

VIENNA'S HISTORIC

FELKER
HOUSE

by GARY KNEHANS

The community of Vienna, located north of Waynesville in Maries County, boasts of having three pre-Civil War structures still standing within its city limits. In last year's edition of "Old Settler's Gazette", there were feature articles about the Latham Log House and the Old Jail Museum. This article about the Felker House completes the trilogy of Vienna's antebellum buildings.

Though not the community's oldest structure nor the one with the most interesting history surrounding it, the Felker House was the edifice of one of early Vienna's most interesting and adventuresome characters.

John Felker was only 18 years old when he came to America from Germany in 1848. Searching for a better life, he soon saw an opportunity to realize his dreams when gold was discovered in California. Felker made a daring trip to the gold fields in 1850. The results of that endeavor are not known. It is believed, however, that Felker's experiences in California and the trip there prompted him to formulate the idea for a cross-plains cattle drive he later undertook.

In a few years, Felker returned to Missouri to begin a cattle operation in Westphalia. His fluency in the language of the "Old Country" quickly afforded him access to the farmers and cattle-raisers in that German-speaking community. Felker was able to extend his operation into Maries County, where he dealt with large stockowners named Anderson, Hoops, and Crismon.

Felker took a bride in 1853, but wasn't ready to settle down. It was time to organize

that cattle drive to California. The new groom and his pregnant wife were among a party of 90 people who set out on 16 wagons for the long trip across the plains from St. Joseph on April 25, 1854. The party took with them 859 head of beef-cattle and 45 horses.

The cattle train crossed the Big Blue River on May 7 and the Platte River on June 2.

On June 9 and 10, the party stopped near Ash Hollow in western Nebraska to allow Felker's wife, Amanda, to give birth to a baby daughter. The group quickly resumed its journey and arrived in Sacramento City, California, on October 1.

The following spring, it was time for the Felkers to return home. Profit from the sale of cattle to west coast

markets allowed the couple to book passage about the steamer, Yankee Blade, for the long journey around the tip of South America. Soon after leaving California, however, the steamer was shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Mexico. The Felkers survived there until rescue came some time later. They returned to Missouri the autumn of that year, 1855.

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Undaunted by the arduous journey, John Felker immediately began building a house, the Felker House, at a site in present-day Vienna. It was here that the couple's second daughter, Louella Jane, was born on December 4, 1855. Their earlier baby died the preceding winter in California.

Felker's adventurous days were over. The couple never moved nor changed residence again. Amanda died on March 20, 1878. John died on February 6, 1889. They were survived by three daughters and two sons.

Throughout the years, the Felker House remained at its original site. However, in 1959, the house was earmarked for destruction to allow the construction of an elementary school building. Madolyn and Carl Baldwin, Cecil and Juanita Hutchison, and Paul and Inez Hollenbeck quickly moved to save the structure by paying for the expense of moving the historic house to its present location in back of the Old Jail Museum, which is only two blocks away from the Felker House's original site.

Members of the Historical Society of Maries County, enabled by generous donations from interested individuals and businesses in the Vienna area, completed a restoration project last summer on the Felker House. It is being furnished with historical artifacts to greet visitors with a sense of its unique heritage.

The historical society is involved in a project to move the Latham Log House to the Old Jail Museum site as well. Through an agreement with the Maries County Commission, the society will build a new county road shed in the Brinktown area. They will swap this with the county for the shed and land now used by the county adjacent to the Old Jail site. This adjacent property will be the new site for the Latham Log House, which is now temporarily located in the city park in Vienna. Completion of this project will result in the community's three pre-Civil War



Last summer's renovation work preserves the Felker House for posterity.

