

Early Land Routes from Detroit to Washtenaw County

The first documented white habitation in Washtenaw County was the 1809 Godfrey Trading Post located in what is now downtown Ypsilanti. The post was located at a ford of the Huron River and was at the intersection of two main Indian trails, the Sauk Trail that traversed lower Michigan from Detroit around the south end of Lake Michigan, and the Pottowatamie Trail that followed the Huron river from the center of the state to Lake Erie. A little to the north in the Ann Arbor area was the St. Joseph trail. The Godfrey Trading Post was probably accessed using the Huron river from Lake Erie. Canoes and other light draft crafts could have reached that far up the Huron river. One route across Michigan by canoe was up the Huron River to the Dexter area, then a portage to the headwaters of the Grand River in Jackson County.¹

The later pioneers found that the furthest loaded crafts could ascend the Huron river was to Snow's Landing, now Rawsonville, four miles south of Ypsilanti, where the first significant rapids on the river occurred. This wasn't the only water route into Washtenaw County, there being also the River Raisin and the Saline River, but the Huron river is the only one that is mentioned as being practical in Pioneer times.

Another method of getting to Godfroys from Detroit was by land over the Sauk Trail. The Sauk trail was just that, a trail, going through the level wet lands of southeast Michigan. Any goods carried over it was carried on a person's back or on a pack animal. A canoe trip up the Huron river, though longer, was far less strenuous. As mentioned there was an Indian trail along the Huron river from Lake Erie but it would have made little sense to use that trail, it being much longer from Detroit than the Sauk trail. There were undoubtedly other Indian trails that paralleled the Raisin and Saline rivers, but the Sauk trail from Detroit would have been the land route of choice into the south part of Washtenaw County.

A second trail into northern Washtenaw County followed the Rouge River from Springwells, the location where the Rouge River empties into the Detroit River; to the area of Dearborn, and then followed the middle branch of the Rouge west to Plymouth. There the trail split with the south leg leading to the ford of the Huron River at Ann Arbor and the north leg running northwest. This trail from Springwells to Ann Arbor became known as the Ann Arbor Road,² and the north leg splitting off at Plymouth became North Territorial Road.

¹ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, vol II, page 674. A territorial road was authorized in 1828 running from Monroe to Dexter "thence to the principal meridian, by the portage between the Grand River and the Huron." A second interesting piece of evidence regarding this is a statement by Darby, page 201. "The Huron (River) from (Lake) Erie can be ascended for 150 miles to a portage of 3 miles, into a stream called the Grand River, entering Lake Michigan." Darby was writing regarding information obtained in 1818 from a map he observed in the surveyor's office in Detroit. Darby's information may have been incorrect but must have had some basis of fact.

² It is not known when this road became known as the Ann Arbor Trail, perhaps quite recently. As early as 1828 it was being referred to as the Ann Arbor Road in the Bucklin Township minutes.

In the winter of 1824 (Benjamin) Sutton left Detroit to look for land to homestead. Accompanied by John Allen, Elisha Walker Rumsey, and Rumseys wife Mary Ann he followed the Sauk Trail (sic) to what is now Plymouth. There they parted ways, Allen and the Rumseys angling southward to locate and plat the village of Ann Arbor. Sutton took the trail's right fork into Northfield (Township)....He returned to Detroit and on May 17, 1824 purchased 80 acres.³

Sutton located near the intersection of the present North Territorial Road and Pontiac Trail and subsequently purchased a great deal more land in that vicinity.

West of Ann Arbor an Indian trail led to the St. Joseph area on Lake Michigan and was called the St. Joseph trail. There was also the Washtenaw Trail, either the same trail or a different trail located in this area, according to pioneer accounts. One presumes that one of these trails became the Ann Arbor road after Ann Arbor was established but this is not a given in spite of what Bethuel Farrand says below. The Territorial Road from Sheldon's on the Chicago Road (in Canton Township) authorized in 1829 followed the route of the St. Joseph trail after reaching Ann Arbor.

There were four through roads in Washtenaw County which early on were of significance to Superior Township. Only two, the Ann Arbor Road and The Territorial Road, actually passed through the township.

Ann Arbor Road
The Territorial Road
North Territorial Road
Chicago Road

Below is early documented information that I have located referring to these roads.

