



ISAAC FRENCH HOUSE

291 THORNTON ROAD NORTH

CITY OF OSHAWA

PREPARED FOR HERITAGE OSHAWA
BY

SU MURDOCH HISTORICAL CONSULTING

47 RODNEY STREET, BARRIE, 705-728-5342
SUMURDOC@SYMPATICO.CA

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ISAAC FRENCH HOUSE

291 THORNTON ROAD NORTH

CITY OF OSHAWA

PART LOT 15, PLAN 370, SHEET 1, 16C2

NORTH HALF OF SOUTH HALF OF LOT 16, CONCESSION 2, EAST WHITBY TOWNSHIP

EARLY LOT HISTORY

Lot 16, Concession 2, East Whitby township was patented from the Crown on January 3, 1828, by King's College. In that year, many of the Clergy Reserves were transferred by the Crown to King's College, allowing the College the right to sell or lease each lot to raise funds. In 1845, King's College transferred the south fifty acres of the lot to Robert Spears. This is presumed to be the larger parcel of what became the subject property.

On November 1, 1856,¹ it was Major and Elizabeth Harper, "heir-at-law," that sold 39 acres of the south half of Lot 16 to Isaac French. The lineage of ownership between King's College, Robert Spears, and the Harpers is not clearly understood.

ISAAC FRENCH

Isaac French was a farmer. Born in the United States and of the Free Church faith, he was aged 46 in 1861. In that year, his wife was American born Margaret, aged 36 (born February 12, 1824). Their children were Mary, 17; [Carpus], 16; Daniel, 15; and Eliza, 4. All the children were born in Upper Canada. [Carpus] and Daniel were labourers. According to the 1861 census, the French family lived in a frame, one and a half storey, single family dwelling. Isaac was associated with 19.5 acres only of Lot 16, Concession 2 (but owned 39). Also on Lot 16 were George Gould with 23 acres and another family with 50 acres.² Another French family was nearby: [Milton], 37, a carpenter; his wife Mary; and children Victoria, 4, and Luca, 8.

¹ This date is taken from the Conveyances Abstract for Lot 16. The transaction was registered on November 8, 1856. The Samuel Pedlar Papers, Frame 254, give the date as November 18, 1846.

² The name is not decipherable on the census.

By 1871, Isaac and his family had become Wesleyan Methodist. The census enumerator noted that he was of English origin, although born in the United States. He and Margaret had children: Dan, 22; Elisa Jane, 13; William H., 7; Franklin E., 5 (born February 6, 1866); and Charles M., 3. Isaac was a farmer and gardener. They had 39 acres of Lot 16 with a house and two barns or stables. Twelve acres were in pasture, six in garden or orchard. In livestock, there had a small assortment of horses, cattle, sheep, and swine. Isaac also had seven hives of bees producing an annual average of a hundred pounds of honey. A photograph dating about 1895 is a good depiction of the extent of his apiary. (See Appendix) The farm also produced about two hundred pounds of butter, thirty pounds of wool, and forty two yards of homemade cloth or flannel. Isaac also had an unusual "crop" of eight muskrats.

The only change in the French household when the 1881 census was enumerated was the addition of another child, Eveline, who was age eleven by then. Isaac referred to himself as a fruit grower.

The 1891 census indicates that the French house was brick, one and a half storeys with nine rooms. Only Frank, a farmer, and Charles, a high school teacher, were living with their parents, Isaac and Margaret.

The 1901 census records Margaret as a widow, living in the household of her son, Franklin and his wife, Edna (born in Ontario, April 25, 1872). They had a daughter, Olive B., born October 5, 1895. The enumerator indicated that they occupied a wood house, with four rooms, but owned 39 acres.

ALBERT FISHER

The French family owned the 39 acres of Lot 16 until January 3, 1928, when Franklin and Edna sold to Alfred E. Fisher for \$8000. Fisher was a builder in Oshawa. In March 1941, he had Plan 370 registered for his holdings of the north half of the south half of Lot 16. The plan reflects a series of severances for building lots with frontage on Thornton Road. The subject property at 291 Thornton Road North became Lot 15, Plan 370.

In 1941, Alfred Fisher was identified as a builder in East Whitby. In July, he sold 150 feet on the west limit by 135 feet to Ilo Smith for \$4000. She was a Toronto widow. In October 1944, Smith sold what is likely the south portion of her parcel. The buyer, for a dollar, was Toronto bachelor Mike Zap.

On May 17, 1949, Zap sold his parcel back to Alfred Fisher. The next day, Fisher sold the north 194 feet of the west 155 feet to Zap. This may have been a means of creating a larger building lot for Zap. This is the subject parcel now known as 291 Thornton Road North. Zap may be the owner who ran what is recalled by the current owner as a "gambling house." The interior is believed to have been divided into smaller rooms at that date.

