Excavating a Mid-Nineteenth-Century Log House in Champaign County, Illinois

Preface

Using our vacation benefits, my architect cousin, Doug Eichelberger, and I tackled the dismantling of a mid-nineteenth-century log house in 1994 during October's middle two weeks. Doug mapped out the tasks; Bina my Border Collie oversaw our progress; family and friends dropped by to help.

I researched and drafted the first section of the narrative that follows—*Log House – Preliminary Study*—in September 1994 to prepare for the project and help interpret the site and whatever particulars we might uncover. We also used it to inform others of our plans, consult with some subject matter experts, and recruit volunteers to assist. A local television reporter visited the site and recorded/broadcast a short news story on our work. Regrettably in retrospect, available time and energy precluded inserting detailed notes on the draft's many sources. To partly compensate I outlined a list of some materials consulted.

In August 2026 I dusted off and revisited the text to lightly copy edit and somewhat expand it—most noticeable on pages 4-5 [Indigenous presence], 7-10 [Sodom neighborhood], and 16 [Charles Stormer]. I based the added material and review of the 1994 text on file materials on hand; sources held elsewhere were not re-accessed to otherwise confirm details written in 1994.

Also regrettably, our necessary return to workplace routines in 1994 and beyond impeded an initial intent to compile findings and conclusions, which we never accomplished. The second section—*Findings, Speculations, Destination*—offers a thumbnail, largely memory-based summary of what we learned through Doug's expertise and where the dismantled materials ended up. This overview was also prepared August 2026.

Sketches of the site layout and selected photos follow these two sections.

Gordon Oyer
August 2026

I. Log House – Preliminary Study

General Background

Location: Northwest corner of the intersection of township roads 3450 North and 700 East, East Bend Township, Champaign County, Illinois. The legal description of the tract on which it stands is the Southeast Quarter of the Northeast Quarter of Section 7, Township 22 North, Range 8 East of the Third Principal Meridian. The site is less than a mile east of neighboring Brown Township and 1½ miles south of the Ford-Champaign county line.

Origin of Interest. The house has been in the family of my great-grandfather, Christian Oyer, since 1902. Family folklore preserved stories that the oldest part of the house was originally a "log cabin." This explained, so the story went, why the walls to this section were thicker than elsewhere in the house. Further, this older, one-room section was known to rest on large, round logs. The stairwell to the basement under a newer section had been cut through the floor of the original structure, and the ends of these foundation logs were clearly visible from the basement stairway.

In early 1993, another of Christian's great-grandsons, my cousin Doug Eichelberger, raised the possibility of dismantling the house and exposing the logs. An architect living in Denver, Colorado, Doug was interested in seeing how the log portion had been constructed and connected to the adjoining frame structures. Doug contacted me about jointly pursuing such a project before the house was demolished. Besides the normal interest generated by the possibility of a log structure in our extended family's history, I was also interested as an amateur historian to learn more about the region's early settlement, and the project promised to shed light on its development and early living conditions.

That same spring a contractor friend and myself visited the house and sought to verify that a log structure existed here. Although the house was unoccupied, its fate was not yet decided, and we wanted to minimize the invasiveness of our search. After looking at the walls and drilling two or three holes, it appeared that the inside wall was regular plaster and lath. A hole drilled from the outside also appeared to hit plaster of some sort, so we concluded it was probably not log, but constructed with unusually wide studs, and this plus the siding and lath and plaster might account for the walls' width.

In August 1994, Doug visited Illinois and we decided to look at the dwelling again. The house was scheduled for demolition in the fall, so we had greater latitude in probing the walls' structure. Upon pulling siding from the east side of the house, we found its wall was indeed constructed of rough-hewn wood. [*See photos*] The size of the horizontal wood members we exposed ranged from 13 to 16 inches in width and had been hewn to a thickness of about 5 inches. Wide gaps existed between the members, and the chinking in these gaps consisted of wood wedges and some sort of mortar. Bark remained on the edges of the large timbers next to the chinking. The horizontal timbers showed marks left by the hewing process. When exposed, the corner where north and east walls met revealed notched joints. We also examined small portions of the north and west walls and confirmed they were at least partly log-constructed. We noted as well that narrower, bark-covered, quarter- or half-round logs comprised the interior supports for the north gable.

We next contacted the present owner, our second cousin Larry Birkey, for permission to dismantle the house and learn more about its origin and construction, not knowing if the process would yield anything worth preserving. Larry was quite supportive, provided the work was completed prior to November, and we initiated plans to proceed toward that goal.

Description of House: [*See sketches 1-3*] The log section forms only one room of the present house. The interior of this one-story log structure measures about 18.5 feet x 18.5 feet. The room's east and west internal walls rise to a height of a little over seven feet, after which the interior side follows the angle of the roof line for several inches toward the apex of the rafters until meeting the ceiling, which crosses horizontally to the other side. A chimney stands on the inside of the north end of this room; the chimney would have served a stove, as no evidence of a fireplace exists. An opening has been cut through the logs in the north wall's center, beside the chimney, measuring about 2.5 feet wide and over 6 feet tall. This may have been a doorway—it is difficult to judge its original function or when it was made. At some point it had been filled in with shelving. A door has also been cut in the same north wall, close to the room's northeast corner, to provide access to a room added to the north. The west wall has two windows (sash with "four-over-four" panes) and one door. The east wall has one door and one (sash/"four-over-four") window.

To the north of this log room a one-story kitchen was added, making the north wall of the log structure an interior wall. The kitchen's east exterior wall is flush with the log structure's east wall, but its south wall does not extend the full width of the older portion, and so its west wall is not flush with the log room's west wall. The kitchen interior measures about 14.5 feet wide and 12.5 feet long and also has a brick stove chimney at its north end.

A bathroom has been added to the west of this addition and to the north of the log structure. Its south wall extends beyond the west side of the log structure, so the bathroom's west wall is positioned beyond the log structure.

To the south of the log portion lies a two-story frame addition with a basement underneath, and another two-story addition lies to the east of the first two-story addition. Where these additions meet the log structure, at what would have been the original log house's south side, the fourth log wall was apparently removed. The resulting "L" formed by the north side of the second two-story addition and the east side of the log structure has an enclosed porch running along the log portion's east side, and some sort of utility room is attached to the porch and the north side of the second two-story addition. An open porch was added on the west side of the log structure, and the addition south of the log structure also has a (south-facing) open porch.

Preliminary Analysis: We cannot draw any firm conclusions until the project is completed, but from briefly reviewing literature and our discussions with preservationists, some observations can be made for further investigation. Since the logs were hewn to such a narrow thickness (5") it can be classified, according to some typologies, as "planking." Because the logs are not fully round, it would technically not be called a "log cabin," but a "log house" or, according to some, a "plank house." It was apparently common for such structures to be seen as an efficient way to provide structural support for a house in areas where milled lumber was not readily accessible or when it could not be afforded. Though made with logs, these constructions were substantial and intended to be permanent, not

makeshift. In many cases the log structure was intended *only* for support and to be sided immediately. In other cases, the logs served as the building's exterior surface.

One immediate question, therefore, is whether these logs ever served as the exterior surface. One preservationist indicated that if the furrowing strips to which the siding is attached are fit into grooves cut into the logs, it was definitely intended to be immediately sided. The strips on this house were tacked to the outside, not fit in grooves, so that test is inconclusive. Another test is whether the wood is weathered. My inexperience cannot determine whether the surface texture and color is due to weathering or normal aging and drying. Many of the hew marks, however, still appear fine and delicate, suggesting they were not exposed to the elements for long.

The square floor plan fits what one authority terms an "English Single-Pen Plan" [Terry G. Jordan, *American Log Buildings: An Old World Heritage* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press: 1985)]. The notching, angled on both sides to prevent the logs from working apart at the joints, is probably "full-dovetail," a rarity among common practice.

Other questions include determining how the logs were modified to incorporate the additions, whether the chimney bricks were locally-made, whether the chimneys are original, whether the house may have been moved from another site, composition of the chinking, dating of additions, dating and composition of interior plaster and wallpaper, dating of windows, determining whether the cellar was once external and in place prior to the construction of the two-story addition above it, whether walls were moved when the second two-story addition was erected, whether the plaster and lath on the one-room kitchen addition matches the plaster and lath in the log structure (suggesting an early date for the addition), whether the ceiling was original or added later, and no doubt many more.

[Note: House classification terminology seems to be a matter of preference. Most agree that "log cabins" were made with round logs and intended to be temporary. Some reserve the term "log house," however, for use when the logs are round or when the thickness has not been hewn much narrower than the width; when hewn to a relatively narrow width, as in this case, the term "plank house" would be applied. Others reserve the term "plank house" for structures comprised of thin (1-2") *vertical* planks, which form the structural support for the roof. But most of the 5-6 preservationists spoken to seemed comfortable with applying the description "*log house*," regardless of whether or not the "planking" was ever intended to be an exterior surface or only structural support—that term is adopted here.]

History of the Land and House

Indigenous Presence. Indigenous use of the area mostly had ended by the time Euro-Americans began to noticeably occupy east central Illinois, though their traces lingered in its topsoil. Over the nine years during which Verle Oyer farmed a 112-acre parcel one section north of the site, he retrieved about ten arrow or spear points and a stone axe head during fieldwork there.

The Illini/Illiniwek bands who dominated the Illinois River Valley when the French arrived there in the late seventeenth century declined during the eighteenth century through war and disease. A major battle between an Illiniwek/French alliance and the Meskwaki (also called Fox) was fought in

1730 near the Sangamon River headwaters, less than twenty miles upstream from the log house site. The Illiniwek eventually were forced to cede all claims to the region in treaties of 1818 (when Illinois gained statehood) and 1832, together intended to secure Indigenous cessions for all central Illinois land. These treaties also required their relocation westward, first to Missouri and then Kansas and Oklahoma. In this process they joined with some other culturally-related tribal remnants into a single consolidated tribe.

As the French abandoned the region and the Illiniwek influence declined, Kickapoo migrated from the north and settled in east central Illinois between the Wabash and Illinois rivers. Major Kickapoo encampments were sited along the Vermilion River near Danville, about forty miles southeast of the house site, and at a "Grand Village" near LeRoy, about twenty miles due west of the site. The Kickapoo were also parties to 1818 and 1832 treaties and the same westward relocation as the Illiniwek, but individuals and small groups lingered in the area for decades. Tales of regional interactions with Indians would surface into the 1880s, though it remains unclear whether those had remained or returned again following removal.

