

Douglas, MI: An Introduction

The City of Douglas began as two communities separated by present-day Center Street. Jonathon Wade platted Dudleyville, named for his brother Dudley Wade, on the south side of “Centre” in 1860. In 1861, William F. Dutcher platted the town of Douglas on the north side of Centre. Dutcher named it for his hometown on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. The original plat consisted of the area bounded by Union, Chestnut, Water and Centre Streets. The two towns were incorporated as the Village of Douglas in 1870.

The Douglas area is unusual among Midwest frontier towns in that it did not experience either the destruction of the fires that hit most towns in the mid to late 1800s or the railroad that brought modernization and urban growth. Because of this, the village of Douglas provided a rare opportunity to observe pre- and post-Civil War Greek Revival and Italianate architecture, together with later structures in the Arts and Crafts and Colonial Revival styles.

The village has largely retained its essential traditional character and quaint charm, having been spared the suburbanization, chain store and “mall” invasion that makes most other places look almost identical to each other. At the same time, the village offers much in terms of first class lodging, restaurants, recreation and cultural opportunities.

Key to the area’s history and popularity is its natural environment. Saugatuck and Douglas are nestled on the shores of Lake Michigan and the Kalamazoo River and are defined by steep, rolling dunes to the west and lush orchard country and

farmland to the east. The climate is blessed by the moderating effects of Lake Michigan which provides cool breezes on warm summer days, and plenty of winter snow.

It was to this setting that urbanites from Chicago and as far away as St. Louis started escaping in the early 1900s, although the settlement of the area began in the 1830s by lumber barons who founded nearby what is now known as the lost village of Singapore. For many years the villages supported a thriving mix of sawmills, barrel factories, and other wood product firms. The area contributed much of the lumber used to rebuild Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871. When the trees were gone, so were the lumbermen. But Saugatuck and Douglas thrived, turning to shipping and fruit growing as a source of income in the latter part of the 1800s. Peaches from the area were called “Michigan Gold” and were shipped by large steamships to the Chicago market. Hundreds of ships of various types were built in Saugatuck shipyards and the town was a haven for ship captains.



A resort, tourist, and “cottage” culture emerged in the 1880s and took a propitious turn in 1910 when a group of Chicago artists established the Summer School of Paintings on Ox-Bow Lagoon, and when a huge dance hall, called the Big Pavilion, was built on the waterfront. The resulting influx of well-known artists and big name Chicago architects resulted in a wave of building. The seed planted at Ox-Bow has continued to flourish over the years, and the area is now known as the Art Coast of Michigan. Today, Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists’ Residency continues to be affiliated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The area’s many historical buildings, fine art galleries, and famous chain ferry, together with the art of recreation, the art of learning, and the art of nature, are all aspects of the area’s history that are part of the art of being Saugatuck and Douglas.

Natural Resources & Environment

Climate

Weather conditions affect the community’s economic base. Variations in average conditions, especially during the summer months, can cause fluctuations in tourism and outdoor recreation activities, upon which the local economy is dependent. Prevailing winds determine lake-shore and sand dune erosion patterns, which impose limitations on development along the Lake Michigan shore. Average annual precipitation can determine lake and river levels which, historically, have had a significant impact on recreational boaters and their ability to enter and leave the Kalamazoo Lake Harbor.

Geology

The tri-community area of Douglas, Saugatuck and Saugatuck Township is located on the southwestern flank of the Michigan Basin, which is a bedrock feature centered in the middle of the Lower Peninsula of the State. The sandstone and shale bedrock is overlain by glacial deposits from 50 to 400 feet thick. There are no outcroppings of the bedrock and the proximity of the bedrock to the surface of the ground does not impose limitations for normal excavating or construction. Glacial deposits consist primarily of sandy lakebed deposits located between two major physiographic formations: the Lake Border Moraine, which is adjacent to Lake Michigan, and the Valparaiso Moraine, which extends through the center of the county, from north to south.

Topography

Most of the Tri-Community Area is relatively flat, but local variations in elevation of up to 150 feet exist in some places between uplands and the floodplain of the Kalamazoo River. There are also considerable local differences in elevation in the extreme northwest portions of the Township in the sand dunes between the Kalamazoo River and Lake Michigan. The highest point in this area is Mt. Baldhead, which rises 310 feet above Lake Michigan.

Steep slopes present impressive scenery and pose increased maintenance and construction costs as well as safety risks. This is especially true with unstable landforms such as sand dunes. Generally, slopes exceeding 7% should not be developed intensively, while slopes of more than 12% should be developed at all because of erosion and storm-water runoff problems.

Floodplains

Areas adjacent to creeks, streams and rivers are susceptible to periodic flooding that can cause extensive damage to buildings and can pose a substantial threat to public health and safety. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in the Lake Michigan Potential Damages Study, found that the Kalamazoo Lake portion of the Kalamazoo River has a greater potential for flooding from high Lake Michigan water levels than thought previously. The study found that both high and low Lake Michigan levels could range more than has been experience in the lifetime of current residents, and more so than recorded by European settlers. Portions of the downtown of the City of Saugatuck have flooded previously, but additional properties would likely flood if Lake Michigan reached extreme high levels, regardless of the conveyance of floodwaters from inland portions of the Kalamazoo River watershed.

Woodlands

The wooded areas of the Tri-Community area are a mixture of hardwoods and conifers. Large areas of upland hardwoods are found in the sand dune areas, along Lake Michigan, and in the northeast quarter of the Township. A large

area of lowland conifers exists in the southwestern portion of the Township east of I-196. Other smaller patches of upland and lowland hardwoods and conifers are scattered throughout the area. Mature trees represent a valuable resource in maintaining the aesthetic character of the area, not to mention their overall importance to wildlife and the natural environment. In particular, the wooded sand dunes along the Kalamazoo River and Lake Michigan, and those buffering adjacent uses from I-196, are especially important.

Cultural, Historical and Archaeological Resources

The Tri-Community area is rich in cultural and historical points of interest and many archaeological sites can be found throughout the area. Leading economists and forward thinking governmental leaders have recognized the social and economic value of promoting and preserving cultural and historic assets.

Historic preservation is an on-going activity in the Tri-communities. As early as the 1940's, the famous "lost village" of Singapore was placed on the National Register of Historic Places; in the 1980's inappropriate alterations to the Saugatuck Village Hall were blocked and alternate plans were implemented that were more respectful to the building's history; the city's former pump house was converted to a public museum in 1993; the Douglas Village Hall – Dutcher Lodge – was restored with the help of the Douglas Historical Preservation Committee and the Old School House in Douglas was just recently restored to its former glory while updating the technology to keep pace with the 21st Century.

The area is also rich in cultural opportunities for residents and visitors. Some of the many opportunities for education and entertainment include a long-standing chamber music venue and jazz performance series, an annual film festival, a children's film festival, a professional theater venue, on-going art fairs, summer school of painting and the arts, and many excellent art galleries.



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