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Log House Restoration

Jan Allen

The serenity of a log house nestled on the edge of a clearing caught our eyes again and again as we traveled throughout this area. At every opportunity, we toured log houses. The workmanship of hand-hewn logs, pegged construction, and dovetailed corners appealed to us. Life in a log house was very different from ours. If one needed something, one made it, grew it, or bartered for it. The log house represented ultimate self sufficiency; the log house was built from the trees on the land.

Next we became aware of deteriorating log houses, and with that awareness we developed a desire to restore one of these treasures. As we came across log houses that looked neglected, we would stop to see if they were for sale. None were for the log houses had special places in their family's history even if the funds or energy for restoration were not available.

In November 1994, we decided to advertise: "Wanted log house or log building." Our ad worked. Within two weeks, we received a call from Mrs. Hollingsworth regarding a log house that she had lived in as a child but now wished to sell and have moved from her property. My husband arranged a time to inspect the log house, located five miles north of New Hope on Old Gurley Pike; I was out of town. The building was a 2-room, dogtrot log house with 16-foot square rooms (fig. 1). The upper sills were each 46 feet long.

The log house had been occupied until the late 1980s, and in the interim had been used as a play and party place by trespassers. My husband liked what he saw and bought it, agreeing to have the house moved within six months. When I returned, we went out to see the log house. I was so shocked at its terrible condition that I was speechless (fig. 2). I thought my husband had lost his mind.

In later years the dogtrot had been crudely enclosed and a lean-to added in the back. A porch, which was falling in at one end, stretched across the front. The exterior was covered with weathered gold felt siding. Most of the logs under the siding appeared to be in good condition except for those around the fireplaces.



Fig. 3 Hollingsworth-Allen House fireplace, November 1994 & December 1995.

Courtesy Jan Allen.

Originally there had been a fireplace in each of the two rooms, but one had been dismantled some time in the past; the opening was crudely boarded up leaving a hole for a stove pipe (fig. 3). The old tin roof had leaked in a few places, and the ceiling was sagging. Layers of trash, old wallpaper, sheet rock, and rotted wood littered the floor.

Our first task was to photograph the house in its current condition. We have kept a photographic record of all the restoration phases. Our second task was to clean up the trash and secure the building from trespassers. We were anxious to move it to our farm where we could control access and work on it at our leisure.

Before moving the house, we made an assessment of what had to be accomplished. The lean-to, the wallboard and sheet rock on the interior walls, and the ceiling were removed and discarded. We found that one room still had milk paint on its logs. The exterior felt siding was also removed. It took the two of us several long, hard weekends to do the removal.

In April 1995, we retired and began working on the move preparation every day. Only sound lumber, samples of wallpaper layers, and artifacts were kept. The log house began to look better.

The chimney had been constructed with limestone cut to fit and required the use of very little mortar. Dismantled rock by rock, the chimney was hauled to the new site. The front porch flooring was removed in three large sections and hauled to the new site.

We conferred with the curator at Burritt Museum on sources for repairs and materials. He offered to look at the log house, give us an opinion on its construction date and his recommendations on the restoration process.

The curator felt the structure was built in the 1840s because of the nail construction; he thought the logs were chestnut. While we were at Burritt, he introduced us to Robert Ervin who did all Burritt's fire-place construction work. The curator also shared the museum's recipe for chinking and some material sources.

For the house's new location, we chose a site on the edge of the woods near the lake on our farm in Lacey's Spring. The new site was leveled, and cement pads were poured for the piled rocks that were to support the log house. A road to the site was enlarged to accommodate the heavy truck and trailer required to move the structure.

Hollis Kennedy agreed to move the house the first week in June. The tin roof was removed and the rafters were tented with tarpaulins until his crew arrived. Additional bracing boards were added on the sides and between the two rooms.

The house was 17 feet tall; however, the Whitesburg Bridge across the Tennessee River has a clearance of 15.5 feet. Therefore, we carefully numbered, lowered, and lay the rafters on the ceiling so they could be reassembled in their original location. Our part of the moving preparation was complete (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Roof rafters, disassembled, Hollingsworth-Allen House, June 1995.

Courtesy Jan Allen.



Fig. 5 Hollingsworth-Allen House in process of being raised, May 1995.

Courtesy Jan Allen.



Fig. 6 Moving day! June 1995.

Courtesy Jan Allen.

