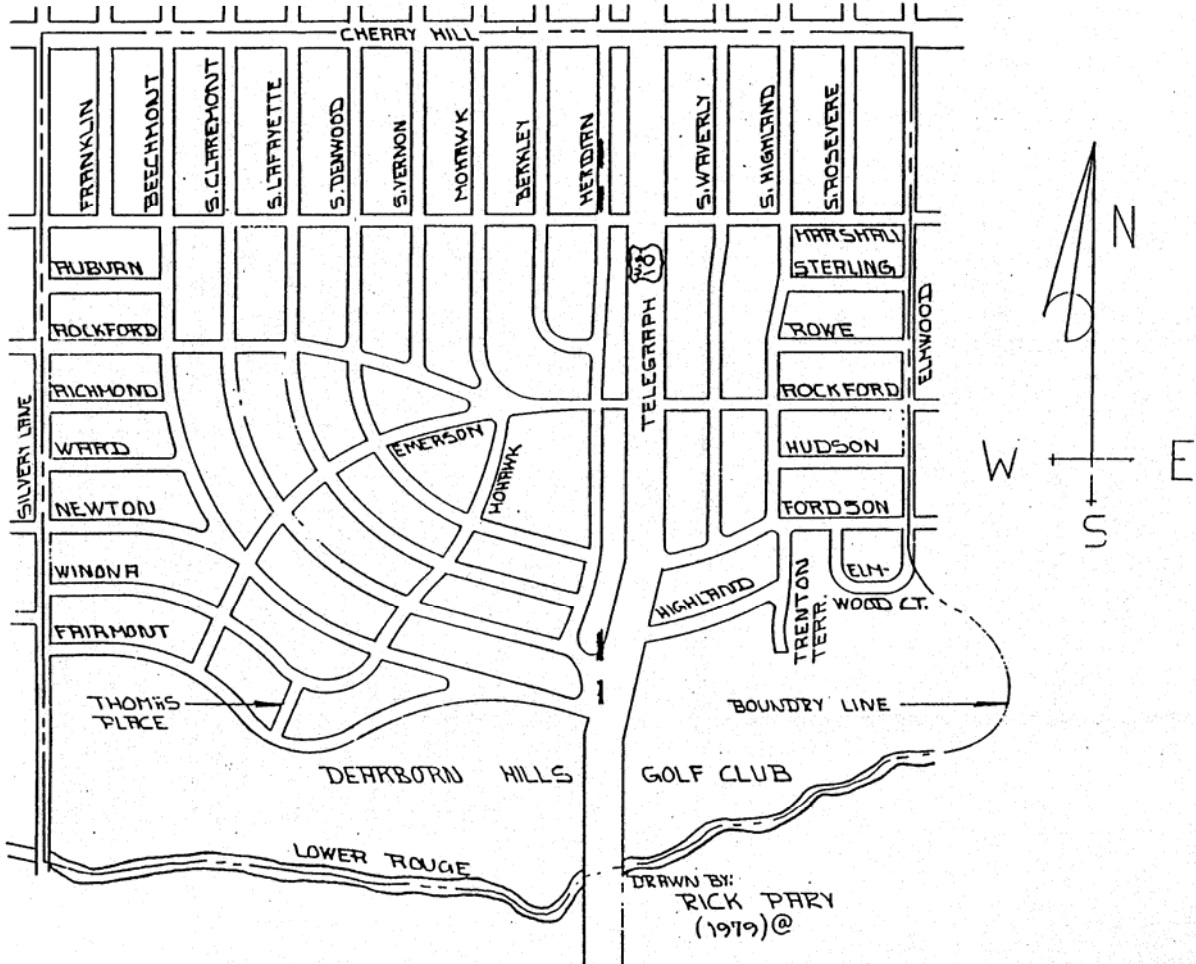


A History of Dearborn Hills

DEARBORN HILLS
OVER 70 YEARS OF CIVIC DEDICATION
FOUNDED 1926



A History Of Dearborn Hills

The history of the people and events that have taken place in the Dearborn Hills area does back over 278 years. It starts in 1701, 75 years before the start of the American Revolution, with the Potawatomi Indians. They made trails along the lower branch of the Rouge River (the river that runs through the Dearborn Hills Golf Course) on their way to Indian villages in Detroit and Southfield. They would often live their winters out among the Oak, Maple, Elm and Ash trees that still shade our homes. An important attraction of the Rouge for the Indians was the red clay which they used to decorate their bodies.

