

FINAL HISTORIC STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT
STILES SCHOOL HISTORIC DISTRICT
ROCHESTER HILLS, MICHIGAN
Draft December 9, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Pursuant to Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act (PA 169 of 1970, as amended) and Chapter 118 of the Rochester Hills Code of Ordinances, the Rochester Hills Historic Districts Study Committee has prepared this report on the proposed Stiles School Historic District following all of the procedures for preparing a preliminary historic district study committee report.

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 by the city of Rochester Hills, Oakland County, Michigan. 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 study committee members follows.

STUDY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

James Hannick is a long-time Rochester Hills resident with an interest and knowledge of local history.

Adam Kochenderfer is an attorney specializing in commercial litigation and land use. He has broad experience working with municipalities to address development, taxation, and the drafting of local ordinances.

Ms. Sue Thomasson has lived in the community for over 20 years and has resided in two historic homes. She currently resides in the oldest home in Stony Creek Village. She has a love of history and currently works at the Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm.

Jason Thompson is chairperson of the Historic Districts Study Committee, and is a member of the Rochester Hills Historic Districts Commission. He has received a bachelor's degree in history from Oakland University, and a masters of public administration from Oakland University. His academic and work activities include a strong background in research and grant writing.

Dr. Richard Stamps, is Associated Professor of anthropology at Oakland University. A professional archaeologist with a strong interest in local history, he is 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 eight years.

The study committee was assisted in its work by Jane C. Busch, historic preservation consultant, who conducted the 2002 historic districts survey, and by Kristine M. Kidorf, Kidorf Preservation Consulting.

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 form are located at the Rochester Hills Planning Department, the Rochester Hills Museum, and the State Historic Preservation Office. Additional photographs were taken in January 2006 as part of the preparation of this report.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICT

Stiles School, at 3976 South Livernois Road, is located on the northwest corner of Livernois Road and South Boulevard, in Section 33 at the southern border of the City of Rochester Hills.

The school building is near the southeast corner of the property, set back from the intersection of Livernois Road and South Boulevard. At the very south end is a two story, brick Collegiate Gothic style school built in 1929. Two modern, single story additions are attached to the north side of the two story building (photo 1) and are not included in the district. The building stands on level land. Mature pine and deciduous trees are located south and east of the older portion of the building. A concrete walkway surrounds the entire building and connects with South Boulevard. A relatively new, backlit double-sided sign sits at the southeast corner of the property near Livernois. A driveway on South Boulevard accesses the parking lot west of the 1929 building.

The 1929 Stiles School building is a two story, light brown brick structure with limestone trim and detailing. Its massing is comprised of two rectangular gable roof structures placed perpendicularly to each other, one parallel to Livernois and one parallel to South Boulevard. A two story stair tower projects from the rear intersection of the two masses, and a one story flat roof mechanical room is attached to the western end of the southern mass.

The two rectangular masses are about equal in size, each five bays long and one bay wide. The bays are separated by brick pilasters capped in limestone trim. Sets of two double hung windows are in the first and second floors of each bay, with the exception of the entrance bay on the east elevation and the five-sided projecting bay on the first floor of the south elevation. The building originally had paired nine over nine double hung wood windows, as shown in an interior photograph from 1957. All of the windows have been replaced with

one over one double hung metal windows, with an opaque metal panel in the upper sash. Within each bay, the first and second floor windows are separated by brick laid in a basket weave pattern. Seven regularly spaced stone brackets top the second story windows below a simple stone cornice (photo 1).

The ends of the rectangular masses on the east, west, and north elevations are solid brick up to the gable. Three bands of limestone trim span the gable ends. A small rectangular attic window is in the center of each gable end. The gable roof is covered in asphalt shingles with copper flashing. There are two massive decorative chimneys spaced equally in the east facing block, and matching central and end chimneys in the south facing block.

The east elevation is the most ornate, with a slightly projecting, flat roofed entrance bay facing Livernois, next to where the two building blocks intersect. The entrance is flanked by stone trimmed buttresses and has a limestone Tudor arch doorway containing three single leaf doors topped with wood transom windows (photo 5). The second story of the entrance bay has a set of double hung windows, and the parapet wall above has two stone trimmed crenels.

The main building contains four classrooms on each floor, with an office on the second floor above the entrance hall. The floors are terrazzo in the hallways and covered in carpet in the classrooms. The hallways have tan brick wainscot two thirds of the way up the wall with painted concrete block above (photo 6). The classrooms have painted concrete block walls with wood trimmed blackboards and coat closets (photo 9). The original wood trim and wood panel doors exist throughout the interior.

The kindergarten room is on the first floor near the entrance door. It has a fireplace of animal theme Flint Faience tiles (photo 8) and a five-sided single story bay projecting from the room. There are seven round murals depicting classic nursery rhymes painted on the upper portions of two walls. The murals may be original to the building or possibly were painted during the Depression by an itinerant worker or through the WPA program (photo 7).

