

# Vicksburg Historical Society

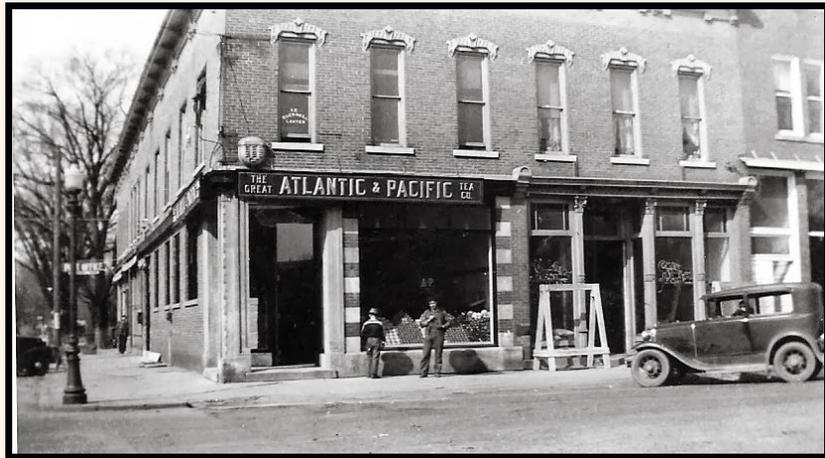
## Our Local Streets ... What's In a Name?

By Maggie Snyder

Ever wonder how some of our local village streets came by their names?

When the Village of Vicksburg was platted in the 1840's, names naturally were assigned to the early streets within the plat, and those were: Water Street, Main Street, Pond Street, and Townline Road, running north and south;

Prairie Street, Washington Street, Brady Street, Park Street and Section Line Road running east and west.



Some of these names are familiar to us today, and some are not, because street names, like everything else, are subject to change over time.

Now, these earliest roads were dirt, period—little more than paths, often with grass and weeds growing up in the middle. And, in say, 1850 that was plenty good enough. Travel was by horse and buggy, horse and wagon or by foot. Maybe someone occasionally would throw a few logs down in a wet spot to help a bit, but that was it.

How were these first Village Street names chosen?

Most of them were named in a pretty logical fashion. Water Street was the original name for present day South Michigan Avenue because its northern terminus was the mill pond occupied by John Vicker's grist mill, and a very important landmark in the early village.

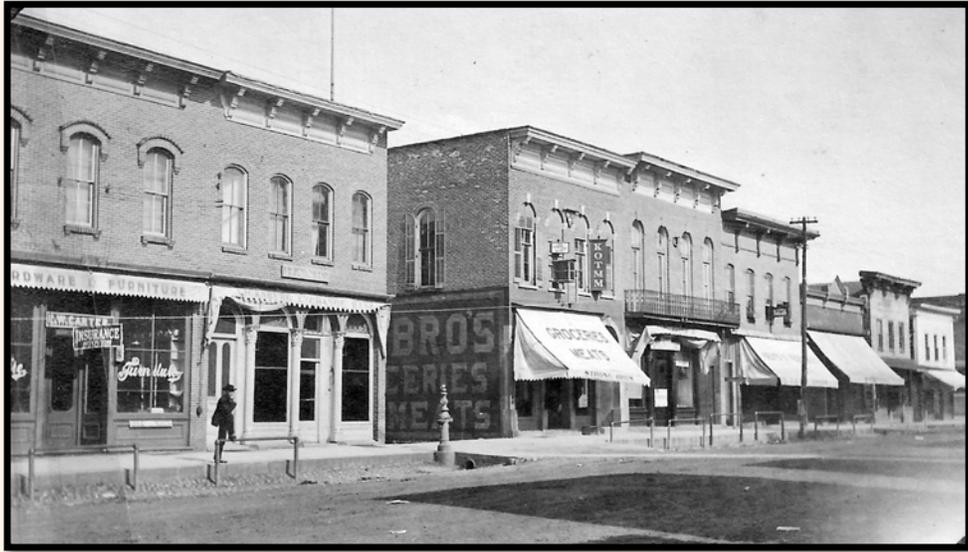
However, by 1900 the mill had burned down, and the residents of the street petitioned the Village to change the name to Michigan Avenue—because they regarded their street to be the best residential section in town ... or maybe in all of Michigan?



