

Do You Live on a Stearns Brother Farm?

by Jim Dubelko

During this, North Olmsted's bicentennial year, it's not as strange a question as you may think. And, depending upon where you live in the city, the answer may surprise you. At one time, the Stearns brothers, who settled between 1815 and 1832 in what is now North Olmsted, owned more than eight hundred acres of land here. Their farms stretched along Lorain Road from just west of Dover Center Road all the way to the Lorain County line. So, if today you are living on Broxbourne Road, for example, your house is likely sitting on land once farmed by David Johnson Stearns, North Olmsted's first settler. If you reside on the west side of Porter Road, you may be living on the farm of his brother, Vespasian. What about if I live on the east side of Porter Road, you may wonder? Well, that was where the farm of another brother, Elliott, once was. If you happen to live on Evergreen Drive near North Olmsted Park, your backyard might have once been tilled by Elijah Stearns, Jr. And if you live on Lily Lane on the far west side of the city, nearby common areas in your condominium development probably once served to produce crops for Alva Stearns, the second oldest of the Stearns brothers.¹

So what about these Stearns? Who were they, what do we know about them, and why are they important to City of North Olmsted? We all know, of course, that there's a road named after them. You can't live in North Olmsted very long before you learn a little about Stearns Road. And not just where it is located. When I first moved out here from Cleveland some thirty years ago, I soon learned that this road was viewed by many as the beginning point of the west end of the city. A place that had less retail development. A place to draw the line, some would say. The quieter side of town.

But the Stearns are important for another reason, one that is less geographical in nature. Not only were they one of the first families to farm North Olmsted, they also produced the first settler, helped found the first church, and organized the first township government. Because of all this, we can justifiably call them North Olmsted's first family. So, the question, "Do you live on a Stearns Brother Farm," now sounds a little more enticing, doesn't it? A chance to rub elbows, at least historically speaking, with the family who contributed so much to the beginnings of our community.

¹ The sixth brother, Asaph Stearns, youngest in the family, also resided here for a short period of time, before selling the farm lands he had inherited from his father and moving to Wisconsin.

L. Ellis Paddock and Gladys Estelle Stearns

Now, a caveat here before the story continues. I'm not the first person to write about this family, and I will hardly be the last. Much of what I write today simply retraces steps taken decades earlier by others. I quickly found that out last summer when, with the help of archivist Dale Thomas, I spent several afternoons at the Olmsted Historical Society archives down in Frostville. I was searching for information about David Johnson Stearns, the city's first settler. Soon, though, I came across a surprisingly extensive body of research not only about him, but also about his father, his brothers and a number of his and their children. The work had been done almost fifty years ago by Ellis Paddock and Gladys Stearns, two people who, appropriately for this story, had met in 1965 when the city was celebrating the sesquicentennial anniversary of David Johnson Stearn's arrival here. When the dinners, the proclamations and the other events of that year's celebration were over, Paddock and Stearns sat down together to write a history of North Olmsted and the place the Stearns family had in that history.

As it turns out, both Paddock and Stearns had great genetic credentials to do the research. Not only were they both descended from Elijah Stearns, the father of the city's first settler, but they were also both descended from him on BOTH sides of their families. In addition, Paddock was also a charter member of the Olmsted Historical Society and a talented amateur historian. When he sat down with Gladys Stearns sometime in 1967 to begin their collaboration, she was a retired travel agent living in a home for elderly women on the east side of Cleveland. Paddock's forte was deed research and he devoted countless hours to painstakingly creating lists that documented the locations and sequences of early land sales in what eventually became North Olmsted. Stearns added her genealogical research to their collaboration, along with a number of colorful stories passed down over the years about different members of the Stearns family. Let's continue with the story.

