

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### BEST FARM, SECONDARY HOUSE (L' Hermitage, Secondary House)

HABS NO. MD-1171-A

**Location:** 4871 Urbana Pike, Monocacy National Battlefield, Frederick, Frederick County, Maryland, 21704. The Secondary House faces southwest towards the front façade of the main house, with rear doorways at ground-level opening onto the farm fields where a row of slave cabins once stood, and beyond to Urbana Pike, the main thoroughfare into Frederick.

The coordinates for the house are 39.370647 N, 77.397872 W and were obtained through Google Earth in December 2010 using NAD 1983. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

**Significance:** The Secondary House was erected in the 1790s by the Vincendiere family, immigrants to the Frederick area from the French colony of St. Dominique (Haiti) in the West Indies. Its log construction is fairly typical of vernacular dwellings built in Western Maryland during this period, yet the house also exhibits accommodations made with respect to the building traditions of the Vincendiere's former homeland. Most significantly, features such as the substantially raised ground level, the basement kitchen, and the doorways that once opened from the first floor rooms onto a porch or gallery are characteristic of structures erected in tropical environments such as the West Indies. Many of these characteristics were transferred to coastal Louisiana where they are now identified with American Creole architecture. The chinked log construction of the Secondary House, while not expressly used in this manner in the French colonies, can be interpreted as a variation on French "bousillage" construction whereby vertical log framing is filled in with a mixture of mud and indigenous Spanish moss. Likewise, the two-room plan of the house is similar to both the English hall-and-parlor plan typical of this region and the French salle-and-chamber plan, although the same-size rooms and central chimney exhibited here (particularly on the first floor) more closely resembles duplex quarters used as slave housing.<sup>1</sup>

The original use of the Secondary House is not known and, moreover, it appears to have been modified over time to accommodate new uses and/or occupants. The Vincendieres may have erected this structure before the main house, occupying it while their own dwelling was under construction, then adapting it as lodging for extended family and fellow refugees from St. Dominique. While exhibiting none of its grandeur, some of the architectural elements that appear in the private spaces of the main house, such as the service wing and second-floor chambers, match those found in the Secondary House. Application of these features to the Secondary House, including mantels, chair rail, window and door surrounds, as well as plastered walls and ceilings, also suggests occupancy by those other than slaves or low-ranking servants. Evidence of a former row of slave houses located between Urbana Pike and this structure further indicates that it

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<sup>1</sup> The rooms of the Secondary House, however, are of equal size rather than a slightly larger "salle" and adjoining "chambre" in the French tradition.

was part of a social hierarchy of domestic dwellings appearing within the plantation landscape.

**Description:** The Secondary House is a single-story, two-cell plan structure of chinked logs covered in wood siding and resting on a raised stone basement. It measures three bays (two bays to the rear) across by one-bay deep, and has a side-gable roof. The front façade as built was symmetrically balanced with an entry at either end, resembling a typical, duplex style quarter. The house consists of two rooms per floor with a small enclosure at the top and bottom of the stairway to create only a limited intervening space between rooms. It has a central brick chimney block to provide heat, and a large stone chimney with a brick stack at the ground level northwest room for cooking purposes. The house was recently re-sided; due to the good condition of the logs underneath (and an early description of the house), it is assumed that the structure has always been sheathed in wood siding. One of the two front entries has been filled in.<sup>2</sup> The remaining entry is no longer accessible due to the removal of the front porch or stoop(s). Entry is currently provided by the two symmetrically placed doorways to the rear of the tenant house, at the ground level. The windows were removed and ventilation panels installed when the house was “mothballed,” but remnants of the previous sash currently stored in the house indicate that they were last six-over-six-light sash.

Evidence indicates that the original windows have been replaced; the openings were filled in with new framing members and brick nogging.<sup>3</sup> The original window type is not known. There are two windows at each of the front and rear elevations of the first floor, clustered towards the center of the structure to allow for doorways on the front façade and to facilitate cross ventilation in hot weather. There are no windows at the ground level of these elevations. Each of the two basement rooms is lit by a single window located at the side elevation, towards the rear of the building. A small, fixed window or portal was cut into the center of the rear façade, at about the level of the sill of the windows, in order to light the interior stairway.<sup>4</sup> There is a window on the first floor of the southeast elevation, towards the front, but no corresponding window on the other side due to the placement of the stone chimney. Windows also appear in both gable ends. As with the windows, changes have also been made to the doorways. On the first floor, one doorway was covered over on the interior by lath-and-plaster walls and on the exterior by the siding, and the other doorway was reduced in size. Due to their deteriorating condition, the door frames were reconstructed and new doors made to resemble the original ones consisting of planks held with battens (one of which is currently being stored in the house). At the basement level, the doors are

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<sup>2</sup> The former opening is currently evident from cracking plaster on the interior walls and was also documented through photographs taken for HABS with the log walls exposed, prior to re-siding.

