

NORMANDY FARMS

HABS NO. PA-6062

Morris Road and DeKalb Road
Franklinville
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NORMANDY FARM

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Location: DeKalb Pike and Morris Road, Franklinville, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: During the 1920s and 1930s Normandy Farm was one of the largest farm properties in Montgomery County. Its barns--among the largest on the East Coast--have become well-known locally for their French-influenced design, as have the exterior walls (and entry gates) which surround the farm.

Description: Normandy Farm encompasses seventy-three acres of gently sloping farmland in a rapidly suburbanizing section of Montgomery County. The property, much larger during the first half of this century, is now defined by DeKalb Pike to the southeast, Morris Road to the southwest, Township Line Road to the northeast, and an adult care community to the northwest. Reforestation has begun in northern corner, the lowest area; the rest of the open land is still farmed.

Most of Normandy Farm's fourteen buildings are concentrated in the southern corner at the intersection of DeKalb Pike and Morris Road. Surrounding this area is a locally famous white wall of stucco-covered stone. Four to five feet tall, the wall begins at the intersection and runs along each street for approximately 500 feet before turning to continue along the property to the interior. There are two gates along Morris Road and one on DeKalb Pike, all of which have wood double doors. The western gate along Morris Road is a simple break in the fence, but the other two are more elaborate. In both cases a semi-circular arch with exposed stone voussoirs carries the wall over the gate. Topping each arch is a shingled roof.

The dominant building inside the wall is the main barn. Built in 1875, it is a T-plan structure oriented towards DeKalb Pike. The barn sits on the property's highest ground in the center of the other buildings in Normandy Farm's southern corner. Its prominence comes in part from its size: the top block is 330' long by 50' wide; the stem of the "T" extends 200' to the southeast and is 30' wide. The barn is also visually distinctive, featuring vertical siding with white boards and contrasting red battens. A series of diagonal battens, also painted red, have been added at the bottom corners of the building. Tin painted orange covers the cross-gabled roof, which also features metal ventilators along both ridge lines.

Other elements contribute to the distinctiveness of the barn. The bricks which make up the first floor have been painted white to match the second floor boards. Along the barn's main, northwestern facade are four stone barnhills (approach ramps)

leading to projecting bays with paired wood-plank doors. In the center of this facade is a separate front-gabled two-story structure faced in brick. On the north end three silos, also painted white, connect to a one-story addition. There is another, cross-gabled T-plan addition on the southern end. Both the southwestern and northeastern facades of the other block feature dutch doors whose exposed framing is painted red. Six-over-six-light sash windows appear frequently along each facade. Along the rear of the main block are three wall dormers. To the north of the barn are a horse barn, a farm shed, and corn crib, and a hog shed, all of which use the same white and red board-and-batten siding.

The interior of the barn reflects the dairy farming which took place at Normandy Farm. Along the first floor are metal milking stalls with corked floors designed to protect the animals' feet. On the second floor are the grain mows which helped provide the enormous amount of fodder demanded by the farm's 300 head of cattle. The first floor of the rear block contains stalls for horses, though they are now being used by one of the tenants for pigs and sheep. At the southeastern most end is an elegantly panelled room formerly used for grooming horses.

The other main building on the property is the Dutch Colonial Revival family home. Built from brick covered with smooth white plaster, it consists of two crossing two-and-a-half-story sections, each with a gambrel roof with an adjoining pent. The five-bay-by-three-bay southeastern block includes three gabled dormers and irregular fenestration. There are entrances on the southeast and southwest elevations; the latter features a round-arch opening with fanlight and panelled reveals, suggesting it was once the main entry. Above the door is a large sixteen-over-sixteen-light window with tracery top. The five-bay-by-four-bay southwestern block contains the southwest-facing main entrance, which has the same details as the southern door. Another entrance faces northwest, and this section also has three gabled dormers. The rear of this section has a two-and-one-half story gable-roof ell with an end chimney. In the crux of these two blocks is a two-story exposed brick section, three bays wide, with another rounded arch doorway. Both blocks have twelve-over-twelve-light sash windows on the first floor and eight-over-eight-light sash on the second; all windows have plain beaded surrounds. On the building's northeast corner is a one-story, three-bay-by-two-bay gable-roof kitchen. A glass-enclosed portico covers its entry, which faces northwest. The section has eight-over-eight-light sash windows and an end chimney.

There are a number of other buildings on the property. Northeast of the house is a gabled smokehouse/summer kitchen made from uncoursed stone. West of the main house along Morris Road is the

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original stucco-covered stone carriage house, which was converted into a garage and the chauffeur's residence. Further west still are the now-abandoned stone, metal, and glass greenhouses.

Further northwest along Morris Road are two one-and-one-half story tenant houses. Though not identical, both stucco-covered stone structures have T-plans and gable roofs. North of the second house is a stone house with a datestone reading "1834" in its northeastern wall. Originally located in nearby North Wales, it was scheduled for destruction in the 1930s when Ruth Strassburger had it reassembled on its present site. Along Township Line Road are two more tenant homes similar in style to those facing Morris Road. Finally, near the western corner of the property is a one-room school house built in 1858; it now houses the Whitpain Historical Society.

