



Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

Issue 54

November 1, 2017

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Biglow's Big Drain Tile Company Started at West View

The Olmsted area lost one of its local industries 120 years ago when the Biglow Drain Tile Company pulled out of West View. It also cost the community a family who seemed to have been regarded well, judging by comments in the newspaper in 1897.



This undated photo from the 1880s or 1890s shows Ephraim Biglow's drain tile-making operation that was located at West View just east of the railroad tracks and south of what now is Sprague Road. Thanks go to Mike Gibson for this copy of the photo.

Ephraim Biglow, Jr., ran a general store in West View for years before getting into manufacturing drain tile. He also served as West View's postmaster. Bigelow was born on June 28,

1845, in Columbia Township into a family that had come there from upstate New York. When he was 28, he married Carrie Osborn of Columbia Township on September 15, 1873. That was also about the time he opened his general store.

About Biglow's general store, Abraham J. Baughman wrote in 1909 in *History of Huron County, Ohio* (where Biglow later moved): "The enterprise proved a profitable and growing one, but at the end of six years his health failed, owing to the close confinement of the store and he partially withdrew from mercantile pursuits to give his time and energies to brick and tile making, taking up that line of manufacture."

In 1880, Biglow started the E. Biglow Drain Tile Company using local clay that he baked in a kiln. It was located just east of the railroad crossing and south of what now is Sprague Road, so it was in Columbia Township. But at that time, West View essentially was an unincorporated community that spanned the border between Olmsted Township and Columbia Township. Biglow's firm was so close to the border that it affected the economic life of both townships.

There was a good local market for drain tile back then. Much of southwestern Olmsted Township was swampy and so were parts of neighboring townships. To make their land more agriculturally useful, farmers used ditches and drain tile to dry up their properties. That's why Walter Holzworth in his 1966 book on Olmsted history wrote in regard to Biglow, "His kiln was the main source of supplies for several progressive land owners and farmers who realized the benefit of tile drained areas."

Drain tile manufacturing worked out so well for Biglow that he decided to expand his tile factory in 1884. The November 28, 1884, edition of the *Berea Advertiser* included this item in its West View column: "Mr. E. Biglow, postmaster and proprietor of a store at this place has decided to sell out his stock and retire from the business. He is largely interested in the manufacture of tile, which absorbs his attention to such an extent that he is obliged to discontinue the mercantile business."

"Mr. E. Biglow, postmaster and proprietor of a store at this place has decided to sell out his stock and retire from the business. He is largely interested in the manufacture of tile, which absorbs his attention to such an extent that he is obliged to discontinue the mercantile business." – Berea Advertiser

Biglow built a big drying shed that was 140 feet long by 24 feet long, as well as smaller drying sheds that were 100 feet by 18 feet and 64 feet by 18 feet. According to Holzworth, Biglow's kilns had the capacity to bake 25,000 tiles, and in 1884, he produced 350,000 tiles that ranged in diameter from two inches to eight inches. He also produced 250,000 bricks that year with his workforce of eight men.

Like the sandstone quarries, which also were important employers locally in the late 1800s, Biglow's tile company operated from spring through fall and shut down during the winter. An item in the Berea newspaper, the *Advertiser*, on March 20, 1891, indicated that business was booming then: "Mr. E. Biglow has started his brick and tile machinery. This is the earliest start he has made since he has been in business. But the demand has been so great that he was obliged to start as soon as it could possibly be done."

Biglow increased production each year into the mid-1890s. Baughman wrote: "He started the business on a very modest scale, but by close attention, unremitting energy and earnest study of processes of manufacture and the adoption of practical methods, he prospered as the years went by."

That changed in 1897. On March 12, 1897, the West View column in the *Berea Advertiser* included this item: "The brick and tile works of this place have started up for a short time only. E. Biglow has purchased the brick and tile works of A. Ruse, New London, O., and will commence work there in May."

The Ruse firm was 10 years old when Biglow acquired it.

