

French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

ARTICLE DU MOIS

ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

May 2021



St. Germain dit Gauthier House - Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin
Photo courtesy of Prairie du Chien Historical Society

Le  *State du Nord*
French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

Mission Statement: To preserve and promote the French-American heritage in Minnesota through education and community events.

Website: fahfminn.org. YouTube: FAHF Minn.



French-Canadian Craftsmanship



THE LOG HOUSE



Happy Spring, Everyone!

Warm days and sunshine makes us want to go on vacation, don't they? What can we do during a pandemic without booking a plane ticket or driving for days to visit and explore something different and historic? I have a great idea for you, three words:

Prairie du Chien!

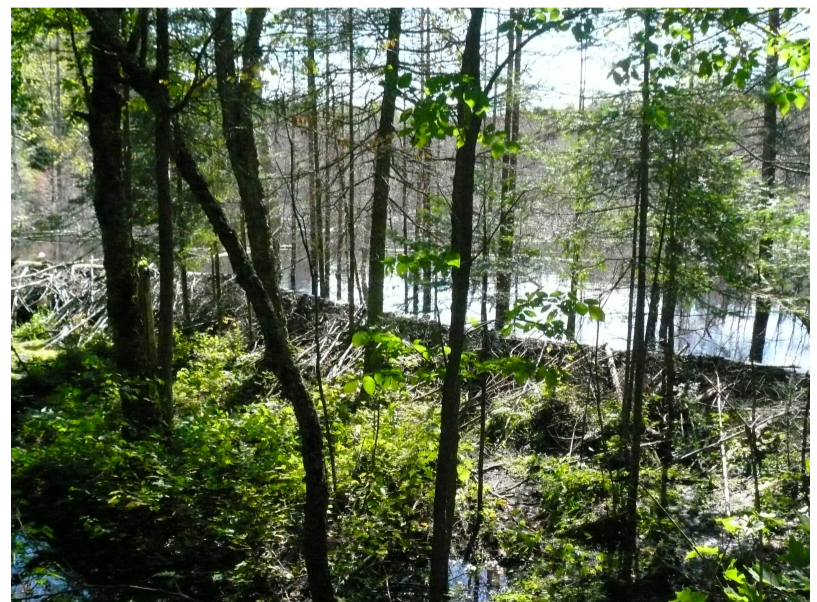
Next month, Wisconsin's Prairie du Chien Historical Society will be very pleased to welcome visitors for the Dedication and Grand Opening of the St. Germain dit Gauthier House on June 12-13, 2021. There will be French-Canadian music, dancing, food and activities. Admission is free and, of course, donations are much appreciated. Visit their website at: <https://www.fortcrawfordmuseum.com/dedication-of-st-germaine-house.html>

What is the St. Germain dit Gauthier House you might ask? First, let me tell you about its particular craftsmanship.

Wood, Wood and More Wood

One of the main characteristics of the territory that our ancestors encountered when they first set foot in the new world was the vast forests. What better material to build houses with than all this wood.

Therefore, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, carpenters built habitations that would keep them warm throughout the long and harsh winters. At the



Laurentians Forest
Photo courtesy of Caroline Meilleur

very beginning they tried to build houses like they had on the old continent, but the rarity, high price of the materials (stone, mortar, etc.) and the difficulty to heat those buildings forced the inhabitants to turn to the wood resource. On top of that, the old techniques were not well-adapted to the winters of New France.

The quality of the wooden material back then was way better than what we have nowadays. We can still find some wooden doors and door frames that are between 150 and 200 years old in Quebec. Before, loggers worked during the winters, because that is when the trees have their lowest amount of sap. Then, the logs were transported on rivers. The fact that they were in the water helped clean the remaining sap (which exited the log at each end). It was a natural way to “dry” the log.

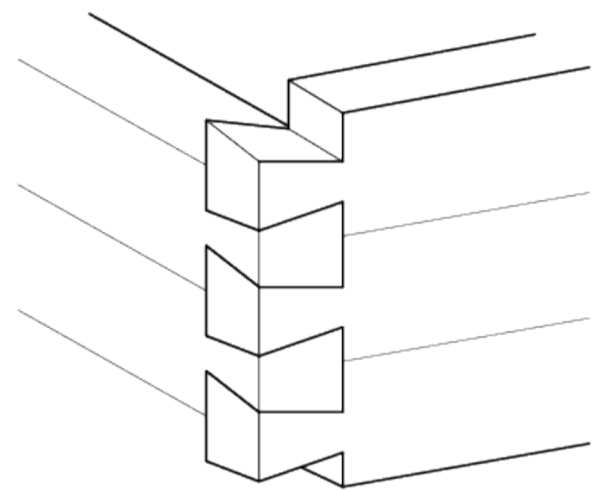
Pièce Sur Pièce Woodwork

There are many different architectural categories of houses. However, for the purpose of this article, I will only talk about the pièce sur pièce house type, which is the style of the St. Germain dit Gauthier House in Prairie du Chien.

