

Jansonist Colony
Bishop Hill
Henry County
Illinois

HABS No.IL-169

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

JANSONIST BUILDINGS
Bishop Hill, Henry County, Illinois

Owners - Various heirs of the original settlers.

Date of Erection - 1848-1854

Present Condition - Rapidly deteriorating

Number of Stories- The buildings vary from one to four stories.

Materials of Construction - Frame and brick buildings.

Additional data- Any history of the Steeple Building is, perforce, a history of Bishop Hill, a colony formed by Swedish emigrants in 1846, who came to Henry County after an agent of the group had previously travelled through various states seeking a likely site for the settlement.

A period of spiritual unrest had preceded the formation of a group of Christians in and around Bishops Kulla in Sweden. This group, calling themselves "Devotionalists", were led by a young man, Eric Janson, who was only 38 years old at the time of his arrival in Illinois in 1846.

This colony has been called Communistic though it did not begin as such, but the difficulty of arranging passage for some of those who lacked money, required a pooling of resources into a common fund.

The colony was drawn mostly from the peasant group, among whom were found artisans of a very high order. Some members came from families of wealth, but all sailed in a body from Gelfe, Sweden in the Summer of 1846, looking forward to the new land of opportunity, where freedom to worship God according to their conscience, was assured.

The steady travel to America required regular sailings, for always more persons appeared at the sailing port than the small vessel could care for. Crowding was usual and at sometimes thirteen weeks were necessary for a crossing; one can imagine the hardship suffered. Some boats never arrived. New York was the port of entry from which various parties went up the Hudson River to Albany, Buffalo and thence to Chicago by way of the Great Lakes. From Chicago all persons able to do so walked, the long journey to Bishop Hill, almost 200 miles.

By such hardy stock was Bishop Hill founded. The first arrivals built log houses but within a few months, steady increases overtaxed the housing facilities and mud caves or dug-outs were occupied, bringing sickness and death to some of the early arrivals.

A log church was the first large building erected, where services were held every day. Mechanics of ability were numerous, the colony soon becoming independent, having its own weavers, tanners, tailors, shoe and harness makers, as well as carpenters and blacksmiths.

In 1847 adobe construction was tried but the following year the first brick were made. The log church was replaced then by the present building, having living quarters on the ground floor.

In all occupations, women worked side by side with the men. Women followed in the fields planting by hand, in the furrows plowed by the men. During harvest the women tied up the grain cut with scythes by the men, one row of workers following the other. Old brick have been found bearing geometric patterns made by the women with darning needles, while the brick were yet soft.

Education played a vital part in the community. Classes were held for adults in the first log church and a school for children was erected after using, for awhile, some of the early mud caves.

The Steeple Building, built in 1854 is reported to have been built - (1) as a hotel, (2) village hall and (3) academy. Either could be true for whatever may have been the function, it is by far the outstanding structure in the town.

Solidly built of brick, covered with lime stucco moulded around window and door openings to form a jamb, this building remains today (1937) in as good condition as when built, almost 90 years ago. Only in one area has moisture played havoc with the stucco, causing a break in the covering near the base at the southwest corner. This rupture occurred about three feet above sidewalk directly back of a rain conductor. The plaster falling seldom broke into pieces less than 3 inches by 8 inches in area, some of them being six or nine inches square, quite thick. No lath was used, the plaster being pressed into raked out mortar joints, and in some cases the brick was broken an inch or two from the face, the plaster and brick still bonded securely together.

A laboratory analysis of this old stucco was given recently by a plaster manufacturer, who states that high calcium quicklime was mixed with four parts sand, after having been made into putty by long aging. Thorough mixing with an understanding of application known to the builders, resulted in a job that has withstood the rigor of this climate for almost 90 years.

The building is now used as a multiple dwelling, title having been given to a number of families as their pro-rata share of claims against the colony.

A formal entrance with two stairways around a middle wall, indicate the prominence of this early building. A wooden clock with a single hand only on each face, still runs, though made entirely of wood and above the clock tower a bell with a curious hammer arrangement still rings.

Originally the roof was flat, sloping to the rear but later a hip roof was added over the old cornice. The old parapet wall was removed at that time.

The south front balcony had a cast iron railing, while the west facade facing the public square has wood spindles. The architect was August Bonholts; the builder, Lors Lundbeck. No research has been made as to who designed or built the other colony buildings which surrounded the Public Square. It can be assumed that a definite plan was followed for the placement of the apartment buildings and stores, all of which are of brick, some with an overcoating of stucco, might lead one to believe that the same architect designed all the buildings.

The stores have interesting elements of a classic feeling, like the mullion between door and show window and the post supporting the sidewalk canopy of the co-operative store.

The Old Colony store, which now houses the Post Office, had a wood pilaster store front treatment, with a brick order superimposed and above this a painted setting sun, with the rays filling up the wood pediment. Hand turned newel posts on the side stair resemble very closely the turned posts on the belfry walk of the Steeple Building across the street.

The Steeple Building is said to be a copy of Federal Hall, New York, but it is much more likely that some Renaissance influence, perhaps some Swedish building, inspired the design.

The colony suffered losses after the Civil War and was later dissolved, the holdings divided up between the heirs of the original settlers. Small apartments are occupied today(1937) in the Steeple Building, Hotel Building, Apartment Building, and on the main floor of the Old Colony Church.

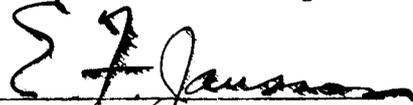
Each summer a reunion is held in the public square.

On the east end of the public square stand two large monuments, one to the Civil War dead and the other commemorating the founders of the colony. On the latter is the following inscription: "Dedicated to the memory of the hardy pioneers who, in order to secure religious liberty, left Sweden, their native land, with all the endearments of home and kindred and founded Bishop Hill Colony, on the uninhabited prairies of Illinois - erected by the surviving members and descendants on the 50th anniversary, September 23, 1896."

In 1928 the community lost its largest and most unique building-"Old Big Brick" - when fire leveled the four story structure. The "Old Big Brick", its ninety six rooms providing living quarters and a common dining room for many residents of Bishop Hill, measured 200 feet by 45 feet. The Colony store and post office, a large two story red-brick structure, is still in use. Grouped around or near the central square of the community are found numerous buildings dating from the old colony; among these worthy of note are the Old Hotel, school house, (still in use), hospital building, wagon shop, brewery, colony church and others of equal interest.

Sources - Illinois Tourist Guide,
Time Magazine, September 21, 1936.
Anna Soderblom, Fredericka Bremner (1850)
Evelyn S. Craig, Postmistress Bishop Hill, 1937.

By



Approved

