Village of Elberta

Historic District Study Committee Preliminary Report

June 15, 2026

LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT COVER FORM

Historic District Name: Elberta BoatLanding Historic District
City/Village: Village of Elberta
Township: Gilmore
County: Benzie
Date Transmitted: June 15, 2026
Report Type: _X_Preliminary __Final
Total Number of Resources: Historic: _11__ Non-Historic: _1_ Percentage: 92% Historic

District is Significant Under the Following Criteria:
X Criterion A: Significant Events: The Elberta waterfront is significant for its association with the development of Great Lakes maritime industry and transportation and for its surviving historic infrastructure.

X Criterion B: Association with Significant People

X Criterion C: Design/Construction: The U.S. Life-Saving Station at Elberta is also significant under Criterion C as a representative example of standardized USLSS architecture designed by Albert B. Bibb. The period of significance extends from 1886 to 1932, encompassing its construction, peak operational years, and transition into the U.S. Coast Guard era.

Legal Boundary Description:
Parcel A*: #06-506-002-21 -* ***1120 FURNACE*** *- Owned by Village of Elberta contains the Life Saving Station, the IronWorks, and the turntable.*

Legal Description: COM AT W 1/4 COR OF SEC 27 E 831.02 FT N 632.70 FT TO N ROW LN HWY M-168 & POB CONT N 215.77 FT S 69 DEG 29' 40" E 620.13 FT S 84 DEG 19' 45" E 69.54 FT S 55 DEG 56' 25" E 62.98 FT S 52 DEG 24' 25" E 340.64 FT THENCE ALG CRV TO RT W/CHORD BRNG S 51 DEG 58' 50" W 165.96 FT ALG CRV TO RT W/CHORD BRNG S 17 DEG 42' 02" E 59.22 FT S 17 DEG 11' 44" E 25.66 FT ALG CRV TO RT W/CHORD BRNG S 05 DEG 25' 11" W 191.43 FT ALG CRV TO RT W/CHORD BRNG S 30 DEG 29' 20" W 25.37 FT NW'LY ALG CRV TO LFT 214.83 FT N 68 DEG 05' 45" W 79.5 FT ALG CRV TO RT 280.8 FT N 35 DEG 11' 45" W 235.97 FT ALG CRV TO LFT 139.95 FT N 13.99 FT N 85 DEG 35' 40" W 23.92 FT ALG CRV TO LFT 103.82 FT TO POB
UNPLATTED ELBERTA
SEC 27 T26N R16W
P.A. 1120 & 1074 FURNACE AVENUE
SPLIT FROM -506-002-20 FOR 2001
[[11/00 BP; 01/01 BP; 07/01 398/939 QC; 10/01 BP; 05/05 BP; 10/06 BP;

Parcel B: #06-506-002-00 - **1213 FURNACE** - *Currently owned by the State Land Bank Authority, but scheduled to be transferred to the Village of Elberta for park land in 2027.*

Legal Description: COM W 1/4 COR OF SEC N 609.71 FT TO POB E 494.33 FT N 66.28 FT TO PT ON N ROW HWY-168 S 84 DEG 27'17"E 12.07 FT S 84 DEG 49'46"E 245.49 FT TO PT OF CURVE TO RT S 78 DEG 46'39"E 87.73 FT N 215.77 FT N 69 DEG 29'40"W 106.77 FT S 12 DEG 54' 30"W 29.3 FT W 804.57 FT S 46 DEG 45'35"W 80.02 FT S 57.38 FT W 378.12 FT S 93.32 FT E 507.32 FT S 42.08 FT TO POB UNPLATTED ELBERTA EASEMENT SURVEY SEC 27 T26N R16W 5.74 A M/L
P.A. 1213 FURNACE STREET
SPLIT TO 506-002-20 & 30 FOR 1998
[[7/80 188/839 TD; 05/00 371/785 EASE; 06/10 2010R-02769 ABDMNT RR ROW; 07/10 2010R-03010 QC; 12/24 2024-04324 WD;

Charge of the Committee: The Village Council appointed the Historic District Study Committee on October 17, 2025 to evaluate potential historic district boundaries within the Village of Elberta and to determine whether these areas possess sufficient historical, architectural, cultural, or community significance to merit designation as local historic districts.

Committee Members: Arlene Sweeting, Chair; David Beaton, Founder and Board Chair - Elberta Heritage Center; Rick O'Connor, Founding Member of the Elberta Heritage Center; Kay Bond, Founding Member of the Elberta Heritage Center; Melissa Sortman, Founding Member of the Elberta Heritage Center; Andy Micham, lifelong resident of the Village of Elberta. Consulting Maritime Historian: Jed Jaworski

Committee Recommendation: It is recommended that a Historic District Overlay be created by ordinance which would encompass the boundaries of the current Village of Elberta Waterfront Park and the adjacent land currently owned by the State Land Bank Authority.

Contact Name: Arlene Sweeting, Historic District Study Committee Chair
Address: 526 Lincoln Avenue, Elberta, MI 49628
Phone: 941-545-5635 Email: ElbertaHeritage@gmail.com

Table of Contents **PAGE NUMBER**

I. Charge of the Committee

The historic district study committee was appointed by the Village of Elberta Council on October 16, 2025, pursuant to PA 169 of 1970 as amended. The study committee was charged with conducting an inventory, research, and preparation of a preliminary historic district study committee report for the Village of Elberta. Upon completion of the report the study committee is charged with holding a public hearing and making a recommendation to Village council as to whether a historic district ordinance should be adopted, and a local historic district designated.

II. Composition of Elberta Historic District Study Committee

Arlene Sweeting, Chair

Arlene Sweeting is a founding member of the Elberta Labor Heritage Center and currently serves as Communications Director. She is a member of the Parks and Recreation Commission for the Village of Elberta. She has a BA in Political Science from UNC-CH, and an MEd from James Madison University.

Rick O'Connor, Secretary

Born and raised in Michigan, Rick O'Connor is a founding member of the Elberta Heritage Center and owns a home in the Village of Elberta at 604 Lincoln. He is a retired finance professional with a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and MBA from Arizona State University. He currently serves on the board of directors for the TruWest Credit Union in Arizona. He has a strong desire to help preserve the rich and varied history of Elberta.

David Beaton

Dave fell in love with Elberta and her history when he bought the old railroad boarding house in the Village of Elberta in the Fall of 2019. He founded the Elberta Labor Heritage Center in 2021 and serves as its current Board Chair. The nonprofit organization was able to purchase a building in downtown Elberta in December 2025 and is looking forward to preserving and sharing the history of Elberta. Beaton has a Communications degree from Michigan State University.

Kay Bond

Kay served as the first Executive Director of Benzie Area Christian Neighbors, interim director of the Benzie County Council on Aging (which later became Benzie Senior Resources) and as the Executive Director of Advocates of Benzie County from 2016-2025. Her hobby is genealogy and she is an expert researcher. She also serves on the Board of the Elberta Labor Heritage Center.

Andy Micham

Andy Micham is a lifelong resident of Elberta. An outstanding athlete in basketball, football, and track, and a 1963 graduate of Frankfort High School, Andy was inducted into the Frankfort-Elberta Area School's Hall of Fame in 2016. Andy worked for the Ann Arbor Railroad for 10 years, before becoming the custodian at the Frankfort-Elberta Area School District. His dad was a deck officer on the car ferries.

Melissa Sortman

Melissa appreciates the hard work and grit of the workers, farmers, and families that make Elberta a historically significant village. Melissa spent many years as a union advocate in the public service sector with K-12 teachers and support staff along with bargaining for the University of Michigan and Michigan State University to ensure employees have a positive working environment and all students who want to attend college have a path to do so. Locally, she has a home in Gilmore Township and is a founding member of the Elberta Labor Heritage Center.

Committee Consultant - Jed Jaworski

Jed Jaworski was a merchant mariner who sailed under the last days of the Great Lakes train car ferries. In 1981 Jed founded the Northwest Michigan Maritime Museum in Frankfort and shortly thereafter became a founder of the Maritime Heritage Alliance in Traverse City. As Director of the Northwest Michigan Maritime Museum Mr. Jaworski developed 5000 sq. ft. of exhibits of exceptional design and amassed the largest historic small craft collection in the state. He facilitated the formation of the Friends of Point Betsie Lighthouse, which led to the preservation of the local landmark. In 1983 he spearheaded the saving of the S.S. City of Milwaukee, the last of the traditional Great Lakes train car ferries and established a non-profit corporation to manage the ship. He also founded the Manitou Underwater Preserve Committee in 1987, which under his

direction won regional community and state legislative support for the establishment of a Manitou State Underwater Preserve in 1988. The effort culminated with the publication "Inventory of Maritime and Recreation Resources of the Manitou Passage State Underwater Preserve" (MSU Press 1995), documenting 70 ship wrecks, 28 historic dock sites along with other resources. Mr. Jaworski has a proven record as a historian, interpreter, exhibit designer, curator, grant writer and museum administrator.

