

The Founding of Manchester

The intersection of Main and Adrian Streets is considered the “heart” of downtown Manchester, and the first commercial buildings were constructed here in 1832–1833.

Why is Manchester Located Here?

The development of the Village of Manchester at this site resulted from connections among several people and events. The United States gained title to this area by means of the November 1807 Treaty of Detroit with the Ottawa, Chippewa, Wyandot and Potawatomi Native American nations. Growth in the area began to occur in the 1820s with the occurrence of four events:

- Congress passed the General Land Act of 1820, which provided for the sale of public lands in smaller lots at a lower price than had earlier been the case.
- The Erie Canal opened in 1825, making it possible to travel from the Atlantic Coast to Detroit or Monroe entirely by water, lowering costs and time involved in travel.
- Maps of the previously unknown interior of Michigan were published and distributed in the East, providing critical information to both settlers and speculators.
- In 1825, Congress authorized funds for the creation of the Chicago Pike or Road, a military route intended to link the forts in Detroit and Chicago, making land transport easier to the region.

Another key factor was land surveys conducted by the U. S. General Land Office (GLO). Local surveyors under contract to the GLO set off individual townships. Instructions to surveyors were extensive, requiring them to record not only typical surveying information, but also water locations and flows, soil and tree types, the locations of mineral and other valuable commodities, and, in particular, “all water-falls and mill sites.” In addition to detailed maps, surveyors recorded observations in field notebooks. The public could examine these maps and field notes, and thus select good land for purchase.

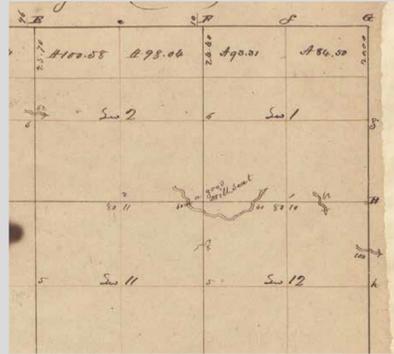


Figure 1 – 1824 Manchester Township – “A Good Mill Seat” – Future Site of Manchester

The survey for Manchester Township was completed in February 1824 by **John Mudget Mack** of Pontiac, Michigan, accompanied by **Hosey Harris** and **Oliver Parker**. These three men are the first documented individuals to traverse what is now downtown Manchester. Figure 1 shows a detail from the township survey map, noting that a “good mill seat” exists at the Section 2 and 11 boundary. This note was made by Mack while standing alongside the River Raisin at the site of the former Furnace Street Bridge.

The steep elevation drop in the River Raisin at this location provided the potential for water-powered mills, which were essential to 1830s agricultural and commercial development. In addition to being a government-employed surveyor, John Mack and his father were members of the Pontiac Land Company, investors in land. The Pontiac Land Company had a business relationship throughout the 1820s with **John Gilbert**, the manager of the Rochester (N.Y.) Land Company, also seeking land investment opportunities in Michigan. Thus, it is likely that in 1825, John Mack conveyed to Gilbert the knowledge he had gained about the water power potential of the future Manchester site. This allowed Gilbert to make his initial purchase of 80 acres in May 1826 at the site of the “good mill seat”, well ahead of land speculators and developers who would arrive when the Michigan land rush started around 1830.

In 1831, Gilbert also purchased 160 acres of land north of his initial River Raisin frontage, the land which is now downtown Manchester.

The connections between Mack and Gilbert also extended to **James H. Fargo** and his brother **Stephen Fargo**, entrepreneurs and land investors from New York, all of whom lived and worked together in Manlius Town, New York in the 1810s. The Fargo brothers, the Mack family and Gilbert also worked with **Shepherd Knapp** (Figure 2), a wealthy New York City banker and investor in both the fur trade and land development in Michigan. Knapp traveled to Detroit often, and he and his wife Catherine eventually became 50% owners of what was the Village of Manchester in 1835, and partial owners/mortgagors of the Manchester Mill. With these partners, Gilbert also purchased approximately 90 parcels of river frontage/mill sites extending from Jefferson in Jackson County to Rochester in Oakland County. Gilbert and Stephen Fargo also invested heavily in Ypsilanti, purchasing adjacent tracts in the late 1820s.

