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Koshkonong landmark Shekey house on National Register

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KOSHKONONG — A Town of Koshkonong house that dates back to 1885 has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Wisconsin Historical Society today announced the listing of the former Albert and Mary Shekey House, located along Koshkonong Mounds Road. It was named to the State Register of Historic Places last August.

"It's the big payoff for all the work and money we've put in over the years," owner Gary Gramley said. "It's a labor of love definitely, but it does involve a commitment and it does cost money."

"I just love the whole property; it would be very tough to give this up," he said of Lakeside Farm. "You've really got to love what you're doing and appreciate everything."

The National Register designation provides access to certain benefits, including qualification for grants and for rehabilitation income tax credits, while it does not restrict private property owners in the use of their property.

Today owned by Gary and Jill Gramley, the 2,700-square-foot residence was built for Mary B. Swart and Albert H. Shekey, the daughter and son-in-law of early settlers of the Town of Koshkonong, Martin J. and Amanda Swart. It was located on the southern half of the family's 1844 farmstead in the vicinity of Native American effigy mounds on the eastern shore of Lake Koshkonong.

The two-story house exhibits characteristic features of the Queen Anne architectural style through an irregular

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MAKING HISTORY

MAKING HISTORY — Gary and Jill Gramley's home along Koshkonong Mounds Road south of Fort Atkinson, shown above, has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Queen Anne-style house built in 1885 is known as the Albert and Mary Shekey house. Mary Shekey inherited the property from her parents, Amanda and Martin Swart.



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plan and massing, a steeply pitched roof with multiple gables, projecting bays, decorative ornaments, and a use of its wall surfaces and multiple siding materials as primary decorative elements.

National Register officials noted that, after having undergone a major restoration during the 1980s, the Shekey House is unique in its level of historic integrity as most Victorian era farmhouses in the area have been adversely affected by exterior modifications.

“This house stands out in the community as one of the most intact examples of a Queen Anne style house in rural Jefferson County,” officials said.

The register is the official national list of historic properties in America deemed worthy of preservation and is maintained by the National Park Service in the U.S. Department of the Interior. The Wisconsin Historical Society administers the program within Wisconsin. It includes sites, buildings, structures, objects and districts that are significant in national, state or local history, architecture, archaeology, engineering or culture.

The Gramleys bought the home in 1971 and around 1988, Gary began an extensive renovation of its exterior, which led to an ongoing process of restoring their historic home.

The previous owners, Carol and Irene Spangler, who purchased the property in the late 1940s from a Methodist Episcopal church, had covered the original siding with asphalt shingles in an effort to make the home more energy efficient. During the Spanglers’ residency, the front entry vestibule was demolished in part and a new entry was constructed by enclosing the front porch.

Other major changes included construction of a screen porch on the west side of the house, two windows in the diningroom and bathroom were enlarged, and the ceilings on most of the first floor were lowered in another effort to lower heating costs.

The Gramleys since have renovated all exterior alterations, starting first by removing the replacement siding and refinishing the original siding, reconstructing the front entry vestibule and restoring the back porch. The screened porch was reconstructed, and exterior doors and windows throughout the house were replaced in their original openings.

The couple found old pictures of the house to use as a guide when renovating the exterior of the home. Interior alterations also have been made since Gary purchased the home, including a kitchen remodeling and the refinishing of hardwood floors and, throughout the house, refinishing hardwood floors that had been covered with vinyl flooring.

In 2008, the Gramleys constructed a four-car garage with an upper-level loft apartment that their friends have titled the “Garage Mahal.” Its design mimics many of the architectural features that makes the house so unique, including its clipped gable roof, decorative siding and trim, and ornamental brackets.

In addition to the four-bedroom house, the Gramleys own 11.8 acres of the original 103.5-acre farm, as well as an original threshing barn, which is the only remaining building left from the property’s farming days. The property once housed several outbuildings, including a milkhouse, two smaller barns, a chicken coop, and a wooden and stone silo.

The Gramleys’ remaining acreage also is home to six Native American burial mounds.

The Gramleys’ house was nominated for the state historic registry during an architectural and historic intensive survey funded through a grant awarded to Jefferson County by the Wisconsin Historical Society. For a property to be eligible for the historic register, it must meet at least one of the four main criteria: event, person, design/construction or information potential. The Shekey house was nominated for its design and construction.

