

A House For All Seasons: The Five Mile House

As with most things more than a century and a half old, the Five Mile House has had to change and adapt throughout most of its life to remain useful. From its beginnings in 1836 as a one-room brick house, it soon expanded one brick room to the east to become a hall and parlor house. And, finally, with the addition of a frame rear kitchen ell it assumed its final

configuration. The remaining historic fabric of the Five Mile House has quite a story to tell in its own right – apart from what has been recorded in the history books (Fig. 1).

As with many old stories, some of the pages are missing.

And, since the ancient builders/authors are long departed from this earth, this leaves the reader with some delightful, possibly unsolvable, mysteries. With that said, perhaps the best place to start is at the beginning. Starting in the structure's oldest section and working forward in time is the clearest way to study the tale written in the Five Mile House's bricks and mortar. And lumber and plaster and stucco and paint and nails....



Fig.1. The Five Mile House sometime in the early 20th Century sported an enclosed porch and a probably fake well. Note also the kitchen ell with its gable end chimney.

The original one-room house (or the west room)

The original one room brick house, which is now the west room, was built in 1836. Constructed of soft red clay bricks made on the site, the 9-inch-thick walls are two bricks thick. A short extra row of bricks inside the walls supports the floor joists. Much of the room's secrets still are hidden from sight by peg boarding on the walls and modern ceiling panels on the ceiling. The almost 19-foot wide by almost 17 1/2-foot deep room currently has an exterior door and a window on the south (front) wall, a window on the west (gable) side, a exterior door on the north (rear) side, and a doorless doorway to the other brick room on the east side. One thing that quickly is apparent is the lack of a source of heat for the original one-room house – there are no fireplaces or chimneys remaining in this part of the structure. Upon further investigation, what appear to be the crumbling remains of a fireplace stack base and hearth are visible under the floor on the west side of the room in front of what is now a window opening. This suggests that the building's original source of heat was an interior fireplace on the west gable side of the house and that the window is a later addition. It must be noted, however, that no evidence of a previous interior chimney other than rough and sloppy brickwork is visible on the inside of the gable wall in the attic. Another source of heat for this room is visible in an early 20th century photograph. In the image, a small square chimney protrudes from the building's ridge near the middle of the west room (Fig. 2). Roof patching is apparent in that area from outside of the house and is prominently visible in the attic. Under the patching, a framed square area containing a wooden base with a round hole cut in it rests upon the ceiling joists. It appears possible that this structure might once have supported a small brick chimney in the attic and through the roof. This suggests that at one time a stove was used to heat the room and the stovepipe was extended through the ceiling where it intersected the base of the chimney in the attic. There is no visible evidence of



Fig. 2. A small chimney is visible rising out of the middle of the west room above the couple in this early 20th century photograph.

the chimney or of a stove remaining in the room itself or under the floor.

As mentioned above, the upper half of the walls is covered with pegboard.

However, the lower half is plastered and painted yellow with white paint visible in the many chipped and crumbling places.

The room's white-painted baseboard is a simple 8 by 3/4-inch board with applied quarter-round trim at the top and where the baseboard meets the floor. The rusty-tan-painted floor is constructed mostly of 3 1/2-inch tongue-in-groove boards running east and west, but a large section of the floor's west side has been cut and removed and

replaced with irregular-width boards. The floor joists supporting the existing floor appear to be modern dimensional lumber (1 5/8 by 7 1/2 inches) and are spaced at irregular intervals ranging from 11 to 23 inches. Stacked brick pillars support the floor joists at intermittent locations. This all suggests that the existing floor was installed sometime early in the 20th century. Although most of the ceiling is covered in modern materials, an earlier ceiling with boards running east and west is visible through a small gap. The boards have a single bead planed into the south edge of each board.

The now doorless doorway between the west and east rooms forms the literal and figurative portal between the original one-room house and the addition on the east side. The trim boards on both sides of the wall surrounding the doorway have a single bead planed around the opening edge. The trim is attached with both square and round nails.

The doorway opening is 78 by 35 inches and has cut notches on the west side where two door hinges used to be attached. The door opened toward the older section.

