

For decades, Discovery Oaks – Bowers Farm was used by Bloomfield Hills Schools as a teaching tool. The Outdoor Education Committee of the Bloomfield Hills Schools Board of Education started the education curriculums in the 1960's. In 1967, John Bartley, a construction supervisor from Mt. Clemens, became the first farm manager, or “school farmer,” living on the property with his wife and children. He was paid \$3 an hour, and in exchange, he restored the barn, managed the land, and welcomed school groups.

From 1967 to 1970, Bartley lived rent-free in a small cottage, often working with students to teach them about cows, farming, and nature. He'd even joke with the children, telling them that brown cows produced brown milk. To support his family, Bartley rented out stalls in the barn for people who boarded horses.

Over the years, Bowers School Farm became an integral part of the curriculum, where students learned everything from identifying plants and animals to tending gardens.

For decades, the farm served as an outdoor classroom for generations of students, community gardeners and summer camp participants. Jill Ludington, Bartley's daughter, reflects with pride on her father's dream, saying, “He had a vision for this land, and it came true. His dream is still alive today.”

Under the operating agreement agreed to in 2026, ownership remains with Bloomfield Hills Schools while staffing authority and day-to-day management responsibility transferred to Oakland County Parks. Legal and fiscal transition of Discovery Oaks - Bowers Farm occurred on July 1, 2026. Full operational transition will happen on Oct. 1, 2026.

Why is the farm named Bowers School Farm?

Dr. Charles L. Bowers, M.D., a local resident, served on the Bloomfield Hills Board of Education from 1960 to 1979, including three terms as President. He played a key role in creating the School Farm, Nature Center and Radio Station, and chaired the Outdoor Education Committee, which helped establish the BHS agriculture curriculum. Superintendent Dr. Fred Thorin praised him as the driving force behind these initiatives. Following his death in 1984, the Board of Education renamed the School Farm in his honor in 1985.

Dr. Bowers grew up in Pontiac, spending much of his youth on his grandfather's farm near New Hudson. His grandmother was a full-blooded Chippewa Indian. A high school athlete, he attended the University of Michigan on a football scholarship before serving in World War II. As a Major, he received the Bronze Star for his service as a medical administrator with the 35th Evacuation Hospital in England, France, Belgium and Germany. After the war, he returned to the University of Michigan, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in 1947, then graduated from Wayne State University School of Medicine in 1951.

Dr. Bowers established his private medical practice in 1954, practicing as a general practitioner in the Pontiac area for 30 years. He married Charlotte Tiffany in 1942, and together they had three sons — Jim, Tom and Pete — who continue to visit and support Bowers Farm today. On the school board, Dr. Bowers created the Youth Leadership Conference and was awarded the Distinguished Service Award in 1980 for his dedicated service to the school district. In 1975, he received the Birmingham-Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce's "First Citizen Award" for his community service.

In 1986, the Bloomfield Hills Rotary Club, of which Dr. Bowers was a Charter Member, built a gazebo at the School Farm in his honor. The gazebo was dedicated to his memory as a gift to the students and residents of the Bloomfield Hills School District.

Summary of land acquisition

The Bowers School Farm was developed over more than 50 years through four acquisitions, spanning from the original Dowling and Beardslee properties in 1857, to the present 93-acre site.

First Acquisition (1967): In January 1967, Sydney G. Dowling sold 47.9 acres to Wm. Pulte, who planned to develop it into a residential subdivision. However, due to high development costs, Pulte sold nearly 47 acres to the Bloomfield Hills School District, including the barn and outbuildings. The sale price was not listed.

Second Acquisition (1975): In 1975, BHS purchased 7.04 acres from the Michigan State Highway Commission for \$80,000. This land had been used during I-75 construction and provided frontage on Square Lake Road. It was here that BHS built the Bowers Academy building.

Third Acquisition (1981-1992): BHS acquired 33.48 acres from the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) through a land contract in 1981, with the deed finalized in 1992 for \$243,900. This expanded the farm's eastern boundary.

Fourth Acquisition (2020): The final purchase involved the remainder of the MDOT property, a small triangular parcel near the highway.

The Educational Building and Facility Today

The current campus includes a classroom building, constructed in 2010 and geothermal heating, a year-round greenhouse and indoor learning spaces with a kitchen and meeting areas. The design aims to provide a calming, open space that fosters a relaxed, yet effective, learning environment.

