THE SLAVE CABINS

ON THE

OLD ENOCH BROWN PLACE

WILLIAMSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

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Introduction

This report was prepared in response to a request from Leanne Jones who, along with Amy Grant, is the owner of property that once belonged to Enoch Brown and his family. Enoch Brown and his four siblings (Alexander, Thomas, Nancy, and Emily) came to Tennessee from Prince William County, Virginia, in 1822. They settled in the Sixth District of Williamson County which was established in 1799 just three years following Tennessee’s admission to the Union. Enoch married Frances (Fanny) Claud on August 22, 1832. Fanny, the daughter of Philip Claud, also a landowner in the county, was born in Tennessee in 1815. Enoch and Fanny lived in the northern part of the county near his brother Thomas, who built Old Town (ca. 1846) near the Natchez Trace. By the Census of 1850, Enoch, who listed himself as a farmer, and Fanny were the parents of Susenna (also spelled Susanna), age 16; Katharine, 12; Ennis, 8; Nancy E, 5; and Mary who was 4 in that year. Fanny, who died in 1856, and Enoch, who survived until 1889, are both buried in the Brown-Temple Cemetery on Temple Road.

The primary focus of the site visit on October 27, 2010 was on two extant log buildings on the former Enoch Brown property. In the “Slave Inhabitants” census taken in July of 1860, Enoch Brown of Williamson County owned 36 enslaved persons, a substantial number, considering that three-fourths of all masters held fewer than ten slaves. Of the total slaves living on the Brown Farm, 17 were female. Eight were age 30 to 48, and the others were 18 or younger. Four infants were listed with ages ranging from four months to one month. Eight were described as mulattoes and the remaining were listed as black. While the number of dwellings was not included in this document, general research indicates that as many as 10 slaves often lived in one house. Based on the average number of slaves living in designated quarters, at least three or four slave dwellings may have been a part of the Brown farm. To ascertain where they were located would require additional research and perhaps archaeological investigation. The census provides no further information about these people, but does confirm that a group of enslaved men, women, and children were an integral part of the daily domestic and agricultural life on this large farm on the eve of the Civil War and emancipation.
History of Log Cabin Construction in Tennessee

The log cabin is a familiar symbol of Tennessee's pioneer period. Although its use as shelter is well known, its quaint image has tended to obscure its importance as a bridge between civilization and the wilderness. The western settlement movement of the first half of the 19th century owes a great debt to the humble log cabin and the adaptive techniques of log construction.

Log construction came to Tennessee in the 17th century with the first Europeans to enter the area. The earliest uses of this technology occurred at opposite ends of the state. Deep within the Great Smoky Mountains, traders from South Carolina built log cabins in the Overhill towns of the Cherokees as secure storehouses for deerskins and British goods used in bartering with the Native Americans. In the west, on the Chickasaw Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River, French military engineers erected log palisades and blockhouses for protection from Indians.

The most important and enduring use of log construction occurred in the dwellings, barns, and related outbuildings of the thousands of independent farmsteads that were established throughout the state. Building logs proved to be an efficient use of the trees that needed to be cleared for agricultural production in the fertile areas of the Upland South, and the thick wood walls afforded ample protection from all types of predators. Houses are the most studied example, but logs were used for the construction of smokehouses, tobacco barns, stock barns, corn cribs, blacksmith shops, and for other related agricultural products and practices. Of the outbuilding types, only cantilever barns, found exclusively in East Tennessee, have been studied in detail.

No matter the function of the building, the most important and distinctive feature of log construction is the corner notch. Coupled with the combined weight of the logs above, this device locks the lower logs firmly in place and ensures structural stability. Seven different notch types have been identified on log buildings in Tennessee: the saddle, V, half dovetail, full dovetail, square, half, and diamond notches. Of these, the half dovetail is by far the most common, due to its relative ease of construction (compared to the full dovetail) and its superior stability when compared to the saddle and V notches.
The basic unit of domestic log construction consists of four walls notched at the corners. This is known as a pen (or crib, when referring to farm buildings). The typical log cabin found throughout Tennessee was a small (approximately 20 by 18 feet) single-pen house that had a rock pier foundation, side gables, off-centered doors on the front and rear eave walls, and a chimney on one of the gable ends. It could be either square or rectangular—reflecting cultural traditions—and one, one-and-a-half, or two stories in height.

More complex houses were formed either by attaching additional units to the original or by subdividing a larger pen into two or three units. A log pen joined to one side of another formed a double pen, or Cumberland house; a pen built a short distance from the first with a roof over both and a passage between them became known as a dogtrot house; and two pens separated by a shared chimney was referred to as a saddlebag house.

Notched log construction is a building technique, not a type or style. Vernacular houses built during the period when log construction flourished were also built of frame, brick, or stone.

