Chapter 2
History

As a precursor to preparing, reading and understanding the Summit County General Plan, it is
important to examine some of the major forces that have created the present pattern of
development. One reason for this is that our future will be partially shaped by events and
decisions made in the past; another is to project our thinking beyond the day-to-day frame of
reference by which we all live.

Overview
Summit County was established in 1840, largely in response to growth and development around
the activities of the Ohio & Erie Canal that had been completed through the area in 1832.
Because many locks were needed between Summit Lake and the Cuyahoga River, people had
time to linger while the boats went through this series of locks. Entrepreneurs saw the
opportunities in this delay and Akron soon became the county’s leading commercial center.

Although the area began to become an important industrial place in the 1870s, growth was
relatively slow until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first third of the twentieth
century, Akron became the rubber capital of the world and the county’s population increased
from slightly fewer than 66,000 in 1900 to over 344,000 in 1930. Growth slowed during the great
Depression of the 1930s, but the county experienced another growth boom during World War II
that lasted until 1970. At that time the county experienced its greatest population to date with a
little more than 553,000 residents. The restructuring of industry and the emerging global market
had a devastating impact on the county’s economy during the 1970s and 80s. Since 1990, the
county’s economy has markedly improved, and while it is once again in a growth mode, the
County’s population in 2000 was approximately 10,000 less than it was in 1970.

Development Prior to the Establishment of Summit County
Before a county was created, the path that the Indians used to portage between Lake Erie and
the Ohio River crossed a summit in the area of present day Summit Lake. Later, that high point
between the Little Cuyahoga and Tuscarawas Rivers gave the county its name—Summit. In
1796, the Connecticut Land Company sent Moses Cleaveland and Seth Pease with a team of
forty men to survey the eastern portion of the Connecticut Western Reserve.1 They laid out the
area in a grid of townships that were each roughly five miles square, a feature retained to the
present day. The first of these townships to be settled in what is now Summit County were
Hudson, Stow and Tallmadge. While now located on the eastern boundary of Summit County,
they were originally part of Trumbull County, and later part of Portage County.

When Ohio became a State in 1803, the Connecticut Western Reserve became part of it. But it
was not until after claims by Native Americans were settled, and the War of 1812 was over, that
the western part of what is now Summit County was surveyed and migration to the area
escalated.

To improve its general economy, the new State of Ohio authorized the selling of bonds to build a canal between Lake Erie and the Ohio River. It appointed a commission to select the best route and, after a bitter and extended battle, the commission approved two routes. The first built was the eastern route which ran up the Scioto River to a point just south of Columbus. From there it headed eastward to the Muskingum River and thence northward toward Lake Erie. Where it crossed the old Indian portage summit, considerable construction was required. Forty-four locks were required to negotiate the fall between the 964-foot elevation of Summit Lake at Akron and the 572-foot elevation of Lake Erie at Cleveland. The first fifteen of these locks were located in close proximity between what is now Exchange Street and the Cuyahoga River—a distance of a little over one mile. This set of locks became known as the Cascade Locks and formed the incentive to build a city at the summit—Akron.

**Summit County, 1840 -1880**

In 1840 another new canal, the Ohio & Pennsylvania, opened between Akron and the Ohio River near Pittsburgh. The junction of the two canals at Akron assured that it would become the major city in the region. Due to the growth of the area, a new County of Summit was created in 1840 out of portions of the existing counties of Portage, Medina, and Stark. Portage County contributed the townships of Twinsburg, Hudson, Stow, Tallmadge, Springfield, Northfield, Boston, Northampton (Cuyahoga Falls), Portage (Akron) and Coventry. Medina County conferred its eastern most tier—Richfield, Bath, Copley and Norton Townships. The two southernmost townships, Green and Franklin, were bestowed by Stark County. These last two townships are larger, six miles by six miles rather than five by five. This is because they were not in the Western Reserve and were surveyed according to the methods of the US Land Ordinance of 1785 rather than the methods used by surveyors of the Connecticut Land Company.

