

# The Early Days of Austin Lake

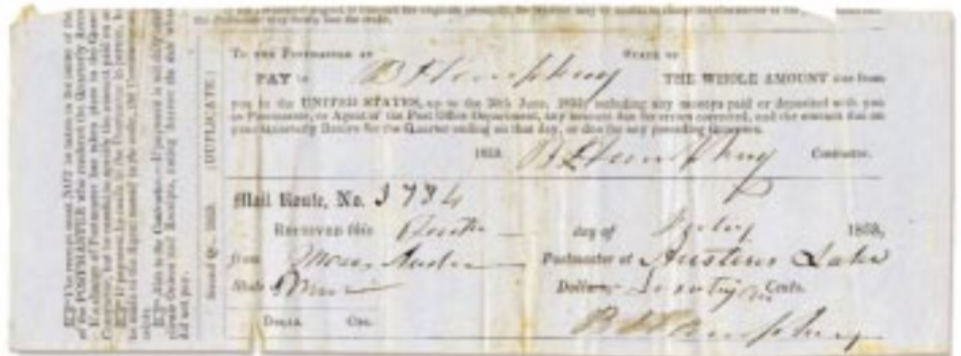
While out enjoying a beautiful warm spring day, I took a drive around Austin Lake, the second largest lake in Kalamazoo County. Admiring the homes that line the lakeshore, I began to wonder about the history of this area. Who was the first pioneer family to make its home along these banks?

In the 1830s, Moses Austin, sheriff of Genesee County in New York, was convinced by his former neighbor, Ruel Starr (an early settler), to follow him to Kalamazoo. Intrigued, Austin purchased a segment of section 24 in Kalamazoo County, and hired a guide named Charles Swan to escort him and his son Benjamin to their newly acquired property.

Leaving from Dunkirk, N.Y., they took the steamer "Sheldon Thompson" to Detroit, where they departed with a team of horses and fearfully negotiated their way through the wilderness and muddy trails of southern Michigan. They finally reached the small village of Kalamazoo on May 7 of 1833, Benjamin's 14th birthday.

Within a few days after restocking in Kalamazoo, they arrived at the north shore of the lake that would later bear the Austin family name. The father and son quickly built a temporary shanty against a large tree they cut down, and set to work erecting a building of hewed logs that would later serve as a tavern. A few months later, the rest of the Austin family arrived, including wife Sarah, son William, and a niece. Because the tavern had not been completed before their arrival they, too, had to dwell in the shanty for a short time.

The tavern, which was later fitted with a dance hall, was host to a variety of fun-filled, eventful gatherings. In 1836, the townships of Pavilion and Portage were cut out of Brady Township and organized under the name of Pavilion. Austin's tavern was the site of the first township meeting. Portage became a separate entity in 1838. In 1837, Moses was elected supervisor of Pavilion Township as well as justice of the peace as a member of the Whig Party.



A receipt from 1853 shows Moses Austin's signature in his role as postmaster at Austin Lake.



An early map of the territory shows the lake that already bore the Austin family name.

The Austins continued to live at the lake until the 1850s when they moved into Kalamazoo. Austin died in 1859 and his wife in 1862. Son William studied law in Kalamazoo and served as county clerk until his death in 1844. Benjamin also moved to Kalamazoo after several years of living by the lake. He worked as a copper- and tinsmith, a watchmaker, in the dry goods trade, and eventually started a very successful wagon-manufacturing business. He eventually became one of the wealthiest men in Kalamazoo.

—Joshua Nowicki  
KVM Greeter Guide