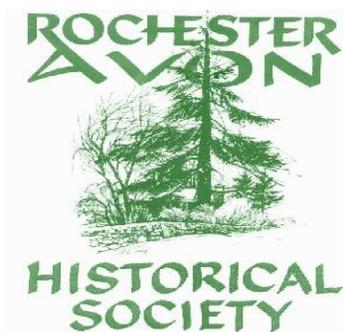


Rochester Avon Historical Society Research Reports

**Report #1
History of the Rochester Elevator
October, 2009
rev. May 2010**



**Rochester Avon Historical Society
Rochester, Michigan
www.rochesteravonhistoricalsociety.org**

History of the Rochester Elevator

303 East University Drive

Rochester, Michigan

researched and written by Deborah J. Larsen
for the Rochester Avon Historical Society
October, 2009

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Introduction

The building now located at 303 East University Drive, Rochester, Oakland County, Michigan and known as the Rochester Elevator Company was built for service as a grain elevator by Charles K. Griggs in 1880. It was the second of three elevators built in the village of Rochester to ship crops to market after the railroad lines entered the town, and is the only survivor, within the city limits, of Rochester's agricultural heritage. The elevator company itself qualifies as Rochester's oldest business, having been in continuous operation for 129 years as of this writing in 2009.

Charles Kelley Griggs and Albert G. Griggs

Charles Kelley Griggs was born in Eagle, Wyoming County, New York, on January 22, 1853, the son of Oliver Hazard Perry (1820-1905) and Lovina Kelley Griggs (1825-1908), both natives of New York state.¹ The elder Griggs was a lifelong farmer, and migrated

with his family westward from New York to Michigan in 1865. O.H.P. Griggs settled on 140 acres in the southwest quarter of section 8 of the Township of Avon, Oakland County, located near the intersection of Walton Boulevard and Brewster Road in today's City of Rochester Hills.² This tract of land eventually passed to the ownership of his son, Charles K. Griggs.

C.K. Griggs learned the elevator business while working in Metamora, Michigan and then embarked upon his own enterprise in the village of Thomas. While working in Metamora, he met Martha "Mattie" Hall Kidder (1856-1929), a schoolteacher from neighboring Macomb County, and the two were married on February 11, 1886 in the Township of Bruce, Macomb County, Michigan.³

In 1880, Charles K. Griggs, in association with his younger brother, Albert G. Griggs (1855-1944), built a grain elevator on the Michigan Central railroad line in the village of Rochester. The younger Griggs, who was more interested in real estate development, banking and politics, appears to have been a financial partner, while Charles K. Griggs assumed responsibility for the operation and management of the elevator business. Albert, meanwhile, served as supervisor of the Township of Avon, Oakland County Register of Deeds, and as a member of the Michigan House of Representatives from 1913-1920.⁴

Albert G. Griggs married Minnie Carpenter (1862-1934) in Pontiac, Oakland County, Michigan on April 8, 1886, just two months after the marriage of his brother, Charles.⁵ In addition to his real estate and political activities, Albert Griggs farmed 180 acres on the northeast quarter of section 17 in the Township of Avon (at the corner of Walton Boulevard and Old Perch Road in today's City of Rochester Hills). This property included a large peach orchard, and Albert Griggs was also one of the founders of a large peach orchard near Romeo in Macomb County.

Charles K. Griggs also made a mild foray into local politics, serving two terms as treasurer of the Township of Avon, but spent most of his productive working life associated in some way or another with the grain and produce business, with his home base after 1880 always located in Rochester. In 1886, he and his wife Mattie built a handsome house in the village of Rochester and made it their home for their entire married life.⁶ The house, situated on the northeast corner of Pine and Fifth streets (today's University Drive), became the home of the Avon Township Library in 1929. (The house was razed in August 1949 to make way for the construction of a new library building, which still stands in 2009 on the property at 210 W. University Drive and now houses several small businesses.)

Charles K. Griggs died at the age of 64, as the result of an accident that took place in downtown Rochester on March 8, 1917.⁷ While crossing Main Street from his office on the southeast corner of Fifth (University) toward the Hotel St. James on the southwest corner, in the company of his business associate Erastus S. Letts (1858-1945), Griggs was struck by a passing interurban streetcar and seriously injured. He was carried to his nearby home in an unconscious state and was thought to be on the road to recovery when he expired from his injuries four days later.⁸

Albert Griggs made his home in the Pontiac area later in his life, and died there on September 26, 1944.

