

52 Hills historic district sites are cataloged

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

History buffs, take note.
The Farmington Hills Historic District Commission has published a paperback book detailing the history and purpose of cataloging the city's 52 historic district sites.

The book includes a copy of a speech, "Historic Preservation: Its Importance in Planning," that Jean Fox, historic district chairwoman, delivered to the Michigan Society of Planning Officials Oct. 3 at Boyne Mountain.
"In a rapidly developing community, it's very difficult to keep some-

blances of the past," Fox said Monday in presenting a copy of the book to each Farmington Hills City Council member.
Copies of the book will be presented to board and commission members and department heads within the city. It will be available for public reading at the Farmington Community Library.

"It's really designed to be used in-house by the city to alert employees where historic district properties are," said Paul Blitman, historic district commissioner. "When they consider public improvements — sewers, roads — they'll be able to take a look at the impact on nearby historic structures."

and those who come after them to be able to see and grow up among the visual evidences of our early settlers, their hard work and noble aims," reads a passage from the book.

SETTLED BY pioneers from New England and New York who came to Michigan in great numbers following the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Farmington Hills today still has 27 homes from the first 30 years of that settlement, according to the book.

Unlike Franklin, Marshall or Monroe, where older homes are built nearby and the districts are compact, Farmington Hills' historic district is non-contiguous.

"The area was a community of farmers, and later a choice spot for estate houses; hence, our older homes were once the core of 60- or 100-acre farms or estates, and today are scattered throughout the community," according to the book.

It adds: "In this sesquicentennial year of the state of Michigan, Farmington Hills can well be proud of its actions to preserve and secure for future generations these sites and buildings, which bring the valued echoes of the past into this burgeoning, modern city of the 20th century."

In the speech she delivered last October, Fox urged turning attention

to older properties along what once were Farmington Township's section lines — today's mile roads.

"One of the provisions of our code is that historic district property on the mile roads may — without a change in zoning — remain residential yet still be approved for certain limited office use under strictly controlled conditions."

"This has enabled us to retain a number of large homes, encourage new business owners to restore them to a historical time period important in Farmington Hills, and delight many newcomers to the community."

ALSO IN the speech, Fox pointed to the array of estate houses built in Farmington Township during the 1920s and 1930s.

"The surrounding farms now are top-quality subdivisions, but what do you do about these lovely large homes?" she asked. "How many cultural centers for the arts or community centers or senior citizen facilities can the community fund?"

"Clearly, part of the answer to a successful historical preservation is overlooking such uses."
In addition to Fox and Blitman, other Farmington Hills Historic District Commission members are Joan Barber, Ruth Mochlin, Robert Pratt, Walter Reddig and Randall Winston.

Airborne Floating weapons recounted

David Litogot teaches elementary school history in the Farmington Public Schools. He is a member of the Farmington Historical Society.

By David Litogot
special writer

Last month's Footprints in History dealt with the Japanese attempt to launch bomb-laden, hydrogen-filled balloons during World War II. These FU-GO weapons were to float across the Pacific Ocean and descend on the North American continent and cause panic, havoc, fires and death.

Two such balloons did land — harmlessly — in Michigan in 1945. One was in Allegan County. The other landed right here in Farmington Hills (then Farmington Township). Michigan was the farthest east of any of the FU-GO weapons discovered during the war.

Ever since the Japanese began launching these balloons in November 1944, the U.S. government kept lid on their existence, any sightings and the damage done.

In June 1945, there was finally a national release of basic information on these balloons. (The Japanese cut the launchings in April 1945.) This prompted a flurry of activity — balloons were sighted everywhere. Planets, meteors, weather balloons — even the moon was mistaken for those dreadful balloons during the summer of '45. (Was that a movie?)

One report was authentic. An incendiary canister landed in the field of Karl Westphal of 20907 Gill Road, on Sunday, March 25, 1945. A neighbor, Mrs. William Hoff, heard a "gumbot" and when she looked out her window, saw a fire in a nearby field. Her husband, a state trooper, thought it burned like a magnesium fire, but discounted it as just a bonfire.

THE INCIDENT was forgotten until John Cook of 20211 Gill Road read about the FU-GO weapons in the newspaper. He then closely examined a tin can he found earlier that

year in his garden. Cook gave it to Sgt. Holt. A military intelligence investigator visited the area and found no other evidence. But the can was identified as being from a Japanese incendiary bomb — the kind used on FU-GO balloons. This "landing" was the farthest east of any FU-GO discovery.

This landing prompted more publicity than the previous Allegan County sighting. The Detroit News ran an article on June 6 titled "State Warned Against Jap Balloon Fleet." The Free Press followed on the next day with "Jap Bomb Balloon Lands in Michigan." A civil defense bulletin was written.

On Aug. 18, the Free Press published "Detroit Area Hit by Jap Bomb in May." But by the time Michiganans were aware of the balloons and their dangers, the enemy was no longer launching them.

Since the war, several papers have been written and articles published. If you would like to read more on the subject, the following articles are readily available in good libraries and archives: W.H. Wilber, "Those Japanese Balloons," Readers Digest, August 1950; Eric Sharp, "The Day Japan Bombed Michigan," Detroit Free Press, Feb. 17, 1979; Carmine Prioli, "The FuGo Project," American Heritage, April/May, 1982.

The "expert" in the field locally is a history bibliographer at the Michigan State University Library. His name is Michael E. Unsworth and he recently published a paper, "Floating Vengeance: The Japanese Balloon Bomb Campaign in Michigan." He presented this paper at the annual meeting of the Historical Society of Michigan at the Bolivar Inn last October.

His talk and slide presentation aroused the interest in this writer to the point of further reading and investigation. Very few people who were adults during the war remember the "threat." Now, we all own a little bit of historical trivia that makes the study of history more interesting.

"IT'S WHEEZE people can find answers in a hurry," Fox added.
City employees tend to work in their own hallway. So the book "will enable them to easily identify properties of concern and play accurately," Blitman said.

- Historic district sites include:
- 15 Greek Revival buildings
 - 13 other pre-Civil War buildings
 - 14 farmhouses built between 1850 and 1900
 - five designs by noted Michigan architect Marcus Hurworn, including the Goodenough house addition (now the Farmington Community Center) and the Spicer estate house (in what is now Heritage Park)
 - three pioneer cemeteries, dating to 1824
 - one Underground Railroad "station"
 - one early stagecoach inn
 - one early 19th century schoolhouse

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