

# N E W S L E T T E R



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St. Clair Flats Historical Society*  
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## **President's Message**

Hi All,

### **Membership Renewal**

As you noticed from the 2018 membership renewal form which you received in January our new Membership Director Terry Wiggins has streamlined the renewal process. The form was already fill out with the information we have on file for you. All you needed to do was make any needed corrections. Terry has updated our database of members and should be able to provide us more complete reports on information about our membership.

By the way, if you did not return your membership renewal yet for 2018, please try to take care of that in the next couple of weeks. If you don't know where your form went, don't worry, you will receive another copy with a reminder in April or May.

### **New Website Coming Soon**

Chris Knight, our new Webmaster, has been working on updating the information on our website and the way it looks and works. She is not quite done with her work on it, but by the spring it should be ready.

### **Building Improvements**

Thanks to Amy Stutz of A.J. Leo Electrical Contractors, we have a brand new electrical panel in the museum. The old one was decades out of date and undersized for our needs. Amy has donated her services, that of her assistant, and the equipment needed for this work. Thank you, Amy.

# Special Exhibit 2018 Update

Our Special Exhibit 2018 Committee has been working diligently all winter. A family tree of Jacob Harsen's descendants and their spouses has been developed and placed on a banner that will be on display this summer. The work on the family tree was begun decades ago by Anne Grout and Jean Nelson and was this year

updated by Bob Williams using Ancestry.com. The tree now includes over a thousand members of Jacob Harsen's family, and a banner of the tree has been printed and is 14 inches high and over 60 feet long. It will be a challenge to figure out how to display it. Below is a photo of one 3-foot long area of the 60-foot banner.



One portion of this year's special exhibit is about the Islanders of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. There will be a bulletin board displaying photos of as many island families as we can get. Send us a photo of your family or separate photos of any members of your family for us to post for the summer. Please note on the back of each photo the names of the people in the photo and the approximate year that the photo was taken. **Please** only send photos that you do not need returned. At the end of the summer we will package up all the photos submitted and place them in a special file for future generations to enjoy. If you have digital photos, you can drop them off in electronic format or email them to [email@HarsensIslandHistory.org](mailto:email@HarsensIslandHistory.org).

Our team of volunteers has been interviewing long-time island families this winter and helping record their family trees and the interconnection of many of the families on the Island. A master tree showing these interconnections is being worked on and will be displayed as part of the special exhibit. It is fascinating to see the connections between members of families such as "Persyn," "Morrison," "Weaver," "Korthals," "Sampier," "Jessup," "Crandall," "Krispen," "McLane," "Sauer," "Hogg," "Mehl," and many others. It will graphically explain why newcomers to the island at told *"Don't say anything bad about anyone, you are probably talking to one of their relatives."*

# The South Channel Piers and Lighthouse

As commercial steam powered vessels grew in size, the original 12-foot deep channel into the St. Clair River South Channel became obsolete, and a straighter, deeper channel was devised using dikes.

A plan was approved in 1886 to deepen the channel between the dikes (locally known as Piers) to eighteen feet. As the sheet piles protecting the original dikes did not have sufficient penetration to support such a depth, a double row of sheet piling was driven along the channel face of each dike to a depth of twenty-six feet. The deepening of the channel was completed in June 1892. Between April 1893 and December 1894, the channel was dredged to a depth of twenty feet at a cost of \$107,024.

In 1902, Congress authorized the construction of a new channel, parallel to the existing one but separated from it by a 100-foot-wide dike on which the lighthouses were located. This work began in 1904, and after the new canal was finished on October 17, 1906, up-bound traffic used the east channel and down-bound traffic the west channel.

On May 1, 1912 the Lower Light was changed from red to white, and the following month an unwatched intermittent white light was established

atop a red cylindrical structure on the lower end of the canal's east revetment.

Henry Corgan was appointed keeper of the Upper Light in 1919 and retired in 1924, after a career that spanned more than half a century. At the time of his retirement seventy-year-old Henry Corgan was the oldest lighthouse keeper in Michigan.

