

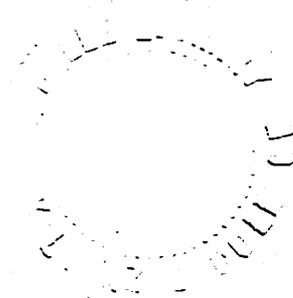
PAPERS FROM THE HISTORY SEMINAR OF
KALAMAZOO COLLEGE #85

THE LUMBER AND BUILDING INDUSTRY OF KALAMAZOO

by

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The lumber and building industry of Kalamazoo from the early beginnings to the decline of its importance was a local industry.

There was much timber in Kalamazoo county during the early period. Three-fourths of the county was classed as "timbered lands".¹ The timber growth in and around the village consist largely of several varieties of oak and hickory, intermixed with elm and bass wood. Burr oak was the predominant tree. The bottom lands, where not cleared, were covered with a heavy growth of elm, black ash, soft maple, and several minor varieties.²

The early settlers of Kalamazoo made use of the "oak openings" to build their houses.³ There was not much trouble finding good lumber in the area around the village of Kalamazoo, since an excellent supply of hardwoods existed. Due to this abundant supply of lumber and the needs for its use by the early settlers, lumbering became important as an industry,⁴ but was only used for local consumption.⁵

¹Fisher and Little, Compendium of History and Biography of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, Chicago, 1906, p.32. (hereafter referred to as Compendium.)

²Durant, Samuel W., History of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, Philadelphia, 1880, p. 209. (hereafter referred to as County.)

³Ibid. same page.

⁴Collections and Researches Made by the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, Lansing, 1894, Vol. XXII, p. 209. (hereafter referred to as Collections.)

⁵County, p. 320.

In order to gain more land for farming the earlier settlers cleared away much of the timber, which they put to no worthwhile use.⁶ The Kalamazoo Gazette published an add which typifies this type of waste:

"Wanted; A subscriber wishes to contract for breaking up seventy-five acres of land, mostly, burr-oak, to be done by the tenth of next July."⁷

Some of the timber was used up by making rail fences and by using it for fire wood.⁸ A large amount of lumber was cut for building purposes. The buildings constructed were of the wooden frame type. Few log cabins were built in Kalamazoo, due to the early saw mill erected on Portage Creek near the Kalamazoo River during the winter of 1831 and 1832 by Titus Bronson.¹⁰ Mr. Bronson and Rodney Seymour cut lumber for three small houses and for the Kalamazoo House, which served as a gathering place for the people of the community and for travelers. The Kalamazoo House was one of the first buildings in Kalamazoo.¹¹ Bronson's early mill did not supply enough lumber to fill all the needs of Kalamazoo. H.H. Comstock had a saw mill in Comstock

⁶Ibid., p. 323

⁷Kalamazoo Gazette, April 29, 1837.

⁸Ibid., January 14, 1837.

⁹Quarter Centennial Celebration of the Settlement of Kalamazoo, Michigan, p. 35.

¹⁰Thomas, James M., Kalamazoo County Directory, 1870, p. 38 and 39.

¹¹Ibid., same pages.

which supplied the rest of the lumber for the Kalamazoo House.¹² There was no mention of how the lumber was transported to Kalamazoo from Comstock, although there is evidence of using the Kalamazoo River for transporting lumber. Oka Town and Abijah Chinchester sent a raft containing 30,000 feet of lumber from Pine Creek to the mouth of the river.¹³ The abundance of water power supplied by the Kalamazoo River and its tributaries aided in supplying the saw mills with power.¹⁴

There was no organized lumber company engaged in the cutting of lumber to supply Bronson's mill; therefore, the people cut down what trees they wanted for their own use and brought them to the mill.¹⁵

At the time of the Panic of '37 the growth of Kalamazoo slowed down. After this, what little industry did rise was a matter of necessity for the farmer's existence. Lumbering showed some increase, however. The saw mills produced wood in order to build new houses and furnished wood for the newly established chair and cabinet factory.¹⁶ The building was carried on by carpenters and by near-by neighbors. At this time there were no established building firms in the village.¹⁷

¹² Fuller, George N., Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan, Lansing, 1916, p. 34.

¹³ Collections, vol. XXII, p. 291.

¹⁴ County, p. 320.

¹⁵ Potts, Grace, Kalamazoo Long Ago, (no date given), p. 72.

¹⁶ Lieffers, Harry Jr., "The History of Kalamazoo to the Panic of 1837", a manuscript in the Kalamazoo College Library, p. 20.

¹⁷ Centennial, p. 39.

