

# A Village Between Two Waterways



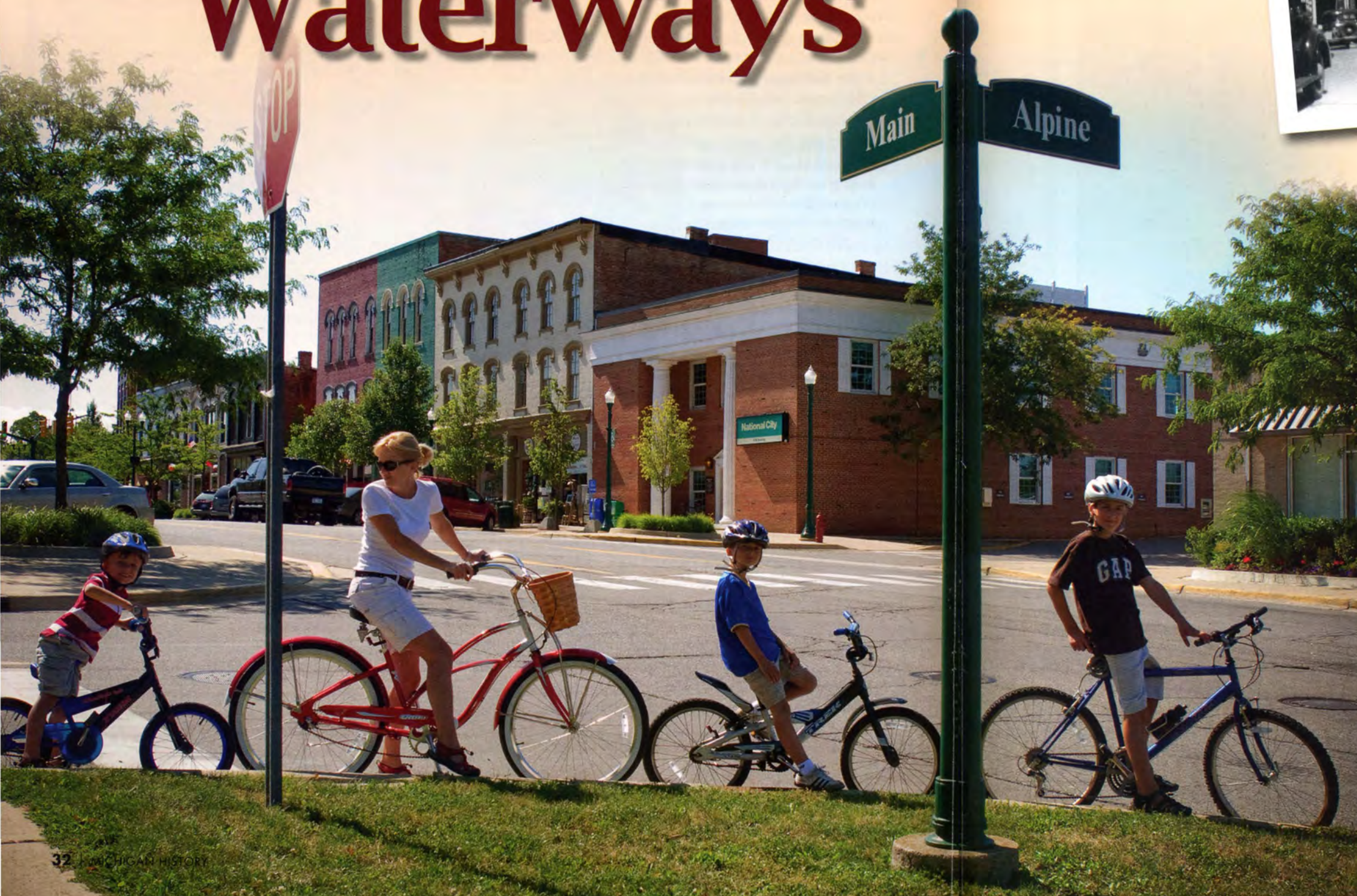
Black-and-white photos Dexter Area Historical Society

By Cyndi Lieske

**F**ounded where two winding waterways meet, the village of Dexter began with a man searching for a new start in life.

Recently widowed, Samuel William Dexter arrived in Detroit in the spring of 1824. He made his way through the wilderness that was southern Michigan and spent four months exploring the area, reportedly purchasing more than 3,500 acres in Washtenaw County. "I came to Michigan to get rid of the blue devils, or to speak more politely, of the ennui, which like a demon pursues those who have nothing to do," Dexter wrote in a letter to his cousin, quoted in local historian Norma McAllister's *Judge Samuel William Dexter*.

