

PIECE SUR PIECE BUILDING (HOUSE)  
(Doucourmau Plantation)  
On dirt road off of Highway 494, about 1 1/2 miles NW of Bermuda  
Bermuda vicinity  
Natchitoches Parish  
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1297

HABS  
LA-1297

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20240

APPENDIX  
FOLLOWS...

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### PIECE-SUR-PIECE BUILDING (HOUSE)

(Doucournau Plantation)

HABS No. LA-1297

Location: The Piece-Sur-Piece Building is located at the end of a dirt road off the Highway 494 about one and a half miles northwest of Bermuda at the former Doucournau Plantation.

Present Owner  
And Occupant: Edgar Roget.

Significance: The Piece-Sur-Piece Building is a rare extant example of a log-cabin plantation outbuilding made of finely finished timbers that were flushed on all four sides, which were stacked on top of each other and notched at their corners.

#### Part 1. Historical Information

##### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: In the mid-nineteenth century.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners, uses: The building was probably originally part of the Cloutier Plantation. For most of the twentieth century, the building sat on the Doucournau Plantation.
4. Builder: Built with slave labor.<sup>1</sup>
5. Original plans and construction: Originally, the Piece-Sur-Piece Building was a one-room plantation outbuilding, which was probably used for slave housing. The building's "*piece-sur-piece*" construction type was probably a common sight on the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century southern frontier, but extant examples are extremely rare, particularly in Louisiana. *Piece-sur-piece* was a French term used to describe buildings that incorporated log cabin notching techniques on finely finished hewn timbers that were flushed on all four sides to fit together without the need for chinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Based on formal analysis of the building type and because of its location on a slave-owning plantation, it is possible to state the structure was erected by slave labor even without knowing the names of the slave artisans and builders specifically. -vbp.

6. Alterations and additions: Changes to the Piece-Sur-Piece Building include one window, two doorways, and three lean-to shed additions, which were probably added to the house in early twentieth century. The additions are all one room. The doorways that lead into the additions were not original.

#### B. Historical Context:

The Piece-Sur-Piece Building on the former Doucournau Plantation is a one-room building with three lean-to additions. Because its one-room open floor plan with an interior end chimney is reminiscent of a slave cabin, and because it is the last extant building in what was a row of similar buildings, it is probable that the Piece-Sur-Piece Building was, in the antebellum era, a slave cabin.<sup>2</sup> Although the building sits on what was in the twentieth century the Doucournau Plantation, it is not clear upon whose plantation the row of cabins were built. Since the original colonial land grants had a tendency to reward applicants with river-front acreage, which resulted in long rather than wide plots, and because when land was sub-divided and sold the vendors tended to carry on the same tradition, many of the plots of land along the Cane River are only 100 to 200 yards wide. The Piece-Sur-Piece Building is located in an area that makes it hard to determine exactly on whose property it was originally built. Probably it was part of the Cloutier Plantation, whose big-house foundations are, according to oral tradition, roughly 50 yards to the north hidden in the overgrown brush.

Carolyn Wells argues that, “Many a settler of Natchitoches lived and died without ever seeing a log cabin (maison piece-sur-piece),” and that “Natchitoches had been settled nearly eighty years before the first log cabins were used.”<sup>3</sup> Wells continues,

Changes began when slaves described as ‘English Negro’ and ‘English Creole’ were brought into the area;... By the time log cabins appear in written records cabins had been around long enough to have taken on a Natchitoches character. Log cabins were considered houses.... Log structures were not new to the French. Their military architects employed double piece-sur-piece walls to build escarps which were nearly impervious to artillery, but the method did not carry over into domestic architecture.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it was American slaves from the upper and “south-western” South that brought log-cabin architectonic culture to Natchitoches. Although often confused as an American vernacular, log-cabin construction was brought to the colonies from Europe. The mythic ideal of the log cabin imbedded in the

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence of the “big house” foundations and of other outbuildings exists, but is on different property today. Site visits, summer 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Wells, “Domestic Architecture of Colonial Natchitoches,” (master’s thesis, Northwestern Louisiana State University, 1973), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

American imagination, stems from a collective memory about the role of the frontier in American history, where early colonists forged from nature livable spaces despite the exigencies of the untamed wilderness. In their preserved state, log-cabins function as symbols of American ingenuity, manifest-destiny, and progress, characteristics that are hallmarks of twentieth-century laissez-fair ideology. In reality, the log cabin served as impermanent shelter for those who were forced inland, due to the lack of available land on the seaboard, where lumber was plentiful and hardware was scarce or nonexistent. Therefore, it is not surprising that those bound laborers on the plantation landscape who were not afforded good land and who had little hardware to work with, also used the log-cabin.

Today, however, it appears that the log-cabin outbuilding on the former Louisiana plantations is an endangered building type. What was once a common site is now found in only a few known extant examples. Their demolition is commonplace, as various residents in Natchitoches have told this author that they used to be a common sight, but in the last quarter century, they have been dismantled, moved, reused, or have collapsed. Moreover, according to research compiled on the Robin House in St. Landry Parish, it has been said that, “the *piece-sur-piece* construction found in the Robin Barn is known to exist in only one other building in the state—the Pointe Coupee Parish Museum in New Roads.”<sup>5</sup> Although it appears that the researcher was not aware of the piece-sur-piece building on the former Doucournau Plantation, or of another piece-sur-piece building down river from the topic of this study, the above statement regarding the Robin House does illustrate how the rare the building type is.<sup>6</sup>

## **Part 2. Architectural Information**

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Piece-Sur-Piece Building is a one-room building with three lean-to additions. On the front façade, the roof extends roughly 7' beyond the exterior wall creating a full-length front gallery. The horizontal hewn timbers are joined together at the four corners of the building with a half-dovetail notch. There is one exterior door and one window on the front façade, and various doors and windows on the lean-to shed additions. There are no moldings in the building, all the doorways have a single plank sill and surround, and the windows have a simple single-faced plank sill and jamb.

