

MICHIGAN HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH

ALLAN BRILEY
1878 LOG CABIN

By Harry Briley

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(In alphabetical order)

- **Besser Museum, Alpena** (McKay Cabin access)
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- **Town and Country Historical Society, Missouri** (St. Louis two-story log cabin video)
- **White Pine Historical and Archeological Society, Nevada** (WPH&AS Frances Cabin photo)

Traveler Alert

The cabin described in this monograph is NOT open to the public.

Access is limited to family and remains as a private family residence. In 2013, the structure was under renovation and unsafe for casual visitors.

Centennial Farm Status

The property is a Michigan Centennial Farm as defined by the Michigan Historical Commission as owned by the same family for over 100 years. Ownership began with Allan Briley in 1878, to his son Edgerton (Edge-er-ton), to his son Gordon, and currently to his son Clinton.



Contents

LOG CABIN DISCOVERY	5
Southeast Porch.....	5
Early Cabin History	6
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN	7
Front Porch – An opinion	7
Stairway Reversal.....	7
The Second Floor	7
Comparative Cabins	8
Eight-Foot High Walls.....	8
Floor Beams	9
DATING THE CABIN	10
Newspapers	10
1890 Newspaper 1 (front).....	10
1890 Newspaper 2 (obverse)	11
1890 Newspaper 2 (front).....	12
Cabin Floor Plan (1880's)	13
Farmhouse Floor Plan (1963).....	14
For Further Reading.....	15
Local Resources.....	15
Revision Notes	15

List of Photographs

Figure 1 - Briley Farmhouse (Source Unknown).....	5
Figure 2 - Farmhouse Interior Doors.....	5
Figure 3 – Briley’s son on crew (Source unknown)	6
Figure 4 –McKay 1898 Cabin at Besser Museum	8
Figure 5 - McKenzie 1889 Cabin (1990 S. McKenzie).....	8
Figure 6 - Frances 1893 Cabin (WPH&AS).....	8
Figure 7 - Faded Signature with an ornate "L"	8
Figure 8 - First Floor – Briley Parlor.....	9
Figure 9 - First Floor – Briley Bedrooms (PSB).....	9
Figure 10 - Second Floor – Briley Log Walls	9
Figure 11 - First Floor Log Joists.....	9
Figure 12 - Second Floor Joists (PSB).....	9
Figure 13 - Ceiling "Tribune" (Both by PSB).....	10
Figure 14 - Newspaper– Montmorency Minutes	10
Figure 15 - Newspaper- Farm Bureau Debate.....	11
Figure 16 – Newspaper – Thoroughbred Winners	12
Figure 17 – Cabin First Floor	13
Figure 18 – Cabin Second Floor.....	13
Figure 19 - Farmhouse First Floor (1963)	14
Figure 20 - Farmhouse Second Floor (1963)	14

LOG CABIN DISCOVERY

By the third generation, most cousins outside the immediate family could not identify the Allan Briley homestead cabin locale. Some said it had moved to the Atlanta fairgrounds (like the Jerry McKenzie schoolhouse) or elsewhere.

In August 2012, Clinton Briley (Hetherton, MI) tentatively agreed to a tour of the cabin on his property for his third cousins Harry Briley (Livermore, CA) and Patti S Briley (Alpena, MI).

He met us on a drizzly day while tending to chores outside his dairy barn. Anticipating a drive into the forested areas, we asked to see the cabin. Apparently skeptical of essential strangers to him, he nodded up the gravel driveway from the barn, "It's up there." Patti and I quickly spun around but did not see what he had pointed out. "Here, I will show you." as he led the tour thru the farmhouse front door.

Clinton and his post-WWII siblings all grew up here. The farmhouse faces north onto Briley Road (formerly called Brown Road). The family often modified it. A pre-war addition pushed the south of the house out for a more suitable kitchen and dining area.



Figure 1 - Briley Farmhouse (Source Unknown)

In 2012, the house was again under renovation with the interior lathe and plaster removed.

Patti and I did not at all expect to discover that the white clapboard siding of this farmhouse completely encased the original 1878 two-story Allan Briley homestead log cabin!

Apparently, people throughout the mid-west upgraded the better-built cabins with siding. A historical society saved one such cabin from demolition in St. Louis in January 2013, having been a Post Office, a general store, and home.

Clinton said they had always known about the cabin since their washer and dryer stood in front of an exposed part of the log wall.



Figure 2 - Farmhouse Interior Doors

Facing the front door, the right side had two bedrooms. The left side led to the parlor, which had doubled as a post office drop point briefly.

