

## Rossford, Ohio: A Superior Cultural Experience

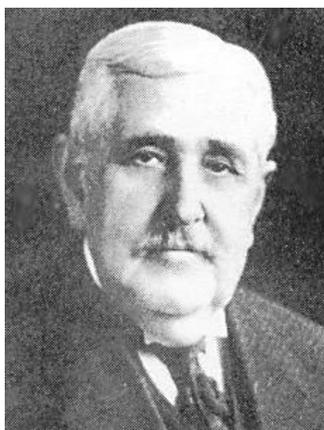
By Dr. Ted Ligibel



# Rossford, Ohio

Rossford was founded in 1898 by Edward Ford as the site for a new flat glass production facility. Edward Ford was born in 1843, the son of John B. Ford, a flat glass pioneer, and Mary Bower Ford. John Ford is considered the “father” of the plate glass industry in America. Though Edward Ford had become president and general manager of his father’s corporation, the Pittsburg Plate Glass Company in Pennsylvania, he chose to forge his own path in the burgeoning glass industry.

He was attracted to Northwest Ohio because of its proximity to the larger industrial powerhouse that was Toledo at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ease of transportation via the Maumee River and extensive railroad connections, plus the availability of sand, limestone, and natural and “producer” gas in the region



Edward Ford

spurred the development of numerous glass-related industries. These advantages, along with reasonable labor and taxation rates, attracted entrepreneurs like Edward Drummond Libbey to Toledo to re-establish his Libbey Glass Company here in 1888. Missing, however, was a local plant that specialized in flat

glass production. This was especially significant as the expanding auto industry would soon require massive amounts of flat glass for windshields and side and rear windows.

Edward Ford purchased 173 acres along the Maumee River in what would become Rossford in 1898, the year he and his family moved to the area.

The town’s name was the result of combining the last names of Edward Ford and his wife, Carrie Ross Ford, whom he married in 1872. Construction on the first furnace was completed by the summer of 1899 and the initial plate glass cast was poured in October that year.

# *Indian Hills . . . “It was the significant archaeological discovery of a c. 1610 “protohistoric” village in Rossford that rewrote Native American and European-American history.”*

As with all northern Ohio communities, the original inhabitants were Native American groups who followed the retreat of the last major glaciation in North America, known as the Wisconsinan period. It is well documented that Native Americans used the Maumee River Valley as a major transportation route for thousands of years, as verified by archaeological investigations and Native American oral traditions. Connecting the Mississippi and Great Lakes watersheds (via the major portage at Fort Wayne, Indiana), the Maumee River holds an important place in American history.

Numerous attempts for control of the Maumee River Valley occurred over a long and contested period as Native Americans, French explorers, and American settlers competed for British control of the valley, culminating in the French & Indian Wars (1754-1763); General Anthony Wayne’s military campaign that resulted in the decisive Battle of Fallen Timbers (1794); and the War of 1812 as evidenced at the Battle of Fort Meigs (1813) in nearby Perrysburg, Ohio. The 1815 Treaty of Ghent ensured American control of the Maumee River Valley and established the permanent boundary between Canada and the United States that still exists.

Rossford holds a special place in this tumultuous history. It was long thought that the Maumee River Valley was largely devoid of human habitation from the early 1400s to the point of European contact in the early 1600s. However, it was the significant archaeological discovery of a c. 1610 “protohistoric” village in Rossford that rewrote Native American and European-American history.

Now known as Indian Hills, the site sits on a modest promontory located directly east of Indian Hills School.

Discovered in 1963 by boys playing in Crane’s Woods, archaeologists from the University of Toledo excavated the ten-acre site in the summers of 1967 and 1968. Excavated portions included a palisaded wall that revealed several circular structures lining the wall’s interior which likely served as habitations. Scores of artifacts, including shell-tempered pottery shards, brass decorative objects, and glass beads were also found. Remarkably, the burials of over 100 individuals were found in four burial pits (ossuaries) at the site.

Though the findings initially were not fully understood, later analysis by University of Toledo archeologists concluded that this was one of the largest and perhaps the last village to be inhabited by regional Native Americans before European contact in the early 1600s. Intensive research determined that the site of the village was referenced on Samuel de Champlain’s earliest maps from 1616 and 1632.