Some also report an early nineteenth century Potawatomi presence in the area. Chief Shemauger Park in Urbana is named after an apparent Potawatomi leader said to have held a "great council" near Urbana's Big Grove sometime between 1825-1845 and signed a treaty with local residents. In 1838 a Potawatomi forced removal "Trail of Death" march from northern Indiana to Kansas passed through the Urbana area in the county's heart.

East Bend community folklore recounts that in the early decades of the twentieth century a mother and two adult sons—reportedly Indigenous—sheltered among the timber where Hillsbury Slough feeds into the Sangamon River, about three miles southeast of the log house site. The men were known locally as the "Hillsbury boys," and they subsisted from hunting, trapping and fishing. They lived about a mile from the East Bend Mennonite Church; one of its pastors occasionally visited them and conducted the mother's funeral in the 1920s or 30s. The two men are buried in the township Beekman Cemetery. When the family arrived and what band identity they may have claimed was not preserved. Yet regardless of this anecdote, for all intents and purposes, Indigenous peoples no longer occupied this landscape by the time we presume the log house was built.

Regional Settlement. East Bend Township is situated in the northwest corner of Champaign County, Illinois, and its corner where the house sits today borders Brown Township to the west and Ford County's Dix Township to the north. Though formed in 1833, Champaign County was one of the later Illinois counties actually settled, and this spot was one of the last settled in the county. The adjoining Ford County to its north was last in Illinois to organize. Consequently, cruder housing structures were likely erected later in this community than in other areas of the state.

Champaign and Ford Counties were originally covered with prairie. The only exceptions were groves of trees that dotted the prairie and followed the course of rivers and streams. One of the more thorough early Champaign County chroniclers, J. O. Cunningham, indicates these timbered areas tended to lie on the north and east side of streams, rivers, and ponds. He attributed this to the tendency for prairie fires to move with autumn winds that blew from the south and west. Any plant growth in the path of these fires would be destroyed, but the water impeded the fires' spread and

protected growth on the opposite banks. Early survey maps of the area show the timber line along the northeast bank of the Sangamon River in northern East Bend Township to have extended much further than on the west side. The timber line charted on these maps indicates that timber would have extended to within about one third of a mile of the log house site. [*See county map*]

These timber regions were the first choice of settlement for the county's early inhabitants. They avoided the very swampy, hard-to-cultivate open prairie which was susceptible to fires in the dry fall. They also felt the prairies bred disease. Timbers, on the other hand afforded protection from wind and fire, stood near water, and provided a ready source of nearby building materials that did not need to be transported far. Besides deferring to fears of prairie-borne disease, moving these materials out onto the prairie for construction would require extra work. The earliest roads made their way across the prairie from timber to timber, and probably followed what were originally animal, then Native American, trails. Because the prairie was swampy and dotted with large ponds, travelers were required to proceed along higher ground as available.

Settlers began to appear in the East Bend region in the mid-1830s. One of the first was Ethan Newcom, who settled "in the early thirties" along the Sangamon near what is now the eastern edge of Fisher. His home was located at a ford in the Sangamon that became known as "Newcom's Ford." Another, William B. King, settled in 1834 at another Sangamon crossing point farther upstream in what is now Brown Township. Both of these settlers lived on the west bank of the river. The log house site is about one mile northeast of the Sangamon (and east of its “Little Sangamon”/Drummer Creek tributary), 4½ miles due north of Newcom's Ford, and four miles due east of King's crossing. The first settler of Cheney’s Grove (now Saybrook) in McLean County, about eight miles upstream from King’s crossing, arrived there in 1825. About nine miles downstream from Newcom’s Ford, the first settler of Middletown (now Mahomet) arrived in 1832.

Champaign County histories record names of only three families who settled in this corner in the 1830s, three in the 1840s, and about ten who arrived in the first half of the 1850s. An 1884 Ford County historical atlas names only twenty-one “early settlers” of later-settled Dix Township. Cunningham might imply faster settlement, indicating that in the Sangamon Timber "up to 1850 not one fourth of the prairie lands had been entered [in land acquisition records] while the timber lands had all, or nearly all, been taken." But this is a bit misleading since much of this land was acquired by absentee owners, some from older settlements near Homer and Urbana, presumably as speculative investments. Cunningham's treatment of the Sangamon timber also focuses more on the region near Middletown/Mahomet, settled earlier than the area north of Fisher. Most land acquisitions to which he refers, then, do not reflect the actual inhabitation of this area—particularly of the East Bend neighborhood north of the Sangamon between Newcom's Ford and King's crossing.

During the area's early days, a major road passed through this region. It was known locally as the "Danville and Ft. Clark Road," which extended from Danville to what is now Peoria on the Illinois River. This was actually part of a much larger pathway across the Midwest, a major avenue of early westward travel. Its earliest course through Champaign County passed a few miles north of present-day Urbana, angled northwest to cross the Sangamon at Newcom's Ford, followed the southwest bank of the river to ford back again at King's crossing, continued up the river’s north side to Cheney's Grove, and then crossed the prairie to Bloomington and Peoria. It therefore passed close to the log

house site, but on the opposite side of the river. Cunningham reports that after Champaign County was formed (1833) and Urbana became county seat, the road was diverted south of the Big Grove to Urbana. Soon the more-traveled route to Peoria extended due west from Urbana to Middletown/Mahomet and followed the general path of what are now U. S. Highway 150 and Interstate 74, bypassing Newcom's Ford and the upper Sangamon route. He explains that, "This road, as traveled since about 1835, now [1905] forms not only the main traveled road between the eastern part of the State on the east, and Peoria on the west, but constitutes, in fact, the main streets in the cities of Danville, Urbana, Mahomet, Farmer City, Le Roy, and Bloomington."

Thus the original Danville-Fort Clark Road would have significantly declined in use by the time all but the earliest East Bend area settlers arrived. But it seems likely that original route through the community would have lingered as a local route for some time and afforded area residents with an accessible route to the older, more developed settlements of Urbana and Homer to the southeast and Cheney's Grove to the northwest.

Sodom Neighborhood. Cunningham notes that this space on the northeast bank of the Sangamon nonetheless developed a distinct identity as a neighborhood:

> There was "Sodom," a neighborhood above the village of Fisher, which was afterward used as the name of a post office established there. Why the location got this name so suggestive of evil reputation, is not known. So "Wantwood" was applied to a treeless expanse of prairie reaching north from the head of the Sangamon timber, the early settler knew not how far.

Wantwood apparently referred to the southwestern corner of modern Ford County, between the Sangamon Timber and Gibson City; a country school just south of Gibson City in Drummer Township carried the name "Wantwood School."

The log house was situated further south than Gibson City, near the Sodom neighborhood's Sangamon timber. With Cunningham, we still don't know when and why the name Sodom was first attached to this settlement. A postal site was established here under the name Sodom in 1853 as the fourth postal location in Champaign County following Urbana, Homer, and Mahomet. [That last post office was named "Mahomet" when first established in 1840, though the town itself remained "Middletown" until it also was changed to "Mahomet" in 1871.] Sodom retained its name until 1857 when the postal stop was re-named "East Bend." That a post office was established so early in such a remote area of the county, not yet organized into a separate township, implies resourcefulness on the part of residents, perhaps especially of its first postmaster. The particular postal site changed throughout its duration, implying it was housed in the postmaster's dwelling rather than as a freestanding "office."

Champaign County Historical Archives records capture an early incident centered at the first Sodom postal site, the presumed home of Thompson Dickson, its initial postmaster and supposed builder of the log house at hand. In 1854 Dickson filed a complaint "before Isaac Devore A justice of the Peace" against one of his neighbors, Harvey Taylor. Taylor appears in this community the 1850 census, and an 1863 map shows that a swath of land immediately west of Dickson's property then belonged to "H. Taylor Heirs." Devore appears in both the 1850 and 1860 censuses, and that same 1863 map shows that he owned land straddling the Sangamon just a mile south of Dickson.

Dickson's complaint indicated Taylor should be arrested because on August 24 of that year "at Sodom

Precinct," Taylor threatened to "shoot and break the head" of Dickson. Taylor was brought to court and required to post bond of $250 until trial. The ultimate resolution of the case is not known. But given that the biblical Sodom's great sin was violent inhospitality toward strangers/foreign guests, this incident leaves an impression of the place's early "roughness" that might hint at why it could receive the infamous name.

The relative marginality of this area is illustrated by its vulnerability in nearly being absorbed into formation of a new, separate county in the mid-to-late 1850s. Settlement of the swampy Grand Prairie expanded in this area as its use transitioned from vast tracts for grazing cattle to smaller tracts of cultivated farmland. The especially swampy land of the Sodom area contributed to it being one of the last areas in the state settled and organized. The irregularly-shaped expanse of land that would become Ford County was not organized as such when Sodom established its postal site; at that time it was attached to Vermilion County (east of both it and Champaign County) for judicial purposes.

In 1855 some residents of eastern McLean County petitioned the state to form a new Harrison County with Cheney's Grove (now Saybrook, about eleven miles upstream from Sodom) as its county seat. This new county would appropriate fully the western third of McLean County, the northwest corner of Champaign County that today reflects Brown Township (with its western segment of Sodom neighborhood), and a six-mile strip of land along the west side of the unorganized territory.

Champaign County leaders seemed not to mind. Writing now as editor of the Urbana *Union* newspaper, J. O. Cunningham opined: "The district to be erected into a new county is so remote from every county seat, and the loss of the several pieces will be felt so little, that we think no one in our county will have any objection to voting 'for the new county.'" When the three affected counties put the question to ballot in June 1855, Champaign County residents voted in its favor 429-130. Because a significant number of residents from the more populous McLean and Vermilion Counties objected, though, the measure was defeated. But it shows how little most Champaign County residents then valued that corner of their territory.

A second threat arose just two years later, as new towns were appearing along the newly (1854) constructed Illinois Central Railroad, which angled through the eastern corner of the unorganized territory and the heart of Champaign County. Some of those communities strategized how to become a focal point for the stretch of railroad that lay between the towns of Kankakee and Urbana. Two adjacent communities situated in the eastern corridor of the unorganized territory each launched campaigns to become the county seat for a new Holmes County. This entity would combine the full unorganized territory (i.e., all of today's Ford County) with an entire six-mile-deep swath of Champaign County's northern tier and a small western corner of Vermilion County (which would later include Rankin). This would incorporate the entire Sodom neighborhood and also slice the nearby railroad town of Rantoul in half.

