

ORSON STARR HOUSE
FINAL REPORT

October 9, 2008

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.

The Orson Starr House is located at 3123 North Main St. in Royal Oak, Michigan. According to the historical documentation of the Orson Starr House, the following report is true.

Boundaries

T1N, R11E, Section 9 Elmo Park Subdivision Number 1 Lot 206, also north 38 feet of Lot 207, also part of vacant Lawrence Avenue beginning at northeast corner of Lot 206, then west lying 129 feet along north lot line, then north lying 1 foot at right angle to north lot line, then east lying 129 feet parallel to north lot line, then south 1 foot at right angle to beginning. Tax Item Number: 72-25-09-226-089.

Percentage of Historic and Non-historic Resources

The percentage for historic resources is one hundred percent (100%) to zero percent (0%) for non-historic resources. There are three historic resources in this proposed historic district. There is one outbuilding, a garage, and a very old tree about fourteen feet from the south side of the house.

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 State in compliance with Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act PA 169 of 1970, as amended in 1992.

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

Karen P. Burden

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

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

Robert Guymer

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Dr. Jim Keillor

Psychologist

Member, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Rob Moore

Secretary, Royal Oak Historic District Study Committee

Historical Significance

Royal Oak traces its beginnings to the early years of the Republic and the years preceding the opening of the Erie Canal. In 1819 a road was extended from Detroit that followed the Military Road and the Saginaw Indian Trail to a point 12 miles north of Detroit coming to a large oak tree previously marked with an "H" by the surveyor Horatio Bell and then westerly until it joined Main Street in Pontiac. The township derived its name from this "royal oak" as referenced by the territorial Governor Lewis Cass.

But when Orson Starr emigrated to Royal Oak township from New York in 1831, that Saginaw Trail road was so rough and unreliable that Orson with his wife Rhonda and young family went by water from Detroit to Mt. Clemens, then up the Clinton River to

Rochester and overland to their new property on the southwest corner of what is now Main Street and Thirteen Mile Road. This area, extending to Thirteen Mile Road and Crooks Road, was the first settlement in Royal Oak Township.

Joseph Chase had established the first mercantile business in this area, which came to be known as Chase's Corners. Joseph Chase was also the township's first postmaster, having been appointed to that important position in 1826. Royal Oak's first schools were also located in this area. It is significant to note that the village of Royal Oak would not be platted until 1838, so in a very real sense modern-day Royal Oak's initial growth occurred at the northern end of today's city.

Orson Starr and his wife, Rhonda Gibbs Starr and son John Almon Starr (one of 10 children) came to Royal Oak from New York in 1831. They built and lived in a log house on the 80 acres while Orson established a business manufacturing animal bells. They built a substantial frame home in 1845 which is still standing. It is located one block south of Thirteen Mile Road at 3123 North Main Street.

Orson Starr was the son of Vine Starr (1757-1831), a Revolutionary War veteran, and Mary Street Starr. He was the fourth grandson of Dr. Comfort Starr (1584-1659) and the second great-grandson of Samuel Starr (1640-1687). Orson Starr had four daughters and six sons. The oldest child was John Almon, known as Almon.

The last of the Starr Family bearing the Starr name was Ella Starr, who lived in the house from 1916 into the 1950's. Mrs. Starr was married to a funeral director who used the front room as a funeral parlor for a time and added a wide door to the front of the house to accommodate moving caskets in and out. The house was then sold to Russell McAlpine who owned it and lived there. Russell McAlpine's mother was Maude Starr McAlpine (the 7th generation of Starr's), daughter of David, youngest son of Orson Starr.

The Starr Bell operation was located on Thirteen Mile (Starr Road) and Main Street. These animal bells became Royal Oak's first industrial product. Orson Starr had learned how to make cowbells back in Richmond, New York from his father, Vine Starr. Orson made 16 different kinds of bells. They were fashioned from sheet iron, zinc and copper and were fired with clay mixed with manure for fire strength. The materials had to be

brought from Detroit, the journey to which took several days. Orson imprinted "O. Starr" on the inside of each bell but later a simple seven-pointed star would mark the bell as one of his. Starr's bells were designed for cows, sheep, and even horses and were ideal for a frontier situation largely without fencing. Starr's bells developed an excellent reputation and became an item of commerce over much of the U.S., being traded as far as Oregon and California. Legend has it that the bells were so well designed that their tone could be heard for up to two miles.

