

A Pictorial History of Bourbonnais Grove's First Log Schoolhouse (1837-48) and Home To French-Canadian Families From 1848-2010

by James Paul and the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society Log Schoolhouse Advisory Committee with illustrations by Gary Seiner and Christina Bradley, and images from the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society

How did the log schoolhouse change in appearance from 1837 to 2011?





Figures 1 and 2. In 2022, the log schoolhouse (above) was restored on the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society's museum campus—the Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve. It was originally located at 493 S. Main Street, Bourbonnais.



Figure 3. Gary Seiner illustrated how the original log schoolhouse may have appeared in 1837.

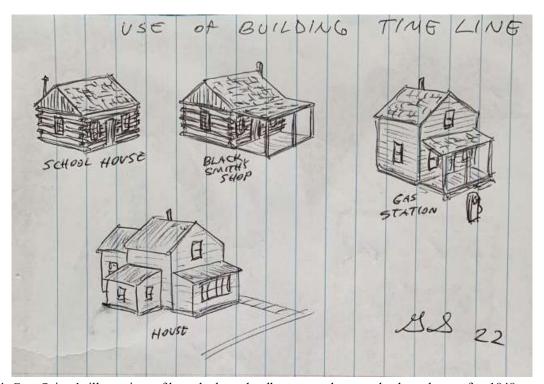


Figure 4. Gary Seiner's illustrations of how the log schoolhouse may have evolved as a home after 1848.

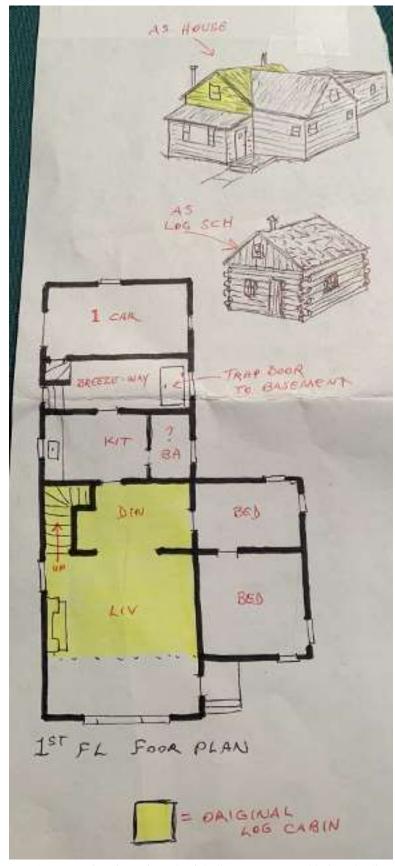


Figure 5. On March 3, 2024, Gary Seiner interviewed Michelle (Marcotte) Baldwin, who lived in the former log schoolhouse. He then drew this illustration of how the log schoolhouse evolved from 1848 to 2011.



Figure 6. This is the former log schoolhouse, as it looked as a home in the 1940s.



Figure 7. This is the former log schoolhouse, as it looked as a home in the 1950s with a gas pump out front.



Figure 8. This is the former log schoolhouse, as it looked as a home in the 1960s.



Figure 9. This is the former log schoolhouse, as it looked during its surgical dismantling in 2011. It was located at 493 S. Main Street in Bourbonnais.

History of the first school of Bourbonnais Grove

What was Bourbonnais Grove like in 1837—the year the log schoolhouse was built? Illinois became a state in 1818, but in 1837, the northeastern corner was sparsely populated. The Potawatomie were compelled to move west of the Mississippi River by the Indian Removal Acts of the 1830s. As the Native Americans left in 1837, there were only five families settled in Bourbonnais Grove, the 12 mile long by 1 mile wide grove a trees along the Kankakee River (from today's Kankakee River State Park to Cobb Park in Kankakee). Those five included the families of Noel LeVasseur, Henri Boucher, and Dominic Bray, who together had set up a trading post in 1835 (located in what is today the parking lot of the Larson Fine Arts Center of Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais); Henry Bloom in Rockville (near today's Camp Shaw-wa-na-see); and the Durham family who were directly connected to the building of the school. Thomas Durham (1784-1854), his wife "Peggy" Margaret (1796-1882) and their nine children arrived in Bourbonnais Grove two years earlier, in 1835—see the graphic image Figure 10 (by Christina Bradley) of the couple stepping out of their covered wagon onto their newly acquired homestead (today's Perry Farm Park in Bourbonnais Township).