The Loda community lobbied heavily for this outcome in the winter of 1856-57, and Prospect City (soon renamed Paxton) did so in 1857. Initially editor Cunningham held to his earlier position, writing in December 1856 that, "We dislike losing any of our territory, but as they are a pretty good set of fellows up there, we don't care if they help themselves to a small slice." But three-and-a-half months later he reversed his opinion, writing an extended critique of the proposal. He invoked county

"self-preservation" and asserted that "every citizen of the county has a direct interest in retaining the six mile strip." He closed, "Our friends who ask us to vote them away are, so far as we are acquainted with them, first rate fellows, which is a very strong argument for keeping them in our county."

The Loda proposal never made it to a vote, but on April 7, 1857, the Prospect City proposal returned only 143 Champaign County votes for and 243 against; Vermilion County voted overwhelmingly against to defeat it. Two years later, Ford County formally organized consisting entirely of the remaining unorganized territory without absorbing any part of already-existing counties. That same year, 1859, Prospect City was renamed as Paxton and designated as Ford's county seat. *[The last eight paragraphs are based on Michael D. Sublett, "Preserving the Territorial Integrity of Champaign County, Illinois: 1855-1867" (1980), typescript, Champaign County Historical Archives.]*

Back on the Sangamon's north bank, the Sodom post office in 1857 was renamed "East Bend," derived from how the river changes course nearby from a southeasterly to southwesterly direction, hence representing its easternmost bend. It would not surprise if some area residents' petition that same year for a Methodist minister to serve them locally might have encouraged christening their community with a more hospitable name than one of biblical infamy. When the area was organized into a Champaign County township in 1860 it also received that more bucolic East Bend name. The western half of East Bend Township, beginning less than a mile west of the log house site, was separated in 1869 to become Brown Township.

The name Sodom lingered locally into later decades before fading from use. A history of the nearby Saybrook community mentions in passing that during the Civil War (1861-65), "Sodom" reputedly included Copperhead—or southern sympathizer/advocate—residents. The name continued in use as late as the1880s, as shown by a preprinted school report card form. Completed for "Joseph Kaufman," it was headed "Dixon College / Sodom, Illinois"—a local school most likely named after Thompson Dickson. This heading was followed by printed lines with blanks to be manually filled that read: "Report of …….. / for the month ending …….. 188….." with "Joseph Kaufman," "Sep 28." "3" handwritten in the three blanks. Joseph was the son of Magdalena Sutter Ingold Bachman Kaufman, mother of Mary Kaufman Stormer. As explained later, Mary and her new husband Charles Stormer purchased the log house site in 1881 and moved onto it as newlyweds in the spring of 1882, probably along with her mother Magdalena and brother Joseph. The preprinting of this report card with the year "188…" demonstrates that as of 1880 some still used "Sodom" to describe their neighborhood, despite having adopted "East Bend" as postal service and township names over two decades earlier.

Certain clues hint that at least some Sangamon area Sodom families in the 1870s and 1880s may have paid little heed to the arbitrary boundaries of county lines and associated with their Ford County neighbors north of the Sangamon more than with those south of it toward Fisher. As one hint, August Ingold, Magdalena Kaufman's son, lived in Ford County before arriving in East Bend Township in mid-1882, offering inter-county relationship-building opportunities there. Another hint points to recurring references to Ford County's Wagonner family in an East Bend context. The Ford County 1884 atlas shows J. S. Waggoner living north of the log house site across the county line in section 33 of Dix Township (perhaps another "Dickson" derivative?), 2½ miles north and 2 miles east of the log house site. That same atlas also names George Waggoner as an early resident of Dix Township. Joseph Kaufman's Dixon "college" 1883 report card showed "Steve Wagonner" preprinted as "principal," with

the names “Charley Waggoner” and “Joseph Kaufman” handwritten on the back, suggesting a possible classmate/friendship bond between two boys.

After Joseph Kaufman’s 1884 death from Typhoid, his family chose to bury him in the “Waggoner Cemetery” on J. S. Waggoner’s Ford County land. At first glance that seems an odd choice, given that a Beekman Cemetery lay across the Sangamon only a mile south of the Kaufman/Stormer house. Former log house residents Thompson (1858) and Cynthia (1864) Dickson were buried in Beekman Cemetery over two decades earlier.

But that 1884 atlas also names J. S. Waggoner’s house as the site of Dix Township’s first religious service, “led by Rev. Mr. Wenner, who was a United Brethren minister,” without giving the year. The United Brethren had formed in the early 1800s from Pennsylvania German pietist and Mennonite roots, and they retained openness to the traditional Amish religious rite of ceremonial footwashing. Provided Renner conducted services there over time, the Kaufmans and other Amish Mennonite residents may have felt a natural affinity with such United Brethren-led services and worshiped with them before establishing their own local congregation in 1889. In fact, the first six burials of the Amish Mennonite community that settled in this neighborhood during the 1880s and1890s were also interred in the Wagonner Cemetery, suggesting they as a group initially preferred its use over the Beekman Cemetery. The congregation later briefly would use the Beekman Cemetery for four burials after first organizing and worshiping in the Houstonville Methodist Church building a couple miles southeast of the Kaufman/Stormer house and before it erected its own church house in 1895 and started its own cemetery the following year.

The Waggoner burial ground was also known as the Blackford Cemetery, perhaps named after James A. and Ephraim Blackford, who the 1884 Ford County atlas names as early Dix Township settlers, despite not appearing as landowners on that year’s map. A later drainage ditch constructed in the early twentieth century, which flows from southern Dix Township and empties into Dickerson Slough in northern East Bend Township, also carries the Blackford name. These same early Dix Township settlers also appear on a list of “East Bend Postmasters” filed in the Champaign County Historical Archives: John S. Wagonner (November 1859 to December 1860), Ephraim M. Blackford (December 1860 to March 1863), James A. Blackford (April 1866 and July 1867).

That archival summary of East Bend post office’s thirty-three years of existence notes it was “at times located in Dix township in Ford County and at times in East Bend Township in Champaign County.” An 1876 Ford County map shows “East Bend P.O.” labeled in Dix Township’s section 28, two miles north of the Champaign County line. In addition to Waggoner and the two Blackfords, at least three other (possibly more) Dix Township residents appear in that East Bend postmaster list, plus another who lived in southern Drummer Township immediately west of Dix. In 1887 the East Bend post office was discontinued and moved farther north in Dix Township to the town of Elliot.

Taken together, these archival pieces allude to a Sodom/East Bend neighborhood center of gravity that came to lie north of the Champaign County line with its southern fringe along the Sangamon’s north banks—rather than remain centered farther south along the Sangamon river’s actual “east bend” in the heart of today’s East Bend Township. It initially may have taken shape along the Sangamon timber, but gravitated northward as Dix Township’s prairie became increasingly drained

and settled. Its evolution also illustrates how humans intuitively respond more readily both to bonds of mutual affinity that form and to natural landscapes and terrain—the Sangamon's course and its timbers, the wet prairies and its sloughs—than to the artificial political boundary lines we construct.

Regional Development. The arrival and location of sawmills, a topic not thoroughly dealt with in county histories, holds significance for this project. The first mills in Champaign County were powered by water and erected in Sidney (1834; 25 miles from the house site), Homer (1834; 30 miles), and Urbana 1836, 1840, 1842; 18 miles). The 1836 Urbana mill did not last long, but the owner "subsequently erected a grist and saw-mill on the Sangamon River at Middletown [Mahomet]" (founded 1836; 12 miles). A sawmill was constructed as early as 1838 in Cheney's Grove, about eleven miles northwest up the Sangamon River into McLean County.

Middletown lay a bit closer to the log house site than other Champaign County communities but was perhaps less accessible. Early residents probably could follow the Sangamon for the nine miles between the Newcom's Ford and Middletown communities, but when that route could first support wagons hauling lumber remains unknown. Local remnants of the original Danville–Fort Clark Road would have continued to offer a wagon trail from Cheney's Grove to nearby King's crossing four miles away, and from Homer and Urbana to Newcom's Ford. Both routes could then proceed along the Sangamon near to the house site on its opposite side. I could not determine when a bridge crossing the Sangamon at Sodom was first constructed to facilitate wagon transport; an 1863 map shows a bridge a couple miles southeast downstream, but not immediately south of the log house site.

In 1850 the county's first steam-powered mill used to cut wood was erected in Urbana. An 1854 article in the *Chicago Press* noted that "lumber [in Urbana] is very scarce, though two steam mills are constantly sawing.... In addition to the two saw-mills is a steam lath-mill, bass-wood or linden being used in making lath. In the yards of those mills I noticed logs from the [Big Grove (north of Urbana)] varying in size from one to four feet in diameter, much of it being black walnut, the residue oak, ash, etc." [Quoted from Cunningham.] This comment suggests that by 1854 lath for interior plaster wall construction was available in the community. Supposedly one steam mill was operated by a man named James Dean who opened it in the early 1850s. It primarily made ties for the Illinois Central railroad, which arrived in the county in 1854. Arthur Orr Howell erected a sawmill near Urbana soon after 1865. A sawmill was erected 4-5 miles south of Newcom's Ford in the 1860s. In 1858, Urbana reported 6 lumberyards in operation; one began in West Urbana (later Champaign) in 1855.

An accessible steam sawmill also could have been accessible in other counties. Leroy, 25 miles due west in McLean County, had a steam mill by 1853. Though Mount Pleasant—later named Santa Anna and now Farmer City (about 20 miles southwest in Piatt County)—was a thriving settlement in the 1830s, '40s, and '50s, I found no reference to a sawmill there. No significant communities existed in southern Ford County until the late 1850s when Prospect City/Paxton was founded as a railroad town; Gibson City, seven miles north of the house, was settled in the late 1860s. Ford County sites could not have provided a source of milled lumber when the log structure was built.

Given this information, we know milled lumber was present in the area well before 1850. The availability of lumber for home construction and wagon routes to facilitate its transport to the house site remains unknown, which clouds learning when lumber became readily accessible north of the

Sangamon and rendered log construction here unnecessary. That said, Henry Sadorus, who settled in the southern part of the county in 1824, hauled lumber 90 miles from Covington, Indiana, in the 1820s. So a determined builder surely could have hauled milled lumber to the site by the early 1850s.

The year 1854 marks a point of no return for Champaign County and its environs, when a major force in region development—the Illinois Central Railroad originating in Chicago—arrived. A depot was constructed that year in Rantoul, about fifteen miles southeast of the site, as well as in Urbana, and another was built about 14 years later in Ludlow, ten miles due east. The railroad rapidly brought people, business, and merchandise, and its impetus sped development of the entire county, not just areas near the railroad. Branches of this and other railroads soon sprang up and prompted platting numerous towns on the prairie away from groves and timbers.