The Historic District Studied

Historic Waterfront District

I. The Boundaries of the Proposed District

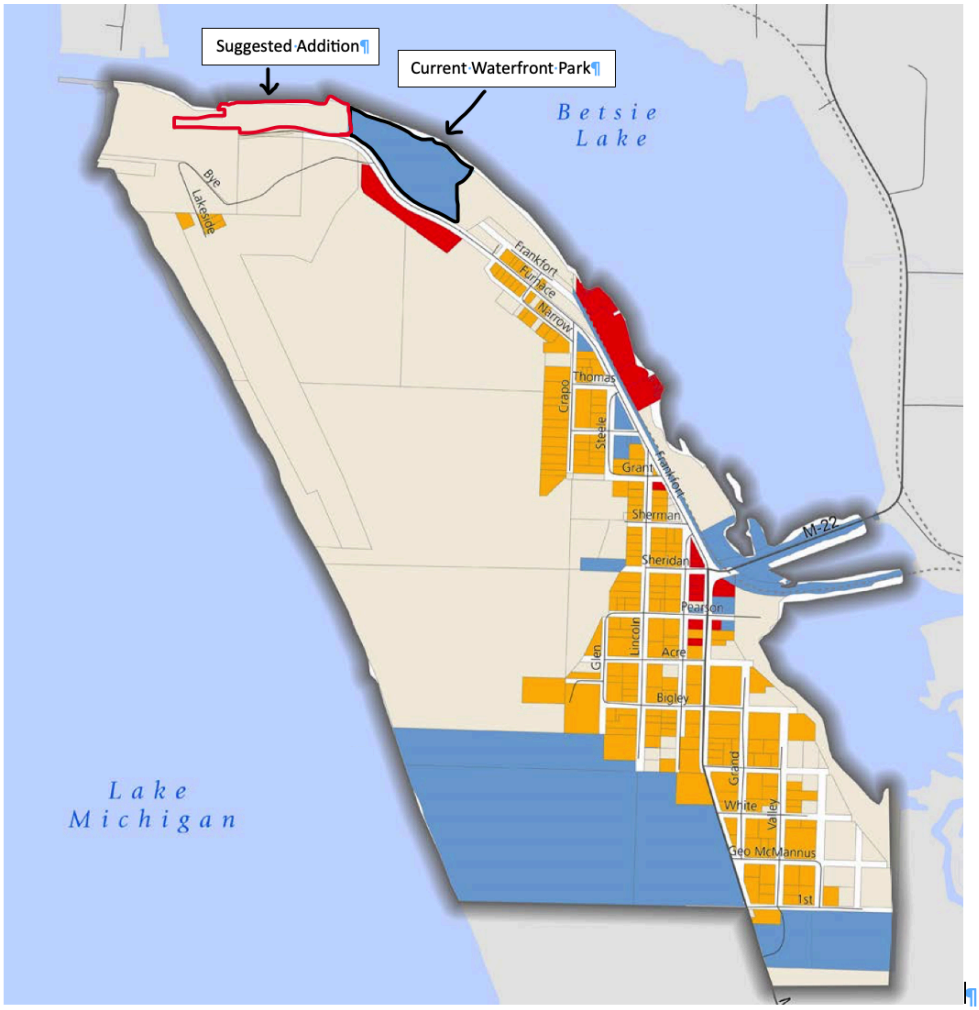
Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of the proposed historical district, as shown on the enclosed map, includes the current Waterfront Park which contains a number of historic structures and the area just west of the Park which contains the East Car Ferry Slip, several cleats and pilings, chains and an anchor. The boundary includes all of the historic structures and the waterfront setting that has historically been associated with the Ann Arbor Railroad and Car Ferry operation.

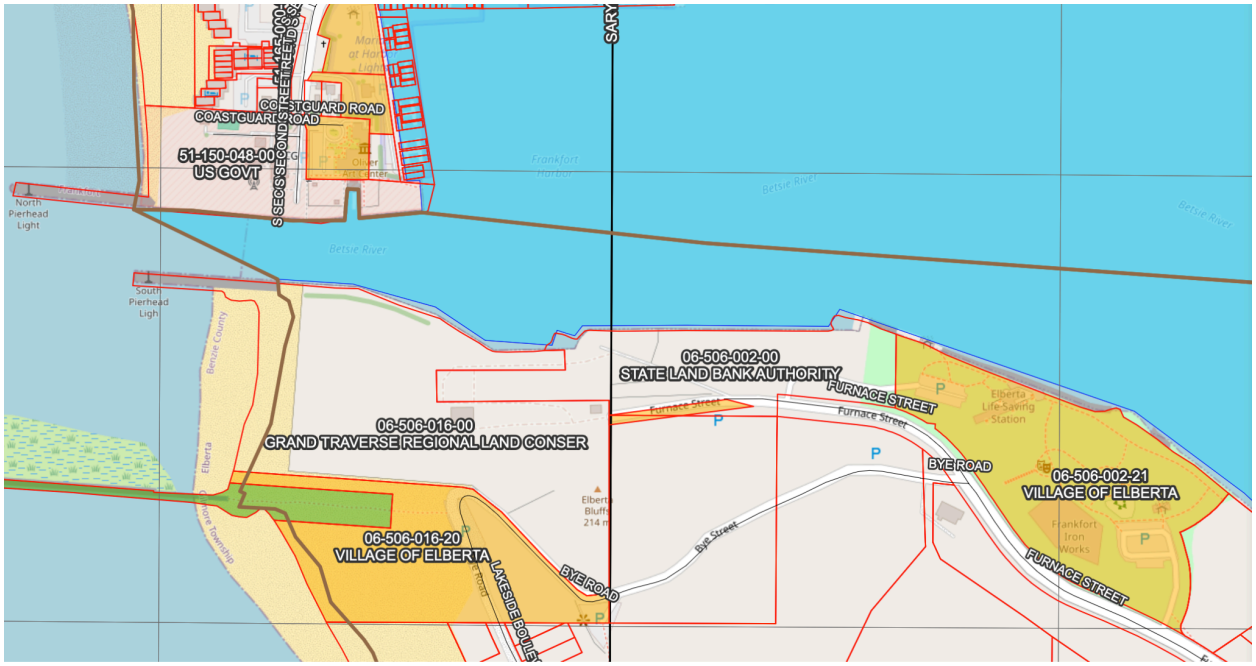
The area west of Waterfront Park (circled in red on the map) is currently held by the State Land Bank Authority and is designated to be turned over to the Village of Elberta for use as a passive park - making it an ideal location for an historic trail. To exclude this area would fail to recognize it as an integral part of the Ann Arbor's Car Ferry operations and make it harder for visitors to visualize the full extent of the industry that was once located on these shores.

Visual Boundary Description

In the map below, the current waterfront park is the blue area encircled with the black line. This property is currently a public park containing the remains of the iron works, the life-saving station, the Ann Arbor Railroad turntable, a pavilion, and a children's playground. The additional parcel encircled in red is currently owned by the State Land Bank Authority but is scheduled to be transferred to the Village of Elberta for use as a park in 2027. It contains the east slip for the car ferries, car ferry cleats, an anchor from the *Ann Arbor #5*, and remains of the aprons and artifacts from the railroads. The recommendation of the Historic District Study Commission is to include both parcels in the Elberta BoatLanding Historic District.



Map of the Village of Elberta.



Property line boundaries of Parcel A and B (Benzie County Equalization Office)

II. History of the Proposed District

Early Settlement and Industrial Development of South Frankfort/Elberta

The Betsie Lake area first entered European historical records on May 18, 1685, when French Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette landed near the outlet of Lake Aux Becs Scies into Lake Michigan. For the next 150 years, the region remained primarily occupied by Native American peoples and saw little documented Euro-American activity (Blacklock, 1975).

In 1838, the U.S. government dispatched surveyor Alvin Burt to map the northwestern Lower Peninsula of Michigan. Twelve years later, in 1850, Michigan Governor John S. Barry sent surveyor Orange Risdon to evaluate the area's potential. Risdon found a narrow, shallow outlet—often blocked by sandbars—but recognized the lake's deep, sheltered waters as a natural harbor. Risdon and his wife purchased land around the outlet from Joseph Oliver, a trapper who had built a small cabin on the 'island' in 1852, establishing Oliver as the first non-Native settler in the Betsie Lake area (Hawley, 2014).

In 1854 Captain Snow found his sailing vessel in a sinking condition after being battered by days of stormy weather. Facing certain disaster with only the unfavorable option of

grounding the vessel on the lee shore, Captain Snow took notice of the narrow outlet of Lake Aux Becs Scies. In a bold and risky move, the Captain steered his vessel under full sail for the outlet in hopes of safely entering the protected lake. Miraculously the small sloop cleared the sandbar and upon entering Lake Aux Becs Scies, became the first commercial vessel to harbor there.

Captain Snow informed George Tift, his ship's owner, of his fortuitous discovery. Tift, a Lake Erie-based businessman, recognized the opportunity and bought the Risdon's and other owner's holdings (Hawley, 2014). A few years later George S. Frost and other investors from Detroit bought Tift's holdings and prepared to start development, sending an agent and a sawmill operation to the bay.

In 1855, the Robars came to the area on their schooner *French Girl*. Aboard the vessel was enough material to build the first frame house in Benzie County which was erected at the intersection of what is now Furnace Avenue and Crapo Street in Elberta. Other pioneers that settled in the area included John Greenwood, Frank Martin, and John B. Dory. By 1859, the entire area was platted as "Frankfort on the Lake." Early settlers included Mrs. Hiram Gage (1857), John Hadsel (1858), and B. W. Perry (1860), who opened a small distillery and taught the area's first school in a cedar log building near the future American House. Perry later became the township's first supervisor and participated in constructing the steamboat *Russian Domain* at A. S. Dow's shipyard in 1867 (Blacklock, 1975).

The mid-1860s brought federal investment that spurred industrial and commercial growth. Congress appropriated funds for piers at Betsie Lake in 1866, and contractors Whitewood and Hubbell began construction the following year. The lighthouse was completed around the same time, and population growth increased rapidly. The village of South Frankfort was formally platted by George M. Cartwright, referred to as "Elberta's Founding Father" in Blacklock's *History of Elberta*.

In 1866, the first plat to be filed in Benzie County defined "Frankfort City" along the south side of Lake Aux Bees Scies. Upon incorporation, the north side became "Village of Frankfort" and Frankfort City became "Village of South Frankfort". The population of Frankfort around 1869 was about 500 persons. George A. Douglas built the first store and post office in 1867 (Blacklock, 1975).

