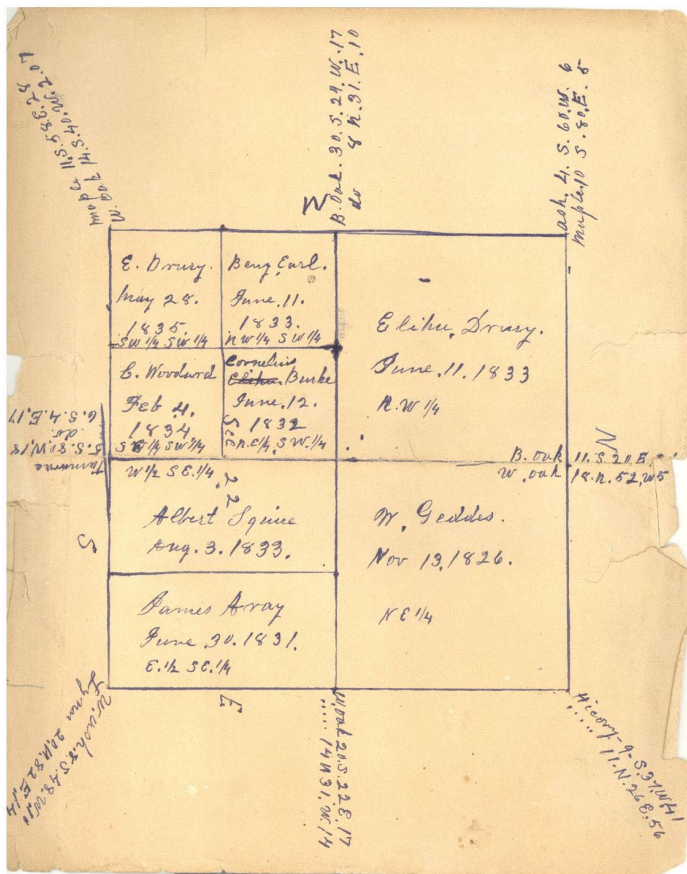


## The Geddes Farm, 1827-2003

by Hannah Geddes Wright

### Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Original Purchase of the Land
- A Difficult Decision...
- At Last the Move to Michigan...
- Forcibly Expelled!
- William the Farmer...
- Uncle Rob, The Hermit
- A Second House is Built / The Meteor
- A Facelift for the Geddes House
- Charles Takes Over the Farm
- The Geddes Farm in 2003
- Postscript: The Underground Railroad



Left: Map of the original landowners of section 22, by William Geddes. Note that NORTH is to the right side of the page.

**Captions:** In order of appearance:  
 1) William Geddes, 1802-1877. 2) The Geddes house, built by William Geddes in 1844-45, restored and remodeled by grandson, John, in 1914. 3) William Geddes Jr. Born 12 June 1846 in Pittsfield Township, Michigan. Died: 29 April 1921. 4) Newspaper Clipping at time of William Geddes Jr. death, 29 April 1921. 5) John Breakey Geddes; born: 22 November 1880; died: 12 December 1958. 6) John B. and C. Ethel Geddes: John is wearing his favorite horse-hair coat (c. 1908). 7) Lineup of a horse, a 1920 Chevy, a Hudson and a Mitchell in front of the Geddes homestead (c. 1930). 8) Haying on the Geddes farm; work horses Sandy and Babe are pulling a hay wagon; Charles is on the ground; John B. is on the wagon (c. 1940).

## Introduction

The Geddes Farm is located at 5174 Platt Rd., Pittsfield Township, Michigan. Located 600 feet from the road, the old farmhouse, built in 1844-45, still houses Geddes family members. The original barn and another which was added later burned to the ground in 1966. Steel barns replaced them and now are used for storage. Originally occupying the NE quarter of Section 22 (160 acres), today about 60 acres on the western half of the farm belong to the Pittsfield Preserve, including the former site of the Town Hall School (1852-1958).

