

## THE EIGHT-MILE HOUSE A SEARCH FOR HISTORY

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Like moonshine whiskey, old homes in Kentucky all too frequently age faster by traditions than by the more conventional calendar of 365 days. Such is the case of the Eight-Mile House in Jefferson County which has become so steeped in local traditions that the structure's history has apparently become obscured. One seeking truth can quickly become frustrated if the search is made via the false leads of folklore.

Facts about the house are difficult to obtain. Perhaps one must be satisfied in learning what the building *is not* instead of what it is. This negative method is presented in this paper because positive proof of the home's origin remains elusive.

The one-and-a-half story stone structure is located on the north side of U.S. 60 east of Louisville between the intersection of Whipps Mill Road and Beargrass Creek. U.S. 60, at this point, generally follows the old Louisville-Shelbyville Turnpike and marks the 8-mile point from the Jefferson County Court House. The name — Eight-Mile House — was probably given because the structure was located near the 8-mile marker and toll gate.

Folklore has the house as originally being built by Colonel William Christian, the third County Lieutenant of Jefferson County.<sup>1</sup> If true, the construction date could be established as between August 1785 and May 1786, the 9-month period when Christian lived in the area. His August 17, 1785, letter to his mother dated "Beargrass" established his arrival at the series of pioneer stations located on that creek.<sup>2</sup> He wrote his mother again on September 25, 1785, that ". . . I expect to be at Home on Thursday and shall set about a Home directly which I expect to get into by New Year. I will build one like our old House

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<sup>1</sup>William Christian (1743-1788) was offered the office of County Lieutenant when Jefferson County, Virginia, was formed in 1780. He refused the office which was accepted by Colonel John Floyd who is generally considered as the county's first Lieutenant. Christian became County Lieutenant in 1785 after the death of Colonel Cox.

<sup>2</sup>Christian's letters quoted here are photostatic copies of *The William Christian Papers*, Virginia State Library, Richmond.

at Holston because we can do it ourselves . . .” Logic makes it doubtful that Christian would have attempted to build a house of stone with the knowledge that freezing weather was barely a month away. Such a short period of time would make it impossible to dress the stone used in the building even had he used his numerous slaves. The majority of them, however, were employed at Bullitt’s Lick, one of Christian’s most valuable pieces of real estate. Understandably, the Colonel preferred to keep his slaves profitably at work manufacturing salt instead of working at less profitable pursuits during the winter season in the Beargrass region. Additionally, freezing weather would make it impossible to successfully use any mortar available in that era.

His November 4, 1785, letter to his mother and William Fleming, dated “Asturgus’s” announced “. . . We are well here and have got three tolerable Cabbins *{sic}* to live in. . .” On December 12, 1785, he again wrote his mother from “Asturgus’s” that “. . . I am writing in a neat little cabbin *{sic}* built for the Children close by our Cabbin. We have a third for of lodging Room for Strangers & Neighbours. . .” (“Asturgus” refers to A’Sturgus Station, an early pioneer fort located on today’s Oxmoor Estate, approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile southwest of the Eight-Mile House.)

But even before the cabins were completed, the Christians had become disenchanted with their new Kentucky home. Mrs. Christian wrote her sister-in-law, Mrs. Fleming, on November 3, 1785, that “. . . We propose to leave Bear Grass in Feb. or march & go up to Danville. . . Your Brother is much disgusted at Kentucky all together & says he shall sell out here as quick as possible to leave the country. . .” Her husband wrote the following day to his mother and William Fleming “. . . I expect to move my Family next Spring into Lincoln [County] . . . As nothing but a general Indian War is expected I would choose to have them entirely out of Danger. . .” The same day, he wrote his sister “We intend to move off to Danville and continue there until some better prospects here. If we had peace here and a trade, I should like Beargrass as it is the flower of all Kentucky.”

By March 26, 1786, Anne Christian had become even more dissatisfied and wrote Anne Fleming “. . . I cant think of staying here much longer. Your Brother wants to Sell out in this country but lands have fallen so low & no purchaser, I dont think he has any chance to part with his yet. . . I hope next to write you from the upper Country. . . I also hope your Mother will rest contented till we see what place we are settled in, now tis very uncertain. . .” Christian was killed by the Indians in May, 1786. His widow wrote her mother-in-law, from Cove Spring, Mercer County, on September 18, 1786 (five months after Christian’s death) “. . . I must tell you that my dear deceased

Husband could not think of living in the country, & in the month of Jan. 86 He told me Seriously, that he woud {sic} be on the road leaving Kentucky by that time twelve months which {sic} we got to it, (if he lived). . . ."

These remarks hardly seem those of persons interested in overcoming the multiple obstacles of constructing a stone home during the winter season in an Indian-infested area!

The actual location of Christian's home on the Beargrass is established by Thomas W. Bullitt (1838-1910), Christian's great-grandson. In his book, *My Life At Oxmoor*, Bullitt states "Colonel Christian was brought back to his home, but died immediately. He was buried in front of his house, on the bank of the Beargrass. This fixed the location of the 'Graveyard,' which has remained as the family burying ground to this day."<sup>3</sup> The Bullitt cemetery is over 1,000 yards southwest of the Eight-Mile House and could hardly be considered affiliated to it.

