

The First One Hundred Years of Vergennes Township History



The Fallsburg Covered Bridge, built in 1871, is Vergennes Township's most famous historic landmark.

By Kevin Gerard

Bustling small towns, “excessive school funding requests”, and neighborhood detectives’ organizations. These happenings and more are part of the fascinating history of the first 100 years of Vergennes Township. From an unbroken wilderness in 1836 to a vibrant township in 1936, people, places, and events all helped to create the wonderful Township of Vergennes.

Township Organization and First Officers

Vergennes was first settled in 1836 and organized as a township just two years later in 1838. Prior to its establishment as a township, Vergennes had simply been an unorganized part of Kent County. At the time of its incorporation, there were 19 families living in Vergennes Township, which at that time included all of present-day Bowne, Lowell, Vergennes, and Grattan townships.ⁱ Although 19 families might sound like very few people with which to start a township, only a dozen voters were required to form a townshipⁱⁱ (every vote definitely did count back then). Despite this fact, Vergennes Township was not reduced to its present-day boundaries until 1848. At that time, the last area of land attached to it-- present-day Lowell Township-- was set up as a separate government.

Upon its founding in 1836, officers were selected to take up the tasks of governing. The number of officers was substantially greater than the number today. This was likely due to the fact that, unlike today, very little local government was carried out on a county-wide level leaving townships with most of the governing responsibilities. The officers of Vergennes Township in 1836, were as follows: Supervisor--Rodney Robinson; Clerk--M. Patrick; Assessors--Lewis Robinson, T.L. Daniels, John M. Fox; Collector--Porter Ralph; School Inspectors--Everett Wilson, Lewis Robinson, George Brown; Directors of the Poor--Everett Wilson, Chas. Newton; Commissioners of Highways--Lucas Robinson, Henry Dainer, P.W. Fox; Constables--Porter Ralph, A.D. Smith, O.H. Jones and Jas. S. Fox.ⁱⁱⁱ It is interesting to note that 15 different people held governing positions at a time when there were only 19 voters in the township. They certainly had a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Pioneers

Like any newly settle area, Vergennes Township benefited from the hard work of its founders and pioneers who were instrumental in making Vergennes Township what it is today. One of those pioneers was Sylvester Hodges who is credited with being the first white settler in Vergennes Township. Settling there in 1836, Hodges was a typical farming man who received 160 acres of land in the township from the U.S. government, his deed being signed by President Tyler.^{iv} Despite the fact he was the first settler in Vergennes Township, Sylvester Hodges is not attributed with many other significant achievements relating to the township. He wasn’t even chosen as one of Vergennes Township’s first officers (one of only four registered voters not chosen for a governing position). Perhaps history has forgotten Hodges’ achievements, or maybe it was his nature to remain in the background. Whatever the case, Sylvester Hodges deserves credit for settling Vergennes Township.

One of the settlers who did not remain in the background of Vergennes Township's early history was Rodney Robinson. In 1836, the same year Sylvester Hodges settled in the township, Rodney Robinson came to this area and settled along the Flat River about one and a half miles north of Lowell. He was one of the 44 members of the Robinson Family, known as the "Robinson 44", who settled all over Kent and Ottawa counties. In 1838 when Vergennes Township was organized, Rodney Robinson was elected as the first township supervisor.^v He was also the first postmaster of the Flat River post office.^{vi} It is possible the post office was even in Robinson's home, as was common in that era, or the office may have been in Lowell. Rodney Robinson's involvement in Vergennes Township's history has earned him a place among its great founders.

A third person who was very influential in the early history of Vergennes Township was John Wesley Fallass from whom the village of Fallasburg received its name. Fallass came to West Michigan in 1837 at age of 25. In 1839, he bought a quarter of section 23. Also in 1839, he built a bridge across the Flat River at the place where the Fallasburg Covered Bridge is today (however, it was not a covered bridge).^{vii} He also built that year, with the help of his brother Silas, a sawmill on the Flat River. In 1841, he established Fallasburgh (the spelling was later changed to Fallasburg) By establishing Fallasburg, which will be explored further later in this paper, John Wesley Fallass left a lasting impact on Vergennes Township.

