

# WILLIAM WHITLEY 1749-1813

By CHARLES G. TALBERT

Lexington, Kentucky

## Part II\*

### THE WILLIAM WHITLEY HOUSE

On a small rise just south of U. S. highway 150 and about two miles west of the town of Crab Orchard, Kentucky, stands the residence which was once the home of the pioneers, William and Esther Whitley. The house is of bricks, which are laid in Flemish bond rather than in one of the English bonds which are more common in Kentucky. In this type of construction each horizontal row of bricks contains alternating headers and stretchers, that is, one brick is laid lengthwise, the next endwise, etc. English bond may consist of alternating rows of headers and stretchers, or, as is more often the case, a row of headers every fifth, sixth, or seventh row.<sup>1</sup>

In the Whitley house the headers in the gable ends are glazed so that a slightly darker pattern, in this case a series of diamonds, stands out clearly. Thus is achieved the effect generally known as ornamental Flemish bond which dates back to eleventh century Normandy. One of the earliest known examples of this in England is a fourteenth century church at Ashington, Essex, and by the sixteenth century it was widely used for English dwellings.<sup>2</sup>

Another feature of the Whitley house which never fails to attract attention is the use of dark headers to form the initials of the owner just above the front entrance.<sup>3</sup> The idea of brick initials and dates was known in England in the seventeenth century, one Herfordshire house bearing the inscription, "1648 W F M." One of the earliest American examples was Carthagenia in St. Mary's County, Maryland, which was built in 1711 and razed in 1934, and which had on the front the initials of the builder, William Hebb.<sup>4</sup>

The walls of the Whitley house are exceptionally thick, and the windows are rather high above the ground, indicating that the builder had the safety of the occupants uppermost in his mind. The glass for the windows is said to have been brought through the Cumberland Gap by mule pack.<sup>5</sup>

The main part of the house contains three rooms and a large

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hall on the first floor, two rooms and a hall on the second floor, and a large attic over the whole. Just to the left of the front entrance is the high-ceilinged family room with its thirteen S-shaped woodcarvings over the fireplace. Across the hall is the dining room with Whitley's gun closet in one corner, and behind that is a smaller room which is thought to have been the original kitchen.

The main stairway, which connects the lower and upper halls is beautifully carved, the end of each step being decorated with an eagle holding an olive branch. The second floor may also be reached by a hidden stairway or ladder leading from the kitchen to the west bedroom on the floor above; a valuable auxiliary route in case of Indian attack.

The reduced width of the main stairs, where they continue to the attic, makes possible a semi-secret space which shares the middle rear window with the stair-well. This cubicle when covered would have hidden a man, but at the same time would put him in a good position for watching or even for firing from the window.<sup>6</sup>

The attic is lighted by two windows in each gable end, and could have been used for spinning and weaving as well as for games and dancing; the name of the house, Sportman's Hill, and the proximity of Whitley's race path indicating that it was not a place of "all work and no play." Here the large rafters are seen, squared with an axe and joined with wooden pegs. The house also has a full basement, the windows of which are protected by heavy wooden bars.<sup>7</sup>

Since Whitley built one of the first brick houses in Kentucky, he must have gotten his ideas elsewhere, probably in Virginia. Although he moved his family to Kentucky in 1775, he returned to Virginia in 1786,<sup>8</sup> and could have observed the trends both in architecture and in furniture.

In his native Rockbridge County a number of houses, which were in existence at that time, bear a striking resemblance to the house which he later erected. Near Brownsburg he must have seen often the Samuel Wilson house, which is said to have been erected before 1750, and on his 1786 visit he could have also studied the D. B. McClung house in the same area. Three other Rockbridge houses which must have influenced both William and Esther Whitley are the Cyrus H. McCormick house, near Steel's Tavern, the Reid White home in the town of Lexington, and the John Miller house about twelve miles west of Lexington. The brickwork of the White home is laid in Flemish

bond, and another example of this type of construction is the Dold building in the same town, which was erected when Whitley was a boy. Furthermore, on his 1786 visit he could have inspected the C. J. Brawley house and the Thomas J. Wilson house, each about four miles from Natural Bridge, the former to the west, and the later to the north. The Withrow Building, at Main and Washington streets in Lexington, is a good example of ornamental Flemish bond. While this was erected about 1790 and was probably never seen by Whitley, it could have been viewed by his builders. In Rockbridge County, side houses comparable to that which has been added to the Whitley house were not common until after 1800, but in New England, Pennsylvania, and the eastern shore of Virginia they were built much earlier. The eastern shore houses usually had their side houses centered with the main house, while those in Pennsylvania and New England generally had the small house joined near the rear of the big house. In Rockbridge County, side and back rooms were often added at a later date as was evidently the case with the Whitley house.<sup>9</sup> The determination of the dates of construction of the various additions to this house is an archeological and not a historical problem.

The Whitley house is not an exact copy of any of these Virginia houses, but would seem to be a composite of features borrowed from several. The exact year in which it was erected may never be determined, but the examination of existing evidence should at least make possible the setting of limits.