The Ann Arbor Road

The Ann Arbor Road ran from Springwells on the Detroit River, the location of the mouth of the River Rouge; along the River Rouge past Ten Eycks Inn near Dearbornville, then to Schwartzburg, Plymouth, Dixboro, and Ann Arbor.⁴ From Springwells to Dearbornville it followed the River Rouge. From Dearbornville to Plymouth it was located on the north side of the middle branch of the River Rouge, and from Plymouth to Ann Arbor it followed the route created by Bethal Farrand, presumably an Indian trail. This route still exists as a road from near Outer Drive in Dearborn to Ann Arbor and the portion east of Plymouth is still called Ann Arbor Trail, although it is uncertain as to when this road was called by that name.

³ Stevens, page 52

⁴ This route can be easily traced in early Michigan atlases. Two wall hung maps at the Plymouth Historical Museum is particularly good in this regard. It is noted that the road often follows property lines based on surveys so it is evident that the route does not follow exactly the original Indian trail.

The roads at this time, 1824, were the Chicago road, starting from Detroit, with a fork at Ypsilanti to Tecumseh, and one to Ann Arbor; and a road from Detroit to Pontiac and Saginaw.⁵

In the fall of 1825 Bethuel Farrand arrived in Ann Arbor. He related the following information in 1852 shortly before his death.

One morning about a week after our arrival (in Ann Arbor) I started the next morning for Detroit. When I reached Plymouth I was joined by Henry Ward and Esquire Root, who were going on the same errand.....When we reached Springwells (returning to Ann Arbor), we met a man with a drove of fat cattle and I bought a cow. I reached home near night of the second day

Soon after I came to Detroit I made a contract to carry the mail from Detroit to Ann Arbor for four years, and all that time I forded all the streams, never once crossing a bridge, for there were none to cross.....On the first day of March 1826 I began to cut a road from Ann Arbor to Detroit, on the Indian trail running by my present residence.⁶ I got all the help I could, and in sixty days completed a wagon road through from Ann Arbor to Plymouth. Major Abraham Richards advised me to apply to the legislature for a remunerative appropriation. I took his advice and two years afterward received \$200.⁷

An Act for the relief of Bethuel Farrand

Whereas, It appears, from the petition of E.W. Rumsey and others to the legislative council, that Bethuel Farrand, of the county of Washtenaw, hath performed certain services and disbursed certain money in opening and improving the road from Detroit to Washtenaw; therefore

Be it enacted by the Legislative Council of the Territory of Michigan, That the Treasurer of said Territory be and is hereby directed to pay to the said Bethuel Farrand two hundred dollars, from such monies arising from territorial taxes in the county of Washtenaw, as may now be in the treasury, or which may be hereafter received for such taxes in said county, and that the said taxes be specially appropriated to this object, until the said sum of two hundred dollars be full paid. Approved May 24, 1828⁸

The Act below creates a territorial road from Ten Eycks near Dearbornville to Plymouth along the path of the Ann Arbor Road and west from Plymouth on what became North Territorial Road.

There shall be laid out and established a territorial road from a point on the Chicago Road at or near C.TenEyck's, running thence on the most eligible route to Schwartzburg, thence by J.D. Davis' to John Tibbetts'; thence to the northeast corner of section 29 in township one south range eight east, thence to Benjamin Sutton's thence, to Osterhaut and Peterson's mill; thence to the intersection of the territorial road leading from Monroe by

⁵ A.D.P. Van Buren, MPC, Volume 5, page 248.

⁶ At the time he spoke Farrand owned and presumably lived on property south of the intersection of Nixon Road and Plymouth Road in Ann Arbor where the current Pfizer laboratories are located.

⁷ Michigan Pioneer Collection, vol 6, 1907 reprint, pages 443-5. .

⁸ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, vol. II, page 651.

Dexter to the meridian, following the most direct and eligible routes. Approved March 4, 1831.⁹

Below is a second Act referring to the above act, passed June 21, 1832. It would appear that the procedures followed in laying out the road were not in conformity with the original enabling act and that an adjustment had to be made.

Be it enacted by the Legislative council of the Territory of Michigan, That the returns to the Secretary of the Territory of the survey of a Territorial road commencing at or near C. Ten Eyck's on the Chicago road, made by the commissioners appointed for the laying out and establishing Territorial roads, approved March 4, 1831, be considered in conformity to the provisions of the statute in such cases made and provided, and that all the acts and doing of the said commissioners in laying out and establishing said road, be and they are hereby declared legal and valid. Approved June 21, 1832.¹⁰

April 23, 1833. The maintenance of roads in southeastern Michigan became an issue. The Act expends money to improve the Ann Arbor Road, the Chicago Road, and the North Territorial Road, among others.

