

The Buchanan Log House: An Architectural History

Excerpt

For more than two hundred years, the Buchanan Log House has stood on the high ground above McCrory Creek in southeastern Davidson County. Built in c.1808 by pioneer settler James Buchanan (1763 – 1841) on a portion of a Revolutionary War grant originally owned by Thomas Gillespie, the building is one of the oldest in the Donelson community. The Buchanan House has been inhabited continuously since its original construction and successive generations of occupants have left their marks on the structure. Although there have been numerous architectural changes both inside and out throughout the years, the historic residence retains much of its original character, charm, and appeal.

James Buchanan came to Tennessee from Virginia and purchased the land from Gillespie in 1807. His hewn log dwelling most likely reflected the frontier culture that he grew up in during the late 1700s. During that time period, a number of traditional British house types were built in the former colonies, and one in particular, two stories in height, one-room deep, and two rooms or more long, appears to be the inspiration for the Buchanan House.

The earliest form of this popular house type (which could be built from wood, brick, or stone) was a rectangular building consisting of two rooms on the first floor: the hall and the parlor. Often, there was only a single room above, but two rooms upstairs were not unusual. Almost all domestic activities took place in the hall, which was square-shaped and the larger of the rooms. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the hall-and-parlor arrangement was the most common multi-room plan found throughout Davidson County and the surrounding area.

Most early buildings constructed in Middle Tennessee were uncomplicated and had simple floor plans. The front and rear walls almost always had opposing entry doors. This was the case in the Buchanan House, although the original location of the rear door has been filled in and the door installed in the place of one of the rear windows. Usually, the chimney was centered on the long axis of the house on the gable end.

Although the settlers and their families often built small log buildings themselves, the size, complexity, and workmanship of the Buchanan House indicate the presence of a professional builder and his crew. The almost complete lack of carpentry or woodworking tools in the 1841 inventory of James Buchanan's estate provides further evidence for this supposition.

Buchanan's house was constructed on a continuous foundation of lightly-worked limestone blocks, and utilized hewn hardwood logs from the surrounding forest for the walls, including the interior dividing wall (see Figure 1). Half-dovetail notched at the corners and built to traditional dimensions of 30' X 18', the building rose to a full two-story height and had multiple windows on both floors. On each exterior end of the house was a tall, well-constructed, double-shouldered fireplace composed of roughly-hewn limestone blocks laid in courses. Costly features such as the large stone chimneys, the two-story height, and multiple windows on an

early house indicate an owner of above average means.