The parlor once held a wood-burning cook stove with its vent hole still in the second floor.

The current renovation will cover the cabin walls once again, but a large basement permits viewing of the original huge log floor beams.

Southeast Porch

Crystal Briley confirmed the log wall exposure saying, "Pa added a small southeast porch. He moved the old white door with the mail slot to the east side of the new addition, as the porch entry. The modern washer sat directly under the window from the living room and stood in front of the only spot with exposed logs."

The end of this monograph portrays the likely cabin floor plan (not to scale) as compared to the floor plan of the farmhouse in 1963.

Early Cabin History

In spring of 1878, at age 44, Allan Briley came to Port Huron. He wanted timberwork within the hardwoods. Allan took the train to the furthest city north, Gaylord. He walked 17 miles due east and claimed 121 acres in Heatherton.

In the fall when Allan first went out to his homestead, he made arrangements with Ed Goslow and Frank Love, two farmers living near Gaylord, that if he did not return by a certain time, they were to come see what happened.

Three days before the appointed time, Allan set out for Gaylord in snow three foot deep. He traveled five miles the first day, sheltered by a brush lean-to and a fire that night. He walked the remaining five miles to the George Peacock farm on the second day. Next, he took a path to Gaylord by noon the next day. When he reached the Goslow farm, the two men were lacing up their snowshoes to go look for him.

He cleared ten acres of forest that first winter. In three years, he built the cabin and a small barn. A team of horses hauled the large logs from the Big Bear Lake area five miles due south (and not taken from homestead timber).

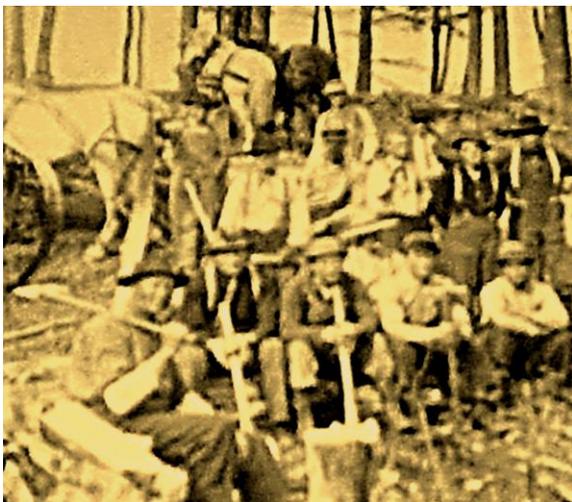


Figure 3 – Briley's son on crew (Source unknown)

He cut a straight trail through the ten miles of woods from his homestead to Atlanta, over which a team of horses brought supplies and a little lumber. This east-west trail later became Old State Road about a half-mile north of the Cabin and parallel to the closer Briley Road.

Allan frequently made a kettle of vegetable soup. One afternoon, while chopping with a neighbor, a "timber-cruiser" came along. Allan invited him to get some soup left on the stove from lunch. The traveler came back to the clearing and said, "That was good soup, Mr. Briley, but what makes it so red?" He pondered the question all afternoon. When he returned that night, the soup was indeed red. Allan next took down several wool socks hung over the stove to dry, but one had gone missing. He dished up the wayward sock for supper.

In August 1950, Clarence Smith, a neighbor of Allan, said that Joe Staninger was the traveling "timber-cruiser" who got the red soup.

With a completed cabin, he wrote for his wife and children from Canada to join him in 1882.

Once established, one of his daughters fetched water from a nearby swamp before they had dug a well. She saw an Indian and ran home scared. The family deduced that Indians used that watering hole when visiting the area.

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

Front Porch – An opinion

Judging from other two-story cabins from the mid to late 1800's, I suspect the current front porch better fits the 1920's farmhouse style and was not part of the original cabin design.

Likewise, the north dormer window appears to be an addition more architecturally in keeping with the upgrade to a farmhouse and ascetically matches the current porch.

Stairway Reversal

During the cabin days, the front door opened into a tiny vestibule that led to the stairway upstairs, as was common for full two-story homes of that era. That floor plan let kids run upstairs from the front door without disturbing adults in the parlor. The vestibule led to a bedroom door on the right and a simple opening on the left into the parlor.

During the pre-war addition, Crystal said, "Pa installed a basement wood-burning furnace with a large grate in the first floor at roughly where the cabin and the new addition met. Pa reversed the stairway to take advantage of that new grate for heating the upstairs. He added a door at the stairwell base. When downstairs got too hot from the furnace, we opened that door to let heat go upstairs.

