

St. Johns

St. Johns was founded as a railroad station on the Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad. John Swegles with the assistance of Robert Higham, chief engineer of the railroad, purchased land where a railroad station was to be established.

One of the first tasks in 1854 was building a sawmill. Cornelius Vrooman built a house next to the sawmill which was also used as a hotel. This was followed by a tavern and general store. As the tracks got closer to St. Johns more people and businesses moved into the town.

The railroad reached St. Johns on January 16, 1857. The first temporary depot was replaced in 1868 with a brick building. A tornado destroyed the depot in 1920 and it was replaced with the current building.

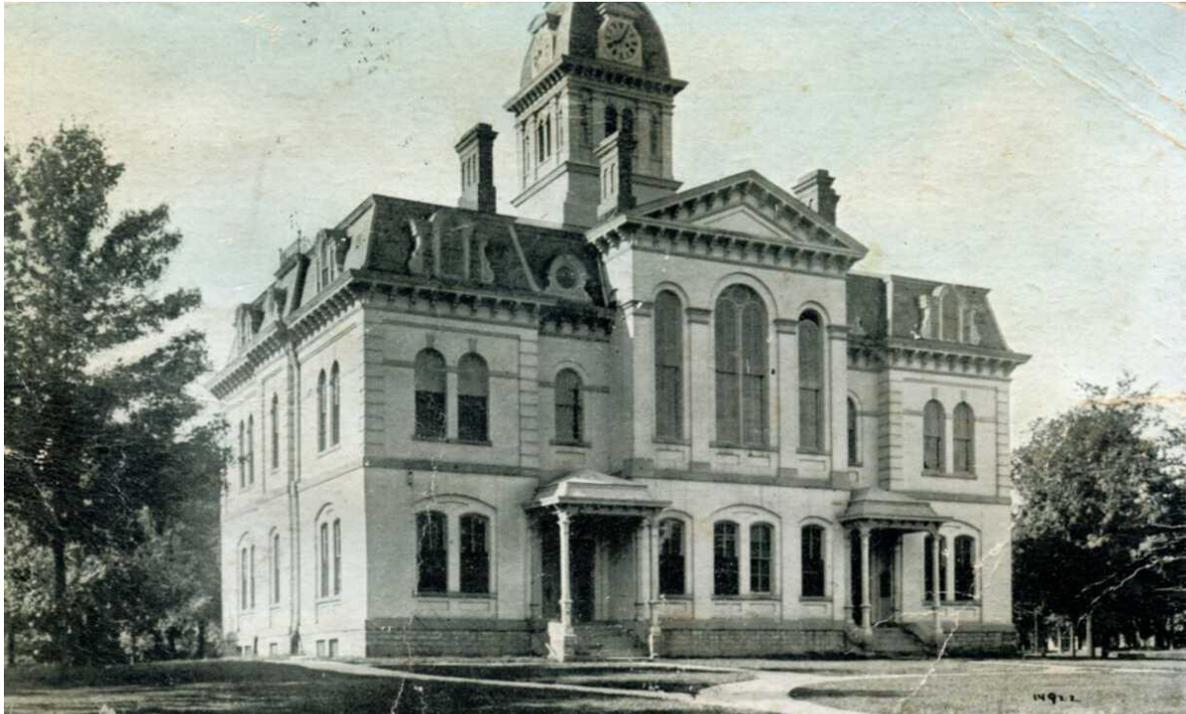


St. Johns Depot early 1900's

Several names were considered for this new town. It was decided to call it St. Johns to honor John Swegles.

