paper products, celery, beer and coffins. The captains of industry also filled City Hall as Mayors and Aldermen. The electric light plant opened in 1886. Also that year Michigan's first Savings and Loan was created in Kalamazoo. The Chicago, Kalamazoo and Saginaw Railroad came to Kalamazoo in 1888. Borgess Hospital was founded in 1889. Street cars, first horse-drawn and then electric, allowed workers to live farther from their jobs and urban sprawl was born along with some of Kalamazoo's finest neighborhoods.

Kalamazoo boomed at the turn of the century with population growing an impressive 62% from 1900 to 1910. Several local automobile manufacturers tried their luck at capturing the driving public's fancy, with none succeeding. Even the well-regarded Roamer, a luxury car, was defunct by 1928. As the carriage makers, cigar manufacturers, and celery growers declined, new industries were born. The paper industry reigned supreme with numerous mills turning out a variety of products. Flinch, manufactured in Kalamazoo, was the world's favorite card game. The interurbans provided quick, cheap inter-city transportation. In 1903, Western Michigan University opened as the Western State Normal School educating future teachers. Bronson Hospital was founded in 1904. The Bijou motion picture theater debuted in 1906. Caroline Bartlett Crane advocated cleaner streets and more importantly hygiene for the meat packing industry.



Milham Park

Prohibition came to Kalamazoo in 1915 and the saloons and breweries closed. Baseball, cycling, Grand Circuit horse racing, and an amusement park at Oakwood Beach entertained the City. New City parks created during this time were Milham, Crane, West Main, Muffley, Sherwood, the Waterworks park and Henderson Park. The United States entered World War I in 1917 and the 126th Infantry from Kalamazoo commanded by Colonel Joseph Westnedge took heavy casualties. Col. Westnedge was one of those casualties. His brother Richard preceded him in death in the Spanish-American War. The City honored the two brothers by renaming West Street Westnedge Avenue and renaming the old cemetery on West Street Joseph B. Westnedge Park in 1920.

Many reforms were sweeping the nation after the turn of the century: prohibition, women's suffrage, recreation for the masses, hygiene, and new types of local government. Kalamazoo set up a Charter Commission in 1917 led by pharmaceutical innovator Dr. William E. Upjohn. The proposed charter followed the Dayton (Ohio) Plan which called for a City Manager-Commission form of government. The new charter passed and a new City Commission was elected on April 1, 1918. For a few years afterward, the City's politics convulsed over the new government. Opponents' attempts to overturn the new charter succeeded, then failed at replacing it. Finally, the City accepted the Manager-Commission and it remains the City's form of government today.

In the same postwar period, Spanish Influenza or Swine Flu decimated populations all over the world. Kalamazoo "fared better than most" according to the City Health Officer. From September 1918 to April 1919, 4,064 cases of influenza were reported including 125 deaths. The national death rate from the flu was 4 per 1,000

population. Kalamazoo's rate was 2.5 per 1,000. On October 17, 1918 the City Commission, by resolution, prohibited public gatherings, specifically at churches, theatres, movies, pool rooms, dance halls etc. The quarantining of flu patients was instituted by the Board of Health on December 9, 1918. On December 17, public gatherings were again allowed as the number of new influenza cases declined.

The roaring twenties also roared in Kalamazoo. Buoyed by a burgeoning economy, the City's pay-as-you-go plan resulted in a new City Hall in 1931, financed without bonded indebtedness or increase in property tax. Kalamazoo's first municipal golf course, Gateway, was developed in 1924 south of Michigan Avenue where WMU now stands. The flapper lifestyle doomed one Kalamazoo industry, however, the corset manufacturers. Celery was now sharing the fields with pansy cultivation and the fresh flower industry took off. Checker Cab became the only lasting Kalamazoo automobile manufacturer. Michigan's first municipal airport, Lindbergh Field, was the precursor of the Kalamazoo-Battle Creek International Airport.



The stock market crash of 1929 and the resulting depression doomed those companies teetering on the brink of insolvency. The City's relief programs provided assistance to the City's unemployed until 1933 when the federal WPA programs took over. In spite of the depression, the City paid off its last bond in 1938 becoming America's only debt-free city over 50,000 people. WKZO, Kalamazoo's first radio station, began broadcasting in 1931. Milham Park Golf Course opened the same year. Western State Normal School President Dwight Waldo's forceful personality saved the school from permanent closure proposed by State budget cuts.

World War II reversed the City's problems. The Depression left the City low on income but with lots of labor. WWII production eased the monetary restraints but severely limited manpower. One third of the workforce and 11% of City employees were in the armed forces according to Willis Dunbar. The City lengthened airport runways, set up Victory gardens on City property and built a canning plant to preserve the food grown. By the end of WWII, the City's infrastructure was suffering from four years of neglect.

