

More than 13,000 years ago, a melting glacier left behind massive piles of sand and gravel that formed the "hills" of Bloomfield, and shaped the original landscape of the area now known as the Johnson Nature Center. There is no evidence of human activity on the property prior to settlement days in the early 1800's, but it is known that natives often traveled in the area, and they very likely fished in the surrounding lakes.

The first settlers came to the Bloomfield area about 1820 seeking good grazing land for their livestock, and space in which they could plant fruit trees. George and Mary Pearsall were the first recorded settlers of the property on which the nature center sits today. They purchased 80 acres of land from the United States government in 1830 at a price of \$2 an acre. In 1859 the Williamson family acquired the property, and doubled the size of its holdings by purchasing an additional 80 acres on the west side of Franklin Road. The Williamsons lived there for nearly 50 years, and their farming lifestyle had a great impact on the land. They built a large two-story brick home, a barn and several outbuildings, and grazed folds of more than 100 sheep for many years. There were likely very few trees at that time, except for a few planted near the house. The sheep would have devoured any of the remaining original vegetation. In the late 1800's, many apple trees were planted in the central areas of the property; most of which are still there today.

The Williamsons sold the farm in 1908. The owner of the property, Colonel Waldon, a wealthy man who built and inhabited the Pine Knob mansion in Clarkston, allowed the farm to lay fallow for nearly 40 years, during which the house and various farm buildings burned or were destroyed. A sugarbush was either planted or, more likely, established itself, in the 1920's. Telegraph Road was built in the 1930's, and it divided the original farm from north to south. Photographs from the late 1940's reveal an open landscape with just a few scattered trees, the apple trees and sugar bush growing well, and vegetation composed primarily of alien weed species that became established after the farming days. The land was sold to developers and subdivided in the 1940's.

Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, the parcels of land along Franklin Road were sold. Richard and Carol Olsen purchased 16 acres, and built the home that now serves as the caretaker residence at the nature center. The Olsens dredged the low, swampy area east of their home and it formed the pond that today's visitors enjoy. In the 20 years the Olsens lived there, they planted thousands of trees, shrubs and wildflowers that included not only native species, but species from other areas of the country as well. They introduced fish into the pond, and kept detailed records of the wildlife they observed on the property. The Olsens sold their property to the Bloomfield Hills School District in 1968.

The school district purchased additional acreage adjacent to the Olsen property, creating a 39-acre site to be used as a nature center for learning. It was dedicated in 1970, and Don

Hollums was hired as manager. Photographs depict extensive tree plantations on the south half of the property and the old apple orchard to the north. Because the grass fires were suppressed, some trees grew along the stream, and scattered clumps of shrubs burgeoned. Don added several species of trees and native wildflowers were planted in various places as well. In 1975, two, old, previously used, portable buildings were settled on the property to be used as temporary classrooms.

After Telegraph Road was widened in 1977, a great many trees were planted to somewhat screen the nature center from the highway. The district decided to purchase, relocate and restore a log cabin from the early 19th century to enhance learning, but a search for an existing cabin yielded no results. So, in 1985, recreation millage funds were used to build a facsimile that was completed in 1987. The cabin was furnished to represent the late 1800's period, allowing visitors to step more than 100 years in time.

There was no cutting or removal of vegetation on the land during all this time, and this resulted in buckthorn becoming dominant. Over time, areas became so choked with buckthorn that it was almost impossible to walk upright through the area. Ground flora, such as wildflowers and grasses, could not grow under the buckthorn. Many of the formerly open areas were quite overgrown and wildlife that preferred open fields simply disappeared. Dan Badgley, who succeeded Don Hollums as manager in 1989, instituted a program in 1998 to remove the omnipresent buckthorn and replant native species. Several areas have been cleared and replaced with prairie meadow species, yet the work continues, especially in the woodland areas. Species lists are being recorded and studied, and it is hoped these efforts will encourage a more diverse wildlife inventory to emerge.