

Nature Reclaims Itself at ARCOLA CREEK PARK

By Karen Lakus, *Historical Interpreter*

HARPER'S LANDING, ELLENSBURG, CUNNINGHAM CREEK, MADISON DOCK.

These are all names that have been used to describe the stream, now known as Arcola Creek, that empties into Lake Erie at the eastern end of Madison Township. Today, this preserved natural area probably bears a resemblance to the place where the first settlers of the Western Reserve, led by Colonel Alexander Harper, landed in 1798. Harper and members of his party had purchased recently surveyed land from the Connecticut Land Company. In the surveyor's map, Arcola Creek is shown but not named. The mouth of the creek first became known as Harper's Landing, although the Harper party quickly moved inland to their property, now known as Unionville.

In 1803, pioneers continued to move to the Western Reserve in the new state of Ohio. Many of these settlers traveled west on Lake Erie by way of Buffalo so the government built a pier and two lighthouses at Harper's Landing to help guide the new arrivals. The lighthouses were little more than tall poles with candles at the top, but they were the first lights on Lake Erie west of Buffalo and must have been a welcome sight for the travelers after their long journey. As more people settled the land around Harper's Landing, they began to call their community Ellensburg (sometimes spelled Ellensbury or Ellensburg).

Revolutionary War Captain John Cunningham acquired 2,699.5 acres in Madison and moved his family there in 1811. His land was rich in virgin timber, abundant wildlife and had a stream running through it that became known as Cunningham Creek. In 1812, bog ore deposits were found by surveyors marking a new road from Cleveland to Buffalo (Route 20 or North Ridge Road) which was to run through the Cunningham's property. This discovery would mark the beginning of 50 years of bustling commerce and industry in Madison.

The value of the iron ore deposits discovered in Madison was realized immediately, but it took years for the investment and infrastructure needed to process it to be developed. In order to turn the bog ore into pig iron, a number of resources had to be available. The heat necessary to melt the ore had to be provided by charcoal. It is said that 200 men worked day and night chopping down trees to provide enough wood to make the charcoal needed to fuel the iron industry. In addition, limestone, used as a cleansing agent, had to be shipped in from Kelley's Island to the port that developed at the mouth of Cunningham Creek.

In 1825, Richard Root and Samuel Weller purchased 52 acres of land from the Cunningham family and opened the Erie Furnace Company at North Ridge and Dock Roads. The company built a large masonry blast furnace and used it to produce pig iron. **JUDGE SAMUEL WILKESON** of Buffalo bought the thriving Erie Furnace Company in 1828. He renamed it the Arcole Furnace Company which was the same name as the ironworks he owned in Buffalo. The Arcole Company produced pig iron that was shipped back to Buffalo to be cast into goods. In 1830, Arcole added a second blast furnace in Madison and it soon became the largest industrial operation in the

ESTUARIES

Surveyors and settlers of the Western Reserve found a number of rivers and streams flowing into Lake Erie through estuaries. Harper's Landing was one of these places. Here the waves of the lake mix with the waters of the stream and form a marsh area that provides a unique habitat for plants and animals. Arcola Creek is one of just two natural estuaries still remaining along the southern shores of Lake Erie today; the other is Old Woman Creek in Huron County.



PIG IRON

Molten iron flowed from the bottom of the blast furnace into molds made in the sand called sows. A sow was a central channel with smaller branches coming from it called *pigs*. The term *pig iron* comes from the resemblance of the mold to a litter of piglets suckling their mother. When the pigs cooled and hardened they would be broken from the sow and taken elsewhere to be cast into goods.

state of Ohio. It is unknown why the name Arcole eventually became Arcola, but over time the name of the creek was changed to Arcola to match its surroundings.

The port at the mouth of Cunningham Creek was essential to local industry. Between 1828 and 1838, a number of improvements were made, including clearing the mouth of the creek for a shipping channel and building two new piers and a larger lighthouse. The town of Ellensburg thrived. Two hundred feet from the beach stood the three-story Allen House, which contained a tavern on the first floor and living and sleeping quarters on the upper floors. The town also had a post office, grist mill, cabinet shop, harness shop, and company-run general store. At the port, food, fabric, household goods, and limestone were the main imports. The main exports were pig iron, timber, and finished iron goods.

Between 1825 and 1863, Ellensburg was also home to a large beach-based shipbuilding industry. At least 22 vessels were launched from there—mainly schooners and a few barks. The first steamship launched west of Buffalo was built at Ellensburg in 1825 by Joseph Fuller, who reportedly constructed the entire boat himself.

