

Robert M. Foster House  
One-half mile north of the Root  
River off County State Aid Highway 12  
Forestville State Park  
Vicinity of Preston  
Fillmore County  
Minnesota

HABS  
MINN  
23-PRES.V,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
Rocky Mountain Regional Office  
National Park Service  
P.O. Box 25287  
Denver, Colorado 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ROBERT M. FOSTER HOUSE

HABS No. MN-131

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23-PRES.V  
1-

Location: One-half mile north of the Root River  
Off County State Aid Highway 12  
Forestville State Park  
Fillmore County, Minnesota

Quad: Fountain, Minnesota

UTM: 15:563485:4833080

Present owner: State of Minnesota

Present use: Unoccupied

Significance: Built in 1866-1867, the Robert M. Foster House is a fine local example of a mid-nineteenth century brick farmhouse. It is also one of only two homes remaining from Forestville, Minnesota, an agricultural settlement which flourished briefly in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: Robert M. Foster purchased the site from the area's first settler, Levi Waterman, in 1853. Work commenced on the house in the fall of 1866 and, after a brief winter hiatus, resumed the following spring. Brickwork began in September 1867 and Foster purchased roofing material for the house the following month. Exterior work on the house probably ended in late October 1867.<sup>1</sup>
2. Builders and suppliers: Principal work on the Robert M. Foster House appears to have been done by Foster with the assistance of his brother-in-law and business partner Felix Meighen and Meighen's son Joseph. In addition, a payment recorded in Felix Meighen's account book for "boarding Brown when at work on house" indicates that at least one hired hand also contributed to the project.<sup>2</sup>

Most, if not all, of the building materials for the Robert M. Foster House came from local suppliers. Foster purchased the roofing material from the C.L.

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<sup>1</sup>Meighen (Thomas J. & Family) Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, boxes 3, 24, 26. Hereafter, the Meighen Papers are cited as MP.

<sup>2</sup>Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, History of Fillmore County, Minnesota (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr. and Company, 1912), 332; MP, box 24.

Colman Lumber Company of nearby Rushford, Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> The bricks came from John Gill's brickyard, which was located just north of the Robert M. Foster House. Gill, an emigrant from Ohio, operated the yard from his arrival in Forestville in 1856 until the 1870s. Other Fillmore County buildings from this period that used Gill's bricks included the Foster and Meighen Store, the Forestville School, and the Fillmore County Courthouse in Preston.<sup>4</sup>

The lumber for the house came from William Renslow and Forest Henry's saw mill on the south side of the Root River in Forestville. The mill had been in operation since 1854 and contributed lumber to a number of buildings in Forestville. Felix Meighen wrote in one of his account books that he received payment for "work at halling [sic] sawlogs to make lumber for Robs house," indicating that he and his son also assisted with this phase of the construction.<sup>5</sup>

The origin of the limestone in the foundation, lintels, and window sills is less certain. Meighen family records note that "Joseph halled [sic] stone out of the River" in July 1867. This may mean that the Meighens quarried the limestone themselves from the banks of the Root River. Fillmore County is known to have sizable limestone deposits.<sup>6</sup>

3. Architect: Unknown
4. Original and subsequent owners: Robert M. Foster (1867 - 1878); Felix Meighen (1878 - 1896); Thomas Meighen (1896 - 1936); Joseph F. Meighen (1936 - 1958); Margaret Meighen Dempsey (1958 - 1966); State of Minnesota (1966 - present).<sup>7</sup>
5. Original plans and construction: No architectural plans for the Robert M. Foster House have survived.
6. Alterations and additions: The Robert M. Foster House had a porch -- possibly built in 1867, definitely present c1890 -- which has since been removed. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources performed some minor repairs to the foundation and windows in late 1975 and early 1976. Otherwise, the building's appearance does not indicate any significant

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<sup>3</sup>MP, box 3.

<sup>4</sup>Brian Pease, "History of the Village of Forestville," an unpublished manuscript prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society, 1988, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup>Pease, 18-19; MP, box 26.

<sup>6</sup>Pease, 16-18; MP, box 3.

