

Plum Grove Historic Farm (2000)

Content developed by Bill Whittaker, March 2000

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Plum Grove was built in 1844 as the retirement home of Gov. Robert Lucas, the first territorial governor of Iowa and former governor of Ohio.

It was later the home of Eleanor Hoyt Brainerd, a popular novelist in the early 20th century; Jacob C. Switzer, a Civil War veteran; and Richard Hughes, a local educator. The house was purchased by the state of Iowa and remodeled in the 1940s as a memorial to Gov. Lucas. It is open for tours during the summer months, tours and the grounds are administered by the Johnson County Historical Society. Archaeological excavations are undertaken each year under the direction of The University of Iowa Anthropology Department.

The Lucas Family

"The following claim I purchased of John Knight in February 1839. & I wish it registered to me as a claim made as I have not got his deed with me the same beeing the S W qr of S 14. & part of the S 1/2 of S 15. that lyes East of the Iowa River - T 79 N. R. 6 W. July 3rd 1840

Handed in July 1840 Robert Lucas"

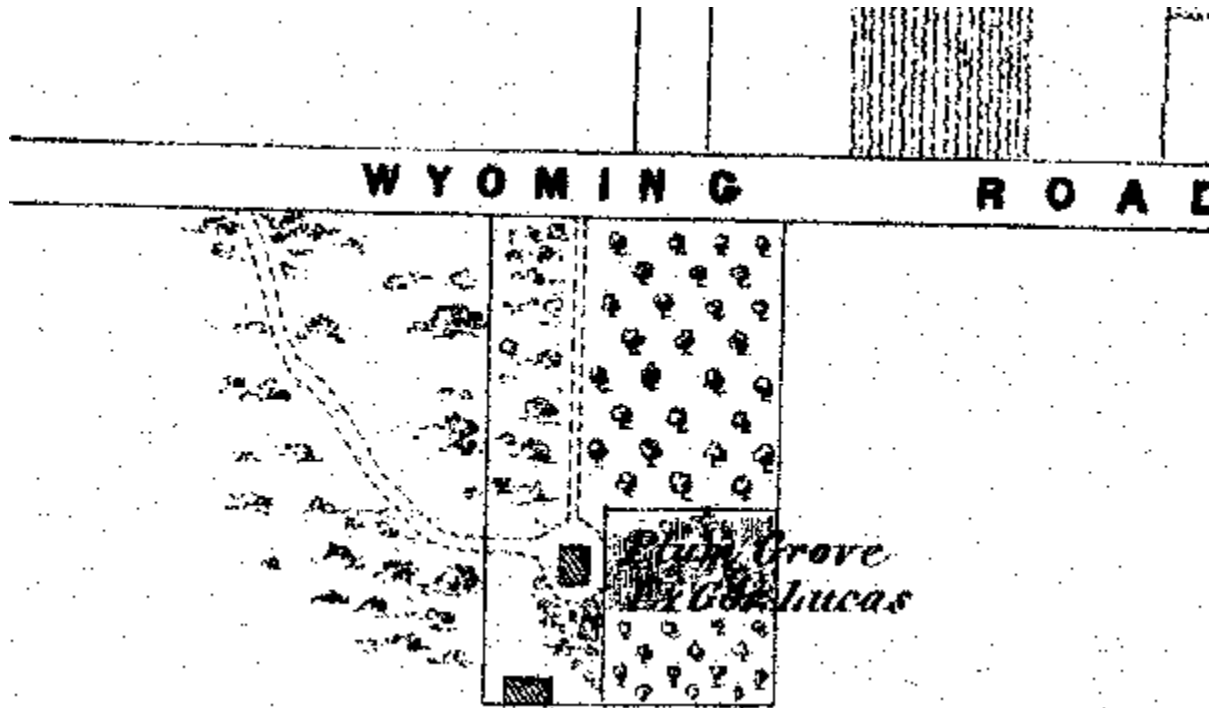
-The claim made by Lucas on the land that would later become Plum Grove, as recorded in Shambaugh's (1894) Constitution and Records of the Claim Association of Johnson County Iowa. A footnote to the claim reads, "Robert Lucas was the first Governor of the Territory of Iowa. It is said that Gov. Lucas paid \$200 for this claim."



