

S.F. 0627: George Stoppel Farmstead Rehabilitation in Olmsted County Appropriation

Authors: Senators Boldon and Nelson

Organization: History Center of Olmsted County

The History Center of Olmsted County is a non-profit organization that serves as the primary historical society for Olmsted County. In 2026, it will celebrate its 100th anniversary as the official repository of historic archives in the county. Its mission is to use these archives to educate and inform the citizens of Olmsted County, Minnesota, and beyond about the diverse impact of six core groups or entities on the county, the state, and across the country and around the world. These six groups or entities are:

- *Geologic and biologic development in the prehistoric period*
- *Evolution of Native Americans in southeast Minnesota*
- *Immigration*, primarily by settlers of European decent, into the area
- *Agriculture* and its many major influences on the county's development
- *Mayo Clinic*, starting with the move of the First Minnesota Volunteer Army recruitment depot from Mankato to Rochester in 1863, a move that brought Dr. William Worrell Mayo to Olmsted County
- *International Business Machines (IBM)*, starting in 1956 and developing in Rochester as a major employer, one of the world's most innovative super-computing centers (e.g., the development of Watson and other supercomputers), and core business computing centers

The George Stoppel Farmstead sits on the history center's 54-acre campus. This farmstead is historically and architecturally unique, with its three existing buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For example, its smokehouse appears to be the only one in the U.S. that incorporates hand-dug caves. These caves served to house the Stoppel family in its first winter in 1856 when their arrival into Minnesota was too late to provide them time to otherwise build a house. The farmstead also consists of a prototypical 1850's bank barn and a stone house, built from the stone quarried from the caves.

Why do these structures on the Stoppel Farmstead need restoration?

Shortly before the History Center move to its current location in 1973, it was gifted Mayowood, the historic mansion of Dr. Charles Mayo, by a portion of the Mayo family. Mayowood is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Home to several large Mayo families, it also was a focal point for hosting kings and queens, dukes and duchesses, presidents, and prime ministers, and others who came for care at Mayo Clinic. Since acquired by the History Center, it has been used for public tours and educational programming. It was and remains one of Olmsted County's most significant attractions to historians, tourists, and citizens of the county and southeast Minnesota.

Preservation of Mayowood required constant funding by the History Center from 1973 through 2012. Despite strong efforts to maintain the mansion, it slowly deteriorated, and by 2008, it was clear that the History Center did not have the resources to prevent its demise. At that time, a small group of Mayo Clinic leaders arranged for the transfer of Mayowood to Mayo Clinic, with the Clinic promising to restore Mayowood to its original grandeur structurally and cosmetically. The agreement provided for the History Center to organize public use of the house 50% of the days annually. Since 2012, Mayo Clinic has fulfilled its promise by investing heavily in restoring and preserving the historic mansion. The History Center currently hosts tours half of the days of each year.

The downside of the History Center's 45 years of ownership of Mayowood is that there were never sufficient funds to preserve the Stoppel Farmstead's historic building. Over time, these precious buildings risked irreparable structural failure. With the transition of Mayowood's ownership to Mayo Clinic, the History Center could begin to focus its resources on restoration of the Stoppel buildings. This effort accelerated in 2020 with support from a state Legacy grant and corporate and individual fundraising. To date, approximately \$1.1 million has been directed to completed restoration of the smokehouse and structural preservation of the barn. Still awaiting restoration is a portion of the barn (e.g., a new roof, flooring) and complete restoration is the original Stoppel Family stone house.

What are the next steps?

The History Center is implementing a comprehensive plan that has three primary phases.

- **Phase 1:** The first phase is the completion of the restoration of the Stoppel Farmstead and its historic buildings. The History Center's Board of Directors has fiduciary responsibility to preserve these structures and implement educational programs that highlight the impact of early immigration and agriculture on the development of Olmsted County. It also must provide access to these structures for all visitors, including handicap-accessible pathways. The total anticipated expense of the first phase is \$3 million.
- **Phase 2:** The second phase is modernization and expansion of the History Center's main exhibit and archive building. This phase will provide space to accommodate new educational programs, exhibits, and activities that will allow the History Center to serve as an attraction site for the more than 3.5 million visitors that come to Rochester and surrounding communities annually.
- **Phase 3:** The third phase is improvement of the use of the History Center's 54-acre campus, bringing diverse groups together for programs and activities. One example is the Village, a gardening agreement with recent immigrant groups in Olmsted County (e.g., Sudanese, Somali, Hmong), by which they plant gardens of their native county vegetables and flowers, then sell them at a farmer's market on the History Center's campus.

Each of these phases result in expanded educational programs for students in the schools of Olmsted County, as well as all children and adults of the county and state and visitors.

What has the History Center done to date to secure funding?

The History Center has obtained a \$500,000 Legacy grant to stabilize the barn's structure and other grants and gifts of approximately \$500,000 that have been used to restore the smokehouse. It also has received a matching grant of \$833,000 from the Jeffris Family Foundation to complete the Stoppel Farmstead restoration. The 2:1 matching grant requires that the History Center raise another \$1.66 million by July 2026. The History Center has started the "silent" phase of the fundraising campaign from corporations and individuals. We are now asking the legislature to support the completion of the restoration of the Stoppel Farmstead's historic buildings and the construction of an ADA-compliant pathway to the farm.

What is the History Center's specific request?

The History Center respectfully requests that \$850,000 be appropriated from the arts and cultural heritage fund to the governing board of the Minnesota Historical Society for the purpose of completing restoration of the George Stoppel barn and stone house, both of which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and an accessible pathway for the farmstead.