

Social History



Larry B. Massie, a well known local historian, was hired to conduct a historical study of land uses of the Colony Farm Orchard, Asylum Lake Property and the Lee Baker Farm. This is a copy of his report.

**Report on the Historic use of the Property Commonly Known as the Kalamazoo State Hospital Colony Farm, the Michigan State University Agricultural Experiment Orchard and the Lee Baker Farm.
By Larry B. Massie
9, February 1991**

Kalamazoo State Hospital Colony Farm

The approximately 324 acre tract which would become the Kalamazoo Asylum for the Insane (hereafter referred to as the Kalamazoo State Hospital to simplify its several name changes) Colony Farm was originally purchased from the government in 1831

by Phineas Hunt. In 1835, Niel Hinder, a pioneer from New York State acquired the land from Hunt. At the time of his acquisition "the farm was partly timbered land and but little of it improved, with no buildings save a log house." (1) By the time of Hinder's death on August 22, 1874, "the farm had become a beautiful one, with a fine house, outbuildings, orchards, etc." (2)

In the summer of 1887, the Kalamazoo State Hospital purchased the "Hinder Farm" from Margaret S. Smith, one of Hinder's daughters, for the sum of \$10,000. Over the next few months the State Hospital also purchased several smaller parcels on the northern periphery of the Hinder Farm, most notably the D.D. McMartin farm (Asylum Lake had originally been known as McMartin Lake because of his association with it).

The State Hospital trustee's report for 1890 documents the rationale for, use of, description of and early history of the Colony Farm also referred to as "Fair Oaks:"

After witnessing the practical workings of the colony idea at Brook Farm, (which was at first looked on somewhat in the light of an experiment), its adaptability and many apparent advantages, both to the patient and the State, the Trustees recommended its adoption as the most feasible plan of increasing at Kalamazoo accommodations for the insane; asked authority of the legislature to purchase 600 acres, and to put up buildings thereon to meet the existing necessities. The plan was indorsed, two colony houses were authorized, but the amount of land was reduced. That restriction was a matter of no little regret. In obedience to the act, the "Hinder's Farm" was secured, containing 320 acres, located about three miles from the Asylum, on an elevated plateau, all under good cultivation, excepting a small portion of low land skirting lakes, included in the purchase, and about 40 acres covered with large native oaks, which has given rise to the name "Fair Oaks."

The site selected for the cottages is on the high banks south of the main lake, undulating and sloping towards the shore. With a grove forming the background, the lake in front, and the Michigan Central R.R. beyond with its many passing trains, ever objects of interest and wonder to patients, this spot affords the necessary seclusion without solitude, and contains a combination of desirable features seldom equaled.

On taking possession of the farm, the old dwelling house was found to be in a fair state of preservation, and although not arranged for the purpose, it was enlarged and fitted up for the accommodation of 20 patients and their attendants. It is now occupied by male patients who assist in the house and farm work as required. No patient is permitted to engage in any occupation unless his strength will permit, and he is likely to be benefited by the exercise. A few of those occupying the house, are old men who find much comfort in living in the country with the liberty given them.

The transfer of the property to the State was effected in June, 1887, too late to accomplish much in the way of building during the season. The site for one house was, however, cleared of trees, excavations made, and the necessary material collected by the first of September. Notwithstanding the embarrassments encountered, the walls of the "Van Deusen Cottage" were put up and enclosed before winter. The following year the building was completed and occupied with female patients. The Van Deusen Cottage is built of brick with partition walls of the same material, containing the heating and ventilating flues.

On the first floor are the sitting rooms, hall, stairway and room for one attendant; in the rear, the dining-room, kitchen, pantry, laundry and lavatory, bath, clothes-room, and water-closet. On the second floor are the dormitories for patients, attendant's room, clothes-room and water-closet.

The building is heated by steam, by indirect radiation. Fire places are provided for day rooms and dormitories. The basement is high and dry, paved with cement and contains boiler and radiating surface. Cold air is admitted through windows into the basement, which is entirely devoted to heating purposes.

The "Palmer Cottage" was commenced in 1888, completed and occupied in November, 1889. This cottage is also built of brick, with partition walls of the same material, containing the heating and ventilating flues. It is arranged to accommodate 80 patients. This cottage contains on the first floor, two day rooms, hall and stairway, attendant's room, dining-room with china closet, the old ladies' dormitory, kitchen, pantry, store-room, laundry, clothes-room, bath-room, and water-closet; on the second and third stories, attendant's rooms and dormitories for patients, which are all associated, excepting of a few rooms at the south end of the building, designed for the sick, and those requiring such accommodations. This building is also heated by steam, boiler and radiating surface located in the basement. Fire on the hearth is used for heating and ventilating purposes and for the cheer and comfort it imparts.