Baughman explained Biglow's move this way: "By keeping in touch with everything concerning his line of business, he came to know of the wonderful clay deposits at New London and foresaw great possibilities there. Removing to this place [New London] in 1897, he established his business in a small way, paying thirty-five hundred dollars for the land and taking up the manufacture with five employees operating the kiln. At that time, his son, E.O. Bigelow *[sic]*, was old enough to join him and together they have built up from this humble beginning a business which is one of the important industries of the county and of which New London has every reason to be proud."



This 1912 postcard shows the E. Biglow Company's tile manufacturing plant in New London, Ohio, during its heyday.

New London's gain was West View's loss. On September 10, 1897, the *Berea Advertiser* ran this item: "Mr. and Mrs. E. Biglow and son have left a void here which cannot be easily filled, socially and religiously, and there are a number of men thrown out of employment by the removal of their brick and tile works in New London. Their many friends wish them success and happiness in their new home."

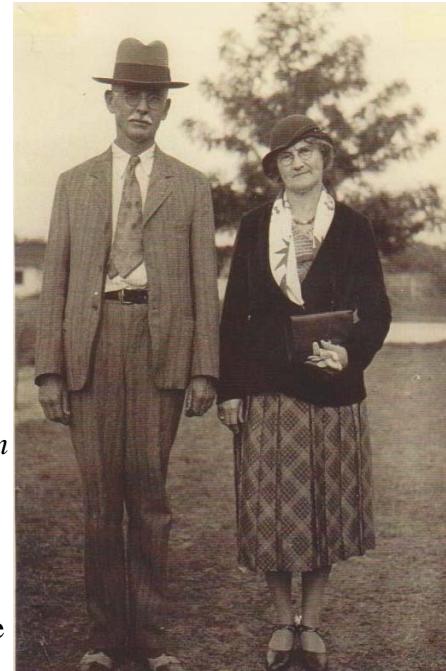
Holzworth wrote that, in New London, which is about 35 to 40 miles away from West View in Huron County, E. Bigelow & Co., became "the largest of its kind in Ohio. The clay pits at Olmsted became frog ponds." He added, "With Tanney & Redfern cheese works going out of business, the closing of the quarries, and the Bigelow *[sic]* Tile Works shutdown, West View suffered an economic blow from which it only partially recovered when the greenhouse business became its most important industry."

In 1909, according to Baughman, the Biglows employed 50 men, operated eight kilns and had made many improvements to their plant. "They have erected a fine plant equipped with the most modern machinery and there is a constant and growing demand for their products, including tile and brick," Baughman wrote. "Their output is sent to many states, being shipped to the eastern seaboard, to Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina. They also have a very extensive trade in northern Ohio and the indications are that the business will constantly increase for it is founded upon a safe, substantial basis and because of its owner's broad experience and keen discernment."

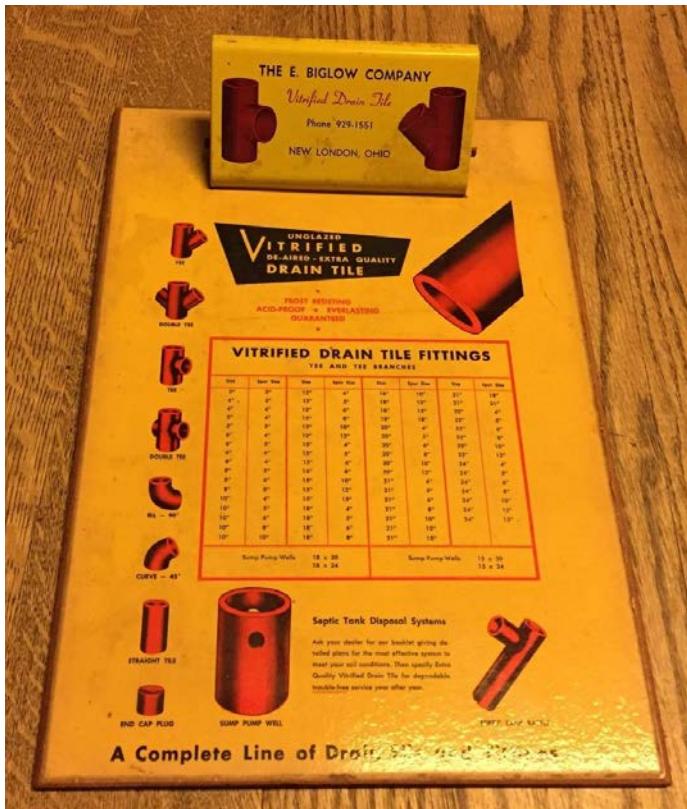
An item from the February 1910 issue of *Brick – A Monthly Record of the World's Progress in Clayworking* also indicated that Biglow did very well in his new location: "Mr. E.W. Biglow, of New London, Ohio...is probably the best tile manufacturer on the continent, doing a business which reached 1,000 cars of tile a year. All of his tile are dark red, thin tile, and they are giving the best of satisfaction to both the manufacturer and the patron."

