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Historic preservation at the grass-roots level

Or, the \$800 house that was stopped by a mud puddle

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HISTORIC preservation, the saving, restoring and rehabilitating of structures, evidence and resources from our past, has enjoyed something of a heyday in recent years.

Tax advantages for individuals converting older structures into income producing products certainly has been a boon, making profitable the large-scale commercial developments.

A revival of 18th and 19th century craftsman techniques was spawned and preserved by the "back to the earth" movement of the mid-1960s. How else would the tole painting, blacksmithing and tinsmithing survived to today.

But still we are afflicted by the "old is bad, new is better" mentality that have cost us so many of our man-made resources.

Historic preservation is conservation at work. There was bickering and complaining when the National Park Service first created our National Parks system. But far fewer today question that vision. Indeed, the roster of thousands who visit our parks, shrines and landmarks each year is a testimony to their original thinkers.

In many ways, historic preservation runs contrary to the very attitudes that shaped this nation. The boundless, "get-something-going and then move on to something bigger" attitude paid little more than lip service to preserving traditions and evidence of our past.

Abundant and relatively cheap natural resources in the forms of lumber, stone and mortar fueled that fire for constant newness.

Europeans, with their closer boundaries and more limited natural resources, think nothing of doing their farm chores in a 600-year old barn, living in 400-year old cottage and worshipping in a 1,000-year old cathedral.

In this country, though, on one hand many view a 70-year old crock or butter churn as nothing less than the holy grail and on the other hand, view a 120-year-old house that needs a new roof and a paint job as an eyesore that should come down so a manufactured home or duplex can take its place.

Take another example. New York City was founded by Dutchman Peter Minuit in the 1620s and was the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam for four decades. Today, not one structure remains from the Dutch colonial period.

A community, whether it is New York City or Christian County, is as much about its past as it is about its present and its future.

Clearly, life in the land of plenty has diminished our appreciation for human craftsmanship and our man-made resources.

But this is not an argument against new construction, nor is it a call to preserve every brick, stone and pane of glass from the past. Rather, it is a cry to look around us closely at what exists and to be sensitive in our re-use and preservation.

Besides burgeoning development, there are other forces working against greater preservation.

The very people most sensitive and committed to preservation are those with the most meager resources, the least business experience and least able to finance the grand projects that would make the most impact.

This paper will explore a single instance of historic preservation that is neither typical nor atypical of the hundreds of projects going on across the country. But the example should show some of the advantages and disadvantages, joys, fallacies and heartaches involved in the process on the grassroots level.

It was love at third sight when my wife of two weeks and I first discovered that a deserted farmhouse we had passed for years in South Christian actually had at one time been and was a two story log house and was in the early stages of being torn down.

A couple of days of investigating who owned it had me driving down down the lane, with an earnest expression, a notepad and my eyes wide open. First came the stop sign at the gate. A half-mile further it was a "No trespassing, violators will be prosecuted" sign and still a half-mile further it was the "Trespassers will be shot" sign.

How do you approach a crowd like that on the first round? Well, carefully, obviously, but also as openly as possible.

"Yes, it's ours, he said, the house did have some logs in it and funny thing, it was all put together with old horseshoe nails. No, they really weren't interested in selling it 'cause the volunteer fire department was going to burn it down for practice. You should see the new house we're going to build there next spring," he said.

Could we look through it? "Why sure, let me show you around. You're not afraid of walking on rafters, are you?"

That was our first meeting. Dusk was approaching as this was early November, 1983, and darkness and the wind blowing through empty window frames did little to help recommend further thought about the house.

Could we come back the next afternoon and look at it a little more? "I don't know why, but come on ahead. We should have everything out of it we want in a day or so. But we really don't think we would be interested in selling it. How much would someone pay for something like that?"

So we were at a crossroads of sorts. The house was doomed, if not by the fire department's torch, then by a winter without windows and leaking roof. The flooring and windows were being removed and stacked in a shed, showing that the present owner had little further intention for saving the house and was indifferent, if not negative, about letting it go.