It was the hard work, dedication, and perseverance of these pioneers that laid the foundation for the wonderful community Vergennes Township is today. Without people like Sylvester Hodges, Rodney Robinson, John Wesley Fallas, and many others, this township could not have been established. We owe much to those who pioneered Vergennes Township.

Settlements

Naturally, with settlers arriving in Vergennes Township, there were settlements that sprang up. These villages provided the settlers with a chance to do their business locally as well as build a sense of community. Although all of these settlements are virtually deserted today, they were once important centers of commerce and social life for the people of Vergennes Township.

The most well-known, and perhaps the most important, of these settlements was Fallasburg. The history of Fallasburg begins with John Wesley Fallass and his brother Silas, who came to the area in 1837 and bought the land that would later become Fallasburg. In 1839, Fallasburg's first business, a sawmill, was built by the Fallass brothers.^{viii} Also in 1839, a bridge was built at the site of the Covered Bridge (as previously mentioned, it was not a covered bridge) In 1840, the Fallass brothers also built a grist mill on the Flat River near Fallasburg. However, Fallasburg didn't really become a village until 1841 when the state road between Grand Rapids and Detroit was surveyed through it.^{ix} Stagecoaches used the road, and this caused many businesses to spring up in Fallasburg, particularly travel related industries. In 1841, when John W. Fallass plotted the village, he laid out three parallel roads. Today, only

Covered Bridge Rd. remains. The roads that were on either side of it are gone. With a town platted and a state road running through it, Fallasburg was on its way to becoming the area's most important settlement.

During the years following 1841, Fallasburg continued to grow. A chair factory was opened above the sawmill, and many other businesses flourished with stone masons, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, hotel-keepers, harness-makers, storekeepers, and tanners working in the village. In 1851, a post office was opened in Fallasburg with John M. Waters as the first postmaster.^x It looked as if Fallasburg was on its way to becoming the area's major city, and it might have if it had possessed the one thing a town in the post-Civil-War needed most--a railroad.

After the Civil War, railroads were being developed all over the country. As railroads were built in Western Michigan, Fallasburg, for whatever reason, did not have a railroad built through it. This caused the village, which had at one point had a population of at least 200,^{xi} to decline. One structure that was actually built during this period was the Covered Bridge. Built in 1871 by Jared N. Breesee of Ada, the bridge cost \$1500. The bridge has been repaired extensively since that time yet still remains much like it was when it was built. Except for the bridge, nothing else was going well for Fallasburg. Timber, which had been the key to Fallasburg's lumbering business, was depleted, and the sawmill was torn down 1878. In the 1890's, the entire Fallas family, including John Wesley who founded Fallasburg, moved away. The post office was closed on April 30, 1901, and, due to competition, the gristmill was torn down in 1912. By the 1920's, Fallasburg was only a dot on the map where a few people lived. It would never again be the commercial center it once was. Today, many buildings from its glory days stand to tell the story of this remarkable pioneer village.

Another settlement that gained prominence in Vergennes Township's history is Alton. Located at the present-day intersection of Lincoln Lake Ave. and 3 Mile Rd., Alton was established in the late 1830's, around the same time Fallasburg was established. The first school in Vergennes Township was built in 1839, on the northeast corner of Lincoln Lake and 3 Mile. Alton would soon become a viable commercial and social center.

Businesses were soon established in Alton in order to meet the needs of the community. Some of these businesses relied on the waterpower provided by Wood's Creek (now known as Alton Creek) to operate. Two dams were built on the creek with one being just south of the intersection of 3 Mile and Lincoln Lake. The other was located about three quarters of a mile west of 3 Mile and Lincoln Lake.^{xii} The early businesses that relied on water power from Wood's Creek included a flour mill, a grist mill, (both built by Thomas B. Woodbury), and a rake factory (built by Edmond Ring). Other early businesses in Alton included a blacksmith shop, a cider mill, a cobbler's shop, and a general store. In 1851, the Alton post office (whose first postmaster was Walter White) was established and operated out of the general store which was built and operated by Henry Keech. Alton was rapidly becoming an important village.

