Esek Pray was one of thousands of settlers who immigrated west from New York and New England when the Erie Canal was opened in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. Settlers would take the canal to Buffalo, catch a steamer to Detroit, and continue west over land by wagon.

The story of Esek Pray and his family provides a glimpse into the early settlement period of southeast Michigan. Pioneers came to Washtenaw County by following a trail that cut through Superior and Ann Arbor townships, known today as Plymouth-Ann Arbor Road.

Esek Pray married Sally Ann Hammond in 1811. Between 1814-1833, they had eight children. In 1825, while their family was still growing, the Prays traveled from New England to settle a farmstead in Superior Township. All but one of the Pray children married members of neighboring families, becoming part of an established farming community in the newly formed state of Michigan. Many of these families’ prosperous farms are highlighted on this tour.

Pray was an integral member of the local community as a public tavern keeper, farmer and justice of the peace. He was also a member of the first State Legislature and participated in the "Frostbite Convention" of 1836 in Ann Arbor, where it was decided that Michigan would become a state by trading claim to the port of Toledo to Ohio and accepting the Upper Peninsula in exchange.

The landscape along this trail is filled with historic resources associated with early settlers, including the Pray family. Houses, farms, cemeteries, three schoolhouses, a store, a church, and the nearby village of Dixboro all served as a focal point for a community tied to Plymouth-Ann Arbor Road.

The historic resources depicted herein are private property and are not open to the public. Please respect the owners’ privacy and do not trespass.

The tour is intended to be enjoyed from the public right-of-way only.
ESEK PRAY TRAIL
Driving Tour of 19th and 20th Century Settlements and Farms
Washtenaw County, Michigan

LEGEND

Site No.          Address          Miles
1  5683 Napier Road
2  10165 West Ann Arbor Road
3  9981 West Ann Arbor Road
4  9350 West Ann Arbor Road
5  9105 West Ann Arbor Road
6  8755 West Ann Arbor Road
7  8605 West Ann Arbor Road
8  8525 West Ann Arbor Road
9  7996 Plymouth Road
10 7734 Plymouth Road
11 7500 Plymouth Road
12 6820 Plymouth Road
13 6595 Plymouth Road
14 6170 Plymouth Road
15 5500 Plymouth Road
16 5206 Plymouth Road
17 5221 Plymouth Road
18 5221 Plymouth Road
19 2211 Plymouth Road
SUPERIOR TOWNSHIP AND AGRICULTURE

Superior Township has been an agricultural community since its establishment in 1831. The first generation of settlers, including Esek Pray and his contemporaries, grew only what they needed to survive by practicing subsistence farming while they cleared land, constructed log cabins, and established the political structure. During the course of the next 150 years, three farm types would emerge in the area: the 19th century general farm that became the early 20th-century dairy farm, the 20th-century industrial farm illustrated by Henry Ford's “Cherry Hill Farm” (2734 Gotfredson Road), and the modern 20th-century specialty farm (Site No. 9).

By 1835, the average log cabin complex evolved into a more substantial subsistence farm, including more elegant houses (Site Nos. 6, 12, and 13), timber frame barns (Site Nos. 5, 14), and multiple outbuildings. The barns were built in the style characteristic of those in New England: simple, rectangular boxes with a gable roof, and a main entry in the middle of the side elevation. Barns served a places for grain processing and storage, as well as animal shelter. Types of crops grown on the subsistence farm between 1850 and 1880 included wheat, rye, corn, buckwheat, barley, potatoes, hay, flax, and maple sugar. These early farmers also kept chickens, milk cows, cattle, horses, sheep, swine, bees, and silk cocoons.

The dairy farm became common during the first part of the 20th century. The switch from general subsistence farming to one of dairy and some subsistence farming had a profound impact on the landscape. Nearly every farmstead upgraded their facilities to accommodate the new technology and to meet government regulations. A typical dairying farmstead was changed to include a gambrel roof barn, silo, and milk house. (Site No. 10). With time, many farmers and their descendants elected to not operate a full-scale farm operation.

19TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

GREEK REVIVAL STYLE

After the initial settlement period, many early residents of the area were able to devote time and resources towards building in the popular style of the era. During the first half of the 19th century (c.1820 to c.1860), the Greek Revival architectural style was most popular. It is commonly recognized by its rectangular box-shape capped by a shallow-pitch gable roof. The home was decorated with architectural detailing inspired by ancient Greece. These features include a triangular pediment supported by columns and a wide frieze board wrapping around the building at the eaves. Some builders also incorporated detailing on their structures, such as dentil molding, decorative patterns, and trim around window and door openings. Greek Revival style homes generally had double-hung windows with six panes in each sash. The windows were frequently flanked by green shutters.

- Site 1: Conant House (1833)
- Site 6: Esek Pray House (1839)
- Site 13: The Nanry House (c.1864)
- Site 16: Dixboro United Methodist Church (1858)

ITALIANATE STYLE

The Italianate style became increasingly common between 1840 and the 1880s, during a time when popular taste shifted from formal residences to a more romantic view of the home. Italianate style homes featured carved brackets in the eaves, rounded or segmental arched windows, and softened woodwork details. The frieze board shrank in width and was soon eliminated altogether. Later, the gable roof was replaced by the hip roof with deeper eaves, and rectangular window openings became narrower and taller. The use of brick was also desirable, as were more complex floor plans. This style was adopted by many one-room school houses built during the second half of the 20th century.

- Site 7: Geer House (1884)
- Site 12: Galpin House (1830s)

For additional information:

A Field Guide to American Houses
by Virginia and Lee McAlester
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985)

Washtenaw County Heritage Tour No. 2: “Greek Revival Architecture Tours”
http://preservation.ewashtenaw.org
what was known as the “Geer community,” which included the school superintendent at the time. The school served room school house. The school was named for William Geer, 10165 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township SITE 2. Charles-Gardner Farm 10165 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The Charles-Gardner Farm is an excellent example of a vernacular farm site. The c. 1860 upright and wing farmhouse with recessed porch, Italianate-style porch columns, and clapboard siding, and the gable roofed New England-style barns are characteristic of the farms once common in the area. Collectively, the buildings represent a 19th century general subsistence farm which was later modified into a dairy operation.

SITE 3. Geer School 9981 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The 1880 Geer School is a typical 19th century brick one-room school house. The school was named for William Geer, the school superintendent at the time. The school served what was known as the “Geer community,” which included William Geer’s post office and general store, believed to have been located at his home (see Site No. 4). The school hosted the community’s dances, fundraisers, special events, and meetings. It was rehabilitated by the Plymouth School District, and continues to be used by the district for educational purposes.

SITE 4. Geer-Foerster Farm 9350 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The William Geer-Foerster Farm contributes to the understanding of the agricultural and social history of the area. William Geer arrived in the area in 1850 with his brother Watson, who later married a daughter of Esek Pray. The house, which has the typical massing of a mid-19th century, 1½-story side-gable house, has logs exposed in the basement. When a finer home was built on the site, this house was used as a granary, but returned to residential use after the second house burned. This house is also the possible location of the Geer post office and Geer general store during the 1890s.

SITE 5. McCormick-Williams Farm 9105 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The site is an excellent example of a late 19th and early 20th century farmstead. The farmhouse was constructed by William McCormick, one of the original settlers in the township, in 1838. His daughter married a son of Esek Pray. The site was actively farmed between 1831 and 1958, including general farming (crops, fruit, wool, and livestock), dairy farming, and cider production, as represented by the outbuildings present on the property.

SITE 6. Esek Pray House (photo on front cover) 8755 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The landmark 1839 farmhouse was built by Esek Pray, an original farming pioneer of the Township who was active in the local social and political circles. The house replaced an earlier log cabin destroyed by fire. Mr. Pray maintained a tavern in his home from the 1820s to the 1850s. After his death, the property became one of the most prosperous farms in the township under the ownership of son-in-law Watson Geer. The Classical Revival detailing on the five-bay house includes a wrap-around frieze board with cornice returns and lunette window at the gable ends and dentil molding. The house also has an elaborate, extra wide front entry, consisting of a two-panel Greek Revival door and sidelights embedded between four pilasters supporting a wide frieze. Both floors of the house have two rooms on each side of a central hall. The floor plan and exterior form of the house, sometimes referred to as the New England Large House, was commonly adopted in New England and New York during the early 19th century, but it is unusual for Washtenaw County.

