Papers from the History Seminar at Kalamazoo College

"The Organization, Operation and Growth of the Kalamazoo District Public Land Office at Kalamazoo, Michigan from 1834 to 1859"

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January 21, 1957
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Introduction

The lands ceded to the national government by the states at the time of the Confederation, plus those acquired by the federal government during the first fifty three years of the nineteenth century, comprised an area of approximately 1,300,000,000 acres of contiguous territory. Its cost of acquisition was $74,758,000 or $.045 per acre.

The government was faced with the problem of profitably and efficiently disposing of this public land. Before the federal union was instituted, two plans were advanced. The "New England" plan required that the land be surveyed into townships and then populated, one by one, under the direction of a parent colony. The "Southern" plan would allow the land to be opened to settlers, with no requirement of survey and with no direction from another colony.

The federal land policy that was formulated in the land acts of 1784 and 1785 incorporated some of each of these plans. Surveys always preceded sales but not settlement, no parent control was necessary nor was a systematic westward movement required. Congress, anticipating large, speedy sales, decided that the land should be sold by companies authorized to handle certain terri-
tories. Therefore, companies were organized, surveys were taken and the sales begun. The transactions took place at the seat of government of the area by auction. Although 73,000 acres were disposed of at approximately $1.60 an acre, the plan was very disappointing; the companies were not managed in a commendable manner, and the disposition of the large tracts of land was slow and difficult.

In 1796, therefore, a new land bill was passed that provided for rectangular surveys into sections of 640 acres each, half of which were to be sold at local land offices, the other at the area's seat of government. Four sections were reserved at the center of each township. One twentieth of the price, $2.00 per acre, was to be paid down, the final payment within one year. This plan, too, met with little success.

Revisions were made in the Harrison Frontier Bill of 1800 which allowed all land to be sold at local offices. The minimum price of $2.00 per acre was maintained, one fifth of which was paid; the remaining principal was paid in four annual installments. This proved unsatisfactory, as did the others. The Indiana Territory Act of 1804 provided for the sale of quarter-section tracts of 160 acres and made it necessary that a new law be enacted for each new geographical division, thus providing for constant improvement. An act of 1806 required that all payments be made in cash.

Slow sales caused the further reduction of tracts to
half quarter-sections, or 80 acre lots in an act in 1820. The credit system was abolished, and it was required that the new minimum price of $1.25 per acre be paid at time of purchase. Under this act a great era of speculation spread over the country, reaching its zenith in 1836 when 20,000,000 acres of land were sold. It was in this period that the Kalamazoo Land Office was most active.

Later, in 1841, a specific pre-emption act was passed by Congress for the benefit of the settler, while in 1854 a graduation act authorized the sale of land at rates from 12½ cents to $1.00 per acre, according to the time the land had been up for sale. Our period had already closed when Abraham Lincoln signed the first homestead act in 1862. This new law allowed settlers to acquire 160 acres of farm land free but for a small processing charge.

We are dealing, however, with the period of land operations from 1834 to 1859. In the 1830's the wave of speculation that swept the nation reached Kalamazoo and gave it its first impetus for growth.
On March 23, 1823, the United States Government established a land office at Monroe, Michigan¹ for the convenient disposal of lands within its southern Michigan district. On the sixth of June, 1831,² this office was transferred to White Pigeon Prairie to oversee the reformed southern Michigan district which had been created from the lands handled by the Detroit and Monroe land offices.

This new district embraced all the counties of Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph, Branch, Calhoun and Van Buren, and all but the northern most tier of townships in Allegan and Barry counties.³ It composed an area of 4,248 square miles or 2,718,720 acres of land;⁴ an area that was to be slightly reduced by the creation of the Ionia office in 1836.⁵

The local office remained at White Pigeon for nearly three years receiving $338,653.74 for the sale of 273,855.78 acres of land.⁶ On April 29, 1834, business was suspended

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2.) Kalamazoo Gazette, January 27, 1838, p. 2.

3.) Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, David Fisher and Frank Little, editors, A. W. Bowen and Co., publishers, p. 60.

4.) Ibid., p. 61.


6.) Fisher and Little, op. cit., p. 61.
while the office transferred its property to the settlement of Bronson, Michigan. Here, on May 2, it reopened its doors to what was soon to become part of the most colossal land boom in the nation's history.

