

John McCarthy House (ca. 1860) 19700 Sunflower Rd. - Edgerton *National Register of Historic Places*

The green hills of Ireland little resemble the golden prairies of Kansas, but it is on such a spot in rural Johnson County that there is a reminder of the largest immigrant movement America has ever experienced. Although Irish immigrants began coming to America in the earliest days of European settlement, by the 1840s this trickle had become a deluge. Because of political unrest and the devastation of the Irish potato famine, huge numbers left the country. Between 1845 and 1848, the population of Ireland declined by almost 500,000 due to famine deaths and emigration. To many, America seemed a promised land. By 1847, John and Mary McCarthy probably had good reason to leave their native land.



The McCarthy house, seen here in front and rear shots, was built around 1860 of native Kansas limestone while the family lived in an adjacent log cabin. The home is a restrained example of the rural Gothic Revival style, popular in the mid-1800s. The home, now known as Sunflower Farm, stands northeast of Edgerton. *Johnson County Museum Collection.*

John McCarthy and Mary Coughlin were born in County Cork Ireland and later married there. Their first son Florence was born in November 1845. Sixteen months later John and Mary left their child with an aunt and sailed on the 14-week voyage to America. Upon their arrival, John went to work on the railroads as a contractor, spending time in Maine, Ohio and Kentucky.

Ten-year-old Florence was reunited with his parents when he came to Kentucky in 1856. By this time John and Mary had three other children. Their birthplaces record the McCarthy migration across America: Hannah was born in Maine in 1850; John Jr. was born in Ohio in 1852; and Edward was born in Kentucky in 1854.

By March 1857, the McCarthy family was residing on their Johnson County farm. Mary and the children were often there alone while John was doing road construction - he was given the first contract by Kansas City for the grading of Main Street. It was on these 160 acres that the well-traveled family finally put down roots.

The McCarthy house, now called Sunflower Farm, is located northeast of Edgerton. It was built about 1860 of native Kansas limestone. The family first lived in a log cabin on the property. The farmhouse is a restrained example of the rural Gothic Revival style which was popular by the mid-19th century. Many families used architectural plan books for inspiration in the design of their homes. Many such books of the period proclaimed the Gothic style as the proper one for a "Christian House." The authors of these books suggested that high eaves and gables helped elevate the family's thoughts heavenward. The central front gable is the most prominent feature of the Gothic style of this period. It was this feature which eventually became associated with rural American idealism, as exemplified in Grant Wood's famous 1930 painting "American Gothic." It is indicative of their great desire to fit in that an Irish immigrant family would build a home so typically American. Today, this house stands as a legacy of one early family's search for their idea of the American dream.

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**Reprinted from the Johnson County Museum's ALBUM newsletter, Vol. X #1, Winter 1997. www.jocomuseum.org*