Introduction of Railroad Lines to Rochester and Newberry Elevator

The first railroad line to reach Rochester was the Detroit and Bay City Railroad. The road covered 109 miles, not including branches, and was purchased in foreclosure by the Michigan Central Railroad in 1881. Track was laid through the village of Rochester in 1872, crossing Main Street on the north side of town near Paint Creek. A driving force behind the organization of the D. & B.C. Railroad was Lysander Woodward (1817-1880), a prominent farmer north of the village who was one of the railroad's principal investors and its first president.

The second railroad line serving Rochester was the Michigan Air Line (a division of the Grand Trunk Western Railway), which laid track through the south end of the village in 1879.

According to Durant's 1877 history of Oakland County, local merchant James Newberry (1819-1905) built an elevator on the D. & B.C. in 1872-73, just as soon as the tracks were laid through Rochester. Durant reported that in 1876-77, the Newberry elevator purchased "over three hundred thousand bushels of grain, aggregating in cost over two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars."⁹ A village plat map of 1896 indicates that the Newberry elevator was located on the east side of North Main Street, at the corner where the railroad crossed the street, just south of Paint Creek.¹⁰

It is unclear when the Newberry elevator went out of business, but the building and property were sold by James Newberry to the Michigan Central Railroad in the spring of 1899, when Newberry divested himself of his Rochester property and business interests and relocated to Virginia.¹¹ From the minutes of the Rochester village council, it appears that the railroad promptly sold for removal the buildings on its newly acquired property. On May 22, 1899, Daniel B. Kressler (1842-1911), who operated a lumber yard and planing mill on the west side of North Main Street, directly across from the old Newberry elevator, petitioned the village council for permission to relocate

the scales from the elevator across the street to a location in front of his office.¹² Permission was granted, and his next request came before the council the following week, when he asked for “a permit to move the Newberry elevator across Main st., to his property on the west side of said street.”¹³ The exact date on which this move took place (if it did, in fact, happen) is unrecorded, but the Sanborn fire insurance map of Rochester drawn in May 1900 shows the property as vacant of all structures.¹⁴ Another account of the fate of the Newberry elevator comes from Eula Pray's 1944 history of Avon Township, in which the author recorded that the Newberry elevator had burned. Pray's source notes indicate that she gathered this information from an interview conducted with Bert Frank in 1944.¹⁵

Griggs Brothers elevators

In 1879, Michigan was leading the Midwest and Plains states in wheat production at 19.5 bushels per acre, commanding a top average price of \$1.17 per bushel.¹⁶ The next year, in the fall of 1880, the *Rochester Era* announced with a bold headline and undisguised enthusiasm that Charles Griggs had broken ground for a new wheat elevator on the D. & B.C. Railroad tracks on the north side of the village.¹⁷ The article described the building's size as 24x40 feet and 20 feet high, and reported that the contract for its construction had been awarded to John Ross & Co. John Ross (1811-1893) was a local contractor who had also built, in 1854, the building on the northwest corner of Third and Walnut streets which became the home of the First Congregational Church of Rochester.¹⁸ (This church building, now 155 years old, still stands in 2009).

Seven weeks later, the *Era* reported that the Griggs elevator was nearly complete, and attributed the building's design to Charles K. Griggs himself. The elevator was described as having seven wheat bins, four of which faced the railroad tracks, and an undocumented number of other bins for various agricultural commodities.¹⁹ The elevating equipment was horse-powered, but in 1892 a newspaper item commented that the Griggs Brothers were installing “an engine to do the elevating.”²⁰

Little else is known about the physical description of the elevator building and its equipment, but a passing mention in the newspaper in 1885 reported that it had been given a needed coat of red paint.²¹

The elevator building was situated on property owned by Charles K. Griggs which consisted of Lots 134, 135 and 136 in the Richardson and Adams Addition to the village of Rochester.²² In November 1880, just as the Griggs elevator was beginning to do business, C.K. Griggs sold the land on which it stood to the Detroit & Bay City Railroad Company for \$350.²³ (A lease agreement was worked out with the railroad which remained in force until the line was abandoned nearly a century later).