The land of the district had been surveyed before the White Pigeon office had opened. It contained 118 townships, subdivided into sections of 640 acres, quarter-sections, eighth sections, etc. The state received the sixteenth section of each tract of 640 acres for the construction of public schools. Two townships in each district were granted to the state for the construction of "seminaries or schools of a higher grade." None of this land, Indian reserves or land upon which salt springs were located was available for sale. No salt spring land was located in the southwestern Michigan district.

The Erie Canal had been completed in 1825, which gave people easy access to the territory of Michigan. Bronson, as the center of the area's land trade, was to receive huge benefits from its position of importance.

7.) Gazette, January 27, 1838, p. 2.
8.) Ibid.
9.) Donaldson, op. cit., p. 223.
10.) Ibid.
11.) Gazette, February 4, 1837, p. 2.
12.) Ibid.
Though it had been established as the seat of justice for the county of Kalamazoo, Bronson had not grown very rapidly. It was not long, however, before the presence of the land office began to influence the city. In the same year, coming from White Pigeon, the Michigan Statesman, a tabloid newspaper, began a weekly publication in Bronson,14 and in the following year, a bank was opened.15

But, before considering this further, let us examine the operation and personnel of the Kalamazoo Land Office. Major Abraham Edwards held the position of Register.16 He had been appointed to his position by President Jackson in 1831, at which time he opened the office at White Pigeon. He was to direct the operation of the local office, seeing that the proper lands were advertised for sale, that sales were made legally, that claims were filed correctly, that payments were collected and patents were distributed. He was also authorized to act as arbitrator between disputants over claims and to judge the legality of claims.17 Thomas C. Sheldon was receiver,18 a bonded officer who received all monies from the land transactions. His source of

15.) Thomas, James M., compiler & publisher, Kalamazoo County Directory, 1869 & 1870, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1869, p. 44.
16.) Ibid., p. 44
18.) Thomas, op. cit., p. 44.
appointment is unknown, but it is assumed that it was the same as that of Major Edwards, Thomas' cousin, Theodore P. Sheldon, came to Bronson as chief clerk. His appointment and specific duties are unknown, but it is assumed that he was bookkeeper and general office manager. His salary is, likewise, unknown. Both Edwards and Thomas Sheldon received an annual salary of $500. Above this Edwards received a commission of one half of one percent of all money shown in receipts to him, while Sheldon received one percent of all money actually paid into the office.

Two traders, Laurence Vandewater and Isaac W. Willard, who followed the land office from White Pigeon on May 2, 1834, were the heralds of the boom that followed close behind them. "A. D. P. Van Buren writes, "from the first day of May, 1834, maybe considered the starting point of the settlement of western Michigan, and from that point to the present time, has been by the labor and enterprise of man converted into beautiful farms, towns, villages and cities." 24

19.) Ibid.
20.) McKinney, op. cit., p. 517.
22.) Thomas, op. cit., p. 44.
23.) There is some disagreement as to the exact date of the opening of the office in Kalamazoo; Van Buren says May 1, 1834, Donaldson and others say May 2, 1834. This author accepts the latter.
During the first four years after the move from White Pigeon, Bronson was the frantic center of an even more frantic land boom. In the first three years the population of the Michigan territory almost doubled from an 1834 total of 87,000 persons. Travelers came on foot, horseback and in wagons to buy the heavily wooded, rich Michigan land. Their arrival was never a mere trickle; it was at least a flow. The East moved West, hungry for land. What was a flow in 1835 became a flood in 1836; a flood that inundated what was now Kalamazoo and strained its resources beyond its capacities.

The movement was at its peak during the summer months. In the spring of 1835, Johnson Patrick began work on a hotel, the "Exchange House." By that summer it was complete enough for him and his family to move into it. By the time [it] was fairly open the excitement of the land speculation was running strong and both hotels [the other the "Kalamazoo House"] had all, and more, than they could attend to. Fredrick Booker was landlord of the 'Kalamazoo House'...and both [he] and Patrick enjoyed an immense patronage for more than two years. Guests were glad to get something for their stomachs, and anywhere to lay their heads -- for they swarmed hither in such numbers that the 'earth shook beneath their feet.' Always two and very often three in a bed made the guests feel the truth.