Ernest Osborn Biglow, the son of Ephraim, was born in Berea on September 27, 1875.

Baughman wrote that he attended Baldwin College in Berea before he joined his father's business. "He is energetic, wide-a-wake, alert and enterprising, and both he and his father are popular with their employees, of whom their treatment is ever just and fair." Ernest Biglow, who was an only child, met the daughter of a New London doctor and married her in 1899. They had three children.



This photo of Ernest Biglow and his wife, Ida, was taken in 1937, almost a decade after the Biglows sold their tile factory.



The E. Biglow Company used this clipboard to show the “vitrified drain tile fittings” it offered. It is not clear when the company issued this clipboard, but it was sometime after seven-digit telephone numbers went into use in the middle of the 20th century.

In July 1928, the Biglows sold their company, although the company kept the Biglow name under the new owners. The Biglows’ timing was good because they sold the company a little more than a year before the stock market crash that began the Great Depression. The tile company closed in 1931 for lack of business but reopened in 1933. It operated until 1981, when plastic pipes became popular. Later, a bypass was built around New London and named Biglow Parkway.

Note: Some historians, including Holzworth and Baughman, spelled the Biglows’ name as “Bigelow,” but that is inconsistent with other accounts and the name of the company. It is unlikely the family would have misspelled their name for the company’s use.

Olmsted Falls Was Recognized as Pretty 12 Decades Ago

The words “quaint” and “pretty” are commonly used these days in descriptions of Olmsted Falls. When author Les Roberts set a portion of his 2008 mystery novel, *King of the Holly Hop*, in Olmsted Falls, he wrote that it “drips charm” much like other northeastern towns such as Hudson and Chagrin Falls. He also wrote that the city, which he called a village, “feels rural, quiet, and almost turn of the twentieth century.”

It’s not new for writers to recognize the charms of the community. One such recognition was printed 120 years ago this month in the *Berea Advertiser*. The paper’s Olmsted Falls column in the November 12, 1897, edition included this item:

Olmsted Falls is one of the oldest villages in Northern Ohio; it is likewise one of the prettiest and most romantic. The natural scenery along the rapids in the river is picturesque and worthy of the artist’s pencil and brush.

This village was the home at one time of N.A. Gray, one of the founders of the Cleveland Leader and a versatile writer and speaker.

The Cleveland Stone Company's quarries located here are not worked as extensively as usual this season and the hundreds of laborers who formerly found employment in the quarries have found other means of earning a livelihood.

Our village is unfortunate in one respect, and that is, there is no immediate prospect of acquiring an electric railroad. Nearly every other village in the neighborhood of Cleveland now has an electric railway. But we have the Lake Shore road, which accommodates our people with regular morning and evening trains.

We are glad to see the Falls making permanent improvements. A good flag walk has been laid at both approaches of the bridge, near turkeyfoot, and enclosed by a substantial railing. A slate walk connects with the cemetery, and one can now go to Turkeyfoot without getting mired in mud.

