

# TavernTalk

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## In 1836 the stagecoach was the fast, modern way to travel

Stagecoaches carrying passengers bound for Detroit or Chicago stopped regularly at Walker Tavern twice a day during the 1840s. Abbott Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire built the coaches that became known as “Concord Coaches.”

Mark Twain described a stagecoach journey he took in 1861, “Our coach was a swinging and swaying cage of the most sumptuous description – an imposing cradle on wheels.” Stagecoaches were suspended on a series of three-inch leather straps instead of springs like other wagons and buggies. They rocked from side to side like a ship in a storm and travelers reported that the motion made them “seasick.”

Concord Coaches came in three sizes to hold six, nine, or twelve passengers, although later models could crowd as many as twenty inside. They were made of white oak and ash. Oak lengths were sawed into the proper size for spokes; hubs were made of elm; and the curved bodies were shaped from basswood. Each piece of metalwork such as the steps, railings, fittings, and door handles were forged by a blacksmith and signed by its maker.

Stagecoaches were quite ornate. The undercarriage was usually painted a bright yellow and the upper portion red or green. Landscapes sometimes decorated the outsides and a lush fabric lined the insides, usually flowered damask.

Three leather bench seats accommodated up to twelve passengers. Each passenger had about fifteen inches of seat room. The travelers who rode in the middle had the worst seat, because it had no back support; they had to hold onto leather straps that hung from the ceiling. Canvas or leather curtains hung over the windows and could be lowered to keep the dust out, but the air inside became stifling when they were closed.

If it got too crowded inside the coach, passengers might ride atop the coach as well. A leather sling attached to the back of the coach held luggage. The coaches carried the mail as well as



passengers, and oftentimes passengers had to ride with the mail bags stored under their feet.

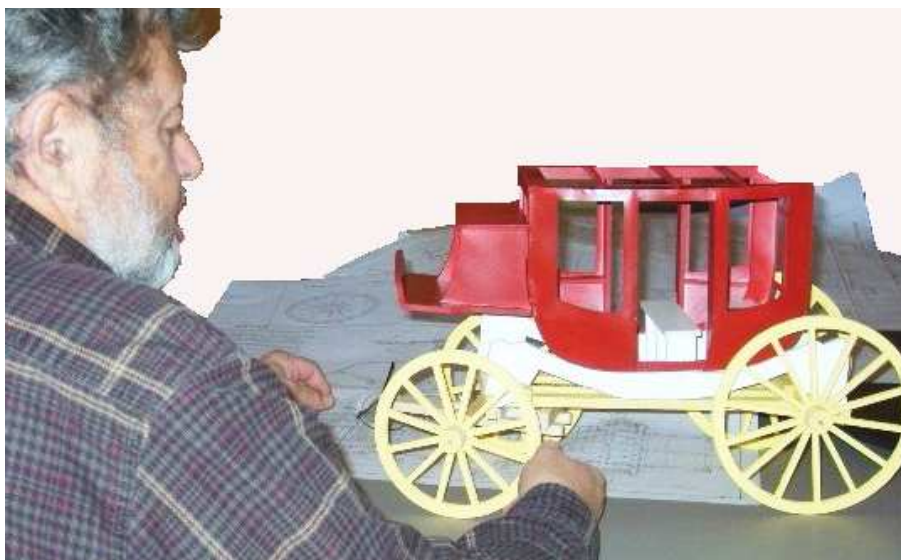
Stagecoach companies wanted the public to believe that their coaches were the fast, modern way to travel. The companies instructed their young, athletic drivers to enter and leave town with their four to six powerful horses running at top speed. In reality, stagecoaches were able to cover eight to twelve miles in an hour when travel conditions were good and roads were dry. A more realistic goal for a driver was to travel fifty miles in a day.

Fares for traveling by stagecoach were divided into three classes: 1<sup>st</sup> – rode all the way; 2<sup>nd</sup> – had to walk at bad places in the road; 3<sup>rd</sup> – had to walk at bad places in the road AND push at hills.

