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No. 16. THE KALAMAZOO RIVER
A local history up to the Civil War

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I NAME, SOURCE AND RIVER DESCRIPTION
Page 1 - Franquelin's Maramee - Father de Charlevoix' Maromek
- De la Potherie verifies de Charlevoix' name - Recanamazoo
or "Iron Mine River" -
Page 2 - Legend of the "Boiling Kettle River" - source of the
Kalamazoo River -
Page 3 - Description of the River - hydraulic power.

CHAPTER II RIVER IMPROVEMENTS
Page 4 - First ideas of improvement -
Page 5 - The Kalamazoo and Clinton Canal - First appropriations -
Page 6 - Stevens T. Mason's report - survey report of James Hurd
in 1838 - William Woodbridge's report -
Page 7 - John S. Barry's report - end of the Kalamazoo and Clinton
Canal -
Page 8 - Senator Walbridge's bill in 1848 -
Page 9 - End of River improvements.

CHAPTER III RIVER NAVIGATION AND TRADE
Page 10 - Louis Herbin's instructions to Charles Langlade -
Chicago treaty of 1821 - Oka Town and Abijah Chinchester -
Page 11 - The "Pioneer" - The "Tip" - "C. C. Trowbridge" -
Page 12 - Description of River trips - freight rates - The "Droop"
- The "Tippecanoe" - The Michigan Central Railroad arrives -
Tragedy of the Milwaukee -
Page 13 - The "Massachusetts" - "Adelaide" - "Helen Mar" -
barges "Adam" and "Eve" - End of the Era.

CHAPTER IV DAVID S. WALBRIDGE, KING OF THE KALAMAZOO
Page 14 - Arrival from Buffalo - his activities.
CHAPTER I  NAME, SOURCE AND RIVER DESCRIPTION

"Towards Michigan's waters so broad and so blue
Flows the bright bubbling River - The Kalamazoo."¹

These anonymous lines could not have been written too long ago, as the Kalamazoo has not always been known by its present name.

Going back to 1684 for our first documented statement on the name, we will have to travel to Paris, France. The "Corte de la Louisiana," written by Franquelin, was published in that year. In his publication, Franquelin stated that the river was then known as the Maramée.² The spelling of this early name remains uncertain.

Father Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, referring to the river, calls it the "Maromek, one of the streams emptying into the eastern part of Lake Michigan."³

Another Frenchman, De la Potherie, verifies Father Charlevoix' title. In his writings of the year 1690, De la Potherie tells of "the Miamis (Indians) of the Maromek"⁴

The Kalamazoo River, in a British description of the important road from Detroit to Fort St. Joseph in 1771, is styled the "Recanamazoo River, or Pusawpaco Sippy, otherwise the Iron Mine River."⁵ This early English name was undoubtedly received because of the existence of bog iron in such quantities along its shores that it was converted to commercial uses in the early days of Kalamazoo village.

¹Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, Volume V, P. 292.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.  P. 127.
⁵Ibid.  P. 17.
Before the advent of the first settlers, the stream was called the Kakalamazoo because of its fanciful likeness to a "bright bubbling kettle." Another version has this stream known as the Kikkenamazoo or "Boiling Kettle River." Digging into the tales of how this stream became known as the "Boiling Kettle River," I uncovered this legend. "The Indian tradition is that many moons ago, Toland Prairie was the site of an Indian village, where one day a wager was made that a certain Indian could not run to a specified point on the bank of the river and return to the starting place before the water, then boiling in a little pot over the campfire, should have fully boiled away. The race was made, but a result is unknown." I have been unable to find out just how the modern version of Kalamazoo came to be. It seems pretty certain that by the time of the first white settlers, it was known as the Kalamazoo River.

The Kalamazoo River has its rise in the northwestern part of Hillsdale County, Michigan, and flows west and northwest into Lake Michigan. From the source to the city of Kalamazoo, the river makes three southward bends, but from Kalamazoo, the course is generally northwest. Its whole length is about 250 miles, entering Lake Michigan at Saugatuck (earlier known as Newark).

The Kalamazoo River is a large and beautiful stream nine rods wide and five feet deep in the middle. Its gentle current flows at the rate of about four miles per hour.