During the 40's the lumber industry did not increase very rapidly. Lumber was used mainly for building purposes and for the chair factory. There was also evidence of using lumber as the base for roads. East Michigan Avenue, as we know it today, built in 1841, had a corduroy base of sixteen to twenty foot sycamore logs which were covered with a layer of gravel.¹⁸

The Kalamazoo Gazette carried an article which advertised lumber wagons for sale.¹⁹ This would lead one to believe that lumber wagons were one means of transporting logs.

The coming of the railroad in 1846 increased the population and made Kalamazoo a good village for business.²⁰ With the increase of population and the building of new businesses, came an increase in the lumber and building business. This is evident due to the increase of saw mills and lumberyards. In 1846 there were numerous saw mills and a flourishing lumber business,²¹ while back in 1841, there was only one saw mill listed.²² In 1855 there was definitely a tremendous growth in the lumber building business.²³

¹⁸Tool, Donald, "The First Ten Years of Kalamazoo", a manuscript in the Kalamazoo Public Library, p. 1.

¹⁹Kalamazoo Gazette, February 5, 1847.

²⁰Ibid., January 29, 1841.

²¹Ibid., January 29, 1841.

²²Moore, Dr. Floyd W., a thesis, The Evolution of a Modern City Free from General Fund Indebtedness, p. 9.

²³Kalamazoo Gazette, May 25, 1855.

Several businesses were very prosperous. An article from the Kalamazoo Gazette showed the "immense" size of the lumber business in comparison to the earlier period. Krause and Denison were largely engaged in the lumber business, taking it from the very stumps, and carrying it through all the various processes, until it appeared on the finished edifice. They had their own saw mill, which supplied them with choice kinds of pine lumber. Krause and Denison kept from fifteen to twenty hands employed in various branches of their business. They did a \$32,000 to \$35,000 a year business.²⁴

A. and S. Knerr and Daniel Veriell seem to have been the principal builders in Kalamazoo, although each manufactured doors, frames, and sashes on the side. A. and S. Knerr employed twenty six men and constructed, on the average, a good sized building per week. This gave them a business turnover of \$30,000 per year. Daniel Veriell employed only eight hands, but the Gazette does mention that it was a "rapidly increasing business."

Hugh McCall also was largely engaged in building by contract, along with manufacturing doors and window sashes. His business was increasing faster than the capacity to meet the demand. Sweetland and Dewing were heavy dealers in lumber, timber, shingles and lath. Their saw mill furnished 8,000 feet of lumber daily.

²⁴Ibid., same date.

Neal and Howe specialized in drying and dressing lumber and in making shingle and "fence stuff". Though they only employed three men, their business was rapidly increasing.²⁵ The preceding account from the Kalamazoo Gazette proves the prosperity of the lumber business. In the 1850's and the 1860's this prosperity continued, along with other businesses.

The 1870's proved to be a different story. Kalamazoo's business was suffering due to high taxes and high prices.²⁶ An article in the Gazette expresses the trouble Kalamazoo had. It said "Kalamazoo is suffering, houses are becoming empty and families are leaving from our midst."²⁷ This decline in Kalamazoo's industry did not help the lumber business.

In 1871 Tobias Johnson joined with L.B. Kendall to manufacture brick from a West-tall brick machine. The Gazette stated that if this machine was a success, brick making was to be revolutionized and lumber would "go abegging".²⁸ In October, 1877, another brick yard, known as Coddington and Westfall, was started in the southeast part of the town.²⁹ With the beginning of the brick industry and the decline of other businesses came a decline in the importance of the lumber industry in Kalamazoo.

²⁵Kalamazoo Gazette, May 25, 1855.

²⁶Ibid., January 20, 1870.

²⁷Ibid., January 27, 1871.

²⁸Ibid., March 29, 1872.

²⁹Ibid., October, 1877.

During the 1880's there were still nineteen saw mills, but they were decreasing in number. The railroads made it easier for different companies to bring in lumber from other areas where they could get the type needed.³⁰

"In 1897 the Peninsular Carriage Company's business was so great that it bought all the lumber belonging to the Coldwater Cart Company when that company went out of business. The lumber consisted of over 125,000 feet of ash, hickory, and rock elm. At the same time, it was having 1,000,000 feet of hickory cut by its lumber mill in Wisconsin."³¹ This was due, probably, to the change in natural resources.

Other reasons, such as the changing demands of the Kalamazoo area and new inventions, caused the local lumber industry to be of less use. In fact, by 1906, there were no saw mills listed.³²

Thus, the use of lumber from the area around Kalamazoo has lost its importance in the growth of the city.

³⁰Compendium, p. 62.

³¹Mehaffie, Hugh F., "Kalamazoo Industry, 1890-1900" a manuscript in the Kalamazoo College Library, p. 8.

³²Read, Mary Ellen, Ecological Survey of Kalamazoo, p. 3, in the Kalamazoo Public Library.

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