During the 1870s three railroads were laid closer to the house site. The Chicago and Paducah (later Wabash, St. Louis, and Chicago) laid tracks about five miles west of the site through today's Foosland and Gibson City. It reached the latter in 1871, where a depot was added sometime between that year and 1874, and Foosland in about 1872, where the depot was built in 1878. The Clinton, Gilman, and Springfield line angled in a few miles farther west and also reached Gibson City in about 1871; its Gilman terminus connected with the Illinois Central out of Chicago. The third nearby railroad was a spur branch of the Illinois Central chartered in 1876 that ran west from Rantoul and four miles to the south through Dewey and Fisher.

Drainage ditches were a second major force essential to the region's development, since they enabled cultivation of the formerly-swampy prairies once considered uninhabitable. Three natural sloughs that ran through East Bend Township and fed into the Sangamon were dredged into drainage ditches: Dickerson Slough, Wild Cat Slough, Hillsbury Slough. The exact timing of their dredging is unknown; they remained uncharted on an 1849 survey map and two atlases from 1863 and 1867, whereas an 1873 map shows all three. As mentioned above, it appears the entirely new Blackford ditch in Dix and northwest East Bend townships was not dug until the twentieth century.

When J. O. Cunningham first arrived at Urbana in 1853, he viewed Champaign County as still a "frontier county" despite "its position in a populous state and surrounded, not far away, by populous counties." Between the arrival of the railroad in the 1850s and the drainage ditches and branch railroad lines of the 1870s and 80s, the region began to fill rapidly. By then, use of logs to construct a dwelling would not be necessary.

Land Ownership

First Land Owner: William Adams: 1849-52. The land on which the house sits was purchased from the U. S. Government as a 40-acre tract in 1849 by William Adams. The only William Adams to appear in county histories during this era is described as an early settler who arrived in 1831 [though census records imply 1834-36] in the Big Grove north of Urbana, in what is now Somer Township. Land records indicate that in Somer Township "William Adams" bought 200 acres in 1836, another 160 acres in 1850, and still more in in 1851. He also bought land in today's Urbana Township in 1840 and 1850. Thus according to land records, in the year 1850 Adams owned 360 acres in Somer Township,

80 acres in Urbana Township, and 40 acres in what would become East Bend Township.

The 1850 census shows only two William Adams in the county—a father and 19-year-old son living in the same household, both born in Ohio. These Adamses lived in Somer Township and the father owned 360 acres of land there valued at $2500, only 50 of it improved; the son owned none. The elder Adams' wife was named Nancy (the only adult Nancy in the household), also the wife's name for William Adams "of Champaign County" who in 1852 sold the 40 acres of land on which the log house now stands. This indicates that the William Adams of the 1850 census lists was indeed the first owner of the house site. Because Adams had improved only 50 acres in the Urbana area, it seems safe to assume he did not live on the remote 40-acre tract in East Bend Township, and therefore did not build the log house. He, along with numerous others in the Urbana region, was probably an absentee owner and land speculator.

The 1850 census lists Ohio-born farmer Jeremiah Adams, 27, living in the county's northwest corner with wife Elizabeth and 21-year-old Lark Robinson, both born in Indiana. None of the three owned real estate. Jeremiah could have been another son of William, but the census analysis concluded he lived farther south in the area of today's Newcom Township rather than East Bend.

Second Land Owners: Thompson Dickson and Heirs: 1852-69. The builder of the log house was undoubtedly Thompson Dickson. County histories say he arrived from Ohio in 1852, the year he bought the 40-acre tract from William Adams in late December. Two months later, he bought another 40 acres adjoining that tract on its northern border. He became a prominent resident, appearing as a major contributor toward the hire of a Methodist minister for the community in 1857. He served as Sodom's first postmaster, and a local history indicates the Sodom post office was located in Thompson Dickson's house on Section 7. This shows that Dickson was inhabiting this 80-acre parcel and reinforces that he built the log house, which then likely served as the county's fourth postal site. One suspects the local names of Dixon School, Dickerson Slough, and perhaps even Ford County's Dix Township point back to his memory.

As mentioned before, the house is currently located on the south*east* corner of Dickson's first purchase, and an 1849 survey map indicates the timber line approached the south*west* corner of his parcel. One may wonder why the house was not erected closer to the timber line, since the builder must transport logs father than seems necessary. But Dickerson Slough drainage ditch today runs along the western edge of the property. Although this slough would not have existed as a dredged ditch in 1852/1853, they later tended to dredge along existing contours of water flow, so the course it now follows originally was probably low and marshy ground. If so, it would make sense to place the house on the tract's eastern edge, away from marshy land at the timber line.

As also mentioned above, the town of Urbana experienced a lumber shortage in 1854, although its two steam mills were "constantly sawing." One of these mills, established by James Dean circa 1850, "engaged largely in the manufacture of railroad ties ... for the construction of the Illinois Central Railroad, just then employing all the attentions and energies of the settlement [of Urbana]." Perhaps the steady market created by railroad construction and expanding housing needs this brought to Urbana and its West Urbana depot environs created a shortage of lumber for home construction. Such a shortage in turn may have influenced Dickson to resort to a hewn-log frame, with the intent to add

siding and expand when the shortage abated. He apparently arrived about a year before the railroad reached Urbana (1854), so this shortage may not have arisen until after Dickson was already settled on this land. A lack of good roads to transport milled lumber to the house site also could have influenced his selection of initial building materials.

At any rate, Thompson Dickson established his household somewhere on this parcel by 1853, and he soon became an integral part of community life. His occupancy here was short-lived, however, for he died in December 1858. He left no will, so his estate was processed though probate court. Settlement documents include an appraisers' bill that lists a stove and piping valued at $4.00 as part of the widow's allotment to be held from sale and another "cook stove & piping" in the body of the appraisal valued at $10.00. [The actual sale bill shows the sale of a stove for $13.00.] Did Dickson own two stoves? Would this indicate that the first addition with its second chimney was added by 1858?

Though speculation, the appraisal details suggest it; operating two stoves required two flues, possibly two chimneys. We do not know if a second chimney stood along the missing, fourth log wall (though two stoves in one room seems unlikely), but the Dicksons may have acquired a new stove and retained but not used the second. Stove information does not allow firm conclusions, then.

The probate file of Dickson's estate also reveals a variety of transactions with neighbors and others. The estate sued John W. Gideon, who lived in the same section immediately south of the Dickson land in 1863, for payment on a note he owed Dickson. When he failed to pay, a levy was issued against his horse. Gideon failed to turn over the horse, and a sheriff was sent to seize it. When the Sheriff arrived, the horse was not to be found. The court eventually sold Gideon's land to Dickson's son, Joseph M., and the estate and court costs were paid with the proceeds.

Dickson's estate also made claims against other individuals, and it received claims as well. One claim originated from J. P. Middlecoff, then a merchant at the newly established (ca. 1855) village of Pera (now Ludlow) on the Illinois Central line about 10 miles due east. In 1856, for unknown reasons, Dickson also had taken out a note for $322.59, payable to local school trustees.

The 1860 census shows that Thompson's widow Cynthia “Dickerson” (54 and a farmer), son Joseph (20), and son Thomas (14), along with an unidentified girl of 8 named Eliza Gyet, lived in the same household. (No Gyet family appears in the 1850 or 1860 censuses from this area, so perhaps she was a step-daughter or other relative.) In 1862 Thomas, then 16, was assigned to the guardianship of a neighbor, Noble Byers, who owned land in section 5 just northeast of the Dicksons. Perhaps he became Byers' hired hand. The guardianship papers indicated that Dickson's widow was still living on the land at the time.

Cynthia died two years later in 1864. Both she and Thompson were buried in the nearby Beekman cemetery just a mile away, south of the Sangamon. Joseph Dickson apparently acquired additional land in Section 8 of the township—an 1863 map shows "T. Dickson" as owner of the original 80 acres acquired in 1852 and 1853, plus an additional 160 acres in Section 8. It also shows a swath of land assigned to “T. Dickerson” farther west in section 7, separated by H. Taylor Heirs’ land and Dickerson Slough to the east with the Sangamon and its “Little Sangamon” (now Drummer Creek) tributary bordering to the west. Since as noted the 1860 census records this family as “Dickerson,” this parcel also apparently then belonged to the Dickson heirs, and it suggests how easily “Dickson” morphed

into “Dickerson” in official records. It also implies that “Dickerson Slough” had been named after the Dicksons. [An apparently unrelated Charles Dickerson lived one township farther east, so at least 5-10 miles from the slough, but his presence could contribute to recordkeeping name confusion.]

The 1863 Champaign County map also shows a school house situated on the south border of the Dicksons' 160 acres in Section 8. It was likely the original "Dixon School," over time located at different sites in the area up until consolidation in 1949, as well as the “Dixon College” of Joseph Kauffman’s 1883 report card. Perhaps the school house located on Dickson land also factored into the $322.59 note payable to school trustees at the time of Thompson’s 1858 death.

Thompson's son Joseph married Rachel Swayze in 1867 in Champaign County. By the time the Dickson brothers sold the land again in 1869, after Thomas had reached legal age, they resided in Davis County, Iowa.

Given that Dickson arrived as one of the region's early settlers when the land was within a fraction of a mile east of the Sangamon timber, it seems reasonable for him to initially resort to a log structure. He also might side and expand it with a one-story kitchen space soon after arrival. Having only two sons, a wife, and possibly a step-daughter, a two-room house, perhaps with a loft, could suffice. Since his teenaged son Thomas apparently moved out to live with neighbor Byers three years after Thompson’s death, leaving only his eldest son, widow, and possibly step-daughter as identifiable house residents, and since his wife then died in 1864 prior to his son Joseph's marriage, no more expansion seems warranted during their tenure.

All this supports, though fails to prove, that Thompson Dickson most likely built the log structure and possibly the one-story addition.

Third Land Owner: John T. McJilton: 1869-1881. Whether the house was expanded by the Dickson family or not, the next resident could use additional room. When John McJilton arrived from Woodford County, Illinois, and bought the land in 1869, he had a wife and five children—three sons and two daughters, with the youngest seven years old. This was his first acquisition in the county, and therefore undoubtedly his place of residence, though just a year later he bought another tract next door in section 8. Supporting this, a county history mentions the first post office as having been "on the farm where John McJilton now lives."

A biography of his son John Edward indicates the McJiltons arrived in 1868; since the Dickson brothers lived in Iowa at the time of the land sale, perhaps they were absent when the McJiltons arrived and the incoming family then lived on site pending finalization of their 1869 purchase. McJilton would also acquire yet another parcel in adjoining section 8, which he sold in 1882.