Could we stall them for a while and find out whether part or all of the house could be salvaged? And, should we sweet talk the family into selling it, how much would it be worth?

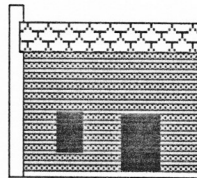
One contractor said he wouldn't give five cents for it. Another family said they had paid \$5,000 for an old log house and upon removing plaster and clapboard, discovered that four out of every five logs had been destroyed by termites.

Now that \$5,000.05 price range didn't help a whole lot and all too often a family would rather let great-great grandmother's house crumble to the ground than see some outsider do something with it. And if they would sell, the price goes up proportionally with the amount of interest one shows.

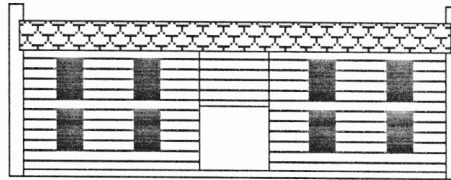
An afternoon of poking around with a crowbar, ice pick and notebook convinced me the untutored, naive pioneer that this house needed to be saved. Would they reconsider with a little bit of cash greasing the skids?

Talking with my wife, who had not yet moved here from Danville, we set a ceiling for the amount we would offer. By phone the next day, we offered him \$500 and he said he would call me right back after he talked with his wife. The "right back" stretched into a week and when we called

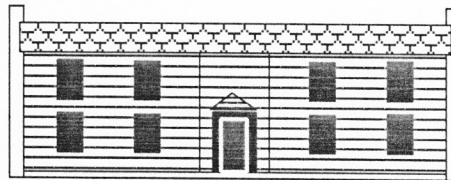
The house's evolution



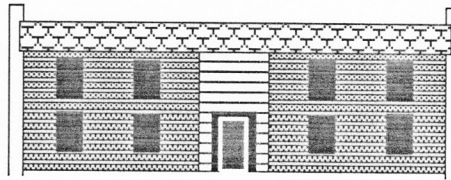
1845



1871



1890's



1984

him back he said they just didn't know.

There was no sentimental attachment, as they had bought the farm from PCA following a bankruptcy. I played my second card, telling him we had found another house, but if \$700 or \$800 would suit them, we would take it off their hands.

To my surprise, he said "OK, let's do that, so long as we can start building there next summer."

This opportunity wasn't going to slip from us and a cashier's check from Planters Bank was drawn and delivered the next day.

A whole seven months... By God, mountains could be moved in seven months. Not long out of the service, I was used to seeing big things move, launching fighter jets from aircraft carriers, sending tons of supplies from ship to ship and piloting lumbering ships through narrow channels.

Now there are two generally accepted ways of moving houses. One is the marking, disassembly, movement and reassembly on the new site. The other is to uproot the whole structure, load it onto a truck and make tracks.

The advantages and disadvantages of one method over the other generally offset one another, but the intact moving method promised to be somewhat more expensive but certainly, in the right hands, offered greater speed.

Now a homebuilder is no real problem to

find. A jackleg roofer is no real problem to find. A house mover? Think again.

The mover first recommended to us had retired, and even died. Another was living in a school bus near Empire in North Christian. The last one, they really didn't know quite how to find him, but one might try catching him at the Elk's Club.

The Elks Club proved to be a bum steer but his ex-brother-in-law gave me the name of his latest girlfriend who promised he would call me that night.

Now independent contractors and calendars are not made for each other and "that night" stretched into the next week, and through all this we had never been one to recognize foreshadowing.

He threw us a curve by showing up the next day, ready to go take a look at the house and give us an estimate. "Why sure, we'd moved a house almost exactly like that from Russellville to Bowling Green," he told us. "Just snatched it up and pulled it with Big Bertha on U.S. 68."

But that had been too unstable a load to suit him and this time he would insist that the house be cut in half, the roof flattened and both end chimneys torn down and cleared away.

Those things being done, he promised to do the actual moving in 10 days at a cost of \$2,000 a half.