SITE 7. Milton Geer House 8605 W. Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The Geer House is one of the finest examples of Italianate-style architecture in the County. Decorative moldings and iron cresting remain part of a structure that was designed with many characteristic Italianate features, such as segmented window openings, paired and chamfered square porch columns, window hoods, and paired brackets on a wide frieze. The house was built for Milton Geer and his bride, Kitty Kimmel, in 1884. Milton was the son of prosperous farmer and neighbor Watson Geer and the grandson of Esek Pray. Kitty Kimmel was the daughter of pioneer Henry Kimmel, who proposed the name “Superior” for the Township in 1831.

KEY TO LISTS & DESIGNATIONS

State Register of Historic Places
National Register of Historic Places
Washtenaw County Historic District
SITE 8. Pray Cemetery
8525 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township

The Pray Cemetery is home to many 19th-century residents who lived in the northeastern part of Superior Township. For a comprehensive listing of families, see http://www.dyanesdesktop.com/watson/cemeteries/pray_cemetery.html.

SITE 9. Murray-Fishbeck Farm
7996 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

Charles Murray and family emigrated from Orange County, NY in 1829. The farmstead as it appears today reflects primarily its 20th-century stage of evolution, most recently as a dairy and then cash crop farm. The original farmhouse was replaced by the 1911 Queen Anne-style home. In the 1930s, a one-story house was moved onto the farm. It had originally served as the club house of the Cherry Hilll Country Club. The barns have been expanded or moved over the years. Since the 1930s, the family has operated the Murray Lake Swim Club.

SITE 10. S. Geer-Staebler Farm
7734 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

The Geer-Staebler Farm is another good example of a subsistence farm that evolved into a dairy operation. Constructed during the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, the site is still used for agricultural purposes. The newer garage and machine shed reflect the increasing use of machinery on the farmstead during the first part of the 20th century. A few buildings on the north side of Plymouth Road were repositioned in 1928 when the road was paved. The site was purchased by the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission in 2001. It is not open to the public.

SITE 11. Frains Lake School
7500 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

Frains Lake School and the lake behind it have served as focal points of a hamlet and its surrounding farming community since the 19th century. The current brick school was constructed in 1872 in the Italianate style. Architectural features include a cupola on the roof top, projecting molding over window and door openings, and a transom window above the front door. The building received a rear addition in the 1990s.

FRAINS LAKE

The Hamlet of Frains Lake was named after Samuel Frains, an early township settler. Situated on the north shore of Frains Lake, it was established c.1835 and consisted of only three properties by 1856. It expanded greatly during the early 20th century, when a bedroom community of smaller homes was constructed.

ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

The one-room school house served as a focal point for the local community. During the school day, children received their formal education inside the building, and learned to play and explore outside the building. The school yard served as an important social center, where children interacted with their current and future neighbors. They played ball, tag, other games including Rover Red Rover. In the 20th-century, the school yard was embellished with swings, merry-go-rounds, and climbing equipment. Baseball became a favorite activity during the recesses and noon break. During evenings and major holidays, the school house served as the backdrop for larger community events, including spelling bees, plays, and pageants.

Many of the original school buildings were built between the mid-1820s and c.1860 and were constructed of logs. They were replaced by frame or brick and occasionally stone buildings during the second half of the 19th century (c.1860 to c.1910).

Of the schools standing in the area today, the Dixboro School comes closest to the idealized version of a one-room country school. The school building and the surrounding school yard are generally intact. Built by Tessmer of Ann Arbor in 1888, it has a rectangular footprint, and is capped by a short bell tower at the front of the gable roof. Only the wood shed and out-houses are missing. Changes made to the front elevation of the school building itself, including combining two front doors into one and installing bathrooms into former coat closets, are part of the building’s change over time. Similar in construction to the Dixboro School are the Geer, Frains Lake, and Popkins Schools. The Geer School (1880) is also a beautiful example of Italianate-style architecture that has been carefully restored. The Frains Lake School (1872) and the Popkins School (1870) are the simplest of the Italianate-style schools.