The west bedroom walls on both floors were adjacent to the stairway. At the top of stairs, a quite plain squared L-shaped balustrade (banister) on the east and south kept us from falling into stairwell from the open hallway."

The front door after the south addition opened into the former tiny vestibule, but now faced a door to a new closet under the reversed stairs (which later accessed a basement stairway).

The Second Floor

The upstairs had three bedrooms for eight children. A second story "dormer" window provided daylight to the staircase.

Crystal described the second floor as follows. "There were two small bedrooms of equal size on the east and a large bedroom on the west.

The north landing had a high dormer window that did not open. The hallway had closet space on the east and south walls (L shaped). Those newer closets opened into the hallway. They were hand constructed out of board lengths, painted white, and attached directly to the walls. They were not fancy, but serviceable.

The ceilings sloped south and north. The west and east gable ends had two windows each.

The two east bedrooms had doors close to the centerline with roughly two-foot separation between the two doors. A double bed fit in each sloped roof area. The knee wall was low but had more than adequate room for sleeping.

The west bedroom door was at the south end opening inward, with its upper door corner meeting the sloped roofline. Pa created an identical door in 1963 at the north landing but never completed the closet divider. The room thus remained a large bedroom with two doors.

There was a grate (perhaps 12 x14 inches) in the northeast bedroom so heat would rise into that room. The grate was directly under the window and visible in the living room ceiling.

The south addition generated some attic space with only enough headroom at the roof peak. I had to stoop into the small attic door and step up to get to the attic. A sack filled with pine needles nailed to the door acted as insulation to keep cold attic air from coming into the hall."

Comparative Cabins

True homesteaders followed the lumber crews in the middle 1800's. Some early cabins were sometimes mere huts to satisfy the law to access the timber and later abandon the claim.

It appears that two-story log homes were on the higher end of the economic scale, even though using simple, efficient floor plans.

The floor plan and the chosen side for the front door depended upon locally available logs, the distance to haul support beams overland, and the lowest tolerable height for the sidewalls.



Figure 4 –McKay 1898 Cabin at Besser Museum

The Besser Museum moved the McKay Cabin to its grounds in Alpena. It has two rooms with a half-height second floor for a sleeping loft (in the attic). Allan had whitewashed his cabin walls, as confirmed by this cabin's own interior.



Figure 5 - McKenzie 1889 Cabin (1990 S. McKenzie)

The Jerry McKenzie Cabin, on its original Big Rock (Atlanta) site, places the front door on the gable wall, normally for a chimney. This placement allowed lower sidewalls with the roofline starting atop the side windows. Jerry arrived in 1888 as a single man without a family.



Figure 6 - Frances 1893 Cabin (WPH&AS)

The Fred Frances one-room cabin is located at the Stinson Mine by Granite, Nevada. It had sufficient space since daily life mostly occurred outdoors. The National Park Service calls a one-story cabin, whose gable wall has the door, as the Rocky Mountain cabin style.

Eight-Foot High Walls

The Allan Briley Cabin first floor is 8 feet high with two windows originally on all four sides.

Large single logs make up the walls, squared on inside and outside by a hand-adze. The upper and lower edges were left rounded. Wood scrap chinked the rounded gaps between.

Allan initially whitewashed the interior directly on the log surface. I found an extremely faded but fancy signature on the whitewash on a log in the second story west bedroom but found no other marks or carvings elsewhere.



Figure 7 - Faded Signature with an ornate "L"

The parlor interior once had flowered wallpaper glued to the logs but only a fragment remained.

Later, the family covered the interior walls with diagonal lathe nailed to the logs, plastered the lathe, and painted the newly modern walls.



Figure 8 - First Floor – Briley Parlor

In the first floor bedroom, an unpainted 2-inch vertical stripe by the left window (Figure 9) implies two bedrooms in the cabin's earliest days prior to making it into one large bedroom.



Figure 9 - First Floor – Briley Bedrooms (PSB)

Crystal remarked, "A partition (1961-1963) occurred when I wanted a bedroom of my own after sharing with brothers and sisters upstairs. Pa divided the master bedroom with closet space between. He added a door to my bedroom at the southern stairway entry."

The second floor peaked at perhaps eight feet (with two windows on each gable side).



Figure 10 - Second Floor – Briley Log Walls

Floor Beams

The first floor squared beams are huge perhaps 8" square on two-foot centers. The current renovation added modern floor joists between each log to remove some floorboard bounce.



Figure 11 - First Floor Log Joists

The squared beams for the second-floor are perhaps 4" square on 16" centers. These ceiling beams, as seen from the first floor, had newsprint spanning the gaps between beams.



