

Fur Traders in Lowell

By: Shantell Ford

The history of the fur trade era in Lowell is a fascinating and complex topic. The Museum has sought to explore this history through an exhibit, education programs and with the Lowell Township Park Interpretive Cabin and sign boards.

In each of this year's newsletters, Museum Administrative Assistant Shantell Ford will further explore various aspects of the fur trade era as it related to Lowell. This issue looks at the fur traders who were active in the Lowell area.

After Madame La Framboise, various traders came through where the Flat River meets the Grand, and the fur trade itself changed along the way. The arrival of American settlers, new routes and methods of transportation, and the ethnicity of the new traders all reshaped the trade. The old cycle of the fur trader's life soon disappeared as summers spent on Mackinac Island and the traveling life were gone. With that change came a loss of kinship relationship with the Odawa and a loss of understanding of their ways. Previous to this the French traders had lived with the native people and had joined their culture. With the new traders there were two cultures living side by side.

Rix Robinson was the first in the area after Madame La Framboise. He had been employed with the American Fur Company and was their choice to follow Madame when she ended her traveling trade and moved to Mackinac Island. He lived at Madame's Lowell post¹ and kept that open for awhile, eventually he closed it and operated out of the post he had established² at the joining of the Thornapple and Grand River³. Rix was a link to the old and the new. Madame introduced him to her people along the trade route, passing on her kinship connections to him. He also married into Chief Hazy Cloud's family with his first marriage, establishing that kin connection for himself. With the trust of the Odawa, and his education in the law, he was the best one to represent the Odawa as they navigated through the treaty process with the American government. He saw the end of the trade and transitioned to a farmer and served in state government.

The traders who followed were not part of the kinship network of the Odawa and did not have the benefits that came with this kinship connection. They had to forge their own relationship with the local tribes. Alonzo Sessions of Ionia wrote of these early relationships, "with scant supplies, with continued uncertainty as to obtaining more, with no shelter except the poor wigwams provided by the Indians, with everything to make and build anew, with all the hazards of toil, exposure, sickness, suffering, starvation, and death - they boldly took the risk and conquered every obstacle. By kind treatment and honest dealing the Indians soon became friends, and often supplied the material most in need when hunger came and famine threatened."

Friendship bonds were created with some of the American traders and settlers, however, things weren't always smooth. The new fur traders weren't passing through, their intent was to settle, and with that came the intersection of two cultures. Before land was available for sale, settlers were allowed to squat upon the land and make improvements. It was said that "the Odawa along the Grand River had the most trouble with settlers who cut their forests, drove away their game and even robbed them of their personal possessions."⁴

Louis de Campau, considered by many to be the founder of Grand Rapids, first came down the Grand River to where it meets the Flat River in November of 1826.⁵ He came with goods and was engaged in buying furs. He did not stay long as Rix Robinson was already established in the area so he moved down the Grand River. Some reports state that he left two of his men here, but either way, he established himself in the village by "The Rapids" and soon had a prosperous business and brought his family out in 1827.⁶ Campau became a great friend of the Odawa, but there were difficulties along the way. In speaking of Campau's settlement at the Rapids, it was noted, "Their relations with the Ottawa were not always harmonious. The Ottawa expected these newcomers to share their wealth in the Ottawa tradition. But what the Ottawa saw as sharing the French regarded as stealing, and violence occasionally ensued. The new settlers also aggravated an already tense situation by supporting one side or the other in factional disputes."⁷

Daniel de Marsac was the brother of Louis de Campau's wife, Sophia de Marsac. He traveled on the Grand River in 1828, found favor with Chief Wobwindego and was a guest in his village, in what would become Lowell. He built a cabin with help from the Odawa and by 1831 had established a regular trading post. He began his career by following the rules of kinship. He married Jenute, a local Odawa, and enjoyed the benefits of being accepted by the people. As American settlers came into the area, it was said he became ashamed of his native wife. As they had only been married in the village tradition, and not in the church, he as others like him in this time period, caught between worlds and cultures, turned his back on his native wife and married a French woman.⁸

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This was heart breaking for Jenute. Her future was forever changed when the news came that her daughter Marie, whom Marsac had taken to Detroit to go to school, had died and was buried in Detroit on March 27, 1839.⁹ This is the 'Indian child' referred to in the 1836 Treaty of Washington that awarded Marsac one section of land. Jenute soon died and Marsac lost favor with both the Odawa people and settlers with his second marriage and treatment of Jenute. He turned to farming but eventually left the area after selling his trading post to his employee, a young man named John Samuel Hooker.

Daniel Marsac and Louis Campau had made an important change in the fur trade world. Instead of depending on Mackinac Island for trade goods, they used their connections in Detroit. Earlier traders had explored using a path through the state instead of following the lakes up and around but at that time it didn't prove to be the best option.¹⁰ This was part of the opening for commerce and travel to come.

