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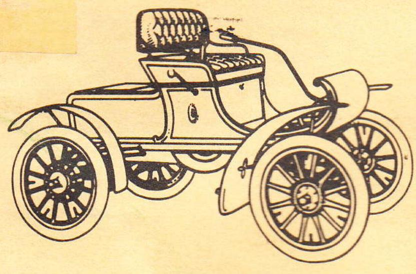

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Transportation in Lansing

PRIOR TO 1905

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Columbia University, New York City, 1963

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FRANK N. ELLIOTT

Frank N. Elliott, born March 18, 1926, at Dunkirk, New York; graduated from Silver Creek High School, June 1944; received his BA from Alfred University, Alfred, New York, 1949; received his MA from Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, August 1950; and received his Ph. D. in American History from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin in 1956.

He served in the Army during World War II from November 1943 to April 1946, in Okinawa.

He was a graduate assistant in history at Ohio University and a research assistant for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin from 1951 until December 1952. From January 1952 until July 1956, he was field supervisor for the Wisconsin Historical Society. In this capacity he was in charge of the collecting activities and the work connected with the local historical societies throughout the state.

Most of his research has been in the field of transportation history. His Master's thesis was "The Erie Gauge War--A Study in Early Railroad History." His Doctoral dissertation was "The Causes for and the Growth of Railroad Regulation in Wisconsin 1848 to 1876." He is currently preparing his Doctoral dissertation for publication and is also working on a study of the growth and development of the Michigan railroad network and he plans to investigate rather thoroughly the relationship between the developing railroad network and the development of agriculture in the state.

Since July of 1956 he has been Curator of History at Michigan State University in charge of preparing the exhibits and collecting the reference materials of a historical nature relating to Michigan agriculture and other historical matters. Since being with the University, he has been most active in the development of a rather extensive manuscript collection relating to the history of Michigan and agriculture generally and including some rather interesting items relating to Lansing and surrounding territories.

Dr. Elliott presented the following paper, "Transportation in Lansing Prior to 1905", at an evening meeting held April 2, 1959, at the Michigan State University Museum, to the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

Permission for publication of this material must be received from the author, Dr. Frank N. Elliott, or the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

TRANSPORTATION IN LANSING PRIOR TO 1905

Frank N. Elliott

The transportation facilities available in a community at any given time determine to a considerable extent the level of economic and even of social and cultural life that the area can sustain. In the Nineteenth Century the need for a cheap, dependable, year-round means of transportation was basic--without it frontier America could not hope to advance much beyond the subsistence level of existence. American farmers never operated on a subsistence basis by choice. They preferred to locate near a harbor, navigable stream, road or other established means of communication. When such facilities were not available, the typical pioneer, like most Ingham County residents between 1838 and 1905, spent a considerable portion of their time and money, in an almost desperate effort to develop an adequate transportation network for their area.

Lansing had little to boast of, transportationwise when Jacob Cooley settled on the banks of the Grand in 1838. To be sure, the Grand River trail did run along the general route of today's U. S. 16, but Indian trails were hardly suitable for the transportation of bulky freight items. The Grand River, in its natural state, was not suitable for the transportation of large quantities of heavy goods. The rapids in the Grand River did make it probable that grist and saw mills might develop at Lansing but at the same time that they encouraged industry they discouraged transportation. In short, political considerations, rather than the transportation facilities then available, dictated the location of the Capitol at Lansing in 1847.

The Grand River was an important factor in the arly history of Lansing but primarily because of the water power possibilities it provided rather than as a means of communication. Fur traders could make good use of the river since they travelled largely by canoe and their cargoes had a high unit valuation in proportion to their bulk. To the trappers, portaging around rapids and other obstructions on the river was a nuisance but not an insurmountable one. A few early settlers did float their families and supplies down the river from Jackson but this never occurred on a large scale.[1] Between 1838 and 1848 the State appropriated money and the proceeds from at least 25,000 acres of internal improvement lands to the task of making the upper Grand River navigable by lake and river vessels. A canal and locks were to be constructed around the rapids at Grand Rapids and river obstructions were to be removed as far east as Lyons. The canal and locks were never completed and although a few steamboats and pole boats did operate between Grand Rapids and Lyons, these facilities were never an important economic asset to the inhabitants of Lansing. The completion of the Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad in 1858 forced the steamboats between Ionia and Grand Rapids out of business.[2] River navigation was not to be the solution to Lansing's transportation problems.

