



# St Joseph County

## Geographic Information Systems Department

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----FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE-----

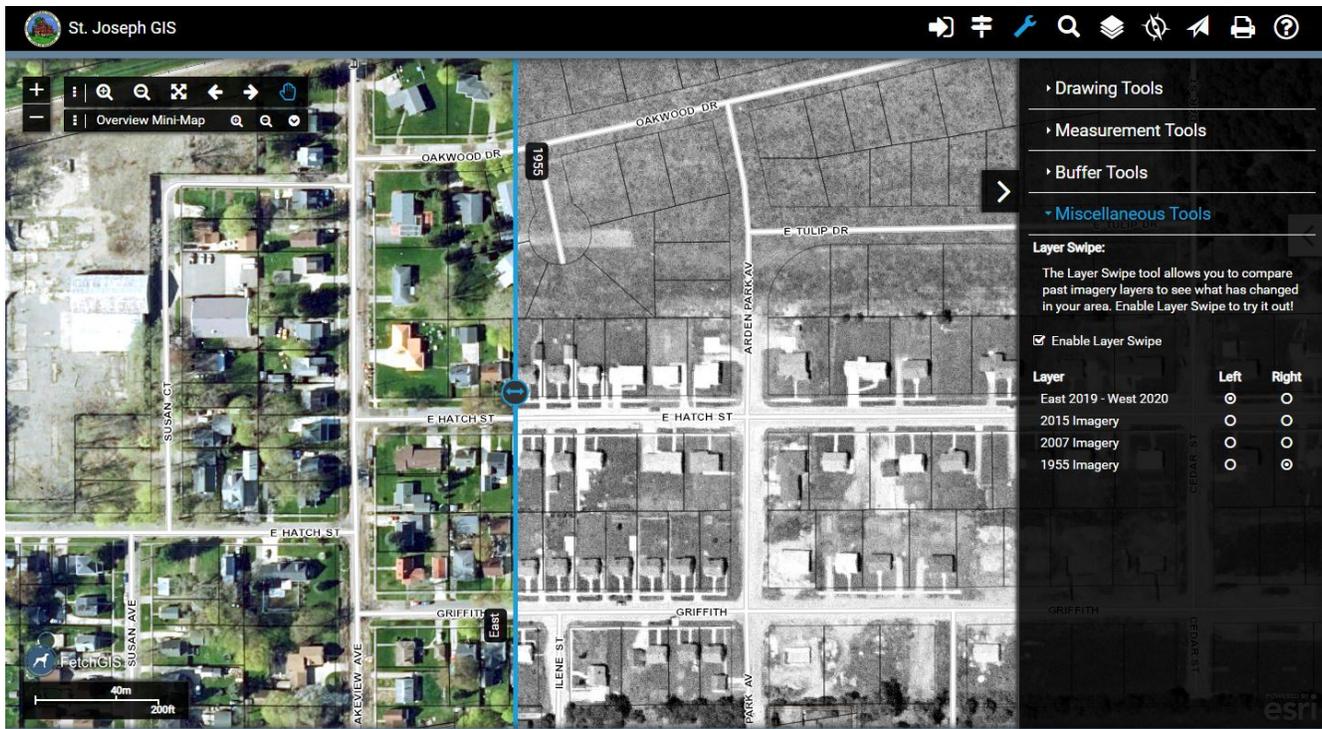
### Free County-Wide 1955 Air Photos Now Available

The St. Joseph County Geographic Information Systems Department has announced the availability of county-wide vintage aerial photography from 1955. These black and white photos, along with other county land information, can be seen on the free St. Joseph County Fetch GIS app.

“Vintage air photos are a great resource to track changes in land use and development over time,” says Jerry Happel, St. Joseph County GIS Director. “The County has changed quite a lot over the last 66 years, and now you can clearly see those changes by comparing the 1955 photos with the 2020 photos using the “Swipe” tool on Fetch GIS.”

Happel says the vintage photos can also sometimes help his office clear up property boundary confusion when an older property description refers to a point or location that has changed or disappeared over time. “For example, many properties are defined by a border with a stream or river that may have changed course since 1955. Seeing the changes on the photos helps us clear up a lot of issues.”

The photos also provide a good historical record of St. Joseph County. According to Happel, “Many of the original homesteads that are now long gone were still clearly visible in the 1955 photos. Seeing what your property or hometown looked like from the air in 1955 can give you a better perspective on local history.”



The USDA Farm Service Agency took air photographs of much of the country during the 1950's. Over 300 individual air photos covering all of St. Joseph County were taken over several sunny days in July, 1955. These 300 original photos had to be scanned, edge-matched, and “stitched” together to create the seamless, county-wide photo as seen on Fetch GIS. Over 1500 control points that were visible on both the 1955 and 2020 air photos had to be identified and matched up.

“This was an interesting side-project that we have been working on with Professor Gerald Barkley at Glen Oaks Community College in our spare time for the last couple of years,” says Happel. “It’s good to finally be able to get these out there to the public in an easy-to-use format like Fetch GIS.”

So, what about these 1955 photos surprised Happel the most? “Trees,” he says. “It seems counterintuitive, but it appears that in some areas there are actually more woodlots in the county today than in 1955. While it’s true that a large number of the old fence rows and individual trees have been removed over the years, many areas of marginal farmland that were once logged, cleared for pasture, or farmed using smaller equipment have now reverted back to woods.”

To view the photos, along with other county land information, visit the free St. Joseph County Fetch GIS app at [https://www.stjosephcountymi.org/landresources\\_fetchgis.php](https://www.stjosephcountymi.org/landresources_fetchgis.php).