**THE CITY OF SANDUSKY - A LITTLE HISTORY**

Unlike many of the larger cities located on the south shore of Lake Erie, Sandusky still retains a large number of historically significant 19th century residences and commercial buildings. Prior to taking one of the Erie County Historical Society’s Sandusky History walks, it is worth considering some of the events in the city’s history that shaped the city as it has evolved over the past two centuries.

SANDUSKY’S ROOTS - The fact that Sandusky was founded on the Firelands of the Connecticut Western Reserve by residents of Connecticut influenced the city’s future character from its inception. Of the original 13 colonies, Connecticut was one of only two colonies that retained portions of their western lands following the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the United States. Connecticut retained a section of land extending 120 miles west from Pennsylvania between the 41 and 42.2 degrees north latitude that was known as the Connecticut Western Reserve. The western 500,000 acres of the Western Reserve was awarded to those citizens whose homes had been burned by the British during the American Revolution and was referred to as the Firelands. The portion of the Western Reserve west of the Cuyahoga including modern day Erie County and the future site of the City of Sandusky only became available for settlement in 1805 when the land on the Western Reserve west of the Cuyahoga River was purchased in a treaty negotiated with various Native American tribes. Settlers began arriving in the area after it was surveyed in 1809, but the outbreak of the War of 1812 impeded settlement until the conflict in the Northwest ended in the fall of 1813. The contrast between the Ohio towns established on the Western Reserve with those in the rest of the state is striking. A visitor viewing the architecture and public squares in many area towns might assume that he or she was somewhere in New England.

Isaac Mills and Zalmon Wildman of Connecticut who had conflicting claims to the land in what was to become the City of Sandusky met Colonel James Kilbourne, the founder of Worthington, in 1817 in New York City. He urged the founding of a city on Sandusky Bay that would serve as the link between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River Valley via Worthington. A compromise was effected with Wildman receiving 3/4ths and Mills 1/4th of the proposed town which Kilbourne suggested be named the City of Sandusky. Kilbourne was to receive a one quarter share of the town and was the driving force in the city’s early development.

The future town was surveyed and platted in 1818 by Hector Kilbourne, a Freemason and the founder to the Masonic Lodge in Sandusky who imposed the square and compass of the Masonic Emblem on the rectangular grid of the town which continues to confuse travelers to this day. Washington Square, located in the heart of the city, was reserved for “market ground” and for the erection of “public buildings for religious, literacy, state, county and city purposes.” Three additional parks were set aside at the points of the Masonic emblem.

THE BENEFITS OF LOCATING HERE - The proprietors were exuberant in their touting of the virtues and prospects of the new town. Advertisements stated the benefits of the City of Sandusky:

-- It is situated on the south shore of Sandusky Bay, about three miles from the entrance thereof; on a site of ground as beautiful as can be found in the United States.

-- It is located on Sandusky Bay, the best Harbor on the south shore of Lake Erie, and affords a sufficient draught of water for the largest vessels which are navigated on the upper lakes, to approach near the shore, on which this City is located.

-- It is surrounded by as fine a country of land as can be found in the United States, much of which, on the south to the Ohio River is well settled, under good improvement, and is accommodated with turnpike and other public roads, now opening in various directions.

-- It is situated on the southernmost part of the upper lakes, and about 100 miles north of Columbus, the seat of state government.

-- The advantages of this situation, for commercial and other purposed, are already too well known, to require a more particular description.

-- It is, however, second to none in Western America, except the city of New Orleans, and in point of health, greatly its superior.



THE PORT, CANALS AND RAILROADS - In spite of these advantages, the city faced numerous rivals on the south shore of Lake Erie and was soon eclipsed by other cities for a number of reasons:

-- Sandusky sits on a bed of limestone which proved to be both a blessing and a curse. Limestone was a ready source of the building material that lent character to many buildings built in the downtown area in the 19th century, and provided the raw material for a thriving lime industry, but it also was a major obstacle because it made it difficult to deepen the bay to accommodate the ever larger ships that began to ply the Great Lakes in the second half of the 19th This issue was only resolved in the 1930’s when the Pennsylvania Railroad greatly improved the channel to the Lake from the Lower Lake Docks.

-- Sandusky’s chief proprietor, Zalmon Wildman, priced lots in Sandusky at prices well above their market value and on onerous terms and failed to make investments in the city that would have sped its progress.

-- With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 goods could be economically shipped to and from the East Coast for the first time and the State of Ohio began exploring the possibility of constructing a canal that would link Lake Erie and the Ohio River. Construction of a canal via the Sandusky and Miami Rivers was the shortest route, and had such a canal been constructed, Sandusky would have prospered and mushroomed in size, but this was not to be the case. In 1825 the Canal Commissioners voted to construct two canals – one from Cleveland to the Ohio River via the Cuyahoga, Muskingum-Scioto Route and one extending from Cincinnati to Dayton. The citizens of Sandusky were outraged and decided to construct the Mad River Railroad which would link Sandusky with the Ohio River via the terminus of the canal in Dayton.

-- Railroads were to soon make canals obsolete, but the Mad River Railroad was not a financial success.

WINERIES & BREWERIES - Although Sandusky evolved slowly, the city prospered and grew steadily and continued to prosper over the course of the 19th Century. Several major rail lines were extended to the city linking it to the East Coast, to the Ohio River and to the ever expanding western frontier. Sandusky became the world’s largest fresh water fishing port, and ice harvested in the winter enabled fish to be shipped as far as the East Coast. The wine industry thrived in the years after the Civil War; breweries were established, and cooperages were built to facilitate the storage and transport of wine and beer. Grain and lumber were mainstays of the port of Sandusky and ship building flourished on the waterfront.

THE CITY’S GROWTH - Cholera Epidemics plagued many U.S. cities in the early and middle 19th century including Sandusky. The epidemic of 1849 was particularly severe and led to so many fatalities that its victims had to be buried in mass graves in what came to be known as the Cholera Cemetery. This growth of the city was not slowed for long, however. Large numbers of immigrants from Germany soon began arriving in ever larger numbers. German newspapers, churches, and social organizations were founded and German could often be heard spoken on the streets of the town.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD - From the 1830’s to the 1850’s, Sandusky was one of the major depots on the Underground Railroad. Many slaves escaped to Canada on ships sailing from the port of Sandusky and many residents held abolitionist sentiments. During the Civil War, a prison was constructed on Johnson’s Island in Sandusky Bay to house captured Confederate officers.

BIG INDUSTRY COMES TO TOWN - In the 20th century, Sandusky was the home of many manufacturing industries including, among others, the New Departure Division of General Motors, Lyman Boat Works, the Hinde and Dauch Paper Company, Diamond Fertilizer, Philco Corporation Radio and Television Division, the Industrial Nut Company, the Barr Rubber Products Company, the Sandusky Foundry and Machine Company, the American Crayon Company, Apex and many others.

TOURISM TODAY - Beginning in the last quarter of the 20th century and continuing until today, Sandusky has experienced a loss of industries and population, and the city has gradually become ever more dependent on tourism. The Cedar Point Amusement Park, water parks, boating, fishing and yachting have become mainstays of the city’s economy and the downtown is evolving into a major tourist destination with new restaurants, brew pubs, condominiums and boutique hotels and a theater offering a wide variety of programming.