

A Stone House Christmas: Blount's oldest home welcomes guests at open house

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The Old Stone House near Friendsville has welcomed guests for more than two centuries, and current owners Dr. Anne and Frank Landers continued the tradition Dec. 18 with their annual open house. This old-fashioned holiday celebration at the historic Samuel Frazier home is the Landerses' gift to friends and family and to those with ties to what is considered Blount County's oldest existing home.

Glenn Perkins and his son, Dennis Perkins, were among the more than 50 visitors who toured the building and grounds. Glenn Perkins' fifth-great-grandfather, David Parkins, purchased the property from Samuel Frazier, the man believed to have built the house sometime prior to Tennessee statehood in 1796.

"It's really nice of (the Landerses) to have this crowd here every year. I enjoy it, just seeing it again," Glenn Perkins said.

Dennis Perkins was visiting for the first time. He said, "It's really impressive."

Loving restoration

Anne and Frank Landers bought the property in 1992. They have lovingly renovated and restored the original structure and added to it in such a way that the upgrades do not detract from the historic appearance yet still provide modern amenities.

Glenn Perkins said, "They did a really good job matching it up."

Mary Jane Miller, a retired Blount County educator, recalled the state of disrepair the house had fallen into before the Landerses began their work.

"I never thought it would look like this," Miller said. "They've really done an extreme lot of work."

The work continues in preparation for the Christmas open house. Anne Landers said each room of the house has its own Christmas tree, cedars cut on the property. A large, ceiling-high cedar decorated with ornaments special to the family stands in what was at once time the "dog-run" or "dogtrot," a covered breezeway connecting the original stone house with a cooking space. The area now serves as the main entry to the house, joining the historic structure with a modern kitchen and living space.

"I have a theme for each one, especially a color. This is my angel room," Landers said of the living room, or parlor, in the original structure. "I always do gold."

Two bedrooms adjoin the parlor. "In the blue room, I have angels also. Those are traditional, gold and blue. In the doll room, the little (bedroom), I always do children's things. ...

“The tree is our bedroom is peach and pink, and the upstairs room in the old house is a bird tree. There are birds all over it. Traditional birds of all different kinds.”

As with the restoration as a whole, the decorations are in keeping with the history of the home.

Three states

According to traditions handed down in the Parkins, or Perkins, family, the house was built when this area was a part of North Carolina prior to 1784. It then lay in the short-lived state of Franklin from 1784 to 1788; after this was considered to be in “the territory South of the River Ohio,” and in 1796, in the newly formed state of Tennessee. The actual date of construction remains a mystery because no known real estate records from that time period exist today. A land grant signed by Gov. William Blount in 1809 conveyed to Samuel Frazier 506 acres in Blount County “on the waters of Gallaher’s Creek.” Since this is most likely a reissue of an existing grant, it cannot be used to determine when the house was actually constructed.

The house itself was built from dark cedar marble quarried on the property, brought to the construction site probably by sled and oxen, and set in place by hand.

The foundation is nearly 3 feet thick, with walls tapering to a smaller width above the first story. According to a 1953 article in the Daily Times written by Elizabeth Baugh, “old-timers in the Friendsville community say they heard from their parents or grandparents that the man who built the rock house ‘broke himself up’ building it.” Records do show that Samuel Frazier and his wife Mary “Polly” Parks Frazier were in Alabama prior to 1819. Records also show that the property went into the hands of David Parkins that same year.

Penn plan

The house was built from a plan proposed in 1670 by William Penn for Quaker immigrants to the New World, called the Penn plan. According to the book “Architecture in Tennessee 1768-1897” by James Patrick, the Penn plan was a variant of the hall-and-parlor plan common in 17th- and 18th-century Virginia, and was also a well-established plan in England and Wales in the late 17th century.

The hall-and-parlor plan provided one space, or parlor, for the general activities of a family — eating, visiting, etc. — and a second parlor, usually the smaller of the two, for use as a bed chamber. In the South, the plan was frequently repeated on a second story. One major difference in this style and the Penn plan is that the smaller of the two rooms was divided in half in the Penn plan, making two small rooms.

In the Penn plan homes, the two smaller rooms normally have corner fireplaces, back to back. This is the case in the Old Stone House.

Almost directly across Big Springs Road from the Old Stone House, a small battle took place between Confederates and what is believed to have been an advance group of Sherman’s troops on their march through Blount County. A cannonball hit the house, and when repairs were made, a red brick was used to show where it hit.

Behind the house is a family graveyard. The only remaining engraved stones are of David and Elizabeth Parkins who bought the house in 1819, and of their grandson, Daniel W. Parkins.