New modern upper and lower Range Lights were constructed in 1935 for the canal. As a result, the old upper light was stripped, and its wooden substructure was set ablaze on May 13, 1934. The lower light was reportedly deactivated in 1929. After having lost its lights, the center dike was removed to create one wide channel to serve both up-bound and down-bound vessels. Visit the Museum to examine the map collection showing the evolution of the Flats Canal.

## Note from the Curator

In the course of our continuing research on the island heritage, we have come across some wonderful pieces of history. The article on the next page was provided by Robert Kowalski, long time islander and a distant relative of Joe Bedore, the famous hotelier on the island. Robert found this letter about the Lighthouse at the Piers in an old newspaper article.



## Piers Lighthouse Story

*Helen Yacques, "an old timer," submitted the following information about the piers.*

*"I spent six rather exciting weeks back in 1922 at the lighthouse that stood on the piers. Mr. Tom Lapin was the keeper for the light, which was lit at sundown, and put out each morning. It was a guiding light for freighters which came up from the lake on one side and down on the other. Mr. Lapin's wife was dying in Detroit, so my husband was asked to take over for a while.*

*To light the lamp, you ascended a circular iron stair-way and it didn't pay to look down. The first day we were there a cruiser caught fire and two people drowned. A passing freighter told us to rescue the men. It was next to impossible to launch our small boat as the waves were so high, but we did it. The second day we were there, a small*



*government boat stopped by on a routine checkup and I learned that baby clothes (we had our first child along) were not to be seen and things must shape up, or ship out. You learn faster in your 20's.*

*I've written to the Corps of Engineers for information on the piers as most people don't remember about them. Gull Island is all that remains."*

Respectfully submitted: Helen Yacques  
"an old timer"

## The Memoirs of Aura P. Stewart

Back about 1815 a young man came to Harsens Island from New York state to join up with his father who had arrived a few years earlier to explore the new territory of Michigan and setup a homestead. That young man went on to build a home of his own on the island, now marked as the Michigan Historic Site "Stewart Farm" and in his later years wrote his memoirs. Those memoirs are described as reminiscences of the early 1800's in St. Clair County including Harsens Island and Clay Township. They include stories of early pioneers of St. Clair County and some of their adventures during the War of 1812. They were published in the *Marine City Gazette*, *The Pioneer Society Minutes*, and in *The History of St. Clair County* by A.T. Andreas & Co. 1883. I would like to share portions of those memoirs in this and future newsletters.

*"For many years, I saw but little of Michigan, except that portion bordering on the shore of Lake and River St. Clair. I came from an inland and thickly settled district, and had seen no flowing water save brooks and rivulets; I had seen no forests but in the distance, and though but a boy of twelve years of age I could not but feel impressed with the wild beauty of my new home. The dense and almost impenetrable forests, the magnificent River St. Clair, the countless number of every variety of waterfowl flying over my head or resting and sporting on the bosom of the beautiful waters, the howling of wolves at night, the constantly passing and repassing canoes of the strange looking Indians, their stealthy tread through the woods and their unintelligible shouts as*

*they passed each other, and, last but not least, the merry songs of the French voyageurs toiling at the oar, propelling their boats swiftly over the blue waters -- these were new scenes to me, and called forth my wonder and delight. I have now entered upon the seventy-second year of my life -- nearly sixty years thus far have been spent in Michigan. I have witnessed the improvements made in the county of St. Clair; flourishing towns have sprung up, and a large portion of our older settlers have become wealthy; all have shared in the conveniences of modern improvements and comforts, but yet, for my own part, I could enjoy no greater pleasure than for a short time to see Michigan as I saw it in 1815, wild and romantic as it then was; to traverse its dense forests, to paddle my canoe over its waters, surrounded by game of every description on river, lake and shore; and at night, while partaking of a supper of game taken through the day, hear the howling of the wolves, the hooting of owls and other voices of the night. Fancy oft times leads me back to the dear old primitive days, and then I am a boy again! Alas! The vision lingers not! I am an old man with increasing infirmities, and nothing is left to me but the memories of the past!"*

