



Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township

Issue 2

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Depot Has Been Around Longer than Some Realized

Since the 1870s, one of the best known buildings in Olmsted Falls has been the railroad depot. Thus, the depot has shared much of Olmsted's history. Unfortunately, it also has shared a common problem with so much of that history: discrepancies in the telling of certain facts.



One of the biggest errors in accounts of Olmsted's history was the erroneous story that "Olmsted" once had an "a" in it. But historical documents clearly show that Aaron Olmsted and his family, for whom Olmsted Township and later Olmsted Falls and North Olmsted were named, never spelled their last name "Olmstead," and the original Olmsted Township never had its name spelled that way, except when people misspelled it. A full chapter in *The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township* is devoted to refuting accounts that claimed that "Olmsted" once had an "a" in it that was dropped at an unspecified time.

Another oft-told error is the assertion that Olmsted Township, which then was known as Township 6, Range 15, was settled in 1814. As we explored in the first issue of *Olmsted 200*, the only thing of note that happened in 1814 was that James Geer, who still lived in Columbia Township planted and harvested a little bit of corn in the future Olmsted Township. He didn't move into the township with his family until 1815. Therefore, when Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township mark their foundation as 1814, they are dating it from that meager corn crop rather than the beginning of the settlement of the township.

In the case of the depot, the discrepancy about its history occurred when it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. As the plaque inside the depot shows, officials at the U.S. Department of the Interior somehow got the idea that it had been built in 1877.



Fortunately, the Ohio Historical Society got the date right in 2010, when it erected the historical marker outside the depot. As the marker says, the depot was built in 1876. Contemporary articles in the *Berea Advertiser*, the newspaper that served the area, confirm that date. In fact, it's interesting to read those newspaper items to get an idea of

what the new depot meant to Olmsted residents at the time and how it embodied both their hopes and disappointments.



Until the depot was built, Olmsted had only what was known as a “flag station” at the railroad’s crossing along what now is known as Columbia Road. (Columbia Road previously was known as Columbia Street and included the current Main Street. The portion of the current Columbia Road that runs north from the intersection with current Main Street was what was known as Main Street back then, so it was more of a “main street” than the current one. A 1903 map with the old designations can be found on page 151 of *The Olmsted Story*.) The flag station was considered to be too small to serve Olmsted Falls by the 1870s.

Back then, the newspaper carried weekly columns from correspondents in the various communities around Berea, including Olmsted Falls. Those columns consisted of a series of brief items of note in the correspondents’ communities, so they told the news in bits and pieces rather than in longer articles, as are common today.

Anticipation was strong.

As early as 1872, the newspaper passed along speculation that a new depot for Olmsted Falls was under consideration, but it was little more than talk for a few years.

Early in 1875, the reporter in Olmsted Falls began chronicling the preparations for the new depot. In the January 28, 1875, edition, the column from Olmsted included this item: “The people of this village are determined to have a new Depot. The money is nearly all subscribed to purchase the ground to be used for that purpose, and the Railroad Company have agreed to build the Depot and put everything in shape the coming season.” (For some reason, the reporter wrote the way many British writers do today by giving a singular noun like “company” a plural verb.)

In the March 3, 1875, issue, the correspondent wrote: “The Railroad Company have laid out the ground for the new Depot, and as soon as the ground is in proper shape, will commence grading.” Back then, the company was the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway

Two months later, in the June 3, 1875, issue, the correspondent noted: “The Railroad Company are fencing the Depot ground.” Two more months rolled by before the project received another mention in the August 12, 1875, issue: “The Railroad Company have commenced grading the new depot ground.” A few weeks later, on September 2, 1875, the column included this item: “The grading of the R.R. grounds for the new depot is progressing, also the street surrounding it.”

However, by that fall, the correspondent began expressing frustration. In the column for the October 7, 1875, edition, the note was: “If the new depot does not progress faster than it has for two or three weeks past, it will not be occupied during the lives of the present generation.”

