

SPRING/SUMMER

2017

ISSUE NO. 2 of 4

# Impressions

## History Meets at the Crossroads of Main Street!

This summer, visitors will immerse themselves in three great rooms, (even a room within a room) when they come to our house on Main Street!

"The Journey in a Day" tells the story of two hundred years of regional and national history reflected in the lives of U-M students. Read more about this exhibit and the students who created it on page 8.

The Museum on Main Street (MoMS) is located on a corner where three streets meet: Beakes, Main and Kingsley. Each one has historical significance but one in particular connects the UM and MoMS in a special way. Kingsley Street was named for Judge "Honest Jim" Kingsley who had a big role in bringing the U-M to Ann Arbor. See how he got that nickname, his role in U-M history and his connection to Ann Arbor's first piano (also in the WCHS collection), on page 6.



### Engaging the Next Generation

This is the fourth exhibit collaboration with our young historians. Whether it is the second grade class of Ann Arbor STEAM at Northside, or the three exhibits curated by U-M students, it is a mutually beneficial experience. From creating exhibits that engage the community to providing hands-on learning. Working together, we can continue the growth of this 160 year-old historical organization. *Continued on page 9*

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"Honest Jim" Kingsley
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Top Photo: Student Hangouts for "Life Magazine": Two young women laughing in a booth at Drake's, May 14, 1937 (Bentley Historical Library) "Drake's Sandwich Shop was a longtime favorite that stood along North University for more than 60 years – famous for fresh-squeezed limeade, great sandwiches, fountain service and the fabulous Martian Ballroom, upstairs." *Susan Chesler*

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# Message from the President – Karen L. Jania

Sunday, May 21st, was our annual meeting at the Rentschler Farm in Saline. We held elections for the board, welcoming new members, Ann Ringia, David Ferguson and Jason Jay Stevens. I would like to thank Emma Haldy and David Easterwood for their service on the Board.

We also presented the first Pauline Walters Memorial award to the Rentschler Farm Museum. This financial award will allow them to hire an intern so that they can carry on their interactive curriculum with elementary school children. Students learn about life in the farm house, chores on the farm and are given a tour of the farm which includes seeing pigs, chickens, sheep and cows. We are very pleased to provide financial assistance that will allow them to continue to this wonderful educational mission.

## Congratulations to the Rentschler Farm Museum!



Kathy Fortener, a Rentschler Farm interpreter, shows Pleasant Ridge Elementary students how laundry was done in the 1930s. (Lisa Allmendinger | AnnArbor.com)

I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue by several of our local area historians. The exhibit on student life at the University of Michigan has been very popular, please try to stop by on a Saturday or Sunday to view this exhibit that was created by UM students. The exhibit includes a student dorm room, a J Hop dress, and many other objects and photos documenting the life of a UM student. The exhibit will continue through October 22, 2017.

***Have a great Summer!***

## The Washtenaw County Historical Society

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### Museum on Main Street

500 N. Main St  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-1027  
(at Beakes & E. Kingsley)

**HOURS** Saturday & Sunday,  
12 Noon – 4:00 PM  
by appointment Monday-Friday  
Groups are welcome,  
Call 734-662-9092

**Current Exhibit:** The Journey  
in a Day: 200 Years of Student Life  
at the University of Michigan

# WCHS Enrichment Programs

By John Kilar, Docent  
Museum on Main Street

The WCHS historic tour for Friday, April 21 began in the basement meeting room of the William L. Clements Library. Brian Dunnigan, Associate Director and Curator of Maps gave a brief presentation covering the origins and history of the Clements Library.

Attendees learned that Mr. Clements was an Ann Arbor native, U-M alumnus (1882) and former regent of the University. He was also a builder of heavy industrial equipment in Bay City. Some of his equipment was used to build the original Panama Canal.

Mr. Clements also collected many historical documents concerning the earliest years of European settlement in North America and the American Revolution. Mr. Clements, later in life, donated his collection and funds to house his collection to the University of Michigan. The funds were used to construct the Albert Kahn designed Clements Library, opened in 1923. Mr. Clements so prized his collection that he wished that it only be used for serious professional research, no undergraduate or public research. However this restriction has since been relaxed.



Participants enjoyed the exhibits in the Avenir Room of the William L. Clements Library (Photo: J. Kilar)

Tour participants then went to the Great Room (renamed the "Avenir Foundation Room" after the recent renovation) and were told of its unique history and restoration. Everyone was encouraged to roam about the Avenir Room and enjoy its many exhibits and displays. Most notable among the displays is a restored George Clymer "Columbian" printing press from 1851 and a "What is it" display of historic objects whose purpose has been lost in time.

## WCHS "What is it?" Game

You can literally check out this traveling collection of odd and obscure items from the 19th and early 20th century. Entertaining and educational, it's perfect for the classroom or adult groups. Participants look at each artifact and try to figure out what it is! Email [wchs-500@ameritech.net](mailto:wchs-500@ameritech.net) or call 734-662-9092 to make an appointment to pick it up.

## Discover Ypsilanti's Unique Automotive Heritage

The Sunday, March 19 WCHS history tour began at 2 pm at the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum (The Hudson Dealership in Depot Town). A brief introductory talk was given to members and guests by Patty Bluhm of the Museum.

Many members were pleased to find out that, contrary to the exterior signage on the building, the museum covers much more than Hudson and Tucker motorcars.



A few of the vehicles on display (Photo: J. Kilar)

We learned that Ypsilanti's automotive heritage ranges from the original Rototillers made at Willow Run to mammoth Hudson marine engines.