Alton continued to grow reaching its peak in 1880. During this time, the church that still stands on the northeast corner of Lincoln Lake Ave. and 3 Mile Rd. was built. Constructed in 1868, the building housed the Christian Church Society which had been established in 1842 by Gideon Hendricks and Newcomb Godfrey. During its glory days in the 1880's, Alton's businesses included three blacksmiths, two carriage repairers, two shoemakers, a miller, a storekeeper, a dressmaker, a machinery dealer, and a cabinet maker.^{xiii} Despite its successes, Alton shared the same reason for demise as Fallasburg--the railroad.

Around the turn of the 19th century, a railroad was being built through Vergennes Township. Unlike Fallasburg's case, the railroad did pass through Alton. The depot was supposed to be built on Lincoln Lake Ave., but the grade was too steep for trains to stop safely. This caused the railroad company to build the depot north of Alton on 4 Mile Rd. At the same time this development caused Alton to fade into obscurity, it also caused another settlement to spring up.

In many ways, Moseley came into existence because of Alton's demise. Around the same time the depot was built on 4 Mile Rd., the Moseley brothers from Grand Rapids came to the area that would later be named after them. They built a potato warehouse and a house for its manager beside the railroad tracks and named the village Moseley. (This name was eventually shortened to Mosley.) Shortly thereafter, Fred Condon built a general store. In 1908, Charles Jakeway built a warehouse north of the Moseley brother's warehouse and stored a variety of goods and livestock in it. He also built a house and an office. In the same year, Frank Keech, the son of Alton's first storekeeper Henry Keech, closed down his father's store in Alton and moved to Moseley. After operating for a while in "downtown" Moseley, Frank Keech moved the store to the corner of Lincoln Lake and 4 Mile. Moseley grew into a fine village. However, nothing is permanent, and Moseley also faced its own decline.

This time the decline did not come because of the railroad but was due to another form of transportation--automobiles. Trains, which had shipped cargo and transported passengers to and from Moseley for many years, were replaced by cars and trucks. It soon became necessary to close the depot, and this started the general decline of Moseley. Although solid dates are not widely available on the demise of Moseley, it wasn't long before businesses changed hands, sometimes multiple times, and eventually were torn down. Now all that remains of this once thriving village are a few ruins and an occasional building that still stands. Like so many villages of its time, Moseley grew quickly, peaked, and then faded into obscurity. The end of Moseley also signaled the end of an era in Vergennes Township--the era of the village.

Although the three villages mentioned--Fallasburg, Alton and Moseley--were the most major areas of settlement in Vergennes Township, other places also played a role in the township's development. Smaller communities and isolated rural farms also could be found in Vergennes Township in addition to more major settlements.

Fox's Mill was one of these lesser known places. It was located on the banks of the Flat River near where the Burroughs St. bridge is today.^{xiv} This settlement was established sometime in the late 19th century by members of the Fox family who were among the original residents of Vergennes Township. Fox's Mill had a grist mill, a lumber mill, a grape vineyard, and an apple orchard. Several houses were also located in the valley. Sometime likely around the 1880's, the mill caught fire and was completely destroyed. After the fire, Fox's Mill quickly disappeared from the map.

More concentrated settlement was also present at one other location in Vergennes Township, the area around what was known as the Vergennes Post Office. Today this area is the intersection of Bailey Dr. and Parnell Ave where the Vergennes Township Hall and the Vergennes United Methodist Church are located. The post office was located on Bailey about one quarter mile east of Parnell Ave. It was opened on August 12, 1837, with Noble H. Finney as its first postmaster. It was only open for a few months before being closed on November 1, 1837. Later it was reopened and was in operation for October 9, 1848, to April 4, 1871. Walker's Tavern, which will be discussed later, was also located about one mile east of this little settlement.

