THE LATHAM HOUSE:

VIENNA'S OLDEST BUILDING!

By Gary Knehans

The Maries County community of Vienna has something not many towns of its size in Missouri can boast. Within its city limits, it has three pre-civil war structures still standing. They are the Old Jail Museum, the nearby Felker House, and the Latham House, which is the first structure built in Vienna.

Records indicate the Latham House was built in 1855 by Valsain G. Latham, a captain in the local militia. Its original site was where senior citizens' housing is now located in Vienna.

Latham also served as a judge and a doctor. He also had a general merchandise business and was reported to have been involved in copper mining, although no one knows where the mine may have been located. As a local militia captain, Latham is believed to have done a lot of recruiting on the front lawn of the Latham House.

In 1907, the house was moved back about 100 feet by a mover using one horse so that a new house could be constructed in its original location. There it sat on the ground, deteriorating under the onslaught of weather. Its foundation logs rotted in the moist soil and its fireplace and foundation were destroyed.

However, in 1977, seventy years after it was abandoned, John Viessman of Vienna spearheaded an effort to restore the historic building and preserve it as an historic landmark. The old structure had been earmarked to be burned to make way for the construction of present-day senior citizen's housing. However, Viessman went before the city council and obtained a ten day grace period to move the structure to the city park, where it was restored.

The restoration effort took longer than Viessman originally thought. "The bottom four logs, the big ones, were all rotted from setting on the ground those seventy years," he says. "So, we had to cut those out new. And, we had to find stones for the foundation. It took two years to get the foundation set, find those four logs and get them hewed, and get enough money to do that. Meanwhile, the disassembled logs from the Latham House were just laying around the park, numbered and covered with plastic."

New doors had to be made and hung. A new roof was put upon the reassembled structure. A new two-story porch was constructed in a design believed to have been close to the original porch. This was based upon townpeople's recollections of the Latham House, as no good photograph of the house in its heydey has been located.

"There is bound to be some photos somewhere," says Viessman, "because up until 1907, it was a residence. A lot of people had postcards made of their houses. It was sort of decorated up in a Victorian gingerbread style at that period. They closed up the fireplace area and made an entrance from it. It's a big house, four big rooms, double stack, and a two-story porch in front."

The city park site is just a temporary one for the Latham House. Viessman would like to move it near where the Old Jail Museum is. "That would require obtaining land," he explains, "land which the county has for their trucks. So, we would have to find an alternate site for them that would be acceptable, purchase it, make a trade, and then move the house intact."

If Viessman's plan becomes reality, all three pre-civil war structures in Vienna would be located in a complex on highway 42, just east of the highway 63 intersection. All three would prove to be quite a drawing card for tourists and students of history.

Vienna's oldest structure, the Latham House, situated in a temporary site in city park.

(Photo by Gary Knehans)

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