26.) Thomas, op. cit., p. 54.
of the adage 'misfortune makes us acquainted with strange bedfellows.'

Thomas Sheldon, the receiver of the local land office, evidently anticipated this period of prosperity and decided to capitalize on it. The tax records for 1835 reveal that he and two others, Justus Burdick and Lucius Lyon, paid taxes on a $2000 evaluation for the "Kalamazoo House." His interest, it appears, was only in immediate profit, because he had disposed of his holdings by 1838, when the land rush began to fall off sharply.

During the summer of 1836 it is reported that "the entire square in front of the "Kalamazoo House," extending almost to South Street was white with the tents of land lookers." The tents filled the city, surrounding the land office buildings and even filling the deer park. Money was plentiful and was spent freely; yet, we hear of no robberies during the entire period.

Sales were high from the very beginning. 128,244.47 acres were disposed of in 1834. By 1835, they had jumped to 745,661.34 acres. 1836, however, was the wildest, most exciting of all the years of land speculation.

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27.) Ibid., pp. 54-55.
28.) Durant, op. cit., p. 254.
29.) Ibid.
30.) Thomas, op. cit., p. 55.
31.) Gazette, February 4, 1837, p. 2.
"Kalamazoo was one great mass convention of men almost raving with the land-mania. Quarter sections that, in the morning, were entered at the land office for $2.00 sold for $400.00 before midnight. Desirable water lots sold for $100 per foot." In January and February $281,437 were received. Sales increased in May until orders reached such a volume that the office was closed for three weeks to allow the officers to write up the books. Opened again in late June, the office was again besieged by thousands upon thousands of applicants, many of whom were unable to gain admission. The press of men finally forced the officers to close the doors and to receive orders through the windows. Weeks elapsed before patents could be issued, the confusion of mass orders and conflicting claims was so great. The massive weight of the ordeal reached its breaking point in August when 447,343.75 acres of land were sold. Operations ground to a halt. The office was closed through September and October, while they cleared away the mountain of back orders and distributed patents.

During the 169 business days of that year 1,634,511.82 acres of land were sold for $2,043,866.37. The largest

32.) Thomas, op. cit., p. 62.
33.) Ibid.
34.) Gazette, February 4, 1837, p. 2.
35.) Ibid. More land was also sold and purchased in the United States in this year, also. In fact, more than in the entire previous history of the nation. Government land sales totaled $24,877,179 as against $23,409,940 total revenue from customs and other duties. (Kalamazoo Gazette, "Centennial Edition," p. 9.)
sales were made during the months of May and August, when 382,218.74 acres at $477,773.42 and 447,343.75 acres at $559,499.68 were disposed of respectively.\textsuperscript{36} Average daily sales for the year ran more than $12,000; the highest sale for one day was more than $70,000.\textsuperscript{37} Strangely, the average price at the office was little above the $1.25 minimum.\textsuperscript{38}

Speculation ran high; land was bought and sold at huge profits, often without ever having been seen by the buyer or the seller. When the patents came through many went unclaimed, while many others were picked up by owners, who, upon checking their property, found it to be mosquito infested swamp or quagmire. Still others returned to their homes with their patents and allowed their land to be sold for unpaid taxes.

In the year following the climax of the land rush, sales fell off sharply. In 1837, 313,855.15 acres were sold. Only 449,056.15 of the original 3,086,138.56 acres in 1831 were still open to the public in 1837. 83,001.69 acres were in Indian reservations, while 95,663.60 acres had been

\textsuperscript{36) Ibid.}  
\textsuperscript{37) Ibid.}  
\textsuperscript{38) Ibid.}  

On July 11, 1836 a presidential order was issued requiring payment of purchases in hard money at the local offices. This was designed to discourage speculation. It certainly did not affect sales volume, but it may have been a factor in keeping the average sale price at near-minimum level.
set aside as school lands. In January of 1838, S. York AtLee, chief clerk of the land office, issued a statement in the Kalamazoo Gazette, formerly the Michigan Statesman, informing the reader that the state, by law, was to receive five percent of the net proceeds of the sale of land for the building of roads and canals and other internal improvements. The State had received $58,538.92 from the Kalamazoo District and, if no changes were made in the existing law, would receive an additional $30,000.

