HISTORIC RIVER ROAD

Following the contours of today's Grand River Greenway in north Ottawa County, Historic River Road defines the progression of our regional civilization. Long ago, mastodon, giant beaver, bison, and other prehistoric beasts tramped paths along the banks of the Grand River. Seeking food and other resources, Paleo-man pursued these same pathways. Later Potawatomie and Ottawa Indians established camps and villages, about a day's hike from each other, to form the Grand River Trail that spanned the state. Using that base, the federal government in 1837 laid the "United States Road from Detroit to the Mouth of the Grand River" (Grand River Avenue). Funding for that initiative evaporated far short of the West Michigan coast, yet the planned route can be seen in the original plat of the Wadsworth Addition to the City of Grand Haven. The old two-track bisected what is now the YMCA.

Meanwhile, in the townships, lumbermen turned that two-track into tramways that delivered logs to the river. The corridor matured. "River Road to Grand Rapids" appeared on an 1854 map of Grand Haven. Clear-cut land was prepared for agriculture, and logging tracks became farm-to-market roads.

By the 1870s, the beauty of fruit blossoms and bayous lured greater numbers of tourists, creating a cottage and resort boom that fuels our economy today. By the early 1950s, local politicians had segmented River Road into essentially Waverly, Mercury, Green, North Cedar, and Warner on the south side of the river and Leonard Road on the north. The original River Road is the oldest byway in Ottawa County and one of the oldest in the state. Historic River Road transports us across time and space. We hope you enjoy the ride.

Enter the Fisherman’s Parking Lot off Harbor Avenue.

Grand Haven's first lighthouse, likely located where you’re parked, was undermined by erosion, and a new lighthouse was built opposite the entrance to this lot. It is a privately owned cottage today. Earlier on this tour, you “met” Captain “Harry Bluff” Miller at Eastmanville Cemetery and again at the old Poor Farm. When Captain Miller ended his career on the Great Lakes, he and his second wife, Mary, became keepers of this light. Harry died in 1876, making Mary Miller the first and only female lighthouse keeper in Grand Haven. This ends your journey along Historic River Road. We hope you’ve enjoyed the ride and will share this booklet with another "time traveler."
Prior to the settlement of Grand Haven in 1834, this was the site of Chief Saginaw-Coosco’s village. Gidley Bayou was named for Townsend Gidley, who in 1835 became the youngest member of the Michigan Constitutional Convention and went on to serve in the Michigan House and Senate for the next 32 years. He was the Whig candidate for Governor in 1851. Gidley moved to this area in 1867, purchased 2000 acres of land, and planted 20,000 fruit trees, mostly peaches. We still call this area “Peach Plains.”

Harbor Avenue at Escanaba Park was the terminus of the Grand River Indian Trail, the proposed “Road from Detroit to the Mouth of the Grand River,” and is nearly the end of your Historic River Road tour. All routes would have bisected today’s YMCA property. At that site Indians once received payments for having ceded their land to the federal government. Alfred Bennett, a black man, purchased the property in 1856. “Bennett’s Hollow” became “Mulligan’s Hollow,” a name that stuck when tugboat captain John Mulligan bought the parcel in the 1880s. The City of Grand Haven paid Mulligan $100.65 for the land in 1908.
Driving Park: Townsend Gidley and his lumbermen cronies in 1874 established the Grand Haven Trotting Park and Agricultural Association. At a time when harness racing challenged baseball as the national pastime, the “Driving Park,” as it was known, hosted nationally ranked horses including Bodine seen here. A regional economic crisis doomed the enterprise almost from the beginning. To stay afloat, Gidley sold a 123-acre riverfront parcel to George Aiken (cover), the one-time South Pacific whaler and ship’s cook who farmed the land.

Coal Tipple
Continue on Harbor Island Drive to Jackson Street where you will turn right.

The imposing concrete structure you see before you is a coal tipple. Steam engines servicing Grand Haven needed fuel to operate. Hopper cars loaded with coal positioned themselves under the tipple’s arches and emptied their load into a deep pit beneath the rails. Coal stored there was conveyed to the storage vault at the top of the tower where, as needed, gravity carried the fuel down chutes into an engine’s tender. Just ahead is Steam Engine 1223, once used for hauling freight between Chicago, Saginaw, Detroit, and Toledo, it was brought to Grand Haven in 1981 and restored by local train buffs.

