

Date of Construction of the Stone House Silverwood Park, Dane County

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As of August of 2014, this author has not found anything that can precisely date the stone house for certain. However, various factors listed below argue for a date range between the late 1840's to mid-1850's.

Land Ownership: The house is located on property acquired through government patent by John S. Bullis. The patent process was completed on February 1, 1848 for government survey Lot 4, Section 13, T5N R12E, Albion Township, Dane County. On page 1183 of Consul W. Butterfield's 1880 *History of Dane County* there is a biography of the Bullis Family that states that they came to Albion Township in 1842. It is likely that they lived first in a house of log construction before building the stone house. Although most people made some improvements to their property before the patent process was completed, most did not built substantial houses such as brick or stone houses on property until the patent process was complete. So we have a likely earliest date of construction of 1848.

Style of House: The house is Greek Revival, commonly seen in houses built in the 1840's and 1850's in southern Wisconsin. Some elements of this style continue to be seen in domestic architecture into the 1860's. But it is rare to see a house built after the 1850's with these overall dimensions as well as all of the Greek Revival elements seen here such as the low pitched gabled roof, returned cornices, straight window caps, side lights at the front door, the frieze or "eyebrow" windows, and structural symmetrically.

Marks on the Wood: Marks left on wood by tools can help identify the construction date of a house. There are three types of marks on the wood in the stone house at Silverwood Park. The large summer beam under the first floor and the lintel beams over the windows and front door display marks showing that they were hand hewn. In southern Wisconsin the hand-hewing of beams in houses disappears around the time of the Civil War, but it is seen later often in barns and sometimes in houses built by people with limited economic means. The second kind of marks found on wood in the house are the straight saw marks on the floor joists of both stories that indicate this wood was sawn at an early saw mill. These early mills used waterpower to drive saws that went up and down like the earlier hand-driven pit-saws, hence some people refer to the early mill saws as "mechanical pit saws." They are more accurately referred to by specific names such as a frame saw or a muley saw. All saw marks left on wood from early saw mills that opened in Jefferson and Dane Counties as early as the late 1830's were parallel, straight vertical (opposite the grain) saw marks. The third type of marks are the circular saw

marks seen on the underside of the second story floor boards and on the rafters on the wood addition on the west side of the house. These second story floor boards appear to have been replaced at some time and we know that the addition was added later, thus there does not appear to be any original wood with circular saw marks in the house. Circular saws may have been introduced to Wisconsin as early as the 1850's, but this was probably only for smaller pieces of wood. Circular saws were used to saw larger pieces of wood starting in the 1870's. Thus the tool marks on the wood in the house fit with a building constructed between the 1840's to the early 1860's.

Tax Assessment Rolls: The tax assessment rolls for the Township of Albion survive dating back to the 1840's. They are on microfilm at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. During the mid-19th century the rolls for Albion Township did not contain any notation concerning when a building was built. But if the property value, relative to the neighbors' property, increased a great deal in one year, then that is usually an indication of the construction of a building. It is very important in researching these tax records to note the overall values of many of the neighbors through the years as well. During boom times when property was increasing at a fast pace, the township was often behind in its valuations. When the township caught up and re-evaluated property, then everyone's property would go up in the same year. Thus, it is important to know if a jump in valuation was caused by the updating of the township valuations as a whole or the result of improvements on one particular piece of property.

As of August 2014, I have had time to look only at tax records dating to the 1850's. Unfortunately, from what I have viewed thus far, there may have been several overall assessment hikes for the township as a whole during the very years that we are interested in, making it impossible to determine a construction date. Still, someone should take the time to look for all of the years starting in the 1840's going through the 1860's.

For now it can be said that John S. Bullis' property in the southwest quarter of section 13, where the stone house is located, was valued at \$243.75 in 1853 and at \$260.00 in 1854. Then it jumps to \$655.00 in 1855. It is valued at \$700.00 in 1856. But everyone's value jumps greatly in the year 1855. For example the in the same township between 1854 and 1855 the parcel that contained the house of William Short jumps from \$333 to \$680. The parcel that contained the house of "Widow Slater" jumps from \$392 to \$720, and it is doubtful that a widow was hiring someone to build for her. All the nearby properties show similar jumps in 1855.

These township valuations were usually much lower than the "fair market value" or price a person could get at a sale of the property. Hence, I believe the valuation of Bullis' property in 1855 and 1856 at \$655 and \$700 probably indicates the stone house was built at that time. Did the earlier lower prices indicate no stone building was yet built or was the township simply behind in raising valuations? We cannot say for sure, but this question should be considered in the light of the discussion of the 1850 and 1860 census records below.

