



Message from the President . . .

Happy New Year and Winter!

Mother Nature has provided us with a ‘real’ winter so far. Having friends and family that grew up in northern Michigan, the SE Michigan winters were in their opinion always mild with never enough snow but this year they have nothing to complain about.

One of my many winter projects this year has been to organize the genealogy research my mom did years ago. It has been in a box for many years, as she was never able to create a final binder before she became ill. Of course, much of my family genealogy revolves around Harsens Island. As I sorted through her collections of documents and pictures, not only did I learn many new things, but was also reminded of family stories both on and off Harsens Island. It was a privilege to put together a final product in her memory that traces family back many generations.

As a spin-off genealogy project, I would like to create a historical binder for our cottages. They have been in the family for generations and I now can more easily put my hands on documents and pictures that directly relate to the cottages’ history. I will make a copy of it when complete and add it to the museum library.

Although we have a great deal of information in the museum library, we would love to have binders, or scrapbooks of any sort, that tell the history and story of specific buildings, homes, and/or cottages with documents, pictures, letters, postcards . . . whatever supports their origins and history. Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . . !

As always, thank you for your support!

Joyce

Joyce Hassen, President



The museum will open Memorial Weekend for the 2026 season. Stop by to see the Tashmoo Bell.

Preserving Your History

We encourage, and would like to assist, islanders in getting their old photos, slides, negatives, and historical documents into digital format to preserve and/or display them.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You can bring photos, slides, negatives, or historical documents to the Museum to have them scanned and the digital copy put on a USB flash drive to take home along with the documents you brought for scanning.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.



Harsens Island Fire Hall Dedication in 1938



Recent donation to the museum, duck decoy carved by Zeke McDonald.

Island Finds By Jerry Forton

Among the many interesting exhibits in the museum is a display case near the entrance. All of the items were discovered on the Island by Society member Mike Sauers. A nice collection of arrowheads, spear tips, and axe heads from the 1800s and even earlier. There are also pieces of clay smoking pipes. Tobacco smoking became popular by Europeans in the late 1500s after being introduced to them by the indigenous people. One of the pipestems in the museum is stamped "Henderson" & "Montreal".

William Henderson came from Scotland and opened his pipe factory in 1847. They made millions of pipes until the 1890s. The pipes were made by hand shaping damp clay, feeding a wire into the stem to form an air channel, squeeze the mold in a vise, form the bowl with a plug tool, then fire them in a kiln. Henderson pipes were a popular item in the fur trade routes that covered most of North America. In 2019 the Henderson factory was re-discovered in Montreal while excavating below the Jacques Cartier Bridge.

So, keep your eyes open for buried relics sticking up, waiting to be found.



Examples Henderson pipes.

A Kiln That Fired Millions of Clay Pipes Was Unearthed Under a Montreal Bridge

Archaeologists recently dug it up—but now they're putting an end to its brief affair with open air.

BY JESSICA LEIGH HESTER • DECEMBER 2, 2019



The kiln was demolished, but its chambers were still obvious. SIMON FILIATRAULT

American Natural Wonder
Story by Cathy Barringer-Rourke
Published by River Scene October 2005

American Natural Wonder
story by Cathy Barringer-Rourke photos by Phil Tuttle

Did you know one of the world's largest freshwater deltas lies right at the bottom of St. Clair County? Don't worry, most people don't. This natural wonder — the largest of the American landmasses surrounded by water, is Harsens Island, where the St. Clair River meets Lake St. Clair. In fact, several islands extend off Harsens and neighboring Dickinson islands to comprise the St. Clair Flats, known for years as the "Venice of America." Today, Harsens Island is home to 1,000 year-round residents and paradise for 5,000 summer visitors, but the island has a long, interesting history documented back to at least the early 1600s. The Algonac-Clay Township Historical Society in downtown Algonac is the place to visit when researching the island's history. Society President Susan Barker said preserving island photos, remnants and other artifacts helps future gen-

erations look into the past. "I think any history is well worth repeating and knowing," Barker said. "It was a lifestyle that was unique to the area. To me, history has to be preserved. How can you realize how good times are now if you don't know where you've been?" According to the late Mick Isaacs, Harsens Island was first settled by aborigine Indians. As a member of the Historical Society, Isaacs regularly profiled the area's history in The Chronicle, a quarterly publication produced by the Historical Society. Isaacs documented the French as having arrived to the area as early as 1615, looking for a passage to China. They traded guns, ammunition, powder and other tools for fine furs with the aboriginal tribe. After several wars between France and Britain in the early 1700s, the British finally overtook the island territory. After the War of 1812, the U.S. and

