

Historical Background and Self-Guided Tour of Letourneau Home/Museum and Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve Gardens



The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society has its headquarters in the George R. Letourneau Home Museum on the Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve. French-Canadian pioneer settlers George Letourneau (1831-1906) and his wife Elodie (Langlois) Letourneau (1834-87) lived in this 2300 square foot home from 1854-83 and raised their eleven children and one grandson there. Letourneau acquired what he called a “pioneer structure” in 1854 when it was a farm house with three acres. Earlier, it had served as a post office and general store from 1837-40, and its foundation may have been over the home of Francois Bourbonnais, Sr. which was built 1832. This home is the oldest structure in Kankakee County. By the mid-1860s, the Letourneaus enlarged and remodeled the home in Greek Revival style to accommodate their growing family. When the Letourneaus moved to Kankakee in 1883, the farm had grown to 200 acres. The two-acre Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve—Village of Bourbonnais property where the house sits today at 698 Stratford Drive East in Bourbonnais, IL—was probably part of this 200 acre farm. The home was continuously lived in until 1985, just a year before it was moved to this location.

George Letourneau came to Bourbonnais Grove from Quebec Province, Canada, at the age of sixteen. After returning from two years in California in 1852, he and Elodie were married. He became a prominent businessman in the area and held many political offices. These political offices and activities included: 1) one of the organizers of Kankakee County in 1853; 2) one of the founders of the Republican Party of Kankakee County in 1856; 3) Bourbonnais Township Supervisor in 1856, 1867, and 1876; 4) alternate delegate at the first Republican State Convention in Bloomington, IL in 1856 where Abraham Lincoln delivered his “Lost Speech”—the precedent for his “House Divided” speech two years later; 5) Kankakee County Coroner (1860-63), running for office on the same 1860 ballot as Abraham Lincoln; 6) Circuit Clerk of Kankakee County (1872-76); 7) first Mayor of Bourbonnais (1875-76); 8) Kankakee County Sheriff (1882-86); 9) Kankakee County Treasurer (1886-90); 10) Mayor of Kankakee (1891-92); 11) two-term State Senator of the 16th Senatorial District of Illinois (1892-96); and 12) Deputy County Treasurer (1896-1906). Letourneau also co-authored with William Kanaga the *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of Kankakee County*, Volume II, in 1906.

Adrien M. Richard (1908-96) became the first president of the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society in 1975. He was an accountant by trade, but local historian and author by avocation, The arboretum, on the preserve that was named after him, was established in 1988 after the Letourneau Home’s relocation and restoration. The arboretum’s trees, shrubs, and perennials were chosen for their native qualities to the area. In 2008, the gardens underwent a thorough renovation spearheaded by the BGHS members, master gardeners from the University of Illinois extension, and Camp OSH volunteers. The gardens were featured on the June 17, 2011 Kankakee Kultivators’ Garden Tour.

Self-Guided Tour of the Letourneau Home Museum and Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve Gardens

1. After reading the Historical Background above, begin your tour in the **Parlor/Meeting Room**. Two large parlors in this home indicate the political, economic, and social stature of George Letourneau. This **Parlor/Meeting Room** is where the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society holds its monthly meetings. Photographs of the past presidents of the society are on the north wall. Please view the large display dedicated to Bourbonnais Grove's French-Canadian heritage, the bricks from Noel LeVasseur's home, the photographs that depict the moving of the Letourneau Home on June 20, 1986 (from 261 N. Main Street to 698 Stratford Drive East in Bourbonnais), and other artifacts.
2. Continue to the **Dining Room** and appreciate the Lincoln era chinaware and the hand sawed and planed walnut four drawer chiffonier made by Alexander LaMontagne around 1850, and the cradle.
3. Proceed to the **Kitchen** with its adjacent **Pantry**. Look out the window to see the herb-filled *Jardin aux Potages* (*Kitchen Garden*). In the room by the back porch, notice the artifacts and corn cob "fuel" for the stove.
4. Walk back through the **Dining Room**. The display case on the east wall contains noteworthy items used by George and Elodie Letourneau. There is also a map of Kankakee County historic sites and a poster of the Bourbonnais Grove Log School House (1837-48).
5. Turn into the **Formal Parlor** with its grand furnishings, needlework (by a thirteen-year-old), and organ. On the west wall, you can gaze on Elodie and George Letourneau's photographs. Notice on the opposite wall the photographs of their daughters, sons, and grandson. Elodie is absent because the family photographs were taken at the time of her death on January 19, 1887.
6. Continue to the **Front Hall** with the photograph and signature of George R. Letourneau on the east wall.
7. Climb the **Stairs** but watch your head!
8. Enter the **Upstairs Sitting Parlor**. This is where the children and adults gathered to play games and visit before going to bed. They were also "out of the way" if father had a meeting downstairs.
9. There are **Six Bedrooms** in this house—five here for the family (the south small bedroom may have been used as a nursery or storage) and one with a separate stairway to the south which was used by the servants who helped care for the children, house, and meal preparation. Notice the chamber pots in the bedrooms. One bedroom to the north has a display of military uniforms dating back to World War I (1914-18). The bedroom with the mannequins in fashions of yesteryear (the olive-green wedding dress was hand sewn) has the west wall open to reveal the original hand hewn wood stud work as well as wood lath (base to hold plaster). Please note that the upper wood lath, which is older, was split by ax while the bottom lath is a more modern uniform version.
10. Go back down the stairs and enter the **Sitting Room**, just to the right of the door. Here you can see George Letourneau's rocking chair and books along with other artifacts.
11. **Walk out the front door, and down the front steps**. Turn around to appreciate the Greek Revival style of the front entrance: support columns that are representative of a Greek temple, narrow windows around the door, and decorative pilasters (rectangular supports that resemble flat columns) which project only slightly from the wall.
12. You are in the **Front Entrance Boardwalk Garden** with its geraniums, mums, sedum, dianthus, pink cone flowers, black eyed Susans, wild petunias, blue salvia, daylilies, and calendula 'pink surprise'—an heirloom annual—on both sides of the boardwalk. Shrubbery around the house (barberry, spirea, lilacs, and rhododendron) offers a warm welcome to visitors.