You can read more about the history of the Concord Coach in the Spring-Summer 2010 issue of the *American Antiquities Journal*, and portions of that article are reprinted above with their permission.

*In the late 1950s you could still get a ride on a stagecoach in the Irish Hills. Frontier City, an old western-style amusement park was located on Onsted Highway just south of Cambridge Junction and offered stagecoach rides as well as buckboard and riverboat rides. Stagecoach Stop USA, another wild-west themed park was built by Fred and Dorothy Bablau in 1964 and operated by the Bablau family in the Irish Hills until the fall of 2008. Walker Tavern is an authentic historical site where stages stopped for meals and lodging during the 1800s.*





Gary LeGuire with the model of a Concord Coach that he built to illustrate how the component parts fit together and what is still needed to make the Walker Tavern Coach a functioning stagecoach.

## Walker Tavern's Concord Coach

If you want to step inside a Concord stagecoach, visit the barn at Walker Tavern. There you will find a replica of a six-passenger Concord Coach in the process of being built. The story behind this life-sized stagecoach model stretches back into Michigan history.

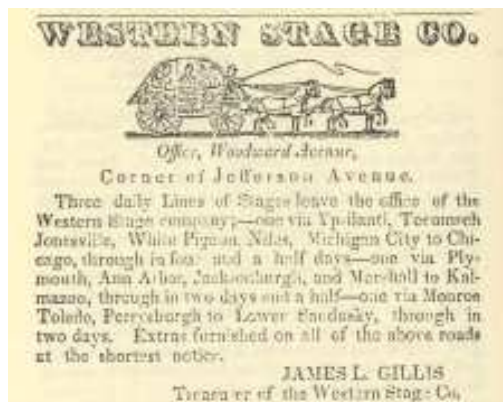
In the 1970s, soon after Walker Tavern was purchased by the State of Michigan in order to preserve it as a typical stagecoach stop, a state employee named Ulysses Maynard began an amazing project. He started to build a Concord Stagecoach from scratch. At the time Maynard was employed as a carpenter and exhibition fabricator for the state's historic museums.

In 1969 Maynard and Harry Kelsey of the Michigan Historical Commission, met with Don Berkabile, Curator of Transportation at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. Mr. Berkabile was able to supply specifications and original drawings for a six-passenger Concord Coach in the Smithsonian collection that was the exact size of a stagecoach that carried passengers and mail between Big Rapids, Grand Rapids, and Kalamazoo up until 1859. That coach was donated to the State Historical Commission sometime between 1915 and 1924 by Big Rapids merchant, Edward C. Newcombe.

Maynard had originally intended to use the Smithsonian plans to restore the donated coach, but its condition was later determined to be too poor to be restored. So instead, he used the plans to begin

building a life-sized replica of that coach. Maynard demonstrated fine carpenter skills and loving care in constructing the driver's box and the curved wooden body of the coach's shell. Forged and hammered iron parts for the steps and brackets for the floor boards of the driver's box were added. This was as far as Maynard got with the project and the partially constructed stagecoach was put on display at Walker Tavern.

In 2006 Gary LaGuire toured Walker Tavern. When he saw Maynard's model, he became intrigued with the potential it held for helping visitors understand what stagecoach travel was like. LaGuire built a seating platform to fit inside the stagecoach's outer body shell, so that people could climb into the coach and sit down. The next step LeGuire recommends is adding a rudimentary undercarriage and plywood wheels to the display. This will make the exhibit look more realistic until more work can be done.



Francis A. Dewey

## The Stagecoach Driver

Stagecoach drivers were greatly admired for their athletic capabilities. Young, strong, and resourceful, the drivers had to be able to control a team of four to six powerful horses thundering down the road at a breathtaking speed. They had to be able to guide those horses along rutted roads and around bogs and mud holes. Drivers needed to cajole their horses on through blizzards and drenching rainstorms and across flooded rivers. If anything broke down, the driver had to be able to fix it.

