

Back to the Beginning: The Village of Okemos (Part 1)

By: Heather Hartmann

The village of Okemos began in the 1830s. Sanford Marsh and his wife Asenath were the first white settlers, purchasing land on the northwest corner of Okemos and Mt. Hope Road. The second white settlers were Freeman and Caroline Bray, who proceeded to buy land and then sell off the southeast corner of the plot. This became the village of Okemos, which was originally named Sanford and then Hamilton.

Cheap land is what brought in the first settlers, those selling the plots hoping to draw people in, build up the area, and create a community. Farming became the primary purpose for most of those that moved to Okemos. One of the earlier settlers was John Grettenberger. He, along with his son Jake, heard about the cheap land and bought up 80 acres. The Grettenbergers are still heavily involved in the Okemos community today.

Due to the bend in the river near Ferguson Park, saw mills soon came to town! One of the early pioneers, John Salt Marsh, was one of these millers. Homes went from being built of logs to sawn lumber, and the Plank Road was built from Detroit to Lansing, passing through Okemos. As the population increased, the schools changed, going from being held in Daniel Cooper's shed to a one room school house to the buildings we have today.

But before the settlers came to Okemos, Native Americans used the land, namely a tribe of Chippewa led by Chief John Okemos roaming from Okemos to Portland. There are many stories of Chief Okemos' community involvement; including strong ties and friendships with many people, and tales of his love for children.

After he died and was buried in Portland, the people of Okemos (at that time named Hamilton) petitioned for the village name to be changed to honor the chief. In 1859, the village official became known as Okemos.

Look for the history of Haslett in the next issue of the Monitor.

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