After the presentation members were free to roam about the extensive displays at the museum. The exhibits included numerous historic automobiles like a DeLorean, several Kaiser-Frazer autos like the Henry J, Corvairs, Studebakers, an Edsel and several Hudson and Tucker and American Motors (Jeep) autos.

Also on display were many of the components manufactured in the Ypsilanti Willow Run, Hydramatic and Ford part plants such as GM's rotary engine and many transmissions, starters, generators and more.

***The 2017 WCHS Enrichment Programs continue in the Fall!***

# THE STORY OF Sammy Ross

## Argus Employee and Indy 500 Race Car Driver

By Cheryl Chidester  
Argus Museum Curator

Sammy Ross was an Argus employee, and a gifted mechanic, who worked in the company's tool room in the 1940s. His name only appears as an entry in the 1928 and 1931 *Indianapolis 500* programs, and his name is not well-known even in racing circles. However, if not for an unfortunate set of circumstances, he could have been remembered as one of the "greats" instead of a "forgotten warrior" from the golden days of race car driving."

Sammy was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan on June 6, 1901. As a youth, he tinkered with racers, built them and rebuilt them, ran them and tested them. Finally he began racing them. Sammy was tough and daring and willing to go anywhere, drive anything if it was fast enough and if there was a chance of winning. He was good. As Sammy said, "I was tough. Tough and dumb. But I could drive." In 1922 Sammy won 36 sprint car races. Two years later he placed first in 17 out of 19 races that he participated in and was the dirt track champion of Michigan in 1924, 1926 and 1927. He ran at the Michigan Fairgrounds and he ran at the big track in Toledo, OH, Illinois and New York State were on his long list of raceways that he also knew.

The dirt tracks were extremely dangerous. So much dust would be stirred up that the drivers behind the leader could not see the cars in front of them. "There were trees outside the track, almost at the four corners of the track," Sammy once recalled about the Michigan Fairgrounds. "When the dust got so thick you couldn't see I'd keep an eye on the tops of those trees. When I spotted them I knew it was time to start making the next turn."

He fought hard and survived the dirt tracks, the danger, the injuries and the slim purses. He made it to Indy 500 and that was one of the hottest tickets in racing.



It was 1928, a time of speak-easies and Al Capone, vaudeville, flappers, flagpole-sitting and Henry Ford. It was the year before the stock market crash and nearly everybody had money for everything, including race cars.

Sammy made many friends during his racing days; among them was "Ollie" Wilkinson of Whitmore Lake. Ollie headed up Sammy Ross's pit crew. When Sammy finally made it to the Indy 500, "Ollie" rode with him. Racers in the 1920s and early '30s had double cockpits to accommodate a mechanic who, during the race, was kept almost as busy as the driver. "Ollie" shared this story and many others with Sammy.

One time Sammy had almost missed a race. In those days race drivers often resided at houses that were close to the track. Mrs. Marvel, an elderly woman who cared and worried about her "boys" who risked

their lives for the sport they loved, owned and operated the boarding house that Sammy was lodged at. The week before the race was filled with adjusting, fixing, testing and racing, and it was exhausting. The eve of the race was a late one and the 5 a.m. wake-up call was just around the corner. "I was a sound sleeper in those days," Sammy commented. "When I slept, I slept." Five o'clock came and went and Sammy slept on. Finally poor Mrs. Marvel, realizing that Sammy had yet to leave the house shouted, "Mr. Ross! Mr. Ross! It's 9:30! You'll miss the Race!" Sammy jumped out of bed, threw on his clothes and ran outside. He had only a half hour to get through the massive crowds and to the track before the 10 AM start.

Sammy spotted an ambulance that was headed for stand-by duty for the race. He ran and caught up to it and leaped on its running board.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" was the driver's predictable reaction. When Sammy explained his plight, the driver, more than willing to help, shouted, "Get inside!" With sirens blaring, the ambulance pulled track side. A relieved but bewildered crew awaited Sammy and greeted him with a cup of coffee.

On Memorial Day in 1928 Sammy was leading the pack of 33 in his *Aranem Special*. There was only 100 miles to go. But on the back stretch Sammy's car hit a bump, one of the many on the old brick-paved track. He was thrown backwards. His head hit the rear of the cockpit. For a moment everything went black. Sammy stuck his head out the side of his car, opened his mouth and gasped for fresh air. When retelling this story Sammy would comment with a chuckle, "That air would usually clear up the cobwebs. We all used to do that." *Continued on page 5*

Then he would pause. "Of course it didn't always work". The old air-in-the-face trick didn't work on May 30, 1928. He blacked out twice while making turns and realized someone else would have to take the wheel until he could get medical help.

Sammy pulled into the pits, threw off his goggles and climbed out of the cockpit. The *Aranem Special* roared impatiently waiting to carry a driver to Indy glory. The relief driver was younger than Sammy. He was impatient and anxious to get back out on the track and maintain the lead that Sammy had so painfully fought for. The driver gunned the throttle. The motor of the *Aranem Special* blew out. The dream of Sammy Ross was over.

The relief driver was Wilbur Shaw. In the decades that followed he would become the first three-time winner of the *Indy 500* and later would be named president of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway by the owner of the "Old Brickyard", Tony Hulman. Sammy would race again in the *Indy 500*, but would never come closer to Victory Lane.

He would race on Toledo's dirt track. It was a week before the 1929 *500*. He and Wilbur Shaw were fighting for the lead when suddenly Sammy's car spun out of control. It was hurling toward the crowd. He somehow veered his car and was sent crashing through a fence instead. Sammy spent the next year in the hospital. Though the doctors wanted to amputate his arm, after five surgeries it was saved. In 1931 he again made it to the *500* with Wilbur Shaw as his relief driver. Sammy's following visits to Indy was as a member of pit crews.