John McJilton was well-respected enough locally to hold township and school district public offices. After his departure for Kansas, only one of the McJilton sons married locally and remained in the area, another married locally but relocated out of state, and the other three also relocated out of state.

Given the size of McJilton's family, it seems reasonable for him to add at least one of the two-story frame additions between his 1869 purchase and his 1881 sale to its fourth owner. By 1868 the region was becoming more developed, and many township roads were in place (as revealed by county maps of 1863 and 1867), so surely he would not construct a more primitive log house.

Fourth Land Owners: Charles and Mary Stormer: 1881-1902. In December 1881, John McJilton sold the house site to Mary Stormer. Six months later she in turn sold it to her husband, Charles, after the newly married Stormers had arrived from Morton, Illinois, that spring to start farming the land. That same June, Mary's half-brother, August Ingold, also bought John McJilton's land in the adjoining section 8. August listed his residence at the time as Ford County, so he probably arrived in the area before the Stormers.

Mary's and August's thrice-married mother, Magdalene Sutter Ingold Bachman Kaufman (1821-1909), was widowed for the third time in 1872, a decade before her children appeared here. She most likely lived with one of these siblings at East Bend, given that her son Joseph (Mary's full brother, born 1866) attended "Dixon College" at Sodom the following year as noted above. Joseph tragically died of Typhoid a year later (1884) and was buried in Ford County's Waggoner/Blackford Cemetery, four miles northeast of the Stormer and Ingold land. When Magdalena bought land of her own two townships east in 1886, apparently as an investment, she listed her residence as East Bend.

Charles and Mary Stormer had only two daughters, the first born in 1885 and the second in 1898. But an 1885 directory lists Mrs. M. M. Kauffman and Charles F. Stormer as both living in section 7, with August Ingold in section 8. This suggests that Magdalena also lived in the Stormer household—she later died in her daughter's Nebraska home in 1909—and that her son Joseph also probably lived there before his 1884 death. The timing of Joseph's death and the first Stormer daughter's birth indicates no more than four would have lived in the Stormer household at any given time before the second daughter's 1898 birth, which does not offer strong motives for house expansion.

This extended family of Magdalena Kaufman appears to be the first Amish Mennonite residents of what became East Bend Amish Mennonite Church, formally established as a congregation in 1889. The Stormer house, with its partial log construction, could therefore claim to be the home of Champaign County's first Amish Mennonite residents. The congregation erected its 1895 meetinghouse one-and-a-half miles south of the log house site across the Sangamon, and it would grow to become a major Illinois Mennonite congregation by the mid-twentieth century.

Fifth Land Owners: Christian Oyer and Descendants: 1902-present. In 1902 Stormer sold this land to Christian Oyer, also Amish Mennonite. Oyer arrived with nine of his twelve children, ages 22 through 6. Oral tradition notes that Christian "did not put a good foundation under his house," hinting that he may have constructed one of the additions. This could refer to the second two-story addition with no basement, the last of the major modifications to the house. Christian died in 1929 and his will indicates the farm was to be rented for four years, with the proceeds to be given to his daughter Elsie as compensation for her care of him, and then sold. His son Joseph Oyer then purchased the land, which descendants of Christian and Joseph still own.

Preliminary Conclusion

Many questions regarding the house and its inhabitants remain. Hopefully the dismantling to occur in October 1994 will shed light on some of them. Whether or not this effort will yield a structure worth preserving remains to be seen. At the least, we hope to document the construction of a dwelling which

has seen many modifications over its life and gain some insight into how houses in the region evolved as the surrounding area became more developed and prosperous.

Gordon Oyer
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Copy edits/insertions, August 2026

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University of Illinois – Map and Geography Library and Illinois Historical Survey

Urbana Free Library

Champaign Public Library

Personal collections of Verle and Gordon Oyer

II. Findings, Speculations, Destination

Summary of Structural Component Findings

As shown in Sketches 1 and 2, aside from porches, a bathroom, and a utility room, the dwelling is comprised of four main components: The original ***log structure***; ***Addition 1*** - a one-story structure to its north; ***Addition 2*** - a two-story structure to its south; ***Addition 3*** – a two-story structure to the east of Addition 2. The following comments expand on the descriptions presented in the "General Background" section (pp. 2-4), based on findings during dismantling.

Log Structure. Given that the logs' external surfaces were not weathered and hew marks still appeared delicate, the exterior probably was sided soon after it was erected. Nothing indicated the log structure had ever been moved, so it most likely was built on its same 1994 site where we worked. The interior surfaces of the logs on all three remaining walls showed faded whitewash. The corners were joined with a mix of full- and half-dovetail notching.

Window openings on the **west wall** had been expanded/lengthened to install longer (6 ft) frame windows. The window south of the (front) door later was moved closer to the door to accommodate installation of a stairwell along the south wall. Half of this window's original opening and pegged framing within the logs remained intact to reveal the original window's height (3.5 ft), but that opening was filled in to allow completion of the stairwell's front wall. The narrowed space created between this modified south window and the front door had no logs, but was filled in with a sheet of canvas stretched between the door and a vertical plank against the north edge of the window.

Newspapers had been inserted in the gap between that canvas and the outer wall siding, likely for insulation. Most of the newspapers were too fragmented/deteriorated to identify except for the following fragments:

1) *Our Intermediate Bible Lesson* dated May 8, 1892
2) *Chicago Times* dated Wed. Sep ___, 1892
3) *Champaign County News* dated Sat. Dec 24, 1892
4) German printing in Gothic German font (very small fragment)
5) undated Champaign newspaper (referenced "Neil St. Pavement Accepted" with mentions of Second St., Springfield Ave, University Ave.)
6) undated Champaign newspaper (referenced "U of I")
7) undated English language Sunday school lesson.

These suggest the renovation may have been done in 1893 or later by Charles Stormer or possibly Chistian Oyer. During the last decades of the nineteenth century up to WWI Illinois Amish Mennonites used German for intra-community discourse and worship, and some church periodicals were published in German. Either occupant could have inserted them any time after, though Oyer would have had to save the papers for ten years and bring them from Woodford County.

The **north wall** had been modified to accommodate Addition 1 by cutting two new openings in the logs for 1) a door in the log structure's northeast corner between the log structure and Addition 1, and 2) an opening alongside and west of the brick chimney, presumably to accommodate recessed

storage—with the bottom probably for the wood or coal supply to burn in stoves—accessed from Addition 1. The brick chimney, placed against the wall east of center near the doorway and inside the log frame, accommodated a stove rather than a fireplace. An earlier, lower opening for piping had been filled in and a second usable opening was cut at a higher level. Raising the usable chimney opening might correspond with work to also elevate the ceiling, as suggested by the ceiling line along the east and west walls. There, where the vertical walls ended, they then angled up along the roof rafters for several inches to then meet the horizontal ceiling. The chimney was probably original to the log structure, though could have been added later—stove piping sometimes extended horizontally through a building's side wall near the ceiling, with exterior vertical piping to distribute it beyond the roof line outside.

The **east wall** also reflected log modification to expand/lengthen this side's only window. Its only door appeared to have been original. Some rot had begun on the top sill log of this side. Weathered and badly disintegrated newspaper fragments were found on top of the sill below the roof. Fragments of *Farm Journal* pages dated September 1943 along with two other fragments with references to events occurring in October 1942 suggest the papers were placed there in the mid-1940s. Their insertion might align with a later project either to raise the ceiling or to enclose the east porch.

All logs of the original **south wall** had been removed to join the log structure to Addition 2. The replacement wall was constructed with balloon framing of vertical studs and plastered lathwork. The stairwell with stairs to the basement under Addition 2 and to the second story of Additions 2 and 3 was installed along this wall, reducing the room's size from its original capacity. Access doors to both stairways opened into this room. The stairwell wall plaster contained elements of horse hair, a common pre-twentieth-century material used to strengthen the plaster bonding. The wall included two adjacent doorways leading into first floor rooms of Addition 2.

Floor joists were comprised of round logs about one foot or more in diameter. Their top edges were hewn flat to accommodate and better anchor the flooring, and their ends were cut to form a broad, flat notch on the top edge that rested on the end sills. Their rounded bottom/sides had been whitewashed. The logs ran north/south, with floor planking affixed, and their ends on the south wall had been cut to create an opening for the stairwell to the basement under Addition 2.

Roof rafters were comprised of milled lumber and appeared to be cut with a cross-cut or vertical band saw rather than a circular saw; circular mill saws were introduced in the Midwest south of the Great Lakes forest lumber industry mostly after the 1850s. The rafters had been lengthened with additional pieces of lumber attached to increase the roof pitch. This increased pitch was likely needed to accommodate the second-floor stairway constructed inside the log structure footprint and provide enough headroom to enter the second story of Addition 2 through a full-sized doorway. This suggests the rafters/pitch were modified when Addition 2 was built. The north gable rafter was made from two poles/logs about 4 inches thick with their bark still on them. They were extended to match the milled rafters by affixing two pieces of lumber on opposite edges of the poles at one end of each, such that both extensions met at the top to form the modified gable peak. This north gable was sided with horizontal weatherboard. Since the siding was cut to fit the elevated roof pitch, it would have been added at the time as Addition 2 modifications. The gable had a rectangular opening in the siding,

either for a loft-space window in the original structure or access to the crawl space above Addition 1; possibly it had served as both. Sheathing on the roof consisted of walnut planking.

A **cistern**, perhaps to collect rainwater off the roof, had been dug and lined with bricks along the log structure's east wall, near the structure's northeast corner. It was now closed and covered, but not filled in. We could not determine when it had been constructed.

Addition 1. This one-story addition had last served as a kitchen, and may originally have been added for that purpose. Its west wall does not extend as far west as that of the log structure, creating narrower north and south walls.

Its **interior** consisted of standard stud and plaster/lath framing. We found nothing that permitted a firm estimate of construction timing, but its older, cruder laths suggest it was erected before Addition 2, with its more sophisticated lathwork. One of the original structure's remaining shortened logs behind its chimney had been removed, and a circular hole was cut into the chimney's back for stove piping access through Addition 1's south wall. About three feet in front of the chimney, the sub-floor planking had a circular hole about nine inches in circumference, that appeared to be a burn hole. This supports the belief a stove was attached to this side of the chimney, perhaps for an original summer kitchen as the initial version of this addition. Beneath the floor, a brick foundation for an a north facing wall was in place several feet inside the footprint. This suggests an earlier version of the addition had been smaller and did not extend as far to the north as we found the 1994 exterior, and it also supports that an cruder, smaller addition like a summer kitchen was likely its first version.

