Historic American Buildings Survey

The O’Pry/Elam House, DeSoto Parish Louisiana

HABS No. (DRAFT)

Location: The O’Pry/Elam house at Old Pleasant Hill is located adjacent to LA State Highway 175, De Soto Parish Louisiana, in the southeast corner of the northwest corner of Section 17, Township 10 North Range 11 West. The house is positioned on a parcel of land 67.64 acres in size. The property is a segment of a larger holding of the Poimboeuf Realty Company, Incorporated. The associated 67 acres of the property is bounded on the north by the northern boundary of Section 17, south by LA Highway 175, east by a 69.2 acre parcel of land of like ownership and west by parcels of land owned by Sidney K. Herold and Tina Anderson. The UTM coordinates for the location of the structure are: N 0450818.98; E 3524517.59.

Present Owner: Poimboeuf Realty Company, Incorporated.

Present Occupants: None.

Significance: The O’Pry/Elam house at Old Pleasant Hill is the last extant in situ structure of the original location of the town of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana. The village of Pleasant Hill moved to its present location in Sabine Parish, a distance of about three miles, ca. 1880 with the coming of the Texas and Pacific Railroad which ran just southeast of the original town site. The house is situated within the bounds of the historic American Civil War battle of Pleasant Hill (April 9, 1864), a decisive battle fought during the nationally significant Red River Campaign and oral tradition indicates the home was used as a field hospital following the battle. Architecturally, the structure represents an atypical Louisiana dogtrot house. It is a framed (as opposed to the more typical log construction), four room (as opposed to the more typical two room) dogtrot featuring an interior chimney (as opposed to the much more common exterior chimney) and historically featured a

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1 Plat Map, Section 17, Township 10 North, Range 11 West. De Soto Parish (LA) Assessor’s Office Records.

2 This statement is presented following extensive reviews of numerous historic maps, primary documents, contemporary studies and publications, surveys and fieldwork.

3 Amos J Barron, *A History of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana: Featuring the Battle of Pleasant Hill, April the 9th, 1864, as Told by a Seventeen Year Old Girl. She Was There.* (Natchez, MS: by the author, 1968), 13.
large open gable front porch rather uncommon to the typical dogtrot style.4

**Part 1. Historical Information**

A. Physical History:

1. Date of Erection: Between 1860-1867.5


3. Original and Subsequent Owners, Uses: The original land patent for the greater property was granted to John Jordan on July 27, 1847.6 The house was first historically used as a residence within the original community of Pleasant Hill. The home is positioned on historic Lot 12 in the town plat of Pleasant Hill. Lot 12 was bounded on the south by Academy Street, on the east by 5th Street and west by 6th Street. The bordering lots for the home were Lot 11 to the east, Lot 15 to the south and Lot 13 to the west.7 Conveyance records indicate the original occupants of the residence were likely the O’Pry family.8 Many locals and descendants of historic owners of the home believe the structure was used as a temporary field hospital following the April 9, 1864 Civil War Battle of Pleasant Hill. The home served as the center of a large operation of agricultural enterprise following the relocation of the town in the 1880s.9 It remained in continued rural agricultural use until its abandonment sometime in the mid

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5 This date of erection is based on: conveyance records, analysis of the historic fabric of the structure, the documented availability of milled lumber in Pleasant Hill, Louisiana prior to the American Civil War, the architectural style of the structure, gathered secondary publications, research and oral histories and DeSoto Parish Census information.


8 De Soto Parish Courthouse, Conveyance Record Book 1, Page 605. Following this record the Lot is repeatedly referred to as the O’Pry “lot,” “house,” or “place.”

20th century. The house is currently maintained by its owners, but remains vacant.

4. **Builder: John B. Skinner**

5. **Original plans and Construction:** The structure was built in a frame timbering construction common to early vernacular architecture of upper Louisiana. It was originally constructed with a central passage or breezeway separating two sets of adjacent rooms, for a total of four enclosed living spaces, or “pens.” The pens on each side were connected by one enclosed passageway adjacent to, but separate from the central breezeway. Originally, each wing of the structure included an enclosed brick chimney positioned centrally along the shared wall of each of the sets of rooms. This construction method allowed for a working fireplace in each of the four living spaces. Because the chimneys were centrally located, this also suggests the house was originally constructed to include all four rooms and not only two living spaces, as is most common with Louisiana dogtrot homes. In the 19th century, the front porch was featured as a large gable extension perpendicular to the main living spaces of the home. This style, unusual to most known dogtrots, might have been a vernacular effort to either “dress up” the home, or to mimic the Greek Revival styles popular with designed residences of the time when the home was constructed. The layout of the original back gallery area of the structure remains unclear due to a lack of surviving photographic or historic evidence.