In September 1959, Zap sold to Leo Arthur and Cecelia E. Ratelle for \$18,000. The agreement reserved the right to the use of the well to the north of the property. Zap had earlier negotiated this right with Ilo Smith. The Rattles sold on July 18, 1963, **M.F.I.P.P.A. Sec. 14 (1)**



ARCHITECTURE

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

Isaac French bought the subject property in November 1856. According to the 1861 census, the French family lived in a frame, one and a half storey, single family dwelling. Although Isaac bought 39 acres in 1856, he was associated only with 19.5 acres of the parcel in 1861. None of the houses listed on the census in the immediate vicinity were described as brick. In 1891, they were in the existing one and a half storey brick house. This is confirmed by the c.1895 photograph.

Architecturally, the dwelling appears to date to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The possibility exists that it was a frame house (standing by 1861) that was later bricked. In 1901, Isaac's widow, Margaret, was living with her son Frank and his wife and young daughter. Their house was described as wood with four rooms, but they owned 39 acres. Although conjecture, they may have been living in the rear (wood) section, with access to the second storey of the brick

dwelling through the unusual roof level link. The brick dwelling may have been leased to a second family.

STYLE AND FORM

The Isaac French house is a storey and a half, centre gable, Gothic Revival dwelling. Many architectural plan books and publications in the mid nineteenth century promoted houses in this form and style as "affordable country cottages." They maintain the balance and symmetry of the earlier Georgian style, but incorporate the centre gable and simplified version of what would become the exuberant decoration of late nineteenth century Gothic houses. The most common variation was a three bay (centre doorcase and two window openings) with a rear kitchen extension. Examples are seen in frame with wood or roughcast cladding, but the most common is a red tone brick with buff-yellow (corner) quoins and window heads. Some are solid brick construction; others are brick veneer on frame. The centre and end gables are usually decorated with cutout bargeboard.

In the 1895 photograph, the one storey, rear (east) extension is frame with clapboard siding. On the south side, at ground level, there is a bay window, doorway, and other additions on the east. The bay window in the photograph, with its 2x2 panes, is a later renovation.

The unusual feature is the second storey link from the brick dwelling to the roof level of the extension. The link is a small gable roofed structure with several window openings. This configuration suggests that the rear section may have been a second dwelling.

The rear extension still exists but has been renovated and reclad. The second storey link now has a shed, rather than a gable roof.

FOUNDATION AND MASONRY

The foundation is random fieldstone. The brick is a brown-red laid in common bond with the header courses placed about three stretcher courses farther apart than the standard five or six. Buff-yellow brick is used to accent the corners with quoins, and the window openings with voussairs or heads. The quoins do not extend to the east facade.

ROOF AND CHIMNEYS

The dwelling has a steep pitched gable roof with a centre Gothic Revival gable. The centre and end gables are trimmed with moulded fascia and cutout bargeboard. The same bargeboard appears in the *c.*1895 photograph. Gutters and downspouts have been added. The roof cladding is asphalt.

The brick chimney stacks at the north and south ends have been removed. The existing chimney is recent.

DOORCASE AND PORTICO

The centre doorcase faces west to Thornton Road North. What were sidelights with a transom, have been covered to reduce the size of the opening. The existing portico or porch at the centre entrance is a mid twentieth century design.

WINDOW OPENINGS

The window openings are flat with buff-yellow brick voussoirs (heads) and wood lugsills. The voussoirs of the second storey are narrower than on the ground floor. There is a gap between the window frames and the voussoirs that again suggests the brick postdates the original date of construction. The sashes in the 1895 photograph are double hung with 6x6 panes. The existing sashes are 6x6 (possibly replacements) with 2x2 wood and 1x1 metal storms. The shutters are recent additions.

CONDITION

The only significant change to the French dwelling is to the doorcase and portico. The rear extension has been extensively altered, but retains its form and the unusual roof level link. The house appears to be in stable condition.

SIGNIFICANCE

Farmer, gardener, fruit grower, and beekeeper Isaac French bought 39 acres of Lot 16, Concession 2, East Whitby township, in 1856. His descendants lived there until 1928. Possibly built by 1861 and later bricked, the house at 291 Thornton Road North represents a traditional

form of the mid nineteenth century Gothic Revival style as it appeared in Ontario. The unusual linking of the dwelling to its rear extension, may indicate the use of the extension as a separate dwelling unit. This residential relic brings a sense of history to a streetscape that has evolved over the centuries from a rural to urban setting. It still features a large lot with mature landscaping, possibly including some of the fruit trees cultivated by Isaac French.

SUMMARY

Farmer, gardener, fruit grower, and beekeeper Isaac French bought 39 acres of Lot 16, Concession 2, East Whitby township, in 1856. His descendants lived there until 1928. Possibly built by 1861 and later bricked, the house at 291 Thornton Road North represents a traditional form of the mid nineteenth century Gothic Revival style as it appeared in Ontario. The unusual linking of the dwelling to its rear extension, may indicate the use of the extension as a separate dwelling unit. This residential relic brings a sense of history to a streetscape that has evolved over the centuries from a rural to urban setting. It still features a large lot with mature landscaping, possibly including some of the fruit trees cultivated by Isaac French.