Jim Bowers, son of Dr. Charles L. Bowers — after whom the farm is named — was one of the architects for the project. Dr. Bowers chaired the district's Outdoor Education Committee in 1969 and was on the School Board when John Bartley was hired to run the farm. The committee envisioned the farm as an outdoor classroom where students could engage with nature, catch polliwogs, ride horses, grow plants and use all five senses to explore agriculture. It was designed as a space for archery, land surveying and hiking, encouraging hands-on learning in the great outdoors.

Bowers Academy for at-risk students

The district later added a high school to the property without disturbing the farmland. Bowers Academy, an alternative high school, was established on the site of a former cow milking shed and graduated its first senior class in 1998.

Bowers Academy serves at-risk students with a focus on place-based learning, as explained by Teaching Administrator Aileen Myer. "We're deeply rooted in the community," says Myer. "Place-based learning encourages students to engage with their surroundings and learn from them, which is especially unique because we're on a farm."

In 2020, the school had 24 students, 16 of whom were seniors who graduated. "We offer non-traditional learning experiences to help students who don't fit the typical mold build a sense of community while earning credits to finish high school," Myer said.

The Academy occupies a small portion of the farm, leaving the majority of the land intact. Students attend Bowers Academy for one to three years, completing their high school education in a supportive, rural setting with small class sizes.

Fond.Memories.from.a.student;

One.of.the.many.district.graduates.who.has.fond.memories.of.the.farm.is.Adam.Krauss? who.is.now.90years.old?was.graduated.from.Bloomfield.Lahser.High.School.in.8669?and. now.lives.in.Akron?Ohio?where.he.is.a.defense.contractor;Krauss.said.the.farm.is.where.he. learned.to.milk.a.cow.and.learn.about.the.miracle.of.birth.by.seeing.newborn.piglets;His. first.visit.to.the.farm.was.in.kindergarten?and.he.said.he.loved.it;He.gladly.went.back.many. times.over.his.79.years.in.the.district.to.attend.teen.dances?cross.country.ski?and.even. earn.his.Eagle.Scout.Badge.in.8668.for.clearing.brush.away.from.the.fence.along.Square. Lake.Road.for.a.better.view.of.the.farm;

»I'm.thrilled.they.have.that.farm?Krauss.says;Unless.you're.in.OH.or.grow.up.in.farm. country?you.don't.get.that.opportunity.to.experience.farm.life.as.part.of.a.school. curriculum;

Ludington.says.she.is.delighted.the.property.is.used.as.both.a.learning.center.by.the.entire.district.for.class.trips.and.camps?but.also.as.a.high.school.for.at_risk.students?for.she.herself.earned.a.GED.(general.equivalency.degree).and.raised.an.at_risk.son;

»We.lived.here.for.three.years?.says.Ludington.of.the.farm;»It.was.an.adventure;.But.her.father's.dream.job.as.school.farmer.ended.in.December.of.7636.when.the.district.decided?Ludington.says?to.replace.him.with.a.more.educated.person;

The.pitchfork.has.been.passed.to.a.handful.of.farm.managers.over.the.years.who.had.better.credentials.but.shared.Bartley's.same.vision.for.farm_based.education;

The Barton Farmhouse

On the morning of July 15, 2008, the historic Barton Farmhouse was moved to the Bowers School Farm property. Community members followed as the house was carefully relocated about one mile from its original site on Long Lake Road, just west of Eastways, to its new home on Square Lake Road. It now sits near the location where the farmhouse originally stood before the Dowlings moved it to 2175 Squirrel Road.

The farmhouse, built around 1832 with hand-hewn beams, was at risk of demolition when a group of local residents intervened to save it. According to Dave Jensen, senior broker at Max Broock Realtors, the house once served as a retreat for the three Hendrie sisters—Jessie, Margaret, and Sarah—whose father, George Hendrie, owned the Detroit City Railway. The Hendrie family, along with their brothers George T. and William, helped found the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club, located on Long Lake at Squirrel Road.

In 1937, the Hendries sold the farmhouse to Carl O. Barton, the founder of Barton Malow Construction, and the Barton family owned the home for the next 70 years.

