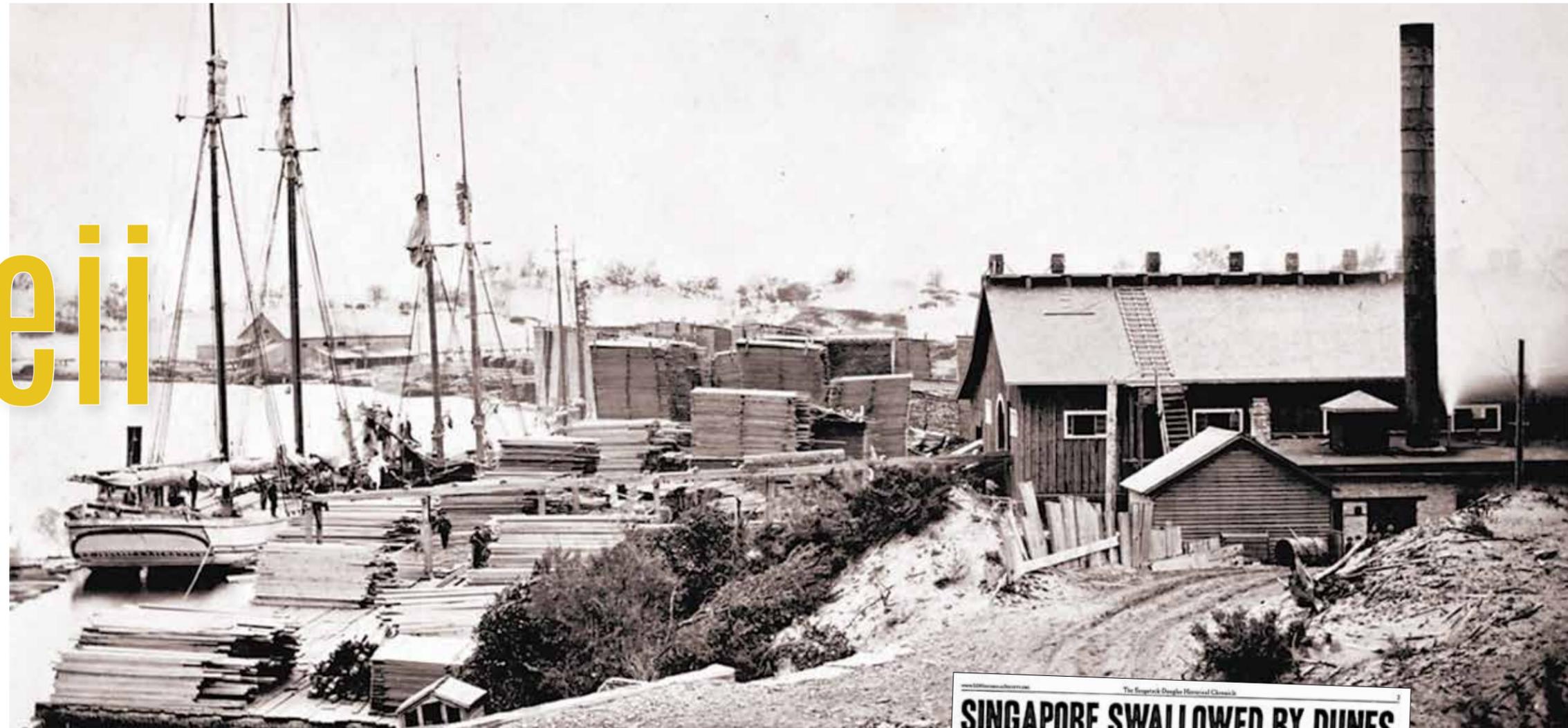


# Michigan's Pompeii

An archeological dig in Saugatuck, Michigan may soon reveal the dune-covered ghost town of Singapore. *by Kim Racette*

**D**une grass sways in the pristine white sand as a gentle breeze passes through a seemingly untouched area of natural beauty near Saugatuck State Park. There's little evidence that others have passed through here and there's no sign of Singapore — West Michigan's most famous lumbering ghost town that was swallowed by sand more than a century ago. This once-thriving town was home to a lumber mill that helped Chicago rebuild after the Great Fire of 1871. This good deed, however, led to the town's demise. But a recently-proposed private development of the area has brought Singapore back into the spotlight.

The proposed NorthShore of Saugatuck development — which would include a marina with 33 slips, lots for 23 homes, and seven homes on Lake Michigan — has raised concerns from environmentalists, some area residents and the Saugatuck Coastal Dunes Alliance about the impact on surrounding dunes and natural areas. However, before any development can begin, an archaeological excavation must take place. If the plan goes through, many are curious to find out what lies beneath these dunes — if anything — and what Singapore may look like today.



## Swallowed by dunes

Many mariners may not realize they are passing the buried Singapore when they enter the Kalamazoo River from Lake Michigan. But if you're on a seasonal dune buggy ride provided by local operators, you'll learn about this popular piece of lore. In several ways, the long-lost town of Singapore has survived and endured because of the intense popularity of Saugatuck, especially during the busy summer season. Saugatuck lies just inland from Lake Michigan on the Kalamazoo River and has a delightful walkable downtown with eateries, art galleries, shops and pretty parks along its tree-lined streets.