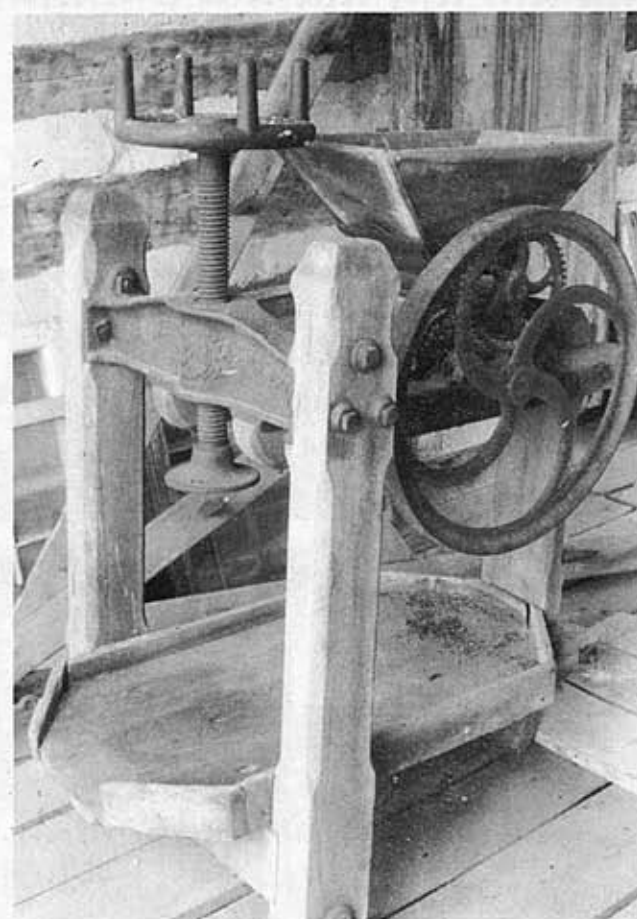


Felker House side view.

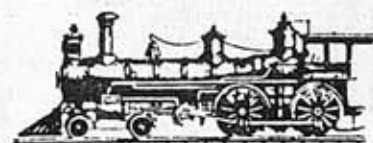
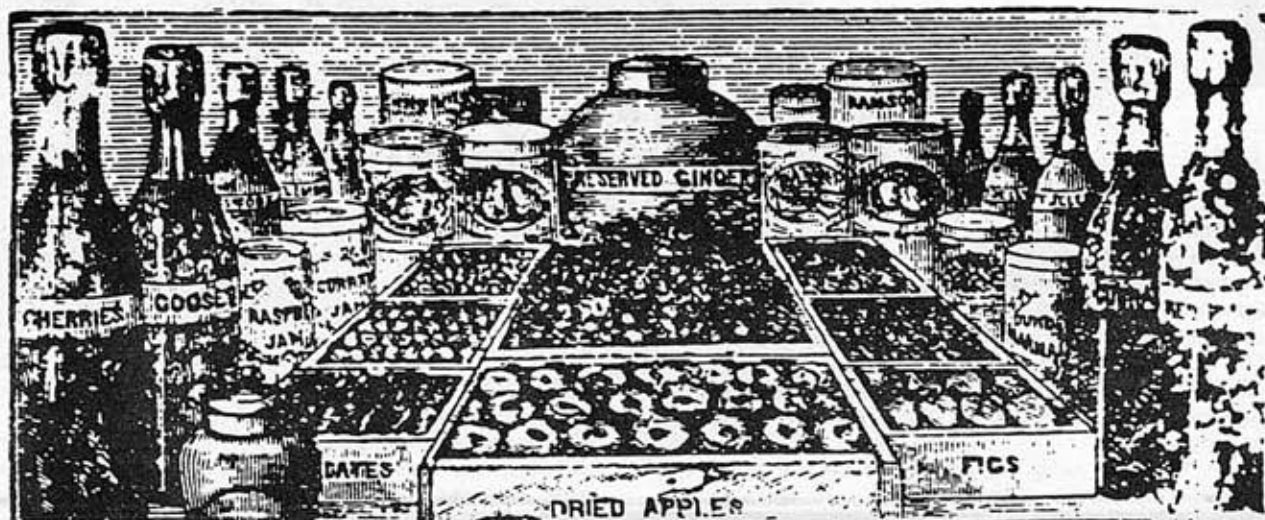
structures being located at one central site.

Members of the Historical Society of Maries County estimate the project cost will be around \$20,000. Donations are being sought. Anyone who contributes a gift of \$50 or more will receive upon request a 36-inch by 27 1/2-inch full-size copy of a "Tourist Map of Maries County, Missouri."

Donations may be mailed to the Historical Society of Maries County, P.O. Box 289, Vienna, Missouri 65582.



Post Civil War cider press adorning the connecting deck between the two structures of the Felker House.



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