

## THE STOUT HOUSE—A story by Bob Hill



We speak today of Kentucky and Louisville history written in cursive; history dating back more than 200 years; history made lasting and bold with names such as Boone, Seaton, Omer and Stout – the latter a name still attached to a road and 200-year-old stone house near Floyds Fork and soon to be incorporated into The Parklands of Floyds Fork.

The rectangular cottage with its thick stone walls – and given the name the “Ben Stout House” although descendants of other families that once owned that house will argue that point – sits at the bottom of twisting Stout Road across from a wooded hill, adding to its sense of isolation, even a sense of surprise of seeing it there.

Turkey Run drains through a crease in the hill just above the house; the namesake for the future Turkey Run Park, which will someday include the house and become the second biggest park in Louisville.

The future of the house – one of the very few in Louisville with its vernacular architectural style and unique, raised basement architecture – is secure; its maintenance and future restoration will be handled by 21st Century Parks effective January 1, 2011.

The house is, in a very real sense, a survivor. Its history, its connection with Squire Boone – the equally daring but less famous brother of Daniel Boone – offers a roadmap straight back into very early Kentucky; the troubled land-title issues; the bloody battles with its original residents; the daily struggles to stay alive along Floyds Fork.

Its story begins with a 1,500-acre field survey done for pioneer Louisville surveyor William Peyton on August 26th, 1780, a survey listing one of the chain carriers as a Rodham Seaton, a man who died in 1805 and is buried in the Seaton Family Cemetery in nearby Seatonville.

Pioneer surveying itself was a problematic – if not dangerous – profession. Indian raids were common. The Kentucky Encyclopedia explained surveyors of the day used a “Jacob’s staff” – a one-legged instrument with an open-faced brass compass; the sightings made through twin forks centered by hair-thin wires.

The surveyor’s handbooks relied on astronomical studies and geometrical information; much of it arcane, if not ignored. Actual measurements were made in terms of 16 ½-foot poles, the distances recorded with flexible, looped-wire chains made up of 16-inch segments; the entire chain being 66 feet in length. The surveying crews had to drag the chains over rugged ground and through virgin timber; their final measurements often in doubt.

Thus, much of early Kentucky history was clouded with conflicting claims, careless surveys and law suits; conflicts that would, in time, drive both Daniel Boone and Squire Boone from the state in disgust – and broke.

Finding permanent landmarks in 1700s to first define land boundaries was also an issue; the landmarks most often mentioned were ax marks chopped into the less than permanent trees.

Thus the August 27, 1786 survey of the square-shaped, 1,500 acres of rich land straddling Floyds Fork that would go from William Peyton to Squire Boone reads, in part – and in elegant, randomly capitalized and hard-to-read cursive:

“...beginning about 75 poles above the mouth of Elk Run generally known by the name of Chenoweth Run at a Cherry Tree and Sugar Tree standing on the south bank of said run and extending hence south 490 poles...and into an island...and out of the island to two White Oaks and a Sugar Tree...thence west to a Hickory, Black Oak and Sugar Tree... hence north to a ..White Oak...hence east to the Beginning...”

The survey helps bring the present into focus; the island mentioned is now “Mary’s Island” purchased for the Future Fund component of the park, and Steve Henry, by Mary Bingham. The survey also came with a very sketchy drawing of the property, with Floyds Fork and a few tributary squiggly lines on the map.

In more broad terms, the 1,500-acre tract lay slightly north of Broad Run, paralleled what is now Bardstown Road on the west, and stretched north to about Seatonville, that community roughly marking the northeast corner of the property.

Save one apparently speculative mention in a Pennsylvania genealogy study, there is no evidence Squire Boone ever lived on the 1,500-acre tract he acquired from Peyton, or had anything to do with construction of the old stone house. The records showed the restless Boone just sold off the 1,500 acres and moved on.

It was in keeping with his history. Squire was the 10th of 11 children born to Nathan “Squire” Boone Sr., and his wife, Sarah Boone. At age 15 he was apprenticed to a gunsmith. At 20 he married Jane Van Cleve, who bore him five children.

From 1767 to 1771 he accompanied his brother, Daniel, from North Carolina into the Kentucky wilderness, helping establish Boonesborough. In 1779 he was wounded during the Indian siege of Boonesborough; a rifle ball was cut from his shoulder, one of several times he was seriously wounded in battle.

Boone would move his family to the new settlement at The Falls of the Ohio; the soon-to-be Louisville. His Kentucky resume would include minister, a petitioner to the Virginia legislature for the establishment of the town of Louisville; representative to the Virginia House of Delegates from Louisville. He lived at various times in Shelby County, Kentucky, Florida, Mississippi and New Orleans before joining his brother, Daniel, in Missouri for a few years.