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<sup>5</sup> *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* for Robin House and Barn, section 8, 3.

<sup>6</sup> For other examples of log-cabin construction on southern plantations, see, Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975, and John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

2. Condition of Fabric: The building is in disrepair, and is covered with vines and infested with rodents. The front gallery floor has collapsed, the fireplace and shaft is disintegrating, much of the roof framing is rotting, the rear lean-to shed is missing several of its vertical timbers, the interior floors are covered in rodent droppings, and the interior walls are covered with torn patches of old wall paper, newspaper, crumbling paint, and exposed nails. A large rat lives in the attic.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: The original section of the building is roughly 20' long, and 16'-10'' wide.
2. Foundations: Inaccessible. Probably the building rests on an earthbound sill.
3. Walls: The walls are made of flushed hewn timbers that are placed on top of each horizontally, and connected in the corner with a half-dovetail notch.
4. Structural System, Framing: The four walls are composed of finely finished hand hewn timbers that are flushed, and placed on top of each other beginning at the sill and ending at the point where the roof rafters are notched and pegged into the wall. The timber walls are connected at the four corners of the building with a half-dovetail notch.
5. Stairways: There are no stairs.
6. Chimneys: The brick chimney extends roughly one foot beyond the exterior roof and is located at the center of the roof ridge on the northern side of the building.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There is one external doorway on the original section of the house, which has both a screen door and a wood door made of planks nailed together. It appears that three other doorways were created to enter the lean-to additions from the original living space. Each of the lean-to sheds has an external doorway.
  - b. Windows: There is one window on the front façade, which is double-sashed with four-over-four lights.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, Covering: The roof is side-gabled with a very slight eave.

- b. Cornice, Eaves: There is no cornice. The eaves are roughly 3'' on the gable side, and 9'' on the front and rear.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plans:

- a. Main Floor: The building has one open floor plan with one single living space, a front gallery, and a lean-to addition on the rear and on the two sides.
- c. Attic: The attic has an open plan with timber plank floorboards, and an exposed chimney shaft.
- d. Gallery: There is a front gallery that originally had post supports resting on an earthbound sill. The supports have fallen off and the gallery's roof is now supported by the two horizontal posts, one on each end of the gallery, that are notched and pegged into the terminal wall plank, and protrude outward (perpendicular) from the wall.

2. Stairways: There are no interior stairways.

3. Flooring: The interior floorboards appear original. They are made of wood and are between 6'' and 7'' wide and tongue and grooved together.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: The interior walls are the exposed hewn timbers of the exterior wall.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: In addition to the one exterior door, there are three internal doorways in the original section of the house. Each doorway leads into a separate lean-to shed addition.
- b. Windows: There is one original window on the front façade, and one window in the rear lean-to addition.

6. Decorative Features: There are no decorative features.

7. Hardware: There are samples of hardware beginning in the late antebellum era and ending with contemporary nails.

8. Mechanical Equipment:
  - a. Heating: The fireplace served as the only source of heat for the house.
  - b. Plumbing: The house has no running water.
  - c. Electric: The house was wired for electricity at some point in the twentieth century.

D. Site:

1. Historical Landscape Design: The Piece-Sur-Piece Building was one of a row of probable slave-cabins. The original plantation probably had a big house, surrounded by various subservient outbuildings.

**Part 3. Sources of Information**

A. Bibliography:

1. Unpublished Sources:

Map Collection, Land Plats of Natchitoches and Its Environs, 1793-1801,  
(State Land Office, Baton Rouge).

Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Records.

*National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* for Robin House  
and Barn in St. Landry Parish, LA.

Wells, Carolyn. "Domestic Architecture of Colonial Natchitoches,"  
master's thesis, Northwestern Louisiana State University, 1973.

2. Published Sources:

Glassie, Henry. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*, Knoxville: University of  
Tennessee Press, 1975.

Vlach, John Michael. *Back of the Big House*, Chapel Hill: University of  
North Carolina Press, 1993.

**Part 4. Project Information**

This recording project was sponsored jointly by the Cane River National Heritage Area, Nancy I.M. Morgan, Executive Director, and the Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Laura Soulierre, Superintendent, together with the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record division of the National Park Service.

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The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), E. Blaine Cliver, Chief of HABS/HAER, under the direction of Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief of HABS, Robert R. Arzola, HABS Architect, and Catherine C. Lavoie, HABS Senior Historian. Oversight of the historical component was provided by Virginia B. Price, HABS Historian. The project was completed during the summer of 2001 and was headquartered at the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. The field supervisor was Caroline E. Wright (Tulane University); she was assisted in the field by architectural technicians Edward A. Pillsbury (Virginia Tech), Katalin Maksay (ICOMOS/Romania), and Maciej Gruszecki (ICOMOS/Poland). The project historian was Jon Lamar Wilson (University of Mississippi).

ADDENDUM TO:  
PIECE SUR PIECE BUILDING (HOUSE)  
(Doucournau Plantation)  
On dirt road off of Highway 494, about 1 1/2 miles Northwest of Bermuda  
Bermuda vicinity  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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