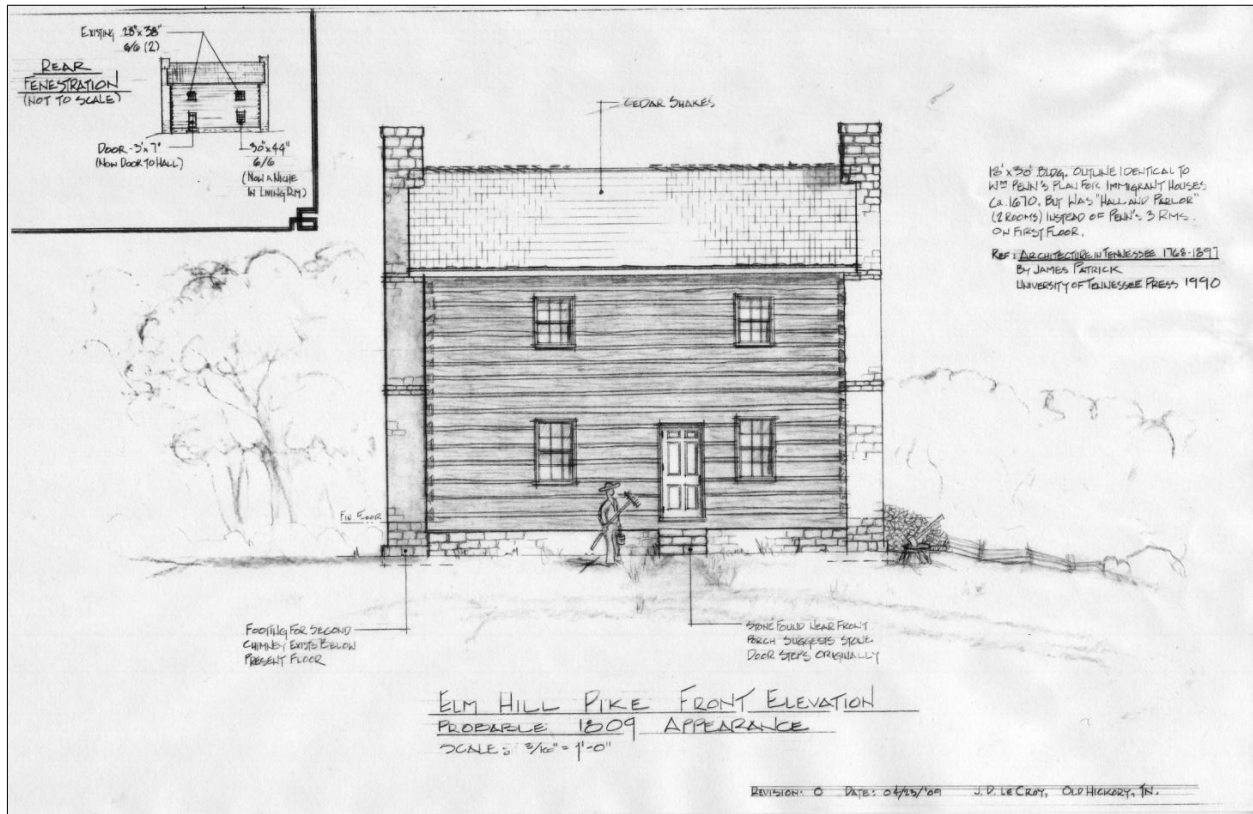


Figure 1

Although whole logs were used for the first floor sleepers (joists), the 4" X 8" ceiling joists on both floors were either split or pit-sawn from yellow poplar timber and then hand-planed. The first floor ceiling joists have decorative beading on their lower edges and are set into blind mortises in the bearing logs. A blind mortise only penetrates halfway into the timber, so the ends of the joists are protected from the weather and not visible from the outside.

A one-inch thick false plate was nailed to the tops of the second floor ceiling joists along both of their ends, which extend about a foot past the outside of the walls. These false plates bear the 4" X 3" sash-sawn yellow poplar rafters, which are half-lapped and pegged at the ridge. Approximately four feet below the ridge, horizontal collar beams were half-lapped and nailed to the sides of each set of rafters, forming a primitive truss. This high level of craftsmanship described above is usually found only in early Tennessee houses; architectural details such as this indicate that a skilled house carpenter, one trained in timber-frame construction techniques, erected the first section of the Buchanan Log House.

The roof sheathing consists of un-edged, sash-sawn yellow poplar planks nailed to the rafters. Originally, the roof was covered with wooden boards or shingles, but sometime in the mid-twentieth century one of the owners removed the earlier roofing material and installed galvanized sheet metal 5-V pattern panels on the entire building.

On both the front and rear facades, the opposing doors were set slightly off center and the windows on the second floor were placed directly above the ones on the first floor. Despite this regularity, the front façade presents an asymmetrical appearance because of the position of the stairway inside. In order to access the upstairs, the builder installed a steep boxed stairway in the front corner of the house, which affected the placement of the nearby window. The 10' ceiling height of the first story required a considerable amount of floor space for the run of the stairs, which were built in a square-C shape and led directly into the upstairs room. Another set of stairs (or ladder) built directly over this staircase led to the attic.

As in many early buildings, there were upstairs hearths as well. The surviving east fireplace on the second floor of the Buchanan House has inscribed geometric markings on the face of the dressed keystone centered in the arched lintel above the opening. At this time, neither the meaning nor the purpose of these markings is known, although they appear to represent the phases of the moon.