It took many people to support the industry at Ellensburg (also known as Madison Dock). Some reports claim that 2,000 seasonal and permanent workers were employed there in the busiest years. There were three boarding houses, one hotel, and approximately 200 cabins and frame dwellings in the community. Madison's population doubled during the heyday of the iron and shipbuilding industries. In fact, Madison was almost as large as Painesville and both towns were larger than Cleveland at that time.

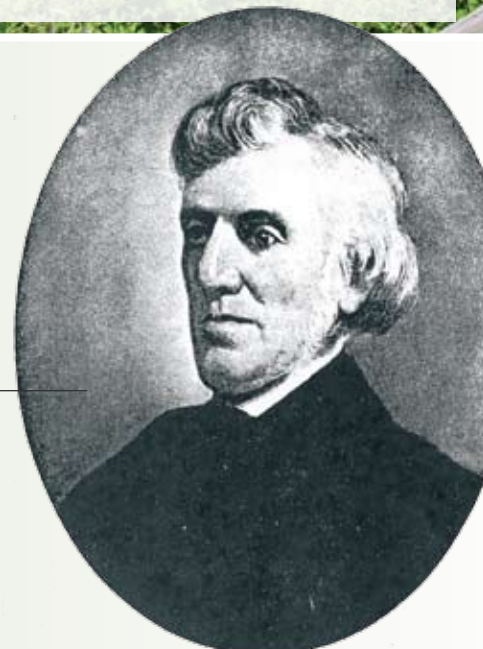
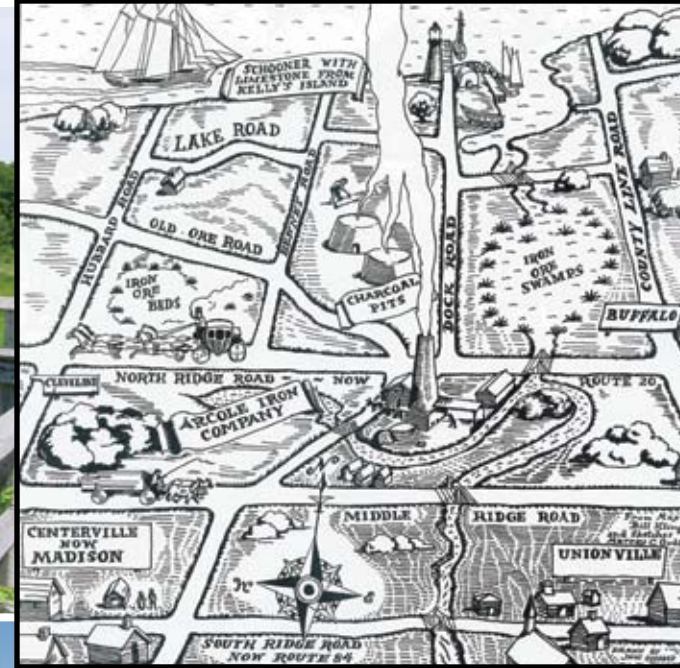
By the 1840s, Madison's bog iron deposits were exhausted and the trees needed to fuel the furnaces and build ships had been cleared. In 1850, the Arcole Furnace ceased operation and was offered for sale, but there were no buyers. The furnaces and charcoal pits collapsed. Sandbars formed at the mouth of the creek to make shipping difficult. The docks were no longer maintained and fell into the lake. Members of the harbor community of Ellensburg moved on and the economy of Madison turned to agriculture. Since so many of the trees were already cleared, it was a natural transition for the area that became known for farms and plant nurseries.

Today, there is little evidence of the bustling town and lively industry that once took place along Arcola Creek. Lake Metroparks owns and manages approximately 153 acres in the Arcola Creek Corridor that includes the park and other land in the creek's watershed. Standing on the serene shoreline it's hard to imagine that it hasn't always looked this way, but where allowed by humans, nature has been able to reclaim itself. Plants, animals, migratory birds, and spawning fish that once found homes all along the Lake Erie shoreline are still protected here and the town of Ellensburg remains one of interest and wonder for all those who wish to imagine it.



BOG ORE

This type of ore, also called limonite, is only 25%-35% iron mixed with other minerals, clay and vegetable matter. It is soft, spongy and close to the surface so it can be dug out by hand with shovels and picks. The size of the deposits in Madison ranged from a few inches to several acres.



Photos by Pat Morse. 1830s map of Ellensburg courtesy of the Lake County Historical Society. Wilkeson portrait courtesy of the Buffalo Historical Society.