

HARSENS ISLAND ST. CLAIR FLATS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BUILDING *for*
THE *Future*
PRESERVING
Our PAST



volume 17 / number 3

May 2026

Message from the President . . .

Happy May!

As I write this newsletter, the last (I hope) of the Seaway Island fire is still smoldering. Having a place on the Flats, the fire was rather 'up close and personal' throughout the night and into the early morning hours. It is truly amazing, and a little terrifying, the sound and fury wildfires emanate.

On to something less scary - the museum will open on Memorial Day weekend and begin normal summer hours of Saturday 10:00 - 3:00 and Sunday 12:00 Noon to 4:00, or by appointment off-hours. We look forward to welcoming our guests!

The Board is planning several special activities for kids and adults to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the country's signing of the Declaration of Independence, so watch for details.

Garfield Arthur 'Gar' Wood as you may know was an inventor, entrepreneur, and champion motorboat builder and racer who held water speed records. He was the first man to travel over 100 miles per hour on water . . . learn more about this fascinating man at our speaker series - date to be confirmed soon!

As always, thank you for your support!

Joyce

Joyce Hassen, President

We encourage, and would like to assist, islanders in getting their old photos, slides, negatives, and historical documents into digital format to preserve and/or display them. In addition, the Harsens Island Historical Society would like to collect digital copies of historical photos and documents of the island for the museum's collection.

You can bring photos, slides, negatives, or historical documents to the Museum to have them scanned and the digital copy put on a USB flash drive to take home along with the documents you brought for scanning. Some photos or documents may be of historic interest, and with the owner's permission, a digital copy would be retained by the Harsens Island Historical Society for the museum's collection.

The Harsens Island History Society is also looking for 8 mm or super 8 mm home movies taken on the island prior to 1960 for segments to be digitized and place in the archives. There would be **no fee for members**, but non-members would be asked to make a small donation. You can make an appointment for scanning with Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or email him at xharpspah@aol.com.

PRESERVE YOUR HISTORY



Fact and Romance of Harsens Island

Early Recollections of the beautiful island at the mouth of the St. Clair River. Authored by Hulda T. Hollands.
Published August 1896.

Indians Loved It Old Mother Rodd and Her Dead Papoose Harsen Homestead Tragedy

Harsen's Island, situated at the mouth of the St. Clair River, has a history, recorded and hereditary, reaching back for more than 200 years; a history coincident, in many respects, with the history of the borderland.

From the early first known period it has been the home of the Indian. The facility with which their favorite food could be obtained from the forest, lake and stream induced the naturally indolent savage to pitch his wigwam in this wild, romantic spot. The Indian villages nestled among the vine draped trees and stretched along the white, sandy beach.

Their homes were simple and crude. Broad strips of bark and the skins of wild animals spread out from the center pole of the wigwam gave them shelter and more skins heaped upon the floor furnished them their beds.

From this spot the warrior braves, in all their paraphernalia of savage splendor, war paint and feathers, went out to battle in their long, birch canoes, returning amid wild war whoops and hideous chanting with strings of reeking scalps waving from long poles and droves of shackled prisoners, who were expected to furnish material for the war feast. On the hard, sandy beach in front of the prison lodge the fires were kindled and the kettles hung.

When all the horrible preparations were completed, the warriors from all parts of the Island were invited to the feast. The invitations were sent out by the chief of the tribe. Small squares of birch bark supplied the place of cards, and the bearer by word of mouth gave the invitation. Each guest brought with him his wooden bowl and spoon. Further details of the loathsome banquet are best left to the imagination.

WHEN PEACE HELD SWAY

Here in times of peace, within the shadows of the primitive forest and overlooking the beautiful river, the young squaws squatted upon mats of colored rushes and embroidered their buckskin moccasins and their broad-cloth petticoats, leggings and blankets, with glass and shells, beads and colored porcupine quills; fit "fancywork" for the clever fingers of the dusky maidens.

And here the little "niches," the Indian boys and girls, practiced with their bows and arrows, paddled their toy canoes or sported like ducks on the bounding waves. The Chippewas were the most intelligent of all the old Indian tribes in this vicinity. Early in the sixteenth century they gained possession of all the land bordering on Lake St. Clair, together with the adjacent islands.

There was among them a tradition, which had been handed down from generation to generation, that some time in their early history a great battle was fought and many savage tribes among their enemies were exterminated.

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Throughout this region, particularly along the rivers and streams and on the most elevated spots of the islands, are mounds filled with human bones scattered around, showing that they were hastily gathered together. These mounds are plainly visible in certain parts of Harsen's Island. In fact, the whole Island was a favorite burial place for the roving tribes as well as for the Chippewas.

A CHIEF'S BURIAL

The burial of a great chief in the old orchard near the Harsen homestead is thus described by an early writer. The body was wrapped in a blue broadcloth blanket bordered all around with silver brooches and fastened together with many silver clasps. His hat was trimmed with silver lace, and a string of 16 silver crescents was around his neck. Many broad silver bands around his arms completed the ornamentation of the chief's body. But of all these bits of legendary lore, this picturesque setting in a frame of green foliage, nothing remains but a shadowed remembrance.

