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

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.
Then, they needed to make sure that the walls were sealed. They used a mix of clay, hay and other materials. 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.

**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.

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THE ST. GERMAIN DIT GAUTHIER HOUSE TIMELINE

ca 1820
Jean-Baptiste Caron, a French-Canadian voyageur, builds the house on Lot 7 Main Village - Prairie du Chien, Michigan Territory.

1825
1825 - Guillaume St-Germain dit Gauthier & Madeleine Brunet arrive from Green Bay and purchase the house. It will remain in the family for three generations.

1848 - Wisconsin joins the Union becoming the 30th state.
1861-65 American Civil War.

1890
Nina Dousman McBride purchases the house and rents it to Charles Gremore.

1900
Charles Gremore, a clam fisherman, buys the house for him and his family and moves it to its present location.

1902
George Coorough, a farmer of Canadian parents, buys the house. It will remain in the family until 1978.

1916 - Addition was made to the house.

1978
City of Prairie du Chien becomes the owner of the house.

2017
City of Prairie du Chien transfers the ownership to Prairie du Chien Historical Society.
2017 - Listed on the State Register of Historic Places.

2018 - House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

2020
Restoration of the St. Germain dit Gauthier-Coorough House.

June 12-13, 2021
Dedication & Grand Opening of the St. Germain dit Gauthier - Coorough House (Festivities).