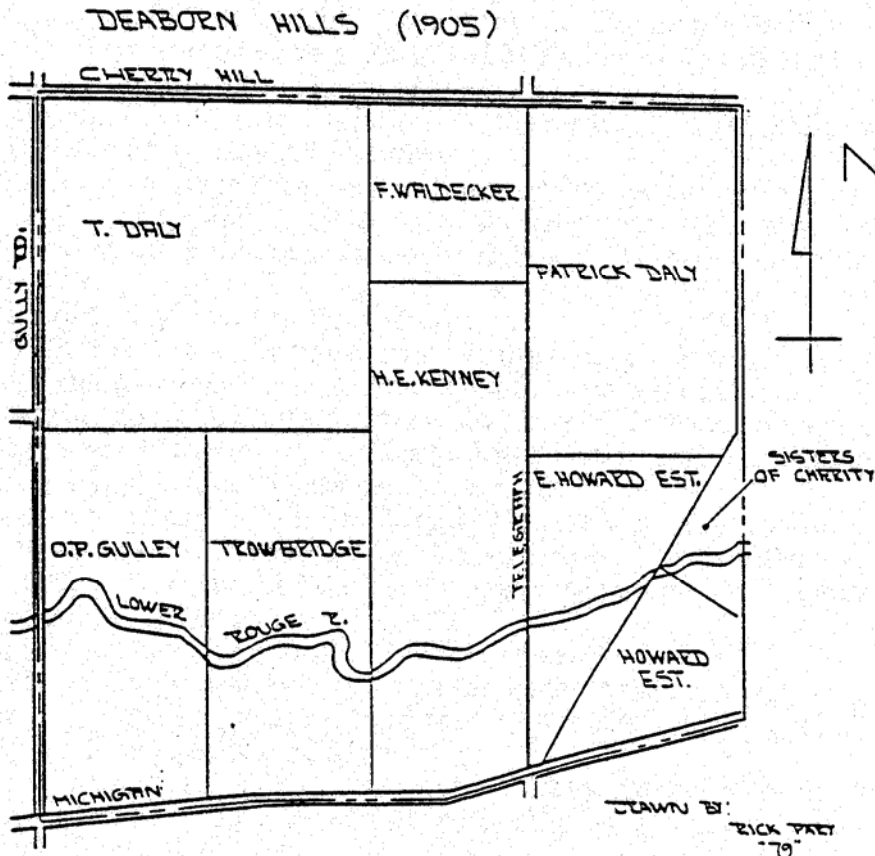
As control of the area changed from the French to the English and then to the United States, the Indians declined in numbers and importance. By the early 1830's when settlers began to come to Dearborn in larger numbers to build the arsenal, the first inhabitants of the Hills has almost disappeared.

The first official records for our area begin in the early 1800's. The U.S. Government Military Reserve, which included all the association land east of Telegraph, was put up for sale when the Government decided it was not needed for military facilities. The association land west of Telegraph was part of Dearborn Township and was sold through the township government.

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The first maps of this area which are available are dated 1876. They show farms owned by William Daly (160 acres), A.B.C. Gulley (78 acres), O. Trowbridge (75 acres), Baker (80 acres), plus D. Daly, F. Waldecker, plus D. Franksein with smaller farms. A 1905 map shows many farms in the same hands with some being passed down from father to son.

What was life like on the farms that once covered the "Hills"? Fortunately Tom Daly who owned a large farm that covered much of the "Hills" west of Telegraph, kept a daily diary.



By the 1870's Dearborn farms were connected directly to the Detroit Metropolitan area. Several trains ran through Dearborn daily and it was common for local people to go to Detroit for baseball games, parties and to business.

In the winter the farmers cut ice from the Rouge to be stored for summer use. Daly took out 35 loads in the winter of 1887. The Rouge was on its yearly rampage. Daly commented that he had never seen it higher.

As the spring came the farmers were planting, oats, sweet corn, field corn, peas, potatoes, wheat, beans and melons. The hired help was paid 50¢ a day.

Most of these garden crops were sold in Detroit. The farmer's wagons could be found groaning under their load at 3 or 4 A.M. in order to reach the Western Market by 7. A full wagon of Melons could be bought for \$7.00.

In the summer the farmers also washed their sheep in the Rouge, let them dry for a week and then sheared their wool. In 1887 they received \$95.15 for 292 lbs. of wool (about 32¢ a pound).

In July the harvest began but many farmers found time to go to Detroit for a ball game.

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With the start of fall and with much of the farm work completed the farmers took up their social lives, attending church events, socials and parties in Dearborn. The farmers also husked corn, plowed for the following season and took apples to the cider mill.