Another tradition is that the Eight-Mile House was built by Dr. Walter Warfield and his wife Sarah (née Christian) and existed when the property was transferred to Richard Dickenson on July 5, 1796.<sup>4</sup> The deed states ". . . whereon the said Walter Warfield at present resides . . ." and "In obedience to the Comission to us delivered, we met at the house of the said Walter Warfield . . ."

Although the location of the Warfield home is unknown, it could not have been the Eight-Mile House. Richard C. Anderson, Jr. (1788-1826), writing in 1814, recalled one of his earliest memories as "I remember that I was with my f. & Mother at Doctor Warfields (The place now owned by Miss Dickenson)."<sup>5</sup> His age would have placed the year of the visit as 1794 or 1795. But the property passed to William Osborn in 1797,<sup>6</sup> William McManamy in 1809,<sup>7</sup> and George Ewinger in 1810.<sup>8</sup> The Dickenson property of 500 acres was divided in 1797 when Osborn purchased 207 acres (including that part where the Eight-Mile House is presently located). Thus, when Anderson wrote in 1814, The Eight-Mile House was not owned by Miss Dickenson and could not have been the home of Dr. and Mrs. Warfield.

Still another tradition claims that the building was a stop for the Louisville-Frankfort stage. This has the advantage of logic because the

<sup>3</sup> Thomas W. Bullitt, *My Life at Oxmoor* (Louisville: John P. Morton & Co., 1911), p. 10. Also see footnotes, pages 14 and 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Deed Book 4, Page 413*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>5</sup> A. Tischendorf and E. T. Parks, Editors, *The Diary and Journal of Richard Clough Anderson, Jr., 1814-1826* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964), p. 3 and *Bulletin of Jefferson County Medical Society* (Louisville, Vol. 19, No. 11, Dec. 1971), p. 13

<sup>6</sup> *Deed Book 4, Page 499*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>7</sup> *Deed Book 8, Page 571*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>8</sup> *Deed Book 8, Page 678*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

property was owned from 1842 to 1857 by Johnson, Swegent, Chiles and Hanna<sup>9</sup> who were operators of one of the largest stage companies in Kentucky.

But association by ownership can not establish the use of any property. Besides, several contradicting points cause one to seriously question if the building could have been a stage stop. Its location only 8 miles from Louisville tends to disprove that it would be selected as a horse-changing station or a place of refreshment for passengers. There is only one major hill between Louisville and the house — hardly any reason to wear down the horses and require changing teams. Besides, the Brengman Tavern in Middletown, less than 4 miles to the east, has been identified as a stage stop and place where horses were changed.<sup>10</sup> Its location — 12 miles from Louisville — follows the general rule of having stops spaced at 10 to 12 mile intervals.

The lack of a tavern license is a further obstacle in establishing the Eight-Mile House as a stage stop. Had the stage paused at this location, surely the owners would have made provisions for passengers to refresh themselves — an important source of income. Yet the Minute Books of Jefferson County contain numerous mentions of tavern license during the era but none for the Eight-Mile House or its owners.<sup>11</sup>

The building is first identified in the 1879 *Atlas of Jefferson & Oldham Counties, Kentucky*<sup>12</sup> which lists it as "D Stitzer 8 Mile Ho." A building is also indicated in the same general location on Bergmann's 1858 map.<sup>13</sup> While the latter is an indicator that the building existed in 1858, it fails to provide documentation of that fact.

David Stitzer did operate a tavern, at least for a short period of time from the Eight-Mile House. A license was granted for that purpose on April 14, 1879.<sup>14</sup> The duration of his tavern is not known, but, before the time of his death on February 23, 1890, he had apparently converted his business into a grocery.<sup>15</sup> In 1895, his widow Amanda stated that "one part of it is an ell" which had been "built in Mr. Kent's lifetime."<sup>16</sup> (William Kent was Mrs. Stitzer's first husband and

<sup>9</sup> *Deed Book 60, Page 619*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>10</sup> Depositions of William Constantine, H. B. Bankes, and Henry Dunn, *John Brengman vs E. P. Johnson, et al*, Old Circuit Common Law, Case No. 35266, Jefferson Circuit Court, Louisville, April 30, 1845.

<sup>11</sup> Private correspondence between author and Director of Archives and Record Service of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>12</sup> *Atlas of Jefferson & Oldham Counties, Kentucky* (Philadelphia, Beers & Lanagan, 1879).

<sup>13</sup> *Map of Jefferson County*, G. T. Bergmann, Surveyor, 1858.

<sup>14</sup> *Minute-Order Book 37, Page 48*, Jefferson County Court, Louisville.

