

**HIGHLIGHTS FROM
THE HARRISON TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL COMMISSION'S
FIRST EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATION:
THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM TUCKER**

APRIL 27, 1994

The speakers for this presentation were commissioners Ruthee Cowan, Tom Gregor, Linda Karczewski, and Marie McDougal with a special presentation by Carol Herzenstiel who lived in the Tucker home for over 20 years.

THE TUCKER STORY

William Tuckar (originally spelled with an "a", the name was later changed to Tucker), and his brother Joseph, were born in New Jersey. Unfortunately for them, they then moved to Stover, Virginia. It was in Stover in 1753, that the Chippewa Indians, during a raid on the settlement, shot and killed the boys' father and took them captive.

They were taken to the shores of Lake Erie where their death song was sung. Some sources say they were asked to sing it themselves. Before they could be put to death, however, William ran to an Indian named We-kan-nis for protection. This Indian either bought them or convinced the Indians to let him take them, but either way, he then took them to his home on the Huron River (later renamed the Clinton), and they became a part of his tribe. Not, unfortunately, before the boys saw the Indians present their father's scalp to the French.

William was 11 years old at the time, and he was a captive member of the tribe for the next seven years. He traveled with the tribe on hunting trips during the winter, returning to the Detroit area each spring. It was on one of these hunting trips near Mackinaw that William's brother, Joseph died. Sources differ. One account has him drowning when the canoe he was riding in tipped, and another has the canoe drifting away, leaving him stranded on an island to starve to death. That account makes reference to Tucker's Indian friends finding only "bleached bones." Sources do agree that he was the first white man known to the Indians to have died.

William went on, however, to establish many firsts of his own. He learned all aspects of Indian life and culture and became an expert hunter and trapper. He was given his freedom at 18 and went to work for the British at Fort Detroit as a guide and interpreter.

His close association with the Indians helped him save the fort in 1763. His Indian sister knew of the attack Pontiac was planning for the fort. She warned William to stay away from the fort, but he realized that something was wrong

and convinced her to tell him the whole story. He was then able to warn Major Gladwin. Another story, however, says that a young Indian girl named Catherine was in love with Gladwin, and she warned him. Perhaps they both warned him on the same day. At any rate, it was William who stayed at the fort and fought until Pontiac was defeated.

Following the defeat of Pontiac, William went to work for a Detroit merchant named Meldrum. He traded with the Indians and was always on the look out for those who would cheat his friends. He was paid \$40.00 a month, but his real rewards would come from the Indians he tried to protect.

In 1773 William went back to Virginia, and on August 8 he married a woman named Catherine. (It is hard to be certain about her last name since local history files have it spelled Hazel, Hezel, Heyel, and Hegel.) He brought her back to this area on horseback, riding right through the middle of the Wyandotte Indian village. William and Catherine had 10 children, and William, with the help of the local Indians, built them a home on the Huron River. The home is still standing on the banks of the river now known as the Clinton. It is the oldest free-standing house in Michigan.

William Tucker was able to build this house on his own property thanks to the generosity of his Indian friends. He had been such a good friend to the Indians that in 1780, they rewarded him with all the land he could walk around in one day. He paced off an area of 3,300 acres (this number has also been questioned by some sources) of what is now Selfridge Air National Guard Base. This was the land that had been the village and hunting grounds for the Indians who raised him. Part of a fortress known as an Indian mound was later found in the area near Tucker's home. Unfortunately, the deed given to Tucker by the Indians was never properly recorded with the Canadian Government, and the U. S. Land Office didn't honor the deed or the claim of the Tuckers. They ended up with only the land that they had long inhabited and improved.

This gift from the Indians, according to some sources, made William the first white land owner in Macomb County. Others say that the first white settler was Nicholas Patenaude in 1758. At any rate, Tucker was apparently the first English speaking settler in the county. There is, therefore, some controversy over whose son (Tucker's or Patenaude's) was the first white male child born in the county. One source narrowed it down by saying that John Tucker was undoubtedly the first male white child born in the county whose parents were both English.

The first school in the county was held in Tucker's home and Joseph Rowe was the teacher. He received \$10 a month with board, washing and mending included. He was, however, also called upon to perform such duties as conducting funeral services since there was no minister in the area at that time. He remained in the area for 10 years. After the war of 1812 the first school house was built on Tucker property near the

residence of Lafayette Tucker, William's grandson. The teacher was Benjamin P. Dodge.

Some reports say that the first church service was held in Tucker's home. A Methodist minister named Case did hold services in the Tucker home, but the first church in the county (other than the Moravian Mission Chapel in Clinton Twp.) was built in 1806 directly across the river from the Tucker lands. The Tucker home is a story in itself. Built in 1784, the exterior was originally made of logs. The second exterior was clapboard, and the third was brick. Today it looks much like the other houses on the block. Little remains of the original log cabin, except for reminders like the wavy windows, hand-hewn and pit-sawed logs in the basement, and mudfill between the floor boards.

Legend has it that one former owner, *in* need of money, sold the kitchen and dining area to his next door neighbor. The Meyers were the owners responsible for the bricking. They sponsored a young couple, Ida and Vinzenz Kilian, from Karlsbad Czechoslovakia. In exchange, Kilian, a mason, was to help brick the house, well, and fireplace and floor in the basement. Kilian also cemented the walls

The well water was said to have medicinal qualities, and people came from as far as Port Huron for the miraculous water. A cistern was built between the well and the house. The Indians also came, when the weather was severe. The basement of the house had an outside door and was deep enough to shelter Tucker's Indian family in time of need. The original Tucker property was also well-known for its large orchard of apple, pear, and cherry trees.

Another interesting bit of history involves the only headstone left in the family grave yard. It belonged to Eliza Little. It reads: Eliza wife of William T. Little died March 30, 1826 age 22 years 9 months and 27 days

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. William Tucker's only daughter married a Robert Little so it is assumed that Eliza was married to one of William's grandsons. Perhaps one of the most interesting Tucker stories, however, involved Tucker's will and his slaves. Tucker died in 1805. His will was one of the few in Michigan territory to convey slaves to another owner. Tucker's widow granted their slaves, Peter and Hannah, their freedom after a year of service to Detroit attorney, Elijah Brush (after whom the Detroit street is named).

Their children, unfortunately, were to remain Tucker slaves. Represented by Brush, the three sons and a daughter (Elizabeth Denison, also known as Lisette) sued the Tuckers in 1807. They said that they were being held in bondage against their will.

In the landmark lawsuit, Judge Augustus B. Woodward (another Detroit street namesake) did not see it their way. He ruled in favor of the Tuckers, stating that three of the four were slaves for life. The youngest son would, however, be freed at age 21. Lisette, therefore, chose to flee to Canada and establish

residency, returning in 1813 as a free citizen.

Lisette would eventually become the only black woman during the 19th Century to will large sums of money for philanthropic construction. She left money which was used to build St. James Chapel on Grosse Ile. Her story has been preserved in a biography, Lisette, by Michigan historian, Isabella Swan.

We are sorry that we are not able to reproduce all of the information presented at this educational meeting. Someone, whose name will remain anonymous, forgot to turn on the tape recorder. This, however, is most of the story of the man who could be thought of as Harrison Township's founding father.