

Blackfeather Farm (1923)

8140 W. 183rd St. - Stilwell
National Register of Historic Places



The Riley-Studebaker House, constructed in 1928 on the 87-acre Blackfeather Farm tract. Johnson County Museum Collection.

The Nelson Studebaker Riley house, located at 8140 W. 183rd Street, was built in 1928 on an eighty-seven-acre tract called Blackfeather Farm. It is an outstanding example of a gentleman's farm, a source of pleasure rather than a means of income for the owner. This well-preserved structure exemplifies the type of country home built by Kansas City's wealthy in the 1920s and 1930s. Kansas City's society magazine, *The Independent*, noted this trend in 1931: "It is far more the vogue for the

affluent to open a nearby country residence in the summer, than to hide themselves off to a California or Atlantic Seaboard resort." J. C. Nichols operated his gentleman's farm on acreage adjoining Blackfeather Farm.

Nelson Studebaker Riley was a prominent businessman in Kansas City, Missouri. He was a descendant of the founder of the Studebaker Brothers Manufacturing Company, which later became the Studebaker-Packard Corporation. Mr. Riley and his brother managed the Midwestern distribution. Nelson and his wife Kathryn had their primary residence in the exclusive Sunset Hills section of Kansas City. They established Blackfeather Farm as a country estate, where they could retreat for the summer and entertain weekend guests year-round with hunting and entertain weekend guests year-round with hunting and fishing outings. The farm was named for the member of the Shawnee tribe who once owned the land.

The Riley house is a dramatic structure, built along a very steep rocky ridge above Wolf Creek. The house combines elements of three architectural styles popular in the early twentieth century: Tudor Revival, Dutch Colonial Revival, and Craftsman. The influence of Tudor Revival can be seen in the turreted hall on the front façade and in the asymmetrical massing of the structure. The steeply pitched gambrel roof is typical of the Dutch Colonial Revival style. The Craftsman style emphasized native materials, and the first floor walls of the Riley house are constructed of rock quarried on the property.

Craftsman architecture is noted for its ability to blend in with its surroundings. The Rileys had Hare and Hare design a landscape to enhance both the natural beauty of the site and the appearance of the home. A creative landscape architectural firm, Hare and Hare was involved in the landscaping of Mission Hills and the Country Club District as well as the design of Cavalry, Rose Hill, and Memorial Garden cemeteries in Kansas City, Missouri. They created a random, rustic appearance for the grounds and worked with the engineering firm of Tuttle, Ayers, and Woodward to develop an eight-acre lake on the property.

The Rileys owned Blackfeather Farm for only a few years. Their social and financial prominence peaked with the acquisition of their country estate. Fidelity Trust Bank gained control of the property in 1931 after the onset of the Great Depression. Blackfeather Farm continued to be used as a private residence until 1934. It was then purchased by the Sheffield Steel Company and adaptively used as a corporate fishing and shooting club until the late 1940s. The property was purchased in 1947 by Thomas Richardson, the owner of a Country Club Plaza shoe store, and it has remained in the ownership of the Richardson family since. Blackfeather Farm is one of the few remaining country homes in the Kansas City area. This Johnson County landmark recently was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, becoming the eighth property in Johnson County to be recognized this way.

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