According to the late Dr. David Stothers, who investigated and reinterpreted the findings in the 1970s, the Indian Hills site “connects the historic and prehistoric time periods for one of the two known cultural traditions in the region of the western Lake Erie drainage basin [in this case, the Sandusky Tradition of the Mascouten (Algonquin families) groups]—an unprecedented discovery.” (Stothers, 1981) The significance of the site led to its listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

Following the end of the War of 1812, American and European settlers began permanently populating Northwest Ohio. This included the portion of northern Wood County that includes present-day Rossford. Permanent settlement into much of Northwest Ohio was impeded by an expansive wetland known as the Great Black Swamp (the old bed of Lake Erie’s glacial predecessors) that stretched roughly

from present-day Fremont, Ohio west to Fort Wayne, Indiana, south of the Maumee River. Wood County, which had been formed in 1820, shortly after the Treaty of Ghent, was largely located within this wetland.

Consequently, the earliest towns that developed were along the Maumee River’s high banks, just as past Native American villages had been. These towns included Perrysburg (1816), Maumee (1817), Port Lawrence (1817), and Vistula (1833), the latter two of which merged in 1837 to become Toledo.

The 1830 *Indian Removal Act* began a decades-long effort by the United States government to relocate all Native Americans residing east of the Mississippi River. As a result, most Native Americans were forcibly moved to Oklahoma and Kansas. This included the historic tribes that inhabited Northwest Ohio and Southeast Michigan (i.e., Potawatomi, Ottawa, and Chippewa). Thus, by the time the first settlers arrived in Wood County, there were virtually no Native Americans remaining here. The American settlers were largely farmers, and little physical evidence from this period exists today, especially in the Rossford area. Apart from some remaining agricultural fields surrounding the city, only a handful of former family farmhouses remain, most having been converted to dwellings now within neighborhoods, such as homes on Rossburn Avenue near Dixie Highway across the street from its original location; the former George Davis family home built in 1856, still thought to be on its original site, but now in the Bacon Street neighborhood; and the former Dunipace homestead, which was moved to Colony Road.

# A Melting Pot of Families

*In response to the establishment of the Ford Plate Glass Company, an influx of European immigrants, especially Eastern European, emigrated to Rossford to find work.*



Rossford lay adjacent to Toledo, but in Wood County, and sat directly on the Maumee River, a site and situation that offered the economic, transportation, and labor incentives that had attracted Edward Ford to establish his flat glass company here.

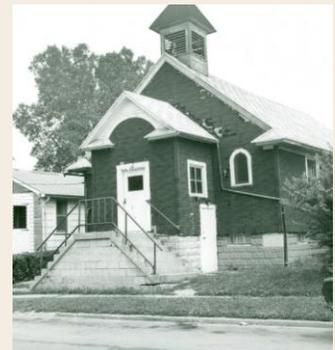
Hundreds of immigrant families chose Rossford, often recruited by Edward Ford, as their new home in the United States. They arrived from Belgium, Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Italy, and Ukraine; in all, at least 18 different ethnic groups have been identified in Rossford. African American families were encouraged by Ford to relocate to Rossford from the Creighton, Pennsylvania area. Such transference was a common phenomenon, especially in the American Midwest, where the industrial revolution had fostered the growth of hundreds of manufacturing enterprises, notably in large urban regions like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit/Dearborn, Chicago, and Toledo/Rossford. This ethnic legacy has played a large role in defining the character and “sense of place” that became—and remains—Rossford. In addition to the sprawling and ever-changing Ford Plate Glass Company, prominent buildings included the Employee Relations Building (Ford Club), erected in 1917 adjacent to the plant on Superior Street. Here,



workers could socialize and relax after work and on the weekends and holidays. The former Rossford Polish Club on Bergin Street is among other important structures related to the ethnic theme. These structures and other commercial and civic buildings, religious structures and congregations, street names, and residential architecture reflect this heritage. Intangible heritage, including festivals, foodways, traditional recipes, sports teams, musical and social societies, and an American Legion Post (533) also helped to define the cultural milieu that was and is Rossford.



