The Founding of Manchester

Why is Manchester Located Here?

The development of the Village of Manchester at this site resulted from connections among several people and events. The land was set aside by the U.S. Congress to be surveyed and sold to private parties by the Pontiac Land Company, which was created in 1822 by land speculators and developers. The company was organized by John Gilbert and his brother H. Fargo. They purchased land from the federal government and sold it to settlers and speculators. The survey for Manchester Township was completed in February 1824 by John Mudgett, who was a government-employed surveyor. The survey was conducted by the U.S. General Land Office (GLO), which was responsible for surveying and selling federal lands.

Maps of the previously unknown interior of Michigan were published and distributed in the East, providing critical information to both settlers and speculators. These maps showed the location of water bodies, mineral and other valuable commodities, and other features of the area. In addition to detailed maps, surveys recorded observations in field notebooks. The public could examine these maps and field notes, and thus select good land for purchase.

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John Gilbert

John Gilbert was born in Lisbon, Massachusetts on October 15, 1754, the son of Captain John Gilbert and Zilah Sweeting. John was a veteran of the American Revolution, and the site of large-scale milling operations was named in honor of his family. John Gilbert and his brother H. Fargo are considered the founders of Manchester. They purchased land from the federal government and sold it to settlers and speculators. The survey for Manchester Township was completed in February 1824 by John Mudgett, who was a government-employed surveyor. The survey was conducted by the U.S. General Land Office (GLO), which was responsible for surveying and selling federal lands.

The steep elevation drop in the River Raisin at this location provided the potential for water-powered mills, which were essential to manufacturing and industrial development. In addition to being a government-employed surveyor, John and His son manufactured large-scale milling operations in the late 1800s.

The Fargo & Fargo General Store

Stephen and James Harvey Fargo established the Fargo & Fargo General Store on August 21, 1833, with James as the resident agent. The store was likely opened originally in the First Street structure, but may have been relocated to its own building by 1835 opposite the Manchester and Adrians, at the current Center Bank Building site. The store was in operation until 1850, when it was replaced by the current Frohman Bank.

The Fargo & Fargo General Store

The intersection of Main and Adrian streets is considered the “heart” of downtown Manchester, and the first commercial buildings were constructed here in 1832–1833.

The Manchester Mill

The Manchester Mill has existed since 1824, operating as a grist mill until 1905. The mill ownership has passed through several persons, and at times struggled with the changing dynamics of grain milling. The mill suffered a catastrophic fire on May 1, 1853, when the spontaneous combustion of accumulated smut removed from the grain ignited a fire, destroying the mill and a major part of downtown Manchester. The mill enjoyed a revival and renewed operations after the great fire (Figure 4), until a second destructive fire in April 1904. The current structure is the third generation of the mill. The earliest photograph of the site was taken after the fire. The mill was renovated in 1905, when it was restored to its original appearance. The mill is now owned by the Manchester Area Historical Society.

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