In addition to the primary crop of wheat, the Griggs elevator was also heavily involved in the wool trade. Newspapers of the time carried regular advertisements for wool by the elevator. An 1886 ad announced that the elevator sought to purchase 150,000 pounds of wool to fill an order from eastern markets."²⁴

The Griggs Brothers built a second elevator in the fall of 1884 on the Michigan Air Line division of the Grand Trunk Western Railway at the southern edge of the village of Rochester. This building appears on the 1896 plat map of Rochester,²⁵ and is alluded to in an 1886 newspaper item, which distinguishes the M.C.R.R. elevator building as the "upper" elevator, meaning, presumably, that the Grand Trunk building was referred to as the "lower" elevator.²⁶ The disposition of the second, or lower, Griggs elevator is reported in a February 5, 1904 newspaper item which states "M.M. Nye has bought the old Air Line elevator of C.K. Griggs and will convert it to a cider mill."²⁷

According to newspaper accounts, the Griggs elevator business was a profitable and prosperous one. An 1899 comment on the front page of the *Rochester Era* attributes local economic fortune in part to the elevator business. Of the company, the newspaper said: "They buy and ship more potatoes than any other firm in the county, excepting one, and they also buy in adjoining towns and counties. They deserve great credit for the large share they take in building up Rochester as a profitable market town for farmers."²⁸

In 1900, the Griggs brothers sold their elevator business in Rochester to local entrepreneur Erastus S. Letts. Letts took possession on December 1, 1900, but only operated the business for a couple of years before selling it to Ferrin Brothers and Company.²⁹ Ferrin was a large agricultural commodities firm based in Rochester, New York, operating numerous elevators and warehouses in western New York, and buying and selling coal in addition to crops. The company was also a major player in the Michigan agricultural trade, and operated an elevator on Junction Avenue in Detroit,³⁰ as well as one in Charlotte, Eaton County, Michigan. The partnership of twin brothers Charles J. (1859-1924) and Francis G. Ferrin (1859-1939) was at the time one of the largest handlers of farm products in the nation, having nearly fifty branch locations.³¹ The Sanborn fire insurance map of Rochester drawn in April 1908 labels the former Griggs Brothers building on the M.C.R.R. as the "Ferrin Bros. Elevator."³²

During the tenure of Ferrin Brothers a tragic accident occurred at the elevator which took the life of a local man. On November 11, 1905, the Ferrin Brothers' local manager, Rudolph A. Reed, was found dead on the second floor of the building by his co-worker. According to newspaper accounts, the co-worker had noticed that the belt was slipping on one of the pulleys and surmised that something had gone amiss with the machinery. He stopped the engine and went upstairs to discover Reed's dead body wedged in

between a horizontal shaft and the floor. The exact cause of the accident which took Reed's life was not determined, but investigators formed a theory that he had been trying to work some of the grain away from the shaft when he somehow became caught by it. He had many broken bones and his injuries were so extensive that it was thought his death was instant.³³

1909 reorganization and building expansion

On March 1, 1909, a group of Rochester investors filed articles of incorporation as the Rochester Elevator Company and issued \$10,000 in shares to capitalize the new firm. Officers of the new company were Erastus S. Letts, president; Milton H. Haselswerdt (1882-1976), secretary; Frank Dewey Shoup (1867-1943), treasurer; and Charles K. Griggs, general manager. In addition to the officers, the other major shareholders in the company were John Cameron Day (1846-1927), president of the First National Bank of Rochester, and Charles W. Upton, a local coal dealer.³⁴ They purchased the existing elevator from the Ferrin Brothers and immediately announced plans to expand and modernize it.

Newspaper accounts of the time all profess the Rochester Elevator Company's intention to expand the building, but they are imprecise in their accounts of how the expansion was executed. The first mention of building alterations appears in the *Era* of May 28, 1909, in which it was reported that, having purchased the Ferrin Brothers building on the Michigan Central, the new company would remove the former Grand Trunk elevator and join it to the Ferrin building, doubling the structure's length and making it measure 24x80.³⁵ (The former Grand Trunk elevator mentioned here is that which had been sold by C.K. Griggs to Merritt M. Nye (1865-1932) in 1904; Nye subsequently used it as a cider mill and machine shop.) A report four days later in the *Pontiac Press-Gazette* also stated that the Grand Trunk elevator would be "removed and joined" to the former Ferrin elevator on the Michigan Central, and further informed its readers that "the entire structure will be remodeled and enlarged and a basement placed under the same."³⁶

On June 7, the new Rochester Elevator company requested, and was unanimously granted, a lease of the village land abutting their building on the Water Street side, to accommodate their expansion plans:

Resolved that the President and Clerk be authorized to lease to the Rochester Elevator Co. a parcel of land 24'x40' on the east side of Water Street at the corner of 5th St. for the erection of an addition to the present Elevator located on the Michigan Central Railway land to be used for elevator purposes.³⁷

