

A 175 Year Maple Sugaring Legacy – The Green Family of Iowa

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Iowa is not the first state that comes to mind when people think of maple syrup; yet there is a strong history of maple production in the Hawkeye state, dating as far back to its Indigenous populations and its earliest Euro-American settlers in the mid-1800s. For many years Iowa was better known as one of the states producing the most sorghum syrup; however, its residents made maple sugar as well. For example, in 1850, its greatest year on record, Iowa produced 315,436 pounds of maple sugar.

Members of the Green family have been making maple sugar and maple syrup on the same Iowa farm for seven generations, starting with the arrival and purchase of land by Gideon Green in 1851. This year the family celebrates 175 years of farming and sugaring at their Maplewood Farm in Winneshiek County.

Sugaring at Maplewood Farm began as soon as Gideon Green arrived from New York state and began carving a farm out of the mix of prairie and woodlands of Northeastern Iowa. Gideon recognized that the maple trees in his woods had been used by earlier Ho-Chunk Native populations from the obvious scarring on the bark and interior wood. The first Green sugar camp, known to the family as the Old Sugar Camp, was established on the bank of the North Fork of the

Yellow River with a group of metal kettles. By the late 1800s Gideon Green's son Melvin Green and his two grandsons, Edward and Stephen, had advanced to boiling on a large open air flat pan. A simple wood framed cook shanty used for meals and a shelter was added to the camp in the 1890s. Flooding of the Old Sugar Camp in 1916 led the family to move the camp to a location nearby in the same maple woods but on higher ground, creating the New Sugar Camp, with the relocated cook shanty and two new concrete open-air arches and flat pans.

In 1930 brothers Edward and Stephen Green went all in on their maple operation at the New Sugar Camp, building a modern sugarhouse next to the existing cook shanty, new wood fired evaporator, wood-fired steam boiler for preheating, and an LP gas finishing pan.

In the mid-1930s, Stephen and his son Clarence had the opportunity to lease and expand to a neighboring sugar-bush directly across the road from their Spring Valley Farm, renaming the new maple woods Green Sugar Bush. With a new sugar house visible from the adjacent county road, Green's Sugar Bush grew in size to around 2000 taps on pails gathered by horse and wagon and has evolved to become one of the largest and most popular maple syrup operations in Iowa. It is

now operated by Stephen Green's great granddaughter Jeni Green Melcher and her husband Tom Melcher.

With the introduction of Green's Sugar Bush, Edward then became the sole owner of the Maplewood Farm sugar bush. For the next forty years, Edward, his son Kenneth and grandson Ted operated the Maplewood Farm sugar bush, tapping as many as 1800 trees and selling maple syrup by local direct sale and a small mail order business.

Following Kenneth Green's retirement from farming and the passing of his wife Elaine in 1970, his family decided to put their sugar making on pause, but in doing so they closed up the Maplewood Farm sugar house and carefully stored the evaporator and other equipment. Eventually the decision was made to not return to com-

mercial syrup making and leave that legacy to their cousins at the Green Sugar Bush, instead reducing their syrup making to the hobbyist level on a new smaller evaporator and sugarhouse adjacent to the other Maplewood Farm buildings.

However, the closed sugar house and cook shanty at the New Sugar Camp on Maplewood Farm were not forgotten. In 1990, the family replaced the sills and footings on the cook shanty, the oldest building on the farm. In addition, the sap gathering trails through the sugarbush have been kept open.

In 2019, the children of Ted Green began a major project to stabilize and preserve the sugar house and cook shanty at the New Sugar Camp, spending the time and money to do it carefully and correctly, so the camp would last for a few more generations.



**Two open-air flat pans in front of the cook shanty at New Sugar Camp at Green's Maplewood Farm, circa 1920
(Image Courtesy of Green Family archives).**

The Green family conducted and paid for the preservation work themselves with advice from professionals like experts on the Winneshiek County Historic Preservation Commission. The work was all self-funded by the family.

The first task that was tackled was repairing one of the two original open air, brick and concrete boiling arches. The second open-air arch had been removed in 1930 when the evaporator house was built. Next the family worked on cleaning up the interior of the cook shanty which was in tough shape as the oldest building. The board and batten walls of the cook shanty were repaired and the roof was replaced. Later, the sugar house walls were stabilized and the foundation repaired.

Overall, the sugar house did not require major structural work and was well built from the beginning with a good metal roof which did a lot to protect the building during its years of non-use. Inside the sugar house some of the original chairs and tables are preserved and the arch and pans are set up like they were 60 years ago.

Kenneth Green was himself a historian as well as a dairy farmer and sugar

maker. In keeping with Kenneth's past efforts to document the history of the area, current generations have scanned many historic photos and documents related to the sugar bush and camp which will be made available on a family website to document their preservation effort and allow family members

The family sees their work as a preservation effort and not a restoration project since there are no plans to use it as a sugarhouse again. Family member Fred Green said the whole effort was only possible because their grandfather put the sugar house to bed properly in 1970 and protected the evaporator and pans. As a result of their careful preservation work, in the spring of 2026 the Green family was awarded a certificate of appreciation by the Winneshiek County Historic Preservation Commission. Their preservation efforts are a great example of how sugaring families might preserve the physical evidence of their history while still moving into the modern age of syrup production. Together, the legacy and preservation of the Maplewood Farm sugar bush along with the impact and influence of Green's Sugar Bush, confirms the status of the Green family as the elders of the Iowa maple syrup industry.



Restoration work on the cook shanty with the sugar house in background at Green's Maplewood Farm (Image Courtesy of Green Family archives).



Interior wall stabilization efforts in sugar house during restoration at Green's Maplewood Farm (Image Courtesy of Green Family archives).