



Elizabeth Blay Maison Schelling
Local History Writing Contest

Mt. Clemens: Important But Humble Beginnings

by Christian Lathers

2008 Elizabeth Blay Maison Schelling Local History Writing Contest

Division II Award Winner

From humble beginnings to gaining the county seat, the city of Mt. Clemens owes its rich history and success to the early settlers of the area. One of these immensely important settlers is the very founder of Mt. Clemens, Christian Clemens. Clemens, like the city of Mt. Clemens, came from humble beginnings. He came from a family of 13 children from Horsham Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Born in 1768 and coming to Mt. Clemens in 1795 at age 27, he first came here with a surveying party under the oversight of Lewis Cass, who was later to be Governor of Michigan. It is believed that Lewis Cass and his expedition (including Clemens) had to blaze a trail from Detroit all the way through to Mt. Clemens. One can only imagine the toils they would have to overcome without modern chainsaws and equipment. According to many accounts, while blazing the trail, Christian Clemens remarked, when coming upon the future site of the village, "Now here is the first rise of ground since we left Detroit." After that remark the remainder of his party jokingly called the hill Mt. Clemens after him. Little did the other members of the expedition know this name would stick and later help shape the future of Macomb County. Later on Clemens became interested in the area and purchased a distillery along with Oliver Wiswell, as well as the surrounding 500 acres around the distillery, which was owned by John and Richard Conner. This distillery was originally Fluemer's Flour Mill, which had been taken over by John Brooks, who then built a distillery on the site, after which Mr. Clemens and Mr. Wiswell purchased and continued operating it. This was the start, and a humble one at that, of the

village of Mt. Clemens. In addition to this distillery in 1802, Clemens went on to build a log cabin on what is now Gratiot Avenue. During this time he married Elizabeth Talmadge Allen, who was a widow of a doctor in Detroit and had two kids, John and Mary. In 1805 Christian Clemens also became Lieutenant Colonel of the militia, which enlisted men from ages fourteen to fifty and held readiness against the Shawnee on the River Huron (now the Clinton River). Unfortunately during the war of 1812 Clemens was captured by the British and held as a POW in Fort Detroit until 1818 when he was released, unscathed. Thanks to his safe release he then immediately started on making up for time lost by having Mt. Clemens officially platted a village. Also the plans for seven streets were laid out: Front, Court, Walnut, Cass, Macomb, New, and Market. In addition to that, Mt. Clemens was officially made the county seat shortly after Macomb County was formed. In 1819 a log courthouse was built, which happened to be burned in 1839 due to a daring escape attempt by a prisoner. It had also been used as a school and a Church. In the same year Mt Clemens also received their first Postmaster, John Stockton, the husband of Christian Clemens' stepdaughter and a war veteran of the war of 1812. In the years following Christian Clemens served as the justice of the peace, Chief Justice of the County Court, county treasurer, and Probate Judge. After this time Mt. Clemens continued to prosper and live on, even after its founders' death in 1844. In later years a multitude of shops and businesses opened as well as the bath and mineral salts hotels and spas that lasted in Mt Clemens for almost 90 years. This industry also drew in the rich and famous including Babe Ruth. All of this is thanks to Christian Clemens and his dedication to his dream of starting a village on that first little rise of land from Detroit. One could even make the stretch that if Clemens hadn't made the city an important place, there might not have been a certain newsboy on a train that later traveled from Detroit to Port Huron and stopped in Mt. Clemens. If this hadn't happened, the newsboy might not have saved Jimmie Mackenzie's son, which would have meant that he might not have been offered free training as a telegraph operator as a token of gratitude. If this had never happened, then the newsboy, who was Thomas Edison, might not have had his interest in inventing sparked and he might not have invented the light bulb. It's a stretch but just imagine if it was invented just a few years later or even 20 years later or if it was never even invented at all. Ironically this all leads back to one man remarking about the first rise in the ground from Detroit. From humble and meager beginnings Mt. Clemens rose to a city of great importance and a rich history that will last for generations to come.