The first addition was constructed in 1957-1958 and is attached to the north end of the 1929 school. The 1963 addition is to the north of the 1958 addition, and has two rectangular wings projecting west on the property. Neither addition is included in the district.

COUNT OF HISTORIC AND NON-HISTORIC RESOURCES

The proposed Stiles School Historic District contains one historic (contributing) resource.

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The proposed Stiles School historic district consists of the southeast corner of the following parcel:

15-33-476-027

More specifically described as: Land in the City of Rochester Hills, T3N, R11E, SEC 33; PART OF SE ¼; Beginning at the intersection of the centerlines of Livernois Road and South Boulevard; then northerly 217 feet; then westerly 136 feet; then southerly 32 feet; then westerly 52 feet; then southerly 174 feet to the centerline of South Boulevard; then easterly 175 feet to the point of the beginning.

The intention of the above description to include only the historic school building and land immediately east and south of the building which has historically been used as a school.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The proposed historic district contains the entire parcel originally associated with the 1929 school building and does not include the 1958 or 1963 additions to the building or land acquired in 1958 to expand the school and grounds.

The proposed district is surrounded by newer development. Houses built in the 1970s and 1980s have been constructed on the parcels to the west. Houses constructed in the 1980s are on the parcels to the north. Across South Boulevard (in the city of Troy) there is a mix of 1980s and 1930s houses. Across Livernois to the east are two 1960s-era office buildings and a mix of houses constructed primarily after the 1940s. Within a wider area surrounding Stiles School there are a few scattered nineteenth and early twentieth century properties. In the winter the Eli Bristol house at 1160 South Boulevard (locally designated) is barely visible from the school.

HISTORY OF THE DISTRICT

*Schools in Avon Township*¹

The history of schools in Avon Township is typical of rural Michigan. Schools were established in Avon Township within a few years of the first settlement, before there was a township government. Territorial law mandated that school districts be laid out as soon as there were fifty families in the township. This system continued when Michigan became a state. School districts levied school taxes, and the residents of each district elected a director, moderator, and treasurer to administer the school. By the 1870s Avon Township had thirteen school districts including some fractional districts that were shared with other townships. All of these were one room schools except for district number five, the Rochester school, which adopted a graded system in 1865.² The 1896 atlas indicates that Avon Township had twelve school districts at that date, including three fractional districts. The primary district schools typically went to eighth grade.

Beginning in about 1910 the population of Avon Township began to grow. By 1929 the population had increased over 260 percent since 1910.³ This was no doubt related to the large number of subdivisions being platted, especially in the southern part of the township. In the fifteen years prior to 1930 the township reviewed over thirty-five requests for new

¹ Avon Township was incorporated as the city of Rochester Hills in 1984.

² Jane C. Busch, "Rochester Hills Historic Districts Survey," (City of Rochester Hills, Rochester Hills, MI., 2002), 38.

³ Eula Pray, *A History of Avon Township, 1820–1940* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Nonce Press, 1986), 11.

subdivisions, and most were approved, although not all were successfully developed. A 1916 sketch shows six subdivisions within a mile of Stiles School.⁴ This increased population and the associated increase in property taxes could account for the construction of a new, larger school building. This was typical of the larger school districts in the township. Brooklands, Hamlin, and Avon School District #2 also built new brick school buildings in the late 1920s. The first two, like Stiles, were built in the Collegiate Gothic style popular for schools at that time.

The Depression caused a setback in both Avon Township and Rochester schools. Due to decreased budgets teachers' salaries were lowered and school years were shortened. The banking crisis of 1933 tied up any money that school districts might have had on hand.⁵ Those district schools that remained open taught grades one through eight. Students who continued on after eighth grade went to Rochester High School on a tuition basis.

As Michigan's rural population grew in the 1940s, primary school districts around the state began to consolidate. In her history of Avon Township, Eula Pray listed eleven school districts in 1944, three of which had recently closed.⁶ In Avon Township two school districts emerged, the Rural Agricultural School District No. 10 Fractional of the Township of Avon, created in 1947, and the Rural Agricultural School District No. 5 Fractional Avon Township in 1949. Later that year District No. 5 became the Rochester Community School District, and District No. 10 Fractional held a naming contest. Five students, including Lefa Sullivan of Stiles School, all came up with the winning name, "Avondale." This became the name of the new high school and the school board, "School Board of Avondale Fractional School District."⁷

Stiles School

Stiles School, erected in 1871, is reportedly named after Mr. Samuel Stiles,⁸ a teacher at the school. There is a conflicting oral report that the school was named Stiles because the land was donated by the Stiles family for the school, however deed records do not appear to support that information. The 1896 Oakland County Atlas shows Samuel Stiles owning twenty eight acres on the southeast corner of South Boulevard and Livernois Road. The property is owned by different families in the 1872 and 1908 atlases. In the abstract for the Eli Bristol House located to the west, a lease for a school is shown as early as 1837.⁹ The lease contained a reverter clause if the school was not longer needed however this clause was removed when the land was deeded from Rena B. Maitrott to the Fractional School District in 1924.¹⁰ A school is shown in this location on the 1872 and 1896 atlas maps. On the 1896 map it is identified as Fractional School District Number One, meaning the district

⁴ Ibid., 20, 21.

