

The Early Settlement of Clinton County

Surveying and Buying Land

Before any land could be sold to settlers in Clinton County, it had to be surveyed. In the late 1820's surveyors divided the county into 16 townships. Each township was a 6 mile by 6 mile square. Each township was then divided into 36 sections. Each section was a 1 mile by 1 mile square or 640 acres.

SECTION LAYOUT FOR EACH TOWNSHIP

	N						
	6	5	4	3	2	1	
	7	8	9	10	11	12	
W	18	17	16	15	14	13	E
	19	20	21	22	23	24	
	30	29	28	27	26	25	
	31	32	33	34	35	36	
	S						

Surveyors used a compass and chain to find the borders between sections. They made maps, wrote notes, and marked the trees in some places to show where sections began and ended. Here is a surveyor's map for Victor Township from 1826. Notice it also shows Indian trails.

Once the land was surveyed settlers could buy it.

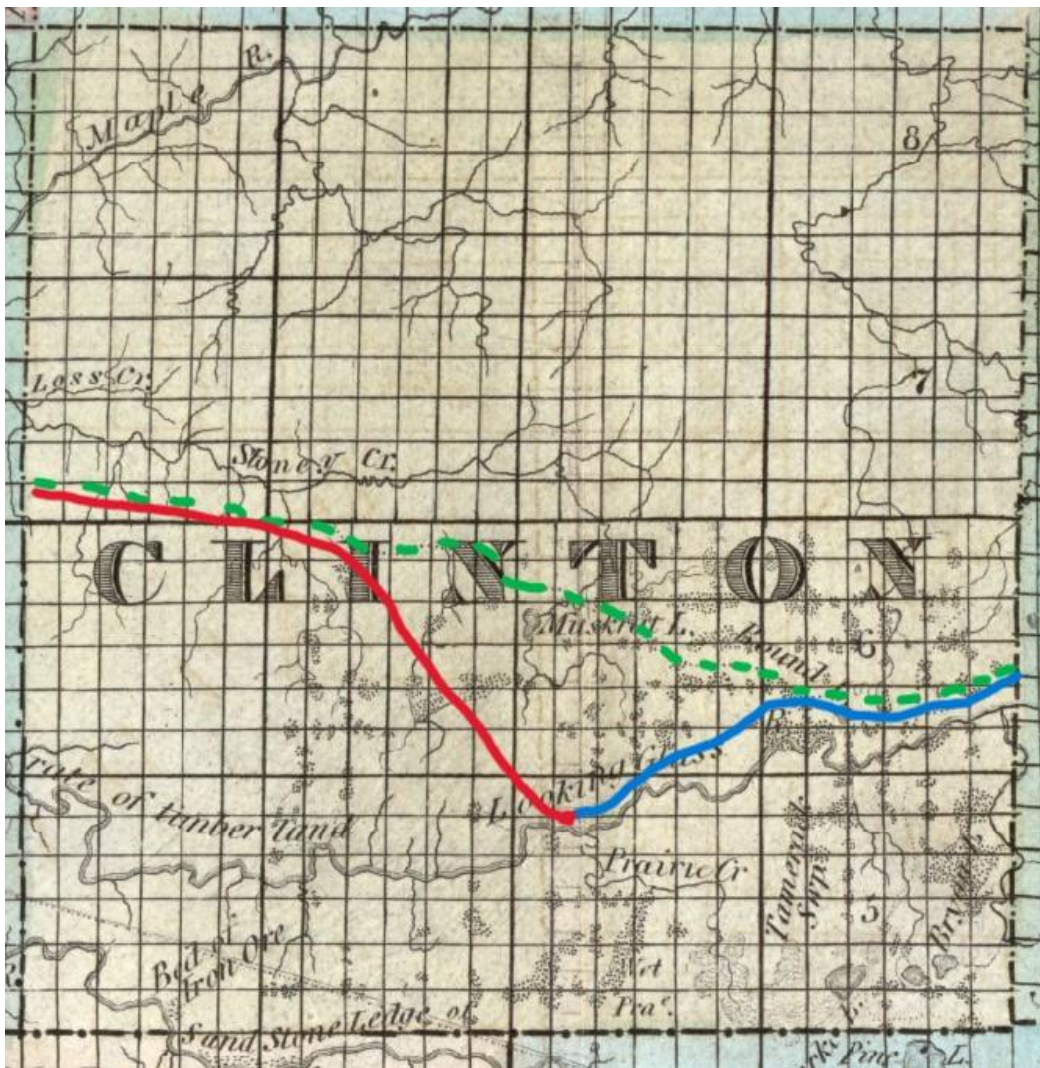
The men would usually go ahead and check out the available land. If they liked what they saw they would travel to a land office and buy the land. The first settlers had to go 90 miles to White Pigeon until the Ionia land office opened in 1836. The land usually cost about \$1.25 an acre. For \$100 a settler could buy 80 acres.



After buying the land, the men would leave the land office, go get their families, and begin the journey to their new home.

Traveling to Clinton County

Getting here was not easy. Most of the first settlers came into Clinton County on the Northern Grand River Trail from Detroit. To get to Detroit most traveled the Erie Canal to Lake Erie and then took a steamship to Detroit. Once in Detroit they would start up the muddy Northern Grand River Trail. If they were hauling any wagons the trail needed to be made wider in many places. Once in Clinton County they would follow and widen Indian trails or make a new trail to get to their new home.



