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# Michigan's Lumbertowns

*Lumbermen and Laborers in Saginaw,*

*Bay City, and Muskegon, 1870-1905*

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speculation. He envisioned few long-range prospects on a lake that he described as shallow, congested with weeds and wild rice. The upper end near the Muskegon River was covered with dead timber killed by high waters. Ryerson took note of Muskegon because of its bad climate and mosquitoes and ague. It was not a place to settle permanently.

Newcomers to Muskegon, and there were few, were lured by information from early surveyors and fur traders regarding the potential value of the dense stands of pine along the lakeshore and riverbanks. Local historians consider Muskegon's founding to be the year the first sawmill was built along the lake in 1837. Benjamin H. Wheelock, an agent of the Muskegon Steam Mill Company, began to build the first sawmill in January 1837. The stockholders in the Steam Mill Company remained in Detroit and Ann Arbor. In August of that year, the Buffalo and Black Rock Company built a water-powered sawmill at the mouth of Bear Lake just north of Muskegon Lake. A third mill was added a year later; however, the Panic of 1837 and limited demand restricted production and forced the original mills to change ownership several times by the mid-1840s.

In these embryonic years, Muskegon comprised four primitive settlements clustered around trading posts and sawmills. Each hamlet (Bluffton, Lakeside, Muskegon, and North Muskegon) was separated from its nearest neighbor by a mile or more of timberland. Towering pines rising 150 feet effectively isolated the individual logging operations from one another. As logging operations progressed, a widening crescent of stumps gradually brought these tiny hamlets closer together.

The center of development of the early community was along the south shore of Muskegon Lake. Bluffton—a trading outpost at the mouth of the lake near Lake Michigan—Lakeside, and Muskegon were the three settlements most favored for topographical and geographical factors. Early settlers came from the south over primitive trails from Grand Rapids, and supplies and mail deliveries reached the south shore more quickly. The first post office was in Bluffton where the footpath from the south ended. Early lake schooners also found it easier and closer to land along the south shore. The mile-wide, swamp-covered flats at the mouth of the Muskegon River at the east end of the lake made land access to the north side difficult.

Attracted by the natural resources, men like Martin Ryerson came early to exploit the area's timber. Optimistically, they built

primitive sawmills before regional markets could absorb their output of lumber. Yet the combination of geographical factors—the Muskegon River stretching into the interior, a harbor that never freezes, and the seemingly endless pine forests—encouraged the pioneers to persist. Despite restricted markets and production, slow but significant growth took place in the Muskegon lumber industry in the first decade and a half after its founding. The number of mills increased from three in 1840 to ten by 1854. As the industry grew, new and better equipment expanded capacity at a rapid rate. In 1850 six mills produced 14,500,000 feet; four years later ten mills turned out 28,100,000 feet per year.

As the sawmilling business grew, the physical layout of the three mill settlements along the south shore shared similar appearances. Gathered close to each mill were usually a blacksmith shop, a stable, a lumberyard (to dry cut wood), a dock, a small general store, a boardinghouse, and a few scattered dwellings. The sawmill and drying docks were always at the end of the lake to facilitate the movement of logs and the transport of lumber. Behind the mill site were the varied residences. Small, drab, and unpainted, built amid a field of decaying stumps, the mill settlements were notably unattractive. The odor of fresh cut pine, mingled with the smoke that belched from the mills' engines and steam boilers, drifted over the roofs of the workers' homes. Usually several small, frame structures housed the married workers and their families, and one or two boardinghouses accommodated unmarried men. A total of twenty or thirty buildings made up each settlement.

The small populations and primitive existence along the lake was reflected in the lack of physical amenities available to the residents. Because no promoter was profiting from the sale of land or town lots, no effort was made to improve or refine the settlements. There was no bank, no public cemetery, no daily mail service, no church, no newspaper. Houses were built wherever convenient, with little or no thought of street patterns. Not until 1849 did Muskegon become the first hamlet to record a plat of anticipated streets. Until new demands for Muskegon's timber increased, clusters of crude buildings, surrounded by brush and pine stumps and a few sawmills were all that made up each community. Their combined populations did not exceed four hundred at any time before 1853.<sup>39</sup>