"Saugatuck is a popular destination by land and by sea for its quaint, almost New England-like surroundings, charming architecture, delicious restaurants, and plenty of arts, culture and fun," says Nathan Nietering, executive director of the Saugatuck-Douglas History Center, located in the Civil War-era Old Schoolhouse in nearby Douglas. "For a town of its size, there are plentiful boat berths, bed and breakfasts, and other activities from which to choose, with the natural beauty of the dune landscape a major draw few other harbors can provide."

PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF THE SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*The Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Chronicle*, a charming quarterly publication distributed at the Old Schoolhouse, continues to recreate and publish copies of old newspapers from the time of Singapore's demise.

The front-page headline, "Singapore Swallowed by Dunes, Lumber Boomtown Lived Fast and Died Young," is a popular attention grabber. According to Nietering, 15,000 copies of the newspaper are printed each quarter and quickly snapped up by tourists visiting the area. Several buildings and homes from Singapore were moved to Saugatuck; they are now located throughout town and are still visible today. These buildings are identified on the walking tour route published in the *Chronicle* and on the History Center's free mobile app (Saugatuck Douglas History Center).

"The sawmill ghost town is part of local legend, and most people learn about it once they come to town by reading the Historical Marker in front of Saugatuck City Hall on downtown's Butler Street," Nietering explains.

One surviving Singapore home is owned by Travis and Sandra Randolph. Travis' great-grandfather worked in the sawmill; after the city closed down, his home was

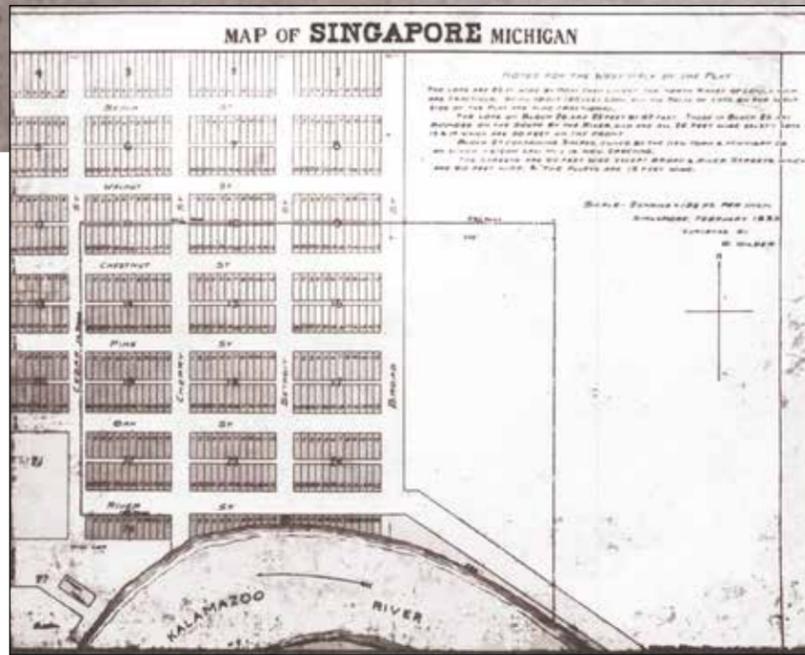


eventually relocated from Singapore to Saugatuck in the mid-1870s by sliding it on wooden logs across the frozen Kalamazoo River.

"He came to this area around 1854 as a boy of 9 or 10 from the Netherlands," Travis says. "They came to this location because of the similarity to their native land, with land that was flat and rich."

Travis' great-grandfather returned from the Civil War,

**(Main)** Singapore in 1869 showing the new O.R. Johnson & Co. mill on the right and an older sawmill in the background. The boat on the left is the schooner O.R. Johnson. **(Above)** The Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Chronicle republished an old newspaper article.



(Top) Rooftops of buried buildings stick out from underneath dunes in 1918. (Above) A map of Singapore from 1837 showing the plot of land and planned developments, many of which did not come to fruition.

and he and his bride participated in a mass wedding with 15 to 18 other couples. He went on to work in the sawmill and became head sawer.

“He had his own metal embossing tool and branded the logs he worked on. As a married man, he was given a company house where he and his wife had three children,” Travis says. “I actually have their three birth certificates with Singapore named as their place of birth.”

According to Travis, the original north wing of the house — including doors, windows and floors — are still in good shape. “The floors are all 12- to 16-inch white pine boards; [they’re] still beautiful,” he says.

Travis’ great-grandfather went on to found and serve as pastor at the Saugatuck Christian Reformed Church, where many of his countrymen joined him. They spoke

their native tongue with services in Dutch, and most remained in the area throughout their lifetimes.

