

The History of Vassar and the Vassar Dam

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The history of what is now the City of Vassar and its location upon the east and west banks of the Cass River did not begin on March 1, 1849 when four men trekked up on the river ice. In fact, the history of this area may be more accurately stated to have begun with the signing of the Treaty of Saginaw on the western bank of the Saginaw River on September 24, 1819. It was that treaty that ceded over six million acres of land, inclusive of land along what was at the time called the Huron River, but now the Cass River, by the indigenous Chippewa to the U.S. federal government.

Within the several years following the aforementioned 1819 Treaty with the Chippewas, the U.S. government had the ceded area surveyed, mapped, and laid out in the township and range system. In the 1823 survey, the area that would become Tuscola Township was identified as Township XI North, Range VII East. The area that would become Vassar Township, inclusive of the yet to be founded settlement of Vassar, was identified as Township XI North, Range VIII East.

In the original survey of T-11, R-8 (later to be named Vassar Township), it was noted that a first-rate mill site was identified along the Cass River, though not at the site that would be selected by Edmunds and North in 1849. Instead, the government surveyor identified a location one mile further upstream where the river made a conspicuous bend as that site.

Five miles further downstream, the first purchase of land in the future Tuscola County took place. A group of three men arrived in what is now the village of Tuscola by means of a team of oxen and a lumber wagon from Lewiston, NY. Passing through Upper Canada, R.S. Hurd, Edwin Ellis, and Charles Hayes were the first arrivals in what would later be known as Tuscola County – finishing the first lumber mill in the area on Perry Creek in late 1836. However, this development was coincidental with a nationwide recession that affected further investment and development of Michigan for the following decade.

A post-recession federal internal improvement project in the area was the construction of a bridge over the river in the location once known as “the bend”, now Bridgeport MI. For his part in the construction of same, Townsend North was to receive in lieu of cash payment, a land grant of 3,000 acres of federal land made available through the Saginaw Treaty of 1819.

In the tender submitted by North, there was a stipulation that he be allowed to select the land that would serve as his compensation for having constructed the bridge. Following his successful completion of building what would be called “the white bridge” over the Cass River, Townsend North selected a tract of pine woods, the claim for which was filed on February 14, 1846.

The land claimed by North consisted of the entirety of Sections 17, 18, 19, & 20, along with a portion of Section 30, of Township X11 North, Range VIII East, which would later be organized under the name of Rogers Township, though subsequently renamed Juniata Township. This land included a ridge that remains conspicuous today, and situated at the headwaters of Moore Creek, as that waterway would become to be named later (and to become Moore Drain in the 20th Century).

Were one to stand at the intersection of present-day South Vassar Road and Sanilac Road, the Townsend North pine lands would run two miles east toward Watrousville and a bit more than two miles south along S. Vassar Road. It is significant to note that the Townsend North pinery was not at all immediately adjacent to the Cass River.

On March 1, 1849, Townsend North, along with his brother-in-law James Madison Edmunds (husband of North’s sister, Mary Ann), James Saunders, and Joseph Grovenor walked upon the ice-covered Cass River from the Tuscola settlement. Their destination was a location along the river where a small creek that led to North’s land claim emptied into the mighty Cass, that according to a 1949 letter from Jessie Dennis to Metta Gage said the Indian name of the river being “che-wah-nom-kong”, which means “the big eddy”, though other references have said the native name was “not-a-way-se-be”, which meant “a black peculiar snake”, now extinct.

Prior to the arrival of the four men, a supply of lumber had been sent ahead to this spot, which would be the place where the contingent would build an open-front shanty to then spend their first night at what would later become to be known as the settlement of Vassar. The following morning, work commenced on clearing a piece of land for crops, a dam was started, and the erection of a saw mill commenced. All of this is chronicled in the words of William Tell Lewis (1859-1953), Vassar historian, who wrote the following at some time after 1899, the year in which Townsend North died:

“They gathered boughs to make beds to sleep on, and the next morning proceeded to lay the foundation for a village. They first cleared some land on which to plant some corn and potatoes, as food stuff had to come from quite a distance.

Work on the dam and saw mill was soon begun. Trees were felled along the river bank, trimmed and cut in lengths, then floated to the point where they decided to build a dam.

The logs were cribbed up like you build the corners of a log house and extended in several sections across the river. Quite a wide flume was built in the center of the dam so arranged that about two feet of water would flow over the dam when planks were removed. This would allow logs, rafts of lumber or boats to pass down the river to Saginaw. Many a raft of square timber for boat building was floated to Saginaw or beyond, that had been harvested in Tuscola and Denmark townships.

A large water wheel was built in the west end of the dam with gates made to hold the water back when the mill was not running. The saw used for sawing lumber was a single upright saw and some of the large pine logs had to be hewn flat on one side so the saw would reach through them. A small circular saw was used for cutting up the slabs or edgings. The mill commenced operating early in 1850.”

A point not mentioned in the above is that the dam was constructed on a naturally occurring “riffle”, which is a point of minor change in elevation of the river bottom that often is identified from the surface as a small “rapids” where water rushes from a higher elevation down to a lower one. Michigan dams of the mid-1800’s era, such as that built by North and Edmunds, were often built upon existing riffles.

Also in 1850, the County of Tuscola was organized. On March 2, 1851, the legislature of Michigan authorized the organization of a separate town by the name of Vassar. North and Edmunds had a plat for a village of Vassar drawn by Surveyor D.A. Pettibone of Bridgeport in December of 1852, though not filed until December 1854. On it, the dam on the Cass River appeared as a prominent feature.

Records indicate that only nine village lots were sold subsequently in 1853, and the census of 1854 showed a Vassar population of 74 males and 39 females, thus totaling 113 for the township. The North & Edmunds saw mill and other enterprises prospered sufficiently to allow for expansion to include a mill at East Saginaw which was built in 1853.

In immediate proximity to the Cass River saw mill, North and Edmunds added a grist mill in 1854, and later a flour mill in 1858. Though with a separate 30’ x 40’ engine house on the bank of the river, the 50’ by 56’ mill with an 18’ cupola on top was powered by a 150’ foot underground shaft that superseded an underground flume that originally powered the milling equipment. All milling property, as well as timber property owned by North and Edmunds, was sold to B.F. McHose in 1864.

The Huron Log Booming Company was established in 1864 to accommodate logging from further upstream on the Cass River after the logging of white pine had generally “played out” in the vicinity of Vassar. Prominent in post-1864 logging on the Cass was James Tolbert of Saginaw who ran logs down the Cass to mills in Saginaw. Logging along the Cass River continued to diminish, particularly after the Great Fire of 1871 that led to 100,000,000 feet of harvest in 1872 and 1873 drop to half that number in the next two years, and down to a mere 5,000,000 feet a decade later.

Subsequent to the sale of his original operation(s) North later organized another saw mill on the eastern bank of the Cass River approximately one-quarter of a mile upstream. As years progressed, the original North and Edmunds saw mill structure remained in place into the Twentieth Century with the dam remaining *in situ* until the WWII era, at which time it was demolished to an extent so as to make it no longer functional.



For the latter half of the 20th Century and significantly into the 21st, the remnants of the former dam slowly continued to deteriorate under the forces of nature, particularly those of ice and flooding. Support from a number of federal, state and local grants funded the removal of remaining debris in 2013, and the river was restored to its original condition. Today, a kayak launch is located where the Vassar dam once stood.