Figure 12 - Second Floor Joists (PSB)

DATING THE CABIN

I had particular interest in dating the cabin. This was done by comparing other cabin styles of known dates (as above) and by ephemeral evidence (printed matter, often discarded).

Newspapers

The family glued newspapers to the ceiling spanning the second-floor joists. Larry Briley (Alpena, MI) wrote, "Insulating by newspapers was common even when my mother was a child in the late 1930s. She said that they used a flour and water paste". No remnants identified the insulation method between the newspaper ceiling and the second-floor floorboards.

These remnants on the ceiling joists were in good condition. The flour paste preserved the paper and text as a sort of thin shellac. I found three layers of newsprint on the beams.



Figure 13 - Ceiling "Tribune" (Both by PSB)

I removed two fragments that dated the cabin before 1890. If the family arrived in 1882, it allowed several papered ceilings, the last being in 1890. Enhanced images of these fragments (front and back) occur with my line-by-line transcriptions. I show likely missing words or phrases within brackets [as such].

1890 Newspaper 1 (front)

(blank on the obverse)

o'clock p.m.
 o'clock p.m.
 [called to order] by the ch[airman]
 board to [find]
 Montmorency
 [gen]tlemen,
 [cha]nce of the
 of the p[eople]
 Montmorency, res[ults]
 swing report
 [January?] 30th, 1890
 for te[sts]

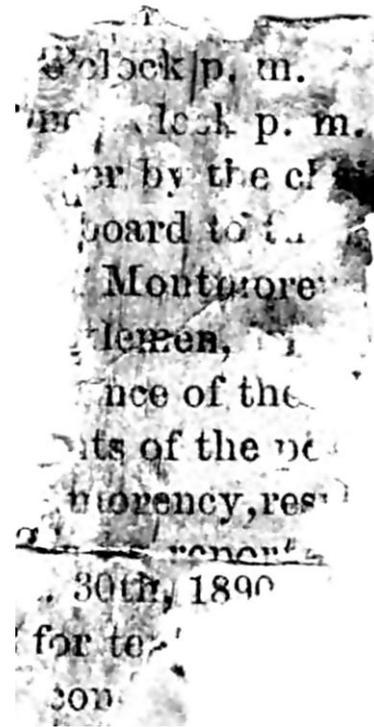


Figure 14 - Newspaper– Montmorency Minutes

("Swing report" hides under a fold)

1890 Newspaper 2 (obverse)

was taken to de[bate]
 presented the most co[mPELLing]
 [fac]ts, resulting in a victory [in the neg-]
 [ative.] although many of the la[di]e[s] declare[d]
 [that] had they voted in accordance with their
 [own sen]timents, the question would have
 [end]ed in the affirmative.

having returned to the
 [the] meeting adjourned, and
 [called] to order for the after-
 [noon.] The discussion of the main
 [topic of th]e day "Resolved, that the
 harder for farmers than ten
 [years ago"], was opened by **G. L. Hoyt** in
 [the affirmative.] The gentleman had evi-
 [dently given] the subject considerable thought
 , and had come well supplied
 [with newspap]er clippings wherewith to prove
 [his case.] He said that if we compare

farm produce and tools and
 ten years ago with the
 and cost the tools and com-
 [modities] at the present time, it is
 [duce] that a certain amount of pro-
 mo[re t]han ten years ago. It
 be a for people to blame
 the condition they are in. We
 [have no-one to] blame, and if we compare
 with that of the professional
 we shall find that we

[are as well off] as he. Mr. H gave figures
 [from a] private account book to prove
 [that a farm]er can buy fully as much, if
 [wi]th the money obtained from
 products of his farm than ten
 [years ago.] As evidence of the prosperity
 he cited the fact that the records
 decrease during the past few years
 mortgages upon farm property. We
 statesman at the helm and there
 but that we are on the eve of
 , such as we have not seen since
 [before] the war.

[was the] disputant in the negative
 Warner kindly [correc]ted
 and causes
 his opp[onent]

mortgages
 during the last decade our
 been diminishing, our expenses
 been materially lessened. The

(Continued on Eighth Page.)

