

Historic Textile Road in Pittsfield Township, Michigan

By C. Edward Wall

Pittsfield Township's historic Textile Road traverses 13,000 years of natural and human history, and dramatically depicts the evolution of animal and prehistoric human trails into roads of contemporary commerce. An historic farmstead which abuts Textile Road, also preserves original artifacts of early horse transportation; and the main barn on that farmstead illustrates aspects of the Underground Railroad in the area; when horse and wagon were kept ready to transport freedom seekers to Detroit and Canada.

Textile Road extends the entire width of Pittsfield Township, but now is divided by US 23. Today, to go from the short eastern portion of Textile Road on the east side of US 23 to the western section, one must jog up Carpenter Road and follow historic Michigan Avenue (the Old Sauk Trail, the Chicago to Detroit Military Road, US12) until it intersects Textile Road.

We do not know how Textile received its name. However, at one time, the stretch East of US 23 (actually east of Michigan Ave.) was called the 'Ford-Textile Hwy' and prior to that it was 'Graves Rd'. (Source: an old set of plans, handwritten notes)



Glaciers were in full retreat from this area about 13,000 years ago. As they retreated, flora and fauna advanced. Among the megafauna were mastodons and musk ox.

For the next 3,000 years (until about 10,300 years ago), mastodons, in particular, were all over Pittsfield Township. We know, because a mastodon skull and bones were found along the eastern section of Textile Road. [1]

In addition, near Saline, an 11,000 year-old mastodon trackway was discovered in 1992 when Harry Brennan began excavating a low area for a pond. This extraordinary trackway shows the footprints of a mastodon bull, cow, and calf. They were walking through a shallow marsh, and the trackway reveals where the bull stumbled over a submerged log and subsequently regained its footing. The cow came along after the bull, with the calf at her side. This trackway is moving northeasterly, toward Pittsfield Township. [2]

The western section of Textile Road skirts to the north of a large marsh--a remnant of the last glaciers and their subsequent retreat.

Just to the south of Textile Road, Michigan Avenue today crosses the midpoint of that marsh. However, in pre-historic times, when water levels were higher, that marsh area would have been avoided by



following paths roughly along what today is Textile Road. Both megafauna and later human occupants of this area would have followed this course of least resistance. Today this marsh area is known as Mastodon Marsh, because it undoubtedly contains the bones of these prehistoric animals. [3]

Early native peoples would have had campsites along the north rim of the Mastodon Marsh. There, the campsites would have received the full warmth of the low winter sun. From there, the native peoples would have hunted fauna in the vicinity of Mastodon Marsh. The ancient pathways that were their east-west transit around Mastodon Marsh today is our Textile Road.

Across Textile, just north of Mastodon Marsh -- at the northeast corner of Marton and Textile Roads (see map below) -- is an old farm with an interesting contemporary history. It was here, as late as 1989 that Sally Roach raised sheep and goats. Annually, she sold over a thousand sheep to the local Arab community for their Big Feast. The foundation of a much older sheep barn still can be seen directly across Textile from the existing farmhouse and barn -- in what soon will become Mastodon Marsh Park. [3a] [Sally ran for the Michigan House of Representatives in 1976, but lost. Her husband, Thomas A Roach, was a long-time Regent of the University of Michigan.]

A short distance east of Mastodon Marsh, Campbell Road intersects Textile from the south (see map below). Campbell Road runs north-south between Michigan Avenue and Textile. At the southeast corner of Textile and Campbell is historic Harwood Cemetery, where Sally Harwood became the first burial in 1824. (Sally was the wife of William Harwood, one of the earliest settlers in Pittsfield Township. Their son, Willima M., was buried there in 1825 as was their daughter, Rosina, in 1827. Harwood had extensive land holdings along both Michigan Avenue and Textile Road). The earliest African-American residents of Pittsfield Township also are buried here, alongside their early white neighbors. [4].

Immediately across Campbell -- at the southwest corner of Textile and Campbell -- was a very early tavern and inn. Based on current perspectives -- and familiarity with today's Michigan Avenue -- the location of a tavern and inn next to Textile Road might seem out of place. However, in historical context, when east-west travelers would have skirted Mastodon Marsh to the north, the adjacency of the tavern-inn to Textile Road was highly appropriate; and, in fact, confirms the importance of Textile as the route of least resistance around and past Mastodon Marsh. Other accounts describe building a basement for a later structure on this site. During the excavation of that basement, many native-American artifacts were found, including numerous arrow heads. [5]

Just to the east of Campbell Road, Thomas Road intersects Textile from the north. Only a mile long, Thomas Road is perfectly straight until it approaches Textile, where it makes a sharp arc to the west (see map below). Historic accounts of the area tell of efforts to bring the road straight through, but of a wagon and team of horses being consumed by the "quicksand" in that area. Despite efforts to "fill" the area, the quicksand consumed everything that was dumped in. Finally, the early settlers gave up, and just skirted the area entirely. [In 2004-2005, when laying a large water main under Textile Road, construction crews encountered unstable soils in this exact location, delaying completion of the water main.] This area is a dramatic reminder of the natural dangers and hardships of overland transportation two hundred years ago. [6]



Historic Sutherland Wilson farmstead is located west of Mastodon Marsh and south of

Textile Road. In the same family from 1832-2000--almost 170 years--this farmstead now is being preserved as a farm museum. The Sutherland-Wilson House is significant as one of the best surviving examples in the county of the synthesis of a New England traditional one-and-a-half cottage and Greek Revival stylistic expression. It also is significant because of its historic association with an early pioneering family. An affidavit by a Sutherland-Wilson family member states that the house was a hiding spot for freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad. [7]

The main outbuilding is a rectangular (approx. 32' x 58'), gable roof, five bent, four bay raised, and ramped barn. The foundation is of unusually large dressed (cut) stone and lime mortar. Constructed of hand hewn old-growth timbers some 32 feet long; horizontal hand hewn girts; and Tamarack pole rafters (harvested from nearby marshes), this is a remarkable example of early barn construction in the area. [8]

Other outbuildings include a carriage house/stable, which also was constructed from hand hewn timbers and straight-saw-cut planks. It still has several pegged windows containing hand-made window glass.



