

# From sand spit to historic site

By Jackie Weber

Ask people today what landmark they most identify with Elk Rapids and the answer will most assuredly be the historic Island House and the white wooden foot-bridge connecting it to River Street.

A favorite idling spot of locals and visitors alike, the Island House rose along with the fortunes of one of the town's founding fathers.

In 1866, Henry Noble and his business partner Wirt Dexter purchased a four-acre sand spit extending north of the mouth of the Elk River into Grand Traverse Bay. Later that year, Henry's brother, Edwin Noble, moved to Elk Rapids and eventually joined the family's lumber and iron business.

When it came time for Edwin to build a home, he chose a building site on the sand spit, which was now an island in the middle of the river. Many townspeople were against him building there, but Edwin persisted.

He had the low spots filled with dirt and an area leveled for his home. The island was later named "The Isle of Pines" because of the numerous and varied species of trees Edwin planted there.

Edwin's sons Henry and Percy (by first wife Emmeline who died in 1879) and his daughter Natalie (by second wife Cora) were all born on the island.

The house was small at first, but as Edwin's family grew, so did their housing needs. Rooms were added for the servants who cooked, cleaned and took care of the family.

The house, though small by big-city standards, became one of the more impressive structures in Elk Rapids. It contained four bedrooms, a parlor, dining room, two bathrooms with marble basins and nickel-plated fixtures and four tubs with hot and cold running water — the latter a luxury indeed at a time when most working class homes were lucky to have one without indoor plumbing.

There were lots of parties on the island. In the winter, the Noble family and their friends would have toboggan and skating get-togethers, warming themselves afterwards around a cozy fire in the parlor. They had pets of all kinds including a friendly doe, horses,

ducks, chickens and even prairie dogs to play with.

Every day was an adventure for the Noble children. There were trips aboard the steamers and schooners that regularly docked in Elk Rapids to New York, Chicago and Boston, where they ate in the finest restaurants and shopped in the most exclusive shops.

There were paintings and books on all subjects available for the children in the family library, as well as private music lessons for Natalie and riding lessons for the boys.

Life on the island seemed enchanted. Good manners and formal dress were the everyday custom. Horse-drawn carriages unloaded dinner guests at a special entrance under the house so they would not soil their skirts and pants in mud or snow.

Around the turn of the century, Edwin's position within his family's company began to change and his financial holdings to diminish. He sold his beautiful island home to Elk Rapids Iron Company in 1903.

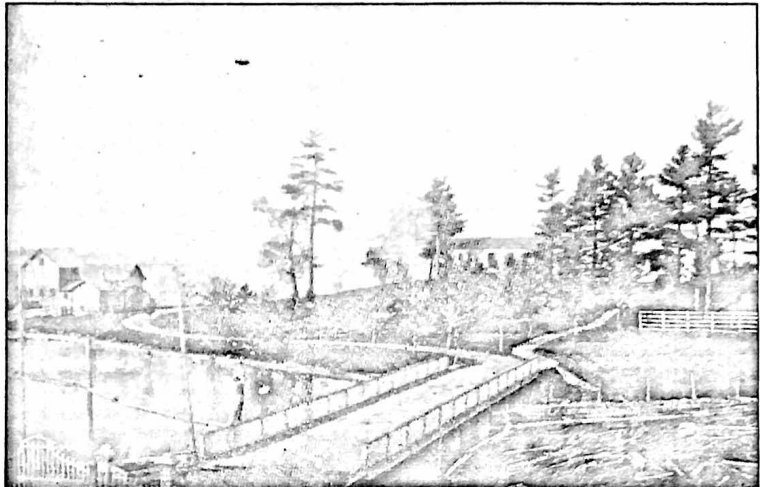
For a number of years, the Island House was used as a vacation home to accommodate the business associates of the iron company. In 1926, the property was transferred to Wirt Dexter's widow, Josephine, and later their daughter, Katherine Dexter McCormick. She never lived on the island, but allowed relatives to stay there during the summer.

In 1948, Katherine deeded the island to the Village of Elk Rapids for a community center. Rooms were rented out for civic meetings and small parties.

In 1949, the village opened a public library there. In 1979, after a lengthy campaign by local residents, the Island House and its grounds were recognized as a Michigan Historic Site.

