



The Lost City of Belvidere

by Christina Clark

Location is everything—and early Michigan settlers found that out the hard way when Mother Nature reclaimed her own and the promising town of Belvidere was swallowed up by the river that gave it life.

Photo courtesy of Shutterstock.)

MARCH/APRIL 2017 | 55

Many are familiar with Atlantis—a mythical island that appeared in two of Plato’s works, *Timaeus* and *Critias*—and the tale of how it was ultimately swallowed up by the Atlantic Ocean. The story of Belvidere, however, is not as well known.

Belvidere was once an auspicious town located alongside the Clinton River in Macomb County. It prospered during the mid-nineteenth century before the river rose up and caused its untimely demise. The swatch of land that became Belvidere sat about four miles from present-day Mount Clemens, near Selfridge Air National Guard Base.

A DREAM DEVELOPS

The original inhabitants of the area that would become Belvidere included a number of Native-American tribes—including the Sauk, Wyandotte, Miami, and Ojibwe—as well as early Euro-American settlers. The rich and fertile land was covered by a variety of trees, such as oak, maple, black walnut, and whitewood. It was the perfect area for farming, hunting, fishing, and trapping.

The land also sat directly in the middle of one of the main waterways that connected Lake St. Clair with the interior. The Clinton River was recorded as being “wider and deeper than the Cuyahoga at Cleveland, Ohio” and highly navigable for “vessels of any size.” Many believed they had found a prime location for a potential town and shipping port, and U.S. Congress even spent \$5,000 removing a sandbar from the mouth of the river to prepare the land for such a purpose.

Of course, it did not take long for someone to notice the potential of

the land. In 1835, two brothers—James and David Conger—jumped at the opportunity to purchase it.

James Conger would become the mastermind behind Michigan’s historical lost city of Belvidere. He was born in 1805 to David and Hannah Lockwood Conger in Trenton, New Jersey, and spent most of his childhood in New York. After studying law in Lancaster, Ohio, and marrying Pauline Belvidere Clark in 1824, James moved to Cleveland to build a law practice. He quickly became a well-established lawyer in the area, but true to a reputation for adventure, he and his family soon left Cleveland to make their way up the Detroit River and settle in Macomb County. There, he discovered the fertile land on the Clinton River.

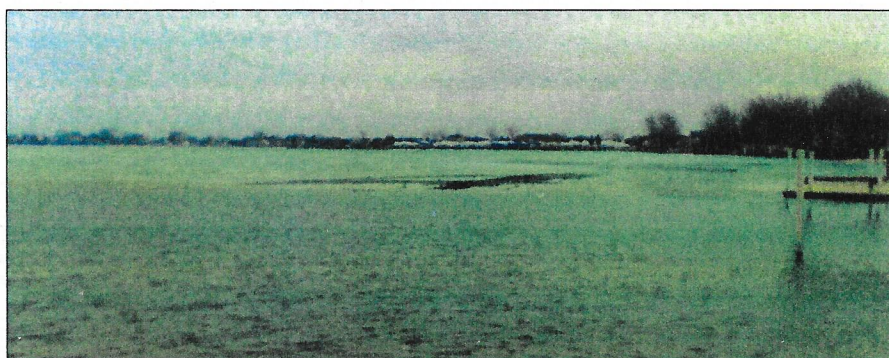
Conger was reported to have described his discovery as being one of the healthiest stretches of land “not surpassed by any other in the Western States.” He had a vision to turn it into a thriving town and thoroughfare for ships. In November 1835, James and his brother, David, purchased the land from Alex Peltier, Joseph Robertjean, and Ignace Moross, who had claimed it nearly three decades before.

It was not long before James Conger’s dream for a new town and shipping port attracted additional

shareholders to the project, such as Thomas Balten, Richard Hussey, Timothy Ingraham, Nelson Oviatt, Thomas L. Peck, Abram D. Smith, Elizabeth Smith, and James Tallman. Eventually, David sold his share of the land to James, who was able to hire a professional surveyor by the name of Abel Dickerson to plat “a city of magnificent proportions” on the marshy land near the mouth of the Clinton River.