Robert Lucas

Robert Lucas was born in Virginia, moved to Ohio as a young man, and became involved in local politics. During the war of 1812 he distinguished himself for his bravery and skill as a general. After the war he rose through the political establishment to become governor of Ohio 1832-1838. He was appointed territorial governor of Iowa in 1838, a position he held until 1841. Robert Lucas was well known for his temper, as a governor of the state of Ohio he once came close to bringing Ohio to war with Michigan over boundaries, and as territorial governor of Iowa he almost brought Iowa to war with Missouri during the "Honey War", again over boundaries.

Lucas built Plum Grove in the country south of Iowa City in 1844, and lived there with his wife, Friendly, and several children and grandchildren. While Robert Lucas aspired to return to the political arena, he had largely fallen out of favor with the political powers in Washington. Lucas died at Plum Grove in 1853, and his family moved out by 1866. A son, Edward W. Lucas, went on to become a well known Iowa politician and businessman.



Only one image of Plum Grove survives from the Lucas era, a plat map made by J. H. Millar in 1854 (north is at the top). Plum Grove appears as a simple rectangle, and the writing on the map reads, "Plum Grove / Ex. Gov. Lucas".

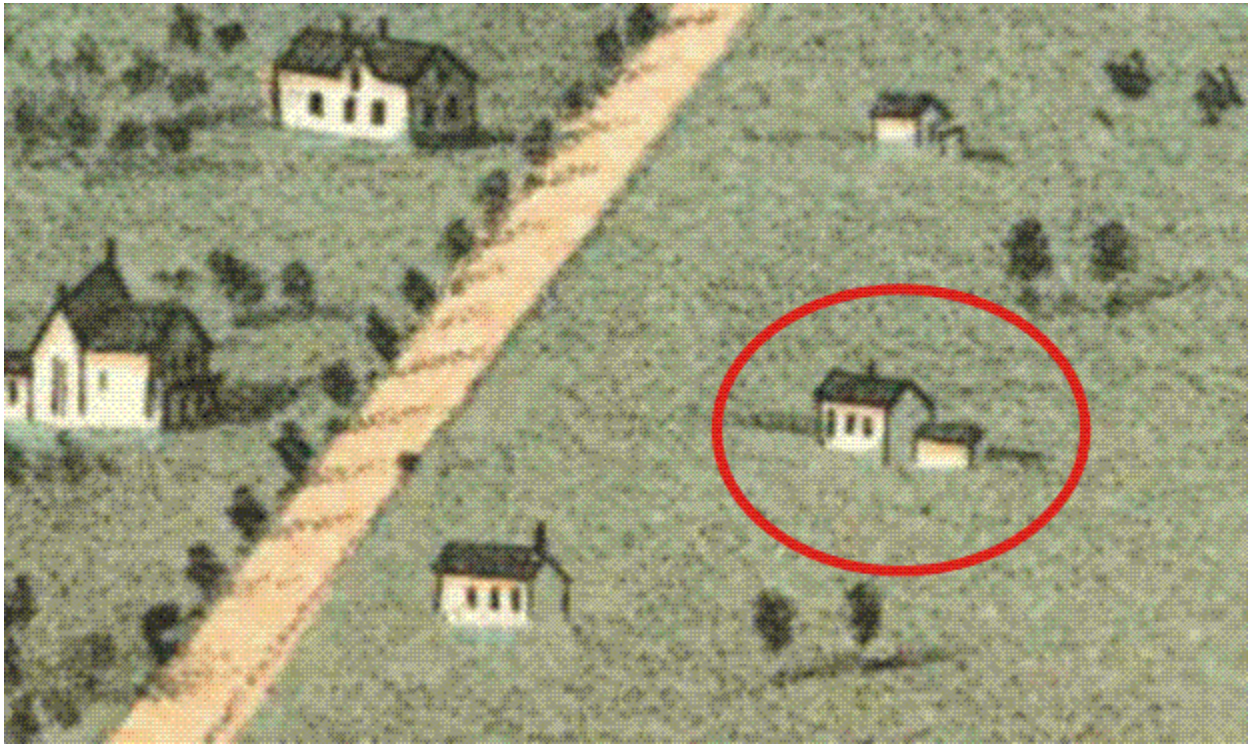
Only one image of Plum Grove survives from the Lucas era, a plat map made by J. H. Millar in 1854 (north is at the top). Plum Grove appears as a simple rectangle, and the writing on the map reads, "Plum Grove / Ex. Gov. Lucas". Plum Grove was then occupied by the Hoyt family, abolitionists who also came from southern Ohio.