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9. "In 1823, the first trading post was established on the Kalamazoo River." *Kalamazoo Gazette*, January 27, 1937.
The uniformity of its volume is due to many feeding springs and equalizing lakes and marshes which prevent low water from drought, or devastation of the neighboring county in flood time.\textsuperscript{11}

The mouth of the river is 350 feet wide, and from ten to fifteen feet deep.\textsuperscript{12} It is not perhaps generally known that there is a good natural harbor at the mouth of the river.

A writer for the \textit{Kalamazoo Gazette} in 1837 stated, "from the fact of having sailed into the harbor, in a schooner drawing more than six feet of water without touching on the bar or meeting with any obstacle, that it is now, for small vessels, a safe and fine harbor. On the south side of the river are several fine basins, where vessels may lie very safely."\textsuperscript{13}

The whole river can be used for hydraulic purpose. The water power is extensive and has been of great value in the development of the southwestern part of Michigan.\textsuperscript{14} This fact is held together by the appearance of Allegan, Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Marshall and Albion at points on the river where water power is greatest.

The river has supplied deep black alluvial soil, sometimes two miles wide, and these bottom lands have insured quick and abundant returns for a minimum expenditure of labor.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Fuller, G. N., \textit{Economic and Social Beginning of Michigan}, P. 322.
\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{New International Encyclopedia}, Volume XIII, P. 74.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Kalamazoo Gazette}, February 18, 1837.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Encyclopedia Americana}, Volume XVI, P. 281.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society}, Volume XXII, P. 322.
CHAPTER II RIVER IMPROVEMENTS

The editor of the Michigan Statesman early in 1836 made this statement: "The Kalamazoo River will shortly be so improved as to afford easy navigation to Battle Creek, some twenty miles above this, from which place we can receive at a cheap rate unlimited supplies of lime and building stone of first quality."1

A few months later the editor turned his statement towards Allegan: "Already our men of capital are turning their attention to the navigation of our truly picturesque river, and it is confidently believed that a communication can be opened between this town and Allegan for boats of commodious bulk. One is now afloat to ply between Kalamazoo and Allegan, thus opening the way for an interchange of commodity that cannot fail to prove beneficial."2

Again we must turn to a writer for the Kalamazoo Gazette to find information concerning the improvement of the river: "The mouth of the river, with little improvement at small expense, may be made as good as any harbor on Lake Michigan. No doubt that Congress at their next session, being duly informed of these feats, knowing already the great want of good harbors on that lake, will grant the necessary appropriations for the improvement of this harbor."3

A visiting writer from the Monroe Times was impressed with his visit on the river. He states, "The river is wide and handsome from the mouth to Allegan, the head of steam navigation, and for a small expense in removing flood wood from its bends, might be rendered to that village, about fifty miles for steamships drawing four or five feet of water."4

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1The Michigan Statesman, April 2, 1836.
2Ibid., October 8, 1836.
3Kalamazoo Gazette, February 18, 1837.
4The Monroe Times (N.D.), Spring of 1837.
Before we see what the results of these articles were, let us look at another side. On seeing the very favorable results that the Erie Canal had made, a terrific dream was started. This came to a head when the State Legislature met in January 1837.

That spring a canal was authorized to extend from the vicinity of Mount Clemens on the Clinton River to the mouth of the Kalamazoo River.\(^5\)

That same year there appeared in the Kalamazoo Gazette the following lines: "For the construction of a canal or railroad or a part of each, from Mt. Clemens to the mouth of the Kalamazoo, if found practicable after survey, the sum of $20,000."\(^6\)

Later that year a sum of $205,000 was appropriated for the Kalamazoo and Clinton Canal. The canal was to be constructed from Lake St. Clair via the Little Clinton River and thence across Michigan to Allegan where it would join the Kalamazoo River and follow it to the mouth. The distance covered would be 217 miles.\(^7\)

The Legislature also did something about improvement on the Kalamazoo River, which it was proposed to improve from Lake Michigan to the village of Kalamazoo, seventy-five miles. This was to be accomplished by clearing out the bed of the stream from the mouth to Allegan, and then by erecting twenty-one dams to produce slack-water navigation from Allegan to Kalamazoo.

The total estimated cost of this improvement was $125,924 of which only $8,000 was appropriated. This sum was to be used for plans, surveys, and a beginning of the work.\(^8\)

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\(^6\)Kalamazoo Gazette, April 1, 1837.

\(^7\)Ibid., January 7, 1842.

