

November 2000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the request of the Will County Land Use Department (Will County), acting as liaisons for the Will County Historic Preservation Commission (Historic Preservation Commission), Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., is submitting the following report of the survey of existing farmsteads in unincorporated Wheatland, Plainfield, and Lockport Townships in northwest Will County, Illinois. The survey area includes 108 square miles of land, 227 farmsteads and historically related sites, and 862 individual structures. The survey was performed July, August, and September 1999, with follow-up survey work conducted in March and September 2000.

A Rural Structures Survey of unincorporated Will County was performed in 1988, which identified approximately 21,000 structures, with approximately 984 structures on 328 sites in the three-township region studied in the current survey. 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. In addition to this survey a report was prepared examining the overall rural themes present in the county and identification of noteworthy structures.

Numerous changes have occurred in the years since the original survey. Therefore, Will County and the Historic Preservation Commission recognized the need to reassess the agricultural heritage in the region. Northwest Will County in particular is one of the fastest developing areas of the state, and for this reason was selected for the first area in the county to be reassessed. The boundaries of Naperville, Plainfield, and Bolingbrook were once several miles apart. Now, through a series of annexations in recent years, all three share common boundaries in the center of Wheatland Township, which, as determined by the past and the present surveys, is one of the most historically significant agriculturally-based regions of northeast Illinois. Plainfield and Lockport Townships have also experienced growth at a somewhat slower rate, but with tremendous impact on the agricultural heritage of the two townships.

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, but including additional information such as sketch site plans and identification of more detailed building features.¹ 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. Survey information was compiled using computer applications. 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. Each of these electronic databases was turned over to Will County for their use in planning and preservation efforts. Two original copies of the datasheets, consisting of six volumes for each copy, and five xerographic copies were submitted to Will County.

¹ The intensive level of the survey was possible because only three townships were included in the new survey, as opposed to the entire county for the 1988 survey.

The survey determined that there is a large, semi-contiguous region in Wheatland Township and northwestern Plainfield Township with a rich cultural heritage dating back to the first farmsteads established by settlers in the 1830s and 1840s. Spread throughout this region are several extant sites where a local farming competition, the Wheatland Plowing Match, was held almost every year between 1877 and 1976. Within this region are several farmsteads meriting local landmark designation. There is also a small settlement, the Wheatland Presbyterian Church rural crossroads, with a rich history and several intact structures. As a multiple property designation, consideration should be given to nominating the region to the National Register as an historic agricultural district.

Spread throughout the three-township area, and centered on the Des Plaines and Du Page River valleys, are several extant buildings constructed of locally quarried limestone. The stone quarrying industry in the Des Plaines River valley began in the 1830s, with quarrying in the Du Page River valley initiated in the following decade as settlement progressed to northwestern Will County. As a group of unique building types, these buildings merit inclusion on the National Register as a multiple property district.

The survey also identified a select number of architecturally distinctive or historically significant sites and structures not defined by either of the two above categories. These are sites that merit local landmark designation. After additional research is performed to grant local landmark designation, a few of these sites may merit designation to the National Register.

Chapters I and II of this report 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 each of the three townships and focuses on historically and/or architecturally significant farmsteads, as identified by the survey, and the families that owned them.

Chapter III discusses the survey, 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; lists of individual building types; and recommendations for additional survey work. Chapter IV contains a description of the survey methodology.

Northwest Will County was settled by pioneer farmers beginning in the late 1820s. This settlement occurred during two subsequent historical developments: the opening of region to settlers after the Treaty of Chicago of 1833 obtained the remaining Native American lands; and the decision to build the Illinois and Michigan Canal, begun in 1836. By the time the canal was opened in 1848, the towns of Plainfield and Lockport had been founded (in 1834 and 1836 respectively) and farmers were established in Wheatland Township. The canal transformed the region, promoting the use of Chicago as a port city and reorienting the growth center of Illinois from the southern portion of the state to the northeast portion. The canal helped farmers move their harvests and livestock to market, which previously had to be transported by horse and wagon. Within a few years, the railroad arrived to the region, offering farmers an additional means of transporting their bounty northeast to Chicago.

Numerous agricultural improvements, due to the introduction of specialized, time- and labor-saving field implements, occurred in the decades from 1860 through 1880. Although the importance of Lockport declined with the growth of Joliet and the opening of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal in 1900, Plainfield maintained positive growth. This was due in part to the establishment of the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railroad in the late 1880s and the routing of U.S. 30 through the town. Although these transportation arteries served newly established industries in the area, agriculture continued to be a vital part of the local economy of all three townships through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century.