

COMMUNICATION TO THE NEW BERLIN PLAN COMMISSION

REGARDING LANDMARKS COMMISSION CONCERNS RELATED TO THE PROPOSED WAUKESHA WATER UTILITY PROJECT – CORNFALFA FARMS SITE

Document prepared by City of New Berlin Landmarks Commission Chair (15+ years),
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Credentials: B.S. History, Summa cum Laude graduate, UW-LaCrosse, postgraduate coursework at Rosary College, River Forest IL; former docent at Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI., lifetime member of New Berlin Historical Society, current member of Wisconsin State Historical Society, Vernon County WI Historical Society, Mercer County PA Historical Society, Grant County WI Genealogical Society

Property Address:

Cornfalfa Farms, at/near mailing addresses of 3821-3919 S. Swartz Rd., New Berlin WI 53146 (intersection of Swartz & Racine)

Historic and/or Common Name of Property:

Swartz Cornfalfa Farms

Owner of Property:

Waukesha County

Type of Property:

Historical Agricultural Landscape located within a previously designated Historic District within City of New Berlin WI

Condition:

Unaltered from original farming purpose—still zoned agricultural and still actively used for farming

Significance—Period:

1800-1899, and after 1900 to present-day usage for farming

The significance of this unique Historical Agricultural Landscape site is the fact that historically it was the largest family owned and operated farm in New Berlin WI, originally starting with 80 acres, one cow and a small log house (ultimately encompassing over 500 acres as noted below). As such it typifies the period of expansion of agriculture in the township of New Berlin and also in the County of Waukesha, as well as agricultural expansion in the state of Wisconsin after the original land grants were issued in 1839. Its agricultural prominence played a part in Waukesha County being known for having a predominantly rural, agrarian nature. It also brought renown to New Berlin in state and national history as well with its unique agricultural products.

Statement of Historical Significance:

The William Swartz Farm was established on May 15, 1844 on this location. It ultimately covered 527 acres from Coffee Road to Beeheim and from the Western boundary of the current City of New Berlin to Swartz Road and beyond. The farm passed to Peter M. Swartz and under his ownership the agricultural operation was expanded, adopting innovative practices that set the stage for the farm's rise to prominence in local, county and state history after 1900. In 1882 he planted the first alfalfa plants in Wisconsin, making it uniquely significant in Wisconsin's agricultural history.

In 1906 Peter C., Lewis M., and Jason S., sons of Peter M. Swartz, became managers of the farms. They grew corn, alfalfa, and small purebred grains. By 1913 the Swartz Bros. were the most exclusive alfalfa growers in Wisconsin and were considered authorities on the culture of alfalfa plants. In 1925 they set out their first apple trees. By 1938 they were harvesting 10,000 bushels of apples on 100 acres. Swartz apples were shipped across the United States and of particular note is their role in providing vitally needed food supplies across the country during the years of the Great Depression and the early years of World War II.

In 1926 they acquired their first breeding stock of Karakul sheep (Asiatic sheep). They won international awards for the finest Persian lamb wool. The Swartz Bros. were known internationally as producers of "The Three A's: Alfalfa, Apples and Asiatic Sheep." They named their farm "Cornfalfa Farms" and held a United States copyright of the title dated August 27, 1912. Due to Peter Swartz's donation of many farm artifacts and records to the New Berlin Historical Society which is located in close proximity to the Cornfalfa Farms Historical Agricultural site, the extensive history of Cornfalfa Farms and its significance in New Berlin, Waukesha County, and the State of Wisconsin is well documented.

Additionally, Cornfalfa Farms served as the site of many activities of the Historic Coffee Street neighborhood. Five acres of the property were set aside for picnics for the surrounding neighbors. The nearby cream city brick church parsonage and cemetery were German Evangelical Reform (Lutheran) and the little one room school of the neighborhood was the Little Grove School, adjacent to Cornfalfa Farms, just across Racine Ave. On the last day of school entertainment was set up for all in the neighborhood to enjoy. One of the entertainers asked to sing was Lester Polfuss, later known as Les Paul. The historic influence of those early socials at Cornfalfa Farms continues to the present day with Apple Fest and Historic Days being held nearby annually at the New Berlin Historical Society, where as mentioned, many of the Swartz family diaries, artifacts and documents pertaining to Cornfalfa Farms are housed and displayed for visitors to see.