The tremendous amount of document tranterence that was necessary for the operation of the land office and the increased mail that accompanied the huge influx of people into the area made additional postal facilities necessary. In May, 1836, therefore, the first regular coach line was opened in Kalamazoo. Wadsworth and Thompson, the owners, operated the coaches with a government contract to carry the mail between Marshall and Kalamazoo.

The increased prestige and enlarged opportunity for advancement in the post office "stirred up a jealousy among the aspiring men of the village, which led to a change in the postmastership." The exact nature and date of this controversy is unknown. But it is assumed that

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39.) Gazette, January 27, 1838, p. 2.
40.) Ibid.
41.) Durant, op. cit., p. 252.
42.) Ibid., p. 251.
it occurred soon after the postal facilities had been expanded. 43

During the land boom the structure of the General Land Office had been changed to accommodate the office of the Surveyor-General under the supervision of the Land Commissioner, thereby eliminating confusion and delay between the hitherto separate agencies. 44

After the rush of 1836, settlers continued to flow into the area. But by this time, the choice sections of land had been exhausted. They turned their hopes northward. The demand for convenient purchase of land north of the Kalamazoo District prompted the creation of the Ionia district office at Ionia on April 1, 1837 45 and the Grand River district office at Grand River in 1838. 46 The Kalamazoo district was slightly reduced by the creation of the Ionia district. 47

As so often happens, the boom was followed by a devastating depression, which struck the country in 1837. Land became practically valueless. Owners preferred to abandon their claims to push further westward or to return to their eastern homes, rather than undergo the expense of keeping

43.) No further reference to this incident has been found. Evidently, it was some minor case of graft that was exposed for political reasons.


45.) Gazette, April 8, 1837, p. 9.

46.) Durant, op. cit., p. 232.

47.) Ibid.
them up and paying the taxes. By the end of that year, mortgage sale notices were appearing in every issue of the Gazette. On June 27, 1843, the first public advertisement for the sale of lands for unpaid taxes appeared in this paper. They were printed annually thereafter.

Land continued to be sold, however, and readers of the Kalamazoo Gazette would expect about once every month to see an advertisement like this:

"Register's office
February 10, 1837.

Holders of Duplicates for public lands are informed that Patents numbered 4445 have arrived from the General Land Office, and are now ready for delivery at any office.

Abe. Edwards, Register" 48

In September, 1841, Congress passed an inclusive pre-emption bill, which gave preference to settlers. 49 It gave pre-emption to those who had made a settlement subsequent to the land survey. Amendments to this act came after the Kalamazoo office had been closed, but a few settlers in the southwestern Michigan area received some benefits from the original bill.

The federal government profited by the land boom in Kalamazoo but so did the people of the city. The territorial road from Detroit to Chicago had this city as one of its main rest points. Kalamazoo became the "hub" of

48.) Gazette, February 10, 1837, p. 3. Though this particular notice appears in an 1837 issue, similar articles appear throughout most of the period under observation.

49.) Donaldson, op. cit., p. 214.
central Michigan, the point from which all embarked into the "wilderness." As a point of embarkation it was the West, offering man all the land beyond it. As the point of return it was the East, supplying man with all the comforts that an eastern city had to offer. The merchants prospered, outfitting the traveler with everything he needed to continue his journey. The hotel owners prospered, feeding and sleeping the visitors of the city. These people prospered because of Kalamazoo's unique position as a point of departure and return. But one group prospered directly because of the land office trade -- the lawyers.

Prior to 1834 there were few lawyers in Kalamazoo because there was no business for them. Occasionally a grand jury was called into session to try some fellow for selling liquor to the Indians. But with the land office there came a need for men trained in law, and an incentive for the lawyer to begin his practice there. The first to come were the two men who followed the land office from White Pigeon, Laurence Vandawalker and Isaac Willard. They were traders, i.e., speculators in land. As events speeded up, men came looking for lands, and speculators like them came looking for unwary men.