Whether large or small, the settlements of Vergennes Township played an important part in its first 100 years of history. Both those who lived in them and those who lived on the rural farms surrounding them relied on these villages to supply their needs and to provide them with a feeling of community. Today, advances in transportation have rendered communities like this obsolete. However, Vergennes Township could not have become what it is today without these areas of social and commercial interaction.

Daily Life

When thinking about the people of the past, we often think of their lives as being one non-stop adventure. Although their lives were often adventurous, they were also normal people who experienced the reality of day-to-day living. School, church, and work were all important activities for the settlers of Vergennes Township and remain important to many people today. What was life in Vergennes Township like during the first 100 years of its history?

Education was important to the people of Vergennes Township and schools were built to encourage learning. (However, the residents didn't always completely support education with their pocketbook. Around 1850, the Moseley School Board asked the voters of their district for \$24 to cover general expenses and the voters voted it down as "too much."^{xv}). The first school in Vergennes Township was built in 1839 on the northeast corner of 3 Mile Rd. and Lincoln Lake Ave. in Alton. When Vergennes Township was established in 1838, it was divided into 13 school districts (keep in mind that at this time the township was four times the size it is now). Each district had a director, treasurer, and clerk and each school's board hired the teachers.^{xvi} When the township was finally reduced to its present boundaries in 1848, it was left with nine schools: Alton, Bailey, Bennett, Boynton, Fallasburg, Fox's Corners, Moseley, Valley, and Waters.^{xvii}

Although not much is recorded about what school was like for the students in the various schools throughout Vergennes Township, it is reasonable to assume that their experience was much like that of other children attending one room schools during that era. The students often had to walk long distances in all sorts of weather to attend school. Children enjoyed simple, homemade fun and received an education in areas such as reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, spelling, civics, and geography. School ran from after Labor Day until sometime in May (depending on the individual districts), and pupils from Kindergarten to the 8th grade all worked in the same classroom. As an 8th grade education was considered sufficient, attending high school was extremely rare especially in the 1800's. The system of the one room school continued virtually unchanged until the 1940's when Lowell Area Schools absorbed all of the smaller districts. Shortly after celebrating 100 years since its founding, the one-room schools that had been fundamental to the education of Vergennes Township's citizens faded into obscurity.

Attending church was also important to those who settled in Vergennes Township. Sundays provided a welcome break from a long week of farming and was often the only time many people saw their neighbors. Going to church was both a social and a religious event, and Vergennes Township's churches were important during the first 100 years of the township's history and continue to be important institutions in the community today.

The first church established was called the Christian Church Society and was located in Alton. It was founded by Gideon Hendricks and Newcomb Godfrey, both early residents of the Alton area. The Christian Church Society was responsible for building the church structure that stills stands on the northeast corner of Lincoln Lake Ave. and 3 Mile Rd. In 1925, the Christian Church Society sold all rights to the Alton Church Society. The sale did not make the Christian Church Society a great profit--they sold everything for one dollar! For many years the Alton Ladies' Aid was in charge of maintaining the building and grounds, and they were responsible for a basement addition in 1927. The space was intended to be used for community events and was stocked with a full supply of dishes. Today, this building is a historic landmark, although it is rarely used. Instead, directly across 3 Mile Rd., a new church building was constructed which houses the Alton Bible Church. Despite the name and location changes, the churches in Alton all share a common heritage and have been tremendous assets to the Vergennes Township community.