It is interesting to note that the Greek Revival stone house located at 974 Hillside Road, Albion Township, known as the Samuel Hall House is given a construction date of 1856 based on the tax assessment rolls, but a careful examination of these rolls calls into question that date. The construction date of 1856 is mentioned in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's online listings of historic properties citing as the source for the date a newspaper article in the Stoughton Courier Hub Newspaper of April 7, 1994. I found this newspaper article and it states that the house was recently put on the listing of the Wisconsin Register of Historic Properties and the research for the listing indicated it was built in 1856. The actual write-up for the listing is housed at the Historic Preservation Office in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. I read through this listing and it states that the house was built in 1856 with an addition built in 1867 and states that these dates are based on the tax assessment records. The date of 1856 is accompanied by a footnote referring to reel 8 of the Dane County Treasury records, Series 90. Indeed, reel 8 does contain the assessment of the Township of Albion for the year 1856, however, that year does not show any increase in value over the previous year. The previous year of 1855 does show an increase over 1854, but unfortunately, as shown above, that may have just been part of the overall increases in all of the properties in the township that year. This listing is a bit more complicated because the house was located on land that was broken up and changed ownership in the mid-1850's. In the year 1852 the lot containing the house is listed under Isaac Bunting and valued at \$268. In the year 1853 the lot containing the house was part of a 115 acres parcel listed under the Bunting surname and valued at \$268. In the year 1854 the lot containing the house was part of a 163 acre parcel listed under the names of George and Samuel Hall valued at \$254. In 1855 the lot where the house is located is part of two parcels that together total 100 acres listed under Samuel Hall and valued at \$800 together. In 1856 the house is located on a 79 acre parcel listed under Samuel Hall and valued at \$571, with Samuel Hall owning an adjacent 27 acres valued at \$150 for a total real estate valuation of \$731. Clearly the price increased in 1855, and not 1856, but that increase may have been part of the overall increase in the entire township valuations in 1855 as noted above. Thus, we really don't have a certain date for the Samuel Hall house either.

The tax assessment rolls for Albion Township can be found at the archives of the State Historical Society. The location is:

Author: Dane County (Wisc) Treasury
Title: Dance County Series 90
Shelf Location: MAD 4/24/U1-v8

These records are on microfilm reels. Start with reel one for the earliest year and work your way forward through the reels. Each reel has the townships listed in alphabetical order, then each individual property owner is listed in roughly alphabetical order.

The Value of the Property as Listed on the Census: The 1850 census has John S. Bullis with real estate valued at \$2,000. The valuation of real estate on the 1850 census

usually included the value of improvements (buildings) as well as the value of the land itself. Someone should check the land records in Dane County, but I believe that in 1850 John S. Bullis did not own enough land alone to account for that dollar estimate. A stone house of the type and size as it exists today would, together with his land, be worth about \$2,000. Thus the 1850 census points to a pre-1850 construction date, but it is possible that a substantial wood house was built first and then burned and was replaced by the stone house. No reference to such a fire exists in the county history book biographies on the Bullis Family. The 1860 census has John S. Bullis with real estate valued at \$5,200. The stone house at 974 Hillside Road appears to have been owned by Samuel Hall in 1860 and he is listed with real estate of \$3,500. The stone house at 603 Craig Road appears to have been owned by James Clark in 1860 and he is listed with real estate of \$6,000. Of course each man owned various amounts of acreage, but these values would seem to indicate that all of these three stone houses were built before 1860.

Other nearby Stone Buildings: Beyond the Samuel Hall house at 974 Hillside Road, more research should be done on the stone house located at 603 Craig Road. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin website lists this house on Craig Road as being built in 1861, but if one reads the “Additional Information” for the house on the website, it says the house is on the 1861 county map and was built “between 1845 and ca.1861.” Several histories of Albion Township claim that the Primitive Methodists began worshipping in a log house in 1844 and then built a stone church in 1847 in section 10. This church no longer exists, but it was located next to what is today known as the Albion Prairie Primitive Methodist Stone Church Cemetery. If records could be found to prove that this stone church was built in the 1840’s, that might work in favor of an earlier date for the stone houses. Both of the other two stone houses were built on land owned by English immigrants who belonged to the Primitive Methodist Church. John S. Bullis was not an English immigrant but his biography does say he was associated with this church.