

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OXBOW AREA  
(and the Moravian Bridge site)  
OF CLINTON TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

The land area near the present Moravian Bridge is known as the Clinton River Oxbow area. It is here where the Middle Branch and the North Branch join with the South Branch of the Clinton River.

The formation of these three branches along with the water that flows from many other small upstream branches have all combined to create the Clinton River Valley. From the union of all these branches, the now larger Clinton River then flows several more miles downstream and empties into Lake St. Clair. This ultimately gives access to the Great Lakes and finally the Atlantic Ocean. This geographic fact cannot to be overstated because it is this route that was followed by many successions of Native Americans, European explorers, and then settlers to this part of the old Northwest that became the future State of Michigan.

This was the water highway system for transportation in Southeastern Michigan for hundreds of years. It predated the dirt trails, the plank toll roads, the canals, the railroads and the concrete highways.

Because of several important topographical features: namely a high sandy loam bluff, fresh spring water and the three river branches meeting in such close proximity, the area near the present day Moravian Bridge was a desirable location and became "THE PLACE" for several early settlements.

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This location, in a major oxbow of the Clinton River, is arguably the most important historical spot in Macomb County and without question one of the most important in the State of Michigan.

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**THE FIRST VISITORS**

Evidence of Native American activity in the period of early post glacial history has been found. Most notable was the recent discovery of a stone ax that was identified by trained archeologists to be from the time period of 7,000 to 9,000 years ago. This is shortly after the retreat of the last glacier. It was this glacier that created the Clinton River Valley and the glacier moraines that give rise to the land around Mount Clemens and the high ground of Moravian Road. It is especially remarkable that this stone ax was found by members of the Clinton Township Historical Commission in an area less than 100 yards from the present Moravian Bridge.

There have been several documented evidences of settlements by a Native American people generally referred to as the Woodland Period, 250 to 500 years ago. There is evidence of these people living in the area of Moxon Drive and Moravian Road and not more than a quarter to one half mile from the Moravian Bridge.

Many artifacts have been found in areas around the former Moravian (Hillcrest) Golf Course. In addition, there are many people living in the Moravian Road area and near the

Clinton River who have found Native American artifacts throughout all the decades of new development of this area, right up to recent times.

Historians suspect that there are still many important artifacts to be found and much of this might be in the area of the Moravian Bridge.

### THE SETTLEMENT OF NEW GNADENHUTTEN

In 1782, a group of religious settlers under the leadership of Pastor David Zeisberger, came to this area seeking safety from Colonial soldiers, renegade Indians, and British soldiers. These people were a peaceful religious sect call Unitis Brethern, or more commonly referred to as the Moravians. When the Revolutionary War had caught up with them in their settlements around New Philadelphia, Ohio, they were the victims of some terrible massacres in which over 100 of their group had been slaughtered.



They sought protection from the British at Fort Detroit and were granted a relocation site on the high bluffs along the Huron (now called Clinton) River. The British commander, Major Arent DePeyster, promised them a peaceful settlement and gave the Moravians transportation, food and supplies to this remote area.

It should be noted that this organized settlement, named New Gnadenhutzen (or Tents of Grace), was the first civilian, non-military, inland (not on the Great Lakes waterways) settlement in the territory of Michigan.

Over the next four years New Gnadenhutzen grew to 28 buildings and over 130 people. These people carved out and developed the very first inland road in Michigan which went from their village to Connors Creek near Fort Detroit. Today this is called Moravian Road, and is honored by the State of Michigan with a historical plaque at the northeast corner of Moravian and Metropolitan Roads.

Once again, this religious settlement was forced to move. The Revolutionary War ended in 1786 and the British at Fort Detroit said the group would have to leave.

The Moravians, still under Pastor Zeisberger, eventually settled in Canada near Thamesville. Today this settlement is located at the First Delaware Nation, Moraviantown. These direct decedents of New Gnadenhutzen often visit Clinton Township and pay their respects to their ancestors.

There have many articles written about this early settlement group of Moravians and we have maps showing the exact location of their home site of New Gnadenhutzen. The settlement was right in the area of the Moravian bridge; and the bridge occupies a location right over part of the land they used for their gardens.



The Clinton Township Historical Commission has done considerable digging and research in this general area. All this area is an extremely important historical site and needs further exploration. It is recognized by the State of Michigan and several national historical organizations.

### THE VILLAGE OF FREDERICK

There was a small village called Frederick in the time frame of 1820 to 1860 and it was located exactly where the present day Moravian Bridge is located. The village consisted of several businesses: a cooperage, two mills, tavern, general store, blacksmith, and a hotel. There were a number of residents and it was a commercial rival to Mount Clemens some 3 miles away.

When the Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal was under construction, the major construction of the canal took place at Frederick. The guard lock into the river was near the present day Moravian Bridge with special dockage for the two mills located adjacent to the canal. Frederick was heavily promoted by Judge Horace Stevens and his brother Frederick who lived in the village and who were active land developers. They envisioned railroads, churches, several new streets, more bridges and hundreds of lots for sale. They advertised and promoted the sale of these lots in various newspapers in the eastern U.S.A. We have a copy of the map that illustrated the proposed land development.

When the Grand Trunk Railroad was built close to Mount Clemens, the people and most of the commercial growth switched to that community and Frederick just died away. Evidence and artifacts of Frederick are being found even today. Much of it is located in areas very close to the Moravian Bridge. This deserves to be archeologically surveyed.

### CLINTON AND KALAMAZOO CANAL

The construction of the Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal began in 1838 in the Village of Frederick in an area just a few feet from the present location of the Moravian Bridge. A section of Moravian Road actually crosses over the old canal bed about 300 feet before the bridge.

On the canal engineering prints, the previous old Moravian Bridge is located further to the north of the present Moravian Bridge. It appears that when the canal was abandoned in the 1850's, a new Moravian Bridge was built at the present site and the canal was filled in for the roadway.



We also suspect that the previously mentioned guard lock at the entrance of the canal from the Clinton River was just a stone throw away from the present Moravian Bridge. Members of the Clinton Historical Commission have been trying to locate the exact area of this lock.

The Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal was part of the interior improvements for the new state of Michigan in 1837. It was to be the jewel of the ambitious transportation plans for the brand new state. There was tremendous interest in this canal and much has been written about it over the years.

We would expect that any work around the Moravian Bridge might expose some of the canal construction. From a historical and archeological view this would be extremely important. Many questions regarding the canal might be answered.

### SUMMARY

The concentration of noteworthy historical sites surrounding and abutting the location of the Moravian Bridge arguably presents some of the most challenging historical locations in all Macomb County. Here is a treasure trove of information about how this area developed over the past centuries. Every effort should be made prior to the demolition and construction of the replacement bridge to insure that these unique artifacts, construction sites and archeological information are not lost.

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