

FINAL HISTORIC DISTRICT STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT  
FERRY COURT HISTORIC DISTRICT  
ROCHESTER HILLS, MICHIGAN

CHARGE OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS STUDY COMMITTEE

The historic districts study committee was appointed by Rochester Hills City Council on December 15, 1999, pursuant to the Rochester Hills Code of Ordinances, Chapter 118, as amended in 1999. The study committee is a standing committee charged with conducting the duties and activities of a study committee on a continuing basis. These duties include inventory, research, and preparation of a preliminary historic district study committee report for a proposed historic district. Study committee members serve two year terms. A list of current committee members follows.

STUDY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Dziurman*, a registered architect with a practice focused on historic preservation, meets the federal professional qualification standards for historic architect. He has served on the Rochester Hills Historic Districts Commission for fifteen years, many of those years as chairperson.

*Linda Raschke* served for six years on Rochester Hills City Council and is interested in the city's planning and development. During her six years on city council she was a member of the historical committee, among others.

*Richard Stamps* is associate professor of anthropology at Oakland University. A professional archaeologist with a strong interest in history, he is also a member of the Rochester Hills Historic Districts Commission

*Lavere Webster* is an art and antiques conservator who lives in one of the city's designated local historic districts. He has served on the board of directors of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society for more than six years.

*Pamela Whateley* is a minister and healing counselor interested in the city's building and development. She served for two years on the subcommittee for the city's Earl Borden Historic Preservation Award.

Jane C. Busch, historic preservation consultant, assisted the study committee in its work.

INVENTORY

A photographic inventory of the proposed district was conducted in 2002 as part of the Rochester Hills Historic Districts Survey. Copies of the inventory forms are located at the Rochester Hills Planning Department, the Rochester Hills Museum, and the State Historic Preservation Office.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT

Ferry Court is located in section twenty-three on the east side of the city of Rochester Hills. Built on flat land, the housing complex centers on a short, oval boulevard called Wayside Park (formerly Ferry Court) that extends northward from East Hamlin Road (photo 1). Six single and four double houses line both sides of the boulevard. Two larger residences, one single family and one multi-family, face Hamlin Road. Stone walls mark the entrances to the boulevard and to the multi-family residence. Mature trees line the boulevard and the perimeter of the complex. The proposed district contains twelve contributing buildings, two contributing structures, and one contributing site. There are two non-contributing buildings.

Fieldstone walls between shaped concrete posts flank the entrance to Ferry Court (photo 2). The fieldstone walls, now painted white, are unpainted in a historic photo (figure 1). Iron rings attached to the two inside posts once held metal gates that closed over the roadway. Vertical wood plank walls connect the middle concrete posts with the outer posts. The wood planks have replaced metal gates that closed over a pedestrian walkway on each side of the road.

The large, stucco Ferry boarding house stands just east of the Ferry Court entrance, facing Hamlin Road (321 E. Hamlin Road; photo 3). Built in 1912, the boarding house is two and one half stories tall with an H-plan and entrances in front and on each side. Stickwork decorates the front and side gables. Prior to its conversion to apartments the building contained fourteen rooms plus a kitchen and a large recreation and dining area.<sup>1</sup> The dirt driveway is entered from Hamlin Road. The concrete, fieldstone, and wood plank walls flanking the driveway are more modest versions of the walls at the entrance to the court.

A two story, rectangular plan brick house stands west of the Ferry Court entrance, facing Hamlin Road (267 E. Hamlin Road; photo 4). The full width front porch has Doric columns. The house was constructed in the late nineteenth century on a sixty-seven acre farm and acquired by D. M. Ferry Company in 1912.<sup>2</sup> A concrete post at the southwest front corner of this parcel matches the posts at the Ferry Court entrance and marks this property as part of the housing complex.

The oval boulevard at the center of Ferry Court is a dirt roadway, paved with asphalt only near the entrance (photo 5). The road encloses a grass lawn marked by a row of boulders at the southern end. The trees lining the edges of the lawn are clearly the young trees shown in historic photos (figures 1 & 2). Missing are the sidewalks and some of the trees in front of the houses and the well in the center of the oval. A hydrant may mark the well site. Despite the changes, the entrance walls combine with the trees and the overall plan to give a strong sense of the historic landscape.