View a reconstruction of Plum Grove from 1850.

The Hoyt Family

Before moving to Plum Grove in 1866, the family of Walter and Louisa Hoyt were involved in the abolitionist movement. Walter's brother and business partner was Lyman Hoyt, a well-known abolitionist and founding member of the Neil's Creek Antislavery Society and the Eleutherian College in Indiana. Walter was originally from Vermont and Louisa was from Kentucky. After their marriage in Indiana, they lived in Ohio, Canada, and New York before moving to Iowa City. When he moved to Iowa he joined his longtime friend, John Borland, in a small manufacturing company. There is also evidence that the Hoyts had business, political, and social ties to the Lucas family and to the family of Samuel Kirkwood, Iowa's Civil War governor who lived down the street.

One image of Plum Grove survives from the Hoyt era, a crude sketch from Ruger's 1868 Bird's Eye View of Iowa City, Johnson County, Iowa. North is to the left. The circled house is Plum Grove, note the addition to the back. The entire map is on the Library of Congress site.



Sadly, Walter died in 1869, leaving Louisa to raise their four children. It appears that Louisa Hoyt used her social and economic connections to live a comparatively affluent life, even after her husband died, although the Plum Grove farm may have provided supplemental income. Many years later, she married John Borland, her husband's old business partner, but Borland died less than a year later.



Eleanor Hoyt Brainerd

The oldest daughter, Adeline (Addie), married into the influential and wealthy Finkbine family. In 1883, Plum Grove was sold to the Switzer family, and the Hoyts moved to Des Moines. The youngest daughter, Eleanor (right), went to college, became a reporter and editor at the New York Sun, and then became a popular novelist in the first decades of the 20th century. A list of her books is included in the bibliography section.

The Switzer Family

By any measure, Jacob Carroll Switzer had a difficult life. Born in Maryland, he moved to Iowa as a teen in 1860. Shortly after arriving in Iowa, his father died, leaving Jacob the head of house. He was drafted into the Union Army in 1862, where he served for four years. Switzer lost a leg in the battle of Winchester, and it took a long time for him to recover. When he returned to Iowa, he was unsuccessful in school, but did manage to pass a bookkeeping course. He served as the Johnson County Clerk (1871-4), married Mary Evelyn Page, who died after the birth of their second child.

Jacob remarried to Catherine Coover and began a new career in the banks of Iowa City. This career was not very successful; banking in Iowa City was notoriously volatile in the last decades of the 19th century, with several banks closing. When they bought Plum Grove from the Hoyts in 1883, the farm may have provided an economic safety net.

When Jacob died on Memorial Day, 1914, all the banks closed in his honor, and a parade of Civil War veterans marched through town. Catherine and their children converted Plum Grove into a boarding house soon after.



The earliest photo of Plum Grove is from this period. It was probably taken sometime between 1911 and 1913, and was published in a 1914 county history. It is facing south, toward the front of the house. Note the additions and porches, which were removed in the 1940s.

After selling the house in 1923, it was occupied by the Hughes and a number of other families. Catherine and two of her children moved to a house on Iowa Ave. The Switzer children went on to a variety of careers, including railroad brakeman, bookkeeper, traveling salesman, home maker, and landlord.

The Hughes Family

When Morgan Davis bought Plum Grove from the Switzers in 1923 he continued to rent it out, but did not live there. Some of his tenants were Zack and Jennie E. Hendeson (Zack was a teamster) and Webb and Anna Hughes. Davis, a large-scale landholder, eventually sold the property to one of his farm hands, William Hughes, in 1925. Hughes (not related to Webb or Anna) grew up in Wales, immigrated to the U.S. as a teen and settled in Iowa just prior to the first World War; drafted, Bill served in the U.S. Army in France.

After his return, Bill married Winnie Davis in 1923, and they moved into Plum Grove with their son, Richard, in 1925. The family was impoverished, and Winnie's produce garden at Plum Grove provided a big part of their income. The also made money by renting out the house to various families including Arleigh and Maggie Cox. Arleigh was a day laborer and Maggie worked as a washerwoman at laundries and as a maid.