## Original Purchase of the Land

William Geddes traveled to Michigan Territory in the fall of 1826, leaving his home in Pennsylvania "the day after the election," and scouted out land then for sale in Michigan. He staked his claim at the Register of the Land Office at Detroit for "the north east quarter of Section Twenty Two, in township three South, of Range Six East, in the District of Lands offered for sale at Detroit, Michigan Territory, containing One hundred and Sixty Acres." He also purchased "the west half of the north west quarter of Section twenty three, in township three South, of range Six East, in the District of Lands offered for sale at Detroit, Michigan Territory containing Eighty Acres." The original land grant certificates, dated February 1, 1827, and signed by J.Q. Adams, are still in possession of the family. William did not return to live on the land until November of 1844.

## A Difficult Decision...

"I think I will leave my native land the spring of A.D. 1842. But to what part of the west I may go is hard to say. I do not like Michigan: it is too cold a land for me. But still I may come and I will try to pay it a visit next fall..."

Thus wrote William Geddes from Londonderry, Pennsylvania, to his older brother, John Geddes, in Ann Arbor, Michigan on December 19, 1840. John and their oldest brother, Robert, had come to Michigan in 1825 and had established a sawmill on the Huron River, and subsequently the little village of Geddesburg.



William had debated many times over the years about whether to move to the land he had purchased in 1827 in what is now known as Pittsfield Township. He had come to Michigan Territory initially in the fall of 1826 at his brother's urging and had seized the opportunity offered by the United States Congress to purchase land for two dollars an acre. An official government document, dated the first day of February, 1827 and signed by President John Quincy Adams, states that William Geddes made full payment "for the N.E. quarter of Section 22 in township 3 South of Range 6, East in the District of Lands offered for sale at Detroit, Michigan Territory, containing one hundred sixty acres." He also purchased the northwest quarter of Section 23. William had then returned home to Pennsylvania to care for his aging father, Robert Geddis. When his father died in 1832, William remained in Pennsylvania still to tend to the sale of his father's farm, and then to clear up legal matters left to him by his father. In the ensuing years, he made several trips to Michigan, often walking much of the distance on foot. By 1840 he was finally free of the multiple lawsuits that had entangled his father's affairs, and he was feeling the urge to move to new parts.

William had married in 1836, at age 34, a young woman named Jane McBay and now had his own family to care for and work was scarce in Lebanon County, Penn. Sometimes William worked as a schoolmaster, other times he worked in gristmills. Some years he made enough to live off by writing. But he felt he really needed to move west to find a life that would consistently support his family.

In some of his letters to John he talked of selling his property in Michigan and perhaps moving to Illinois where two other brothers, James and Agrippa had settled, or even Iowa. A couple of times, John wrote to William about offers he had received on William's land, one an elderly Englishman who

owned property in the Ypsilanti area and had sons whom he would set to clearing the land. William considered selling the land, but never acted on any of the offers.

As it was, 1842 came and went, and still William and his family continued on in Pennsylvania. He had taken the job of Justice of the Peace by now, and that was sustaining him for the time being.

### **At Last the Move to Michigan...**

Finally, in 1843 the decision was made. In October, 1843 he wrote to John: "I have come to the conclusion to leave this country...I want you to rent a house for us in Ypsilanti or Ann Arbor if one can be had at a fair price in a dry and open place. Or in the country if you can get one you think would suit us better. I want to have the whole house to ourselves if possible. It ought to be a comfortable one so as to give us a fair chance at the first in your climate. I would prefer Ypsilanti as being more convenient to my land." However, in February, 1844, he wrote that he was having some problems: "The wife dreads the moving very much on account of the youngest child [born September 29th, 1843] not having milk enough she has to feed it on cow's milk and that will be troublesome on the way."

There were still obstacles to be overcome. In May, 1844, his mother-in-law, Sarah McBay, who would be coming with them, was ill with consumption and could not travel at the time. He also wrote of the women's reluctance to leave Pennsylvania, but he had moved them into a small cabin which they did not like, so he was confident that they would eventually be willing to go. In September, 1844, William wrote again to John of his frustration in getting his women to move: "My women are all in a bad humor and when I brought home your letter and read it, the wife and her mamma came out for staying where we were, that there was no other country like this. But we can't and won't stay where we are and of course, move we must, and the difference between a long and short move is not so much the mischief as to get started. I would have been with you before this but there is no moving them handly (sic) and I never could say when I would or could come, so I said nothing...I have to call in Franklin County to see William Clark and family and there will be another great effort made to stop our Journey further west."