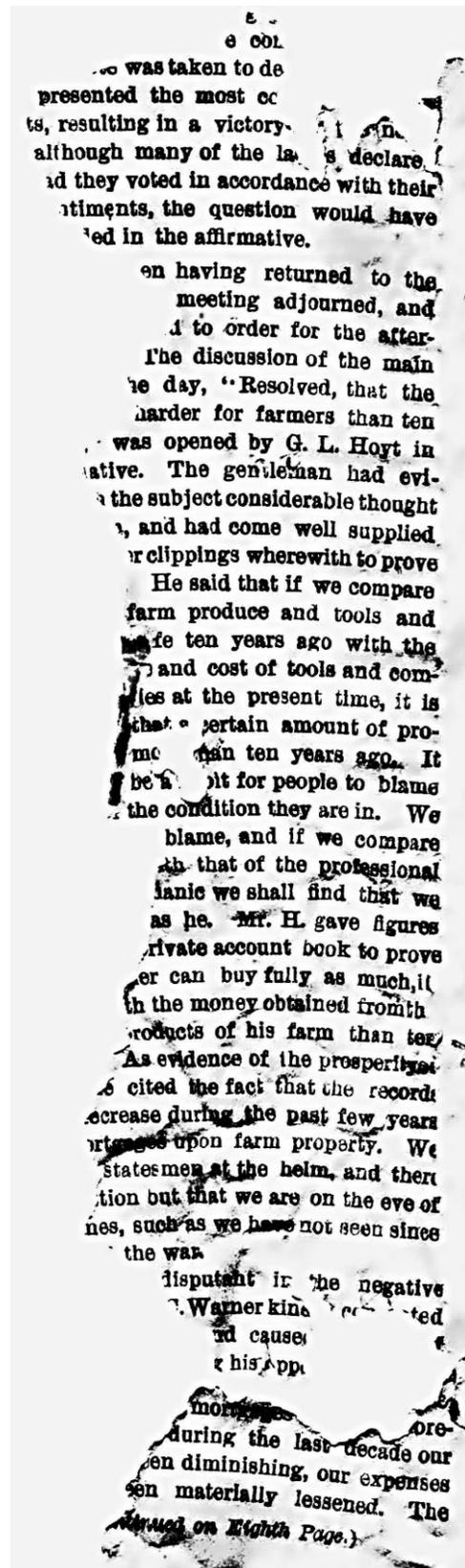


Figure 15 - Newspaper- Farm Bureau Debate

1890 Newspaper 2 (front)

a half thoro[ughbred]
 from a thoroughbred
 ## 0357, got a record of 2:___
 Lexington, Kentucky, **October 29th, 1889**. [His]
 sire was Onward 1411, and his dam was
 thoroughbred mare, Mary, by Wilke
 by Donerail, a son of Lexington.
 also the dam of Kenilwort[h]
Woodford Abdallah 16 [pro-]
 duces trotters to two dif[ferent sires,]
 one Electioneer.
 ## John W., bay gelding, g[ot a record of]
 2:29.25 at Dover, Delaware, Octob[er __, 1889. His]
 sire was Messenger Duroc 106, [and his dam, the]
 thoroughbred by Asteroid, son of [Lexing-]
 ton.
 ## Thalia, bay mare, got a recor[d of ___ at Lexing-]
 ton, Kentucky, **August 29, 1889**, a [____ year]
 old, of 2:26.. She was sired [by]
brick 5805. Her dam was the [thoroughbred]
 mare Miss Watson, by Billy
 of Melbourne Jr.
 ## Walter Herr, a chestnut ge[llding, got a]
 record of 2:30 at Chillicothe, O[hio, _____]
 16, **1889**, as a four-year-[old. His sire was]
Sir Walter 2001, and h[is da]m, the [thoroughbred]
 mare Sophia, by Lelape.
 ## William M. Hill, bay horse, [got a record of]
 2:24.25 as a four year old, at [_____,]
December 24, 1889. His sire was [_____, and his]
 dam, the thoroughbred mare [_____]
 by Wagram.
 ## Here are several hard facts
 theory of the editor of the
Gazette, and as [Scottish poet Robert] Burns
 observed [, "Facts] are stubborn things."

=====

Blind Teeth.

Blind teeth are still, to many un[aware]
 persons, the source of anxiety [lead-]
 ing almost to terror. Yet they se[ldom cause]
 any material injury, and never
 that they are supposed to [It is]
 probable that they are even
 a [related di]sease.

the

eyes
 is to look for blind teeth,
 knock them out. Many a blind
 the veterinarian removed at the
 bidding of credulous owners,