Figures 10 and 11. Thomas and Margaret Durham arrived and set up their farmstead in Bourbonnais Grove in 1835. Durham broke open the prairie—today's Perry Farm Park—for the first time in that same year. Thomas Durham was born in Virginia in 1784. He and Margaret were married in Tennessee in 1811. They moved to Ohio and Indiana before their final move to Illinois. They were Quaker abolitionists.

At 50 in the spring of 1835, Thomas Durham started to break open the prairie on his new farmstead in Bourbonnais Grove—see graphic image Figure 11 by Christina Bradley. A year later, on January 12, 1836, Will County was formed and Durham was elected Rock Village Precinct Commissioner as one of three commissioners in the newly formed county. One of his ambitions was to build a school in Bourbonnais Grove. After all, he and his wife, Margaret, had a vested interest: seven of their own children were of school age. At the commissioners' first meeting, Levi Jenks (who was also a Methodist circuit rider minister—see page 7) was appointed Will County clerk and school commissioner. Durham agreed with Jenks that for any new settlement like Bourbonnais Grove to survive, it must have a school. By 1837, land was acquired for a schoolhouse along the Bourbonnais Trace about halfway between the Durham family log home and the LeVasseur trading post—see Figure 12. The Bourbonnais Grove log schoolhouse was built in 1837 by Solomon Yoder/Yeader under the supervision of Durham and Jenks and with the approval of the French-Canadian families. It was a 1 ½ story 20' x 20' log structure—see Figures 1-3. This school was the second log cabin school in the Kankakee River Valley. The first one was built in Aroma Park (Williams, et al., *The Wonderful Land*, page 22).



Figure 12. In this present-day map, one can see that the log schoolhouse (blue star) was built halfway between the Durham farmhouse (green star) to the south, and LeVasseur's trading post (red star) to the north.

The *Norman truss* roof support system was used in the construction of the school (Figure 13). The French-Canadian settlers in Bourbonnais Grove used this distinctive form of roof support which originated in Normandy, France. The *Norman truss* utilizes horizontal roof support which is different from the British kingpost truss system (vertical roof supports).



Figure 13. In the reconstructed log schoolhouse, the center roof rafter of the Norman truss, is an original 1837 log.

Today the restored log schoolhouse sits on the museum campus with the Letourneau Home/Museum. This is very appropriate because the Letourneau Home was built in the same year as the log schoolhouse—1837. As the oldest existing house in Bourbonnais Grove, it was built just south of the pine tree still standing in what is today the Clancy-Gernon Funeral Home parking lot along North Main Street in Bourbonnais. The house was likely built on the stone foundation of Francois Bourbonnais, Sr. family's log cabin. The Bourbonnais family left their log cabin around 1832 and moved to what would become Bureau County, Illinois. The construction of the house was unusual in 1837 as Jack Klasey wrote in an August 19, 2023, Kankakee *Daily Journal* article: "instead of logs, it was built of lumber sawn from trees in the surrounding grove." In 1854, George Letourneau purchased the house and referred to it as a "pioneer structure". The Letourneau House was moved to its current location at 698 Stratford Drive East in Bourbonnais on June 20, 1986. As you look at the photograph Figure 14, imagine there are no Letourneau family inspired 1860s Greek Revival characteristics like pediments above the windows and porch columns. Now you can see the 1837 pioneer structure.



Figure 14

At the log schoolhouse, classes probably included ten or more male and female students from grades 1-8. The students would have—including Durham's four sons and three daughters, and

LeVasseur's son and daughter—learned reading, history, writing, math, and geography. During the tenure of the log schoolhouse from 1837-48, Thomas and Margaret Durham had several children of school age: Arabella, age 16 in 1837; Harry, age 14 in 1837; Pleasant, age 13 in 1837; Martha, age 12 in 1837 (on January 1, 1845 she married David Perry); Margaret, age 11 in 1837; Thomas, Jr. age 10 in 1837; Stephen who was ages 5-16 during the years 1837-48; Gurdon who was ages 3-14 during the years 1837-48; and Daniel who was born in 1837 and would have gone to the school.

In 1838, Noel LeVasseur married his second wife, Ruth Russell Bull (1818-60). They had eight children. From 1837-48, their two children of school age were: Edward who was born in 1838 and would have gone to the school, and Julia, who was born in 1840 and would have gone to the school before it closed. The other LeVasseur children (Harriet, Lucy, and George (twins), Carrie, Freddie, and William/Guillaume Noel) were born after the school closed in 1848. At 92, Henry F. Tower reported in a 1929 interview with local historian Burt Burroughs that he attended the Bourbonnais Grove log school in 1847 at age 11 with two of Noel LeVasseur's children (Johnson, Facebook post, May 11, 2021). Accordingly, Edward and Julia were the only two children possible—proving the school was coed. Tower also recalled that his teacher, Mr. Starr, boarded at Thomas Durham's home.