Section 5. There shall be layed out and expended from the money in the territorial treasury not otherwise appropriated, in repairing the territorial road between the dwelling house of Conrad Ten Eyck, in the county of Wayne, and the village of Ann Arbor in the county of Washtenaw, a sum of money not exceeding five hundred dollars; and Isaac Burhans, of Washtenaw, is hereby appointed agent to superintend the repairing of said road. Approved April 23, 1833.¹¹

Since the same act approved money for the Chicago Road and The Territorial Road in different sections, the above section must refer to the Ann Arbor Road.

Other interesting legislative acts:

Be it enacted by the Legislative Council of the Territory of Michigan, That the highway commissioners in the township of Nankin, in the county of Wayne, be and they are hereby authorized to resurvey, alter, and establish that part of the territorial road between Schwartzburgh and the dwelling house of J.J. Andrews, in said township, as they shall think proper and necessary. Provided, The expenses of making such alterations shall not be chargeable to the territorial treasury. Approved June 26, 1832.¹²

Evidently someone finally realized that only the segment of the Ann Arbor Road from Ten Eyck's to Plymouth Corners had been made a territorial road. This was corrected in 1835.

⁹ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 896. It was at the house of Benjamin Sutton that the first meeting for the organization of Northfield Township took place. The route described in this act is inconsistent with the named locations which may be the reason for the subsequent Act.

¹⁰ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume 3, page 925.

¹¹ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, pages 1253-4

¹² Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 930.

Section 1. Be it enacted by the Legislative Council of the Territory of Michigan, That the road from Detroit to the village of Ann Arbor, in the county of Washtenaw, by the way of Spring Well, Ten Eyck's, and Plymouth Corners, be and the same is hereby established a territorial road. Approved January 30, 1835.¹³

The Territorial Road. (Geddes Road)

There were a number of roads called Territorial Road, it being a generic term because they were created by the Territorial Legislative Council. This road has the distinction of being The Territorial Road.¹⁴ Several writers have confused this road with the Plymouth - Ann Arbor Road, which was also designated a territorial road in 1835. This road deserves to be called The Territorial Road since it is the longest of the territorial roads authorized by the Territorial Legislature; it branching off from the Chicago Road just east of Canton Center Road in Canton Township and running to the mouth of the St. Joseph River on the west side of the state. Starting at Sheldon's Inn on the Chicago Road it followed survey lines west until it intersected with the road on the north side of the Huron River in Superior Township, and followed that road into Ann Arbor. A road we presently call Geddes Road. I am unclear where the original territorial road crossed to the west side of the Huron River.

That there shall be a territorial road laid out and established commencing in the Chicago road, at or near the inn of Timothy S. Sheldon, in the township of Plymouth, in the county of Wayne, thence west on the most direct and eligible route through the village of Ann Arbor, by Samuel Clements to Grand River, where the St. Joseph trail crosses the same, and also through the Cohgwagiac and Grand prairies, thence westerly on the most eligible route to, or near the Paw Paw (River), to the mouth of the St. Joseph River of Lake Michigan; and Seely Neal of Panama, and Orrin White of Ann Arbor, in the county of Washtenaw, and Jehial Enos of Grand Prairie of the Kalamozzoo, are hereby appointed commissioners to lay out and establish the same. Approved November 4, 1829.¹⁵

The Act below was necessary because the survey and returns of The Territorial Road had not been completed within one year as prescribed by the Act of 1827 regarding the establishment of territorial roads.

An Act for establishing a certain Territorial Road

Whereas, Seeley Neale and others were authorized by a law of this Territory to lay out and establish a territorial road, commencing at or near the inn of Timothy S. Sheldon, on the Chicago road, in the township of Plymouth,¹⁶ and running thence through

¹³ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 1361

¹⁴ I have twice heard reference to this road being called South Territorial Road, as opposed to the North Territorial Road. I suppose the Ann Arbor Road could have been the Middle Territorial but it didn't become a Territorial Road until 1835 and was already well known as the Ann Arbor Road.

¹⁵ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume II, page 744. The Territorial Road from Monroe to Dexter by way of Saline was approved June 28, 1828.

¹⁶ At that time Plymouth Township included the yet to be created Canton Township.

the village of Ann Arbor west to the mouth of St. Joseph's river, and have laid out and surveyed a route for said road; now, therefore, be it enacted by the Legislative council of the Territory of Michigan

That the commissioners appointed to lay out said road are hereby authorized, together with the surveyor of said road, to make a certified return of the survey and plat of the whole length of said road, and place copies of the same in the offices of the clerks in the different counties through which said road passes, and one copy of said survey and plat in the office of the Secretary of this Territory, before the first day of May next, and on making the return as aforesaid, said road shall be and become a public highway, any law to the contrary notwithstanding.¹⁷ Approved March 3, 1831.

