Tallgrass Prairie

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
Strong City, KS

Self-guiding Spring Hill Ranch House Tour

...we arrived at the palatial residence of the wealthiest man in the country, S.F. Jones. It stands on a very prominent hill and can be seen for miles, either way. At a distance it could be readily taken for an old Scotch castle.... It is a magnificent structure, and we could convey no possible idea of its beauty with less than half a column of descriptive writing of the highest order....

Strong City *Independent*, October 15, 1881

The grand four-level ranch house forms the centerpiece of the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch. Completed in 1881, it stands as a beautiful example of French Second Empire architecture, a style popular in the late 19th century.

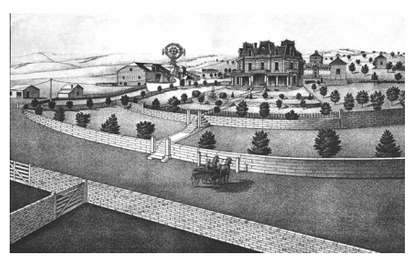
This large, stately home is also an example of great change in the American West, the transition from small ranches on the vast open range to large enclosed ranching businesses, laying the foundations for the present-day American cattle industry.

Ranch House Tour Introduction

Born in Tennessee on November 6, 1826, Stephen F. Jones, his wife Louisa, born in Georgia on January 6, 1833, and daughter Lutie, born in 1871 as the youngest of five children, came to Kansas in August 1878 to start a cattle ranch in the Flint Hills, building on success found in the cattle business while living in Texas and Colorado from the 1850s through the 1870s. The ranch house, built with native limestone, faces east, making a dramatic first impression. The French Second Empire style of architecture was very popular in the 1870s and 1880s, with many public buildings, like the Chase County Courthouse, and other large homes sharing the style. This architectural style is notable for the mansard roof enclosing the upper story with dormers and projecting gables, as well as stone cornices, brackets, and quoins adding to the elegance of the style.

Constructing the four-level, eleven room ranch house cost $25,000 and, according to local records, took 20 men working night and day to complete the home. In fact, so much activity occurred during construction that travelers often thought they had reached Strong City, Kansas, two miles to the south, and would try to find a room for the night.

Jones came to Kansas with $100,000 to use in building the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch, named for the many springs he found on the property. He eventually acquired 7,000 acres of land and built over 30 miles of limestone fences to enclose the ranch.



Lithograph of the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch, ca. 1887.

Begin Tour Here, Formal Entry and Parlors

(Tour begins downstairs in the formal entry area of the ranch house.)

The formal entry and two parlor rooms were the most elegantly decorated areas in the entire ranch house. The large formal entry doors, ornate walnut staircase custom-built for the house, and tall foyer add to the grand feel of the space. The parlor furnishings were donated to the preserve in 1995. None of the original furnishings survive to the present. However, the mantelpieces in both parlors, as well as the baseboards, the woodwork with faux walnut paint finish, the doors and windows and associated hardware like handles and doorknobs, and most of the plaster crown molding still survive and can be found throughout much of the house.

The parlors were used for both formal and more casual gatherings. A newspaper reporter visiting the ranch in 1882 described the house as "one of the most elegantly furnished" in eastern Kansas, adding that "the house is richly furnished throughout, the floors are all laid with velvet and Brussels carpets, while large and costly mirrors and an ample supply of appropriate furniture for the various rooms convince the visitor that rare good taste was employed in the selection."

Walnut Staircase and Original Wood Flooring

With only minor modifications, the elegant walnut staircase remains as it was when installed in the 1880s. It was custom built for this house off site, then assembled when the house was under construction from 1880 to 1881. Each of its 98 balusters was hand carved individually. The banister, consisting of 17 separate, hand-carved pieces of walnut, was assembled with the aid of Roman numerals on the underside of each piece. Also, please note the original pine floorboards on the staircase landing. Most of the original pine flooring in the house was replaced in the 20th century and is now covered in oak flooring.

