

HISTORY

Looking Back . . .

Transportation has been the key element to 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 Road project. The purpose of the road was to provide a better method to transport products between the east and west. The road's construction began in Cumberland, Maryland, in 1811 and was originally designated to end in Wheeling, West Virginia. The road continued, however, sporadically during the next 25 years.

In 1820, specifications for the road stated that no slope could be steeper than an angle of five degrees with the horizon. An 80-foot wide right-of-way was to be cleared of trees and brush, and, along the center, a strip 30-feet wide was to be covered with crushed stone nine inches deep.

Not only did land values along the route increase, but construction gave work to farmers and their teams. Every farmer was happy to see surveyors driving stakes in a strip 80-feet wide through their farms.

When the Old National Road was built through this area, it crossed a trail that carried people from the north to points south.

In the meantime, 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. It was dug by Irish and German laborers and local farm boys for 30 3/4 cents and numerous jiggers of whiskey per day. The canal was 40 feet wide and four feet deep, just wide enough for two canal boats to pass. By 1829, it was open to Dayton. In 1832, over a thousand passengers a week were using it even though the locks at the Ohio River were not yet completed. Cargo still had to be off-loaded at the city and taken by wagon to the river.

The Miami Extension north from Dayton began in 1833, and work on the great Miami aqueduct began the same year. Work progressed slowly through hard economic times, but the canal 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.



Vandalia Cafeteria - 1948

The farmers in western Ohio could at last get their products to markets in the south and the 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 the farmer.

In 1837, bids were let for the road eight miles west of Springfield, and the farmers were warned to get their crops out of the fields before its construction. The covered bridge over the Miami River was built, and the road crossed the Miami Canal. Two almost right angle turns took Old National Road through the newly

platted town of Vandalia.

Benjamin Wilhelm came to Ohio with his parents and siblings in 1820. The family lived in Red Lion in Warren County until 1821 when they moved to Randolph Township.

When land transactions actually took place between the 32-year-old Benjamin Wilhelm and the original land owners of the community are unknown. It's said that Vandalia was named by a group of westward-bound settlers who stopped, due to bad weather and bad times, at the crossroads which is now Dixie Drive and National Road. The settlers, heading for Vandalia, Illinois, gave the area the same name as their original destination.

On August 4, 1838, the Village of Vandalia, Ohio was platted into 33 lots, one row on the north side of 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 first store at the northwest corner of the "Crossroads" and became the first merchant in the village.

Mr. Wilhelm deeded land to the United Brethren Church upon which the first church in the village was built in late 1839. The congregation had been meeting in private homes and barns before this first house of worship was built at the northeast corner of the intersection of Troy Road and Nelson Street (now Dixie Drive and Kenbrook).

Mr. Wilhelm also deeded land for a public school at the southeast corner of the intersection of Nelson Street and Perry Street (now Kenbrook and Perry Street), but it was several years before a school was built. The children were taught in private homes.

Continued on page 7

HISTORY

Continued from page 5

The Old National Road had been completed to the Indiana line by 1840. Conestoga wagons became numerous, hauling freight in all directions, and stagecoach services were coming into use. 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 Troy Road was upgraded, becoming a toll road in 1842, and was named the Miami and Montgomery Turnpike. A toll gate was located on this road about one half mile south of Old National Road on the west side.

Mr. Wilhelm was appointed the first Vandalia postmaster in 1843. Mr. J.M. Fear was the village butcher in 1846, and Mr. John Beard Jr. was operating a steam-powered sawmill. These and other businesses flourished at the "Crossroads."

The population of the village had grown to 200 by 1848, and Mr. Wilhelm and other citizens filed incorporation papers. An 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.

A cholera epidemic swept across Ohio in 1849. Vandalia was probably the hardest hit of the small villages in percentage of deaths. When travelers on the Old National Road became too ill to travel, they stopped in Vandalia at a local hotel, thus starting and spreading the epidemic which 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 which Benjamin had deeded to the United Brethren Trustees in 1838. Their bodies were later moved to Poplar Hill Cemetery where their gravestones may still be seen.

Mr. Wilhelm was re-elected to the office of mayor in 1849 and 1850. On October 11, 1853, Benjamin and his second wife, Mary Jane Wilhelm, in consideration of \$100 deeded Lot #41 in the Village of Vandalia to the Butler Township Board of Education. Several years later a wood-frame school was built on the lot, which at present is the north side of Seger Park.

Later that year, Benjamin Wilhelm packed all of his belongings and with his family headed for a new life in the west, settling in Bloomington Township, Muscatine County, Iowa. At the age of 83 years, Benjamin Wilhelm succumbed to pneumonia and was buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Tipton, Iowa.

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

of America." When the 1913 flood destroyed the canal, floated some buildings down river, and necessitated moving the railroad tracks to higher ground, the Old National Road was still intact, and the covered bridge still spanned the river. But when the road was re-routed over Taylorsville Dam, the residents left, and the world by-passed the village of Tadmor forever. Tadmor never became a city or well-known, yet it remains a very important slice of this country's transportation history. Vandalia's first 100 years as the "Crossroads" saw little

change. By 1940, the population was just 378. The last 50-plus years, however, have seen tremendous growth in population, commerce, and industry.

In 1959, the voters of Vandalia chose the council/manager form of government that would make the Village of Vandalia officially a charter city of the State of Ohio.

In 1960, the population jumped to 6,342 people and for the next decade grew rapidly, reflecting the attractiveness of the community. Population increased 63.4 percent to a total population of 10,796 in 1970, and an increase of 20 percent from 1970 to 1980 raised the population to 12,967 people. Today, 25,000 is the estimated population of both Butler Township and the City of Vandalia.

The modern-day "Crossroads of America" includes I-75, the north/south interstate, and I-70, the east/west interstate, which is once again located in Vandalia, Ohio. In addition, CSX railway system and the Dayton International Airport, located in Vandalia and Butler Township, are an integral part of the modern-day freight and people transportation systems serving Vandalia, Butler Township, and the greater Dayton area.

Vandalia-Butler Historical Society Log House