Living just eight miles from Ann Arbor, Dexter residents enjoy the benefits of a small community nestled near the nearby University of Michigan. Dexter has grown slowly and steadily since its founding in 1824. The historic photo at top shows Main Street in the 1920s.



Color photos Colleen Fitzgerald/Photo Generations



Gordon Hall (shown above in 1880 and at right in 2009) was completed around 1843 and named after Samuel Dexter's mother, Catherine Gordon Dexter. The Dexter Area Historical Society recently purchased the more than 9,000-square-foot home. The Dexter Cider Mill (above) was built in 1886 and is still in operation.

The Massachusetts-born Dexter decided his best prospect among the many potential sites was fertile land where a small creek met the Huron River. In 1824 he founded what was then known as the Mill Creek settlement. He hired men to build a sawmill and gristmill on the banks of Mill Creek. His first home was constructed a short distance from the mills. "It is amazing that a man of his caliber came to Michigan and started a town," said Ann Arbor area historian Grace Shackman, who has written about Dexter and taught classes about the village's history. "Most of the people coming to Michigan were trying to make money, but he wanted to start a good place."

Dexter returned to the area in 1825, with his second wife, Susan, and infant son. The next year, Dexter—a Harvard graduate and lawyer—became Washtenaw County's chief judge. Unfortunately, Susan Dexter and the couple's infant son died in the summer of 1827. The

following year, Dexter married Millisent Bond, a young woman who had recently moved to the area with her mother. According to accounts at the time, after the wedding, the judge and his new wife rode through town together on a large white horse to their home on Huron Street.

When it was platted in 1830, the settlement was named Dexter, for Samuel Dexter's father, also named Samuel Dexter, who was a cabinet member for presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Historians note that the streets were drawn up in such a way that the homes situated on them would have sunlight streaming through at all hours of the day. Other notable events that year included the arrival of the village's first merchant, Charles Cowden, and the first blacksmith, Alexander Crane. The first school was completed in 1831.

As this was nearly a decade before the first railroad came through Dexter, teams of horses brought goods

such as sheeting, skirting, nails, tea, coffee, rum, brandy and whiskey from Detroit to area stores.

The First Baptist Church society of Dexter held an organizational meeting in 1831. Starting in October 1832, the group met for Sunday services at the schoolhouse until their church was constructed in 1840; it was the first church built in Dexter.

Residents from the surrounding area poured into the village on July 4, 1841, to meet a train from the Michigan Central Railroad, which was the first to serve the village. Judge Dexter was a proponent of the intercontinental railroad and had deeded land for the railroad to the state of Michigan several years earlier. A passenger train made a daily trip to Dexter; freight trains ran more frequently. Eventually, a night passenger train was added to the schedule. Trains connected Dexter to Detroit to the east and Chicago to the west.

"Business was soon booming on the railroad," according to *A Trail Through Time 150 Years, A Brief History of the Dexter Area*. "Emigrants were coming through by the thousands. The railroad had all the passengers it could handle. For years, the trains carried more passengers than seats. It was not uncommon to see 50 or 60 passengers get off the trains at Dexter."

Also in 1841, construction began on Gordon Hall, Judge Dexter's home. Named for Dexter's mother, Catherine Gordon Dexter, the Greek Revival style home is said to be one of the best examples of its kind in the state. It was designed and built by Calvin T. Fillmore, brother of President Millard Fillmore. Construction was completed around 1843. The more than 9,000-square-foot "Mansion on the Hill" overlooking the village contained twenty-two rooms, nine fireplaces and fifty-five windows. Located just outside the village limits in Webster Township, the home was likely part of the Underground Railroad.

A woolen mill built in 1838 was the first major industry in the village. When the mill was sold thirty years later, it, along with an attached dye house, manufactured as much as seventy-five yards per day of woolen goods such as flannel, doeskin and cashmere. Later in the century, the mill made cloth for use at Jackson Prison.