*"It appears that there were no permanent settlements made on the River St. Clair prior to the conquest of Canada by the British forces, but immediately following that event lands were located and permanent residences made. At Point Aux Trembles, there were four families; on Strumness Island (Dickinson's) there were three families, and three, also, on Harsens Island; between Point Aux Trembles and Recor's Point were fourteen,*

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and five families were settled between Recor's and Black River. The names of the residents on Point Aux Trembles were Chortier (Shirkey), Minne, Basney and William Hill. [Since Mr. Stewart wrote his memoirs, Mr. Hill departed this life at the ripe old age of ninety years.] Mr. Chortier appears to have been the most prominent man of the Point Aux Trembles settlement. The names of the residents of Harsens Island were William Harsen, Jacob Harsen, Francis Harsen and Mary Stewart, formerly Mary Graveraet. Capt. Peter Laughton was the first settler on Strumness

Island; he was a retired British naval officer, and had selected the island as a part of the land he was entitled to draw from the British Government. Mr. James Harsen and his son-in-law, Isaac Graveraet, were the first settlers on Harsens Island. Mr. Harsen was a gunsmith, and Mr. Graveraet, a silversmith; they came from the city of Albany, N. Y., for the purpose of dealing with the Indians, and selected Harsens Island as their place of business; they purchased the island from the Indians, under the sanction of the British Government."

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## **Historical Society remaining events for 2018**

TBD = to be determined. Locations may change – See our website at [HarsensIslandHistory.org](http://HarsensIslandHistory.org) for the latest information. All members welcome to attend any Board meeting listed as Board/Membership meeting.

**Museum hours** May 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> - Saturday, Sunday, Monday - Memorial Day Museum Open House  
(Special open hours - Saturday 11:30am – 3pm, Sunday 12 noon – 4pm, Monday 10am – 3pm)  
Summer (June, July, Aug, Sept.) 2<sup>nd</sup> Fri. 6 – 8 PM; Thurs. & Fri. – 12 - 4 PM, Sat. 10 AM – 3 PM; Sun. Noon – 4 PM  
Winter (October through April) Closed, but, open by appointment.

- May - 5<sup>th</sup> - Saturday - 10:30 AM – Board/**Membership meeting** at the Museum  
26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup> - Saturday, Sunday, Monday - Memorial Day Museum Open House  
(Special open hours - Saturday 11:30am – 3pm, Sunday 12 noon – 4pm, Monday 10am – 3pm)
- June - 2<sup>nd</sup> – Saturday – 9:30 AM – Museum host orientation at the Museum  
2<sup>nd</sup> – Saturday - 10:30 AM – Board/**Membership meeting** at the Museum  
2<sup>nd</sup> – Saturday – 3:00 PM – Museum host orientation at the Museum  
8<sup>th</sup> – Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum  
9<sup>th</sup> – Saturday – 3:00 PM - Lecture series  
16<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 11 AM - Delta News collectors meeting, open to the public
- July - 7<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 10:30 AM – Board/**Membership meeting** at the Museum  
13<sup>th</sup> – Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum  
14<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 3:00 PM - Lecture series  
23<sup>rd</sup> – Friday – Voyagers arrive via canoe at museum for three-night encampment.
- August- 4<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 10:30 AM – Board/**Membership meeting** at the Museum  
10<sup>th</sup> - Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum  
11<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 3:00 PM - Lecture series  
18<sup>th</sup> – Saturday – 4:30 PM Wine and Appetizers at the museum.  
5 to 6 PM **Annual Membership meeting** at the museum.
- Sept. - 14<sup>th</sup> – Friday – Social hour – 6 to 8 PM at the Museum
- Oct. - 6<sup>th</sup> – Saturday – 10 – 3 PM - Pie Sale at Museum  
13<sup>th</sup> - Saturday – 10:30 AM – Board/**Membership meeting** at the Museum
- Dec. - 1<sup>st</sup> – Saturday – 10 AM– 3 PM - Cookie Walk at the Museum

Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society  
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