⁵ Max Mallon, *One-Hundred Years of Rochester Schools 1865–1965* (Rochester: Rochester Board of Education, 1972), 84.

⁶ Pray, *History of Avon Township*, 97, 157.

⁷ Minutes of the Rural Agricultural School District No. 10 Fractional of the Township of Avon (Avondale School District), February 7, 1949. Collection of Floyd Cobb Jr.

⁸ Kari Clark, phone conversation with Jackie Beecher, October 20, 1998. Rochester Hills Historic Districts Study Committee file.

⁹ LaVere Webster, comments at Rochester Hills Historic Districts Study Committee Meeting, March 9, 2006.

¹⁰ Deed recorded on March 3, 1937, Liber 1083, Page 149, Oakland County Register of Deeds provided by LaVere Webster.

was comprised of properties in Avon and Troy townships. It was one of twelve school houses in Avon Township at the time. Local histories indicate that the site contained a one room school as would be expected for the time and place.

According to the 1938 rural property inventory, a one room rectangular, wood frame building with a hipped roof was built on the property in 1915, and a two room rectangular frame building with a gabled roof and covered porch was built there in 1920. Both of these buildings were extant in 1938 along with the 1929 brick building. Although the rural property inventory is not always reliable on construction dates, considering that it is correct on the 1929 date perhaps it is correct on the other dates. A ca. 1920 date for the two room school is corroborated by Eula Pray, who dates it to 1923.¹¹

As indicated on the dedication plaque still inside the school, in 1929 the present Collegiate Gothic style school was constructed by Fractional District Number 11, Avon and Troy Townships. The architect was Frederick D. Madison of Royal Oak and the contractor was Lee Campbell and Son. The school board is listed as Elias E. Johnson, director; Elmer E. Maitrott, moderator; and Arthur B. Winter, treasurer (photo 10). On the 1930 atlas the land surrounding the school parcel is shown belonging to Rena Maitrott.

The architect had experience designing schools and was most likely aware of the publications and guidance provided by the state of Michigan for school design. The kindergarten or children's room was constructed in accordance with accepted practice at the time. As kindergarten rooms were new they were typically on the first floor, near an entrance, with a fireplace to create a more home-like atmosphere. In some elementary schools the kindergarten room walls were semi-rounded to allow more light and fresh air into the room.¹² The fireplace, bay window, and painted decorations in the kindergarten room at Stiles all demonstrate these principles. Mr. David Hackett recalled that in his early years at Stiles, the children would sit inside the fireplace, which never had a fire, and read books.¹³

In 1931 Stiles School had nine teachers, two in the two room building and seven in the new brick building.¹⁴ Former students remember the 1929 building being constructed in front of the 1920s two room building. At various times the two room building was used for drama programs, study hall, community center and upper grades.¹⁵ In 1932 the residents of the district voted to continue the school through the tenth grade in order to stop paying tuition for students to attend Rochester High School.¹⁶ It is not certain how long the school contained ten grades.

As was common throughout Michigan, the school was used for community functions, such as clothing distribution during the Depression, and for community events. A newspaper article from 1933 indicates a three-act comedy was being performed by the Stiles Dramatic

¹¹ Ibid., 96.

¹² State Historic Preservation Office, Michigan Historical Center, *An Honor and an Ornament: Public School Buildings in Michigan* (Detroit: Inland Press, 2003), 10.

¹³ Peggy Schodowski, conversation with David Hackett, Fall, 2005.

¹⁴ Pray, *History of Avon Township*, 96.

¹⁵ Peggy Schodowski, conversations with former students, 2005.

¹⁶ *The Rochester Era*, "Stiles a Junior High School," August 12, 1932.

Club that evening. A dramatic club would seem to indicate that plays for the public were a regular occurrence at the school.

The 1938 rural property inventory describes a 2.5 acre parcel with a woven wire fence. It contains cards for the three buildings described above, although it does not show how the buildings are arranged on the parcel. It does indicate that the 1929 building originally had a slate roof.

By 1939 the school housed 240 students.¹⁷ In 1947 the Stiles School District, along with three other districts in Avon, Troy, Bloomfield, and Pontiac townships were merged to form the Rural Agricultural School District No. 10 Fractional of the Township of Avon with the first meeting of the elected school board being held on October 16, 1947.¹⁸

According to school board meeting minutes, insurance bids were obtained for Stiles School and the Annex in 1948. It is presumed that the Annex is the two room building based on the lower value. The meeting minutes in 1948 and 1949 indicate that the Stiles fence was an issue; a chain link fence was installed in 1949. During these and subsequent years the population of the area serving the school continued to grow. In 1949 the population estimate of the total number of people in the Avondale School District was seven thousand, and in 1951 the Avondale School Board attempted to lease space in the Avon Southwest Community Hall to alleviate the overcrowding at Stiles. By 1953 the school had 623 students, nearly 400 more than in 1939. In 1956 an addition was being planned for Stiles School by architect George D. Mason. It was constructed in 1957 – 1958 at the northwest corner of the 1929 building. In late 1957 discussions began with adjacent land owners to add parcels to the school property. After months of negotiations it appears that the land was added sometime in 1958.¹⁹

