

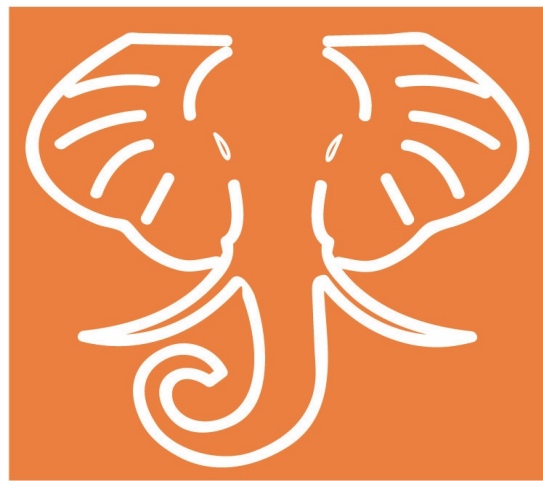
The yesterdays of Grand Rapids,

Belknap, Charles Eugene, 1846-1929.

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The YESTERDAYS of GRAND RAPIDS



By
Charles E. Belknap

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CHARLES E. BELKNAP

In Grand Rapids, Michigan
From 1854

OF GRAND RAPIDS

the mansion and the cowshed. Personally the ones I remember most clearly were those that in the hands of the school ma'am landed upon my spanker beam.

The Islands

Although the Rapids was a good sized town when I came here, the islands were still in the river, and known only by number as one, two, and three. There was a fourth, about which there was a dispute. French people called it Robard's, others Robarge, but it was of little importance. The three formed a beautiful river park that had it been retained in its primitive grandeur, could not have been surpassed by any work of man.

I had a love for islands, because my great adventure before coming to Michigan was when my father put me in the bow of a canoe and paddled to Butternut island in the St. Lawrence river, where we camped out and gathered a load of hazel and butternuts for the coming winter. From that time islands had a grip on me that I made no effort to cast off.

The number one island began just about the foot of Lyon-st. and number three terminated about where the Wealthy-st. bridge now crosses the river. The three islands were divided by narrow channels and rapid currents. Only small boats could navigate between.

My first view was in June, 1854, when from the top deck of the river steamer we came up the east channel to land at the Eagle hotel dock. A few days later I was getting acquainted with the town and near the Butterworth foundry met Harry Eaton and his gang, who by way of initiation to the west, proceeded to push me off a slab pile into the river to see if I could swim. I could and struck out for the head of Island number one.

A few Indian wigwams were under the wide branching maple trees which gave protection from sun and rain, and two laughing Indian boys in canoes were trying to capsize each other. A solitary Indian standing like a statue under a tree grunted his disapproval of the boys on the shore and disappeared into his tepee.

THE YESTERDAYS

Sitting on a rock in the sun to dry my clothing, I studied the rapids and hundreds of large boulders of granite and lime rock about which the waters rushed. Except for a little cleared land where the Indians had planted corn, the west shore was all a meadow of deep, rich grass and blended tints of wild growth.

In after years I often thanked Harry Eaton for pushing me off that slab pile, because it gave me my first day under those wonderful water maples. I was somewhat older before I really appreciated the great sycamores at the water's edge, the island plateau of giant water elms, the almost tropical mass of grape vine that festooned the trees, and in every depression the wild plum and crabapple that crowded the elder bushes and sumac, and that I came to love the tinkle of bells, on cows that had waded the river to feed on the abundant grass, blended with the music of blackbirds and bob-o-links swaying about on the cattails.

On the east channel, nearly opposite the foot of Pearl-st., stood the great-grandfather of all sycamores, just above the low water mark. When the Indians set up their wigwams there in the spring they suspended swings for the children on the long angling branches, and hung baskets of food far out on the limbs away from the reach of dogs. In the white man's day many boats were locked to staples driven in the body of this tree.

But even then the three islands were almost without a blemish. Indians never built a fire at the foot of a tree and the high water that flooded the islands each year washed them free of all refuse of their camps. The heavy covering of grass and plants prevented washing of the soil. The prevailing west winds wafted the odors of trees and flowers over the village.

May not an old man of today be forgiven for a longing that this beautiful playground of his boyhood might have been spared for his great-grandchildren? Only men of deep thinking can tell you how long nature was in creating and clothing these islands, but any school boy with a piece of

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chalk can figure how long man was in obliterating the last trace of them.

The Mission Land

French Jesuit missionaries located headquarters at Mackinac Island prior to 1662. From there members were sent to all the Indian tribes along Lake Michigan, including Grand river, more than two hundred years ago, but nothing very definite has been learned from their records.

By the treaty with the Indians of the Grand river valley in 1821, among other concessions, was one square mile of land for mission purposes. Beside the river well-worn trails led to this location which was staked to run south and west from the present corner of West Bridge and Front-av. There is little in print that gives personal touch with the men who selected the location, but they were wise beyond our thoughts today. Besides being sacred to the Indian as the land of his ancestors, the birthplace of his traditions; the scenic beauty of forest and stream, its abundance of fruit, game and fish had attracted the Indian for unknown ages to this place.

When the first missionaries had established their log school-house, church and blacksmith shop they saw at once that some day it would become a place of importance. Others saw this as well; the trader quick to take advantage of the furs which the Indian would trap, the speculator with an eye to the forests of valuable trees and more important than either, the settler who would populate the country with an enterprising white race.

As a place where the Indian would be civilized the mission was a dismal failure and by the terms of the treaty the lands were eventually sold and the proceeds divided, the Baptists receiving \$12,000 and the Catholics \$8,000 after a long period of litigation. The old buildings were not totally obliterated until the early sixties.

In the fifties the land was platted. A dense growth of oak grubs covered most of the ground except where the Indians and a few whites had grown corn and other crops.

Boston capitalists secured the land and gave to the streets