

Techno-Rustic Resurrection

Lary Family Saves Historic 1790s Log House in Paris, Kentucky

By Banning K. Lary

On June 1, 1792, Kentucky County, Virginia, became the commonwealth of Kentucky, the fifteenth state to join the Union. Kentucky was blessed with rich hunting grounds and sumptuous forests, so dense a squirrel could travel from Ohio to Tennessee without touching the ground. Officers who served with distinction during the Revolutionary War were given land grants to settle in Kentucky and expand the United States westward. These settlers cut down trees, carved roads from animal trails, established “stations,” at crossroads where travelers could obtain provisions and trade goods, and built log cabins and homes.

Virginia born Revolutionary War veterans Samuel Curtright and Dennis Lairy, Sr. came to Bourbon County, Kentucky, in the 1780s. Curtright, an early entrepreneur, founded Curtright’s Station, a colonial version of today’s convenience store, near the Clintonville settlement outside of Paris. Curtright and Lairy acquired land from Charles Smith, a Revolutionary War officer who received a 4000-acre land grant known as a Virginia patent. Curtright’s daughter, Sarah, later married Lairy’s son, Dennis Jr. and together had thirteen children, many of them reared in the log home.

The original Lairy home was a two-story house made of first-cut hewn tulip poplar logs (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), so called because of its tulip-like blooms. The trees are tall and straight (up to 190’ tall x 10’ wide), the wood strong, light and easy to work with the tools of the day: fell axe, broad axe, carpenter’s adze, hand plane and pit saw. Native Americans and early settlers used hollowed-out tulip poplar trunks for canoes. The wood is both resistant to fungi and boring insects like

termites. The tulip poplar is the Kentucky state tree and was the inspiration for Joyce Kilmer's famous poem "trees."

While the poplar logs were cut and hewn with hand tools, the ash trees used to make the joists, doors and window trim were cut in a saw mill, such as the one operated nearby by James Bristow, Jr., a local craftsman. The mill was originally powered by horse, then later by water (Peter, 1882). Bristow may also have had a hand in building the Lairy house, evidenced by the description for a similar house he built for his client, Nathaniel Gist, in 1793, written into their contract:

"The house to be two stories high, thirty eight feet in length by thirty feet in breadth, the lower story to be twelve and the upper nine feet pitch and divided as follows. The lower story to contain three rooms and an entry, one room eighteen feet by twenty, the other two eighteen feet by fifteen each, and the entry for the stair case to run in, twenty feet by twelve, the upper story to have a passage through the middle thirty feet by eight with two rooms on either side fifteen feet square each" (Bristow, 2001).

Preservationists make a distinction between a "log house" and a log cabin," the difference residing in the quality of the construction. Log cabins were cruder, more temporary dwellings, often made by the first settlers for the purpose of staking a claim to a piece of land. Travel writer Thaddeus Harris (1803) stated cabins "are built with unhewn logs, the interstices between which are stopped with rails, calked with moss or straw, and daubed with mud... if the logs be hewed; if the interstices be stopped with stone, and neat plastered; and the roof composed of shingles nicely laid on, it is called a log house." Log houses were built on foundations of wood or stones, while cabins had dirt floors. The best houses of the day, such as the Lairy house, utilized floor joists resting on stone piers covered with wood flooring.

Robert Sanders, owner of Environmental Landscape, a company specializing in high-quality historical building restorations and native landscaping for premium facilities such as the Keeneland Race Course, was initially responsible for saving

the log home. He heard a realtor had slated the ramshackled structure to be bulldozed to improve the look of the land listed for sale, swooped in and made a deal to remove the house himself. It took a crew of six ten days to pull off the clapboards, trim and flooring, then detach the beams and joists one at a time using a hoist with nylon straps. Each log and beam was numbered with brass tags, similar to those used in race horse halters.

“The wood was first-cut with 12-15 growth rings to the inch,” said Sanders. “The wood we cut today only has about five rings to the inch.”

