

A Brief History of Williamston, Michigan

(a not-so-impartial review of major developments in the Best Little City in Michigan, by Kenneth V. Zichi)
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Before Written History

The area that was later to become Williamston was originally the ‘summer home’ of a small group of the Tawas band of the Chippewa people. This land was used by them for planting what few crops they needed, holding an annual spring gathering of related bands of the tribe, and burying their dead.

The most famous native American resident was Okemos, whose name survives as a postal address in nearby Meridian Township. Okemos means “Little Chief” in Chippewa and as in English, that phrase can mean either ‘physically small leader’, or ‘leader of subordinate authority’. It is unclear if this name was applied to Okemos because he was short, or because his authority was limited because he had few if any tribesmen below him, as both those descriptions are accurate!

Unlike many native Americans, Okemos had a relatively well-documented life.

For example, as an ally of the British in the War of 1812, he was so badly wounded during an attack on a U.S. Cavalry unit near Sandusky Ohio, that he was left for dead along with his cousin and all the other members of the attacking party. He and his cousin however *did* survive the attack, and lived on many years to recount the tale. However, Okemos bore a four to five-inch-long scar from a saber on the left side of his forehead the rest of his life as a reminder of that battle fought in his youth.



Chief Okemos in full tribal gear, especially for the portrait, circa 1850.

European Settlement

Unlike the coasts of Michigan, which were settled and administered under colonial authority of France, England and/or Spain, this area never flew a flag other than the Stars and Stripes.

Williamston was first settled by people of European ancestry in 1834 when Hiram and Joseph Putnam cut a road through the dense forest between what is now Stockbridge and the Red Cedar River. This road still exists today as Williamston Road, and, inside the Williamston city limits, it is named “Putnam Street” in the family’s honor. Upon arriving in the area, the two scratched out a 15 acre settlement on the north bank of the river on the former Native American planting ground, built a log cabin, and started farming the land that is now the Brookshire golf course and city residential area.

Phelpstown / Williamstown

After only one season of poor farming, the Putnam brothers returned to Jackson, all but abandoning the land. In 1839, they sold their land to three brothers from Batavia, New York: Oswald B., James M., and Horace B. Williams. James M. (often called simply “Miles”), built a dam, saw mill and later a grist mill on the Cedar River near the

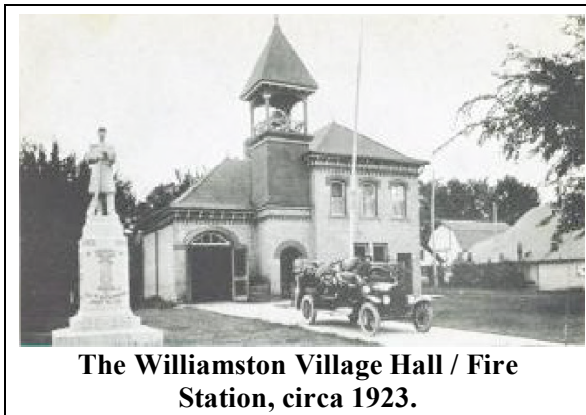
present Putnam Street Bridge, and he eventually platted the land of the original village of Williamston in 1845.

The area grew quickly, primarily as a farming town, but when the State Capital was moved from Detroit to Lansing in 1847, things began to drift away from farming and toward a more 'modern' economic base. The town became a popular stop on the Grand River trail (that later became a plank road, and is now Grand River Avenue) from Detroit to Lansing in the mid-late 19th century. Because the primary means of transportation at that time were horse-drawn and because the trip from Detroit to Lansing using only muscle power often took more than a day, Williamston became a convenient overnight stop, or at least a good place to stop for a meal, a drink, or a bit of entertainment on the way to a more distant destination.

'Modern' Williamston

Williamston was incorporated as a Village by the Michigan Legislature April 5, 1871, the same year the Howell and Lansing railroad from Detroit to Lansing sited a depot in Williamston as one of the intermediate stops. This period represented the beginning of 'industrial' Williamston's first 'boom' time. A large number of buildings still extant, such as the Andrews Hotel, the Town Hall, and National Block Hotel were built during this time, and define the look, feel and style of Williamston to this day.

From this time until shortly before World War I, Williamston was the undisputed commercial and social hub of the farming and early industrial society in Eastern Ingham County. In addition to shops and industry, Williamston had an Opera House which not only showed movies but also hosted live performances, medicine shows, and social functions as well. The town also hosted several municipal bands, and at times had three or four local newspapers. The citizens were similarly interested in insuring for the common good, and to those ends, subscribed and built the building that still serves as City Hall.



The Williamston Village Hall / Fire Station, circa 1923.

Hiram E. Higbee, (1843-1908) was the architect and builder of the Williamston Town Hall. Construction of the main part of this building was completed in November, 1890, and was designed and built in large part as a response to the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1890 which required private polling places.

However, far from being reactive, this building and the site on which it was located was a prospective attempt to provide a

focus for civic pride and a natural social gathering place for the community. In fact, the 'pocket park' in front of City Hall was designed from the beginning to allow for civic gatherings and memorials, such as the war and peace memorials as well as the time capsule currently on this site, and the annual community Christmas Tree lighting which

has taken place in some form since the first tree was donated in the 1941 in memory of Village President (Mayor) Harry A Love who died while in office earlier that year.