Of course, that 1897 newspaper did not include any photos to illustrate the points made by the writer. Thus, we can only guess that the reference to the “natural scenery along the rapids in the river” was similar to the current view along Rocky River in David Fortier River Park near the mouth of Plum Creek.



This view of Rocky River from the Water Street Bridge has apparently changed very little since a newspaper writer called it “picturesque” in 1897.

It is interesting to note that the *Advertiser* item pointed out that the Cleveland Stone Company's sandstone quarries were not being "worked as extensively as usual" in 1897. After it began about 1870, quarrying removed tons of sandstone from what now is the park – so much that it lowered the level of most of that section of land between Plum Creek and the current Olmsted Community Church property by about 14 feet, judging by the height of Inscription Rock. By late in the 19th century, quarrying slowed down. At some point, it stopped. Left behind were many cubic blocks of sandstone that had been extracted from the ground and others that had been shaped into round disks for use as grindstones. Those stones remain familiar sights around the park.

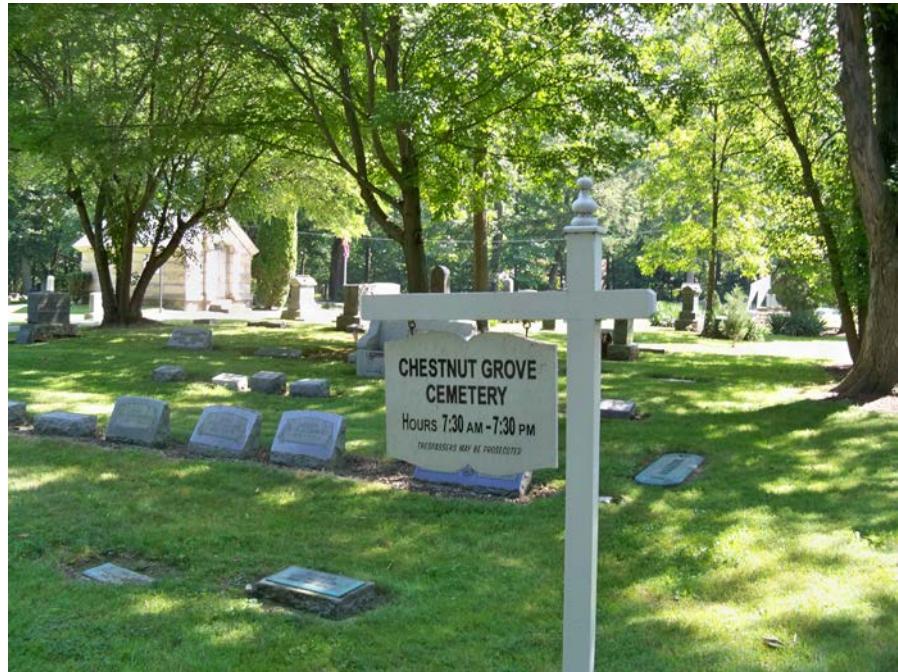


*These round
grindstones, now
covered with
moss, were left
behind from
sandstone
quarrying. They
can be found near
the path in David
Fortier River Park
that runs parallel
to Plum Creek
between the
creek's falls and
the Charles A.
Harding
Memorial Bridge.*

The reference to the lack of an "electric railway" also is noteworthy. It obviously was a disappointment for people in Olmsted Falls, although they still had a stop along the older railroad, "the Lake Shore road," that had served the community since 1853. In the 1890s, a streetcar line was built through the northern part of Olmsted Township near Butternut Ridge. That gave residents in that area easier access to both Cleveland and Elyria. They already had been growing apart from the rest of Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls for decades, and the east-west streetcar line drew them away even more from their more southerly neighbors. In a little more than a decade after the above article was published in the newspaper, the northern section of the township joined with a small southern section of Dover Township and broke away to form North Olmsted, which became an incorporated village at the beginning of 1909.

Without a direct connection to the streetcar system, Olmsted Falls experienced slower growth in the 20th century. In a 1941 article about Olmsted Falls in the *Cleveland Press*, writer Eugene Segal called the community "unindustrious, small, tranquil and slow-moving."