In planning these cottages, efforts were made to relieve them as far as practicable of institutional appearance,

both as to their elevation and internal appointments; so that in viewing them at no great distance, nestling among the trees, one might easily get the impression that they were summer watering places, and the persons seen sitting upon the capacious porches without apparent oversight, were summer resorters, rather than patients suffering from mental disease. How far we have succeeded in our efforts, must be left to those who may chance to visit "Fair Oaks." The change, however, from the Asylum wards to these cottages marked and can hardly fail to prove salutary to many. Besides the pleasure and benefit to the patients, the advantage to the State in a pecuniary sense, should not be overlooked. Every bed put up at the colony at a cost of \$300, Creates a vacancy in the main institution which has cost the State \$1,000 to establish. In other words, cottages constructed after those in operation for the same number of patients \$500,000, facts worthy of consideration in making future provision for the insane. (3)

Prior to the turn of the century two additional large structures to house patients, known as the Mitchell Cottage and the Pratt Cottage were constructed. Other cottages known as Rich, Grosvenor and Fair Oaks were added by 1916. (4) Additional structures that were ultimately placed on the Colony Farm property include a central heating plant, two garages, two pump houses, a 100,000 gallon water tower, a hay barn, well house, feed room, tool shed, implement shed, bull barn and an intricate system of tunnels connecting the various structures. (5)

In addition to those structures another source cites the construction of a piggery and maternity barn in 1930, that the Pratt Cottage was damaged by fire and rebuilt and enlarged in 1930, a herdsman's building was erected in 1939 and a slaughterhouse built in 1940. (6)

The following table documents the harvests of agricultural products at the Colony Farm in the early years: (7)

Colony Farm	July 1, 1888 to July 1, 1890	Jan. 1, 1890 to July 1, 1890	July 1, 1888 to Jan. 1, 1890	Jan. 1, 1890 to July 1, 1890
Marsh hay to "Home" farm	6 tons		\$48.00	
Hay (crop of 1888)	163 1/2 tons		\$1,962.00	
Hay (crop of 1889) to "home" farm	18 tons		\$144.00	
Marsh Hay	12 tons		\$72.00	
Hay (part of '89 and '90 crop)	162 tons	38 tons	\$1,295.00	\$304.00
Clover (crop of '89) to "Brook" farm	16 tons		\$112.00	
Oats (crop of 1888)	1,280 bushels		\$409.60	
Oats (crop of 1889)	958 bushels		\$239.50	
Straw from same			\$40.00	
Corn (crop of 1888) assorted	1,545 bushels		\$618.00	
Corn (crop of 1888) poor	700 bushels		\$210.00	
Corn (crop of 1888) hand picked	137 bushels		\$68.50	
Corn (crop of 1889)	1,367 bushels		\$382.76	
Corn (crop of 1889) poor	501 bushels		\$90.18	
Corn stalks	30 loads		\$80.00	
Apples	132 1/3 bushels		\$52.00	
Apples	44 barrels		\$88.50	
Cherries	26 quarts		\$2.08	

Plums	4 bushels		\$8.00	
Strawberries		775 quarts		\$77.50
Raspberries	11 quarts		\$1.10	
Beets	7 dozen		\$0.56	
Beans, string	5 bushels		\$3.75	
Cabbage	248 heads		\$14.88	
Cucumbers	2 1/2 bushels		\$2.50	
Coen, sweet	1 bushel		\$1.00	
Lettuce	18 bunches	318 pounds	\$0.90	\$9.44
Onions	18 bushels		\$9.00	
Onions	45 dozen		\$11.25	
Peas	7 1/3 bushels	3 1/4 bushels	\$7.50	\$2.70
Pie Plant	45 pounds	275 pounds	\$1.85	\$8.25
Potatoes (crop of 1888)	312 bushels		\$183.20	
Potatoes (crop of 1889)	632 bushels		\$196.20	
Radishes	90 dozen	75 dozen	\$4.50	\$3.75
Tomatoes	7 bushels		\$10.50	
Turnips	35 bushels		\$10.50	
Two-year-old heifers to "Brook" farm	2	7		\$196.00
Two-year-old steer to "Home" farm			\$30.00	
Calf	1		\$10.00	
Hogs, slaughtered	6,486 pounds		\$324.30	
Turkeys	12		\$9.20	
Chickens	160		\$40.00	
Ducks	8		\$3.20	
Pea Fowl	1		\$0.75	
Eggs		203 dozen		\$30.45

Milk	22,866 quarts	10,959 quarts	\$914.64	\$488.33
Total			\$7,713.90	\$1,070.45

The only potentially hazardous chemical that I have documented in use on the Colony Farm is Paris Green, (8) an insecticide and pigment prepared as a very poisonous bright-green powder from arsenic trioxide and copper acetate, formerly in common agricultural use.

Following World War II the Colony Farm was gradually phased out for patient use and operations there by the State Hospital terminated in 1969. The contents of the structures, including many antique furnishings, were disposed of by auction in 1971. The buildings were subsequently demolished. The Colony Farm property with the exception of the Orchard site was transferred from the Department of Mental Health to WMU in 1975. In 1977 the water tower was demolished and the local Marine Corp Reserve unit blew up the entrances the tunnel system.

Potential pollution sites may exist at the garages (petroleum products seepage and perhaps underground storage tanks) and unless precautions were taken asbestos contamination may have occurred during demolition of the residence structures.