He was my hero and we shook on it, with me deciding it would be my winter project to find some land on which to put the new homestead.

Let's back up a little and look at the evolution of log structures in Christian County.

Log structures — both log cabins and log houses — served as the earliest shelters in Christian County.

It all began with the simplest, roughest log cabins of the 1780s and 90s (of which none are believed to survive today) and led some two decades later to the log house. Along the way and between the two extremes is every variation of structure known to the creative mind — barns, pig pens, ice houses, smoke houses, slave quarters and taverns.

And where are these structures today? Sadly, most are gone, taking with them a part of our own past. Those log structures that remain have fallen to varied fates. Of the hundreds that still stand in Christian County, many reside on the forgotten corners of farms, many stand in virtual ruin through neglect, many stand sturdy but almost invisible beneath an outer layer of clapboard and a few have been uprooted and set down alongside our highways and their humble origins exploited in the pursuit of one turning a buck.

The words log cabin and log house often are used interchangeably but a fine line of distinction

exists between the two and is worth some explanation.

Listen to how a letter published in New York's Monthly Magazine in 1802 states the difference: "Cabins are houses built of whole trees, without being hewed, the interstices between the logs stopped with rails, and daubed with mud ... if the interstices should be stopped with stone, and neatly plastered, and the roof composed of shingles, nicely nailed on, it is called a log house."

Simply put, then, the rough cabin was intended as nothing more than a shelter from the elements, thrown together in the most expedient manner with no real thought of creating an enduring structure that future generations might use.

The earliest log cabins in America were made by the Swedes who settled in Delaware in the first half of the 17th century. However, this form of building began to be disseminated by the Germans, and more importantly by the Scotch-Irish who emigrated from Western Pennsylvania to Maryland, Virginia, and finally to Kentucky.

The earliest cabins served only the most basic needs of our settlers, for they lacked window glass, architectural trim, and in most cases, even wood flooring.

The cabin's walls were built on a foundation of stones gathered from nearby limestone and sandstone outcroppings, usually laid up without mortar.

Rough chimneys would have a stone base and flues made of "cats and clay," small poles embedded in the clay or mortar.

The roofs were of rough board and the floors of puncheons — logs split lengthwise and smoothed — for the sawing of timbers of that length and diameter was out of the question under the circumstances.

By the end of the 18th century, log dwellings and dependencies were beginning to be built with greater care as the county became increasingly settled, the threat of hostile enemies lessened, craftsmen and carpenters made their appearance here and materials became increasingly available.

Adz-hewn square logs with several different types of corner construction replaced round wall logs. Seemingly limitless stands of virgin hardwood provided our earliest settlers with abundant walnut, oak, ash, locust, cedar, chestnut and poplar for permanent log buildings. Poplar usually was used for the roof framing and for at least the top sill or cornice log, for poplar was easy to work, had a high tensile strength and was lighter than the dense hardwoods. It had the added advantage of being plentiful and had great insect resistance.

Four general types of building arrangement

were the most common: The single pen, a single room almost invariably 20 feet by 20 feet square with a side chimney; the double pen version, identical 20-foot pens built side-by-side with chimneys on either end; the "saddlebag" version where two side-by-side pens shared a common chimney; and the "dogtrot", where two separate pens were joined by a breezeway that could shelter livestock or the family dog and that eventually was closed in, creating a foyer or entrance hall.

Finding land was a humiliating experience, ranging from phones being hung up in our ear at the very thought of me inquiring whether the land was for sale to the familiar saw that "Yes, grandfather's house had fallen in and trees had toppled across the lane, but we think our son in Arizona might want to do to something with it some day."

A site finally was located and bought by May and as soon as weather permitted, demolition work began. The crew was close knit, being my wife, my father, my younger brother when home on leave, my mother, my sister, my brother-in-law, and my older brother.

While we were able to avoid the prevailing wage laws, they tired easily and left when they wanted, far before sunset.

Before we ever started, a person with a degree in architectural history from the University of Virginia looked over the house, answered a myriad questions and stressed the importance of taking a slow pace and keeping it original — in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Delightful slices of history jumped to life during the dismantling and the house became a microscope on an age long past.