Also, the several churches erected to meet the religious needs of the community over the years, including Baptist, Catholic (Roman and Eastern), Methodist, Lutheran, and African Methodist Episcopal were important cultural centers for specific ethnic groups. Some churches still retain customs associated with their founding and some contain stained glass with the names of founding families inscribed.



Historic congregations like Sts. Cyril & Methodius (Slovak) and St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Churches (now combined as All Saints Parish), Allen AME Chapel (African American), and St. Michael’s Catholic (Ukrainian) Church, helped define Rossford’s cultural traditions.

*Rossford is typical of the small Midwestern community in terms of its physical design and layout. Essentially conforming to grid-patterned streets forming horizontal blocks at 90-degree angles, Rossford is laid out along a linear main street (Superior Street) that follows the configuration of the Maumee River. Rossford's building environment is characterized by low scale, one- and two-story structures, both frame and brick in construction.*

*The physical characteristics of the structures along Superior Street represent an increasingly rare form of small-town urban design in that the entire stretch is a blend of industrial, commercial, civic, religious, governmental, educational, and residential structures all adjacent to and intermingled with one another.*



Though there have been notable demolitions over the years, the existing form continues to cast an intimacy of urban design that has long since disappeared from most smaller municipalities. Iconic structures that remain along Superior Street include the former Ford Club (now the headquarters of IPS); the Rossford State Bank (now law offices); the Tuller Block; the Rossford United Methodist Church; the Community Recreation Center; the Collegiate Gothic style Rossford High School (by Toledo architects, the Stophlet brothers); the mid-century bank (now 5/3 Bank); the Mid-Century Modern style 1950s civic complex at Superior Street's southerly terminus; and, of course, the massive former Ford Plate Glass plant (now NSG Glass), anchoring the northern end of Superior Street. Other iconic structures, like the imposing, three-story brick former Polish Hall (c. 1910) on Bergin Street, Indian Hills School (1970) on Glenwood Road, and All Saints Catholic Church (2002) on Lime City Road, are important examples of the evolution of Rossford's design heritage. A handful of vintage residential houses are sprinkled throughout this district, several dating from the company-town era of Rossford's

history. Designed in both Gable-front and Foursquare forms, most of these are frame construction.

Perhaps the most iconic of these is the home at 411 Superior Street, dating to 1898, and documented as one of the original Ford company-built homes.



Other homes have had small storefronts added to their front elevations, extending right to the sidewalks, examples of the classic "mom and pop" form of commercial establishment. Superior Street itself comprises an important element in Rossford's physical character, existing as a landscaped boulevard the entire length of the commercial district. This boulevard is unique in that, technically, it is two roadways—Dixie Highway (Ohio Route 65) on the northerly portion of the road and Superior Street comprising the

southern section. Though the exact date of this boulevard's creation would require further research, it may have had its origins as early as 1894 when an interurban trolley, the Toledo & Maumee Valley Electric Railroad, was routed through what would become Rossford, to Perrysburg about eight miles to the southwest. Following World War I, Superior Street was dedicated as a Memorial Parkway honoring the four local men who lost their lives in that war. Also, reportedly, some of the wealthier families who lived along East River Road upriver



towards Perrysburg paid to have the highway from Rossford to Perrysburg landscaped in the 1920s and 1930s to create a more beautiful drive along that road. Today, Superior Street also is a dedicated Memorial Parkway to Rossford resident, Marine Sargent David R. Christoff, who died in 2006 during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Spreading out from Superior Street are densely built neighborhoods that consist primarily of one- and one-and-a-half-story frame homes, with a scattering of brick and two-story homes interspersed. A few two-story former corner stores can still be found in these neighborhoods. A highly significant aspect of the residential architecture in Rossford is the fact that the Ford Plate Glass Company developed housing for its workers in both single and multiple family units. The “company town” was a relatively new concept in later 19<sup>th</sup> century America, having begun in England in response to the need for nearby and safe housing for workers and their families. Some notable American examples include Pullman in Chicago; Gary, Indiana; the Proctor & Gamble community in Cincinnati; and, most applicably, Ford City in Armstrong County, Pennsylvania, developed by the Ford family to provide housing for laborers at Pittsburgh Plate Glass Plant Number 3. It is not surprising then that Edward Ford embarked upon the same effort here, creating company-provided housing in his town, Rossford. Approximately 37 homes had been erected in 1899, but by 1903, five years after the town had been founded, 100 homes had been built. Multi-family “terraces,” like Ford Terraces and Dixie Highway Terraces (both now demolished) followed shortly thereafter.



