



Hunter House: Before the Grills

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The Middle of July heat beating down on the scorching pavement of Woodward Avenue. Cars motor past a variety of Dairy Mats, office buildings, and crucially, the iconic restaurant known as Hunter House Hamburgers. The Small, White rectangular building standing tall on Hamilton Row is a landmark for Oakland country as well as fast foodies in Michigan. However, not many know the history behind this great eatery and the significance it has to the area.

While the restaurant on Woodward first opened in 1952, the name takes inspiration from the historical figure John West Hunter and what he did for the Birmingham area 200 years ago. Hunter traveled from Auburn New York to the Birmingham area in 1818 alongside his brother Daniel Hunter. They were not the only two to come to the land that year as they were joined by Benjamin Pierce Elijah Willits and John Hamilton (Reem 2). Altogether they would purchase 640 acres of land.

Hunter would be joined by his family after some time, making them and the other men the first residents of Birmingham. Being the first family in Birmingham is not the only significance Hunter had in Birmingham. Hunter also possessed Oxen, which at the time had immense agricultural value(Smith 76). This gave the Hunter family power over the area and an opportunity to grow and start the city.

Before any shops or taverns can open, houses are a crucial necessity. Hunter was tasked with starting from scratch but this also meant he had all of the power in creating what he wanted. Considering the Bloomfield and Birmingham area now, trees are a plentiful resource which further boosted Hunter's creativity. The family first built a log cabin in 1819. enough where they could stand tall on their feet. but also be in a position to start developing the land. As time went on and the area was mapped, it was found that the Hunters settled in 'Section 36'. This is eventually where Maple road and Woodward would intersect(Smith 76).



1838 Map of the Bloomfield/Birmingham area. Section 36 is generally where the Hunter family settled

The following year, in 1820 Bloomfield would be declared townships in the greater Oakland county, further planting the Hunter family's place in the history of these cities. This same year, John Hunter would open the first restaurant in the area- a tavern serving as much alcohol and grub as they could (Bloomfield Historical Society). As time passed the Hunter's

grew to be popular amongst the new residents of the city as they owned many of the resources or attractions of the area.

The Hunter family grew and more space was there for the taking. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the original cabin was on John's neighbors land. In late 1820, John Hunter constructed his second log cabin. This cabin would be used by John while the first house would be passed to his children.

Important to note is that in 1822, a total of 7,500 acres of land across all of Michigan were purchased (Fuller 36). This infers that Michigan as a whole is becoming a further populated place and those with the most amount of land were the strongest. Considering John and the rest of the Hunter family had developed the land in Birmingham 4 years before, they have more power and influence than ever due to the influx of settlers.

Hunter did not stop at 2 houses and a tavern. He and a team of carpenters began the construction of the city's first frame house in 1822. This is another first for the family, as this house would stand out amongst the popular log cabin architecture at the time. This style would eventually become popular, but for the time it was revolutionary.

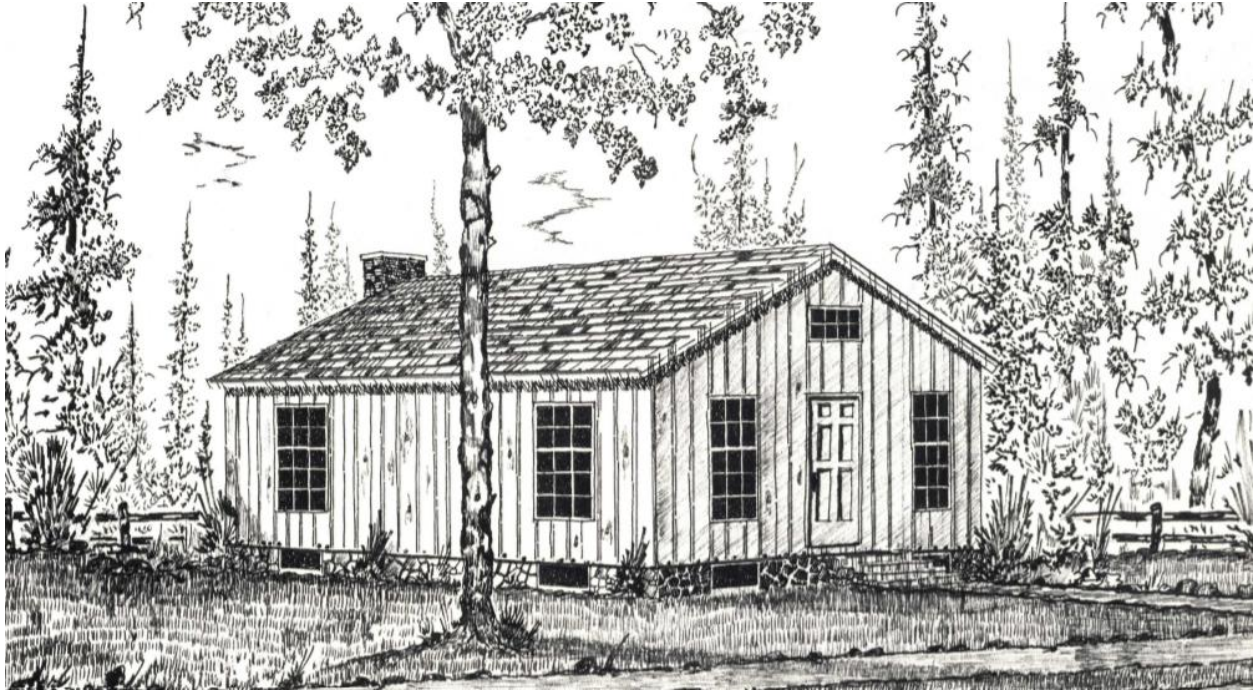


Illustration of the Hunter house, built in 1822. Found in Bloomfield Blossoms by Kay Smith

The Hunter's would continue to dominate the development of the city however would not take on further projects following this. John West Hunter would live until 1880 where he would pass away at age 87. According to the National Economic Bureau of Research, the life expectancy at the time was about 41 years-Hunter doubled it. Hunter was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, alongside his 2 wives-both outliving the life expectancy.

The final 'Hunter House' would be altered and moved multiple times, however, it now sits in the careful hands of the city of Birmingham, where it has been well maintained.



John W Hunter House Photographed by Andrew Jameson

The legacy of John West Hunter still thrives in the Birmingham and Bloomfield area in different forms. Hunter opened the first tavern in the area in 1820. This eatery inspired the now 'locally famous' burger joint known as Hunter House Hamburgers. The restaurant which opened in the early 1950s stands tall today amongst the many office buildings and parking garages. Sitting on the corner of Hamilton Row and Woodward, the tavern lies as a testament to the original eatery feeding all who walk through its doors.



The Outside of the Hunter House Hamburger restaurant in 2019

Recently the restaurant has come into the news, with risks of it being torn down and replaced by an office building, which would be devastating to the history of not only the Hunter family but also the entire area.

John West Hunter advanced from New York to settle with his family in 1818 and as a result, made a mark on the entire area for hundreds of years following. Whether his legacy is remembered in the form of a classic burger joint on Woodward or for his architectural achievements in the area, he is a crucial part of Bloomfield's and Birmingham's history and should be remembered as such.

Word Count: 954

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