Alternating double and single houses, four on each side, line the boulevard. An additional ranch house at the north end of each side brings the total number of houses on the boulevard to ten. The first eight houses were built in 1912. They are small houses, one story tall, with vinyl siding

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<sup>1</sup> James Ball, property owner, in Minutes of Rochester Hills City Council Meeting, 12 August 1987, 11.

<sup>2</sup> The Michigan Rural Property Inventory gives an 1889 construction date for this house. This is feasible based on style and construction. The 1872 atlas map shows a house that could be this one but neither map nor inventory provides conclusive evidence.

over the original stucco. The side by side double houses have hipped roofs (photo 6). Steps lead up to the front doors, which are sheltered by gable roofs supported by square columns. The single houses have pyramidal roofs, and curved brackets support the gable roofs over the front doors (photo 7). Although these houses are relatively simple in design, the use of stucco and the brackets on the single houses suggests an Arts and Crafts influence. Originally each house had a privy and a garden plot in the rear yard. The small ranch houses, built ca. 1950, have aluminum siding, probably original (photo 8).

There are two non-contributing resources in the proposed district. A two car, prefabricated metal garage stands behind the brick farmhouse at 267 East Hamlin Road. A small storage shed with particle board walls stands behind the double house at 1965/1971 Wayside Park. Although the garage is more visible than the shed, neither detracts significantly from the overall design and feeling of the district. Ferry Court exemplifies the historic district where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The vinyl siding over the stucco on the single and double houses diminishes the integrity of the buildings as far as materials. But the form of these small worker houses; their relationship to each other, the boulevard, and the boarding house (which retains its original stucco); together with landscape features of trees and entrance walls all give a strong sense of history and place to Ferry Court. It stands apart from its surroundings and from all other housing—historic and non-historic—in Rochester Hills.

#### RESOURCE LIST

##### *East Hamlin Road, west to east*

267 East Hamlin Road. Two story side gabled painted brick house. Full width front porch with Doric columns. Built ca. 1870s–80s. Contributing. Two car gable roof metal garage. Non-contributing.

321 East Hamlin Road. Two and a half story H-plan gable roof multi-family house with stucco cladding. Front facade has cross gable at roof line and entry porch with square posts and brackets. Decorative stickwork in front and side gables. Built 1912. Contributing. Pair of fieldstone and wood plank walls with shaped concrete posts flanking driveway entrance. Constructed ca. 1912. Contributing.

##### *Wayside Park, center*

Entrance walls. Pair of fieldstone and wood plank walls with shaped concrete posts flanking entrance to Wayside Park. Constructed ca. 1912. Contributing.

Boulevard and median. Oval boulevard paved with asphalt near entrance, remainder of road dirt. Mature trees line grass median in center. Constructed 1912. Contributing.

##### *Wayside Park, west side, south to north*

1964 and 1970 Wayside Park. One story hipped roof double house with vinyl siding. Two gable roof entrance porches with square posts. Built 1912. Contributing.

1948 Wayside Park. One story pyramidal roof house with vinyl siding. Decorative brackets support gable roof over front entrance. Built 1912. Contributing.

1926 and 1932 Wayside Park. One story hipped roof double house with vinyl siding. Two gable roof entrance porches with square posts. Built 1912. Contributing.

1910 Wayside Park. One story pyramidal roof house with vinyl siding. Decorative brackets support gable roof over front entrance. Built 1912. Contributing.

1894 Wayside Park. One story side gabled ranch house with aluminum siding. North wing addition. Built ca. 1950. Contributing.

*Wayside Park, east side, south to north*

1965 and 1971 Wayside Park. One story hipped roof double house with vinyl siding. Two gable roof entrance porches with square posts. Built 1912. Contributing. Gable roof storage shed with particle board walls. Non-contributing.

1949 Wayside Park. One story pyramidal roof house with vinyl siding. Decorative brackets support gable roof over front entrance. Built 1912. Contributing.

1933 Wayside Park. One story hipped roof double house with vinyl siding. Two gable roof entrance porches with square posts. Built 1912. Contributing.

1911 Wayside Park. One story pyramidal roof house with vinyl siding. Decorative brackets support gable roof over front entrance. Built 1912. Contributing.

