

The History of Russell Island

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In the spring of 1802, Christian Frederick Denke, a Moravian missionary from Nazareth Hall, Pennsylvania became the first person to attempt to settle on Russell Island. His purpose was to establish a mission for the Chippewa Indians. Christian stayed with the Harsen family on the present day Harsen's Island while he was building a cabin on Russell Island. He ended his stay with them, however, when a fire caused by a gunpowder explosion destroyed the Harsen's cabin and killed two of the Harsen family members.

Christian completed his cabin on Russell Island. Having learned the Chippewa language, he translated Bible passages and hymns into their language to use in his missionary work. He also planted crops of potatoes and tobacco. However, when the government passed a law prohibiting the sale of liquor to the Indians, they

Around 1905, Algonac merchants purchased Russell Island from the Detroit, Belle Isle and Windsor Ferry Company for \$1,700 with the purpose of creating a summer resort. The resort became known as Camp Algonac which was a tent city (it was also known as White City). Travelers arrived in Detroit by train from various inland cities in Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Ohio, boarded steamboats and traveled to Algonac, where they were ferried to Russell Island in naphtha launches. The July 14, 1908 edition of *The Bryan Democrat* from Bryan, Ohio described Camp Algonac in the following article: (Provided in its unedited form!)

TO CAMP ALGONAC \$11.15

For an exceedingly attractive and enjoyable vacation outing, the Tented City, Camp Algonac, affords an opportunity to residents of inland cities, and those residing on the lake water-

The beauties of the water trip on the White Star Line steamers from Toledo to Algonac are almost beyond description.

The sanitation of the camp has been installed under the supervision of the board of health of Michigan, and the drinking water supply, which is unsurpassed, is furnished by a number of deep artesian wells.

A system of 2,000 candlepower arc lights, situated at frequent intervals, furnishes night illumination that lengthens the days enjoyment and makes pleasant the evening on a bathing beach that has no equal on fresh water. Campers don bathing suits in the tents and step into the water within a hundred feet of the tents on this wonderful white sand beach 2,500 feet long and from 200 to 400 feet wide.

Ample police protection is provided, making it safe for families, woman folks and children to take the outing unchaperoned. No

bowling and billiards. The view from the South Channel was fabulous, as steamships passed down the St. Clair River at the approximate rate of one every four minutes.

Camp Algonac continued in full swing until 1909 when the camp basically went broke and was closed. Until 1912 or 1913, however, campers came and went on their own to Russell Island and enjoyed the beautiful outdoor scenery.

In 1914, the Russell Island Company, Inc. was formed by William W. Hannan, a Detroit developer and William L. Carpenter and Flavius L. Brooke, both justices of the Michigan Supreme Court, who had received the title to the part of Russell Island that was formerly owned by Walter Campbell. The island was then subdivided and individual plots were put up for sale. George Brown of Algonac was hired as the general caretaker of the island. George and his wife built a house on Russell Island and remained there with their five daughters until George's death in 1962.

blamed Christian and became hostile toward him, causing him to abandon the mission in March of 1803.

The next recorded land settlement on Russell Island took place shortly after the War of 1812 when Lewis I. Brakeman and his wife, Candace, settled there. Other early settlers included Azel and Rennett Abel, James and Catherine Dunlop, Joel Tucker, Bartlett A. Luce and Thomas B. Clark.

However, the person who gave his name to Russell Island was Samuel Russell who was born in Northern Ireland on July 22, 1813. Samuel came to Algonac and on January 13, 1841 married Sarah C. Smith. He became one of the most prominent men in the county and held many positions including Custom House Officer, Clay Township Justice of the Peace, Sheriff of St. Clair County and Clay Township Supervisor. He was the owner of Russell Island from 1855 to 1858.

In 1858 Samuel Russell sold the island to John P. Clark and George Clark. The island was then rented out for pasturage for many years. Upon the death of George Clark, five prominent Detroiters secured deeds for parts of Russell Island from the Clark family.

ways as well, that has no equal when real enjoyment, solid comfort, recreation and rest away from tiresome routine of every day life, at small cost, is taken into consideration.

Camp Algonac is situated on Russell's Island in St. Clair River and is probably the most beautiful spot nature ever designed for rest and recreation during the summer months. It is celebrated as one of the most healthful water resorts in the north and affords splendid fishing and bathing facilities.

The management of the resort has installed, under the best sanitary conditions, tent accommodations for several hundred people at one time. The accommodations consist of wall tents, 10 x 12 feet, with canvas floor, fitted out with new cot beds, bedding and camp stools with back. The tents are supplied with flies which render them heat and water proof.

The meals of the campers are served in a large dining tent, and, up to the present time from the very opening of the season, only words of praise have been heard as to the bill of fare and table service afforded. So it can readily be seen that the usual disagreeable features of camp life are eliminated in the proposition that the management has to offer.

undesirable persons are permitted on the island and no intoxicating liquors are sold upon the grounds.

Entertainment of various sorts is provided upon the island for the campers.

Camping parties are now being organized for eight day outings every Monday to Monday during July and August at Camp Algonac, transportation both ways, 20 meals and seven nights lodging, covering everything is furnished at a rate of \$11.15 from Bryan. Excursions leaves every Monday morning. See J. H. Ried for particulars.

Visitors were not allowed to cook their own food so that beauty and cleanliness could be maintained. Almost 1,500 visitors at a time could be accommodated on the island. Businesses on the island at the time of Camp Algonac included barbers and hairdressers, a post office and physicians.

Russell Island was described in brochures of the time to be the "Gem of the Great Lakes." Camp Algonac was approximately 187 acres, including 43 acres of oaks with walkways, swings and rustic seating. Every activity imaginable was available, including boating, swimming, fishing, croquet, tennis,

Russell Island today is part of Clay Township in St. Clair County and has grown to have over 150 cottages which provide summer homes to over 150 families. The Russell Island Yacht Club is the social center of the island today. It is the only store on Russell Island today, selling candy, ice cream, pop, pizza, beer and the like. Many events are hosted at the Yacht Club. The Russell Island Property Owners' Association now represents the interests of the Islanders, takes care of the playgrounds and docks and subsidizes the Russell Island Ferry. Those lucky enough to venture on to the island today will inevitably be taken back to another era when life seemed more simple and carefree. It is an atmosphere the Russell Island dwellers wish to preserve far into the future. 🍀



The Russell Island ferry with Russell Island in the background.