British governments agreed the international border would extend down the western shore of the St. Clair River, along the North Channel and around Anchor Bay, leaving the St. Clair Flats' islands Chippewa Indian territory. When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged the St. Clair Flats Canal at the end of the South Channel in 1870, the governments agreed the boundary would extend down the middle of the North Channel and across Lake St. Clair. The "ownership" of Harsens Island still is disputed today by some First Nation legalists who claim neither

government properly procured the island's title. Harsens Island was named after Jacob Harsen, a gunsmith and fur trader who arrived around 1778. According to Harsens Island Real Estate, he purchased the entire island from the Chippewa Indian tribe for a keg of whiskey and a string of beads. Actually, the United States government had taken control of the land and did not consider the Chippewa tribe owners, but they did grant Harsen and a few others patents to some of the land. According to Isaacs documentation in The Chronicle, Harsen, his wife, five sons and two daughters were the first white settlers on the island, as well as the first between Detroit and Mackinac. Harsen's log home was located on what is now Golf Course Road. A gunpowder explosion destroyed the home in the summer of 1800, a few years after Harsen died. According to Isaacs, Harsens wife, then wid-

How can you realize how good times are now if you don't know where you've been.

owed, was hosting a group of Moravian missionaries when the explosion occurred. The blast resulted when a spark from a candle or one of



The Idle Hour, built in 1891, has been restored to serve as the private Idle Hour Yacht Club.



This dock, directly across from the old Tashmoo Park, was built on the original landing site for the Star Lines fleet.



A water-side view of the Idle Hour, built in 1891. It's the last remaining hotel of 16 that once dotted the island.

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ignited a pile of gunpowder that had spilled from the keg in the hearth. The explosion killed two of Harsen's children and destroyed the home.

The Harsen House was built a short time later on the same site for Harsens' descendants. The structure still stands today, although it's now slightly larger and has been renovated.

Harvey Stewart also was a pioneer who settled his family on the island in the early 1800s. Stewart managed one of the first distilleries in Michigan, which also served as a British fort during the War of 1812.

The distillery's whiskey was traded with the Chippewa Indians for furs and wild meat. Stewart later became Clay Township's first supervisor, serving from 1828 to 1833 and again in 1842.

During this era, the North Channel was a primary shipping channel due to its accommodating depth. A sand bar in the bay at the North Channel's outlet posed an obstacle, requiring ships to drop anchor upon arrival.

Smaller boats then would unload some of the cargo to lighten the load, allowing the ship to proceed.

Once the ships were beyond the sand bar and into deeper water, the cargo would be reloaded, and ships could continue the trip — hence, the name Anchor Bay.

From 1821 to the end of the century, agriculture dominated the higher, drier portions of Harsens and Dickinson islands. Yet, Harsens Island was known for shipbuilding from 1840 to the Civil War. Several

ships were built on the island, including the schooner *Island City* in 1859.

Many people found employment transferring cargo from ships before the 6,000-foot-long shipping canal was built in 1856 along the South Channel, which was later widened and deepened several times. This new Channel brought with it the "resort era," with steam ferries traveling between Detroit and Port Huron and a number of hotels opening along the South Channel, including the legendary Joe Bedore's Hotel, which survived until it was torn down in 1968.

Fire eventually destroyed most of island's hotels, including the Star Island Hotel, Marshland Hotel, Lemke Hotel and the regal Grand Pointe.

The exception is the Idle Hour, the last remaining of the 16 hotels that once graced the island. During World War II, the U.S. government leased the property to use the hotel as barracks. About 200 training recruits are said to have stayed there,

marching up and down the driveway. The hotel now serves as the private Idle Hour Yacht Club.

The resort era also brought the White Star steamship line to the Harsens Island area, where it would make over a dozen stops in the Flats alone.

