Ann Arbor, Michigan: A Little Bit of Luck

Founded in 1824, Ann Arbor is the county seat of Washtenaw County in southeastern Michigan (see Figure 1). In Michigan, Ann Arbor is seventh in population after Lansing (the capital) and Detroit, from which it lies about 40 miles west. It sits in a productive agricultural area along the banks of the Huron River, which flows southeast into Lake Erie. True to its name even today with a population of more than 115,000, Ann Arbor has an uncommonly large number of trees within the city limits (Wikipedia). It has been home of the University of Michigan since 1837, to which its livelihood is inextricably tied ("Making of Ann Arbor").

Figure 1 http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=21599

Figure 2 http://www.city-data.com/w8/bgm10731.gif
Before European settlers came, Washtenaw County was home to a significant Native American population. The Chippewa (or Ojibwe) Tribe and several others lived in the region; the Chippewa were mainly hunter/gatherers, but other tribes relied on agriculture as well, specifically growing corn, squash, and rice ("Native American History In Michigan"). By the 1700's approximately two-thirds of the native population had been wiped out by diseases brought by the whites. As in other areas, a series of treaties, some broken, and other events effectively removed the majority of the remaining Native Americans from the area, in Michigan by about the mid-1930's ("Native American History In Michigan"). However, early residents of Ann Arbor report trading such things as deerskin, venison, and berries almost daily with Native Americans. Some whites preferred their buckskin moccasins to shoes ("Making of Ann Arbor"). The indigenous people also left a lasting mark in the state through place names; Washtenaw itself is derived from the Chippewa word Wash-ten-ong meaning "Grand River" ("Washtenaw County History").

"In 1680, the French explorer LaSalle passed eastward through this region canoeing from Portage Lake down the Huron to Lake Erie" ("Washtenaw County History"). French fur traders soon followed, but true settlement of the area still took more than a century. In 1805 a few early settlers of Michigan convinced congress to make it a territory, believing that a rush of settlement would soon follow. A trading post called "Godfrey's, on the Pottawatomie Trail" was established on the site of present day Ypsilanti (see Figure 2) in 1809 ("Washtenaw County History"). However, migration to the area did not increase for several years, perhaps due in part to the War of 1812 in which "Michigan found itself both a battlefield and an occupied territory" ("Making of Ann Arbor"). As the 1820's approached, however, the draw of rich timberlands and a network of easily accessible waterways, not to mention agricultural potential, began to draw settlers and land speculators.

John Allen was one such speculator. It was a bit of bad luck in investing that brought John
Allen's father from prosperity to debt. John himself took on much of the debt, and in an effort to raise money he joined many others of the time who determined to head to the frontier, buy up a large plot of land to found a town, and sell plots for profit. Success would depend "on the attractiveness of the site selected, its potential for future growth, and luck" ("Making of Ann Arbor"). He arrived in Detroit in January 1824 and joined up with one Elisha Rumsey in his venture; the selected and purchased the site by February, and built a house in March. Fortuitously, even though the nearby Ypsilanti townsite had been established a year earlier, the commissioners and governor selected Allen and Rumsey's tract for county seat ("Making of Ann Arbor"). In May they registered the name for the town as "Annarbour," one word, and with the English spelling of arbor. The name was in honor of Allen's wife, Ann, and of the grove of oak trees which grew on the land they had chosen. All later spellings of the name show the current spelling.

As can be seen from inaccuracies of the 1824 map of Michigan (Figure 3), the area was still very much a frontier and needed settling: the founders began advertisement of their new town in the Detroit newspaper by the beginning of June ("Making of Ann Arbor"). Within a few years, their town had grown to a comfortable size; demographically, the settlers were young and of British descent, having migrated from the New England area, particularly upstate New York. The source of settlers reflects the easiest way to get to the area at the time: by boat, up the St. Lawrence river and over the Great Lakes to Detroit, and inland from there, likely following the Huron River. Within only 6 years, there were nearly a thousand people in the town. From the beginning, Ann Arbor sported a diverse economy; mills and farming were set up immediately, and by 1927 "there were 'three inns such as they are, four stores, two tanneries, two blacksmith shops, and about twenty dwelling houses'" ("Making of Ann Arbor"). While these early businesses obviously suited the needs of the frontier, within a decade there were jewelry stores, a newspaper, a bank, clothing and hat shops, etc. In 1839, a new railroad linked Ann Arbor with Ypsilanti and Detroit, further solidifying its economic foundation ("Making of Ann Arbor").

