

*Horton's*

# *Michigan Notebook*

## *Political & Social Commentary*

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### **NASA's Space Probe & Michigan's Admission to the Union**

**By Steve Horton**

So, what does the NASA probe to an icy object in the far reaches of outer space have to do with Michigan being admitted to the Union on January 26, 1837? Well, I'm glad you asked.

Earlier this month, a NASA spacecraft known as New Horizons sent back its first close-up photos of "the most distant celestial object ever explored." Those images were of an icy object that is 4 billion miles from earth.

The spacecraft's main mission had been to fly past Pluto—which is 3 billion miles from our planet—and send back photos with the goal of our better understanding that former planet located in the Kuiper belt—now considered a dwarf planet, although there is an effort to reverse that downgrade and return it to its former status.

This mission was accomplished three-and-a-half years ago. With New Horizons still intact and in operating order, NASA officials decided to aim it at another target—a small object beyond Pluto that they dubbed Ultima Thule.



A dispute over the boundary with Ohio delayed Michigan's admission to the union.

On Jan. 1st, as our world was recovering from its New Year's Eve festivities, the spacecraft swept by its destination and began transmitting photos. Those pictures showed two spheres, one three times larger than the other, that gave the appearance of a snowman. Ultima Thule, we were told, extends about 20 miles across and has "a mottled appearance the color of dull brick."

As for Michigan, our state might have been admitted to the Union earlier had it not been for a dispute with Ohio over the boundary. That disagreement led to what's called the 'Toledo War', although it was more of an armed stand-off and, fortunately, there weren't any casualties.

Both Ohio and Michigan had been part of the original Northwest Territory, land gained

from Great Britain after the successful War of Independence. Ohio, being closer to the Eastern seaboard, was admitted to the Union in 1803 and soon became an important player in national politics.

Michigan, being more remote and getting some 'bad' press initially about its suitability for farming, did not see the necessary influx of settlers to become a territory until 1805 and it was not until the early 1830s that the possibility of statehood could be seriously entertained. The threshold needed was 60,000 people and by 1834 officials, led by the Territorial Governor Stevens Mason, were convinced the population had grown enough for them to petition the U.S. Congress for admittance.

Which they did in 1835. But Congress, faced with the boundary dispute and with Ohio having more clout, put the request 'on hold.'

Michigan claimed that the Northwest Ordinance, which established the original territory and spelled out how states could be carved out of that large area and how they would be brought into union, had set the boundary as an east-west line extending from the southernmost tip of Lake Michigan.

This meant that a 468 square-mile region along the border—known as the Toledo Strip—should be part of Michigan. This area included the Maumee River that flowed into the Maumee Bay on the western end of Lake Erie. The settlement that would become the City of Toledo was located at the mouth of the river. Given the importance of waterways to agriculture—rivers and lakes being the easiest and cheapest means of shipping commodities to the market—the value of this region to both sides was understandable.

Ohio had already laid claim to the strip when it was admitted to the Union, establishing the border with a northeasterly angle rather than the straighter one given in the Ordinance. It also started at a point on

Lake Michigan further north than where Michigan thought it should be.

This boundary line was included in the state constitution that Ohio sent to Congress. Apparently, though, the Congressional committee did not settle the matter in a definitive way. This lapse, plus the fact that the original border language in the Ordinance was used by Congress when the Michigan Territory was established two years later rather than Ohio's version, helped set up the future conflict.

Another factor was the impending 1836 Presidential Election. President Andrew Jackson wanted Vice President Martin Van Buren to be his successor, and Ohio's electoral votes were a key to that goal. Thus, he did not wish to antagonize the voters of the Buckeye State.

In addition, the policy at that time was to admit a northern and southern state at the same time, so as to maintain the balance of power in the U.S. Senate—a key consideration for those southern officials wanting to maintain and extend slavery.

To resolve the stalemate, Michigan was offered the entire Upper Peninsula in exchange for Ohio keeping the Toledo Strip. Since the petition for statehood had already included the eastern third of the northern peninsula, what was being added was the western region.