The flagship of the fleet was the Tashmoo, a palatial side-wheel excursion steamer that ran from 1900 until it sank off Amherstburg, Ontario in 1936.

Named after Tashmoo Park, it was one of the boats that handled government mail service on the island — which had none until White Star started service around 1898. A post office opened on the island in April 1900 under the name Sans Souci, the unincorporated downtown area, until December 1961 when it was changed to Harsens Island.

The resort era overlapped with the infamous Prohibition era. Located on the Canadian border, the island was a popular venue for rum-running, since it was easy to hide in the

marshes and many canals.

The resort era saw its end due to a number of events, including the sinking of the Tashmoo, the arrival of the automobile, the end of Prohibition and a series of hotel fires.

Coming in November: the Harsens Island series continues with a look at the environmental and ecological aspects of the region. We will explore the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' management of the state game and wildlife refuge areas, invasive species and other threats to the native wetlands, and the roles played by hunting and conservation clubs.

Sources: www.roots.com,
www.wikipedia.org



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Continued from page 5 . . . Natural Wonder

Harsens's History

Algonac resident Joan Bulley remembers Harsens Island far differently than it is today.

Bulley's grandfather, George Raymond, started Raymond Ferry in 1920 — one of many vital auto ferries linking the island to the mainland. The ferry service was carried on by her father, Stewart "Stu" Raymond.

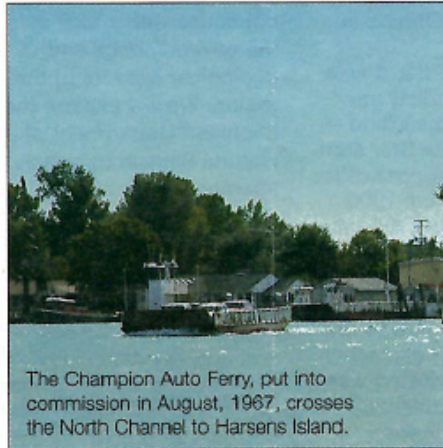
Bulley lived on the island until age 14 when her father moved back to the mainland to work for Townsend Lumber.

"It wasn't like it is now," Bulley said. "It was very private. You drove or walked across the ice in the winter. There were no steel ferries then, just wood. It was very cold. We ate off the land because no ferries were running. There was no money.

"We ate rabbits, pheasants, squirrels and whatever else we could get," she continued. "I remember going down to the water and spearing pike with my dad. We would tie the pike to a tree and it was so cold they would stay frozen. We ate a lot of duck. My dad knew which ones were good to eat."

Bulley, a member of the Algonac-Clay Township Historical Society, recalls working on the Raymond ferry-boats that ran from May

through Labor Day until 1942. They would run from Pointe du Chene near the old Gar Wood boat plant to the island's Grand Pointe Cut, where some of the old dock pilings still exist.



The Champion Auto Ferry, put into commission in August, 1967, crosses the North Channel to Harsens Island.

Raymond Ferry had the first self-propelled auto ferry to the island. In 1929, the ferry service had to move from Pointe du Chene since Gar Wood was expanding his boat-building plant.

In 1930, Raymond Ferry purchased the Tashmoo Park Auto Ferry from R.C. Witmiller. A round-trip fare from the Island Stop dock was just \$1.50. The Raymond Ferry fleet had three boats including the Chief Harsen, the 12-car Raymond and the six-car Junior.

Another ferry operator, Arthur Champion, founded his Champion Auto Ferry service in 1939. His grandson, David Bryson, continues to operate the ferry service today.

"My dad and Art

Champion were good friends," Bulley said. "Art Champion came down and said he was going to start building steel ferries. My dad was going to get out of it anyway."

Bulley vividly remembers one of her many tasks on the ferries.

"I used to mend the cork life preservers with my dad," she said. "There was a sleeve where the cork dropped in and you had to make sure the sleeve was sewed up tight."

Bulley has fond memories of the island as it was

back then, though they contrast sharply with life there today. She remembers using a duck boat to travel through the marsh to a friend's house and the community gatherings the families would have.

