

Kingsley, Michigan is a small town that is located fifteen miles south of Traverse City in beautiful northern Michigan. Kingsley was founded in the late 19th century and thrived off the lumber boom. Then, as the lumber boom subsided agricultural became the main economic base. Finally, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s road and transportation improvements made Traverse City more accessible, and Traverse City became the main employer of Kingsley residents. Like so many small towns, the schoolhouse was an integral part of the community. As the town grew and changed, so did the schoolhouse and the land surrounding it. By studying the school house and the land surrounding it, one can track the growth of this small town. The biggest factor influencing the development of the school and this particular plot of land is the economic opportunities provided by the surrounding areas.

Before humans arrived, northern Michigan was largely covered by forests. The Great Lakes provide an ideal environment for forests. “Winds coming across Lake Michigan pick up moisture and deposit it inland as snow and rain” (“DNR-Forests”). Areas near the west coast of Michigan, where Kingsley is located, benefit most from this lake-effect precipitation and because of this forests in this area are highly productive. It is easy to assume that pre-settlement forests would all be old growth, but that is not necessarily true. Factors such as blow downs and wildfires affected the growths of forests. The forests in the Grand Traverse County area circa 1800 were mostly white pines, red pines, and cedars (Corner). These types of trees are generally drier and are more susceptible to wildfires that could be sparked by lightening (“DNR-Forests”). Therefore, these forests were not just old growth, but rather “a rich mosaic of various ages including saplings, even aged trees, and old growth that could range from 250-400 years” (“DNR-Forests”).

The original forests of Kingsley were most likely first inhabited by the Potawatomi tribe who arrived in the mid-17th century (“Potawatomi Culture and History”). The first white settlers were the Judson Kingsley and John Hull families from New York who arrived in 1861. A few years later, Kingsley was put on the map when a railroad was built through John Kingsley’s property. In 1874, Dr. Myron S. Brownson bought 1,000 acres adjacent to John Kingsley’s property. These few families began to build up the town. A train station was the first development, followed by a post office, hotel, and several businesses. Kingsley was officially incorporated in 1890 (“Village of Kingsley History”). The railroad and abundance of timber offered economic opportunities to the people living in this area and the town began to grow.

The lumber industry drastically affected the environment in Michigan. When Michigan became a state in 1837, 90% of the state was forested (Michigan Environmental Council). The common legend is that a squirrel could have traveled Michigan without having to touch the ground. By the 1880s and 1890s timber was in high demand in New England. “By the early 1900s, millions of Michigan pine trees worth more than all the gold mined in California” (“DNR-Forests”). The lumber industry exploded. A few decades later, the industry began to collapse. One factor that led to the collapse was forest fires. Dried debris and stumps left behind by lumber companies posed a major fire hazard and there were two major wildfires in Michigan in 1871 and 1881 (“DNR-Lumber”). As lumber companies faced bankruptcy and tax delinquency, the State of Michigan took control of those lands and began conservation efforts

("DNR-Lumber"). Figure two shows the percentage of land owned and conserved by the State of Michigan as State Forests. Grand Traverse County, where Kingsley is located, is 40-70% state forest.

The lumber industry had a specific economic impact in Kingsley. When Perry F. Powers wrote *A History of Northern Michigan and its People* in 1912, he described Kingsley as "a growing little place with four churches, a flour and planing mills, a bank, electric light and a water plant, and a good school" (Powers 263). In Kingsley, a major lumber mill was founded by Ralph Case and Joseph O. Croster. The mill was started in 1881 and was for years the largest industry in the region as well as the largest employer (Powers 876). The population of Kingsley grew to about 800 people by the 1894 with lumber being the primary economic base ("Village of Kingsley History").

When the population grows, so must the schools. The very first school of Kingsley was called the Porter School House. It was built in 1884 and was located west of the village (see figure 3). Clearly, the image shows that the schoolhouse was not adequate for a growing population. On July 4, 1894 a fire destroyed major portions of the village, which gave the village an opportunity to rebuild ("Village of Kingsley History"). A property map from 1895 shows the rebuilding plans (Figure 1). For the first time a parcel of land was set aside labeled "public school land." This parcel of land, located on the corner of Clark St. and Blair St. is still public school land to this day. The first school to stand on this land was built in the late 1890s (see figure four). The school remained there until 1960.

During the period of the second school house from 1890s-1960, Kingsley was forced to change its economic dependence from the lumber industry to agriculture. Fortunately Kingsley experienced a blessing from geographic luck. The soil in the area was good for agriculture and the village did not suffer the same fate of so many other small lumbering towns that completely vanished after the lumber industry collapsed. The most common crops in the area were potatoes and corn ("A History of Agriculture in Michigan"). This new agriculture-based economy suited Kingsley well. The total population of Grand Traverse County grew from 20,479 in 1900 to 33,490 in 1960 (Forstall). Families and businesses thrived during this time. By 1960, Kingsley boasted a dry goods store, department store, meat market, grocery, seven gas stations, and two bars. As in the days of the lumber industry, the economy of the village was reflected in its need for a larger school.