Commercial and industrial development followed quickly. The Frankfort Furnace Company was organized in 1869, erecting a facility capable of producing 40 tons of iron per day. Supporting industries included sawmills—such as Lawrence W. Crane's mill and the "island mill" operated by Hubbell and Banks—to supply timber for harbor construction and local industry. The Frankfort Iron Works and its charcoal kilns, Robert

Blacklock's foundry, and the development of tramways and docks along the waterfront established South Frankfort as an industrial hub. John B. Dory pioneered winter transportation routes to Manistee using a dog-driven sled, demonstrating the challenges of overland travel before roads existed.

Immigrant labor played a key role in early industry and settlement. Scandinavian families, particularly in the Copenhagen Point neighborhood, worked in commercial fishing, the iron works, and maritime industries. These communities contributed to a culturally diverse early workforce, which also included the notable figure Edward Goethals, who carried the first pig iron from the furnace to the dock and later held numerous civic roles.

The first commercial enterprises—general stores, hotels, blacksmiths, barbers, and other service businesses—emerged alongside these industries. By the early 1870s, South Frankfort had multiple stores, including those operated by S. E. Crandall, E. B. Fletcher, August Coddens, and Glarum & Classons, while hotels such as the American

House and Eagle House served transient workers and residents. The first schoolhouse was built in 1870, and the Methodist Church in 1884, reflecting the growing permanence of the community (Blacklock, 1975).

By the late 19th century, South Frankfort had transitioned from a frontier settlement to a structured industrial and commercial waterfront. The community's strategic location on Betsie Lake allowed for year-round water transport connecting local industries to regional and national markets, laying the foundation for later infrastructure such as the Ann Arbor Railroad, the Elberta ferry docks, and extensive car ferry operations. Industrial, commercial, and residential development along the south shore—supported by immigrant labor, entrepreneurial families, and early civic leaders—created a landscape that would define Elberta/South Frankfort as a critical node in Great Lakes maritime and industrial history.

Copenhagen Point (1867 – late 1880s)

A small settlement called "Copenhagen" sprang up along the south shore of Betsie Lake in and around the proposed Historic District. The settlement was mainly inhabited by Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish immigrants engaged in commercial fishing, construction of the harbor, and later, the building of the Frankfort Iron Works. Their homes were for the most part hastily built clapboard sided dwellings. Among those identified as being part of the settlement are the Vigland family, Big Hans Madsen (the

hercules of the Iron Furnace Crew), the Rasmus Mortensens, the Chris Kaarvand family, John and Pete Gudemoos, Nels and John Johnson, Jacob Dahlgren, the Wolcotts, and the Virvinks (Blacklock, 1975).

Little is known about the Copenhagen fishery, but during this period, immigrants living along the coasts often set nets from small skiffs and mackinac boats. The boats were hauled up on shore with log rollers to protect them from the surf. Small sheds housed nets and equipment near the boats. The fish provided food for their table as well as additional income. Fish would be sold fresh locally and/or salted, barreled, and sold to the first vessel bound for markets like Chicago or Buffalo. (Blacklock 1975).

At Copenhagen Point, a small shipyard was established. Known as Dow's shipyard, at least two vessels were constructed there, one being a small steamer built in 1867 called the *Russian Domain* (Blacklock 1975).

Harbor Development at Lake Aux Becs Scies (Betsie Lake)

By the late 1850s, permanent settlement around Lake Aux Becs Scies (later known as Betsie Lake) had increased to the point that a dependable harbor connection to Lake Michigan became essential for transportation and commerce. In 1859, local entrepreneur L. A. Doby led a group of men in an early effort to improve the natural outlet between the lake and Lake Michigan. By 1860, their work had created a rudimentary channel and included the construction of small harbor piers extending into Lake Michigan. These early improvements, however, proved vulnerable to the lake's powerful storms and were soon damaged and washed away. Lacking sufficient resources to maintain the works, the project was abandoned (Blacklock 1975).

Recognizing the strategic importance of the harbor, Edmund G. Chambers and other local leaders petitioned the U.S. Congress in 1862 for federal assistance. This advocacy resulted in surveys conducted by U.S. Government engineers in 1864 and 1865. Based on their findings, Congress appropriated $98,000 in 1866 to construct a federally improved harbor. On June 17, 1867, contractors Whitewood and Hubbell of Detroit arrived on site with dredging equipment and began work. After cutting their way into Lake Aux Becs Scies, they commenced construction of a new channel approximately 750 feet south of the original outlet. The channel was designed to be 12 feet deep and 200 feet wide, with piers extending into Lake Michigan. At the time, this harbor

represented the northernmost federally improved harbor on Lake Michigan (USACE 1866; 1867; Blacklock 1975).

From its earliest years, the harbor played a vital role in the region's economy. It supported logging and lumbering operations and, beginning around 1870, became integral to the iron-making industry located along the south shore. For more than a decade, iron production was a dominant economic force in the area, relying heavily on the harbor for the shipment of raw materials and finished products. The port also developed into an important center for commercial fishing and regional shipping.

Congressional authorization for harbor construction was amended several times—in 1868, 1879, and 1892—to permit additional dredging and the extension of harbor piers beyond their original design. These modifications were necessary to address persistent sandbars forming at and near the pier entrances. By 1900, the north pier extended 1,499 feet in total length, including 710 feet beyond the shoreline, while the south pier reached 1,938 feet, extending 1,420 feet lakeward (USACE 1900).

Navigation aids were added as the harbor grew in importance. In 1873, a bell tower and light were constructed at the end of the south pier to assist vessels entering the harbor.

Continued commercial use prompted further investment, and in 1896 and 1897 the Toledo & Ann Arbor Railroad Company spent $25,000 to extend the south pier by an additional 400 feet. In an experimental attempt to reduce wave action at the harbor entrance for its rail car ferries, the railroad installed pipes along the piers to discharge oil onto the water. The system quickly failed when the pipes clogged with sand, and the idea was abandoned.

By the early 20th century, continued improvements brought the harbor to its greatest extent. By 1912, the piers exceeded 2,000 feet in length, and the navigation channel was maintained at depths ranging from 18 to 20 feet (Blacklock 1975; USACE 1910; 1915). During this period, schooners and passenger steamships regularly called at the port, serving both freight and passenger traffic along Lake Michigan. This pattern continued through the first third of the 20th century, until the widespread adoption of the automobile reduced reliance on waterborne passenger travel.

Until 1925, federally funded dredging focused primarily on maintaining the navigation channel between the pier entrance and the Frankfort waterfront, without extending improvements into the Elberta waterfront area (USACE 1866–1925). A major transformation of the harbor occurred between 1925 and 1932, following congressional authorization on March 3, 1925. This project reconfigured the harbor entrance and introduced an outer stilling basin formed by new breakwalls extending into Lake

Michigan. The basin featured a 400-foot-wide entrance marked by navigational lights, with the larger light tower and fog signal located on the north pier. The stilling basin was dredged to a depth of 20 feet, while the channel between the piers was maintained at 18 feet (USACE 1925–1932; Blacklock 1975).

Further improvements followed with an act of Congress on August 26, 1937, which authorized dredging of an inner basin to a depth of 18 feet within Lake Betsie, extending to within 50 feet of existing shoreline structures along the Frankfort waterfront. This work was completed in 1939, though it did not include the lake bottomlands associated with the current study area (USACE 1937–1940).

In the postwar period, attention increasingly turned toward recreational boating. In 1965, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recommended additional harbor improvements to accommodate both commercial and recreational navigation. Congress approved these measures on October 27, 1975, authorizing deeper approach and entrance channels, expansion of the inner basin, and the creation of a recreational anchorage area. The project included dredging the approach and entrance channels to depths of up to 24 feet, tapering to 22 feet between the piers, along with an 18-foot-deep interior basin in Betsie Lake and a 10-foot-deep recreational anchorage extending eastward of the basin.

Alongside federally funded projects, privately financed harbor development occurred continuously from the 1850s onward. Waterfront industries and businesses repeatedly altered shorelines through dredging, filling, and dock construction to support maritime commerce, including the shipment of iron and lumber products, commercial fishing operations, and the Ann Arbor Railroad’s car ferry service. Although documentation of these private activities is incomplete, historic harbor charts, plat maps, and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps clearly demonstrate extensive non-federal dredging within Betsie Lake to facilitate navigation to Elberta and sustain the harbor’s long-standing commercial role.

Maritime Commerce

The growth of waterfront industry and transportation is illustrated by vessel arrivals and clearances at Betsie Lake from 1868 through 1914, as compiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from customs and shipping records. Traffic steadily increased alongside industrial activity, reflecting the evolution of Elberta and Frankfort from resource-based economies to diversified transportation hubs. For example, during the period 1868–1869, 300 commercial vessels entered and cleared Betsie Lake. By 1897,

arrivals and clearances had grown to 1,714 vessels with a total tonnage of 706,546, and by 1914, 2,514 vessels totaling over 3.3 million tons were recorded (See Table 1 - page 14).

Table 1. Vessel Arrivals and Clearances, Betsie Lake, 1868-1914

Date	Total # of Vessels	Total Tonnage of Vessels
1868 - 69	*300*	*NA*
1874 - 75	*219*	*62,094*
1879 - 80	*201*	*38,879*
1884	*488*	*NA*
1885	*261*	*NA*
1888	*1,342*	*216,376*
1890	*443*	*57,140*
1891	*1,541*	*258.908*
1892	*910*	*167,777*
1893	*988*	*278,709*
1894	*1,101*	*337,728*
1895	*1,182*	*412,951*
1896	*1,374*	*509,277*
1897	*1,714*	*706,546*
1898	*1,681*	*793,896*
1899	*1,790*	*1,405,955*
1904	*1,892*	*1,618,088*
1909	*2,191*	*1,832,695*
1914	*2,514*	*3,321,456*

U.S. Army Corps of Engineer Figures

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' annual report also highlights a transition in waterfront enterprise. Early activity focused on the extraction and shipment of natural

resources, including iron, timber, and fish. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, commercial focus shifted toward **cross-lake transportation**, particularly railcar ferries operated by the Ann Arbor Railroad, along with **agriculture**, notably fruit processing, and **recreation and tourism**. These shifts illustrate Betsie Lake's emergence as a regional transportation hub, supporting both industrial operations and broader economic development in northern Michigan.

