

25 June 2003

Dear Bill,

Here is my considered report on your interesting complex of buildings. I apologize for taking so much time to finish it.

If you have any questions, or if you want me to come back to study things further, please feel free to get in touch.

Thanks for being an excellent host, and best wishes to your Chapter. You have a wonderful group here.

Cordially yours,
Jim Boeringer

P.S. I am working to restore another log house. I enclose some descriptive matter that may be interesting. J.B.

WILLARD LOG HOUSE

Izaak Walton League of America, Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chapter

INTRODUCTION

The Bethesda-Chevy Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America owns property on which stand three farm buildings constructed about 1825. The Chapter asked Wayne Goildstein, President of Montgomery Preservation, Inc., for advice about how best to preserve the buildings. He recommended that I provide the advice because I have had extensive experience with log buildings, but I caution the Chapter that I am just an enthusiastic amateur who has acquired his knowledge from experience and hard work, not from training. I can probably set the Chapter onto the right road, but a professional preservationist should also be consulted. In addition, the Chapter is fortunate to have at least one member experienced in dealing with this kind of construction, Mr. Dave Murphy, 301-227-5794. I suggest that he also be asked to evaluate the following descriptions and suggestions.

Respectfully submitted,

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SIGNIFICANCE

The Willard Log House, Smokehouse, and Springhouse are significant not only because they have survived for almost two hundred years, but also because they form a beautiful ensemble of early agricultural buildings.

HISTORY

c1750. In the middle of the 18th century, Robert Peter, son of the Scottish Laird of Crossbasket, emigrated from Scotland to Georgetown. He acquired over a thousand acres of land in Montgomery County, naming it "Crossbasket" after his father's title and holdings in Scotland.

1806. Robert Peter died.

1812. Robert Peter's estate was divided amongst his children, his son George Peter, Sr., acquiring Crossbasket, which became known as Cors Basket, even though the misspelling is just a Spoonerism.

1825. Robert Dick purchased Crossbasket, renaming it "Piney Hill Farm". Some time after that, he constructed the log house as a home for the overseer of the property, Jesse Hyatt.

1870. Robert Dick gave up the property to settle debts that he owed to George Peter, Jr.

1871. George Peter, Jr., sold the farm to two brothers, Dewalt Willard and Charles Willard, who divided it. Crossbasket, alias Piney Hill Farm, became the property of Dewalt Willard.

1888. Dewalt Willard's children purchased the property and renamed it Corn Basket.

1942. The Willard family sold the property, thereby beginning a series of purchases and sales, during which the name was changed yet again, this time to "Charbasket".

1949. The Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America, purchased the property for recreational activities.

1952. An interior brick chimney was added.

1953. "Carlock 10-1-53" is scratched into the outer chinking of the smokehouse.

1977. "1977" is scratched into the inner chinking of the smokehouse.

MAIN HOUSE

Foundation

Both the original house and the addition are built upon stone foundations. The original house probably had a dirt floor. It now has a poured cement floor. The addition has a wooden floor above a comparatively deep crawl space.

Logs

The Willard House contains many puzzling details. According to the "Historic Medley" papers, it originally consisted of a single room and attic, with a fireplace and chimney on one gable end. The stone chimney, however, is two stories tall, with consistent stonework from top to bottom. If it had been built at the same time as a one-story house, it would have been shorter. If it had been constructed when a second storey was added, then the masons imitated early construction very well. All the changes made in the buildings in the twentieth century carefully imitated old style, sometimes well and sometimes badly. The wider chink between the logs halfway up supports the suggestion that the second story was added, but this space could also have been caused by the thick front beam supporting the second floor. Also, several logs are clearly replacements, such as an anomalously wide log just below the top of the second storey. The logs of the original house and the addition are identical in dimensions and style, but the seam is obvious.

Exterior Walls

The most recent chinking has been done with Portland cement, which has an unfortunate tendency to absorb water. The outer surface of the chinking has also been brought out too far, forming lips that channel water into the wall. This is the main problem that needs to be solved. Each strip of chinking should lean inwards. The top edge should be well in under the upper log so that water can not easily reach it. Caulk was not available to early builders, but the inward lean provides a V into which modern owners can insert caulk effectively. The bottom edge of the strip should form a slight lip to enable water to run down the face of the chinking and off the lower log without puddling or infiltrating. Common sense should prevail. It should also be pointed out that log houses were often covered with clapboard to shed water.