Finally, October 12th, 1844 they were on their way. William wrote from Greinivillage, Franklin County, Pennsylvania: "Yesterday we arrived here and may likely stay here at William Clark's till Wednesday or Thursday next when we will take our passage for Geddes Mills, Washtenaw, Michigan, if all are well...My women don't like this traveling in railroads, but on the canal it will be smoother and pleasanter, no shaking and jolting."

In a "Bill of Expenses in Moving November 1, 1844" William lists his expenses in making the trip from Lebanon County, Pennsylvania to Michigan. It begins: "From Harrisburg to Chambersburg and back to Harrisburg." It appears that he hired a "P. Rodearmel for taking women (his wife and his mother-in-law, Sarah McBay) and children to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania"; from there they proceeded to Pittsburg, arriving on the 26th, then on to Beaver, Pennsylvania, then Warren, Ohio; from Warren they journeyed to Cleveland, arriving there on the 30th of October. At Cleveland a boat was procured, ferrying across Lake Erie to Detroit, Michigan, at a cost of \$12.00. They arrived in Detroit on Nov. 1, 1844 at 8 O'clock in the morning.

The family proceeded from there to Geddes Mills, the railroad station in Geddesburg. They apparently rented a house in Ypsilanti for a year until a house could be constructed for them on the land that William had purchased in 1827.

William received a letter dated Nov.16, 1844 from Peter Rodearmel, the man who had helped in transporting the family to Harrisburg. In it Rodearmel expressed relief at having heard from William because of a rumor: "I was glad to hear that you got out safe. The talk whas [sic] that you and the family whas [sic] lost on the Lake. But I find that whas [sic] not so."

## Forcibly Expelled!

According to John Geddes' diary, on November 28, 1845, "William Geddes moved into his own house."

On November 29th, John wrote: "William Geddes was forcible thrown out of his own house by Henry Stuck and three others and his goods."

The house that William had constructed for his family on Section 22 in Pittsfield Township was built by a man named Henry Stuck for about \$700.

Apparently Henry Stuck did a lot of work for William preparing the land for habitation. In March, Stuck was paid for sawing poplar and white ash logs. He was also paid for "Ohio "and "Black plaster." A receipt dated May 15, 1845, states that William paid him \$100 for "making rails and fence, Grubbing, cleaning and ploughing land for him in Pittsfield Township." Another, dated July 11th was for the same.



So William had contracted with Henry D. Stuck to build a house. According to Stuck's account, he was, by virtue of the contract, "entitled to the possession of the Said house and premises until the Same was finished and delivered over to said Geddes."

A dispute arose between William and Stuck about the finishing of the house. According to William's papers, the contract between them was that the house would be finished by September 8th, 1845. As of January 1846, writes William, the house was still not finished according to the contract. Late in November of 1845, William ran out of patience. He decided to take possession of the house. This action was followed by an apparently aggressive act on Stuck's part.

The result was that there was a lawsuit and a countersuit in the courts. Stuck's defense stated that while he was still working on the house, and while his tools were still in the building, and before Geddes had paid for the house and the finishing of it, that Geddes

"broke into the house and broke the lock put on by said Stuck, that he said Geddes was requested to leave the same which he refused to do and if any force was used, it was only so much as was necessary to remove him, that the said Henry D. Stuck might finish said house as he agreed to do, that the said George Stuck and Hilber Demerest were aiding and assisting the said Henry D. as his servants and workmen and by his command. If they committed or done any acts whatsoever they done so as the workmen of the said Henry D. and not otherwise. That if they removed any goods, they did so in a cautious manner and without doing any injury and only so far as the Said Henry D. Stuck had a right to do for the purpose of finishing Said house he being entitled to the possession thereof."