Almon was taken into partnership by his father at the age of 21 but he soon started his own brick and tile factory. Using bricks from his brickyard, Almon in 1853 built his own house several hundred yards west of the brickyard and tile factory. The home, built on Almon's own 100 acres, still stands at 3123 Crooks Road. This home was constructed directly over the course of the old Indian Trail.

Members of the Starr Family have always been active members of the community. Starrs have been prominent in education, the florist industry and Thomas J. Starr even became a nationally known Lincoln biographer. Almon Starr oversaw construction of the first town hall in 1870. A member of the Starr Family was a director of the school for over 50 years that later was named "Edwin A. Starr" School. Almon and his son Edwin even succeeded in building a crude telephone after viewing Alexander Graham Bell's invention at the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia that ran between the men's homes. Their telephone was already in operation before commercial phone service became available to Royal Oakers in 1878.

The roots of the property now known as 3123 N. Main St., Royal Oak, Michigan, can be traced back to a conveyance by the United States Government to Augustus Elwood on May 17, 1825, consisting of 80 acres, the original entry E $\frac{1}{2}$ of NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 9, T.1 N., R. 11 E. On October 14, 1826, a warranty deed was passed to George Soules of Brutus County, New York, for \$200, for the purchase of the property and recorded in Liber 4 of deeds.

The involvement of the Starr family in the property began on August 13, 1835, when Orson Starr purchased the property for \$160.00. This transaction was recorded in Liber 10 of deeds. Orson Starr died on April 21, 1873, whereupon his son, Almon Starr, was

appointed executor of his estates and assumed control of the property. On March 30, 1873, Almon and his wife, Nancy, conveyed a strip of land to his brother David Starr in order to make a division of the property in accordance to their father's will, recorded in Liber 113 of deeds.

David Starr, along with his wife Charlotte Starr, sold the property to Isaiah Davenport on January 3, 1876 for \$1,500 (recorded in Liber 116 of deeds), who subsequently sold the property to Charlotte Starr on the same day (recorded in Liber 114 of deeds). Charlotte Starr later sold the property to her daughter, Ella Starr, on March 20, 1916 for \$1, with "love and affection" (recorded in Liber 285 of deeds). The intention was to grant Ella a life estate, according to the abstract. A quitclaim deed was filed on August 8, 1919 by Charlotte Starr to release her right, interest, and title to the property (recorded in Liber 327 of deeds).

Portions of the land surrounding the Starr House were platted on October 4, 1919 for the purpose of building homes (recorded in Liber 20 of deeds). The home continued to function as a private residence until 1976 when a consortium of three private citizens who were members of the Royal Oak Historical Society purchased the house. It was then purchased by the City of Royal Oak for \$30,000 from block grant funds for the purposes of historic designation and appreciation.

The generations of Starr Family members have left a significant mark on the city they helped begin. Their contributions to the community are reflected in the Starr Road, the Starr Market, the Starr-Jaycee Park and of course, the Starr School. The home that Orson built so long ago is a proud reminder of their legacy.

House

Architectural Description

The form of the house is a gable-front-and-wing house. The house faces the street to the east. Both the gable front and wing are a story-and-a-half structure with a basement below. The house was built in 1845 in the Greek Revival Style that was popular during the early to mid 1800's. In 1915, a major remodeling project occurred and was done in the Bungalow style of architecture. The Bungalow style was popular around the turn of

the century. In the mid 1950's another remodeling project took place to incorporate a second floor bathroom and other modern alterations. In the mid 1980's the house was restored with a plan commissioned by the City of Royal Oak and written by PUDI (Preservation/Urban Design/Incorporated) in 1982. The Royal Oak Historic Commission considered the many changes that happened to the house since its original construction. As a result, they decided to restore the main (north) wing to reflect the Greek Revival style and to rehabilitate the secondary (south) wing in the Bungalow style. Renovations to the house were done in the mid 1980's based on the report from PUDI and following the Secretary of The Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