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Main Street was a no-brainer—and just about every town of any size across America had a Washington Street in honor of our first President.



Prairie Street, of course, was so named because by following it west out of town you entered into the flat area of land known as the Gourdneck Prairie, which further west blended into what was, and is, commonly referred to as the Schoolcraft Prairie—that area of rich, dark soil still mostly used for agricultural purposes today.

Park Street was the southern-most street, surrounded by forest, and perhaps early settlers laid out a park there. We do know for sure, thanks to the 1880 Bird's Eye View of Vicksburg, that Park Street in 1880 ran along the northern border of a park-like square bounded on the south by South Street, on the west by Main Street, and the East by Pond Street, which we'll discuss next.

Pond Street was the original name of present-day Kalamazoo Avenue because it ran along the western edge of a body of water named Lake Vicksburg, which was later known as "the swamp" as it dried up over the years.

This lake, or pond, was located to the north and east of the present-day school Administration Building and encompassed the general area now occupied by the Market Place and the high school and its grounds. Once the pond dried up, the name "Pond Street" hardly made sense, and Kalamazoo Avenue was certainly an easy choice as a replacement name.



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Brady Street was almost certainly named for General Hugh Brady—infamous for ridding Lower Michigan of its “hostile” Native Americans in 1840 on behalf of the Federal government (and, at the time highly admired for his actions). It was re-named Maple Street in 1902, again at resident’s request.

It’s easy to imagine why they asked for the change when you consider the following: A family letter written by a member of Samuel Hawkins’ family and dated 1876 states, ... *Last Saturday (a) week ago the School Board procured Maple and Elm Trees for all the Scholars and each one that was disposed set out a Centennial Tree on the School Ground upwards to 150 trees was set making our School Grounds when the trees get to growing one of the Finest in the Co.*”

This “School Ground” was located on the southeast corner of present-day Maple Street and Michigan Avenue and was the location of the Maple Street School. No doubt those trees DID “get to growing, and by 1902 presented a fine sight and appreciated shade for those living on the street.

Townline Road, running along the line dividing Schoolcraft and Brady townships, is now known today as Richardson Street, and I believe is the only street in the village re-named specifically in honor of a prominent local family.

The Richardson family was among the earliest pioneers in the area, and its members were well known in area business circles.



Gould Richardson came to Kalamazoo County in 1838 and purchased 400 acres in Pavilion Township. By 1842 he had accumulated enough money to build a frame house on Townline Street in Vicksburg.



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According to a *Vicksburg Commercial* article, he often worked on the interior of the house at night, by candlelight. One evening he accidentally overturned a candle setting his new house on fire. Despite his best efforts to contain the blaze, the house was a total loss. And, to top it all off, he fell while carrying water to fight the fire and broke several ribs. Kalamazoo merchants, hearing of his troubles, raised money to help him rebuild. Those considerate and generous men were all eventually repaid by Mr. Richardson.

Gould Richardson died in 1872 and was the first burial in the then-new Vicksburg Cemetery on the north side of West Highway Street. Brush and weeds and other undergrowth had to be quickly removed to make way for the gravesite.

Gould Richardson, his brother Solomon, his son John and grandson Jerry were all involved in business in early Vicksburg, lived at one time or another on Townline Street, and planted and cared for the Maple trees lining the street.

And so, the close association of the Richardsons with that particular street eventually led to the suggestion that “their” street be re-named in honor of the family.

