

## How Roads Were Named in Washtenaw County.

In cities and villages there was a need that the streets be named and this was quite likely attended to by the local council or governing body early on. Even the earliest village plat maps identified streets and roads with a name, although not necessarily the name we currently call these streets and roads today. Except for the main roads, township roads were another matter. In rural areas names of convenience were derived locally and had no permanent or official status. Even the many territorial roads authorized by the territorial government received no name and were usually designated by the settlements the road connected. Territorial Road was a generic term, used locally to identify a road.

The main roads were mostly known for where they went; Pontiac Road, Cherry Hill Road, Salem Road. The present Ann Arbor Trail in Wayne County was referred to as the Ann Arbor Road in the Buckland Township minutes as early as 1828<sup>1</sup>. Michigan Avenue in Ypsilanti was historically known as the Chicago Road although in Ypsilanti it was Congress Street. Some roads were known by an identifying feature; North River Road, Ridge Road, and some for what they were, Church Street. How long North Territorial had the North prefix is unknown but it has been a long time. It differentiated that road from the two territorial roads south of it, the Ann Arbor-Plymouth Road and Geddes Road, both also known as Territorial Roads.

Roads were named after long time residents or large property owners. Kimmel Road, Lutz Road, and Stovall Road are all road names that appear in the Superior Township minutes. No roads by these names currently exist in Superior Township. These road names were probably in reference to the roads on which these people had built their home, and the same road several miles away might have had a different name, named after the land owner in that area. This is quite similar to some of the cities of Europe in which the street name changes every few blocks.

On other occasions two roads had the same name. At one time there were two Superior Roads in Superior Township (Superior Road and Prospect Road) and three Salem Roads in Salem Township (Salem Road, Curtis Road, Six Mile Road).

The first attempt at officially naming rural roads appears to have been in Public Act 149 of 1893. This Act was the enabling act that established county road commissions. Among other provisions section 18 states "Immediately after laying out or taking control of a road (by the county road commission), the said board shall give the same a name by which it shall afterwards be known in their proceedings". This was restated in PA 283 of 1909, section 18. The current rendition of this law reads,

"Immediately after laying out or taking control of a road the board shall give the road a name. The board may change the name of the road if it determines that a name change is necessary in order to conform to a general plan or avoid confusion or duplication. The name given by the board to any road under its jurisdiction, either originally or in case of a

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<sup>1</sup> Buckland Township was an early township comprising the four later townships of Livonia, Redford, Nankin, and Dearborn.

change as provided for in this section, is the official name by which the road shall be known."<sup>2</sup>

Public Act 283 of 1909 is still current (compiled laws 224.18) and establishes that county road commissions are responsible for the official name of any road under its jurisdiction. The Act does not require that the road commission name the road. That is now usually left to the developers and private owners who are establishing roads. Certain naming criteria must be met, and any organization or individual has an opportunity to object to a name or suggest another before the final subdivision plat or site condominium map is approved. Once the plat or map has been reviewed by the various agencies that are required to do so, and the map or plat has received final approval and recorded, the responsibility of a road or street name change then rests with the county road commission, although the change can be requested by any person or organization.

The Good Roads District of Eastern Washtenaw County was in operation from November 3, 1914 until January 4, 1921, although no new work was started after the April election of 1919 which established the Washtenaw County Road Commission. Its operation was very similar to that of a county road commission<sup>3</sup>. In 1918 the State requested that the Goods Roads District prepare and submit a map showing the names of the District's roads.<sup>4</sup> At a May 4, 1918 meeting 13 roads were named. Among them was Superior Center Road (now Prospect Road) identified in terms of section lines and section corners.

"The road running north from Ypsilanti between sections 3&4 in Ypsilanti Township and sections 33/34, 27/28, 21/22, 15/16, 9/10, and across a portion of section 9 to be named the Superior Center Road."

The Washtenaw County voters approved the creation of a county road commission April 7, 1919 but even after the WCRC was created, roads continued to be identified by location in reference to township section lines and corners unless they had a name, which few did.

