

WEST BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP CELEBRATES 185 YEARS

By Steve Kaplan, Township Supervisor and
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GWBHS 2,296 words

In 1819, Oakland County consisted of only two townships; Oakland Township (the northern three-fifths of the county), and Bloomfield Township (the southern two-fifths). In 1827, Bloomfield Township was reduced to what are now the areas of West Bloomfield, Bloomfield Township, Bloomfield Hills, and Southfield. Six years later on April 22, 1833, the Charter Township of West Bloomfield was officially recognized.



Courtesy *County Evolution in Michigan 1790-1897*. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 25

Early Settlers

European American settlers migrated to West Bloomfield Township steadily after the War of 1812, mostly from the Northeast. The first resident on legal record is John Ellenwood, a native of New York. He moved here in 1825 and lived on the eastern shore of Pine Lake. John Huff had previously built a cabin in the future township to the north of John Ellenwood. In fact, the Ellenwood family resided with John Huff until their home was finished being constructed. John Ellenwood served as one of the first township supervisors holding offices in 1835-1837, 1839, 1841-1844, and 1848. In addition to township supervisor, he served as postmaster, and was active in the planning and layout of many township roads. Daniel Benjamin, in 1834, gained election as the first West Bloomfield township supervisor. By 1850, there were 1,086 residents living in West Bloomfield Township.



Image of John Ellenwood's son, John M. Ellenwood. Courtesy of

GWBHS

Government

West Bloomfield Township held its first board meeting at a home in 1834. In 1896, a plot of land was purchased, north of Pontiac Trail and east of Hidden Valley Drive, which is now Hickory Pointe Subdivision. A wooden town hall structure was built on the site with nothing remaining today. A brick town hall was built at 4460 Orchard Lake Road in 1923 and is now Regent Street of West Bloomfield. The current town hall was built at 4550 Walnut Lake Road and opened in 1989.



Former town hall at 4460 Orchard Lake Road, 2007. Courtesy of Gina Gregory.



Current town hall

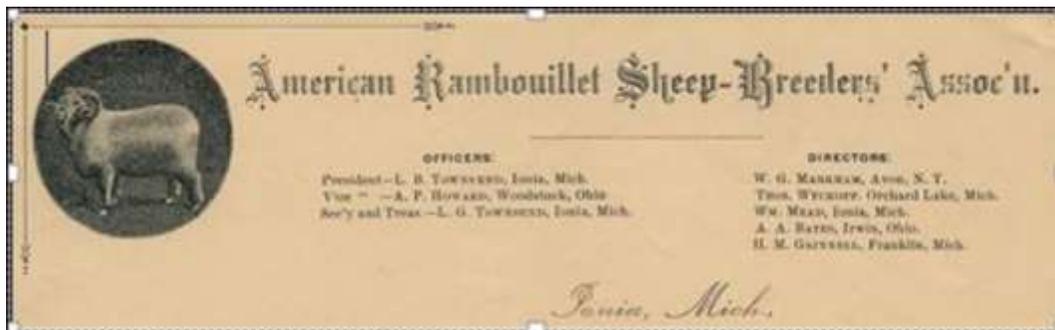
The Township Board consists of West Bloomfield Township Supervisor, Steven Kaplan; Township Clerk, Debbie Binder; Township Treasurer, Teri Weingarden; and four Trustees (back row, from left to right): Jim Manna, Jonathan Warshay, Diane Swimmer, and Howard Rosenberg.



Courtesy of Roy Riggs

Farming

West Bloomfield Township developed as a farming community, primarily with apple orchards and grazing animals. In 1880, there were 859 acres devoted to growing apples, and 40,000 pounds of wool were produced per year. In 1891, a West Bloomfield farmer, Thomas Wyckoff, was the first importer of the Rambouillet breed of sheep to Michigan, and the second importer to the United States. His operations attracted worldwide attention and he was instrumental in establishing an American-bred Rambouillet, that remains a profit “cornerstone” of the United States sheep industry today. At one time, there were more sheep than people located in the township, and sheep could be found grazing at Orchard Lake and Walnut Lake Roads into the mid 1980s.



