

The History of Norwalk

Revolutionary Roots

Norwalk's pioneer days actually begin back in New England, shortly after the colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776. In 1779 the British set fire to Norwalk, Connecticut in New England in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Eighty of the 86 buildings in Norwalk, Connecticut were destroyed, along with schools, churches and stores.

Firelands Founded

In 1809, the state of Connecticut grants land from its Western Reserve in Ohio as compensation to those who lost property during the British raids. The "Fire Sufferers Lands" became known as the "Firelands."

The first permanent settlers came to Norwalk Township in 1809, the same year as the formation of Huron County. The settlers located near the brick school on Old State Road at the south edge of Milan.

Huron County was officially organized in 1815 and transferred the county seat to Norwalk in 1818 from the original site north of Milan.

Early Days of Norwalk

In 1816, the first plat of the village of Norwalk was surveyed by Almon Ruggles. This plat was altered to become the blocks along Main Street approximately from Church and Case east to about Prospect. In 1819 this plat was approved by the Common Pleas Court as far east as Milan and Woodlawn.

Platt Benedict was first to permanently settle in the village of Norwalk in 1817, along with his wife Sally de Forest Benedict and their five children. He encouraged "mechanics" (carpenters, masons, cabinet makers, etc) to come to the new village. In 1818, Platt Benedict was named Postmaster.

Norwalk's first weekly paper, The Norwalk Reporter, was issued in 1827. It merged with the Reflector, then a new paper, in 1830.

Norwalk village was incorporated in 1828. Sixty nine men voted at the first election in 1828, when James Williams was elected the first mayor. He was an attorney by trade, and lived for many years in a frame house on the site of the Norwalk Theatre on East Main Street.

By the time the federal census of 1830 was taken, the population of Norwalk village had grown to 310. In 1831, Platt Benedict led a group of men and boys to dig up maples in the woods and plant them along Main Street. Twenty years later the town became known as The Maple City.

The 1880 federal census counted 5,704 people in Norwalk, which entitled the community to change its designation from "village" to "city" in 1881.

The Growth of Commerce

In 1833, the Bank of Norwalk opened with stock of \$100,000. John Gardiner was its first clerk, who later started the Norwalk National Bank in 1865, a direct ancestor of the Citizens Banking Company.

The Milan Canal opened in 1839, and plank roads were built across northern Ohio to facilitate moving grain wagons to and from Milan. The roads and canal brought retail trade for Norwalk merchants.

In 1853, the Toledo, Norwalk & Cleveland Railroad opened through Norwalk on the near north side. This became the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern, and eventually the New York Central and Penn Central. The 1853 railroad was the last link in the New York to Chicago rail system.

The main shops were built in Norwalk, and in 1879 employed 700 local men with a payroll of \$18,000 per month. These shops were moved to Cleveland about 1900.

A Manufacturing Town

The coming of the railroad in 1853 made Norwalk a manufacturing town. NSC Perkins built a foundry and sewing machine factory; Barnard Cortrite made fanning mills. Norwalk also had a dowel pin company as well as wood products companies.

In 1900, the G.S. Stewart Furniture Factory opened in former railroad shops on Whittlesey Avenue in 1900 and would operate for another 50 years. In 1875 the A. B. Chase Company began making organs and then pianos in Norwalk, a business which continued until 1930.

The Gerken family moved their business to Norwalk in 1919, where the Norwalk Upholstering Company eventually became the Norwalk Furniture Corporation. Norwalk Furniture closed in 2008. Twelve local investors stepped forward and purchased the business, renaming it Norwalk Custom Order Furniture. The company is growing and doing well.

Early Infrastructure

In 1859 a company was formed which manufactured gas for illumination, and soon Norwalk streets and many homes enjoyed gas lights. Later a natural gas company took over the process. Also in 1859 Main Street was given a coating of gravel. The first stone paving with squares was started in 1877.

In 1871 the first municipal water works started, pumping water from the river near the present armory. This plant was replaced in 1897 when the first two reservoirs were built at the present site. A filtration plant wasn't added until about 1930.

In 1886 the Norwalk Light and Power Company organized, which provided 82 arc lights for illumination of city streets. The company was proud to keep the lights on until midnight each night. By 1890 a new electric lighting company provided electricity for home lighting. The first house wired in Norwalk was located at 145 West Main.

Wheeling & Lake Erie Railroad first entered the Norwalk area in 1877 as a narrow gauge railroad but this was reorganized in 1880 with a new rail line that ran through Norwalk east and west, and at the time, north to Huron. This provided two different railroad passenger lines as well as freight lines for the Norwalk area.

