

LIFE ON THE OHIO
Switzerland County Historical Society
By Virginia Reeves

THE FERRY HOUSE

Ferryboats played a very predominant role in the development of Switzerland County. They operated in Patriot, Florence, Markland, Vevay, and Lamb. This article will focus on the historic Ferry House that was located in Vevay. The individual ferryboats and their operators will be covered in future articles.

John Francis Dufour built the Ferry House in 1811. Located on the banks of the Ohio River at Vevay, Indiana it was the residence for the operation of the Ohio River ferry. Mr. Dufour was one of the five founding brothers who laid out the town of Vevay. John Francis and the Dufour brothers moved to Vevay from Jessamine County, Kentucky with the hopes of starting an extensive vineyard. The Dufours had been known for their wine while living in Switzerland.

The ferry house was under construction when the first steamboat passed down the river. There was much excitement as the Swiss colonists gathered on the foundation of the ferry house to get a better view of the steamboat, the NEW ORLEANS.

The Ferry House was built of fieldstone and the architecture was somewhat suggestive of the Old French Quarter of New Orleans. It was situated on a high knoll above the ferryboat landing and quite picturesque with its ivy-covered gables, orchards, beautiful shrubbery and lovely flower gardens. John Francis and his wife lived in a log house on Market Street while the Ferry House was under construction.

The Ferry House had a distinctive Swiss architectural feature: There was a long verandah on the river side, upstairs and down; the open porch was contained under a continuous roof, rather than being added to the structure. The lower porch had a brick floor with an adjoining terrace paved with stones. The two porches had wooden posts and the upper porch was enclosed with a wooden railing. A trap door on the upper porch floor, reached by an outside stair, was to be used for Indian attacks. However, this was not needed as the Indians were friends of the Dufours. The walls of the house were three feet thick and the doors heavy and wide. There was an alleyway, also called a dogtrot, between the main part of the building and the kitchen. The Dufours had been slave owners in the South and built the kitchen across from the main house, as was the custom in Kentucky and North Carolina. Later the Grahams enclosed the kitchen area and walkway converting it into a dining room, making the Ferry House a single unit. The first floor contained a parlor, a living room, and kitchen. Four bedrooms comprised the second floor plan. Both floors had brick fireplaces, including the kitchen hearth. The third floor was reached by steep, narrow cupboard like attic stairs and had tiny bedrooms. The roof was tin.

Cooking for the ferry house took place on a large open fireplace. Cook stoves were not invented until the time of the Civil War and were a rarity in most homes until after 1880. Most foods were raised by the owner or wild meats used. Commercial canning did not take place until the end of the century. Even recipes were not largely available. Women used a pinch of this and a chunk of butter the size of a walnut. Sugar was scarce as well, so sorghum was used as a sweetener. The

icebox provided refrigeration. Corn meal was used for the common bread, ground at Joshua Smithson's mill, just across the Ohio River.

John Francis Dufour opened a tourist inn at the Ferry House in 1833, perhaps indicating that ferry and packet traffic had increased substantially to necessitate accommodation of overnight guests. He had an advertisement in the Switzerland Monitor, February 23, 1833, as follows:

"ENTERTAINMENT AT THE FERRY HOUSE IN VEVAY"

"The subscriber respectfully informs his friends and the public generally that he keeps private entertainment for the accommodation of travelers at the above named house, situated on the bank of the river near the landing. Steamboat travelers, on their landing, may get admittance at any time of the night, and those waiting for the boat to go either up or down, will be assisted in getting aboard. His charge will be reasonable.

John F. Dufour"

One traveler, a French emigre guest, despondent over lack of employment and feeling hopeless about bringing his family from Europe, hanged himself there on the third floor in a small bedroom. From then on, the house was said to be haunted.

John and Polly Dufour built another house in Vevay and moved to it. Their son, Oliver, brought his bride, Amanda Ruter, to live in the Ferry House in 1842, and there they lived for several years.

In 1848, Timothy Ward Graham bought the ferry house and the ferry business. Only two families and their heirs, the Dufours and the Grahams, have owned the Ferry House. Timothy Graham, son of Samuel Graham married Martha Turner on November 7, 1833. They first lived in Ohio County, Indiana before moving to Ghent, Kentucky. After purchasing the ferry business, they moved into the Ferry House with their children, Robert T. Graham, born October 21, 1834; William Graham, born June 28, 1838; George Graham, born August 11, 1840; Timothy Walton Graham, born November 11, 1842; Mary Jane Graham, born April 11, 1845; and the baby, Munce Zacariah Graham, born October 19, 1847. The Grahams retained their house in Ghent because of Kentucky laws governing the operation of ferries from the Kentucky side of the river.

Robert T. Graham assisted his father in the ferry business and two years before his father's death, he married Martha Lester at Jacksonville, Indiana on June 4, 1866. Eight children blessed their marriage two of whom died in infancy: Sarah, Robert, Charles, Eva, a twin brother Everett, Clara, Capt. John L. Graham, and Juniata.

Capt. Bob passed away at the age of 68 years on April 25, 1903. The services were held at the Ferry House by the Rev. Yager of the Ghent Christian Church and by both lodges. People from both sides of the river came and it was thought to be the largest crowd ever seen in Vevay at a funeral.

In 1883 and 1884, there were terrible floods on the Ohio River and the Ferry House suffered heavy damage. Floods damaged the Ferry House many times after that. The flood in 1933 did severe damage: Almost every window pane on the first floor was broken, floors, partitions and ceilings were torn loose in places, and the wall in one room was knocked out. Repairs have been estimated from \$500 to \$1,000.

In 1937 the great flood hit the Ohio Valley. The lockmaster of old Dam # 39 called the Ferry House each day to report an expected rise

when a flood was expected. This way the Grahams knew if it would be safe to go to bed at night. One night the lockmaster told them they would be okay for the night. When they awoke the next morning, everything on the first floor was floating. Things had to be moved to the second floor immediately. This was not enough as the water kept rising until the house was totally submerged. Only the top of the chimney could be seen when the water was rushing by.

This time the Ferry House was damaged beyond repair. It stood empty until it was razed in 1963.

Information for this article was obtained from numerous sources including newspapers from Vevay and Madison. To learn more about the Ferry House and the many ferryboats that served Switzerland County visit the new "Life on the Ohio" museum when it opens in April. In addition to photos and documents, you will see the actual pilot wheel from the Martha A. Graham ferry and other ferryboat artifacts.