Courtesy of GWBHS



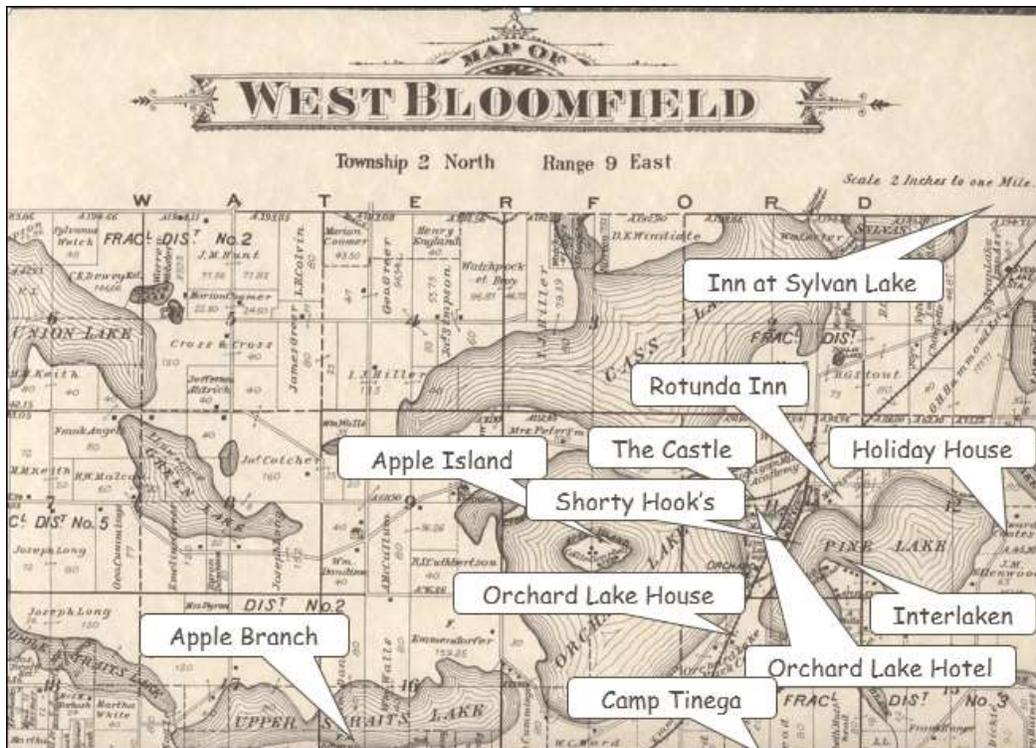
Snow apples were an early apple



Farming was important to the area for over 100 years. Green farm, c. 1940s. Courtesy of GWBHS.

Summer Recreation

With the plethora of lakes and natural beauty, a number of resort hotels were developed on Orchard and Pine Lakes in the late 19th century. Where the Detroit United Railway and the Grand Trunk Railroad crossed at Seminary Road, visitors arrived and could take a steam ferry ride to the Interlaken Hotel and to Apple Island. This area was a vacation destination, where one could come for rest and relaxation, with swimming, fishing, and sailing.



Map of retreats, resorts, hotels, and camps. Courtesy of Buzz Brown, GWBHS.



Wilma Webb, Frank Tucker with canoe on Cass Lake. Courtesy of GWBHS.



From Marshbank Park looking east to Cass Lake. Courtesy of Dave Scott, Motown Digital

Railways

West Bloomfield Township had a portion of the Grand Trunk Railway trailing through it. The Grand Trunk Railway was a major shipping network between the automotive manufacturing sites throughout lower Michigan. Trolley cars ran parallel to the railway in the early 1900s, bringing visitors into and out of the township as early as 1901. The Orchard Lake trolley stop was the most popular of all the stops along the DUR (Detroit United Railway), where fares averaged a penny per mile.



Interurban Car #7164 - Showing stops at Oak Grove, Orchard Lake, Pine Lake, Cass Lake, Sylvan Lake and Pontiac.

Courtesy of GWBHS

Winter Recreation and West Bloomfield Olympians

During the winter, many residents enjoyed ice fishing, hockey, and curling. Curling first came to the United States on Orchard Lake between Cedar and Apple islands in the winter of 1831-32. Later, the Detroit Curling Club and West Bloomfield resident, George M. Lawton, took the event to the 1932 Winter Olympics as a demonstration sport.



Robert Kerr sweeping. Courtesy of GWBHS.

George M. Lawton delivering the stone and



Courtesy of GWBHS

Other Olympians originated from West Bloomfield Township, as well. In 2014, Meryl Davis, a West Bloomfield Township native, competed in Sochi, Russia in the ice-dance competition with Charlie White, earning the Gold. More recently in 2018, another West Bloomfield Township native, Kyle Mack, won the Silver in big-air snowboarding in the Pyeongchang, South Korea, Olympics. The township honored Kyle Mack with an event at West Bloomfield High School in April 2018.



Courtesy of annarbor.com



Kyle Mack Celebration Event flyer photo. Courtesy of Connie Mack.

