

The Century-Old Wright Home

By JULIE LECLERC KNOX

This fine home on the old river road between Vevay and Madison was built a hundred years ago. It is usually known as the John W. Wright place, and is now the property of Mrs. Beryl Malcolmson.¹ Exceedingly well preserved and freshly painted, like a petite old court beauty, it greatly belies its age, though boldly avowing it in the fan-shaped embellishment on the facade. There the initials of the first owner and the date of building—"J. W. W.—1836"—stand forth in strong relief.²

Situated on a fat, little knoll, this remarkable old house commands a sweeping and beautiful view of the Ohio River and the Kentucky hills from the front; but the outlook is almost as intriguing as one looks toward the Indiana hills from the rear of the house. Only a story and a half, the building yet has a dignity almost manorial. The bricks of which it is built were burned on the place and it was two years in process of erection.

There are two wooden pillars at each end of the house and also at each extremity of the small porch, or stoop, across the front. Two doors side by side, form the entrances to the two front rooms. They are beautifully panelled and of white pine. The transoms above them have a puzzling appearance—diamond shaped panes, placed horizontally, instead of vertically, as is usual. But after seeing the sailor like designs of the interior, it is not hard to fancy the door-panes as like fish scales, or even a conventionalized school of fish, for the architects were sailor men, in a sense.

Charles Bruce Freeman and his son Thomas were from Nantucket. They learned the trade of wood-carving in the

¹ Before submission for publication, this article was read by Mrs. Beryl Malcolmson and received her complete approval. The information relating to Charles Bruce Freeman and his son Thomas was furnished by Mrs. Malcolmson. Further facts were obtained from two great-granddaughters of Charles Bruce Freeman, Laura and Josephine Lamson. Mrs. Joseph Lamson, whose great-aunt on her mother's side married Thomas Freeman, also furnished some information. Her husband, Joseph Lamson is a great-grandson of Charles Bruce Freeman. Still further information was obtained indirectly from Mrs. Ida Llewellyn of Columbus, Indiana, a daughter of Thomas Freeman, who helped his father build the Wright home, Mr. Raney Freeman, brother of Mrs. Llewellyn, died at Henryville, Indiana, two years ago. He visited Mr. Lee Burns before he wrote his pamphlet, *Early Architects and Builders of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1935). Mr. Burns gives a brief write-up of the Wright home on p. 207 of his study which is No. 3 of vol. XI, Indiana Historical Society Publications.

² The original owner, John W. Wright, was one of seven brothers, each of whom erected a substantial home. The seven homes are found scattered along the Ohio in both Kentucky and Indiana. This home built for J. W. Wright, is on the right side of the highway (State Road No. 56) from Vevay to Madison, about four and one-half miles from Vevay.

shipyards of Bedford, Massachusetts. From there they drifted to Philadelphia, but learning that there was much building being done in the rich Ohio Valley, they ventured farther West. Mr. Wright gave them the contract for building his house and also *carte blanche* to indulge their own fancy which they did at will, as is apparent immediately one enters the house.

The most distinctive portion of the old house is the west front room with its nautical carvings extending around above the baseboard and also at the top of the wainscoting. On this the architects seem to have lavished the wealth of their efforts, for the mere joy of the working. Not a sign of classic influence is to be seen. Instead of the familiar "egg-and-dart" motive, or some such, of the Greeks, there are mouldings that look like rope and some that Mrs. Malcolmson facetiously likened to Dutchmen's pipes, interlocked, stem to bowl. Others resemble the pine tree, conventionalized. One is impressed with the originality plus of the builders who learned their craft making carvings for boat cabins and in shaping figure-heads for vessels. The magic and mystery of Hawthorne's "Drowne's Wooden Image," and other such tales, seem to be brought directly home to the beholder.

These details are noticed only after the lovely mantel-piece has been examined, for attention is immediately focused on it. Fashioned of pine, it is painted white and adorned by an entablature, in the center of which is carved a great star, representing, no doubt, the North Star, sailors' guide and compass.⁴ Above the mantel, very appropriately hangs, an heirloom in the family, a picture of the famous old ship *Constitution*, the proposed destruction of which inspired Holmes to write his immortal poem. On each side of the mantel, reach-