<sup>3</sup> The new window size is not too significant so it may have been undertaken to accommodate standard-sized replacement windows rather than as a conscious effort to create smaller openings for energy efficiency or aesthetic purposes.

<sup>4</sup> A similar portal was cut into the log walls prior to the current opening, but was covered over by a stairway that was added between the main floor and the attic, thus necessitating the new portal.

new and are Dutch-style so that the bottom and top sections can be opened separately (thus allowing park visitors to peer inside without entering).<sup>5</sup> The gable roof is now covered with raised-seam metal.

The formal entry was located to one end of the southwest façade (again, the northerly one has been covered over). The presence of individual entries into each of the two rooms of the main floor suggests that the house may originally have been used as a duplex. A small winder stair hall to the center and back of the house, enclosed at the top and bottom, further allowed for separation of the two primary rooms (although the rooms are currently connected by a doorway). Access to the unfinished attic space was originally provided via a hatch in the ceiling of the northwest room, presumably with a ladder stair. A partially enclosed stairway has since been added to the northern room, above the main stair. Evidence that conflicts with the notion that the house was used as a duplex is the fact that only one basement room contains a large fireplace and hearth for cooking, while the other room appears to have been finished in a more formal manner, possibly for use as a dining room and/or parlor. It may be that the house was originally intended for use as a duplex (possible with a shared kitchen), but was changed early on, which would explain why the exterior doorway was removed from the north room of the first floor (and the doorway between the two rooms possibly added.)

The interior consists of two adjoining rooms per floor at both the basement and first floor level, with an unfinished attic. The house has been abandoned for some time and is in stable but deteriorating condition. Plaster is falling and moldings, windows, and original doors are missing throughout. However, remaining molding suggests that most of the finish was done at one time, with the exception of the windows and the first floor exterior doorway that received new moldings when they were replaced (and reduced in size). Whitewash on the beams, now visible due to falling ceiling plaster, suggests that the beams/floor joists were once exposed. Thus, the plaster was a later refinement. In fact, the moldings appear to have been applied before the plaster, which may merely indicate the antiquity of the plaster, as that was once common practice, suggesting that it was applied early on. The basement floor appears to have been used as a kitchen and parlor or dining room/parlor. The kitchen space includes a large fireplace with arched opening. Ghost images of former wainscoting and/or cabinetry are visible. Adjoining this is a room of the same size but more formal in its finish, including a fireplace (mantel missing) with a chimney closet to one side. The floor is now missing, exposing a root cellar. A boxed winder stairway adjoins the ground and first floors, terminating in a small hall that allows privacy for the two first floor rooms.

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<sup>5</sup> The doors were missing at the time that NPS acquired the property, so their appearance is unknown. Most likely, they resembled the vertical plank doors held with battens that appeared to the front of the house (now stored inside).

The second floor rooms served either as bed chambers or as multi-purpose living and sleeping chambers when the entries to both were in place, and perhaps once the one exterior entry was removed, as a parlor and a (more private) bed chamber. Both rooms have a fireplace on the common, interior wall. The mantel is extant in the north room only, consisting of a plain surround with back band. Cracking and falling plaster reveals a number of features including the log walls chinked with stone galleting, and the changes in the doorway and window openings. The north room also includes a former opening for access to the attic, and a partially enclosed winder stair to the attic. The truncated pattern in the brick hearths in both rooms suggest that the chimney stack may have been altered from the original, possibly to accommodate access via the new stair to the attic. The south room includes a built-in cabinet on the front wall abutting the doorway into the adjoining room. It is interesting to note that a portion of the partition wall between the cabinet and the fireplace is beaded board, rather than lath-and-plaster, suggesting the later addition of, or change to, the doorway between the two rooms.

The attic is a single, unfinished space, bisected somewhat by the central chimney block, which is canted slightly to appear centered along the roof ridge while also allowing enough space to access the new stairway that emerges at that location. The roof structure is exposed to reveal an open rafter system with roughly hewn principal rafters joined by mortise and tenon at the top and then notched into the sill plate below. Simple planks have been added to create supporting "tie beams." Narrow planks serve as common purlins to hold the roofing material.