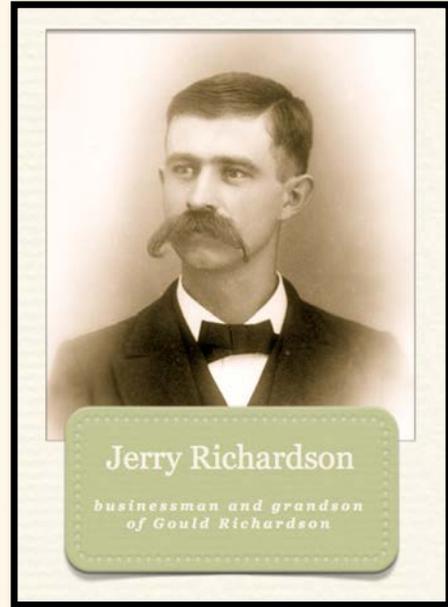
Therefore, in October of 1920, the Vicksburg Village Council voted unanimously to rename Townline Street Richardson Avenue to honor this well-known pioneer family.

Now, is it Richardson Avenue or Richardson Street? Sometimes it appears one way, sometimes the other. But either way, the actions of that early Village Council help us remember an important early family whose members contributed much to the development of the Vicksburg area.

Section Line Road was the original name for what later became Highway Street. Its original name is self-explanatory—it ran along the section line. However, at some point in time it was renamed for a very logical reason.

Extending west out of Vicksburg it led to Schoolcraft and the aforementioned Schoolcraft Prairie, and extending east it led to Wakeshma Township, the community of Fulton and eventually to the county line.

The early importance of this east-west highway was reaffirmed during a road renovation in front of the high school when large logs were dug up—evidence that a corduroy section had once been laid down there in an effort to make travel easier through what was at that time a swamp area.



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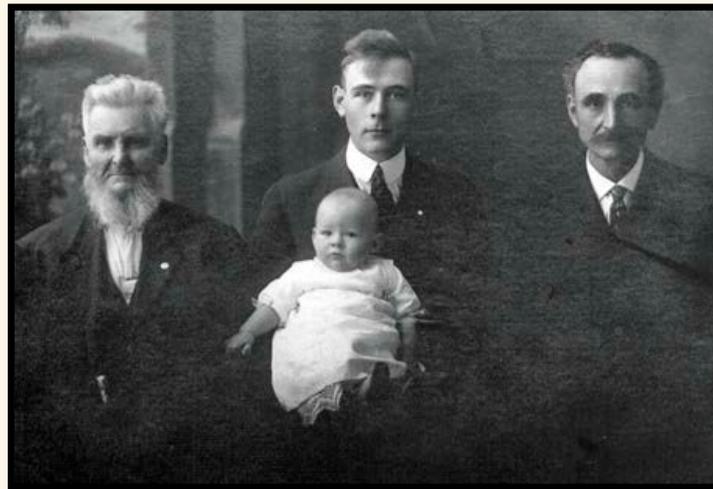
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Now, the importance of a highway to *Fulton* perhaps needs to be explained: *Fulton*, first called *Wakeshma Centre*, was once a much larger and bustling community than it is today with its own bank, hotel, doctors, funeral parlor and complete line of retail establishments.

However, it had no railroad, so east-west travel was brisk, as *Wakeshma Township* depended on *Vicksburg's* rail connections for their mail and for the long-distance transportation of both people and livestock.

Over time, as the *Village* grew, adjacent parcels of land were platted and added to the original *Village*, and streets were part of those plats. *Wilson*, *Hobart* and *Bowie* bear the names of the developers of those particular additions—*Mortimer Wilson*, *Cassie Hobart Wing*, and *William Bowie*.

Some streets in new additions were named after pioneer families, such as *Frakes* and *Briggs* and *Bair*. Others—*Best*, *Hamilton*, *Davis*, *Raymond*, and *Adams* were named for, well, who knows. These five names belonged to former prominent residents of the *Village*, but who really knows for sure.