After c. 1910, school buildings were modified to accommodate 20th century needs such as indoor plumbing and better heating. The Popkins School 1934 addition is one such example. A growing trend in American education toward school consolidation later sent students to larger, newer, multi-room buildings, leaving the one-room schools in the care of the local community.
VILLAGE OF DIXBORO

Dixboro, with its several taverns, served as a major stagecoach stop in Superior Township during the early settlement period. The village maintained a store, serving early travelers as well as the local residents. The first store in Dixboro was operated by John Dix out of his house, located near the eastern boundary of the village, and included the post office. A store was situated at the southeast corner of Plymouth and Cherry Hill Roads by the 1860s or early 1870s. During the 20th century, the Dixboro Store became an intricate part of the Dixboro community. Together with the Site 17: Dixboro Church (1858) and Site 18: Dixboro School (1888), it visually defines the center of the village. The store provided goods for the residents of Dixboro and nearby farms, purchased excess eggs and other products from the farmers, and provided a setting for social activities. These included a table with chairs and a checkerboard inside the store, and a dance hall on the second floor of the store building.

Dixboro was home to several businesses and mills, serving goods and services to travelers and the surrounding farming community. The village was platted by John Dix of Massachusetts, who arrived in 1824. The plat was completed by A. B. Rowe in 1826. The plan included 64 residential lots along Plymouth Road on either side of its intersection with South Road (Cherry Hill Road). A large green was set aside in the middle of the town for the church and school. The Dixboro School was established during the late 1820s, but the church was not built until 1858.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Dixboro began to gradually grow. In addition to new residences, small farms and the church, it received a parsonage in 1869, a new store probably during the 1880s, and a new school building in 1888. An apple cider mill operated at 5135 Plymouth Road during the late 1880s and 1890s. The Farm Cupboard, later known as the Lord Fox, became an established restaurant. After World War II, the first “suburb” of residential structures was established on the north side of the hamlet. More recently, houses have been added to the east side near the intersection of Plymouth and Ford Roads.

SITE 12. Galpin-Smith Farm
6820 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

The Galpin-Smith farmhouse was constructed by Philo Galpin, one of the original pioneers of the 1830s. Over time, he accumulated large land holdings, some of which he sold to his children for the price of “natural love and affection” (as recorded in the deed). His children married into surrounding families, including the extended Pray Family. During the second half of the 19th century, two distinct farms emerged on the property. The western portion, which includes the Galpin-Smith House, was operated by grandson Philo Esek Galpin and descendants. The house is an early example of the Italianate architectural style. The eastern portion of the farmstead has since been demolished to make room for the Ford Road/M-14 intersection.

SITE 13. Douglass-Nanry House
6595 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

The Douglass-Nanry House is one of the most elegant Greek Revival-style houses in southeastern Michigan. It is built in the form of a Basilica, with a central, two-story, gable-roofed upright portion flanked on each side by parallel, one-story hip-roofed wings. Architectural features include the stylized front entry with shouldered architrave trim, four Doric columns, wide frieze with embellished molding, and prominent cornice returns. On the interior, the Douglass-Nanry House was constructed with walnut and grained trim also in the shouldered architrave style. The house includes a fireplace, and a one-story rear addition that is believed to be original. The house was probably constructed by George Douglass, Jr. sometime between 1856 and 1864, when it was sold to John W. Nanry. Note the unusual Greek Revival-style stone smokehouse and outhouse to the rear.

SITE 14. John McCormick Farm Site
6170 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

The open space to the east of the farmhouse is the site of the log home of John McCormick, a pioneer settler who arrived in Superior Township in 1825. McCormick built his house soon after arrival, and it was at this home that the first township meeting was held in 1828. The current house is the third house built on the farm. A vernacular, two-story upright and wing house, it was constructed sometime between 1864 and 1874.
SITE 15. Oak Grove Cemetery
5500 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

The cemetery is occupied by many of Dixboro’s prominent residents. It is owned and maintained by the Oak Grove Cemetery Association, which was established in 1860, although there are some grave markers that precede that date.