Addition 1 also contained a second brick stove chimney inside its north wall. This second chimney access could indicate the stove had been moved over time and the chimney added later. More unlikely, a heat stove and cook stove may both have been used simultaneously in Addition 1. A bathroom had been added on its west wall, probably later than the initial kitchen addition. This may have occurred during the Oyer occupancy when indoor plumbing for it was added, given that one of Christian Oyer's granddaughters (b. 1909) recalled an outhouse on the site during her childhood, but the room also may have preceded the plumbing.

The paint line and sheathing remnants on the formerly-exterior gable siding of the log structure suggests Addition 1's **roof** had originally followed the log structure's roof line on the east side, but had peaked lower and descended sooner to create a smaller, lower gable than that of the original structure. This aligns with the fact that the room's front wall does not extend as far west. At some later point the roof peak was extended to match that of the original structure. The rafters showed no sign of extension, so they must have been newly cut at that time. The roof had also been modified on the west to accommodate the bathroom addition. The roof of the bathroom and west porch were reset to a pitch slightly less that the rest of the Addition1/log structure pitch, and the bathroom west wall aligned with the extended porch front edge. The elevated roof peak, flattened front-edge roof pitch over the bathroom, and bathroom addition probably occurred at the same time, but we could not determine whether it happened during Addition 2 renovations or later.

Addition 2. This two-story addition appears to have been the linchpin uniting a major dwelling expansion. Its balloon-frame construction suggested an origin sometime in or after the nineteenth century's second half. The first floor mostly consisted of a single large room with an exterior door

facing south onto a porch. The porch roof was supported with round, milled posts. The walls' sophisticated tongue-in-groove pine lathwork had dovetail-shaped inward grooves cut into its flat side surface such that hardened plaster might more firmly attach to the lath. A brick chimney for a stove stood on the west wall.

Addition 2 appears to have been constructed to match the roof and floor/ceiling lines of the older Addition 3. The second story of both additions had low ceilings that sloped with the roof lines. Full-sized windows were installed on the gable ends but only half-sized windows were installed on the shorter walls that ran under the eaves.

A **basement** with cement floor had been constructed under this addition. It may have reflected the expansion of an earlier root cellar, but nothing clearly indicated this. A brick trough of sorts was constructed along its east wall that may have been used to cool/store with water. The basement east wall did not extend to meet the west edge of Addition 3, so the basement footprint was slightly smaller than that of Addition 2 above it.

Addition 3. This two-story addition was constructed of older mortise and tenon framing; its floor joist ends had been cut to form a protruding notch inserted into a square opening cut into the side sills. This style of construction typically pre-dated balloon framing and was mostly phased out by the 1870s, so Addition 3 was undoubtedly constructed earlier than Addition 2.

Materials under the structure suggested this addition had been moved in on skids as a previously constructed unit to adjoin the east side of Addition 2. We found no indication of who may have originally constructed it or of the original site from which it may have been moved to this site/position.

Both floors of its interior were divided into two rooms, one north and one south. On the first floor, the exterior west wall had been entirely removed to permit creating two larger first floor rooms by combining new space from Addition 2 construction and the existing rooms of Addition 3. Therefore, whereas the second floor of the two additions were joined at their floors and at Addition 3's original west exterior wall (now an interior wall between rooms), the first floor of the two additions joined only at their floors and south side wall edges in the newly-created merged rooms.

A brick chimney for stoves stood in the middle of the structure on the north wall of the south rooms. It consisted of yellow brick rather than the reddish brick found elsewhere throughout the structure. This chimney also did not extend through the roof, however, so it had been taken out of service at some point, undoubtedly prior to moving it in as a house addition. Further, its foundation consisted of loose stones rather than a solid brick platform like the house's other three chimneys, therefore was partly supported by the frame structure itself. This resulted in its weight settling both the chimney and the attached floor, which created a badly sloped floor in the first floor's south room where the chimney stood. Perhaps this feature was at the root of family tradition that Christian Oyer "did not put a good foundation under his house."

In the stovepipe hole of the chimney's second floor a boy's waistcoat/vest was found stuffed into the opening. It's style and materials suggest it would have been made in the 1870s/80s. The fabric was torn and well-worn, so it had been well-used and would have been put in the opening—likely for

insulation from drafts after no longer used for a stove—well after it's date of manufacture. Assuming it belonged to a house inhabitant after the chimney was decommissioned and the house consolidated with Addition 2, the likeliest known candidates would be Joseph Kaufman (1866-84) or one of the older Oyer boys: Joseph (b. 1880), Peter (b. 1882), Samuel (b. 1886) or Manuel (b. 1888).

Other Observations

Materials. Square nails were noted in some components, which indicates likely nineteenth-century construction; these were typically being phased out of use by the 1880s/90s.

Different versions of clay brick manufacture were also noted, some made using crude forms and others with a more sophisticated extrusion process. What appeared to be the crudest bricks were used as a foundation under the west porch, possibly repurposed from some earlier use. Nineteenth-century cottage industry clay brick and tile manufacturing operations were known to have existed in the immediate area along the Sangamon. One such operation was situated a half mile south of the structure site. Piles of clay remnant fragments could still be found along a hedge on that property, and samples were acquired. Certain basement wall bricks seemed to resemble those from that local operation, but this was very inconclusive. The top row of basement bricks appeared to be harder, more sophisticated extrusion-formed bricks, which aligns with its later construction.

Samplings of wallpaper, molding, chinking, etc. were retained in plastic bags and labeled, but (again regrettably) not stored in weatherproof spaces and have since deteriorated.

Archeological Dig. After the log structure was removed, Len Stelle, an instructor from Champaign's Parkland Community College brought his class to the site for an archeological dig. The site's history as a likely postal delivery/pick-up location, and therefore a quasi-public site, enhanced its potential to reveal insights into the area's early occupancy. The group excavated pits both inside and outside the log house footprint, including areas near the front and back doors—openings that could produce a "throw area" pattern where occupants tossed refuse and unwanted materials out of a dwelling's door. Although debris could be seen at the bottom of the cistern, no attempt was made to retrieve them given risks of collapse and serious human injury. The excavations failed to reveal any particularly unique or remarkable objects, mostly nineteenth- and twentieth-century pottery/ceramic shards.

General Speculations about the Dwelling

These documentary research and architectural dismantling findings do not enable firm conclusions, yet they do permit some speculation:

1) The ***log structure*** was surely constructed by Thompson Dickson in the 1850s.

2) ***Addition 1*** was likely added by either the Dicksons or McJiltons given their family sizes, though possibly as late as the Stormers. Its cruder lathwork implies it was built earlier than Addition 2, with its more sophisticated lathwork. The two stoves in Thompson Dickson's 1858 estate tends to support the presence of an addition during his tenure, perhaps to house the cookstove. That first addition, however, could have been a cruder structure like a summer kitchen that utilized the back side of the log structure's chimney for another stove, and then later replaced by a more

substantial room with a separate, second chimney. This addition's final form with elevated gable peak, altered front-edge roof peak, and added bathroom took shape either during the Addition 2 renovation or perhaps later when the Oyer family replaced the site's outhouse with indoor bathroom plumbing in the twentieth century.

3) The more sophisticated lathwork and milled porch columns associated with ***Addition 2*** suggest the log structure modifications to accommodate building this addition most likely occurred after the 1860s. The post-Civil War era's increasingly rapid industrialization and mechanization permitted production technique innovations and expanded mass production; rapidly expanding railroad networks increasingly enabled mass distribution. But the latter nineteenth century decades were also times of financial difficulty for Midwestern farmers. Declining prices from overproduction (prices halved between 1870-90), major periods of drought, and financial panics in 1873 and 1893 created much hardship. This Gilded Age led to greatly unequal wealth distribution, and Midwestern farmers organized populist movements to pursue better economic conditions. After stabilizing in the late 1890s, the agricultural economic situation greatly improved in the early 1900s.

Based on this, the Addition 2 expansion likely occurred late in the McJiltons' stay (1869-81), during the Stormers' stay (1881-1903), or early in the Oyers' stay (1902 and after). The 1892 newspaper wall filling used in relation to modifications for Addition 2 expansion invite associating those newspapers with its construction, though it could have been inserted later by the Stormers or Oyers after the modification. But the dates and nature of the paper fragments help narrow who may have added them, and suggest (not prove) when they could have done so. Therefore, the paper fragment with German printing and those with 1892 dates suggest a Stormer project or, less likely, possibly an Oyer one.

Looking at family circumstances for motivation, both the McJiltons with five growing children and the Oyers with nine, some as young adults, would benefit from more space compared to the Stormers with two children at any given time and Mary's mother in residence. But considering their means, though not known for any of these families, the recently widowed Magdalena Kaufman and her daughter Mary Stormer may have inherited resources to invest in expansion. Mary Stormer had initially purchased the site in late 1881 before reselling to her husband in mid-1882. Magdalena had funds to invest in farmland in 1886, offering either equity to borrow against or, if sold, available cash. A January 17, 1889, boosterish "Fisher News" item in the Bloomington *Pantagraph* boasted, "More fine buildings have been built in the summer and fall of '88 than in any 5 previous years." It implies that the turn of the 1890s witnessed increasing construction and ready access to building materials in the community. The 1893 Panic, however, was especially severe and hit farmers hard, so if the Stormers built it that year it likely occurred before major bank runs that summer.

Rumors that the one-story dwelling was originally a log house survived in the Oyer family up to the time of our project, though that easily could be deduced at any point when entering the basement and viewing the truncated ends of its floor joists. The family anecdote of Christian Oyer putting an inadequate foundation under his house points to him as renovator, although that also could be simply a complaint in later generations about the unstable floor around the

Addition 3 chimney. No stories were passed along about moving Addition 3 on skids into place from elsewhere; no explicit family anecdotes of Christian Oyer actually constructing/renovating the larger dwelling survived. Both silences seem odd if he had done the modifications, given their scope and effort. This especially since the story did survive that Christian Oyer built the barn on the site when the family first arrived, and his sixteen-year-old son Samuel was sent to the nearby Sangamon timber to cut oak poles for its frame. It also would seem odd for Oyer to retain for ten years then transport from Woodford County the 1892 newspapers to later insert here (or for Stormer or anyone else to have locally retained and left them behind for Oyer to use).

With no more to go on, I personally suspect that the major renovation centered around Addition 2 was completed by the Charles Stormer family, perhaps in 1893—a mere guess at best.