Throughout their lives, Sammy and Wilbur remained genuine friends but never spoke of that fateful Memorial Day of 1928. Sammy Ross is one of many of the Argus family with unique life stories.

But wait; there is more to this story... In the early 1970s, Joe O'Neal purchased the 1342 Main Street building in Ann Arbor. (It is currently home to Karen O'Neal's Out of Hand Papermaking Studio.) At the time of the purchase, Joe "inherited" an elderly man who was living in a back room – his name, you guessed it – Sammy Ross. By that time, Sammy had lost a leg but was still in high spirits.

He had dreams of patenting his tool "inventions" and kept the paperwork, his secrets, under his mattress. He often tinkered late into the night. An old, oversized Buick was one of his projects. Sammy modified it so that he could drive it with one leg. He also made a new friend – Joe's young son, Andrew. Often, when Joe was in the office on Saturdays, Andrew would tag along. Sammy and Andrew spent hours together in conversations that made little sense to anyone but them.

By the mid-1970s, Sammy's health declined and he moved into an assistant care facility in Whitmore Lake where a common activity was to race Sammy in wheelchairs. He had one big race left in him. His competitor was Howdy Homes, the current CEO of Jiffy Mix, then a young *Indy 500* competitor who was based out of Stockbridge, Michigan. Although it isn't certain, it is likely the checkered flag was Sammy's. Either way, it was a race to remember and one to recall and another good story to tell.

## "What is Michigan?" New Exhibit at the Argus Museum

You are invited to the Opening on **Thursday June 22, 6-8:30 PM**

Please join us to discover the winners of our Photo-Contest! Amateur photographers who live in Michigan were invited to submit images of Michigan. Enjoy foods and drinks while socializing and exploring the Argus Museum and exhibit. Around 8 PM, we will announce the three selected winner of the contest!

- **The Finest Award:** Awarded by the competition judges
- **The Favorite Award:** Awarded by popular vote on Social Media
- **The Argus Award:** Awarded by the Argus Museum Curator

The contest is sponsored by Sponsored by Ann Arbor's Camera Mall, photography group "Lens Therapy" and the Argus Museum

[Click here to RSVP online!](#)

**The Argus Museum is on the second floor of the Argus I Building, 525 West William Street in Ann Arbor.** The show will be available for viewing, Monday-Friday, 9 AM - 5 PM through August 4. For more information contact the Argus Museum curator, Cheryl Chidester at 734-769-0770 or email [cchidester@onealconstruction.com](mailto:cchidester@onealconstruction.com)



Hosted by the Argus Museum, "Our Town" photography exhibition opened this Spring to an enthusiastic gathering of photographers, historians, art collectors, neighbors, family and friends. With almost 100 in attendance, the show, which features work by Ann Arbor-based French photographer, Marc-Grégor (MG) Campredon and Michigan native, Andy Shields.

# THE BACKSTORY: "Honest Jim" Kingsley

By Patti F. Smith

Patti is an author of local history books, enjoys public speaking and storytelling. She also writes for Concentrate Media, Mittenbrew, and other local periodicals.

We've all heard of "Honest Abe" Lincoln, but Ann Arbor had its own "Honest" politician back in the day too.

James "Honest Jim" Kingsley was born in Canterbury, Conn., in 1797. After studying law, he was admitted to the bar in his home state. When he was 26, Kingsley moved to Virginia to be a private teacher. Three years later, he found himself in Mississippi until an epidemic of yellow fever broke out. For reasons lost to history, he then moved to Ann Arbor and made the city his own.

Judge Kingsley's accomplishments were incredible by the standards of both his time and our own. He began a law practice in Ann Arbor and became the first person admitted to the Ann Arbor Bar. Less than two years later, in 1828, he was appointed as a Washtenaw County probate court judge. Simultaneously, Kingsley served in the Michigan territory's legislature.

Many know that John Allen was postmaster of Ann Arbor's first post office, which was built in either 1824 or 1825. After his arrival in town, Kingsley was Allen's deputy postmaster. Mail arrived once a week, and Kingsley would sometimes put the mail in his hat and carry it around to the recipients. (Allen also studied law under Kingsley, which was the way people got admitted to the Bar back then. He likely paid the usual tutoring fee of \$300 for this privilege).

But Kingsley's good deeds were not limited to Ann Arbor. After Michigan became a state in 1837, Kingsley served in the state House in 1837 and then in the state Senate in 1838, 1839, and 1842. While in the state Senate, Kingsley drew up the first charter of the Michigan Central Railroad and was a consistent advocate for railroads and train travel.