1895 Wayside Park. One story side gabled ranch house with aluminum siding. Rear ell. Built 1950. Contributing.

COUNT OF HISTORIC AND NON-HISTORIC RESOURCES

The proposed Ferry Court historic district contains fifteen historic (contributing) and two non-historic (non-contributing) resources.

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The proposed Ferry Court historic district consists of the following parcels:

1. 15-23-300-025 Described as:

T3N, R11E, SEC 23; PART OF SW 1/4; BEG AT PT DIST; S 89-03-30 W 948.28 FT; FROM S 1/4 COR; TH S 89-03-30 W 55.00 FT; TH N 01-21-00 W 651.01 FT; TH N 89-03-30 E 172.00 FT; TH S 01-21-00 E 205.03 FT; TH S 04-10-05 E 240.15 FT; TH S 89-03-30 W 128-80 FT; TH S 01-21-00 E 206.20 FT; TO BEG 2.05 A;

2. 15-23-300-026 Described as:

T3N, R11E, SEC 23; PART OF SW 1/4; BEG AT PT DIST; S 89-03-30 W 809.32 FT; FROM S 1/4 COR; TH S 89-03-30 W 138.96 FT; TH N 01-21-00 W 206.20 FT; TH N 89-03-30 E 128.80 FT; TH S 04-10-05 E 206.53 FT; TO BEG 0.63 A;

3. 15-23-300-029 Described as:

T3N, R11E, SEC 23; PART OF SW 1/4; BET AT PT DIST; S 89-03-30 W 1003.28 FT; FROM S 1/4 COR; TH S 89-03-30 W 54.55 FT; TH N 01-21-00 W 196 FT; TH S 89-03-30 W 158.26 FT; TH N 08-00-10 E 460.60 FT; TH N 89-03-30 E 137.95 FT; TH S 01-21-00 E 651.01 FT; TO BEG 2.08 A;

4. 15-23-300-030 Described as:

T3N, R11E, SEC 23; PART OF SW 1/4; BEG AT PT DIST; S 89-03-30 W 1057.83 FT; FROM S 1/4 COR; TH S 89-03-30 W 190.50 FT; TH N 08-00-10 E 198.41 FT; TH N 89-03-30 E 158.26 FT; TH S 01-21-00 E 196 FT; TO BEG 0.78 A;

#### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The proposed historic district contains the entire employee housing complex laid out and developed by D. M. Ferry & Company in 1912. It includes the late nineteenth century farmhouse that Ferry incorporated into the complex after the company acquired the property and the two ranch houses added at the end of the boulevard ca. 1950. When Ferry Court was built it was surrounded by farmland. Ferry's farms were north, east, and south of Ferry Court, and another privately owned farm was to the west. Today the Christian Memorial Cultural Center Cemetery is north and east of Ferry Court (photo 9). Across Hamlin Road to the south is an apartment complex built in 1986 (photo 10). The small house to the west of Ferry Court was probably built as part of the Hamlin Place Farms subdivision, platted in 1916 (photo 11). West of this house is commercial development at the intersection of Hamlin and Rochester Roads.

#### HISTORY OF THE DISTRICT

##### *D. M. Ferry & Company*

Dexter Mason Ferry came to Detroit from western New York State in 1852. After working for a few years as a bookkeeper for Milo T. Gardner's seed company, Ferry became a partner in the company. With a third partner, Eber F. Church, they established Gardner, Ferry & Church in 1856. Following some changes in partnership the company became D. M. Ferry & Company in 1867. The company flourished as a result of Ferry's innovations in seed breeding and marketing. Before Ferry, only the Shakers packaged seeds in small packets. Ferry introduced the commission box—an assortment of seed packets in a display rack for retail sale. To ensure reliability the company obtained high quality seed and took what was leftover off the market at

the end of the growing season. Before long, Ferry's brightly printed seed packets had a national reputation. The company's bulk seed business grew as well, supplying farmers who produced fruits and vegetables for commercial markets including the growing canning industry. By the time Dexter M. Ferry died in 1907, D. M. Ferry & Company was the largest garden seed business in the world. In 1930 D. M. Ferry & Company merged with the C. C. Morse Company of California—the largest seed producer on the West Coast—to become the Ferry-Morse Seed Company. Dexter M. Ferry Jr. became president of the merged company, which kept its headquarters in Detroit until 1959. In that year Ferry-Morse Seed Company moved their home garden division to Kentucky and their headquarters to California.