Linkages

The corners of the logs in the original large building match those in the added small building. All the linking corners have been identically cut in the Pennsylvania manner, which is the best and most difficult to make. The ends of the logs are fitted together with inverted-V cuts that look like little roofs and serve the same purpose, namely, to shed water. The craft of cutting wood in this way has been lost. It is unlikely that knowledgeable craftsmen were available when the building was updated and extended. Therefore I theorize that the addition was constructed not of fresh-cut logs but of logs salvaged from some other existing domestic structure. The logs are too fancy to have come from a barn or any other agricultural building. The addition should be retained despite its being not well attached to the main building.

Interior Walls

To eliminate drafts, the interior walls of old domestic log buildings were generally covered with plaster or newspapers. Exposing the interior logs is a recent affectation. The interior walls of the Willard House were once covered with lath and plaster. The work is early but probably came later in the history of the buildings.

Flooring

Narrow tongue-and-groove boards in the lower floor are probably not original, but replacing them would not be worth the effort. Wide yellow pine boards comprise the attic floor. They look original and should be carefully retained.

Windows

The first stage in constructing almost any log house was the creation of a solid roofless box containing no openings in the sides. After the box was complete, apertures for doors and windows were outlined with wooden wedges and sawn out. Then these spaces were framed with thick planks, fixed in place with large, stubby wrought-iron nails. The original windows are gone. The present six-over-six double-hung windows look good and may be retained. The addition unfortunately contains one pair of windows, side by side. This was never done in old log buildings, but rectifying it is impractical.

Internal Woodwork

The internal frames have beaded woodwork. They might be original. The the two pairs of stairs are original, well made, and in good condition. The partitions are made of chinked logs, piled up, one atop the other. They are not original and have been made to resemble the exterior walls. Some partitions are thick; others are thin. Interestingly, however, some of the logs used to make the partitions could have been left over when the wing was added. All of the log partitions look very wrong and should probably be removed. A puzzling detail is the fact that there is no passage between the original house and the addition.

SMOKEHOUSE

Significance

The first structures to be built in new agricultural settings were outbuildings—barns, chicken coops, corncribs, smokehouses, etc. They tended to be built quickly and roughly, not only to serve their intended purposes but also to provide shelter while the builders worked on the domestic structures, which took more time on account of their finer craftsmanship. This smokehouse might well have provided shelter for the builders while they worked on the main house.

Linkages

Corners of agricultural log outbuildings were coarse, simple, and loose, whereas corners of domestic structures were craftsmanlike, complicated, and tight. The ends of the logs in the Willard smokehouse were merely flattened to stabilize the logs. This manner of linkage did not shed water, but this specimen was probably protected from water damage by eaves that were wider than those in the new roof.

Chinking

From the inside, one can see interestingly slanted stones that were part of the original chinking.

Door

The frame of the board-and-batten door is old and solid. Both it and the door itself are probably original.

SPRINGHOUSE

The Springhouse is a stone structure with wooden roof and door. I could not examine it closely because it was flooded on the day of my visit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The house and outbuildings stand on ground that was sopping on the day of my visit. This circumstance cannot be attributed merely to the wet weather during this time. An expert needs to reshape the land so that it drains effectively but still looks good. This is true even though no water seemed to have penetrated the house itself on the day of my visit.

2. Most of the exterior chinking of the Main House was cosmetic rather than practical. It must be changed, because it directs water inwards. Use common sense. Look at each chink and project where water that lands on it will go. The least that can be done is that the exterior chinking that protrudes the most should be replaced, and the rest should be caulked. This would be a stopgap solution. It would probably be better to replace all of the exterior surface of the chinking, probably only the outermost inch. The interior should be left alone. It could be that the only chinking that should be removed is that part that is Portland cement. This problem is an aspect of a general quality of the work done on the house subsequent to 1949, namely, that it was directed to appearances, rather than to protection and preservation.

3. The buildings should serve a purpose. They should be used. Nobody notices when things begin to go wrong with an unoccupied building, but regular traffic facilitates early detection of dangerous symptoms, such as a leaking roof or an incursion of insects. The house was originally the home of an overseer, and it could be used for that purpose now. The entire complex, including the new Chapter House, should not be left unguarded. If the Willard House is not lived in, then it should have a walk-through inspection at least once a week, in all seasons.

CONCLUSION

I thank Mr. Bill Gordon for his hospitality during my visit. I enjoyed examining these buildings and was honored to be asked for my opinions. I commend the Chapter and the League for their interest in preserving these significant buildings, and I wish them all success in doing so.

Respectfully submitted,
James Boeringer

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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