With his handsome dwelling complete, James Buchanan started a family. He married Mary Lucinda East (1792 – 1865) on April 24, 1810, and their union eventually produced sixteen children – ten daughters and six sons – who were all raised in the log house. In order to make room for his growing family, Buchanan built a 20' X 18' one-and-a-half story, one-room addition to the west side of the residence in c.1820. Also made of hewn hardwood logs half-dovetailed at the corners, the new section of the building enclosed the west fireplace of the original house. The logs used in this section were carefully hewn in a similar size and manner as the earlier ones, but were not as thick as those in the original house (see Figure 2).

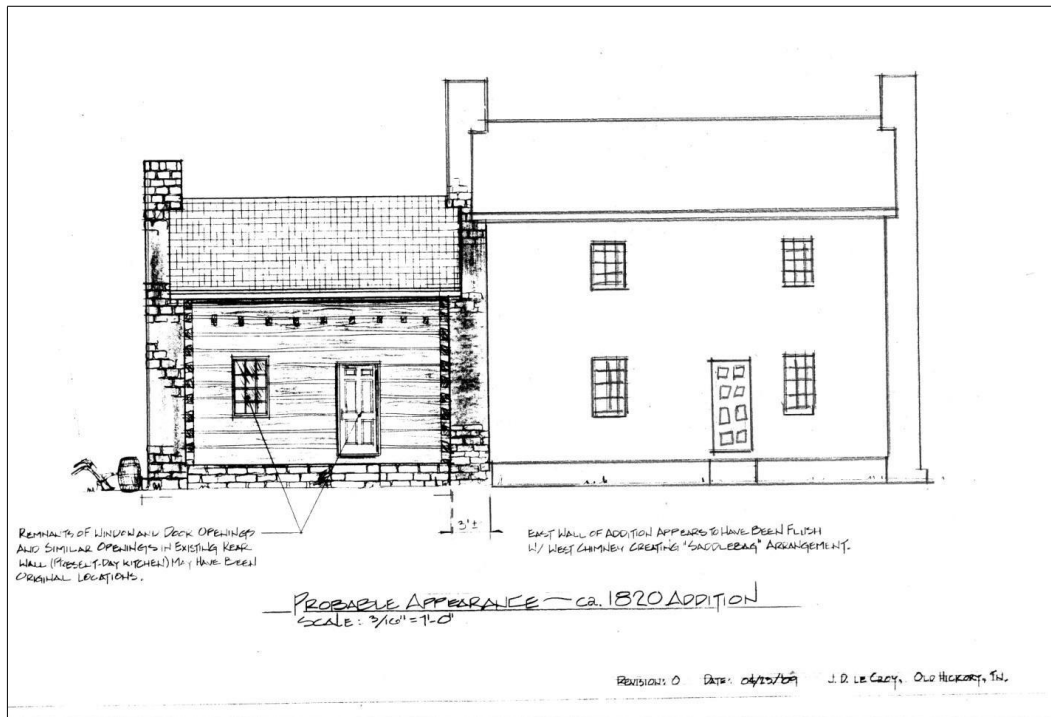


Figure 2

When adding a room to a dwelling, often an owner would rework the fireplace so that it could be used to heat both the older and the newer spaces, and the house type that resulted from this action was known colloquially as a “saddlebag” house. Instead, Buchanan chose to construct a third fireplace on the west wall of the new room of the addition. Again, this decision to build new rather than enlarging the earlier one indicates a financially well-off owner. The original mantle for this fireplace remains in place.

Although the new section looks like a small house by itself, with opposing doors and multiple windows, it utilizes carpentry techniques specific to hewn log construction rather than the more exacting timber-frame methods used on the earlier part of the house. For example, instead of a false plate supported by cantilevered joist ends bearing the rafters, the new ones rest on a squared top plate that is supported by extended end logs. This overhang allows the solid wood plate to substitute for the lighter boxed cornice used in the timber-frame system; that is, the rafter-bearing log top plate also functions as both fascia board and soffit.

Another departure from the earlier timber-frame methods involves the second-floor joists. In the new section, the ends of the joists rest in open notches cut through the full thickness of the bearing log rather than in shallow blind mortises. Because a saw was used rather than a mallet and chisel, this technique was much easier and quicker to execute, but it left the exposed ends of the joists visible and more vulnerable to the weather.

