

The “New” Old Channel Trail

By Tom Eitnrear

2025

The small town of Montague, Michigan came into existence in 1865, and the limited number of inhabitants at that time found themselves carving a community out of the wilderness. Streets, plats and lots had been surveyed but the forest would not yield until sufficient human effort had been exerted. Commitment, endurance and resolve were characteristics of the early settlers, and slowly the town came to life and grew.

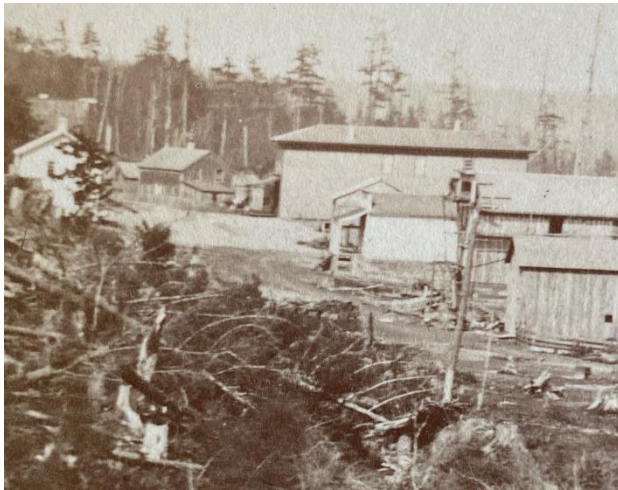


Figure 1. Montague, Michigan 1870

The citizens of Montague quickly realized that street maintenance was necessary for the proper functioning of their fledgling town. Various ideas were put forth to improve the streets, one of which was to utilize the mountains of debris created by the local sawmills and shingle mills. Sawdust, small chunks of wood, and slab wood were spread out on the streets to create a more agreeable surface, as seen in Figure 2.

The owners of the mills found this idea advantageous to their enterprises as debris disposal was a constant issue that had to be addressed. Generally, the mill owners would dispose of the debris near their mills if possible but with the vast volume of logs being processed they were quickly running out of room.

Streets were nothing more than paths that were traversed by foot, horses and wagons. They meandered around stumps in an effort to find the path of least resistance. As time passed more settlers arrived and the streets became more distinct due to regular use.

When rainstorms passed through the area the streets became challenging. Muddy streets provided the ideal matrix for wagons or buggies to create ruts. When the streets dried, the ruts became a real nuisance.

The citizens of Montague quickly realized that street maintenance was necessary for the



Figure 2. Intersection of Old Channel Trail and Williams Street 1871

When the mill owners ran out of room to spread the debris horizontally, they commenced piling it vertically as seen in the highlighted areas in Figures 3 and 4. Elevating the road bed by piling

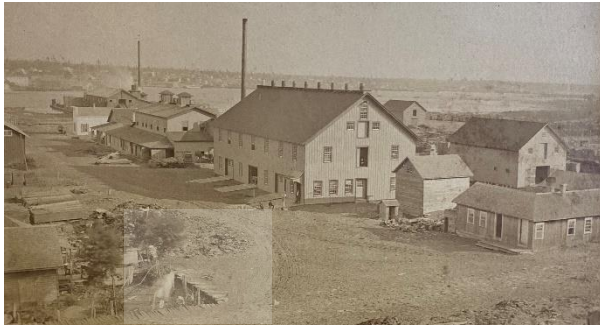


Figure 3. Temple Curtain Roll Factory 1875



Figure 4. Temple Curtain Roll Factory 1875

debris to a depth of nearly 3 feet and spreading a layer of sand on top was a short-term solution that appeared to be successful, but the sawdust and wood debris would undergo decomposition leading to an unstable street surface.

The population continued to increase into the late 19th century, which led to more traffic on the streets. Citizens became dissatisfied with the street conditions and in 1892 petitioned the local government for “better” roads. The petition stimulated George E. Dowling, one of the founding fathers of Montague, to reply with a proposition “that if the petitioners will remove the present road beds and leave the roads in as good condition as they were years ago, he will put up \$1,000 for the job.” This indicates that the streets had deteriorated, and that maintenance had not been addressed. It is unknown if the proposition was accepted.

During the early 20th century horse and buggy drivers found themselves increasingly interacting with automobiles. Greater numbers of people were making the transition to the “horseless carriage” as a means of transportation, but this had no positive impact upon the roads. In fact, some would speculate that automobiles made the road conditions worse due to the sandy nature of the soil in the Montague area.



Figure 5. Sandy road beds were prone to ruts

It was becoming clear to the citizens that the automobile was the future, and that the road issue would have to be addressed. In May 1922, a notice appeared in the local paper announcing that the Muskegon County Board of Road Commissioners had accepted Assessment District Road #8 and Road #12 as county roads. The local population silently cheered as they knew that designation of a county road meant that funds would be available, and utilized, to improve the road.

Assessment District Road #8 is that section of road presently known as Old Channel Trail, starting from the intersection with Dowling Street and ending at the intersection with Indian Bay Road. Assessment District Road #12 is that section of road presently known as Old Channel Trail, starting from the intersection with Indian Bay Road westerly, and then northerly to Old 99 as shown in Figure 6.