### *Ferry Seed Farm and Trial Gardens*

In the late 1860s D. M. Ferry & Company established a stock seed farm and trial gardens outside of Detroit. By the 1880s the farm and gardens were within the city limits and inadequate for the company's needs. The stock seed farm was moved to Pontiac, but before long it proved inadequate as well. Ferry sold its land in Pontiac and in 1902 bought approximately 568 acres of land in section twenty-six of Avon Township, south of Hamlin Road, establishing Oakview Farm for breeding and growing stock seed.<sup>3</sup> In 1912 the company bought 113 acres in section twenty-three, north of Hamlin Road, for its experimental and trial gardens, replacing the gardens in Detroit.<sup>4</sup> During the 1920s Ferry bought the remaining 169 acres in section twenty-six, enlarging its Avon Township operation to 850 acres.

On the stock seed farm Ferry grew seed that was shipped to the company's growers, who then grew the seed that Ferry sold. Farm employees worked to maintain the purity of the plant varieties and to develop new and improved varieties. At the experimental and trial gardens workers compared and tested different plant varieties, recording such characteristics as the percentage of germination for each seed lot. As suburban development proceeded in Avon Township cross pollination from home gardens made it increasingly difficult to isolate the seed crops. In 1944 Ferry-Morse sold its seed farm—all of section twenty-six—to Howard McGregor Sr., who used it to produce feed for his Great Oaks Stock Farm.<sup>5</sup> The company continued to operate the experimental and trial gardens north of Hamlin Road into the 1950s. In the 1960s Ferry-Morse sold the remainder of its land in Avon Township.<sup>6</sup>

### *Ferry Court*

D. M. Ferry & Company built Ferry Court shortly after they purchased the acreage north of Hamlin Road in 1912.<sup>7</sup> They built four single houses and four double houses on Ferry Court

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<sup>3</sup> "Means Much for Rochester," *Rochester Era*, 21 November 1902; Oakland County Register of Deeds, Liber 203, p. 221, Liber 205, pp. 445, 446, 470, and others, available at Register of Deeds Office, Pontiac; Geo. A. Ogle & Co., *Standard Atlas of Oakland County, Michigan* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1908), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Oakland County Register of Deeds, Liber 248, p. 23, available at Register of Deeds Office, Pontiac.

<sup>5</sup> "McGregor Buys Ferry-Morse Farm," *Rochester Era*, 28 September 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Oakland County Register of Deeds, Liber 4517, p. 757, Liber 4840, p. 359, available at Register of Deeds Office, Pontiac.

<sup>7</sup> Michigan State Tax Commission and Works Progress Administration, "Rural Property Inventory, Oakland County, Avon Township," Code No. 23N, 1938, Record Group 72-76, State Archives of Michigan, Michigan Historical Center, Lansing, Michigan. Although construction dates given in the rural property inventory are not always

(figure 2) and a boardinghouse (figure 3) on Hamlin Road, on the opposite side of Ferry Court from the existing brick farmhouse. As described in the 1938 rural property inventory, all of the buildings (except the brick farmhouse) were constructed of concrete block with stucco cladding and had a telephone, electricity, hot air furnace, and indoor plumbing. The small houses had four rooms per dwelling unit and the boardinghouse had twenty rooms. Although the houses had indoor plumbing by 1930, there is anecdotal evidence that they had privies earlier on.<sup>8</sup> Two small ranch houses were added at the north end of Ferry Court ca. 1950, not long before the company ended its Avon Township operation.

Floyd Cobb Jr. lived in what is now 1933 Wayside Park from 1929 until he went into the service in 1943. Cobb was six years old when his father, Floyd Cobb Sr., got a job doing paperwork for two Ferry geneticists—Gordon Morrison and Harold Coulter, the latter superintendent of the experimental and trial gardens. Cobb’s memories of growing up in Ferry Court provide a vivid picture of life there during this time period. Cobb lived in the four room house—the right side of a double—with his sister and parents (figure 4). The front door opened directly into the living room, with the kitchen behind. The two bedrooms were on the left side of the house. The bathroom, with bathtub, was in the basement where it shared space with the coal bin and furnace. Heat from the furnace entered the living quarters through a grate in the left corner of the living room. Although Floyd Cobb Sr. worked in the office, the remainder of the houses were occupied by farm workers and their families. During the summer, students from Michigan State University who worked on the farm lived in the boardinghouse.<sup>9</sup> During the winter the boardinghouse was vacant though it provided a venue for parties for the Ferry Court community. Gordon Morrison and his family lived in the brick house.