Rix Robinson
Photo courtesy of: Michigan Archives

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After following the curve, Jackson Street becomes Harbor Drive. Proceed to the corner of Harbor Drive and Washington Avenue, an excellent place to start exploring on foot.

This is the original site of Rix Robinson’s fur trading post and warehouse dating to 1821. Robinson supplied over twenty posts from the Traverse Bay area to St. Joseph, but this and the Ada post were central to his business. Though William Ferry was credited with being the founder of Grand Haven, it was Rix Robinson and Robert Stuart who laid the groundwork for Ferry’s move from Mackinac Island. While on this site, visit the Tri-Cities Historical Museum’s Transportation annex, follow the brass course of the Grand River on the sidewalk, attend an event at Waterfront Stadium, enjoy the Musical Fountain, and stroll the famous Boardwalk.
Dewey Hill

Take the short walk to the viewing deck at Linear Park.

From this vantage point you can see Dewey Hill. In 1923 the Ku Klux Klan boasted 160 local members. Headlines in the September 17, 1923 edition of the Grand Haven Tribune read, *Fiery Cross Burns Here on Hilltop* and went on to state that:

*The Klan has come to Grand Haven t’was in the mouth of every Havenite Saturday night with the first burning of the fiery cross, emblem of the Klan, that was witnessed on Dewey Hill across the harbor at Grand Haven. The sudden growth of the Klan has been astonishing and many laws have been enacted to work against their secret meetings and practice of wearing hoods and masks.*

Enthusiasm for the Klan died after 1925. The ad from a local clothing store below was found in the July 20, 1917 edition of the Grand Haven Tribune. The KKK association was anything but subtle.

*Join the KOOL KLAD KLAN

Official Outfit

Suits

Palm Beaches, Mohair, Actarpo, Cool Cloth, and Tropical Worsted at $8.50, $9.00, $10.00, $12.50, $15.00.*

Image courtesy of: Grand Haven Tribune

Potawatomie Bayou: After Aiken committed suicide in 1916, dairy farmer Harry Deremo bought the property. He supplemented his income by clamming on Potawatomie Bayou. The unionids were harvested, boiled, shelled, and the rare pearls were sold to jewelers on Pearl Street in Grand Rapids for as much as $10 each. The shells went to local button factories and the clam meat was fed to livestock.

Located just across Potawatomie Bridge on the river side was Germania Park (14953 and 14945 Mercury). From about 1900 to 1919, the steamer *May Graham* and all other imaginable conveyances bought hundreds of picnickers here to enjoy the fully equipped kitchen, band shell, ball field, shaded benches, and each other’s company. The park crumbled under anti-German sentiment during WWI and was sold into private ownership for $1 and other considerations.

Deremo clamming
Photo courtesy of: Esther Green

Doris Salisbury at Germania Park
Courtesy of: Tri-Cities Historical Museum
Millhouse Bayou Bridge: In the 1860s, a man named Somerset was returning from Grand Haven to his home near Millhouse Bayou when he heard a sound that horrified him. A pack of hungry wolves was tracking his scent. To distract the animals, Somerset tossed a package he had been carrying and rushed to where he knew a boat was moored. Somerset rowed to safety as night fell.

Over time, rudimentary bridges were built at that site. When the War Department disallowed structures that filled the channel between the Grand River and Millhouse Bayou, a float bridge was constructed. By 1907, wind, weather, and rot deteriorated that span. Improvements thereafter were thwarted by marl and sand on the bridge, requiring cars to get a running start when attempting the crossing. After countless problems, a new bridge was completed in 1915.

Charles Langlade

Exit Mill Point Park on School Street which connects to Savidge. Head west and follow signage to Grand Haven via U.S.31 south. Turn right on Coho Drive.

It is impossible to say where specifically, but in 1754 Charles Langlade established a fur trading post in this general neighborhood. Langlade was awarded exclusive trading rights on the Grand River for the heroic role he played in the French Indian War, aided by Ottawa Indians he personally recruited from along the Grand. Despite having been on the losing side of that conflict and being reprimanded when his troops killed, butchered, boiled, and ate a Miami Indian chief, Langlade maintained his status. He oversaw seasonal operations here from 1754 through at least 1791, when explorer Hugh Heward recorded their meeting in his famous journal. Here Charles Langlade is pictured on a commemorative coin issued by Langlade County in Wisconsin.
Turn left on School Street to enter Mill Point Park.