The brick addition (or the east room)

As the construction details and materials are very similar to the original room, the east room was added soon after the one-room house, probably between 1836 and 1850. This addition also was constructed of soft red brick made on site. The walls are two bricks thick. The room, which measures about 14 ½ feet wide by about 17 ½ feet deep, has a window and a door on the front and rear walls, an interior fireplace on the east wall and a doorless doorway to the west room on the west wall. Fortunately, the pegboard and modern ceiling tiles have been removed from the east room in preparation for restoration planning. The walls are plastered and display blue paint on the lower half of the wall with dirty white paint and some patches of lighter blue paint on the upper half. What appear to be blue bands near the middle and ceiling of the walls probably are explained as just the part of the wall exposed and painted blue when the pegboard was in place. There are a couple of flowery wallpaper remnants on the south wall. The ceiling itself is composed of 7- to 9-inch-wide boards running east and west that are attached to the ceiling joists with square nails. The ceiling boards have a single bead planed along the south edge of each board. This decorative touch is identical to that on the visible section of the board ceiling in the west room. Another couple wallpaper remnants are attached to the ceiling in front of the fireplace chimney. The fireplace chimney appears to be constructed from bricks identical to those used to construct the addition, but the fireplace and mantle have been faced with a veneer of modern three-hole rough-faced brick. The fireplace has a concrete hearth cast in place with Indian arrowheads inserted as decoration at both front corners. The chimney also has a hole in its center above the fireplace

for a stovepipe. An existing five-sided, single-burner cast iron stove stands disconnected in the southwest corner of the room. The remaining legible raised letters cast into the stove top read: "Charleston Ill. 31." The company name has rusted into illegibility and oblivion.

The rusty-tan painted floor is constructed from tongue-in-groove boards running east and west. The boards on the north side of the room are 7 ¼ inches wide and the boards in front of the fireplace and on the south side of the room are 5 ¼ inches wide. The simple white painted floorboard trim is composed of a 5 by ¾ inch board with quarter-round trim where the board meets the floor. Unlike in the west room, there is no decorative quarter round on the top of the floorboard trim.

Deteriorated and chipped plaster over the doors and windows on the north and south walls reveals hewn wooden lintels. Rather than having individual lintels, a single 4 1/4 inch high lintel on each wall stretches more than 9 ½ feet over each door and window combination (Fig. 3). The

doorway leading to the removed kitchen ell has a single bead planed into the outside edge of facing boards surrounding the door opening. The door itself also is interesting and probably is original to the addition's

construction. The door, which has two vertical

panels side by side, is associated with the Greek Revival Style. The 74 ½ inch by 35 ¾



Fig. 3. A single hand-hewn lintel stretches across each door and window combination in the east room addition.

Fig. 4. This blue and tan two-panel door probably is original to the east room addition of the house.



inch door has flaking white paint over blue paint on the door's stiles and rails and tan paint on the inset panels (Fig. 4). The door, which is attached with two hinges, probably survived because it was protected from the weather by the added kitchen ell. Also, because the door was an inside door when the house's other exterior doors were replaced in the late 19th or early 20th centuries, there was little aesthetic reason to upgrade it at the same time.

The kitchen ell

Although it has since been removed, the kitchen ell probably was added behind the east addition sometime between 1840 and 1870. The ell, which measures 13 feet 2 inches wide by 15 feet 11 ½ inches deep, was attached to the north behind the brick room addition, but also partly overlapped the original room of the house. The ridge of the ell's



Fig. 5. The north side of the house still shows plenty of evidence of the removed kitchen ell.

gable roof remains attached a little below the ridge of the main part of the structure; however, the ell's roof was truncated at the edge of the brick building (and the resulting opening boarded up) when the ell was removed (Fig. 5).

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The size of the remaining timbers suggests the addition used braced frame construction techniques. The remaining sills on the north and south sides are 7 inches wide and six inches deep. The remaining sill on the east side is 6 inches square. The ell remnants include a partial loose concrete block foundation with hand-hewn wooden sills still in place on the north, east, and south sides. The remaining sills were horizontally half-lapped at the ell's corners and secured with wooden pegs, also known as treenails (Fig. 6). Square nails remain in the sills and in a couple of remaining floor beams. The floor



Fig. 6. The remains of the kitchen ell include these wonderfully joined pieces of the old sills.

beams and rafters from the ell exhibit rounded saw marks suggesting they were cut at a sawmill with a circular blade. The remaining floor joists are 2 by 6 inches and the remaining rafters are 2 by 4 inches. Other salvaged timbers from the removed ell are stored on site awaiting possible reconstruction of the kitchen ell.