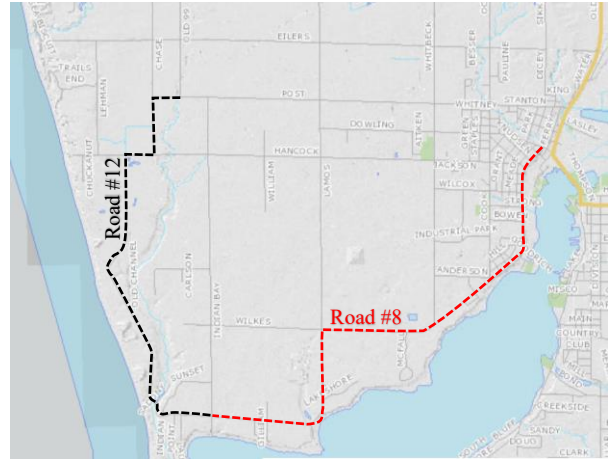


Figure 6. Muskegon County Assessment District Road #8 and Road #12

The road work commenced in August 1922 at the Dowling Road intersection and consisted of laying down a layer of coarse stone, followed by a layer of fine stone, and compacted with a 10-ton steam roller. The final step was the application of hot asphalt binder to the surface. The construction continued and by July 12, 1923, the road had been completed to Maple Grove. The recently constructed Goodrich boat dock, located at what is presently called Maple Grove Park, could now be easily accessed.



Figure 7. Old Channel Trail intersection with Richardson Street showing the compacted road bed awaiting the asphalt binder application

Great enthusiasm was evident regarding this “new” road, so much so that the Progressive Club decided to have a competition to name the road, even though it was already named Prospect Street. The Progressive Club was composed of local businessmen representative of the varied interests of the community who discussed methods of improvement of the Montague area, and promoted interest along community, civic, resort, and agricultural lines. The Club would award \$5 to the individual who suggested a name that will convey to a visitor some idea of what the road is, where it leads, how it runs along both White Lake and Lake Michigan, and returns to Montague.

The selected name was announced at the Montague Homecoming on August 22, 1923, and Melvin T. Dowling was the winner with his submitted name of “Old Channel Trail.” One citizen, Thure Anderson, was not impressed with the name and surveyed a number of people who supposedly did not find the name enticing. Thure was dismayed that a committee composed of a few people would make the decision for the entire community. Additionally, he thought the word “old” had connotations to John Barleycorn, a term related to whiskey and beer. The word “trail” was also deemed by Thure to be an unbecoming and meaningless designation for a road of such character.

Thure suggested that 6 names be selected by the committee and presented to the populace on return post cards, and let the citizens select by marking their favorite name. His suggestion apparently fell upon the deaf ears of the Progressive Club as the road signs to this day show Old Channel Trail.



Figure 8. Street sign in Montague, MI

During the Homecoming gathering many of the citizens relayed to the Montague village president, W.E. Osmun, that they desired a dedication ceremony of the new road. The school board also desired to hold a dedicatory exercise for the soon to be completed new school building. A town hall meeting was held on August 27, 1923, to discuss these two events, and the date of Friday, September 21, 1923, was selected to celebrate the new school and road.

This action fanned the flames of enthusiasm in the local populace, and the committees got to work. Dr. J.J. McLaughlin and J.R. O'Brien volunteered to be in charge of developing the celebratory program which began at 2 pm with an automobile parade. Everyone who had a car and wanted to participate was invited to start from town and follow the Old Channel Trail out to White River, north to M-99 and then back to town ending at the new school where a dedication ceremony would transpire at 8 pm.

Many automobiles were decorated in different fashions ranging from exquisite to grotesque. Some vehicles were decked out in a solid mass of flowers while others bore streamers and canopies of variegated colors. Houses along the parade path were also decorated. Prizes were awarded in the following categories:

- Best Decorated Car, 1st prize, Prof. Joseph Sadony \$15
- Best Decorated Truck, 1st prize, Willard Hagelin, Pike Light
- Three Oldest Cars, 1st prize, Ed Johnson, basket of merchandise
- Best Decorated House, Gust Kroll, basket of merchandise
- Best School Child in Costume, 1st prize boy, Charles Gritzner, \$5 savings account
- Best School Child in Costume, 1st prize girl, Virginia Cavanaugh, wool sweater

The school dedication took place in the well-filled auditorium. Speeches were made by State Senator William Connelly, Congressman James McLaughlin, and State Representative Clarence Pitkin. Instrumental music was provided by King Tut's Orchestra, and several vocal selections were given by the male quartet composed of D.S. Christian, Adolph Anderson, Dr. Viggo William Jensen, and George H Smith.

The dedication ceremonies were deemed an unqualified success due partly to the ideal weather conditions, but mainly because of the commitment of the citizens. There would not be another occasion in Montague history where a mere road would receive such fanfare.

Resources

The Montague Observer, December 1, 1921
The Montague Observer, May 25, 1922
The Montague Observer, June 1, 1922
The Montague Observer, September 7, 1922
The Montague Observer, July 12, 1923
The Montague Observer, July 26, 1923
The Montague Observer, August 9, 1923
The Montague Observer, August 23, 1923
The Montague Observer, August 30, 1923
The Montague Observer, September 6, 1923
The Montague Observer, September 13, 1923
The Montague Observer, September 20, 1923
The Montague Observer, September 27, 1923
The Montague Observer, October 4, 1923
The Whitehall Forum, December 8, 1892