In a March 23, 1959 letter to the school superintendent, the insurance company indicates that the Annex for Stiles School had been razed.²⁰ In January 1963 the *Pontiac Press* reported that the school board approved adding classrooms, a multi-purpose room, and kitchen, designed by architects O'Dell, Hewlett, and Luckenbach of Birmingham. In 1998 the Avondale school system stopped using the building as an elementary school, and it was sold to the internationally known Oakland Steiner School in 2006.

Frederick D. Madison, Architect

The architect of Stiles School was based in Royal Oak, Michigan and designed a large number of buildings in the 1920s. The Oakland County Jail (demolished) in Pontiac was built in 1921, the Washington (now Baldwin) Theater in Royal Oak in 1922, and the Genesee County Courthouse and Jail in 1925-26. About the time Madison was designing

¹⁷ School Census Report, May 31, 1952, collection of Floyd Cobb Jr.

¹⁸ Municipal Advisory Council of Michigan, Report No. 1017-A, G-926, 8/31/49, \$500,000.00 Avondale School District No. 10 Fractional Avon, Troy, Pontiac and Bloomfield Townships, Oakland County, Michigan, School Site and Building Bonds, September 7, 1949, collection of Floyd Cobb Jr.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Rural Agricultural School District No. 10 Fractional of the Township of Avon (Avondale School District), 1947 through 1964. Collection of Floyd Cobb Jr

²⁰ Letter dated March 23, 1959 from Thatcher, Patterson, & Wernet, General Insurance Agency, Pontiac, Michigan, to Raymond M. Baker, Superintendent of Avondale School District #10 Fractional of Avon Township, collection of Floyd Cobb Jr.

Stiles he was also working on Royal Oak (Dondero) High School (1928), along with additions to schools in Birmingham, Royal Oak, and Allen Park. He also designed a store for Montgomery Ward in Royal Oak and the Genesee County Juvenile Home. In 1934 he provided architectural information for the Rochester schools for work to be performed under the Civil Works Administration, including additions to Rochester High School and Woodward School. In 1939 he designed the Gladwin County Courthouse in the Art Deco style.²¹

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISTRICT

The proposed Stiles School 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. The areas of significance are education and architecture. The district's period of significance is from 1929, when the current school building was constructed, to 1947, when the Stiles School District was merged into the Rural Agricultural School District No. 10 Fractional of the Township of Avon.

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.

Historic schools were symbols of community as well as functional centers for community activities. The most important activity, of course, was education. The commitment to education was made at the local, state, and national levels; thus schools represent a nationally significant pattern of events that was manifested locally.

At the time of construction the property owners in the Stiles School District were responsible for the school's construction, maintenance, and operating costs. The fact that money was raised to construct an architect-designed school meeting current standards showed a commitment by the population to the importance of education. The new, larger school building also represents a surge in population growth in this area of the township. More people in the district created enough tax dollars and a need for a large brick school to be built within ten years of the district building a two room school. The school was used as a community center, including as a distribution center for relief supplies during the Depression.

Three schools built in Avon Township during the 1920s survive and retain integrity. Stiles School is the last intact school that became part of the Avondale School District. The nearby Brooklands School, which is similar in style to Stiles and was built in 1927, is part of the Rochester Community School District. Brooklands has large additions; however the

²¹ Robert O. Christensen. "Genesee County Courthouse and Jail" (National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1989), Section 8, 5.

historic school is still intact and not overwhelmed by the additions. The former Avon School District No. 2 building located on John R (A.C.E. High School) that was built in 1928 retains its integrity despite the usual replacement windows. Unlike Stiles and Brooklands, this school does not display any specific architectural style.

Two other schools that were constructed about the same time as Stiles and were also absorbed into the Avondale School District, have been converted to retirement residences and have been completely enclosed with newer construction. The additions to Hamlin School, in the Rochester Community School District, do overwhelm the building, which no longer retains integrity.²² Thus at least three other schools built in Avon Township during the 1920s have lost their integrity and no longer represent the importance of education in this rural community.

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.

Schools are architectural landmarks, with a recognizable form that distinguishes them from their surroundings. By the twentieth century school architecture was often quite imposing, even in rural areas such as Avon Township. The two story brick Stiles School was unquestionably a landmark in the rural landscape of agricultural fields, farmhouses, and newer suburban houses along Livernois Road and South Boulevard in the 1920s. Today the school is a historic landmark at a busy intersection devoid of other historic buildings.

