

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Old Houses of Mason County

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Maysville, Kentucky

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Old houses are like old trees. They disintegrate slowly under what our forefathers were pleased to call poetically "the corroding touch of time," or they go up in a final blaze, whether that blaze be caused by heaven's lightning or the careless cigarette. Many old landmarks are no more. Among them the old Court House at Washington whose walls had echoed to the voices of the young state's greatest orators. And because the same fate may await other old houses, still standing, it has seemed a laudable endeavor to record their existence, and a few lines of their history.

The oldest house in the county is that built by Arthur Fox (gentleman) in 1785, to which he brought his bride, Mary Young married in March of that year. The house of logs now clapboarded, stood on the highest slope of land, in the village laid out by Arthur Fox and William Wood on seven hundred acres of land and patriotically christened "Washington". This cabin, "Fox's Station," consisted like most pioneer dwellings of a single room with loft above, which loft expanded with an increasing family to a full sized room.

To Fox's station in the wilderness journeyed George Wood of Revolutionary service with his wife and four children. Here (whether above or below stairs deponent sayeth not) was added December 14, 1786, a fifth child, Dolly Wood, the first white child, so it is claimed, to be born in Mason County. The old house, still sturdy and staunch has been occupied for many years by members of the Bickley family, also of pioneer ancestry. All summer long the door yard is gay with flowers.

The second oldest house is what is known as "the flatboat house", because partially constructed of the timbers of the flatboat, in which George Mefford descended the Ohio with his wife and children in 1787. This house was originally known as "Mefford's station," and though once moved has been in continuous occupation. George Mefford had previously been a gunsmith in Pennsylvania, and made guns for the Revolutionary Army. The flatboat house stands on land now owned by Mr. John R. Cochran on the Maple Leaf Road and is easily reached.

Along about 1790 Captain Thomas Marshall of Virginia built the log house with enormous stone chimneys near the Clark's Run Road whose wide cupboard was the receptacle of Mason County's early

documents, Captain Marshall having succeeded Robert Rankin as second county clerk. This bluff and sometimes homesick Virginian was later to build another house, but the first still stands in good preservation on land owned for many years by the Claybrookes, themselves of pioneer antecedents. The historic cupboard was some little time later superseded by a small log "office" built near the house.

The materials of which the old houses were constructed varied with the passage of time. They were naturally first of log, cut out of the primeval forest by the pioneer's own hand. Considerably later as a rule came the stone, or rock house, and last of all the brick. Sometimes the types overlapped.

The old Thomas Forman stone house built in 1791 on land now owned by Mr. John Larkin is an excellent example of this second type, with its thick walls and deep window sills. When it is remembered that only seven years had passed since the building of Kenton's Fort in 1784, one feels tremendous respect for the New Jersey pioneer, who came out from Monmouth county in what is known in the older state as the Great Migration. It was this Western movement that gave its name to the Jersey Ridge road in whose neighborhood several pioneers settled. The substantial old stone house seems good for many a year yet.

Later in 1800 was also built a stone house by John Lashbrooke of Westmoreland County, Virginia, of Revolutionary record, but of such strong British prejudices as to hold him to the law of primogeniture, and to hand down various Tory books and periodicals to his descendants. His son's house, not far away, and also of rock is situated on the Taylor's Mill road and is a complete contradiction of all preconceived ideas of pioneer architecture. Grim, and gaunt, and two-storied it stands, with the dog run immortalized by Elizabeth Maddox Roberts piercing its lower story.

And right here the conscientious chronicler is confronted with a problem. Just what constitutes a house? One feels that however the question is answered the following facts should be made a matter of record.

Among the original forts or "stations" was the blockhouse of James McKinley, whose land grant in 1782 made him coeval with Simon Kenton. It has entirely disappeared. But a second house on the McKinley grant, known originally as Helm's Tavern was in early days a "wagon yard", the drivers constituting the preponderance of the guests. The walls were four feet thick, and neither heat nor cold penetrated them. A part of the foundations of this old house, burned in 1883, constitute an integral part of the modern home of Mr. Charles J. Hunter, a lineal descendant of

James McKinley, who still owns the land of his ancestor.