Lewis Robinson and Philander Tracy came to today's Lowell in 1836. They had come to Grand Haven with the '*Robinson Forty Four*', all family to Rix Robinson. They came up the Grand River to the Flat River and built a building to be used as both a warehouse and trading post for Rix Robinson. Their post wasn't like the traditional posts and times were changing so fast that this wasn't their defining career.

Philander Tracy became the first postmaster at Lowell. His wife died in 1838, the first recorded white death in the village and she was buried on Rodney Robinson's farm along the Flat River in Vergennes township. He moved to Grand Rapids in 1840 and from 1841-1844 he served as an associate judge of Kent County. He remarried, had a family and died in Grand Rapids in 1873.

Lewis Robinson also served his community as Township Assessor and School Inspector. He too ended up leaving Lowell later in life and died in Novi Michigan.

The Robinson and Tracy families experienced friendships and difficulties while settling. Timber for Lewis Robinson's first log hut was cut two or three miles up Flat River and floated down by the help of the Odawa. They formed important friendships. The museum has on display gifts given to Lewis Robinson's niece, Clarinda Robinson Stocking by local Odawa. Knowing that the giving of gifts was so important to the Odawa, this is an important representation of the depth of that friendship.

The culture clashes came too. Philander Tracy sowed oats in an Odawa cornfield on land he had filed for at the land office. The Odawa had the right to live, hunt and fish upon unsold property. The Odawa sent a statement of their case to Washington and burned Tracy's oats. Washington ruled for the Odawa and revoked Tracy's entry for that land.¹¹ He was able to settle on other nearby land, and the Odawa gave money to a "Frenchman" Isadore Nantais who then bought the land on their behalf.¹² This land is on the east side of the Flat river, originally section 35 in Vergennes. Rodney Robinson, Clarinda's father, also had a confrontation with Negake, an Odawa

man that ended with Rodney dealing harshly with him physically, but in doing so won his respect. Negake's son was named after the Robinson brothers, Rodney Lewis Negake. Not much is known about their actual post except that they seemed to work with or in conjunction with Rix Robinson, and they were located across the river from the Marsac post, offering competition.

Cyprian Hooker brought his family to Lowell from Saranac in 1846. His son John worked as a clerk and native interpreter for the first store in Lowell, and then was hired by Daniel Marsac to work in his trading post. By this point however, Marsac had lost the respect of many of the Odawa and supported his family by farming. It is reported that he even moved away at one point, leaving Hooker in sole charge for over a year. Hooker eventually took over the post. He also worked as the U.S. Indian Agent, so he knew the people well. He kept a ledger of Odawa births and deaths which was the official record needed for allotments. He employed Odawa to work at his post, tanning and curing the raw hide. One of the Odawa that he employed was Negonce, granddaughter of Chief Cobmoosa. She had been born on August 29, 1835 just on the east side of the Flat River. When the block of brick buildings were built north of Main St on the east side of the river, *((that currently houses Century Post Pub, Gary's Country Meats, Fans in the Stands, and Riverbend East Salon*))* John Hooker named it in honor of her. He had known her most of her life, saw her depth of character and how well respected she was with her own people and with the settlers.

As the traders had changed, so had the business. While friendships formed and developed, the close kinship ties with the Odawa were gone. Clashes between cultures ensued, but the trade changed and continued.

The fur trade ended in the Great Lakes as demand for furs had declined as silk top hats were gaining in popularity over the beaver pelt hat. The woods and rivers had been over hunted in the desire for furs, and American settlers had arrived, changing the landscape. John Jacob Astor sold the American Fur Company to Ramsey Crooks in 1834 but by 1847 the company had closed. With the treaties of 1836 and 1855, by 1857, even the Odawa themselves were gone from Lowell.

Notes on Sources

- 1 Autobiography of Gordon Hubbard
- 2 The research of Stella Richmond Hill, Burton Historical Library
- 3 December 21, 1916 Lowell Ledger, by John S. Hooker, who knew Robinson well
- 4 People of the Three Fires - The Michigan Indian Press, Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council 1986, Ottawa - James M. McClurken
- 5 Historic Grand Haven and Ottawa County Leo C. Lillie
- 6 Memorials of the Grand River Valley
- 7 People of the Three Fires - The Michigan Indian Press, Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council 1986, Ottawa - James M. McClurken
- 8 Ste Anne's Church records, Detroit MI, December 28, 1835 Daniel de Marsac married Scholastica (Colette) Beaufait
- 9 Ste Anne's Church records, Detroit MI
- 10 Record of Hugh Heward's travels for John Askin
- 11 Federal Land Patents - Lots 6 & 7, Section 35, Vergennes Township, Kent County, Michigan - filed by Philander Tracy, sale cancelled and another sale filed by "Isadore Nauntie", Metis
- 12 Nauntie was actually Metis and a friend to the Native