<sup>7</sup>Roy W. Meyer, "Forestville; the Making of the State Park," Minnesota History 44 (Fall 1974): 89-92; Curtiss-Wedge, 908-09, 960-61, 1010-13.

alterations to its original construction.<sup>8</sup>

B. Historical Context:

Robert M. Foster arrived in Fillmore County, Minnesota, in 1853 and quickly rose to prominence as a partner in the area's leading general store (for a biography of Foster and a history of Forestville, see below). He commenced work on the Robert M. Foster House in the fall of 1866 with the assistance of his brother-in-law and business partner Felix Meighen and Meighen's son Joseph (also see below). In addition, a payment recorded in one of Felix Meighen's account books for "boarding Brown when at work on house" indicates that at least one hired hand also contributed to the project.<sup>9</sup>

According to his records, Felix Meighen received a payment of \$150.00 in September 1866 for "work at Roberts house halling [sic] stone, lumber, lime, sand, &c." Later that month, Meighen noted an additional charge for "extra work on house cutting stone & raising stone higher delaying work." In all likelihood, these entries refer to laying the house's limestone foundation. The next references that appear to be to the Robert M. Foster House in the Meighen Papers are from the summer and fall of 1867. Although these entries do not name the house, they do record shipment of 10,000 bricks and several wagon-loads of limestone, both materials used on the house. These references also coincide with Foster's purchase of roofing material on 11 October 1867.<sup>10</sup>

Most, if not all, of the material for the Robert M. Foster House came from local suppliers. Foster purchased the roofing material from the C.L. Colman Lumber Company in nearby Rushford, Minnesota, while he bought the bricks from John Gill and the lumber from William Renslow and Forest Henry, all of Forestville. The limestone used for the foundation, lintels, and window sills was probably quarried by the Meighen family from a deposit along the Root River. Meighen family records note that Joseph P. Meighen "halled [sic] stone out of the River" in July 1867. Fillmore County is known to have sizable limestone deposits.<sup>11</sup>

The Meighen family account book also mentions a stable built in September 1866. As Robert M. Foster was a farmer, this may have been built in conjunction with his house. Although no signs of a stable are now visible, the ruined limestone foundations of two barns and a granary are visible to the south of the site. Their age cannot be determined.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Photograph, Minnesota Historical Society Audio-Visual Library; "Project Proposal," Forestville Historic Site File, 11 June 1975, Forestville State Park Offices.

<sup>9</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 332; MP, box 24.

<sup>10</sup>MP, boxes 3, 24, 26.

<sup>11</sup>Pease, 16-18; MP, box 3.

<sup>12</sup>MP, box 24; Pease, 16-18; the foundations were identified by Wyman Yaste, Interview, 10 April 1991.

One year after completing the house, Robert M. Foster left his business partnership with Felix Meighen, perhaps to devote more time to farming. Census records from 1870 reveal that he operated one of the largest farms in the township, encompassing 420 acres of land, with an estimated cash value of \$12,000. Typical of its time and location, Foster's farm produced oats, corn, and wheat, as well as a smaller amount of potatoes. If operations on the neighboring Felix Meighen farm to the south are an indication, Foster probably sold much of his wheat to one of the flour mills in Forestville, although some of the crop may have also been stored in the granary to the south of the house for use on the farm. Besides growing cereals, Foster also owned nine hogs, eight cattle, three dairy cows, and two oxen in 1870, which he presumably kept in the barns south of the house. Foster produced 300 pounds of butter from his dairy cows in 1870.<sup>13</sup>

Robert M. Foster sold his house and farm to Felix Meighen and moved to another farm four miles west of Forestville in 1876. Meighen's son Joseph and daughter-in-law Mary then moved into the Robert M. Foster House, and they probably helped to integrate it into the Meighen family's farming operation neighboring to the south. Although no agricultural records concerning the Robert M. Foster House and farm from this period have survived, research has shown that the Meighen family diversified their farm at this time, most notably by increasing the number of hogs and poultry, and by adding an apple orchard. The operation of the Robert M. Foster House and farm may have followed the same trend.<sup>14</sup>