Stiles is the only school in the city designed by Frederick D. Madison of Royal Oak, who designed schools and civic buildings throughout southeast Michigan. It is one of two Collegiate Gothic style schools retaining architectural integrity in the city of Rochester Hills. The Collegiate Gothic Style was very popular across the United States for over thirty years beginning about 1905, and by the end of World War I the majority of new school buildings were designed in the Collegiate Gothic style. It was chosen because of its scholastic connotations, and many Michigan communities have vernacular versions of Collegiate Gothic Style Schools dating primarily from the 1920s. The style is characterized by Tudor arches, stepped parapets, and multi-paned windows.²³

Stiles is pictured in the 2003 Michigan State Historic Preservation Office publication, *An Honor and An Ornament: Public Schools in Michigan*, as an example of a later, simpler version of the Collegiate Gothic Style.²⁴ The intact Tudor arch entry, the extensive use of limestone trim including the banding on the gable ends, and the decorative chimneys all are characteristic of the style. Although the multi-paned double hung windows have been replaced, the large original openings remain intact. The interior of the building, simple in style, is highly intact and is an excellent example of school design at the time. The terrazzo floored hallways and the extensive use of wood trim and doors throughout the building do not usually survive in school buildings. The kindergarten room, with its bay window, fireplace, and murals is demonstrative of school design and philosophy of the 1920s.

²² Busch, "Rochester Hills," 39.

²³ State Historic Preservation Office, *An Honor and an Ornament: Public School Buildings in Michigan*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

The two additions which are excluded from the district are to the north and are set back so that the historic school building is clearly evident. With its intact exterior Collegiate Gothic detailing and intact interior, the building retains its historic character.

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Stiles School Scrapbook, 1948-1957. A scrapbook of the Stiles School P.T.A., located at the Rochester Hills Museum.

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DISTRICT MAP

Stiles School Proposed Historic District



Legend

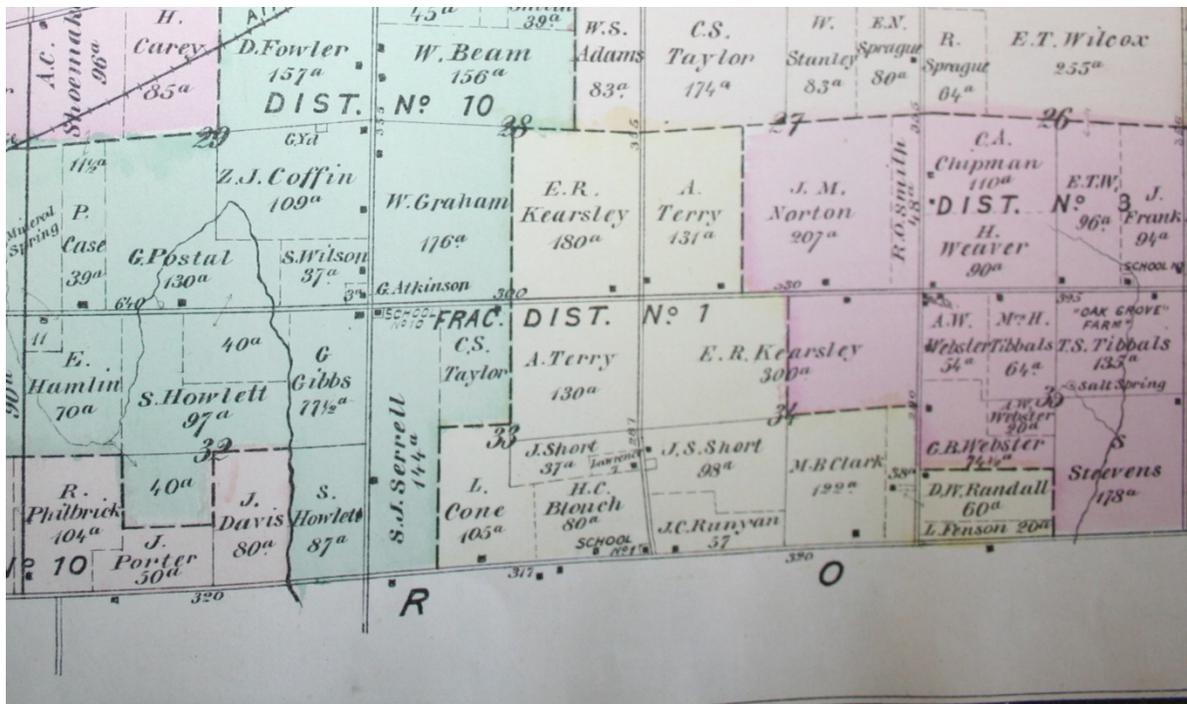
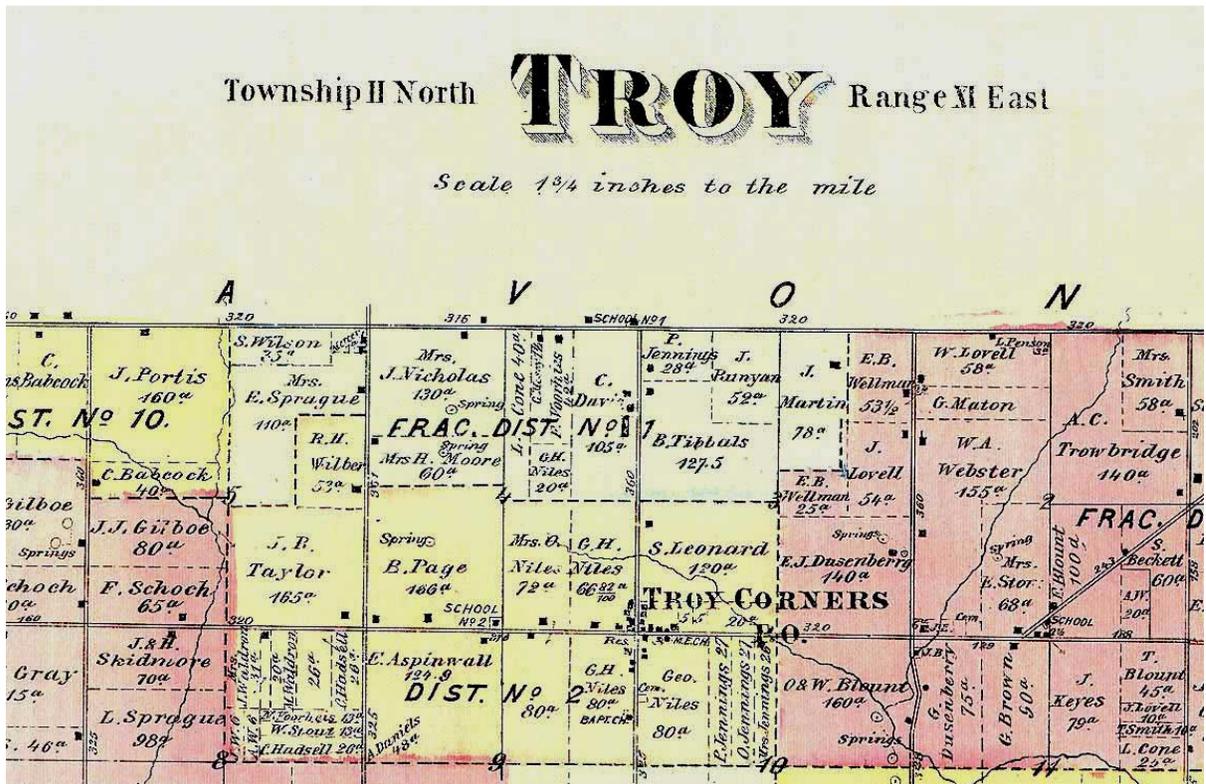
-  TaxParcel
-  StilesProposedDistrict2
-  RoadEdge