The roof framing in the new section is simpler than the framing in the original house. Instead of sash-sawn scantling, the rafters in this section consist of red cedar poles, 4” in diameter. Although they are also half-lapped and pegged at the peak like the first set of rafters, there are no let-in horizontal collar beams; rather, plain collars were nailed flush to the sides of these rafters. Single vertical boards connecting the ridge and collar of each pair of rafters complete the primitive trusses that support the roof of the addition.

Most of the information regarding the construction of the original log house and the c.1820 addition has been obtained by directly examining the dwelling and noting the existence, location, quality, and condition of the historic characteristics. These characteristics often have been altered by decay, repair, or replacement, and may not present the same appearance as when they first were installed. Quite often, only the faintest signs of earlier building components remain, but these architectural “ghosts” and fragments often prove to be quite valuable for educational and interpretive purposes.

We know little about the history of the Buchanan Log House during the period from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the twentieth century. Lucinda Buchanan lived in the house until she died in 1865. Due to her advancing age and her children leaving home, there is no reason to think that she made any substantial improvements to the house during those years.

Reconstruction-era Judge Thomas N. Frazier purchased the house and farm from the Buchanan estate by 1867, and various family members, including his son, future Tennessee governor James B. Frazier, lived there during the next 60 years. Although the Frazier family certainly upgraded the old house to suit their needs, there is no information available at present

that describes the details of any additions, outbuildings, or other physical changes to the Buchanan House or farm by these owners during this period. It does seem likely that one of the Fraziers added the frame one-story, board-and-batten, shed-roofed addition at the rear of the house, which contained two bedrooms, a bath, and the kitchen, but documentary proof is not available (see Figure 3).

A member of the Frazier family must have removed the log dividing wall between the hall and parlor, as well as the interior fireplace. Well before the end of the nineteenth century, the traditional two-room arrangement had become outdated, and the small interior spaces were problematic for modern living. With the dividing wall removed, there was no real need for two fireplaces. It is hard to say when the rear doorway of the earlier log section was filled in and the adjacent window converted into the new rear door opening, but it most likely occurred when this work was done.

