Both Highland Park and Hamtramck are independent cities within the city of Detroit.

Highland Park was originally a farming community located six miles from Detroit. The first recorded European settler was Richard Ford (no relation to Henry Ford), who settled the ridge that used to exist in Highland Park before it was leveled for the construction of Woodward Avenue. There were several attempts at developing the area; in 1825, Judge Augustus B. Woodward began plans for Woodwardville; in 1836, another judge, Judge Benjamin F.H. Witherell, began plans for Cassandra. Both men’s attempts were ultimately failures. The settlement was referred to as Whitewood in 1860 when the area got its first post office. The city came into being when the townships of Greenfield, Hamtramck and Whitewood were incorporated into Highland Park in 1889.

The history of Highland Park, like that of Detroit, has been heavily influenced by the automotive industry. In 1907, Henry Ford purchased 160 acres north of Manchester Street. The Highland Park Ford Plant was completed in 1909, and in 1913, the first assembly line was put in operation there. The introduction of the assembly line saw a spike in population in the area, from 4,120 in 1910 to 46,500 by 1920. Like Hamtramck, Highland Park has also broken records in population growth. Highland Park’s population peaked at 52,959 in the 1930s. The population in 2010, according to the census, was 11,776. In order to protect its tax base, and particularly the tax revenues from the Highland Park Ford Plant, the city was incorporated in 1918. Over the years, both Highland Park and Hamtramck have resisted efforts by Detroit to be annexed into the city of Detroit.

The automotive industry continued to be a major factor in Highland Park’s development. In 1925, the Chrysler Corporation was founded and built its headquarters in Highland Park when it purchased the automotive plant of Brush-Maxwell. Chrysler’s headquarters remained at that site for 70 years. The Highland Park Hummingbird was the nickname for the gear reduction starter used by Chrysler from the 60s to the 80s. The part was nicknamed ‘Hummingbird’ because of the sound it made.

The first depressed (sunken) urban freeway built in the U.S. was the Davidson Freeway, built in 1944, which ran through Highland Park. By the late 50s, the Ford Plant had begun to shut down production, which contributed to the decrease in Highland Park’s tax base and population coupled with the race-based riots of 1967, and “white flight” from much of Detroit, not only Highland Park. In 1973, the Ford Plant stopped production in its Model T factory and shut down. The plant was sold to a private developer in 1974.

It wasn’t until the early 90s that Chrysler made the decision to relocate its headquarters and technology offices to Auburn Hills. Chrysler paid the city of Highland Park $44 million in compensation, but the move, which took place through 1991-1993, saw the displacement of 6,000 jobs and the decimation of the city’s revenue. Until then, Chrysler had accounted for 25% of the city’s tax base and 50% of its budget. The city had once been known by the nickname, The City of Trees, on account of the large number of trees throughout it. However, due to the spread of Dutch elm’s disease in the 70s, the majority of these large trees were cut down.

By the 80s, Highland Park residents were predominantly living in poverty. The city’s financial status was so bad that it was put under emergency management by the State of Michigan’s Governor John Engler from December of 2000 to July of 2009. In 2011, under emergency management, 2/3 of Highland Park’s street lights were removed due to the monthly $60,000 electrical bill. Highland Park Police Department was disbanded from 2001-2007 and during those intervening years, the Wayne County Sheriff’s Dept. policed the city. The McGregor Library was an institution originally created in 1924 by Katherine and Tracy McGregor for “homeless, crippled, and backward children.” It closed in 2002, but since 2007, there has been movement to get the library re-opened. The 2013 movie “Highland Park” stars Danny Glover and is a fictional story about the library’s reopening.

Highland Park has been featured in several movies including 8 Mile (2002), Four Brothers (2005), Waterfront (2007), and Gran Torino (2008). Water Front is a documentary about the Highland Park community’s struggles against the privatization of their water under the emergency manager.