History: The Secondary House was likely built just before the turn-of-the-nineteenth century by the Delavincendiere family (a/k/a De La Vincendiere or, as it was eventually simplified, Vincendiere). The Vincendieres emigrated here in 1793 from the West Indies colony of St. Dominique (Haiti), and were formerly from France. They were among the many escaping the slave uprising that began in 1791 and had operated a plantation in St. Dominique, bringing with them to Maryland at least twelve enslaved persons.<sup>6</sup> As suggested, this structure may have been used as their dwelling house while undergoing construction of the main house, and then used to house extended family and fellow refugees, or perhaps a plantation overseer. The first parcel of what would eventually become a much larger plantation was purchased by an agent for Victoire Pauline Marie Gabrielle Vincendiere in March of 1795, although evidence suggests that the family was already living on the site by that time.<sup>7</sup> Information indicates that Victoire and

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about the Vincendieres, their background and experiences in St. Dominique and Frederick see, Paula Stoner Reed, "L'Hermitage on the Monocacy Battlefield, Frederick, Maryland." In *Material Culture in Anglo-America*, David S. Shields, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 127-154. Also, Paula Stoner Reed, *Cultural Resources Study, Monocacy National Battlefield* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004 (updated)), 90-101.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick County Land Records, Liber WR 13, folio 397, Frederick County Courthouse, Frederick, Maryland. The parcel contained 457 acres.

her family arrived in “Frederick Town in Maryland” as early as December 1793.<sup>8</sup> Based on the will of a French refugee living with the Vincendieres that is dated December 23, 1794, they were living on the property at that time. However, the adjoining parcel upon which the main and secondary houses sit was not acquired until 1798.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is possible that they were living in an existing structure on the property at the time of its purchase. The text of the will states that it was written from “Chambre Sud du Pavillion Est” or the south chamber of the east pavilion.<sup>10</sup> This statement has been interpreted by some to be a reference to the Secondary House as a “pavilion” to the main house.<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence of the construction of the Secondary House prior to the turn-of-the-nineteenth century exists. A June 1798 account of a traveler through this area described on the property “a row of wooden houses and one stone house with upper stories painted white” that would appear to be the Secondary House and the former row of slave cabins known to have existed in the fields between it and the road to Frederick.<sup>12</sup> The fact that he mistakenly described the upper stories as stone painted white is an indication that the log walls of the upper story were sided rather than left exposed, and that from a distance, could not be distinguished other than by color. Likewise, the assumption that the upper story was also stone suggests how unusual a raised log house may have appeared to one observing the dwellings of this region. Tax assessment records for Frederick County from 1798 likewise indicate “new improvements” to the property at that time.<sup>13</sup> The main house, which also contains a log section of similar construction to the Secondary House, was likely erected soon thereafter.

It is unclear as to why the Vincendieres chose to settle in Frederick, although it was among the most populous and prosperous farming regions in the state. In fact Frederick flour was routinely exported to the West Indies where it was very highly regarded, a reputation with which the Vincendieres as planters were likely

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<sup>8</sup> According to the family’s “Declaration of Negroes” filed 24 December 1793, which indicates that they were at that time residents of “Frederick Town.” Reed, “L’Hermitage on the Monocacy Battlefield,” 130.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick County Land Records, Liber WR 10, folio 124. This parcel added 291 acres for a total of 748 acres.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick County Probate Records, Will for Pierre Laberon, Liber G.M. 3, folio 27, Frederick County Courthouse, Frederick, Maryland.

<sup>11</sup> Reed, “L’Hermitage on the Monocacy Battlefield,” 152. Heather Hembrey and Joy Beasley speculate that, “if the word *pavilion* is translated to refer to a “small detached dwelling” or “cabin,” associated with the larger house it might be inferred that Laberon wrote his will from the south chamber of the secondary dwelling.” Heather A.E. Hembrey and Joy Beasley, “A Study of Land Tracts Comprising L’Hermitage, 1724-1798.” *In Archeological Overview and Assessment and Identification and Evaluation Study of the Best Farm*, Joy Beasley, ed. (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Capital Region, National Park Service, 2005), 4.10.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz. *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree, Travels through America in 1797-1799, 1805*; Vol. XIV in the Collections of the New Jersey Historical Society (Elizabeth, NJ: The Grassmann Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), 111.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick County Tax Assessment, 1798. C.Burr Artz Library, Maryland Room, Frederick, Maryland.

familiar.<sup>14</sup> In addition, other émigrés already inhabited a “Frenchtown” within downtown Frederick.<sup>15</sup>

By 1800, the census indicates that Victoire was living at this site with a household of eighteen family members and invited individuals, and ninety slaves, making the Vincendieres one of the largest slaveholders in Frederick County.<sup>16</sup> By 1810 the census records indicates a household of eight individuals (including Victoire) and ninety slaves, and by 1820 there were twelve household members, forty-eight slaves, four “free” and two “not naturalized” residents. The family resided here until 1827, when they sold the property to the John Brien and moved into the town of Frederick.<sup>17</sup> In 1835 L'Hermitage was sold to wealthy local landowner John H. McElfresh and it remained in the family until sold to the National Park Service in 1993. The property was later transferring to his daughter Ariana, who married Charles E. Trail in 1852. The McElfresh/Trail family never lived here, however. Instead the farm was occupied and operated by tenants until the last one vacated in 1999.

