

# Early area roads followed Indian trails

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By David Litogot  
special writer

Traveling Farmington's dirt roads today can be adventure. Driving over ruts that would swallow a sports car has kept my favorite garage and local carwash in the black.

Negotiating these roads aroused my curiosity about Farmington's early roads, specifically Grand River — the road that caused Farmington to boom.

The earliest roads in the state followed Indian trails that were widened and "improved." Farmington had three such trails: one that ran north and south through the center of the township, one that established Shiawassee, and one that ran from Detroit to the Grand River in Kent County. This third

trail would become a dominant road in the state as well as Farmington's main street.

The early roads were not necessarily convenient or easily traveled. In 1832, the U.S. Congress passed an act establishing the Grand River Turnpike. This crude trail would become a crude road — with mudholes, stumps, roots and questionable bridges.

This 177-mile road would be of military importance, protecting Michigan from the Indians and the British, the latter still vivid in the minds of many Michiganders. Sale of public land would pay for the road.

BEFORE Long settlers, not soldiers, used the road. The interior of the state could not be developed. Up to this time, only lake and river settlements existed. Even with the improved road, the travel was slow and difficult.

Since farmers were paid for pulling wagons out of mudholes, there is some speculation that settlers along the road "cultivated" these ruts.

Grand River not only saw pioneers

## footprints in history

moving to new land, but also stagecoaches with passengers, mail and baggage. By the middle of the 1800s, these coaches ran daily up and down Grand River.

But with the roads in such poor condition, a trip of 20 miles took one day. The passengers in the stagecoaches and riders on horseback looked forward to an evening in an inn, where they could rest and refresh themselves.

About this time, in 1836, Orrin and Allen Weston built a house along the turnpike that in time would be an inn — today's Botsford Inn. The inn, called the Weston House, was an official stop between Detroit and Howell starting in 1838.

IN THE 1840s, a board was appointed by the Legislature to build a plank road, but not enough money raised. A plank road used boards laid on wooden tracks, or "stringers." These wooden roads made it possible to avoid mudholes and ruts.

In 1847, the Plank Road Act was passed. It not only provided strict guidelines for the size and construction of the road but also allowed for a toll to be collected to pay off the stockholders. The toll ranged from one-half cent per mile for 20 sheep or swine to two cents a mile for a two-horse-drawn vehicle, or 20 cattle.

A gatehouse, Tollgate No. 4, sat at the corner of where Inkster Road and Grand River meet today. Usually, a family lived in the toll house to make it easier to collect fees at all hours of the day.

The toll road was finished and

opened in December 1851. Fifty miles long, the Detroit-Howell Plank Road was a pioneer in road building. It would eventually join the Lansing-Howell Plank Road to complete the route to the new capital at Lansing.

In the 1850s, the Detroit to Lansing

trip took 10 hours at an average speed of 8 1/4 miles per hour. What once took three or more days now took one day. Commercial travel and a regular freight service was maintained.

THE PLANK Road could not be kept up by the tolls received. Eventually, the planks and stringers decayed, and the road wore out. By 1858, the planks were removed and replaced with gravel. Traffic was still heavy on the Grand River Road, with wagon trains of goods, stagecoaches filled with passengers, drivers and their herds, and businessmen.

Grand River, not Shiawassee, was now the main street of Farmington. The shops, businesses, and services made up the "downtown" region — the location hasn't changed.

By the early 1900s, the Detroit Urban railway (a future trolley) was a popular means of transportation. But eventually, the automobile brought pavement, passing lanes, curbs and eventually expressways.

Ironically, it was these expressways that made Grand River a "secondary road" for many stretches from Detroit to Lansing.



As many as 14 passengers could ride in and on a stagecoach along the Detroit and Howell Plank Road as it passed through Farmington about 1850.

## obituaries

**FLORENCE E. HALSE**

Mrs. Halse, 83, of Wayne, Mich., died Feb. 3 in Ann Arbor Hospital, Wayne. Born in New York, N.Y., Mrs. Halse was a homemaker. She was a member of the Danish Sisterhood Society of Detroit.

Survivors include her daughters, Pearl Cortright and Dorothy Hindelang; sons, Edward and Earl; 10 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

Services were Feb. 6 at the Thayer-Rock Funeral Home, Farmington, with the Rev. Charles Fox of St. John American Lutheran Church officiating. Burial was in Grand Lawn Cemetery, Detroit.

Memorials may be made to the Heart Fund.

**WILLIAM CHARLES BARKER**

Mr. Barker, 46, of Farmington Hills died Feb. 6.

Born in Montezuma, Iowa, Mr. Barker was a sales manager for Merrill Lynch Realty in Farmington Hills.

Survivors include his wife, Judith Lee; sons, Michael LeVan, David LeVan, and Steve LeVan; daughters, Michele Chisholm, Julie Barker; parents, Forest and Lena Barker; brothers, James and Robert.

Services were at the First United Methodist Church of Birmingham. Burial was in Victor, Iowa. Arrangements were made by the A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Home, Troy.

Memorials may be made to the American Heart Association.

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