



Esek Pray House
8755 West Ann Arbor Road
Superior Township, Washtenaw County

Historic District Study Committee
Final Report
October 3, 2000

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Description.....	4
Significance and Historical Background.....	5
Conclusions	6
Recommendation.....	6
Bibliography.....	7

Attachments

Attachment A-1	Letter Petitioning Designation
Attachment A-2	Letter from Superior Township Supervisor
Attachment B	Washtenaw County Historical Preservation Ordinance, Section 3
Attachment C-1	Memo from Planning Director
Attachment C-2	Resolution Appointing Study Committee
Attachment D	<i>Superior Township Intensive Level Survey</i> Disclaimer
Attachment E	Legal Description of Property
Attachment F	Excerpt from George Pray Diary

Illustrations

Figure 1	Plat Map of Superior Township, 1999
Figure 2	View of South (front) and East Sides
Figure 3	West Side
Figure 4	North (rear) Side
Figure 5	First Floor Plan
Figure 6	Second Floor Plan
Figure 7	Site Plan of Present Property
Figure 8	Historic Plaque Detail
Figure 9	1836 License to Operate a Tavern
Figure 10	Superior Township Plat Map, 1856
Figure 11	Superior Township Plat Map, 1864
Figure 12	19 th Century Photograph of House
Figure 13	Diagram showing Historic Extent of Pray/Geer Farm

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Introduction

In a letter dated August 7, 1998 (Attachment A), Jane Van Bolt, the present owner of the Esek Pray House at 8755 West Ann Arbor Road in Superior Township, petitioned the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners to have the house designated a historic district under the jurisdiction of the Washtenaw County Historic District Commission. Following the provisions of Section 3 of the County's Historical Preservation Ordinance (Attachment B), the Board appointed a Historic District Study Committee by resolution on December 8, 1999 (Attachment C-2). The resolution charged the Study Committee to evaluate the property and determine if the house meets generally accepted criteria for a historic district.

The members of the Esek Pray House Historic District Study Committee are:

Scott Diels - architect, past member Ypsilanti Historic District Commission, present member Ann Arbor Historic District Commission.

Marnie Paulus - liaison to Washtenaw County Historic District Commission, M.S. in Historic Preservation Eastern Michigan University, board member Kempf House Society and Ann Arbor Historical Foundation.

Louisa Pieper - preservation consultant, past Historic Preservation Coordinator for the city of Ann Arbor, 1975 – 99, founder and past board member of Michigan Historic Preservation Network.

Grace Shackman - past member Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners, history columnist for the *Ann Arbor Observer*, member Ann Arbor Historic District Commission Awards Committee, Old West Side Association Historian.

Nancy Snyder - Chair, Washtenaw County Historic District Commission.

Jane VanBolt - present home owner, past member Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation Board.

John VanBolt - present home owner, past member Ypsilanti Historic District Commission, past member Ypsilanti City Council, General Counsel to Michigan Attorney Discipline Board.

Kay Williams - Chair, Superior Township Historic District Study Committee, past Superior Township Clerk, past member Washtenaw County Planning Commission, Washtenaw County Historic District Commission.

Susan Wineberg - M.S. in Historic Preservation Eastern Michigan University, past member Ann Arbor Historic District Commission, past President Washtenaw County Historical Society, past member many Ann Arbor Historic District Study Committees.

Description

The Esek Pray House stands on the north side of West Ann Arbor road in Section 3 of Superior Township (Figure 1). It is built of red brick in a very traditional style--a full two-stories high, two rooms deep and five bays wide. The gabled asphalt roof has a shallow pitch with the gables on the sides so that the ridge is parallel to the road (Figures 2 and 3). Exterior detailing is simple and in the Classical style with cornice returns and a decorative frieze. Greek Revival detailing includes a wrap-around frieze board with cornice returns at the gable ends, dentil molding, and a lunette in each gable. The window openings are symmetrically placed on the facade (Cover illustration) with two-over-two, double-hung wood window sashes which are not original. The owners are in the process of replacing these with six-over-six wood sash similar to the original. The house also has an elaborate, extra wide front entry, consisting of a two-panel Greek Revival door and sidelights with four pilasters which support a wide architrave above. The foundation is fieldstone. A one-story, hipped roofed enclosed porch and small laundry—bathroom wing extends across most of the rear. (Figure 4)