The St. Germain dit Gauthier House was built with a particular method which is called pièce sur pièce à queue d’aronde (see image to right). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the then Michigan Territory, the settlers did not have a lot of tools nor material available to them. They had

wood and axes for sure. Thus the convenience and beauty of the pièce sur pièce à queue d’aronde or, in English, dovetail joint. The logs were hand-hewn squared by axe and assembled horizontally (on top of each other) together at the corners in a dovetail technique. This made the logs lock together. No nails were needed. This technique was very convenient because it prevented the building from opening at its angles.

On the next page is a picture provided by the Prairie du Chien Historical Society of a northeast house corner close-up. This is awesome because you can notice Roman numerals carved in the logs. These numbers helped with the original assembly of the house to make sure each log fit perfectly together.



Example of a Dovetail Joint
Photo source: actionpatrimoine.ca

Then, they needed to make sure that the walls were sealed. They used a mix of clay, hay and other materials.¹ The exteriors of the walls were usually covered with vertical or horizontal planks or even wooden shingles. Some problems could arise like: mold and premature decay of the wood, if the gaps were not filled properly or planks not covering the dovetail corners, exterior walls not “painted” with lime, roof too short or bottom of the walls too close to the soil, lack of maintenance of the joints, bugs and so much more. The foundation was usually made out of stones. To know more about the way this Prairie du Chien house was built, I strongly encourage you to visit the house and its exhibits starting on June 12, 2021. Information panels will be displayed throughout the house explaining its construction.



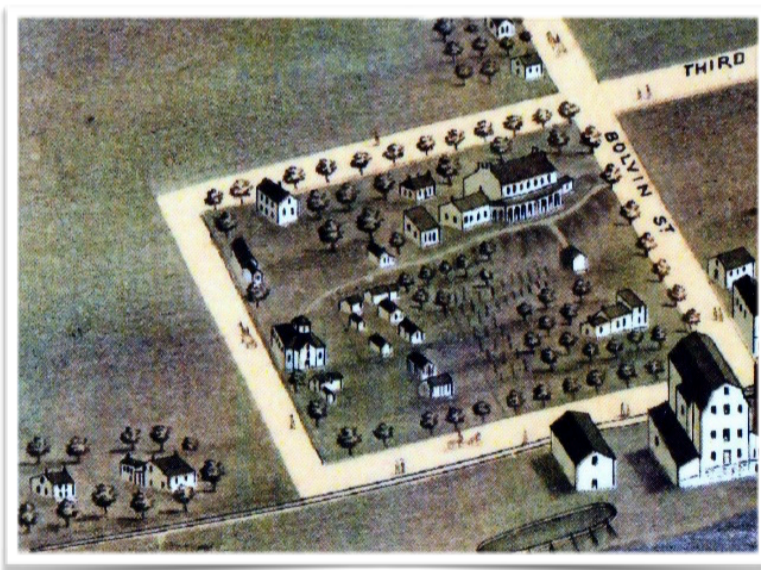
Carved Roman Numerals on NE Corner of St. Germain dit Gauthier House
Photo courtesy of Prairie du Chien Historical Society

St. Germain dit Gauthier House

So much has been written already about the St. Germain dit Gauthier House and from its original owner Jean-Baptiste Caron to today, especially by Mary Elise Antoine, President of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society. I invite you to visit this website's

home page to watch the house restoration
YouTube video: [https://
www.fortcrawfordmuseum.com/](https://www.fortcrawfordmuseum.com/)

On the next page, I made a little timeline of the life of the house.



Caron House (Structure to Far Left) from an 1870s
Bird's-eye View of Prairie du Chien
Image courtesy of Prairie du Chien Historical Society

¹ François Varin, Éditions *Continuité* et Action patrimoine. <https://actionpatrimoine.ca/outils/fiches-techniques/charpente-pieces-sur-pieces-2/>: accessed on April 24, 2021.

THE ST. GERMAIN DIT GAUTHIER HOUSE TIMELINE