The first teachers at the log school were Solomon Yoder/Yeader and/or Joseph Boltonhouse, followed by Milton O. Clark (before 1844), Charles Starr (1844-45), and Joseph Jeffcoat (1847-48). When the log schoolhouse was open during the years of 1837-48, all teachers were male. They likely had an eighth grade education. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, many men became soldiers and therefore, more women started to become teachers. Teaching became a career that single women could enter during the last half of the nineteenth-century. By the year 1900, female teachers outnumbered male teachers.

As you see on the tables in Figure 15, there are ink wells with quill pens and also slate tablets. From 1837-48 there would have been a student writing transition from quill and ink to slates so that they could practice their writing. The teacher also used a large "blackboard" (probably 4'x4' wood painted black) so that he could teach an entire classroom at one time. Please also note the other items associated with 1837: the pot belly stove, 26-star U.S. flag, the wash table, student tables and benches in place of desks, the school bell on the teacher's desk, and the teacher's table and chair.



Figure 15. This is an interior view of the restored log schoolhouse during the 1837-48 time period.

In the Bourbonnais Grove pioneer settlement of the 1840s, the religions of the Durham Quakers and French-Canadian Roman Catholics grew to include Methodism. Like the Durham Quakers and the French-Canadian Roman Catholics, the Methodists were anti-slavery Abolitionists. The first Methodist quarterly meeting was held at the schoolhouse in January 1842 (Reverend John Sinclair presiding the next year). Bourbonnais Grove became part of the six-week Methodist circuit. Stephen R. Beggs, Levi Jenks, James Leckenby, [unknown first name] Chapin, David Lewis, and C. Lazenby were the circuit rider ministers.





Figures 16 and 17. One of the Methodist circuit riders was Reverend Stephen Beggs (1801-95), seen at left.

During the tenure of Bourbonnais Grove's first log school from 1837-48, the first Roman Catholic mass was held in Noel LeVasseur's new brick home (built by Thomas Durham) in June 1837; St. Leo's Chapel was built in 1841; the first Methodist quarterly meeting was held by circuit rider ministers at the schoolhouse in January 1842; 1841; circuit rider ministers held the first Methodist quarterly meeting at the schoolhouse in January 1842; Martha Durham married David Perry on January 1, 1845; and from 1841-46, Fathers Du Pontavice, Dunn, Crevier, and St. Palais served the St. Leo's mission chapel.

By 1846, at least 22 French-Canadian families lived in Bourbonnais Grove. The records of St. Leo's Parish in 1847 noted 77 French-Canadian families or 471 persons. The Bourbonnais Grove log school was 20 feet by 20 feet in size. Maximum capacity for students was probably 20-25. How could this problem be solved?

The log schoolhouse had reached its capacity in 1848. How could the new French-Canadian immigrant children in Bourbonnais Grove be educated? The only answer was to close the log schoolhouse. One can only imagine the discussion between the Durham and LeVasseur families about this problem. In ten years from 1837 to 1847 the population in Bourbonnais Grove had multiplied from 5 to 77. Education would have to take a hiatus until new and larger schools could be built for boys and girls.

The history of formal education in Bourbonnais Grove between the closing of the log schoolhouse in 1848 and 1852 is sketchy, and unique. As the public school eventually moved closer to St. Leo's Chapel (in 1847 the chapel was renamed Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish or MBVM), "This foreshadowed an interesting relationship between the public school district and the Parish" (*Maternity BVM Celebrating 150 Years of Education: 1860-2010*, 8). For two years, 1852-54, four Sisters of Mercy tried to begin a parish school. However, the nuns were recalled to Chicago because the parish could not support the school. From 1857-59, the parish tried again—unsuccessfully—to start a school with the Sisters of the Holy Cross from

South Bend. Perhaps the fire that destroyed the frame MBVM Church in 1853 and the cost of building a new church from 1854-58, left little financial support for a school.