Wm. S. Bair, Forrest G. Bair, Arthur S. Bair, Albert S. Bair

However, we do know for sure the more complicated history behind several of our village streets, and not surprisingly, a few of the names have a connection to the establishment of *Lee Paper Company* in the early 1900's.



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The paper mill, of course, provided many more jobs than could be filled by those already residing within the village. Therefore, preparations for additional housing for mill workers started a couple years before the first paper came off the Lee machines, due to a request from the Mill's organizers that had a very modern ring to it.

Before they would agree to build a paper mill in town, the organizers had to be assured of a "bonus" of \$16,000. No small amount at that time. The Village of Vicksburg appointed three Village trustees, Dr. W. W. Scott, Dr. C. H. McKain and banker E. L. Page, to see to the raising of this sum through the sale of residential lots in land owned by the Village.

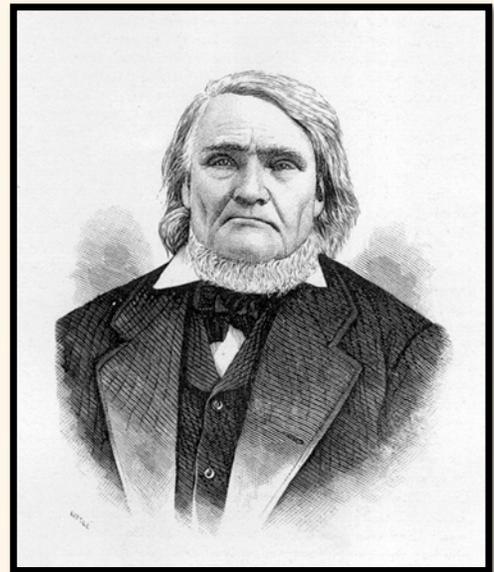
There were three areas of land adjacent to the Village from which some lots had already been sold, but none of these areas had been platted. These were the Frakes addition, the Draper addition, and the Kenyon Addition.

The Frakes addition stretched along the east side of Boulevard Street, extending east to the shores of Sunset Lake, bordering the northern edge of the old Briggs addition. The Frakes family were very early pioneers here, contemporaries of William Bair, and John Vickers, recognized as Vicksburg's founding father.

The east side of the Kenyon land bordered the north side of West Prairie Street, while the Draper property bordered the south side of West Prairie and went south to the GTW tracks.

These three unofficial additions were properly platted and registered, and Scott, McKain and Page came up with a scheme to get the lots sold to raise the needed bonus money.

The Frakes Addition was registered under the Frakes name, but the Draper and Kenyon plats were combined and called Citizens Addition, and the easy way out was taken with the designation of its north-south streets as First, Second, Third and Fourth. No imagination there. However, the east-west streets were named Draper Street, Kenyon Street and Bair Street to remind us, to this day, of those early pioneers and landowners.



Joseph Frakes



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Back to the Bonus for the Paper Mill. To raise the required \$16,000 a lottery of sorts was formed. Those interested signed up for the drawing, which was held on August 22, 1903 in Corporation Hall. The name of each individual interested in purchasing a lot in one of the new additions was placed in one hat; each lot number, with a sale price assigned to it, was placed in another.

With great ceremony and flourish, a lot number was pulled out—then a name pulled out—and that was your new address. A check was written on the spot, or financing was arranged. The purchase price of the lot went into the Bonus Fund.

Out of this interesting arrangement, streets in the Frakes addition came to be named Scott, McKain and Page, perhaps as a sort of reward for their hard work in organizing the sale of these lots.

In 1906, *The Vicksburg Commercial* noted that Vicksburg had gained 240 residents since 1900. Every building in town, no matter how dilapidated, that could possibly be converted into a house had been transformed into living space.

As a consequence, those who owned land adjacent to the Village and were looking to make a dollar, and even the paper company itself, jumped into the housing market.