4) ***Addition 3*** proves especially intriguing and mysterious. It was incorporated at the same time Addition 2 was constructed. But who in this once swampy, late-to-be-settled neighborhood would have constructed a mortise and tenon frame house close enough to move here? Was it built on site by the Dicksons or McJiltons, perhaps as a dwelling for a married child? It appears that two McJilton sons married locally after their parents' departure, but that one of these two—as well as the other three children—lived elsewhere out of state once married. That left only one son who remained to raise a family locally. Or was it built by someone else on a neighboring property, acquired by the renovator, and moved to this site to adjoin the newly constructed Addition 2? And of course, who wore the waistcoat/vest found stuffed in its chimney? Nothing emerged during our brief 1994 window to shed light on these questions.

   Also with little concrete to go on, here I suspect the McJilton's may have erected it as a free-standing house for their larger family in the late 1860s or early 1870s. But it seems nearly as plausible that an earlier Sodom resident had erected it on another site in the 1850s or early 1860s (or even earlier) and it was later moved here either first as a free-standing living space along with the log structure or later at the time of Addition 2 renovations.

Storage/Destination

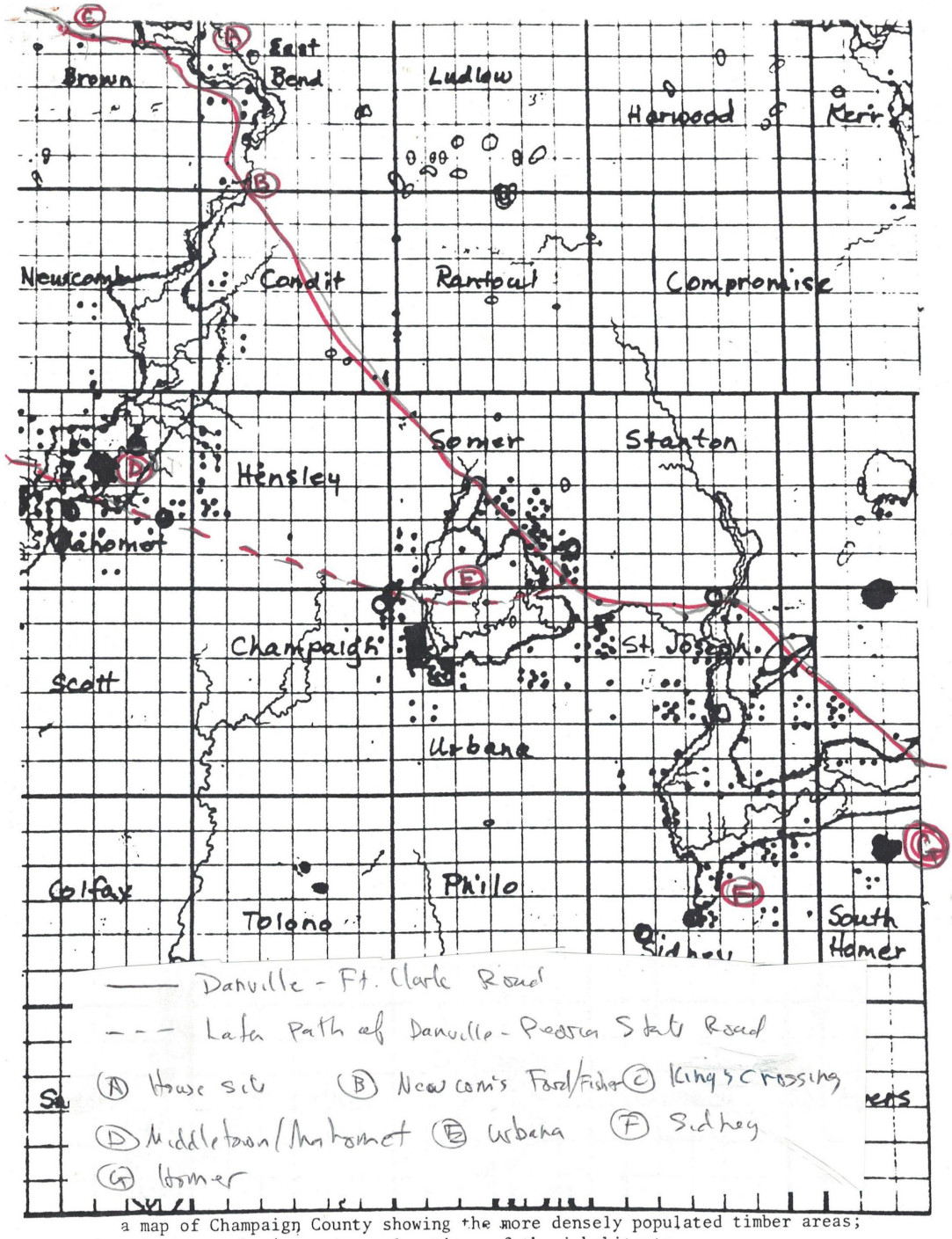
Once the structure was dismantled, the log planks and other materials such as floor planks, rafters, rafter sheathing, windows, doors, wainscoting, porch columns, etc. were moved for storage to a barn owned by Gordon's father, Verle Oyer, about a mile north of the building site. They remained in storage until 2000 when Gordon's maternal uncle, Kelly Birkey, retrieved the logs to re-erect the house on the grounds of the I & I [Indiana and Illinois] Tractor Club at Penfield, Illinois, where he was an active member. The club had acquired the facilities and grounds of the village's former public school to house their collections. Penfield is situated on the far eastern edge of Champaign County, less than twenty-five miles from the original log house site.

Kelly Birkey then erected the initial log frame in 2002—this time with a stone fireplace chimney, sealed the logs, located additional logs to fill in the missing fourth wall, and in 2005 finalized the project with timbers milled on site. Dry rot that showed early signs on some logs at the time of

dismantling, exacerbated by storage in a musty barn and exposure to weather when re-erected, eventually required its exterior to be sided in the 2020s—perhaps as it also may have been sided when first erected in the 1850s. As of this writing, the structure remains in use on the Penfield site.

Drafted by Gordon Oyer
Reviewed by Doug Eichelberger
August 2026

Champaign County, 1850

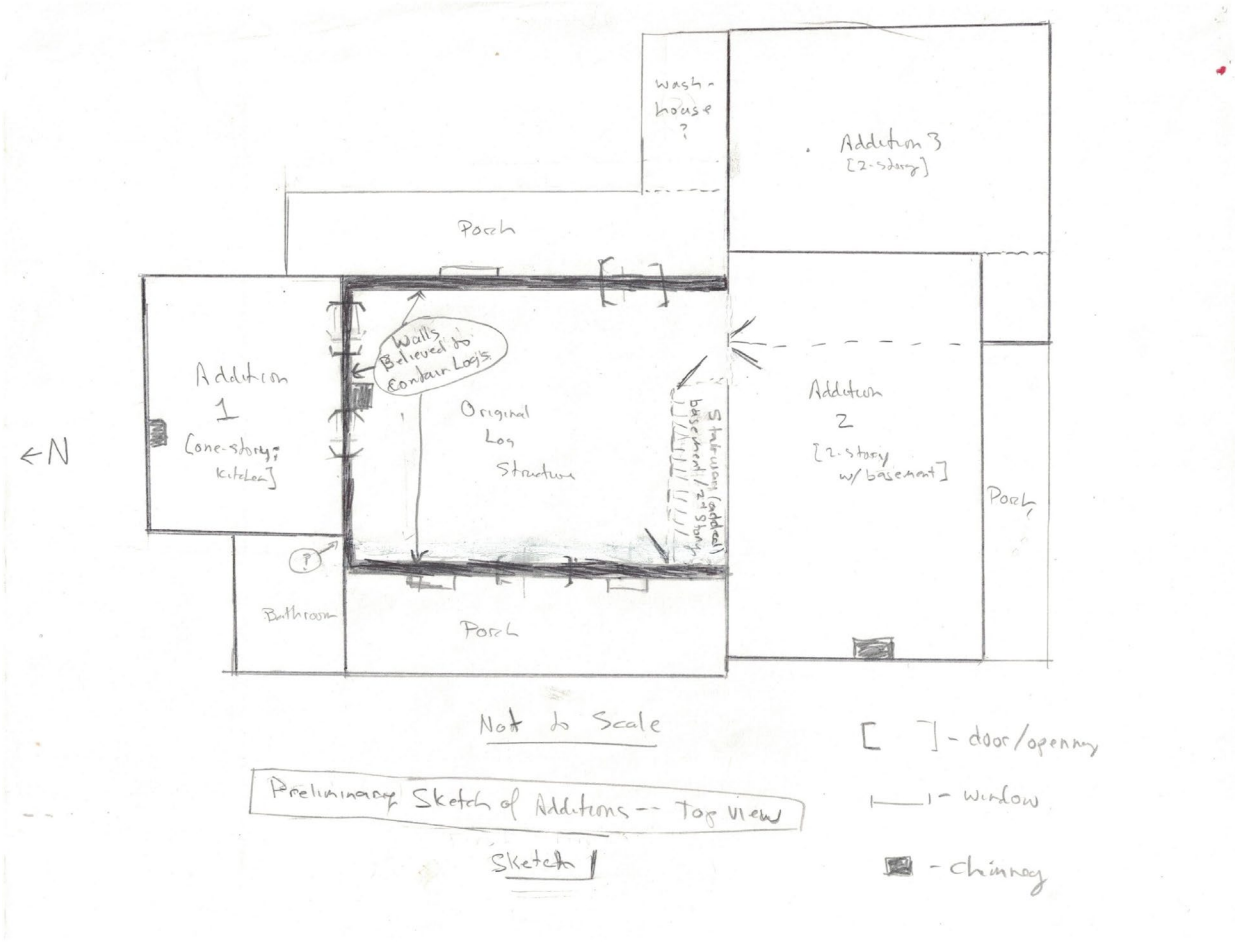


a map of Champaign County showing the more densely populated timber areas; dots indicate the approximate locations of the inhabitants