Other Commercial Enterprises

Local ferry service was established on Betsie Lake beginning officially in 1870. The ferries generally ran between 6am and 9pm, and, over the course of time, departed from various locations on the lake to make connections both east and west, and north and south. The first steam ferry was the 'Jay', whose engine was built locally in the Blacklock Machine Shop. Other vessels included the 'Onward', 'Hazel', and 'Cynthia'.

The coastal steamer 'John D. Dewar' docked at Robar's Landing in Elberta, and sailed from there on regularly scheduled trips to Manistee and points between (Blacklock 1975).

Numerous businesses were established from the 1890s to the mid-1930s to store, pack, and process fruits and vegetables. This included a large cabbage warehouse and a fruit processing plant located on shorelands of Betsie Lake. Their products were shipped by wagon, rail, and boat (Blacklock 1975).

The fruit processing plant known as the Elberta Packing Company operated on the shorelands from 1936 until consumed by fire in 1975. The Betsie Bay Marina was developed on this site a short time later; the smokestack of the packing plant still stands as a reminder. The former cabbage warehouse is now the Cabbage Shed Restaurant (Blacklock 1975).

The Naming of Elberta

As a result of the confusion caused by the likeness of the names, the people of South Frankfort voted to change the name of their Village to 'Elberta' at an election held in May of 1911. Other names considered were "Greenwood", "LakeView", "Terminus", "Ferryland", and "Boatlanding". The Elberta peach was at the height of its popularity as a local product and the name 'Elberta' was submitted by Mrs. Morgan Fox who received a prize of $5 and a box camera for the winning entry (Blacklock 1975).

Lake Aux Becs Scies also underwent name changes. Native Americans originally

referred to the lake as “Un-Zig-A-Zee-Bee” meaning “river of the sawbill or Merganser duck. French explorers called it Aux Becs Scies, which has a similar definition. Sailors and early settlers not speaking French soon corrupted the pronunciation of Aux Becs Scies to “Lake Betsie” (Blacklock 1975).

Historical Development of the U.S. Life-Saving Station

Early Federal Life-Saving Efforts (1787–1878)

From the earliest days of the Republic, shipwrecks along America’s coasts and inland waterways posed persistent threats to commerce and human life. Early lifesaving efforts relied on local volunteers—surfmen, fishermen, lighthouse keepers, and wreck masters—who responded to disasters using community-owned boats and rudimentary equipment. Beginning in 1848, the federal government took a more direct role, funding rescue stations and equipment through the Treasury Department. By 1854, surfboats were distributed to Great Lakes communities, including Lake Michigan, although these early stations lacked standardized buildings, paid crews, or consistent reporting requirements.

Following widespread criticism after devastating shipwrecks in 1870, Sumner I. Kimball reorganized the system. In 1871 the U.S. Life-Saving Service (USLSS) emerged as a professionalized federal agency, and in 1878 it became a separate entity within the Treasury Department. Paid keepers, standardized drills, daily patrols, and improved rescue technologies—including the Manby mortar and later the Lyle gun—marked a turning point in lifesaving operations nationwide.

Growth of Maritime Traffic on Lake Michigan and the Need for a Station (1870s–1882)

By the late 19th century, Lake Michigan had become a critical transportation corridor supporting immigration, lumbering, agriculture, and industrial commerce. Harbors such as Betsie Bay were increasingly busy but hazardous, particularly during storms and winter navigation. Although a fully staffed Life-Saving Station operated at Point Betsie Lighthouse, the distance between that station and the south end of Betsie Bay delayed response times.

The October 1880 rescue of the schooner *J.H. Hartzell* south of Frankfort—heroically conducted by the Point Betsie crew—dramatically underscored the dangers of this

stretch of coast. In 1882, the USLSS formally determined that the volume of maritime traffic justified a second station near the harbor entrance to Betsie Bay.

Site Selection and Construction (1883–1887)

The site for the South Frankfort (later Elberta) Life-Saving Station was selected in 1883, with title secured in 1884. Plans and specifications were prepared under the direction of **Albert B. Bibb**, architect for the Treasury Department and the U.S. Life-Saving Service. Construction began in 1886 and was completed in 1887.

Bibb was instrumental in modernizing USLSS architecture during the 1880s, designing stations that balanced functionality with modest architectural distinction. The Elberta station reflects this period of transition: a two-story, wood-framed structure with dormers, a hip roof, and a lookout tower, designed to accommodate both rescue equipment and crew living quarters. The station exemplifies Bibb's standardized yet site-responsive approach to federal maritime architecture. The U.S. Life-Saving Service Heritage Association identifies the building as a "Bibb #3 Station House."

The station appears to be a variation of a more common station design (Bibb #2) of which 15 such structures were built between 1886 and 1891. (Ann Arbor Railroad Marine Terminal NPS Form 10-900, 1991). These stations were nearly square, unlike the Elberta station which is L-shaped. Most likely the Bibb #2 station design was altered to provide a larger boat room to accommodate the lifeboat that was much larger than surfboats that were used at most stations. These lifeboats were bigger, heavier, and required deeper water to launch and were limited to stations located on Great Lakes harbors. The simple detailed building is dominated by a cross-gabled roof. The steeply pitched roof has hipped dormers; one on the south, two on the east, and one on the north. The wood frame structure is framed by 4" x 6" studs with diagonal bracing let in. The exterior walls are clapboard to above the windows and then vertical boards and milled battens. The peaks of the dormers are wood shingles. Above the doors to the boatroom were a row of small windows. The dominant feature of the structure of this building is the lookout tower that rises from the hipped roof above the boatroom. At a later date additional dormer windows were added on the west and north.

The interior walls are plaster with tongue and groove pine wainscotting still visible and varnished in most rooms. The large boatroom dominated the downstairs with the crew's mess room across the hall. A narrow stairway leads to the second level. To the south of the hall is a large crew bunk room. An interesting feature of this room is the crew lockers. Along the north wall are seven built-in pine cupboards. Each has double doors

and three shelves. Below each are two large drawers with brass bin pulls. Off this room was a floor opening surrounded with a short railing to house a pole to slide down to the boatroom, fireman style. Across the hall are two rooms for the use of the keeper and his family (Ann Arbor Railroad Marine Terminal NPS Form 10-900, 1991).

Early Operations and Personnel (1887–1892)

With construction nearing completion, Thomas E. Matthews—formerly keeper of the Point Betsie station—was appointed keeper on January 12, 1887. Matthews recruited and supervised a crew of seven surfmen. Early duties included grading the grounds, building apparatus tracks, laying sod, cutting firewood, and establishing drill routines.

Daily station life was governed by strict regulations. Matthews maintained detailed logs documenting weather conditions, patrol schedules, equipment drills, station cleanliness, crew attendance, and vessel traffic. These records provide invaluable insight into late-19th-century maritime operations on Lake Michigan. Matthews' tenure ended abruptly in January 1892 following administrative conflicts, despite his strong reputation in the community. (North Manitou LSS NHL application,1990)

Long-Term Service and Technological Change (1892–1932)

In February 1892, George Morency assumed command of the station, serving for more than 20 years. Under his leadership, the station operated through a period of intense maritime activity and technological transition. In 1915, Morency was succeeded by George C. Robinson, followed in 1916 by Charles Robinson, who served until his retirement in 1932 (North Manitou LSS NHL application, 1990).

During this period, lifesaving practices evolved significantly. The Lyle gun replaced the Manby mortar as standard rescue equipment, remaining in use until 1962. Wireless radio communication—pioneered locally by the Ann Arbor Railroad—revolutionized emergency response. The sinking of the *Ann Arbor No. 4* in 1923 near the south pier demonstrated the critical importance of radio coordination between vessels and shore-based responders.

As navigation technology, weather forecasting, and vessel design improved, shipwrecks became less frequent. The Point Betsie station was reduced to an observation post, while the harbor station assumed responsibility for traffic monitoring and rescue operations in and south of Betsie Bay.

Transition to the U.S. Coast Guard and Relocation (1915–1937)

In 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service merged with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard. By the late 1920s, plans were underway to relocate the Frankfort station to a new site north of the harbor entrance. Land was conveyed by the Ann Arbor Railroad in 1929, and a new Coast Guard station opened in 1935.

The original 1887 station ceased active lifesaving operations in 1937. The Ann Arbor Railroad acquired the building, moved it approximately 400 yards east, and adapted it for use as a Marine and Yard Office. A wood frame, one-story warehouse wing was added at that time (85'× 20"). The wing has a particle poured concrete basement. On the south side is a small receiving platform, with five large windows and three small windows. The west side has two large windows and a large freight door 48" wide (Ann Arbor Railroad Marine Terminal NPS Form 10-900, 1991).

The station has seen several changes but is in good condition and much of the original features can be seen. The crew's mess room was made into a restroom and locker room in recent years. A brick addition was added to the west of the building in the 1960s and the boatroom has been divided into two rooms. Linoleum floors have been added in several rooms over the wood floors.