The first improvement to the school was made in 1942. A stone gymnasium was added to the school on the corner of Blair St. and Clark St. The improvement was constructed as a Work Progress Administration project. Michigan was becoming heavily industrialized by this point in its history, so the Great Depression hit the state harder than most. By 1933, nearly 50% of the state's nonagricultural work force was unemployed, which was almost twice as high as the national rate (*A Brief History of Michigan*). Therefore, the Work Progress Administration was very active in Michigan. By the middle of the year of 1942, a majority of the factories had converted to produce products for the war, but earlier in the year, when the school was being built, unemployment was still relatively high. It is interesting to see how global events like the

Great Depression and World War II can and did affect something as small as the construction of a schoolhouse in a small rural town.

The second major construction project happened in 1963 (“Village of Kingsley History”). The school was torn down and rebuilt. Several factors contributed to the need for the new school. First, the stone school was structurally unstable. Also, the school had become too small to fit the needs of a community that was continuing to grow and thrive on the agricultural industries. Therefore, a new school was built. The project was completed in 1965. The school housed all students from kindergarten through high school. The building still stands today and a section of the stone school house still stands.

In the 1960s and 1970s the economy of Kingsley shifted again. Once again, the economy of Kingsley depended on natural resources. However, this time the economy was dependent on the environment in a much less direct way. Increasingly, residents of Kingsley were employed in Traverse City. Traverse City was continuing to grow. By 2011, of the county’s 88,349 residents, almost 20% lived within Traverse City’s 8.7 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau). Traverse City’s economy depended on two major industries, agriculture and tourism. The peninsula provided ideal conditions for growing fruit, most famously cherries. The natural beauty of the area draws tourists all seasons of the year. As Traverse City continued to grow and roads continued to improve, residents of Kingsley relied more and more on Traverse City for employment, entertainment, and other goods and services.

Currently in Kingsley, Michigan there are now three schools. The 1963 school on the original parcel of land set aside in 1895 is now called Kingsley Middle School. A new elementary school was constructed in 1985 just south of the original school on the same parcel of land. Construction on the school took two years to complete. A high school was added in 2001 a quarter mile away. These additions of schools are a testament to the growing population and community of Kingsley. The final construction to occur on the original school house occurred in 2004 when asbestos was removed from the school.

One of the best ways to gather information on small town local communities is to ask the members who have lived there. Charles Vogue was born in Kingsley in 1942. His parents owned a store that doubled as a grocery and post office. Mr. Vogue attended the old stone schoolhouse for his entire schooling. He said, “All students attended the same school house. It was a stone school house with a flat roof.” While he was there, the average class size was approximately 20 students. When the school became too crowded, the school board would purchase a one room school house and relocated it to the schoolyard. Mr. Vogue was a member of the school board when the new elementary school was built in 1985. He recalls the decision to build the school as being “a popular decision. The economy of Kingsley was strong during the time and the population was growing. The old school simply wasn’t big enough anymore. It stopped making sense to keep buying portables. Instead we chose to just build a new school.”

Even though the population of Kingsley was growing at the time, business was declining. Kingsley was conveniently located twenty minutes away from Traverse City. People

could work in Traverse City and still live in small town with lower property tax and more safety and security. However, big businesses in Traverse City were forcing small business in Kingsley to close their doors. It was difficult for small grocery stores and gas stations to compete with supermarkets that were more convenient and less expensive located a mere twenty minutes away in Traverse City. Mr. Vogue said “I had friends that had to close their doors. It came at a good time though. Kingsley is becoming more of a family village and all of those old shop owners were ready to retire anyway.” When asked if he thought the evolution of the school was a good representation of the evolution of the community, Mr. Vogue said “I think that is fair. When I was young the town was so small that the one building was enough. As more families move in it makes sense that we needed a bigger school. I think it shows that the village is health and continuing to grow.”

It is fascinating how one block of land can tell such a rich story. Hundreds of people daily drive by the school house on the corner of Clark St. and Blair St. and never consider the history that it stands for. That block of land witnessed the change from wildlife and forests to humans and agriculture. This small piece of land tells a story of people, economies, destruction, growth, and history.

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Appendix

Figure One – Kingsley Left. Atlas: Grand Traverse County 1895. www.historcmapworks.com



Figure Two – www.geo.msu.edu/geomich/nationalforests.html

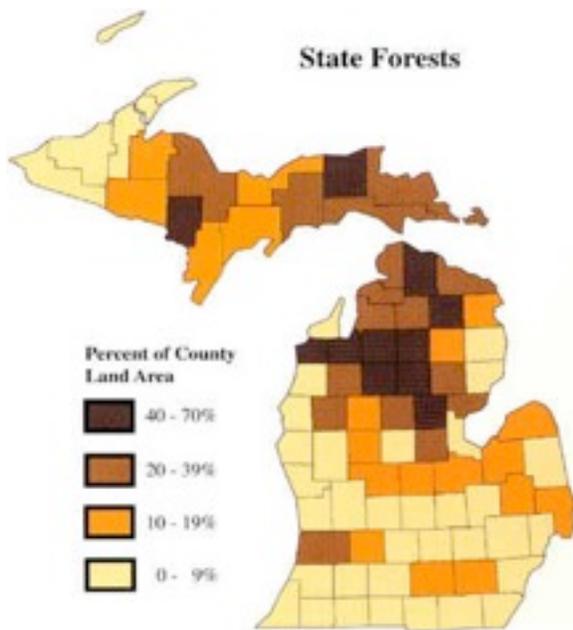


Figure Three – Traverse Area District Library: Local History Collection. Floyd Webster.



Figure Four – Traverse Area District Library: Local History Collection. Floyd Webster



Figure Five – Traverse Area District Library: Local History Collection. Floyd Webster