A roof slope outlined with tar and shingle paper on the side of the brick addition on the east side of the kitchen ell is evidence of a covered porch in the corner formed between the rooms. The porch probably was unenclosed because, unlike in the kitchen ell, the east room's exterior brick wall is stuccoed over in the porch area (Fig.

7). A concrete pad stoop on the east side of the projected side porch is the only remaining suggestion of an exterior exit from the kitchen ell.



Fig. 7. The shingle paper tarred above the window on the northeast corner of the house is evidence of a kitchen ell porch.

The attic and the front porch

At first glance it might seem odd to group the front porch with the attic of a historic building. But in the case of the Five Mile House, the attic and the porch literally are linked in the history of the structure. For some unknown reason, sometime between 1870 and 1920 the building's entire roof structure was rebuilt using circular sawed rafters. There is no remaining physical or historical evidence of a past fire in the attic or of weather-related damage to the original roofing structure forcing the replacement.

The original ceiling joists on hall and parlor section of the house, which include

notched places for the original rafters at each end, were retained and display no damage. But, the new rafters no longer line up with the old ceiling joists and rest on boards attached across the ends of the joists. The old joists, which show straight saw marks indicative of a reciprocating saw, measure 2 ¼ by 4 ½ inches and are 16 inches on center. The new rafters, which show round saw marks indicative of a circular saw, are of a much smaller size and are spaced more distant than the joists.

Here is where the porch comes in: The porch rafters are scabbed on to the east sides of the south ends of the new rafters and consequently are spaced to match the new rafters rather than the old ceiling joists. As with the other existing rafters, the 1 7/8 by 3 ¾ inch porch rafters show round circular saw marks. The front porch, which stretches the entire length of the south side of the hall and parlor house, has commercially milled tongue-in-groove double-beaded ceiling boards installed with round nails. The porch could not have been constructed before



Fig. 8. The Five Mile House has a full-width porch on its front (south) side

round nails became available in about 1880. The seven porch posts across the front of the porch have been replaced with modern lumber, but the two 3 ½ inch square posts closest to the house are original to the porch and sport decorative chamfered corners (Fig. 8). The porch has a decorative concrete block foundation and currently has a poured-in-place concrete slab floor. The porch also has hooks screwed in the ceiling to support a porch swing.

General notes on the exterior

As an early brick structure in the frontier of Illinois, the Five Mile House was built to be impressive. This wish to impress was continued during construction of the east room addition. Although the room sizes for the east and west rooms are different, the addition was designed to give the structure the appearance of Georgian symmetry. From the front, the original house and addition form a hall and parlor



Fig. 9. Fallen stucco reveals a decorative flat brick arch over the south window in the east room addition.

house with mirror image doors and windows on each side. Another impressive architectural feature is the flat brick arch over the front window in the east addition (Fig. 9). This is purely a decorative feature, as the structural element supporting the wall above the 45 by 29 ½ inch window opening is a hewn wooden beam mentioned earlier in the interior east room description. The window opening at the rear of the brick addition is 44 ½ by 29 inches and does not have a flat brick arch. Unfortunately, the windows in the original room of the house are well stuccoed over, concealing the presence (or lack of presence) of flat brick arches. The window on the south side of the west room is 45 ½ by 28 ½ inches. The window on the west side of the older room is boarded up, preventing an accurate measurement from the interior.

The only remaining door that probably is original to the Five Mile House was discussed in the section describing the east addition interior, but the building's other

doors, while not as old, have acquired some history of their own and deserve being examined here. From the original hinge marks, it appears that all of the doors originally had two hinges and opened to the inside of the house; however the doors in the west room now open to the outside. As with the remaining trim in the house, the doors are painted white. The front (south) door in the original room of the house is 78 by 32 ½ inches and has a large glass panel in the upper half of the door. Starting at the floor level, the lower half of the door has two stacked horizontal panels with three decorative square panels inset with round medallions instead of a third panel under the glass section. The rear door in the older room is 78 by 30 ½ inches. It also has a glass panel in the upper half, but has three stacked horizontal panels in the lower half. The front door in the east addition is 75 by 36 inches and has a glass panel in the upper half, but starting at floor level it has two short vertical panels side by side topped by a single horizontal panel. These three doors all are framed with round nails, making them no older than 1880. The owner who had them installed probably considered them an upgrade to the appearance of the structure over the earlier doors with two vertical panels. A decorative early 20th century screen door also is installed in the southwest doorway leading to the porch. The door has upper and lower screen panels separated by a panel decorated with vertical turned spindles and has saw cut gingerbread trim boards in the corners.