Railroad Use, Preservation, and Adaptive Reuse (1936–Present)

The building continued in railroad service until the Ann Arbor Railroad ceased operations in 1976. In 2000, the Village of Elberta purchased the structure. Today, the former Life-Saving Station is a prominent feature of Elberta's Waterfront Park and serves as a public hall for weddings, community events, and educational programming. Despite relocation and adaptive reuse, the building retains a high degree of integrity in design, materials, workmanship, and feeling, clearly conveying its original lifesaving function.

Frankfort Iron Works (1867–1883)

The Frankfort Iron Works was established in 1867 on the south shore of Betsie Lake, marking one of the most ambitious industrial undertakings in Benzie County during the 19th century. From its inception, the enterprise was well capitalized and quickly became

the largest and most extensive manufacturing operation in the county, bringing regional prominence to the Village of Elberta and the surrounding harbor community. The original iron works complex included a blast furnace for smelting iron, a boiler and engine, stone and ore crushers, and elevated platforms to support the production process (Blacklock, 1975).

Construction of the blast furnace began in 1869. Iron production at the Frankfort Iron Works relied on charcoal fuel, requiring enormous quantities of hardwood. At peak operation, as much as 100 cords of wood were consumed daily, with annual orders totaling approximately 15,000 cords. To meet this demand, iron ore and limestone—used as a flux in the smelting process—were shipped to Betsie Lake from Escanaba and other Upper Peninsula ports, initially by sailing vessels and later by steam-powered propellers.

To support fuel delivery, a network of charcoal kilns was constructed, numbering twenty-two at peak operation. As nearby hardwood supplies were depleted, the distance between the kilns and the furnace increased. To maintain efficiency, management commissioned the Blacklock Machine Shop to construct a steam locomotive capable of hauling wood to the iron works. This narrow-gauge railroad, originally laid with wooden rails, became the first steam-powered railroad in Benzie County. In addition to transporting fuel, the railroad carried hay, farm supplies, and even passengers, linking the iron works to surrounding settlements and logging camps.

The casting house, constructed of brick, became operational on July 1, 1870, when the first iron was successfully produced. By July 1, 1871, the first pig iron was cast, and production soon reached as much as forty tons per day. Pig iron produced at the Frankfort Iron Works was shipped from its docks on Betsie Lake to industrial markets in Detroit and Buffalo. Men worked twelve-hour shifts under demanding conditions, and the workforce reflected the area’s growing diversity; historical records indicate that workers from at least thirteen different nations were employed at the iron works. The operation provided employment for hundreds of people, many living in nearby lumber camps or in the Copenhagen settlement and surrounding harbor area.

During its twelve years of operation, the Frankfort Iron Works was a driving force in the local economy and a catalyst for waterfront and industrial development. However, the reliance on charcoal ironmaking ultimately proved to be a limitation. By the early 1880s, more efficient iron smelting technologies rendered charcoal-based production obsolete. In 1883, the blast furnace fires were extinguished, and the Frankfort Iron Works ceased operations.

The closure dealt a significant blow to the regional economy. Employment opportunities declined sharply, and the settlement of Copenhagen all but disappeared as workers and their families, unable to find work in sawmills or other local trades, relocated elsewhere. What had been a bold experiment in industrial development appeared, at least temporarily, to have failed.

Within a decade, however, the site found new industrial life. In 1883, the former iron works property was purchased by the Toledo, Ann Arbor & Northern Michigan Railway. The furnace buildings were converted into a roundhouse and machine shop located west of the present subject site, portions of which still survive. The surrounding grounds were repurposed for railroad tracks, switches, and a depot, while two residences on a bluff approximately twenty feet above Lake Betsie—originally constructed for iron works officials—continued in use. A large wooden water tower was erected on the bluff to supply steam engines operating on the site.

Following the reorganization of the railroad as the Ann Arbor Railroad Company in 1892, the property was further developed to support rail and maritime commerce. Large warehouses capable of storing several hundred railcar loads of flour in transit were constructed, and a grain elevator measuring between 80 and 100 feet in height was built alongside the west slip. These facilities remained in use until 1916, when the elevators were demolished.

Throughout the early 20th century, the former iron works grounds continued to function as a vital transportation hub. Coal was stored between the railroad tracks and Lake Betsie to supply ferryboats that crossed Lake Michigan. In 1925, the Ann Arbor Railroad constructed a 400-ton reinforced concrete, automatic, electric locomotive coaling plant on the east end of the site. This facility remained in use until the late 1950s, when ferryboat engines were converted from coal to diesel fuel and the coal dock was closed.

Today, remnants of the Frankfort Iron Works remain visible within Elberta’s Waterfront Park, providing tangible evidence of the community’s earliest large-scale industrial enterprise. These surviving features, together with archaeological resources and the adapted railroad infrastructure, illustrate the site’s layered history—from iron production to rail and maritime transportation—and its central role in shaping Elberta’s industrial and economic identity.

Crane Lumber Company (1870–Early 1900s)

The rapid industrialization of the Betsie Lake waterfront in the late nineteenth century was driven not only by ironmaking but also by the region's vast forest resources. As settlement expanded after the Civil War, lumber milling evolved from small, local operations into large commercial enterprises supplying wood products to markets throughout the Midwest. Among the most significant of these was the Crane Lumber Company.

Lawrence W. Crane was born in Ireland in 1841 and came to America when he was just 12 years old. He arrived in Elberta in 1855 and in 1870 established the first lumber mill in Elberta, the Crane Lumber Company, on waterfront Lots 7, 8, and 9 of the plat of Frankfort City, east of the proposed historic district (Blacklock 1975). The mill was strategically located along Betsie Lake to take advantage of waterborne transportation. A dredged navigation channel, referred to on Sanborn insurance maps as a "slip," allowed schooners and steam-powered vessels—commonly known as "lumber hookers"—to access the otherwise shallow shoreline and transport finished lumber to rapidly growing cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago.

Crane quickly expanded his operations beyond basic sawmilling. Additional facilities included a planing mill and a shingle mill, with the planing operation ranking among the three largest in the nation (Blacklock 1975). The scale of these operations made the Crane Lumber Company the primary driver of commercial navigation and waterfront improvements east of the study area, many of which remain discernible in the modern shoreline configuration.

In 1896, the original Crane mill was destroyed by fire. A replacement facility was subsequently constructed just offshore and surrounded by the waters of Betsie Lake, commonly referred to as the "island mill." This new configuration allowed continued access to deep water while accommodating the increasing scale of production.

Sanborn insurance maps provide detailed documentation of the company's expansion and shoreline alterations. By 1885, the L.W. Crane Hardwood Sawmill occupied extensive waterfront property southeast of the Frankfort Lumber Company, extending from the intersection of Geo. M Street and Frankfort Avenue to at least Sherman Street and Frankfort Avenue. The complex included a sawmill, tramways, and shipping infrastructure. These shipping facilities consisted of slips perpendicular to Frankfort Avenue, wharves and lumber docks parallel to the shoreline, slab yards, and large log-holding areas dredged along the lake edge.

By August 1893, the waterfront configuration had changed substantially. The westerly slip had been filled, the lumber dock removed, and much of the former log-holding area infilled to accommodate expanded manufacturing facilities. Sanborn maps from that

year depict a nearly continuous waterfront lined with lumber stacked up to twenty feet high, reflecting the peak of Crane Lumber Company operations.

The 1899 Sanborn insurance map shows the company's holdings extending from approximately Crapo Street to Sherman Street along Frankfort Avenue, suggesting that Crane had acquired the adjacent shorelands previously occupied by the Frankfort Lumber Company. At this time, the operation included a sawmill with a reported daily capacity of 50,000 board feet, along with tramways, log drives, wharves, and at least one slip running parallel to Frankfort Avenue. It is unclear whether the mill structures were located on original shorelands, filled lands, or large timber wharves constructed over the lake.

The Crane Lumber Company remained in business until 1905, operated by Martin and James Crane (sons of Lawrence). By August 1911, its machinery and lumber were removed, and the sawmill was abandoned. Ownership of the property soon passed to Homer Bailey, who operated a smaller-scale sawmill for a brief period (Blacklock 1975). By 1925, Sanborn insurance maps no longer depicted lumber milling on the site. Instead, the former industrial waterfront had transitioned to railroad and agricultural uses, including a building owned by the Ann Arbor Railroad Company and a seasonal fruit sorting and packing facility at the intersection of Thomas Street and Frankfort Avenue.

Bank's Mill / Frankfort Lumber Company (1879–1890)

Another significant contributor to waterfront industrial development in South Frankfort (now Elberta) was Bank's Mill, later known as the Frankfort Lumber Company. Albert E. Banks was a prominent local entrepreneur whose business interests included a circular sawmill, lathe and picket mill, the Blacklock Machine Shop and Foundry, retail stores, and the first steam-powered ferryboat on Betsie Lake. His enterprises operated from approximately 1875 through the turn of the twentieth century (Blacklock 1975).

Bank's sawmill was constructed in 1879 and remained in operation until about 1890. In November 1883, Banks reorganized his lumber operations into a stock company known as the Frankfort Lumber Company, citing business convenience. Contemporary accounts described the company as operating one of the largest general mercantile enterprises on the Betsie Lake shoreline, with annual sales approaching $100,000.

Sanborn insurance maps from 1885 and 1893 depict the Frankfort Lumber Company occupying waterfront property adjacent to and west of the Crane Lumber Company. The

site was located between the intersections of Crapo Street and Frankfort Avenue and Geo. M Street and Frankfort Avenue, placing it at the eastern end of the proposed historic district. Facilities included a sawmill, company stores, and extensive shipping infrastructure designed to support large-scale lumber production and distribution.

Shipping facilities consisted of three slips perpendicular to Frankfort Avenue, wharves parallel to the shoreline, and a large lumber dock. Each slip served a distinct function: the westerly slip provided access to company stores, the middle slip served slab yards, and the easterly slip supported sawmill operations. A large log-holding area was dredged between stacks of drying lumber and Frankfort Avenue, further altering the shoreline.

