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The History of Michigan Wine Industry: Pre 1900s

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The history of wine in Michigan is first noted in 1679 when French voyagers sailing through the straits made wine with the wild grapes growing in abundance along the shorelines of what is now known as the Detroit River. ¹ A couple decades later in 1702, the first plantings of grapevines took place at the settlement of Fort Ponchartrain du Détroit, built under the lead of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac. ²

In 1793, French settlers traveled to the region along the traversing river now known as River Raisin, named for the wild grapevines along the riverbanks. ³ In the mid-1800s, vineyards were planted in this region of Monroe for the purpose of producing wines, igniting Michigan's pre-1900s wine industry.

The First Discoveries of Wild, Native Grapevines

The wild grapevines of le détroit

On the 7th day of August 1679, the 60-ton vessel Griffin (The Griffon in French) departed the Niagara region to set sail for the Upper Great Lakes. Commandeered by Rene Robert Cavelier, de la Salle (La Salle), the Griffin was the first large vessel to travel on Lake Erie and into Lake Huron and Lake Michigan (formerly Lake Illinois).⁴

On the 11th day of August 1679, the voyagers entered the straits (now the Detroit River) and sailed between the islands. Father Louis Hennepin, the historian of the sailing party, recorded

the region's beauty in his journal:

*"The islands are the finest in the world. They are covered with forests of nut and fruit trees, and with wild vines loaded with grapes. From these we made a large quantity of wine. The banks of the strait are vast meadows, and the prospect is terminated with some hills covered with vineyards, trees bearing good fruit; and groves and forests so well arranged that one would think that Nature alone could not have laid out the grounds so effectively without the help of man, so charming was the prospect."*⁵

The First Plantings of Grapevines for Wine Production

Within two decades, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, while commandant at Michilimackinac, heard of the legendary region of "du Détroit" (named *Rivière du Détroit - River of the Strait* by earlier French explorers). Cadillac wrote to Count Frontenac, the governor of New France:

*"I have heard from the Indians and the coureurs de bois glowing descriptions of this fair locality... on both sides of this straight lie fine, open plains where the deer roam in graceful herds, where bears, by no means fierce and exceedingly good to eat, are to be found, as are also the savory (wild duck) and other varieties of game. The islands are covered with trees; chestnuts, walnuts, apples and plums abound; and, in season, the wild vines are heavy with grapes, of which the forest rangers say they made a wine that, considering its newness, was not at all bad."*⁶

Cadillac set sail for France in 1698 in order to convince Jérôme Phélypeaux, Comte de Ponchartrain (or his father, Louis), Minister of Marine to Louis XIV, of the merits of a major settlement on le détroit.

When Cadillac landed at le détroit, a ceremony took place to claim the land. In honor of the Comte du Ponchartrain, Cadillac named the settlement Fort Ponchartrain du Detroit in 1701. (The post's name was eventually shortened to Fort Détroit in 1751). In a September 1702 letter to Count Ponchartrain, Cadillac wrote of the fort's progress, including the planting of a vineyard.

Cadillac and other area settlers used wine as a form of trade with the Indians. As recorded in the 1782 Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society documents, five barrels white wine required by Indians in trade.⁷

The Birth of Michigan's Commercial Wine Industry

On July 14, 1817, following the War of 1812 and the 1813 River Raisin battles, Governor Lewis Cass of the Michigan Territory established the District of Monroe County in recognition of President James Monroe who had visited the area. Monroe was the territory's third European settlement. When Michigan Territory was admitted to the United States of America on January 26, 1837 as the 26th state of the union, Monroe was the third largest town in Michigan after Detroit and Ann Arbor.⁸

On October 16, 1835, 17-year-old Joseph M. Sterling of Jefferson County, New York, arrived in the Monroe region of the Michigan Territory on the steamer Bradley after stopping in Ohio to earn additional passage.⁹

Perhaps as Sterling traveled on Lake Erie, the combination of the sight of the grapevines on Kelley's Island and the wild grapevines flourishing along the Detroit River and the River Raisin influenced his future profession as winemaker. Sterling was the first to plant a vineyard in the Monroe region for the purpose of making wine.¹⁰

Soon after Sterling's arrival to Monroe, he became a prominent citizen in several businesses, one of which was a partnership with William A. Noble in warehousing. Sterling also built several private homes and public buildings, including city hall.