The other significant church in the history of Vergennes Township is the Vergennes United Methodist Church which is still serving the community to this day. This historic Church, which sits on the northeast corner of Parnell Ave. and Bailey Dr., was founded in the spring of 1843 and met in the home of Antony Yerkes which was near the present-day intersection of Bailey Dr. and Cumberland Ave. about one mile east of the present church building. The original membership consisted of six families. Between 1843 and 1864, circuit riders provided the preaching as regularly as possible. However, since their circuit also included churches in the City of Grand Rapids; as well as Plainfield, Courtland, Boston, and Otisco Townships;^{xviii} they certainly couldn't be there every week. The church met in a schoolhouse built on the Yerkes's property, the Bailey School (which was on Bailey Dr. about one half mile east of Parnell Ave.), and in various homes. The

church building at Parnell and Bailey was built in 1864 on land donated by Smith Bailey. The church would continue to grow and develop and still stands today as the oldest, continuously open United Methodist Church in the Grand Rapids District. The church is a landmark of Vergennes Township and has influenced many of the township's citizens.

Whether it was at one of these two churches, at a church in the City of Lowell, or in homes, the churches of this area were important to many people during Vergennes Township's first 100 years and continue to be important to the township's citizens to this day.

Just as we do today, the citizens of Vergennes Township needed to make a living. Some choose to do this through businesses such as mills, stores, and shops. However, commerce-based jobs were rare, and the majority of people earned their living by farming. Sometimes a person would make most of his money by farming but also run a business on the side. Neighbors frequently helped each other out with their work by holding events such as barn-raising or quilting-bees. These events were also a social gathering and provided a chance for neighbors to get together. Work was one of the most important aspects of daily life in Vergennes Township, and many hard-working people lived in the township.

Life was not always easy, fun, or adventurous for the settlers of Vergennes Township. Life during the township's first 100 years centered around school, church, and work and the needs of each day. Life wasn't all about the daily grind, however, and people made time to socialize and enjoy life. Our lives today are in many ways very different than their's back then; however, many things, such as the need for hard work or the desire to provide good education, haven't changed a lot.

Over its first 100 years the township and its residents have sought to provide adequate services in order to ensure the safety of Vergennes Township's citizens and encourage industry. Often times it was the citizens themselves who were responsible for supplying the services. Whenever, for various reasons, the government has not been able to provide services for its citizens, the people have found ways to provide for themselves. Police and fire protection, cemeteries, and public transportation were available for most of the township's first 100 years thanks to the combined efforts of the people and the government.

Police and fire protection is essential for any area. The first law enforcement officers in Vergennes Township were the four constables elected when officers were first chosen in 1838. During that time, fire protection was primarily provided by neighbors forming "bucket brigades" whenever fire broke out on someone's property. This type of protection was common during the township's early years until fire engines came into common use.

One interesting example of the neighbor-helping-neighbor protection that was common in the township's first 100 years is the Vergennes Detective Association. Founded on October 17, 1878, the group was established according to an act of the state legislature allowing, "The formation of companies for the detection and apprehension of horse thieves and other felons."^{xix}

This group of 39 men would attempt to track down criminals and often would lie in wait outside criminal hideouts. Each member was endowed with the powers of a deputy sheriff. One of many such groups formed across the state, the Vergennes Detective Association answered the people's call for extra law enforcement.

According to the famous saying death is one of two things that is certain, and Vergennes Township had its share of deaths. Cemeteries were established in order to provide places to bury those who died and, as of 1984, Vergennes Township had seven cemeteries (six public and one Catholic).

The oldest cemetery in the township is most likely the Alton Cemetery which is located on the northeast corner of Lincoln Lake Ave. and 3 Mile Rd directly behind the old church. Barney Ford, who died in 1843, was the first person to be buried in the Alton Cemetery ; however, it was not until June of 1854 that the Alton Burying Ground Association was established.^{xx} An area of approximately 198 feet by 264 feet (about 1.3 acres) was designated as a cemetery, and officers were elected to govern the cemetery. The cost of purchasing a lot was \$1.00. The cemetery continued to grow until in 1984 it had five acres and 88 graves. Throughout the years, many citizens of Vergennes Township have been buried there.

The other cemeteries that served the township include Althaus, Bailey, Blanding, Fallasburg, Fox's Corners and St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery which is adjacent to Fox's Corners Cemetery. Also, it is likely that many people, particularly during the earliest years of Vergennes Township's history, were buried on their own farms. Both notable and common people die, and many of Vergennes Township's citizens have been buried in the township's cemeteries.

