



# Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –  
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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## John Road House Preserves History of Two Early Olmsted Township Families

Fitch and Stearns are well known as the names of two north-south roads in Olmsted Township and North Olmsted. In the 1800s, many of the residents of Olmsted Township also were named either Fitch or Stearns. Both families settled in Olmsted early in the century and produced many offspring.



*This house at 26812 John Road dates back to 1860.*

Today, you would be hard-pressed to find an Olmsted resident named either Fitch or Stearns, but you could find a house at 26812 John Road where both families came together. Since June 1995, that house has been the home of Peter and Laura Borns. They have restored it with care and affection after it suffered some harsh renovations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“Some of the deeds

and things said part of it was started in 1860," Peter Borns said. "You can tell by the foundation and the stonework...that it's probably been added on about four times."

Borns said he has found dates of 1863 and 1888 that seem to refer to some of the construction. A carriage stone (used to step on while getting into a carriage) in front of the house shows another date: 1877. *The house is located just west of The Links golf course.*



However, according to an account written late in her life by Clara Jeanette Snow, who lived there, it wasn't the first house on the property. It came after a log cabin built by

her parents, James White Fitch and Lucretia Priscilla Stearns, shortly after they were married in 1842.



*The date on this carriage stone is 1877.*

Both of them were born into families of early settlers in Olmsted Township. The Stearns family was the second family to settle in the township. Months after James Geer and his family moved into the township as its first settlers in 1815, Elijah Stearns and his oldest son, David Johnson Stearns, arrived from Vermont. Elijah was looking for land where his seven sons could establish farms. He liked the soil around

Butternut Ridge, which then was covered by a dense forest, so he bought 1,002 acres at a price of two dollars per acre from the heirs of Aaron Olmsted, the original purchaser of almost half of the township. In subsequent years, his sons all settled on the land.

Vespacian Stearns, who was born in 1798, was the third of Elijah's sons. In 1820, he brought his new wife, Priscilla, from Vermont to Butternut Ridge. They had nine children, including Lucretia Priscilla, who married James Fitch.

The history of the Fitch family in Olmsted Township also began with seven brothers who came from New England. They came from Connecticut beginning in 1831. Among them was Sanford Fitch, who brought his wife, Clarissa. Their eldest son, James,

was born in 1822, when they still lived in East Windsor, Connecticut. He was 10 years old when his parents brought him to Ohio.

On October 2, 1842, James Fitch married Lucretia Stearns while working for her father, Vespaclian. James Fitch bought 10 acres of land from his father on which he built a 12-foot-by12-foot log cabin the following March in 1843. That was his and Lucretia's first home at the John Road site.

Clara Snow wrote that Vespaclian Stearns gave the couple a cow, six sheep and some furniture, including:

- A hand-turned, high-post, cherry bedstead with feather bed and pillows;
- Six hand-made chairs;
- A rocker;
- A cupboard for food and dishes;
- Another cupboard for linens and bedding; and
- A small cook-stove.

“A lean-to kitchen was added to the house the next year,” Snow wrote. “A few years later a frame house was built to which many additions were made until it was very commodious.”

That frame house apparently was the one that Peter and Laura Borns now own, although there is discrepancy in the chronology cited by Snow. If it was built a few years after the log cabin (1843), then it must have been started before 1860. But if it was started in 1860, then it was more than a few years after the log cabin had been built. Although Cuyahoga County property records are not always correct about the construction dates of old houses, they list 1860 as the date for the house at 26812 John Road.

No matter when the house was built, James and Lucretia Fitch had quite a life there. They had 12 children. On October 1, 1892, they celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. A newspaper article about the celebration said that “a very large and unusually congenial company of relatives and friends gathered at the pleasant



*This picture, which hangs on the wall in the house, shows James and Lucretia Fitch with their 12 grown sons and daughters.*



*These old tools hang on one wall.*

Laura Borns said. “Now, I haven’t seen that story in writing, but I thought, isn’t that the cutest story?”