Cobb believes he recalls his father saying in the late 1930s that their rent was six dollars a month. They had a vegetable garden, supplemented by seasonal produce that the company left on the porches of Ferry Court residents. In addition, Cobb’s father brought home extra vegetables that were unneeded after he recorded information about them. On Fridays he distributed them to other families in the court. Although the Cobb family was not affluent—Cobb’s mother worked part time as a waitress—Cobb said of growing up in Ferry Court “we were like millionaires.” They played games in the center of the court, playing around the two wells there. They played ball and ran track in the field to the north of Ferry Court. And further back, in the woods, a pile of stone removed from the farm fields and an ice house provided additional opportunities for recreation.

After Ferry-Morse sold the property in the 1960s successive property owners operated Ferry Court as rental housing. Low income tenants occupied the single and double houses and a group of “social reformers” created a commune in the boardinghouse, where they operated a food co-op and publishing business.<sup>10</sup> In the late 1960s the property owner changed the name of the

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correct, the 1912 construction date listed in the inventory is close to that given by Eula Pray in her *History of Avon Township* (Ann Arbor: Nonce Press, 1986), 53. Pray lists the single and double houses and boarding houses among those the company constructed in 1914 and 1915. However Pray incorrectly gives 1913 as the year of purchase for the 113 acres north of Hamlin Road.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Stamps, conversation with Derek Delacourt, 5 September 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Other accounts state that single male employees lived in the boardinghouse. It may have served different functions during different time periods.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Dargay, “Wayside Park Has ‘Seedy’ History,” *The Eccentric*, 19 November 1992.

complex to Christian Court in an effort to improve its image. Current owner James Ball purchased the property in 1987. He renovated the deteriorated buildings, installing vinyl siding on the small houses and converting the boardinghouse into apartments.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISTRICT

The Ferry Court Historic District is significant under National Register Criterion A, for its association with a pattern of historical events, and under Criterion C, for its embodiment of the distinctive characteristics of a type of architecture and planning. The areas of significance are agriculture, architecture, and community planning and development. The district's period of significance is from 1912, when Ferry Court was constructed, to the late 1950s, when the Ferry-Morse Seed Company ended its operation in Avon Township.

#### **The National Register Criteria**

**The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:**

**A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.**

D. M. Ferry & Company is nationally significant in American agricultural history as the largest garden seed business in the world in the early 1900s and an innovator in seed breeding and marketing. From shortly after 1912 until the merger with the C. C. Morse Company in 1930, Oakview Farm in Avon Township was Ferry's only facility for seed breeding, growing, and research. With eight hundred and fifty acres at its peak from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s, Oakview Farm occupied a prominent position in Avon Township's agricultural economy. The farm also represents the trend in Avon Township agriculture toward large farms growing specialized commercial crops. Oakview Farm, along with Parke, Davis, and Company's Parkedale Biological Farm, occupies an even more specialized niche in American and Avon Township agricultural history than the more typical dairy farm. Oakview and Parkedale produced crops and products for specialized branches of agriculture-based industry. Today no buildings or landscapes remain from Parkedale Farm. Ferry Court is one of only two remnants of Oakview Farm; the other is a group of three barns at Hampton Golf Course. Ferry Court is an important surviving piece of Avon Township's agricultural history, of which relatively little remains.

**C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.**

Ferry Court embodies the distinctive characteristics of company housing in the early twentieth century. Although too small to be called a company town, Ferry Court clearly belongs to the same category, with houses and land owned by the company and rented to company employees.



The designer of Ferry Court was aware of progressive planning ideas of that time period, particularly the garden city movement. This is evident in the placement of the houses on a cul-de-sac, the landscaped median, and the rustic stone entrance walls and well with flared roof. The cul-de-sac is an unusual feature in a company town and part of Ferry Court's distinctive character.<sup>11</sup> Ferry Court's location on a farm was also unusual for company housing and met the garden city ideal of a rural location away from the crowded industrial city, although the straight rows of crops in the trial gardens were hardly picturesque. Unlike other company housing, where this ideal could only be met by moving the community away from the factory or mine where the employees worked, in this case the "garden" and the workplace were the same.