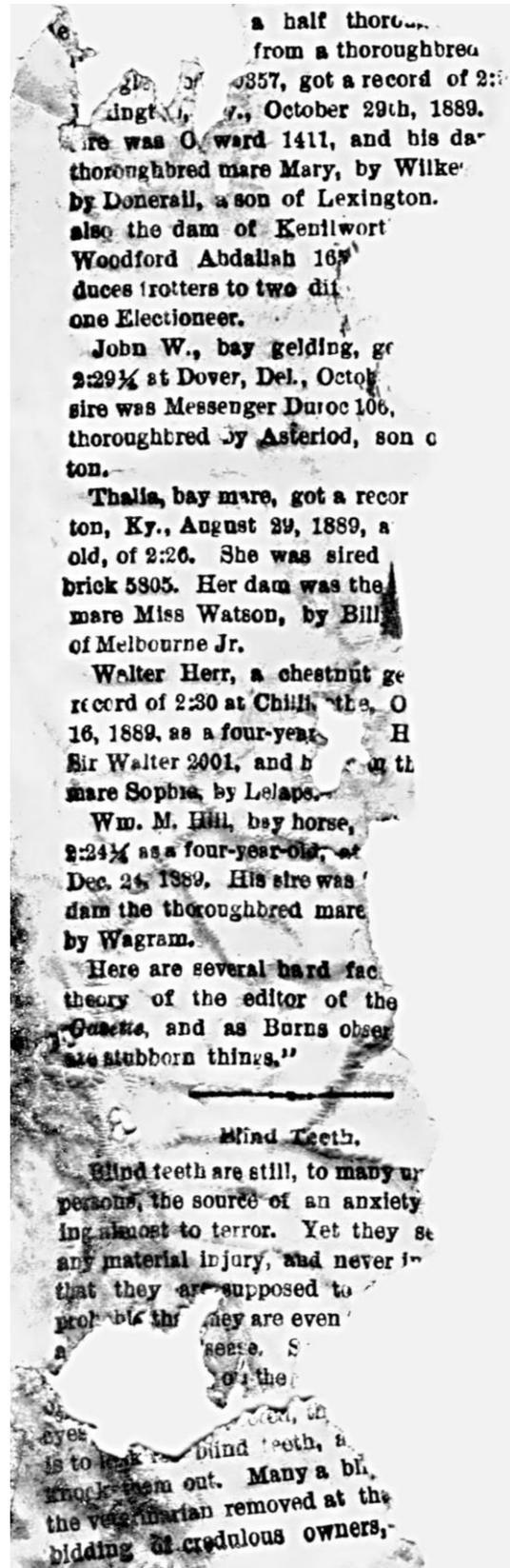


Figure 16 – Newspaper – Thoroughbred Winners

Cabin Floor Plan (1880's)