Hattie Fitch married George Barnum, who also came from one of Olmsted’s prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century families. The pane on which her name is inscribed is made of the type of glass that is not smooth but shows waves on its surface, as was common for glass panes from the mid-1800s.

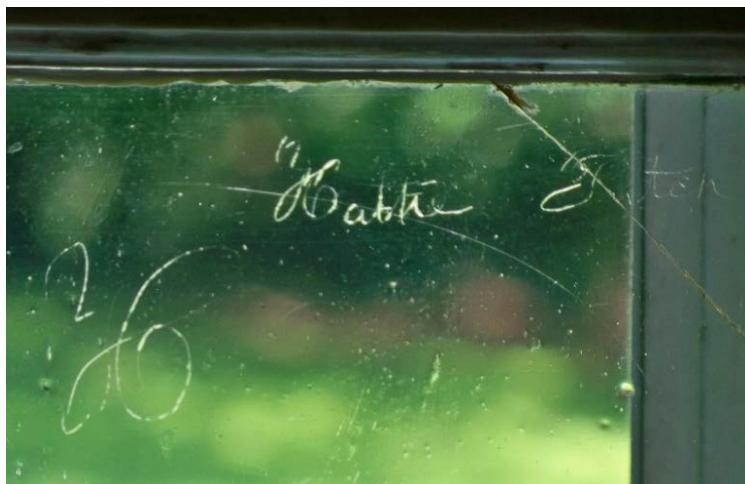
“A descendant knocked on the door once and asked if we’d be interested in selling it,” Laura Borns said. “We said, ‘Oh, it should stay with the house.’”

Although the house was regarded well in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was hard on it. By the time the Bornses bought it in 1995, it needed much work. Fortunately,

and commodious residence.” The story also referred to the house’s “spacious parlors,” where the guests gathered. It said that the Fitches had been for half a century “foremost in every social, educational and business enterprise” in the township. James Fitch died on June 12, 1898. Lucretia Fitch died almost one year later on June 5, 1899. Both were buried at Butternut Ridge Cemetery.

Only one of their children, Harriet, died before they did, but she was the one who left an enduring memento: an inscription in a pane of glass in an upstairs window. It has a big “H” and the name “Hattie” etched into it. Hattie was a common nickname for Harriet in the 1800s. The window is now in a bathroom, but Peter Borns said it probably had been part of Hattie Fitch’s bedroom.

“The story that I was told was that she was proposed marriage and that she was checking to see if the stone was diamond,”



*Hattie Fitch left her name and initial etched in this window.*



*This painting of Plum Creek, Inscription Rock and the stone bridge in David Fortier River Park in Olmsted Falls is one of several by Laura Borns hanging in the house.*

back side of house. “We call it our sun room,” she said. “It’s our family room. And we felt that, since the house was so close to the road now, when we were projecting how we were going to live in this house, we think we’re going to want this view of the backyard. So we got it windows and made the vaulted ceiling.”

Otherwise, not only did the Bornses work to restore the house as much as possible to its 19<sup>th</sup> century configurations and appearance, but they also furnished it with items they salvaged from local antique shops, such as a spinning wheel. Another piece of furniture from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is a windup phonograph, although they have installed a stereo system in it.

An example of how they have returned the house to a 19<sup>th</sup> century look is their installation of old chandeliers and library lamps in a few rooms. Peter Borns enjoys showing how the library lamps were made to be pulled down easily so they could be lit in the days before electrical power was common in houses.

they had the right talents for the task. He is an engineer. She is an artist. In fact, her paintings, some of them portraying local scenes, are hung around the house.

“We tried to be restorers rather than remodelers,” Laura Borns said. “For instance, the first year, we took apart all the windows. They’re double hung, so we got the weights back in working order. We completely revamped all the windows. It took over 12 months, if I remember correctly.”