Development

With the automobile industry taking off in the early 1900s and becoming more affordable to the middle-class, developments in the township furthered and summer cottages were built. By 1938, there were ten subdivisions in the township. One was developed by a former US Senator, Mayor of Detroit, and Ford Motor executive, James Couzens. In 1936, James Couzens established Oakland Housing, Inc., with a \$550,000 personal donation and some federal funds, and an 874-acre piece of land was purchased. The Westacres subdivision was created, with 140 single-family homes on one-acre lots.



Westacres clubhouse, courtesy of GWBHS.

Roads

The first road paved in West Bloomfield Township was Orchard Lake Road in 1909. In 1930, five more roads were paved: Pontiac Trail, Commerce Road, Maple Road, Long Lake Road, and Cass Lake Road. One stop light existed at Maple and Orchard Lake Roads.

At one time, Northwestern Highway was planned to continue all the way to I-75, crossing Halsted Road. In the 1970s, the Concerned Citizens of West Bloomfield petitioned to quash the idea, preserving a more residential feel. The township controlled the roads until 1909, at which time the Road Commission for Oakland County took control. This is one of the major differences between a city and a township; a city owns and maintains its own roads, whereas a township does not.



1920s traffic Jam at “Wilkins Corner” at Orchard Lake Road and Pontiac Trail, courtesy of GWBHS.

Township roadways have always been very important to the elected officials and they have cultivated a positive, cooperative relationship with the Road Commission for Oakland County. In 2017, the five-lane

Orchard Lake Road became a four lane boulevard from Northwestern Highway to Maple Road. The boulevard improves traffic flow and helps reduce congestion in the area.



Orchard Lake Boulevard ribbon-cutting, 2017. Courtesy of Kris D’Arcy

Roundabouts have been constructed by the Road Commission of Oakland County throughout the township, with the first at Maple and Farmington roads, and most recently at 14 Mile and Orchard Lake roads. A future roundabout is planned at Maple and Middlebelt roads. The benefits of roundabouts are many, first and foremost the improved safety over the traditional, signalized intersection. Traffic speeds are much slower and the possibility of broadside “T-Bone” collisions and head-on collisions are virtually eliminated.

2018 saw many West Bloomfield Township roads resurfaced and the gravel portions of Halsted and Walnut Lake roads will see major gravel improvements. A complete resurfacing of Pontiac Trail from Orchard Lake Road to Haggerty Road is planned as a two-phase resurfacing project, scheduled to begin 2020, with phase two in 2022.

Worship

In 1866, a frame schoolhouse was built at Four Towns. This area received its name because it is near the point where the townships of Commerce, Waterford, West Bloomfield, and White Lake meet. From 1866 – 1930, the building served as both a school and church. West Bloomfield Township is now a thriving and diverse community with several synagogues, churches, and congregations of many different faiths and religions.



Courtesy of fourtownsumc.org

Schools

The first school in the area was Pine Lake and it started as a one-room schoolhouse that operated from 1828 to 1948. In 1916, electricity was brought into the building and in 1932, a basement was dug so that bathrooms and a furnace could be installed. In 1958, the building was shifted onto a new foundation and it remains as a home to this day, at the southwest corner of Middlebelt and Long Lake roads. The first high school opened in 1920 in Keego Harbor, and the West Bloomfield High School on Orchard Lake opened in 1971.

West Bloomfield Township is now served by the nationally- acclaimed West Bloomfield School District and six other districts: Birmingham, Bloomfield, Farmington, Pontiac, Walled Lake, and Waterford.



Scotch School from 1853-1926. Courtesy of GWBHS.

Today

West Bloomfield Township is home to nearly 66,000 residents and many thriving businesses. It is the sixth largest township in Michigan in terms of residency, and Michigan's wealthiest community, of those with a population of 65,000+ residents (2016 Census).

The township is home to Cauley Ferrari, the only Ferrari dealership in Michigan. Planterra Conservatory is an indoor botanical garden and was voted as one of the best wedding venues by Bride magazine.

Medical Facilities

West Bloomfield offers world-class medical facilities, including Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital, and Beaumont Medical Center. Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital opened on March 15, 2009 and was an expansion to the existing Henry Ford Medical Center that opened in 1975. Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital offers 191 private beds, 30 private emergency room beds, and is a certified Level III Trauma Center and certified primary stroke center. With 2,300 team members and over 300 volunteers, it is the township's largest employer.



Henry Ford West Bloomfield Hospital. Courtesy of Stephanie Scheer.

Public Safety- Police

In 2017 West Bloomfield Township was ranked the safest municipality in the state by the National Council for Home Safety and Security. This comforting fact made possible by our impressive, top-notch West Bloomfield Township Police and Fire Departments. As of today, the township has 60 full-time police officers, 13 sergeants, three lieutenants, a deputy chief, and a chief of police.