(Continue tour by climbing the short set of stairs and entering the space to the left.)

Kitchen Area, Root Cellar, and Spring Room

The former kitchen areas of the ranch house, separated from the parlors by a short set of stairs and a doorway, illustrate the changes that have taken place inside the ranch house more than any other space. Later residents would transform the space by dividing it and creating the present-day utility room and bathroom.

The Joneses prepared their food downstairs in the kitchen and then carried it up a short staircase and by dumbwaiter to a "butler's pantry," where the food was put onto plates and served in the dining room. Later residents would modify the butler's pantry into a modern kitchen and remove the dumbwaiter.

The root cellar stored preserved fruit, vegetables, and homemade foodstuffs for the Joneses in a cool, dry environment and also doubled as a storm shelter. Stephen's wife, Louisa, insisted on a storm shelter she could get to quickly, since she had a great fear of tornadoes and the damage they could cause.

Down the tunnel is the spring room, where the Joneses stored perishable food. Cool spring water was piped into the house from a cistern atop the hill west of the ranch house where it was used in the kitchen as well as diverted into this room, continually filling a shallow trough. Glass and ceramic containers of milk, cheese, and other perishable foods were immersed in this cold spring water, helping to preserve them for longer periods. Cool air trapped in the spring room also helped to keep foods from spoiling.

The water followed a channel around to the other side of the spring room and was then piped into another cistern located underground east of the spring room. From there the water was used to power a small fountain in front of the house and to irrigate gardens, an orchard, and a vineyard in the bottomland east of the ranch house.

(Continue tour by climbing the stairs and going to the room to your right.)

Spring Hill Ranch Office

The first use of this room was as the Spring Hill Ranch office, complete with telephone service. People conducting ranch business would enter the office directly from the outside through the side door to the west. The back porch enclosure was added in the 1920s. Later ranch house residents would make good use of this back porch access to turn this room into a bedroom, with the quick access to the outside useful in case of any overnight emergencies on the ranch.

(Continue tour by entering back porch.)

Tour Ends Here, Ranch House Back Porch

The two rooms that were used as the preserve's bookstore and gift shop were the ranch house's original dining room and sitting room. The south doorway provided entry into the dining room from the outside. The sitting room, located east of the dining room, was where most evenings were spent when the parlors were not being used. This room may have become the primary household living room in the 20th century when the parlors downstairs were turned into storage rooms.

The butler's pantry and the top of the short staircase from the former downstairs kitchen are along the north wall. In the 1920s and 1930s, the ranch house's kitchen was moved from downstairs into the butler's pantry. To make this possible, the butler's pantry was widened to accommodate a stove, refrigerator, and other modern appliances. A doorway was also added connecting the dining room to the sitting room / living room space.

Three rooms on the upper floor were used as bedrooms and guest rooms. Although the Jones family still had to use an outhouse, the upper floor of the ranch house also featured a bathing room, complete with a copper bathtub and water holding tank. These upper floor rooms are currently used as office and working space for the preserve.

(Tour ends on Ranch House back porch.)

Tour Bonus, Front Porch

Explore the front porch and view the impressive eastern face of the house and the lovely terraces and landscaping Mr. Jones constructed to enhance the look of his ranch. Along Fox Creek, marked by a line of trees east of the ranch house, Jones began building the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch. In August 1878, he purchased 160 acres of rich Fox Creek bottomland for $2,000. He eventually purchased around 7,000 acres of land from local landowners and railroads and built over 30 miles of stone fence to enclose his ranch.

View of Fox Creek bottomland from front yard of the ranch house.

For More Information

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is a public/private partnership between the National Park Service (the primary land manager) and The Nature Conservancy (the primary land owner). The preserve offers a variety of activities, including ranch house tours, hiking trails, backcountry bus tours, and more.
The historic Spring Hill Ranch house and barn are open daily 9:00 am to 4:30 p.m., except Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. All hiking trails and all outdoor areas are open 24 hours. No camping is permitted.

To learn more, please contact the preserve at:

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