They architecturally modernized only one room on the



*In this view of the back side of the house, the sun room is the closest one.*



*Peter Borns pulls down a library lamp.*

a cement floor.

Laura Borns said the basement is full of clues to how the house was expanded and otherwise altered over the decades. The original section of the basement has walls made of sandstone, which probably was exracted from local quarries, but another section has walls made out of fieldstone. Yet another section has walls of cinderblock. The Bornses can point to where one basement wall ended until the kitchen was added to the house. They also can point to 10-inch-by-14-inch sill boards used in the foundation.



*Above right, thick, wooden beams are in the basement. Left, quarried sandstone and fieldstone both form parts of the basement walls.*

The house has 3,800 square feet of space with five bedrooms upstairs, several rooms on the ground floor, two full bathrooms and what Peter Borns calls “a couple of bonus rooms.” So even though they have been working on the house for more than two decades, they still have plenty to do.

“Last winter, I went through and all the original brick work had just disintegrated, so I replaced it all,” Peter Borns said as he pointed to a large beam in the basement that helps to hold the whole house up. “It’s all mortice-and-peg construction. That’s what all the beams that go through there on the original house [are].”

Until sometime in the 1970s, according to their former neighbors, the basement had a dirt floor that tended to fill with water and muck. It was replaced with

Yet another discovery they made by exploring the basement is that the living room's oak flooring was laid on top of original poplar flooring. The planks in the poplar flooring run north-south while the planks of the oak flooring run east-west.

But a trip to the basement is not necessary to see evidence of other changes made to the house. For example, a visitor on the front porch for the first time might be confused by the house's two front doors.

One of them is the result of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century renovation.

“Sometime in the 40s, it was split off as a double, duplex-type house,” Peter Borns said. “It had a separate kitchen. This long narrow [portion] from the archway to the back wall was another wall, and they had a secondary kitchen in there from when it was a duplex.”

The house seems to have been a duplex for two or three decades. The Bornses believe it was converted back to a single-family residence sometime in the 1960s or perhaps the 1970s, when a family with the name McDougald owned it. The McDougalds sold it in December 1988.

The house suffered other indignities when it was converted into a duplex. “When they put in forced-air heat, they ran the furnace flues right through the stairway here,” Peter Borns said while pointing to where the ductwork once ran. “And upstairs, they dropped the ceiling down again and ran all the ductwork over the doorways into each bedroom upstairs from the basement. Then they enclosed it all, closed off the stairway and put in a linen closet above it. I tore all that out.”



*This photo shows one front door. The other door is along the wall to the right of it.*



*This photo from sometime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in the scrapbook of the house that Peter and Laura Borns keep.*



*Although it is out of focus, this photo from the Bornses' scrapbook offers another 20<sup>th</sup> century view of the house.*

west half, and there's one in the attic to warm the upstairs because everything is plaster and lath walls. You can't run ductwork up a lath wall because it would hit the back side of the lath and just destroy the wall."

The attic had to be heated even in the 1800s, he said, because it once contained several little bedrooms for some of the dozen Fitch children.

Another 20<sup>th</sup> century renovation that Borns had to remove was some "ugly paneling" along the upstairs hallway. "Knotty pine with three-quarter-inch panel," he said. "They closed it off, put it right over the banister and everything."

Yet another decorating touch to which the Bornses objected was the paneling in a downstairs room that was just off from one of the two front doors. "Inside here, they did it all in three-quarter-inch panel board that was real prevalent back in the 60s," Peter Borns said. "Eight foot up and painted all baby blue. So I tore all this out, [did] some of the reclamation work and refitted it all, [and] redid all the trim in the windows."

Part of the renovation work he did was dangerous. Even though he worked with the knowledge of an engineer, Borns sometimes was surprised at what previous owners had done. For example, he once found an old cistern when he was removing a set of three cement steps that seemed very solid at a corner of the house.