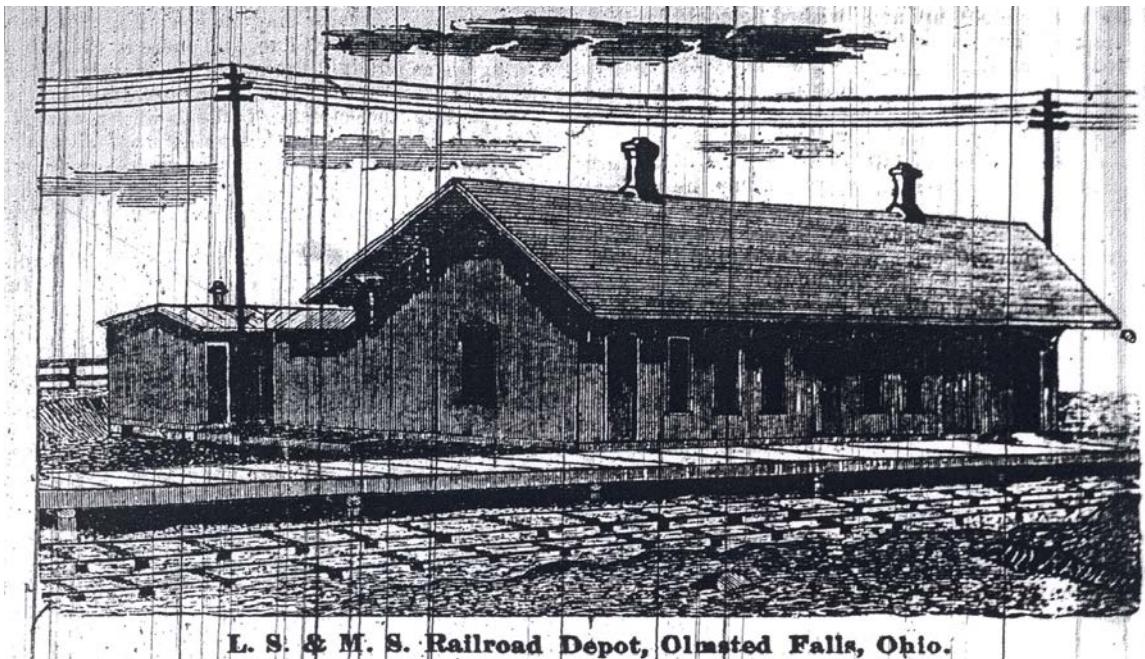
“If the new depot does not progress faster than it has for two or three weeks past, it will not be occupied during the lives of the present generation.”

Several months later, on March 20, 1876, the correspondent wrote: “The foundation for the new depot is still seen, and has got to be an object of no interest at all. People begin to think that the depot is a grand humbug, but

not so, a report from the railroad authorities is that as soon as the weather moderates work will be commenced upon the building.”

As promised, work moved more swiftly that spring and summer. In the April 13, 1876, paper, the reporter wrote: “Monday the frame for the new depot was erected, and work will be pushed rapidly along.” In the June 1, 1876, the news was: “The carpenters have finished the work upon the new depot, next in order will be the painters, then a Carpenter again.” One month later, the July 6, 1876, edition included this item:

“The new depot grounds are being put in shape as fast as possible, the depot itself is about completed, but it will be some time yet before the grading will be done and the grounds put in proper shape so that the depot will be used.”



In the August 10, 1876, edition, the *Advertiser* gave readers who had not already seen the depot an idea of what it looked like when it published a print. That was notable, because outside of advertisements, the paper contained few illustrations back then. The caption read: “The Depot building represented above has just been erected. The entire length is 108 feet; width, 30 feet. It contains ladie’s [sic] sitting room, gentlemen’s sitting room, ticket office, and baggage room. The building is finished in fine style and is an ornament to the village and a credit to the Railroad Company. The grounds are being graded and preparations are being made to occupy the building soon.”

However, the Olmsted correspondent’s column below the picture included this terse comment: “We will say no more about the depot for some time yet.”

After he saw a copy of the print earlier this year, Peter Zwick of Zwick Engineering said the picture of the depot “resembles what I would now refer to as an architectural rendering of a proposed building.” He suggested it might be a standard drawing of the railroad’s typical structure for its depots. He noted that the picture includes two chimneys, not the single chimney the depot now has.

