



# *Olmsted 200*

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

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## **Couple Prepares to Depart from Restored 1830s Fitch House**

Fitch Road is just one part of the legacy left to Olmsted by the Fitch family. Members of the family, which included some of the community's earliest settlers, also left behind several houses that are still in use. That includes the house at 8566 Lewis Road that has been in the loving hands of Rich and Carol Roberts for almost half a century.



*This house at 8566 Lewis Road started as the home of Eli and Sabra Fitch and their family in the 1830s.*

Now, as the Robertses prepare to transfer the house to new owners, it stands as a testament to their work and that of a series of owners since Eli and Sabra Fitch built it. As best as the Robertses can determine, the Fitches built the house in 1838, although some sources have cited other dates. Some accounts of Olmsted's history also incorrectly gave Eli's brother, Elisha, credit for building the house, but Elisha Fitch's house instead was located at what is now 7555

Columbia Road.

Eli and Elisha Fitch were among six sons of Thaddeus Fitch of East Windsor, Connecticut. The Fitch brothers and their families moved to Olmsted Township beginning in 1831. That was four years after Eli married Sabra Cady in 1827.

When Eli and Sabra Fitch built their house, their property stretched west to Rocky River and as far north as Water Street. They also owned land across from what is now Lewis Road. Altogether, they owned about 600 acres. There they raised 10 children, including a daughter, Marie Eliza, who was born in 1831 when they still were in East Windsor.

Thirty years after building the house, Eli Fitch died at age 70 on November 4, 1868. His widow, Sabra, lasted more than three decades longer. She was almost 99 years old when she died on September 15, 1901. Both were buried at Butternut Ridge Cemetery.



*An obelisk (left) at Butternut Ridge Cemetery marks the graves of Eli and Sabra Fitch. On the right is a close-up of the engraving on the side of the stone. Photos courtesy of Helen Atkinson Dipert.*

James Hickey, an Irishman who married one of the Fitches' daughters, seems to have acquired much of their land by the time an 1874 map of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township was published. Over the years, the land was divided into smaller plots and most of it was sold off. Cottages, and later bigger houses, were built on many of those plots.

The barn that originally went with the house was long gone before the Robertses moved in, but they know it was located near what now is the second driveway south of the house.

Little is known about the history of the house during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The house remained in the hands of descendants of the Fitches until 1961, although by then the family that owned it bore the last name of O'Brien. Before the O'Briens sold the house, they built another house behind it for themselves. In 1961, a family named Gannett bought the house, which then came with just an acre of land.

### **House needed years of restoration.**

By then, Rich Roberts said, the house had fallen into disrepair. "The Gannetts came in and they were antique buffs and tried to put the house back together, but they weren't especially successful at that," he said.



*This illustration by Bay Village artist William Mannion shows the house in the late 1970s before the Robertses added a second story to the older section on the left.*

Robertses in the fall of 1970.

A January 26, 1965, *Plain Dealer* article in the Robertses' collection quoted Paul Gannett, who worked in public relations for Lutheran Hospital, as saying, "We are restoring the house, not remodeling it." He also said, "There can be no sense of hurry about the house repairs or the furnishings."

Unfortunately, time ran out for the Gannetts and their ambition to restore the house. Less than a decade after they bought the house, Paul Gannett died. His widow sold it to the

"We were just married, and we were looking for an old house," Rich Roberts said. "This one was available."

Carol Roberts said of the Gannetts, "They did a lot as far as building it back up from what it was after it had gone downhill." Her husband added, "But it still needed years of work, and we're still working on it after 47 years."

When the Robertses acquired the house, the roof was caving in on the southern end of it, which was the first section the Fitches built (although an uninformed observer might have mistaken it for an addition to the house because it had just one story while the section built later had two stories). Instead of just fixing the roof, Rich and Carol Roberts put a second story on that older section in the early 1980s by going up another five feet. That added two bedrooms to the house, one for each of their sons. Originally, the second story on northern end of the house contained just one, big open bedroom. A bathroom apparently was added when indoor plumbing was installed.

“We took a little bit of space off the bathroom and built bookcases just because I thought it made a nicer hallway,” Carol Roberts said. “And we have a lot of books.”

Other changes they made to the house included redoing the plumbing, drywall and electrical system, adding insulation, enclosing the back porch, and replacing most – but not all – of the original windows from the 1800s. Many of the old window frames were falling apart. Rich Roberts was unsuccessful in trying to save them, so in 1993 he replaced most of them with architectural-style Pella windows that look much like the originals. Those in the back of the house are Andersen windows.