SITE 16. Dixboro Store
5206 Plymouth Road, Superior Township

Situated in the heart of the community, the Dixboro Store (photo at left) has served as a local focal point for many years. It was probably constructed during the 1870s, serving as the general store, post office, and buying-trading site for surplus farm products. Various shopkeepers lived above the store and in the now-connected house next door. The rear one-story barn was once a garage and blacksmith shop. During the 1930s, gasoline was sold in front. In 1924, the main building received a large addition to accommodate a two story, shed-roofed dance floor for entertainment. Dance attendees came by car from a large surrounding region. Local legend suggests that Henry Ford and his side-kick Harry Bennett frequented the dance floor.

SITE 17. Dixboro Church
5221 Church Street, Superior Township

The Dixboro Church (photo at left) was built in the Greek Revival style in 1858, by E. W. Ford of Saline for $2,241. The plans for the building were drawn by Abraham Cooper of Ypsilanti for $15. This church building met the needs of numerous small religious groups that had met sporadically since Dixboro was founded in 1824. Listed in the State Register of Historic Places in 1971, and the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, it continues to serve as a visual and functional focal point of the community.

SITE 18. Dixboro School
5221 Church Street, Superior Township

This school was built in 1888 by August Tessmer in the Italianate style, for $1,200. It replaced an earlier school building on land set aside in 1825 as a central green square for the Dixboro School and Church. Features include rectangular block form and gable roof, front-gable orientation, brick pilasters, round-arched window openings, and raised brick hoods. During the 1930s the building was altered and two front entry doors were combined to make one central door. In addition, cloak rooms were converted into bathrooms. At this time the school had two baseball diamonds, a swing set, a see-saw, a merry-go-round, and a pump in the southeast corner of the property. Since then, monkey bars and a climbing gym have been added. The school remained in operation until 1958 when it was sold by the Ann Arbor Public Schools to the Dixboro Church.

SITE 19. Popkins School
2211 Old Earhart Road, Ann Arbor Township

This site is one of four remaining one-room school houses along the Esek Pray Trail. It is an excellent example of the mid-19th century Italianate-style school building, modified to meet early 20th century needs. Constructed in 1870 for approximately $1500, it had three windows on each side elevation, and a door flanked by one window on each side on the front elevation. The 1930s alterations removed the front door to a new side wing containing an entry and restrooms, and added a bank of windows onto the east wall. The building suffered a major fire in 1983, and was extensively rehabilitated in 2001-2002.

Related Historic Resources of Interest
—Open to the Public—

- The Washtenaw County Court House (see below)
- The Washtenaw County Historical Society’s Museum on Main Street (see page 3 and below)
- Kempf House Museum (see page 3)

Washtenaw County Courthouse
100 East Huron Street, Ann Arbor

Washtenaw County has had three courthouses since its establishment in 1827. The building site was designated in 1824, and the first courthouse was constructed in 1834. It is here that Esek Pray and his contemporaries met to determine the boundaries of the future state of Michigan. The courthouse was replaced in 1877 by a large, multi-story brick structure, which was replaced by the current building in 1955.

Kellogg-Warden House
500 North Main Street, Ann Arbor

The Kellogg-Warden House is an excellent example of an early Greek Revival town house. Built in 1833-1837, the house was originally situated in Ann Arbor’s Lower Town, the residential area through which Esek Pray and others would have walked on their way to downtown Ann Arbor. The house was moved to its current site in 1990, and is now the home of the Washtenaw County Historical Society. For information call 734.662.9092, or see www.washtenawhistory.org.
Tour 1
Esek Pray House, 8755 West Ann Arbor Road, Superior Township
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48107

Tour 2
Greek Revival Architecture: North & South Tours

Tour 3
Historic Barns

Tour 4
German Heritage

For more information and printable tour brochures, visit http://preservation.ewashtenaw.org/