

Stipp house was Bloomington's oldest

For many years, a dilapidated wood frame residence on the east edge of downtown Bloomington offered a visible reminder of the city's earliest days. As a matter of fact, the Stipp house (as it was popularly known) was older than the city itself.

The home's first owner was not Dr. George Winfield Stipp, its namesake, but rather James Allin, the founder of Bloomington. In 1829, Allin moved to what would become Bloomington, and the following year he constructed a "dogtrot" log cabin, that is, a cabin featuring an open breezeway bookended by two rooms. Little did Allin know, but this rather unremarkable though eminently practical cabin would survive into the early 20th century to become the "ancient and historical" (in the words of *The Pantagraph*) Stipp house.

Back in the early 1830s, Allin played an instrumental role in the creation of McLean County, offering some 20 acres of land just northwest of his place for the purpose of a county seat. Allin and his family lived in one room of the cabin, and he ran a store from the other room. The cabin was located on what would become the 200 Block of East Grove Street.

In May 1831, a post office opened in the store-side of the Allin cabin, and in September of the same year, several months after Bloomington was platted and the first town lots sold, the county's inaugural court session was held there.

The Allin cabin, though, did not serve as the McLean County courthouse for long. In 1832, the county paid for the construction of a modest frame structure of whipsawn cherry and black walnut to be located the Courthouse Square. Even so, Allin's cabin continued to be used as a residence, place of business and public meetinghouse.

Asahel Gridley, another city father, eventually bought Allin's combination house / store, and it's said that Gridley was the one who added the second story. Through the subsequent decades the house was subjected to untold additions and alterations, both minor and extensive, and the old dogtrot was eventually buried inside a much larger frame structure (see accompanying photograph).

Dr. George Stipp, a charter member of the McLean County Medical Society and medical inspector during the Civil War, purchased the residence in the mid-1850s. At that time, it was a quarter century old and had most recently served as a boarding house.

After a "long and tedious illness," Stipp died in August 1879. His second wife, Sarah W. Harris, lived in the increasingly neglected home before moving into the Illinois Hotel (now House) on the courthouse square. By the spring of 1903, the Bloomington City Council entertained a discussion about tearing down the old house and outbuildings. Its historical significance notwithstanding, the council believed the collection of ramshackle

buildings on the weedy, overgrown lot presented not only a fire hazard, but a “menace to the welfare of the entire community.”

The following year, in 1904, a Pantagraph reporter visited the now-abandoned Stipp house, which by then was in a truly awful state of disrepair. Much of the front porch, which had once run the length of the house, had collapsed, and the roof and walls were pockmarked with holes. “Weather boarding has been stripped from the rear of the building,” the Pantagrapher added, “and great gaps ... afford peeping holes for the curious.”

The anonymous reporter crawled through one of the larger openings in back to take readers on a tour of the city’s oldest house. Much of the Stipp family furniture and personal belongings were still inside, though thieves had removed the silverware and other valuables. In the kitchen, the reporter noticed an “old cook stove, part of it gone and the rest covered in rust.” On the floor of the dining room was an “old wooden clock disemboweled and the works rusted lying on the carpet.”

The sitting room included a low davenport covered in black horsehair, a gold-framed mirror still hanging on the wall and a center table with a marble top. The parlor featured a busted piano, legless stool and an upholstered chair upon which rested a piece of sheet music titled “Just Before the Battle Mother.”

The old house was taken down not long after the reporter’s bittersweet walkthrough.

Fortunately, bits and pieces of the home were saved by the historic minded or plain curious. Oscar Burtschi, for instance, salvaged a part of the black walnut stairwell to make several “handsomely turned and polished” gavels, which he gave to three local Masonic lodges.

Sarah Stipp passed away in May 1917, and several years later, Ida Hanna, a daughter from Stipp’s first marriage, gave the historic property to the county. In 1921, the Board of Supervisors (the predecessor to the County Board) decided to erect a veteran’s memorial building on the lot. John McBarnes, an aged farmer from Old Town Township, donated \$150,000 for the construction of this building.

In March 1922, workers felled ten magnificent, pre-settlement elm and bass trees from the Stipp property in order to make way for the planned John McBarnes Memorial Building. By this time, these towering, old-growth trees were one of the few survivors within city limits of what was once a 6,000-acre forested tract known as Blooming Grove.

Around this time, Bloomington resident N.W. Brandicon noted how the Stipp grounds were relatively undisturbed, and that a mere blocks from the courthouse square and the central business district a wild remnant of the prairie grove remained intact. Here “spring beauties” and other wildflowers found mostly in natural areas grew in profusion.

When the Stipp house was taken down, the pioneer-era logs were salvaged and removed to the zoo at Miller Park, with the intention of reconstructing the old cabin for use as an historic attraction.

“The [park] commissioners said they would rebuild the log cabin sometime—when they had the spare money. But that day never came,” said Mary Bomgardner, widow of longtime park custodian Edward Bomgardner, in a 1929 interview. “Consequently, the logs and other material simply rotted away on the ground back of the bear den . . . Finally, as I recall, Alderman Maurice McCarthy took the matter up in the council and got through a resolution that the old stuff be carted away or burned up, so that it did not encumber the ground any longer.”