



Former stage coach house near Ridgeway to be sold

By Pelham Lyles

Over two hundred years of history will be offered on the auction block at the Fairfield County Courthouse in Winnsboro on Oct. 6, 2003. The old Vaughn-Blair Stagecoach House located on a dirt road in the Simpson community west of Ridgeway was once called Simpson's Turnout. At different times during the 1800's, the inhabitants (first the Jones family then the Vaughn and Blair families) used the house as a stagecoach stop for travelers along what is now Highway 34 which still today connects Ridgeway with Winnsboro and Camden.

It is not known exactly when the house was built, but records show that William Jones or his father Ralph Jones built the house as a one-story log cabin at some time previous to 1811. It was in that year that the elder Mr. Jones' will mentions that his son William and his wife Meredith are living in the house.

One large room on the first floor served as the village post office and community gathering place and provided accommodations for stagecoach travelers. For some years, the family received compensation for allowing the stagecoach to rest or change horses and its passengers to refresh and sometimes disembark for the night during bad weather. As stagecoaches also delivered the mail, the community would pick up their correspondence at the house. The Charlotte, Columbia, and Augusta Railroad paralleled the road in front of the house, and old maps show the site as Simpson's Turnout.

The cabin, known as a 'dogtrot' cabin was constructed in the style employed in the colonies from early settlement time in the seventeenth century until late in the nineteenth century. The early house consisted of two square log rooms separated by an open breezeway or "dogtrot" hall. Squared logs cleverly notched enclosed the two

twenty-by-twenty-foot box-shaped rooms that were separated by the ten-foot-wide, twenty-foot-long open outdoor hallway.

A roof constructed of pine round pole rafters notched and pegged at the apex would have covered the two “boxes” and central breezeway. Generally the rafters were not supported at the top by a central ridgepole, but were strengthened by spaced wooden slats upon which wood shingles were nailed.

By the early decades of the 1800s, farmers in the Back Country, as this area of South Carolina was called, were beginning to prosper with their cultivation of “upland” cotton. During the first century of farming here, this cotton grew well on virgin soils that had not yet been depleted of nutrients and eroded into red gullies. Some time before mid century, a more prosperous William Jones expanded and “modernized” his simple home by adding a long shed rear addition that contained two shallow rooms and an open central back ‘washing up’ porch. A second floor of timber framework was built on top of the log house and the entire house was sheathed in beaded sawn clapboards. A shed roofed front porch supported by graceful square fluted columns now stretched across the front width of the house. The open breezeway was enclosed and a grandiose double-door front entrance was inserted with flanking “lights” or frames of decorative paned glass on both sides and above the doorway.

Interior renovations of the nineteenth century version of luxurious living have covered over the pure functional simplicity of this log home. Hand carved mantelpieces, paneled wainscoted walls, and twelve-inch baseboards were all hand grained with sponge work, ragging, and other decorative paint applications to resemble costly hardwoods, marble, and other stone.

Interestingly, this hand work, called faux graining, covers the surfaces of the downstairs rooms and up the stairway. The walls and ceilings of the upper story are made of simple wide pine boards which were never painted and have mellowed into beautiful reddish tones which have a satin patina of age.

Descendants of that first family are buried in nearby cemeteries and at other house sites in the area. William Jones died in 1854, leaving Meredith and two granddaughters to watch the spectacle of the Union army destroying the railroad bed in front of the house. The troops had orders to burn or destroy the barns, livestock, and crops of farms along the way. Perhaps they took pity on the widow and young girls, because they left the house untouched.

Mrs. Jones tried to remain on the property for a short time afterwards, but finally gave up and moved to Florida with relatives who had not been touched by the ravages of the war. The house was vacant for a number of years, then occupied for a couple of decades by tenant farmers. In 1893, the house was bought at sheriff’s auction by T.W. Woodward, a prosperous neighborhood store owner and one-time state legislator. The day after the auction, James Vaughn happened to be in the store

when Mr. Woodward announced that he had just bought the old house that Mrs. Vaughn had always coveted. Mr. Vaughn bought the house on the spot for \$1000 and immediately rode home to announce the purchase to his jubilant wife. Three generations of the Vaughn family lived in the house until grandson William MacConnells Blair left in the 1960s to move his ailing mother into town closer to medical care.

In the late 1960s preservationists listed the property on the National Historic Registry. Mr. Blair, who was very proud of his home, visited it almost every day and could be seen sweeping the porch and trimming the boxwoods that his grandmother had rooted from cuttings from another well-known historic house in the county. Unfortunately, his health and finances never afforded him the opportunity to install the utilities and comforts he would need in order to spend his last days in the ancestral house.

By the mid twentieth century, vandals and deterioration had beset the stagecoach house, and the future looked bleak for Mr. Blair to return to the home place. In 1995 a stabilization grant from the S.C. Department of Archives and History was secured to rescue the house from oblivion. An architect and contractor were hired and the restoration took a little over a year to complete. The project was a major accomplishment, but although a well was drilled and basic electrical services put in, there was much more work needed to be done to make the house livable. Mr. Blair died without a will three years ago and the property has remained in legal limbo until now.

Visitors to the house are wonderfully amazed to see that the interior has never been modernized by repainting or inserting additional rooms. The specialized faux graining is pristine, only slightly faded through the years, probably due to its being made with buttermilk. In the parlor, the hand-planed paneling is painted to resemble mahogany wood. The baseboard looks like Georgia marble with striations of gray feathering. The walls above the wainscoting are buttermilk white and the ceiling is blue. The mantelpiece was feathered and rubbed to look like other types of fine architectural stone.

The house has been auctioned once before in 1893. The restoration grant provided a twenty-year protective covenant which runs out in 2015.

For serious inquiries, contact Pelham Lyles at (803) 635-9811 or at the Fairfield County Museum (803) 635-9811 where she is the director.

As an art teacher in the public schools in Fairfield County, I tried to instill in the students a connection to the grassroots of their own cultural environment. The project to study old homes, their families, cemeteries, etc., was supported by a principal who managed to get some funds to take the kids on field trips. Mrs. Virginia Porter Fiser corresponded with me to fill in the stories of the family who lived in the old Jones-Vaughn-Blair Stagecoach house.

Although the beautiful old house was uninhabited for many years, and vandals and squirrels had done much damage, I worked hard over the ensuing years to help preserve the place, procured a preservation grant to help the owner (Mr. Willie Mac Blair) rebuild the roof, foundation, and exterior siding, porches, windows and doors. We were able to drill a modern well and put in a septic tank, but Mr. Blair was never able to finish the work to make it habitable and died a few years later. The house stood vulnerable to the return of vandals and natural decay for a number of years until the lawyers finally settled his estate and sold the house on the courthouse auction block. Several more years passed until a couple was able to make it livable and moved in. After a few years, they had to move on due to age and health problems and a university historical archivist and archaeologist bought it and blissfully live there and love the place.

I believe Mrs. Fiser has passed away and hope she is able to see how her ancestor's home is now being loved. This packet contains our correspondences and a copy of the children's final published account of the year spent studying local history.



Mr. William McConnell Blair and Mr. Elmer Turner, along with their dog Pup and my daughters Shelby and Pelham and two friends.