*The Robertses added these bookcases on the second floor.*

When they bought the house, it still was sided with shingles that apparently were installed in the 1930s. “The shingler came through town and shingled all these old houses,” Rich Roberts said. The Robertses removed those old shingles in 1988 and considered restoring the previous cedar siding, but the cost would have been about \$30,000, so they went with a cheaper alternative.

Where possible, they have preserved the original woodwork in the house. Where that wasn’t possible, they tried to match the original moldings, baseboards and window frames as well as they could.

Their family room still has a Sears & Roebuck stove that probably is like stoves that once were located all around the house.



*Stoves like this one in the family room once heated rooms throughout the house.*

“There were no fireplaces in this house,” Rich Roberts said. “There are two chimneys here. When we had the floors up before carpeting, you could see where the holes were. A hole went from between the first bedroom in front and the living room, so a stove must have been there. The stovepipe went up through the room and connected to the chimney halfway up the bedroom wall on the second floor. They used stoves instead of fireplaces.”

The Robertses believe the current kitchen on the north end of the house was originally a bedroom, and the original kitchen was where the family room is now. Like many old houses, this one originally was divided into smaller spaces with more walls and doors than it has now.





*The stairway did not always have a railing.*

railing on the stairway was not always there, and as a child, she worried about falling off. She also recalled that the house had an outhouse in the backyard.

Another of her memories was that renters lived in the house in the 1950s when construction crews were building the Ohio Turnpike through the area. She said what now is the family room was converted to a small, one-bedroom apartment then. Rich Roberts is not sure, but he thinks the O'Brien family already might have moved into the ranch-style house they built in back, closer to the river.

"When we moved in, the only utilities we had were electricity and phone," Rich Roberts said. The house had oil heat, a septic tank and a hand-dug water well in the corner of the property, he said. All of those were upgraded during the Robertses' time in the house, but in the process, they lost a big, old oak tree that stood out front by the road.

"The tree was ancient because when the road came down, there was a little hook in the road right where it was to bypass this oak tree," Rich Roberts said. "When they brought the sewers and water down, we had them go around the tree, but they did too much damage to the roots of the tree, so the tree eventually died."



*This "old tree trunk" supports a main beam.*

Despite that, he considered getting sewer and water service a "godsend" because he previously spent many hours of work on the water well and septic tank.

As with many old buildings from the 1800s, the basement tells some of the house's history. What Carol Roberts called "basically an old tree trunk" supports a main beam that holds up the house. Likewise, she said, the original beams are "basically trees."

One section of the basement's ceiling has a square opening in the wide poplar boards that were the original

floor for the first story. It shows the oak flooring that was installed on top of the poplar boards at some time. Also, it's easy to tell the early section of the house from the section that was built later because the beams run different ways in the two sections.

The walls of the basement are made of sandstone that probably was quarried in Berea. One section of the back wall indicates that it once held a doorway to the outside.

### **Portrait depicts Fitch brother.**

Of course, the Fitch family had been gone for years when Rich and Carol Roberts bought the house, but it came with an interesting family heirloom: a portrait of one of the Fitch brothers. However, even though the house had belonged to Eli Fitch, the painting depicts Elisha Fitch.

According to an article from the *Berea News* from sometime in the 1960s, Paul Gannett acquired the painting in December 1963, but it was torn and stretched out of shape. So Gannett hired George Lash, an artist from Westlake, to restore it, the newspaper said.

Rich Roberts said that the Fitch descendent who visited two or three decades ago told him and his wife that the portrait was damaged when a ladder fell against it and ripped the canvas. "It wasn't an especially good restoration," he said in reference to Lash's work. But Roberts added, "There's a little plate on there that said 'Elisha Fitch,' and it's in the original frame." It's believed that the portrait was painted by a relative of Elisha Fitch, perhaps even one of his brothers, but it is unclear who painted it.



*Rich and Carol Roberts are selling the house.*



*Oak flooring for the first story shows through the older poplar boards in the basement ceiling.*



*This portrait of Elisha Fitch hangs in the house built by his brother Eli.*

That painting and the house soon will be owned by someone new. "It's been a good house for us," Rich Roberts, who worked as an accountant, said. But he and his wife, who worked as a teacher, spend most of their time now either in Florida, where their sons have settled, or at their other house at Put-In-Bay.



*On the left is the dining room, which the Robertses' remodeled extensively. On the right is the living room, which once was more closed off from the entryway to the house by a wall and door.*

"We've had fond memories and great parties," Carol Roberts said. "And the flow of the house has worked really well. There is not a reason that we would leave other than our lifestyle is different with our children in Florida and the island house.... We have terrific memories. It's been a great house for us."