BUILDING BELVIDERE

After Dickerson’s initial survey, an even more detailed and accurate map of the area was made by another surveyor, Edward Blackwell, in December 1836. He planned some 1,000 lots, roads, and parks for the town. While developing the town, both Conger and Blackwell fell so in love with the dream that they each purchased land within the city limits. Blackwell bought one lot while Conger purchased seven, which included a steamboat landing, shanty, outbuilding, barn, cider mill, and hotel. Three other investors bought a plot of land each.



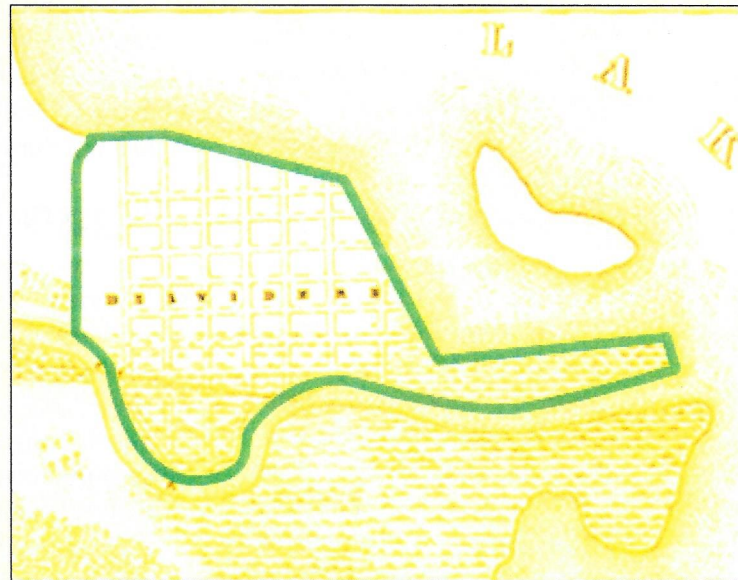
Top: Today, the Conger Bay street sign in Harrison Township reminds residents and visitors alike of Michigan’s lost city of Belvidere. (Photo courtesy of the author.) Above: The site of Belvidere Bay has a history of fluctuating shorelines. Note the small portions of land peeking above the surface of the water. (Photo courtesy of the Macomb County Government.)

With the hope of attracting more residents to the area, Conger took out advertisements in big cities in Michigan and Ohio around the same time he made his land purchases. His advertisements appealed to young families who wanted to live in an up-and-coming town, with Conger promising that the purchaser could pay 20 percent of the payment up front in cash and pay the remaining balance in four incremental installments of 20 percent each. A 10 percent discount would be granted if the balance was immediately paid in full. The deal was an immediate success—Conger sold lots to more than 20 families, assigning them by a lottery-style drawing.

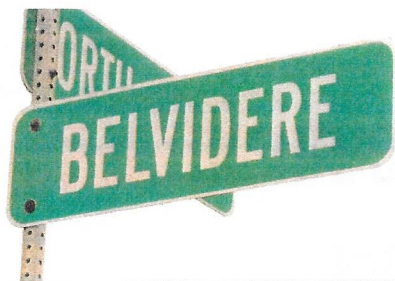
The town continued to take shape on paper, set to feature broad avenues and boulevards with endearing names such as Superior, Cleveland, and Conger; a 70,000-square-foot Washington Square Park; and a number of docks and canals. The map also planned for the town's structures, which included the hotel purchased by Conger, a wind-powered sawmill and gristmill, a well-stocked general store, a post office, a tavern, carp fisheries, a machine shop, and more than a dozen homes. A 175-pound steamboat had been built to traverse the Clinton River, and there was even talk about constructing a lighthouse, pending congressional funding.