While it started off well, Ann Arbor's success was nearly guaranteed through a series of events which brought the University of Michigan to the town. The town set aside 40 acres of land for the
State of Michigan in a bid to become the state capital, but lost to Lansing in 1836 (Wikipedia). In 1837, it offered the land to the University of Michigan, then in Detroit, which began construction on the site and opened for classes in Ann Arbor in 1841. Ever since, the university population has played a vital role in the health, and social and political life of the city ("Making of Ann Arbor").

The middle of the nineteenth century also brought increasing numbers of immigrants to the area, particularly from Germany and Ireland. Fresh off the boats from the Atlantic, immigrants received brochures of the new frontier towns, and many German families chose to settle in Ann Arbor. Many had been shopkeepers, or had other professions in the old country, and set up shop in the new town ("A History of the German Settlers..."). One Christian Eberbach had been a chemist and apothecary in Germany, and opened a drug store in the new town ("Making of Ann Arbor"). Many of the immigrants chose farmland surrounding the town, rather than moving into a neighborhood, and these Germans have maintained much of their ethnic identity even to this day. Some are full-blooded German to the fifth and sixth generations, and still teach their children to speak German ("A History of the German Settlers...").

When the Civil War began, Ann Arbor officials quickly announced their support for the union, and a few small volunteer militias were formed. However, the fighting was far away, and life continued almost as usual for most of the city. Economic and population growth continued and in 1870 the town reached a population of 7,363. Soon after, however, the depression of 1873 caused the growth in prosperity to falter. To make matters worse, the people of Ann Arbor had loaned $100,000 to the Toledo, Ann Arbor, and Saginaw Railroad Company to build a line to connect them with southern markets, but the company had gone under in the depression (it is interesting to see in Figure 6, which is from 1973, the Toledo and Ann Arbor RR running south from Ann Arbor-- the railroad was never actually built, so perhaps this indicates the planned route). Now the town was without the additional railroad line it had been expecting, limiting businessmen to the existing Michigan Central line to move their goods to market. Over the next several years, the population decreased slightly until the eventual completion of the new Ann Arbor Railroad in 1878, and the increasing popularity of the university brought back the town's "durable prosperity" by the 1890's ("Making of Ann Arbor").

Figure 6: 1873 Washtenaw County
http://www.rootsweb.com/~migenweb/1873atlas/washtenaw.jpg
Since that time, a few events have dramatically affected the development of the city. A surge of immigrants from diverse origins greatly expanded the city's population around 1920. Ann Arbor's sound economy helped them weather the Great Depression with little struggle compared to the rest of the country, and even the rest of the state. In the late 1930's, the university began exploring offering studies in technology, moving away from their traditional focus on the humanities ("Making of Ann Arbor"). This would forever shift the economy of Ann Arbor toward high-tech industries. World War II brought an influx of workers and military men to work Ford Motor Company's nearby Willow Run plant, which was producing B-24 Liberator bombers. The city gained great post-war prosperity and in the decades that followed both city and university also "gained a reputation as an important center for liberal politics" (Wikipedia). More recently the city has been dealing with urban sprawl, and the city has bought up several large pieces of land immediately adjacent to the city to prevent the spread. Due to the college population, the average age is still quite young, just as it was at the town's founding, and the diversity of the city is greatly increased (Wikipedia). Though Ann Arbor faced several situations that threatened its prosperity, with a little luck it has become one of the largest and most successful cities in the state of Michigan today.
References

<http://moaa.aadl.org/>.


<http://www.artsofcitizenship.umich.edu/sos/topics/native/>.