When the Washtenaw County Road Commission first convened on May 5, 1919 the first order of business was to establish which roads were to be county roads. All State trunk line roads and federally assisted roads were mandated to be in the county system, and per the Acts of 1893 and 1909, were to be given "a name by which it shall afterwards be known in their proceedings". The road commission also had to deal with the reward roads created by the Good Roads Commission, which they were obligated to take over, and Assessment District (AD) Roads. The AD roads were roads that the county had accepted to improve as a result of a petition from citizens who were willing to pay a special assessment tax for the improvement of their road. A total of 25 AD roads were improved by the WCRC between 1920 and 1929, some of them having been initially named county roads. When the AD roads were improved, any that were not already

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<sup>2</sup> Obtained from the Michigan Legislative web site in December, 2005

<sup>3</sup> The Good Roads District of Eastern Washtenaw County was comprised of the townships of Superior, Salem, Ypsilanti, Pittsfield, Ann Arbor, Northfield, and Scio, including the village of Dexter, and the cities of Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor.

<sup>4</sup> Good Roads District of Eastern Washtenaw County minutes.

considered county roads became county roads and as a result were named, although they were frequently referred to in WCRC documents with an AD road number, usually followed by the road name. All the roads initially or eventually accepted into the county system were named.

In 1924 the county roads in Superior Township that had been officially named were Plymouth Road, Cherry Hill Road, Geddes Road, Ridge Road, Superior Road (Prospect), and South Salem Road (Curtis). In 1928 Gotfredson, the AD #22 road, was added.

Sometime around 1929 someone came up with a scheme to give a three digit number to all of the county roads, similar to the numbers given to State and federal routes. It appears that this was a statewide project. The scheme was short lived and appears only on the 1930 and 1932 WCRC road maps. In Superior Township the county roads received the following numbers:

Plymouth Road	US 12	federal road, route number established in 1926.
Cherry Hill Road	382	
Geddes Road	376	
Ridge Road	417	
Gotfredson Road	419	
Superior Road & Salem Road	421	Prospect Road and Curtis Road, numbered as a single road

By 1932 all the trunk line (TL) routes had names and were usually identified by name and trunk line number. This was also true for the county roads although on internal documents some county roads, both those named and/or numbered, had a hyphen with a single digit suffix which denoted a particular section of the road.

1932 saw the beginning of the take over of township roads by the WCRC as a consequence of the McNitt Act. For a while in WCRC internal documents the unnamed township roads not in the county system were identified by a two digit, hyphen, one digit number. There is no explanation of how the system worked or when it was introduced. It, too, was short lived because the Detroit Edison Company wanted the roads to have names.

I don't want to go into a history of the Detroit Edison Company. It is enough to say that Detroit Edison had to establish a system to identify the location of each of their customers. It was they who came up with the house numbering system we use today and it was they who named the rural roads of Washtenaw County, at least most of them.

"In rural regions, installation of equipment and responses to trouble calls were delayed because servicemen found house identification almost impossible. The (Edison) Company invented and applied to its whole territory a system of house numbering which, with the aid of volunteer organizations and local government units, came to be generally accepted. One incidental benefit was the elimination of the confusing and contradictory

naming of the roads themselves; previously a road frequently carried a different name in each of several adjoining communities."<sup>5</sup>

Detroit Edison had purchased the independent electrical generating companies in southeast Michigan and during the 1920's was in the process of extending electrical service into rural Washtenaw County. The farms along Plymouth Road received electricity in 1925 and electrical service was subsequently extended off the main roads.

In the WCRC minutes of April 6, 1934 is a notation that the "Representatives of the Detroit Edison Company spoke at the Board meeting regarding the naming of roads. The following week the minutes state "A study is being made with Edison Company relative to the naming of roads in a systematic manner." Then on December 7, 1934 there is the notation that "The Detroit Edison Company reports that they have had a number of requests from township clerks and individuals to change the names of certain roads. The company wishes to know if these requests should be referred to you (WCRC) for decision or (whether or not) you wish to decide."

It appears that that some time between April and December of 1934 the Detroit Edison Company published a map showing names of rural roads in eastern Washtenaw County and that some people took exception to some of the names. This map likely had been in existence for several years prior as an internal document of Detroit Edison Company.

There is nothing further in the minutes regarding this and nothing appears in the minutes of Superior Township. This arrangement of Detroit Edison preparing these maps which gave names to rural roads must have worked out satisfactorily because the March 6, 1936 WCRC minutes note that Detroit Edison had submitted a map showing the road names in the west half of Washtenaw County and asks for suggestions and approval of the road names. Edison indicated that they could not put names on the roads in the western tier of townships because that was the area serviced by Consumers Power Company.