There is another picture, however, so deeply stamped on memory's walls that death, not time, may efface it. It is of a later period when the red man's lands were fast passing into the hands of the paleface in exchange for the paltry "presents" which were annually doled out at the trading posts by the government agents. At this time, their dress and customs were just beginning to show the touch of their contact with civilization.

OLD MOTHER RODD

There is an oil painting hanging in the legislative hall at Lansing of a picturesque character and a typical specimen of the Indian woman of half a century ago, who was well known to all the pioneer residents of Harsen's Island. Old Mother Rodd belonged to the Chippewa tribe. Her home was on the Indian reservation south of Sarnia. She died at Port Huron several years ago at the age of 115.

Let me describe her from memory. Short and squat of figure, a square bronzed face with narrow black eyes glittering between the half-closed lids, high cheek bones, long, coarse black hair plaited in a thick braid which hung down her back and great brass hoop rings in her ears. Her broad flat feet were encased with buckskin moccasins, decorated with colored porcupine quills and beads. Above these were the wide bead embroidered broadcloth leggings, which reached to the ankles and flapped back and forth with a regular movement as she walked. The narrow skirt of the same material, elaborately trimmed and fringed with beads, reached just below the knee.

Overlapping this for a short distance below the waistline was a blouse, or "short gown" as the residents called it, made of gaudy, large-patterned calico. Around her neck were many strings of beads of all colors and sizes hanging low down in front over the blouse. And outside of all this was the heavy woolen blanket, spread out to its full size over the head and shoulders, drawn tightly across the back and held together in front with her large copper-colored hands. A great bundle of baskets, or corn husk and rush mats, was held in place by a band of bark across the forehead.

Happy were the little Island children when they were allowed to swap a loaf of quash-e-gun (bread), a piece of co-coosh (pork) or a pan of nip-po-nin (flour) for a bright-colored dinner or work basket. And happier yet when they saw the old dame pitch her camp in the edge of the apple orchard near the beach. Then it was "hurrah" for the succotash feast which they knew awaited them.

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In front of the camp on the clean white sand, she built her fire. From a pole resting on two crotched sticks driven into the ground hung the polished brass kettle containing the savory mess. Old Mother Rodd was scrupulously clean and when the luscious succotash was dished up with the wooden spoon into the bright tin cups, the most fastidious guest could not resist her hospitality. On rare occasions during the sugar season there was added as dessert the little birch bark mokoks filled with powdered maple sugar.

THE GRAVE IN THE WOODS

Hanging from the limb of a nearby apple tree was the bark hammock in which the little papoose, wrapped like a mummy in blankets, was fastened with strips of tanned deerskin.

Back from the river a short distance, under one of the largest apple trees, was a little mound which marked the resting place of another papoose who had roamed over the happy hunting grounds for many moons. With the opening of the apple blossoms each year, old Mother Rodd made her appearance and celebrated the anniversary over that little mound with the customary pow-wow, chanting songs and indulging freely in "santa-waba." Two or three days were spent in this manner until her voice became weak and the firewater gave out, when she would cover the grave with Indian food and leave it until the apple blossoms came again.



Image created by AI.

EARLY SETTLERS

Harsen's Island was once in British water. At that time, the dividing line ran along the center of the north channel, but a later survey gave it to the United States. The first white settlers on the Island were two fur traders, James Harsen and his son-in-law, Isaac Graveraet, and their families. They purchased the Island from the Indians under sanction of the British government and from that time until the present day it has been owned and occupied by their descendants.

Harvey Stewart, the pioneer of the well-known Island family of Stewarts, settled on the Island early in the present century. The ancient distillery which he managed at that time is still standing although in a ruinous condition. It was the first distillery in Michigan and, at one time during the war, served as a British fort.

A bright old lady, a granddaughter of one of the earliest residents and a Harsen by birth, has lived all her life of 74 years on the same spot near the western shore of the Island. The quaint old homestead with its old-fashioned interior and surroundings stands on the eastern bank of the north channel over-looking a long stretch of mainland on the opposite shore with a glimpse of the little village of Algonac in the distance. In striking contrast to the bustling social life on the eastern shore of the Island is this quiet retreat. Although the water is dotted with pleasure boats of all kinds, very little of the main shipping passes this point.

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TRAGIC HISTORY

Adjoining this farm is the old Harsen farm with its homely associations, its tragedies and its neglected burial ground. Of the original homestead, nothing but a few decayed timbers remain. The following incidents are a part of the tragic history of the Harsen family.

The first Mr. Harsen was a strict Lutheran and trained his family in the same belief. Although in a locality where wild game was abundant, he forbade the use of firearms on the Sabbath. One Sabbath morning while all the family were in the house studying the catechism and reading the Bible, a large flock of ducks lit on the shore. The temptation was too much for the oldest son. He seized the gun and started to run out when the butt struck the door, and it exploded. The charge entered the arm of his niece, a girl of 7 years. She was taken to Detroit where it was amputated.