At the time of its creation in 1840, Summit County had a total population of 22,560. Cuyahoga Falls and Akron were about the same size, with Akron’s population at 1,665 and Cuyahoga Falls at 1,400. Both wanted to be the new county's seat of government. The Ohio General Assembly decided in favor of Akron in 1842 and Simon Perkins donated land in the area between the two original cities for a courthouse and safety building. The site is still used for the same purposes.

The period between 1840 and 1880 saw the beginnings of industrialization. The first railroads arrived in the early 1850s. Many other railways quickly followed and soon replaced the canal as the major mode of transporting goods and people. By 1880, 38% of the County's residents lived in Akron. The County's population grew by 21,228 between 1840 and 1880 making the total population in 1880 nearly 44,000.

**Summit County 1880 -1920**

Between 1880 and 1920 there were more public improvements, and even greater industrial growth than in the previous forty-year period. In the 1880's Akron secured an electric street lighting system, a telephone company, and electric trolleys. Because all the lines converged in the center of Akron, initial commercial development concentrated along Main Street. Later, this activity dispersed along the trolley lines.

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Though the 1890's were not especially prosperous for Summit County, a major development occurred that had a long-range impact on the County's future. Benjamin Franklin Goodrich helped make Akron, Ohio the “Rubber Capital of the World” during the late 1800’s. B.F. Goodrich opened his Akron plant, the Akron Rubber Works in March 1871. In 1895 the Akron India Rubber Company was established with John Seiberling as an investor. It was there that John's sons, Frank and Charles, learned the rubber business, and in 1898 they formed the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. In 1900, Harvey Firestone moved to Akron and by 1902 had opened the Firestone Rubber Company. In 1915, local son William O’Neil organized the General Tire and Rubber Company. These four companies—Goodrich, Goodyear, Firestone, and General—quickly became the largest employers in the county due to the rapid increase in the mass production of the automobile.

At the beginning of this era, there were no automobiles. During the middle period, few people could afford them and roads were not generally paved. By the end of the era, automobiles were fairly common. Because each car needed four or five tires, Summit County experienced phenomenal growth. Population increased from 43,788 in 1880 to over 286,000 in 1920, an increase of 653%. Most of this growth occurred in the last decade of the period. In 1910 the County's population was 108,253; by 1920 it was 286,065. Growth during this period was also concentrated in the cities, especially Akron. In 1880, 38% of the county's residents lived in Akron. By 1920, the percentage of County residents living in Akron had increased to 73%.

**Summit County 1920 -1960**

Even though Akron experienced a short, sharp and surprising depression in 1920 that nearly destroyed some of the large rubber companies, the County continued to experience growth for another decade before the Great Depression set in. During this period, government continued to try to catch up with private sector needs. Many of the county's roads were paved and utilities were expanded. In the spring of 1920, the first paved road to Cleveland (via Richfield) was completed. Under court order to improve its sewage treatment capacity, Akron constructed seven miles of trunk line along Riverview Road, and opened the Botzum Wastewater Treatment Facility in 1928.4

Akron completed a new Municipal Building in 1926, and its new Post Office on East Market was opened in 1928. Many other of Akron's present day landmarks were also constructed between 1925 and 1929. These include the United Building, Akron Savings and Loan, O'Neils Department Store, Polsky's Department Store, First National Tower, YMCA, YWCA, and the Mayflower Hotel. During this short building spurt between 1925 and 1929, construction commenced on over 28,000 structures with a total value of over $93 million.5 Among them was the Goodyear Airdock, at the time the largest structure ever built without interior supports. In the middle of all of this construction, the stock market crashed. Between October 1929 and the end of 1930, Akron industries laid-off 14,200 workers and bank deposits were reduced by $14 million.6

World War II quickly took Summit County out of the Depression. In January 1939 there were 52,700 workers employed in the Akron district rubber companies. By January 1944, over 130,000

were on the payroll. Goodyear became a supplier of aircraft making both blimps and planes for the war effort. Goodyear also supplied Boeing and Martin with brakes and tires. At Firestone, workers helped build anti-aircraft guns, wings for transport planes, shatterproof oxygen cylinders for high altitude planes, bogie wheels, tank tracks, and machine gun cartridges. To meet the demand for rubber products, every Akron district tire factory worked day and night, seven days a week. These included the older companies of Goodyear, Firestone, Goodrich, and General as well as smaller newer companies such as Seiberling and Mohawk.7