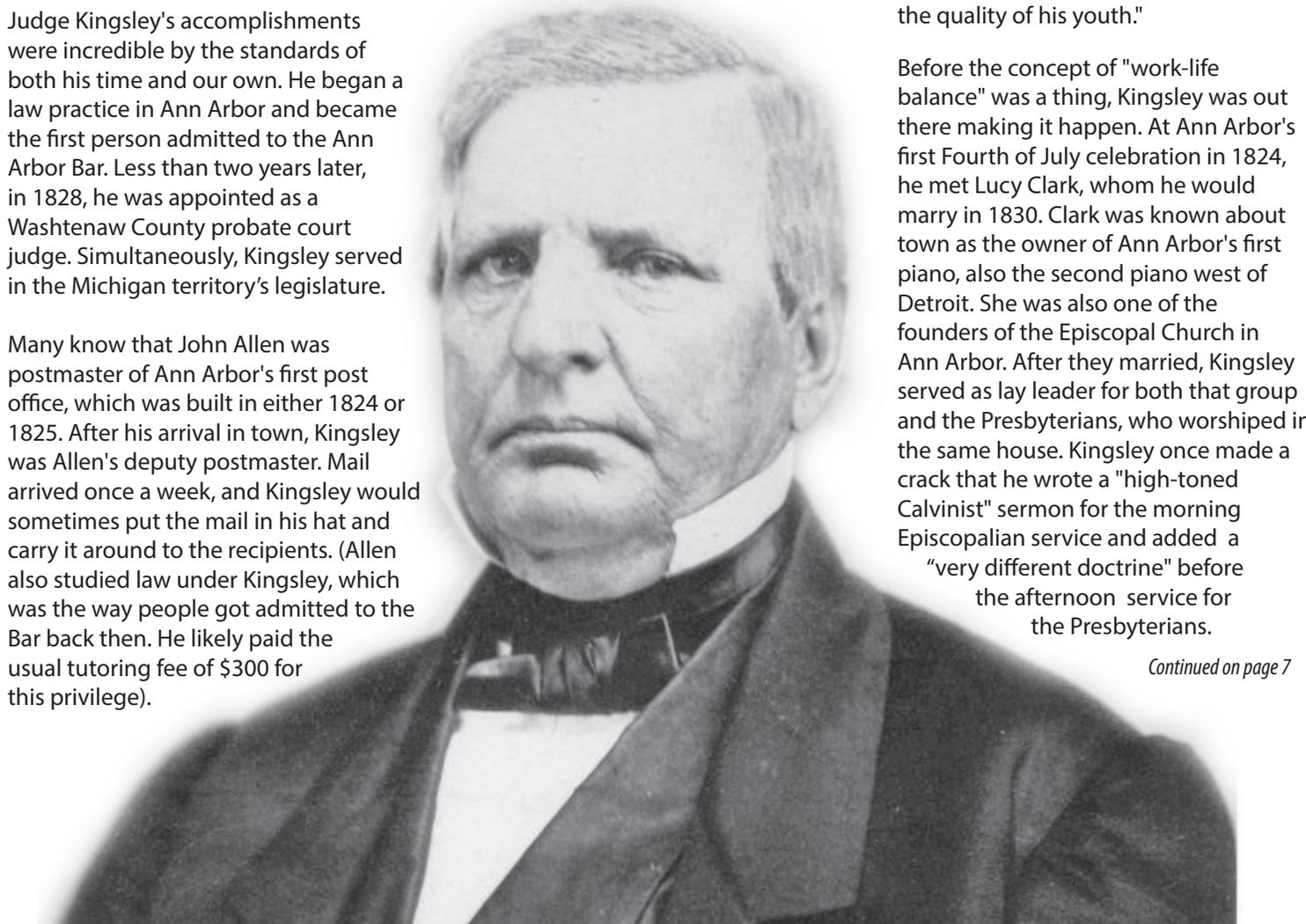
Kingsley might as well have invented the phrase "a rolling stone gathers no moss" because the man just kept on rolling.

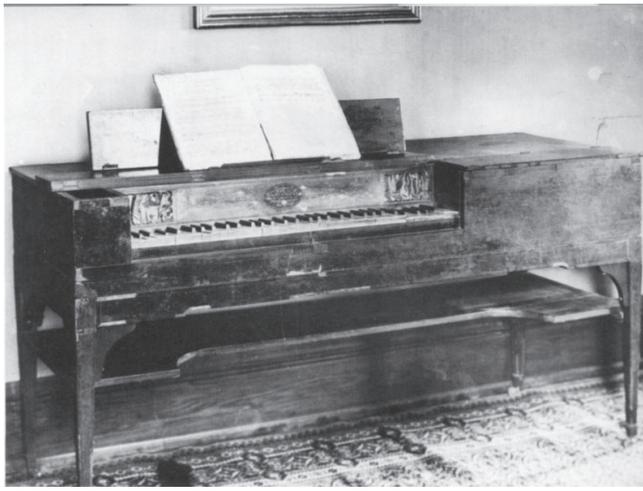
He served as a member of the 1850 Michigan Constitutional Convention, as Ann Arbor's mayor from 1855 to 1856, and as a regent of the University of Michigan from 1852 to 1858. Kingsley has a long and impressive association with the university, as he was credited with being one of the major proponents of locating the university in our fair town.

At the age of 72, Kingsley returned to the state House. Notwithstanding his advanced age (for the time), the Michigan Argus gave him a glowing recommendation, as "in mature age he has preserved the quality of his youth."

Before the concept of "work-life balance" was a thing, Kingsley was out there making it happen. At Ann Arbor's first Fourth of July celebration in 1824, he met Lucy Clark, whom he would marry in 1830. Clark was known about town as the owner of Ann Arbor's first piano, also the second piano west of Detroit. She was also one of the founders of the Episcopal Church in Ann Arbor. After they married, Kingsley served as lay leader for both that group and the Presbyterians, who worshiped in the same house. Kingsley once made a crack that he wrote a "high-toned Calvinist" sermon for the morning Episcopalian service and added a "very different doctrine" before the afternoon service for the Presbyterians.

*Continued on page 7*





Lucy Ann Clark's piano is now on loan to the UM Stearns collection (Bentley Historical Library)

Kingsley and his family built a house at North and Detroit streets, impressive enough to be dubbed "Kingsley Castle." In 1835 the family built a second home at the west corner of Lawrence and Division. Both houses were eventually moved a short distance from their original locations.

The Kingsleys had one daughter, Frances, and three sons, James Jr., George, and Frank. Frances married Charles A. Chapin and they had three children, Lucy, Volney, and Mary Chapin. George had two children and Frank served in the Civil War and died in battle.

