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Hoosier NF Highlights

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Issue #110

September 28, 2016

If Rock Walls Could Talk

The Rickenbaugh House on Celina Lake



By Teena Ligman, Public Affairs Specialist

The Rickenbaugh house stands on the shoreline of Celina Lake within the Indian-Celina Recreation Area of the Hoosier National Forest. In 1874 Jacob Rickenbaugh, a local tanner and farmer, hired three Belgium stone masons, the George brothers, to build the house. The brothers built the house in one year from native materials on site. The home's solid sandstone blocks were carved from a bluff near the house, and moved into place using oxen and ramps. The stones have unique stipple-like chisel marks and hand tooled borders (called quoining).

The community at Celina once included Rickenbaugh's tannery, a blacksmith shop, a store and a few houses. The nearby town of Winding Branch (near the current Celina Lake dam) was larger, and included a church and school. Before the church was built, services were held in the Rickenbaugh home.

The Rickenbaugh house was quite grand, with two stories and a full basement. The 19" thick stone blocks serve as exterior and interior walls; the interior walls covered with plaster. Each floor had 3 large rooms. Jacob believed the kitchen was the heart of a home and where the

family spent the most time so the home's kitchen is spacious. The fireplace has an unusual 6 foot convection oven with an outdoor firebox.

Jacob and his wife Elizabeth had 10 children; two died in infancy, but the rest were raised in the house. Later their third child, Ella, married and moved away, but after her husband died, she returned with her daughter, Nola. Ella became the Postmistress for the Celina Post Office, located in the corner of the front room, where it remained from 1878 until 1951. Nola later took over the Postmistress job from her mother. The Celina Post office served Celina and Winding Branch.

The house never had plumbing or electricity. Yet four generations of the Rickenbaugh family lived in the house. Nola Blunk, long a widow, abandoned the house in 1953 when she married a neighbor and moved out.

The house and land around it was acquired by the Forest Service in 1968. Celina Lake was constructed, flooding the springhouse and old tanning vats. In 1984 the house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The grand old house continued to deteriorate and fall prey to vandals.

In 1995 a group of concerned local citizens formed the Friends of Celina House (aka Celina House Interpretive Association) to raise funds to rehabilitate the house. They worked with the Forest Service and the Lincoln Hills Resource Conservation and Development Area (RC&D) to receive a grant from Indiana Landmarks to develop initial rehabilitation plans for the house. Lincoln Hills RC&D facilitated the acquisition of grants to finance the rehabilitation of the exterior, cellar, and first floor of the house between 1999 and 2003.

Local citizens working with the Forest Service and many other partners helped save the house. Today the Rickenbaugh house has been stabilized and much of the rehabilitation is complete.

The second floor is a work in progress. Part of the area will remain unfinished to allow for interpretation of early construction methods. Volunteers will finish rehabilitation of the remainder of the upstairs and seal up the house. Another volunteer is removing invasive plants around the house and interpretive trail.

Interpretive panels detailing the house's history are inside and out. Interpretive signs also follow the 0.8 mile interpretive loop trail which starts at the house. Original and period furniture has been returned to the house and it is open periodically to interpret its history. Community meetings may be held at the house with prior arrangement. Contact the Tell City office of the Forest Service.

For more information on the Rickenbaugh house contact Teena Ligman at tligman@fs.fed.us or 812-276-4757.



The Rickenbaugh House today at Indian-Celina Recreation Area. Photo by Micheall Reed.



The Rickenbaugh House, from the back corner, in 1998, showing how it had fallen into disrepair.



The interior of the Rickenbaugh House in 1998, after vandals had removed the mantles and walnut cupboard doors.



Volunteers from the Historicorps Program working on the upstairs of the Rickenbaugh House in 2015.