

A brief history of Turtle Island by B. Achinger

Turtle Island is of recent geological formation. As Lake Erie receded, after the last ice age, a large delta had formed at the mouths of the Ottawa and Maumee rivers. It is probable that Turtle Island was part of a large peninsula stretching from Little Cedar Point, Ohio in the south towards La Plaisance Bay, Michigan to the north. As time passed, the island took shape as strong nor'easters pummeled this peninsula. The make up of the new island was sand, clay, and gravel, as opposed to the rock carved islands twenty miles to the east, namely: West Sister, North Bass, South Bass, and Middle Bass Islands. This fact would play a significant part in the eventual deterioration (by erosion) of the island.



West End of Lake Erie – Maumee Bay

The Miami Indians were the probably the first inhabitants of the small island. John E. Gunckel's "The Early History of the Maumee Valley" states that the Miami and other tribes collected hundreds of dozens of seagull eggs on the island. Many arrowheads and other artifacts could once be found on the small strip of beach on this island and the other beaches in the area. From this, it is reasonable to conclude that Indians hunted, trapped and gathered on the islands of Maumee Bay. Additionally, it was an Indian leader that provided the inspiration for the island's name. Chief Little Turtle, an Indian of both Miami and Mohican ancestry, was a powerful and gifted leader of the Miami during the American Revolutionary era. Little Turtle was a key figure in many of the battles in and around the Maumee Valley region during the formative years of the old Northwest Territory. Later, after falling out with his native people, he befriended the new nation and became very

popular with the American people. He was buried with full military honors by U.S. troops in Fort Wayne, Indiana in July of 1812.

The White man's history of the island begins in the late 17th Century. A Toledo Times' article, dated 10/8/1936, states that the British maintained a log cabin fort for defense against musketry circa 1794. It was a key strong point in their chain of defenses in western Lake Erie. The goal of the British was to thwart the American General (Mad) Anthony Wayne by denying his re-supply route via Lake Erie for battles up the Maumee River, particularly the Battle of Fallen Timbers. With Mad Anthony's resounding victory in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, near present day Maumee, Ohio, the British regiment abandoned the fort on Turtle Island. Contrasting this article, local folklore in the Point Place, Ohio and Erie Township, Michigan areas allude to the Indians as fortifying the island. Another story claims that the French took the small island from the Indians and established a fort for use as a fur trading post during this period of the late 18th century. Another legend claims that the British held the island until the War of 1812 and subsequently lost it due to their defeat by Commodore Oliver H. Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie. However, there is little, if any physical evidence supporting these claims about who exercised control of the small island. After this, the recorded history of the island disappears until well into the next century.

Turtle Island enters recorded history in 1827, when it is sold at public auction by the U.S. Government in Monroe, Michigan. Ironically, just four years later, the island is sold back to the U.S. Government by Edward Bissell, of Lockport, New York, for the sum of \$300.00. In an effort to improve commercial navigation in the waters of Maumee Bay and enhance trade and commerce in the new fledgling Port of Toledo, Congress appropriated the necessary funds to erect and maintain the first lighthouse on Turtle Island. At this time, the island measured about 6 ½ acres and included a modest keepers house and a small farm. By 1839, due to constant wave action, strong storms, and erosion the island was reduced to about one and a half acres in size. During the decade of the 1830s, the government spent tens-of-thousands of dollars trying to shore up the island and the lighthouse structure with little success.



Turtle Island Lighthouse – circa 1885

After the Civil War, the worn out original structure was replaced with modern light tower and keepers' dwelling. Completed in September of 1866, the new lighthouse was constructed of the finest Milwaukee brick and was described as one of the finest lighthouses on the Great Lakes. Yet, the new structure was little help in combating the constant deterioration of the island. Finally, in 1883, a concrete wall was erected around the exposed side of the island. This was the last serious attempt made to shore up the island. In the end, with the newly completed Romanesque Toledo Harbor Light in service about four miles to the east, the U.S. Government abandoned the island in 1904 and sold it in a public sale to A.H. Merrill. It is rumored that the U.S. government spent over a million dollars, between 1831 and 1903, maintaining the island and constructing the two Turtle Island Lighthouses. As time passed, the Turtle Island Lighthouse began its slow and steady descent into neglect and obscurity. What follows is a list, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Service in Washington DC, of the sixteen Turtle Island Lighthouse keepers and their dates of appointment to the position:

Samuel Choate	December 18, 1832
Benjamin I. Woodruff	October 6, 1834
Oliver Whitmore	February 7, 1835
Ebenezer Ward	March 29, 1837
Gideon L. Kelsey	April 23, 1839
Alexander H. Cromwell	November 4, 1847
Gordon S. Wilson	September 4, 1850
Okey McCormick	April 28, 1853
Isaac McCormick	December 20, 1854
James Coonahan	March 30, 1858
Andrew Harrison	May 13, 1861
Nathan W. Edson	September 23, 1867
Ann Edson	March 2, 1869
Samuel Jacobs	September 8, 1872
Emmet A. Root	July 7, 1874
William Haines	March 29, 1875

For the next thirty years or so, Turtle Island was left to its fate. In addition to the non-stop barrage of the elements, vandals and thrill seekers managed to strip the lighthouse structure down to its bare essentials. By the 1930s, most of the lighthouse keepers' quarters and the boat house were gone. Without a vested commercial interest on the island, there was little need for protecting and/or securing the property from vandalism.



Turtle Island Lighthouse, Keepers Quarters, and Boat House

In May of 1933, A. H. Merrill and two additional interests transferred ownership of the island to George L. Merrill. Later that month, the Associated Yacht Clubs (AYC) of Toledo signed a lease with Merrill for the purpose of establishing a series of docks, a beach, a picnic area, and a small clubhouse on the island. It took about two years for these grandiose plans to un-ravel. Many stories swirl about regarding this abandonment of the island. The most popular one is simply a matter of money. The clubs of the AYC ran out of money, which, during the Great Depression, was not uncommon. A newspaper article of unknown origin, dated June 24th 1936, details the rejection of a plan submitted by the AYC that would have the state of Ohio purchase the island and make it a state park. This, in turn, would allow the use of state funds for the purpose of improvements to the island in general. The AYC lease would still be honored; their plans for a harbor and clubhouse would remain in tact. In the end, it was deemed that there would not be enough of a public benefit to justify the purchase of the island by the state of Ohio. The AYC abandoned their lease in 1937, according to a later Toledo Blade article.



Turtle Island Ruins - 1930

From the 1930s to the turn of the new century, little is said and done on the island named for Chief Little Turtle. As time passed, a bloodless war of sorts ensued over governmental control of the tiny island. Occupying both Michigan and Ohio, the island and the boundary between the two states would be a topic of controversy for many years. A tall tale swirled about that had ownership of the island changing hands due to the results of the annual November football rivalry between the Wolverines and Buckeyes; most often a gentleman's agreement between governors. Other stories place the island as an un-finished vestige of the infamous Ohio-Michigan border war of the 1800s. Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court decided and decreed on February 22, 1973 the fixed Ohio-Michigan boundary running through the island and Lake Erie.

An outbreak of Tornadoes on Palm Sunday of 1965 is rumored to have blown the lantern off the top of the lighthouse tower and demolished the rest of the attached keeper's quarters. This account has made its way into many publications, both official and un-official, of the island and lighthouse. Conversely, there are many stories that contradict this account. Many area boating enthusiasts and lighthouse aficionados testify that the lantern survived for many years after this weather event. As for the keepers' quarters, this portion of the lighthouse was clearly demolished well before the 1960s.



Turtle Island 1989

More recent history of the island has brought a few half-hearted attempts to restore the lighthouse and the surrounding property. The latest version of this included three new buildings constructed in 2001-02, which reportedly, were intended to be used as summer vacation rentals. Apparently, the authorities in Monroe County, Michigan issued a stop on the construction of these buildings long before their completion. Yet, the island's owner had ignored this decree. It has also been mentioned that because the island was situated across two separate states, the current lease holder of the island assumed that there were no laws governing the island or what could be done on the property. The entire issue of this latest chapter of the island's history was set for trial in Monroe County Circuit Court on November, 2004.

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