"People would come over and we would jack up the heat," Bulley recalled. "We shared Friday and Saturday nights with people on the island. We'd go to someone's house for a potluck and play cards just to keep warm."

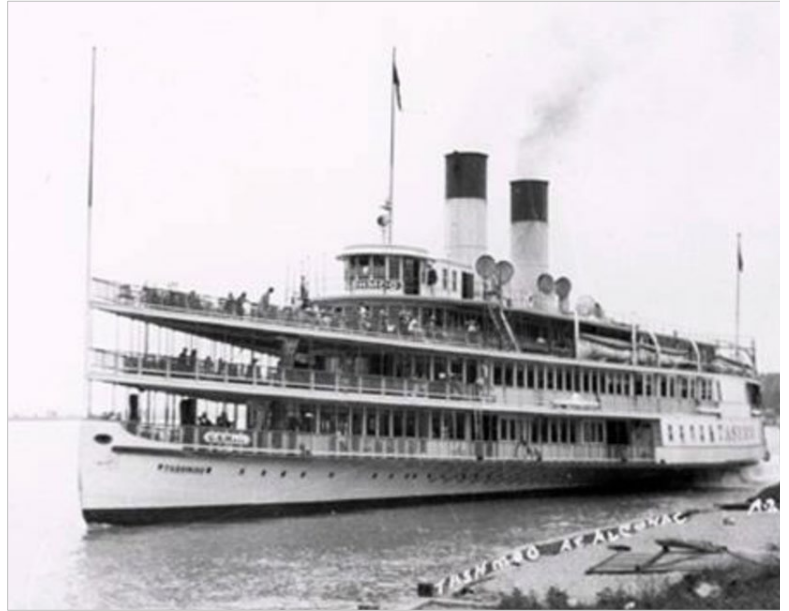
Those more primitive days on the island may be gone, but not forgotten.

"It was an interesting place," Bulley added. "Now it's very commercialized. There are a lot more people there. It's more of an R and R place now."

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Tashmoo

- **Fame:** Luxurious 311-foot paddle-wheel excursion steamer.
- **Owner:** White Star Line Navigation Co.
- **Name:** Tashmoo, meaning "sweet water" after Harsens Island's 60-acre Tashmoo Park. The park was founded in 1897 and purchased two years later by the line from William Fish before the ship was built.
- **Nicknames:** "The Queen of the St. Clair River," "The Lady of the Lakes" and "The Glass Hack," for the 600 glass windows enclosing the deck nearly from floor to ceiling.
- **Maiden voyage:** June 9, 1900.
- **First captain:** East China Township native Burton S. Baker.
- **Capacity:** 4,000 passengers, though limited to 2,800.
- **Cost:** \$2 round-trip fare for a five-hour excursion between Detroit and Port Huron.
- **Early riders:** President William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt.
- **Amenities:** Mahogany paneled bulkheads, rectangular portholes for diners' uninterrupted viewing, lush carpeting, glass chandeliers, linen tablecloths, nautical china and silver servings.
- **Local dock:** Tashmoo Park, where the line constructed a large casino and later a steel-arched dance pavilion with a 10,400-square-foot hard-



wood floor in 1912; both still stand today; amusement rides were added around 1920.

- **Last run:** June 18, 1936 when the steamer struck a submerged rock while returning from a moonlight cruise to Sugar Island in the Detroit River's south end. Passengers continued to dance as Capt. Donald MacAlpine called for full speed ahead and landed 10 minutes later at a dock near Amherstburg, Ontario. All 1,410 passengers and crew safely made it to land before the Tashmoo sank in 14 feet of water.
- **End of the line:** When attempting to raise the steamer from the water, the bow was lifted too quickly and the keel broke, ending its fine career.
- **Record:** Safely carried 6 million passengers during its 36 years in service.
- **Park passing:** Tashmoo Park closed in 1951 and the property changed hands many times before being purchased in 1985 by Bob Bryson, who, with wife Susan, now operates Tashmoo Marina on the property.
- **Remnants:** The old casino and dance pavilion now are used as the marina's cold storage for a variety of wood boats, including Chris Crafts, Seas Skiffs, runabouts and cruisers.
- **Building restoration:** "When we redid the dance hall, we kept it the same inside," said Susan Bryson. "Even when fixing the

roof on the building, we actually got wire brushes and scraped all the rust off. Then we primed it and painted it to keep that framework. That building hasn't twisted or warped. The architectural design on the building is incredible. It's 100 years old and still there."