One such driver was Frances A. Dewey. Dewey was a French Canadian originally from Three Rivers, Quebec. He immigrated to New Hampshire with his parents before coming to Michigan in 1829. Dewey began driving stages when he was eighteen. In the 1830s he drove the Chicago Road between Detroit and Ypsilanti. Later he drove the Monroe Pike through Tecumseh. Walker Tavern was one of Frances Dewey's favorite stagecoach stops. He wrote in his journal, "*Nature made Sylvester Walker for his business. Men of every class and condition of life from the earliest times would stretch out their day's drive to reach the hospitable roof of the Walker's hotel.*"

When the railroad replaced the stagecoach as the most popular way to travel from Detroit to Chicago, both stagecoach drivers and stagecoach stops found themselves short on business. Looking for a new occupation, Frances Dewey purchased Walker Tavern from Lucy Walker in 1868 and he and/or his family farmed the property up until the 1920s. Frances Dewey died in 1892. He was eighty-one years old.

## Volunteers Needed

Volunteers like Lori Cencer, Eve Merkle and Bonnie McJennet (pictured here dressed for the 2010 Victorian Halloween celebration) are an essential ingredient in Walker Tavern's crowd-pleasing programs and special events. Call 517-467-4401 today to see how you can get involved.



## 2011 dates to put on your calendar

January 20, 10 -11:30 a.m.  
**Friends of Walker Tavern's Annual Meeting**

Jan. 27, Feb. 24, March 31, April 28  
**Walker Crafters**, 1 - 3 p.m.  
Volunteers get together to make things for the Walker Mercantile store. No experience needed. All hands welcome.

April 30, 1-4 p.m.  
**Volunteer Spring Cleanup Day**  
Volunteers clean up the site and find out about other volunteer opportunities. Free hot dogs and rootbeer floats for all participants.

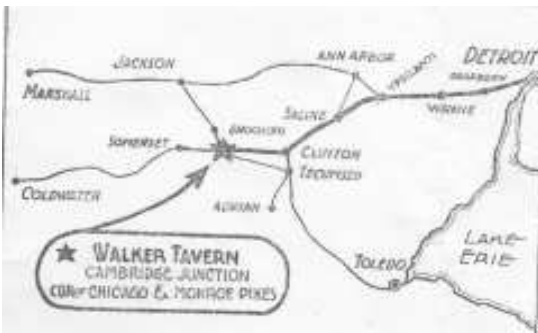
May 13 - 15  
**Civil War Reenactment**  
Living history encampment with civilian and military reenactments including Civil War battles, sutlers, and daily activities. Friday: school groups only. Saturday and Sunday: open to the public. Admission: adults \$3, children \$1, under 5 free.

July 6, 12, 19 & 26, 1 - 3 p.m.  
**Wednesdays at Walker**  
Programs for adults and children to "do history" together. This year's programs focus on Native American culture, Quilts, the Underground Railroad, and Pioneer Settlement. Cost is \$6 per person and pre-registration is required.

August 6, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
**Walker On Wheels**  
Vintage cars, trucks, bicycles and campers 50 years and older on display against an historic backdrop. Also features old time music, food, and auto industry exhibits. Admission to the show is free.

September 3, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.  
**Stagecoach Days**  
Lost Arts, old-time music, food, and family activities. Admission: adults \$3, children \$1, under 5 free

October 22, 1 - 4 p.m.  
**Victorian Halloween**  
Experience Halloween as it was celebrated by 19<sup>th</sup> Century families with stories, fortune telling, games, crafts and goodies. Admission: \$3, those in costume \$2.



The map on the left shows that stagecoach stops like Walker Tavern were located every 10 to 15 miles along the old Chicago Road.