Jim Kingsley lived to the ripe old age of 81. When he died in 1878, he left behind his progeny and the town he loved. But his story was not quite over. The street on which Kingsley resided was originally called "North", for the

simple reason that it was at that time the northernmost street in the village. But after Kingsley's death, talk began about renaming the street. At the July 8, 1892 meeting of Common Council (Ann Arbor's pre-City Council governing body), citizens submitted their requests for a formal name change. Their requests stated that the street name of "North" was no longer appropriate, as the street was

no longer the northernmost street in the city. A petition, supported by a letter from Michigan Governor Alpheus Felch, requested that the street be renamed after Kingsley. The motion passed the council unanimously.

So how did this accomplished man get the nickname "Honest Jim"? History is hazy on the exact origins of the nickname, but the eulogy Felch composed for Kingsley in the Michigan Argus offers ample testament to his disposition. "Judge Kingsley was a man of great simplicity of character," Felch wrote. "No display or show was ever exhibited by him ... He was kind and generous in his impulses, a true sympathizer with the poor and unfortunate, and a warm and sincere friend." From lawyer to teacher to legislator to street namesake, Kingsley left his mark on our city and our state in a truly remarkable way. The fact that he was so many things, but held up as a man of integrity, speaks to the kind of people — yes, even politicians! — we have in our lovely town.

**The Name Should be Changed.**

It has been suggested that it would be very appropriate to change the name of North street to Kingsley street. North street has no peculiar significance, for there are many streets north of North street. On the other hand, Kingsley street would be most appropriately named. Judge Kingsley built the first house on North street as early as 1828 or 1829, opposite the old school house now used as a tenement house. The first house was a two story white house, and was quite an imposing structure for those days. In fact, it went by the name of Kingsley's castle. Sometime in the '30's, Judge Kingsley also built what was recently known as the Henriques house, where David Rinsey's residence now stands. He occupied a very large tract of ground on North street, including where St. Thomas church now stands. He sold the church lot to the church and gave liberally towards its construction.

Judge Kingsley did very much for Ann Arbor. He was a member of the legislature at the time the location of the University was secured at Ann Arbor and exerted considerable influence in bringing about that location here. He was one of the first trustees of the University appointed by Gen. Cass. He was a member of the first board of regents of the University, appointed under the constitution of 1850. He was one of the early mayors of Ann Arbor. He drew the original charter of the Michigan Central railroad, and it was largely through his influence that the road was brought here. No street has ever been named for him, or anything done by the city to show appreciation for his great services in behalf of the city. It is for this reason that the suggestion is made that the name of North street, on which he lived, should be changed to Kingsley street.

Ann Arbor Argus, September 18, 1891

## THE RESTORED "CHAPIN PIANO" IS A KEY ARTIFACT IN THE WCHS COLLECTION



Mrs. Hannah Gibbs Clark, came to Ann Arbor in May, 1827 from Connecticut, with her son Edward and her daughter, Lucy Ann (who married James Kingsley). Miss Clark, owned a piano that was brought with the rest of their possessions by ox team from Detroit. Mrs. Charles A. Chapin, the granddaughter of Miss Clark, bequeathed it to the Washtenaw County Historical Society in 1940. The Society then arranged with the University of Michigan to store it for them. In 1973, Lela Duff, a local historian, discovered the piano identified as the small Kearsing piano in the Stearns Collection, as the one bequeathed to the Washtenaw Historical Society by Lucy Chapin. The complete restoration of the piano

was finished in 1975 by Leigh C. Anderson, U-M professor emeritus of chemistry, who repaired and restored the case and Kurt W. Pickut, associate professor and director of piano technology in the U-M School of Music, repaired and rebuilt the piano action mechanism. It was unveiled and played at the Society's December 1975 meeting and is now on loan to the University of Michigan Stearns Collection.

# THE JOURNEY IN A DAY: 200 Years of Student Life at the University of Michigan

Visitors are invited to witness two hundred years of world and regional history, reflected in the lives of U-M students. "The Journey in a Day" exhibition includes nearly fifty historic objects and dozens of photos. The exhibition includes a recreation of a Martha Cook Residence Hall room, circa 1917, amongst the first on campus to house women.

A poster kiosk occupies the middle of one room in the Museum, plastered with fliers and posters from across time. A reproduction of student scrapbooks brings visitors in direct contact with individuals at various times throughout history.

From the morning ritual of reading the Michigan Daily, to student reaction and involvement in U.S. wars, from the mandates and tweets of student organizations, to a survey of infamous late night Ann Arbor hot spots, this is a wide ranging exhibition with many interesting, entertaining and illuminating stories to tell. The exhibit is open until October 22 at the Museum on Main Street

U-M students have teamed up to create this sweeping exhibition, surveying two hundred years of daily rituals, social life, challenges, victories, and the roles U-M students have played in historic events. Designed by U-M students participating in MUSEUMS 498, in the History of Art Department, in collaboration with the U-M Bicentennial Office, and the Washtenaw County Historical Society. Instructor, Jason Jay Stevens is in the middle.