Although all the important elements of log construction in the upper South have their roots in the Old World (Scandinavia and German-speaking states), the form that the Tennessee log house finally assumed evolved along backcountry roads and around the cultural hearths of southern Pennsylvania and the Carolina Piedmont. Hewn-log construction reached its zenith in Tennessee in the mid-19th century, but it continues to be practiced in isolated areas even today.
In late October of 2010, a survey team from the Center for Historic Preservation visited the former Enoch Brown property in northern Williamson County and examined two historic log buildings. Constructed from large hardwood timbers, the buildings hewed flat on two sides and erected in the traditional way. Presently situated on high ground near the site where the main house on Enoch Brown’s plantation once stood, the structures appear to have been moved from another place. Their characteristics, location, and relationship to each other do not appear to be historical. More than likely, the cabins were moved from another part of the property where the slave quarters once were located to where they now rest. The quarters were the designated area on an antebellum plantation where the majority of the enslaved people had their cabins and tended their gardens. On many of the larger plantations this section resembled a small village. Slave housing varied considerably as to size and quality, and depended upon when and where the structures were built, as well as the financial situation of the landowner.
Upon close examination, it seems that Cabin 1 was originally built as a smokehouse, and Cabin 2 had served as a dwelling in the past. The relocation and repurposing of the buildings most likely occurred in the 1890s. Dates etched on the foundation of Cabin 1 (Figure 2A) and on the retaining wall outside of Cabin 2 (Figure 2B) provide evidence for this hypothesis, as well as the unusual setting and foundations. Usually, log buildings were built low to the ground, resting on a pier foundation of unmortared stones. A tall continuous foundation of roughly-hewn sandstone blocks would be very unusual on nineteenth century log buildings in Middle Tennessee.

Figure 2A.  

Figure 2B.  

Cabin 1: Shown below in Figure 3A, this single room, 1 1/2 story cabin measures 16' x 16' with a height of 12'6" at the eave. The logs are hewed to approximately 5" thick. It was constructed with oak, yellow poplar, and ash logs, and has a foundation made of sandstone blocks. The foundation's wide Portland cement mortar joints and their tooling are indicative of late nineteenth century masonry techniques. The cabin now has one door and five windows, with an open gable porch at the front. The windows and porch have been added recently, as part of a complete remodeling of the structure. The earlier chinking and daubing between the logs has been replaced, and the chinking stones have been exposed for ornamental purposes (Figure 3B). The size, height, orientation of the door, lack of original windows, and other features of this structure indicate that it served as a smokehouse long before it was refashioned into a living space. Although the date inscribed in the foundation may indicate when the structure was built at its present location, we cannot determine what the actual function of the building may have been at that time.
Additional photographs of Cabin 1:

Figure 3D. Foundation.

Figure 3E. Side.

Figure 3F. Façade.

Figure 3G. Rear.
Cabin 2: Shown in Figure 4A, this single room, single story structure measures 16' x 16' with a height at the eaves of 10'. Oak and yellow poplar logs were used in its construction, and the foundation is made with sandstone blocks. The chinking and daubing have been replaced on this cabin as well, utilizing the same decorative style as Cabin 1 (see Figure 3B). This cabin has one door, four windows, a stone chimney, and a shed-roofed porch attached to the front. The windows, two square ones on the wall opposite the chimney and two triangular ones on either side of the chimney, and the porch were added recently. Modern foam insulation sprayed on the walls of the basement is also relatively recent. This structure has a line of holes on the exterior wall opposite the chimney which indicates the former existence of a lightweight roof that possibly provided shelter for a loom or some other outdoor task. (see Figure 4B).
This log building could quite possibly have been a slave dwelling. Its size and lack of windows or any other ornamentation indicates that the inhabitants had few economic resources, and its age, characteristics, and location are good evidence that it was used to house enslaved people. In his autobiography, Booker T. Washington, who was born a slave, described his birthplace as a typical one-room log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square, without glazed windows or a proper door. A large open fireplace served for both heating and cooking. In the center of the dirt floor was a large, deep hole covered with boards where Washington’s mother stored sweet potatoes during the winter. Rudimentary habitations such as Washington’s could be quite crowded. Often entire extended families, from babies to grandparents, shared the same single room and slept on crude beds of straw or corn-shucks.
Brown properties are shown on the 1878 Williamson County map, published by D. G. Beers & Co. of Philadelphia, which lists Enoch and his son Ennis (sometimes spelled Innis).

It is likely that some of Brown’s former slaves continued to work on the farm, as sharecroppers or wage earners, and lived in existing dwellings for some years. Enoch Brown was one of the investors in the National Bank, the first to open for business in Middle Tennessee following the Civil War, so his financial situation was comparatively intact in the years of Reconstruction. Further research could reveal more of the lives of the former slaves, but the most important fact is that when this map was drawn, the people working and living on the Enoch Brown Farm were free and a census of "Slave Inhabitants" need never again be compiled in Williamson County, Tennessee.