SOURCES

Conveyances Abstract and related documents. *Durham Land Registrar's Office*

East Whitby census, 1851 to 1901. *Barrie Public Library*

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Thomas Bouckley Collection. *The Robert McLaughlin Gallery*

M.F.I.P.P.A. Sec. 14 (1)

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APPENDIX

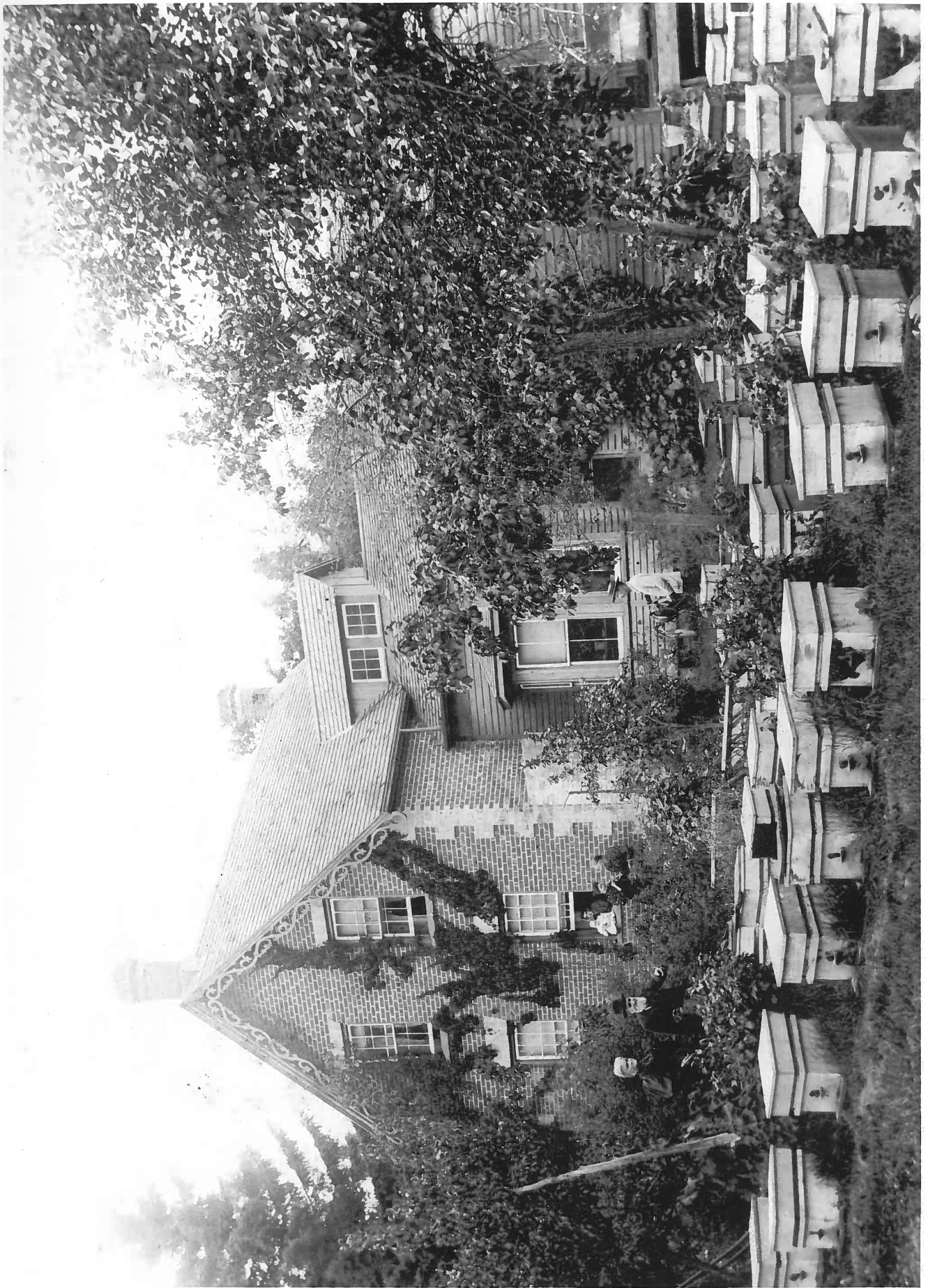
Section of 1877 J.H. Beers & Co. map of East Whitby township

Isaac French homestead, 1895. "Mr. French is pointing out the hives to his wife." No. 416.
Thomas Bouckley Collection. *The Robert McLaughlin Gallery*

Sources

Photographs May 2002

- 1 West facade
- 2 Gable detail, west facade
- 3 Gable detail, west facade
- 4 Roof detail, west facade
- 5 Window, south side, west facade
- 6 Quoin detail, north side, west facade
- 7 West and south facades
- 8 South facade
- 9 Window detail, gable, south facade
- 10 North facade
- 11 North facade
- 12 Northwest corner, north facade
- 13 North facade

















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