What is now Mill Point Park and Spring Lake’s newly opened Grand River Greenway Walk, in 1870 was the site of the Cutler & Savidge Lumber Company covering the entire west end of Mill Point (SL). Employing up to 500 men seasonally, Cutler & Savidge was one of the largest, most productive mills in the world during the lumbering era. By the 1880s the Grand River Valley was logged out. Hunter Savidge, a well-respected community leader, died in 1881. Dwight Cutler went on to invest in resort properties serving early tourists to this area.

**Odawa/Battle Point Launch:** By June 30, 1883, unrelenting rains had engorged the Grand River. Eighty million feet of logs were catapulted downstream along with the remnants of several Grand Rapids bridges. If booms designed to manage the logs failed, allowing logs to escape into Lake Michigan, it would have meant certain economic disaster for the entire region. Lewis Cross captured the drama of the log jam in his painting of the Ottawa County Boom Company’s makeshift swing used to channel rampaging logs into Stearns Bayou just east of this site. The quick-thinking strategy saved the day and our future as a community.

Parking Available
**Felix's Marina**: Elfrieda Schultz and Felix Pytlinski wed in 1923 and purchased land on Stearns Bayou. They opened a boat rental business with a single vessel crafted by Felix. Their first customer, a bulky YMCA instructor, sank the tiny boat. Undeterred, Felix built four more and launched anew on July 4, 1929, the same day ten people drowned at the Oval in a seiche, exacerbating the gloom of the Depression. The couple persevered, eventually developing a marina, dance hall, gas station, and store.

In 1929 Robinson Township Supervisor, Charles Stearns was contracted to convert the original floating bridge over Stearns Bayou to a permanent structure. He staked the floating bridge with logs to secure its position and filled the bridge bed with sand.

Follow charming Boom Road to 152nd to return to Leonard Road. Head west. Leonard will become Pinewood as you cross the bayou. Turn right on to S. Lake Avenue. Turn left at the stoplight on to River Street. Turn right at Meridian Avenue at Exchange Street.

Near the corner of Meridian and Exchange, just steps west of the Spring Lake District Library, you will find a Michigan Historical Marker honoring artist/cartoonist [Winsor McKay](http://link). You are encouraged to read the plaque and peruse the library for details of McKay’s interesting life and stunning images of his playful work.

Continuing west at 102 W. Exchange you’ll see the Barber School Community Building. Built in 1855, Barber School has had a long journey. In 1873 the building was purchased by Hunter Savidge and moved from the SE corner of Park and Liberty Streets to the Cutler and Savidge Lumber Mill, where it was used as a warehouse and later as the Spring Lake Yacht Club. In 1987 the SL Heritage League moved the structure to its present location. Today Barber School is used for Village Council meetings, community functions, and private gatherings.

**Winsor McKay**

*Photos courtesy of: Spring Lake District Library*
Lewis Cross
Return to Leonard Road. Drive west to 144th Avenue south.

At 144th Avenue and Bayou Drive is a privately owned residence that was originally the home of painter, naturalist, and historian Lewis Cross. Known as “The Castle,” the building blocks of this unique abode were molded by Cross himself. The home overlooked a floating bridge spanning Deremo Bayou, as seen in this image painted by Cross. It is one of over 400 landscape, marine, and portrait pictures created by this modest, self-reliant man. Some are as large as 8’ by 11’ and many depict carrier pigeons that long ago swarmed the Grand River Valley, but are now extinct. Old and sick, Lewis Cross committed suicide on April 4, 1951.

Clark School: Clark School was originally located on 144th Avenue between Johnson and Lincoln Streets. In 1875 it was moved across Rogers Bridge, the pilings of which can still be seen where 136th Avenue dead-ends.

George Rogers honed his engineering skills in the Civil War and was commissioned by Robinson Township to build the bridge in 1870. The Rogers Bridge served the general public and the logging industry. In time, the ramshackle overpass was used only for pedestrian traffic, particularly by children attending Clark School. Phoebe, Addie, and Helen Clark were esteemed teachers in the history of Robinson Township.