6. **Alterations and Additions:** The house has undergone numerous alterations throughout its existence. The front porch in particular has undergone at least three known changes from the earliest known existing photograph of the structure. The 19th century photograph features a large gable front porch. Architectural evidence remains suggesting the former locations of

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10 De Soto Parish Conveyance Record Book L Page 350. Written within the text of the conveyance record is “the lot upon which I [James O’Pry] now reside, built upon by J. B. Skinner.” According to the 1850 De Soto Parish Census, John Skinner was a 22 year old Overseer living within two households distance of W.D. Atkins, whose wife Elizabeth would later acquire the property in 1872. Skinner disappears from the Census in 1860 but later purchases a different lot in the village of Pleasant Hill in May of 1870.

11 Lane, *Architecture of the Old South*, 81-82. Unlike many surviving extant Louisiana dogtrot homes, no evidence exists to suggest the home was originally built of hewn logs or employed in use of log construction.


13 ca. 1895 Photograph, Courtesy Mr. Gene Poinboeuf. Interestingly, Poesch and Bacot in, *Louisiana Buildings 1720-1940*, make note of two other structures in De Soto Parish, the Allen House (ca. 1848) and the Scott House (ca. 1850?), as sharing elements of both the Greek Revival Style and the vernacular dogtrot home. Both homes are of framed, milled lumber construction.
the timbering for this porch in both the standing frame and sill underneath the house. Subsequent photographs, taken from both before and after 1960, additionally document two distinct porch styles. This evidence suggests the gable front porch was removed and considerably altered prior to 1930. While many of the boards have been replaced overtime, photographic evidence remains indicating the current configuration of the porch existed prior to 1968 and after the second known configuration of the porch ca. 1930. The same evidence indicates the passageway through the center of the home, the “dogtrot” itself, was enclosed after 1930 and before June 1968. During this period the exterior weatherboarding was also sheathed in rolled asphalt siding displaying a faux brown brick pattern. Remains of this siding may still be observed. Some time prior to ca. 1930, the eastern chimney was removed from the home. This was likely done to coincide with the conversion of the northwestern room of the home into a “modern” kitchen. Stamped manufacturing dates on two porcelain glazed iron sinks inside the structure suggest an installation after 1926. The 1930 photograph of the structure appears to feature only one chimney. The interior void left by the removal of the chimney was then utilized as new storage or pantry space connected to the kitchen. Dr. Poimboeuf removed the asphalt siding following the acquisition of the structure. This re-exposed the board and batten weatherboarding indicated in the 19th century photograph of the structure. Around this same time (ca. 1968) the dogtrot enclosure was removed as an early historic rehabilitation effort. Other minor alterations are extant including the addition of shutters to the windows where none are visible in any known historic images of the structure from any previous time period.

B. Historical Context:

The property on which the house resides was originally acquired by land patent from De Soto Parish by Mr. John Jordan on July 27, 1847. John Jordan (1812-1880) and family were original settlers to the area who came from a community known as Pleasant Valley in Dallas County, Alabama. Along with the families of the Childers’s, Rembert’s and others, the town of Pleasant Hill began to thrive throughout the 1850s into the time of the Civil War. The rural community boasted a fine church, boy’s college, post

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14 Upon closer examination of the 1930 photograph, it is evident the western chimney was drawn in with a ballpoint pen.