Two weeks later, the story took another twist, according to an *Era* account of June 11:

The cement shingle machine company have finished moving this week to their new plant on the M.C. [Michigan Central Railroad]. The abandoned building will be soon torn down and taken to the new site by the Ferren [*sic*] building, where a modern elevator will be built by the Rochester Elevator Co.³⁸

The next week, the newspaper commented that excavation for the new elevator was underway near the Michigan Central depot, and in early July it reported that the frame had been raised and construction was proceeding rapidly. Clearly, some sort of construction went on at the former Griggs/Ferrin elevator site, but whether that was new construction to expand the building, or whether an existing structure at another location was dismantled and/or moved to the site to join the existing elevator is not known for certain. The item about the cement shingle company appears to suggest that a building they abandoned might have been moved in pieces to the elevator site and reassembled there.

One colloquial account contends that the former Newberry elevator was the building that was moved to the Griggs site, comprising the northern portion of the building as it stands today. However, we know from fire insurance maps that the Newberry elevator was no longer standing at its original location in 1909; it had been sold, and apparently moved, in 1899 (or by other accounts, it had burned). If the story about the Newberry elevator has any credence, then it would have had to have been moved and/or dismantled a second time in 1909, most likely from the Kressler lumber and planing mill on the west side of Main Street. The village council minutes for 1909 do not mention any permit for the moving of a building across Main at this time.

Some light is shed on the mystery of the building's construction in the reports of two building consultants who examined the Rochester Elevator building in 2001 and 2005, respectively, to assess its structural integrity for a possible move. Each consultant worked independently of any detailed knowledge of the building's construction history. Both agreed that the center section of the building as it stands today comprises the original Griggs Brothers elevator building erected in 1880. Consultant Rudy Christian, a specialist in historic timber frame preservation who examined the building in 2005, noted that the northwestern section of the building (the gambrel-roofed end facing University Drive) appears to have been created from a salvaged building of undetermined age which originally had a gabled roof. He also noted that the basement beneath this portion of the building is created of poured-in-place concrete. Christian believed that the southeastern-most section of the building was moved to this site and mated to the existing Griggs building, with some evidence suggesting that the section

was modified to make it “fit” the 1880 section.³⁹ Consultant Stephen Stier, who examined the building in 2001, theorized that the southeastern section was moved to the site, elevated on wooden pilings to match the roof line of the existing building, and was some time placed on a concrete block and steel foundation when the wooden footings deteriorated.⁴⁰

A synthesis of the consultants' findings and the available news reports on the elevator expansion from the spring and summer of 1909 would suggest the following scenario:

- The original Griggs elevator (center section of the building as it stands in 2009) was expanded at both ends in 1909.
- The former Griggs Grand Trunk elevator, which had been sold some years earlier, was removed from its location near the Grand Trunk depot and mated to the existing Griggs elevator at the Michigan Central tracks. This structure forms what is now the southeastern-most section of the building.
- The northwestern section of the building (the gambrel-roofed portion which faces University Drive) was also added during the spring and summer of 1909, and was built on site using timbers from a previously salvaged building, most likely the building abandoned by the nearby Twentieth Century Cement Tile Roofing Company, as reported in the *Rochester Era* on June 11th of that year.
-

I believe that the Newberry elevator played no part in the expansion of the Rochester Elevator. Over the years, the movement of the old Grand Trunk elevator may have gotten confused with the Newberry building in the retelling of the story.

Whatever the method by which the building was enlarged, it opened for business in late July 1909. The *Era* reported:

The new Rochester Elevator Co. bought their first wheat last Monday. The old elevator will be used for wheat and other grain, while the new building will take care of the beans, potatoes, and farm produce bought by the company.⁴¹

The Rochester Elevator Company filed its first annual report with the state of Michigan at the end of 1909. It valued the elevator building at \$5,000, a barn and stove shed at \$250, and the value of its goods at \$6,840. The company had no real estate holdings (the property on which the building stood having been leased from the railroad and the village) and no mortgage. It was a cash business with little overhead.⁴²

The company's annual report for the year 1910 is notable for the absence of the name of Charles K. Griggs, who apparently divested himself of all interest in the Rochester Elevator Company during that year.⁴³ The company filed its final annual report for the

year 1911, at which time Frank D. Shoup and Milton H. Haselswerdt were the major stockholders.⁴⁴ By 1913, advertisements in the local newspaper listed F.D. Shoup as the proprietor of the elevator, and the Sanborn map of January 1916 labeled the building as the "F.D. Shoup Elevator."⁴⁵

Subsequent ownership

The business continued under the name Rochester Elevator Company and the apparent sole proprietorship of Frank D. Shoup until 1922. In February of that year, the *National Grain Journal* announced that Shoup had sold the elevator to the Rochester Farmers' Elevator Co.⁴⁶ Little is known about this group of owners. With no available business records for the period, it is not known whether this means that the elevator was being operated as a farmers' cooperative, as the altered name seems to imply. In 1920 the Michigan Elevator Exchange was organized to help rural elevators pool and market their commodities for better prices, and it may be that the Rochester Elevator became part of this movement.