In an undated letter to an unknown person (possibly his cousin, William Geddes, the Printer) William tells quite a different story:

"I have been forcibly expelled by an armed mob from my domicile in a snow storm and nearly killed, wife and little children, the child unborn, turned out, the aged and feeble mother-in-law who clung to her bed Post dragged away notwithstanding she plead ill health, but there was no redress."

In another account, William figures his damages:

"\$61.53-Damages against him and five others for forcing open with Clubs my door on the 29th Nov. and assaulting and choking me nearly to death and assaulting my family and dragging us all out of the house, as well as throwing out all my Goods."

In November of 1848, this case was decided in favor of Henry Stuck, and William Geddes was ordered to pay "one hundred thirty three dollars and sixty eight cents damages, besides costs."

William continues his lament:

"I prosecuted for 3 years and they were found guilty of a forcible entry, they were not even fined or reprimanded because they were ignorant men. I had had bad counsel."

In a letter dated April 15th 1850, a man named M. Burlem wrote to William the following:

"I seen a close neighbor of youres [sic] I think he was the Man that built youre [sic] house. I asked him if he knew you. Yes he said he did. He sware [you are] the meanest man in Pittsfield. He said you built a great House away off the Roede [sic] for feer [sic] you Would hav [sic] to guiv [sic] a Males vitules. Him and me had qute[sic] a Sharp Cut but he would not Stand his ground. I did not Learn his name. he is a Midling tall faire [sic] Heired [sic] fellow lives about two Miles From you."

### **William the Farmer...**

After William's move to Michigan, we can only track him through his diaries. Unfortunately the detailed thoughts expressed so freely in letters to his brother John from 1826-1844, are not included in his diaries. Mostly we read only of how many cords of wood he sold that day, the daily temperature, and who came to visit.

In 1852, William continued his support of education and the public school system by leasing a corner of his farm to the township for a school. The lease was for 99 years at a cost of 6 cents per year. A school was erected that winter, made of brick. That building functioned as a school for District No.3 for a period of over 40 years, while across the road stood the Pittsfield Township Hall, built in 1856. Presumably the school's name came from that association. [See the [history](#) of Town Hall School.]

Then in 1895, it was decided that a new school building was needed. Thus the construction of a new school building was undertaken, this time a wooden structure, built next to the old one. The brick school was subsequently torn down. Town Hall School continued on the same farm property as an operating school, educating four generations of Geddes children, as well as those of the local community, until the spring of 1957 when its doors were finally closed.

(For another 30 years the old schoolhouse stood abandoned, except for being used as a warehouse for a beekeeper. At one point some vagrants entered the building and built a fire on the floor to keep warm. Fortunately the fire did not damage the building, but a black scar remains on the hardwood floor.)

Then in the spring of 1987, in a last ditch effort to save the building, the roof of which was now badly in need of repair, the Geddes family donated the school to Eastern Michigan University. The school was subsequently moved to the campus of the university and restored to its 1895 vintage.)

William prospered as a farmer on his land mainly selling wood for an income, and raised a family of six children with his wife, Jane (although one daughter, Sarah, had died in infancy): Robert (1837-1904), Sarah (1839-1840), Mary (1841-1928), Caroline (1843- 1862), William (1846-1921), and Isabel (1848-1917). Jane died in 1861 and William, who never remarried, lived to the age of 75 years, dying at home in the house that he had built, May 21, 1877.

William's diary tells the sad ending of his life:

*Tuesday, April 3, 1877* -- I am sorely afflicted with a cough and a pain in my side.

*Monday, April 30, 1877* -- Sick and very weak. Expect the Doctor.

*Saturday, May 5, 1877* -- Doctor here. (This was William's final journal entry. He died May 21, 1877.)

## **Uncle Rob, The Hermit**

Following the death of William in 1877, the Geddes house was occupied by his oldest son, Robert Geddes, known by the family as "Uncle Rob, the Hermit." William, the younger son, had married in 1874. Where he and his wife, Jenny Standbridge lived until 1878 is unknown (they may have lived with Uncle Rob). In 1878, he and Jenny built the farmhouse at 2730 Morgan Rd.