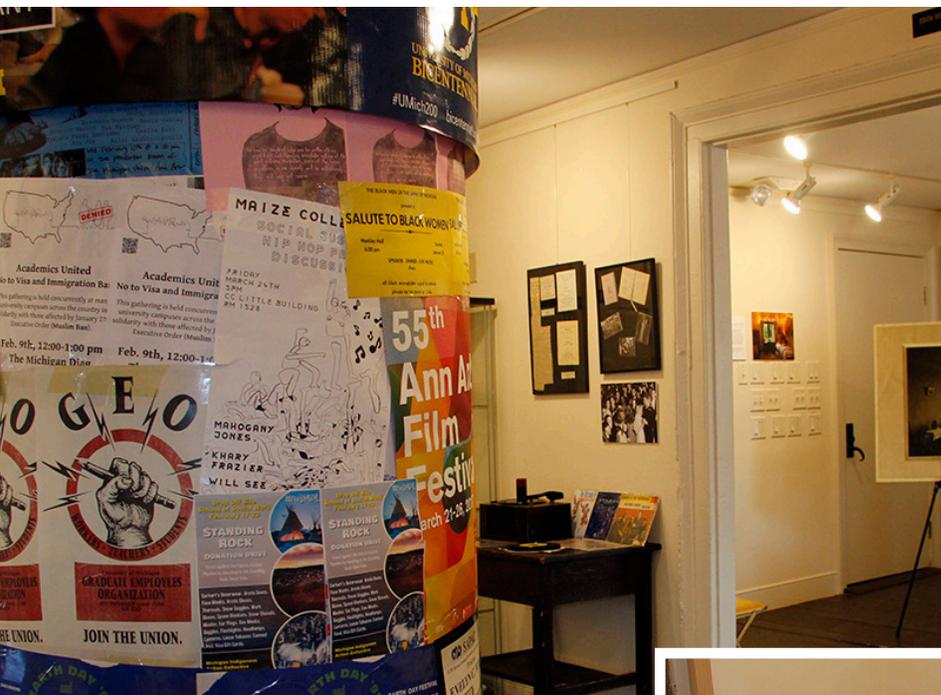


Exhibit is open on Saturday & Sunday 12-4 PM or by appointment. Call 734-662-9092 or you can email [wchs-500@ameritech.net](mailto:wchs-500@ameritech.net)



# The Michigan Daily

125 years of Editorial Excellence 24-7 on Your Digital Device  
[digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily](http://digital.bentley.umich.edu/midaily)

The Bentley Historical Library has recently released 12 decades of The Michigan Daily history through an online database that contains searchable digital copies of the historic student paper. This is a collaboration between the Bentley, The Michigan Daily and the U-M Library. The digital archive contains every surviving issue of The Michigan Daily, from its founding in 1891 to 2015—including more than 300 volumes from 23,000 issues.

This reduces the need for handling the original, fragile materials. The content is browseable and searchable by date and full-text. These high-resolution scans are available for free. You can download pages or entire issues as a text file, JPEG or PDF.

You will learn how the students of each of these decades viewed the world and what mattered to them. You get some insight into the relationship between the University and the city of Ann Arbor, and the mutually supportive relationship with the business districts that surround the campus.

*“People will be able to search through everything from Tom Hayden’s early work and what he did at the Daily, to coverage of presidential elections of the past, the civil rights movement in the ’60s, and so much more.”*

Neil Chase, chairman of the board for student publications and former editor in chief of the Michigan Daily ('85-'86)

## Take “The Grandmother Tree Walk” through the Arb this Summer

Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum celebrates the University of Michigan bicentennial with a self-guided tour of 12 historic trees in the Arboretum. The bicentennial story is told from the perspective of the trees, and key moments of U-M's people and history that occurred during the trees' long lives are revealed. Kiosks containing maps of the trails at Nichols Arboretum as well as guides to the Grandmother Tree Walk can be found at the Washington Hts. and Geddes Rd. entrances to the Arb and at Matthaei Botanical Gardens.

See more University Bicentennial events the public is invited to attend at [www.bicentennial.umich.edu/](http://www.bicentennial.umich.edu/)

Martha Cook Residents - From the Martha Cook Building Records at Bentley Historical Library



(Continued from page 1)

These exhibits give the next generation a chance to originate their own historic themes and points of view based on interest, research and team collaboration.

When students have the opportunity to curate an exhibit, in an historic house, it brings the classroom into a real-world museum setting. It also gives the young curators an audience to put their work before, and receive visitor feedback.

If your class or organization has an idea for an exhibit about local history, contact Judy Chrisman at [Judychr@aol.com](mailto:Judychr@aol.com).

## Join Other Friends of History with a WCHS Membership

Your membership supports our mission to educate and inspire our community to engage in the preservation and presentation of area history. Membership supports our educational outreach.