Aerial photographs as of April 2007.
TaxParcel lines were obtained on 07-01-09 from Oakland County.
Although the information provided by this map is believed to be reliable, its accuracy is not warranted in any way. The City of Rochester Hills assumes no liability for any claims arising from the use of this map.

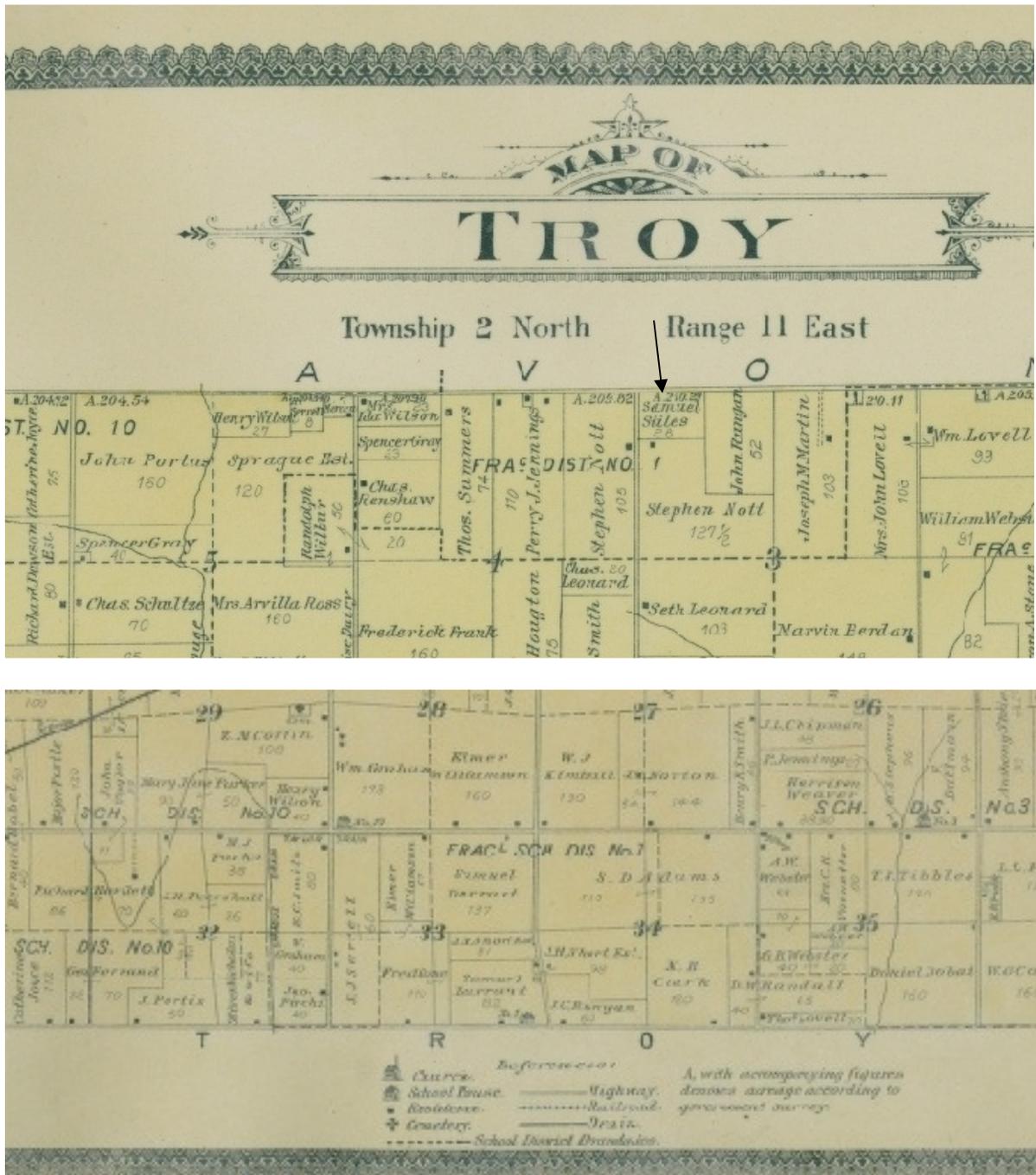
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1 inch = 50 feet

