



**Rural Historic Structural Survey
of
Homer Township
Will County, Illinois**

September 2002

**for the
Will County Land Use Department
and the
Will County Historic Preservation Commission**



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September 2002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the request of the Will County Land Use Department (Will County), acting as liaison for the Will County Historic Preservation Commission (Historic Preservation Commission), Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (WJE) has prepared the following report of the intensive survey of existing farmsteads in unincorporated Homer Township in Will County, Illinois.¹ The survey of Homer Township was performed between December 2001 and June 2002, and includes 36 square miles with 76 farmsteads and agriculturally related sites containing 343 individual structures. This intensive survey was performed to update the previous survey of the township performed in 1988, which had identified 126 farmsteads with approximately 568 individual structures. Of the 76 farmsteads and agriculturally-related sites identified in the current survey, 12 are individually eligible for or are currently designated as Will County Historic Landmarks and/or National Register of Historic Places properties; 49 have sufficient integrity to contribute to a potential Will County or National Register rural heritage historic district; and 15 lack historic integrity and are non-contributing to a historic district. Approximately half of the remaining farmsteads in the township are actively engaged in some form of agricultural production, and numerous others are utilized as liveryies. However, although many farmsteads in Homer Township survive, they are under increasing threat from development.

Northern Will County was settled by pioneer farmers of European origin beginning in the late 1820s. Homer Township was first settled between 1831 and 1833. Two subsequent historical developments led to an increase in settlement. First, the region became more accessible after the Treaty of Chicago of 1833 expelled the remaining Native Americans to land west of the Mississippi. Second, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, begun in 1836 and completed in 1848, opened up transportation and trade in the region. The towns of Plainfield and Lockport were founded in 1834 and 1836, respectively, and farmers became established in Wheatland, Du Page, and Homer Townships in the decades that followed. While the canal and railroads helped farmers move their harvests and livestock to market, residents of Homer Township did not have direct access to either transportation route within the boundaries of the region. This was one of the reasons early settlements in Homer like Hadley and Goodings Grove failed to grow into towns. Road construction improved in the early 1900s in response to the introduction of the automobile, giving the farmers in Homer and elsewhere better access to outside markets.

The Rural Structures Survey of unincorporated Will County performed in 1988 identified approximately 21,000 structures, 343 of which were noted to be potentially significant. The 1988 survey documented sites with photographs and survey data on standard Illinois Historic Preservation Agency format cards. For most sites, the data for the 1988 survey was gathered from the public right-of-way. WJE has previously performed an intensive survey of Wheatland, Plainfield, and Lockport Townships, with a final report dated November 2000; and an intensive survey of Du Page Township, with a report dated November 2001. These previous surveys covered 144 square miles of land, 255 farmsteads and agriculturally-related sites, and 1,091 individual structures. This report incorporates information from the two previous intensive survey reports.

Because of the numerous changes that have occurred in the years since the first rural survey in 1988, the Will County Historic Preservation Commission recognized the need to reassess the agricultural heritage in the region. Northern Will County in particular is one of the fastest developing areas of the state, and for this reason was selected as the first area in the county to be reassessed. In April 2001, a referendum passed in Homer Township for the incorporation of approximately one-half of the region.

¹ In addition to unincorporated Homer Township, a select number of incorporated farmsteads in Homer Glen were surveyed through the cooperation of village and county officials.

The Will County Rural Historic Structural Survey described in this report was conducted on an intensive level, reconfirming the data gathered in the 1988 survey, and also including additional information such as sketch site plans and identification of more detailed building features. (The intensive level of the survey was possible because only one township was included in the present survey, as opposed to the entire county for the 1988 survey.) Survey work was conducted on farmstead and agriculturally related sites on unincorporated land, although a limited number of significant sites on incorporated land were included as well. Access to each site was sought from property owners to allow for closer examination of structures documented in the survey. This also allowed for photographs taken at close range to be included in the survey data. Rural structures constructed before 1950 were documented, as a minimum age of 50 years is the basic criteria for elements to be considered for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (National Register). Each of the structures was documented on a separate survey form. Database software was used to organize written survey data for each structure and each farmstead site. Mapping software using geographic information system (GIS) technology was used to plot a graphic database showing the location of each farmstead.

The intensive survey conducted to date of the five northern Will County townships has identified several historic resources worthy of preservation, including a large, semi-contiguous region in Wheatland Township and northwestern Plainfield Township; a small settlement, the Wheatland Presbyterian Church rural crossroads; several extant buildings constructed of locally quarried limestone (including two large farmhouses in Homer Township); and a region forming a “heritage trail” in southeast Homer Township with numerous architectural resources (including intact farmsteads) and unique landscape views. The survey also identified a select number of architecturally distinctive or historically significant sites and structures not defined by either of the latter two categories. These sites and structures merit local landmark designation, but after additional research is performed, a few may merit designation to the National Register as well.

Chapters I and II provide the context in which the surveyed farmsteads were established, grew, and in many cases have been divided into separate properties. Chapter I covers the geological, historical, and architectural contexts of Will County agriculture. Chapter II discusses the historical context of Homer Township and focuses on a select number of historically and/or architecturally significant farmsteads. Chapter III describes the survey results, and includes a discussion of the National Register and local Will County criteria for determination of historical and architectural significance; a listing of the significant farmsteads in the survey region and potential individual or group designation; tabulation of individual building types; and recommendations for future survey work. Chapter IV contains a description of the survey methodology. A bibliography of research sources and appendices, including historic and current maps of the survey region, are contained at the end of the report.

FEDERAL ASSISTANCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Illustrated above is the view northeast from Brooks Cemetery on Parker Road in Section 10 of Homer Township. Visible on the horizon, in the northeast quadrant of Section 11, is the cluster of roofs of a suburban housing development.