The Colony Farm Orchard

The Orchard site situated on the west side of Drake Road had evidently been originally developed as an orchard by Neil Hindes prior to his death in 1874. (9) This is corroborated by the fact that the Colony Farm produced 132 ½ bushels, 44 barrels of apples, 4 bushels of plums and 26 quarts of cherries during the period July 1, 1888 through January 1, 1890, the second season following its purchase from Mrs. Smith. (10) Undoubtedly improvements and additional trees were added in subsequent years. By 1936, with the construction of a new canning factory on the main State Hospital grounds on Oakland Avenue 40,000 gallons of fruit and vegetables were being canned and 45,000 pounds frozen annually. (11) The majority of this would have been harvested from the Colony Farm and Orchard. These figures do not include the large quantity of fruit consumed fresh.

With the gradual abandonment of the Colony Farm concept during the post World War II decades, the orchard was also increasingly allowed to lie fallow, although at least some portions of the orchard was productive as late as the early 1960s. (12) In 1963 Dr. Angus J. Howitt, head of the MSU Department of Entomology, began actively using the Colony Farm Orchard as an experimental research site. Administration of the site was not officially transferred from the Michigan Department of Mental Health to the MSU Experiment Station until 1974, however. (13)

Dr. Howitt's research emphasis was the development of ultra-low volume pesticide application technology. Because Michigan pesticide laws require exact applications, he required the use of a non-commercial orchard to conduct such experiments. His experiments were concerned with applying pesticides at less than the labeled rates; dilute technology utilizing ultra low volume sprayer nozzles, and adoption of aircraft application technology to sprayer technology. (14) Although there appears to be no "permanent records of pesticide applications" extant, based on conversations with MSU staff involved in the experiments under Howitt's direction, it is the impression of Dr. James Johnson, Howitt's successor, "that insecticides utilized on the Kalamazoo Orchard were conventional insecticides, such as those that might be used by fruit growers." (15)

Howitt was paraphrased in a 10 October 1974 Kalamazoo Gazette article as saying. "Sprays used on the fruits are considered non-poisonous - a few experimental formulations being tested on the fruit have not been approved by the E.P.A. for use by commercial growers." (16) However, Johnson informed me that by the time his department gets access to such products they have been quite thoroughly tested and are approaching approved release for commercial application. He also stated that whatever chemicals that were not used would have been returned to the MSU campus and disposed of in a legal and environmentally safe manner as is the standard university policy. (17) Pesticide application research continued at the Kalamazoo site until the mid 1980s. (18)

Additional research at the Kalamazoo orchard site beginning in the 1960s involved the use of traps baited with chemical sex lures that mimic actual odors produced during mating season to enable scientists to monitor grape berry moth life cycles, the development of improved baits for cherry fruit fly traps, research studies on apple pest predator mites and studies to determine precise spraying times for apple pests. (19) The Kalamazoo orchard also functioned as a monitoring site to chart the northern advance of insect pests. (20)

No research of any kind has been conducted since 1988. It appears that the Trevor Nichols Research Complex located near Fennville better suits MSU needs as an experimental orchard. (21)

The Lee Baker Farm

The property comprising the bulk of the present Lee Baker Farm was purchased from the federal government in 1832 by John Gibbs, a carpenter from New York State who immigrated to Michigan Territory with his brothers, Isaac and Chester. Gibbs paid the standard price for government land - \$1.25 per acre. As Gibbs developed his farmstead, he continued to ply the carpenter's trade. He helped raise the third frame house in Kalamazoo, built numerous barns, the first bridge across the Kalamazoo River and many of the original mills and mill dams in the county. Following overland trips in quest of gold to California in 1850 and Colorado in 1859 and 1860 Gibbs constructed the elaborate Italianate vella which still stands on the property. (22)

Following Gibb's death in the 1880s the 240 acre farm was purchased by G.W. Hall. Prior to 1913 the farm was acquired by H.A. Kiltz. In 1930 the Kiltz farm was purchased by the Kalamazoo State Hospital for \$28,992.70. (23) The farm was transferred to Western Michigan University under the terms of Public Act 269 of 1959. A portion of the property was utilized by the WMU Agriculture Department and a 44 acre tract was used by the Biology Department as an ecological/ornithological study area under the supervision of Dr. Richard Brewer. (24)

[In April of 1991 the Western Michigan University Board of Trustees voted 5 to 1 to approve the development of a research and business industrial park. Western Michigan has maintained the Gibbs House in excellent condition, however the majority of the Lee Baker Farm property is now part of WMU's BTR Park. This decision was not without [controversy](#).]

References:

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5. Maps of the Colony Farm Grounds. Ca. 1960, in "Land Acquistitions File - WMU Farm - City Properties 1969-1967" in Gerald Schwemmin's office WMU.
6. Schrier, Clarence. Brief History of the Kalamazoo State Hospital. N.P., <1964>. p.14
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15. Dr. James W. Johnson to Mr. Nicholus Kogon correspondence. 10 Jan. 1991.
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18. Dr. James W. Johnson to Gerry Haarer correspondence 15 Oct. 1990.
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[Previous Page](#)