Some of the early travelers in Kentucky kept journals, and others were interviewed in later life by historians. A large brick house at the edge of the wilderness, as the Whitley house would have been if in existence prior to 1792, would certainly have attracted considerable attention; and, since many of the travel accounts indicate careful observation, it seems likely that such a house would have been considered worthy of some comment.

In the 1840's the Presbyterian minister, John D. Shane, had an interview with Mrs. Sarah Graham of Harrodsburg, who, as the seven-year-old Sarah Spillman, had entered Kentucky by the Crab Orchard branch of the Wilderness Road in November, 1780. She stated that there was, to her knowledge, not even a hewn log house in Kentucky at that time, the first of that type having been erected in what is now Jessamine County in 1781.<sup>10</sup>

William Brown who came over the same route in 1782, passed the Crab Orchard and Logan's Fort, and estimated the distance

between them to be about eleven miles. He made no reference, however, to any point in between.<sup>11</sup>

Joel Watkins, a Virginian who visited Kentucky in 1789, returned by the Wilderness Road, leaving Danville on September 1 and arriving at the Crab Orchard on the evening of the same day. Deciding to delay their departure for a few days, Watkins and his party returned to "a certain Mr. Ously's [*sic*] . . . on Lick Creek, opposite the mouth of Drak's [*sic*] Camp Creek. . . ." <sup>12</sup> The travelers remained at the Owsley home until the afternoon of September 3, when they again went to Crab Orchard where they spent the night, and on the morning of September 4, they started down the trail toward the Cumberland Gap. No mention was made of the home of William Whitley, and Owsley's house was not described, which would indicate that it was a conventional log structure.<sup>13</sup>

The Methodist bishop, Francis Asbury, visited Crab Orchard on numerous occasions. In his journal he mentioned being there on April 11 and on May 1, in 1792, and again on May 8 and on September 28, in 1793. On the latter date he traveled up the Wilderness Road as far as St. Asaph's, and, although he generally mentioned anything unusual which he saw along the way, he made no record of having passed a brick house.<sup>14</sup>

On November 10, 1793, the French botanist, Andre Michaux, traveled from Danville to Crab Orchard by the Wilderness Road and spent the night at the latter. Although his journal was rather detailed, he made no reference to a house of brick in that vicinity.<sup>15</sup>

Needham Parry, who peddled saddles through Kentucky in 1794, and who carefully observed the country because he was considering making it his home, also kept a diary as he traveled. He mentioned passing Traveler's Rest, the home of Isaac Shelby, on June 28, and he arrived at Crab Orchard on the 30th. He had visited in the meantime the homes of James and Eliezer Givens. His diary, however, had no entry pertaining to William Whitley.<sup>16</sup>

The failure of the travelers who visited Kentucky after 1792 to mention the Whitley house should not be taken to mean that it did not exist. This apparent oversight is more likely to have been the result of two other pertinent factors. First, the frontier was by that time being pushed back to such an extent that a better than average house, even though built of brick, would have attracted less attention.<sup>17</sup> Then too, brick construction, at least for certain types of buildings, was no longer a novelty.

As early as March 19, 1791, the trustees of the town of Lexington had announced that a contract for "the brik [*sic*] work of a markethouse . . . fifty by twenty-five feet" would be awarded on the 28th day of the same month.<sup>18</sup> On May 19, 1792, a similar notice appeared in the *Kentucky Gazette*. This time a contract was "to be let to the lowest bidder on the 20th instant [for] the building of a Brick House within the town of Lexington; intended for the use of Transylvania Seminary."<sup>19</sup> On December 29 of the same year Alexander and James Parker announced the arrival of a large assortment of merchandise which might be seen in either of their two stores, one of them a "framed house opposite the Court-House, and the other . . . a brick opposite the State House . . . ."<sup>20</sup>

If the date of construction of the Whitley house had to be determined from travel accounts alone, almost any year might be assigned, since the travelers obviously could not have mentioned everything that they saw, and furthermore, they probably could have traveled from Crab Orchard to St. Asaph's or Danville by more than one route.

A second type of evidence was mentioned in the preceding chapter. The tradition that Whitley paid for his house by disposing of part of his farm is very strong, but the fact remains that he deeded no land to anyone prior to September 28, 1792.<sup>21</sup>

It would seem also that the change from a log station to a large brick house might involve an increase in the number of slaves. As has already been pointed out, Whitley was never a large slaveholder, but by 1795 his slaves, which had been listed as one or two in all previous years, were suddenly increased to four, and his average remained close to that figure for the rest of his life.<sup>22</sup>

A still better type of evidence would be the statements or even the casual remarks of those who lived in, or even visited in the house. The "Whitley Papers" in the Wisconsin State Historical Society's Draper Collection<sup>23</sup> provide a certain amount of such evidence. These manuscripts contain the words of William Whitley; of his daughter, Levisa McKinney; and of his nephew, Solomon Clark. Whitley dictated his narrative to his son-in-law, Philip E. Sublette, shortly before his death, while Lyman C. Draper interviewed Solomon Clark in 1842 and Levisa McKinney in 1851.<sup>24</sup> Some significance must be attached to the fact that in the entire collection there was no mention of a house until 1793,<sup>25</sup> and the term "brick house" was not used until October of 1794.<sup>26</sup> In earlier references to the family abode the

term "station" was always used, and this appeared for the last time in 1787.<sup>27</sup>

A consideration of these four pieces of evidence has resulted in the conclusion that William Whitley was still living in a log station in 1787, and that he had moved into his brick house by 1794, and both the land and the slave arguments point to a date of construction nearer to the latter than to the former.