In the spring of 1925, there was a strange episode in the elevator's history during which ownership of the business changed hands twice in one month's time. On March 20, 1925, the *Rochester Clarion* reported that Plymouth R. Nott (1856-1939), a prosperous farmer in the neighboring Township of Oakland, and his son, Lessiter J. Nott (1885-1969) had just purchased and assumed possession of the Rochester Farmers' Elevator.⁴⁷ One month later, the *Clarion* carried this surprising announcement:

The Rochester Farmers' Elevator, which several weeks ago disposed of their business to P.R. Nott, has this week purchased the business from Mr. Nott.⁴⁸

Newspaper advertising for the elevator, which had begun featuring the name of P.R. Nott as proprietor, quickly reverted to its prior format, with no individual's name listed. No explanation was given for the quickly-reversed sale.

The next change in elevator ownership came five years later, in 1930. The *Clarion* described the reorganization of the business thusly:

Announcement is made by C[lyde] B. Goodison of the Rochester Farmers' Elevator Co., of a change in members of the firm name. The elevator will be known in the future as the Rochester Elevator Co. Three new partners have joined the concern but Mr. Goodison will remain as general manager and treasurer.

The new partners are as follows: W[illiam] H. Bouma, vice president of the F[rank] T. Caughey Co., Detroit, who had been appointed president of the local

business. B[igham] D. Eblen, secretary of the Caughey Co., Detroit, secretary of the new company. P.C. Gilbert, treasurer of the Caughey Co., vice president of the Rochester concern.

It is the aim of the new company to buy all kinds of grain from farmers in the territory. Due to the new partners being connected with the Detroit firm, better prices are promised for all produce purchased. In time a big expansion is planned.⁴⁹

Sometime between 1930 and 1933, the Farmers' Elevator was purchased by Rochester businessman Lewis Cass Crissman (1888-1955), who also owned and operated the Crissman pharmacy in the village. Lewis C. Crissman's son, Lewis Keith Crissman (1914-1983), recalled that he worked every afternoon at the elevator while he was in school, and after he was graduated from the University of Detroit in 1936 with a degree in business administration, he became the manager.⁵⁰ L. Keith Crissman and his wife, Mary Hosner Crissman (1913-2009), continued to run the elevator after they bought it outright (about 1942, according to a published biography of L. Keith Crissman).⁵¹

Although Rochester and Avon Township were quickly transitioning from an agricultural to a suburban bedroom community during the decades immediately following World War II, business at the Rochester Elevator was still going strong, and there was still the need for the services of a grain elevator. According to a front page article in the *Rochester Clarion* during the summer of 1948, a huge wheat harvest, the largest in many years, was underway. Keith Crissman told the newspaper that he had never seen such a harvest and that truck loads were "pouring in from early morning to late at night."⁵²

In 1952, L. Keith Crissman decided to invest in the automobile business. He sold the Rochester Elevator in September of that year to two employees of the firm, George W. Carey (1904-1980) and Doyle Wilson.⁵³ Crissman then purchased the Ralph Garner Chevrolet dealership in Rochester.

The most recent sale in the history of the Rochester Elevator happened over half a century ago, in 1956, when Carey and Wilson sold the business to Edward Moulis (1910-1999) and J. Wesley Smith. Wesley Smith bought out Moulis in 1962 and ran the elevator with his son, Lawrence Smith. Lawrence Smith took over the business from his father and continues to run it in 2009 with the assistance of his own sons.

The railroad line that served the Rochester Elevator closed its Rochester depot in 1962, and traffic on the line declined until it was abandoned in 1976. By that time, Smith was

shipping very little agricultural product from the elevator and had already begun to transition his business to cater to the needs of suburban homeowners. In 2009, the Rochester Elevator sells home and garden supplies, feed and seed, and softener salt, and offers related services to busy suburbanites.

Update: The Rochester Elevator was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on December 13, 2010.

