

The Thomas House is a single pen log house built c.1855 in the hilly eastern side of Red River Parish. The setting on Louisiana Highway 787 (a minor road) remains rural. As was typical, the house received a wood frame addition during the historic period. Within recent years most of the addition has been covered in a modern material. Despite these and other modifications, enough of the log construction survives to convey the identity of what is now a rare type.

The Thomas House is large for a single pen, measuring roughly 24 feet wide by 20 feet in depth. Originally it had a porch across the front and back. (The back porch was enclosed during the historic period, as noted below.) Because the interior is covered in later materials, it is impossible to determine if there was a partition (to make two rooms) during the historic period. The house has been in the same family since its construction, and Mrs. Estelle Colley, the great-granddaughter of the original owner, was interviewed for this submission. Born in the house in 1917, she can recall no partition until the modern era when her husband installed one (since removed). Her mother, who died in 1995 just four months shy of being 100, also remembered only one large room.

The house is of fairly fine log construction, featuring squared off logs which fit fairly tightly together. Notching is of the half dovetail type. The numbering system used in organizing the construction can be seen at the south end near the corner. Each log has a "number" formed of a vertical ax mark or marks. Whether the gaps between logs were covered by battens on the interior is not known because any clues are hidden by wooden planks (the latter presumably from the early twentieth century). There is no evidence of chinking. It is also possible that the logs were covered originally on the interior with wood planks (although not the ones there now). The log pen rests on sills formed of single logs. The sills in turn rest on a variety of materials (wood blocks, rocks, bricks). Some of these undoubtedly were added to replace the original wood blocks or ironstone. (Stone on the whole is not native to Louisiana. The principal exception is a type of ironstone.)

The original hand hewn structural framework of the porches survives, although the rafters have been replaced. On the front porch one can see wooden pegs where the plate and side supports join. The front and back log walls extend four or five logs higher than the ceiling. On the façade one sees where the ceiling joists slot into the log wall.

The low front entrance (about 5 1/2 feet) gives every indication of being original. Its boards are held in place with square nails. The original size and pattern of windows on the original log portion is not known. Today the window sizes vary. The granddaughter of the original owner, who was born in the house in 1896 and died in 1995, recalled a time when there was no glass in the windows – only shutters. On the rear wall is a very small square opening whose original use is unknown. Although windows in early log homes were small, this one seems too small.

The following alterations have occurred since the c.1855 construction:

- 1) Addition and rear porch enclosure, all during the historic period: The rear porch was enclosed in a makeshift manner to provide for additional space. The walls are of simple vertical planks. The house was extended to the south using board and batten construction and continuing the old roofline. Presently this range consists of two rooms and a back porch. (Whether the front room is a porch which was later enclosed is unknown.) The date of the addition and rear porch enclosure cannot be documented, although the round head nails used throughout indicate a date of after roughly 1880.
- 2) The log walls on the interior were covered with medium gauge boards (three to four inches). One presumes this dates from the early twentieth century. The ceilings are finished in narrow gauge beaded board.
- 3) The present chimney is a 1930s-'40s brick replacement of the original, which according to family tradition was of mud and stick construction.
- 4) The front porch rafters and posts have been replaced over the years, and the overhang has been extended.
- 5) It appears that the window openings have been adjusted over the years.
- 6) In the 1960s plywood was placed over most of the deteriorating addition and rear porch enclosure.

Assessment of Integrity:

The wood frame addition and rear porch enclosure are not an integrity issue in the professional opinion of the LA SHPO because expansions such as these were quite common in log construction. The only notable integrity issue is the modern covering on the expansions, which is clearly out of character. However, despite the visual impact of this material, it should be emphasized that the original single pen log cabin survives with most of its character-defining features intact (the hand hewn logs, half dovetail notching, the single pen plan, and the log joists, sills and plates). Log houses of the

Thomas House type or larger were once quite common in North Louisiana and are now quite rare. Indeed, one feels fortunate to find an example that is not in ruins. Hence the Thomas House is quite important to represent a classic archetype, alterations notwithstanding.

NOTE ON PHOTOGRAPHY

It is extremely dark on the interior of the original log pen; hence there are no interior photos in this submission. In any event, all that would be seen are walls covered in medium gauge boards.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: c. 1855
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Unknown
CRITERION: C

The Thomas House is of local architectural significance within the context of northern Louisiana as a rare example of domestic log construction. As such it exemplifies the folk architectural tradition of the Scots-Irish/Appalachian Uplanders who were by far the principal pioneer settlement group in the region.

Settlement in northern Louisiana began in earnest in the 1830s as Scots-Irish pioneers moved into the region from the Upland South. Their architectural "signature" was log construction. Indeed, the hardy Uplanders were the only pioneer group to consider log buildings the norm for a permanent dwelling. It is clear from the settlement patterns of the region that on the eve of the Civil War, the disbursed hamlets and irregular farms of the northern hill parishes boasted many hundreds of log houses. But today this impressive heritage is all but gone. Standing structures surveys for a several parish area show a total of 25 surviving log dwellings from this early period of settlement (i.e., pre-Civil War). This number is now probably lower, given the fact that some of the surveys are over 10 years old and some of the abandoned log houses may have been demolished or may have fallen down. As one of the rare survivors, the Thomas House is of considerable importance to enable the region to convey its early architectural identity. With its snugly fitting half-dovetail notching, it is a particularly fine piece of log craftsmanship.

Historical Background:

The Thomas House has remained in the same family since its construction, now being owned by the fifth generation. The original owner, William J. Thomas, was born in 1812 in Edgefield County, South Carolina. As a young man, his family moved to Butler County, Alabama. By 1854 he and his family had moved to what would become Red River Parish. On January 23, 1854 Thomas bought 280 acres of land in Sections 27 and 34 and built the candidate. Upon his death in 1882, the house was inherited by Robert Marion Thomas. Robert Marion and his wife had four daughters, one of whom, Lavana Francis, inherited the property where the house is located upon her father's death in 1914. Born in the house on January 11, 1896, she lived there all of her long life, dying in 1995 at the age of 99 years and 8 months. Upon her death, her daughter, Estelle Rigdon Colley, inherited the property. On June 18, 1999, Mrs. Colley donated the property to her only child, the present owner, Ruby Colley Baker. Mother and daughter live together within sight of the old family house. Occupied until Lavana Francis' death in 1995, it is now used for storage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Historic Structures Surveys, Bienville, Lincoln, Union, Webster, Jackson, Claiborne, and Red River Parishes, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.