

Historical Human Impacts on the Grand River

Even before Europeans settled on the east banks of the Grand River, in what is now downtown Grand Rapids, humankind had been affecting the water quality of the Lower Grand River Watershed. Many native peoples used the Grand River for fishing, transportation, and other daily activities. ¹“The Grand River is Michigan’s largest stream. It extends 270 miles through Jackson to Grand Haven. The Indians knew it as ‘Owashtanong’, meaning ‘far away waters’.” The Grand River Times in 1837 mentioned the Grand River as “one of the most important and delightful [rivers] to be found in the country” with “clear, silver-like water winding its way through a romantic valley.” Europeans impacted the river greatly in the next one hundred years as industrialization spread across the country. As early as 1889, Everette Fitch recorded the detrimental effects humankind was having on the Grand River. She wrote, “The channel was, as usual, covered with a green odiferous scum, mixed with oil from the gas works.” Even more than a century ago the Grand River was deteriorating, its banks clogged with mills and factories and its water clogged with logs and dams. In its history the river has been abused with waterpower, river-dependant industries, large increases in population, stripping of the forests, and discharges of chemical and sewage wastes. The prediction in 1905 by the Grand Rapids Evening Press was that by the year 2005 the Grand River would be more a sewer than a river.

Today’s Human Impacts on the Grand River

Today, technology and knowledge have been used to improve water quality in the main channel. Point source pollutants have been studied, regulated, reduced, and to some extent eliminated. This has greatly helped the water quality of the river. Now is the time for nonpoint source pollutants to be addressed. The success of the main channel needs to be repeated with nonpoint source pollutants in the Grand River’s tributaries, riparian corridors, and wetlands. The river is the main artery for the watershed, but without healthy tributaries the watershed can still deteriorate.

Historical Sites

- Indian Mounds and Village on Grand Rapids west side – called Bokotink by the Native Americans who inhabited the area before the Europeans pushed them out in the 1830’s
- Grand Lady Paddlewheel Passenger Boat Landing – old steamboat channel filled and replaced by the Amway Plaza Hotel, 1868
- Log jam of 1883 historical marker – Pearl St. Bridge by Amway
- 1st Railroad Bridge – built in 1858 North of Leonard
- Sixth St. Bridge – built in 1886, it is the longest remaining metal bridge in Michigan
- Soldiers Home – built in 1886, now the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans

Natural Features

- Salt Works Bar – upstream of pedestrian bridge on Kent Trails (T6N R12W Sec3)
- Four Islands – adjacent to village of Grand Rapids (on maps as early as 1850’s). They were destroyed by the 1890’s. Until that time, one island was the county’s prison and another was a well-known steamboat stop for the rich.
- Bailey Springs – a hang out for the rich in early Grand Rapids times. It is ½ mile north of North Park on the south side of the river.

¹The Story of Grand Rapids - A Narrative of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Edited by Z.Z. Lydens. Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids MI, 1966. pg 105.