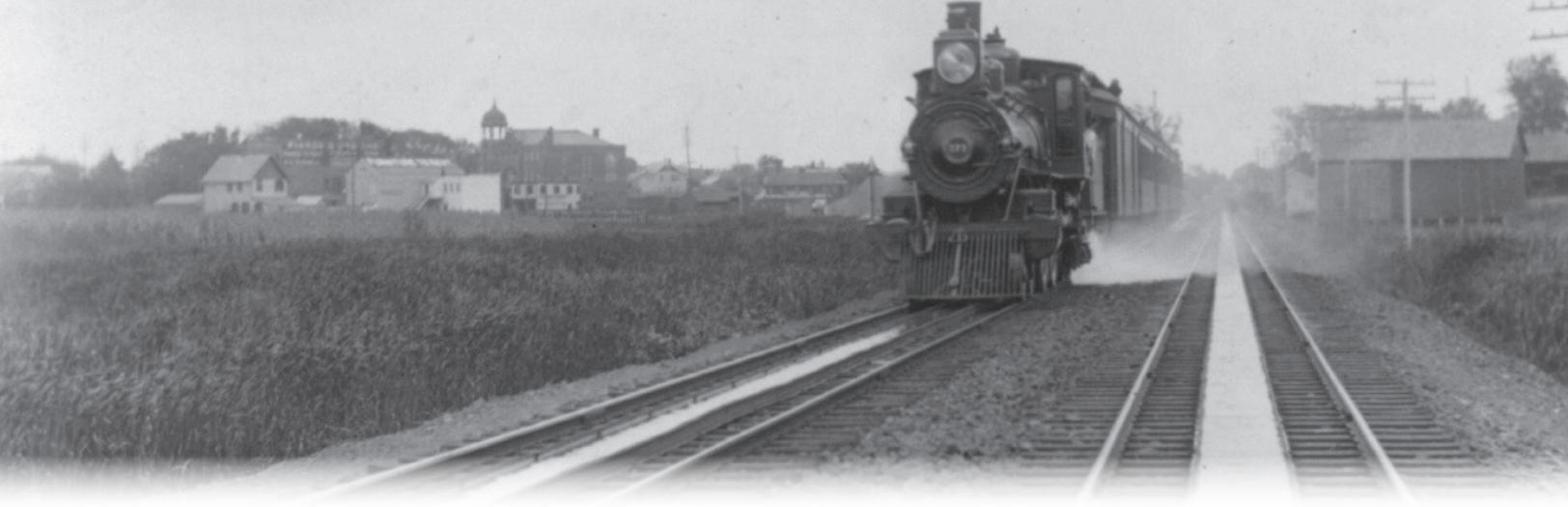
Annual dues also help us care for the collection, present free enrichment programs and free admission to the Museum on Main Street and the Argus Museum. It supports our ability to create rotating exhibits and 5% goes directly to the WCHS Endowment Fund. This fund will provide future income for the Historical Society to take care of our greatest artifact - the Museum at 500 N. Main Street. In turn, members receive print and/or digital copies of *Impressions*, postcard program reminders, a 10% discount at the Gift Shop and opportunities to volunteer.

You can join or renew online at [washtenawhistory.org](http://washtenawhistory.org).

# Ypsilanti's Jerkwater History

By Laura Bien

Laura is a published author, poet and researcher who also writes local history articles.



Ypsilanti became a jerkwater town in 1906, when the Michigan Central built track pans just east of town. “Jerkwater” is a railroad term originating with steam locomotives. To understand it, we have to see how a steam train works.

Most American steam engines hauled an enormous tender, or supply-box, which contained an inner reservoir of coal (in remote or wooded areas, wood) surrounded by a U-shaped water compartment. The water and fuel fed the steam boiler powering the train.

The engines used huge volumes of water. However, stopping for water delayed the schedule. One solution, according to Cassidy and Hall’s *Dictionary of American Regional English*, was to “jerk water” from trackside streams with leather buckets on ropes. This jerry-rigged system would only work on trains with smaller, less thirsty boilers, and “jerk water” became associated with smaller, less significant, or “back-woods” local train lines. It also came to signify insignificant towns where the train didn’t bother to stop, but only collected water, either with buckets or from an improved system called a track pan.

The track pans just east of Ypsilanti consisted of two long shallow metal troughs. One was built between the rails of the eastbound route, and the other between the westbound rails. Each pan extended for over a quarter of a mile. They were likely filled with water from a pond on the nearby Wiard’s farm, where Henry Ford later built his bomber plant and where Willow Run Airport now stands.

A train chugging out of Ypsilanti could lower a scoop from the underside of the tender, and gather water from the track pan without slowing down. At high speed, the water was forced into the tender, replenishing the supply. Sometimes the water also sprayed into the windows of the first passenger car—conductors warned passengers to close their windows when approaching the track pan.

“The new water chute of the Michigan Central whereby engines may take water while running at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour has just been completed and water was taken by the engines for the first time yesterday,” said the February 27, 1906 Ypsilanti Daily Press.

“The chute, which is a long trough, is located on the track about a mile east of the city, back of the Wright and Harris farms,” the paper continued. “The water is pumped into the chutes, which are 1,600 feet long and are located in the center of each of the east and west bound tracks, from the Wiard pond about one half-mile farther east . . .”

Each trough was about one quarter mile long, but the newspaper says that the pans extended for half a mile. This suggests that the pans were staggered in their respective tracks. The route was busy, and if two trains simultaneously passed each other while spraying water, it could have been quite a mess.

The paper continued, “[The water] is kept from freezing by hot water pipes running beneath them.” The water in the pipes was heated at an engine house near the track pan manned by two engineers, who also operated a pumper that refilled either track pan after a train had passed.

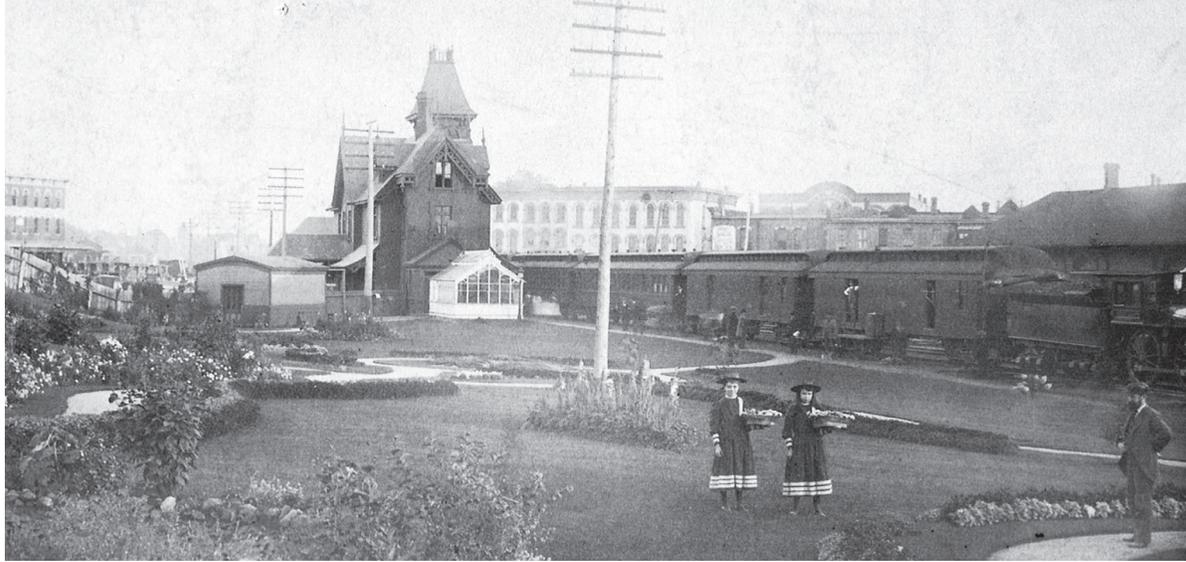
The paper said, “The building of those chutes has cost the Michigan Central about \$10,000 [\$236,670 today], about \$5,000 of which has come to this city