After his survey contract was completed, John Mack moved to Rochester, Michigan, where he opened that village’s first hotel in 1828. By 1834 he relocated to Hamtramck Township, where he held several prominent positions, including Supervisor and Clerk. Mack Avenue in Detroit is named after him.



Figure 2 – Shepherd Knapp – Major Investor in Manchester

John Gilbert, the Founder

John Gilbert was born in Lenox, Massachusetts on March 16, 1774, the son of Captain Job Gilbert and Zibiah Sweeting. Lenox was a hotbed of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, and the site of large metal casting furnaces and water-powered mills. Job Gilbert, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, was trained in surveying, furnaces, water mills, and large civil engineering works. He passed these interests and skills onto his son John. In 1799, John, along with his parents, settled in Onondaga County near present day Syracuse. On May 4, 1803, he married Susan Ann Haskins.

The new couple settled in Manlius, New York, and John began a prosperous career of surveying, civil engineering and land speculation, achieving considerable wealth. John served as a cavalry quartermaster in the War of 1812, achieving the rank of major. After the war, he accepted large commissions from Governor Clinton to survey and construct the Erie Canal, where he worked with Orange Risdon, the founder of Saline. He relocated to Rochester, New York, and developed several mill-related industries. But with the growing anti-Masonic movement of the early 1830s, John and family relocated to Ypsilanti. There he quickly became a prominent investor, developer of the first railroad in the area, and the village’s first supervisor.

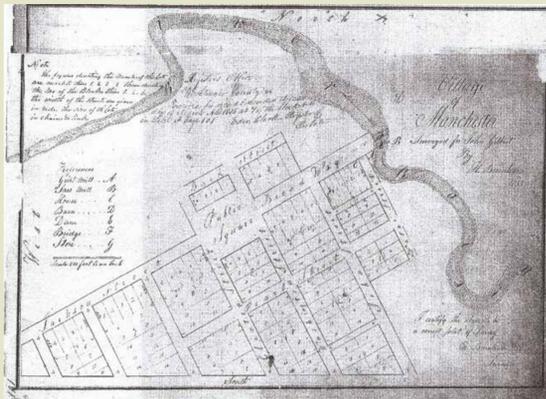


Figure 3 – First Plat of Manchester

11, which straddled his land holdings, as the ideal location for a village, being in a large burr oak plain, with excellent river elevation drop and steep surrounding topography. He commissioned the construction of a dam, mill race, bridge and grist mill by engaging Emanuel Case as a general contractor and mill operator, and William S. Carr and Elijah Carr, to prepare timber for the mill. He also sent in his son Harry H. Gilbert as overseer and carpenter.

In 1833, Gilbert commissioned a survey and plat for the future village, which was prepared by prominent surveyor Hiram Burnham, and is shown as Figure 3. This original plat consisted of 14 blocks, with some street names assigned. The village concept centered around a “public square” with prominent homes and churches around it, evoking his New England youth. It is noted that Manchester in 1833 consisted of two mills (saw and grist), one house, one barn, one store, one dam and one bridge, all clustered at the river. This is also the first recorded use of the name “Manchester”.

Gilbert continued to acquire property in the Manchester area up to October 9, 1835. On November 23, 1835, he sold all remaining parcels he owned in the village area (i.e., approximately 440 acres) to Stephen Fargo for the price of \$8,000. This equates to about \$18.00 per acre, versus the \$1.25 per acre he originally paid for it. Stephen Fargo then brought in his brother James and wife Eliza, and Shepherd and Catherine Knapp, as co-owners.

The Manchester Mill

The **Manchester Mill** has existed since 1832, operating as a grist mill until 1981. The mill ownership has passed through several persons, and at times struggled with the changing dynamics of grain milling. The mill suffered a catastrophic fire on May 1, 1853, when the spontaneous combustion of accumulated smut removed from the grains ignited a fire, destroying the mill and a major part of downtown Manchester. The mill enjoyed a rebuild and renewed operations through the late 1800s (Figure 4), until a second fire destroyed the mill again in July 1924. The current structure is the third generation of the mill.