Indian trails were one of the first means of reaching the Lansing area. The main trail in the Lansing area was the Grand River trail which followed the basic route of today's U. S. 16. There were also other trails throughout the County but Indian trails were generally narrow and hardly suitable for wagon transportation.[3] The Indians, however, had chosen their routes well. Indian trails followed the high ground for the most part and were generally the shortest routes not requiring extensive improvement available between the settlements that were to become Michigan cities.

White settlers converted the Indian trails into roads as rapidly as possible. At first road construction in Michigan was furthered by the Federal Government--often in the guise of military preparedness. In 1832, while Michigan was still a territory, Congress directed that a road be laid out from Detroit through Shiawassee County to the mouth of the Grand River. By 1836, approximately $50,000 in Federal funds had been spent clearing the roadway as far as North Lansing.[4] After statehood, Michigan received further Federal aid in financing internal improvement projects. In 1841, Congress passed a law stating that five percent of the proceeds from the sale of public lands within the state might be used according to the discretion of the legislature.[5] That same year, another act gave Michigan and other recently established states 500,000 acres of public lands that were located within their respective boundaries which should be used for public improvements.[6] The proceeds from the sale of these "internal improvement lands" were used for a wide variety of projects. Some of it was used to help finance the state railway network while in other cases specified amounts of land were devoted to aiding the financing of particular bridges, canals and highways, including in 1849, a bridge and streets in Lansing.[7] Further Federal aid for highway construction was not forthcoming and by 1850 unfortunate experiences with railroad and canal financing moved the state to refuse to help finance further internal improvements. If roads were to be built, some other agency would have to build them.

The townships were given the task of building and maintaining highways in Michigan between 1850 and 1905. The technique of laying out a township road was not involved. Petitions for a new road were directed to the township board. When it was decided to build a road, the Highway Commissioner for that township was directed to let the contract and make the necessary arrangements for the actual construction. Contracts for the grading were generally assigned to farmers along the line who would perform this work in their off seasons. Since road building consisted of little more than cutting off the trees and brush, leveling off the humps, and filling up the holes, it was work that most farmers could do with tools they had at hand. Township residents were liable for a certain amount of road work each year although that obligation could be discharged by payment of a small fee. The work was supervised by the locally appointed, and untrained highway commissioners.[8]

The results were as bad as might have been expected. Orlando Barnes, one of Lansing's most prominent citizens and a staunch advocate of improved transportation pin-pointed much of the problem. "Most of the road making and repairing is done by or under the direction of men who never read a

text book on the subject. Never even examined the work of good road making. The result is waste--waste and disappointment. The road maker must be trained in his business as much as the doctor or the lawyer in his. The result of ignorance is the same in all. It may therefore be justly said we can never have good roads or low road taxes till we put road making and repairing in the hands of experts."[9]

This situation persisted until 1905 when a constitutional amendment permitted the use of public funds for the construction and improvement of public wagon roads.[10] Consistently good highways did not come to Michigan until after trained engineers undertook the supervision and maintenance of the state's highways in 1905.

Michigan settlers could not avoid using the highways, such as they were, no matter what their condition. Early settlers waxed profanely poetic in describing the inadequacies of Ingham County highways. One old settler recalled nostalgically the many times that he had been forced to throw a bag of grain over his back and carry it to the mill before the construction of a highway permitted him to use a wagon.[11] Another man telling of his trip from New York State to Ingham County in 1838 commented:

> "We soon struck into timbered lands and saw less of swamps and marshes. Roads were less travelled, but guided by marked trees, we found our way to the Center,--called Jefferson City-- . . . . We went on foot about a mile and found two huts, a little clearing, and a family going in. But here was the end of a beaten road, and of all road, except an Indian trail. We had designed to have continued our journey to DeWitt in Clinton County, only 14 miles from this place, but were obliged to forego the journey for want of a road . . . . On the 25th we left for home, taking, from necessity, the way we came in, there being no other way out of the city."[12]

