In 1849, John Lewis bought 160 acres of land, roughly where Living History Farms is now, from the United States government. He paid $1.25 per acre. In 1860, Lewis sold the land to E.R. Clapp, a Des Moines businessman, at $10 per acre.

In 1870, Martin and Ellen Flynn hired brick-makers and carpenters to construct a 15 room mansion on their land, along with a large barn for grain, hay, and cattle. The Flynns raised 10 children at their Walnut Hill Farm. Martin died in July 1906. His children inherited the farm company and continued the business until 1915.

In 1840s, the U.S. government opened central Iowa territories for white settlement. Polk County was surveyed in 1847 and divided into 21 townships. Living History Farms’ land is in the southwest corner of Polk County, in Walnut Township.

In 1867, Clapp sold his 600 acres in Walnut Township to Martin Flynn at $26 per acre. Flynn, an Irish immigrant, had made a small fortune in earth-moving work for railroad companies, such as the Union Pacific Railroad. Flynn continued to purchase land in the area, ending up with a 1500 acre farming operation. The Flynn Farm specialized in pure-bred Shorthorn cattle and Berkshire hogs.

In 1870, Martin and Ellen Flynn hired brick-makers and carpenters to construct a 15 room mansion on their land, along with a large barn for grain, hay, and cattle. The Flynns raised 10 children at their Walnut Hill Farm. Martin died in July 1906. His children inherited the farm company and continued the business until 1915.

In 1915, the Flynn Farm Company sold 800 acres of the Walnut Hill Farm, mansion, and barn to the State of Iowa for $200 per acre. The State created the Clive Honor Farm, a work farm for selected inmates in the Iowa prison system.

In 1910s, Living History Farms was formed as a nonprofit institution. In 1969, the Foundation purchased 171 acres from Rollo Bergeson west of Interstate 80/35. In 1970, they purchased 165 acres on the east side of the highway. The Bergeson family donated an additional 25 acres, including the Flynn Mansion.

In 1967, Living History Farms Foundation was formed as a nonprofit institution. In 1969, the Foundation purchased 171 acres from Rollo Bergeson west of Interstate 80/35. In 1970, they purchased 165 acres on the east side of the highway. The Bergeson family donated an additional 25 acres, including the Flynn Mansion.

In 1973, Living History Farms began construction of a 1900 horse-powered farm. The historic 1900-era farmhouse was moved from Grimes that year. The century old Carlson Barn was dismantled on its original location in Stratford, Iowa and reassembled at Living History Farms in 1974.

In 1974, Living History Farms began construction of a 1900 horse-powered farm. The historic 1900-era farmhouse was moved from Grimes that year. The century old Carlson Barn was dismantled on its original location in Stratford, Iowa and reassembled at Living History Farms in 1974.

In 1973, Living History Farms began construction of a 1900 horse-powered farm. The historic 1900-era farmhouse was moved from Grimes that year. The century old Carlson Barn was dismantled on its original location in Stratford, Iowa and reassembled at Living History Farms in 1974.

Early exhibits made use of outbuildings original to the Flynn Farm and the Clive Honor Farm. A hog barn was cleaned and repurposed for a visitor center. Another outbuilding became first a pottery shed, then the broom works. A root cellar became an underground café.

Only the front four downstairs rooms of the Flynn Mansion were open to the public during the 1970s. Wallpaper, woodwork and plastering had to be repaired and replaced. The house held offices, craft displays, and the museum store before being restored to the 1870s time period. Removing white paint from bricks and woodwork was a difficult process.

Restoration continued, and in 2010, a modern addition was removed from the Flynn Mansion and then replaced in the original historic footprint.

Pre-history 1840s 1850s 1860s 1870s 1910s 1930s 1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s