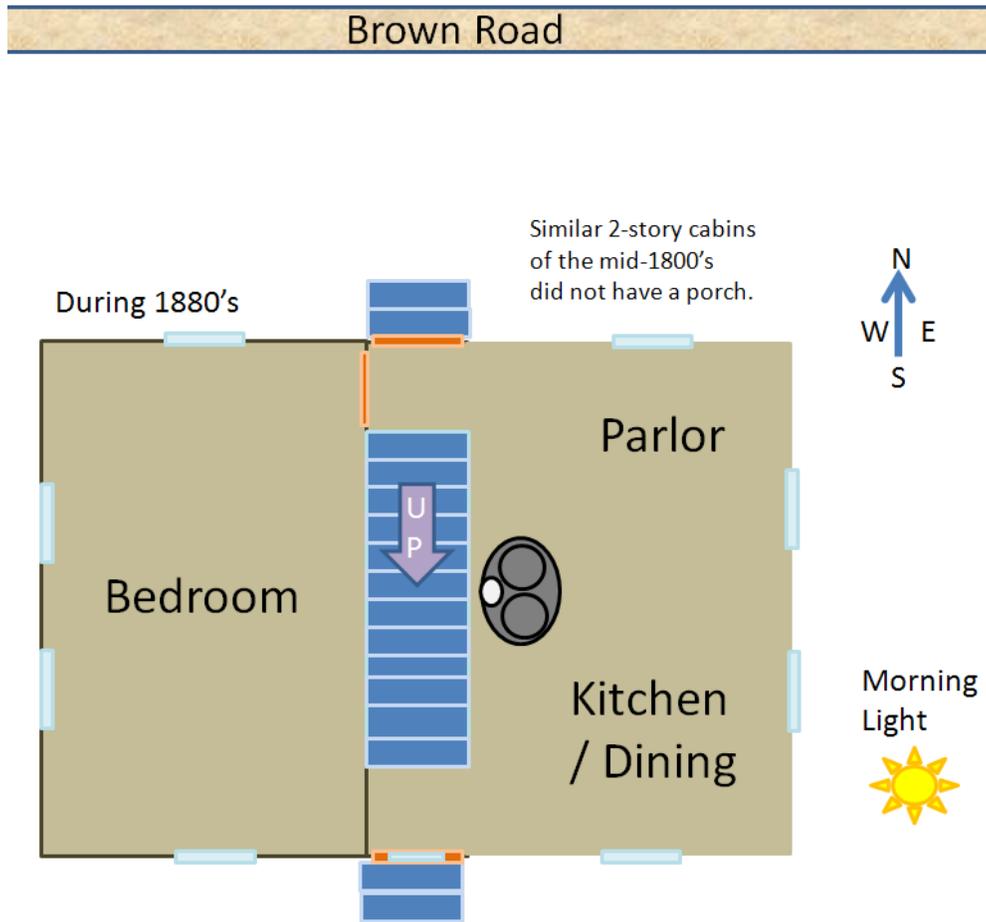


Figure 17 – Cabin First Floor

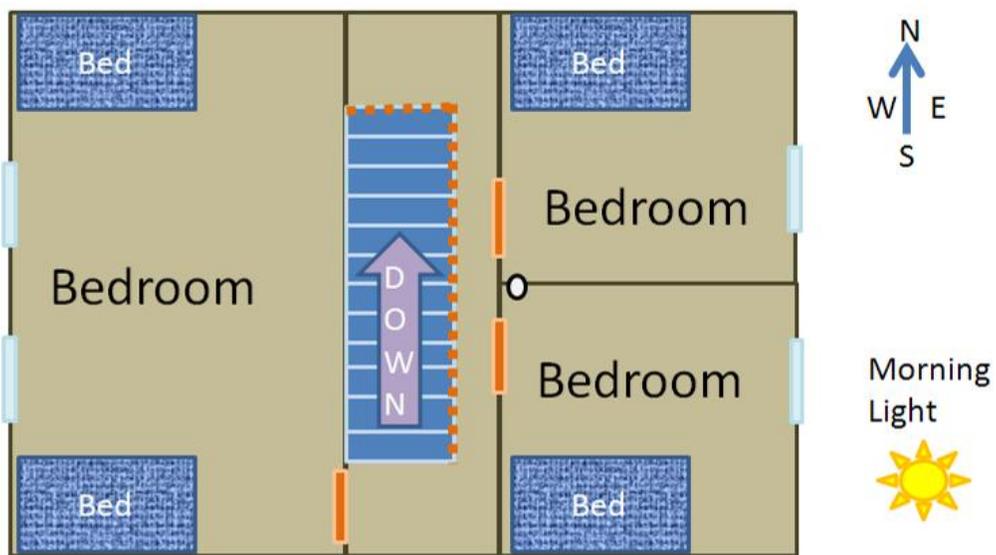


Figure 18 – Cabin Second Floor

Farmhouse Floor Plan (1963)