We sat back watching as the log house was slowly raised (fig. 5, page 41). By jacking first one side and then the other, the structure was raised until it was high enough for the large trailer to be backed under it. This very precise process took two days. The jacking process freed the large rocks on which the house had rested; we moved these to the new site. Once the house was on the trailer, we obtained a permit from the Alabama State Highway Department for use of U.S. Highway 431 as part of the route to Lacey's Spring.

Moving day! We were excited (fig. 6, page 41). The 25-mile trip took all morning going a slow, steady speed with crews ahead warning traffic. The truck pulled carefully down our narrow road and then backed onto the new site. During the afternoon, the house was raised enough to remove the trailer. The jacks were left in place for a few days while we positioned the support rocks. At last the log house was on its new site. No damage was done to the log house during the raising, the move, or the lowering onto the rocks.

Our first job was to reset the rafters and to get the roof covered and protected from weather. Each rafter had a peg hole in the sill and was pegged at the apex where it met its counterpart from the other side of the roof. We discovered that the rafters were not spaced at regular intervals—they ranged from 22 to 29 inches apart. With the rafters in place, we recovered the roof with tarpaulins to protect the interior. Although the original roof had been covered with wooden shakes and later replaced with tin, we elected to recover the roof with tin (fig. 7).

Logs in the chimney areas needed to be replaced. Our son, Mike McGuire, heard about some people who had removed old logs from the exterior of their house. These logs had come from several houses in Lauderdale and Limestone counties; they were a mixture of chestnut, oak, and yellow poplar sold as one lot. We bought them and moved them to the site (we had thought we were finished with the moving process). We now had a store of extra logs to use for house repairs and building period furniture.

With help from the front end loader on our tractor and much ingenuity, my husband replaced the deteriorated logs on both house ends. We then replaced the roof with new tin and filled in the peak areas with wood boards salvaged from the exterior of the lean-to.



**Fig. 7 Replacing the tin roof,
Hollingsworth-Allen House, September 1995.**
Courtesy Jan Allen.

During November 1995, Robert Ervin rebuilt our chimney was rebuilt by Robert Ervin. Although the rebuilding process used much more mortar than the original chimney had contained, we were very pleased with the results. So that the fireplace can be used for cooking, we have had a crane hand built for it. By December 1995, the log house was enclosed.

Our focus shifted to the interior where we removed buckets of nails and tacks from the log walls; it was a job that we could do in all kinds of weather. Over the years, seven layers of newspaper and wallpaper had been glued and tacked to the log walls. At some time, the walls were sheet rocked with more paint and wallpaper on top of that. A 5-gallon bucket of nails was pulled from the walls in just one room. In later years, the ceiling boards had been moved below the rafters to provide nailing area for sheet rock.

We decided to shift the ceiling boards above the rafters in the traditional design. The old ceiling boards proved to be rotten and had to be discarded.

We had insufficient salvage lumber to redo the ceilings. The Davie Ashley sawmill in Elora, Tennessee, rough cut new ceiling boards from yellow poplar for use in the ceiling. These boards were stored in our barn to cure for 6 to 12 months.

Again using our trusty tractor, the porch flooring was repositioned. The old porch roof supports were 4 by 4s that we discarded as inappropriate. On our farm, we chose instead cedar trees of appropriate diameter and cut them to the required height removing branches but leaving the bark.

The cedar tree posts looked great. We reinstalled the porch rafters and put on the new tin porch roof. Hooks for a porch swing were still in place on the rafters.

Restoration of the log house was put on hold for 1997 while we built a house at the farm. Our long range plan is to fill the log house with period furniture and use it as a guest house.

We restarted the restoration this spring by opening up the dogtrot. The stack of ceiling boards is still calling to us from the barn. We have decisions to make on how to finish the interior: leave the milk paint, whitewash the logs, or leave them plain.

There is still much to be done in the restoration process and in researching of the log house's history. However, we always take time to sit and rock on the porch and enjoy the serenity of the log house.



Fig. 8 Hollingsworth-Allen House, chimney rebuilding, December 1995.

Courtesy Jan Allen.

Jan Allen and her husband are in the process of restoring a small log house, relocated from New Hope to Lacey's Spring, to serve as a guest house. When they are not working on the house, visitors may find them rocking on the porch..



Fig. 1 View of Huntsville-Madison County Courthouse, 1950s.
Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.