Augustus Weller, one of the commissioners appointed to locate the Capitol in 1847, took three days to travel the forty miles from Jackson to Lansing. He was forced to cut trees to provide a means of crossing swollen streams and to mince along over corduroy roads that were partly afloat.[13] Conditions continued so bad that it took four to four and a half days to get from Lansing to Jackson and back when the first legislative session was held at the new Capitol in 1848.[14] Rough and seasonally dusty or muddy, highway travel was hardly a pleasure in the period prior to the Civil War. More important, the highways were not capable of sustaining the ready passage of freight or of bulky agricultural produce that was needed by a maturing county economy. Still, a pioneer reminiscing in 1895 concluded that there was less complaint about the roads in 1842 than there was at that later date.[15]

The public highways were inadequate and yet some form of farm to market or market to market highways were needed. To resolve this dilemma, Michigan, like many other states, succumbed to the plank road craze of the 1850's.

Private corporations appeared everywhere to build sensibly graded, wooden surfaced toll roads. Southern Michigan was covered with timber--much of it nothing more than a nuisance to the settlers. What could be more logical, or economical than to cut that surplus timber into planks and to use the planks to surface an all-season highway? Then, as now, there were enough people who were willing to pay for the privilege of using the superior facilities of the toll road to make a well-located concern a profitable venture.

The State of Michigan chartered over one hundred plank road companies. In 1848 alone, at least eight such concerns were chartered that would have gone through portions of Ingham County. Most of them would have passed through what is now Lansing. That same year the Legislature, responding to a nationwide reaction to the theoretically undemocratic "special charters", passed a general incorporation act for plank road companies. The sections dealing with the corporate structure of the company were not remarkable but those dealing with construction are interesting. Each plank road was to be at least two and not more than four rods wide. It was to have at least sixteen feet of good smooth and permanent road of which at least eight feet would be of three inch plank. The state extended the right of eminent domain to these corporations, but at the same time steps were taken to protect the traveling public from exhorbitant charges. Toll gates could be erected but rates were not to exceed two cents per mile for vehicle or carriage drawn by two animals. Alternative rates were fixed for other vehicles or for vehicles with more or less horses, for sheep, swine and cattle. The Legislature charitably absolved people going to and from military parades that they were required to attend, and people going to and from funerals, from any toll. The Legislature deliberately encouraged plank road construction by exempting plank road companies from all taxes except a one percent fee each year on the capital stock of the company. Such a tax might not only encourage plank road construction, but might also discourage stock watering and the fixing of rates on the basis of providing a fair return per share on an over-capitalized concern. These taxes were later changed to a still modest five percent of the net profit and still later to two and one-half percent of the gross income.[16]

The most important of the plank roads built in Ingham County was the property of the Lansing and Howell Plank Road Company. Chartered in 1850, it was meant to be, and quickly was, merged into the Detroit and Howell Plank Road Company. Its route was essentially that of the old Grand River Trail. Approximately five million board feet of oak, most of it sawed in sawmills especially constructed for that purpose along the right of way, went into the construction of this road. Construction on the eighty-three mile route from Detroit to Lansing was completed by 1853. In good weather, passengers on the Hibbard and Burrell Stage line were able to make the trip between the Capitol and the State's leading city in ten hours for only $4.00. Previously the cost in time and money for the same journey was an uncertain factor--dependent primarily on the prevailing weather and corresponding condition of the roads. Subsequently, the road was continued to Ionia and Grand Rapids. The Detroit and Howell was profitable from the time it opened

until the completion of the more satisfactory Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad in 1858. In 1866, the Detroit and Howell, still a modestly profitable concern, received legislative permission to abandon the by now worn out planks and to convert to a graveled turnpike.[17]

By the 1880's most of the state's plank roads had been converted to graveled turnpikes. By that time many of the plank and graveled highways were not very good, indeed some of them had always left much to be desired. One state inspector told his superior that the graveled roads were generally inadequately drained, that only twenty-four of the eighty-nine companies that were actually completed ever paid their taxes and that "I have yet to find the 'smooth, good and permanent road' called for in the Acts."[18]