Our authority had said one half of the house appeared to date no later than 1850 and it was nearly certain to have been built at two distinct periods.

Sure enough, the left-hand side had square corner notches and the right-hand side had vee-notches, strongly suggesting that one was built rather hurriedly and the other at a somewhat more leisurely pace.

Shreds of insulating newspaper tacked to the upstairs walls talked of Sen. John C. Calhoun.

Inside the wall above the door was a rusted but well preserved horseshoe.

Beneath the gables of the older side of the house were courses of wide beaded poplar clapboard, a sign of a little higher-than-normal craftsmanship and the first we had seen since honeymooning in Williamsburg, Va.

The firebox on both chimneys had been shrunk in size, apparently when wood heating gave way to coal. Filling the cavities were huge amounts of dirt, intermixed with a wide variety of trash,

most of it dating from the 1920s, including advertisements for knickers.

The positioning of doors and windows and the construction of the foundation strongly suggests that originally the house consisted of only one pen, with its door almost centered on the front of the left-hand, or earlier, section with a single window to its left.

At a later point, the second pen was constructed, and the two pens were joined. However, it appears that it was some years later that the dogtrot or breezeway was enclosed and the front door established where it now is positioned.

Interior construction details indicate that a staircase originally was constructed in the dogtrot, at some point being removed and relocated in the right-hand pen.

Removing the roof was a reasonably fast but trying experience. The rafters, which were studded with cut square nails were hewn poplar and every indication showed that they were original to the house. While walking across the back half, I fell through, catching myself on my outstretched arms.

Pulling myself out, it occurred to me that those rafters just might have to be replaced, because as sound as they appeared, a century of hot summers and cold winters had made them brittle to the point that they were undependable.

Measurements of them, however, later would ensure that the original proportions of the roofline could be retained.

No fewer than four colors of shingles were on the roof in different spots and during that hot summer, removing them fell to early weekend mornings. Removing them one hot Sunday morning was a slow, laborious task and once we laid down on the roof to catch my breath and looked up, only to see two buzzards circling overhead.

The multi-colored shingles puzzled me until we talked with a farmer who at one time had owned it and used it as a tenant house.

"That's simple," he said. "While they were blasting for I-24, boulders the size of basketballs went through the roof and we patched it with whatever we had handy."

After three months of afternoons, nights, weekends and Sunday mornings, the house at last was ready, contractors had poured the new footing and we were ready to move.

My mover, however, was nowhere to be found. His familiar haunts were vacant, telephone calls went unanswered and the former owners were getting a touch hot under the collar.

By early July we were able to pin him down and he and an odd circus of helpers arrived with their equipment.

25-foot steel beams were slid beneath the

house and a 20-ton hydraulic jack was placed at each of its four corners. The four jacks operated off a central pump that he would regulate by carefully shorting it with a screwdriver.

Once off the ground about three feet, a sixteen-wheel dolly was slipped beneath the house, the two beams were chained and bolted together and one end fastened to Big Bertha, a 1952 white Chevrolet truck with a black hood and a questionable engine.

The fact that the house left its foundation on Friday the 13th of July should have told us something.

On the initial moving day, we were full of adrenalin and nine months of work were beginning to bear fruit. Full of expectation, we drove to the new site, only to find it empty. Driving 12 miles south, there sat the house.

The reason, he explained, was that the previous day's rain had created a 50-foot mud puddle just in front of the truck, a mud puddle that he was leary of crossing with 30 tons of logs in tow. Maybe in two days, he assured me.

Those two days became four and once again we drove to the lot with great hopes. Not there. So we drove south again and to our dismay, it wasn't there either. We drove back on the agreed-upon route with no luck and got to the first phone.

"Billy, where's the house?," we asked.

"Oh, I was going to call you about that."

"Where's the house?"

"Well, we got as far as the St. Elmo schoolhouse and the fuel pump burned up, so we put it behind there."