Back in 1876, the newspaper’s Olmsted correspondent kept to his word about saying nothing more about the depot for some time. It was almost two months later, October 5, 1876, when this item appeared: “The new depot is completed at last. Mr. Barnum, the station agent, took possession last Monday. Olmsted Falls has a good depot,

finished in good shape with a waiting room for gentlemen and one for ladies, with a dressing room attached. There is also a large freight room, a ticket office and a telegraph office, with night and day operators. There is only one disadvantage, it is much to [sic] far away to one side of the village.”

The Mr. Barnum referred to in that report was John Barnum, a grandson of the John Barnum who settled in Olmsted in 1820 and a member of the Barnum family that was instrumental in quarrying for sandstone in what is now David Fortier River Park.

The reason for the complaint about the depot being too far from the center of Olmsted Falls is that it was built farther west than where it stands now. It was close to the intersection of the current Mapleway Drive (formerly called Division Street) and Garfield Street (formerly known as South Depot Street).

The correspondent had more to say on that subject about two months later in the paper on December 7, 1876: “When we got our new depot, we expected that all our inconveniences, present and future, were removed. We must say that we are a little disappointed. The management of affairs at the depot is in competent and willing hands and all things about it appear exceedingly well. But it is so far off. It costs our merchants as much to bring their goods from the depot as the shipment from the city.”

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Moving day came eventually.

Despite residents’ displeasure about the location of the depot, they had to put up with it for the next few decades. That changed in the early 1900s. As the Ohio Historical Marker states, the railroad heeded the complaints, put the depot on rollers and used a locomotive to haul it down the street to where it now stands near what is known today as Brookside Drive (formerly Railroad Street).

In the early half of the 20th century, many Olmsted Falls residents used the depot to commute by rail to jobs in Cleveland. But the depot became less busy after World War II. Passenger rail service ended in 1948 or 1949 (sources disagree), and freight service lasted only until 1954, according to one source. By then, the railroad that owned it was

the New York Central, which used the depot for storage and as a maintenance-of-way facility until about 1965. Later, a business that sold and restored antiques used the depot.

The depot might have been lost in 1972, when it caught fire. Fortunately, the fire station was close, so the damage was limited.

After lying vacant for several years, the depot that had served the big railroads for decades became the home of small railroads. In 1977, the Cuyahoga Valley & West Shore Model Railroad Club began leasing the depot from Conrail, the successor to the New York Central. Members restored the depot to display their model railroad collections and to serve as a meeting place. In 1996, the club bought the building.

The Pennsylvania Railroad caboose that stands next to the depot was a donation from Conrail that was delivered on November 9, 1988. It was built in 1951 and weighs 56,800 pounds.

Depot Was Almost Home for One Longtime Resident

One Olmsted resident with plenty of fond recollections about the depot is Anna Hall. She married into the Hall family, which helped make the greenhouse industry an important part of Olmsted's economy for several decades in the 20th century, so she has lived most of her adult life on McKenzie Road in Olmsted Township across the road from where one of those greenhouses was located. But she grew up in Olmsted Falls as the daughter of Ed Breisch, who was the station agent for the railroad. Consequently, she spent much time around the depot in its heyday.

Ed Breisch was a student at Hiram College when he came to Olmsted Falls to work at the depot one summer. Hall said her father liked railroading so much that he never returned to college. He was the station agent when she was born on June 26, 1921. They lived on Mill Street just west of Plum Creek, so they were very close to the depot.

“It was very busy,” Hall said, recalling carloads of goods coming in every day. “Everything came by rail. Things weren’t doing that well on highways at that point yet. In fact, my father always said, ‘Everything including the bread and ice cream came in by train.’”

Most of the goods came in from Cleveland. “Of course, they had trains stopping that were coming east and west, but most of everything that came in commercially was coming out of the Cleveland area,” Hall said. “Linndale was the breakoff point on the west side and Collinwood on the east side. That was really where the engines changed, but I don’t think that was pretty much where the freight was.”

Passenger trains went through the terminal in downtown Cleveland, she said, but freight trains went along the lakefront. All of the locomotives were powered by steam until the Terminal Tower was built, Hall said, but the trains going into the Terminal

Tower had to be electric, not steam-powered, so that's why the trains changed engines at Linndale.

The commuter train that took Olmsted Falls residents downtown to work was called the Plug. Hall said it left the Olmsted depot about seven o'clock in the morning and returned in the evening about six o'clock.

