

DRAFT TEXT - A Little History of a Little Creek: Axtell Creek

Once upon a time—before any of us lived in Kalamazoo—before there even was a Kalamazoo—there was open, rolling land where white oak trees grew. Nearby, the land changed to flat plains, long-ago created from glacial outwash, where burr-oak trees grew. The widely-spaced trees were almost free of undergrowth except for graminoids (grasses) and forbs (non-grass, non-woody prairie plants)—looking much like orchards of today. Annual fires kept the understory between the large trees from growing big and becoming a dense forest. This is called a fire-dependent savannah and much of the area where Kalamazoo is today, began just this way.

Through the savannah, several small creeks meandered freely from their spring-fed sources and met up with other creeks to become larger streams as they made their way to what is now the Kalamazoo River.

Axtell Creek is one of those small creeks and, like the others, its history is directly linked to the history of Kalamazoo and its growth along the banks of the creek.

In the late 1820s, permanent settlers began arriving in Kalamazoo. A town, then called Bronson, was platted (laid out). By 1837, the name was changed to Kalamazoo, after a Native American term meaning ‘boiling water’—the rapids of the Kalamazoo River.

As Kalamazoo grew in population, streets were laid out, sewers and water mains were added, and large buildings sprung up. With these human-made changes came changes to Axtell Creek. Maple Street, Howard Street, and Crosstown Parkway were built along and crossing Axtell Creek. Later, Maple Street School was built on its banks. Still later, businesses lined its banks all the way to Portage Creek, where it ends. Parts of the creek were enclosed in drainage culverts; other areas remaining open and filled with trash; excess storm waters brought all kinds of pollutants to its waters.

The Crosstown Park and Ponds were built in the XXXXs as an open greenspace in the city and a reservoir for stormwater runoff. In XXXX, concerned citizens (and what other gov. entities) realized Axtell Creek, Portage Creek, and the entire watershed was in need of help to reverse negative environmental trends and regain the natural resource that Axtell Creek is to Kalamazoo.

Today, Axtell Creek is free. Its banks are planted with native plants that help filter the water going into it from runoff (storms and other sources). Rain gardens have been planted to collect runoff before it reaches the creek. It has become a beautiful, natural area—true to its source in Kleinstuck Marsh on the south side of Maple Street, and an educational example of environmental stewardship and community groups working together to improve a local treasure. Improvements and education continue, today. A downspout runoff program in the runoff area helps homeowners reuse rain and snow runoff on their properties to water their own lawns and gardens, and not reach the sewers or Axtell Creek. The new headquarters of the Girl Scouts of Glowing Embers Council, across from the creek’s source, is planned to keep as much water runoff on their property—and out of the creek and stormwater drainage system, as possible.

Activity 1:

Look at Axtell Creek, as it is today, and try to imagine what it used to look like:

—Back before Crosstown Parkway was built in 1960.

—Back Maple Street School was built in 1949 and existing celery fields were terraced for sports fields.

—Back before 1930, when the land beside the creek was celery fields and Crosstown Ponds hadn't been built.

—Back before the Civil War when Howard Street and Maple Street had been built.

—Back before 1829, when a surveyor's map shows Axtell Creek starting at Kleinstuck Marsh and at several springs at the bottom of Maple Street Hill.

Activity 2:

Look at Axtell Creek, as it is today. Consider management of the creek watershed. Can it be improved?

—Invasive plants along its waterway, such as purple loosestrife and garlic mustard can crowd out native plants. Can they be eliminated?

—The creek mysteriously disappears as it flows into a culvert under Maple Street from its source. Don't know what we can say here that this target group will understand....

—Look for the artesian spring bubbling up on the west side of the stream between Maple and Howard Streets. What is the potential improvement??

—Over the past few years, native plants have been added to the creek banks behind Axtell Creek. Can you identify them?

—The banks of south Crosstown Ponds have been replanted to reduce shoreline erosion and discourage wildlife populations that pollute the area and create erosion through wear and tear near the creek bank.

Maps over time: early vs now.