Finally, the nuns of the Congregation of Notre Dame began a continuum of educational success in Bourbonnais Grove on October 1, 1860. That is when three Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame began classes for 50 girl students in a small stone house on the corner of Roy and Marsile Streets. In January 1861, the nuns moved their home and school into a two-story stone building on land just east of the Maternity BVM Church—see Figure 18. This building had been constructed at the expense of Bourbonnais Grove in 1859. This school for girls became known as Notre Dame Academy. A larger three-story frame convent for the nuns and academy was completed on August 1, 1862, and expanded until 1910.

Boys' education remained in the hands of secular teachers in the second Bourbonnais Grove public school (1859-68)—in the same two-story stone building that was formerly the school used by the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame in 1861—see Figure 18. The Viatorian Order (who had served the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church since 1865) began teaching in the public school and soon bought the building from the Bourbonnais Grove school board. By 1868 the school was fully under Viatorian control and renamed the St. Viator Academy. By 1874, the school complex included a three-story building—see Figure 18. In that year the academy was offering college level courses in French, Latin, philosophy, mathematics, vocal and instrumental music, theology, and commerce. Accordingly, the Viatorians were offered a university charter by the Illinois state legislature in 1874. St. Viator's College was born and began to offer degrees in arts, sciences, and letters—see Figure 19.





Figures 18 and 19. Although these two illustrations are indicated as "photos", they are 1859-1906 artistic renditions of the religious campus area east of Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church. At right is St. Viator College as it appeared in 1906 and at left is the college as it looked before Roy Memorial Chapel was built. The red arrow at left indicates the second Bourbonnais Grove school (1859). In the right illustration, the second Bourbonnais Grove school is the first building to the church's right.

History of the log schoolhouse as a home for French-Canadian families from 1848 to 2010

After the log schoolhouse closed in 1848, several French-Canadian families made the structure their homes until 2010. In 1848, a twenty-year-old French-Canadian village blacksmith Joseph Lesage (1828-1920), who was born in St- Leon-le-Grand, Quebec Province, purchased the former school. He and his family resided there and had a home next door to the north. Joseph's first wife, Domitilde Bourcher, died on April 8, 1850, two weeks after giving birth to their daughter Domitilde Georgina in the log schoolhouse. Joseph then married Julie Fortier

(1831-97) on January 24, 1853 (Figures 20 and 21). Julie gave birth to ten children in the former log schoolhouse. The children's names were Joseph, who became a priest; Elizabeth Martin; Alfred; Marie/Mary Letourneau; Marie Julie, who became a nun; Isaac Gaspar; Dr. Philip Isaac; Sophie Eugenie; Marie Josephine; and Dr. Joseph Arthur Thomas Viateur.



Figures 20 and 21. Portraits of Joseph Lesage and Julie (Fortier) Lesage



Figure 22. Joseph Lesage's blacksmith tools are on display in the Letourneau Home/Museum.

On October 11, 1870, Domitilde Lesage (1850-1928), Joseph's oldest daughter, married Canadian-born Charles Henry Byron/Biron (1846-1912). In 1871, Domitilde and Charles were driven from their Chicago home by the Great Fire. Their fire-fused dinnerware are on display in the Letourneau Home/Museum. Domitilde's father and stepmother (Joseph and Julie), invited the Chicago Fire refugee couple to live in the former log schoolhouse. The Byron/Biron family grew to ten children: Marie Josephine, Eugenie (who became Sister Mary Melanie), Arthur, Joseph, Juliette Richer, Joseph Hermenegilde, Joseph George "Foxy", Marie Anne Corine (who became Sister Imelda de Jesus), and Joseph Eugenie. CharlesBryron/Biron was appointed village postmaster on June 20, 1892. He ran the post office and a small grocery store out of the home. The address at the time was 93 Main Street, but was later changed to 493 S. Main Street, Bourbonnais



Figure 23. Charles Byron/Biron's Civil War bayonet is on display in the Letourneau Home/Museum.

Mary Lasage (1859-1934), daughter of Joseph and his second wife Julie, was born in the log schoolhouse. She later married Phillip Letourneau (1860-1932), son of George and Elodie Letourneau (Figures 24 and 25).



Figure 24. Mary Lesage Letourneau, ca. 1920.



Figure 25. Male members of the Letourneau family were photographed in 1887. Left to right: George A. Letourneau Jr., Robert, Oswold, George R. Letourneau Sr., Arthur, Philip, and grandson Albert—lying down (son of George A. and Lucy LeVasseur—Noel and Ruth LeVasseur's daughter).

