

Detroit through 300 Years
Physical Clues to Our Long History
July 24, 1701 to July 24, 2001

by Arthur Mullen

As one of the oldest settlements in the United States west of the Appalachia's, Detroit has a rich physical history that is not always evident to either long term or new residents. Many of us take our surroundings for granted without realizing that there is much to be discerned about our past in our every day experiences. We only need to have a general understanding of our past for these clues to appear.

Detroit has been under the command of three different countries since its founding by Antoine de le Mothe Cadillac on July 24, 1701. With a practiced eye, it is very easy to discover the physical influences from each of the countries and the Native Americans from before us.

Our (confusing) Street Grids

The layout of the City clearly shows three different grid systems from three distinct periods of Detroit's history. Everyone who visits downtown Detroit has confronted the confusing downtown grid with ties to the early U.S. control of Detroit. In the immediate downtown area, the earlier French physical imprint was removed by the devastating fire of 1805. Nearly the entire small village was destroyed by that fire and the new territorial governor, Judge Augustus B. Woodward, decreed that the town would be reconstructed utilizing a grand urban grid based on a spoked wheel system (the stylized form of this design is the basis of Cityscape Detroit's logo). Woodward wanted to emulate the newly laid out Washington D.C. grid designed by L'Efant. There was extremely strong resentment to this plan by the local mostly French inhabitants and only the central-most portion of the grid was ever established. The rest of the plans were abandoned. Most residents know that the downtown street grid is difficult to navigate but often don't understand the reason. This grid only extends from the Detroit River north to Adams St. and east west from Randolph to Cass Ave. The area south of Michigan Ave. west of Woodward was the site of the old Fort Detroit which was built by the British after gaining control of the Detroit in 1760. The fort, eventually named Fort Shelby, was decommissioned in the mid-1800s, and instead of using the Woodward Plan with diagonal and radial streets to subdivide the land, it was determined to incorporate the earlier rectilinear French grid onto the site.

The French rectilinear grid was built off of their "ribbon farms" which was their method of dividing property near Detroit. These farms, usually ranging between 200 to 400 feet wide, stretched linearly inland for approximately three miles, thus the name. By today's standards, this does not seem like a logical division of land. However, it was one of the most efficient methods of dividing up the property considering the mode of transportation and their limited number of settlers. In Detroit's early history, the river was the prime mode of transportation. Road travel was too seasonal due to mud, swamps or snow and ice. By organizing the long narrow parcels, large numbers of people could then be adjacent to the river transportation system. This settlement pattern stretches along the entire length of the Detroit River into Lake St. Clair and included land along the Rouge River. Due to the northeast to southwest flow of the Detroit River,

the ribbon farm property lines went from the southeast toward the northwest. Once the French farms began to be subdivided for development purposes, the streets were platted following their general NW/SE direction. After the fire of 1805, the new Woodward grid was laid on top of the French property grid in only the central portion of downtown. The remaining French NW/SE grid remained.

After the U.S. gained control of Michigan, efforts were made to confirm property ownership, and the United States government began to survey the entire Northwest Territories, preparing for the eventual sale of the territorial lands. Eight Mile road became the Base Line for all of this surveying in the NW territories. (For your information - Eight Mile Road stretched across Lake Michigan becomes the border between Wisconsin and Illinois.) All of the property surveyed and sold by the U.S. government in Detroit and the majority of the State of Michigan follows the true north-south direction. The outlying parts of Detroit and the suburbs follow this true north south grid pattern as evidenced by our regions north-south and east-west mile roads. This explains why there are three basic grid systems in the City of Detroit. Their existence physically illuminates the early history of the city of Detroit.

Our Native American heritage is also evident in the physical layout of the city. Michigan Ave.-- aka U.S. 12, Chicago Road, Sauk Trail -- follows an old Native American trail used for trading to circumnavigate around the south shore of Lake Michigan. This earlier history is visible in the subtle twists the road makes as it nears Dearborn, and it becomes even more profound as you head west on the road.

Another interesting physical characteristic of Detroit's development was the division for roads. Since over 30% of Detroit's land was already settled using the French ribbon farm pattern, when property was subsequently divided, the owners deeded the property to the City for the creation of roads and alleys. When you drive in SW or SE Detroit, this is the reason why many of the sidestreets do not line up with each other heading east and west. Different property owners decided where they were going to place the secondary east-west streets like Vernor and Charlevoix Sts, while the north-south streets leading away from the river followed the property lines of the ribbon farms.

Existing Shoreline and Fill

In many parts of Detroit, Jefferson Ave. followed the high point of the Detroit River shoreline giving the street its meandering direction. The area between Jefferson and the river tended to be very marshy swamps. All of Detroit's Marina and Jefferson Chalmers neighborhoods and southern portions of Grosse Pointe Park were referred to as the Grand Marais (Great Swamp) prior to the areas being filled for development purposes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Atwater St. is another example of continued filling of the shoreline. At one time, this street running along the river was much closer to the river but continued fill from the mid-late 1800s through the early part of the 20th century extended land further into the river.

Rivers

Though most of southeast Michigan is relatively flat, much of the existing topography of the City was significantly altered during Detroit's development and it takes a keen eye to see this. Why is there a small hill on Griswold St. leading down to Congress St. in downtown? The Savoyard

River (from which the former Savoyard Club at the Buhl Building got its name) flowed along what is the present day Congress Ave. before emptying into the Detroit River. Cadillac chose this promontory between the rivers as the location to site the original settlement. Much of the original bluff was later shaved off and pushed into the Detroit and Savoyard Rivers to create additional land and much of the Savoyard's topographic features were eliminated.

Other rivers and streams have also just ceased to exist due to man's interventions including placing the rivers in culverts while eliminating much of their natural topographic features. Examples of this loss of natural watercourses include the Savoyard River, Conner and Parents Creeks. They have ceased to exist in their natural state. Of note, Conner Ave. follows the original course of the river which explains Connor Avenue's non-linear path bisecting the two of Detroit's three grids. Early Detroit can still be glimpsed at in Elmwood Cemetery where a small portion of the early creeks still runs through the grave yard.

Conclusion

Our physical landscape can tell us a great deal about our settlement patterns and our history as a region and as various peoples, without even interpreting the built structural environment. These visible clues and signs help us to understand how we developed as a City while explaining why our surroundings look as they do. In addition, local history is one of the best ways for children to be exposed to, learn and comprehend history. The areas covered in their local history lessons may come alive to them after exposing them to the actual physical landscape of where history happened. In Detroit's 300th Anniversary Year, it is important for us as a society to build a understanding and appreciation for our local past. With an understanding of our past, we may more easily be able to progress forward.

Enjoy Detroit's year long celebrations and we hope history comes alive for you. Vibrant and exciting cities use their heritage as a focal point for their ongoing development and redevelopment efforts. Cities also use history as a tool to build pride in their region. We must better express great pride in our long and important history for we have lots to be proud of!

SOURCE: http://www.cityscapedetroit.org/articles/Physical_clues.html - Arthur Mullen