Thus, the town of Belvidere was born. Named for either James Conger's wife, Paula Belvidere Clark Conger, or the mythical creature Apollo Belvedere, Belvidere was fast becoming a thriving town in Macomb County. Conger's remarkable achievement of founding a flourishing town was made better by the success of an invention of his—a medication called the "Magic Regulator." Better-known as "Conger's Regulator" or "Tonic Liver Pills," the medicine was marketed as

Conger's Dream, Then and Now



The above maps show the Belvidere area in 1837 and 2017, respectively. Before the town was flooded and abandoned, its streets were organized along a grid plan. The area looks much different today—residents live on canals in what is now known as the Belvidere neighborhood of Harrison Township. (Top image courtesy of the Archives of Michigan.)



a “colonic stabilizer” and went on to sell out during the cholera outbreaks of 1840 and 1849. As time passed, it seemed that Belvidere had an incredibly bright future.

THE RIVER RISES

At the time, all seemed to be going well for Conger—but disaster was looming on the horizon. According to Charley Peltier, who was a young boy when Belvidere was growing, a group of Chippewa came from Romeo in 1836 to hunt the wild turkeys that lived along the river. The Native-American chief heard the hammering and building of the city and asked Peltier’s father what the noise was. The elder Peltier replied that a town was being built.

The Chippewa chief replied that no town could be built on that land because the water of Lake St. Clair and the Clinton River would rise and flood the town. The Native American was not the only one to warn against the construction of Belvidere. A Catholic priest also warned against rising waters, but he was also ignored.

Legend had it that the Great Lakes and surrounding bodies of water had a history of periodically high waters, subject to a cycle of rising surface levels every few decades. Unbeknownst to Conger, the land on which he had built his dream town was directly in the water’s path. Even worse was that 1837 marked a high point of the cycle.

As predicted, the waters of Lake St. Clair began rising that year, surging into the new town. It first flooded farms and filled cellars before rising enough to flood the

first levels of businesses and homes. Many of Belvidere’s residents fled the town, moving to neighboring Mount Clemens. Hundreds of Belvidere businesses failed, including the Bank of St. Clair. Canal and railroad construction came to an immediate halt.

After all he had done to make his dream a reality, Conger was not ready to abandon Belvidere. He remained in the town and moved to the second floor of the hotel he had purchased.

AN ERA’S END

Eventually, the high waters subsided. Though some residents and farmers returned to their homes sometime later, the city never truly recovered from the floods. Conger went on to become an influential man in Macomb County, teaching students and dabbling in politics, religion, and philosophy. He began practicing law before the Michigan Supreme Court in 1837 and served a term in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Whig from 1851 to 1853.

Despite being a person of means for the majority of his life, Conger died a poor man in St. Clair in 1876. By his request, he was buried with a large monument among the remnants of his beloved town of Belvidere. When the floods returned, his remains were moved to Greenlawn Cemetery in Columbus, Ohio, where they are currently located.

Belvidere met its permanent demise in July 1882 not by flooding, but rather by fire. When the steamboat *Ida* was maneuvering down the Clinton River, it caught fire and set the old Belvidere warehouse ablaze. The fire spread quickly and burned down what was left of the town, the warehouse, an adjoining shed, a windmill, and two boats.

Today, the town and the monument to Conger are both gone, but the name of the bay and a nearby road remain, paying homage to the great historical—but ultimately doomed—city of Belvidere. 🌊

Christina Clark is a freelance journalist and photographer living and working in Metro-Detroit. Her work has been published in Metro Parent Magazine, the Metro Times, Chronicle, and Michigan History for Kids. In her free time, she plays roller derby, draws, and reads as many books as she can.

Top: The Belvidere street sign in Harrison Township. (Photo courtesy of the author.) Right: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers twice worked on projects on the Clinton River near where Belvidere once stood, first in the 1880s and again in the 1960s. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.)