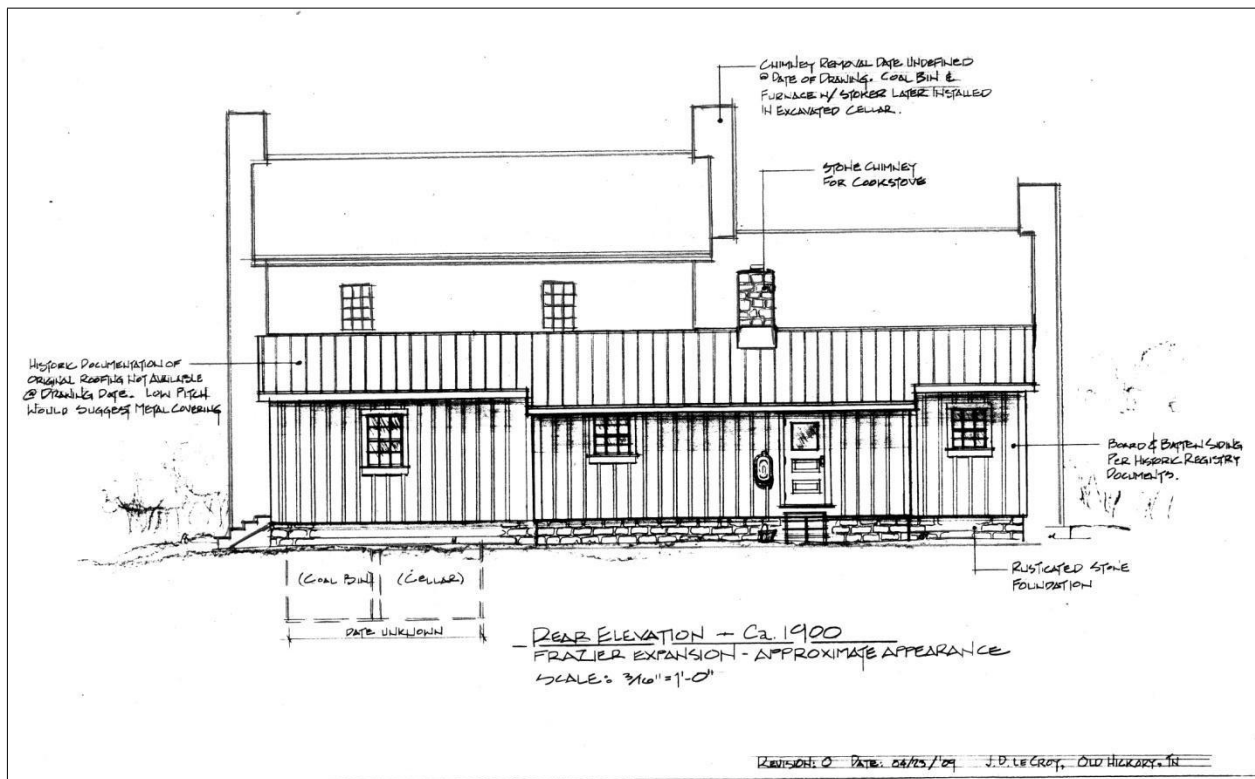


Figure 3

The remodeling described above probably happened during the Fraziers' stewardship, because the next owners, the Paynes, made no mention of any of these alterations, although they themselves made many substantial changes to the dwelling. These improvements included installing electricity, covering the logs on the exterior with painted weatherboard siding, replacing the wooden floor of the front porch with steel-reinforced concrete, adding a rear porch,

and rebuilding the chimneys. They may have installed a new front door and entry hall in the 3' 6" space between the log pens where the west fireplace once stood (see Figure 4).

Photographs taken between 1946 and 1950, when the Starks lived in the Buchanan House, show that the interior chimney was gone by then, the original exterior door and window on the c.1820 addition had been replaced by a twin double-hung window, and the window on the southeast corner of the building was still in place.

