

Benjamin Woodworth by Eloise Kelly

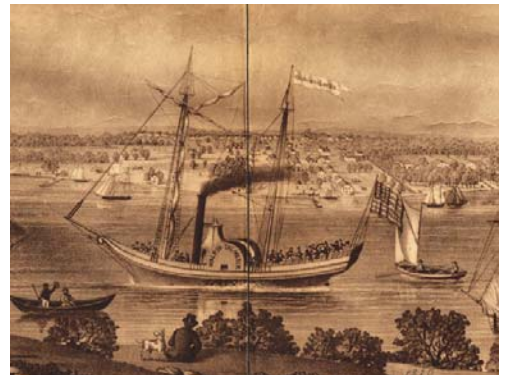
(Courtesy of Eloise Lavin, edited by Joanne Steckling)

Benjamin Woodworth was born in Scituate, Massachusetts, Jan 13, 1782. He was a man of many trades, a large bluff man with a big voice, a carpenter, builder, stone cutter, brick maker and an architect of sorts. He came to Detroit in 1803 where he thought there would be more demand for his services. General Hull had been appointed the first Governor of Michigan and his house, as he put it, "was not befitting a man of his importance." He asked Ben Woodworth if he could build one more suitable for him. When Ben told him he could but he would need some experienced men to help him—the Governor said he and his "cabinet" were going to see the President on government business, and asked him to go with them, and then to go home and find men to bring back to help him. They could meet at a designated place and return with them to Detroit. Mr. Woodworth found two men he had worked with, joined the Governor's party and reached Detroit in 1804.

The first thing he did after they returned was to locate and lease a piece of land with clay on it, set up a kiln, and begin making bricks with which to build the Governor's mansion. By 1807 he had completed a frame house for himself on Randolph Street and Woodbridge, and he married Rachel Dix. By then the bricks were ready to use and he built a mansion for the Governor and then built a brick building for the Detroit Bank on the northwest corner of Jefferson and Randolph Streets.

In 1812 he erected a large shoe box type building on Randolph Street near his home, the back of which adjoined Bettelet's wharf on the Detroit River. This became the "Woodworth Hotel." The two story building had a deck running all around the second story where the guests could sit and look out over the city.

When the first steamboat "Walk-in-the-Water" began to operate between Buffalo, NY and Detroit in 1818, stopping at all points along the south shore of Lake Erie as far south as Sandusky, Ohio, he renamed it "The Steamboat Hotel." He had such a large volume of business he added another large room across one end on Randolph toward Jefferson St., at one end of which he installed a bar, where most of the dignitaries met to transact their business. He made so much money he began to look for other enterprises to invest his money. He began to operate a Stage Coach line from the hotel to the communities to the North and West as far as twenty miles, and invested in land and had a flourishing business. When the railroads began to operate, his business dropped off and the stageline was put out of business, and as other wharves and hotel were built farther west of the river, he lost much of the hotel business. To provide more income he began operating a small ferry boat between Detroit and Windsor Canada. He obtained his ferry license Aug 8, 1820 and the "Spy" did very well.



General Cass raised his commission to a lieutenant in the Legionary Corp. Dec. 12, 1823 and was made Captain of an Artillery Co. which became of great importance when the United States soldiers were withdrawn and Fort Shelby abandoned in 1825, and they became the chief defense of the city. He trained them and created a military band of sorts, was made a Coroner Nov. 26, 1815 until some time in 1836.

When Steven Simmons, a saloon keeper, of Wayne, Michigan, killed his wife in a drunken rage, he was taken to Detroit where the court was located, was tried by a jury, found guilty and sentenced to hang on Sept 23, 1830. The acting sheriff Thomas Knapp refused to build a scaffold or act as hangman, and the Governor had to look for someone else to do the job. Benjamin Woodworth had been telling other citizens that were he the sheriff, he would hang him as a civic duty and the Governor, hearing of this, asked him if it were true. When Benjamin said it was, he immediately appointed him sheriff, Sept 23, 1830, and the hanging scheduled for the next day. He began building a gallows in a prominent spot, with bleachers on three sides for spectators. Enterprising citizens began erecting tents alongside, from which to sell refreshments. On the morning of Sept. 24, 1830, just previous to the hanging, to add a dramatic color to the scene, he had the Militia march down the street, headed by the band playing solemn music. When Mr. Simmons was brought out, he made an impassioned speech, claiming that he was drunk and did not know what he was doing and did not believe he should die for his crime. When the citizens saw and heard him they did not want the execution to take place; as he stepped onto the platform, he began to sing in a fine baritone voice a hymn:

*Show pity, O Lord forgive
Let a repenting Rebel live:
Are not thy mercies full and free?
May not a sinner trust in thee?*

The Governor was present and could have given a reprieve, but did not, and the trap was sprung. Immediately a movement was begun to repeal the law and in 1846 an Amendment was passed and the law repealed. The day before the hanging Mr. Simmon's son went into business with his oxen and wagon transporting people from Wayne to Detroit for a fee and it was said he made considerable money. That was the last hanging in Michigan, the third. The other two were in Indiana.

Wayne County Land Records show that Benjamin Woodworth purchased 219 acres of land from Jacob Dix in 1835. The property was described as being on the western border of the fork of the River Rouge in Springwells Township.

In 1837-38 came the Patriots Rebellion in Canada and American sympathizers began organizing to aid them and while Mr. Woodworth was an open friend, as sheriff he took no active part. As a protective measure 450 muskets were confiscated and locked in the jail basement. The next night, Dec. 31, or morning of January 1st, a mob broke into the jail and carried off the guns. Sheriff Woodworth was accused of being an accessory to the theft of the muskets, and though he denied the charges, he was relieved of the Sheriff job in 1839.

Sometime later with the help of his son Samuel, he began to build a small steamboat, which they named "The General Vance" and when completed young Sam acted as Captain and at times Wheelman. They operated between Detroit and the shore towns on both sides of the Detroit River to Lake Erie, making stops at Grand Port (Ecorse), Truaxton (Trenton), Grosse Ile, Amherstburg (Petite Cote) and Sandwich, Canada. Their ferry, The "Spy" ran up the river as far as Mt. Clemens.

On June 24, 1844, while the *General Vance* was docked at Windsor, her "old teakettle" boiler blew up and sent Samuel 50 feet in the air, spectators said, "he flew up into the air higher than a kite" and a Major Truax was blown onto the dock, both instantly killed. The entire town turned out for their funerals. After Samuel's death, the hotel became rundown and was sold to Milton Bradley. Four years later, 1848, a great fire destroyed every building in that area and the same year Benjamin and Rachel moved to St. Clair, Michigan, where she died in 1856, and he in 1874 at the age of 89 years.

Editor's note: Major Abram Caleb Truax was the founder of Trenton. After the War of 1812, Major Truax decided to settle in Michigan. He acquired a large tract of land, the highest ground along the Detroit River, and erected a sawmill, church and store, the beginnings of the town of Truax, later called Truaxton, and then Truago. In 1850, a plat was registered under the name "Trenton".