A Family from Vermont

The Ohio historical marker next to Fire Station No. 2 at 29592 Lorain Road states that it was at this location that David Johnson Stearns first settled in what today is North Olmsted. But I think, and Ellis Paddock and Gladys Stearns probably thought so too, that the Stearns story is not just about that location or about David Johnson Stearns. The story is more about an entire family that transplanted itself here from Vermont two hundred years ago, and about the father of that family, Elijah Stearns, who, when old age

was beginning to creep up on him, sat down with his oldest son David and made a plan to provide for the future of the Stearns family. Call it nineteenth century estate planning if you like. You wouldn't be far off.

Sometime before 1815--how long before is anyone's guess, Elijah, who was a farmer and a Revolutionary War veteran, and David, just then reaching adulthood, concluded that their family's future in Vermont, the state that Elijah had moved to from Massachusetts a few years following the War for Independence, was bleak. Their concerns were likely related to the impact that a new war, one that we've since labeled the War of 1812, was having upon their lives. The Napoleonic wars had been raging in Europe for over a decade, and just a few years earlier the United States had been pulled into the conflict by the trade embargoes and other similar acts it had imposed against England and France during the administrations of Presidents Jefferson and Madison. These acts, and the War of 1812 that followed them, caused a lot of damage to the economies of New England states like Vermont which were especially trade dependent on England and her remaining North American colonies in Canada and elsewhere.

As a lot of New Englanders did in these difficult times, despite the dangers posed by the new war which had a battle front along the southern shores of Lake Erie, Elijah and David decided to move their family to northeast Ohio, where land for farming was advertised as good, cheap and plentiful. They planned to buy a little over a thousand acres of land and to create homesteads there for David and his five brothers, and perhaps some retirement land for Elijah and his second wife. A typical farm homestead then might require anywhere from 100-150 acres of land. So, do the math like Elijah and David likely did. You'll see that one thousand acres was just about the right amount of land for them to buy.

Aaron Olmsted's Land for Sale

Most likely through a newspaper advertisement, Elijah and David learned that the Estate of Aaron Olmsted had a large amount of land for sale in northeast Ohio. The land was located in an area of the state then called the Connecticut Reserve (later "Western Reserve"), because it had been given to Connecticut in 1786 by the federal government in exchange for that state's agreement to surrender any claim it might have to any other lands in the west that were part of the charter it had received, as a colony, from England. Connecticut turned around and sold the land in the Reserve to a company of private individuals organized as the Connecticut Land Company. In 1795, Aaron Olmsted, who was a sea captain, successfully bid to purchase over 14,000 acres of this land located in a township west of Cleveland then known simply as "Township 6, Range 15."

Olmsted had to wait years to complete his purchase of this land, because of the presence of Native Americans on the land. It wasn't until 1805, when the Treaty of Fort Industry was signed by the United States government and several Native American tribes, that lands in the Connecticut Reserve west of the Cuyahoga River became available for settlement. Unfortunately, before Olmsted could act to complete his purchase, he died in 1806. And, perhaps just as unfortunate for early settlers like the Stearns who wanted to purchase land in the township that would one day bear Olmsted's name, his death set into motion a series of estate proceedings, ejection actions, partition lawsuits, and even an act of the Ohio Legislature, that made it difficult for anyone to get clear title to any of the land for the next two decades.

From Vermont to North Olmsted on Horseback

The legal proceedings resulting from Aaron Olmsted's death had been under way for almost a decade, when in 1815 Elijah Stearns, his son David, and David's younger brother, Alva, made the 500 mile trip on horseback from Dover, Vermont to Cuyahoga County, Ohio to inspect the land they intended to buy. It lay in the northern part of Township 6, Range 15, west of the Rocky River, and along a trail on a ridge that ran from the river valley to the western edge of the township. Today, that trail consists of two roads in North Olmsted--Butternut Ridge Road from its intersection with Columbia Road to Lorain Road, and Lorain Road from that intersection to the county line. Elijah and his sons presumably found the land to be satisfactory, because he and Alva soon returned to Vermont to complete the purchase, while David remained on the land to protect the family's claim to it and to wait for surveyors to arrive and lay out the lots. In the process, he became North Olmsted's first settler.²

