

Area Information & History

Cass River History

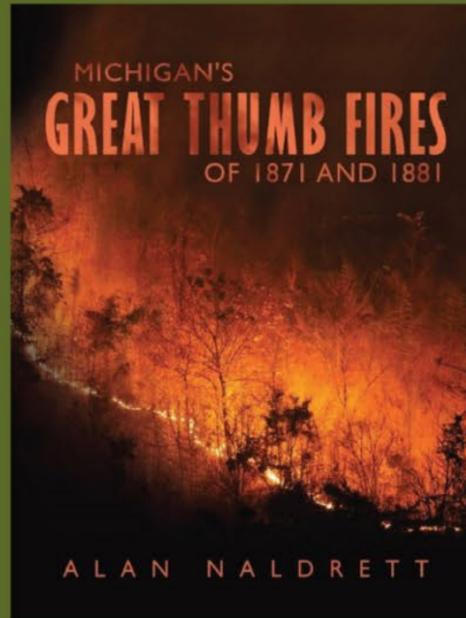
The Cass River, formed by a glacier eons ago, extends 61.5 miles through the Thumb region of Michigan. It was named after General Lewis Cass, who served as the territorial governor of Michigan, and was a Democratic nominee for President in 1848.

The Main Branch of the Cass River is formed by the confluence of the North and South branches at the "Forks" located just south of Cass City. From there it flows west through Caro, Vassar, Frankenmuth, Bridgeport, and into the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge. At the refuge, it flows into the Shiawassee River and eventually ends up in the Saginaw River and Bay. The "Lower Reaches" of the Cass River (the stretch from M-46 through Vassar, Frankenmuth and into Saginaw), composes the newly established Cass River Watertrail (cassriverwatertrail.org).

The Cass River served as a major travel corridor for various Native American tribes for centuries, which is testified by the historic Petroglyph carvings found East of Cass City on the North Branch of the Cass River in Sanilac County. That 240-acre site (Sanilac Petroglyphs Historic State Park) which is managed jointly with the Chippewa Indian Tribe, remains a sacred place for Native Americans to this day.

In the mid-1800's, the Cass River was used to float logs to Saginaw, which resulted in Michigan leading the Nation in lumber production. The "Great Thumb Fire of 1881" closed out the lumbering era and ushered agriculture into the Thumb. Today, the Cass River plays a significant role in Ecotourism – a type of nature-based tourism that focuses on environmental sustainability and ecological preservation, aiming to protect natural landscapes and promote green growth.

Source: Tom Lounsbury, Outdoor Sports Writer



The Great Thumb Fires of 1871 and 1881

On September 5, 1881, "The Great Thumb Fire" devastated the Thumb area of Michigan. Starting in northern Lapeer County near the intersection of Oak Grove and Jefferson Rd. in North Branch, the fire spread north across Lapeer, Tuscola, Sanilac and Huron counties. The fires raged for 3 days, as a result of drought, hurricane-force winds, heat, the after effects of the 1871 Port Huron fire, and the ecological damage wrought by the era's logging techniques. It devastated over one million acres in Sanilac and Huron Counties alone. The blaze ultimately killed 282 people in

Sanilac, Lapeer, Tuscola, and Huron Counties. Throughout the Thumb, people sought safety inside wells and by immersing themselves in area lakes, streams and rivers. Farmers along the Cass River fled to the water for safety as the fire rolled over them again, and again. They saved their lives, nothing else. The water was so hot the fish died and floated on the surface by the hundreds.

The American Red Cross, founded by Clara Barton, had its first disaster relief operation here in the Thumb. It provided money, clothes, and household items to approximately 14,500 people now dependent on public aid after the fire destroyed over 1,480 barns and outbuildings, 1531 homes and 51 schools.

A State of Michigan Historic Site Marker #141, recalling the historical devastation and loss of life is located in Bay Port, Michigan.



Logging

The logging industry flourished along the Cass. In the early 1800's about 90 percent of Michigan was forested, largely with white pine, many towering over 200 feet in height, with up to 5 foot diameters. During spring thaws, logs were floated down the Cass River to the Hubinger Sawmill and others downstream of Saginaw. The vast quantity of white pine

combined with Michigan's network of navigable rivers, including the Cass River, set Michigan up to be the leading producer of timber in the country for a great portion of the late 1800's, until the "Great Thumb Fire of 1881" devastated the area.

Source: Logging Cass River - Mark Putnam

Paddler's Checklist

- Clothing – dress for the weather
- Lots of drinking water
- Life Vest
- Insect repellent
- Closed-toe shoes
- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Dry bag – to keep phone/electronics dry
- Rope or bungee cords

Thumb Things to See...

- Cass River Watertrail
- Thumb Octagon Barn
- Petroglyphs Historic State Park
- Thumb Quilt Trail
- Sanilac Co Evergreen Park
- Caseville Beach Park
- Thumb Lighthouse Tour
- Turnip Rock – Pt Austin