*The stonework in the basement, left, indicates that a door once was located where just a window is now. The back of the house, right, faces toward another house built closer to Rocky River by previous owners who were descendants of the Fitch family.*

For other stories about houses built and owned by members of the Fitch family in the 1800s, see *Olmsted* 200 Issue 15 from August 2014 and Issue 46 from March 2017.

*In addition to Rich and Carol Roberts, Tom Atkinson and Helen Atkinson Dipert provided help with this story.*

## **Former Resident Remembers Kindergarten in Old Village Hall**

The Bonsey Building, the former town hall that now houses the Moosehead restaurant, has served many purposes since it was built in the early 1940s. It held the



village council chamber, other municipal offices, the police department and the fire department for many years. In the 1940s and early 1950s, it also was home to the public library. And one *Olmsted 200* reader remembers attending kindergarten there.

Mike Gibson, who now lives in Bend, Oregon, was in the Olmsted Falls kindergarten class of 1952-1953.



*This photo from the 1940s shows the Congregational Church (which was torn down in the 1950s) next to the town hall, where Mike Gibson and others attended kindergarten in the 1940s and 1950s. This and other photos in this story are courtesy of Mike Gibson.*

“I remember climbing stairs to the second floor,” he wrote. “I remember handrails with wire mesh wrapped around them so we little kids wouldn’t fall through. I climbed those stairs (or a modern reconstruction) in 2013, but the guys in the suits upstairs had no idea what I was talking about.”

Kindergarten in Olmsted Falls began in 1944 as a private preschool. Walter Holzworth, in his 1966 book on Olmsted history, wrote that the first teacher was “Miss Knapp,” who was educated at Kent State University.

“The short sessions were held upstairs in the town hall, with 15 children in attendance,” he wrote. “By 1950 the class had grown to 31 and the Kindergarten activities were transferred to the public school system. In 1959 Miss Knapp was honored by the Olmsted School board, faculty and P.T.A. for her devotion of teaching pre-school children.”

However, a photo of Gibson’s kindergarten class taken on May 12, 1953, shows the teacher then was a Miss Thomas.





*These photos, taken 60 years apart in 1953 and 2013, show Mike Gibson in the same spot in front of the building where he attended kindergarten. In the kindergarten photo on the left, he is the boy in the back row not looking at the camera. In the photo on the right, he is holding the kindergarten photo in front of the building that now houses the Moosehead restaurant.*

When Gibson's class entered first grade, the students went to the building at the corner of Bagley Road and Mapleway Drive that is now Olmsted Falls City Hall. That building was built initially in 1916 and subsequently expanded in following decades. It served as the district's sole school for 38 years. On September 8, 1954, Falls Elementary School opened for classes. One of its features was a heated floor in the kindergarten room for the comfort of students.

Gibson recalls attending second grade and third grade in Falls Elementary. His class went back to the 1916 building for fourth grade, but he recalls that the class returned to the elementary building for fifth grade and sixth grade. Then the class went back to the 1916 school for grades seven and up. That's the school from which Gibson would have graduated in 1965, but he attended it only through 11<sup>th</sup> grade because his family moved to Los Angeles for his father's job in 1964.



"I was a big band geek at Olmsted High and continue to play clarinet to this day," he said. "David Fortier was my piano accompanist for clarinet solos." Fortier later served as an Olmsted Falls councilman and mayor. After Fortier died in a car accident on February 21, 1986, the city named the park in the center of town David Fortier River Park.

*Mike Gibson, a self-described "big band geek" while at Olmsted Falls High School, continues to play clarinet.*

Gibson worked as a teacher for 40 years and retired from the school system in Riverside, California. Although he moved away from Olmsted before he graduated from high school, he has returned to town from time to time. In 1995, he attended the 40<sup>th</sup>-year reunion for the Olmsted Falls High School Class of 1965.

The Gibson family goes back several generations in Olmsted. Mike Gibson is the great-great-grandson of Joseph Gibson, who built a dam for Ed Damp's mill after an 1883 flood destroyed the previous dam. Joseph Gibson's name is carved in the rock on the east side of the Rocky River, where the old dam stood. (A photo of the carving and more on Joseph Gibson can be found in Issue 43 of *Olmsted 200* from December 2016.)

"My mother's mother was Helen Staten, a fairly well-known local artist," Mike Gibson wrote. "She lived in the Philo and Delight Bradford home on River Road from 1934 to 1991."

Gibson's father, Bill Gibson, was active in a local historical group in the early 1960s.

"My father, who only passed away in 2015, was sometimes interested in Olmsted history; sometimes not," he wrote. "I have a feeling that not all the Gibson family stories should be in print!!!"

Gibson has copies of many old Olmsted photos that his father collected. He has offered to share them with *Olmsted 200*, so look for them in the months ahead.