By 1893, the westerly slip had been filled, and the Sanborn map from that year identified the sawmill as closed. The Frankfort Lumber Company no longer appears on Sanborn insurance maps from 1899, 1911, or 1925, indicating that the operation had been dismantled and the waterfront transitioned to other industrial and transportation-related uses.

Ann Arbor Railroad and the Car Ferry Era in Elberta

Railroad Development

The arrival of the Ann Arbor Railroad in Elberta marked a transformative period in Benzie County's transportation and industrial history. Promoted and financed by James M. Ashley, a prominent Ohio politician and railroad entrepreneur, the railroad established Elberta as a critical northern terminus connecting Michigan's interior to national markets via rail and Great Lakes shipping. Ashley's vision for an integrated rail–lake system leveraged Elberta's waterfront to create a multimodal transportation hub.

James Mitchell Ashley (1824–1896) was a former Republican Congressman from Ohio (1859–1869), a primary sponsor of the 13th Amendment, an early abolitionist, an Underground Railroad supporter, and later Governor of Montana Territory (1869–1870). After leaving public office, Ashley entered railroad finance. In 1877, he secured rights to the unfinished Ann Arbor & Toledo line, which had gone bankrupt in the Panic of 1873. Between November 1877 and May 1878, track was laid from Alexis, Ohio, to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ashley also acquired the Toledo & State Line Railroad from the Pennsylvania Railroad, creating a connection to Toledo. With the help of his sons, James Jr. and

Harry, he completed the line to Toledo in 1879 and began building northward (*Ann Arbor Railroad*, Clarke Historical Library, CMU).

Regularly scheduled service commenced on July 1, 1878. Ashley's two sons then joined him in building the railroad. James M. Ashley, Jr. , at the age of 24, became general manager of the railroad, soon to be named the Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern Railroad. The eldest Ashley son quickly became the front man on all construction projects. Following his graduation from the University of Michigan, Ashley's second oldest son, Harry, joined the father and brother in the business. Young Harry also became a general manager.

Following the closure of the Frankfort Iron Works in 1883, the Toledo, Ann Arbor & Northern Michigan Railway (TAA&NM) purchased the former iron works property and repurposed it as a railroad terminal.

In 1889 the railroad reached Copemish, and in the following year an independent line, the Frankfort & South Eastern, also arrived there. In 1892 Ashley acquired the F&SE and thus brought the entire railroad from Toledo to Frankfort under his control. That same year Ashley built a ferry slip and other facilities at Elberta, and ordered a pair of car ferries from the Craig Ship Building Company of Toledo.

The maritime terminal in Elberta was finished in 1892. The shoreland along Betsie Lake was filled to accommodate a rail switchyard on the site of the iron works dock and charcoal kilns. Other shoreland improvements were then completed. Two special loading slips were built for the train car ferries, known as the east and west slips. A large flour warehouse and associated dock were built to serve the traditional "break-bulk" rail/marine trade. This operation ran as many as 100 carloads of flour a day and employed 30 men. A freight house scale was also constructed, which served the region. About 1898, a nine-story grain elevator was built beside the west slip under a plan to haul grain in the lower holds of the main ferry *Ann Arbor #3*. The building was the tallest to be constructed to date in Benzie County. The grain operation did not prove successful, however, and in 1917 the building was removed. (Blacklock 1975; USACE 1893,1899,1911).

Although the Ann Arbor Railroad was mainly a freight line, its passenger traffic began to increase dramatically as the tourist and summer resort industry opened up in Northern Michigan around the turn of the century. It was to boost this business that the Ann Arbor Railroad built a plush resort hotel, the Royal Frontenac, in Frankfort, in 1901.

The Royal Frontenac was one of the great luxurious summer hotels of its time - comparable in every way to the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, which had been built in 1887 by two other railroads, the Grand Rapids & Indiana and the Michigan Central. It was a white, green-trimmed, three-story building, 500 feet long and 100 feet wide. Each of its 225 guest rooms had electricity, plumbing, hot water, and a telephone. Black students from Fisk University in Tennessee served as porters and waiters.

The Hotel was kept full all season by the railroad's "Resort Special", which rolled in every day with coachloads of summer visitors from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Although it originally stayed open year-round, it closed up for the winter beginning in 1907. The Hotel burned to the ground on the night of January 12, 1912, and was never rebuilt.

At peak service during the early 1900s, the Ann Arbor ran two passenger trains daily. Early every morning, train No. 52 would pull out of Elberta and go past the Y at the southeast end of Betsie Lake, then chug backwards to the Frankfort depot (near Hotel Frontenac), load up with passengers and head south. At about the same time, No. 51 would leave Toledo and head north, arriving at Elberta-Frankfort late in the afternoon. The two trains would pass each other somewhere around Alma or Mt. Pleasant (Wakefields, 1980). They carried a baggage coach, a combination mail and smoker car, two or three standard day coaches and a parlor car and diner.

The Resort Specials were plusher. They consisted of Pullman sleepers and an opulent diner (with silver service and real linen on the table), as well as baggage and mail coaches. Until the time of the first World War, the Ann Arbor also ran a daily-except-Sunday train between Frankfort and Cadillac. It left Cadillac at 9:45 in the morning and reached Frankfort around noon; then headed back to Cadillac at 3:45pm in the afternoon.

Then there was the famous train called 'Ping Pong'. It began as a convenience for Royal Frontenac guests, just an engine and one car running from the hotel to a golf course on the east end of Frankfort. Later it shuttled for many years between Frankfort and Beulah, sometimes going as far as Thompsonville. Since there was no way to turn around at Beulah, the Ping Pong had to make the return trip to Frankfort in reverse.

In 1906, one of the first marine wireless stations was erected on marine terminal property under the supervision of the Marconi Company. By 1912, the remains of the Frankfort Iron Works were converted to a railroad engine roundhouse and shop. A coal trestle was built which held 100 cars of coal, and in 1925, a 400-ton reinforced concrete coaling tipple was constructed.

The 1920s were also peak years for passenger traffic on the Ann Arbor Railroad. In 1920 it carried 617,533 passengers (Wakefields,1980). Together with freight loadings, however, the number of passengers decreased sharply with the growing popularity of the automobile in the thirties. The last passenger train pulled out of the Frankfort station on July 19, 1950. It carried mostly railroad buffs, eager to ride the last passenger train on the Ann Arbor Railroad.

In 1934, the former U.S. Life Saving Service building was purchased by the railroad company, moved some 400 yards east, and converted to a terminal office. A commissary was attached to the building and a marine repair shop erected nearby. In the late 1950's, the ferryboat engines were converted to diesel and the coal dock was closed.

The beginning of the end for the Ann Arbor Railroad came when the carrier declared bankruptcy on October 15, 1973. Ironically, the bankruptcy came, in part, because the Ann Arbor could not repay a loan to the DT&I, which had provided $2.5 million in 1965 for the rebuilding of one of the car ferries, *Ann Arbor #7.* By the early 1970's, only two of the Ann Arbor's carferry routes were still operating - those to Kewaunee and to Manitowoc. Service to Manistique had ended with the demise of the Manistique & Lake Superior Railroad in 1968, and the Menominee run was dropped in 1970. As the Penn Central bankruptcy and reorganization was taking place in the mid-1970s, operation of the Ann Arbor was briefly conveyed to the freshly minted Conrail system. Conrail ran the Ann Arbor trains and carferry system from April 1, 1976 until September 30,1977, as its "Ann Arbor Division".

In order to preserve the service in the corridor, the state of Michigan purchased the entire Ann Arbor route, and on October 1, 1977, freight and ferry operations were turned over to the Michigan Interstate Railway. That deal worked for five years, but in April 1982, Michigan interstate stopped running trains north of the city of Ann Arbor, and the ferry system soon succumbed. Viking, the last carferry operating out of Elberta, steamed to Kewaunee for the final time on April 27, 1982. The company finally closed its operations at Elberta in 1983. (Benzie County Bicentennial Commission 1976; Blacklock 1975).

Ashley and his two sons became famous in railroad building circles. In building the Ann Arbor Railroad, they talked and fought their way through Michigan, influencing cities, villages and townships into bond issues, and industrialists and businessmen into money and rights of way (Blacklock, 1975). The building of the Ann Arbor Railroad is one of the great sagas of Michigan history. The Ashleys had few resources to their name when they began; they prevailed by sheer determination and the audacity to do whatever was

necessary (McNew, 1989). In 14 short years they built a 300-mile railroad, building the Ann Arbor Railroad into a viable and productive carrier that survived for 90 years, employed thousands of individuals, and contributed to the early development of Northern Michigan - and especially the Elberta and Frankfort communities.

The Great Lakes Car Ferries

The development of the open sea rail ferry can be credited to two notable individuals: **James Ashley**, builder of the Ann Arbor Railroad, possessed the dream; and **Frank Kirby**, noted Naval Architect, provided the technical and engineering skill. The first cross-lake ferry service was established by the Toledo, Ann Arbor & North Michigan Railroad (later known as the Ann Arbor) in 1892.

Prior to that time, freight was shipped across Lake Michigan from Frankfort, Ludington, and Muskegon to Wisconsin ports and Chicago on 'break-bulk' steamers. In this kind of operation, package freight was transferred from railroad car to ferry and off-loaded the same way, a tedious and costly procedure.

James M. Ashley had a better idea. He reasoned that much time and money could be saved by transporting the railroad cars themselves aboard ship. (This, of course, was already being done by ferries across the Niagara, St. Lawrence, Detroit and St. Clair rivers and the eight-mile-wide Straits of Mackinac; but a ferry across a large body of open water such as Lake Michigan represented a major innovation).