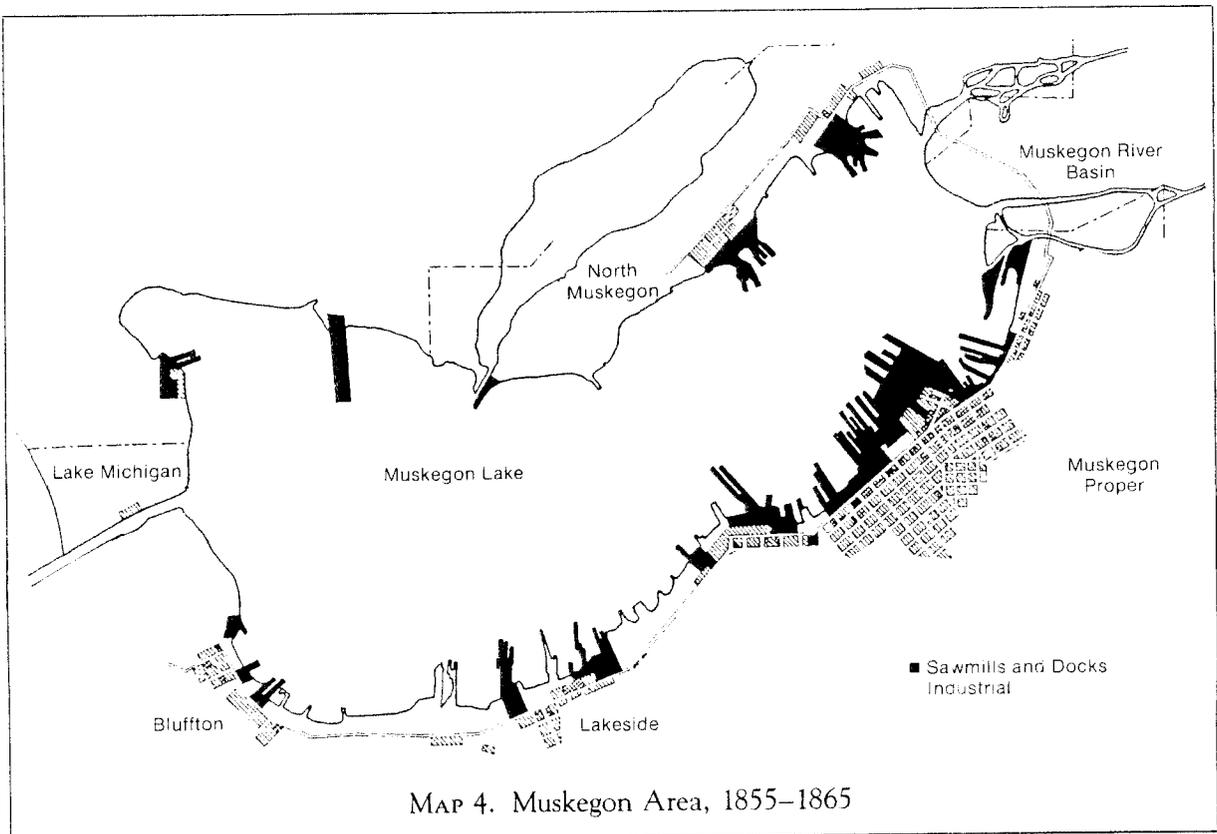
Muskegon remained an isolated community until market demands in the early 1850s changed its size and future prospects. As Chicago grew it became a prime consumer of Muskegon lumber. Easily acces-

sible by schooner and steamship, Muskegon not only exported lumber but also imported merchandise, freight, and people on returning lumber steamers. The railroad network that spread into the prairies of Illinois and Iowa also became an artery to move lumber westward from the great Chicago wholesale yards.

Despite the growth of commerce, overland transportation to Muskegon remained difficult. In 1846 Martin Ryerson, who had expanded into the mercantile business, built a wagon road between Muskegon proper and Ravenna where it joined the road that had recently been opened to Grand Rapids. Yet Ryerson's road was poor, and in 1849 it took an entire day to travel by team a mere four miles.<sup>40</sup> The road was nothing much more than a track among stumps, sand, and mud. In 1851 the road was improved by the addition of planks, and a stage line began irregular operation over the track. By 1853 it took a day in good weather to drive the fifteen miles between Muskegon and Ravenna.

Other elements contributed to Muskegon's growth. A post office was established in 1848; several new sawmills were constructed in 1853; a school system was organized in 1849; and a bank was established in 1855. Logs began to be floated down the Muskegon River in the early fifties, and the milling business developed some early organization. The plat for Muskegon, developed in 1849, encouraged lot sales in that area. The early plat, though, added little to the aesthetics of the stump-strewn settlement. Right-angled roads intersected in the familiar grid pattern on a plat that measured about seven square blocks on each side. The area along the waterfront, where settlement first concentrated, remained unplatted. Lots within the initial plan sold for \$45; by 1856 the price rose to \$100.

After 1853, with the availability of new Western markets for lumber, Muskegon grew rapidly. Populations in the three hamlets increased from four hundred in 1853 to two thousand in 1857. Logs choked the Muskegon River and new sawmills were built to consume the flow. By 1857 there were sixteen mills in operation on the lake employing more than 550 men and cutting more than 100,000 feet of lumber each day. Sawmills began to encircle the lake by 1860. Although only a few mills dotted the north shore, the south shore was lined with mills, docks, and piles of drying lumber. The city's physical appearance, though, remained uninviting. Boardinghouses for unmarried workers were built near the mills and in residential areas. Houses were small, flimsy, and unpainted shacks of two or three rooms. Many of these were originally built by lumbermen and



MAP 4. Muskegon Area, 1855-1865