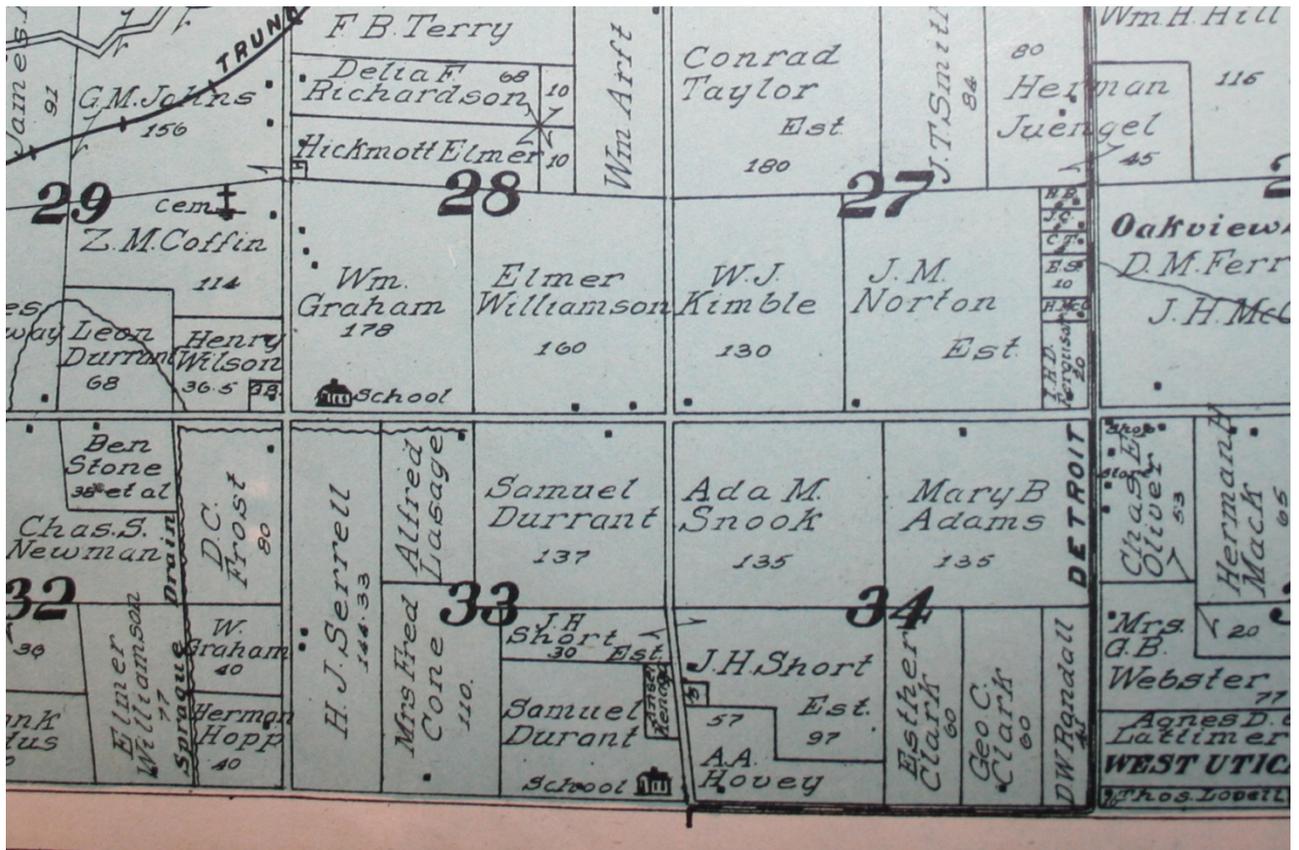
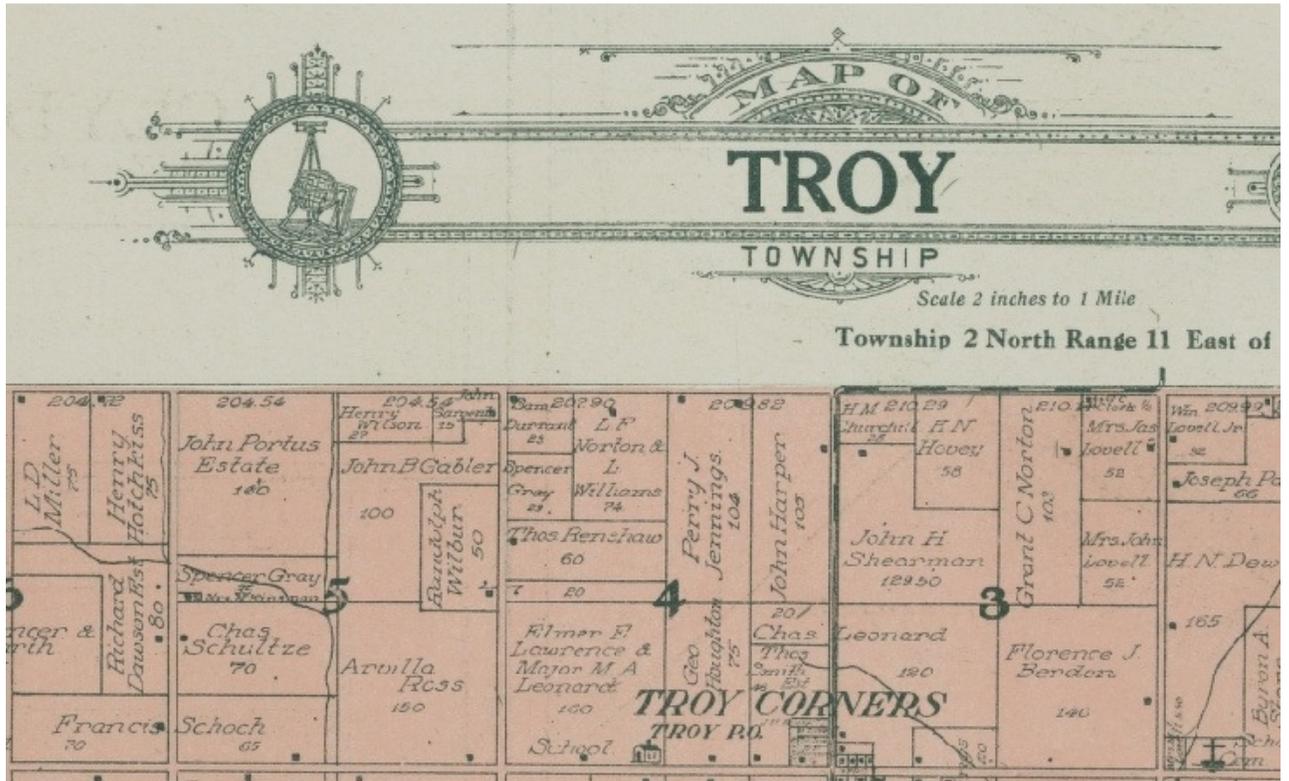
PERTINENT ATLASES



1872 Oakland County Atlas, George Ogle Publisher, Troy (top) and Avon Townships showing no Stiles property in immediate area.



1896 Oakland County Atlas, Kace Publishing. Troy (top) and Avon Townships, arrow indicates Samuel Stiles Property on Troy map.



1908 Oakland County Atlas, George Ogle, Publisher, Troy (top) and Avon Townships showing no Stiles property in the immediate area.

PHOTOGRAPHS



Photo 1: Stiles School, looking southwest, 1958 addition in foreground.



Photo 2: South elevation, note first floor bay for kindergarten room.



Photo 3: Stiles School, west elevation, 1958 & 1963 additions on left (not in district).



Photo 4: Stiles School, view from the north end, looking south.



Photo 5: Stiles school, historic entrance detail.



Photo 6: Main first floor corridor in 1929 building.



Photo 7: Stiles School, one of the painted murals in the kindergarten room.



Photo 8: Flint Faience tile fireplace in kindergarten room.



Photo 9: Stiles School, typical classroom.



Photo 10: 1929 school dedication plaque.



Photo 11: Stiles School, view from property looking east across Livernois.



Photo 12: Looking south across South Boulevard from rear of property.



Photo 13: View of parcels behind school looking west down South Boulevard.