

School Tour—A Dowagiac History Timeline

Dowagiac has had an interesting history since its founding in 1848. It has gone from frontier town to manufacturing city in the 20th century to a nice small city that has adjusted to the 21st century 'service' economy. This school tour is for 2nd graders and meets State of Michigan Educational benchmarks in history—H2.0.1, H2.0.3 and H2.0.4. Use this document as a guide and follow along with the PowerPoint slide show to help visualize the history presented here.

Dowagiac History Timeline

1848 In 1847, Michigan Central Railroad Company makes plans to have its line from Detroit to Chicago pass through Cass County. Land speculators buy land and plat the village of Dowagiac. The railroad is built through the area in 1848 and Dowagiac is founded.

1871 Philo D. Beckwith (P.D. for short) incorporates the Round Oak Stove Company after about five years of growing stove production. The founding of the stove company leads to Dowagiac becoming a small manufacturing city with products shipped across the country.

1880s to 1950s Dowagiac manufacturing grows with Round Oak becoming one of the largest stove factories in the country, Dowagiac Drill Company (founded 1881), Rudy Furnace Company (1914), Premier Furnace Company (1920), Dowagiac Steel Furnace Company (1929) and Heddon Fishing Tackle (1902).

1960s to 1980s Contraction of manufacturing in Dowagiac due to a variety of factors. Round Oak closes in 1947 due to poor management; Premier and Dowagiac Steel Furnace close in 1960s due to many outside forces, including the creation of the interstate system which took Dowagiac off the road transportation's primary highways. Heddon leaves Dowagiac in 1984. Rudy sells local ownership to national firms, but continues manufacturing under different names on a large scale into the 21st century.

1980s to present Dowagiac works to reinvent itself for the current economy. Southwestern Michigan College opened in 1966, leading to education opportunities for local residents and bringing professors and professionals to the city. Smaller scale manufacturing continues with Ameriwood and Lyons Industries. Education, tourism and small business become important components in the 21st century service economy.

Important events in Dowagiac History

1830 William Renesten builds a grist mill and dams the Dowagiac creek to harness the water power for the mill. The mill becomes the Colby Mill, which served the city until 1948, and Mill Pond is created. Other settlers buy land in the area, including Patrick Hamilton, the McComber family and Justus Gage.

1854 First Orphan Train arrived in early October 1854 with 54 orphaned children from New York City. The pilot program had one destination-- Dowagiac. Most are taken in by local families and the project is deemed a success by the New York organizers. Orphan Trains operate for 75 years placing more than 200,000 children throughout the United States.

1855 Former slave Thomas Jefferson Martin moves to Dowagiac and opens a barber shop. Martin would be a well-respected man in the city and a leader of the African American community in the State

of Michigan. He chaired the first convention of Michigan African Americans in 1860 and called the next convention in 1884.

1859 Mark Judd builds a saw mill, which becomes Judd Lumber Company. The business was family owned and operated until 2019 and is still the oldest lumber yard in the state of Michigan.

1861 Dowagiac builds the original Dowagiac Union School building at the corner of Main and Parsonage Streets. The City adds the Ward School building on Oak Street in 1864, both paving the way for regular education for area children. The site of the Ward School has had a school on it since—today Justus Gage School is on the site.

1860s Several fires in the downtown business district took out most of the original wooden business buildings that lined Front Street and Commercial Street. Brick buildings replaced the structures and most of downtown's business buildings date to the late 1860s to 1880s.

1880s to 1890s With industry prospering in the city, area residents begin constructing large homes in the residential areas. Most of the large homes still stand today and serve as landmarks throughout the city.

1903 Third Dowagiac Depot is opened to the public. The depot still stands and serves as an Amtrak train station and home to the Chamber of Commerce and *Dowagiac Daily News*

1912 Former President Theodore Roosevelt visits Dowagiac as part of his whistle-stop train tour of Michigan while campaigning for the Republican nomination for President.

1929 A train derails in the city after striking a truck at the Mechanic Street crossing.

1948 The original Colby Mill is torn down and the dam replaced so the State of Michigan can straighten the highway.

1964 Cass County residents vote to establish a community college. Southwestern Michigan College begins classes in 1966 and changes the dynamics and potential of area residents.

1965 Dowagiac appoints George Grady to serve as Chief of Police. He is the first African American Police Chief in the State of Michigan. Chief Grady served for a decade before stepping down due to health issues.

1990s After years of neglect to the downtown district, the city reinvents Front Street. Working with the state, M-51 is redirected away from Main and Front Streets to divert truck traffic; incentives are offered for 2nd story apartments; a large factory building is torn down and Depot Drive is created.

1992 Author Gwendolyn Brooks visits Dowagiac, which starts the Dogwood Fine Arts Festival and other art initiatives in the city.

We can break the classes into two groups and rotate to do two activities

Activity 1: H2.0.1 and H2.0.4

Basement: Create Your Community Timeline

Working off the introduction, the students can create a timeline with major dates defining an era and then choose some additional events from the list (from above) to plug into their own timeline.

Simplified Timeline

1848: Michigan Central Railroad arrives and Dowagiac is founded

1871: Round Oak Stove Company founded by P.D. Beckwith

1880s-1950s: Dowagiac becomes factory town with major four furnace factories

1960s-1980s: Most factories close and local economy changes. Southwestern Michigan College opened in 1966, providing educational opportunities for all residents.

1980s to present: Dowagiac reinvents itself for “service” economy with tourism, education, small business and some manufacturing

Need: Community Timeline worksheet, list of events, pencils, clipboards

Activity 2: H2.0.3: Explain how individuals and groups have made significant historical changes

This activity will look at three events that had a broad impact on Dowagiac:

1. Philo D. Beckwith founded the Round Oak Stove Company in 1871.
2. The community voted to establish Southwestern Michigan College in 1964.
3. City of Dowagiac names George Grady the first African American Chief of Police in the State of Michigan in 1965.

Museum Director will lead the discussion and ask the students to answer questions about what impact each of those events had on the community.

Extra time from Activity 2: Scavenger hunt on ground floor and second floor for several artifacts or information related to stories told in introduction