In a message to the Legislature on January 4, 1834, Governor Stevens T. Mason recommended a "reconnaissance of the Kalamazoo River" and he pointed out that the "contemplated improvements in navigation of the Kalamazoo River are entitled to your attention."9

Early in 1838 the first light house was erected at the mouth of the river.10 Soon after, on the north side of the river at Singapore was built a stone light house.11

In a report made by James Hurd of a survey in 1838 of the Kalamazoo and Clinton Canal, he showed that there would be six levels of forty-three, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, seventeen, fifteen, and two miles required with a lockage upon the eastern slope of 349 61/100 feet and upon the western slope of 341 11/100 feet. Estimated cost of the canal was $2,250,000.12

During the early part of 1839 the sum of $60,000 was appropriated for the Kalamazoo and Clinton Canal.

In a message to the Legislature on January 7, 1841, Governor William Woodbridge stated: "The amount expended on the Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal from December 1, 1839, up to April 1840 appears stated at $32,897.10 and from the latter period to December 1, 1840, at the sum of $134,615.10, making the sum of $167,512.20, and leaving the sum of $20,000 of former appropriations."13

The year ending November 30, 1841, found $56,954.68 being expended on the canal and for improvements of the Kalamazoo River the sum of $1,154.63.14

10 S. D. Nichols was the keeper of the light house for a number of years. Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, Vol. III, P. 305.
11 It must have stood about twelve rods from the river. The remains are now about in the center of the channel. Ibid. Vol. V, P. 292.
12 History of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, P. 167.
13 "Up to November 30, 1840, a total of $276,241.66 had been spent on the canal." This shows two contrasting pictures. Fuller, G. N., Messages of the Governors of Michigan, Vol. I, P. 386.
14 Ibid. P. 442.
Governor John S. Barry, in his message to the Legislature on January 4, 1842, said, "The Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal. -- The total estimated cost of the canal has been $2,119,814. On this work have been appropriated $330,000 and expended $332,918 making an excess expenditure of $2,918 above appropriations. -- For the improvement of the Kalamazoo River -- estimated cost $7,799. Appropriated $8,000 and expended $6,241 leaving the balance unexpended $1,755."15

This seems to bring to an end the attempts to improve the Kalamazoo River until years later.

On his next annual message made January 2, 1843, John Barry stated that during the year of 1842 only $538.28 was expended on the canal. The next year he reported that claims for $3,436.66 had been allowed.16

The end of the canal dream was in sight and on January 6, 1845, Governor Barry stated, "The State owns the Kalamazoo and Clinton Canal, of which has been expended about $375,000 and which is now nearly finished from Frederick to Rochester, a distance of about sixteen miles. The work however without its further extension, not promising any considerable return for the investment made has been omitted in the enumeration of the resources of the State as they now exist."17

From all records existent, those sixteen miles were the only ones ever constructed. The canal idea was started too late and the railroad dealt it its death.

Now we move back to the Kalamazoo River improvements. In 1848 this article appeared in the Michigan Telegraph: "If the Kalamazoo

16Ibid. P. 497.
17Ibid. P. 515.
River can be made navigable, it will help make Kalamazoo the most flourishing town in western Michigan.  

In 1849 an editorial appeared in the *Michigan Telegraph*. "We have been favored by Senator Walbridge, Chairman of the Select Committee on the bill to authorize the improvement of the Kalamazoo River, with their report made January 25th. The committee (Messrs. Walbridge, Robinson and Shoemaker) recommended in strong terms the appropriation of 7,495 acres, being the quantity unlocated of the 50,000 acres of the Internal Improvements lands granted by Congress.

"The Grand and St. Joseph Rivers have each received about $50,000 while the Kalamazoo has had but 4,000 acres to be applied between Allegan and the mouth, and none above Allegan, the feasibility of making this River a profitable outlet for produce thereby competing successfully with the monopoly of the railroad, as well as opening a market for the lumber and grain of Allegan, Van Buren and Barry Counties, is substantiated by the fact that the citizens interested propose to contribute at least $5,000 voluntarily to aid the work.

"From our own knowledge of the River and the application of steam power to boats of light draught, we hesitate not to say that a line of communication to Milwaukee by Kalamazoo River harbor is perfectly feasible eight months in the year, by expending judicially the appropriation embraced in the bill.