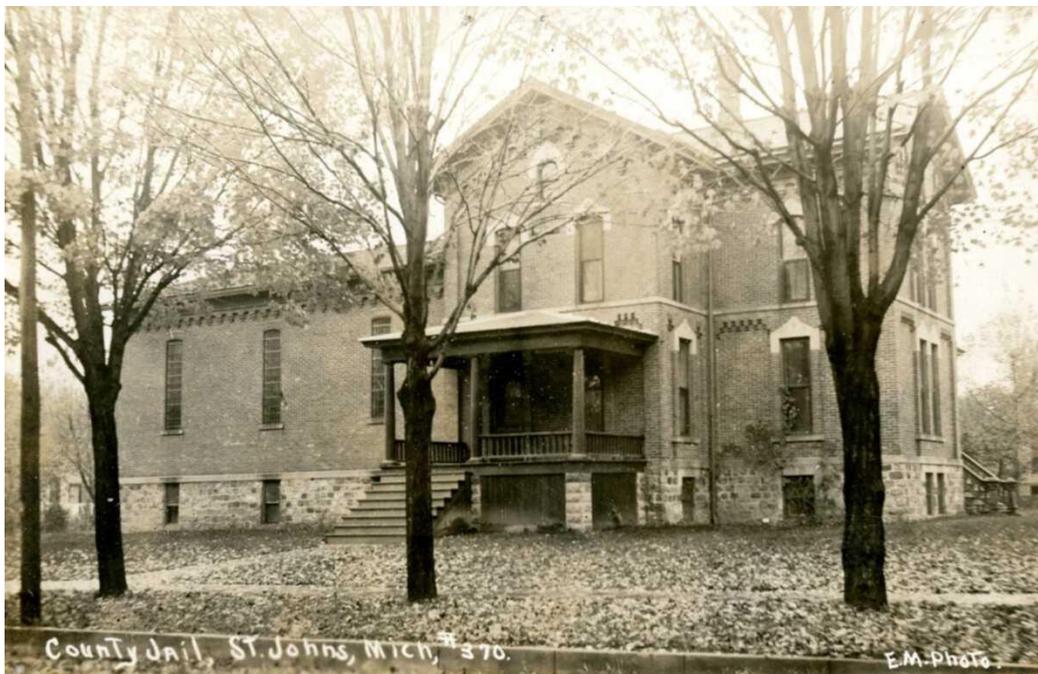
St. Johns officially became a village on October 15, 1857. Later that same year the county seat was moved from DeWitt to St. Johns. It became the city of St. Johns in 1904.

The first county offices were in Plumstead Hall on the northeast corner of Clinton Avenue and Walker Street. It was used until the first Clinton County Courthouse was opened in 1871. This courthouse was enlarged and later replaced by the current one in 1998.



Clinton County Courthouse before additions

First jail in St. Johns was built in 1876 and used until 1950.



Clinton Avenue soon was lined with businesses. St. Johns became the main shopping place for the area.



In 1902 the Interurban arrived allowing people to easily travel between St. Johns and Lansing. It ran until 1929 when people chose to travel by cars instead.





Clinton Avenue c1940 with Clinton Theater and J. C. Penney

The largest and most impressive hotel was the Steel Hotel. It opened in 1888 and was destroyed in a 1975 fire.



St. Johns also had many factories. They made wagons, trucks, tables, and wagon and car parts.



St. Johns Table Company

The first hospital was the Hart Hospital in 1911. It had no elevator so patients had to be carried up and down stairs. It was replaced in 1927 by Clinton Memorial Hospital.



Hart Hospital

The first county fairs were held in DeWitt. They moved to St. Johns in the late 1850's. A fairground was built on Townsend Road. The fairground had a racetrack for horse and (later) car races. The fairground closed in 1934 and the land was sold. In 1937 the 4-H fairs began at the city park.



On Palm Sunday, March 28, 1920, a major tornado went through Clinton County and destroyed some buildings and damaged many others.



The St. Johns public school began in 1855 in a blacksmith shop. The first building was on the corner of Mead and Walker. At that time, the building was outside of town. Students would often see bears walking by the school.

In 1876 this building was replaced with the East and North Ward schools. There was also a Union School building that burned in 1885. It was replaced by Central School in 1886. It was used as a school until 1986.



East Ward and North Ward Schools



Central School

The Rodney B. Wilson High School opened in 1925. Rodney B. Wilson was named for a student who died during the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. It became a junior high in 1968 and closed in 1998



St. Joseph School opened in 1924 with Sisters of St. Joseph of Nazareth as teachers.