"So I had one of those big Ingersoll Rand jackhammers, you know, the compressor and all that good stuff," he said. "Brrrrrm. Brrrrrm. I was busting up the cement and all of a sudden, whoa! I get that they weren't solid after all. It's hollow. Boom! It goes splash! I'm standing on top of this thing with a hundred-pound jackhammer trying to hammer through it, and here I'm over the cistern."

Such routing of ductwork for the heating system was unusual, he said, and it wouldn't be allowed under current building codes.

"The McDougalds left it there and didn't take it out and probably used it for a closet," Peter Borns said of linen closet above the ductwork over the stairway. "So in order to get rid of that and put heat up here, I ended up having to put three furnaces in – one for the east half of the house, one for the

Borns said he imagined that, if he had been less fortunate, he might have been the subject of a news story promoted on local television as: “Man impaled by jackhammer – details at eleven.”

Although the house now sits on just 1.45 acres, the property was much bigger when the Fitches built there. The house next door and a bit closer to Fitch Road stands at what had been the site of the Fitches’ barn. The next house over at the corner of John and Fitch stands where they had their chicken coop. “And this whole corner here was called Fitch Corner,” Peter Borns said. On the west side of Fitch Road and a few lots north of John Road is a house that was built for one of the grownup children of James and Lucretia Fitch, he added.

Neither Peter nor Laura Borns is a native of northeastern Ohio. He grew up in the Dayton area and she came from Westfield, New York. After they were married, they moved to Cuyahoga County, so he could attend Cleveland State University. Before they found the house in Olmsted Township, they lived in Bay Village.

“I saw it first,” Laura Borns said. “I told our realtor friend, ‘I just know Pete is going to want this house. Not that I didn’t want it, [but] I just wasn’t sure if I wanted to take on this big a project. I knew that it never was going to get smaller or less. I knew it just had that feeling. It’s just going to be the one that feels like home to him.’”

In other words, she knew that her husband liked a challenge like that. “He loved the larger lot and just the little sense of privacy, a feeling of space,” she said, adding that it also had a sense of comfort.

Despite its age, the house is not on the National Register of Historic Places. The Bornses heard that the McDougalds had researched that possibility but the kitchen addition and perhaps the siding on the house prevented them from going after the listing. But the idea of going after a listing is not dead.

“Yes, it’s 21 years older now,” Laura Borns said.

Before Peter and Laura Borns bought the house, it had received little attention for a number of years. John and Carol McDougald bought it in 1977 from Robert and



*Laura and Peter Borns posed by the carriage stone in front of their house for this photo from August 2016.*

Patricia Elrod, according to county records. They then sold it to in 1988 to the Eliza Jennings organization, which owns The Renaissance, the retirement community that took over the former Homelinks golf course, which had been the home and farm of John Hall and his family in the 1800s.

“The Renaissance bought it as a buffer property to keep from when they had the expansion,” Peter Borns said. “So they bought this so nobody could complain about the new buildings.”

The original plan The Renaissance had for the house was to use it like a Ronald McDonald house, where people could stay while visiting relatives, he said, but that didn’t happen.

The Bornses bought the house in June 1995 from the Eliza Jennings organization.

“It sat on the market for almost two years, I think,” Peter Borns said. “They kept dropping the price and dropping the price. I said, ‘Well, if we’re going to buy it, let’s go in and lowball it.’”

After acquiring the house, they worked on one room at a time while living in it.

“I remember when the kids were little enough that they kind of liked it when the rooms were not fixed up because they would go wild,” Laura Borns said. “But we just kind of made our way through the house.”

Peter Borns recalled removing about 100 years of paint off of each of the doors.



*John Hall’s house served for many years as the clubhouse for Homelinks Golf Course along John Road.*

house. “It was a beautiful house. We were heartbroken. We would pipedream. We were younger and more energetic then. We’d say, ‘Hmmm. Maybe we should offer to buy that house and we could fix it up, too.’ We were like, no, maybe we have our hands full.”