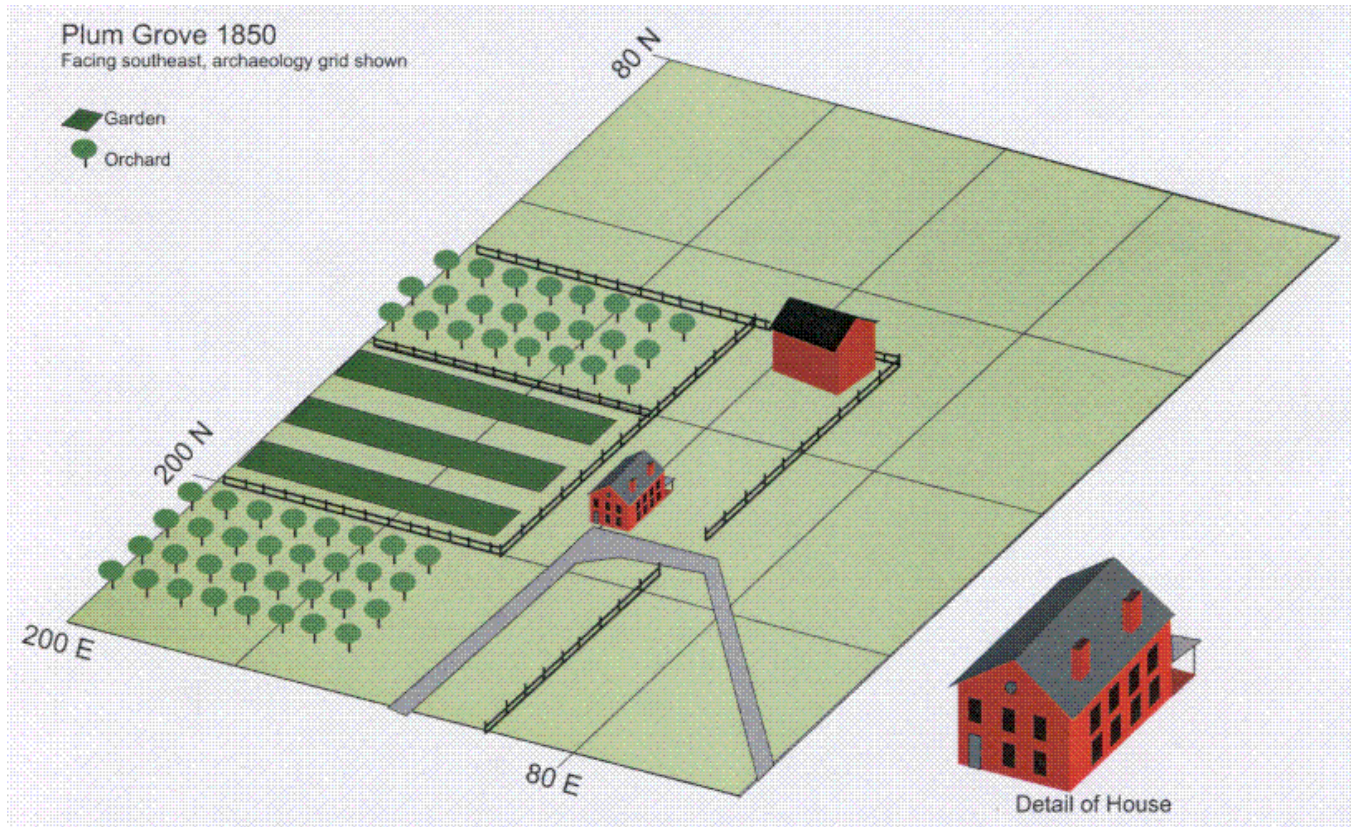


Plum Grove in the 1930s. Note the car parked under the porch. Photo facing southwest.

By the 1940s, Plum Grove was in disrepair, and a group of concerned citizens were able to convince the state to purchase the house and its property in 1943. After extensive renovation, including the demolition of the additions and outbuildings, the house was opened for public tours in 1946.