Edison evidently was also installing road name signs, they being referred to in the minutes. On March 11, 1938 the WCRC sign shop is reported to be preparing signs for Lyndon Township "of the Edison type". The early Edison signs were boards painted gray with black lettering, and were placed on utility poles, posts, or trees as convenient. The signs may have been of cedar wood which naturally weathers to a gray color, rather than being painted gray.<sup>6</sup>

As of 1950 the Superior Township Fire Department was using the Edison maps to identify dwelling locations, they being the only maps of this nature available.<sup>7</sup>

The minutes of the annual meeting of the Washtenaw County Historical Society, dated Monday, June 8, 1936 contains the following:

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond C. Miller, Kilowatts At Work, page 220. Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1957. Unfortunately the only reference in the book pertaining to Edison naming the roads.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Betty Meyer, long time Superior Township resident.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Meyer

"Mr. Hallenbeck (WCRC Superintendent and Manager), being present, he was asked to explain about the naming of county roads. He introduced Mr. Meanwell of the Detroit Edison, who was responsible for the selection of names. The slide of the Washtenaw County map was thrown on the screen, and from it Mr. Meanwell talked. This called out some discussion of names which there was dissatisfaction with, but in general the feeling of the society was expressed by Prof. Wines, who said he had no idea what the job of naming and labeling of roads had been, and he thought it had been done very well indeed, and that the tax payers of Washtenaw county who should logically bear the expense, should be very grateful to the Detroit Edison Company."<sup>8</sup>

The Detroit Edison Company, perhaps Mr. Meanwell, would certainly have considered any road name then in general use, but some of those in Washtenaw County were discarded in favor of the road name in use east of Washtenaw County such as Joy Road and Warren Road. If there was no such general use name, the names of local land owners appears to have been utilized, at least in most instances. They may have been those land owners who provided a utility line easement off the roadway. Indeed, running a power line on poles in a vacant farm field was preferable to a road right-of-way with its associated problems of permits, trees, and liability.<sup>9</sup> It has also been suggested that the first purchaser of electrical power from Edison had the honor of the road being named after them. In some cases either of these may have been the case, but without further information from the Detroit Edison Company, now DTE Corporation, or the Washtenaw County Road Commission that might confirm this, at present this is only speculation.

The road names were originally for Edison's internal use and Meanwell did not have to justify his selection of names, although he probably could give reasons for them. Even if the records are made available, there is no assurance that there is an explanation as to why any given Edison road was named as it was. Of course some are obvious such as Stommel Road, but some are not, Vorhies Road. Undoubtedly similarity in names, difficulty in spelling, or inappropriate or confusing names were avoided, but I am at this point not aware of what criteria, if any, the Detroit Edison used in establishing road names. It could have been nothing more than a name that sounded appropriate, and met the requirements indicated above. So when I say that an Edison road was named after a given individual, it is only speculation, based on a certain amount of evidence, generally the fact that an individual by that name resided on or owned land adjoining the road.

By 1937 all the roads were named, and they had the names that we are now familiar with. Salem Road had become Curtis Road; Superior Road had become Prospect Road. A map prepared by Harry Raschbacher, the county surveyor in 1937,<sup>10</sup> contains all the road names as we know them today, except for Milford Road which was changed to Pontiac Trail in 1938,<sup>11</sup> and the west end of Geddes Road which at some date became Fuller Road, there already being a Geddes Avenue in Ann Arbor.

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<sup>8</sup> Bentley Historical Library, Washtenaw County Historical Society, catalog number Bp 3/2, box 3.

<sup>9</sup> WCRC minutes of May 18, 1934. "The Edison Company is making a large extension of their service in Bridgewater Township with about 7 miles of line, only 1/2 mile is in the road right-of-way. The rest being about 60' in the fields.

<sup>10</sup> University of Michigan, Graduate Library Map Room.

<sup>11</sup> Washtenaw County Road Commission minutes, March 18, 1938.

There may at one time have been a movement to identify and name roads after Indians or Indian trails. Pontiac Trail is a good example. I have no idea when Ann Arbor Trail in Wayne County was so named. In the Superior Township tax records of the early 1930's some properties along Geddes Road on the extreme western edge of the township are referred to as being on the Pottowatomi Trail but the name was never adopted.

As of the December 1936 minutes, and the annual reports through 1940 of the WCRC, there appears no acknowledgement whatsoever by the Washtenaw County Road Commission of the role the Detroit Edison Company played in the naming of Washtenaw County Roads. Perhaps a note of appreciation of the work Edison did occur later. Or maybe the County Board of Supervisors did the honors. Nor is there any indication that the road names provided by the Edison Company were officially approved and adopted by the Washtenaw County Road Commission. Perhaps that also came later.