Both floors of the house have two rooms on each side of a central hall (Figures 5 and 6). The floor plan of the house, sometimes referred to as the double pile Georgian plan, was commonly adopted in New England and New York during the early 19th century, but it is unusual for Superior Township and Washtenaw County. A solid brick wall from cellar to attic floor divides the house longitudinally and another separates the west rooms from the center hall. The woodwork in the downstairs hall and southeast room is of black walnut in a Greek Revival style with acanthus leaves in the corner blocks. The stairway has a cherry banister and newel post with a mother of pearl disk embedded in the top. Scars in the wood of the first floor and brickwork in the attic indicate that all eight rooms originally had fireplaces, with four chimneys serving two fireplaces each. At some point the chimneys were consolidated into the remaining two, one on each end gable. The first floor fireplaces on the west have been completely removed in the past and now only the southeast fireplace remains functional. Three other fireplaces also remain on the second floor. The ceilings are approximately nine feet high. All of the interior hardware is old, and most of it appears to be original. The front door lock is of English manufacture (Carpenter) and bears the hallmark of King William IV.

The Esek Pray farm consists of two parcels (Figure 7). The front (south) parcel is located just north of the main road, and consists of 1.56 acres. The second parcel is rectangular, oriented north-south, and contains 2.5 acres to the north of the first parcel. Several outbuildings define the residential complex near the front of the property, and surround the driveway and parking lot. The house is the oldest and most significant feature on the property. It is situated close to West Ann Arbor Road, facing south, screened from the road by a row of large older trees. To the west of the house is the driveway, which leads to the garage, chicken coop (now a garden shed), and pump house to the northwest. These outbuildings surround the west, north, and south sides of the large parking area at the end of the driveway, respectively. The chicken coop has a gabled, cedar shingle roof, clapboard walls, and a new (1981) poured concrete and block foundation. The small pump house is on its original concrete foundation with an unattached pump inside. It has a gabled asphalt roof and walls of vertical boards with a sliding door on the east. The cluster of structures is surrounded by gardens and a large rear yard. In the front yard to the west of the house lies a large boulder with a plaque commemorating Esek Pray, the original owner of the property (Figure 8). To the north of the complex around the driveway and its rear yard is the open pasture of the second parcel of the property. The east-facing stable is located there, due north of the garage, in the southwestern corner of the pasture area.

Significance and Historical Background

The first owner of the property was Esek Pray, who purchased the east half of the northeast quarter and the east half of the southeast quarter of Section 3 of Superior Township for a total of 152.73 acres in 1825. He also purchased adjacent land in Section 34 of Salem Township. Pray established his farm, building a log cabin and clearing land for fields. In 1836 he received a license to operate a tavern on his property (Figure 9), using the barn as the stagecoach stop. In 1839 his house burned, and he constructed a new one in brick.

Esek Pray married Sally Ann Hammond, and together they had a family of eight children. Each one of these children married a member of a neighboring family, allowing Pray eventually to become the patriarch of a very large, extended family which included the McCormick, Murray, Sutton, Finton, Pope, Galpin, Geer, and McKim families, and eventually also the Kimmel and Lewis families.

During the 1830s and 1840s, Esek Pray participated in township, county, and state politics. He was a member of the Second Convention of Assent, known as the “Frost Bitten Convention”, of December 14, 1836, which enabled the Territory of Michigan to become a State. He participated in the First State Legislature and held the office of Justice of the Peace of Superior Township for 24 years. Pray also developed his farm into a highly successful operation (Figure 10). In the 1850 Federal census, the farm was ranked second in cash value of all the farms in Superior Township. The house saw double duty as a tavern and an inn for early travelers.