The library underwent a major renovation in 1993, although architects were careful to retain many of the interesting features of the original house, like the stately fireplaces and rich oak moldings, making it one of the most unique library facilities in the state.

Plans were unveiled in early 1998 for a second renovation to winterize the porch and convert parts of the library's cavernous Michigan basement into work rooms and storage areas.



THIS PHOTO TAKEN in the late 1880s or early 1890s shows the Island House and the carriage bridge. The carriage house (far left) was the home of the Noble Estate's caretaker and a stable for the family's horses. It was later torn down.

Photo courtesy Elk Rapids Area Historical Society

## Good citizen Edwin S. Noble

By Glenn Ruggles

When Edwin Noble died in his sleep in 1922, most Elk Rapidsians knew they had lost their postmaster of the previous nine years. Only a few were aware that one of northern Michigan's most colorful and controversial characters was gone.

From 1865, when Noble came north with news that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox, until the early 1890s when his career in iron and lumber came to a mysterious close, Edwin Noble dominated the growth of Elk Rapids and most of Antrim County.

Said to be a wizard with figures, he was the driving force behind one of Michigan's early industrial empires: The Dexter-Noble Company and its extension, the Elk Rapids Iron Company.

Outspoken, sarcastic, witty, arrogant and violently patriotic, Noble appeared to be a contradiction at times. A man of firm principle whose wit and sarcasm could slice an opponent to ribbons, he often appeared as nothing more than a "fast buck" hustler.

But whatever the final analysis discloses, Edwin Noble was typical of the ingenious, hard-driving, free-wheeling capitalist of 19th century America; he had an opinion on every issue of the day.

A long-time partner in the Dexter-Noble Company and secretary-treasurer of the Elk Rapids Iron Company, Noble was involved in blast furnaces, chemical and cement plants, sawmills and lumber camps, and brickyards.

A life-long Democrat in solid Republican territory — he was appointed postmaster in the 1912 Democratic upset that elected Woodrow Wilson as President — Noble was an ardent advocate of free trade. His sense of humor and razor-like pen are evident in this brief collection of his best thoughts:

On philanthropy: "Is the man who attends a church social and eats fifty cents worth of provision, for which he pays 10 cents, a philanthropist or a hog?"

On the nobility of slavery: "If I wanted 200 men and found 400 sitting about, I should get them cheap. If 400 were wanted and but 200 to be had, I should pay them their price."

On sexism: "Has the man who stands at the street corner and makes suggestive remarks about ladies who pass ever had a mother, or was he always an orphan?"



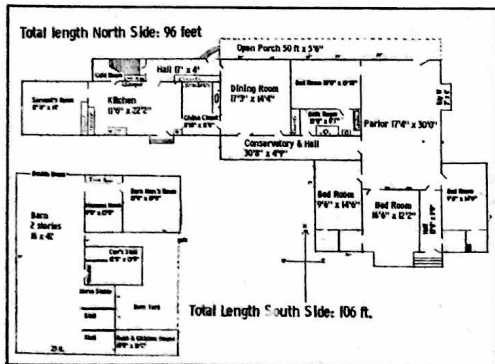
Long before NAFTA, Noble had this to say about free trade: "I, as an American citizen, am not willing to own that with the best ores, best fuel and, I believe, best brains in the world, we cannot compete with the nations of the earth if allowed to do so untrammelled by legislation."

In 1892, Edwin was seriously injured in a boiler explosion aboard his pleasure boat. The steam released in the blast badly burned his legs and he would spend the next two years recovering from those injuries.

At the time of the mishap, family members suspected it may not have been an accident, because around the same time Edwin's name was taken off the list of stockholders in the Elk Rapids Iron Co., with no explanation given for the loss of his shares.

Soon after, Edwin was forced to liquidate most of his land holdings, including the Island House, and find other employment. He ran a grocery store downtown for several years, and later worked for the Elk Rapids Cement Co. until it closed in 1911.

Edwin Noble became silent in 1922, and the golden heyday of the Grand Traverse region was dulled as his seemingly endless stream of northern Michigan wisdom came to a close.



A floor plan of the Island House c. 1900