## **Burglary Left Milliner Hatless but Not Hopeless**

Olmsted Falls was a small village in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it had its share of crime. Sometimes, it was the result of someone getting out of line after having too much to drink at one of the saloons. But at other times, the Berea newspaper, the *Advertiser*, reported more serious crimes.

One such item appeared 120 years ago this month in the Olmsted Falls column in the *Advertiser* on October 29, 1897:

*Burglars broke into Eva Stokes' millinery store Friday night and carried away most everything in the store. The stolen articles consist of trimmed hats, trimmings, ribbon, mackintoshes, collarette dress shirts, dress patterns and a variety of other goods, the total value being estimated at \$300.*

As readers might recall from a story in Issue 51 of *Olmsted 200* from August, Eva Stokes had opened her millinery shop in September of 1897. It was in the warehouse owned by Tom Stokes, who apparently was not related to her. That warehouse is now a residence at 7835 Columbia Road. (For old and new photos of the building, see Issue 50 of *Olmsted 200* from July.) Within weeks of its opening, the newspaper called the shop a "decided success."

However, the burglars did not let Eva Stokes enjoy her success very long. In those days before burglar alarms, they struck just several weeks after the store opened. There is no indication in subsequent issues of the paper that the criminals were identified and

apprehended. But the crime did not put an end to Stokes's business. In the spring following the burglary, she ran more advertisements in the newspaper, such as one that appeared in the May 27, 1898, edition of the *Advertiser*. It looked like this:

## **A Bower of Beauty**

Our new Millinery, bought for the Spring trade, is the finest we could buy in the market. By it our customers are brought in contact with all the

### **Latest Novelties in the Millinery Line**

both in materials and styles. Care and judgment have been used, and we can offer close buyers some very excellent bargains in both prices and quality.

## **Miss Stokes,**

Olmsted Falls, Ohio.

It's not clear how she recovered from the burglary, but somehow she did.

## **Still to Come**

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about how the West View area lost a notable manufacturer 120 years ago. It also will include pairs of then-and-now photos from one reader that show how certain Olmsted scenes have changed over the years.

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, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Florida, New York, 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.

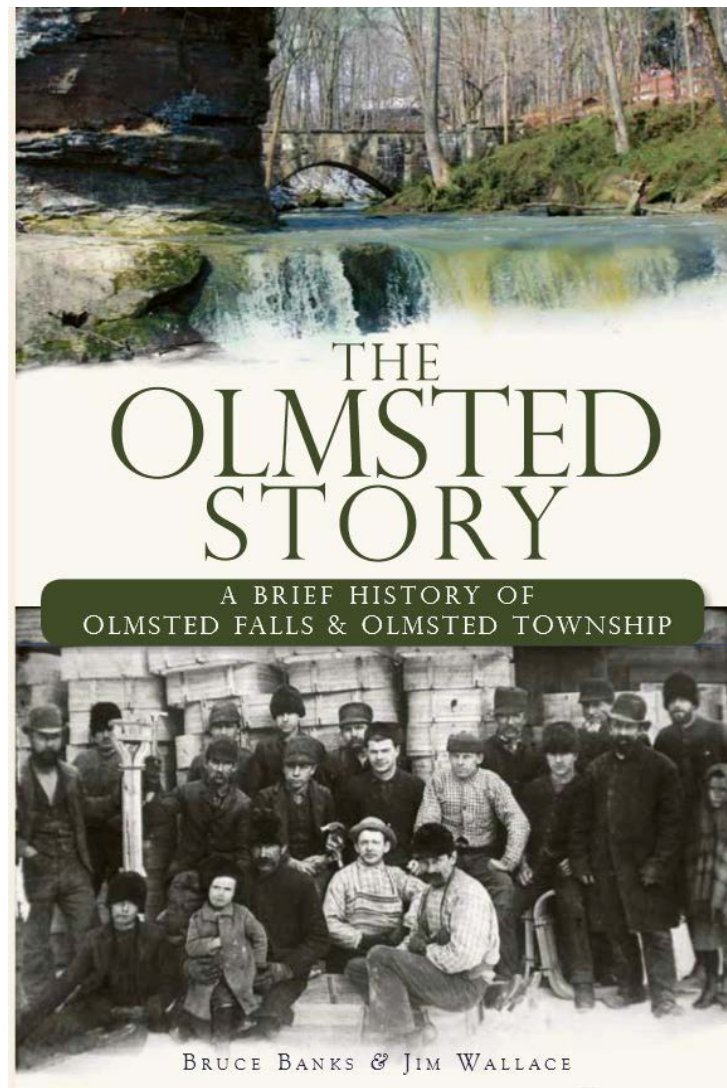
If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to



<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 Village Bean in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.



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