When Mancini Development proposed developing the land in 2008, the community banded together to prevent the historic home from being demolished. The farmhouse was moved to the Bowers School Farm property, thanks to a collaboration between Preservation Bloomfield, local government, and Bloomfield Schools.

Preservation Bloomfield led fundraising efforts to move, restore and maintain the farmhouse, preserving this valuable piece of history. Built when America was only about 50 years old, the farmhouse stands as a testament to pioneer spirit and early architecture, offering a tangible connection to the past for future generations to enjoy.

The Craig Log Cabin

In 2009, the Craig Log Cabin was relocated from the corner of Lone Pine and Franklin roads to the Bowers School Farm, following the same preservation efforts that saved the Barton

Farmhouse. The community's determination to protect the cabin led the Bloomfield Township Board of Trustees to unanimously approve funding for the move. Built around 1830, the log cabin was relocated with the understanding that Preservation Bloomfield would reimburse the township for the moving expenses.

The Township Board contracted with Brock and Associates of Novi, who charged \$49,700 to move the cabin. The cabin was placed on a new foundation along Long Lake Road, just east of the Barton Farmhouse. Now, students visiting the Bowers School Farm can experience firsthand the log cabin construction used by early settlers in the area.

Today, both the Barton Farmhouse and the Craig Log Cabin are jointly managed by Bloomfield Hills Schools, the City of Bloomfield Hills, Bloomfield Township, and the Bloomfield Historical Society.

The Windmill

A historic windmill was relocated to the Bowers School Farm in 1987, but its story dates back much further. Originally installed at Fairview Cemetery in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the windmill was later purchased by the Haberkorn family and moved to Pine Lake in West Bloomfield Township before being donated to the Bloomfield Hills School District.

This particular windmill model, as listed in the 1908 Sears, Roebuck catalog, sold for \$49.40 and weighed 1,150 pounds.

Although the windmill was donated to the farm in 1975, it wasn't assembled until 1987, when an Eagle Scout led the project. Today, while the windmill no longer pumps water from the ground, it still serves as a picturesque feature on the farm. It recirculates water from a tank, offering students a visual understanding of how a windmill once functioned.

History of the Pigsty and Cottage - Life in the Pigsty

The pigsty had been converted to a home years earlier by previous owners before the school district acquired the property. Attorney William E. Dowling and his wife, Sydney G. (Kemp) Dowling hired workers to remodel the pigsty by bricking the wooden frame exterior, adding an indoor bathroom, and installing a pull-down ladder to access the upstairs bedrooms, which were once a chicken loft.

The Dowling family also had the original farmhouse - not the pigsty - moved from its Square Lake location to 2175 Squirrel Road, where it still stands.

The pigsty-turned-cottage had been vacant for many years after the Dowlings and their children left the land and before Farmer John moved in. So Farmer John Bartley had to bring the cottage back to life for his family, in addition to reviving the farm for the school district.

Who Lived in the Pigsty?

Most of the buildings on the Bowers School Farm are painted red, but there's a charming white brick building west of the large barn known as "Bowers Cottage." During the August Corn Roast event at the Benjamin-Barton Farmhouse, Eleanor Engelhart asked if I knew anything about the Kemp family, who lived in the white cottage during the 1950s. She recalled that a friend of her son, Fred Kemp, had lived there. I told her I had never seen the Kemp name connected with the property. I remembered that the William E. Dowling family owned it from 1948 until 1967, when it was briefly owned by William J. Pulte, who then sold it to the Bloomfield Hills School District.

Eleanor's question led to some interesting discoveries. John Bartley became the first School Farm Manager in 1967, right after the school district acquired the property from Pulte. He and his family moved into the cottage, which had been a pigsty, and after extensive cleaning, they lived there for three years.

An article in the 27 June 1954 issue of the Detroit Free Press was titled "They Live in a Pigsty" and had appeared in the "for and about WOMEN" section of the paper. The following is a summary of the article:

From about 1907 through 1914 William E. Dowling (b. 1854) his wife Sydney G. (Kemp) Dowling (b. 1859) and Sydney's two sons from her first marriage Fred (b. 1872) and Ward (b. 1874) lived on a 0.6-acre farm Windy Hill on Drahner Road south east of Oxford Michigan. In 1914 seeking a place from which it would be easier for William to commute to and from his law practice in Detroit the Dowlings bought the 29-acre farm that had belonged to George T. Hendry between 1871 and 1896. Located in the northeast corner of the intersection of Square Lake and Squirrel Roads it was only 8 miles from the rail commuter station on Kensington Rd at Long Lake across from the Hunt Club. The property included a white farmhouse right on Square Lake Rd (very near where the Barton Farmhouse now stands) a large red barn and a frame pigsty near the barn. The Dowlings would call their new home "Ups and Downs".