The poplar logs and ash beams were then pressure washed, treated for insects and transported back to Environmental Landscape where they were rolled into storage containers on PVC pipe. This prevented damage to the wood and allowed air circulation. The flooring, molding and fireplace mantels were stored separately in a barn. Then the unthinkable happened. A lightning storm caused a fire in the barn, incinerating the specialty items, leaving only the poplar logs and ash beams. And a silver spoon, engraved with the initials A. P. L. for Allen Pendleton Lary, the grandson of Dennis Lairy who built the cabin (the name changed from Lairy to Lary around 1800). The spoon connected the logs to their ancestral owners.

About this time, Banning Gray Lary, MD and his wife Katherine, had purchased Glenlary, the 1840 ancestral home of his great grandfather, John Curtright Lary, Allen Pendleton Lary’s father. Dr. Lary found out about the Lairy house and purchased the wood from Sanders, literally hours before the container was sold to another buyer of historic cabins. Dr. Lary appointed his son, Todd Lary, an engineer from Miami, as project manager to supervise the resurrection of the original pioneer cabin behind the Greek revival mansion. Robert Sanders was hired as general contractor and the project began to take shape.

“Though I had reconstructed several historic cabins, the Lairy house was unusual for its time. It had tall ceilings, trim around the windows. We realized while we were doing the earthwork it was simply too complicated to build without an architect, and I recommended Helm Roberts.”

Helm Roberts was a noted preservation architect and former Navy pilot who was dying of cancer. The Lary House was to be his last project.

“It was the last item on his bucket list. He would drive himself out to the site, no crutches, no driver, no anything, honk the horn for people to come out and help him,” said Sanders. “The tradesmen would carry him up the steps so he could do his drawings inside the structure rising around him. His last request was to get the drawings finished, answer any questions we might have and complete the contract.” Helm Roberts lived long enough to see the roof put on the house.*

“Once we got going, the whole family got involved in the project,” said project manager Todd Lary. Writer and painter, Kent Lary, began doing research into the log home’s history and restored an old mantle painted by JCL. Scott Lary sought out the precise GPS location of the original house and designed a cornerstone. Todd’s niece, interior designer, Venus Roberts (no relation to Helm) began to work with Todd’s wife Diane to figure out the interior.

“Todd and Diane said they wanted the cabin to be ‘Techo-Rustic,’ a term I never heard before,” said Venus, who was responsible for coordinating all the fixtures, furnishings and finishes. “Combining the history and natural beauty of the old materials with modern home environment technology was a unique challenge, such as where to place the electrical wiring. We did not want to disturb the integrity of the poplar logs as they are the showpiece of the cabin.”

Working with Derrick Whittaker of Creative Kitchen and Bath in Lexington, Roberts devised a way to design lighted cabinets without backing so the beams are visible behind dining china and glassware. She took special care to design a

spacious livable kitchen that's highly function and contains every possible amenity, including a kitchen island that seats twelve people. Granite counters run along three sides, through the cooking alcove and finally abutting a concealed refrigerator freezer and pantry.

The restored Lairy log house is comprised of three levels. You enter on the second level past the muck area and half bath to the kitchen and great room with its magnificent twenty-four foot tall fireplace, fashioned of intricate symmetrical cut limestone blocks. An outer door leads to the east facing patio with a sumptuous panoramic view of the horse corrals, pond and countryside. The top level sports the master bedroom and bath with windows looking down on the great room. The lower level houses four bedrooms, two to a side with Jack-and-Jill bathroom access.

“Being able to unite our heritage on the land that is our family’s heritage is a dream come true for our mother and father,” says Todd Lary, who took charge of the project and shepherded it through to completion.

Lary farm was originally named “Glencoe” after the battle where independent Scottish clans were murdered on February 12, 1692, after failing to take an oath of allegiance to the British crown. The homestead was lost to the family for over 100 years when John Curtis Lary (JCL), known by some as “the Renaissance man of Bourbon County,” sold off the farm to finance his travels to Europe to race penny-farthing bicycles in the 1880s. He spoke seven languages and cared little about the rigors of farming. A lithographed tintype of JCL posed with his bicycle serves as a bittersweet reminder to the Lary family that discipline and hard work are the keys to success.

References:

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NOTE: Quotes in this article were taken from transcriptions of interviews done by the author.

[Helm Robert's dream was for a Peace Pyramid to be built by people of all cultures at the intersection of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers extolling the tenets of the world's three great religions. For more info see: www.peacepyramid.com]