Chestnut Grove has been the official name for the Olmsted Falls cemetery since 1878, but many people still refer to it as Turkeyfoot. That's the name used in 1897 in the newspaper article that spoke of the prettiness of Olmsted Falls, despite its mud.



Also mentioned in the 1897 *Advertiser* item was Turkeyfoot Cemetery, which was started in 1854, one year after the railroad arrived. In 1878, Olmsted Township trustees gave it the official name Chestnut Grove Cemetery, which it retains today. But that never stopped Olmsted residents from referring to it as Turkeyfoot, which they continue to do well into the 21st century. The slate walk to the cemetery that allowed people to avoid getting “mired in the mud” was important back then in the days before paved streets. The newspaper often contained complaints about the mud through which residents had to slog in inclement weather.

Photos Show How Olmsted Falls Has Changed

One way to reflect on how a community has changed over the decades is to compare pairs of photos taken from the same vantage point many years apart. That's an activity that Mike Gibson has enjoyed doing, mainly by taking advantage of copies of some very old Olmsted Falls photos that his father collected and pairing them with new photos taken in 2013. He has shared some of those photos with *Olmsted 200*.



The bend along Rocky River was greener in 2013 (left) than it was in about 1900 (right), when Damp's Mill and its dam still stood there.



In 2013, the old church had become the Grand Pacific Wedding Chapel with a new steeple (left). In 1910, it was the Methodist Episcopal Church and had just lost its steeple in a ferocious storm (right).



In 2013, Mill River Plaza dominated the east side of Columbia Road near Mill Street (left). In 1940, that side of the road had many separate, older shops (right).



In 2013, the west side of Columbia Road was dominated by Grand Pacific Junction (left). In 1976, when the nation was celebrating its bicentennial, Kucklick's Village Square Shoppe (painted white) operated in the Depositors Bank Building and stood out in Mike Gibson's photo (right).

Gibson grew up in Olmsted Falls until just before his senior year in high school, when his family moved to California. He now lives in Bend, Oregon, but enjoys occasional trips back to Ohio to see his hometown.

“It was a great place to be a kid in in the 1950s,” he wrote. “I think I remember so much because I either walked or rode a bike all over town. I remember every little bump in the streets and sidewalks. I got the feeling, in 2013, that the ‘center of action’ in Olmsted has moved west on Bagley Road down by the high school and middle school. The old ‘uptown’ seemed more for tourists. Then again, the day I visited it was 95 degrees with humidity through the roof!!! I’d have been more comfortable in Alabama.”

Gibson has sent many other old photos that will appear in future issues of *Olmsted 200*. Some are better copies of certain photos that have been published previously, while others show sights that seemingly had been lost many decades ago. One of those photos will appear in an *Olmsted 200* story next month.

“It’s been fun to look at the old photos,” Gibson wrote when he sent them. He said he was beginning to re-examine the old Olmsted photos with an eye for Olmsted history rather than just looking for people in his family.

Gibson would like some help in identifying people in one particular batch of about 20 photos. They show his grandmother’s arts and crafts group, the Painters and Putterers. The photos are dated 1955, 1957 and 1963. All of them were taken in the basement of his grandparents’ home at 7435 River Road. He also has one of the group’s “Painting for Sale” signs. If anyone knows who might have been members of that group back in the 1950s and 1960s, let *Olmsted 200* know, so you can be put in contact with Gibson.

All *Olmsted 200* Issues Now Are Available on City’s Website

Anyone who wants to read a back issue of *Olmsted 200* now has another place to find them. Beginning in late October, the City of Olmsted Falls began posting all the issues on its website at: http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/index.php. If you can’t remember that, just go to www.olmstedfalls.org and click on the “History of Olmsted Falls” link and then look for the link to *Olmsted 200* on the left side. Clerk of Council Angi Mancini has promised to post new issues each month.

The availability of *Olmsted 200* issues on the city’s website is in addition to their availability on Olmsted Township’s website at: <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. The township has been posting them since January 2014. In recent months, the township’s administrative assistant, Traci Dietrich, has made sure they were posted each month.