"Sentiment against the proposed compromise was almost universal at first," noted Willis Frederick Dunbar in *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*. "A resolution adopted in March (by the acting legislature) had dismissed the area that was to be Michigan's consolation prize as a 'sterile region on the shore of Lake Superior, destined by soil and climate to remain forever a wilderness'."

Delegates called to a special convention in September to consider the offer, rejected it. However, passions soon cooled, and a second

gathering was held in mid-December. This time around, the compromise was accepted. President Jackson, having gotten his way and having gotten Van Buren elected, promptly put Michigan's 'resolution of assent' before Congress after it reached him.

Following some debate, the motion was passed and on Jan. 26, 1837 the President signed the bill that made Michigan the 26th state in the federal union. Arkansas, a slave state, had been admitted unconditionally on the same day Michigan had gotten its offer—making it the 25th state to join.

Among those who found fault with the offer was, the editor of the Detroit *Free Press* who told his readers that the western part of the Upper Peninsula was “a region of perpetual snows—the *Ultima Thule* of our national domain in the north.”

**SO, WHAT'S WITH THIS *ULTIMA THULE***—a name NASA officials thought appropriate for an icy object at the far edge of our solar system and a term employed by a newspaper editor nearly two centuries ago to ridicule a piece of real estate.

Intrigued, I headed to the dictionary. It seems the ancient Greeks and Romans, in their literature and maps, listed Thule as the farthest northern location. Ultima Thule, deriving from that, has two definitions: “a distant unknown region” and “the extreme limit of travel and discovery.”

The editor would have used the first meaning in his description of the Upper Peninsula, while NASA presumably implied both definitions in their use—the icy object as well as the purpose of the spacecraft.

The Detroit editor and Michigan officials can be forgiven (to some extent) for their lack of insight as to what the future would hold. The copper and iron ore bonanzas, the tourism, and the Yoopers and their culture (including the pasty) have enriched Michigan

in a variety of ways during the ensuing decades.

And while our state might not get the tax revenues from the Toledo Strip, residents living and working near the border with Ohio still benefit from that proximity and the free flow of traffic back and forth.

As for the spacecraft that successfully completed its mission 4 billion miles from its home planet, once again we were given a demonstration of the vast potential of human intellect and ingenuity. What the scientists and engineers accomplished with this feat ought to have been trumpeted across the land and around the world.

It's mind-boggling that a flying craft could be sent off into space, supplied with a camera, and years later actually cross paths (as planned) with a small mass of rock whirling through space, and then be able to send back images for us to view.

Apparently, we've become accustomed to such marvels. We hear or read about it, but this story—or similar ones that detail engineering wizardry or scientific breakthroughs—are glanced over; relegated to the minor news of the day.

And, even worse than apathy or nonchalance, many people from time to time take a hostile attitude to science.

We accept and embrace the benefits; for example, when scientific investigation and experimentation have resulted in hybrid seeds that dramatically increase food harvest, have produced computers and software that are revolutionizing our work and leisure, and have cured once-deadly diseases.

However, let a finding or proposed theory refute or undermine our personal beliefs or cherished opinions, then all of those men and women are suddenly “educated idiots,” lacking common sense; their evidence summarily dismissed.

I don't offer this observation with the inference that scientists are infallible or that

those of us lacking such knowledge and ability don't have the right to question what's presented or put the findings and theories in the perspective of a broader picture.

Yet history ought to give us pause when an attitude of hostility greets new ideas, or the curiosity that leads to further discovery is belittled or rejected. There are too many instances where so-called, accepted truths were disproven by the scientific method.

The earth (as once thought) didn't turn out to be the center of the universe, a stationary body around which the other heavenly bodies revolved. And things called "germs" really do spread disease. And smoking does cause lung cancer.

In 1836, a lot of Michiganders (our ancestors) thought the Upper Peninsula was a bad bargain; a worthless place "up there"... our Ultima Thule.

This past New Year's Day, a mere 182 years later, a craft made by men and women, using materials fashioned from earthly ingredients, reached a place called Ultima Thule, an accomplishment seemingly beyond imagination.

The former was a verdict reached by ignorance with all of its attendant certainty and self-assuredness, while the latter is a testament to how far we can travel and all that we can discover by using knowledge to reach our dreams.