13. Walk down the cement sidewalk to the northwest boardwalk. A smoke tree is on the right and a hedge maple on the left. As one looks south, the **Daylily Gardens** spread on the right and the Adrien M. Richard Preserve raised **Sign Garden** is on the left. The **Sign Garden** includes boxwoods and daylilies. The white oak trees throughout the gardens are representative of the native white oaks that were on or near the Letourneau Home in its original location at 261 North Main Street in Bourbonnais. *Please read all the donation/memorial signs that appear on black metal throughout the gardens.*
14. Stroll under the **Black Spruce Tree Canopy Garden** while continuing south on the boardwalk. Crab apple trees with donated antique farm implements including an antique red pump are to the left of the canopy, and ground cover lies under the black spruce trees (ajuga, Japanese spurge, and snow on the mountain). In the center of the southern daylily bed is a red oak. To the right of this red oak is a red maple. Looking east at the Letourneau Home, one can observe another characteristic of the Greek Revival style: pediments (low-pitched triangular gables) above the windows.
15. Just to the right (west) of the Japanese spurge under the black spruce tree, is the boardwalk that leads to the 1837 log schoolhouse. Please complete this tour before going to the log schoolhouse because it has a separate self-guided tour.
16. Just before the corner of the boardwalk on the east side (left of boardwalk) is a small **Peony Garden**. The small red peony nearest the boardwalk corner was donated by Anne Richard, wife of Adrien Richard. This peony was moved from her childhood farm home in St. George to her home in Bourbonnais before it was transplanted here in 2009. The three Easter lilies are also from Mrs. Richard's Bourbonnais home. A large sugar maple shades the peony garden. Just to the southwest is a linden tree.
17. Turn east at the southwest corner of the boardwalk, and enter the newly constructed **Grape Arbor** with red climbing 'blaze' roses and Himrod white seedless grape vines. The grape arbor was constructed by Ken Ponton on May 28, 2011. The arbor, grapes, and roses were donated by Theresa and Vic Johnson in memory of the Dupuis and Bouchard families.
18. South of the grape arbor is the **Bird Bath Garden**. The "lily" bird bath is shaded by crab apple trees, smoke tree, and surrounded by five Annabelle hydrangeas. Just behind the smoke tree on the left is a slice of a two-hundred year old oak tree that was removed from the Perry Farm in 1990. It was one of the two large oaks that once gave the name Twin Oaks to what is now known as the Perry Farm. Continuing to walk south along the perimeter of the Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve, one can view the large white ash and 'emerald green' arborvitae with the ginko biloba or maiden hair tree growing in the arborvitae and a catalpa tree at the southern end. The ginko biloba is regarded as a living fossil because its species dates back to 270 million years ago. Please look closely at its fossil-like leaves.
19. Continue to the east of the outhouse to the **Lamb's Ear and Iris Garden** with the crumbled wagon as a centerpiece. This garden is shaded by a shadblow serviceberry and white oak tree in the front along with a large Russian olive and yellowwood tree in the rear—southeast of the outhouse.
20. There are two more gardens in the back yard: the **Jardin aux Potages (Kitchen or Herb Garden)** and the **Native Plant Garden**. There is a sign east of the **Jardin aux Potages** which indicates where specific herbs are located as well as an introduction to the garden. The **Native Plant Garden** sign (on the south side of the house with a trellis in the back) identifies the native plants. Stand south of the **Jardin aux Potages** to view another characteristic of the home's Greek Revival style: ornate vertical heavy cornices (uppermost section of moldings along the top of a wall or just below the roof) on the southeast and southwest corners of the house.
21. To the right or east of the **Native Plant Garden** is a row of holly. Wild petunias are on the side and end of the **Holly Garden**. Just to the southeast of the holly under the pine tree are five pink 'invicebelle spirit' hydrangeas.

22. To the east is the **Fragrant Sumac Garden** which is shaded by the crab apple tree, and then the **Hessi Cotoneaster Garden**. This deciduous shrub has pinkish white flowers and then small bright red fruit. Its dark green foliage turns burgundy in the fall. The row of hessi cotoneaster connects the fragrant sumacs with the **River Birch Garden** to the north. The river birch tree shades American cranberry bushes and periwinkle.
23. The **Two Red Maples Garden** on the northeast side and corner of the property includes sweet woodruff ground cover, American cranberry bushes, feather reed grass, creeping Jenny, St. John's wort, heirloom annuals, fragrant sumac, spirea, and irises (*fleur-de-lis*) in addition to the two red maple trees.

This is the end of your self-guided tour of the Letourneau Home Museum and Adrien M. Richard Heritage Preserve gardens. Please help the Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society promote the Letourneau Home/Museum and gardens. This property is owned by the Village of Bourbonnais—so it is our community property to enjoy. If the Letourneau Home/Museum is closed, you may still enjoy the gardens for a stroll, picnic, and background for your special occasion photographs.