The *Commercial* noted, "The west side of town—the new Lee Paper Company's addition—will see wonderful improvements this summer with a large number of residences being erected thereon." Seventy-two lots were platted in Wendell and Mary Dell's Addition, located directly south of the Mill.

Many houses were erected there, some of them built by the Mill, providing rental housing for some Lee employees and their families on streets named Lee Ave., West Raymond St. (as an extension of East Raymond St.), and Park Avenue. As many of these residents were Polish, recent immigrants brought here from the Chicago Polish community to work in the paper mill, this area was locally known for many years as "Polish Town."

How about some of our other streets?

North Street – South Street – received their names because at one time or another they were north and south boundaries of the village.

Mill Street once dead-ended at the Briggs Flouring Mill on Washington St.



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Boulevard appears on circa 1910 maps as THE Boulevard, but interesting enough, never actually was a real Boulevard as we in the Midwest define it as a street with a landscaped area down the middle. However, it was at one time a wide street, paved with brick, lined by a beautiful canopy of trees, and must have been a lovely way to come into town from the north.

Grove Street is another with an interesting history. Fraser's Grove, adjacent to the Street to the South, was a 40-acre plot of oak trees just south of the Village, owned by the Fraser family for many years.

Fraser's Grove played host to campground meetings sponsored by a religious group called Spiritualists in the 1920's, drawing as many as 3,000 persons from all over the country for their three week summer sessions. To handle the crowds, the Grove was eventually fitted out with housing facilities, a cafeteria and a grocery store.

By 1927 the long-standing Spiritualist Camp Meetings had evolved into a School of Devine Metaphysics and Psychology, and was a leading center in the Midwest for instruction in metaphysics and applied psychology.

This school soon moved to somewhere in Indiana, but the campground, under the able direction of Miss Jeannette Fraser, kept hosting Spiritualist meetings for some time thereafter

The development of the automobile in the early 1900's had a huge impact on our system of streets and roads. In fact, the primitive road conditions of the day were an obstacle to be overcome before the automobile industry could really take off.

In the rural areas surrounding the Village of Vicksburg, roads were little more than the Indian paths crisscrossing the area, widened through use—unmarked and unnamed, other than the casual names that were attached depending on who lived along each one.

Though Michigan could lay claim to the first mile of concrete highway anywhere in the country when, in 1909, the Wayne County Road Commission paved one mile of Woodward Avenue in the Detroit area, concrete or asphalt or even gravel roads in Kalamazoo County was a ways down the road.

However, when things changed, they changed quickly. By 1914 cars were becoming more common, and it was now assumed by most people that they were here to stay.

And so it's no surprise that the Village Council received a petition in April of 1914 asking for the paving with asphalt of Main Street from Washington Street north to Prairie, then east to the GR & I tracks. The Council approved the request in June and, this appears to have been the first effort to replace dirt and gravel streets within the Village.



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The pressure was on in the rural areas surrounding Vicksburg as well, and in 1915 a plan was finally developed for countywide rural road improvement, and work began on the construction of gravel roads in the out-lying areas on a pay-as-you-build basis.

These gravel, or crushed stone, roads were a welcome improvement over the old dirt paths, but construction moved at a painfully slow pace, due to a lack of money. A bond issue was put before the voters to fund road construction, but was voted down.

Things got going again in April of 1917, when the same bond issue was brought back to the public. It was approved this time, thanks to an all-out effort by township supervisors like Brady Township Supervisor Walter Weinberg who urged his constituents to support the issue by reminding voters that a team of horses could make a much quicker trip to town, and with a bigger load, over gravel roads than over unimproved dirt roads.

The composition of the road surface itself, however, wasn't the only problem facing rural travelers. Early roads simply followed the natural contours of the landscape, resulting in very steep hills and very low valleys. A horse, given enough time, could drag a buggy or wagon up most any kind of a grade, though going back down safely might be a little more of a challenge. However, these same grades were too much for the early automobiles having less horsepower than...horses had.



