

Maple River History

The area known today as the Maple River watershed was created by the advance and retreat of the southern face of massive ice shields during the ice age. As the face of the shield advanced and retreated it removed surface material from the area, and exposed bed rock. This is a relatively unique circumstance.

As the ice began to melt, the shield face was located at the north edge of the current watershed, and the ice extended north from there. The melting water could only flow away from the ice shield face, and follow the path of least resistance to lower areas. That caused the melting water to flow south and west, creating runoff across what is now Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The water coursed through what is now the Maple River watershed, and down, what is now, the lower Grand River watershed.

As long as portions of the ice shield remained in the area and continued to melt, the resultant water had no other course to follow other than across what is now the Lower Peninsula. However, as the shield face moved farther north, water from the melting ice could then fill low areas to the east of the Lower Peninsula. Eventually, when water levels subsided, the cross state water course was separated into the Bad River Watershed to the east and north, and the Maple River Watershed to the south and west.

As a result of the original bed rock exposure in much of the river bed, most of the water flowing through the watershed was ground water. As people began to reshape the land for agricultural use, they began the dramatic reduction in both surface water and ground water levels. Prior to that effort, much of the area was wet, swampy lowlands, ideal for hunting and gathering. Subsequent to the creation of the vast drainage system that now exists, most of the original watershed is dry land useful for farming.

Currently it is estimated that more than 50% of the water that flows through the watershed is groundwater, with the remainder from rain and other surface waters. The water in the Maple River has high levels of minerals, due to direct bedrock exposure. The bedrock exposure is the reason that the only remaining salt marsh in the state is in the Maple River Watershed.

Currently, charges of surface water from rain and melting snow, move quickly, and flash, down thorough the watershed, creating problems related to sediment and erosion.

The earliest inhabitants of the immediate area were the Sauks, Native Americans that were hunter-gatherers. They were relatively aggressive people. Their neighbors to the north and south of the watershed were/are Chippewa's. The Chippewa's hunted, gathered, and also farmed. The Chippewa's had an excellent social and political structure, and were not particularly aggressive. Due to conflict between the two tribes, the Sauks being prone to raiding Chippewa villages, the Chippewa formed a regional army and attacked the Sauks from both the north and south simultaneously. The Sauks were wiped out for all purposes.

A well established cross-state water travel rout runs from Saginaw Bay in the east, up the Bad River system, to the Maple River system, south and west down the Grand River to Lake Michigan at the west terminus. This rout was well known to native peoples and early settlers. Later in history, the State of Michigan allocated funds and initiated the construction of a canal to connect the Bad River system with the Maple River system so

that there could be a shorter travel-trade route across the state that would be usable by more and larger boats. The evidence of that project is still clearly available in the form of the partially dug canal located in Gratiot County.

Much of the entire area, including the Maple River watershed, was wet which made land travel difficult. The native peoples established dry land travel routes along the gravel ridges that ran across the area. Later, settlers adopted the same travel routes. Even later, several of those routes were converted to what are now highways.

When the Sauks controlled the watershed, they knew about the salt marsh, and used it to make dry salt. Salt was a valuable trading currency that they benefited from. When the Chippewa took control of the watershed they also took over the salt marsh and received the benefits of that trading commodity.

In the early 1800s, a trader, prospecting for new markets, boated up the Grand River from the Grand Rapids area. He continued up the Maple River to the rapids at, what is now Maple Rapids, in North West Clinton County. Boaters had to portage around the Maple Rapids, and it was the site of a Chippewa village. The trader discovered that the Chippewa had salt to trade, a very valuable commodity. And, that the area produced many good quality furs. For those reasons, the trader built the first trading post in the area at the Maple Rapids. A steam boat traveled regularly between Grand Rapids and Maple Rapids to transport goods and supplies to and from the trading post.

The following years witnessed major demographic changes. The number of Chippewa dramatically diminished due primarily to contagious diseases brought to the area by new arrivals. The numbers of settlers increased due primarily to trading, drainage and increased land available for farming.

As time passed, settlements along the Maple River have come and gone. Maple Rapids, Bridgeville, Rochester Colony, Elsie, Ovid are examples of such settlements.