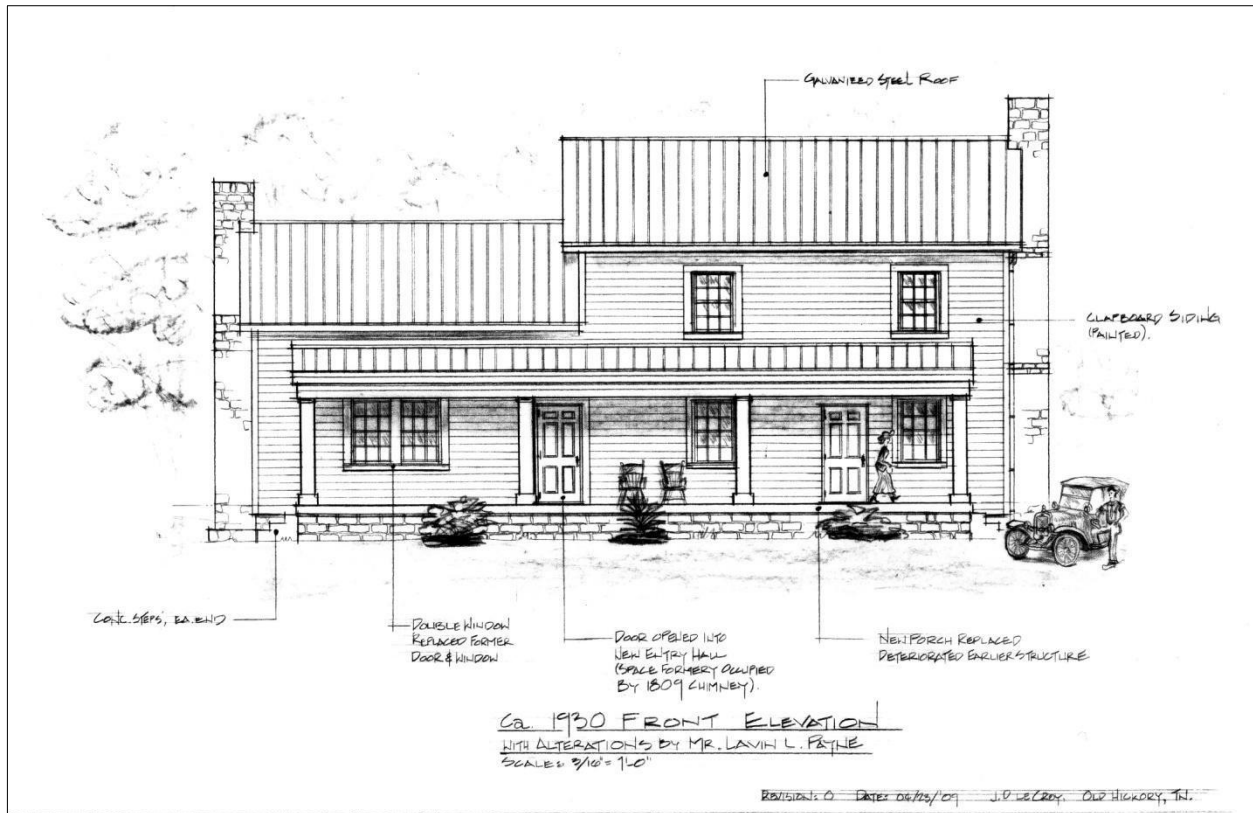


Figure 4

No record of any alterations to the Buchanan House during the periods of the Hudsons' occupancy (1950 – 1957) or the Keathleys' (1957 – 1965) is available at present. The Williamses resided there from 1965 to 1973. They upgraded the electric wiring, installed a new septic system, and rediscovered the fireplace in the upstairs bedroom.

The most significant change that the Williamses made to the interior of the house was eliminating the front door and entry hall between the pens, the closet, and the original box stairway; then replacing them with the wide double stairs that are there at present. To accomplish this, the west wall of the original house and the east wall of the c.1820 addition (both log) were removed to accommodate the new staircase, and new frame walls built on either side of it. At the same time, the loft room above the dining room was made accessible and finished for use as a bedroom.

In 1973, Barry and Virginia Greer bought the Buchanan House and spent eight years restoring it. The Greers removed the weatherboard siding from the exterior of the building and the drywall from the interior log walls; removed the two windows on the west wall of the small log room and installed bookcases in their places; removed some walls to eliminate a downstairs bedroom and open up the kitchen area; added the bay window; removed the earlier low ceiling and created the vaulted ceiling in the rear addition, extended the kitchen into former rear porch area; and installed the recycled yellow poplar floor boards in the main log room.

In addition, they purchased pieces of architectural salvage that came from different historic buildings in the area and incorporated them into the fabric of the Buchanan House. Among these were the following:

- the mantle and chair rail in the large upstairs bedroom (from a c.1830 house in Sumner County).
- the wainscoting and chair rail in Nave Room (from a c.1830 house in Robertson County).
- the double entry doors with sidelights and transom, the mantle backboard, the stones near the propane tank, the small cabin, the smokehouse, and the gazebo (from the c.1830 Chandler House on Central Pike).
- the lock and latch on the hall door (antiques from Pennsylvania).
- the hall door and panel above (made with historic materials from Robertson County).

In 1984, after the Greers completed the restoration work, they placed the Buchanan Log House on the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural and historical significance.

In 1989, the Metropolitan Nashville Airport Authority (MNAA) made an agreement to purchase the Buchanan House as part of its plan to expand Nashville's commercial airport. Initially, the MNAA upgraded the central heat and air system, repaired and replaced the older windows (including interior storm sashes), and added insulation to the house with the intent to use the building for office space. However, three years later, the MNAA acceded to the wishes of the local community and turned the historic house and a surrounding 1.4-acre lot at 2910 Elm Hill Pike over to the Buchanan Log House Chapter of the Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities (APTA) to administer for the benefit of all the citizens of the state.

Sources

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