Across Textile Road from Sutherland-Wilson Farm was the Cody Farm. The Cody's were relatives of Buffalo Bill Cody. Newspapers of the time recount Buffalo Bill visiting his relatives when he brought his Wild West Show to the Ann Arbor area. On at least one occasion, Wild Bill Hickock accompanied Buffalo Bill on a visit to the farm. [9]



Also immediately across the road from Sutherland-Wilson Farm is Sutherland

School--a one-room school house dating from the 1880s. It was preceded by a school built from logs.



Although the log structure is long gone, the more modern structure survives to this day, and now is being used as a residence. The school and Harwood Cemetery together span the life of early residents of Textile Road and vicinity, literally from birth to the grave. [10]

Just to the east of Sutherland-Wilson Farm, starting at Harwood Cemetery and extending about a mile and one-half farther to the east, several families were very active in the underground railroad. These included William Harwood, Roswell Preston, and Asher Aray. All had properties along Michigan Avenue and Textile Road. [11]

A Detroit newspaper from the 1850s tells of Asher Aray, an African American, bringing a wagon-load of 26 freedom seekers to Detroit. Heralded as one of the largest groups of freedom seekers to make their escape at one time, they began the last leg of their trip to freedom along Michigan Avenue and Textile Road.

In an 1880 history of Washtenaw County, Asher Aray is described as always keeping a wagon and team of horses ready to help freedom seekers on their way to Canada. Although Asher's barn is long gone, the historic Sutherland-Wilson barn -- which was in existence during the days of the Underground Railroad -- still stands as a reminder of this tradition. [12]



The Arays were Patentees in Pittsfield Township. That means they settled so early that their original land deeds were signed by the President of the United States. The [Patentee map](#) of Pittsfield Township shows them owning land at the intersection of Platt and Textile Road, and a few years later they also owned land a half mile to the east along both sides of Michigan Avenue and Textile Road. [13]

Pittsfield Township has acquired Pittsfield Preserve -- more than 535 acres on both sides of Textile Road, which will become future community parks starting with Mastodon Marsh Park to the south of Textile Road. [14] The Township also owns Sutherland-Wilson Farm, which it leases to the Pittsfield Township Historical Society for restoration and interpretation.



Today, the six miles of Textile Road in Pittsfield Township take us back into time to the last glacial retreat; to the days of mastodons and musk ox; to native peoples seeking food, shelter, and travel routes; to the early days of westward expansion and settlement; to the work of the Underground Railroad; and much more. And all this illustrates the impact of natural features on the evolution of animal and human pathways, pathways that became Textile Road.

Notes:

For additional information, please see:

[1] The skull and other bones were found south of Textile Road, not far from Roberto Clemente School, when a low area was being excavated for ponds. These bones now are in the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History.

[2] <http://www.exhibits.lsa.umich.edu/New/VirtualExhibits/Mastodon/Mastodon4.html> A cast of this trackway, and related bones found at the site of the trackway, now are on display in the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History. Related photos are courtesy of the Museum of Natural History, and also will be found on its website.

[3] The earliest explorers and settlers in this area found the ground water level approximately fifteen feet higher than it is today. In those days, salt springs still reached the surface in Saline, Michigan. Except during very dry periods, Mastodon Marsh would have been much wetter than it is today. See: http://www.salinehistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=salt_springs

[3a] For a contemporary history of this farm, please see: Contemporary Roach Farm (151 E. Textile)

[4] http://www.pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=harwood_cemetery

[5] These accounts were made by various persons attending prior Pittsfield Township Historical Society meetings, but were not recorded in writing at the time. Now, I am uncertain who actually recounted these events. If this is read by those who have personal knowledge of these events, will they please contact the author: C. Edward Wall: (734) 434-5530.

[6] http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=macfarlane_plants

[7] http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=farm_description and http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=history&content=farm_ugrr_affidavit

[8] http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=barn_assessment

[9] http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=history&content=cody_farm and http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=history&content=oral_nordman

[10] http://www.pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=school_sutherland

[11] Carol Mull has undertaken research that documents the Underground Railroad activity in this area. She currently is writing a book, which will include this account.

[12] http://pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=history&content=aray_family See also Carol Mull's research and related accounts.

[13] http://www.pittsfieldhistory.org/images/platmap_patentee_80.jpg See sections 13 and 22. Also see: http://www.pittsfieldhistory.org/images/platmap_1840_80.jpg See sections 13, 20, 22, 23, and 26. The parcel of land owned by an Aray in section 20 is immediately across Textile from Sutherland-Wilson Farm (and surrounded by the Cody farm); the parcel in section 22 is at the intersection of Textile and Platt Roads; the parcel in section 23 is on both sides of Michigan Avenue, and backs up to Textile Road; and the parcel in section 26 fronts on Textile Road. The parcel in section 23 is where Asher kept his horse and wagon ready to carry freedom seekers on to Detroit and Canada.

[14] <http://www.pittsfieldhistory.org/index.php?section=sites&content=preserve>

2022 Note: many links are to our old website and no longer active.