Esek Pray’s son, George, grew up in the house. In 1845, he was a member of the first class to graduate from the University of Michigan. His diaries (Attachment F), now in the Bentley Historical Library, give a vivid picture of University life in those days. A permanent exhibit in the University’s Student Activities Building depicts an early student dormitory room using artifacts that belonged to George Pray.

Esek Pray died in 1856, and the family farm was turned over to his daughter Mary Jane and her husband Watson Geer. Over the next 40 years, the Geers built a very successful farm (Figure 12). They owned a total of 335 acres in Sections 3 and 10 of Superior Township, and Section 34 of Salem Township. They also owned land in Manchester Township to the southwest, and a lot in the City of Ypsilanti. By 1860 (Figures 11, 12, and 13), the farm raised a significant number of sheep (217), wheat, and orchard products. It also produced hay and clover, butter and cheese, potatoes, barley, and a moderate amount of corn, oats, and peas. Livestock included horses, milk cows, cattle and swine. By 1870, the farm increased to 400 acres and continued to be one of the most successful in the Township. The farm continued to raise sheep (270) and produce large amounts of wool and hay in addition to the traditional crops and animals. The 1880 census indicates that the farm had grown by another 55 acres, making it the largest farm in the Township that year. The Geers then owned 300 sheep and a significant number of cattle. Corn, oats, wheat, and potatoes continued to be the staple crops.

Watson Geer passed away in 1893. His son, Thomas Pray Geer, inherited the property and continued to farm it until probably the 1920s. The property was then divided along a north-south boundary, and passed on to Geer grandchildren Willard Geer and Vera Lyke. The chicken coop and pump house date from this period. Willard Geer obtained the Pray house, which he sold to the Bernice and Diane Black in 1946. Vera Lyke inherited acreage and the barn to the west of the house. That area has since been developed into two small residential lots. The Blacks sold the house to William and Cynthia Burmeister in 1969. Excluding the period from 1974 to 1979, when

Richard and Madelyn Haynes lived in the house and added the stable in the rear, the Burmeisters lived here until they in turn sold the property to John and Jane Van Bolt in 1987. The Van Bolts added the garage in 1989. The property was listed on the Michigan State Register of Historic Sites in 1986. It was also included in the *Superior Township Intensive Level Survey* in 1996 (Attachment D).

The legal description of the property (Attachment E) defines the boundary of the recommended district, with the road and its row of 19th century maple trees on the south and the property lines to the north, east and west. Adjacent parcels, which were formerly part of the Pray farm, have been subdivided for residential development and are not included. The 1839 brick house is the most significant structure on the property, supported by the chicken coop and pump house built in the 1920s. Three of the five structures on the property, or 60%, therefore contribute to the significance of the district.

Conclusions

The Study Committee finds that the Esek Pray House meets the following criteria which have been adapted from the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In addition to these criteria, the Study Committee finds that the house has sufficient integrity of location, design, materials, and workmanship to make it worthy of preservation.

1. *Its character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the community, state, or country.* This is one of the oldest houses remaining, not only in Superior Township, but the County as a whole. It is a fine example of an early dwelling.
2. *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the development of the community, state, or country.* Esek Pray was actively involved in and had a significant affect on the early development of the Township and County.
3. *Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style valuable for the study of a period, type, method of construction, or use of indigenous materials.* The Esek Pray House is an excellent example of the Greek Revival style.
4. *Its embodiment of elements of design, detailing, materials, or craftsmanship that render it architecturally significant.* The detailing and craftsmanship, particularly on the interior are of the highest quality.
5. *Its unique location or singular physical characteristics that make it an established or familiar visual feature.* This house, with its two similar neighbors, has long been a landmark on this busy road which connects the cities of Ann Arbor and Plymouth.
6. *Its suitability for preservation or restoration.* The property is in excellent condition and should be protected so that its significant features will remain intact.

Recommendation

The Study Committee recommends that the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners adopt an ordinance designating the Esek Pray House as a Washtenaw County Historic District under the jurisdiction of the Washtenaw County Historic District Commission.

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