

# History of Chesaning

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Located on the Shiawassee River in Saginaw County, historic Chesaning derives its name from the Chippewa word for “place of the big rock.” A huge boulder on the grounds of the elementary school was at one time a meeting place and reference point for Indians and early settlers of the area. Originally known as Northhampton Township, the area was first settled in 1839 by Thomas W. Wright. The name “Chessening” was adopted in 1853 – changing to the current spelling in 1877. Township elections were first held in 1847 with William Smith (Supervisor and Justice of the Peace), Rufus P. Mason (Clerk), and L. Stevens (Treasurer) winning offices. Mr. Mason continued his political aspirations and on April 12, 1869 was elected as President during the first village election.

Constructed in 1842, John Watkins’ sawmill was the first to be located on the Shiawassee River. Under new management in 1846, the mill added grinding machinery to become the only gristmill in what is now Chesaning Township. A second mill began operation shortly thereafter and was known as the “little mill” to distinguish it from the larger, original structure. Access to cheap lumber encouraged the building of wood-frame residential structures that began to appear the same year Mr. Watkins opened his mill.

Devastating forest fires in 1881 destroyed 8,000 square miles of land forcing dealers to look elsewhere for lumber. By 1885, demand for housing was intense. With lumber losing favor as its price and rarity increased, Otis Bettis built the first brick home in the village. The housing market changed yet again in the 1890’s when Victorian homes with turrets and towers were the height of style. Dr. Lyman B. Stewart set the trend with what was considered the most elegant home yet built. The Byron Coryell residence, whose 1900 home was erected on an even larger and grander scale, soon eclipsed the Lyman home. As the town banker, Mr. Coryell spared no expense and ultimately added a hot water system and electric lights. In 1908 the foundation was laid for George Nason’s home on West Broad Street. Erected at a cost of \$10,000, when completed it was said to be the “handsomest mansion” in the Chesaning area.

Throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the town expanded in other ways. Concern for the education of the settlement's children resulted in the first school being constructed in 1843. By 1844, Miss Eliza Ann Smith was teaching at the subscription schoolhouse (a green pine, small-board shanty). The education agenda progressed quickly thereafter with a school district being formed in 1845 and a more permanent school building in place the following year. Economically, the town benefited from a new flouring mill opened between 1867 and 1868, a retail meat market owned by George Peet and Alec Cummings in 1885, and a bank in 1901.

An indelible symbol of the area is the Chesaning Showboat. The Chamber of Commerce began discussing the possibility of a showboat after several residents attended a performance at the Lowell Showboat in 1936. Representatives of the Lowell enterprise visited with the Chamber to share the steps taken for Lowell to get the project moving. Considering it too large an undertaking, the idea was not pursued until 1937 when Charles E. Stuart became the Chamber president. Mr. Stuart appointed a large committee to begin construction on the "river queen."

Plans were made to conduct three performances over a July weekend that year. On the night of July 16<sup>th</sup>, an orchestra and chorus of young people went aboard the vessel that was hidden under the willows in the park. Finally, the ship was seen rounding the bend, her lights reflecting off the dark waters. The crowd burst into applause as the ship (propelled by motor boats pushing from behind) with the whistle blowing and the chorus singing, "Here Comes the Show Boat!"

Sparked by the success of the first year's performance and the good will generated, improvements were made to the attractions each year. In 1940, the Showboat featured its first Queen and the performances were extended to four nights. Discontinued during World War II because of gas and tire shortages, the Showboat was re-launched in 1947. In 1949, the ship was christened "The Chesaning" and went through a rebuilding process in 1951 that included a new slip for storage between shows.

The pleasure derived from the Showboat by those that attend the performances is surpassed only by the enjoyment of the residents that make it happen. A true community project, locals change the theme annually and perform all the decorating, advertising, special transportation and mechanical tasks that keep the Showboat afloat. These civic-minded individuals have given kindly of their time, energy, and ingenuity for over sixty years – greatly enhancing Chesaning’s allure and community spirit.

Over the last several decades and until this day, the Chesaning region has evolved. Chesaning was traditionally an agricultural community, but two-grain elevators, Peet, agricultural dealerships, tile companies, and other related agricultural business and support services closed like falling dominoes. Many generational businesses fell by the way side, which created some tensions as new businesses attempted to rise. Fortunately, several major industrial businesses were started up and remain open to this day. As Chesaning has developed more and more into a festival and tourist town, this has created some tensions between the remaining industrial and agricultural businesses and Chesaning’s new traditions.

Chesaning’s small town Showboat image is one widely known across the entire state. This is reason for great pride. But within the confines of the community, a struggle is occurring to identify a new and vibrant economy for the future.