Farmers prepared for the holidays by selling turkeys, chickens, and hogs. They also spent some time working on the roads which was a community project. This slow paced and agreeable way of life could be found in the Hills from the 1830's until 1914.

As Detroit grew and the industrial revolution spread, farms quickly changed into residential areas. This was accelerated in Dearborn by Henry Ford's development of the Rouge complex.

Dearborn Hills was bought by the Hannan's Development Corporation in 1914. The first homes were built in 1918. The land was plotted and given approval for sale in 1920. The Golf course along the Rouge was then planned as a private club for residents. However, the depression got in the way and in 1930 it was sold to private owners.

The first residents must have felt like early pioneers. While sewers had been established, road and electrical services were still being developed.

Several of the most outstanding features of Dearborn Hills emerged in the early years.

Why did they develop curved streets? Bill Thomas, an early resident, said they were laid out about 1920. He had seen them in California and believed they added charm and distinction to a neighborhood. Although curved streets result in odd shaped and fewer lots, there was little objection. There was an abundance of land and many residents bought second lots for investment.

How were street names developed? The early planners wanted to avoid using the names of Presidents, which was a popular practice of that time. Instead they selected names from their experiences and consulted the London Street Directory.

Why were the trees so carefully preserved? Many residents believed their trees were very important to the rustic charm of the area. Equally important trees provided natural air conditioning for homes in the summer.

In 1922 there were 10 houses west of Telegraph and 15 on the east side. Basements were dug by hand and with horses that pulled large scoops to remove the dirt.

An early settler in the Hills was John Nyboer and his wife. They moved here in 1905. John remembers the tower that supplied water to the residents. It stood on the triangular block bounded by Emerson, Denwood, and Rockford. The base of the tower can still be found in the backyards of the homes on this block. The Nyboers remember the spring, and fall as the most difficult parts of the year for travel. The roads were not paved and almost impassable. Everyone carried a strong tow-rope for emergencies. For many years the Nyboers picked large harvests of wild strawberries and raspberries from patches near the fire station on Outer Drive.

Soon after the first residents moved in, the Dearborn Hills Civic Association was formed. It was considered a model and its officers were often called upon by neighboring communities to help set up their civic associations. The first president, in 1925 was Ralph P. Ernest. Other officers were Norm Laird, Bob Dillin, Ham, Bob Bachelor, John Ferris, Ed Christensen and Bill Thomas.

During the early days of Dearborn Hills, Telegraph Road ended north of Cherry Hill and began again south of Michigan. It wasn't until 1926 that Telegraph was paved through the Hills. At this early point, and extending through today, a very important agreement was struck between the city and the Civic Association. The City's Building Department has always asked the Association to "pass on plans" for new houses or additions to existing homes. As a result design and building standards have always been very high.

Bill Thomas, who was known as "Mr. Dearborn Hills," decided that brick homes made a more substantial and attractive appearance. Therefore plans for houses with siding, exteriors were rejected. This is the reason there are so few fully sided homes in the Hills.

The early problems of the Hills revolved around streets and sidewalks. Many residents didn't want paved streets because they believed it would ruin the "rustic charm" of the area. Every year calcium chloride was sprayed on the streets to control the dust. The city wanted concrete streets with sharp edged curbs. The Association insisted on blacktop surfaces with rounded curbs. This style of street improvement was installed as part of a 1930's W.P.A. Project. Sidewalks were an equally tough issue. Bill Thomas remembers a man coming to his home, a shotgun in his hand, insisting that no one had better touch the tree in front of his house. Bill got the idea and many sidewalks took detours around trees.

The residents winter fun took form in a community toboggan slide. The slide was at the corner of Silvery Lane and Fairmont. The residents linked their garden hoses together to ice down the wooden tracks for the kids.

The modest amount of building in the mid 1920's stopped with the depression of 1929-30. Few homes were constructed until the end of the 30's. Construction came to a complete halt during World War II.

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The greatest building boom came during the late forties into the early 1950's.

As a result of the solid planning, cooperation of the City, and the controlled growth of the Hills, this massive building did not destroy the character of our subdivision.

The struggles of the Association over the most recent years have dealt with traffic on Telegraph and on the side streets and zoning restrictions on property.

Throughout these struggles the Association has tried to maintain the integrity, stability, values, and character of Dearborn Hill so this tradition can be handed down to our children and their Grandchildren.

I want to thank Doug Thomas, John IVyboer and the staff of the Dearborn Historical Commission for their assistance with this history.

Errors? Omissions? Additions? I would appreciate any other information about the history of the Hills so we can include it in future editions.

Jim Petrie