Picture courtesy of WBPD

Public Safety-Fire

In 1926, the fire department consisted of nine volunteers and was located in Keego Harbor. Fast forward 185 years, and West Bloomfield Township Fire Department has five fire stations, with a sixth under construction on Green Lake Road, scheduled to open in late 2019 or early 2020. The fire department now employs 59 firefighters and paramedics, 12 sergeants, 12 lieutenants, a fire inspector, five captains, a deputy fire marshal, a fire marshal, an assistant fire chief, and a fire chief.



Keego Harbor Fire Station. Courtesy of GWBHS.



Courtesy of Wbfd

Parks and Recreation

West Bloomfield Parks and Recreation Commission (WBP) operates 12 parks and facilities, including the award-winning Marshbank Park. The West Bloomfield Nature Preserve, the first “Wildlife Sanctuary” in Michigan, is located in the vicinity where Arrowhead Road meets the trailhead. There are 1,500 acres of wetlands, 2,500 acres of woodlands, and over 75 miles of bike/safety paths. A 6.33 mile portion of the pathway system was formerly a portion of the Grand Trunk Railway. There are 28 lakes, the most of any community in Oakland County.



Marshbank Park, Photo courtesy of WBP



Bike safety path. Courtesy of WBP

Library

The West Bloomfield Township Public Library had its beginning as a community service project in the 1930s when 38 members of the Keego-Cass Women's Club walked door to door asking for books and money to begin a collection. About the same time, 20 members of the Westacres Book Club organized a library in their subdivision's clubhouse on Commerce Road. The Westacres library opened in 1939 with 700 donated books.

Today the Library is one of the top-five circulating libraries in Michigan. The Library was awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the nation's highest honor for museums and libraries, in 2010. Only five libraries a year are designated with this distinction. The award recognizes libraries and

museums that demonstrate extraordinary and innovative approaches to public service and inclusiveness.

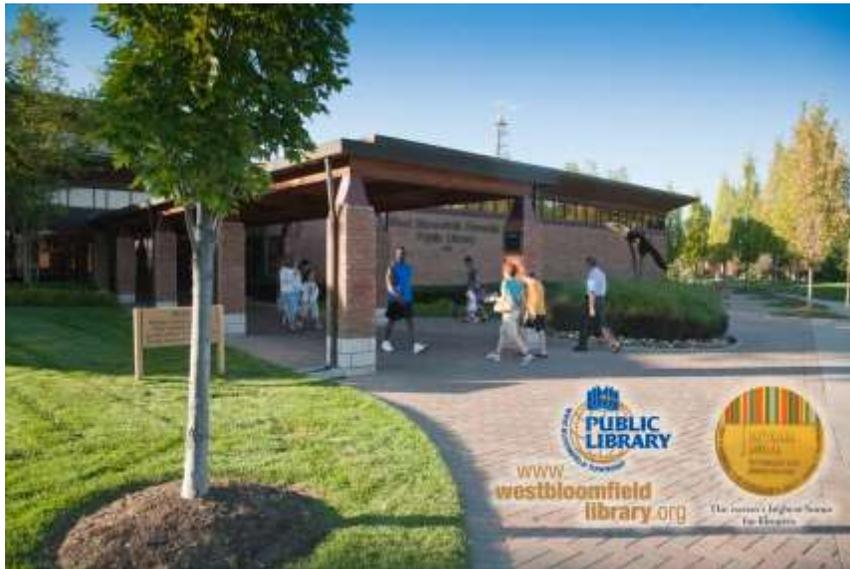


Photo courtesy of West Bloomfield Township Public Library

Community Events

West Bloomfield Township is the home of the juried Orchard Lake Fine Arts Show, presented by Hot Works.org. The show was voted top 100 art shows in the country, ten years in a row. The show features 140 professional and juried artists from across the nation, with original artwork. The Institute for the Arts & Education offers a student art competition. The event is held the last weekend in July, at Powers and Daly roads, in the heart of the township.



Food Truck Tuesdays is a new offering at the civic center campus. The event is held May through September and offers a variety of lunch options. It is an opportunity to enjoy the outdoors and converse with local officials on any topic of interest or concern. For more information, visit our webpage at www.wbtownship.org.

Thanks to Gina and Rob Gregory and the Greater West Bloomfield Historical Society for help with historical data. The GWBHS is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that collects, preserves, researches and stimulates public interest in the history of Keego Harbor, Orchard Lake, Sylvan Lake, and West Bloomfield, located at the Orchard Lake Museum, 3951 Orchard Lake Road in Orchard Lake, MI, and at www.gwbhs.org.