

**KNOWLES HOUSE**  
**524 E. LINCOLN AVENUE, ROYAL OAK**  
**Final Report**  
**January 14, 2014**

By ordinance dated December 19, 1994 the Royal Oak City Commission established the Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee in accordance with Michigan's Local Historic District's Act, Public Act 169 (1970), as amended.

**Boundaries**

Property Description:

T1N, R11E, Section 22, Assessor's Plat No. 22, Lot 22

Tax Item No.:

63-72-25-22-326-005, 524 E. Lincoln Avenue

**Percentage of Historic Significance**

The mid-1800's gable and wing house with its early 1950's mid-century addition is 95% historical. The bay windows built in the 1990's are the only contemporary elements to the house and could easily be removed.

**Charge of the Study Committee**

The Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee is charged with the mission of identifying, researching, and studying potential historic sites and districts within the City of Royal Oak. The research results are reported to the City and the State in compliance with Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act PO 169 of 1970, as amended in 1992.

Scott and Patricia Brown, owners of 524 E. Lincoln Avenue, consented to having their property studied for possible historic designation. The Historic District Study Committee advised the Royal Oak City Manager of their decision and study commenced.

**Members of the Study Committee**

Ruth G. Cleaveland

Chair, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Chair, Royal Oak Historic District Commission

Member, Roundtable of Royal Oak Historical Organizations

Tammis Donaldson

Registered Architect

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Robert R. Duchene

Vice-Chair, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Teacher, United States History

Dr. Jim Keillor

Psychologist

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Marc Sackin, Attorney at Law

Secretary, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Colleen Corey

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Supervisor, Department of Human Services, State of Michigan

### Historical Significance

The 1880 census casts a revealing look at rural life in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Royal Oak. The Knowles farm produced 240 bushels of oats, 500 bushels of Indian corn and 75 acres of rye. The farm had six horses, seven milk cows and 40 lambs born, but unfortunately had four sheep killed by dogs. Farming was not an easy life but William H. Knowles worked hard enough to buy two more farms in the up-and-coming Royal Oak area.

William H. Knowles lived the immigrant experience typical of so many of his fellow 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans. Born in Tadcaster, Yorkshire on April 22, 1807, William left Britain in 1829 and would never again see his parents, William and Nancy Ann Midlam Knowles.

After four years in New York, William Knowles moved to Detroit where he lived on Macomb Street and made a living using his carpentry skills. (On arriving in Detroit, William had just fifty cents which he used to buy breakfast for himself and his wife, Harriet.) William had married his first wife Harriet in 1831, a union that resulted in four sons.

The family lived for seven years in Monroe County but the stave-manufacturing enterprise for which he labored failed. Returning to Detroit, William worked in shipbuilding, a major industry in Detroit at that time. The author of Portrait and Biographical Album wrote the following about William H. Knowles:

"He was Pathmaster three years, and he laid out Cass Avenue and broke the first ground there. In Royal Oak Township he has been Highway Commissioner three years and most of the roads in the eastern part have been laid out by him."

By 1840 William Knowles wife Harriet had died. Three years later he married a widow, Mrs. Ann Helson. This union bore another son, John E and when Ann died in 1859, William married Amelia (Ashton) Montgomery. This resulted in four sons and two daughters.

Mr. Knowles apparently had a taste for real estate. In Detroit, he had "been amassing a comfortable nest-egg through dozens of land transactions in Wayne County" (Penney & Lance, Royal Oak: Twigs and Acorns, p. 221). With the proceeds, at the age of 60, he

bought a farm on the south side of Lincoln Avenue, which then was sometimes referred to as 10½ Mile Road and at other times as “Eighth Street”. The Knowles family’s new home “had several barns, a horse treadmill and a quaint old-fashioned farmhouse set back from the road. It had a large front yard surrounded by an iron picket fence and several pine trees” (Perkins, Royal Oak, Michigan The Early Years, p. 168). In his later years, Mr. Knowles taught Sunday school in a Methodist church.

William and Amelia’s eldest son, Frank Lincoln, was 8 years old when the family moved from Detroit to their farmhouse on Eighth Street. Frank did farm work for his father until he married Eliza Ann Watts on April 23, 1884. Together Frank and Eliza Ann had ten children, of whom only three lived to adulthood – Austin, Ethel and Olive. In November of 1892, the month before he died, William H. Knowles gave his son Frank and his daughter-in-law Eliza Ann, 42 acres of land in Royal Oak in Section 16, the area where Royal Oak Middle School is located today. They moved into a house at 723 N. Main Street which was also owned by his father.