Except for a short visit from his brother Alva, who returned in the spring with a friend to help him build a cabin, David Stearns lived alone on the land, very near to the present day intersection of Stearns and Lorain Roads, for the next three years, while the rest of the family remained in Vermont. We know a little bit about what those first years were like for him thanks to Crisfield Johnson, a self-described "compiler of history," who for most of his life lived just outside Buffalo, New York. In 1878, Johnson came to Cleveland to write a history about Cuyahoga County. Among the long time residents of the county

² Although Elijah may have intended to return to Ohio, he never did. Perhaps difficulty in getting clear title to the land in the township had something to do with that. Or maybe the limitations of old age finally caught up on him. In any event, when he died in Vermont eight years later in January 1823, he still didn't have title to any of the property he had purchased here eight years earlier. The deeds to the land he and David had purchased finally began to be issued from the Estate of Aaron Olmsted in late 1823.

he interviewed was David Johnson Stearns, 85 years old and still, according to Johnson, “in remarkable physical vigor, and of undiminished mental power.”³

Stearns told Johnson that, in the first years that he resided in what at the time of the interview was the northern part of Olmsted township, he lived close to Native Americans who tapped sugar from “sugar bushes” on the lands he and his father had purchased. He spoke of encounters he had with wild animals, including black bears. And he talked to Johnson about his isolation from family, friends and neighbors. One story he told was about an Irish immigrant from nearby Ridgeville Township who one evening came to Johnson’s cabin, crying hysterically that his son had been killed when a large tree branch fell on him in the forest. Johnson’s closest neighbor was not at home to help search for the boy’s body, and, as Stearns recounted to Johnson, the next closest neighbors lived over a mile and a half away on the other end of the ridge trail. Stearns had to saddle his horse and ride all the way there--today, from approximately the intersection of Stearns and Lorain Roads to the intersection of Butternut Ridge and Columbia Roads, just to get help.

Wife, Children and Brothers

David Stearn’s isolation from his family came to an end when he married Polly Barnum, a girl from nearby Ridgeville Township, in 1819. In the decade that followed, the two started their family, and in the same decade David’s younger brothers left Vermont and settled here on the lands purchased for them by their father Elijah. Brothers Alva and Vespasian came in 1820. Three years later, following the death of their father in January 1823, brothers Elliot and Elijah, Jr. arrived. All four of them, like their brother David, farmed lands that ran along Lorain Road.

For the remainder of the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century, the Stearns were an important part of the North Olmsted community. There was a time when you could hardly drive down Lorain Road west of Dover Center Road without a Stearns brother’s farmhouse or farm in your line of vision. The Stearns were active in the township government during this period. David Johnson Stearns was elected the first township clerk in 1823. He and his brothers thereafter took turns serving in different township offices. They also were founders of the First Universalist Church which for years was located on the southeast corner of Lorain and Butternut Ridge Roads, before being moved to its present day location at 5050 Porter Road.

³ Crisfield Johnson, “History of Cuyahoga County, Ohio” (D. W. Ensign & Co., 1879), at 484-486.

The Stearns brothers lived out their lives on their farms, the last of the brothers, Elijah, Jr., dying in 1891. A number of their children continued to farm their lands into the twentieth century. Two of David Johnson Stearns' sons, for example, Buel and Willard, had working farms on either side of their father's original homestead. Willard was still farming that land in 1909 when John D. Rockefeller made an unexpected visit to his house on Lorain Road to congratulate him and his wife Maria on their 65th wedding anniversary.

Eventually, the Stearns farms on Lorain Road came to an end. With the coming of the Interurban (electric railcars) at the end of the nineteenth century, North Olmsted began to be viewed by developers, not as a place for farms, but instead as a place for residential subdivisions. At the same time, local farming began to give way to larger agricultural businesses both here in Ohio and elsewhere, as the methods for transporting crops improved. Slowly, North Olmsted, which had incorporated as a village in 1908, transformed from a farming community into a suburb of Cleveland.