Robert lived in the original house on Platt Road until his death in 1904. He never married and was known to be a hermit. As the story goes in the family, Robert used the fireplace in the kitchen as a latrine, and this has led to an unfavorable picture of him. Letters have been found in recent years, however, between him and a cousin that reveal a charm and quick sense of humor, however eccentric he may have been. Maybe Uncle Rob has gotten a bum rap.

Following is a newspaper article entitled "Hermit's Cell," date and origin unknown, which states the following:

*Ann Arbor, Mich., Sept. 17* -- One of the most interesting places in this county is the hermitage of Robert Geddes in Pittsfield township. Mr. Geddes is a bachelor of about 60 years who lives in a rickety frame house built in the '30s. He has a long white beard, reaching nearly to his waist. Not a sign of a carpet, rug or cushion was to be seen in the rooms, but corn cobs, farm utensils and rubbish were strewn about the place.

But stored away in one corner of the kitchen was an old chest and from this the hermit drew out evidences of culture that would gladden the most refined. He said: "I have an old Shakespeare that you might like to see," and brought forth a copy of the first Shakespeare printed in America. The edition consisted of eight volumes, bound in calf, all finely preserved and very rare. The old man told of its peculiarities and quoted Shakespeare like a college professor.

Then he brought out a copy of the Spectator, dated 1791; six volumes by Lawrence Stern, dated 1779; a captain's commission given to his great-great grandfather by the continental congress in 1776, and, most interesting of all, a grant of land made to another of his ancestors by Thomas Penn and Richard Penn, proprietors of the Pennsylvania colony. The document was written on parchment and was ornamented by a huge waxen seal, bearing the Penn coat of arms. It was signed by James Hamilton in 1761. Several other interesting old documents were brought out, one of them bearing the signature of John Quincy Adams.

The land grant that was referred to in the article is described by Uncle Rob in a letter to his cousin, Charlotte Randall (granddaughter of John Geddes, the Ann Arbor pioneer). He said it was a deed for land that William Sawyer bought from and was signed by the Penn brothers, dated 25th September, 1761 and "is a curiosity -- it is written on parchment and has attached to it by a green silk Ribbon the Seal of the Province of Pennsylvania. The Seal is about as large as an ordinary watch, and, has stamped on it what I suppose are the Penn Coat of Arms. Besides Heraldic emblem on one side, are the words, Justice and Mercy and on the other side Truth, Peace, Love, and Plenty." This land grant is, sadly, no longer in the possession of the family.

William and Jenny had two sons, John B. (1880-1958) and William R. (1884-?). In a letter to Cousin Charlotte Geddes, dated March 10th 1899, Uncle Rob talks about his nephews, John and Willie:

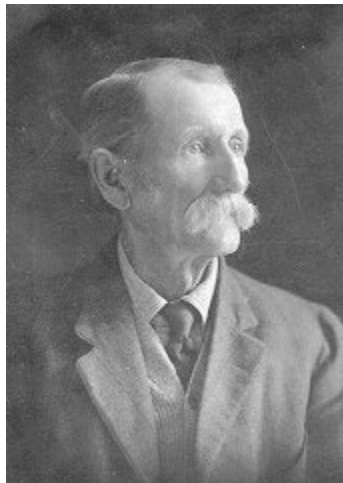
"Brother Will's boys are big boys now, especially John, who stands 6 feet and 1 inch in his shoes, and is able to do a man's work on the Farm now. He was 18 years of age, 22nd of November 1898. Willie is not so tall but he is only 15 (Jan. 8th, '99) and has several years to grow yet. I went down with the Boys on the 18th of last June to Geddesburg Fishing. They wanted me to go with them as they had never been there, so they put one of the horses on their Buggy and we went over there and put the horse in the old Barn while we looked after the Fish. We did not catch a great many fish, but we saw



the old place, which I had not seen for 9 years. I introduced the two boys to Mrs. Monaghan who look[ed] as young as ever (and twice as natural). She was very pleasant and Mr. Monaghan the same. We brought our dinner with us and ate it at noon in the old Barn, feeding the Horse then as well. Monaghan was engaged when I saw him in the pleasant occupation of picking Potatoe Bugs and Mrs. Monaghan was combing her Hair, no harm in that of course.