In Royal Oak: Twigs and Acorns, Penney & Lance write that “Frank didn’t have a farm – actually he hated farming. He did, however, board buggy and riding horses from Detroit in the summer.” Frank Knowles was a carpenter, a mechanic, a contractor, and a foreman for the Vinson Company in Detroit. He was incapacitated for quite a while after he fell 22 feet off of scaffolding. As a result of this injury his family dug up worms in order to obtain “angle-worm oil” which could be massaged into his shoulder. Whether due to “angle-worm oil” or not, the injury healed.

Although Frank L. Knowles did not like farming, it seems that he did like politics. He served as Village Trustee for two terms running from 1892 to 1898. He then served as Village President for six years, from 1897 to 1904. He also served on the Village School Board for two years. In addition, he led the ticket for commissioner when Royal Oak adopted its commissioner-manager form of government in 1917 and was elected to a four-year term.

It was during his tenure as commissioner that the worldwide Spanish influenza epidemic appeared in Michigan. Frank caught the dreaded disease and died suddenly on Sunday evening, January 19, 1919. His widow, Eliza Ann Knowles, made some significant

earnings from real estate sales after Frank's death but lost most of it in the stock market crash of 1929. She died at age 86 on September 24, 1946, having lived in the house on Main Street for 62 years. The house was demolished in the early 1950's.

William H. Knowles' death was likely not a sudden one as he transferred much land to his third wife and two of his sons in the months and even weeks before his death on December 28, 1892. William's wife, Amelia Ashton Montgomery Knowles, died a few years later in 1897.

A 35-acre lot, part of a 54-acre lot purchased from James and Hannah Ward in 1854 for \$1500, is where the 524 E. Lincoln remains. William H. Knowles stepson, Elmund, farmed the land and by 1900 had a wife, Lilly, as well as a 7-year-old son and a year-old daughter. By 1910, Elmund has taken on a 53-year-old boarder, a "hired man" by the name of Willie Staff.

A second parcel went to son Alfred Payson Knowles in 1892. Payson had married Mary Ann Parker in 1887, a local girl raised at Nine Mile and Ridge Road. The young couple took up residence at 524 E. Lincoln and had two sons, Alfred Payson Jr. and Edward. Together they opened the first milk station in Royal Oak. Farmers brought their milk to the station, which the young couple hauled over rural and plank roads to the east side of Detroit.

Unfortunately, after an illness of two years, Alfred Payson died in 1895. With the help of a hired man (but sometimes alone), Mary continued to haul milk to Detroit, dragging the milk behind four horses, often bogged in mud to the axles. Before long, the 25-year-old Mary became the bride of the 19-year-old William Truesdell. Royal Oak was growing rapidly and the couple subdivided their property into what became known as the Truesdell Addition. Mary and William Truesdell had children by the names of Roy and Edna but by 1910, William had died.

On September 4, 1912, the 43-year-old Mary wed the 20-year-old Frank Barnard. The Barnards built a new home at 606 E. Lincoln next to the old farm house. Mary lived in that home until her death in 1939.

A different family assumed a significant presence on E. Lincoln early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. James Edmond McCavey was born March 2, 1845 on the family farm located on the south side of E. Twelve Mile Road, near Campbell Road. When Michigan was still a territory, the farm had been acquired as a government homestead by James' parents, John and Margaret McCavey of County Killarney, Ireland. Unfortunately, when James was 9 years old, Margaret was widowed and thus mother and son were left to carry wheat from the farm to Clawson to have it ground. Frequently they were forced to walk because the oxen were at work in the fields.

In 1870, James married Louise Schanhite in Birmingham and they raised two children, William and Clara, on that farm. The 1900 census shows James and Louise living with 28-year-old William, working as a "thrasher" with his wife Edna and their young children James and Baba. There was also a 65-year-old illiterate "servant" named John Shoe, born in Germany and described by the census-taker as a "farm laborer".

Then in 1911, James and Louise moved to a city house at 520 E. Lincoln. Perhaps at age 66, James was tired of farming and wanted to manage his hotel, the McCavey Hotel, located at Fourth and Center Avenues. In the 1910 census, James listed his occupation as "hotel keeper".

The McCavey family was certainly an enterprising lot. Besides farming and the hotel, James' grandson, James Granger McCavey founded the Oak Construction Company. There were also steam shovel operators, a service station located at 426 E. Lincoln, and James Granger was an honorary Indian Chief on Walpole Island.

By 1920, a millwright by the name of Louis Rickard lived at 524 E. Lincoln with his Canadian-born wife, Ellen. In 1927, Louis died but Ellen would continue living at 524 until her death in 1949. The 1930 census shows Mrs. Rickard living alone but those Great Depression days had to have been a challenge as she lists her occupation as "odd jobs" and her industry as "anything". By 1940, Edwin Knowles is listed as a "lodger" and a niece by the name of Mary Louise Lawrence Knowles is living with Ellen. By 1935, James M. McCavey resides there and continues will into the 1950's. During the 1950's and 1960's, ownership of the old farmstead will pass from Edwin Knowles to James Granger McCavey, to his civil engineer son, James M. McCavey. Well into the 1990's, ownership of 524 E.