Green dashes show the Northern Grand River Indian Trail. **Blue** is the Northern Grand River Trail and **Red** is the Dexter Trail, both of which settlers used.

Building a Log Cabin

One of the first things settlers did was build a log cabin for their family. Log cabins needed about 50 to 60 trees. They did not have glass, so if they made a window it was covered with greased paper or a blanket. Each cabin also needed a fireplace at one end which was used for cooking and heat during the winter.



Clearing the Land

Most of Clinton County was covered with trees. Before the land could be farmed trees needed to be cut down with an ax or saw and brush burned. At first crops would be planted around the tree stumps. Next stumps would be burned and removed. There was a lot of smoke in the air!

First Settlers

The first European in Clinton County was George Campau. He opened a trading post on the Maple River in what would be Maple Rapids in 1826.

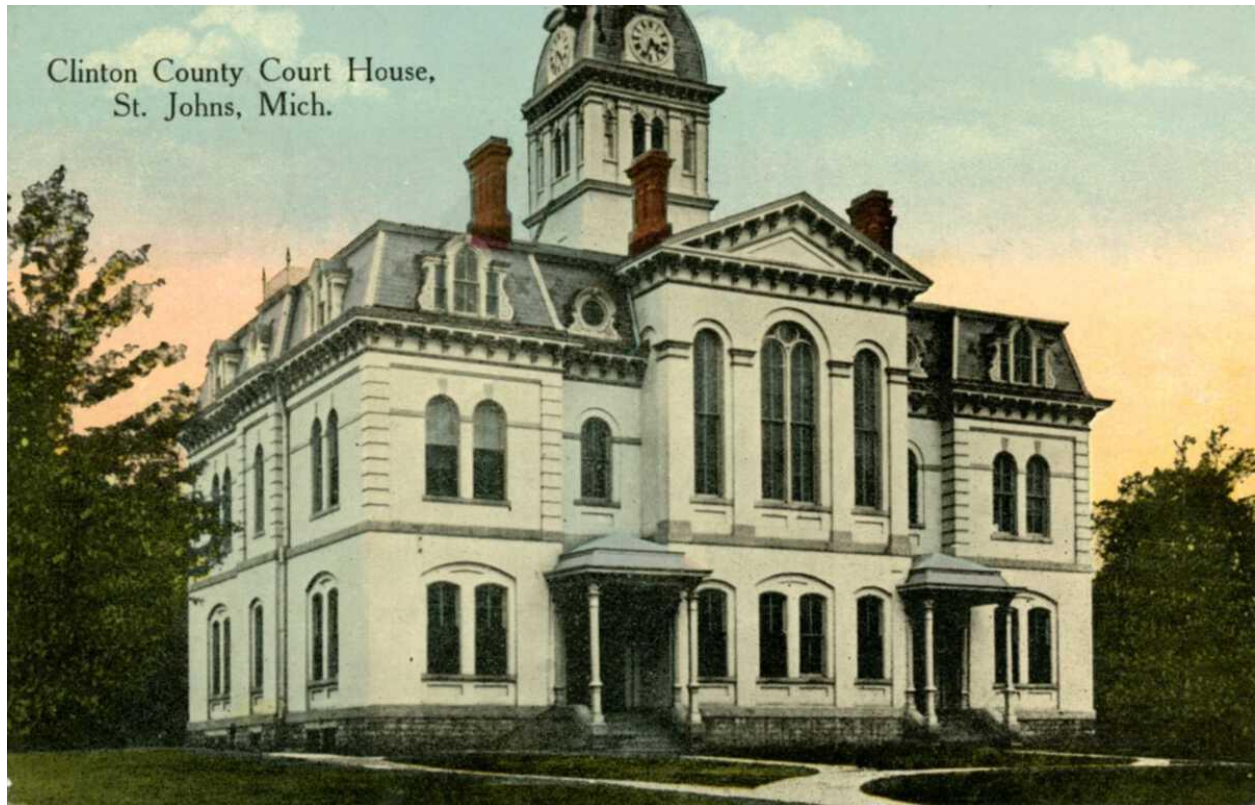
In 1833 the Dexter Party traveled through Clinton County on their way to Ionia. Once they got to where DeWitt is today, they didn't know where to go next. They hired an Ojibwe who led them through the forest down a narrow, poorly marked Indian trail. This trail became known as the Dexter Trail and was used by many other people.

When the Dexter Party got to Muskrat Creek, Samuel Dexter's young son Riley died and was buried next to the trail. He was the first settler to die in Clinton County. Riley Township is named for him.

Towns

As more people came to Clinton County, they began to create towns where they could buy and sell goods. Some were built next to rivers and streams which powered sawmills to make lumber and gristmills to grind wheat and corn. Westphalia was founded by Germans who had left their country for a new life in America. When the railroads were built in the 1850's, towns were started along railroad lines where goods could be sent and received.

DeWitt was the first large town and was made the county seat in 1839. In 1853 St. Johns began next to the new railroad line. It became the county seat in 1857 and the county offices moved there from DeWitt.



Clinton County Courthouse, St. Johns