The Dexter Cider Mill, powered by a twelve-horsepower steam engine, was built on the banks of the Huron River in July 1886. The mill could produce one hundred barrels of cider in ten hours. Today, cider at the





The Civil War monument (above and at right) was dedicated in 1898 and stands in Monument Park. A more recent addition to Dexter is the Dexter Farmers Market on Alpine Street built in 2005.

mill is made much the same way as 120 years ago, using an oak rack press. Reportedly the oldest continuously operating cider mill in Michigan, it is open each year from late August to mid-November.

New residents from throughout the New England states came to Dexter hoping to work on area farms, start businesses and build their own homes. In 1870 the population had grown to 1,161 residents. In 1881 there were four hotels located within the village limits. Two years later, new telegraph lines were installed, and by 1893, long distance telephone lines were available. The first electric lights came to the village four years later.

At the turn of the century, Dexter's main street and shopping area had taken shape with a new bakery, an ice cream shop and a hardware store. Between 1880 and 1900, resident entrepreneurs opened their doors throughout the village, setting up a butcher shop, a machine shop, a harness-maker and a hardware store.

In 1911, Harvey Blanchard became the area's first authorized Ford dealer. Ten years later, Blanchard and his son, Jack, began the Blanchard Transportation Company, operating a bus line between Ann Arbor and Lansing.

Throughout the early part of the twentieth century,

Dexter was known as the birthplace of U.S. Senator Royal S. Copeland. Copeland served as mayor of Ann Arbor from 1901 to 1903 and as a three-term congressman from New York (1922, 1928 and 1934). Despite his move to New York City in 1908, he remained a friend to the village. "The Senator, Mrs. Copeland and son, Royal, spent a few weeks each summer in the old hometown, where he delighted to meet old friends and acquire new ones," the *Dexter Leader* newspaper noted in Copeland's obituary in 1938. Copeland's funeral took place at the Dexter high school gymnasium named for his father; more than 800 people attended. "The passing of Senator Royal S. Copeland is, to the village of Dexter, an irreparable loss of a dear friend," the *Dexter Leader* noted. "Any project which was put forth for the betterment of his home town met with his hearty approval and ready assistance."

Village residents and many from the surrounding townships prepared for a milestone celebration in 1941, when the village celebrated the centennial of the railroad's start in Dexter. Men grew "centennial beards" to encourage conversations about their village's big day. A group of 100 men attended a Detroit Tigers baseball game to draw attention to the celebration. "Publicity has

focused on Dexter until our name has been on the lips of people all over Michigan and on many outside," wrote the *Dexter Leader* on June 22, 1941. "The news of Dexter, its whiskers and its excellent cooperation was spread out on the wires of the Associated Press, as well as being broadcast by the city dailies, the neighboring weeklies and several radio stations."

In 1951, Katherine Dexter McCormick—granddaughter of Judge Dexter, Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate, and suffragette—passed away leaving her birthplace, Gordon Hall, to the University of Michigan. As part of her bequest, she instructed the university to use the building for housing. Instead, the university began dismantling parts of the historic home, much to the outrage of historians. W. Hawkins Ferry, honorary curator of architecture of the Detroit Institute of Arts, stated in the *Detroit News* in March 1951, "The Mansion is too fine an example of Greek Revival architecture, of which there are so few in this state, that it is a great pity to have this go so uselessly, that it could still be preserved and put to educational use." The university did, according to McCormick's wishes, convert the home to four apartments for use by faculty.

The town celebrated its sesquicentennial in 1974 with a full week's worth of commemorative events including Youth Day, Homecoming Day and Business and Neighbor Day. Men and women joined community groups to help plan the celebration by putting on performances, hosting special meals and planning a parade as the celebration's highlight.

An industrial park was developed on the south side of the municipality in the late 1980s and a southern commercial district also brought in new businesses to the area.

"We have an excellent industrial park that's rated as one of the best in Michigan," said village council member and longtime resident Paul Cousins. "We have a really solid tax base in the village due to the industrial park and commercial districts."

Between 1990 and 2000, the village grew from 1,487 residents to 2,338. According to recent statistics from the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), the village had an estimated 3,557 residents as of April 2009. Some growth has been the result of annexation of land for new residential subdivisions in the 1.7 square-mile village. Three such developments are now part of Dexter.





In 2005 residents approved a \$7.8 million, twenty-year bond issue to build the Dexter District Library. The 30,000-square-foot library opened in March 2009.

Changes are being seen in Dexter with the recent construction of a new bridge and the dismantling of Mill Creek Dam, which will make the way for Mill Creek Park in the coming years. Local officials are proceeding with preliminary work to determine if the village will be designated as a city in the near future.