Also part of an old brick house on the site of Kenton's station is a section of a more modern residence. It has long been considered the earliest example of building with brick in the county. It may be so, but the date remains uncertain.

It was a real tragedy when the flames destroyed the beautiful old Alexander K. Marshall house built in 1795. The bricks were used in building the home of Mr. Benjamin Marshall, a descendant, near the old site. A like fate befell the spacious Alexander D. Orr residence on land long owned by the Keith family. The house was rebuilt of the original brick and on the same foundations, dating back to 1804.

Thus they passed, the fine old mansions. But in 1795 was built by Samuel Frazee, intrepid Indian fighter and trusted scout for George Rogers Clarke a brick house that still stands. Tradition says that the land was bought from the Indians with several hundred bushels of salt brought down the Ohio on a flatboat. The brick was of course burned on the place, and a curious pattern is discernible in its arrangement. The following description by a grandson is of interest.

"It now looks contracted with small rooms and no halls but it seems to have been ample for a large family with always spare rooms for visitors. How many happy hours have I spent in that old house with its cupboard loaded with preserves, honey and maple molasses. How well do I recollect too the locality of the kitchen, loom house, smoke house, the row of bee hives shaded by the old willow tree. The sun dial mounted on a post in the yard - and the never failing spring." Samuel Frazee and Simon Kenton were always warm personal friends, and after the latter's removal to Springfield, Ohio, he returned for frequent visits to his old crony, and sitting before a blazing log fire they would relive their adventures. The old house is situated near the Germantown Road on land still owned by descendants. In 1795 too General Henry Lee of Virginia built the frame house that was to succeed the log "station" of an earlier date. It was of frame, the boards sawed from native walnut lumber and fastened together with wooden pegs instead of nails. So fine was it considered that pioneers came from far and near to admire it, and no tears were shed for the two Indians buried in a corner of the yard who had ill-advisedly tried to interrupt its construction. The house still stands on land owned by a descendant, Miss Lucy Lee.

By 1800 houses were being built rapidly. In this year was begun the house built by Captain Thomas Marshall on the outskirts of Washington, and known from its owner's political proclivities

as "Federal Hill." Kentuckians seem to have liked their biscuits and their politics hot even then. "Captain Tom", whom we have already seen as a builder on Clark's Run, and who was so called to distinguish him from his father "Colonel Tom" both of notable Revolutionary service, took his own time in building, so that all was not finished until 1803 as a date on the walls attests. The house and land are still in possession of a descendant, Miss Lewis Marshall. The old family burying ground is close at hand and is perhaps responsible for the tradition that the "Green Room" is authentically haunted. Be that as it may, on each side of the path leading from the village are the low headstones of the slaves dead in the great cholera epidemic of 1833.

In 1805 John Shotwell, having come out with his neighbors from New Jersey in the "Great Migration", built in the village of May's Lick, or as sometimes called May's Spring a brick house still a part of the beautiful "Wilson home", and owned with the land that encompasses it by a descendant Mrs. Mamie Scott Brooks. It used to be said of this house that "the kitchen was in the cellar, and the pantry in the garret", a situation made necessary by the influx of negro servants.

But the fast-growing village of Washington had also been busy. Before 1802 an old log house, later clapboarded was built in the vicinity of the stone Court House built by Lewis Craig in 1794, one year after the last serious Indian raid in Mason County. This man, stone mason and preacher and good at both, had brought his famed "Travellin' Church" from Spottsylvania County, Virginia to Kentucky in 1781, an undertaking unique in history. We are able to date the log house, because in 1803 was born there one of the ablest and knightliest of the leaders of the Confederacy, Albert Sidney Johnston. His parents lie buried in the old Baptist graveyard on the hill.

In 1804 the first post office was built, though Edward Harris had been postmaster as far back as 1797, and the first postal returns had been made by Thomas Sloo October first, 1794. From this first post office mail was delivered to several states. It stands sturdy and staunch and its ancient pigeon holes are still intact.

