



Lower Town

ANSON BROWN'S EXCHANGE BLOCK CA. 1920



WILLIAM R. THOMPSON'S WASHTENAW HOUSE HOTEL OPENED IN 1832. WITH A BALLROOM AND BAR, IT ATTRACTED DISTINGUISHED GUESTS FROM ALL OVER THE STATE, INCLUDING STEVENS T. MASON, MICHIGAN'S FIRST GOVERNOR. A ROOMING HOUSE BY 1878, IT WAS TORN DOWN IN 1927.



LOOKING UP BROADWAY ABOUT 1920, THE FORMER WASHTENAW HOUSE HOTEL IS AT LEFT AND THE HURON BLOCK IS AT RIGHT.



THE ARROW MARKS ANSON BROWN'S BUILDING IN THIS VIEW OF LOWER TOWN FROM ACROSS THE RIVER AROUND 1900. THE LARGE BUILDING ON THE LEFT BEHIND THE IRON BRIDGE IS ARGO MILLS. TO ITS RIGHT IS THE AGRICULTURAL WORKS.



In 1832, New York native Anson Brown erected the Exchange Block in what was called Lower Town. He was determined to make this side of the river Ann Arbor's center. Where the Potawatomi Trail crossed the Huron River, a wooden bridge had been built in 1828 to carry traffic from Detroit and Pontiac to the village of Ann Arbor. Brown and his partners dammed the river upstream and built a flour mill next to the bridge, where Edison later built the substation to your left.

The partners laid out streets with New York City names: Broadway, Maiden Lane, Canal, and Wall. Brown succeeded in capturing the appointment of postmaster, forcing upper-village "Hill-Toppers" to come to Lower Town for their mail. His ambitious dreams died with him in the cholera epidemic of 1834, but Lower Town survived as a distinct neighborhood with its own school, industry, and commercial center. It was incorporated into the city as the fifth ward in 1861.

Workers as well as business owners lived in homes that still remain on Broadway, Pontiac, and Traver.

In the 20th century, single-story commercial buildings, parking lots, and expanding university facilities replaced much of Lower Town. Anson Brown's Exchange Block remains — the oldest surviving commercial building in Ann Arbor.



FROM A FOOTBRIDGE OVER THE OLD MILLRACE ABOUT 1910, YOU SEE THE FORMER WASHTENAW HOUSE HOTEL AT LEFT, THE BACK OF THE THREE-STORY ANSON BROWN BUILDING, CENTER, AND THE HURON BLOCK ACROSS BROADWAY, RIGHT.

THE TWO-STORY BUILDING ON THE FAR RIGHT IN THIS EARLY PHOTOGRAPH WAS ERECTED IN 1831 ON THIS SIDE OF BROADWAY BY ASA SMITH FOR HIS HOME AND CABINET SHOP. IT WAS THE FIRST BRICK STRUCTURE IN LOWER TOWN. NEXT DOOR, IN 1833, JOSIAH BECKLEY BUILT THE THREE-STORY HURON BLOCK WHERE HE HAD A GENERAL STORE. IT FACED ANSON BROWN'S NEW BUILDING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF BROADWAY. UPSTAIRS, JOSIAH'S BROTHER GUY BECKLEY PUBLISHED AN INFLUENTIAL ABOLITIONIST NEWSPAPER, "THE SIGNAL OF LIBERTY," FROM 1841 TO 1847. OVER TIME THE BLOCK HOUSED GROCERY AND VARIETY STORES, SALOONS, A MEAT MARKET, AND A BAKERY, WITH RESIDENTS AND SMALL BUSINESSES UPSTAIRS. WOODEN SIDEWALKS AND COBBLESTONE GUTTERS EDGED THE DIRT STREET. THE BLOCK WAS DEMOLISHED IN 1959.