Many people concluded that it was improper for plank road companies to charge tolls for the use of a graveled turnpike and demanded that the charters be forfeited. In October 1879, C. C. Trowbridge, a director of the now plankless Detroit and Howell Plank Road Company, chastized that firm's detractors in a brief historical lecture. Bemoaning the shortness of mankind's memory, he reminded men of the State's miserable highway facilities prior to the coming of the plank roads. He recalled for his listeners their previous pleas for improved transportation. He narrated how private businessmen had stepped into the gap, supplied the necessary capital when public funds were not forthcoming and effected a major improvement in the State's transportation situation. Trowbridge claimed that plank road company dividends had averaged less than five percent per year in an age when his readers must have remembered that rates of ten percent were not at all unusual. He reminded them of the savings in the cost of fuel and supplies that the road had permitted, asserted that land values had quadrupled after the construction of the road, and insisted that fair play demanded that the charters continue in force until their prescribed conclusion in the early 1900's.[19]

A. N. Munder, another supporter of the Lansing and Howell, succintly ended a similar plea for justice by saying ". . . . it was what they [the detractors] wanted when these men [the investors] spent their money for it and it is what they [the detractors] want now only they do not wish to pay for it." [20] These, or similar arguments were not without effect and in the early 1890's the state made arrangements for a compensated dissolution of the plank road companies.[21] Plank roads had met many of the region's developing demands for transportation but they were still not the panacea for the state's transportation needs.

By the mid-1830's, many Michigan citizens became convinced that the railroad was the solution to their transportation problem. Railroads provided popular topics for the Fourth of July orators and other civic boosters. One such speaker rhetorically questioned whether as a result of the railroad's cheap, flexible, all-season transportation for both passengers and freight ". . . on this spot, where the forest so lately reared its huge trunks and lofty boughs, may we not expect ere long a great metropolis?"[22]

Most Michigan citizens were satisfied by this time that the state's development would be sadly delayed unless adequate transportation facilities were promptly provided. Therefore, the first Constitution of the new State enjoined the Legislature to promote better transportation, and in 1837, the Legislature obediently passed a grandiose public improvements law. This measure was not necessarily as foolhardy as it may appear in retrospect. Railroading, to be sure, was still in its infancy--stephensen had proved the practicality of such transportation only twelve years previously. Still, Michigan's first railroad, the privately financed Erie and Kalamazoo, did go into operation in 1837 and the still young Erie Canal, which had done so much to accelerate the settlement of Michigan, was an exciting example of what a state-owned transportation route could do. Surely, the argument went, Michigan would fare as well as New York State had fared in its venture into the realm of public transportation.

Michigan's Public Improvements Law of 1837, provided for one of the most ambitious programs of state financed transportation in a transportation starved age. The act provided for the location and construction of three east-west railroads, two to the south and one to the north of Lansing, and for the construction of two canals.[23]

The Public Improvements Law was not the first state aid to railroads in Michigan, but it was the most dramatic. Earlier, in 1835, the territory had given some railroads banking powers but that permission had only succeeded in further confusing an already chaotic system of wildcat banks. Later, in 1838, the state had, without ill effect, guaranteed certain issues of stock for two concerns and authorized state loans of $100,000 each to two other companies. However, due to a combination is mismanagement and bad luck, the projects sponsored under the improvement act of 1837 had less happy conclusions. By 1846, the State, disillusioned, badly in debt and defaulting in payments on its bonds, sold its interests in those concerns and got out of the transportation business.[24] The Michigan Constitution of 1850 closed the door on any future State promotional schemes by declaring emphatically in Article Fourteen, Sections 6, 8, and 9, that the credit of the state was not to be used in furtherance of internal improvement schemes.

Wanting railroads and getting them were two entirely different matters. Railroads were expensive. Even a poorly built and equipped railroad was likely to cost over $30,000 per mile. Furthermore, Michigan, like many other trans-Appalachian communities, found that the need for railroads often preceded the ability of an area to sustain them. Private venture capital, hard enough to obtain under the best of circumstances, was practically impossible to obtain for enterprises that showed little likelihood of immediate profit. As one railroad supporter voiced it, "capitalists will not invest in your new railroad companies merely to go through a wilderness even if the country was settled . . . ."[25]

After 1850, the State could no longer constitutionally build railroads or aid private concerns in financing them. Andrew Jackson's Maysville veto

of 1830 had effectively eliminated the possibility that the federal government might contribute to such localized internal improvement projects. Still, the railroads were badly needed--where were the funds to come from?

The Federal Government owned vast quantities of land in 1850. Much of the public domain, so the argument went, could never be exploited until railroads or comparable means of transportation had been built through those untouched lands. Since that was the situation, why not give away some of the public domain in order to make other portions of it saleable?

The arguments in favor of land grants to railroads were in harmony with the spirit of the times and had real merit. In 1850, the Illinois Central Railroad received the first of what were to be many Federal land grants to aid railroad construction. Six years later the Lansing State Republican reported with cautious optimism that Michigan had just received its first Federal land grant. Congress had provided that one railroad in the Upper Peninsula and three railroads in the Lower Peninsula were to receive the now traditional checkered pattern of alternate odd numbered sections for six miles on either side of the track. The remaining, and now presumably more valuable sections, were to be sold by the government at not less than double the normal minimum price.[26]

The complete story of the Michigan railroad land grants is a complex and undeveloped story. Suffice to say that three of the concerns passing through Lansing received land-grant aid which was helpful in financing the construction of one or more of their divisions. The Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw alone obtained approximately 744,827 acres and netted around $3,-525,973 on the sale of that land.[27]

The lands were not given to the railroads until they had constructed a prescribed number of miles. Meanwhile, however, the promoters were able to pledge the promised lands, as security for normal bond issues. Then, after the road had been built and the grant claimed, the lands could be sold by whomever owned them at the moment for whatever the market would bear. Unfortunately for the railroad promoters, the land grants, although a tremendous help in financing a road, were not always easy to sell and sometimes caused as many headaches as they had cured.[28]

Michigan citizens continued to be interested in furthering railroad construction after 1850, even though they were unwilling that the State should undertake such projects itself. Both the Legislature and individual communities helped such projects in a number of ways. A general incorporation act of 1855, although providing for rate regulations and other matters in the public interest, made it very easy to form such a corporation. In the same measure, Michigan, like many states, reverted to a policy that had already proved successful in encouraging plank roads and adopted a railroad tax structure that was deliveratelv favorable to the railroads. All normal state or local taxes on railroad property were waived in favor of a one percent tax on the company's capital stock.[29] Indirect state aid did not stop with a favorable tax structure, however.

In 1869, the Michigan Legislature passed an act enabling localities to grant financial aid to railroads that would pass through or near them. In essence, the act provided that any township, village or city could make a loan or donation to a properly chartered railroad company of any sum up to ten percent of the community's assessed valuation. The act carefully provided rules governing the voting of aid to the railroads and wisely imposed on the Secretary of State the duty of holding the bonds until after the railroad had met its part of the obligation.[30]

Lansing, in company with over fifty other Michigan communities, responded promptly, and even eagerly, to this opportunity to encourage railroad construction. Such aid was not necessarily voluntary. Railroad promoters seemingly never had enough cash. By refusing to commit themselves publicly to a set route, the promoters could force neighboring communities to bid against each other to have the line built through their limits. There was an advantage in building to Lansing, Jackson, Detroit and other rapidly developing communities but traffic centers were not so well established that the railroads could not choose an alternate route. Furthermore, the concerns were often so short of funds that they had no choice other than to build to the highest bidder. The presence or absence of a railroad might well mean life or death to a community--indeed, many once thriving communities that were bypassed by the railroad are ghost towns today. It might be risky to support an unproven railroad project--it might be even more dangerous not to aid the project and see it located through another town. Lansing, thus motivated, promised a right of way through public streets, depot grounds and $10,000 with which to build the depot to the Amboy, Lansing and Traverse Bay in order to have the concern fix its station within the city proper.[31] In all, Lansing, and other Ingham County communities granted slightly over $118,000 in aid to railroads that passed through their region.[32]

Newspaper editors were inveterate city boosters during the mid-Nineteenth Century. Professionally optimistic, they continually pontificated on the natural and other advantages that made it inevitable that their community, no matter how small or ill-favored, must become one of the nation's leading trade centers. What skeptic could refuse to vote aid to a railroad from Battle Creek to Lansing when the presence of such a concern would mean that the banks of the Grand River would be studded with cotton and woolen factories . . . . "When cotton can and will, with the railroad, pour in from the Mississippi as cheap as it can be landed in New York. Who can imagine the magnitude of business on this route when your cars take on their loads of salt at Saginaw, and without transhipment load back with cotton, rice, sugar, molasses, tobacco, etc., etc., from the South. They are a part of what we should soon experience as the rich returns of a railroad from Lansing to Battle Creek."[33] In 1863, the editor of the <u>Lansing State Republican</u>, boosting the Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw at the moment, observed "People of Ingham County, it now remains for you to say whether we shall have a railroad south or not. If you vote the loan on Tuesday next the road will surely be speedily built. You cannot be so blind to your own best interests as to do

otherwise."[34] Two weeks later he happily reported that the aid had not only been voted but that over three fourths of the entire County had voted for it and that only four Lansing inhabitants had voted against the measure.[35]

Private, local, state and federal efforts were eventually rewarded and the railroads finally came to Lansing--although not nearly as quickly as the City's inhabitants thought that they should. The trunk line concept of railroading was still in its infancy and company titles reflected the essentially interurban nature of these early projects.

The Amboy, Lansing and Traverse Bay (sometimes referred to as the Awfully Long and Terribly Bumpy or as the "Rams Horn" because of its route)reached North Lansing from Owosso, September 4, 1861. After much impatient urging by the local editor and some assistance from local citizens who pitched in to help lay the track, the rails were finally extended the additional mile to Lansing by September 15, 1863. For the first time Lansing had direct rail communication with Detroit. The Amboy, Lansing and Traverse Bay assigned its rights south of Lansing to the Northern Central Michigan Railroad Company and by 1873, that concern had built south from Lansing to Jonesville where it connected with the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern.[36]

The Jackson, Lansing and Saginaw opened from Jackson to Lansing in 1866 and continued the line of the old Rams Horn from Owosso to Saginaw in 1867.[37] The Peninsular Railroad Company was put into operation from Battle Creek to Lansing in 1865. A subsequent consolidation with the Port Huron and Lake Michigan, which in turn became part of the Grand Trunk System extended connections on to Flint and Port Huron by 1877.[38] The Ionia and Lansing Railroad Company was opened between Lansing and Ionia in 1869 and by 1871 under the more ambitious title of the Detroit, Howell and Lansing, had extended its lines to Detroit.[39] Between 1861 and 1877 Lansing had completed its railway transportation network. The names have changed but the New York Central, Grand Trunk and Chesapeake and Ohio systems include those lines that were so happily greeted by Lansing residents almost a century ago.

Lansing generally was well pleased with its railroads. Inevitably there was some dissatisfaction, if only because railroads were still so new and unproven that shippers and operators alike did not know what they could legitimately expect of them. The equipment used was primitive and not altogether satisfactory. A few critics even claimed these early roads moved so slowly that the only way to tell whether you were going or not was to get off and put a chalk mark on the track.[40] In 1857, the state prison authorities suggested the alarming possibility that the railroads were guilty of bringing criminals in the State.[41] On the whole, however, most Lansing citizens seem to have shared the opinion of their editor who once gleefully announced, "Since the walls of Jericho began to tremble, no ram's horn has ever created such a sensation."[42]

The telegraph came close on the heels of the railroad. Since 1850, railroads had been making regular use of the telegraph in coordinating their operations. In 1864, one year after the completion of the Rams Horn, Lansing

had its first commercial telegraph in operation. Rates were high--it cost forty cents to send ten words to Detroit and three cents for each additional word, but Lansing businessmen now had instantaneous communication with outside markets, a matter of considerable importance in a period of slow mails.[43]

The problem of obtaining adequate transportation facilities within the city may have been commercially less important than obtaining proper inter-city facilities but was probably only slightly less vexing. The first streets were often little more than stated intentions. Mudholes were the order of the day and the underbrush was sometimes ten inches high at mid-street. A few enterprising hotel keepers established plank pathways for pedestrian traffic. Not until after Washington Avenue was graded in 1859 were plank walks put down in any consistent fashion. Plank sidewalks were cheap to construct. A rod of plank walk, four feet broad and one and a half inches thick laid on oak stringers could be built for only $2.50.[44]

Progress on the sidewalks dallied, however, and tempers frayed as "the ladies' best dresses are all in shreds. Half the population are limping about with sprained ankles and bruised shins and the crying evil is responsible for any amount of cursing, both loud and deep."[45] Planks got old, and to avoid damage suits the board sidewalks were eventually replaced by a combination of gravel, brick and cement walks. By 1905 approximately half of the city sidewalks were cement.[46]

Little was done to improve street paving until after the City had received its charter in 1859. That year a great deal of work was done on Washington Avenue. This improvement was paid for by both a special assessment on the property owners of that and adjacent streets and by the regular highway assessment of ten cents per hundred dollar valuation and fifty cents per male inhabitant of the city liable to the poll tax.[47] At its conclusion, some residences were left so high above the street that they had to install steps down to the level of the road while other homes were left so far beneath the street level that the only way busybodies could see who was passing by was to climb up to their second floor. Tongue in cheek, one man reminisced "For a number of years the advantages of this change was evident; the roadway was continually in such a soft and pliable condition that the hoofs of the horses were never damaged by concussion, and painted vehicles were unnecessary as they all looked alike after passing through this street. Fast driving was unknown, consequently no one was run over and killed."[48] Bad though the streets were, drivers were still guilty of racing their horses up and down Michigan Avenue, to the considerable indignation of editors and other right-thinking people.[49]

Lansing took its first step in the direction of hard surface paving in 1878. Typically, for the region and the period, the first hard surface chosen was wood. Round cedar blocks were set endwise on a closely packed sand cushion, and the area between the curb and pavement was covered with large stones. In 1880, the cost of a similar effort to pave Washington Avenue between Shiawassee and Kalamazoo streets was estimated at about $20,000.

The cedar blocks were cheap, easily replaceable and satisfactory for a time but water penetrated them easily and they wore out quickly. The first brick pavement, also set loosely on a sand foundation, was not laid until 1894. There were no cement streets in Lansing until after 1908.[50] Lansing's street paving experiences were quite similar to comparable developments in other American cities at this time.

Street lighting, at least of a sort, came rather early to Lansing. In January of 1873, the City erected about one hundred gas lights. This was a decided improvement over the few oil lamps that had previously graced Washington Avenue south of Allegan. Around 1885, the city substituted some electric arc lights for the gas lights already in existence.[51]

Bridges were important elements in Lansing's transportation system. Again typically for the region and period, most of Lansing's first bridges were built of logs. Lansing's first bridge was erected over the Red Cedar at Cedar Street in 1841 and the Grand River was first bridged at Main Street in 1847. Wood bridges were comparatively cheap but even so it was still sometimes difficult to raise the necessary funds. At least once, a hotel operator, determined to beat out a local competitor, willingly assumed a substantial share of the cost of a bridge that would bring travelers past his establishment before they could see his rival's.

Lansing had some covered bridges, its first one being built in 1866. Wood bridges were only temporary expedients, however. By the 1870's, floods and depreciation had taken their toll and most of them had been replaced by iron and steel structures.[52]

Street railways were the final step in the development of Lansing's internal transportation system prior to 1905. A streetcar is really nothing but a modified railroad suited to intra-city needs. Lansing's first operating street railway company was a horse car road which opened for business April 12, 1886. In 1890, the horses were retired and the system was converted to an electric line. At first the electric cars were well received and busy shoppers cheered the opportunity to whiz along at twenty miles per hour instead of the seven or eight miles an hour that the horse cars had previously maintained.[53] Lansing's street railways were not profitable, however, and there was a gradual decline in both service and equipment until the system ". . . .became a disgrace to the city, which had the reputation of having the poorest street car service in the country . . . ." [54] By 1904, Lansing was connected to an interurban system of street railways that was to provide competition for the railways and to enjoy a brief heyday of its own before it fell to the competition of the automobile and improved highways.[55]

The year, 1904, was truly a landmark in Michigan's transportation history. That year the State Constitution was amended so that state funds could again be used to build and improve highways. R. E. Olds and others, in Lansing and elsewhere, were already building the automobiles that were to revolutionize not only highway travel but the verystructure of American life. The quest for more and better transportation facilities was not over in 1905, but it had reached a significant plateau.

Lansing's struggle for adequate transportation was typical of the age and region. Merchant or farmer, it made no difference, neither could thrive without adequate cheap transportation facilities. As a result, the search for a staisfactory means of communication was necessarily a major task for Nineteenth Century Ingham County residents. Some efforts were ill advised, others were not technologically feasible. By 1905, however, Lansing and Ingham County generally had solved their basic communications problem. Michigan, in that year, stood on the threshold of an entirely new transportation era.

Bibliography to Transportation in Lansing Prior to 1905

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