East (Front) Elevation

The dominant gable end portion of the house is representative of the Greek Revival style by the shallow pitched roof, wide band of trim beneath the eaves, eave corner returns, and classically placed windows and doors. The first floor windows are double hung, nine over six sash and the second floor windows are double hung, six over six sash. The gable end is facing the street and is one and a half stories tall. The eave returns are a typical Greek Revival detail which results when the frieze band wraps around the corner onto the gable to create the impression of a pediment, like a Greek temple would have. The siding is wood lapped clapboard at about 5" exposure; it was replaced during the Bungalow renovation stage. The central "coffin" door with flanking double hung windows was restored during the mid 1980's. The secondary wing portion of the house is representative of the Bungalow style by the wide canted porch columns that rest on a low wall, bead board ceiling porch, the double hung windows are six over clear sash, and the shed dormer facing the street off the gable roof. The house is painted entirely white with a cedar roof and copper standing seam roof at the dormer.

North (Side) Elevation

The north elevation is in the Greek Revival style with a wide eave band at the eave and windows to match the front gable end. A small "elbow" window is present in the frieze band beneath the eave.

South (Side) Elevation

The south elevation is in the Bungalow style.

West (Rear) Elevation

The west elevation is the reverse for the front elevation with gable end in the Greek Revival style and the wing in the Bungalow style.

Structure

Frame building on a stone foundation. The stone foundation is exposed on the interior. At some point in time an overlay of poured concrete was added to the exterior stone. This type of repair to the foundation was common in the early 1900's to overcome the deterioration of the lime mortar. The basement has hewn timber frame beams and rough sawn joists. According to one of the descendants of the Starr family, the ceilings in the house are much lower than one would expect of a structure of that age because the studs were cut too short when it was built.

Interior layout

The restoration study describes the Orson Starr house as a "comfortable house with simple trim and small cozy rooms." The gable end portion of the house has a front parlor, family parlor, stair, master bedroom and bathroom on the first floor. The second floor has bedrooms on each side of a hall off the stairway. The wing portion of the house has a dining room and kitchen on the first floor and a large bedroom and on the second floor. There are wood floors and wood trim.

Secondary or Accessory Building (Garage)**Architectural Description**

The garage has a simple rectangular plan and a gable roof facing the street (East). It is a stick-built structure with lap siding, the framing is exposed to the interior. According to Lois Lance who interviewed Russell McAlpine, former owner of the Orson Starr house,

"The original siding from the house was put on the garage when it was built in approximately 1911. The house had new clapboards put on when the big remodeling was done. The front gable end has a slide-by carriage door with steel wheels mounted to a steel track. The roof is cedar shake with raftertails and an exposed bead board soffit.