Lincoln will pass from one McCavey to another. Then in 2003, Doris McCavey sells the property to Timothy James Reid, who in turn will sell it to the present owners, Scott and Patricia Brown, in 2005.

The story of the McCavey's and the Knowles reflects the history of Royal Oak as well as urban America. In 1900, when Frank Knowles was Village President, the population of Royal Oak was 468. In 1911, when James and Louise McCavey moved to the "city", Royal Oak had grown to 1,071 and continued to grow robustly until the 1930's, when the population stalled in the mid-20,000's. This might explain why Mr. Rickert could not attract boarders and was willing to work at "anything" to survive.

Whether operating a hotel as a sideline to farming or dragging milk through the mud to Detroit, or making staves in Monroe County, the story of these two families is one of persistent enterprise and constant fidelity to the needs of the next generation. As Royal Oak finds its way through the vagaries of the regional and national economies, the story of the Knowles and the McCavey families provides a useful reminder that we are well-served to look back before setting out into the future.

### **Architectural Description**

This mid-1800's dwelling located at 524 E. Lincoln exemplifies the farm house style built during that era. It is orientated in an East/West direction with the main covered porch entry facing north. The western half of the house is two stories in height while the eastern half is only one story. Sometimes referred to as a "gable and wing". A five-window bay compliments the lower story of the western side of the front façade. The western gable roof line below the eaves has a decorative dentil pattern above the two windows of the second floor.

The house is currently sided with white vinyl. A 1990's photograph shows the house with new cedar lap siding, possibly replacing the existing lap siding.

A three flue brick chimney rises from the center front of the roof. It services the wood-burning fireplace in the living room as well as the furnace.

The interior flooring in the living room, dining room, and bedroom are of oak with mitered corners. There is a modernized bathroom on this level.

The stairway to the second level is obviously the original with its steep and narrow rise. There are three more bedrooms on the second floor and another full bathroom.

The basement has timber supporting beams. The attic has rough-sawn skip sheathing covering the sawn rafters. In the attic corner there is a 6x6 timber with a cut nail, nailed in the side. Beyond the timber corner post are 2x4 studs (actual size).

The dimensions of the original house are 49 feet wide by 29 feet in depth.

According to records at the building department, additions and work were done on the house in 1952/53. The garage and kitchen addition represent this vintage with the long thin red brick.

The first garage built on the property was behind and slightly to the east of the house and measures 32 feet by 13.4 feet. This is built with wood framing and wood lap siding. In the early 1950's a brick garage addition was added to the older one on the north side and affixed to the eastern side of the house 13.5 feet from the main front façade.

The house is situated on a one-acre lot with large trees and direct access to a local park on the south side. A circular drive services the north side of the house which is about 50 feet from the street.