In 1807 was built the stately frame home of Governor John Chambers situated on the hill opposite Federal Hill. It has been the home of the Goggin family for over a hundred years. The woodwork, and notably the stairway are especially fine for any date, and little short of a marvel for that early day. Governor Chambers, later territorial governor of Iowa, through his service under President William Henry Harrison at Tippecanoe, is said to have built the home for his mother, Phoebe Milligan Chambers, a charming but most militant lady, who fought the British personally "back East."

In 1807 was constructed the old brick house built by Captain Benjamin Bayless for his bride, Elizabeth Wood. The Bayless family was long prominent in early annals, but for many years, the house almost an integral part of the Presbyterian Church, has been owned by the Forman family of blessed memory. Miss Phoebe Forman, a descendant still lives there.

In 1815 we have certainly three and probably four houses. We shall consider those in Washington and its vicinity first. In that year George Wood, his family having successively outgrown a log and a rock house built a large brick house on what was then known as Water Street. It was well constructed and still stands not much the worse for time. The main proviso in its building was that there should be one room "big enough to have a dance in." Again the date is fixed by the birth of a daughter in one of its big rooms.

One of the loveliest houses in the county stands next to the old Post Office which its gentle mistress owns. This is the old Murphy-Lashbrooke house built in 1815 by William Murphy who succeeded Edward Harris as Post Master in 1802. The spacious house with its beautiful fanlight, and English "courting and wedding arches" proved a more expensive undertaking than had been expected, so it was bought a year from its beginnings, by William Lashbrooke, a nephew, and his descendants are still in possession.

Certainly not later and perhaps earlier than 1815 was built the old Durrett homestead near the Clark's Run road. Its builder was Richard Durrett a pioneer preacher and land owner. His deed from Simon Kenton is dated March 6th, 1801. The house is of brick, burned of course close at hand, and it bears a curious resemblance to the Murphy-Lashbrooke house in that its two stairways lead to two entirely unconnected sets of rooms upstairs. The land is still in the hands of descendants, who bear the old name. It is heartening to the chronicler to find how often this can be truthfully said. It speaks volumes for the splendid stock that peopled "Old Mason."

Before leaving Washington which as the "shire town" and county seat has consistently held the limelight of early building, we must not omit to mention the old Bank, the first in Northeastern Kentucky whose builder and first President was General Henry Lee. It was certainly built before 1813 as its checks of that year, still extant, testify.

Still another building uncertain as to date but pathetic in its present dilapidation is Lewis Craig's old church at Minerva. It is not far from where that Baptist of Great Faith lies buried. Its brick pillars are losing their stucco, and where once sturdy pioneers sang and exhorted - only tobacco hangs. Like the old Bank it cries out for rehabilitation at the hands of a just and

generous citizenry.

And now at long last we come to Maysville, the early Limestone, too close to the river and "Indian territory" for early distinction in building. The oldest house in Maysville now standing is the frame house, once tavern of Jacob Boone on Front Street, the second door from Limestone. It was not built till 1815, though Jacob came to Mason county from Reading, Pennsylvania in 1736. He is deserving of more local fame than has ever been recorded him, due no doubt to the all-eclipsing renown of his illustrious cousin, Daniel Boone.

We find Jacob in the Draper Papers, August 20, 1787, acting as interpreter between Colonel Benjamin Logan and the "chiefs and warriors." Again he is designated officially as the man through whom all affairs with the Indians are to be transacted. Again he is present with Daniel Boone, Colonel Sharpe, and Colonel Logan at Fishing Gut on the Ohio where a treaty is made between the pioneers and the Shawnees under Chief Blue Jacket. Jacob Boone gave the ground for Maysville's first cemetery, back of the public Library and he and his wife Mary De Hart lie buried there. "Honor where honor is due." We hope his tavern flourished.

The old houses of the County, here in 1815 we reluctantly leave them! There are others "right around the corner" that are clamoring for mention. Perhaps they will get it later. Who knows?

The old houses, God bless them for the pioneer hands that built them in the face of hardship and danger! For the clean and honorable lives that were lived out beneath their spreading roof-trees. For the high ideals and genuine religion that were fostered there, and last of all for the crowding descendants who will in the present and the future hold faster to honor and to patriotism because of those old houses of their fathers. God keep them safe - at least in memory!