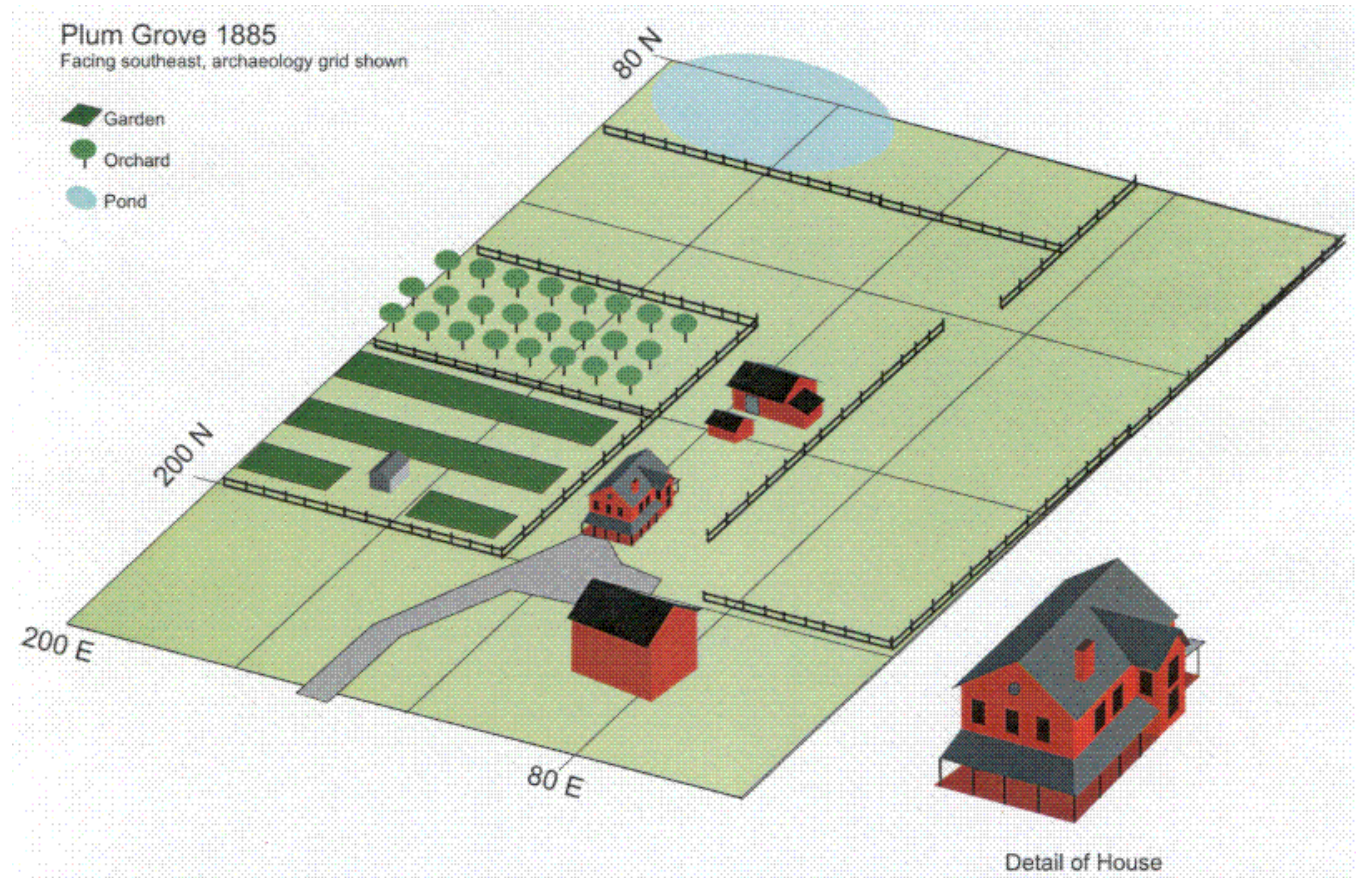
Richard Hughes served in the Navy in WWII, and returned to Iowa City, where he became a prominent educator in the Iowa City and Coralville area. Richard retired as principal of Coralville Kirkwood Elementary in 1986, and spent some of his retirement summers as a volunteer docent at Plum Grove. Sadly, he died in 1992; he was the last resident with detailed memories of Plum Grove.