- **Centennial celebration:** A 100-year anniversary of Tashmoo Park held at the marina in 1997 drew over 700 people.
- **Dock renovations:** The dock, where the Tashmoo once stopped, was redone last year. The renovation retained many of the original dock posts and others that were still poking up from the water underneath.
- **Induction:** Tashmoo found its place in the National Maritime Hall of Fame in Kinspoint, N.Y., in 1985.



Harsens Island Historical Society Calendar 2026

Date	Day	Time	Event
January 17	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom
March 21	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom
April 18	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting via Zoom
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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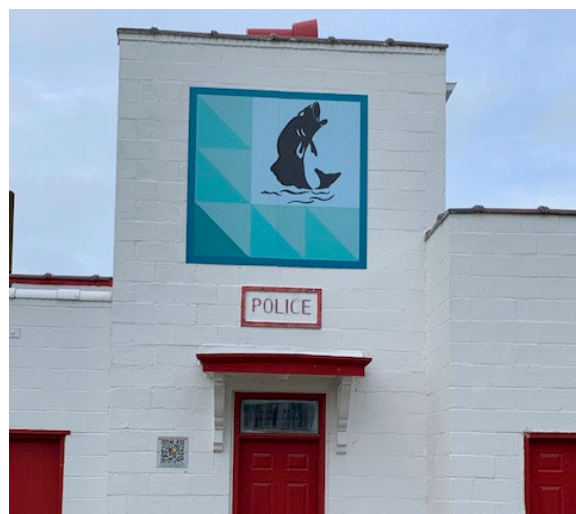
The historical society is looking to add to its collection. We accept donations of artifacts, photos, documents, and stories related to the Island and surrounding area. If you would like to add your family history to the museum archives, we can help you capture your memories for future generations.

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.

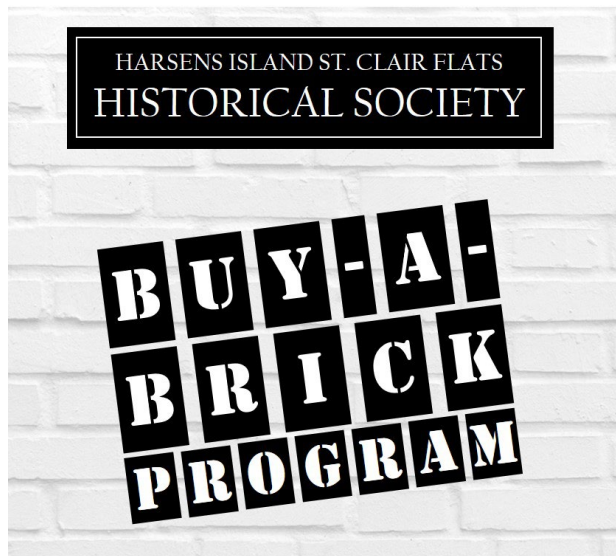
The [Historical Society of Michigan](#) published their 2024 Winter Issue of the Chronicle. The new Harsens Island Historical Society Quilt Block was mentioned in the magazine.



Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society Building Renovation BUY-A-BRICK Program

The past three years we celebrated the completion of several renovation projects; in 2020 the Clayton Evans Room Addition, in 2021 the Karen and Drew Peslar Library and in 2022 the large exhibit space at the entrance to the museum named the Nancy Boulton / Gary Grout Room.

To help maintain the museum's infrastructure and a healthy financial position for our Historical Society, we are reactivating our BUY-A-BRICK Program.



Members and friends can support the Historical Society and assure the continuance of the museum by donating \$350 to our BUY-A-BRICK program. Donors will be recognized or may designate a memorial on one of the bricks inside the museum. Of course, they may remain anonymous if they wish. Donations of any amount to support the renovation efforts are welcome and appreciated. To sign up, or if you have questions, contact Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or xharpspah@aol.com.



BUY-A-BRICK Order Form is included below.



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).