The county hired Legacy Architecture of Sheboygan to initiate the survey, which inventories all properties in an area that maintain a certain level of historical integrity — meaning they have not been structurally altered — or are historically significant. The firm surveyed four quadrants encompassing the towns within Jefferson County.

The results of the survey found that the Gramley house remains the sole example of Queen Anne-style architecture within the Town of Koshkonong and one of the most intact examples of the style throughout all of rural Jefferson County.

The Legacy Architecture report stated that in rural Jefferson County, there are only about 40 other previously

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identified Queen Anne-style houses recorded in the Wisconsin Historical Society's architecture and history inventory. However, the majority of these homes have been affected adversely by exterior modifications, making the Shekey House a unique and rare example of the style in the area

The Queen Anne-style of architecture was most popular during the years of 1890 to 1910. The Shekey house is an early example of the style, and also has influences of the Second Empire style through the use of mansard roof forms at the porches and projecting bays.

Many of the house's most unique features are influenced, however, by the Queen Anne style, including its irregular site plan and shaping, steeply pitched roof with multiple gables, projecting bays, decorative ornaments, and use of wall surfaces as the primary decorative elements by using multiple siding materials.

As previously mentioned, the property on which the Gramleys' home stands once was part of farmland owned by Martin J. and Amanda Swart, who settled on the eastern shore of Lake Koshkonong in 1844.

At the time of Martin's death at the end of 1884, the Swarts' children, Mary and George, inherited the property. Mary and her husband, Albert Shekey, received the southern 103.5-acre half of the her parent's farmstead, where the Gramleys' house now stands, while her brother, George O. Swart, inherited the northern half and nonextant 1848 farmhouse along Old Highway 26.

Born in 1859, Mary married Albert H. Shekey of Janesville, an engineer with the Chicago and North Western Railroad, in 1880. It is believed that the newlyweds first resided in Janesville with Albert's three children from his first marriage, Joseph, Frances and Carrie, according to a report by Legacy Architecture, which surveyed Jefferson County's historical properties.

Presumably in 1885, the year after obtaining the property, Albert and Mary Shekey constructed the Queen Anne-style house on the southwestern edge of the property along a private road that today is Koshkonong Mounds Road.

An extant barn also was built there at the same time as the house. A historic wooden sign, later restored by the Gramleys, hung above the barn's front double-door entrance. Inscribed Lakeside Farm, it has been restored and again adorns the barn.

A nonextant concrete block garage was constructed northwest of the house sometime after 1937. It later was torn down by the Gramleys to construct their current four-car garage.

It is unknown whether the Shekeys relocated to Koshkonong from Janesville upon acquiring the property, resided there seasonally or rented Lakeside Farm to others. By 1989, Albert was listed in city directories as a resident of Janesville, where he continued working as a railroad engineer for the Chicago and North Western.

The Shekeys continued to have a Janesville residence until Albert's death in 1921, the report states. In March 1931, Mary donated the property as a memorial to her parents to the Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to be used in providing pensions for retired ministers and widows of ministers. She passed away in Janesville in 1944.

The lakefront portion of the northern half of the former Swart family farmstead was subdivided for residential lots along what is now Vinne Haha Road and platted as the Vinnie Haha Plat by Aral Swart, the adopted son of George O. Swart and Robert Kamrath in 1920. The Wisconsin Conference subdivided the north end of its property's lakeshore and sold several lots for residential development at what was then the south end of Vinnie Haha Road.

The Methodist Episcopal Church sold the property to Carol and Irene Spangler during the late 1940s.

In 1948, they platted the Spangler's Plat subdivision on both sides of an extension of Vinnie Haha Road south to Koshkonong Mounds Road and sold additional lots along the lakeshore, keeping an entirely inland 75-acre parcel surrounding the house in which they resided and raised their family.

The Spangler children constructed the fieldstone fence west of the house during the 1950s. Later, the Spanglers further subdivided the property into additional lots along Koshkonong Mounds Road.

The parcel containing the house was purchased by Gramley in 1971 when the Spanglers moved into Fort Atkinson. Gramley purchased additional land surrounding the house from the Spanglers in 1987, and eventually subdivided and sold off two 1-1/2-acre lots along Vinnie Haha Road, retaining the 11.8-acre parcel surrounding the house that remains to this day.

Gramley noted that his son, David, shares his parents' love of older homes.

He hopes someday to convert his childhood home into a bed-and-breakfast as a way to honor and preserve its

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