He died at age 71 in what is now Harrison County, Indiana, his bones buried in a cave in a tourist destination near Corydon called Squire Boone Caverns – or perhaps moved to a cemetery in what is now Fort Knox, Kentucky, as some histories suggest.

The complex lineage of the old stone house on the 1,500 Floyds Fork acres Boone owned is best told in a 65-page family history called “The Stout, Holt, Read, Hause and Omer Families of Early Southeast Jefferson County Kentucky.” The family genealogy was compiled by a Louisville man, Don Dearing – with the encouragement of another family member, Don Pfaadt.

The history is first a tribute to Dearing’s maternal grandmother, Isabelle Stout Smyser, who lived for a time in that old stone house; its history entwined with hers. The history also contains an 1879 map that shows Stout Road at a time when it forded Floyds Fork and continued north into Seatonville. The book’s many photos resurrect the family dead – and show their final resting places in several nearby cemeteries.

Dearing’s histories and accompanying documents show that Boone took assignment of the 1,500-acre grant on April 21, 1792 – and sold 500 acres of that land to a John Mundle.

Over the next 12 years various pieces of that property were bought, sold and merged until on February 24, 1814, ownership of 160 acres of the original 500 acres was conveyed from a Christian Swartz to Daniel Omer III and his wife, Martha.

Included on that land – and apparently built sometime around 1800 – was the old stone house that still stands there today.

In his history, Don Dearing argues the Stout Road house was built by members of the Omer family; Boone was never involved. His reasoning is that a very similar stone house – now called the Omer-Pound Historic Residence – was built about 1796 for a Daniel Omer Jr. by members of the Omer family at what is now 6609 Billtown Road, a farm later bisected by the Gene Snyder Freeway.

Because Christian Swartz was married to Daniel III’s sister – he and Catherine Omer Swartz had floated down the Ohio River from Pennsylvania in a flatboat in 1801 – Dearing believes Christian Swartz had probably contributed to building the Omer-Pound house.

Thus it seemed likely the Stout Road house also was built by Omer family members for Daniel Omer III and his wife using limestone rock quarried from near the Omer-Pound house and hauled down a connecting road that forded Floyds Fork to the Stout Road property.

“Swartz bought (an) 115-acre tract in 1803 on which the stone house in question now stands,” wrote Dearing in his history, “and which Daniel III was to acquire in 1814 and reside in the remainder of his life.

“Both of these stone structures have the same exterior design with the exception that Daniel III’s was longer and has exterior chimneys at both ends, however when reading the descriptions others have written of the interior compositions of the two, the latter may have been built with more refinement.”

Both Don Pfaadt and Don Dearing also have one other thought on what’s called “The Ben Stout” house: Given the family and house history it might better be named the “Omer-Stout House.”

And history would provide ample evidence that Daniel Omer III and Martha Stafford Omer – who had grown up just down the road – enjoyed their time in the house. The list of the 15 children born or raised in it include Fannie, Levi, Lewis, Sarah, Elizabeth, Allen, Effa, Lavinia, Henry Clay, Ann, Charles, Benjamin, Evaline and Daniel – the latter 13 born between 1813 and 1837.

When Daniel Omer III died on April 14, 1858 the land went to his son, Charles Omer. In 1867 he sold it to Benjamin Stout, whose wife, Charlotte Hause, had grown up on an adjacent farm along Floyds Fork.

Benjamin and Charlotte Stout would raise seven children in the house. Charlotte died in 1900. When Benjamin died in 1910 – after living in the house more than 40 years – the farm and stone house were passed on to his daughter, Fannie, and her husband, Foree Jean.

The house and land passed on through the Jean family until 1971 when it and .4375 acres of land went through a quick series of owners ending up in 1976 in the hands of a Kevin Kane.

In 1983 the house would be placed on the National Register of Historic Places, but the addition of raised decks front and back and the “modernization” of its interior over the years – and in violation of the historic places requirements – would profoundly alter its charm and character.

But history had one more twist for the old stone house. With a \$100,000 grant from 21st Century Parks, Louisville Metro Parks in 2006 was able to purchase the old house and tiny tract of land through a City of Parks initiative to preserve it.

When 21st Century Parks purchased the Jean farm from the great-grandchildren of Foree Jean, it began plans to restore the old house and make it part of the 1,076-acre Turkey Run Park with its forest, hills and family-oriented Silo Adventure Center on the site of the old Jean dairy barn and outbuildings. The Jan. 1 takeover will seal the deal.

“It would be neat if it could be restored and used as part of the park as a destination after a hike,” said John Hamilton, assistant director of Metro Parks.

Don Dearing had a more personal take on the house’s possibilities:

“It would be like history looking over your shoulder, he said.”