Section 5. The commissioners of highways for the township of Ann Arbor, be and they are hereby authorized to make such alterations in that section of the territorial road, leading from Sheldon's on the Chicago road to the mouth of the St. Joseph river, which lies between the bridge across the Huron river, near Jethro Bunker's farm and the public square in the village of Ann Arbor, as in their judgment may seem necessary and proper. Approved April 22, 1833.¹⁸

North Territorial Road

The presumption is that North Territorial Road follows an Indian trail that split from the Ann Arbor trail in Plymouth. That it was an Indian trail may or may not have been the case. This pioneer trail carried settlers into Salem Township and eventually was opened into the center of the state. It was a main road west and as yet has not been extensively improved. It is a delight to drive but not for someone in a hurry. As mentioned above, the section from Ten Eyck's to Plymouth Corners followed the route of the present Ann Arbor Trail.

In the Spring of 1824 he (Benjamin Sutton) started out to find a more desirable location. He crossed the Rouge (river) at a place which was afterward called Swarzburg and struck an Indian trail leading west, which let him over a plain for about five miles to where the trail forked. Mr. Sutton took the north or right hand trail from where the main trail divided, and traveled a westerly course for about twelve miles ...Here Mr. Sutton located (on the) east half of the southeast quarter of section thirty-four (in Northfield Township)...The same year Mr. Sutton with his family started for his new home in a lumber wagon following the old Indian trail. From Plymouth Corners west this road was known by the old settlers as the Sutton road, which was extended to Ann Arbor a distance of about five miles.¹⁹

There shall be laid out and established a territorial road from a point on the Chicago Road at or near C. TenEyck's, running thence on the most eligible route to Schwartzburg, thence by J.D. Davis' to John Tibbetts' (west of Plymouth Corners); thence to the northeast corner of section 29 in township one south range eight east, (Salem Township) thence to Benjamin Sutton's, thence, to Osterhaut and Peterson's mill; thence to the

¹⁷ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 888

¹⁸ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 1125

¹⁹ MPC. Volume 18, page 507.

intersection of the territorial road leading from Monroe by Dexter to the meridian, following the most direct and eligible routes. Approved March 4, 1831.²⁰

Section 13. There shall be laid out an expended as aforesaid, in opening the territorial road between Plymouth Corners, in the county of Wayne, and the west boundary line of the township of Salem in the county of Washtenaw, a sum of money not exceeding two hundred dollars; and Jacob E. Bullock is hereby appointed agent to superintend the repairing of said last mentioned road. Approved April 23, 1833.²¹

Chicago Road

A great deal has been written about the Chicago Road but little reference has been made to the following summary of the route from Detroit to the Mississippi River by way of the Sauk Trail. These directions were prepared about 1772 by a British Officer during the period that England had possession of the Old Northwest Territories. The document is among what is known as The Haldimand Papers, British military correspondence pertaining to Upper Canada, including Detroit, Michigan and western territories. Among these documents is a summary of two land and river routes to the Mississippi from Detroit. One route goes to the River Miami (now the Maumee) in Ohio, to Fort Wayne, and by various rivers to the Mississippi. The other, related below, goes by way of the Sauk Trail (The Chicago Road) to Niles (Fort St. Joseph), up the St. Joseph River to the South Bend, Indiana area, makes a portage to the Kankakee River, which connects with the Illinois River, and then to the Mississippi River.²²

The Road from Detroit to Fort St. Josephs by land and from thence to the Junction of the Illinois River with the Mississippi by water.

From Detroit to the River Huron, or Nandewine Sippy.	40 miles
There is a village of Puttawateamees of six large cabans. The river at this place is about Fifty feet wide and the water is generally from one and a half to two feet deep, when there are Floods Travellers are obliged to make Rafts to cross it, the road in this place bad.	
To the Salt River or Wanadagon Sippy	12 miles
There is another village of Pittawattamees of five Cabans. This river is never so high as to prevent people passing it.	
To one of the Branches of Grand River or Washtanon that falls into Lake Michigan.	60 miles
There is another village of Pittawattamees of eight large Cabans.	
To Reccanamazo River, or Pusawpaco Sippy otherwise the Iron mine river.	75 miles
There is another village of Pittawattamees of eight large Cabans, this river cannot be passed in Freshes on Rafts, at other time 1 or 2 feet deep.	
To the Prarieroude	30 miles