As she began planning the remodeling of the farmhouse Sydney kept thinking about how much nicer the location the Pigsty was if only it were a house. Very quickly the Dowlings decided to move the Farmhouse to the northwest corner of their property and invest in converting the Pigsty to a human dwelling. (Note that the farmhouse still stands today at 8731 Squirrel Road the second house south of the I-31 overpass). The professional carpenter that Sydney first hired to convert the Pigsty quit in frustration. She then hired two boys from Auburn Heights who were willing to follow her directions. The article lists a number of the things that were done to make the pigsty into a house. Some of these were;

covering the frame structure with old white washed bricks· installed a modern bathroom· using beams and boards from an old carriage house for a ceiling· converting a tiny chicken loft into a bedroom accessed by a pull down ladder;

The article states that as soon as the pigsty was ready for occupancy (probably 7⁶¹⁶ or 7⁶¹⁷) Sydney's younger son Ltj. Commander Mark Kemp moved in. Sydney and William Dowling then focused on renovating the relocated farmhouse and lived there. In 7⁶¹⁰ just before the publishing of the article in June Sydney's older son James (Jim) Kemp's wife Phoebe and their four children moved into the pigsty house;

One of the other significant structures on the farm is a very large Root Cellar; Jim Kemp used this as a garage for his car. His children played on the grassy mound that covered the cellar. Today the root cellar is used to store various pieces of mechanical equipment used on the school farm;

It is interesting to note that in one of the pictures in the 7⁶¹⁰ the article shows the pigsty house framed between two 3 or 4 foot pine trees along Square Lake Road. These trees are still there today 10 years later but are now about 96 feet tall;

Who were William E. Dowling and Sydney G. (Kemp) Dowling?

William E. Dowling – William Dowling was a prominent figure in Michigan's legal and political circles. Before 1940, he served as an assistant Wayne County Prosecuting Attorney and was later elected Prosecuting Attorney, serving until 1945. In 1943, he was appointed by Michigan Governor Harry F. Kelly to a commission investigating the Detroit Riot records. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed Dowling to the U.S. Tariff Commission, a move that surprised some Republicans. After his tenure in Washington, he returned to his home at 2175 Squirrel Rd. and worked as a corporate lawyer. William Dowling passed away at the age of 65 in June 1963.

Sydney G. Dowling – Born Sydney Gilday in California around 1893, she moved to Detroit with her widowed mother and six siblings by 1900. Sydney married George Kemp between 1910 and 1915, having two sons before divorcing prior to 1930. After the divorce, she worked as a stenographer in the Wayne County Courthouse, likely where she met William Dowling, whom she married later.

In 1967, four years after William's death, Sydney Dowling sold their farm, Ups and Downs, to homebuilder William J. Pulte. However, Pulte soon realized the cost of developing the land for residential use was too high, and he sold it to the Bloomfield Hills School District. Initially considered for a school, the land was transformed into a working farm after John Bartley successfully convinced the School Board to use it for educational purposes. Bartley was hired as the first farm manager and, along with his wife and three children, moved into

the White Cottage, where they lived for three years. The Cottage later served as a farm office and is still in use today as a storage building for Bowers School Farm, which continues to operate 45 years after the property was purchased.

The Farm Today

The farm is bustling with life, home to goats, horses, turkeys, rabbits, and other livestock. Students from all grade levels visit for field trips with their teachers, while high school students engage in agriscience and animal science programs. In addition, students participate in special events such as fall festivals and winter park activities. Occasionally, farm educators visit local schools to assist with garden projects. Summer farm camps offer hands-on experiences for area children, teaching them about animal care and agriculture.

In the broader community, master gardeners design and maintain the farm's gardens, and other local gardeners rent plots to cultivate their own crops. The community stops by to purchase fresh eggs and produce and other local farm stand items, while others rent the activity barn for meetings, teen dances, weddings, or reunions. The farm's gazebo is also a popular spot for children's birthday parties.