The pattern of draining the land for agricultural use has continued and the surface waters and ground waters that traverse the watershed continued to be lowered. Rain and snow melt water continues to purge down through the watershed at very fast rates, creating problems related to sediment and erosion. The State of Michigan permits discharges of such chemicals as phosphorus, and processed municipal waste water into the watershed. These discharges are monitored by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

As agriculture and manufacturing have developed, the increased use of chemicals has impacted negatively on the watershed. Over time, improved knowledge regarding the impacts and use of such chemicals has promoted their wiser use.

The functions, activities and consequences of the office of Drain Commissioner in each of the five watershed counties can not be overstated. Major channeling, dredging, and ditching projects have changed the course and nature of the river over the years. Currently, County Drain Commissioners bear a dual responsibility to protect and improve the environment, and to promote wise use of the watershed.

The development of public/governmental planning functions is of great importance to the watershed. Such bodies contribute to steering the long-term wise use of the watershed.

by controlling development and construction. Their consideration of the materials and information provided by the Friends of the Maple River Organization's Maple River Watershed Monitoring Plan, as well as information from other groups and organizations both public and private is paramount.

There are several dams and impoundments in the Maple River Watershed.

One dam that remains was constructed in Elsie. The original plan was to construct four such dams along the Maple River to control spring flooding. The Elsie Dam is so effective that plans for the remaining three dams were abandoned.

Another dam was constructed and still exists in Hubbardston, on Fish Creek. That dam was originally developed to power a grain mill. Currently the dam provides some flood control value.

A third dam was constructed to create the Rainbow Lake impoundment in southwest Gratiot County, and is now developed with private residences.

The dam that creates Lake Ovid, in the Sleepy Hollow Park, was constructed in as part of that state recreation area. It is managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and is used by tens of thousands of people annually.

A fifth dam was constructed to form the Lake Victoria impoundment in south east Clinton County. There are now many residential facilities in the area.

Smaller dams, such as the one that controls the water level for Alward Lake in Clinton County, are not unusual.

Over time, many other dams were created, used, and later eliminated. One such dam was created at Maple Rapids to power a grain mill, raise the stream water level about four feet, and allow steam boat traffic between Maple Rapids and Bridgeville. Both the dam and Bridgeville are now part of history.

The Maple River Flooding, which is in south central Gratiot County is bisected by US-127. This wetland was created as part of a large state owned natural game area for public use and to promote undisturbed natural flora and fauna. That land is managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The geography of the Maple River watershed is diverse. It ranges from large flat swamp land at the eastern headwaters, to areas of significant relief further down stream, to the west. In addition, the width of the river ranges dramatically from its narrow headwaters to a wide area, called "The Lake" that runs from Maple Rapids north for about a mile.

Today the Maple River watershed is much drier, with a much lower water table. The drains and other man made changes because the rain and snow melt water to purge through the watershed very quickly. This contributes to sediment and erosion related problems. State permitted discharges allow certain chemicals to be discharged into the watershed. Many bridges and two major roads cross the river. Most manufacturing, mills, and some settlements have disappeared. Several settlements are now cities, towns and villages. And, several railroad corridors continue to traverse the watershed.

A great deal of transportation between Lansing, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Flint and Detroit is facilitated through the watershed. There are many species of flora and fauna.

In recent times the numbers of whitetail deer, coyotes, hares, several species of fish, and black bear have increased due to intentional stocking and/or changes in habitat. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources projects the revival of timber wolves within five years. There are still many examples of the sugar maple trees for which the river is named. The only remaining salt marsh in the state still exists near Maple Rapids.

The appearance and disappearance of many settlements has taken place as a result of changing travel patterns and technology. Several cities, towns and villages that exist today began as farming supply communities. Some, such as St Johns, were intentionally planned and constructed as developments along the railroad line.

Over the years many public and private agencies and organizations have invested heavily in the watershed to recreate wetlands, public lands, and recreational opportunities, and promote its wise use. The watershed continues to support excellent hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, bird watching, camping and other activities. Due to the investment in state land, large portions of the watershed are available for responsible public use. Much of the river continues to be privately own, and is controlled by Riparian Rights Laws.