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Before his death in 1997, John Haas, born in 1905, vividly described to me roadwork done on South 33rd Street, between "S" and "T" Avenue in Pavilion Township, in 1927.

*"I remember when they put the new road through here in 1927. The road used to follow the same contour as the land over there across the road – the high spots were higher, and the lows lower than they are now.*

*"That was OK for a horse and buggy, but as soon as cars came along, why, they couldn't get up the hill here. The road was just dirt. The threshing machine had an awful time getting up that hill – we'd hear 'em in the night going by trying to get to another farm by morning. We'd get up in the morning and look out and the rail fence would be down – they'd take the rails and stick 'em under the wheels trying to get some traction to get up that hill.*

*"Anyway, the county had to cut the hill down. They hired local men who had a team and a plow to do the work. One man would plow the top of the hill to loosen up the dirt, then another man with his team would come along with a slip scraper and scrape the dirt down to the hollow. They just kept at it until the hill was cut down like you see it now and the low spot down by the creek was filled in some. After they got it leveled out enough so they figured a car could make it up the hill, then trucks hauled in gravel and men spread it out by hand – with a shovel, you know.*

*"Some of the men kept their teams in our barn while they were working on this part of the road."*

Yet another problem plagued motorists during the first few years of the automobile in addition to steep grades, mud and ruts—roads in the country weren't marked. A road might have an informal name, but that name did not appear on any kind of a marker.

This did not present much of a problem as long as you stayed pretty much in your own local area. But once you got away from your home area, who could tell *where* you were?

Modern motorists take good maps for granted, but early maps were as primitive as the horseless carriage itself. Early automobile guidebooks carried small maps supplemented by detailed instructions that left nothing to chance. Streets and roads might not be named, but directions could still be given. For example, "Take first left-hand branch road, bear left, passing through irregular 4-corners with schoolhouse on left. Take first right-hand road, at blacksmith shop turn right..."

All this was well and good, but if the schoolhouse burned down, or the blacksmith shop turned into a grocery store, a motorist might end up in Paw Paw rather than Plainwell, simply because roads were not marked.



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However, in 1917 the “blazed trail” movement began. Numerous map companies tacked up signs or painted stripes on poles corresponding to instructions on their maps. This solution presented its own problems as one overburdened pole might carry several different symbols or signs—not a very helpful sight to the already-confused traveler.

A systematic federal and state highway numbering program adopted in 1928 ended the confusion and promoted the development of standardized road maps, as we know them today. However, this system only applied to federal and state highways—country roads STILL had no name.

Gravel gradually gave way to concrete and asphalt in outlying Kalamazoo County, as the ever-increasing number of cars on the road called for increasingly better roads, and once the main streets were paved, the Village of Vicksburg worked to improve side streets as funds allowed. However, out in the country, 36th Street north from “W” Avenue through Scotts was still a gravel road as late as the early 1950’s.

And it wasn’t until 1948 that Kalamazoo County instituted the familiar number and letter system to identify rural roads. At the same time, house numbers were assigned to rural homeowners.

Which brings us to the question, have you ever wondered how come your house in the Village came to have its particular number?

Originally, if residents of the Village wanted their mail, they had to walk downtown to the post office to get it. By 1916 residents of the Village had gotten tired of the daily trek, so they got together and submitted a petition to Washington, DC requesting house-to-house delivery within the Village.

Before this service could be instituted, however, some organized system had to be developed to tell what mail went to which house, and Vicksburg soon went along with the almost-universally adopted “Philadelphia System” that assigned a specific group of numbers to each consecutive residential block, starting from a central point.

Street names were formalized, street signs were ordered by the council and erected, homeowners put up house numbers, and house-to-house mail delivery began in the Village in May of 1917.

So what’s in a name – or number? Like literally everything around us, the names of our streets and roads and the numbers on our houses all reflect our collective history—there’s a reason behind them all, and perhaps tonight we’ve solved yet another one of History’s Mysteries.



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