Photo of House 2007

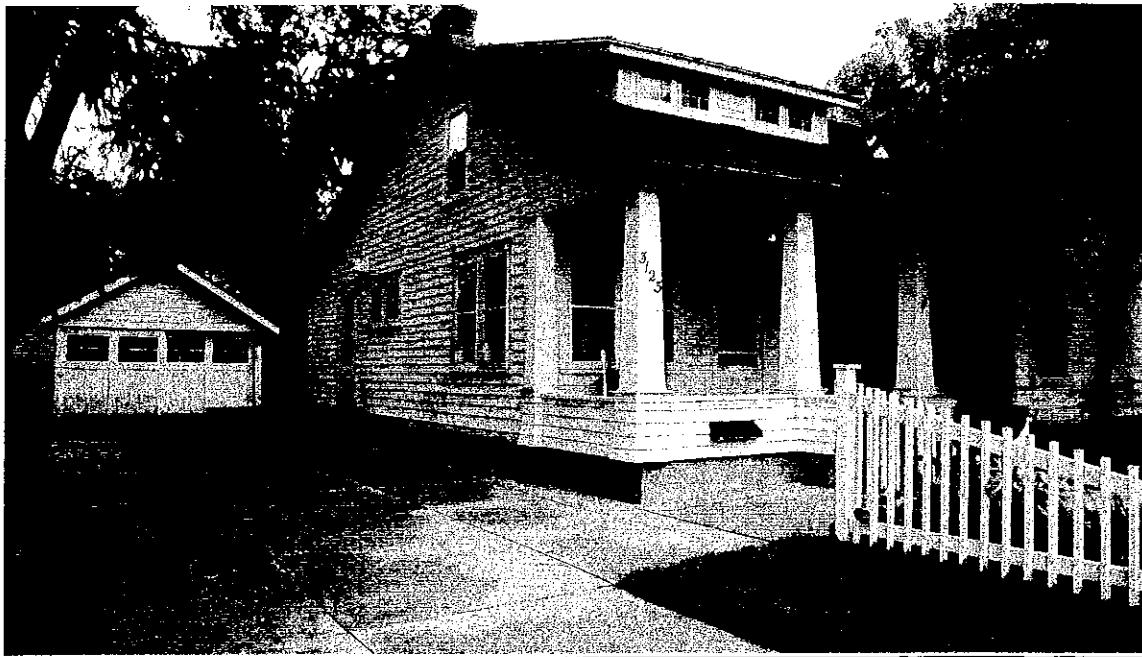


Photo of Garage and House 2007

Summary

The significance of the 1845 Orson Starr House is that it is one of the oldest, if not the oldest home in Royal Oak, Michigan. The House is positioned in its original location and has not been moved. The physical integrity of the original house is intact.

In 1999 the Orson Starr house received the "Save America's Treasures" award, a partnership of the White House Millennium Council and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Orson Starr house retains considerable historic integrity and meets National Register criterion C because it embodies the distinctive characteristics of type, period and method of construction. In addition, the house meets criterion B, as Orson Starr is associated with the life of a person of significance to the City of Royal Oak's historical past.

Conveyances of the property now known as 3123 North Main Street, Royal Oak, Michigan

United States to Augustus Elwood, May 17, 1825

Augustus Elwood to George Soules, October 14, 1826

George Soules to Orson Starr, August 13, 1835

Estate of Orson Starr, deceased, to Almon Starr and David A. Starr, sons of
Orson Starr, September 3, 1874

David A. Starr and Charlotte E. Starr to Isaiah Davenport, father of Charlotte E.,
January 3, 1876

Isaiah Davenport and Eliza A. Davenport, his wife, to Charlotte E. Starr, their
daughter, January 3, 1876

Charlotte E. Starr to Ella E. Starr, her daughter and granddaughter of Orson
Starr, March 20, 1916

Charlotte E. Starr to Ella E. Starr, her daughter and granddaughter of Orson
Starr, August 8, 1919

Ella E. Starr to Russell Orson McAlpine, son of Ella E. Starr and great-grandson
of Orson Starr, circa 1957

Russell Orson McAlpine and Lillian Mae McAlpine sold the property to William J.
Mulligan and Helen H. Mulligan, the first not to be descendants of Orson
Starr, November 24, 1964

William J. Mulligan and Helen H. Mulligan sold the property to the Starr
Preservation Committee so it could be preserved until funds could be
raised through the Royal Oak Historical Society. A consortium of three
private citizens who were members of the Royal Oak Historical Society
purchased the house. Due largely to the efforts of Robert A. Dondero
and Owen A. Perkins, President of the Society, the preservation effort
was begun. Much credit for the success of the project also goes to
Richard P. Miller, Publisher of The Daily Tribune, William J. Sullivan of
Sullivan & Sons Funeral Homes, and attorney Steven A. Jones, who did
much of the research.

The City of Royal Oak, through Block Grant funds, purchased the property from
the Starr Preservation Committee in 1975

Bibliography

Frank, Richard C. & Knibbe, Elisabeth. *Starr House Restoration Plan*, 1982.

Perkins, Owen. *Royal Oak, Michigan-The Early years*, 1971.

Penney, David G. & Lance, Lois A. *Royal Oak Twigs and Acorns*, 1996.

McAlester, Virginia & Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*, 1984.

References

The Historical File, Royal Oak Public Library

The Orson Starr House – Memories Galore

The Starr Line compiled by Doreen Potter Hanna, 1972

The Royal Oak and Twigs & Acorns, written by David G. Penney & Lois A. Lance, copyright 1995

Other resources are listed on the attached page

Royal Oak Images – Roundtable 2006

25-4H 13 MILE RD.

A hand-drawn diagram of a circle with a vertical line through its center. An arrow points upwards along the vertical line, and the letter 'N' is written above the arrowhead.

LOT 089

ROYAL OAK, MICHIGAN

THIRTEEN MILE

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