# STAGECOACH TO WALKER TAVERN

**RULES OF THE ROAD:**

- Ride the stagecoach from Detroit to Walker Tavern at Cambridge Junction. In the 1840's the Chicago Road was the major route for travel between Detroit and Chicago. Stagecoach stops were located every 10 to 15 miles along the way. A stagecoach driver's goal was to travel 50 miles in a day, but many things can happen along the road, as you will see.
- Choose a playing piece and place it on the Detroit circle.
- Spin to see who goes first. The first player to spin green spins again and moves to the color indicated.
- Take turns in a clockwise direction.
- When a player lands on a stagecoach stop (yellow circle), he or she must make a decision. The person to his or her right reads a Decision Card and the player chooses what to do.
- Turn the card over and follow the instructions on the other side.
- The first player to reach Walker Tavern at Cambridge Junction wins the game!

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You can now travel by stagecoach from Detroit to Cambridge Junction stopping at stagecoach stops along the way. Encounter hazards and trials that might have befallen 19<sup>th</sup> century travelers and make decisions that either speed up or slow down your progress. Come play the new Walker Tavern board game - "Stagecoach to Walker Tavern." It is part of the exhibition about early travel on the old Chicago Road located in the barn at Walker Tavern.

*Tavern Talk* is a publication of Walker Tavern Historic Site and is edited by Cheryl Natzmer Valentine. Walker Tavern is part of the Michigan Historical Museum system under the Michigan DNRE. Visit our website at: [www.michigan.gov/walkertavern](http://www.michigan.gov/walkertavern)

**Walker Tavern Historic Site**  
**13220 M-50**  
**Brooklyn, MI 49230**

## **Hewitt House Survey**

We asked what kinds of exhibits and services you most wanted in the renovated Hewitt House, and you overwhelmingly answered, “Restrooms and Exhibits on Michigan’s Pioneer Past..” The Hewitt House Survey invited members of the community to rate twelve possible uses for the Hewitt House on a scale from one to five, one being “not important” and five “very important. Participants also rated as very important exhibits about changes in travel from stagecoaches to automobiles, exhibits about the history of the Irish Hills, Walker Tavern as a 20<sup>th</sup>

century roadside attraction, and space to holdr programs and workshops. Travel information, gift shop, and an archive or reading room were viewed as nice, but non-essential. Refreshments and a space for community groups to hold meetings were viewed as relatively unimportant by most people. Thank you to everyone who participated in the survey. Your opinions will have a strong impact on planning for the new Hewitt House exhibits.

## **Join the Friends**

Become a member of the Friends of Walker Tavern. **Annual membership is just \$20** and includes invitations to Friends of Walker Tavern events, voting privileges at the Annual Meeting and one free admission to each of three special events: the Civil War Reenactment weekend, Stagecoach Days and Victorian Halloween. Write “Annual Friends Membership” on your check’s memo line.

**Make your check payable to:**  
Friends of Walker Tavern

**Mail your check to:**  
Walker Tavern Historic Site  
13220 M-50  
Brooklyn, MI 49230

## **Recipe Corner**

This simple, yet delicious recipe for Pumpkin Bread comes from Laura Cencer’s new cookbook, “Pioneer Hospitality.” The book is a collection of recipes, cooking lore, and Walker Tavern history that brings the era of taverns and stagecoach travel to life. Cencer is a resident of the Irish Hills and a Walker Tavern volunteer. “Pioneer Hospitality” may be purchased through the Walker Mercantile.

*\*Although nutmeg was a very popular spice in pioneer kitchens, it was very expensive and would not always have been available. Nutmeg was such an essential and valued part of pioneer cooking that pioneer kitchens often had a special container designed just to keep the nutmeg safe. Can you find the nutmeg grater in the Walker Tavern kitchen?*



### **Pumpkin Bread**

To make one small loaf you will need one cup of cooked and mashed pumpkin, two eggs, one cup of sugar, two cups of flour, and half a small spoon of nutmeg\* (if you have it).

Mix the eggs and pumpkin. Stir in the flour, sugar and nutmeg. Spoon into a baking dish or loaf pan and bake in a moderate oven for about one hour. Let cool before slicing.