Continued on page 11

in the form of wages for the laborers. For three months past a gang varying at times from twenty to thirty-five men have been at work, the track has been raised and filled with ballast for nearly a mile, water pipes have been laid, an engine house built and an engine installed, until now everything is complete."

Track pans kept steam trains profitable by keeping them reliably fast. The railroad company's investment paid for itself. As early diesel trains appeared in the 1950s, some also used the track pans, but only to replenish a hot-water heating system that warmed passenger cars. Eventually, the cheaper and easier-to-maintain diesels eclipsed steam trains, and as technology advanced, track pans slowly became obsolete.

But the idea still exists, in such firefighting "airtanker" airplanes as the Canadair CL215 and the CL415, both of which can scoop water from lakes or rivers. Just as with the steam boiler trains, the planes' ability to gather water in transit saves valuable time. The old vehicles fire up to travel; the new ones travel up to fire.



Beautiful gardens were maintained beside the Depot and young girls would board the trains that stopped in Ypsilanti and pass out flowers to show that Ypsilanti was a great place to visit, pass through or settle.

It's clear that Ypsilanti was a "jerkwater" town only in a technical, and not a pejorative, sense. You can still use the term another way, however—the way northern Michigan loggers used it, according to the Dictionary of Regional English's description of logger slang. "Cooks are still 'stomick robbers,' their helpers are 'cookees,' coffee is 'jerkwater,' and milk is 'cow.'"

Next time you pour some cow in your jerkwater, you might like to raise a little toast to the train men who helped build Ypsilanti.

## Ypsilanti's Depot Town

Depot Town was created after the Train Depot opened in 1838. Most of the buildings standing today were built from 1850 to 1880.

During the American Civil War, the Thompson Block was used as a barracks by two regiments: the Fourteenth Michigan Infantry Regiment in early 1862, and the Twenty-Seventh Michigan Infantry Regiment in 1863. Oliver E. Thompson bought the building in 1869, and it became known as the Thompson Block.

The Michigan Central Depot was widely known for the gardens (pictured above) which surrounded it. The longtime gardener, John Laidlaw, built enormous arrangements that evoked Niagara Falls, the battleship Maine, and well-known landscapes.

The Thompson Block around 1891. The bell on the roof of the building was used to notify volunteer fire fighters of the location of a fire.



## Washtenaw County Historical Society

Museum on Main Street • The Argus Collection

PO BOX 3336 • ANN ARBOR, MI 48106-3336



**THANK YOU** for your membership and donations. Your support is the foundation of the Society's work to preserve and share local history.

# 2017 - Washtenaw County History Summer Fun!

## Dexter Gordon Hall Days: A Country Fair

Saturday, June 17 & Sunday, June 18 • 10AM -5PM

**8341 Island Lake Road, Dexter, MI** Look for a "Midway" with booths full of games for all ages, a threshing demonstration, the Lions Food Wagon, popcorn booth, Cotton Candy, train rides, a petting zoo, and other activities. Special events include Gordon Hall tours, a Tea and Fashion show, a Country Dance on Saturday from 6:30 – 9 PM and our famous Pie Auction. Entry fee: donation of \$5 each or \$15 per car. All proceeds benefit the restoration of Gordon Hall.



## Wayne Clements Memorial 3rd Annual Independence Day Event

Saturday, July 1 • 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM

**Railroad Depot Museum 402 N. Ann Arbor Street, Saline.** Plenty of family and hands-on fun including tours and activities by volunteers from the Saline Area Historical Society. The event is free - donations are welcomed.



**Wayne Clements** (1931-2015) joined the Saline Area Historical Society in 1987. He worked with the city of Saline to establish and open the Rentschler Farm Museum.



Wayne stayed active in the society serving as President until 2008 and then as the Building and Grounds Chairman. He was involved in providing tours at the Rentschler Farm, the Weber-Blaess One-Room Country Schoolhouse, and guidance on dozens of historical preservation projects throughout the state. His knowledge and creativity made the Saline Area Historical Society the success it is today and created a framework for future generations.

## Sunday House Tour July 16 • 2-4 PM

**Sutherland Wilson Farm Museum, 797 W Textile Rd, Ann Arbor.** Come see how beautiful the 19th century Sutherland-Wilson farm house is in the summer. In the 1805s, Langford (1802 - 1865) and Lydia (1806 - 1892) Sutherland replaced their log cabin with this Greek Revival house. Farm buildings from that eras were built from locally harvested hand-hewn timber and hand-cut stones gathered from nearby fields. Here the Sutherlands raised horses, sheep, dairy and beef cattle. oxen for more that 150 years. The Sutherland - Wilson Farm was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. These docent-led tours are free and open to the public.