The first to permanently settle himself in the village

was Zephaniah Platt, who opened a land agency and acted as attorney. He advertised in the Kalamazoo Gazette as follows:

**General Land Agency**

The subscriber has permanently located himself at Kalamazoo, where he will attend to his professional business, as Attorney and Councillor at Law, and also act as Agent in the purchase and sale of Lands. He will attend personally to the locating and entering land at the several public offices, for a reasonable commission, or a portion of the net proceeds arising from the sale of the lands, as shall be agreed on. Persons wishing to dispose of lands, improved or unimproved may furnish a description, and if not sold, will be subject to no charge.

Zephaniah Platt

He was followed by S. Pettibone, who would gather information "for the purchase and sale of lands, or any other business of that line that he may be entrusted with." George O'Brien, a lawyer and speculator, advertised for laborers to clear the lands he had purchased.

All lawyers did not move to Kalamazoo in order to act as agents. T. M. Adams of Grand Rapids offered references as proof of his worth. Cephas A. Smith "attorney and councillor" through whom "all business [would be] done to order or according to agreement" was


52.) *Gazette*, February 17, 1837, p. 3. The following dates are only one of a series of advertisements for each.

53.) *Ibid.*, April 1, 1837, p. 3.

54.) *Ibid.*, February 17, 1837, p. 3.

another out-county lawyer. He offered to "receive agencies for land disposal, or prevent waste or destruction of a client's land and receive a moderate compensation for doing so."56

Having little business in actual legal practice, the Kalamazoo lawyers, therefore, earned their money by examining county lands and recommending particular localities to speculators for "investments," or purchased them for their own speculation. When, in 1836, the land boom was at its zenith, the half-dozen57 lawyers that were established in Kalamazoo had more business drawing up deeds and contracts than they could cope with.

By July 1837, however, the land fever had cooled off and business declined. Most of the land had been purchased by farmers for homesteads, but much had been purchased by speculators, many of them the lawyers themselves, for the purpose of resale. Only 27,036 acres of land remained for sale in the county.58 The choice land was gone and the speculators began to vend their wares.

"Lands! Lands!

10,000 acres of Michigan lands for sale to actual settlers. Liberal terms: Will not object to part cash down.

William L. Downing"59

The national economic depression of 1837 caused a de-

56.) Ibid.
58.) Gazette, January 27, 1838, p. 2.
59.) Gazette, July 8, 1837, p. 3.
cline in Kalamazoo commerce and industry as well as in the land business. But the town's lawyers were in good financial condition. Their brisk legal trade continued, as they turned themselves to executing mortgages and bankruptcy litigations which were brought about by the panic. "[Many] were able to acquire choice holdings at a price far below their actual value."60 But by 1841 the land rush was a thing of the past and the eleven lawyers of the town settled down to a less lucrative business of common practice.

In 1842 the first political head rolled in the Kalamazoo Land Office. Theodore P. Sheldon, who had been chief clerk at White Pigeon and had moved to Kalamazoo with the office, left "when a change of administration closed his connection and he embarked in a general collection agency."61 We are told that he later became a banker.

Nine years later the career of another political appointee came to a close; that of Major Edwards, register of the local office. We are told that he held his position until the election of General Taylor, "when he was removed for being a Democrat."62 During his years as register, two of his sons, Alexander and Thomas, served as clerks.63

60.) Stiles, op. cit., p. 17.
62.) Durant, op. cit., p. 286.
63.) Ibid.
Major Edwards was succeeded by Samuel York AtLee, who had previously been chief clerk at the local office. Mr. AtLee retained his position as register until 1857. The reason for his departure is unknown; it probably was political. Volney Hascall followed Mr. AtLee in 1857, holding the position until the government closed the office in 1859.

The following years saw the rapid decline of the importance of the land office to the area. The remaining acreage of open land was small and far from being the best land in the area. The city had received its impetus and now continued to grow; nearly doubling its population every ten years. The land office became another lost bureau of the federal government.

Rumors that it might close suddenly renewed interest in its existence and minor propaganda articles began to appear in the Kalamazoo Gazette, edited by Volney Hascall who took over the job as editor in 1846 and was to hold it until 1862 even though he was land office register from 1857 to 1859. He tried to convince the skeptics that the Kalamazoo office was paying for itself. "The amount of land located in this state, this year, exceeds that of any other since 1836 and 1837. Since the present

64.) Ibid., p. 232. Boyle informs us that AtLee was also editor of the Kalamazoo Gazette from January 23, 1837 to October 7, 1837.