**Bibliography**

Portrait and Biographical Album

Royal Oak: Twigs and Acorns, Penney & Lance

Royal Oak, Michigan The Early Years, Perkins

## TOWNSHIP LINE

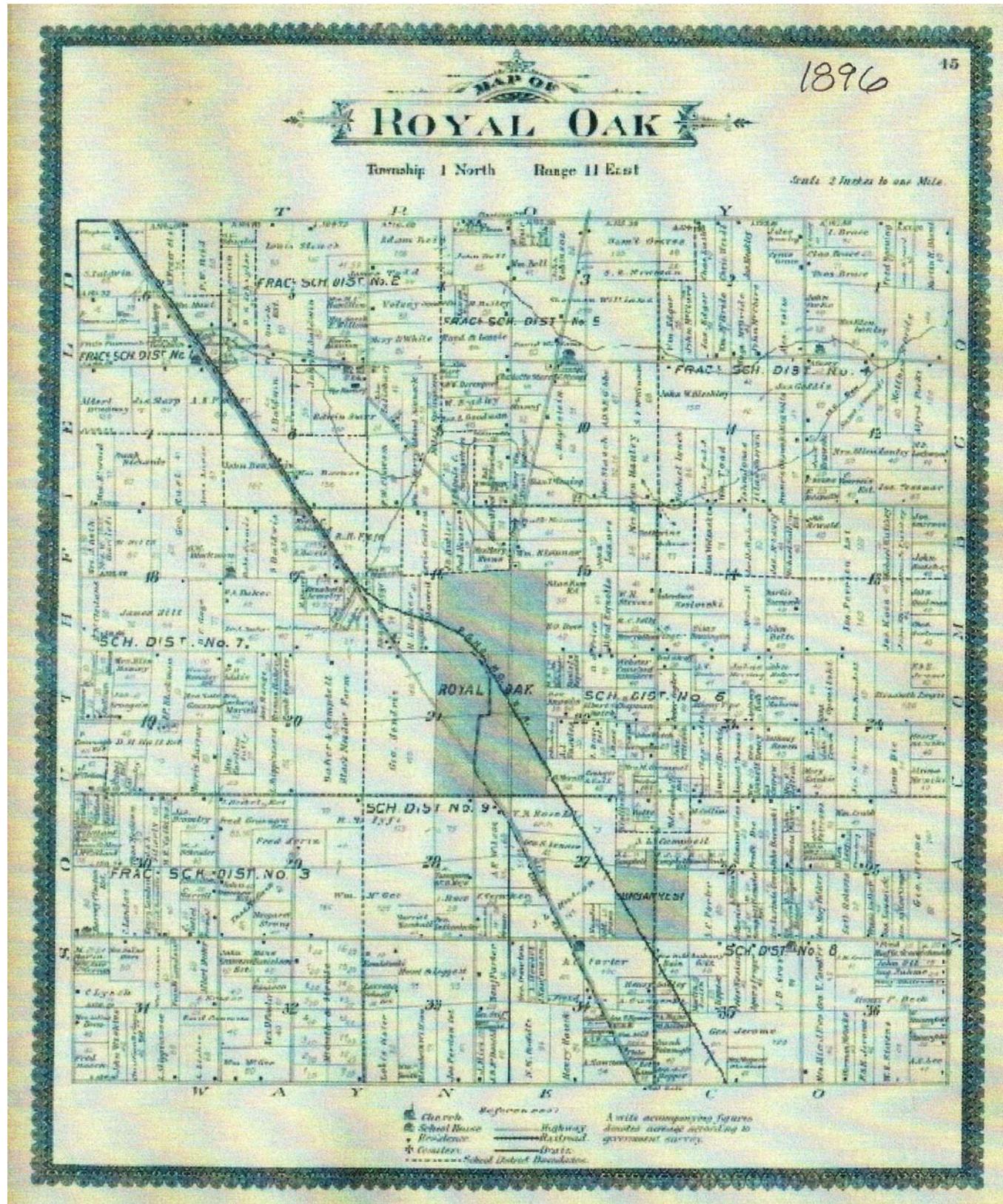
6	5	4	3	2	1
7	8	9	10	11	12
18	17	16	15	14	13
19	20	21	22	23	24
30	29	28	27	26	25
31	32	33	34	35	36

RANGE LINE

FIGURE 2. – A regular township.