In 2001, the Dexter Area Historical Society purchased Gordon Hall from the University of Michigan for \$1.5 million. The group plans to preserve, maintain and restore the mansion to its former elegance using the home's original plans.


In 2005, area residents approved a \$7.8 million, twenty-year bond issue to build the new Dexter District Library. The 30,000-square-foot library opened in March 2009 one block from Main Street and a short distance from Mill Creek and the Huron River. The new building offers dedicated computer space for children, teens and adults, as well as free wireless Internet access. More than 10,000 new items were added to the library collection.

Located eight miles northwest of Ann Arbor, Dexter could have easily been swallowed up by the university

town. Instead, the village has carved out its own identity and is poised to continue with a progressive path through the new century in the work of residents who care about their community.

"Our service clubs have always been so involved," said Cousins. "That is an important part of the community—the library, the excellent schools, the nearby metro parks and the village parks. They all add up to what I think is a very good community." **mh**

**Cyndi Lieske** is a Howell-based freelance writer. She would like to thank Nancy J. Van Blaricum, volunteer genealogist with the Dexter Area Museum; Norma McAllister, founder of the Dexter Area Historical Society; Paul Cousins, Dexter Village Council member; and Grace Shackman, area historian, for their assistance with this story.

 To learn about a Dexter native who made national headlines in 1953 when he was accused of associating with Communists, visit [michiganhistorymagazine.com](http://michiganhistorymagazine.com) and click on "The Case Against Milo Radulovich."

# A Tiger in Dexter

Dexter residents have an All-Star neighbor in Detroit Tigers' third baseman Brandon Inge.

Inge, who lives in a nearby township, is generous with his time and talent in the Dexter area.

"In my years in the ministry, I have met a number of celebrities and professional athletes at community events and fundraisers," said the Reverend Larry Courson, pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Scio Township outside of Dexter. "When it comes to reaching out to the community around him, Brandon Inge is the most impressive."

Residents take pride in the fact that the Detroit Tiger and 2009 All-Star player is a part of their community and like to talk about the latest Inge sightings around town. For Inge, Dexter is the place he likes to call home when he is in Michigan. "I like the good people and the small hometown feel of the area, plus it's centrally located," Inge responded in an e-mail about living in Dexter.

In April 2008, Inge was the main attraction at a fundraiser for a new Little League baseball diamond in honor of Tyler Steffey, a Dexter teen who died in a car accident in 2007. Inge spent more than four hours at the Dexter Pub signing autographs and meeting with fans of all ages. The event raised more than \$10,000 for the ball field. "The only time I saw him stop the line was when he went to talk to the Dexter High School baseball team," Courson said. "When they came in, he stopped to talk to them as a group."

Inge was unable to attend the field's dedication in May 2009, but he helped ensure former Tiger and Baseball Hall of Famer Al Kaline would pinch-hit for him. Kaline, along with Inge's wife, Shani, helped

dedicate the field and Kaline threw out the first pitch. Inge said he was pleased he could help out. "I was honored to be part of anything [Tyler's] family has done in his memory since he passed away," wrote Inge. "It's great for the community and it gets everyone involved."

The Inges have also played a part in helping raise money for the Dexter Relay for Life for the American Cancer Society. In 2007, the couple donated \$100,000 to the University of Michigan's C. S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor to help build an activity center in the pediatric cancer infusion clinic scheduled to open in 2011, according to

[mlb.com](http://mlb.com), the official web site of Major League Baseball.

"When Brandon made his first visit to Mott, the kids tore at his heartstrings," Shani Inge said in a statement reported by [mlb.com](http://mlb.com). "He has such a big heart, and every time he visits, he makes personal connections with families. We really feel like these people have become an extension of our own family."

Courson said he will always remember Inge getting down on one knee to talk to the littlest fans who came out to meet him at the Dexter Pub in 2008. "I think he has embraced Dexter and has been a real positive addition to the community," Courson said. "I am thankful that we have someone like that who is willing to make a difference."

—Cyndi Lieske



Stephen Courson

Brandon Inge signed a glove for local Tiger fan Sean Wakefield and posed for photos with Kyle and Kathie Knapp at an April 2008 fundraiser in Dexter. Proceeds from the event were used to build a Little League baseball diamond in honor of Tyler Steffey, a Dexter teen who died in a car accident in 2007.