

Detroit in 1796

By Isaac Weld

From 1795 to 1797 young British traveler Isaac Weld traveled throughout the eastern United States and the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada. During the fall of 1796, his journeys took him west to the frontier town of Detroit. Just three months earlier, the British army had turned over the fort at Detroit to the Americans, evacuated the town, and moved across the river to the newly established Fort Malden and village of Amherstburg. Weld was a keen observer, and from this account of his visit here we have this fascinating view of Detroit in 1796.

DETROIT IS AT present the head-quarters of the western army of the States; the garrison consists of three hundred men, who are quartered in barracks.

About two-thirds of the inhabitants of Detroit are of French extraction, and the greater part of the inhabitants of the settlements on the river, both above and below the town, are of the same description. The former are mostly engaged in trade, and they all appear to be much on an equality. Detroit is a place of very considerable trade; there are no less than twelve trading vessels belonging to it, brigs, sloops, and schooners, of from fifty to one hundred tons burthen each. The inland navigation in this quarter is indeed very extensive, Lake Erie, three hundred miles in length, being open to vessels belonging to the port, on the one side; and lakes Michigan and Huron, the first upwards of two hundred miles in length, and sixty in breadth, and the second, no less than one thousand miles in circumference, on the opposite; not to speak of Lake St. Clair and Detroit River, which connect these former lakes together, or of the many large rivers which fall into them. The stores and shops in the town are well furnished, and you may buy fine cloth, linen & c. and every article of wearing apparel, as good in their kind, and nearly on as reasonable terms, as you can purchase them at

New York or Philadelphia.

The inhabitants are well supplied with provisions of every description; the fish in particular, caught in the river and neighbouring lakes, are of a very superior quality. The fish held in most estimation is a sort of large trout called the Michillimakinac white fish, from its being caught mostly in the straits of that name. The inhabitants of Detroit and the neighbouring country, however, though they have provisions in plenty, are frequently much distressed for one very necessary concomitant, namely, salt. Until within a short time past they had no salt but what was brought from Europe; but salt springs have been discovered in various parts of the country from which they are now beginning to manufacture that article for themselves. The best and most profitable of the springs are retained in the hands of government, and the profits arising from the sale of the salt, are to be paid into the treasury of the province. Throughout the western country, they procure their salt from springs, some of which throw up sufficient water to yield several hundred bushels in the course of one week.

There is a large Roman catholic church in the town of Detroit, and another on the opposite side, called the Huron church from its having been devoted to the use of the Huron Indians. The streets of Detroit are generally crowded with



View of Detroit in 1796.

*This engraving is from the original painting in Paris. The Brig General Gage is at the wharf.
Illustration courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*

Indians of one tribe or other and amongst them, you see numberless old squaws leading about their daughters, ever ready to dispose of them, pro tempore, to the highest bidder. At night all the Indians, except such as get admittance into private houses and remain there quietly, are turned out of the town, and the gates shut upon them.

The American officers here have endeavored to their utmost to impress upon the minds of the Indians, an idea of their own superiority over the British; but as they are very tardy in giving these people any presents, they do not pay much attention to their words. General Wayne, from continually promising them presents, but at the same time always postponing the delivery when they come to ask for them, has significantly been nicknamed by them, General Wabang, that is, General To-morrow.

The country around Detroit is very much cleared, and so likewise is that on the British side of the river for a considerable way above the town. The settlements extend nearly as far as Lake Huron; but beyond the River La Trenche, which falls into Lake St. Clair, they are scattered very thinly along the shores. The banks of the River La Trenche, or Thames, as it is now called, are increasing very fast in population, as I before mentioned, owing to the great emigration thither of people from the neighbourhood of Niagara, and of Detroit also since it has been evacuated by the British. We made an excursion, one morning, in our little boat, as far

as Lake St. Clair, but met with nothing either amongst the inhabitants or in the face of the country, particularly deserving of mention. The country round Detroit is uncommonly flat, and in none of the rivers is there a fall sufficient to turn even a grist mill. The current of Detroit River itself is stronger than that of any others, and a floating mill was once invented by a Frenchman, which was chained in the middle of that river, where it was thought the stream would be sufficiently swift to turn the water wheel; the building of it was attended with considerable expense to the inhabitants, but after it was finished, it by no means answered their expectations. They grind their corn at present by wind mills, which I do not remember to have seen in any other part of North America.

The soil of the country bordering upon Detroit River is rich though light, and it produces good crops both of Indian corn and wheat. The climate is much more healthy than that of the country in the neighbourhood of Niagara River; intermittent fevers however are by no means uncommon disorders. The summers are intensively hot. Fahrenheit's thermometer often rising above 100; yet a winter seldom passes over but what snow remains on the ground for two or three months.

Whilst we remained at Detroit, we had to determine upon a point of some moment to us travellers, namely, upon the route by which to return back towards the Atlantic.



View of Detroit from the Canadian Shore.

This watercolor by Dr. Edward Walsh is dated June 22, 1804. The Huron church is in foreground. The site is today near the Canadian approach to the Ambassador Bridge. Illustration courtesy of the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

We determined therefore to proceed by Presqu'Isle. But now another difficulty arose, namely, how we were to get there; a small vessel, a very unusual circumstance indeed was just about to sail, but it was so crowded with passengers, that there was not a single berth vacant, and moreover, if there had been, we did not wish to depart so abruptly from this part of the country. One of the principal traders, however, at Detroit, to whom we had carried letters, soon accommodated matters to our satisfaction, by promising to give orders to the master of one of the lake vessels, of which he was in part owner, to land us at that place. The vessel was to sail in a fortnight; we immediately therefore secured a passage in her; and having settled with the master that he should call for us at Malden, we set off once more for that place in our little boat, and in a few hours, from the time we quitted Detroit, arrived there.

SOURCE: *Travels Through the States of North America: and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada During the*

Years 1795, 1796, and 1797, 4th ed. (London: Printed for J. Stockdale, 1807.)

British traveler Isaac Weld was born in Dublin, Ireland, on March 15, 1774. His journey to Canada and the new United States was prompted by the idea that the Irish people “would afterward be led to emigrate hither in great numbers.” Arriving in Philadelphia in September 1795, he made his way, on horseback, on foot, and by canoe through dense forests and along rivers, trusting often to friendly Indians for safe conduct. In the cities he saw much of the best of society, and was introduced to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. As a result of this trip he published his *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada*. First printed in London in 1799, it went through several editions and was translated into French, 1800; and German, 1801-2. Weld also traveled extensively on the continent and for 56 years was a member of the Royal Society of Dublin of which he served as secretary and vice-president. Isaac Weld died near Bray, County Dublin, on August 4, 1856.