At about the time of the first world war, the industrial growth in the area began to be concentrated in larger cities such as Lansing, and population of Williamston stagnated, and even declined a bit from 1900-1920 as many younger residents left “rural life” for the “big city”, and the businesses supporting them followed. This trend reversed during the depression as more people left farms and tried to make a go of things in cities of all sizes, and Williamston was eager to capitalize on those trends which led to some interesting growing pains in the 1930s through the 1970s as popular ideas struggled to keep up with changing times.

Williamston was incorporated as a City by vote of the population on April 1, 1945. The contemporary analysis of why that move was taken at that time, revolve around elimination of duplication of taxpayer funded positions, and lowering taxes, however, reading between the lines, I believe this was seen as Williamston’s ‘opportunity’ to fix some of the population decline problems that started before the First World War. The attempt to address these concerns and make Williamston a vibrant community again largely manifest itself in the City’s efforts to establish reliable water and sewer services, to try to stem the stagnation and decline in both population and commerce through industrial growth, and encourage residential and business growth and development post World War II.

These efforts included many undeniably good things like improving roads and sidewalks, and providing clean water and modern sewage treatment, but because the were often described as being ‘forward looking’, there was an underlying assumption that anything ‘old’ was ‘bad’, and the only way for the community to improve itself was to dispose of everything ‘old.’



A souvenir Half Dollar made by the Williamston Centennial committee

In hindsight, we can say that *fortunately* these attempts were not terribly successful in the mid-1900s. This had a lot to do with economics: there was not a lot of money in town in the 1950s and 1960s to tear down, ‘re-muddle’ or otherwise ‘modernize’ the stock of Victorian buildings in Williamston, and therefore most of the changes made were relatively transient. As a result, the charm of Williamston still exists, while in a lot of similar towns that did have resources in the mid 1900s those wonderful old buildings were razed or converted beyond recognition and the ambiance of those towns has been all but lost.

While people agitated to ‘tear down those old eye-sores’ and ‘modernize our downtown so our businesses can compete with Okemos’, well into the 1970s, those ideas ultimately did not succeed in Williamston. True, we did lose several historic buildings during this period, including the Leasia mansion on South Putnam, and the west 1/3rd of the National Block Hotel building, to name just two landmarks no longer here, but on the whole, Williamston has retained its Victorian feel and turn of the (20th) Century charm,

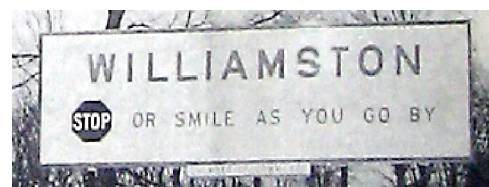
which stood it in good stead in the late 1980s and 1990s when those things again became more valued.

In April 1963, the people adopted a revised City Charter which provided for a ‘council/manager’ form of government, which is generally acknowledged as a more appropriate structure for a small city. This charter has been amended several times, but remains in effect today.

The City suffered a bit, economically, in the 1970s. With the energy crisis, and the general trend in retail away from small stores, many businesses in Williamston folded, or became very marginal. This trend in many ways reversed in the mid-1980-1990s when the ‘small town ambience’ became a trait that many people began to again seek out, and at the same time, Williamston merchants hit upon the ‘antiques’ trade which helped revitalize the commercial sector downtown. While many consumers are still fixated on ‘big box’ retailers, which the population of this area does not easily support, particularly with Meridian Township and Lansing just a few miles down the road, there is a growing ‘counter pressure’ toward local stores and locally produced goods and services (particularly food) that is leading to growth in Williamston even in the present hard economic times.

As the 21st Century begins, Williamston is again becoming the area’s social center. Annual festivals, such as **ArtFest on the River** and the **Jubilee**, spotlight the arts and culture of the region. We have a more ‘classic’ look to our streetscape (thanks in no small part to the efforts of the men and women of Williamston’s Downtown Development Authority, and their tireless efforts to keep downtown viable), and a weekly farm market in the summer months (courtesy of the City and the Williamston Economic Development Corporation). To top that all off, new private ventures such as the Williamston Theatre are reviving the older ‘city life’ aspects of Williamston, and other new and exciting businesses and social features, such as an art-glass blower, the bandshell and other renovations in McCormick Park are happening every day.

For years after I-96 was built, Williamston was best known for the sign at the right. We may have outgrown the hokey sign, but Williamston is still a friendly small town, with a big heart, and lots to offer!



If you haven’t taken the time to walk around and explore Williamston lately, you owe it to yourself to check things out. Maybe you’ll find out why I like to call Williamston the ‘Best Little City in Michigan’!

The City archives are incomplete, particularly from 1900-1915, and we’d appreciate receiving information to help fill in some of the blanks this has created. If you have newspapers, official data, or other records from this time period that contains City information, please contact City Hall at (517) 655-2774. Even if it is ‘just’ a letter with an official’s title or signature, it may help us reconstruct the history a bit better!

We’d be happy to make copies to complete our records, and return your originals to you unharmed if you so desire.

***This brief outline barely scratches the surface
of the history of Williamston!***

You may want to check out other web resources such as the public domain text of History of Ingham and Eaton Counties, Michigan by Samuel W. Durant, published in 1880, or look at the Platial.com Williamston History Map I've created. Either one will provide you some additional background.

Please call City Hall for my contact information if you have questions or suggestions on how to improve this document!

Oh, and be sure to check out the list of Williamston's past Mayors and Village Presidents, and the walking tour pamphlets included elsewhere on this website.

--Kenneth V. Zichi

(this document last updated 3/2008)