Norwalk Takes a Ride

The first car of the Sandusky, Norwalk & Milan Electric Railway came to Norwalk in 1893. The second car was the famous Number 101, also known as the "Dinky". The Dinky operated every half hour from 6:30 AM to 11 PM and the fare was a nickel, or six rides for a quarter. With three lines serving its residents at different times beginning in 1893, Norwalk remained a center of interurban traffic until 1938 when the last car ceased operations.

The first horseless carriage built in Norwalk was a steam car produced by Ethan Sly in 1902. By 1905, forty nine Norwalk residents owned automobiles. The Auto-Bug Company was formed in Norwalk in 1909 and became the Norwalk Motor Car Company in 1910. Cars were manufactured in a building at Linwood and Monroe Streets, and shipped up to six automobiles per day. The company introduced the “Norwalk 35” model which reportedly could travel 50 miles per hour.

Famous Residents

In 1868, Flora Call was born in nearby Greenfield Township. Flora married Elias Disney in 1888 and moved to Chicago the next year. She gave birth to her son, Walt Disney, in 1901. Perhaps the most famous of Norwalk’s native sons is Paul Brown, who was born in Norwalk in 1908. He became a pioneer figure in American football history, coaching for Ohio State University and the team that would bear his name, the Cleveland Browns. Brown was the founding owner of the Cincinnati Bengals and was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1965.

Born in Milan just a mile north of Norwalk, Thomas Edison usually gets the credit for being the electric genius in the area, but counted among his friends was Norwalk resident Harry Bennett. A pioneer inventor himself, Bennett partnered with Edison in a Milan company that manufactured magnetos. In addition to experimenting with light bulb elements, Harry built one of the first automobiles in the nation. Harry then founded a company in 1910 at 21 Mill Street in Norwalk to service automobiles and eventually focused on electric motors. Bennett Electric is still in operation and currently located on Republic Street in Norwalk.

Ernsthausen Empire

In 1912, John Ernsthausen & Rolla Fader started the Norwalk Truck Company, which evolved into the Norwalk Truck Line. The Truck Line became the largest independently-owned trucking company in the world. The company served as inspiration for Norwalk High School’s mascot, the Truckers.

Profits from the company’s success eventually funded the Ernsthausen Foundation, which continues to impact Norwalk today. With funds from both the Ernsthausen Foundation and the City of Norwalk, the Ernsthausen Community Center was built in 1989. In 1994, indoor pools and a weight room were added to this state-of-the-art recreation complex.

The Ernsthausen Foundation also funded construction of a new Performing Arts Center in 2002, adjacent to the new state-of-the-art Norwalk High School which opened in the fall of 2001.

Building Roads for Ohio

In the 1930s, Norwalk cemented its reputation as the “cradle of contractors” for heavy-highway construction. A.J. Baltes Company was ranked among the largest contractors in Ohio during the 1930s and through the 1950s.

A large number of Norwalk’s current contracting companies can trace their roots to A.J. Baltes. Today, more than a dozen highway construction-oriented companies call Norwalk home. This number increases to around 90 when all sectors of general contracting are included.

Racing to the Top

In 1962, the Norwalk Dragway opened on 100 acres with 850 seats and a 6-row high stand. Bill Bader Sr. bought the Dragway in 1974, and over 40 years later, Norwalk Raceway Park now features 26,000 grandstand seats on 204 acres.

In 2006, the Raceway announced a new affiliation with the National Hot Rod Association and renamed the park for its new sponsor: Summit Racing Equipment Motorsports Park. In 2007, the Badgers spent over \$7 million to expand the drag racing facility. Summit Motorsports Park's project included new luxury suites, office and parking renovations, and a state-of-the-art media center.

Downtown Revitalization

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Norwalk Revitalization Corporation coordinated a \$2.4 million infrastructure improvement project in Norwalk's central business district. Reconstruction began in 1997 and completed by 1999. Norwalk was named a Main Street Community in 2000.

Comprehensive Planning

In 2003, the City of Norwalk initiated process to update the city's Master Plan, which was written in 1964 and approved in 1972. The comprehensive plan process began in 2004 with the Mayor's appointment of oversight committees and was completed in 2006. The plan is available for viewing and downloading at the City of Norwalk's web site.

In 2010, the City of Norwalk and NEDC hosted four innovation forums called "Restarting Our Engines" to gather ideas and input from nearly 70 business leaders on moving our area forward.