1850 Reconstruction



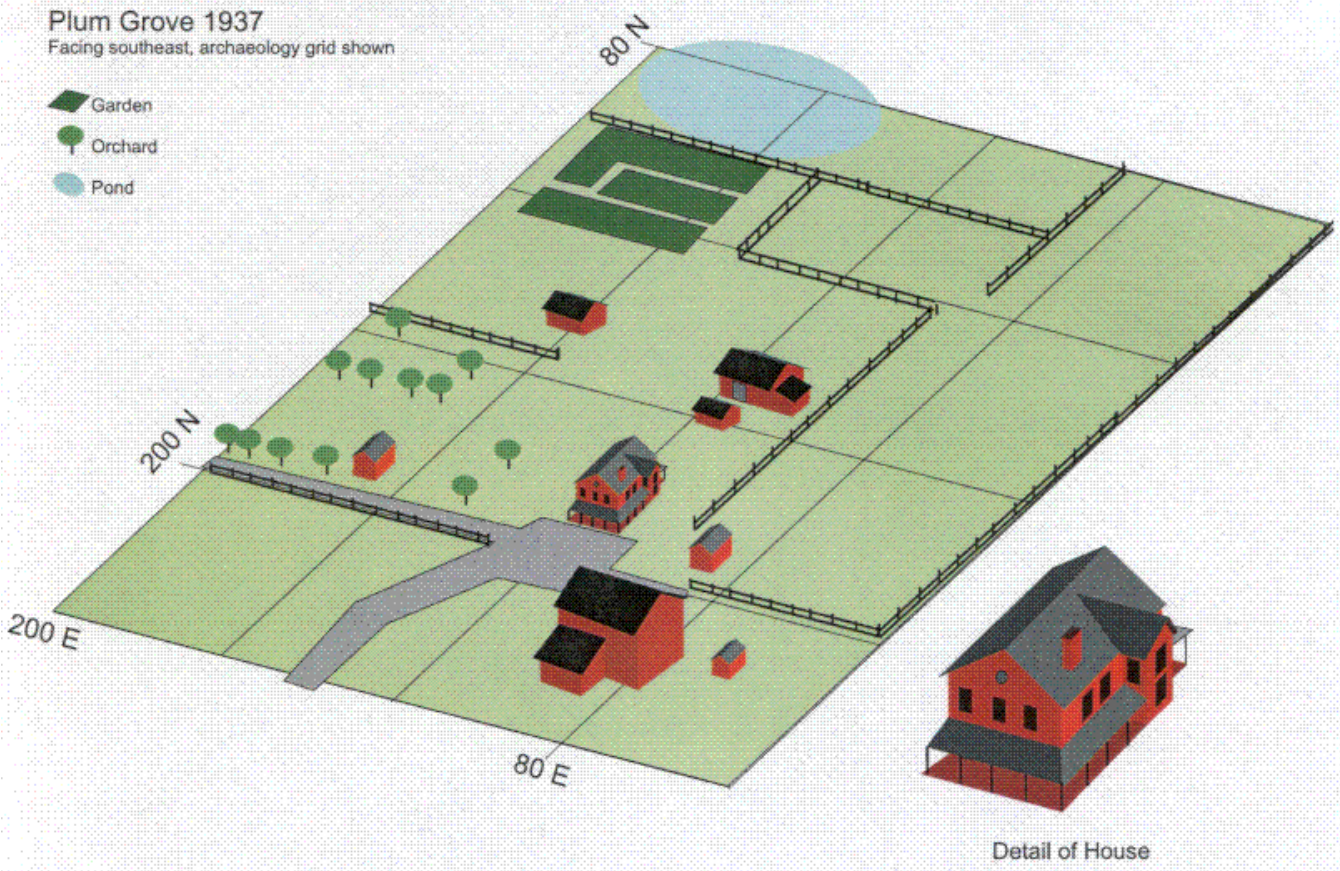
Plum Grove as it appeared ca. 1850, based on historical and archaeological reconstructions.
Read about the [Lucas family](#) who occupied the farm at this time.