³ Charles Bruce Freeman, at the time this house was built, was sixty years old and Thomas Freeman, said to have done most of the construction, was twenty-one. These builders remained in southern Indiana and many descendants of the former's daughter, Mrs. Abigail Freeman Lamson, are prominent citizens of Vevay and Switzerland County. It was the pleasure of the writer, through the kindness of the Misses Laura and Josephine Lamson, granddaughters of "Aunt Abby," as she was lovingly called by many, to look through the architectural draft book of Charles Bruce Freeman. Some pages of it were at some time used by Mrs. Lamson as a sort of combination scrap-book and diary. Along with newspaper clippings and pictures of Maximilian, Carlotta, Victoria, Princess, Eugenie, poems and other matter, Mrs. Lamson wrote in the old fashioned script of her time an original poem to the memory of her father. Familiar quotations such as, "Many a true word is said in Jest"; "Some are wise and some are otherwise," are intertwined with drafts of stately buildings, that fill the columns along with interesting bits of family history. One of the most outstanding items is the record that she had forded the Ohio River on horse back, at Craig's Bar, when sixty years of age. Mrs. Lamson was widely known as a woman of superior intelligence, gracious manner and kindness of heart. She passed away in 1884 at the age of eighty-nine. Her scrap-book, attesting highmindedness and literary inclinations (She wrote considerable poetry), has been carefully and reverently handed down in the family from father to son.

⁴ Mr. Burns says: "The rope moldings and the use of stars and other devices in the carved woodwork, while unusual in residence work, were common enough in the cabins of whaling ships on which they had worked."

ing from floor to ceiling, are the long presses of pioneer builders. These are of pine painted dark and they have the quaint drop-fastenings, shaped like acorns. The press on the right is emphasized as to width by strips of white wood that divide it into drawer and bottom cupboard.

The east front room is of the same size as the west room, but has not the carving and there is a press on but one side of its mantel. Back of this room is a large, sunny kitchen with interesting windows that give a fine view. There is a corner cupboard of butternut (white-walnut) with wooden knob fastenings and there is not a single nail in it. There is a long back porch, closed at each end by double shutters. Several rooms, originally built for servants, have been torn away, and today there is a small room, detached from the house, just behind the porch.

At the rear of the front room with the wonderful carvings is the dining room in which is one of the most outstanding features of the house, a remarkable, winding stairway, suggesting those on ocean steamers. It has a graceful sweep, like the sinuous curve of a dolphin, flipping its tail. Standing out from the wall, it leaves a narrow alcove with a ledge above, high over which is a window. The blind of this window has to be adjusted by a long rope-like cord. This action reminds one of the sailors climbing to furl and unfurl sails. The rail of the stairway is of walnut, the spindles of cherry and the steps of ash. The latter have the same shape and tread as those seen on ships.

The stair leads to the master bedroom, from which one may pass through double doors, upper part glass, out upon a Romeo and Juliet balcony, topping the downstairs front porch. There is a closet or attic at each side of this bedroom, each entered by a lovely paneled door. The three rooms on the second floor, running true to form as in older houses, are on different levels. On the left of the landing at the top of the stairway one ascends one step to the door of the bedroom over the dining room. To the right of the landing one opens another door, steps down on a small platform, and then descends two more steps into the bedroom over the kitchen. The door leading to this room has a raise-up-the-latch-walk-in fastening like those of the home of Little Red Ridinghood's Grandmother. The string is as strong now as it ever could have been.

To reach the door of the master bed room, one must step up from the landing at the top of the stair. Mrs. Malcomson, who has a keen appreciation of fitness in architecture complains of some remodeling that spoiled somewhat the original plan before the house came into her possession.

Aside from the intriguing quaintness of the building, many antique pieces of furniture add to its charm. An old cherry chest of drawers fills in a niche in the room of carvings that was once a window which opened into the dining room. The latter room boasts a wonderful old sideboard and china closet combined. Built of solid walnut, it is of unusual design and quite massive. There is an old and odd glass butter-mould with the figure of a cow marked, "Patent applied for," but by whom and when is one of the mysteries of the past.

A great brass kettle, full of wood beside the fireplace, tempts one to envy, but the most desirable of all the desirable antiques is a round table with pedestal which looks as if it might have been modeled after that of King Arthur, only it is much smaller. It suggests the family circle, seated around it on a wintry night with books and magazines piled high upon it. The "clouded sky" patch-work quilt, spread on the bed upstairs, must not be overlooked. Many years old, it is mute witness to the imagery and needle-work of the ladies of long ago. This old home has attracted quite a bit of attention, from time to time, and some publicity has been given it by Indianapolis newspapers, the remarkable mantel-piece having posed for its likeness.