

4.3 19th Century (1801-1900) Summary

In 1826, Louis Campau established a trading post along the Grand River. The easiest way of communicating during this time was through the Grand River by the use of Indian canoes. However, development of Grand Rapids pick up in the 1830s.

Changing the River

- 1837 the Grand River was said to be “one of the most important and delightful (rivers) to be found in the country” with “clear, silver like water winding its way through a romantic valley” (The Grand River Times). However, not everyone was as charmed. A visitor to Grand Rapids, Frank Little, wrote that the “incessant, impressive roar of the rapids” kept him up at night as he slept.
- Canals were cut into the riverbanks as early as 1835 to harness the river’s power for sawmills.
- In 1838, the river channel was cleared of sunken logs from Monroe Street to Lyons.
- In 1847, the building of a canal around the rapids was approved but not completed. As part of the project, the riverbed was excavated.
- In 1849, a rough dam was built near Sixth Street out of stone, gravel, logs and brush. It was shaped like a horseshoe. The dam was constructed to divert the flow of water to several mills that were located on east and west side canals. A chute allowed men with lumber rafts to go through the dam.
- The horseshoe-shaped structure was torn down and replaced in 1866 by a more permanent wooden dam closer to Sixth Street.
- In the 1880s channels were dug to allow for steamer passage to Grand Rapids.

Logging

- In the mid-1830’s, 95% of Michigan, or thirty five million acres, was covered by virgin forests.
- During the peak decades of the 1870s and 1880s, more than two billion board feet of timber passed through Grand Rapids on its way to mills either in Grand Rapids or Grand Haven.
- By 1885, the lumber output from the mills began to decline, and by 1892, the pine forests of the Grand River had been essentially cleared.

Manufacturing

By the 1870’s, there were over 125 manufacturers, employing more than 4000 workers, and producing goods valued at over \$6,500,000. The largest were furniture and flourmills, but there were also breweries, shoe and clothing manufactures, and several foundries in the city.

Fisheries

Sturgeon were abundant and considered a nuisance fish at the start of the century. However, due to habitat destruction, dams blocking spawning grounds, and overharvesting, by the end of the century, their numbers were greatly reduced. Fishery management of the Grand River watershed began in the 1800’s when trout, salmon, panfish, walleye, and northern pike were stocked. American eel were also stocked; however, no records of survival exist.

The Riviera at the End of the Century

In 1889, Everette Fitch wrote, “The channel was, as usual, covered with a green odiferous scum, mixed with oil from the gas works.” The Grand River was greatly abused by water-powered, river-dependent industries; large increases in population; stripping of the forests; and discharges of chemical and sewage wastes.