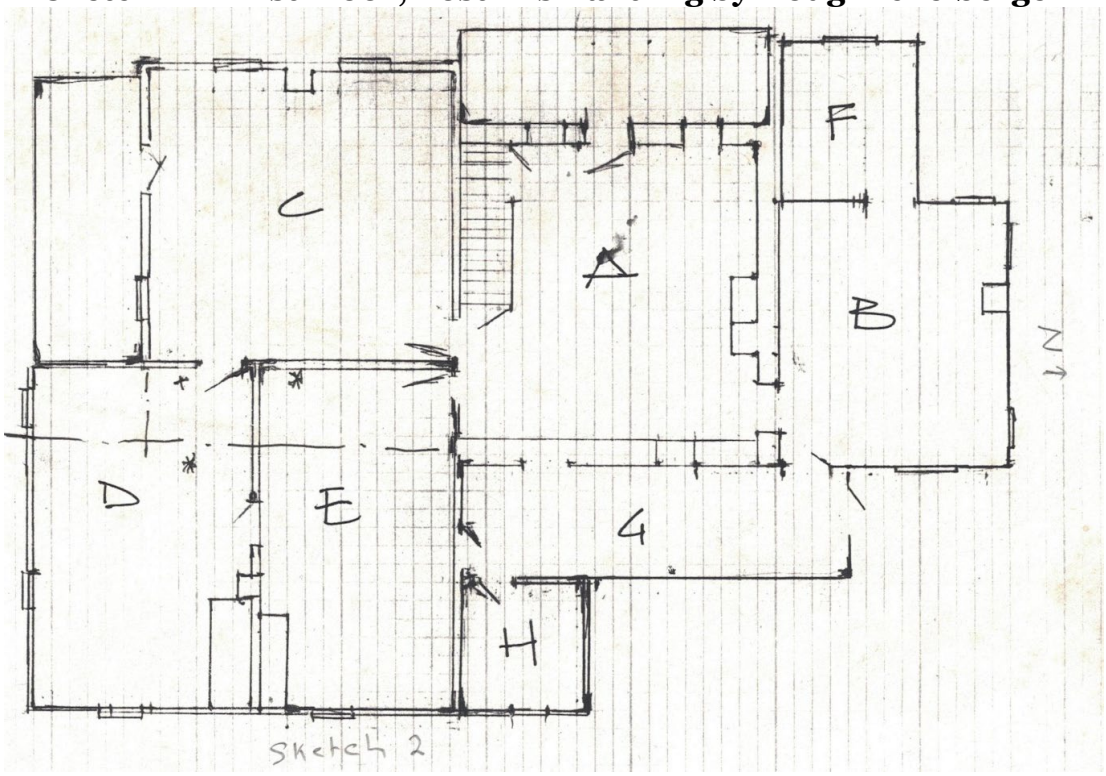
Ca. 1850

iii

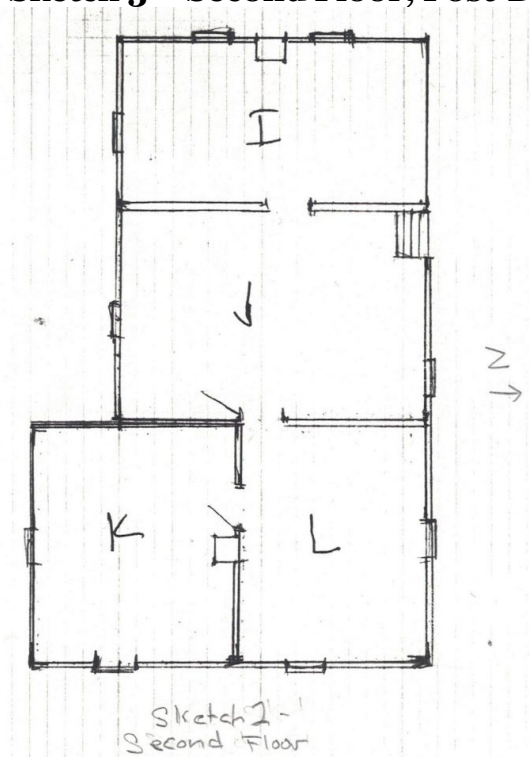
Sketch 1 - Preliminary



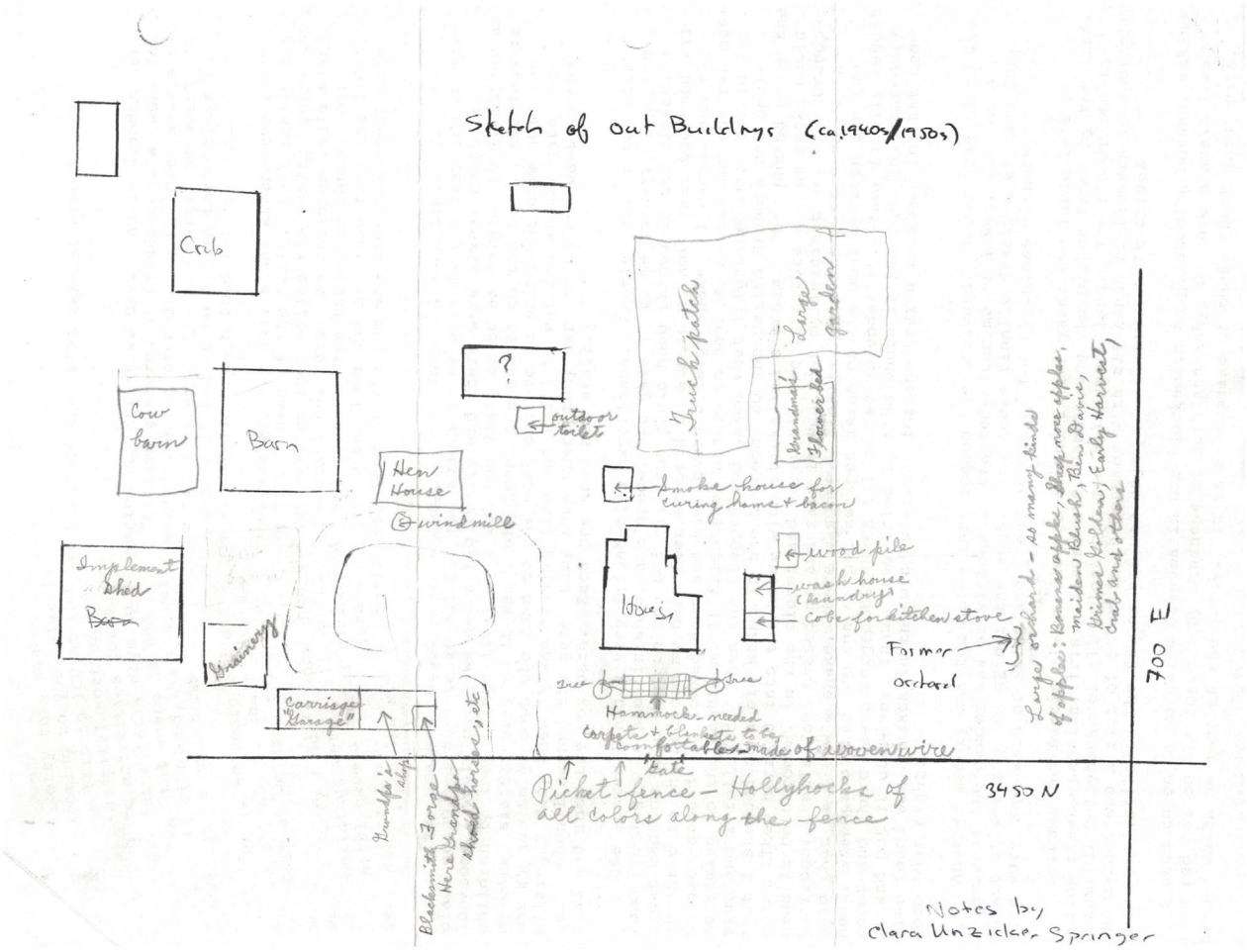
Sketch 2 – First Floor, Post-Dismantling by Doug Eichelberger



Sketch 3 – Second Floor, Post-Dismantling by Doug Eichelberger



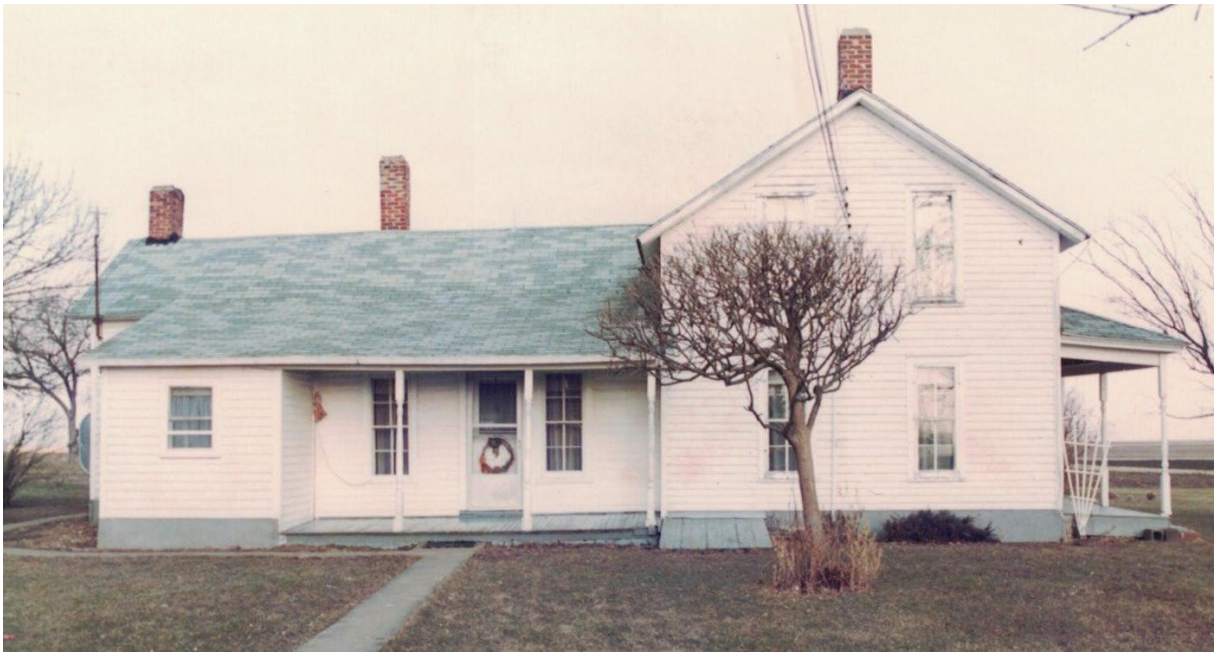
Sketch 4 – Farmstead Layout (Preliminary)



Descriptive notes written by Clara Unzicker Springer (1909-2004), prepared 1994

Farmstead

Before Dismantling



In Progress - Exterior

In Progress – Modified Original Window Frame

In Progress – Inerior Whitewash

At Penfield

ca. 2005

ca. 2025