Fortunately, the house was still there for them to buy. The house that John Hall built in the 1800s on the land now home to the Renaissance wasn’t so fortunate. It had served as the golf course clubhouse during the years Homelinks operated. But even though the Eliza Jennings organization reconfigured the golf course, now called The Links, around the retirement community, it did not keep the house.

“This piece of wood comes from John Hall’s home when the house was demolished,” Laura Borns said while pointing to a piece of old wood in her

Peter Borns said they woke up one morning and discovered John Hall's house was being torn down. They ran over to it as soon as they could and saw pieces they wanted to keep, such as two windows, he hopes someday to put into the gable peaks of their attic for ventilation.

"I said to the crane operator, 'Can you save those for me?'" Peter Borns said. "He manipulated that backhoe like a child's toy and just took them out and set them down for me."

Likewise, Borns retrieved from John Hall's house as much molding as he could.

Laura Borns recalled, "The guy said, 'I hate doing this.' He said, 'I hate doing jobs like this one,'"

Peter Borns said, "It was a good-sized house. It was built well. It was double-walled brick and dead airspace in between. How pretty that was back then."

They also were sad when The Renaissance torn down John Hall's barn in 2014. It had stood there along John Road since 1880 and was one of the most photographed buildings in Olmsted Township. (For more on the deconstruction of the barn, see Issues 10 through 14 of *Olmsted 200* from March through July 2014.)

Fortunately, the former home of James Fitch and Lucretia Stearns Fitch is in the hands of people who are taking care of it. Peter and Laura Borns even keep a scrapbook of the house's history and photographs of their work on it.

*Thanks to Peter and Laura Borns for their hospitality and for sharing information and photos of their home.*

## **Trees Formed Many 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fences**

The Fitch family and other 19<sup>th</sup> century Olmsted residents left more than beautiful, old houses around Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls. Some of them left a type of natural fencing in the form of Osage orange trees that still survive in a few places.

For example, a line of trees extending north from John Road marks the border between The Links and Springvale Golf Course. Many of those trees are Osage oranges, which produce inedible green fruit the size of grapefruit. Around Olmsted, a common nickname for the fruit is "monkeyball." Stories are still told of annual monkeyball fights between groups of high school



*These Osage oranges are from trees along Fitch Road.*

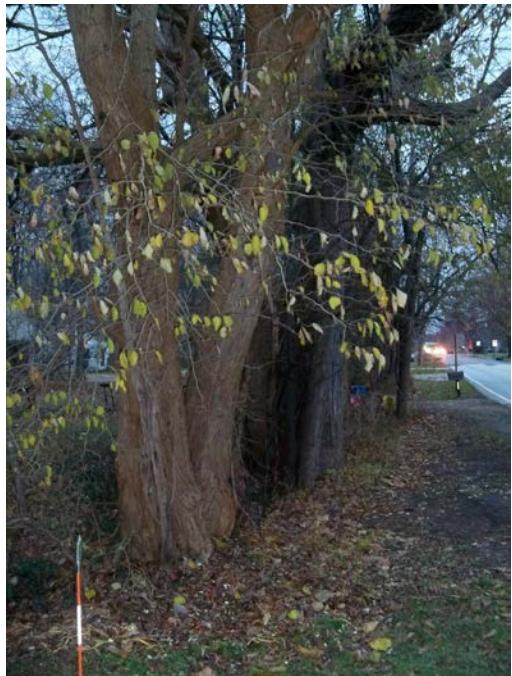
students. Elsewhere in the country, people call the trees “horse apple,” “hedge apple,” “prairie hedge,” “bow-wood” or “yellow-wood.”