"The benefits that would follow to this valley, including the Holland settlement, would be incalculable, and we hope and trust our energetic Senator will be sustained by the Legislature in securing so permanent a benefit to his constituents and the state."  

Three weeks later there appeared another article. "We congratulate our fellow citizens of the Kalamazoo valley and our friends at the Colony and the Rapids upon passage of the bill, donating 7,500

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18 *Michigan Telegraph*, December 2, 1848.  
acres of land, making with voluntary contribution pledged in the bill a fund of $15,000 for the improvement of our River to Allegan. This sum we think will be ample to raise a sufficient number of dams to make slack-water navigation and the water power created will eventually be worth vastly more than this sum for manufacturing purposes.

"Only think of daily arrivals of steamboats with plaster lime, lumber, salt, building stone, coal, grain and flour from the Grand and Kalamazoo River valleys, to say nothing of the passengers to and from the Holland Colony and the harbors on both sides of the Lake.

"The River will reduce railroad freights to one-half its present price. Who is there so little interested in this improvement that will refuse to lend a helping hand to its speedy accomplishment. Let there be no delay in carrying out the provisions of this bill, passed for one of the most feasible and important objects."

Nothing else seems to have been done, the improvement plans for the Kalamazoo River came to an end about 1850.

20Michigan Telegraph, February 21, 1849.
CHAPTER III RIVER NAVIGATION AND TRADE

For the history of trade we turn back to records. The Kalamazoo River area was roamed by three Indian groups. They were the Ottawas, who were found on the river as late as 1824,¹ the Miamis, and the Pottawattomies.

That trade on the Kalamazoo was to remain free to all who wished to go there was the special instruction given Charles Langlade of Green Bay, when Louis Herbin in October 1755 sent him to take command of the whole Grand River valley.²

The Pottawattomie Indians held title to the lands of the Kalamazoo area until the Chicago treaty of 1821.³ They then ceded to the United States all territory south of the Grand River.

The first evidence of a trading station being established on the river comes from 1823. In that year a French trading post was established.⁴ Two years later the American Fur Company established a trading post on the Kalamazoo four miles from the mouth of the river.⁵

When the first white settlers came to the Kalamazoo River area, they found the most effective means of transportation on the river to be by canoe.

In the month of June 1834, Oka Town and Abijah Chinchester ran a raft containing 30,000 feet of lumber from Pine Creek to the mouth of the Kalamazoo.⁶ This trip took two days and it was the first known raft to make a trip on the river.

In 1836 a group of seven Kalamazoo men made a huge barge and

³Fisher, D. and Little, F., Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, P. 25.
⁴It was located on the present site of Riverside Cemetery in Kalamazoo.
⁵Kalamazoo Gazette, January 27, 1937.
⁶Collections, G.N., Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan, P. 329.
sent it down the river. This barge carried flour, making one round trip, and on the second trip it ventured onto Lake Michigan where it was caught in a storm and wrecked.7

The first flatboat on the river was the "Pioneer," which was built by Joseph Bush of Allegan for Milo Winslow. It is believed to have been in operation during the spring of 1836.8 The vessel carried one thousand barrels of flour and twelve men were necessary to pole it up and down the river.

Amos P. Bush and his brother Horace built the "Tip" in Kalamazoo during the winter of 1837 and 1838.9

In the spring another flatboat was put on the river. It was known as the "Great Western" and it required a crew of ten.10

That same year a new era came to the Kalamazoo River. The first steam boat was built on the river. This steamer was built at Allegan, and was named the "C. C. Trowbridge."11 The steamboat was to ply between Allegan and Newark (now Saugatuck). After a few trips the steamer was found to be too large and unwieldy for use on the tricky river. It was then hauled off the river. The Kalamazoo Gazette had a few lines about the launching of the "C. C. Trowbridge."12

The flatboats built in Kalamazoo required three days to make the trip down the river and seven days for the return trip. Down-

7History of Kalamazoo County (N.A.), P. 168.
8History of Allegan and Barry Counties, Michigan (N.A.), P. 77
9They were born ship builders as their father Jonathan built boats used by Washington to cross the Delaware and the U.S.S. "Constitution." Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society., Vol. XVII, P. 290.
10This.
11Charles C. Trowbridge was a whig who opposed Stevens Mason in 1837 for Governor. Mason won by only 237 votes.
12"We are requested to give public notice that today at two P.M. a steamboat will be launched at Singapore. The boat has been built by William Wilkins, and under the command of George Porter, will ply between our village of Allegan and the mouth of the Kalamazoo River." Kalamazoo Gazette, October 13, 1838.
freight was principally flour manufactured in Kalamazoo and the up-freight was general merchandise.