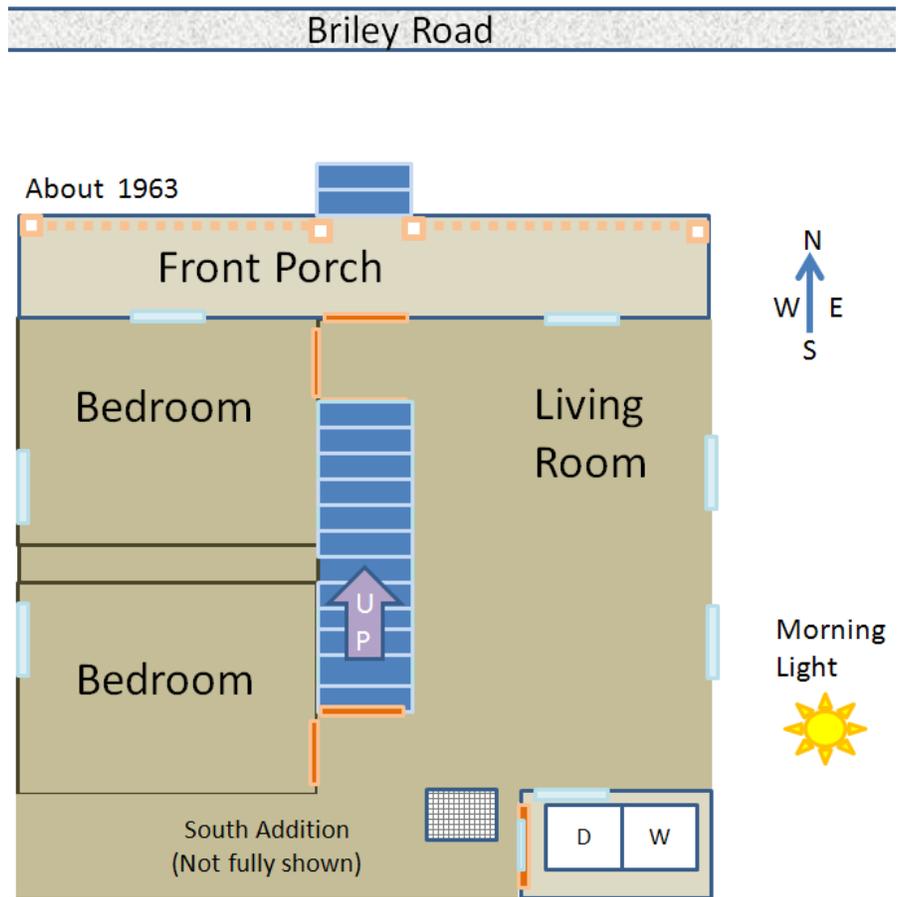


Figure 19 - Farmhouse First Floor (1963)

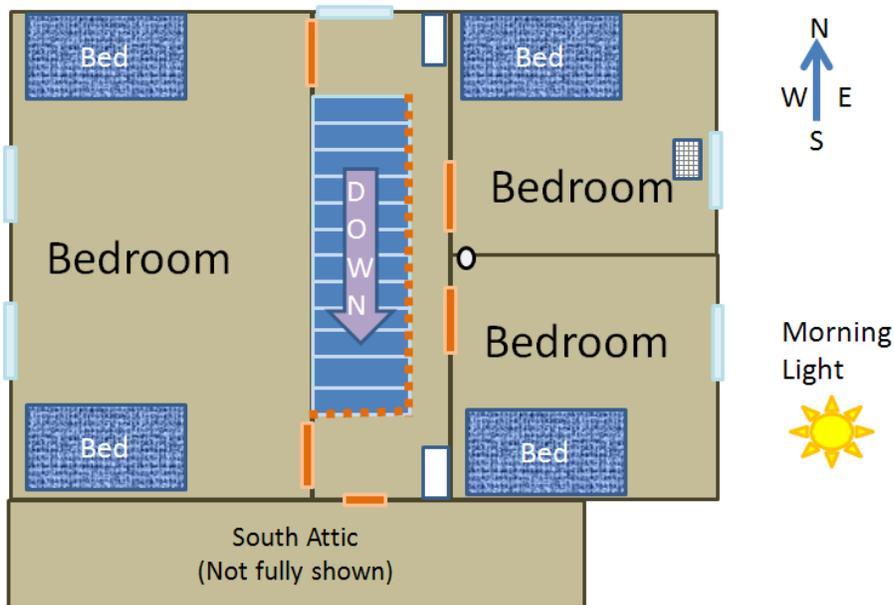


Figure 20 - Farmhouse Second Floor (1963)

For Further Reading

“**Blue Sky Circuit:** Montmorency County, Michigan, 1922-1926”, ©1991 Pastor Harold Hazzard for the Montmorency County Historical Society, 24pgs, Montmorency County Tribune – Of interest are the transportation modes during the months and road construction by horse teams as late as the 1920’s.

“**Life in a Lumber Camp:** February 1914”, ©1990 Montmorency County Historical Society, 24pgs, Montmorency County Tribune in cooperation with the Alpena News – Of interest are the Men’s Camp log cabin construction description and various means of heating that dormitory cabin.

“**Village of Hillman:** 1891 – 1991”, ©1991 Garnet Tripp, 64 pgs, Montmorency County Tribune – Of interest are the sections on Lumbering and the early Railroads to the area during the 1890’s.

Local Resources

Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan, 491 Johnson St, Alpena, MI 49707, 989/356-2202, Monday-Saturday 10am-5pm, www.bessermuseum.org

- John Peter McKay Log Home (Circa 1898) – Docent will unlock and provide tour. An older woman in Alpena area lived in this cabin as a young girl and sometimes acts as the docent.
- Lousada Homestead Cabin (Circa 1863) – This small hut was likely a ruse to homestead for the claimant to harvest its timber and then abandon the claim.
- Lumber Gallery (basement floor of the museum proper) – Logging and History of Farming

Revision Notes

Rev. A – 8/26/2012 – Rapid documentation of visit to Cabin in August while still fresh in my mind, distributed to family members who had lived in the house for their review and corrections.

Rev. B – 10/1/2012 - Added history about homestead claim, elaborated on the red sock soup episode, and added the Indian at watering hole episode.

Rev. C – 06/24/2013 - Corrected North/South orientation of floor plan, added 1963 floor plan, added details about second floor and stairway reversal, added comparative cabins, and edited for readability.