With thousands of men and women from Kalamazoo County returning from World War II, and the subsequent "baby-boom," a rapid expansion of the community began. The roads, water and sewer lines struggled to keep up with the demand, particularly in the outlying areas and a subsequent series of annexations by the City more than doubled its geographic size by the end of the 1950s. Leading to an increased investment in infrastructure, the expanding City eschewed the pay-as-you-go model and undertook an impressive number of public work projects including road widening and paving and leading eventually to a new Wastewater treatment facility. In 1959, the City of Kalamazoo adopted part of plan from Victor Gruen & Associates to close sections of Burdick Street and create the nation's first open-air pedestrian shopping mall.



As Burdick Street closed to automobile traffic, the nation's new interstate highway system opened the area to further economic growth. By 1963 both I-94 and US-131 were completed, connecting Kalamazoo to Detroit, Chicago and Grand Rapids with four-lane divided expressways.

Runway expansion and a new terminal also brought increased traffic to Kalamazoo's airport. Along side these public improvements, businesses in Kalamazoo expanded rapidly, particularly manufacturing industries. Post war economic growth led to expansion or increased production at Checker Cab Co., Upjohn, Kalamazoo Vegetable Paper Company and the Sutherland Paper Company among others. In 1966, General Motors opened its 2,000,000 square foot Fisher body plant along I-94.

Demand on the educational infrastructure surged as well, and new public and catholic high schools, Loy Norrix and Hackett, were constructed along with many other new or expanded facilities. These soaring student populations were not reserved for grade schools. The Western State Normal School had been renamed a college and by 1957 was Western Michigan University. The enrollment had far more than doubled between the end of the war and 1960, and had doubled again by 1968. To meet this demand, the University expanded to a new West campus included in the City's annexations.



In 1950, the first local television station, John Fetzer's WKZO, began transmitting into homes. The area also shared in the nation's "cold war" fears, and the city built or designated fallout shelters, installed warning sirens and organized rehearsed disasters to prepare for possible emergencies. In 1957 and 1958 Kalamazoo was chosen as "typical" of American cities and represented the nation in exhibits in both Great Britain and Germany, recognizing its similarities with other communities across the United States.

Kalamazoo also shared with the nation a growing racial unrest through the 1960s. Discontented with economic and social

inequality, Kalamazoo's African-American leaders organized boycotts of Northside retailers over hiring practices and thousands marched downtown in the summer of 1963 protesting poverty and access to equal employment and housing. On December 19th of that year, Martin Luther King spoke at WMU's Read Fieldhouse urging a spirit of brotherhood between black and white, but by 1967 civil disobedience turned to rioting and hostility. In separate incidents in Kalamazoo's Northside and Downtown areas mob violence broke out, as well as at Central High School which housed the majority of the school district's black students compared to the predominately white Loy Norrix facility. Meanwhile, peaceful upheaval was occurring in local government. Kalamazoo's first black City Commissioner, Arthur Washington Jr., was elected in 1959. A former head of the Kalamazoo NAACP, Washington served until 1966. Gilbert Bradley was elected the City's first black mayor in 1971 and in 1976 Robert Bobb was appointed the first black City Manager. The parallel drive for gender equality helped pave the way for

Kalamazoo's first female Mayor, Caroline Ham, in 1981 and City Manager, Sheryl Sculley, in 1984.



On May 13, 1980 a tornado swept through downtown Kalamazoo damaging much in its path. Economic decline had already begun to ravage the community. Like many midwestern cities so dependent on the post-war manufacturing boom, Kalamazoo struggled with the effects of increased unemployment combined with decreased revenue for both

businesses and governments. As plant after plant boarded up or relocated, the City of Kalamazoo struggled to cope. In particular, the paper industry once prevalent along Portage Creek and the Kalamazoo River, all but disappeared from the area. Globalization forced "downsizing" and job losses at Upjohn, which had become the area's largest employer. The company started in Kalamazoo would eventually merge with Pfizer, then the world's largest pharmaceutical company. First of America bank was purchased by National City, an Ohio-based company. Global competition also caused great losses in the automotive industry, a bedrock of Michigan's economy. Like many others across the Midwest, the Fisher body Plant closed in 1992.



To operate more efficiently, the City of Kalamazoo's Fire and Police departments were consolidated into the Department of Public Safety in 1982 and officers were cross-trained for better and quicker response. Economic development within the City looked for creative ways to counter this trend. Investment in downtown became a priority, led by the City's Downtown

Development Authority. Projects included the redevelopment of the Arcadia Commons area featuring a new home for the Kalamazoo Valley museum and an outdoor festival site to draw citizens downtown. The Kalamazoo Center, a hotel/convention facility opened by the City in 1975, was sold and eventually renovated extensively as a Radisson hotel. Automobile traffic was reintroduced on the downtown mall. A third campus for Western



Michigan was built in the southwest corner of the City, and this new Business and Technology Research Park was a joint effort of the state and local governments. Kalamazoo also looked to reuse the sites of its abandoned factories. Brownfield sites utilized federal and state dollars to clean up highly polluted areas creating attractive packages of incentives for new businesses to reinvest in the area. Several of these sites were located in the downtown districts. In 2005, Kalamazoo Public Schools drew national attention by announcing the "Kalamazoo Promise." This

philanthropically funded program promises college tuition, up to 100%, to graduates of the district's high schools with appropriate grades.