The houses and boardinghouse show the influence of the Craftsman aesthetic in their stucco cladding and bracketed entries. Although the houses lack the front porch that defines a bungalow according to today's architectural historians, small houses of this type (the single houses) were commonly called bungalows in the early twentieth century. Small, simple four room houses such as these were promoted for worker housing. The integrity of the single and double houses has been diminished by the application of vinyl siding over the stucco. Nevertheless, the form of these small worker houses, the boardinghouse with its intact exterior, and the boulevard with median, trees, and entrance walls combine to create a historic landscape that is unique in Rochester Hills. In a larger context, Ferry Court is an unusual and significant variant of company housing.

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<sup>11</sup> Arne Alanen, communication by e-mail to Jane Busch, 4 October 2002.

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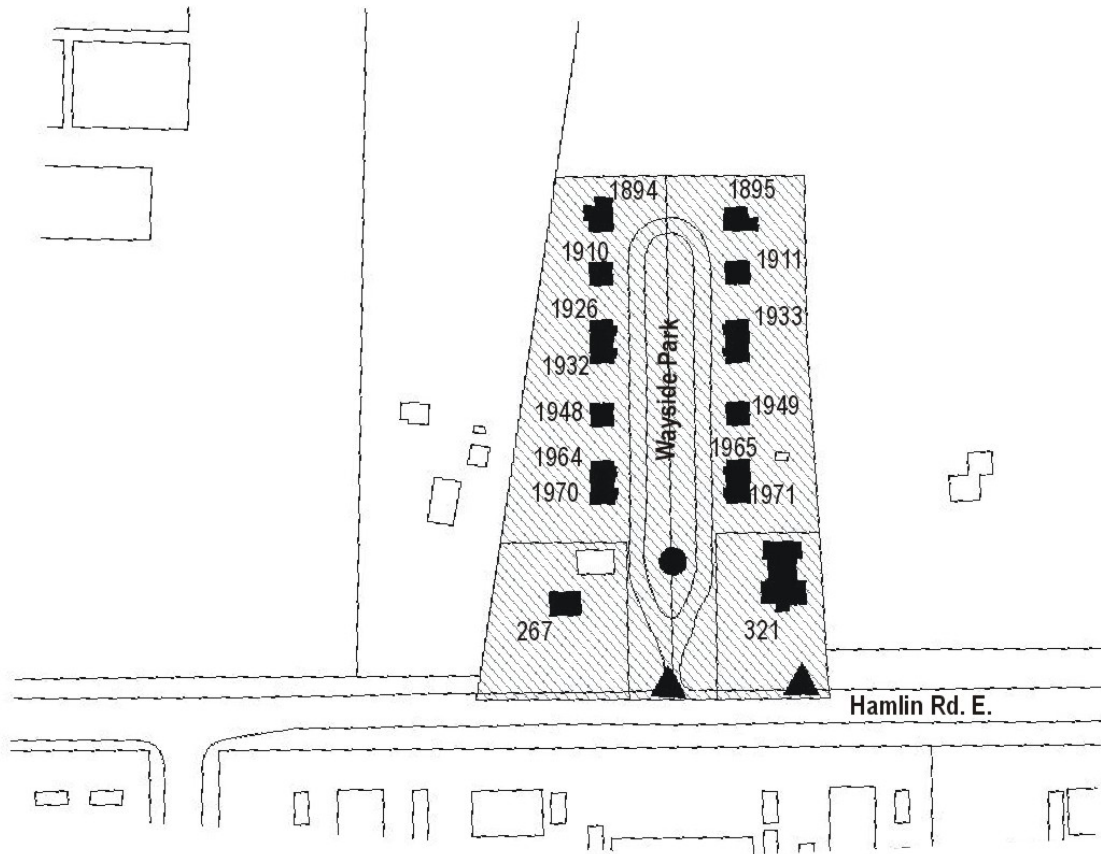
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Resources

-  Contributing
-  Non-Contributing
-  Building (Footprint Varies)
-  Structure
-  Site
-  Proposed District