Joseph P. and Mary Meighen left the Robert M. Foster House in 1888. Several entries in the Meighen family records for the years immediately after note payments to the Meighens for "rent of house." Although none of the entries specifically mentions the Robert M. Foster House, a knowledgeable local history source confirms that the Meighen family rented the house to farm laborers during this period.<sup>15</sup> This practice continued under Thomas Meighen, who became owner of the property following the death of his father Felix in 1896. The only confirmed names for tenants of the Robert M. Foster House, however, belong to George Yaste and his family, who rented the house between 1917 and 1935 while Yaste worked on the Meighen farm.<sup>16</sup>

After Thomas Meighen died in 1936, ownership of the Robert M. Foster House went to his son Joseph F. Meighen. Farming activity fell off in Forestville over the next decade and the house was abandoned by 1950. Although Margaret Meighen Dempsey,

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<sup>13</sup>"Manuscript of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Nonpopulation Census Schedules," Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul. For information on the Meighen farming operation, see Robert M. Frame and Robert M. Hybben, "Historic Structures Report: Four Buildings at the Forestville, Minnesota, Townsite," an unpublished manuscript prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society, 1991.

<sup>14</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 960-961, 1010-1011; Frame and Hybben, "Historic Structures Report: Four Buildings at the Forestville, Minnesota, Townsite."

<sup>15</sup>MP-13705, box 7; Wyman Yaste, Interview, 10 April 1991.

<sup>16</sup>Wyman Yaste, Interview, 10 April 1991.

Joseph F. Meighen's sister, acquired ownership of the house in 1958 and the State of Minnesota purchased it from her in the mid-1960s, the house remained empty and gradually fell into ruin.<sup>17</sup> The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources performed some minor repair to the windows and foundation in late 1975 and early 1976, but by the end of the 1980s, the house had become uninhabitable.<sup>18</sup> The Minnesota Historical Society commissioned a study of the Robert M. Foster House in late 1990 to determine possibilities for preservation or reconstruction. The preparation of this HABS report is part of that study.

#### Life of Robert M. Foster

Robert M. Foster was born on 25 November 1821 in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. He lived in Ohio through his twenties and early thirties before joining his brother-in-law, Felix Meighen, at Meighen's home in Galena, Illinois, in 1852 or early 1853. Intrigued by potential business opportunities, the two men traveled to the newly opened sections of southeastern Minnesota in 1853 and purchased land in southwest Fillmore County. Meighen returned to Illinois, while Foster remained behind and operated a general store for the area's increasing number of settlers. Although he left his partnership at the store with Meighen in 1868, Foster continued to live in Forestville until 1876. Besides working at the store, Foster also farmed, and served as a justice of the peace, county commissioner, and county coroner at different times during his life. He eventually resettled in Austin, Minnesota, where he died in 1915.<sup>19</sup>

#### Life of Joseph P. Meighen

Born on 18 February 1852 in Jo Daviess County, Illinois, Joseph P. Meighen was the son of Felix Meighen and the nephew of Robert M. Foster. He moved to Forestville, Minnesota, with his family in 1855 and grew up working on his father's farm. In 1876, he married Mary Elizabeth Smith of nearby Spring Valley, Minnesota, and moved into the Robert M. Foster House. He and Mary lived in the house, raising two sons, until 1888, when they moved to Beaver Township in extreme southwest Fillmore County.<sup>20</sup>

#### Brief History of Forestville, Minnesota

Located along the south branch of the Root River in southwest Fillmore County, Forestville traces its history back to Levi Waterman, an emigrant from Iowa, who

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<sup>17</sup>Meyer, 90-91; Wyman Yaste, Interview, 10 April 1991.

<sup>18</sup>Forestville Historic Site File, "Project Proposal," 11 June 1975, Forestville State Park Offices.

<sup>19</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 332 - 333, 960; "Manuscript of the Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Nonpopulation Census Schedules," Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul.