Royal Oak

#22





## KNOWLES HOUSE



**524 E. LINCOLN AVENUE, ROYAL OAK, MICHIGAN**



**NORTH SIDE OF HOUSE**



**EAST SIDE OF  
HOUSE**



**SOUTH SIDE OF HOUSE**

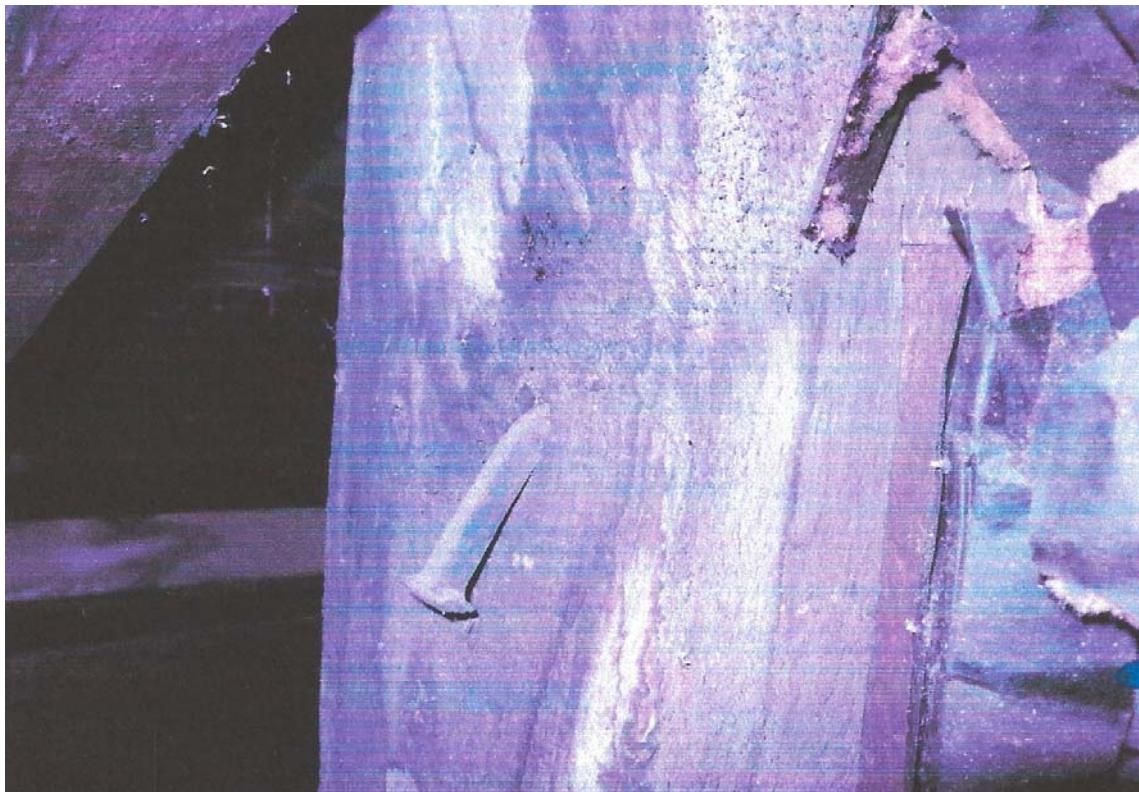


**ORI**

**GINAL GARAGE**



**GARAGE CEILING**



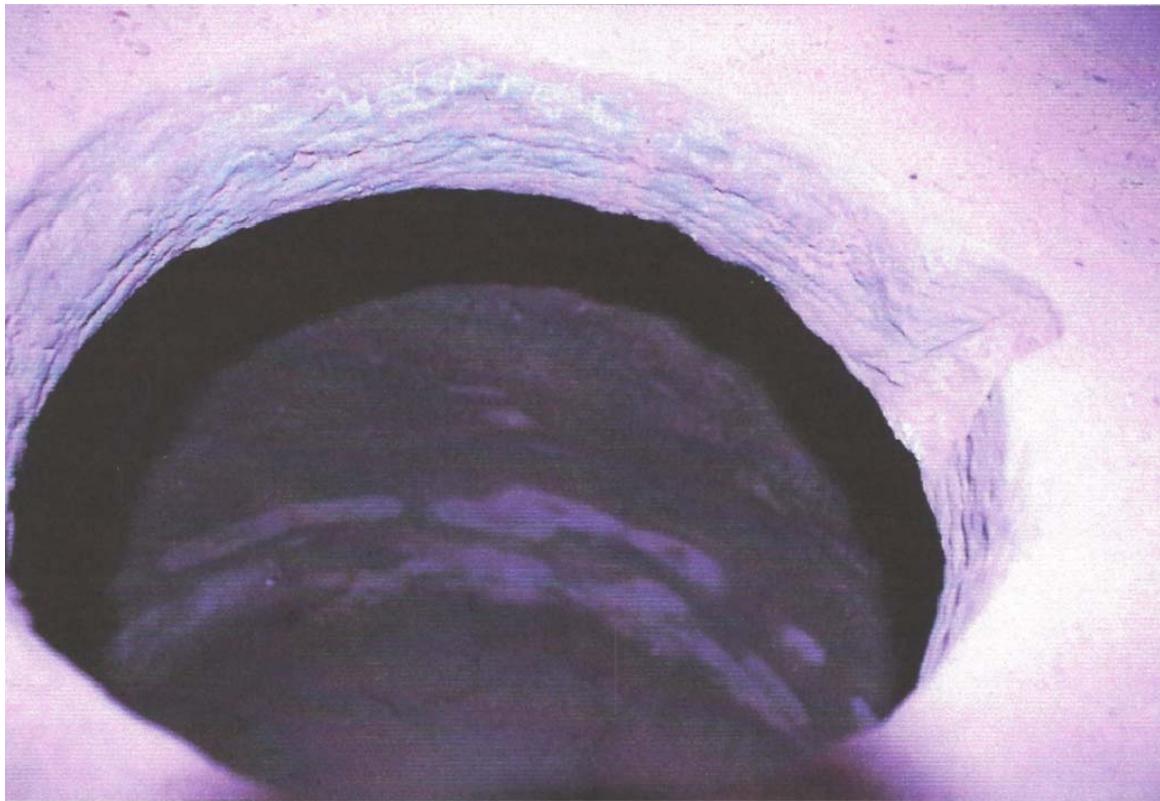
**ATTIC – SHOWING ORIGINAL NAIL**



**ATTIC**



**DRY WELL UNDER DINING ROOM**







*Frank Lincoln Knowles  
1860-1919  
son of William & Amelia Ashton Knowles*



**Mary Parker and Frank Barnard**

Possibly their wedding photo – provided by Fred Barnard, great nephew of Frank Barnard

*FOLLOWING EXCERPT PROVIDED BY PRESENT OWNERS, SCOTT & PATTY BROWN*

Here's what we know about 524 E. Lincoln. This story appeared in the 1877 history of Oakland County with a picture listed at the William H. Knowles house on Eighth Street, now Lincoln.

