

Rebuilding a Potawatomi Cabin



Fig. 1. Photo of Bourbonnais cabin after a tornado struck in 1905, near Shawnee, Oklahoma. Cabin was inhabited by a family of eight.

THE Citizen Potawatomi Tribe was originally from the upper Midwest. In the late 1860s, as the white settlers' frontier drive pushed west, they opted to sell their allotments and move into the new territories so that they might live under their own government. The tribe, numbering roughly 28 members in four families, came to Oklahoma, near what is now Shawnee. They moved to a fertile and wooded area between the North Canadian and South Canadian rivers, now Potawatomi County. When they arrived in Oklahoma, some of the first permanent dwellings they built were log cabins, using local logs but importing windows, doors and planking hauled via wagon from Coffeyville, Kansas.

One of these cabins—12 x 16 ft., 1½-story, single-room—was built in 1881 by Louis C. Tyner. In 1882, Antoine and Mary Ann Bourbonnais purchased the cabin. Antoine was born in Montreal of French and Potawatomi ancestry. Mary Ann was born and educated in New Orleans. Both were leaders of their people. Aside

from taking care of her own family, Mary Ann Bourbonnais was called upon to act as midwife, doctor, spiritual counselor and record-keeper for the community.

The Bourbonnais (sometimes spelled Bourbournais, as in the photo inscription) added five rooms to the cabin, in the form of a second cabin attached to the original with an open roof and loft (otherwise known as a “dogtrot”), later or perhaps almost immediately closed in with vertical logs. The new rooms included a 10x16 kitchen off the back and a front porch that ran the full length of the 40-ft. building. The completed addition comprised approximately 1600 sq. ft. of living space plus 400 sq. ft. of covered porch area. The oldest photos of the building date from about 1900, when the Bourbonnais inhabited it with their six children (Fig. 1). Photos in the Potawatomi Cultural Heritage Museum in Shawnee show other local buildings constructed in a similar fashion.

Though entirely of chinked construction, the building as we reconstructed it at the request of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation is a mixture of log corner styles, starting with the original dovetail-corner cabin built in 1881, and the second, half-lap-corner cabin built adjacent to it after 1882. The Bourbonnais filled in between the two cabins with vertical logs (Figs. 2–3).

The smaller of the two cabins (1881) was built of large white oak logs hewn two sides and joined at the corners by half-dovetails. The wall thickness was around 5½ in. and the largest log about 16 in. in diameter before flattening on the two sides. This cabin, built without any sawn lumber, had full log gable walls, round purlins, round and hewn joists and hewn door and window jambs. The original floor planking was gone when we arrived, but everything else was original. This cabin style is similar to other log buildings we have worked on in the Midwest that date from 1800 to the 1880s and is clearly similar to other existing cabins in the area, specifically those of the nearby Sacred Heart Mission.

The larger of the two cabins (after 1882) measured 14x16 ft. and used a lapped corner joint. The white oak logs were much smaller than in the 1881 cabin, suggesting the possibility of a scarcity of local materials as the settlements grew or the need to build quickly, or perhaps the limits of the builder's craftsmanship. The wall thickness was around 5 in., and the log diameter averaged about 8 in.



Photos Simon Gnehm

Figs. 2–3. Front and back walls show mix of horizontal chinker and a kind of stave construction. Concrete foundation and pressure-treated deck framing concede to modernity. On the roof, left photo, Rick Collins (l.) and Adrienne Walker; right photo, Isaac McCoy (l.) and Scott Russell.



Fig. 4. Plank door swings on wooden pintle hinges.



Fig. 5. Isaac McCoy at work on a plate log. Log walls are a mix of old and new.

Like the dovetail cabin, it had full log gable walls, round purlins, round and hewn joists, and hewn door and window jambs. The only sawn material originally in either of these buildings would have been the floor planking. It's fairly clear that when the Bourbonnais built the second cabin they imitated the design of the original one except for the time-consuming dovetail joints. According to the photos from 1900, the entire structure was covered by riven or sawn shingles about 12 in. wide laid with about a 10-14 in. exposure. Photos in the Potawatomi Cultural Heritage Museum show other buildings from this period with similar shingles.

The dogtrot and kitchen were built using hewn 4½-in.-thick logs varying in diameter from 4 to 7 in. Photos from the 1930s show the cabin sided with clapboards except for the kitchen and dogtrot. It's not clear why the Bourbonnais elected to build using vertical logs in these two rooms, but the logs used in this later addition were of a much smaller diameter than in the original buildings.

What's consistent about the entire structure is that (with the exception of the millwork) it was produced locally and with simple hand tools. At about the same time, French monks were establishing a school, church and monastery nearby in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. Cabins on the Sacred Heart site are similar in method except that the roofs use sawn oak rafters instead of round purlins, the floors sawn oak joists instead of logs hewn on the top face, and the dovetail slope at the corners is not as steep as in the joint used for the Bourbonnais cabin (around 22 degrees). The Sacred Heart cabins were built for the monks and priests to live in until larger stone structures were completed. The mission was built close to the Chisholm Trail, serving as a stopping point for many on journeys east or west.

At our shop in Illinois, we fabricated the shingles, trim, wooden hinges, hewn replacement timbers (approximately 10,000 bd. ft. of white oak and mixed hardwoods) and flooring, while the on-site crew (consisting entirely of itinerants) spent a little over a month installing log walls and a purlin roof system, custom shingles and flooring, trim, handmade doors with wooden hinges and Oklahoma-made windows (Figs. 4-5). While on site we received excellent support from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Having contracted with them to restore and relocate this important structure, we hope it has reached its final resting place in Shawnee (Fig. 6).

—RICK COLLINS and ADRIENNE WALKER

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Fig. 6. Relocated and restored cabin reposes among American elms in Shawnee, Oklahoma.