<sup>20</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 908 - 909.

established a claim to the area in 1852. Waterman sold his rights to the land to Robert Foster and Felix Meighen in 1853. Although Meighen returned to Illinois to complete his term as deputy sheriff of Jo Daviess County, Foster remained and opened a general store near the present townsite. Meighen rejoined him in 1855.<sup>21</sup> One early history of Fillmore County indicated that Forestville had over 100 settlers and approximately 20 houses by 1858. At the time, the town also had three saw mills, a grist mill, a schoolhouse, two hotels, two stores, and a number of tradesmen.<sup>22</sup> Historian Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge has remarked that "Forestville became not only the center of a large territory in [Fillmore] county, but also the stopping place for pioneers bound for points west and north."<sup>23</sup>

Forestville's population declined following the Civil War, when the Southern Minnesota Railroad bypassed the town in favor of a route to the north, and many residents moved to the rail centers or west to other farmland.<sup>24</sup> As this happened, the Meighen family acquired most of the Forestville site and eventually, as one historian has noted, "Forestville functioned as Thomas Meighen's company agricultural village." The town's population remained at about 55 through the 1880s and 1890s. Although most of Forestville's buildings were abandoned by the mid-1930s, farming operations continued until 1958.<sup>25</sup> The State of Minnesota purchased the land in the mid-1960s and opened Forestville State Park to the public in 1968.<sup>26</sup>

## II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Built just after the end of the Civil War, the Foster House is a significant rural example of early Minnesota architecture embodying simplified elements of Greek Revival formalism, found in the front facade symmetry and the side hall plan, with Italianate elements such as window proportions and the front porch (removed). The front facade is has three bays and the gable end faces the road.

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<sup>21</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 332 - 333.

<sup>22</sup>J.W. Bishop, History of Fillmore County, Minnesota (Chatfield, Minnesota: Haley and Brown, Printers, 1858): 27 - 28.

<sup>23</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 334.

<sup>24</sup>Pease, 7.

<sup>25</sup>Dennis J. Seglem, "A Restoration Report of the Remaining Unrestored Rooms in the Thomas Meighen Residence, Forestville, Minnesota," an unpublished manuscript prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society, 1991, 9.

<sup>26</sup>Meyer, 88, 91-92.

2. Condition of fabric: The Foster House retains good design integrity on the exterior, although the structural integrity of the brick walls is very poor. The interior has deteriorated significantly, with the collapse of all interior supports and floor systems.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 24'-1" x 30'-1".
2. Foundations: Limestone, roughly tooled, squared, and coursed, with 6" high watertable course projecting 2" from the face of the brick walls above.
3. Walls: Red-orange, locally manufactured brick, in common bond, with headers every eighth course. Sections of wall have been patched with mismatched brick and mortar.
4. Structural system, framing: Masonry bearing walls; first and second floors constructed with north-south summer beam mortised for floor joists; roof construction includes full-cut 2" x 4" rafters at 2'-0" on center, with a ridge board and attic knee-wall framing. Originally a metal tie-rod extended between the north and south walls, carried under the summer beam and secured on the exterior of the north and south walls with an iron "S" plate; with the collapse of the summer beam, the rod and "S" plates have been pulled in from the exterior walls, taking adjacent sections of brick with them.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The original hip-roofed wood porch that extended across the front facade has been removed, leaving only wood nailers in the brickwork at the roofline and ghost outlines of the posts and brackets. Foundation evidence indicates that a rear service porch once existed at the rear (west) door and rear first-story window area.
6. Chimneys: A small brick chimney is centered on the roof ridge; chimney flues are built into the east (front) and west (back) walls, but no external chimneys exist.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The front (east) sidehall entry is a wood-frame doorway with transom and sidelights and limestone sill and lintel; the door is missing and its lintel has collapsed. The rear (west) entry is a simple wood-frame doorway with transom and limestone sill and lintel; a four-panel door remains in place. On the south is a stone areaway with stone steps and jambs leading to the cellar opening; the door is missing.
  - b. Windows: Window openings of Italianate proportions are arranged symmetrically on the east, south, and north facades; on the west facade the second story windows are symmetrical, while the first story and attic windows are just south of center to accommodate the chimney flue. All window openings have limestone sills and lintels and

originally contained six-over-six double-hung sash except the attic window, which may have been a fixed sash. There are no shutters or shutter hardware. Cellar window openings exist on the north and south sides; they have brick infill, no sash, and stone window wells.