So in a driving rain, Toni and we travelled south and sure enough, there was the house parked behind the former one-room schoolhouse.

It is hard to describe adequately — and tastefully — the appearance of a house that has been ripped in half, is sitting precariously on wheels, a horribly rotted log visible here and there, and is soaking wet.

Calling it a wet, mangy dog comes close and might even be complimentary. The full weight of the situation was catching up with my wife of nine months, and seeing the house in this condition surely poked holes in the pep talks I regularly had been giving.

The easy part of building a new foundation was centering the house above the 24-inch wide cement footer, building the block foundation up to the house and then lowering it into place.

The hard part was listening to the block mason swear and question my sanity with each rising course of block.

With the first half of the house in place, the inevitable jokes about Riley's "half-way" house surfaced.

Flushed with the success of getting half of

the house moved, we looked forward to an even speedier job on the second half.

Not quite so fast.

Unbeknownst to us, however, the mover had some favors to others on which he had to deliver. First he had bartered a houseboat for moving three houses near Oak Grove and had to move that boat from some nebulous place "up north."

Then, there was a gas station that had to be moved from Canton Pike and North Drive to East Ninth Street.

Finally, we thought, we were set.

No, he had lucked into a government contract in Panama to dismantle and move an entire electrical generation plant and would be back the first part of the next month.

Meanwhile, the former owners said that a bulldozer would start tearing down the second half if it wasn't moved by Labor Day so they could begin work.

Beams finally were slid beneath the second half in early September and a week later, the 2 1/2-hour, 12-mile trip from site to site was complete.

Once there, the two halves had to be mated and leveled and several key logs replaced by those from other homes or barns that had been torn or burned down. Naturally, we were assured it would be an slow, exacting process using levels and transits.

Leaving work early one afternoon, we found the real process involved running cables through the house to opposite walls, linking Big Bertha to that cable and pulling until the wall appeared more nearly square.

By early November the house at last stood roofless but level and ready for new construction. The 10 days the mover had promised probably were accurate, but there was an average of three weeks between each of those 10 days. And now the summer's potential for work was lost.

We now entered the nether world of independent contractors. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

The first step was to nail a levelled "cap" or plate to the top of the structure in preparation for building the rafter and roofing system.

The first rafters were put in place the first of December, with most in place by the end of that day. By the end of the next month, the house again had a roof, an addition on the back and two anxious owners who watched as snow drifted to the bottom of the windows.

Too cold to work, this was the time of simply sitting back, studying the rooms and letting them do the talking.

When we bought the house, it had been subdivided into apartments, the entire interior was finished in wallboard, covered with wallpaper that

would do credit to a French bawdy house and the second story of the left-hand side sealed off since the early 1960s.

Removing the wallboard told a story in itself.

All the ceiling beams had carved beading on their bottom edge.

A diagonal stripe of whitewash in the dogtrot told that a staircase obviously once had resided there. The staircase in the right-hand section, meanwhile had bannister hole on the wrong side. Adding two and two and comparing nail holes, caused us the exciting discovery that the dogtrot staircase had at one time been moved into the other room, the only alteration being done was trimming it by about a foot and one step.

Luck smiled upon once more when we discovered that an oddly shaped piece of wood we found under the house actually was that missing foot of staircase and matched line for line and grain pattern for grain pattern.

That same luck did not follow throughout the house. In subdividing the house, for instance, a bathroom had been installed in the right hand side. Leaks accompanying that modernization caused the entire floor — including logs a foot wide, to be eaten through completely, necessitating their complete removal and replacement.

In any restoration project, one must be mindful of the “law of twos” — the project will cost twice as much as expected and take twice the amount of time allotted. That law was fully in effect here, for any savings realized with finding the original staircase was offset by the replacement of an entire floor joist system.

The process of restoring a building obvious has been exaggerated to the layman. You simply call in brick masons, stone masons, plasterers, electricians, plumbers and carpenters, let them study the job and get back to you their best estimates.

When those estimates come in a week later, you leaf through them, pick yourself up off the floor and go to the library and check out every do-it-yourself book on the shelf concerning brick masonry, stone masonry, plastering, electricity, plumbing and carpentry.