1885 Reconstruction



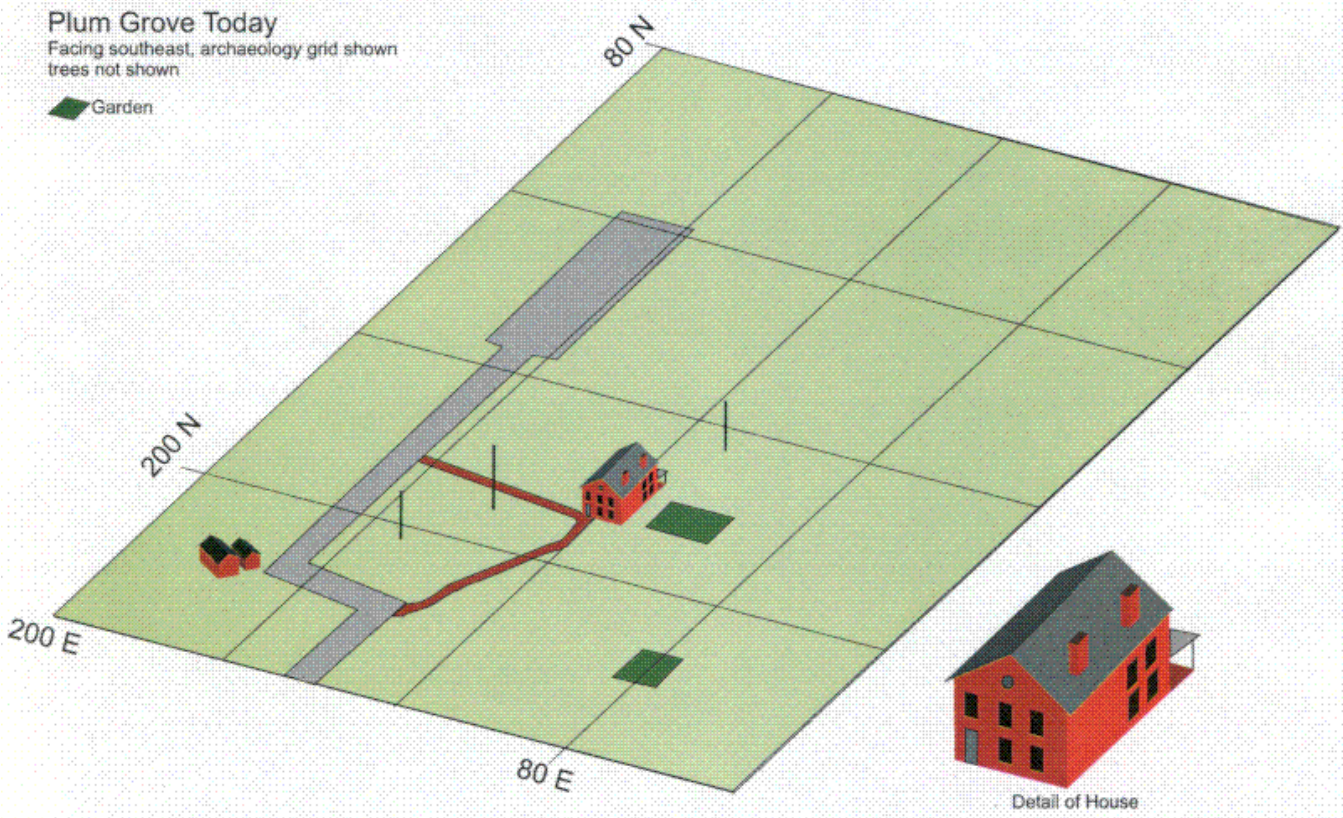
Plum Grove as it appeared ca. 1885, based on historical and archaeological reconstructions.
Read about the [Switzer family](#) who occupied the farm at this time.

1937 Reconstruction



Plum Grove as it appeared ca. 1937, based on historical and archaeological reconstructions. Read about the Hughes family who occupied the farm at this time.

Plum Grove Today



Plum Grove as it appears today.

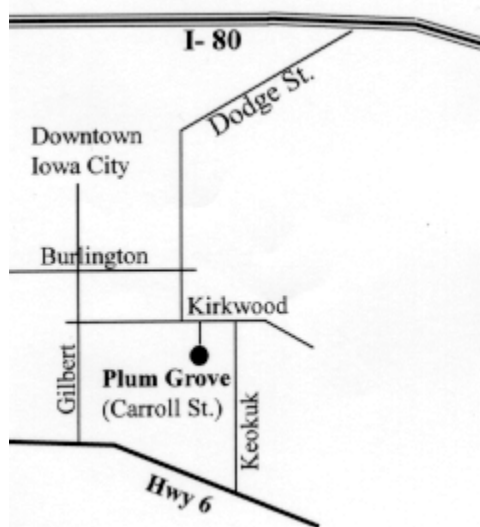
Archaeology at Plum Grove



Since 1974, a number of archaeologists have excavated at the Plum Grove farmstead, most notably Thomas Charlton, who conducted an annual field school (1996-2010). The excavations are designed to improve our understanding of Iowa frontier history and changes in farming from 1844 until 1943. Features excavated so far include the Lucas and Hoyt barns, a butchering trench filled with animal bones from the Switzer period, the gardens from the Hughes period, several cisterns, the house septic system, foundations of the house additions, and several out buildings.



How to Find Plum Grove



Map to Plum Grove, Iowa City

Further Reading

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