"And then there was a train, which they called the Shoppers' Special, that went in – and I don't remember whether it was nine or 9:30, but it was in that vicinity," she said. "And then there was one coming out of Cleveland that stopped at the depot at three o'clock in the afternoon, which was the Shoppers' Special, because there were no shopping centers. I mean, Cleveland was where you went to shop."

Another train came in from Cleveland about nine o'clock in the evening to serve people who stayed downtown for a meal or a movie or other activities.

"Because my father being at the depot, his time was split up, because he had so many trains he had to work," Hall said. "There were times of the day he could leave, so we only lived a block and a half from the depot. That's why

"I always said I grew up in that depot. I was my dad's shadow. I was with him all the time, and I was practically all my life in that depot." – Anna Hall

Her first recollection of her father at the depot was seeing him at the telegrapher's key.

(These memories of Anna Hall are from an interview I conducted with her on August 18, 2012, at her home on McKenzie Road. She had many other recollections, including memories of the greenhouse business and what downtown Olmsted Falls was like before World War II. They likely will be included in future editions of *Olmsted 200*.)

News from the Past

As should be evident from this issue's lead story about the Olmsted Falls depot, old newspapers can be a good source for contemporary views of what happened in the past and how people at the time viewed them. In the June 1 issue of *Olmsted 200*, we considered several items from the *Berea Enterprise* from April 1913 for an impression of what life was like in Olmsted Falls a century ago. Earlier that month, in the April 4, 1913, edition, the *Enterprise* included reports about the devastating flooding that hit the area on March 25. Under a headline of "BRIDGE WASHED AWAY AT WEST VIEW" was this article:

West View, April 1 – On Mar. 25, Tuesday of last week during the terrible floods of Ohio, Rocky River was the highest ever known by old

residents of this town, although thirty years ago the bridges were swept away when the river came up.

The road bridge during this uprising was completely swept away and demolished while the east end of the quarry bridge was broken so that it was condemned. The waters flooded both quarries destroying much property.

The grist mill owned by Mr. Thos. Chambers threatened to be carried away but stood the wash-out wonderfully for the age and slimey underpinning. The water completely surrounded the building and washed through and through it.

The waters reached their greatest height when the home of Jake Majou formerly owned by E.C. Bevan, was nearly surrounded and had to be strengthened by the aid of ropes tied to trees on the bank.

The pasture of Geo. Orum was under water sweeping large logs into the stream.

On the road along the town-line between Columbia and Olmsted townships, the stone wall was washed away.

A bridge was washed away at the Cleveland Stone Co. and water, which almost covered the quarry, took some machinery away down the river.



Accompanying the article was a photograph showing the water of Rocky River rushing over what is now known as Sprague Road near the Chambers mill, which now is the location of Gibbs Butcher Block, just south of Olmsted Falls in Columbia Township. The caption said: THE "LINE ROAD BRIDGE," COVERED BY THE RAGING WATERS OF ROCKY RIVER, PHOTOGRAPHED JUST BEFORE IT WAS LIFTED FROM ITS ABUTMENTS AND CARRIED DOWN STREAM

In that same issue, the Olmsted Falls correspondent's column included the following items:

- “Flood relief contributions have been received at the post-office in considerable quantity this week, and it is understood will be forwarded Monday or Tuesday.”
- “The recent storm has undermined more of the stone retaining wall on Mill-st. Unless some thing is done soon there will be nothing left to repair.”

Still to Come

In future issues, we will share more tidbits about Olmsted's history, including the little-known background of a recreational facility that might have turned out to be much bigger and much different than what resulted. In turn, that could have changed the way Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls developed.

Again, if there is anything about Olmsted's history that you would like to know more about, let me know and I'll do my best to come up with the information from the archives I have acquired over many years or at least throw the question open to readers for their contributions. As Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township approach their bicentennial (whenever they celebrate it), this is a perfect time to explore their shared history.

Written contributions, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. Anyone who wants to receive future issues should send a request to that same email address. Feel free to share this issue with others who are interested in Olmsted's history.

*Olmsted 200 is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of **The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township**, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. **The Olmsted Story** is available at Clementine's Victorian Restaurant at Grand Pacific Junction and through online booksellers.*

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