One of areas where the most change occurred during Vergennes Township's first 100 years of history was the area of transportation. Stagecoaches and trains were the most prevalent form of travel although automobiles would appear in the early 1900's. Even though it wasn't always as easy as it is today, people found ways to get where they needed to go.

Stagecoaches were a popular mode of transportation during the mid 1800's, and Vergennes Township benefited greatly from the business a stagecoach line brought as well as the improved transportation it provided. In 1841, a state road between Grand Rapids and Detroit was laid out and was often used by stagecoaches. This is one of the main reasons for Fallasburg's growth. Also, the Walker Tavern, which served as a community center during the early years of the township's existence, was built as a stagecoach stop. Constructed in 1836 (the year the first settler arrived in Vergennes Township) by Eliba Walker, this tavern was on Cherry Creek and likely located on Bailey Dr.^{xxi} There is no record regarding how long the tavern existed or what caused it to disappear. Stagecoaches brought people, people brought business, and business brought growth to Vergennes Township. The stagecoaches served an important role in making the township what it is today.

After the Civil War, railroads sprang up all over the country and often made the difference between which areas grew and which died. Railroads dramatically affected Vergennes Township's landscape and caused Alton and Fallasburg to fade into obscurity at the same time they caused the new town of Moseley to spring up. About the turn of the century, a railroad was laid between Lowell and Greenville, and a depot was established at Moseley. This railroad, which is still visible today, was the only one in Vergennes Township and provided transportation for many people and goods going to and from the township.

Whether government-run, privately-based, or both, the people of Vergennes Township have enjoyed access to good services throughout most of their history. By working hard to provide themselves with protection, cemeteries, and transportation, the citizens of Vergennes Township ensured a good quality of life. They also left a foundation on which the township could grow in future years.

The first 100 years of its history have helped to make Vergennes Township into the wonderful community it is today. Through the hard work of its people and the sometimes bizarre events of history, the township has progressed through many changes. Vergennes Township's story has been written by its people, places, and events, and the story is more than worth reading.

ⁱ “Vergennes Was One Goal In Big Robinson Migration.” *The Grand Rapids Press*. August 30, 1959.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dillenback and Leavitt. *History and Directory of Kent County*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Daily Eagle Steam, 1870.

^{iv} “Vergennes Was One Goal In Big Robinson Migration.” *The Grand Rapids Press*. August 30, 1959.

^v Ernest B. Fisher. *History of Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan*. Chicago: Robert O. Law, 1918.

^{vi} Walter Romig. *Michigan Place Names*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986.

^{vii} <http://fallasburg.i2integration.com>

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Walter Romig. *Michigan Place Names*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986.

^{xi} Ernest B. Fisher. *History of Grand Rapids and Kent County, Michigan*. Chicago: Robert O. Law, 1918.

^{xii} Adelbert and Cora E. Ford. *Recollections of Alton and Moseley from Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

^{xiii} “Vergennes Was One Goal In Big Robinson Migration.” *The Grand Rapids Press*. August 30, 1959.

^{xiv} Priscilla Lussmyer. *A Brief History of Fox’s Mill from Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell, Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

^{xv} Adelbert and Cora E. Ford. *Recollections of Alton and Moseley from Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

^{xvi} Irma Richmond. *The Schools of Vergennes Township*. from *Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell, Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

xvii Ibid.

xviii Donald A. McPherson. *Vergennes United Methodist Church*. from *Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell, Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

xix “Horse Thieves and Felons Once Menaced Vergennes.” *The Lowell Ledger*. June 18, 1942.

xx Adelbert and Cora E. Ford. *Recollections of Alton and Moseley* from *Vergennes Township Living History*. Lowell Michigan: The Vergennes Club, 1984.

xxi “Walker Tavern Was Community Center In Vergennes Township A Century Ago.” *The Lowell Ledger*. May 25, 1950.