The Dixie Terrace, Rossford, Ohio

The population at the time (c.1903-1905) was 1200, with the vast majority of citizens working at the Ford plant. Most of these residential structures are characterized as vernacular style constructions, in popular Gable-front and Foursquare forms. Undoubtedly, many of these originated as “catalog homes,” ordered through companies like Sears & Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, and Aladdin Homes.



Raw materials, cut to specific designs, were shipped by railroad to local freight depots where homeowners or their carpenters would arrange to pick up the materials to deliver to the chosen site. All needed materials were contained in such shipments, including not only the lumber, but also the flooring, roofs,



doors, windows, and hardware. Local lumberyards also carried plans for homes, garages, small stores, and barns.

One of the largest residential developments in Rossford’s history was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of the *Eagle Point Colony* in the northwestern quadrant of the city, directly along the Maumee River.

This curvilinear street subdivision represented the wave of heavily-landscaped communities that began to spring up in America following the Civil War, as in Riverside outside Chicago. Eagle Point Colony was established beginning in 1916 by the George B. Ricaby Company, under the Eagle Point Realty Company name. Rossford resident, Joseph Dunipace, was the general manager. The land on which much of Eagle Point Colony was developed had been the Dunipace farm (the original Dunipace farmhouse was moved and now stands at 200 Colony Road, just south of the Eagle Point Colony’s stone entrance gates). Eagle Point Colony was laid out by William Pitkin, Jr., a recognized landscape architect of Rochester, New York. The large lush lots and meandering streets attracted numerous residents who were well-known in Toledo and area businesses and industries. Expansive architect-designed homes in the Renaissance, Colonial, and Mediterranean Revival styles arose on these lots, many with a view of the Maumee River. Prominent residents included the Rheinfrank, Bock, Lamson, France, Walbridge, and Hoke families. Eagle Point Colony has remained a desirable residential location since its founding. In 1983, it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Historically, and owing to its proximity to the Maumee River, boating and fishing were major pastimes in Rossford and have deeply influenced its character and recreational heritage. Important elements in the overall character of Rossford are the city's parks, both current and historic, and its marina. Included in this list are Crane's



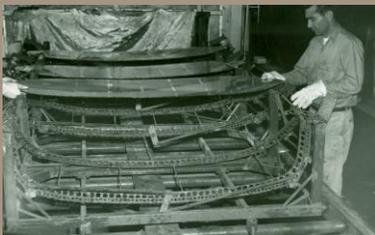
Woods (now the location of Indian Hills School and the Indian Hills Archaeological site), Island View Park, Beech Street Park, the Edward

Ford Memorial Park, adjacent to the glass plant on Dixie Highway, and Veteran's Memorial Park on the Maumee River, which includes the municipal marina.



## *The impact of Rossford's industrial heritage*

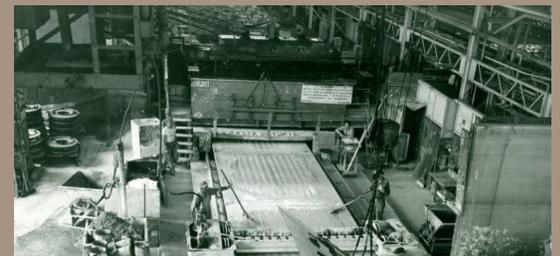
The industrial history of Rossford largely revolves around the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company and its massive impact on this community. As noted previously, Edward Ford purchased 173 acres along the Maumee River in what would become Rossford in 1898. Construction on the flat glass plant commenced shortly thereafter, and the first furnace was completed in the summer of 1899. The initial plate glass cast was poured on October 28, 1899, and the first batch of flat glass was shipped in mid-November of that year. By 1900, a production capacity of six million feet of glass per year had been reached, thereby eclipsing Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company as the largest manufacturer of flat glass in the nation.



