

Old wall found by construction crew becomes foundation for lesson in Flint history

By The Flint Journal

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Ryan Garza | The Flint Journal files

Bob Christner, of Colasanti Corporation, shows a wall that was found during construction of a parking ramp on Kearsley and Beach streets in downtown Flint.

FLINT, Michigan -- Ends up there's a lot of history behind that wall unearthed in downtown Flint last week.

Armed with a 1886 map of downtown Flint, history buff Leroy Cole on Wednesday uncovered the mysterious history of the buried wall -- a fieldstone wall found on Friday by construction workers building a parking ramp at the corner of Kearsley and Beach streets.

Looking at the wall and then down at his map, Cole pointed to the George T. Warren & Co. Cigar Factory located at the exact location of the wall.

And guess who worked at the cigar factory? None other than Billy Durant.

Durant, of course, is better known for founding General Motors.

But he got his start -- and forged his reputation as a master salesman -- in the cigar industry.

As a young man sometime in his late teens or early 20s, George Warren hired Durant to go on the road to sell cigars. Durant is said to have sold 22,000 cigars in two days, according to a 1998 book "Empire Builders" by Burton Folsom Jr.

Durant packed cigars and kept books for the company -- more than a decade before he went on to his largest success, the founding of General Motors in 1908.

While it may seem surprising, the cigar industry was big in the late 19th century in Flint. It was the business that kept Flint going between the end of the lumbering business to the start of the car industry, Cole said.

And, all that makes the discovery of the 8- to 10-foot tall wall -- which was probably part of the basement -- all the more interesting, Cole said.

"It's just a remarkable find," he said. "It's not just one of the many cigar factories; it's the cigar company that Billy Durant touched."

But, soon, the wall will be out of sight again. After the foundation for the parking ramp goes in, the site -- and that little piece of history -- will be buried again.

And, even if it is interesting, Cole said he's fine with that.

"The ramp is more important to Flint now than the wall," Cole said.