By summer, emphasis had to shift toward getting the back addition liveable so that by winter it would be reasonably tight, reasonably warm and so that the utilities installed there would be safe. That summer was a blur of flooring, septic lines, moving, sheetrock, electric cables, insulation and cabinets, but our deadline was met and we were in the back section of the house full time by Labor Day.

At every opportunity, we looked for the chance of recycling house parts.

Every square nail that could be pulled from

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clapboard or flooring was straightened, wirebrushed and oiled for reuse along with identical square nails bought from restoration supply companies.

Atop the original plank floor was narrow tongue-and-groove flooring branded with the stamp of R.C. Owens, Hopkinsville, USA. We carefully removed that and once scrubbed, it was nailed into place in the new dining room, sanded and oiled.

By taking our time, we wound up with a vintage hardwood floor, that cleanly and appropriately serves as a transition between the old and new portions of the house.

Parts from similar houses being demolished also were scavaged. We received permission to take 30 panes of old glass, two doors and two cabinet doors from the Garrett house, being torn down that summer on U.S. 41-A. The rippled and flawed glass, once cut at Lovell's, matched perfectly the existing small panes to either side of the front door.

An old house being razed on Cleveland Avenue yielded beaded plank paneling in sufficient quantity to sheath the dogtrot staircase and the corner staircase in the living room.

Fitting new material to the old portion presented some unexpected problems. Each window hole on the front, for instance, is a different size and even with shimming, it required three different size windows to fill out the front.

That portion was built when a 2x4 actually was two inches by four inches, instead of today's nominal dimensions of 1 3/4 x 3 3/4, causing some lumber to have to be bought oversize and then pared down.

In every possible case, materials were bought in Christian County, but on such things as porcelain doorknobs and square nails one simply draws a blank shopping locally.

Some authenticity compromises had to be made in the interest of energy efficiency and warmth.

Between the logs, small lengths of wood originally had been forced and mortar applied to either side. Where those pieces of wood remained, they were retained. Where they were missing, 3-inch thick styrofoam insulation was forced with screen stapled to either side so mortar would adhere.

Steinback must have had our situation in

mind when he wrote "The winter of our discontent," for our first winter was one of frustration, enduring it with two kerosene heaters and an electric blanket and keeping my parent's house in mind as a safety valve.

If misery loves company, we weren't alone, if that's a consolation. Field mice from the adjoining corn field made themselves at home until the worst part of the winter when they finally gave up. As tight as we could make the old portion, some pneumonia holes remained, big enough for an occasional housecat passing through the neighborhood.

On one night, we were awakened by the then-familiar clickety-clack of cat's paws on the floor followed by a shrill scream and struggle as two felines mixed it up in the middle of our future living room.

On another night, I dismissed a movement at my feet as nothing more than Toni curling deeper into the quilts. That next morning I awakened face-to-foot with what had to be the biggest black cat I ever had seen. He apparently was just passing through and after a day or so, the cold got to him too and he headed for a barn on the adjoining farm.

Keeping a thin trickle of water running from each of the inside faucets normally kept the water safe but as it spashed in the tub it formed a massive block of ice in one end that periodically had to be removed. Having the skin of ice form across the commode bowl definitely will cramp one's style but wrapping a heat tape around the bowl solved that problem.

All this time, we had hoped against hope that at least one of the two chimneys would be rebuilt in time for our wood-burning stove to contribute to the cause. The contractor, after all, had promised they would be finished by the first week in November.

Well, the first one finally was finished on Feb. 2 and the other one on April 1.

With winter finally over, a much more pleasant lifestyle became possible and never once did Toni or I complain about summer's heat.

Some of our most fascinating discoveries were to come as the old section was unsealed from the winter and restoration work began.

In order to reflect light inside the rooms, all of the walls originally were whitewashed. In order to create a smoother wall, every crack or seam in the logs had to be filled before the whitewash was brushed onto them.