Map by Hamilton Anderson Associates  
2002

**Proposed Ferry Court  
Historic District**

City of Rochester Hills  
Oakland County





Photo 1: Ferry Court, looking northeast from entrance

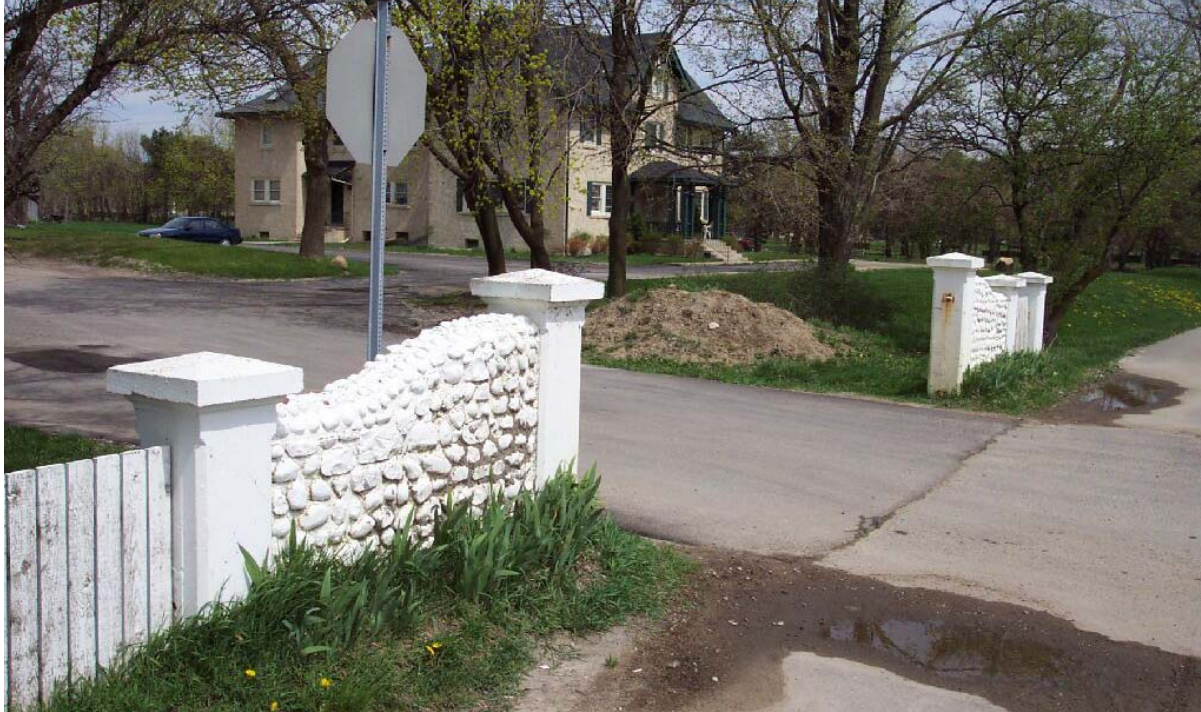


Photo 2: Entrance walls; boardinghouse in background





Photo 3: Ferry boardinghouse, 321 East Hamlin Road



Photo 4: Former farmhouse, 267 East Hamlin Road





Photo 5: Ferry Court, looking north



Photo 6: Double house at 1926 and 1932 Wayside Park





Photo 7: Single house at 1949 Wayside Park



Photo 8: Ranch house at 1894 Wayside Park





Photo 9: Christian Memorial Cemetery, east of Ferry Court



Photo 10: Apartments south of Ferry Court, across Hamlin Road





Photo 11: House west of Ferry Court

Credit: All photos taken April 2002 by Burke Jenkins ASLA,  
Hamilton Anderson Associates



Figure 1: Postcard view of Ferry Court, ca.1920  
Credit: Courtesy of Rod Wilson



Figure 2: Ferry Court, looking northwest, ca. 1930  
Credit: Courtesy of Floyd Cobb Jr.





Figure 3: Postcard view of Ferry boardinghouse, ca. 1920  
Credit: Courtesy of Rochester Historical Commission



Figure 4: Left: Floyd Cobb Jr. and his sister Jeanne on the porch of their house, ca. 1932.  
Right: (Clockwise from rear left) Aunt Lois Cobb, Step-grandmother Veda Cobb, Jeanne Cobb, Floyd Cobb Jr. in front of their house ca. 1935.  
Credit: Courtesy of Floyd Cobb Jr.