History: Normandy Farm occupies land purchased by Jacob Levering in 1730. The property passed to his daughter Catherine and her husband John Heist, who around 1834 built the Franklin House, a tavern which forms the core of the current main house. The tavern offered food and lodging to travellers on the newly constructed state road between Norristown and Doylestown in Bucks County.¹

Heist died in 1847, and the tavern and the adjoining farmland changed hands a number of times. In 1874 William Singerly, a real estate broker and publisher of the Philadelphia Record, purchased the tavern and 82 surrounding acres to use as a summer home and "gentleman's farm," a popular practice at the time. Calling it the "Record Farm" after his newspaper, he gradually expanded the property north and west from the original tract bordered by Morris Road and DeKalb Pike. By 1893 he owned over 600 acres extending from the west side of Morris Road to the east side of Township Line Road. At various times he used the land to raise over 200 Holstein cattle, 850 Cotswald and Southdown sheep, and thoroughbred horses. The farm became known for its progressive farming techniques and high quality breeding stock.²

¹ Douglas Dinsmore, "Normandy Farm," Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, April 1993; Margaret Elizabeth Rush Kytte, "Normandy Farm History;" "Public Sale," Norristown Herald and Free Press, November 17, 1847. The construction date comes from a datestone in the main house wall.

² Montgomery County Deed Book 216, p. 278 (April 1, 1874); Theodore Bean, ed. A History of Montgomery County (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1884), 1175-76; Property Atlas of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: J.L. Smith, 1893), 29. Bean

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To create a proper farm Singerly built a number of new structures. Most significant were the new barns, which had been completed by 1884. He added a creamery and a blacksmith's shop, both of which have been demolished. He also renovated the house, though it is difficult to determine precisely which changes can be attributed to him. An 1884 drawing shows a gable-roof two-and-one-half story structure facing southeast. Its orientation, towards the state road, and remaining details suggest this section was the original traveller's inn. An ell, apparently built in two stages, extends northwest from the southwestern end of the main block. Nearest the house was a two-and-one-half story, two-bay addition with a gable roof; connected to this was a two-bay, three story section with a nearly flat roof. A second story wood porch ran along the southeastern and southwestern elevations. Again, the chronology of additions is unclear.³

Singerly continued to expand the farm until his death in 1898. At that point it was revealed he was nearly \$145,000 in debt. In the subsequent sheriff's sale the mortgagee, the Chestnut Street Trust and Saving Fund Company, took control of the farm. Over the next several years it sold pieces of the land to local farmers. In 1901 Dr. William Wilson purchased the 82 acre tract containing the farmhouse and barn; three years later Wilson bought another 28 acres west of Morris Road.⁴

Ten years later these two tracts formed the center of what was to become Normandy Farm. In 1913 Wilson sold them to Ralph B. Strassburger, a Norristown native who in 1911 had married May Bourne, one of the heirs to the Singer Sewing Machine fortune. As a wedding gift her parents gave the couple \$4 million, money which went to purchase Normandy Farm in 1913 and the Norristown Herald in 1921. He became the paper's editor and publisher, later merging it with the Norristown Times.⁵

claims Singerly purchased the farm and 68 acres in 1872, but the deeds show otherwise.

³ Bean, 1175-77.

⁴ "Singerly Farms Sold By Sheriff," Norristown Weekly Herald, November 28, 1898; Montgomery County Deed Book 701, p. 409 (September 9, 1913).

⁵ Joseph A. Slobodzian, Legacy: \$4-million estate recalls family's forgotten glory," Philadelphia Bulletin, April 29, 1979, C-1.

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Almost immediately after purchasing the property the Strassburgers started creating what they called "Normandy Farm." Drawing on what they had seen during their honeymoon in northern France, they covered the stone wall surrounding the property with white stucco and built the elaborate roofed gates. They rapidly bought more land, accumulating over 500 acres by 1920 in a pattern similar to the earlier Record Farm. They began breeding thoroughbred horses, a practice they later transferred to another farm they owned in France.⁶

Two major changes took place after World War I. In 1924 the house was remodeled to its present appearance, at which time the northeastern kitchen was also added. Several years later the farm shifted to dairy farming, which demanded more land for fodder. Normandy Farm expanded further and the Strassburgers bought several hundred additional acres elsewhere in southeastern Pennsylvania. The interior of the barns were converted to milking stalls and silos were built to hold feed for the 300 head of Ayrshire.⁷

In 1947 the Strassburgers left for France after he was indicted for failing to pay \$12,000 in Federal income taxes. They sold the dairy herd in the early 1950s, after which time the land was used for truck farming. Strassburger died in France in 1959; his wife later returned to the U.S. before her death in 1975. After that their only son Peter moved out of the house, which has been empty since. He began selling the 701 acres he had inherited in sections: property west of Morris Road became a residential/golf course development; the land north of the central tract is now a retirement community. By his death in 1993 the only remaining land was 73 acres approximating the original tract purchased by Ralph Strassburger. In 1994 this land, including the house and barns, was sold to a developer.⁸

⁶ The best explanation of the Normandy Farm property comes from a 1929 map still hanging in the property's garage. "Strassburgers Buy Singerley Property," Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 30, 1913 (Scrapbook C-5, 9, 24-25).

⁷ Kytte, "Normandy Farm History;" Slobodzian, "Legacy."

⁸ Slobodzian, "Legacy;" Walter F. Naedele, "On the block, a grand chip off a lost era," Philadelphia Inquirer, April 26, 1994, B-1.

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Historian: William Wright, summer 1994