65.) Ibid.

66.) Doyle, op. cit., p. 11 ff
incumbents have been in office, there has been received in this office alone, the sum of $18,000, and an amount of land equal in value has been located with warrants. The amount received at the Ionia office, we learn, is nearly quadruple the above."67

Rumors continued to grow into near certainties. Hascall finally had to openly plead with the government to allow the office to remain.

"We hope that the rumor of the closing of the U. S. Land Office at this place is not true. It would be a decided detriment to the interests of the public to have it done. Granting that there may not be over 100,000 acres in this land district unsold, (the reason given by the old law for closing offices, where this is the case,) it should not apply here, where applicants are daily crowding in to purchase the Government lands. ...Congress should at once pass a special act to continue the office here; for it is not only paying its way clear of all expenses but adding a surplus to the treasury of the U. S.

P. S. Since the above was put in type, the Register and Receiver have received a telegraphic dispatch from the commissioner of the General Land Office, to suspend proceedings in reference to the transfer of the books and c., of the office to Ionia -- The public will be glad to find that the ----(line of type illegible)65-- open for their advantage and convenience.

Senator Stuart of Michigan submitted a bill to the Congress in February of the next year. It was immediately passed and referred to the House which passed it also. The President signed the bill into law in April 1856. It declared that the land office "shall be continued until

67.) Gazette, November 18, 1853, p. 2.
68.) Ibid., December 7, 1855, p. 2.
69.) Ibid., February 22, 1856, p. 2.
such time as, in the opinion of the President, the same can be discontinued without prejudice to the public interests."  

Thus the land office at Kalamazoo received a stay. But it had outlived its importance. It had not been an integral factor in the growth or prestige of Kalamazoo since the days of the land boom. By the middle 1840's its usefulness as an impetus toward civic growth had been exhausted. It existed for the rest of its stay as a small, unimportant government agency. Yet it had been responsible for the original growth of the city; it had furnished Kalamazoo the incentive to expand. When it closed no one remembered the true contribution that this little office had made to Kalamazoo and southwestern Michigan. Its epitaph was too short and too impersonal and far from fitting.

"The United States Land Office has been discontinued and the remaining public lands situated in that district are transferred to the Ionia district."  

The reason? The office could no longer defray its own expenses, due to the exhaustion of most of the vacant land in the area. It was reported that the government would save $1,000.00 per year.

"Persons entitled to patents at Kalamazoo must call for them by July 31st, at which time they will be transferred to the General Land Office at Washington for delivery."  

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70. Ibid., April 18, 1856, p. 2.  
71. Ibid., June 24, 1859, p. 2.  
72. Ibid.
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting:

WHEREAS Washington Gibbons, of Van Buren County, Michigan, has deposited in the General Land Office of the United States, a Certificate of the Register of the Land Office at Washington D.C., whereby it appears that full payment has been made by the said Washington Gibbons, according to the provisions of the Act of Congress of the 24th of April, 1819, entitled "An Act making further provision for the sale of the Public Lands;" for the north east quarter of the north west quarter of Section Twenty-three, in Township five North of Range twenty-six, in the District of Land's subject to late at Brandon, Michigan, containing thirty-eight acres and seven tenths of an acre, according to the official plot of the survey of the said Lands, returned to the General Land Office by the Surveyor General, which said tract has been purchased by the said Washington Gibbons.

NOW KNOW YE, That the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in consideration of the Premises, and in conformity with the several acts of Congress, for such cases made and provided, HAVE GIVEN AND GRANTED, and by these presents DO GIVE AND GRANT, unto the said Washington Gibbons, and to his heirs and assigns forever, to have and to hold the same together with all the rights, privileges, and appurtenances of whatsoever nature, belonging, unto the said Washington Gibbons, and to his heirs and assigns forever.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, I, the President of the United States of America, have caused these Letters to be made PATENT, and the Seal of the General Land Office to be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN under my hand, at the City of Washington, the day of , in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and , and of the Independence of the United States.

BY THE PRESIDENT:

Photostatic Copy of Land Patent Certificate
Notice the date and the signatures.

Certificate courtesy of Mrs. F. L. Van Voorhees, Gobles, Michigan.
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