Removing whitewash and scrubbing the bedroom walls uncovered dozens of small scraps of the Kentucky New Era, all dated in January and February of 1871, indicating almost certainly that the construction date of the right hand section was in the early 1870s.

As fascinating as the dates were to us, the contents and advertisements contained upon them proved even more revealing.

Here were ads for the Shoo-Fly Saloon on Main Street, legal notices for supplying milk to Western State Hospital and a directory of churches in the city. Notable was the fact that saloons outnumbered churches nearly two to one.

The most touching finding was this description of Reconstruction in the Hopkinsville:

"What now is the condition of affairs? We have the same generous, enlightened and energetic white population. Our rich and productive soil is still here. The farms and houses yet remain — but nearly every vestige of prosperity has vanished; all around us we see farms neglected, fences fallen down, houses dilapidated, bushes and briars in the places previously occupied by shrubs and flowers. Despondency and gloom instead of happy cheerfulness. Why is this? It is the result of the late unhappy war."

Actual daubing began at the end of spring rains using a mixture of one part mortar, four parts lime and six parts sand. A chunk of original mortar had been taken to the Breathitt Animal Diagnostic Lab here wherethat formula roughly was verified and the binder that helped hold the mortar together was identified as hog hair.

Cleaning what was to become our living room yielded six wheelbarrows of dirt and old mortar.

Detective work remains one of the most fascinating aspect of the project. Take for instance the corner staircase in what was to become the living room.

In the thirty or forty years that the left hand side stood alone as a house, the only access from one floor to another was through a corner staircase, a compact engineering marvel in which one walked up three steps, pivoted three steps and walked the rest of the way to the second floor.

Because of that single access, that upstairs room often was referred to as "The Daughter's Room" since parents traditionally would sleep on the first floor near the fireplace and the daughter or daughters would sleep upstairs therefore having to pass through the parents' bedroom to get to and from her own room.

That staircase was removed when the house was remodeled in the 1960s and the walls and ceiling covered with plasterboard. Removing that revealed the whitewashed outline of the corner staircase on both walls and allowed me to measure their angles.

Remember, now, that farmers never threw anything away.

Nailed to the hewn ceiling beams was a four-foot section of the staircase stringer that had been used to help secure the new plasterboard to the

ceiling and what we thought were simply planks filling the hole passing from downstairs to upstairs turned out to be the original stair treads.

Adding one thing to another and that to still another and looking at similar stairs built at approximately the same period gave us enough guidance to rebuild the project with fair confidence that the home's original occupants would recognize it.

Three years into the project, the restoration work now is largely done. Trim around doors and windows is being scavaged or duplicated, floors are being refinished and stone and brick fireplaces slowly are being rebuilt.

All in all, it has been a facinating project and, as if from osmosis, we have learned much from just listening to the house tell us what to do next and carefully reading details from nail holes and whitewash.

Only now have we had the relative luxury of time to go to the library and court house to study the who and when of the house.

A very cursory check indicates it to be the Allensworth homeplace, a farm family not appearing in the 1810 county census but appearing in the 1820 edition. The father, records show, came from Virginia, the mother from Tennessee.

The five children in one census all were said to have been born in Tennessee but in the next census, Kentucky was listed as their place of birth.

Was this sloppy bookkeeping or did this reflect the controversial revision in the state's boundary

The family cemetery not far from the home's original site spoke of details that the house couldn't, many of the sandstone tablets bearing last names as familiar then as they are today. One woman's date of death matched the date of birth of a four-year-old child, surely saying that the woman died in childbirth in that house by the cliffs of the Red River.

The old fashioned construction work has been a challenge at times and admittedly, restoring a mantel to its original position and a rebuilding a staircase and stone fireplace has been rewarding, but we believe our biggest contribution has been the conservation of a man-made resource — a distinctively Christian County resource — and returning to it the smells of Christmas, the laughter of children and the warmth of friendships.

Again, this is not an argument against new construction, nor is it a call to preserve every brick, stone and pane of glass from the past. Rather, it is a cry to look around us closely at what exists and to be sensitive in our re-use and preservation.