In 1877, Ashley began to present his idea of an open water rail ferry to some of the greatest railroad men and capitalists in the country. They gave him credit for boldness and originality, but were not willing to stake their money on the outcome of such a hazardous undertaking (Kewaunee Enterprise, 1892). Finally, about 1891, Ashley was able to contract the services of Frank Kirby of Detroit, Michigan. Kirby was one of the most renowned Great Lakes naval architects. Kirby, an innovator himself, had designed the first iron ship to be built on the Great Lakes in 1872, and was accomplished in dealing with new concepts and materials (Kewaunee Enterprise, 1892). Previously Frank Kirby had also designed the *St. Ignace*, an ice breaker car ferry designed to operate in the ice and sea conditions of the Straits of Mackinac. This new style of ferry Ashley was looking for had to be designed for longer voyages across the open and unprotected waters of often stormy Lake Michigan.

Once designed, the new ferry had an enclosed bow and side, and was loaded from the stern. She had a wood hull sheathed with steel to 4' above waterline, and was designed for ice breaking. Above the car deck was a cabin and passenger deck. The pilothouse was located forward on this deck. Since many ships already lay on the bottom of Lake

Michigan, due to cargo shifting during a rough voyage, a technique to secure the train cars to the ship was an essential problem to be solved. An extra rail two feet outside the regular rail was installed and an ingenious system of jacks, clamps, chains, and turnbuckles that would fasten the train car securely to the ship. So certain were most people that the ferry would not work that shippers refused to entrust cargo to the ferry service for its inaugural trip. Finally, a coal shipper under contract to the railroad was persuaded to ship four carloads of coal on the first voyage (Wakefields, 1980).

Ann Arbor No. 1 was launched in September 1892 and put into service in November of that year. Her sister ship, *Ann Arbor No. 2* reached Elberta on New Year's Eve and was put into service almost immediately.

Both were wooden ships, almost identical in design. Both had four tracks, with a capacity of 24 railroad cars and, like the *St. Ignace* at the Straits of Mackinac, they had triple propellers - two at the stern and one at the bow. The bow propeller had proved useful in breaking sheet ice in the Straits, but it was not effective on the lake and was soon removed from both Ann Arbor boats.

Kirby's plans for two vessels -- *Ann Arbor No. 1* and *Ann Arbor No. 2* – proved a great success, despite skepticism in marine engineering circles. After the maiden voyages of these vessels on November 27, 1892, word of their success spread. The two great boats have no counterpart in the world. Eastern, western, and southern journalists hailed these two boats. Even the English, French, and German papers printed descriptions of them. An English paper stated that the day when loaded cars would be transported between Europe and America is at hand. The same paper stated that "if such a thing comes about, Governor Ashley will be credited with being who made this dream come true" (Kewaunee Enterprise, 1892). The paper called Governor Ashley "the Columbus of the nineteenth century".

As business prospered, the Ann Arbor added a third ship. *Ann Arbor No. 3* to its fleet in 1898. She was the first steel ferry, with a double hull, and she proved to be the most durable and dependable of all Ann Arbor ferries, serving faithfully until she was retired in 1960.

Ann Arbor No. 4, launched in 1906, was the 'jinx' ship of the fleet. She became legendary for her mishaps. The most serious of these was in 1909 when she capsized and turned on her side at Manistique as a result of faulty loading; and in 1923, when, after battling the great storm of February 13, she went aground and piled up against the breakwater at Elberta.

With its ferry business flourishing, the Ann Arbor added new routes to its schedule and boats to its fleet. In 1894 it opened a regular run to Menominee, and in 1895 one to Gladstone, with a passenger stop in Escanaba. In 1896 a triangular service from Elberta to Kewaunee and Manitowoc was established: this was later changed to a separate run for Manitowoc. In 1902, service to Gladstone was shifted permanently to Manistique.

Ann Arbor No. 5 was built in 1910. At 360 feet she was the longest car ferry on Lake Michigan at that time - 100 feet longer than *Ann Arbor No. 4*. Her powerful, 3000 horsepower, triple-expansion engines made her the champion ice breaker of the Ann Arbor fleet and the No. 5 became known as the 'Bull of the Woods'.

Ann Arbor No. 2 was retired in 1913 and sold to the Manistee Iron Works, which reduced her to a barge. *Ann Arbor No. 1* burned to the water's edge at Manitowoc in 1919; her hull was recovered and turned into a barge.

To replace these boats, the Ann Arbor had *No. 6* built in 1916 and *No. 7* in 1924. In 1925,shortly after the launching of *Ann Arbor No. 7*, the Ann Arbor came under the control of the Wabash Railroad through a stock purchase, thus making the Ann Arbor part of a larger rail system.

The 1920s were peak years for the Ann Arbor car ferries. In 1925, for example, they handled 80,272 cars, as compared with 32,297 in 1910 (Wakefields, 1980). Business declined in the Depression years, however, and except for the heavy traffic of the war years, continued to fall off through the 50s and 60s.

The last new ship built for the Ann Arbor was launched in 1927 and named the *Wabash*. She had engines very similar to *No. 6* and *No. 7*, but was about 20 feet longer. The arrangement with the Wabash lasted until 1963, when the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton Railroad purchased the Ann Arbor, and the Double A traded Wabash blue for the orange and black paint of the new parent DT&I.

Ann Arbor No. 6, altered in 1959, became the *Arthur K. Atkinson*, after the president of the Wabash Railroad System. *No. 5* was scrapped in the early sixties. The *Wabash* was rebuilt in 1963 and converted from coal to oil firing. Her deck was raised to accommodate auto frames on flat cars. After the work was finished, she was renamed *City of Green Bay*, but in 1972 her coast guard certificate was permitted to expire. She was laid up at Frankfort until 1974, when she was sold to a salvage firm in Ontario. Later she was loaded with scrap, towed to Spain, and cut up.

No. 7 was rebuilt in 1965 and her name was changed to *Viking*. She was given four new diesel-electric engines and a bow thruster for greater maneuverability; total cost of the conversion was $2.5 million.

During the five-year period from 1973 to 1978, the Ann Arbor had only one boat, *Viking*, in operation. Business improved somewhat after that, however, and the *City of Milwaukee* was purchased from the Grand Trunk and put in service in November of 1978.

The *City of Milwaukee*, the last of the large Ann Arbor ferries, became the focus of extensive preservation efforts following its retirement in the early 1980s. The Society for the Preservation of the *S.S. City of Milwaukee* (SPCM) spearheaded multiple campaigns to save the vessel, raising substantial funds and proposing innovative plans for its mooring and adaptive reuse. Initial attempts to secure a permanent berth in Frankfort failed due to legal and municipal hurdles, but continued advocacy led to temporary mooring with the Village of Elberta. The Society for the Preservation of the *S.S. City of Milwaukee* (SPCM) owned and maintained the vessel from 1988 to 1999. In November of 1997 they presented a proposal to the Village of Elberta Council entitled: 'Adaptive Reuse of the *S.S. City of Milwaukee* as a Maritime and Railroad Museum Ship'. In May 1999, a Comprehensive Plan for the National Historic Landmark Car Ferry *City of Milwaukee* "Mobilizing for Success" was prepared by Kenneth J. Vrana at the Center for Maritime & Underwater Resources Management at Michigan State University on behalf of the Society for the Preservation of the *S.S. City of Milwaukee*. Despite these efforts, advocates could not garner the support necessary to keep the *City of Milwaukee* moored in Elberta. Today, the *City of Milwaukee*, moored in Manistee, is recognized as a National Historic Landmark, representing one of the world's most ambitious and successful rail–lake operations.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

National Significance

The Elberta Waterfront Historic District is significant under National Register Criterion A for its association with the maritime and railroad transportation industry; Criterion B for its association with **James M. Ashley** and **Albert B. Bibb**; and Criterion C as a significant and distinguishable industrial-maritime landscape. While some of the historic buildings have been lost, enough remains to tell the story of a unique chapter in the history of transportation in Michigan.

Great Lakes Maritime Commerce

From the 1870s onward, Elberta became a focal point for commercial shipping, lumber transport, commercial fishing, and agricultural exports. Vessel arrivals increased dramatically, rising from hundreds annually in the 1870s to more than 2,500 vessels and over 3.3 million tons of cargo by 1914, illustrating Elberta's central role in Great Lakes commerce. The most nationally significant event associated with the property is the establishment of the Ann Arbor Railroad car ferry system in 1892. Conceived by James M. Ashley and realized through collaboration with naval architect Frank E. Kirby, the system introduced the world's first open-water rail car ferry, fundamentally altering freight transportation across Lake Michigan.

This innovation:

- Created a Chicago rail bypass of national importance
- Integrated rail and marine transportation at an unprecedented scale
- Influenced ferry and icebreaking technology worldwide

For nearly 90 years, Elberta served as the eastern anchor of this system, handling interstate and international commerce linking Maine to the Pacific Coast and Canada.

Nationally, the U.S. Life-Saving Station at Elberta represents the maturation of the federal lifesaving system during a critical period in American maritime history. It embodies the architectural, operational, and humanitarian ideals of the U.S. Life-Saving Service prior to its 1915 consolidation into the U.S. Coast Guard. As part of a nationwide network of nearly 200 stations, the Elberta station contributed to a federal system that saved tens of thousands of lives and laid the foundation for modern maritime rescue operations.

Criterion A: Association with Significant Events

The Ann Arbor Railroad and Car Ferry Yard are significant under Criterion A for their association with transportation and industrial development in Michigan. Elberta's terminal illustrates the integration of rail and maritime transport and the innovative logistics required to move railcars across Lake Michigan—a feat unmatched elsewhere in the world. The surviving waterfront infrastructure embody these historic patterns and serve as tangible links to the village's transformative role in regional commerce. These resources contribute to the understanding of Michigan's industrial and transportation heritage and highlight the state's unique legacy of innovation in Great Lakes shipping and railcar ferry technology.