### Fact vs. fiction

As with all good legends, the story of Singapore contains equal amounts of truth, mystery, success and destruction. Local historian Kit Lane, in her definitive “Buried Singapore: Michigan’s Imaginary Pompeii,” explains that the town of Singapore was established in 1836 by New York speculator Oshea Wilder north of the Kalamazoo River, where ready access to Lake Michigan was available. He named it Singapore, after the thriving and well-established port, with the hope that its namesake would bring this new one good luck. A famous old tintypes from Singapore’s early years shows the schooner *O.R. Johnson* arriving in the port for a load of lumber. Not only was Singapore a lumber town, it was also a ship building community.

Business boomed, with several hundred people arriving and settling in to make their fortunes. The historical marker in Saugatuck says that Singapore was settled at the mouth of the river, with sawmills, hotels, stores, a cemetery and a Wildcat bank that even outshone the one in Saugatuck, then nicknamed “the flats.”

Part of the enduring legacy of Singapore is the fascination many have for the logging era in Michigan, infusing it with a glamour still palpable today. It was the state’s version of the Wild West. Michigan State University Professor of Geography Randy Schaetzl explains that the logging period, with the creation of lumber and sawmill towns including Singapore, is still of intense interest for many. “This was a very special period of Michigan history,” Schaetzl says. “Imagine what it would

have been like back then, with just the bare necessities out there in the woods and in these towns.”

It was very hard work to harvest the wood and bring it to Singapore to be processed into board feet, which was then sent out to help build cities hungry for the white pine found in Michigan.

“These were tough guys who worked extremely hard, but they were really stripping the area of the woods they needed to continue,” Schaetzl says. “Once the logs were gone, they moved on because there wasn’t another economy to support the town.”

In providing much of the lumber to reconstruct 17,500 buildings destroyed by the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the forests surrounding Singapore were stripped bare and the town was quietly abandoned by 1875 — the buildings dismantled and carted away. The buildings left behind were slowly overtaken by the shifting sands, with strong winds coming in off Lake Michigan hastening their demise.

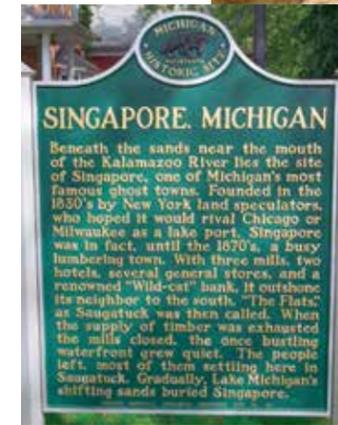
### An archeological dig

The last well known sighting of the city is found in “Buried Singapore.” In the book, Lane writes of a woman who visited the area in 1883 and described several homes, a hotel, and part of one of the original sawmills that were still visible. According to this unnamed source, they were “partially buried in sand and in good shape.” Today, one oddly shaped dune west of town is reputed to be the largest remaining structure hidden underneath the sand, but not surprisingly, everything else has disappeared.

How much historical significance does Singapore have? If there is anything left of the city below the sand, will that affect this proposed development project? Answers may be coming soon, as conversations continue on the feasibility of redevelopment.

According to Katie Otanez, regulatory project manager in the U.S Army Corps of Engineers Regulatory Office, they are waiting to receive the results of an archeological survey that has been ordered. “Our office evaluates permits for proposed work in wetlands and waterways,” she explains. “We are reviewing the project because they are proposing constructing a marina basin connected to the Kalamazoo River.”

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is also a key player in deciding the future plans for this area. In January, the DEQ issued one of two key permits essential for this development to move forward. With several added conditions, the DEQ approved the NorthShore of Saugatuck project, which would



construct a 1,600-foot-long-marina just east of the channel connecting the Kalamazoo River and Lake Michigan and just north of Saugatuck. This piece of property is privately owned by Jeff and Pam Padnos and would be developed by Brian Bosgraaf of Cottage Homes.

The second permit needed would have to be issued by The Army Corps of Engineers, which is currently reviewing

21 public interest factors specific to this development, including: Navigation; impacts to fish and wildlife populations; the overall ecology of the area; conservation; and how remains of Singapore (or even older settlements that may have been on this site) may impact the laws of the National Historic Preservation Act.

“We need to determine whether there’s anything there that could make this a historical property, because that may impact our recommendation,” Otanez explains. “We’ve had a lot of concerns and objections raised during town meetings; but in the end, working together, the Michigan DEQ and the Corps will decide if this project is contrary to public interest.”

As a direct descendent of Singapore, what does Travis Randolph think should happen where this abandoned town once thrived? “Our whole economy in this state is based on and around water,” he says. “Singapore was founded in that location because of its location on the Kalamazoo River to reach Lake Michigan; when a natural waterway is used that way, I don’t have a problem with it.”

When asked about disturbing an area where there might be remains of historical significance, he responds with characteristic good humor: “If you ask me, there is nothing there because the Dutch took it all. Anything there of value is long gone!” ★

(Above) Modern-day Saugatuck dunes. (Left) A historical marker outside the Saugatuck City Hall tells of Singapore’s past. (Below) Copies of Singapore’s bank notes.



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DUNE PHOTO BY NORM HOEIJSTRAL; BANK NOTES PHOTO COURTESY OF SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY