

Livonia Roads:How They Got Their Names

Gene Scott

The first roads that were more than dirt trails go back to the third century and the brick roads of Greece and Italy. In America, we've put up with what were generally called "wagon roads" until shortly after Henry Ford introduced his Model T in 1908.

There were asphalt-paved roads, but they often melted in hot summers or cracked apart in the winter. Wooden plank roads that got folks over the muddy spots also became popular in our pioneer days. All more cumbersome than today's potholes.

The Model T and other models of the new "horseless carriages" changed all that. Within a year, the first mile of concrete road in the nation was laid in October 1909 on Woodward Avenue between Six and Seven Mile Roads in what was then Greenfield Township, just outside Detroit.

That first stretch of concrete road on Woodward Avenue was a real coup de tat for the Wayne County Road Commission, organized in 1907 with Ford as one of its first commissioners.

The Commission preceded the State Highway Department, leading efforts to create good roads in the county and the state and later on, the first segments of Michigan's interstate system. Within the next 25 years, Wayne County and much of lower Michigan had a network of paved roads. By the 1920s, cars and trucks could actually go faster than 30 miles per hour.

Ironically, road and street names were slower coming into use. Which makes one wonder how folks found their way around. Signage in Livonia was stepped up in the 1930s and 1940s when the township population increased five-fold.

Going from east to west in Livonia, its eastern boundary road is Inkster, which continues north and south into Oakland and Monroe counties, passing through the city of Inkster, from which it took its name. Inkster, at first a French settlement, started in the 1830s and was called Moulin Rouge. It developed around Robert Inkster's sawmill near Michigan Avenue and took his name after 1863. As far back as 1882, Inkster was the home of the Eloise Home for the Poor where indigent county residents once tilled 135 area farms. It later became known as the Wayne County General Infirmary, closing in 1984.

Middle Belt officially became a road after 1910, when the County Road Commission began assigning names to major roads that went through the county. Middle Belt, which begins near the Raisin River in Monroe County, extends north into Oakland County. It was once a busy wagon trail and later the site of the Detroit Horse Racing Course which closed in the 1990s, and early victim of the lottery and casino rage. Intermittently, Middle Belt has been mistakenly signed as a one-word road, "Middlebelt."

A secondary road, Henry Ruff, angles its way north from Romulus. Ruff owned a stretch of farms in between and chose the shortest route to get to them. A Garden City old-timer said it was also a "rough road" in the years before paving.

Merriman Road was given that name by the Romulus neighbors of Charles Merriman in 1858. He died two years later, but his farm, which extended south from Michigan Avenue, remained in the family into the 1920s. That part of Merriman Road and surrounding farms were acquired for what since has become the Detroit-Wayne County Metropolitan Airport, but Merriman continues south from there.

A sub-division road is Hubbard, which got its name from one of the many families of Daniel Hubbard who came to Michigan about 1838.

Farmington Road became a principal road south through Livonia from its namesake village in Oakland County in the 1800s. Farmington began to develop soon after the Arthur Power family arrived from Farmington, New York in 1824. It became one of the stagecoach stops on the plank road to Lansing (now Grand River) before 1850. Erastus Ingersoll continued on the old Grand River trail and built the first inn in what became Lansing, but his brother Gilbert stayed in Farmington. Gill Road, which continues south into Livonia, is likely named after him.

West from Farmington is Stark Road, named after the Livonia village of Stark and local farmer L.B. Stark. It was a station on the Pere Marquette Railroad from 1877 to 1909. This village never had more than 50 residents.

Wayne Road extends south through Westland to the City of Wayne at Michigan Avenue. First settle in 1824, it was renamed Wayne in 1851, honoring General Anthony Wayne, for whom the county is named. Incidentally, when the county was named in 1796, it embraced what then was the territory of Michigan which included all of the present state and parts of Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The next major Livonia road is Levan, a sub-division road for part of its course south from Seven Mile. It is named after Charles Levan, a principal land owner in the late 19th century.

Many of the farms along the southern part of this road were acquired by the Plymouth Road Land Development Company in the early 1900s and industrial uses later followed with exceptions like the area south of Five Mile which became the home of the now 5,000-student Madonna University and St. Mary Mercy Hospital.

Perhaps the oldest of Livonia's principal roads is Newburg, dating to the start of the former Newburg village at Ann Arbor Trail in 1819. It got its name as being the "new burg" in western Wayne county, but has been misspelled through the years, a cause for postal concerns in the days before zip codes. There were three other Newburgs in Michigan. Lasting until about 1930, several buildings of the former village of Newburg are now part of Greenmead Historical Park at the north end of Newburgh Road.

Forming the City of Livonia's western boundary is Haggerty Road, which continues north into Oakland country and south to Michigan Avenue (US-12). It is named after John Strong Haggerty, a county road commissioner in the 1920s and 1930s who also held several state jobs including Secretary of State. Haggerty also owned a brick company.

For the east-west roads we begin at Joy Road which also is among the area's oldest. Joy Road actually begins at Grand River in the City of Detroit and continues, with some interruptions, all the way west to Dexter in Washtenaw County. It was among the early shortcuts west from Detroit. Joy Road is named after James H. Joy, a Detroit businessman who owned several railroad companies. Before 1850, it was known as Bonaparte Road, after the French emperor.

Winding through the southwest corner of Livonia are Ann Arbor Trail and Hines Park Drive. Ann Arbor Trail has been around since the first settlers of Ann Arbor in 1818. Edward N. Hines Drive, named after one of Wayne County's first road commissioners, was opened as the county parkway in 1949.

Chicago, a sub-division road that continues west from Detroit and was named prematurely as a way west to the City of Chicago.

Plymouth road, first called Plymouth Plank Road, due to the many crossings of wooden planks, was the major road west from Detroit well in the 20th century. It was briefly designated a national road, US-12.

Schoolcraft, which begins at Wyoming Avenue in Detroit, is named for Henry Schoolcraft. He was an Indian agent in 1822, the state's first geologist, and author of numerous studies on the Indian nation and folklore. Schoolcraft County in the upper peninsula also bears his name. Alongside Schoolcraft is Interstate 96, also known as the Edward Jeffries Freeway, opened in 1968 and named for the Detroit Mayor in the 1940s.

Five Mile Road got its name over 200 years ago when Augustus Woodward, then Michigan territorial governor, established the mile roads going north from Detroit's center at Woodward and Jefferson. Since 1925, it has been called Fenkell in Detroit, after George Fenkell, water system commissioner.

Among Michigan's oldest roads is Eight Mile, also called Base Line Road, a boundary line for 13 counties across the state. Base Line Road was established by the Michigan Territorial Commission in 1795.

The city and our state have come a long way since their early days and the first roads such as they were. It is interesting to note that the first mile of concrete -paved road was laid on Woodward Avenue in 1909. Since then, Michigan advanced in road construction well ahead of the rest of the country and today has some of the oldest roads in America.

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