<sup>15</sup> Deposition by Mrs. Amanda Stitzer, *Amanda Stitzer vs Carolina Schustey*, Case No. 4801, Common Pleas Division, Jefferson Circuit Court, Louisville.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

owned the property from 1865 to 1868.)<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Stitzer further stated "I can't tell you what it's worth now. When it was sold the last time it brought \$3400, but it has all run down since then, and the value is not as great as it was then."<sup>18</sup>

Thomas C. Fisher remembers the building from his childhood as a Negro saloon. As a young teenager prior to World War I, Fisher accompanied his step-grandfather, Dr. Silas O. Witherbee, to the structure where the latter administered to one of the saloon's patrons who apparently had altercations with another customer. The patient had suffered a knife wound which penetrated the abdominal cavity, exposing the intestines. Fisher sat upon the patient's chest and administered chloroform while Dr. Witherbee "sewed him up." The patient recovered and was seen by Fisher the following week "walking very slowly."<sup>19</sup>

It is unknown when the frame "ell" was removed but Fisher does not remember it. By the process of elimination, it was probably removed about the turn of the century.

Another long standing tradition is that the building served as a toll gate for the Turnpike. The 1858 map, however, shows the toll gate as being south of the road and west of Beargrass Creek. The 1879 map indicates that function had moved to the north side of the road but the "Toll Ho" is the fifth building west of Beargrass Creek.

Vernon Wetherby remembers it as a toll house at the turn of the 19th century.<sup>20</sup> But it was not known as the Eight-Mile House; that name was used by a 2-story, frame tavern west of Beargrass Creek.

Documentation of the building's early history is apparently unavailable. Deeds do not locate the structure on plats nor do they provide any helpful description such as "stone house" for the appurtenances.

The building was purchased jointly on December 12, 1967, by the Commonwealth of Kentucky and Jefferson County. Most published accounts at the time stated the house had been built by Colonel William Christian<sup>21</sup> although Thomas W. Bullitt, in his letter to the Editors of *The Courier-Journal* on October 20, 1967, warned "While the state and

<sup>17</sup> *Dead Book 122, Page 185*, County Clerk of Jefferson County, Louisville.

<sup>18</sup> Stitzer, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Private correspondence between the author and Mr. Thomas C. Fisher, Middletown, Kentucky.

<sup>20</sup> Private correspondence between the author and Mr. Vernon Wetherby, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>21</sup> *The Lexington Leader*, Jan. 19, 1962, "Stone House in Jefferson County Built Before 1785 by Col. William Christian"; *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville) Aug. 8, 1967, "Fiscal Court and State to Buy 8-Mile House." *The Courier-Journal*, July 29, 1967 "Editorial — A Worthy Addition to Historic Sites"; *The Courier-Journal*, July 27, 1967, "County Plans to Try to Buy 8-Mile House"; *The Courier-Journal*, March 10, 1967, "Joe Creason's Kentucky"; and *The Courier-Journal*, October 17, 1967, "Site Offered for Eight Mile House."

county may well be justified in acquiring the stone house adjacent to the site of the old Eight Mile House Tavern, this stone house was not, and I repeat not, the home of Col. William Christian as you reported in the Oct. 17 *Courier-Journal*.<sup>22</sup>

The future of the structure is uncertain. The Kentucky Heritage Commission, in whose name the deed is recorded, has recommended to the Commonwealth that the property be sold — an action probably based on the frustration of attempting to prove the house's historical or architectural significance.<sup>23</sup>

The Eight-Mile House's very location discourages restoration as a museum or tourist center. The property contains only 0.42 acres. Access onto congested U.S. 60 is difficult. And even this is further compounded by the intersection of busy Whipps Mill Road. Finally, the land upon which it stands borders expensive commercial property, making its current value prohibitive for residential use.

Shortly before leaving office in 1971, Governor Louie B. Nunn allotted \$35,000 to the Kentucky Heritage Mansions Foundation for the restoration of the building. These funds, however, can be used only if the state or county owns the property.<sup>24</sup> The Organization for a More Beautiful Metropolitan Louisville has petitioned the Jefferson County Fiscal Court to buy the property from the state with the understanding that the group would restore and maintain it.

A July 30, 1973, editorial in *The Courier-Journal* supported county ownership. The editorial states, "Whether it was built in the 1780s as the residence of William Christian, an early settler of the area, or in the 1820s as a tavern, as some have claimed, is doubtless of considerable interest to regional and architectural historians. But in either case the building is one of the few remaining links to the area's earliest history as a frontier settlement."<sup>25</sup>

The editorialist neglected to explain, however, why a building having no connection with Colonel William Christian or any early pioneers could be "remaining links to the area's earliest history as a frontier settlement."

Other preservation groups have demonstrated only minimal interest in the Eight-Mile House. Perhaps they, tiring of the false leads of folklore, have concentrated their efforts on buildings of identifiable importance.

<sup>22</sup> *The Courier Journal*, October 20, 1967, "Letters to the Editor."

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes*, Kentucky Heritage Commission, Frankfort, Sept. 28, 1972.

<sup>24</sup> *The Louisville Times*, June 5, 1973, "Fiscal Court hears plea to help in preservation of old Eight-Mile House."

<sup>25</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, July 30, 1973, "Eight-Mile House should be saved."