Later on in 1800, another tragedy took place in the old house. A keg of powder had been placed in the parlor chimney for safekeeping and the fireplace opening filled with green boughs. A Moravian minister, an inveterate smoker, had been visiting the family and soon after his departure there was a terrific explosion, which completely demolished the house. Mr. Barnard Harsen was killed and his sister, Mrs. Graveraet, was nearly cut in two with a pewter platter which was lying on the keg. It was supposed that the minister's pipe caused the explosion.

OLD HARSEN HOMESTEAD

Another house was built on the same site which is still standing and known as the old Harsen homestead. It is well preserved and only for recorded facts and its primitive architecture, one could scarcely believe that it had felt the suns and storms of more than 75 years. The quaint interior has been transformed into one of the prettiest summer homes on the Island. A bathing beach in front reaches out for several hundred feet over the clean white sand and at the back is the old apple orchard, in whose shadows are the graves of generations of red men.

A magnificent tree, called the will tree, near the house has a peculiar history, if we may credit the story as told by a resident. A colored man, a servant in the family named Will, was buried at the foot of the tree. The apples are black! The connection between these two facts forms the gist of the story.

A country lane leads from the back of the house to the ancient burial ground of the Harsen family, located on an elevated site midway between the two channels. Scattered over a cleared spot in the center of a grove of grand old forest trees are the sunken neglected graves. Some are marked with slabs, cracked and broken, and bearing names and dates of a past century and overall is the wild growth of grave moss, once planted by loving hands and the sun glints down through the thick foliage, leaving flickering shadows on the prostrate tombstones.

Over a large part of the Island is the unbroken forest with its woodland wealth and forming a magnificent background for the summer colonies of Maple Leaf and Sans Souci.

But the heart and soul of the Island during the summer season is Grande Pointe clubhouse. It is, a beautiful building, decorated and furnished with the most perfect taste, with immense pleasure grounds and quiet groves and walks and drives, starting from nowhere and ending nowhere, yet managing to reach the home of every cottager in the most sociable manner.

Truly, Harsen's Island is a unique spot, a combination of the past and the present.

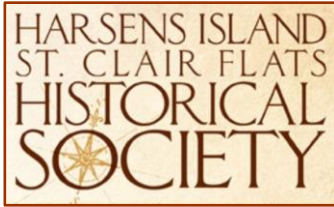
Harsens Island Historical Society Calendar 2026

Date	Day	Time	Event
May 16	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
May 23	Saturday	TBD	Museum Opens
June 20	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
July 18	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
July 18	Saturday	9:30 AM	Election Ballots Due
August 15	Saturday	10:00 AM	Annual Membership Meeting
August 15	Saturday	10:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
September 19	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
October 3	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Annual Pie Sale
October 17	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
November 8	Sunday	TBD	Remembrance Edmund Fitzgerald
November 21	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Planning Meeting via Zoom
December 5	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Cookie Walk
December 19	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom



Museum Hours

Summer Schedule (June, July, August)
Saturdays 10:00 AM – 3:00 PM
Sundays 12:00 PM – 4:00 PM
Winter Schedule (September through April)
Closed but Open by appointment



A publication of the Harsens Island St.
Clair Flats Historical Society

Mailing Address:

P.O. Box 44
Harsens Island MI 48028

Museum Address:

3058 S. Channel Dr.

www.harsensislandhistory.org

HISCFHS Board of Directors 2025

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The historical society is looking to add to its collection. We accept donations of artifacts, photos, documents, and stories related to the Island and surrounding area. If you would like to add your family history to the museum archives, we can help you capture your memories for future generations.

Please contact our curator; Chris Knight at
chris.knight@comcast.net

Harsens Island Historical Society

The Harsens Island St. Clair Flats History Society has a quilt block on the building and a QR code is mounted next to the side door. Using the camera app on your phone, scan the code and it will show the link to the Historical Museum page in the [Quilt Trail](#) site.

The [Historical Society of Michigan](#) published their 2024 Winter Issue of the Chronicle. The new Harsens Island Historical Society Quilt Block was mentioned in the magazine.





PO Box 44
 Harsens Island
 MI 48028
 www.harsensislandhistory.org

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION 2026

Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Spouse: _____

Primary Mailing Address: _____ Member No. _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____ Cell Phone: _____ Spouse Cell: _____

E-Mail Address: _____ Spouse E-Mail: _____

Additional Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Additional Phone: _____ Membership Type: _____

Annual Renewal Dues:

- Individual (1 Member Only) \$20.00
- Family (1-2 Adults + Children < 18) \$30.00
- Business \$50.00

Lifetime Dues:

- Lifetime Individual \$300.00
- Lifetime Family \$500.00

Building Donation / Roof: \$ _____ Other Donation: \$ _____

(* The necessary roof replacement in 2024 has left reserve funds low) If desired, please specify use: _____

Newsletters are emailed to members. If you require newsletters via postal mail, please write a note on your returned application.

Please complete and send with a check made payable to: **Harsens Island Historical Society**.
 Mail to: Harsens Island St. Clair Historical Society, P.O. Box 44, Harsens Island, MI 48028

OFFICE USE ONLY:

Date received: _____

Check # _____ Amount \$ _____

I would be interested in volunteering as a museum host this summer (greeting visitors, answer questions, if possible, & record museum shop sales).