By 1920, Alphonse "Mike" Marcotte (1888-1953), a painter, purchased the home. For a few years he lived there with his three brothers: Eli (1885-1930), Philip (1890-1957), and Ralph Sr. (1897-1969)—see Figure 26. Alphonse married the widow Clara (Benoit) Cyrier on September 21, 1922. They lived in the house with Clara's two daughters from her previous marriage, Dorothy and Marguerite. Alphonse and Clara soon had a daughter of their own, Anna Maria (b. July 24, 1923).



Figure 26. Ralph and Rosella (Mercier) Marcotte Sr. wedding photograph on September 5. 1921.

A headline in the October 4, 1946 edition of the *Kankakee Daily Journal* announced: "Newlyweds Find Home in Old School House." The newlyweds were Richard (1926-69) and Mary Ann (Lambert) Rivard (1927-2012)—see Figure 27. The article stated that

... the couple decided they would remodel the old log home which has been in possession of the bride's father [Oscar Lambert] for several years. . . Originally constructed out of hand-split, rough logs, the little house which stands at 88 Main Street. . .was covered with frame siding several years ago and from the outside it is hard to realize that the house is constructed of logs.. . Inside, however, the large log beams are clearly visible near the ceiling . . . Charles W. Murphy, Kankakee electrical contractor who equipped the place with electrical wiring, found remnants of old candle holders in the house. These are believed to be many years old . . . The original structure consisted of only one story but during the years two rooms were added upstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Rivard are remodeling the downstairs part of the home into a living room, dinette, kitchen and bathroom and plan to use the upstairs rooms as bed rooms . . . The logs in the house are held together by wooden pegs as nails were scarce in the days when it was erected. The rooms have been entirely redecorated, modern fixtures have been installed and the newly married couple consider themselves lucky in being able to live in such an attractive looking home in these days of an acute housing shortage—despite the age of the structure (*Kankakee Daily Journal*, October 4, 1946).

Richard Rivard, a salesman, remarked about the remodeling: "The carpenters nearly gave up the ghost trying to saw through the logs. It took them one full day to cut through an archway to the kitchen" (Johnson, *Grand Prairie Chronicle* Facebook post May 11, 2021). Figures 5 and 6 show the home appearance while the Rivards lived there.



Figures 27 and 28. The newlyweds Dick and Mary Ann (Lambert) Rivard. They raised 10 children in the schoolhouse: (back row l-r) Fred, Chuck, Joe, Jim and Tim (twins), and Chris; (front row l-r) Julie and Jenny (twins), Maureen, and Nancy.

In 1970, Ralph "Red" Marcotte Jr. (1931-2011) and his wife Mary (1932-2019) purchased the home from Mary Ann (Lambert) Rivard. Red and Mary rented their home from 1971-74 to Nuns of the Congregation of Notre Dame: Sisters Theresa Galvin, Jeanette Cote, Marilyn Doucette, Madeline LaMarre, Pauline Lerch, Dianne Marinelli, Helen Kavanaugh, Anne Marie Levangie, Barbara Topazio, Patricia McCarthy, Jaculyn Hanrahan, and Mary Ann Hedda. From 1974 to 1997, Red and Mary lived and raised their nine children—see Figure 29. By 1997, it was just "Red", Mary, their oldest daughter Denise, with her daughter Anna, living in the former log schoolhouse. That year, the four family members moved to Kristina Drive. From August 1997 to October 1998, "Red" and Mary's son Andre and his wife Melissa, with their two boys, rented the home. After they moved out, other renters lived in the home until 2010, when it was sold to the village.



Figure 29. Marcotte family photograph on "Red" and Mary's 50th Wedding Anniversary (January 5, 2002): (back row (l-r) Joel, Andre, Phillip, Mary, Red, Denise, and Jacques; (front row sitting l-r) Pierre, Annette, Michelle, and Jon

After "Red's" death, Mary retained ownership until 2010 when the Village of Bourbonnais purchased the Marcotte Home when it had fallen into disrepair. As Mary Marcotte was aware of the schoolhouse's historical significance, she sought help from Mayor Paul Schore to help preserve the structure. The home was demolished in December 2011. The logs of the former schoolhouse were surgically removed by historic preservationist Tim Kilby of Defiance, Missouri and Piggush-Simoneau Inc. of Bourbonnais. Kilby stated about 60% of the original structure remained. The logs were stored in a facility under the village water tower. The original logs were hand-split, rough, square and held together with wooden pegs. The original 1837 logs can be seen in the Figure 30 photograph taken in October 2022 during the restoration. The dark colored logs in Figure 30 are the original 1837 logs whereas the light colored logs are supplemental logs.