The story goes that they owned the Farm which paralleled Knowles Street to the West, Lincoln (8th) to the North....no one has confirmed the South or East Boundaries. William H. Knowles came to the U.S. in 1827 with little money; skilled as a carpenter; lived in NY and then Detroit, buying land. He moved to Royal Oak Township in 1867, to a house on Lincoln Ave., still standing and for some time owned by the McCavey family. Taught Sunday school at the Episcopal (now United) Methodist Church. Knowles was married 3 times, fathering more than 15 children, 10 of whom lived to adulthood. Third wife was Amelia S. Ashton Montgomery, of Morristown, NY. He has a headstone in the Royal Oak Cemetery.

The McCavey family purchased the home sometime before 1902 and did a major upgrade on the house in 1902. The William McCavey family owned Oak Construction which (claims have it) built many of the roads in Berkley and other northern suburbs, as well as the original Detroit Industrial Highway between Willow Run and Detroit, now I-94. Much of the concrete work at our house is of professional grade, such as 14-inch thick basement walls, driveways with a curb and manhole cover.

Another remodel in 1952 doubled the size of the house and changed its style extensively. There was an additional fascia with bay windows added in the 1980's. The final McCavey family member to live in the house, Doris McCavey, died on February 16, 2002. The house was sold to us in April of 2004 and we have lived there ever since.

*FOLLOWING EXCERPT PROVIDED BY PRESENT OWNERS, SCOTT & PATTY BROWN*  
*(continued)*

In the crawl space below the most current renovation are the remnants of a well. We have maintained the structure, repairing and replacing, but not remodeling.

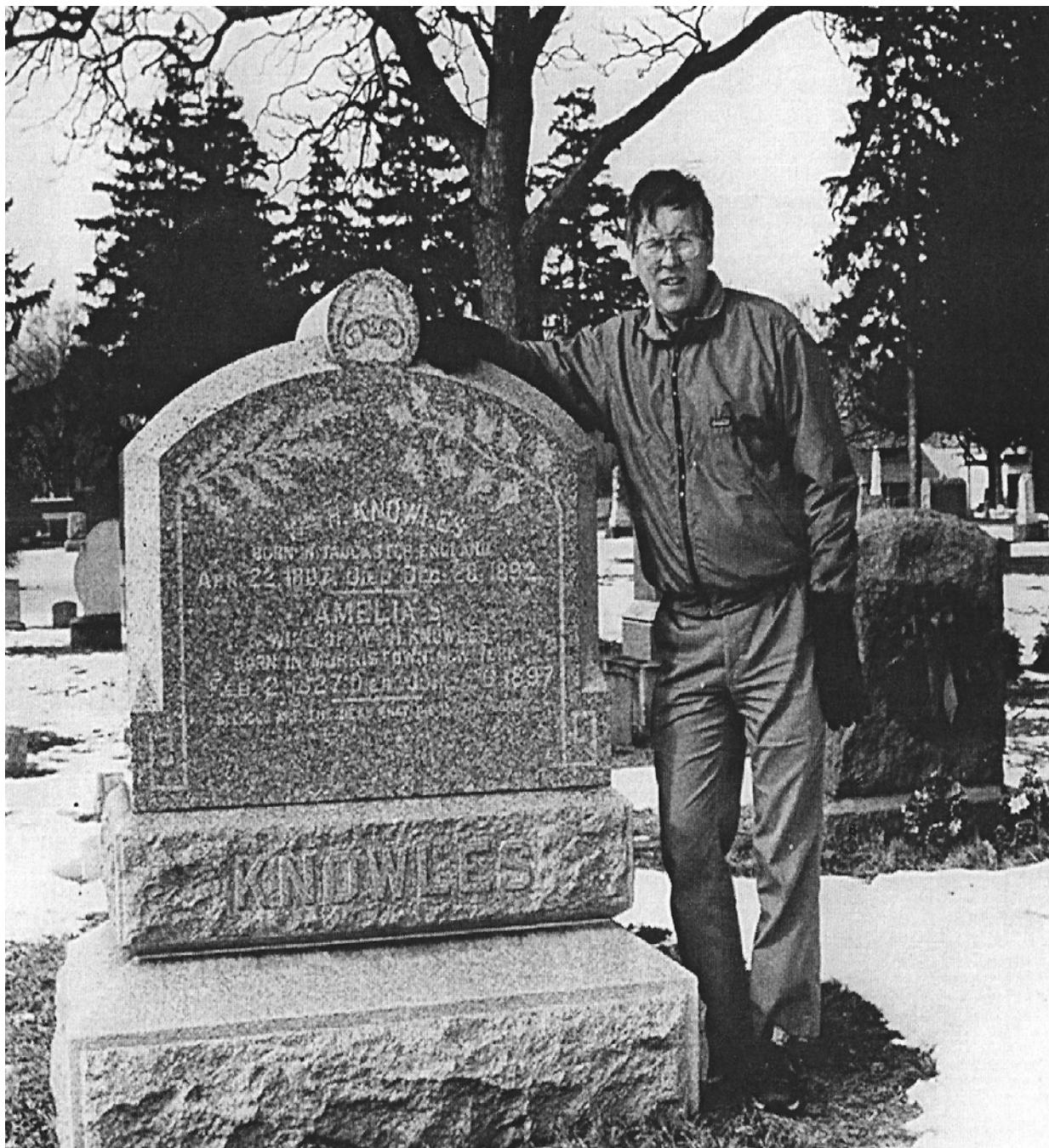
The McCavey Family built a second house on the property (now 520 E. Lincoln, owned by Russ and Tammy Ristau) in 1906 where the older members of the family lived while younger members took residence in 524 E. Lincoln.