²⁰ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, page 896

²¹ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, pages 1253-4

²² Michigan Pioneer Collection, 1886, vol.10, pages 247 & 248

There is a small lake of about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile wide and 11 miles long, abounding with several sorts of Fish, such as Maskenongi, Whitefish & ca.	
To the Fort St. Joseph	75 miles
There is a few Puttawattamees near the Fort, the road after you pass the River Huron is very good being mostly on a small height of land & little wood till you come to St. Joseph's where you pass through about a mile long and another about six miles long.	
From Fort St. Joseph's you ascend that River to a carrying place.	12 miles
From carrying place to Recankeekee	4 miles
To the Juncture of this River with the Iroquois R(iver).	150 miles
In this fork is a village of 14 large Cabans of Mascontains.	
To the Junction of this River with the Chicangoni river which forms the Illinois River.	45 miles
At the fork there is a village of Puttawatamees of 12 large Cabans.	
To the Rocks or old French Fort called Pumetewee.	90 miles
To the Mississippi.	<u>240 miles</u>
From Detroit to the Mississippi by way of the Illinois R(iver)	833 miles

Since the Chicago Road (the Sauk Trail) was noted during pioneer times to be almost impassible during rainy seasons, Spring and Fall, those traveling the Sauk Trail at those times quite possibly followed Ridge Road east of Ypsilanti northeast to the Plymouth area and connected to the River Rouge trail which was the east end of the St. Joseph trail. There is nothing to substantiate this other than the belief of some Canton Township historians that Ridge Road was at one time an Indian trail.

In 1825 the United States Congress was persuaded to fund \$3000 for the survey and construction of a military road from Detroit to Fort Dearborn (Chicago). The route was to follow the route of the Sauk Trail which which was already seeing a good deal of use.

Be in enacted by the Legislative Council of the Territory of Michigan, That the commissioners of highways in the township of Ann Arbor be and they are hereby authorized and empowered to make any, and such alterations in the territorial road, commencing at Ten Eycks's and running west to the meridian, between the mile boards numbered thirty-four and thirty-six, as they or a majority of them may deem proper. Approved June 29, 1832.²³

And it needed maintenance.

Section 12. There shall be laid out and expended as aforesaid, in repairing the Chicago road between the dwelling house of Conrad Ten Eyck, in the county of Wayne, and the east line of the county of Washtenaw, a sum of Money not exceeding three hundred dollars; and Timothy F Sheldon is hereby appointed agent to superintend repairing said last mentioned roads. Approved April 23, 1833.²⁴

²³ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, vol. III, page 948

²⁴ Laws of the Territory of Michigan, Blume, volume III, pages 1253-4

The flat land between Detroit and Ypsilanti allowed the Chicago Road to be almost a straight line but west of Ypsilanti the impracticality of maintaining a straight line became evident.

The Chicago Road was never designated a Territorial Road.

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What Washtenaw County Roads were Indian Trails?

Reference is often made in pioneer accounts of the first settlers "following the Indian trail." As far as Washtenaw County is concerned, this may or may not be the case. That some of our early roads follow the general course of Indian trails is evident. Certainly the first land lookers and settlers traveling the wilderness of Washtenaw County would have utilized whatever pathways they could find. And quite probably the destinations of these early travelers were the same as the local natives, particularly at river fords and areas of settlement. The first locations of white settlements almost invariably were where native settlements had at one time existed, and the bridges over major rivers on long established roads are at the location known to have at one time been a place to ford the river.

It is probable that the actual location of Indian trails changed over time, perhaps by a few feet, possibly by several miles. Seasonal flooding, a change in a river's course, a fallen tree, an eroded embankment; any number of things could have caused a trail's course to change, particularly on those trails that had little usage. But whether you were an Indian or a white man it was desirable to avoid low marshy areas and steep gradients, and if it were easier to go around a hill than over it, or to skirt a stream rather than crossing it, you would do it.

It should be kept in mind that some of these pioneer "Indian trails" may have been a trail established by previous settlers and that even the location of the early settler roads were altered for various reasons. Most pioneer accounts are second hand, explaining how someone else took an "Indian trail" to some destination. Except for the Chicago Road I have found no pre-settlement accounts of the location of any Indian trails in Washtenaw County. There is no doubt they existed, particularly along river courses, since the river would have led to a known destination, be it by way of a canoe or the path along the river. But unless other evidence comes to light, when I am told that a road follows the path of an old Indian trail, my response is, "maybe".

Nevertheless, the early roads have a significance in their own right and whether or not they may have been Indian trails they are a fascinating aspect of our history.