8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: A shallow gable roof with board sheathing and wood shingles, now covered with green asphalt shingles.
  - b. Cornice, eaves: The eaves project slightly. The cornice includes a 12" soffit board, with fascia and trim boards; there is a 3 1/2" bedmold between the brick wall and the cornice.
  - c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: none.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The interior of the Robert M. Foster House has collapsed. Wyman Yaste, a former resident of the house, described its floor plan in an oral interview conducted at the site on 10 April 1991. The first floor originally included a second-floor stairway immediately west of the entryway and was separated from the south wall by a hall leading to the kitchen in the southwest corner; a pantry was located in the northwest corner and the sitting room or parlor was located in the northeast corner. The second floor included a bedroom in the northeast corner, two bedrooms in the west half, and a hall in the southeast, directly over the first floor hall and entry area.
2. Stairways: All stairways have collapsed into the cellar, but appear to have had ornate, wood, turned-baluster railings.
3. Flooring: Where visible, flooring consists of wide, tongue-in-groove boards, unpainted.
4. Wall and ceiling finishes: Interior walls are finished with lath and horsehair plaster, covered with paper and replastered. The kitchen walls have remnants of wainscotting.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Where visible, interior doors were wood four-panel doors in simple door casings.
  - b. Windows: Remaining windows are six-over-six, double-hung sash, with simple 5" wood casings.
6. Decorative features and trim: Remaining interior trim elements include the ornate, turned-baluster walnut railing on the second floor staircase; wainscotting around the kitchen, and simple wood baseboard, ranging from 5" or 6" in the second floor rear bedroom to 8" along the stairway, to 12" in the

front entryway.

7. Hardware: Except for door butt hinges, no hardware survives.
8. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: evidence of the heating system survives only in the central chimney and the two end-wall chimneys, all described above. There are no air conditioning or ventilation systems.
  - b. Lighting: no evidence survives.
  - c. Plumbing: no evidence survives.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Foster House is situated on a lot located part way up a large hill. The house is oriented on an east-west axis, facing the road below on the east, with the hill rising behind the house to the west. The lot itself remains cleared, but is surrounded by the wooded hillside.
2. Historic landscape design: Other than the rutted remnants of the access road leading from the main road west toward the house and vanishing along the south side of the lot, there is no readily visible evidence of an original landscape plan.
3. Outbuildings: There are no surviving outbuildings. Foundations remain for three structures located generally to the south of the house and across the access road, in an area that now is wooded. These foundations were for two barns and a granary. The ruins of a cistern are located a few yards northwest of the Foster House.

### III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: None
- B. Early Views: A photograph of the Robert M. Foster House, taken c1890, is on file at the Audio-Visual Library of the Minnesota Historical Society.
- C. Bibliography
  1. Primary and unpublished sources  
  
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Yaste, Wyman. Interview. 10 April 1991.