These figures may be modified by future research, but even if they stand unchanged, they should have not the slightest effect upon the feeling of importance which the people of Kentucky attach to the continued preservation of Sportsman's Hill. This house is and rightfully should be a state shrine, not primarily because of its age, even though that equals or exceeds the age of the commonwealth itself, but rather because it was the home of one of the greatest of Kentucky's heroes, William Whitley.

(To Be Concluded)

#### FOOTNOTES

##### Part II

<sup>1</sup> Henry C. Forman, *The Architecture of the Old South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1948), 29,42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 71.

<sup>3</sup> The initials of Esther Whitley, placed on the rear of the house were covered by a later addition to the building.

<sup>4</sup> Forman, *op. cit.*, 150.

<sup>5</sup> *Louisville Times*, September 6, 1889, feature article signed M.M.T. This article credits a woman named Jenny Towns with transporting the glass.

<sup>6</sup> Clay Lancaster, "Some Secret Spaces and Private Places in Early American Architecture," in *Antiques* (New York, 1922-), L (1946), 327.

<sup>7</sup> For other descriptions of the Whitley house, see Christopher C. Graham, "Pioneer Life," in *Louisville Monthly Magazine* (Louisville, 1879, 1 vol.), 197; Maude W. Lafferty, *The Lure of Kentucky* (Louisville, 1939), 84; Clay Lancaster, "Kentucky's Architectural Firsts," in *Antiques*, LII (1947), 331-334; Rexford Newcomb, "The Architecture of Old Kentucky," in *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* (Frankfort, 1903-), XXXI (1933), 191; Theodore Roosevelt, *Winning of the West*, 6 vols. (New York, 1905), IV, 88.

<sup>8</sup> See Part I, note 54.

<sup>9</sup> James W. McClung, *Historical Significance of Rockbridge County, Virginia* (Staunton, Virginia, 1939), 59, 64, 74, 77, 95, 128, 153, 190, and 218.

<sup>10</sup> Draper MS. 12 CC 45-46.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Speed, *The Wilderness Road*, Filson Club Publications Number 2 (Louisville, 1886), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia S. Herold (ed.), "Joel Watkins Diary of 1789," in *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, XXXIV (1936), 239.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 240. William Owsley, father of Governor William Owsley, had settled in this vicinity in 1783. See Lewis Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1847), 492. If the present Drake's Creek were meant,

the Owsley place would have been about three miles to the northeast of the site of the present Whitley house.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Asbury, *Francis Asbury's Journal*, 3 vols. (New York, 1821), II, 126-27 and III, 117-118.

<sup>15</sup> Andre Michaux, "Journal of Travels into Kentucky, 1793-1796," in Reuben G. Thwaites (ed.), *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (Cleveland, 1904), III, 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Lucien D. Beckner (ed.), "John D. Shane's Copy of Needham Parry's Diary of Trip Westward in 1794," in *The Filson Club History Quarterly* (Louisville, 1926-), XXII (1948), 247-248.

<sup>17</sup> See Part I, note 65.

<sup>18</sup> *Kentucky Gazette*, March 19, 1791.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, May 19, 1792.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, December 29, 1792.

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln County Deed Book B, 154. In view of the possibility that a deed might have failed to get into the index, the actual copies of all deeds made in Lincoln County prior to 1792 have been examined. These are recorded in Lincoln County Deed Books A and B.

<sup>22</sup> Lincoln County Tax Lists, 1787-1812, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.

<sup>23</sup> The "Whitley Papers" constitute Volume IX of the Kentucky manuscripts.

<sup>24</sup> Draper also interviewed William Whitley, Jr. (Draper MSS. 12 C 62-62 (8)) and the youngest Whitley daughter, Ann Harper. (Draper MSS. 18 S 188-96). The former believed that Whitley moved to "within two miles of Crab Orchard" in 1786, and the latter referred to "the new brick house" when telling of an event which occurred in 1795. This would seem to indicate that Whitley moved into a log house on the 1400 acres which constituted his own preemption and settlement when he left his station at the Walnut Flat. This house may have been retained as an outbuilding when the brick house was erected. The land at the Walnut Flat, which Whitley had obtained from Valentine Harmon, was claimed also by Isaac Campbell, and Whitley already had lost one decision in the courts. (Lincoln County Order Book 1, Page 36). It is likely that this was his reason for moving.

<sup>25</sup> Draper MS. 9 CC 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Draper MS. 9 CC 53. Here Whitley said that "Israel Hart's Defeat, May 1787, took place about 5 miles from my Old Station." On the same page, when referring to the wounding of Isaac Keller, Whitley said that Keller "came to my station."