When the war ended, factories were converted almost overnight to the production of consumer goods. Due to the long depression and war, there was a scarcity of goods of all kinds, including tractors, toys, clothes, and appliances. The greatest demand, however, was for cars and houses. The war effort required so much material that no passenger cars were manufactured in America between February 1942 and September 1945. To satisfy pent up demand, auto manufacturers produced over 2 million cars in 1946 and 3.5 million in 1947. Of the 27.5 million tires made in those years, most were manufactured in Akron.8

By 1960, the impact of the mass-produced automobile was reflected in the development pattern. In response to new job opportunities, the population of the County grew from 410,032 to 513,569, an increase of 25% between 1950 and 1960. During the same period the population of Akron grew from 274,605 to 290,351, an increase of less than 7%. Thus, it became clear that the population was decentralizing at an increasing rate. Cities were becoming less dense, outlying areas more crowded. Buses replaced streetcars. Trucks largely replaced trains. Autos replaced pedestrians and bicycles. The county's population grew by 78% between 1920 and 1960, but the population had shifted from Akron to outlying areas. In 1920 Akron held 73% of the county's residents. By 1960, that percentage had dropped to 57%.

**Summit County 1960 -2005**

During the first decade of this period, industry continued to boom. The region's rubber, auto, and steel industries remained viable and in many cases expanded. Machine tools and electric machines remained in high demand.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the region's prosperity came to an abrupt end largely because high quality foreign products became available to American consumers and their cost was often less than those produced locally. High labor rates, extensive employee benefits, older plants and high energy costs here encouraged companies to look at other locations where costs were lower and productivity higher. The County's labor force changed significantly during this period, and many industries closed or moved elsewhere. The percentage of workers engaged in traditionally high-paying manufacturing jobs dropped from 42% of those employed in the labor force in 1970 to 24% in 1990. During the same period the percentage of persons employed in traditionally low-paying retail and service positions increased from 38% to 51%.9

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8 Karl Grismer: Akron and Summit County, Summit County Historical Society, n.d. p. 517.
9 Ohio Department of Development. County Business Patterns, 1995.
As a result of this restructured economy, Summit County lost almost 39,000 residents between 1970 and 1990. During this time, the urban areas of the Midwest became known as the "rustbelt" due to the high levels of unemployment in the steel and steel fabrication industries.

In spite of the general population loss that occurred during this period, auto registration soared, land was developed at accelerating rates, and the remaining open space in the County quickly disappeared. Previously undeveloped areas that were well served by new transportation systems such as Twinsburg, Macedonia, Hudson, Stow, Cuyahoga Falls, and Green attracted many new industries. The expansion of these residential, commercial, and industrial activities between 1970 and 1990 consumed over 20,700 acres of the County's undeveloped land. During the same period the County lost over 38,000 residents. Fewer people consumed greater resources.

Even during this period of seemingly unchecked growth and land consumption, land preservation efforts were present. In 1974, Congress authorized the establishment of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area for the purpose of preserving and protecting "for public use and enjoyment, the historic, scenic, natural, and recreational values of the Cuyahoga River and the adjacent lands of the Cuyahoga Valley, and to provide for the maintenance of needed recreational open space necessary to the urban environment." In 2000, the area was made a National Park and the park's name was officially changed to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP).

Since 1990, a number of initiatives have had a positive influence on the County. The economy of the County also improved markedly. The number of persons employed jumped by over 43,000 between 1990 and 2001, an increase of 15%. During the same period, unemployment dropped from over 6% to less than 4.5% and personal per capita income rose from $19,070 to $31,145. Due to the stabilized economy, Summit County's population grew by 5% between 1990 and 2000, to nearly 543,000.

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10AMATS, Land Use Database
11Public Law 93-55