2. Secondary and published sources

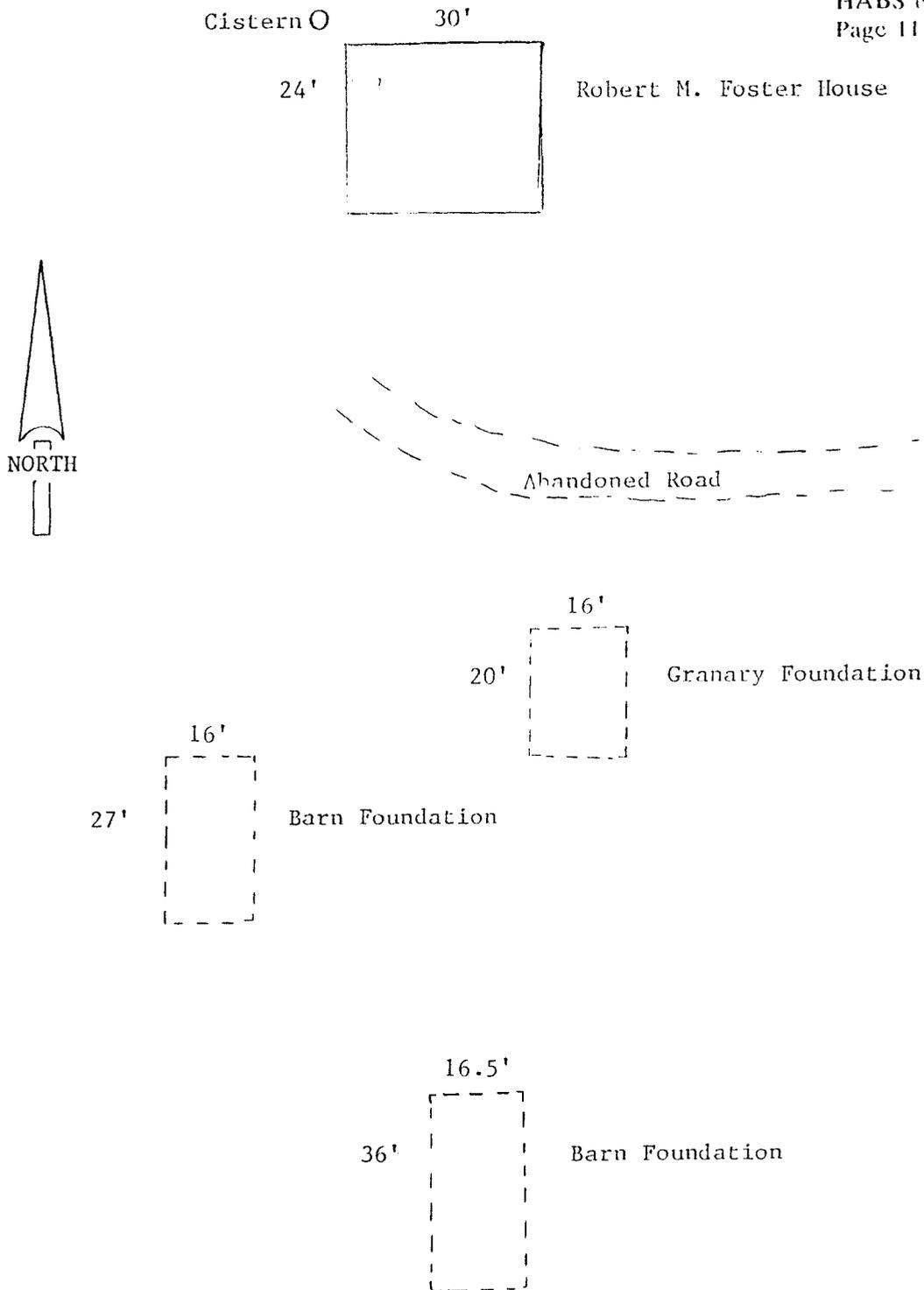
Bishop, J.W. History of Fillmore County, Minnesota. Chatfield, Minnesota: Haley and Brown, 1858.

Curtliss-Wedge, Franklyn. History of Fillmore County, Minnesota. 2 vols. Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr. & Company, 1912.

Meyer, Roy W. "Forestville; the Making of the State Park." Minnesota History 44 (Fall 1974): 83-95.

Historians:

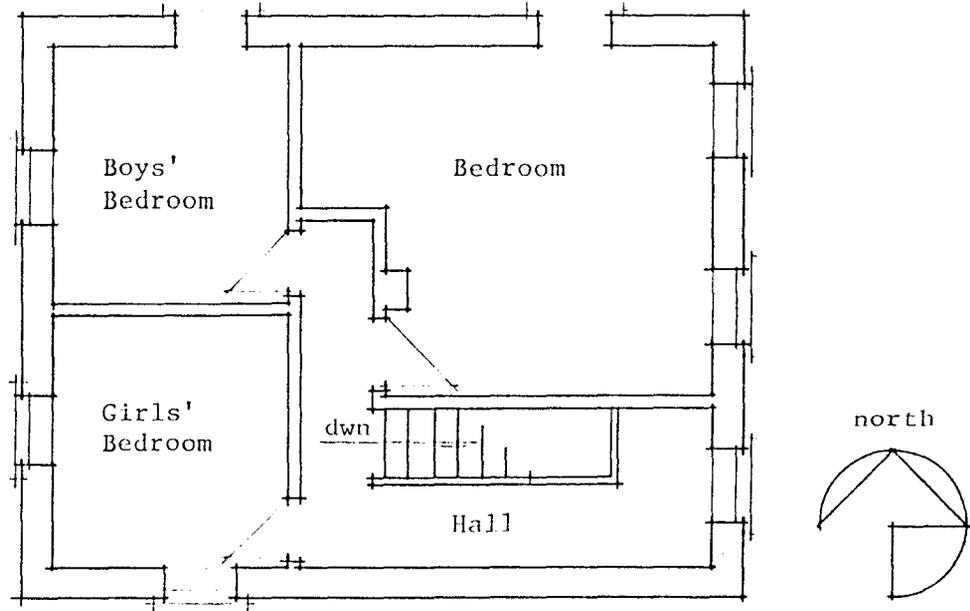
Robert M. Frame and Robert M. Hybben, March 1992



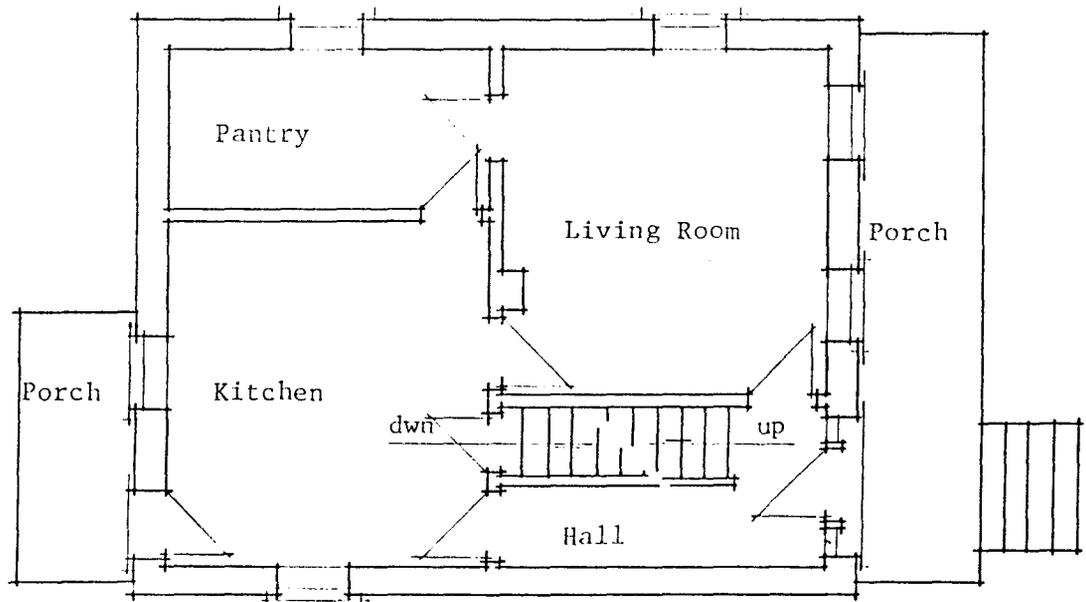
Sketch map showing relationship between Robert M. Foster House and outbuildings, Forestville, Minnesota.

Based on survey 10 April 1991. Foundations identified by Wyman Yaste.

Not to scale (1" = approximately 30').



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Note that these sketch floor plans are not to scale and that they are based on limited on-site observations and a 10 April 1991 interview with Wyman Yaste.

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Xerographic copy of photograph (ca. 1890, original filed as MF4.7F/p2 in Audio-Visual Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul). Photographer unknown. THREE-QUARTER VIEW SHOWING EAST AND SOUTH SIDES, LOOKING NORTHWEST.