Figure 30.

In February 2012, the Village of Bourbonnais began seeking money to pay for the reconstruction, restoration, landscaping, signage, and maintenance of the log school house. The restoration would be on the Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve, west of the Letourneau Home/Museum. On June 1, 2017, the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society (BGHS) membership approved the first *Fleur-de-Lis* Celebration Dinner for November 3, 2017, to raise funds for the restoration and publicize its presence in the community. The words "celebration dinner" were encouraged by BGHS member Lynn Ahlden who served on a BGHS subcommittee with Dr. Charles Balesi, Wal Schuller, and Dr. Jim Paul. The honorable Frederic Chole (French Deputy Consul General) spoke after the dinner, and Vic Johnson was presented the first *Fleur-de-Lis* Award of Excellence by his daughter Laurel Soper (BGHS past president) (Figures 31 and 32).





Figures 31 and 32.

The BGHS and Village of Bourbonnais Log Schoolhouse Steering Committee was formed on April 4, 2018 to continue fundraising efforts for restoring the log schoolhouse. On January 20, 2022, this committee was renamed the BGHS Log Schoolhouse Advisory Committee to oversee the log schoolhouse as a "permanent exhibit" of the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society. See Figures 33 and 34 for the advisory committee members.





Figures 33 and 34. At left, Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society members accept a donation from Olivet Nazarene University: (l-r) Laurie Cyr, Cindy McBarnes, Steve Monts, Mayor Paul Schore, Steve Depasquale, Jim Paul, Norm Strasma, and Frank Koehler. At right, advisory committee members pose after moving furniture into the restored log schoolhouse on November 14, 2022: (l-r) Jim Paul, Ken Ponton, Cindy McBarnes, Laurie Cyr, Charles Balesi, Gary Seiner, Mayor Paul Schore, Max Michels, and Steve Monts.

A major fundraising boost came on August 2, 2019 when the BGHS membership approved an allocation of \$18,224 to the log schoolhouse from a bequest of Frances Cooper Wertz (1915-2018), seen in Figure 35. Mrs. Wertz was a retired teacher in the Kankakee School District.



Figure 35. Frances Cooper Wertz

At the September 17, 2021 Fleur-de-Lis Celebration Dinner, Lisa Kahn, Co-Chair of the French Heritage Society (Chicago-Midwest Chapter) announced an award grant of \$16,000 to restore the log schoolhouse. She also confirmed that it will become an official "French Heritage Corridor Site"—see Figure 36. On October 18, 2021, the Bourbonnais Village Board approved a bid of \$260,545 from PSI General Contractors of Kankakee to begin the restoration project. The ground was broken on November 2, 2021, and foundation work began. After supplemental logs were acquired, the reconstruction continued, and an inauguration/dedication of the log schoolhouse was held on November 15, 2022 at 2:00 pm. The Village of Bourbonnais contributed substantial funding for this project through direct funding and raised/grant funds. Mayor Paul Schore worked feverishly to ensure that the schoolhouse reconstruction was completed.



Figures 36. Lisa Kahn, Co-Chair of the Chicago-Midwest Chapter of the French Heritage Society, presented the "French Heritage Corridor Site" plaque at the log schoolhouse's grand opening on November 15, 2022.

On March 6, 2023, the Country School Association of America approved the log schoolhouse's entry as a "landmark schoolhouse" into the National Schoolhouse Register. Later that year on August 8, 2023, the Kankakee County Board approved the historic landmark nomination for Bourbonnais Grove's first log schoolhouse. The Village of Bourbonnais had already approved the log schoolhouse as a village historic landmark on June 17, 2023. The

presentation of the plaque dedicating the log schoolhouse as a county historic landmark took place on October 17, 2023 before the annual *Fleur-de-Lis* Celebration Dinner that evening—see figure 37.



Figure 37. Kankakee County Historic Preservation Commissioners Jane Johnston and Catherine Langlois presented the BGHS with the log schoolhouse historic landmark plaque. (L-R): Jeff Jarvis, Catherine Langlois, Norm Strasma, Gary Seiner, Lynn Ahlden, Steve Liehr, Daron Kinzinger, Judy Smead, Penelope Stickney, Phil Stickney, Ellen Liehr, Steve Monts, Mayor Paul Schore, and Ken Ponton. On bench are Jane Johnson, me, and Laurie Cyr.

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Dedication of Log Schoolhouse—November 15, 2022 Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society website: www.bourbonnaishistory.org Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society Board Members

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