"As for myself I live alone in the old House. Mary [his sister] left me for Ypsi 2nd April '91. After she left I Boarded with Will, but lived in the old house `til the 18th of August 1895, since then I have not only lived alone but have also boarded myself.

In 1904, Uncle Rob died and the house was left vacant for a number of years, except that it was used as a granary. It also became known as a haunted house -- the story was you could hear chains being dragged around in the attic.



### **A Second House Is Built / The Meteor**

William Geddes Jr. (Will) was responsible for building the second house on the family farm in 1878. It is located at 2730 Morgan Road.

It was from this new house, around 1878, that Will saw a meteor fall in the west woods of the farm as he stood on the back porch one evening. (See Hannah Geddes Wright's historical fiction, [Falling Star](#), which recounts this event.)

William and his wife Jenny lived at that residence from 1878 until their deaths. Their two sons, John and William were both born in this same house.

### **A Facelift for the Geddes House**

In 1914, John B. Geddes, grandson of the pioneer, William, gutted the old farm house on Platt Road and remodeled it. He opened up and raised the roof, put in larger windows, including two diamond shaped windows; tore out walls, rebuilding new rooms upstairs and down, built a fieldstone fireplace and archways between rooms and put on porches. He then moved his growing family in to it. He had been living at the Morgan Rd. residence with his parents, Will and Jenny Geddes, since his marriage to Carrie "Ethel" Sweet. John had been born in that Morgan Rd. house in 1880, and since his marriage in 1908, two children had been born to them, Winifred in 1910 and Carl in 1911. Two more children (Calvin, 1916, and Charles, 1921) would be born to John and Ethel in the remodeled farmhouse.





John (Jack) and Ethel raised their family on the farm, making money selling eggs and butter, as well as producing a few gallons of milk for sale.

When World War II came, Carl (1911-1985) marched off to war, Calvin (1916-1981) was attending medical school, Winifred was married and Charles came home to help work the farm.



Newly married in 1942 to Pauline (Polly) Witherby, Charles had been employed as a tool and dye maker in Detroit, but his parents needed help as his aging father was losing his eyesight.

Charles eventually took over the farm and built it into a prosperous dairy farm. He and Polly raised their six children on the farm. In 1956, John and Ethel moved back into the Morgan Road house, and in 1958 John died there.

### **Charles Takes Over the Farm**

During the 60s, 70s and 80s Charles and his family operated the farm with help from his sons and daughters. The operation survived three major fires, the first, in 1966, burning down the old barns and surrounding buildings; the second, in 1978 destroyed a workshop area, and a third in 1981, involving a large number of round bales of hay -- the winter supply of feed for the cattle. All three fires were major setbacks for the family business, but still it survived by hard work and faith in God. The dairy cows and equipment were all finally sold at auction in February, 1989 when Charles decided to retire as a farmer and the sons and daughters had all gone on to other occupations.



### **The Geddes Farm in 2003**



The year 2003 finds the Geddes farm still being used as farmland, although it is rented to a neighboring farmer. The original house is still occupied by Geddes family members and 86 of the original 160 acres are still in possession of the Geddes family. It was officially designated a Centennial Farm by the Division of Michigan History of the Secretary of State's Office in 1979. The western half of the farm is now a part of the Pittsfield Preserve.

### **Postscript: The Underground Railroad**

John Geddes, the brother of William is said to have been involved with the Underground Railroad in Ann Arbor. His house is believed (though apparently not proven) to have a secret room under some loose floorboards in the parlour. William was a neighbor to Asher Aray, who was very active in the Underground Railroad; but as far as we know, William was not.

**Source Note:** Portions of this text have been excerpted from the book *The Geddes Family History to the 21st Century: Washtenaw County Branch* by Hannah Geddes Wright.