The flatboats carried a sail, and a fair west wind to commence with would greatly facilitate the return trip. Hard labor came in poling the boats and their cargoes up the river. The men would use poles that were from sixteen to twenty feet long with a heavy steel pointed iron socket at the lower end weighing from ten to fifteen pounds. The boats would only move in the day time pulling along shore at dusk. The men would secure the boats to the shore and then sleep on board. In the morning they would be on their way as soon as it was light enough to permit them. $100 was charged for a freight trip from Kalamazoo to Newark.14

During the winter of 1840 and 1841 two more barges went onto the river. One, the "Dropp" was built by the Bush brothers15 of Kalamazoo. The other was the "Tippecanoe" which carried a crew of eight. These boats were in active operation on the river until the opening of the Michigan Central Railroad to Kalamazoo in 1846. The railroad brought about a general decrease in river traffic.

On November 18, 1842, this article of tragedy appeared in the Gazette: "We understand that the ship Milwaukee left the mouth of the Kalamazoo on Thursday the 17th for Buffalo, but the wind which blew a gale, prevented her either from making an offing or returning to the port, the channel being difficult of access. The vessel was driven ashore a short distance from the mouth of the river, where she broke in two. The crew, comprised of fifteen men, six of whom only

13"We now have a grist mill in our town." Michigan Statesman, October 8, 1836.
15Ibid.
were rescued, the other nine were either drowned or perished from the cold. The Milwaukee had on board 1300 barrels of flour, 900 of which were owned by Mr. Walbridge of this town and 400 by Mr. Bush of Allegan. 16

Six months later another article appeared: "We announce the launching of the brig Massachusetts. The brig of 200 tons was launched at the mouth of the Kalamazoo River on the 29th of April. In point of workmanship and model, she is unsurpassed by any on the lakes. She leaves the mouth of the Kalamazoo for Buffalo of the 16th of June taking the cargo from the wreck of the ship Milwaukee." 17

In February 1846 the first boat left the mouth of the Kalamazoo for Chicago. Two mills alone shipped 20,000 barrels of flour this spring. 18

The railroads brought an end to major river navigation although lumber was carried down the river for several years. For a number of years shipbuilding on the Kalamazoo was a major industry.

The "Adelaide" in 1847 was built in Allegan; it ran from Allegan to Saugatuck one day and back the next, keeping up this schedule for two years. 19

In 1854 the "Helen Mar" was built at Allegan by Mr. Bush. She remained on the river until the Civil War.

In 1855 two barges, the "Adam" and "Eve," were built at Saugatuck. They were intended for towing on the Lake and they were the first experiment of this kind. 20

Thus an era that lasted only a brief span came to a close. It was a dramatic era which left its mark on the river.

16Kalamazoo Gazette, November 18, 1842.
17Ibid. May 12, 1843.
19History of Allegan and Barry Counties, Michigan (N.A.), P. 77.
20Ibid.
CHAPTER IV  DAVID S. WALBRIDGE, KING OF THE KALAMAZOO

David Walbridge undoubtedly did more for river navigation on the Kalamazoo than any other man. He did so much that I am calling him "the King of the Kalamazoo."

In 1841 David Walbridge arrived in Kalamazoo from Buffalo, New York. Soon after arriving he bought up great quantities of wheat. He soon established a line of flatboats on which the grain was carried down the river, being transferred at Saugatuck to sail vessels bound for Buffalo.¹

In the spring of 1842 he leased a grist mill and carried on an extensive business in grinding flour, which followed the same course to the eastern market.

Mr. Walbridge would build his flatboats here in Kalamazoo. As soon as they were completed on Portage Creek, his wagons would bring down a load of flour or grain. The Walbridge boats would carry 300 barrels of flour to Allegan, where they would double their capacity for the remaining trip to the mouth. The reason for this maneuver was the difference in depth of the Kalamazoo.²

Mr. Walbridge, during the lean years, kept money circulating around Kalamazoo. He fought the railroads, and when they arrived his boating system was dealt a severe body blow from which it never recovered.

¹History of Barry and Allegan Counties, Michigan (N.A.), P. 77.
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