The famous Cornfalfa Swartz Brothers farm of over 500 acres had at one time, six large barns and as many smaller outbuildings and sheds. Each of the six barns had a specific purpose; they housed the many horses, cattle, sheep and pigs that were needed for the farm operations. The buildings were also used for storage of wagons, tractors, and farm machinery as well as for storing the large harvest of corn, alfalfa, hay, wheat, oats and apples, which the Swartz's were so well known for. Cornfalfa Farms was also internationally known for raising the unique variety of Asiatic Karakul sheep, used in the making of expensive black fur coats, hats and lapels. The Waukesha Daily Freeman described Peter Swartz "as a very enterprising and progressive farmer, exhibiting at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, and at the St. Louis Exhibition in 1904, (where) he received diplomas and medals for the best wheat exhibited by the grower."* Peter Swartz's sons continued the successful farming operation begun by their father, and won a gold medal for their alfalfa exhibit at the San Francisco Exposition in 1915, now displayed at the New Berlin Historical Society.* Between World Wars I and II, as mentioned earlier, Swartz's Cornfalfa Farms was a national producer of apples due to their perfection of the apple varieties that they had been growing for three generations.

To sum up, the site of Cornfalfa Farms represents a significant era in New Berlin's, Waukesha County's and the State of Wisconsin's past, when farming was the predominant occupation of most residents. Nationally, the significance of Cornfalfa Farms exists due to the Asiatic Karakul sheep, growing the first alfalfa in the State of Wisconsin, and also due to the apples that contributed to the nation's food supply, particularly during the period between the two World Wars. As previously mentioned, the orchards planted in the 1920's were by 1938 yielding 10,000 bushels on approximately 100 acres.

This unique Historical Agricultural Landscape has been virtually unchanged since it was originally established as a farm by William Swartz in 1844, over 175 years ago. It is one of the only remaining unchanged historical agricultural landscapes of its kind in the entire county of Waukesha. In this era of constantly vanishing farmland for subdivision after subdivision throughout southeast Wisconsin, the precious resource of this unique historical agricultural landscape must be preserved. The proposed Waukesha Water Utility plans for a pumping station and twin reservoir tanks to be located on this landscape, at the southeastern edge of Minooka Park, will irrevocably change the rural, agrarian aspect of this land forever. The tranquility and presence of the historical agricultural landscape provides an ability for all passersby to reflect on a vital era in New Berlin's, Waukesha County's and the State of Wisconsin's history. In itself, that ability to reminisce is a critical and valuable means to link our past to our future. The immense and complete disruption to this Historical Agricultural Landscape by the implementation of the proposed project is an unconscionable plan that will irretrievably violate that ability to envision, reminisce and cherish the past. The Landmarks Commission of the City of New Berlin firmly believes that the Cornfalfa Farms site should not be considered for the Waukesha Water Utility project due to its very unique historical and agricultural significance. The influence of this pristine area representing New Berlin's, Waukesha County's, and the State of Wisconsin's past must remain for future generations to treasure.

In conclusion, the New Berlin Landmark Commission has become aware of the application from the City of Waukesha Water Utility for a pump station and two reservoirs to be built and installed on the Historic Cornfalfa Farms site. If these two gigantic and immense 9 million gallon reservoirs are constructed on this site it will dramatically and permanently devastate this Historic District, of which Cornfalfa Farms is an integral part. Additionally, the unknown frequency of entrance and egress of vehicles monitoring, servicing and maintaining the day-to-day operations of the pump station will egregiously violate and permanently alter this serene historical agricultural site, unique in Waukesha County since 1844 to the present day for its untouched rural nature. Cornfalfa Farms' recognition in 2004 by Waukesha County Historical Society with a marker onsite is a verified acknowledgment of the important and unique role Cornfalfa Farms played in Waukesha County, New Berlin and State of Wisconsin history. The proposed development of this special site undermines the intent of the May 20, 2004 recognition that Cornfalfa Farms will be maintained as a rural historical agricultural landscape for future generations of Waukesha County and New Berlin residents to enjoy.

*Source: p.83, New Berlin, Wisconsin: From Country to City: A 20th Century History by Audrey Juds and David Totten, c. The New Berlin Historical Society

Document prepared for discussion and action at New Berlin Landmarks Commission meeting
Thursday, October 17, 2019