The hand-made bricks used in the construction of the Five Mile House are interesting in their own right. Sometime after the kitchen ell was added, the soft bricks of the hall and parlor part of the house were covered with stucco and painted white. This appears to have been a necessity, as any exposed bricks quickly are eroding away. That the stucco was applied after the kitchen ell was added is apparent because the part of the north brick wall that would have been covered by the kitchen ell does not have the applied stucco. It is in this area where the joining line between the original house and the east room is most visible. By examining the location of the joint in comparison with the

location of the interior wall, it is apparent that the joint is at the east side of the interior wall. This shows that the interior wall originally was an exterior wall for the west room and that the east room was added later (Fig.10). This section of wall also offers some other interesting construction details. The bricks in the old and new sections are of slightly different sizes. Although all of the bricks are quite irregular, the bricks in the original structure measure about 8 ½ by 2 inches while the bricks in the newer addition measure about 8 1/8 by 2 ¼ inches. And, although both rooms use forms of the American Bond pattern, the older section has five rows of stretchers between rows of headers while the newer section has anywhere from five to seven rows of stretchers between rows of headers.



Fig. 10. This crack shows where the east room was added on to the original one-room brick house. The wall was not stuccoed here because it was protected by the kitchen ell.

The underlying roof structure, including the current rafters, was discussed earlier in the section concerning the attic; however, the current roof over the house and the porch consists of wood shingles covered over by deteriorated rectangular green asphalt shingles. The roof appears to have a rusty metal ridge cap.

The grounds

The Five Mile House always has sat at an important crossroads in southeastern

Coles County, Illinois. The property currently is bounded by Illinois Route 130 on the west and by Westfield Road on the south and by fence rows on the east and north sides. A decayed wooden fence post and the remains of an iron pipe fence post are visible about 15 feet west of the current east fence row suggesting that the fence row might have been relocated at some point in time. Three water wells are visible. The currently used well, which is about 13 ½ feet due east of the south edge of the Five Mile House's front porch, is surrounded by a modern rough-faced, two-hole brick wall about 6 feet square and 3 feet high. Two earlier wells are covered by circular iron-rimmed concrete pads, which are 3 feet 5 inches in diameter, and have a small hole for the long-removed pumps. One is 39 feet southeast of the house and the other is 28 feet due north of the east side of the house (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Two wells are visible in this image: The current well is in the brick enclosure to the right of the house and an earlier well is in the left foreground.

A two-seat outhouse, which was a necessity as the Five Mile House never had modern plumbing installed, is about 47 feet northeast of the house. The structure's construction materials suggest that it probably was built in the early 20th century. The outhouse, which is sided with 5 inch wide tongue-in-groove boards, is 6 feet 5 inches wide and 5 feet 2 ½ feet deep. The outhouse door, which is constructed from 3 ½ inch wide tongue-in-groove boards, is only 5 feet 3 inches tall and 2 feet 4 inches wide. The outhouse has a corrugated sheet metal roof covering an earlier roof of asphalt shingles.

The property also includes a non-contributing modern (1950s or 1960s) ranch

house in the northwest corner of the site. A rectangular concrete slab of unknown origin is poured in the ground near the northeast corner of the property.

Conclusion



Fig. 12. As this early 20th Century photograph shows, the Five Mile House is a link to Coles County's historic past.

The Five Mile House continues to be a landmark for many people in southeast Coles County, Illinois. The current structure possesses great material integrity for at least the past 100 years of its history and there is much historic fabric remaining from its original one-room construction in 1836. As the oldest remaining structure in Coles County, the house is a physical connection to Illinois' pioneering days and an important link to the past (Fig. 12). During the past 164 years the Five Mile House has had to change and adapt to remain useful. With its projected restoration, the structure will change once again to help educate the future while celebrating the past.