Planted together, they make a good hedge. The reason for that, according to a 1985 article in *Mother Earth News* by Dave Wayman, is that they are “horse-high, bull-strong and pig-tight.” Further, he wrote:

*The tree was easily propagated from seed, and grew fast. In a few years, it would form a hedge almost tight enough to hold water. Any spaces between the trees would be screened by the Osage's thick, thorny branches. And since the trees propagate by sending up shoots from their roots, all the holes would eventually fill in with new trees.*

*If planted close together, Osages would grow only to about 20 or 30 feet, never attaining the height of most deciduous trees. Consequently, they made perfect field borders: They could contain livestock without shading crops excessively. Besides, it was a lot easier to plant trees in lines around fields and pastures than it was to erect and maintain rail or stockade fences.*

The result was the planting of thousands of miles of Osage orange trees in the East, South and Midwest, including Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. That lasted until barbed wire became inexpensive and widely available.



*These trees formed part of a fence for a Fitch family homestead.*

In addition to the line of trees between The Links and Springvale Golf Course, another place in Olmsted Township where a portion of an Osage orange hedge can be found is along the west side of Fitch Road just south of the North Olmsted border. The trees are in front of the house owned by Donna Anderson at 6314 Fitch Road. She estimates her 35 trees “are over 150 years old and were used to keep the Fitch Homestead’s cattle off Fitch Road back before barbed wire and electrified fencing.”

The Fitch homestead to which she refers is not the one featured in the preceding story at 26812 John Road, but another Fitch home on the other side of Fitch Road. Anderson said that former Fitch house is two doors south of her house, which was built in the mid-1900s.

One of the trees in front of her house has a 12-foot circumference, but Anderson is afraid that it and the others might not be around much longer because of plans to install a

sidewalk there. She would like the sidewalk to be built a little bit to the east and closer to Fitch Road, so the trees could be saved, and has been fighting to change the sidewalk plans. Her fight has included writing to the Olmsted Township trustees and putting a sign about saving the trees on a bench next to the trees. But the trustees contend the issue is out of their hands.

“The county as well as the Township looked at moving the sidewalks a few feet over however it posed a danger to pedestrians as it was too close to the street,” Trustee Lisa Zver wrote. “The trees and the open overhang on her property are in the county right-of-way thus the county ultimately decides where the sidewalks can and cannot go. If the sidewalks are placed too close to the street, and a pedestrian gets hit by an automobile, the county as well as the Township would be liable.”

About Anderson, Zver added, “I know she feels passionately about the trees and we sympathize with her. I wish there was something that we could do, however there is no place else that the sidewalks [could] be installed.”

But Anderson remains unconvinced that the trees must be sacrificed for the sidewalk. She would rather have a historical marker than a sidewalk. That seems unlikely, but for now, the front of her lot at 6314 Fitch Road is one place to see what’s left of an Osage orange tree fence from the 1800s.

## **Website Includes New Account of Olmsted Township History**

Olmsted Township’s new website (<http://olmstedtownship.org/>), which went into operation in February, contains not only plenty of information about what is going on in the township these days but also information about what happened in the township in days past. Under the “Community” tab is a “History of Olmsted Township” page with an account that runs from the auctioning of township land in 1795 to the dedication of its Ohio Historical Marker in 2016. Here is a direct link to that page: <http://olmstedtownship.org/olmsted-township-history/>.

Past issues of *Olmsted 200* are also still archived on the township’s website, but they are in a new place. From the site’s opening page, select the “I Want To” tab. Then under the “View” column, choose “Past Newsletters.” That takes you to a page with a column of the township’s own newsletters on the left and a column of *Olmsted 200* on the right. Then just select the number of the issue you want to read. To get there faster, bookmark this link: <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>.

Many thanks go to the Olmsted Township trustees, Lisa Zver, Jeanene Kress and Tiffany Fischbach, as well as Traci Dietrich, the website’s administrator, for helping to make *Olmsted 200* more widely available to readers.

## Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about an Olmsted resident who became internationally famous in his field. It also will have a few mid-20<sup>th</sup> century photos of one of the oldest houses in Olmsted Township.

If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com). *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Florida, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help in proofreading and editing many issues. Written contributions and photos, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com).

*Olmsted 200* is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of *The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township*, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. *The Olmsted Story* is available at the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.

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