The availability of numerous railroad lines in the Toledo area, several directly serving Rossford, as well as the proximity to Great Lakes shipping via the Maumee River

and Lake Erie proved highly advantageous for glass production and distribution around the nation. Initially, the Rossford plant employed several hundred workers primarily in the casting, grinding, and polishing departments. The 1903 payroll was \$32,100 per month. Between the years 1903 and 1912, the plant reached a size of 400,000 square feet.

Over the ensuing years, the plant continued to expand, particularly in response to the huge demand for automobile and architectural glass. Several innovations were perfected at the plant over the years, including safety and laminated glass for automobiles and buildings in the 1920s. In 1926, Edward Ford adopted a new Belgian technique, known as the Bicheroux process, for casting plate glass through water-cooled rollers. This flat glass production process greatly streamlined production, and, in the 1930s, the plant received an exclusive contract to supply all the glass for vehicles produced by General Motors Corporation. In 1930, the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company merged with the Libbey-



Owens- Sheet Glass Company to form the Libbey-Owens-Ford (LOF) Glass Company. One of LOF's largest orders at the time (1930-1931) was for window glass for New York's Empire State Building which used Libbey-Owens-Ford glass exclusively. The Rossford plant continued to prosper and perfected the development of colored architectural glass, a product known as Vitrolite, that was used on storefronts, in bathrooms, as decorative panels and counter-tops in homes and businesses, as well as artistic murals in public buildings. In all, 28 different colors of Vitrolite were available by the mid-1930s.

LOF's reputation for quality flat glass continued, and was characterized by strong promotional campaigns, including mounting a major exhibition at the 1939 New York World's Fair. By 1940, the Rossford plant had expanded to 1,250,000 square feet and the annual payroll was \$170,452 per month, over \$2 million per year.

At this time, the plant employed 4,000 workers. The economic impact of a workforce this large on Rossford, Toledo, and the surrounding region was far-reaching.



Innovations during this period included the development of an insulated glass known as *Thermopane*. In 1946, Libbey-Owens-Ford began to manufacture this insulated window glass. In 1951, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were sealed in Thermopane glass at the National Archives.

In the 1950s, LOF adopted a new process of flat glass production known as “float glass.” The float glass technique was developed by Sir Arthur Pilkington and Kenneth Bickerstaff in England (Pilkington Brothers’ glass companies) and revolutionized flat glass production in the world. The conversion to float glass eliminated the need for the grinding and polishing components of making sheet glass, again streamlining the process. An immediate and impactful result was

that the need for grinding and polishing skills and the jobs they represented were largely eliminated.

In 1986, the British glass manufacturer Pilkington Group purchased the company and its flat glass production assets but maintained the LOF name and glass production at the Rossford plant. In June 2006, Pilkington Group was acquired by Nippon Sheet Glass (NSG), and the LOF name was removed from the company's name. Today, a few of the original plant buildings exist, but their exact location would have to be verified with intensive research. The current workforce is estimated to be around 300 employees.

Over the years, numerous spin-off industries and commercial establishments were attracted to Rossford, but it was the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company, and later, Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Company, that was the mainstay of Rossford’s economy and its industrial heritage. Throughout its history, later generations of the Ford family remained active with company management. Following the death of Edward Ford in 1920, his son, George Ross Ford, became president and treasurer of the Edward Ford Plate Glass Company. The Edward Ford

family’s generosity to Rossford is perhaps incalculable. All aspects of community life were impacted by their love of community. Schools, churches, social halls, homes, and businesses were either constructed by or subsidized by the Fords. The company also supported civic improvements like street paving and parks. To say that Rossford is “the town that Ford built” is an understatement. Edward Ford and his family’s influence will continue to be felt here for generations to come.



#### About This Report

This historical and cultural overview of Rossford, Ohio was written by Dr. Ted Ligibel, APT-PR, Historic Preservation Consultant, as part of a Cultural Tourism Grant awarded by Ohio Humanities to the Rossford Convention and Visitors Bureau. Dr. Ligibel’s research and findings will be used to upgrade historical displays and programming at the Edward Ford Memorial Park.

Photos courtesy of the Rossford Public Library’s digital collection.

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