Because of the prominence of Lorain Road in North Olmsted, the Stearns farms were among the first to be sold to real estate developers. By the time the 1940 census was taken, there was only one Stearns still farming in North Olmsted. George Stearns, a 71-year old farm laborer, was a great-grandson of David Johnson Stearns, the city's first settler. When he died in 1942, that quietly signaled the end of an era for the city.

Now, Let's Look for Your Street

So let's return to the original question and see whether your house lies on one of the original Stearns brothers' farms. The rest of this article will provide you with some clues, but to be sure about it, you should get out a copy of your deed and examine it closely. It will tell you what original township lot your house is located on. With that information, this article, and perhaps an old map or two, you can find out if you live on a Stearns brother farm.

1. David Johnson Stearns farm. David, the city's first settler, farmed land that was the west part of original township lot number 11. This land is located along the north side of Lorain Road, extending from that street's intersection with Elmhurst Road to a point about one-half mile to the west. This land would have encompassed much, if not all, of Elmhurst and Broxbourne Roads, and Wellesley and Whitethorn Avenues. So, if you live on any of those streets, check your deed. If your property is part of original lot 11, then you're likely living on David Johnson Stearns original farmlands.

2. Alva Stearns farm. He was the second oldest Stearns brother. He owned land to the west of his brother David's, on both the north and sides of Lorain Road. Most, if not all, of his farmland was located in original township lot 1, on the south side of Lorain Road, today near the Interstate-480 interchange. The westernmost parts of Cinnamon Woods Condominium Development are on his farmlands. If you live in this condominium development, check your deed. If you are living in original township lot number 1, you are probably living on Alva Stearns farm.

3. Vespasian Stearns farm. The third oldest of the Stearns brothers, Vespasian owned land in the vicinity of Porter Road and Lorain. If you remember the Hixson building on the northwest corner of that intersection, then you know where his house was, because the Hixson building was originally the home of Vespasian. His farm lands were on both the north and south sides of Lorain Road. He owned land in the west part of original township lot numbers 19, 20, and 21. If you live on the west side of Porter Road (north or south), Dewey Road, Decker Road, Dorothy Drive, or Southern Avenue, check your deed. If your property was carved from any of those original township lots, you too may be living on Vespasian Stearns' farm.

4. Elliot Stearns farm. The fourth of the Stearns brothers, Elliot owned farmlands just east of Porter Road, on the north and south sides of Lorain Road. Porter Road, which at one time was a cow path, separated his farmlands from those of his brother Vespasian. His land was located in the east part of original township lot numbers 19, 20 and 21. Check your deed if you live on the east side of Porter Road (north or south), or if you live on Burns Road. You may be living on Elliot Stearns farm.

5. Elijah Stearns, Jr.'s farm. The fifth brother, Elijah, Jr.'s farm was located on the north side of Lorain Road, just west of North Olmsted Park. It was the middle part of original township lot numbers 13 and 14. If you live on West Park or North Park Drives, or Evergreen, Douglas, or Alden Drives, or Willet Drive or Circle, check your deed to see if you may be living on Elijah Stearns, Jr.'s farm.

A Final Word about the Stearns

When the City of North Olmsted in 1965 celebrated the Sesquicentennial of the arrival here in 1815 of David Johnson Stearns, the Stearns brothers farms that at one time had stretched along Lorain Road from west of Dover Center Road all the way to the Lorain County line, and had consisted of over 800 acres of land, were already long gone. But, perhaps surprisingly, the houses that the five brothers had built for themselves and their families in the early to mid-nineteenth century along the north side of Lorain Road,

were still standing. All five of them. Sadly, that is no longer the case today as we celebrate the Bicentennial. All of the brothers' homes are gone, each one taken down as the city developed. The needs of the present surpassed the needs of the past. Only David Johnson Stearns carriage house was saved, and it sits today down in Frostville. Visit it this year if you get the chance. Other than the street that bears the family name and perhaps this article, it's really all that is left in this bicentennial year to remind us of North Olmsted's first family.