Thanks go to officials in both the township and the city who make it possible for more people to learn about Olmsted’s history. In Olmsted Township, former Trustee Sherri Lippus first offered to put the *Olmsted 200* issues on the township’s website, and Trustee Lisa Zver, who replaced Lippus, has been instrumental in ensuring that they remain there, especially since the township upgraded its website. In Olmsted Falls, Mayor Ann Marie Donegan inquired about the possibility of including *Olmsted 200* on the city’s website, and now all of the issues are there.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about a corner of Olmsted Township that rarely received much attention.

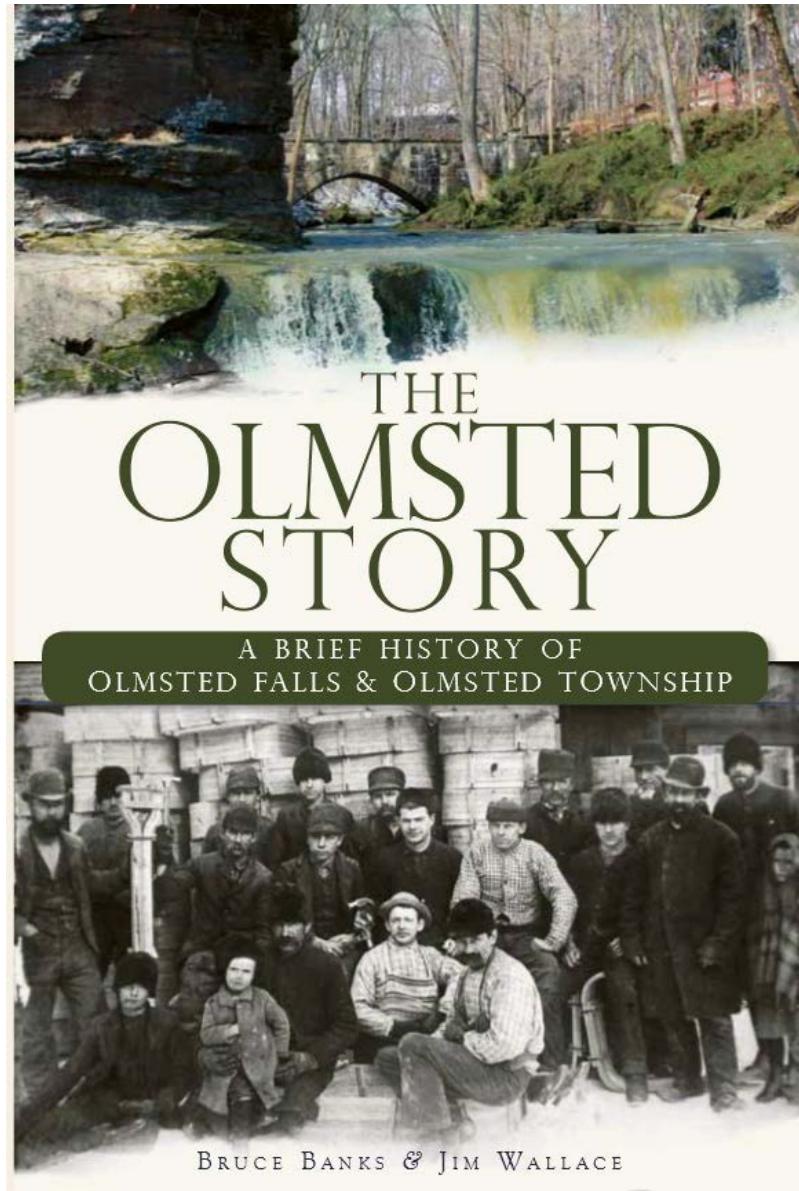
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Florida, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read. All of the issues of *Olmsted 200* also are available on the website of the City of Olmsted Falls. Find them at: http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/index.php. A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help in proofreading and editing many issues. Written contributions and photos, 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.

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 the Village Bean in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.



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