The property clearly meets Criterion A at the **national level of significance** for transportation, commerce, and industrial history.

Criterion B: Association with Significant People

The property is directly associated with individuals significant at both the **national and regional level**.

James Mitchell Ashley (November 14, 1824 – September 16, 1896) served as a member of the United States House of Representatives from Ohio during the American Civil War, where he became a leader of the Radical Republicans and pushed for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, ending slavery in the United States. Starting at age 17, he worked as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, actively defying the Fugitive Slave Act. He also authored the resolution which started the first impeachment inquiry against Andrew Johnson. After the war, he served as Governor of the Montana Territory and he was a key developer of the Toledo, Ann Arbor & Northern Michigan Railroad, serving as its president from 1877 to 1893. His epitaph on the Ashley family obelisk in Toledo honors him as a "pioneer in the building of the city of Toledo" and a key figure in the "struggle for liberty and the preservation of the Union".

James M. Ashley is a figure of unquestioned national significance:

- Primary sponsor of the **13th Amendment** abolishing slavery
- Influential abolitionist and Radical Republican Congressman
- Governor of the Montana Territory
- Visionary railroad executive and transportation innovator

Ashley's decision to locate the Ann Arbor Railroad's marine terminal at Elberta directly shaped the community's identity, economy, and physical landscape. His role in pioneering open-water rail ferries ties Elberta to a transformative chapter in American transportation history.

Albert B. Bibb

Albert B. Bibb was one of the key architects of late nineteenth-century Life-Saving Service buildings. Bibb, who entered the Office of the Supervising Architect in the mid-1880s, helped give the Life Saving Service's stations a more distinctive architectural identity. His work reflects the period when lifesaving structures evolved from simple functional shelters into buildings that were still utilitarian but also visually prominent and publicly legible as federal rescue stations.

Locally and Regionally Significant Figures

Additional associated figures include:

- **Frank E. Kirby**, naval architect of the original Ann Arbor ferries
- **Robert Blacklock**, whose machine shop produced engines, rails, and locomotives critical to early industrial development
- **Lawrence W. Crane**, whose lumber operations ranked among the largest in the nation

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Criterion C: Design/Construction Significance

The Elberta waterfront meets Criterion C as a significant and distinguishable industrial-maritime landscape.

The property embodies:

- 19th- and early 20th-century harbor engineering by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Rail-marine transfer infrastructure, including ferry slips, switchyards, and dredged basins
- Industrial shoreline modification through dredging, filling, slips, and piers
- Adaptive reuse of industrial structures, notably the U.S. Life-Saving Station

Engineering and Planning Significance

The property meets Criterion C for engineering, industrial design, and maritime construction. The Elberta ferry slips represent rare surviving elements of early rail ferry

engineering. The integration of harbor works, rail yards, ferry slips, grain elevators, coal trestles, and marine repair facilities created a unified industrial system unparalleled elsewhere on Lake Michigan.

Architectural Significance

The former U.S. Life-Saving Station (1887), designed in the style associated with Albert Bibb, remains an excellent example of federal maritime architecture and retains high integrity despite relocation.

Local Significance of Rail Yard and Remaining Structures

At the local level, these structures are deeply tied to the maritime and industrial history of Benzie County.

The Frankfort Iron Works, established in 1867 on the south shore of Betsie Lake, was one of the most ambitious industrial undertakings in Benzie County during the 19th century. The enterprise quickly became the largest and most extensive manufacturing operation in the county, bringing regional prominence to the Village of Elberta and the surrounding harbor community. Today, remnants of the Frankfort Iron Works remain visible within Elberta's Waterfront Park, providing tangible evidence of the community's earliest large-scale industrial enterprise. These surviving features, together with archaeological resources and the adapted railroad infrastructure, illustrate the site's layered history—from iron production to rail and maritime transportation—and its central role in shaping Elberta's industrial and economic identity.

For nearly 50 years, the Life Saving Station safeguarded mariners navigating one of the most hazardous harbor entrances on Lake Michigan. Regionally, the station was part of a coordinated network of lifesaving facilities along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Its placement near Betsie Bay exemplifies the Great Lakes model of lifesaving, where stations were often located at harbor entrances rather than isolated shorelines. The station's operations supported commercial shipping routes that connected Michigan's western shore with regional markets throughout the Midwest.

With the acquisition of the building by the Ann Arbor Railroad in 1937, the station ceased active lifesaving operations, but continued to serve as an important component in Elberta's multi-modal rail and ferry transportation hub. The Railroad moved the Life Saving Station structure approximately 400 feet east, added a commissary, and adapted it for use as the Marine and Yard Office. The building continued in railroad service until the Ann Arbor Railroad ceased operations in 1976.

State Significance of Ann Arbor Rail Yard and Remaining Structures

At the state level, the Elberta Life Saving Station is a rare and well-preserved example of a late-19th-century Michigan Life-Saving Station designed under Albert B. Bibb. It illustrates Michigan's central role in the evolution of federal lifesaving policy on inland waters and reflects the state's dependence on maritime commerce during its peak industrial years.

In 1892, the Ann Arbor Railroad Company initiated railcar ferry operations across Lake Michigan, a pioneering endeavor that made Elberta one of the few ports in the world capable of loading entire railroad cars onto vessels for transport across open water. Operating year-round, despite severe ice conditions for more than a third of the year, the ferries were among the most notable icebreakers of their era. Their innovative design and persistent operation influenced naval icebreaking techniques worldwide and cemented the Ann Arbor Railroad's reputation for engineering ingenuity. The ferries transported freight, agricultural products, and passengers, supporting industries across Michigan, Wisconsin, and the broader Midwest for nearly a century. Infrastructure in Elberta expanded to meet these needs, including docks, slips, warehouses, grain elevators, and coaling facilities, making the village a critical link in regional and national transportation networks.

For more than 90 years this structure was involved in the car ferry operation and is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to both the maritime and railroad history of the Great Lakes region. The majority of Elberta's residents worked in the foundry on the terminal site that remains standing as part of the railroad roundhouse, or were employed at the yard or on the car ferries. The surrounding communities were integrally linked to the site, through the shipping of produce and other goods on the trains that were ferried across the lake on the car ferries to link this small but important community with the rest of the nation.

This site and these structures represent the initial development of, and the gradual refinement of a Great Lakes rail-car ferry depot and terminal. The historic shore facilities that exist: marine office (1887, 1937), slips (1892), turntable (1892), and the remains of the Roundhouse (1883) create a powerful sense of the integrity of feeling, association, and location.

Integrity Evaluation

Despite loss of some buildings, the property retains sufficient integrity to convey significance:

- **Location:** All primary activities occurred on the original site
- **Design:** Harbor layout, slips, rail alignments, and shoreline form remain legible
- **Setting:** The waterfront context remains intact despite conversion to parkland
- **Materials:** Surviving structures, ferry slips, and other artifacts remain
- **Workmanship:** Engineering and construction methods are still evident
- **Feeling:** The site continues to evoke its maritime-industrial past
- **Association:** Strong documentary and physical links remain to historic events

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Period of Significance for Proposed District: 1886 - 1945

The period of significance for the Life Saving Station extends from **1886 to 1932** encompassing its construction, peak operational years, and transition into the U.S. Coast Guard era.

The period of significance for the Ann Arbor Railroad & Car Ferry Operations extends from **1892 to 1945**, with traffic declining after the post-war years.

Photographs

Village of Elberta Life Saving Station.

Interior of Life Saving Station - Downstairs

Kitchen & Commissary.

Life Saving Station - Upstairs.

Current signage identifying the Waterfront as an historic site.

Marker location

Look for: Two post marker with the same text on each side
Site Status: On site
Address: Betsie Valley Trail, Elberta, MI,
Coordinates (Lat, Lon): 44.62452 -86.23044
County: Benzie

Marker stats

Marker ID: S122
Erected date: 1958
Registry listing year: 1957
Significant date: Industry and Invention (1875-1915)
Historical themes: Maritime Heritage

Iron Works with turntable visible on the bottom left.

Close-up of Iron Works.

Turntable.

Former location of West Slip Apron with Life Saving Station in background.

Ferry pilings and an anchor from *Ann Arbor #5* are still on the property.

Car Ferry Cleats

Car ferry slips are still visible on the site.

This sign currently marks the entrance to the Frankfort Harbor.

All Photos by Arlene Sweeting.

Lists of Historic and Non-Historic Properties

Located on Parcel A - the current Waterfront Park:

U.S. Life-Saving Station/Ann Arbor Marine Terminal Office - Constructed in 1887 by the U.S. Life Saving Service. Designed by Albert B. Bibb.

Frankfort Iron Works - Built in 1870. Only one brick wall and the stone retaining wall of the 1870 structure exists.

Turntable - In front of the remains of the Iron Works is a turntable. It is 75' in diameter and 4'deep. Two iron beams 6' high support the track which rotates on a single rail in the pit. The turntable is thought to be original but was strengthened with larger beams in the early 1920s.

Located on Parcel B:

Remains of the East Car Ferry Slip - Constructed in 1892, this is the site of the world's first open sea train car ferry operation. The loading aprons have been removed but the slips are still marked by metal moorings.

Cleats and Pilings - for mooring lines

Anchor - from the Ann Arbor #5

Chains and Railroad Ties

Number of Resources Within Property

1 Buildings
3 Structures
8 Objects

Total Number of Resources:
Historic: _11__ Non-Historic: _1_ Percentage: 92% Historic

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Attachments

October 17, 2025 Village of Elberta Council Minutes