It is also claimed that they became very wealthy by selling (or leasing) the land in North Royal Oak where Meijer's now stands.

William McCavey was a "crotchety old man" by most accounts. See Mr. Buttons from Buttons Rental for some interesting stories of interaction with Mr. McCavey.



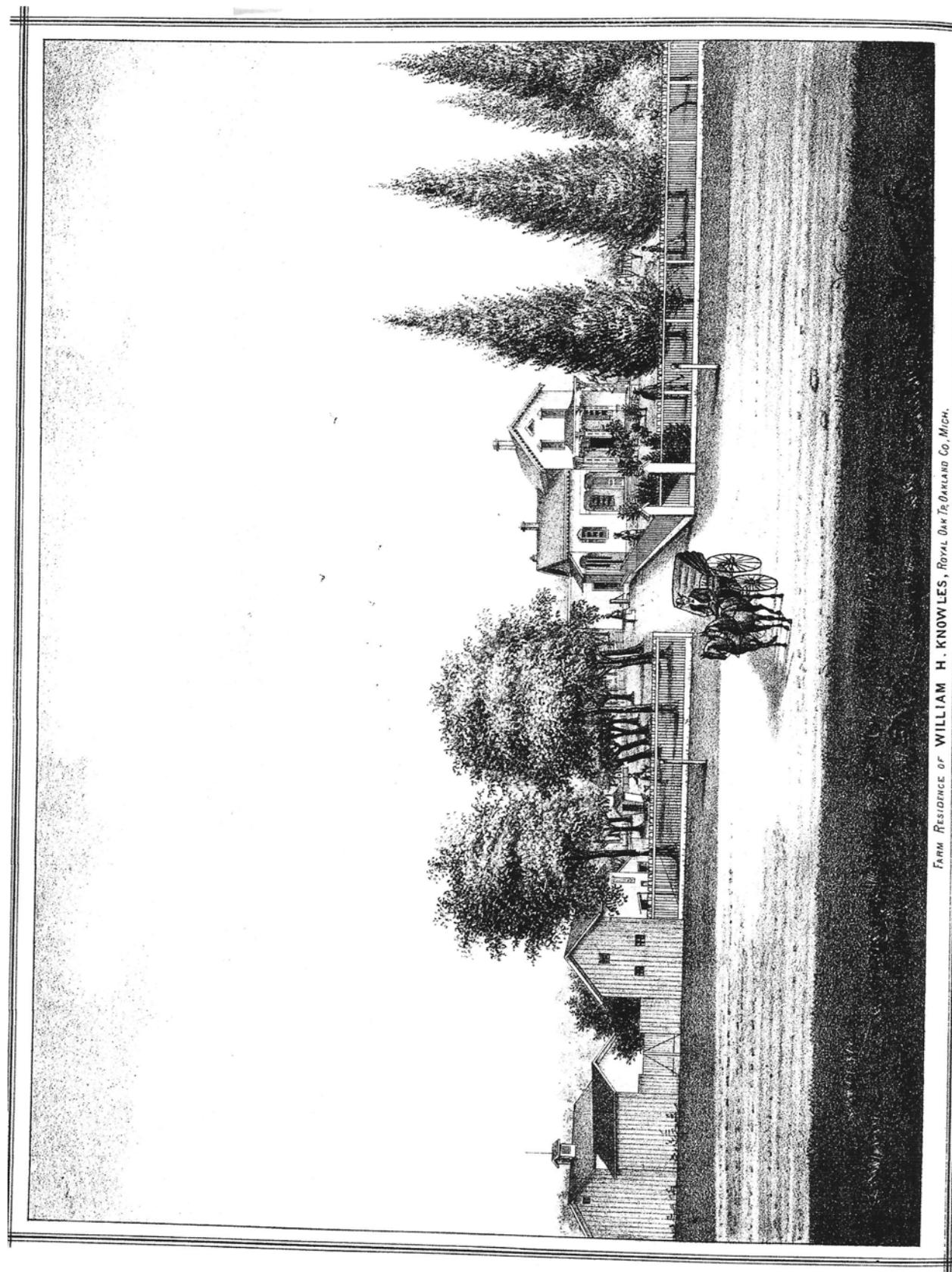
AMELIA S. ASHTON MONTGOMERY KNOWLES AND FRANK L. KNOWLES



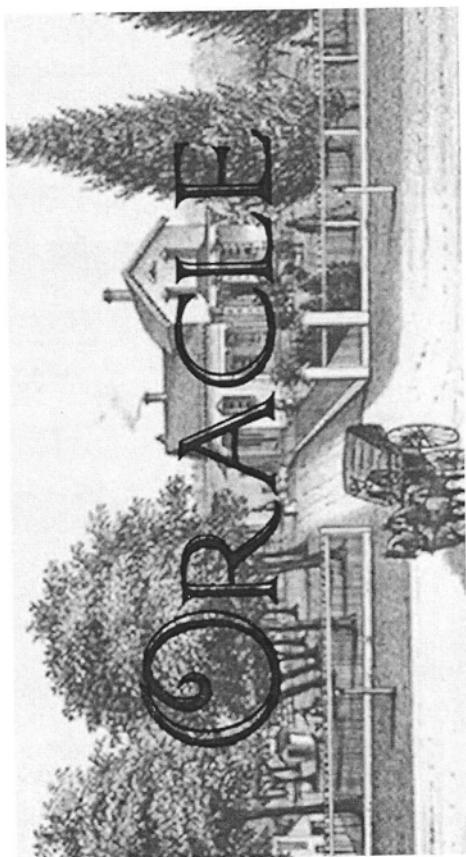
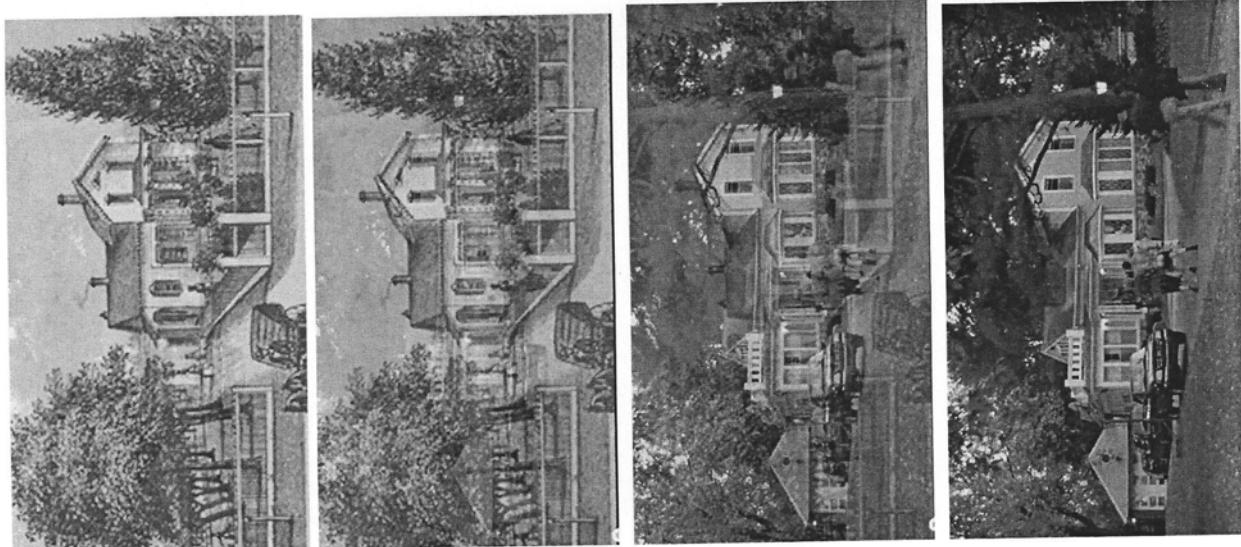
#### **THE WILLIAM H. KNOWLES MONUMENT IN ROYAL OAK CEMETERY.**

It reads: "Wm. H. Knowles born in Tadcaster (Yorkshire), England, April 22, 1807, Died Dec. 28 1892 – Amelia S. (Aston), wife of Wm. H. Knowles, Born in Morristown, New York, Feb. 2, 1827, Died June 26, 1897 – Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord".

Great great grandson David G. Penney on the right.



*FARM RESIDENCE OF WILLIAM H. KNOWLES, Royal Oak, OAKLAND CO. MICH.*



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5nmciuhUTE>

Finally, in 2011, a short local film called Oracle was filmed at our house.

A very interesting opening shot transposes the drawing from 1877 onto the current structure of the house.



The McCavey (Hotel Royal) Hotel at the southeast corner of Fourth and Center Streets. Owned and operated by William McCavey.