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Appendix



Plat of village of Rochester showing the locations of the Newberry and Griggs elevators. (Illustrated Atlas of Oakland County, Michigan: Compiled From Official Records and Local Inspections. Racine, Wis.: Kace Publishing, 1896, p.87.)



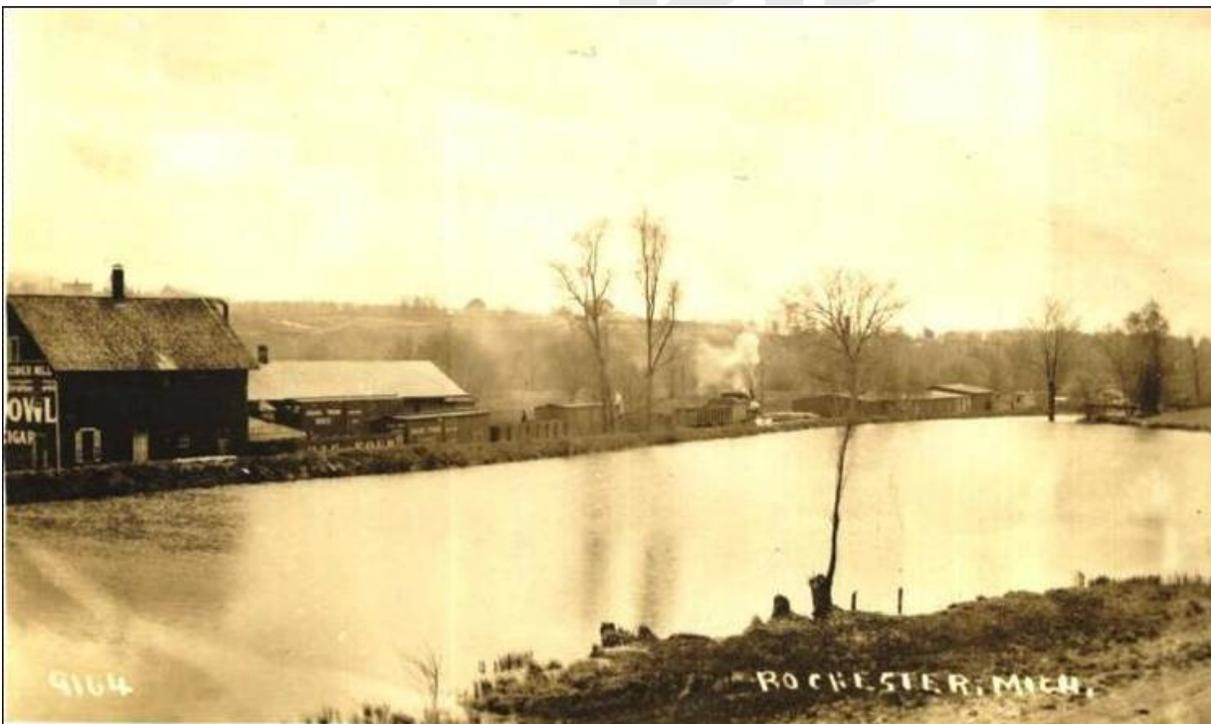
East side of the Rochester Elevator in June 1946, after a flood washed out the railroad track and eventually destroyed the mill pond. (Rod and Susan Wilson collection)



Rochester Elevator, west side, circa 1950 (Rod and Susan Wilson collection)



Rochester Elevator April 1978



Merritt M. Nye cider mill (former elevator) on the Grand Trunk siding (Grand Trunk depot in the background to the right of the cider mill), ca. 1904. (Rod and Susan Wilson collection)



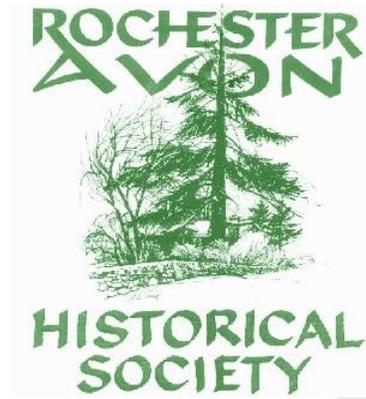
Charles Kelley Griggs family circa 1900
Left to right: Martha "Mattie" Kidder Griggs, Mark Kidder Griggs,
Charles Kelley Griggs
(Photo courtesy of Belle Griggs Johnson)



A. G. Griggs

Albert G. Griggs, circa 1897

*This report was prepared by and for the
Rochester Avon Historical Society*



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Endnotes

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