On March 31, 1849, the Michigan State Agricultural Society was established through the state

legislature for the purpose of promoting the improvement of agriculture in the state.¹¹ This same year, in Detroit, the state's first state fair was held. Within six years, in 1855, Michigan Agricultural College opened in East Lansing. This combination of events was noteworthy for the education of young people and evolution of fruit growing in Michigan.

A few years later in 1863, Sterling, who had served as Mayor of Monroe from 1862 to 1863, planted the first vineyard for purposes of making wine in Monroe County,¹² consisting of two-and-a-half acres planted next to his apple orchard near the docks in Monroe.¹³

A few years later, he bought a 30-acre parcel along the shores of Lake Erie in Frenchtown Township near Monroe for summertime residence for his family. Incidentally, he purchased the land for \$2,012 from the son of the previous owner, Mr. Sancrainte, believed to be the first white settler to the area.¹⁴ He planted 2,050 vines of Concord, Delaware, Catawba, Ives Seedling and Norton's Virginia on twelve acres of the property.¹⁵

In 1868, he founded the Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company with Noble, Caleb Ives and Samuel P. Williams and began making wine. The winery was named for the point of land that juts out into Lake Erie, Pointe Aux Peaux. The name translated means "point of skins," which refers to when the Indians dried their pelts and skins on the flat rocks along the lakeshore.

In 1870, a two-story winery was erected after three years of construction. It was built from limestone brought by vessel from Sandusky, Ohio. An air chamber left between the exterior stone wall and the interior brick wall enabled the winemakers to maintain year-round



Pointe Aux Peaux winery (Photo: courtesy of Monroe County Historical Museum)

temperatures of around 60 degrees. The first floor was the wine cellar and the second floor was used for pressing the grapes and as a tasting room for the winery's visitors.¹⁶

In 1871, the Pointe Aux Peaux winery processed 69,000 pounds of grapes and 5,000 gallons of wine.¹⁷ "The wines gained a reputation for their purity and were extensively used for medicinal purposes as well as for beverage,"¹⁸ according to Talcott Wing, a historian who wrote *History of Monroe County* in 1890.

The winery's reputation grew when the gentlemen of the Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company showcased their wines in the 1872 Michigan State Fair. The first premium, a gold medal, was awarded to the winery for presenting the best collection of wines.¹⁹

The following year, during the 1873 Michigan State Fair, William Beal of the Michigan Agricultural College and of the State Pomological Society visited several vineyards for examination. Beal and other society committee members awarded Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company with a gold medal for its vineyard, exclaiming they "had never seen any vineyard better laden with fruit or in better condition in any respect."²⁰

In an 1874 report by the State Pomological Society to the Michigan Horticultural Society, the committee praised Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company pronouncing, "The Concord of 1871 as the best and most perfect. This was a white wine of a fine golden color, a delicious bouquet, a fair strength and a flavor that showed it had much of the full spirit of the soul of the grape. The Delaware of 1870 is a very delicate wine with much less bouquet and flavor, but is ripened by age, and so light to the taste that its fine body and strength is hardly appreciated or felt. As a wine for the sick it is probably unsurpassed."²¹

In this same 1874 report, the committee recognized John Reising, another Monroe winemaker, for his bottle of, "Norton's Virginia, a very fine wine of moderate body, a pleasant astringent taste, a good flavor and ranking with the very best shown; and although it lacked age, it was considered as equal to many of the fine Bordeaux wines of France."

Also, in 1865, Joseph Sedlaczek, who had arrived from Munchengraetz, Bohemia to Monroe in 1852, planted a four-acre vineyard and began experimenting as a wine grower. By 1872,

Sedlaczek's business was largely wholesale, consisting of shipments to New York and Philadelphia.²² Sedlaczek eventually partnered with Joseph Weier who had arrived in Monroe in 1849 and planted a vineyard in 1865. At some point, Weier and Sedlaczek form the Monroe Wine Company, the former as President and the latter as Superintendent.²³

John Kressbach became a renowned winemaker in charge of the Detroit Wine Company headquartered in Monroe from 1868 until his death in 1888. Fourteen acres of vines were planted adjacent to the city of Monroe.²⁴

In 1873, another notable settler of the area was George W. Bruckner who established Lotus Island Vineyard, including five acres of Concord and Catawba. A year later, Snake Island was renamed to Bruckner's Lotus Island as a tribute to the winemaker. Snake Island was later renamed to Lotus Island.²⁵ Another island nearby was owned by Bruckner and E.J. Boyd, who grew mostly Concord and smaller amounts of Catawba and Delaware.²⁶

By 1873, more than 20 vineyards on nearly 200 acres grew 600,000 pounds of grapes. The grape varieties grown were largely Concord, Catawba, Delaware, Ives, Norton's Virginia and Hartford Prolific, and a few other varieties that were occasionally added for experimental purposes.²⁷ By 1887, most farmers in the county had a small vineyard. And, at one time, more than 1,000 acres of grapevines were planted.²⁸

The Pointe Aux Peaux winery continued to flourish for many years. In 1874, 44,000 pounds of grapes were grown. Sterling continued to be recognized as a savvy business leader in the community. In 1877, Sterling served on the executive committee of the Michigan State Agricultural Society²⁹ and was, notably, the chairman of the business committee for 12 years.³⁰

Another notable Monroe winemaker is Anton Weier (no relation to Joseph Weier) who had emigrated from Wackerhiem, Rheim Hesse, Germany. In 1884, Weier imported Concord grapes from New York and planted a small vineyard. By 1891, his company, Weier Wine Company had a 30-acre vineyard and a wine cellar with capacity to hold 140,000 gallons. Weier primarily used Catawba, Golden Concord, Delaware and American Claret for the wines produced by his

winery. Before his death in 1907, Weier worked with his son August, who learned winemaking from his father.³¹

The state census of 1884 indicated that, in 1883, Monroe County had 309 acres of vines: 184,673 pounds of grapes sold and 12,335 gallons of wine were made.³²

This same year, as stated in the *The Public Leader*, the official newspaper for the beer, wine and liquor industry at the time, noted that at the Detroit Wholesale Market, “grapes are in light supply with only a few Catawbas offerings, and selling at 7 cents per pound in this market.”³³

In 1885, a log book was started at the cottage, built in front of the Pointe Aux Peaux winery building. The log book’s first entry was July 1 of this year and stated, “The buildings, vineyard and grounds looked nicely.”³⁴ Noteworthy, a copy of this log book is available at the Monroe County Historical Museum.

In 1891, Sterling passed away from pneumonia at age 73. Within the year, the wife of or daughter of Sterling’s winery partner, Williams, discarded the remaining wine as she had become active in the temperance movement.³⁵ The families closed the winery business, though the property stayed in the family for years, remaining a favorite summertime destination through the 1940s.

The deaths of Monroe’s pioneer winemakers, grape rot and the subsequent onset of Prohibition ended this region’s renowned reputation for fine wine and thriving vineyards. The value of this spectacular land along Lake Erie increased and development ensued on the prime real estate that was once home to Michigan’s burgeoning wine industry.

After the demise of the winery, Pointe Aux Peaux’s two-story building was converted to a house for the caretakers, which soon after earned the name The Stone House. Interestingly, The Stone House still stands today (2009) and may be the oldest winery building in the state of Michigan. Of note, Gerald Burrer bought the property in 1946. When he passed away, his son Bill Burrer sold the property, though a stipulation of the sale was that the new buyer had to

preserve the winery building for its historical value to the area. The Stone House is connected seamlessly to a modern lake house sitting on a large Lake Erie parcel.

Plantings Beyond Monroe Region

The 1884 state census indicated that 24,685 gallons of wine were produced in Michigan. Of the 3,228 acres of vineyards, 1,550,702 pounds of grapes were sold. Notably, half of the wine production was in Monroe County.³⁶



The old Pointe Aux Peaux winery building is now seamlessly connected to a modern lake house.

Monroe County dominated wine production in the state in the mid-to-late 1800s; however, there were other regions producing wines and growing vineyards. Of course, many European settlers planted private vineyards to continue long-standing Old World family traditions of making wine for personal enjoyment.

A few other distinguished notations in history include the plantings of grapes in 1850 by Rev. Fr. Goedetz, a pastor of the Catholic Church in Westphalia in Clinton County. Apparently, the church parishioners followed Goedetz's lead and it wasn't long before nearly every farm in the area had grapevines. According to the 1887 report, "wine has been made in considerable quantities and the sale and culture has been profitable to those who engaged in it."³⁷

In 1862, the farm of Jonathon G. Ramsdell, a circuit court judge in Grand Traverse County, gained a reputation for testing and showcasing fruit varieties.³⁸ In the 1887 Michigan State Horticultural Report, it states that Ramsdell, at one time, had planted two and a half acres of vineyards, including Iona, Wilder, Delaware, Concord and Agawam. Ramsdell stated that he thought Iona was worth 15 cents a pound for the manufacturing of wine, though he shared, "I have abandoned grape culture, and ought to have ripped out my vines last year, but was too tender-hearted. The truth is, the little insects known as thripes have met me and I am theirs.... The vineyard that has been my pride will be given up and I shall abandon the business."³⁹ Unfortunately, his vineyard did not survive.

In 1870, George Parmalee, who at one point was an appointee of the Michigan State Horticultural Society, of Old Mission Peninsula encouraged farmers to plant different fruit varieties. According to the 1922 Annual Report by Michigan State Horticultural Society, “this prompted Edward Bradfield to experiment with every variety of grapes grown in the United States. After planting as many as 38 varieties of grapes in 1873, he decided Iona was the best for wine.”⁴⁰ Bradfield’s farm was in Ada in Kent County.⁴¹

The 1884 census also indicated that 47 acres of vineyards were planted and 3,294 gallons of wine were produced in Gratiot County. To the east, Bay County had 34 acres of vines planted, which generated 2,349 gallons of wine. More than 833 acres of grapevines were producing grapes in Berrien County, though only 677 gallons of wine were recorded for the census. Nearly 500,000 pounds of grapes were sold.⁴²

In 1899, Lawyer Robert Taylor planted five acres of grapes in Lapeer on the western boundary of the town. A regional legend states, “A beekeeper friend gave Taylor a grape seed that had gotten stuck in his hollow tooth. Taylor planted it and the vine produced the best of his Concord grapes at the time.”⁴³

Horace W. Davis, who had a 200-acre farm, planted 2,000 grapevines a year for several years, starting around the same time as Taylor’s plantings. Interestingly, this vineyard was later leased by Joseph Wakaresku in 1935 and the Lapeer Winery was established, becoming a renowned winery in Michigan for two decades.⁴⁴

Southwest Michigan

In 1856, in southwest Michigan’s Van Buren County, A. B. Jones bought a small farm near Paw Paw Station, a depot built where an “Indian trail” and the railroad intersected (now Lawton). Jones planted a few grapevines, most likely Delawares, and eventually sent grapes to Lansing. He received twelve to fifteen cents a pound and earned roughly \$40. This prompted him to

plant several hundred vines in 1868 and coin his farm, "Pioneer Vineyards." The grape growing and supply business made him a prosperous gentleman of the time.⁴⁵

Of course, Jones had no idea that his vineyard planting would stimulate Michigan's oldest wine industry of today (2009) and help attract Welch's to this region in 1919, a pivotal milestone in Michigan's vineyard history. As Monroe's wine region essentially folded during Prohibition, Van Buren County's vineyards thrived, supplying their bountiful of grapes to Welch's for grape juice production.

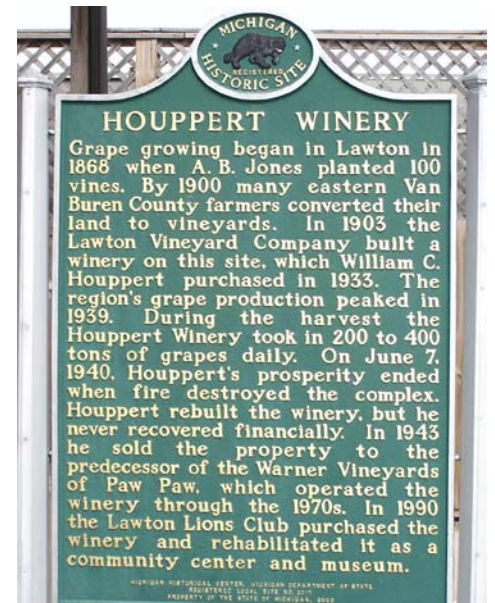
First Official Experiment Station

The establishment of the national Hatch Act of 1887 underscored the importance of research, providing federal land grant funds to set up experimental agricultural stations.⁴⁶ These stations were connected to land grant colleges established within the Morrill Act.⁴⁷

Michigan's first experiment station under the act was established in South Haven in 1889 on the farm of Theodatus Timothy Lyon. Lyon had extensive plantings of various fruit cultivars, including 87 varieties of grapes. He also served as President of the State Pomological Society of Michigan⁴⁸ and was very active in the Michigan State Horticultural Society. The 1887 report mentioned that someone made a crayon drawing of Lyon and presented it to him at a meeting. It said that the drawing was sent to the State Capitol for permanent display.⁴⁹

1900: Temperance Movement on the Rise

By 1900, Van Buren County was flourishing with vineyards. New York, Ohio, Missouri and Michigan were the nation's largest wine producers. Monroe's once-booming wine-growing region was in decline, and the temperance movement was heating up across the country. Eighteen years later, Michigan banned alcoholic beverages on May 1, 1918 a year and a half



This Michigan Historic Site marker is located at the old Houppert Winery building that is now the Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center in Lawton.



Grape baskets loaded with freshly-picked grapes ready for shipment. (Photo: St. Julian archives)

before the 18th Amendment banned alcoholic beverages in all states in the union. The 18th Amendment was ratified in 1919 and the ban of alcohol became effective January 16, 1920 – the rollicking era of Prohibition arrived.

Endnotes

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- ⁸ Old Village Plat, Monroe, Michigan, 19 July 2009
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- ¹³ Michigan State Pomological Society, Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan (Lansing: W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1874) 222.
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- ¹⁷ Michigan State Pomological Society, Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan (Lansing: W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1872) 435.
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- ¹⁹ Michigan State Pomological Society, Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan (Lansing: W.S. George & Co., State Printers and Binders, 1873) 184.
- ²⁰ Monroe Commercial, 18 September 1873, p 3. and 2 October 1873, p 3.

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- ²³ Adrian County Directory 1874-5 (Detroit: Burch, Montgomery and Co., 1874) 53.
- ²⁴ John McClelland Bulkley, History of Monroe County, Michigan, Volume II (Chicago, New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1913) 647; and Michigan State Pomological Society, Seventeenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the State Pomological Society of Michigan (Lansing: Thorpe & Godfrey, State Printers and Binders, 1887) 214.
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