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Vandalia-Butler

Crossroads of AMERICA

For nearly 200 years, Vandalia has been a center of transportation and expansion.

Transportation has been the key element of Vandalia's success and growth since the community's earliest beginnings.

One of the very first cross-country road projects undertaken by the federal government was the Old National Trail Road project. The road's construction began in Cumberland, Md. in 1811 and was originally planned to end in Wheeling, W. Va.

When the Old National Road was built through this area, it crossed an existing trail that carried people from the North to Southern points. The village of Tadmor, the remains of which can be found in the easternmost part of Vandalia next to the Miami River, was never very large, but it was an important center of transportation in the 19th century. It was located at the crossroads of every means of transportation of its day.

The Miami Canal was started in Cincinnati in 1825. By 1829, it was open to Dayton. In 1832, over 1,000 passengers a week were using it. The Miami Extension north from Dayton began in 1833. Work progressed through Troy in 1837. It finally linked up with the Wabash and Erie Canal

eight years later and became known as the Miami and Erie Canal.

Farmers in eastern Ohio could at last get their products to markets in the South and East. Subsistence farming was a thing of the past. Flour, whiskey, pork, apples, nursery stock and grain were all shipped by way of canal boat and brought cash to farmers.

Then, in 1837, bids were let for a road eight miles west of Springfield. A covered bridge was built over the Miami River, and the road crossed the Miami Canal. Two right-angle runs took in the newly platted town of Vandalia.

It is said that Vandalia was named by a group of westward-bound settlers who, due to bad weather and bad times, stopped at the crossroads of what is now Dixie Drive and National Road. The settlers, who had been heading for Vandalia, Ill., gave the area the same name as their original destination.

Benjamin Wilhelm came to Ohio with his parents and siblings in 1820. When land transactions actually took place between 32-year-old Benjamin Wilhelm and the original landowners of the Vandalia community is unknown, but on August 4,

1838, the Village of Vandalia, Ohio was platted into 33 lots: one row on the north side of the National Road and two rows on the south side of the road. All were east of Troy Road (now Dixie Drive). Montgomery County deed records list Benjamin Wilhelm as proprietor. Mr. Wilhelm built the town's first store at the northwest corner of the "Crossroads" and became the first merchant in the village. Mr. Wilhelm deeded land at the intersection of Troy Road and Nelson Street (now Dixie Drive and Kenbrook) to the United Brethren Church in late 1839 for the first church in the village. Mr. Wilhelm also deeded land for a public school on the southeast corner of the intersection of Nelson Street and Perry Street (now Kenbrook and Perry Street). Mr. Wilhelm was appointed the first Vandalia postmaster in 1842.

The Old National Road was completed to the Indiana line by 1840. Conestoga wagons became ubiquitous, hauling freight in all directions, and stagecoach services were coming into use. In Vandalia, two blacksmiths, two taverns, a hotel, a carriage maker and a wagon maker, along with other

businesses, served the needs of travelers as well as local residents.

The population of the village had grown to 200 by 1848, and Mr. Wilhelm and other citizens decided to file incorporation papers. The act incorporating the village of Vandalia was passed by the Ohio legislature on February 7, 1848. In an election held on March 22, 1848, Benjamin Wilhelm was elected the first mayor.

Tragedy struck the newly incorporated town in 1849, when a cholera epidemic swept across Ohio. Vandalia was probably the hardest hit of the small villages. When travelers on the Old National Road became too ill to travel, they stopped in Vandalia at a local hotel, thus spreading the epidemic that claimed the lives of 50 Vandalia residents. Entire families were wiped out, and the village was quarantined for several weeks. Another 50 residents fled the village, never to return. Mr. Wilhelm's wife, Sarah, and his infant daughter both died of cholera and were buried in the graveyard that Benjamin had deeded to the United Brethren Trustees in 1838. Their remains were later moved to Poplar Hill Cemetery, where their gravestones may still be seen today.

Mr. Wilhelm was re-elected to the office of mayor in 1849 and 1850. In 1853, Benjamin Wilhelm packed his belongings and, with his family, headed for a new life in the West.

In 1911, the north-to-south trail through Vandalia, which had become a well-traveled road, was designated as the Dixie Highway, because it connected the North to the South just as the Old National Road connected the East with the West. At that time, Vandalia became known as the "Crossroads of America."

At first, Vandalia's status as the "Crossroads" brought about little change. By 1940, the population was just 378. The last 60-plus years, however, have seen tremendous growth in population, commerce and industry.

By 1960, the population had jumped to 6,342 people. Today, the estimated population of both Butler Township and the City of Vandalia is 24,000.

The modern-day "Crossroads of America" includes Interstate 75, a north/south route, and Interstate 70, an east/west route. In addition, CSX railway system and the Dayton International Airport, located in Vandalia and Butler Township, are integral parts of the modern-day transportation systems serving Vandalia, Butler Township and the greater Dayton area. †