The property is commonly known as the Best Farm for its long-time tenants, beginning with David Best as early as 1843 and extending to late in the century.<sup>18</sup> According to census records for 1850, Best had a wife and four children in addition to seven slaves, a free-black house servant and a laborer, and eight (white) men assisting him on the farm.<sup>19</sup> By 1860 the numbers had increased to seven family members, two free blacks including a “House Servant,” three male slaves and eight (white) laborers.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore likely that the Secondary House was used to house some of these workers. It has also been speculated that David Best may have retired to the Secondary House when he turned the farm over to his son, John T. Best, in 1863.<sup>21</sup> The 1870 Census includes among those living on the farm other than family, five white labors and one mulatto worker. Best grew primarily wheat, corn, oats, and hay, and by the post-Civil War era also operated a successful dairy farm here. By 1870, Best was able to purchase his

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<sup>14</sup> Reed, “L'Hermitage on the Monocacy Battlefield,” 128. Reed has also suggested that their agent, local merchant and landholder James Marshall, may have had a prior business relationship with the Vincendieres and helped to establish them in Frederick (and probably before they obtained legal title to the property; Reed, 137.

<sup>15</sup> Joy Beasley, “Occupational History of the Best Farm,” *In Archeological Overview and Assessment*, 3.6.

<sup>16</sup> 1810 U.S. Population Census Records, Frederick County, Maryland Archives, Annapolis, Maryland; and Reed, “L'Hermitage on the Monocacy Battlefield,” 143-144.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick County Land Records, Liber JS26, folio 551. According to Paula Reed, Victoire had a townhouse built for her in Frederick and lived there for the rest of her life; Reed, *Cultural Resource Study*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> David Best's occupation is documented in a mortgage record for a loan from the widow of John McElfresh, presumably for funds needed to operate the farm. Frederick County Land Records, Liber HS 18, folio 474.

<sup>19</sup> 1850 U.S. Population Census and Slave Census schedules.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1860.

<sup>21</sup> Deposition by John T. Best, son of David Best, C.E. Trail Quartermaster Claim, #R-153, National Archives, RG 92. In addition, the 1870 Census lists David Best in a separate household on the property next to his son John and his wife and daughter.

own property, but remained as a tenant on the L'Hermitage.<sup>22</sup> According to historian T.J.C. Williams, "For over forty years he [John T. Best] carried on a flourishing dairy business, which was a source of much revenue to him" and in 1888 he moved from L'Hermitage to his own farm where he had built a house.<sup>23</sup> Best did, however, continue to lease the property until about 1890.

The 1910 Population Census Records indicate that Jonas Summers was renting the property, along with his wife and seven children. A farm hand, Hela Summers, his wife and baby appear next in the listing, suggesting that they were residing closest to the main house and thus likely in the Secondary House.<sup>24</sup> They had all vacated by 1920 and L'Hermitage was rented to various tenant farmers until 1924 when first occupied by Courtney Wiles and family who, like Best, operated a dairy farm here. By about 1930, Elmer Wiles took over operation of the farm and Courtney moved into the Secondary House, which was electrified for his convenience. No other amenities appear to have been added, and even the main house did not receive indoor plumbing until 1950s.<sup>25</sup> By the late 1960s, the Secondary House was abandoned; the lower level was used as a root cellar and animals were allow to roam through, while the first floor was used to house rabbits.<sup>26</sup> The Wiles family continues to farm the property, but gave up residency in 1999. By that point it was already owned by the National Park Service, who had purchased the property in 1993. The house has been stabilized, including new siding, roofing, doorways and doors, and ventilators installed in the window openings.

Sources: Beasley, Joy, ed. *Archeological Overview and Assessment and Identification and Evaluation Study of the Best Farm*. Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Capital Region, National Park Service, 2005.

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<sup>22</sup> 1870 U.S. Population Census. The records list property that Best owned elsewhere. 1870 Agricultural Census, Maryland Archives, indicated that he still resided at L'Hermitage, with all 425 acres improved.

<sup>23</sup> T.J.C. Williams, *History of Frederick County*, (Baltimore: Regional Publishing Company, 1967 reprint of 1910 edition), 900.

<sup>24</sup> 1910 U.S. Population Census.

<sup>25</sup> Beasley, *Archeological Overview and Assessment*, 3.24; cites interview with Kenny Wiles by Joy Beasley, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> From Monocacy National Battlefield, Survey 7, February 10, 1997, "Walk-through of the Best, J.T./Trail, C.E. House (Wiles)," and interview with Keith and Michelle Wiles (Wiles grandson and wife, residents), as cited in Reed, *Cultural Resources Study*, 108.

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