The earliest non-photographic view of the mill and downtown Manchester is found in a lithograph created by Benjamin Matthias of Philadelphia, circa 1854, shown in Figure 5. The lithograph was financed by local merchants seeking to promote Manchester, and was subsequently published in the 1856 “Map of Washtenaw County Michigan”, published by Bechler and Wenig, surveyors and map publishers in Philadelphia.

In examining the Manchester image, it is apparent that the view is from the top of Ann Arbor Hill, looking south and west across the village. The view is somewhat idealized, but the important fact is that the steeples of the Methodist and Baptist Churches, on the north and south sides of Main Street respectively, are accurately profiled. The view of the mill profile with a gable roofline matches a photograph of John Gilbert’s Huron Mill in Ypsilanti (built approximately the same time as Gilbert’s original 1833 Manchester Mill), leading us to believe this is an accurate view of the rebuilt mill after the fire, replicating the original.



Figure 4 – Manchester Mill, circa 1880

The Fargo & Fargo General Store

Stephen and James Harvey Fargo established the **Fargo & Fargo General Store** on August 21, 1833, with James as the resident agent. The store was likely opened originally in the flour mill structure, but may have been located in its own building by 1835 opposite the mill on the southwest corner of Main and Adrian Streets, at the current Comerica Bank Building site.

We are able to learn much about the early operations of the Manchester Mill and the resident Fargo & Fargo general store due to the preservation of the early mill and store ledger books by **William G. Fargo**, grandson of James Harvey Fargo. These ledgers also provide surprising information about early Manchester settlers’ lifestyles.

As an example, the ledger page for John Gilbert is shown in Figure 6. We see Gilbert purchased goods from August 21, 1833 through April 22, 1835. Among other things, he bought “sundries”, glass, a silk camblet, a horse, mackerel, brooms, sugar, tea, coffee, whiskey, a stove, mittens and cranberries. A camblet is woven fabric with images embedded or burned into the fabric. For whatever reason Gilbert bought the camblet, he returned it for a full refund two months later! Cranberries were considered at the time a preventive medicine. You could buy food such as salted or smoked fish, clothing, hardware, sewing supplies, drinks of all kinds, and, apparently, place an order for something unusual to be shipped in.

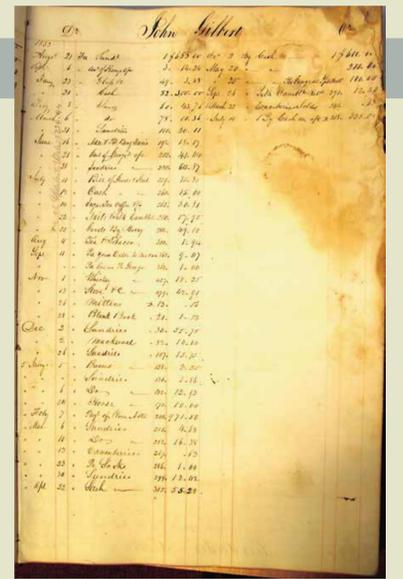


Figure 6 – John Gilbert Ledger Page at Fargo & Fargo General Store



Figure 5 – Earliest Known View of Manchester



Figure 7 – 1840s Depiction of Thriving Manchester, England

Why is Our Village Named Manchester?

Early histories of Manchester often referred to our village being named after Manchester, New York, as our original settlers were believed to have migrated from Manchester, New York. However, current research shows that this is not correct, and in fact our Manchester is named after Manchester, England, the worldwide center of water-powered manufacturing in the early–mid 1800s. In fact, Manchester, New York, like several other river frontage towns in the United States with water-powered mills, originally had different names, but all adopted the name “Manchester” in the 1820s to emulate their British cousin and its prominence in the manufacturing sector.

Given these facts and the realization that John Gilbert’s motivation was to promote and develop his new village, its water power potential and available water rights, and of course to earn quick profits, it is evident that he was seeking a name that would pique both emigrant and financial interest in his new Michigan village with its tremendous water power potential. American society and government in the 1810–1840 period also wanted to be free of dependency on British finished goods, and to develop their own industrial base. The naming and renaming of so many of America’s early communities over this 30 year period was an attempt to establish themselves as potential equals of their British namesake, in part by taking advantage of the name recognition of Manchester, England. Figure 7 shows a contemporary depiction of Manchester, England with its industrial prosperity, the goal of its namesake towns in America.

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