16 Margie and Gene Poimboeuf to Josephine E. Hayley, 9 August, 1968, courtesy of Mr. C.C. Hayley, Wichita Falls, Texas.

office, hotel, “beautiful” homes and several hundred inhabitants. The
house is positioned on the original Pleasant Hill town Lot 12, situated on
the northwestern edge of the town. Although no conveyance record has
been recovered that ties original ownership to the O’Pry family, the lot is
repeatedly referred to as the “O’Pry Lot” time and again in both 19th and
early 20th century conveyance records. Again no record has been
recovered that explicitly states when the family acquired the property, but
the O’Pry’s did sell the lot and house to Mr. David A. Blackshear in
1867. James (1821-1867) and Mary (1837-1909) O’Pry may be found in
the 1860 De Soto Parish Census and both are buried in Old Pleasant Hill
cemetery located about one- half mile east of the house. However,
neither James nor Mary is indicated as property owners in the 1860
census, indicating the O’Pry’s likely constructed the house between 1860
and 1867. Field surveys, careful study and comparison of historic and
contemporary maps of the town, as well as historic and contemporary
references for the battle history, indicate the home is located within the
bounds of the major Civil War Battle of Pleasant Hill fought on April 9,
1864. Each of these sources indicates the property where the dogtrot is
located was very near the center of the battlefield. However, assuming the
house was indeed extant at the time of battle, it was likely spared from
direct assault. The territory around the house was most likely occupied by
the soldiers of Union General William Dwight. These soldiers were
positioned mostly in front of the home and were largely spared from the
brunt of the Confederate assault; they were not forced to retreat from their
position until after the battle was finished. Oral tradition indicates the
home was used as a temporary field hospital following the battle. No
primary sources have thus far been located to either dispute or to verify
this claim. It is known by several primary accounts that many of the
structures of the town were indeed used as temporary hospitals following
the battle.

The house and property changed hands at least nine times within the years
1867 and 1907. Those families whom owned the house for the longest
stretches were the O’Pry’s, Musgrove’s and Elam’s in order. Upon legal
precedent, the property was known from at least as early as 1867 and until
1904 as the “O’Pry Lot,” or the “O’Pry Place,” even though it had passed

19 De Soto Parish Conveyance Record Book 1, Page 605; Heriot’s 1871 town plat.
20 De Soto Parish Conveyance Record Book L, Page 350.
21 Barron, A History of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana, 12.
22 Gary D. Joiner, Through the Howling Wilderness. (Knoxville: The University of
through some eight owners by 1904. To the Elam’s however, the home was known as the “Musgrove Place.”

Civil War veteran John Waddell Elam purchased the house in 1888 and began operating an extensive farming operation from the residence. The earliest known photographic image of the house was captured during the occupation of the home by Mrs. Lottie Elam ca. 1895, during a time when John and Lottie were separated. It is known that John Waddell Elam served as a scout for General Taylor’s Confederate Army during the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill. While all of the other original structures were either moved, abandoned and fell into neglect or otherwise disappeared, the O’Pry/Elam house at Old Pleasant Hill is the last remaining in situ structure from the original town site.

Part 2. Architectural Information

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The building is a vernacular, sill on pier, three bay, one story side-gable roofed structure. It is a rare surviving example of an early joined timber framed dogtrot style home featuring four main living spaces. The structures primary façade faces south. Both the front porch and rear gallery have been greatly modified from their original condition. The overall dimensions for the footprint of the house, excluding the front porch, is approximately 14 X 12 meters. The primary characteristic feature of the house, the central open breezeway or “dogtrot” runs through the length of the center of the home. Four exterior doors, one for each main living space, flank the open passageway. One remaining interior brick chimney is extant between the two east side

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24 De Soto Parish Conveyance Record Book # 2 Page 630 ; Oral History C. C. Hayley


26 Ibid; See Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction: Personal Experiences of the Late War* (1879), page 169. Confederate General Richard Taylor notes a Mr. J. T. Williams, the local sheriff, as scouting for his forces during the battle of Pleasant Hill. The 1860 De Soto Parish Census confirms William’s occupation as sheriff and indicates that John W. Elam served as a constable for the Parish prior to the war. As such Mr. J. T. Williams (Taylor’s scout) as sheriff would have essentially been young Elam’s boss. It bears to reason Elam would have accompanied Williams on these missions. Thus, the Elam/Hayley family tradition that John W. Elam served as a confederate scout during the Red River Campaign appears valid.


28 Another common name for this style home is “two pens and a passage.”
rooms of the home. The structure features board and batten weatherboarding and a deteriorating corrugated metal roof. Simple trim and decorative moldings may be found throughout the interior of the structure. Doorways and window trim typically feature a single plank sill surround.

2. Condition of Fabric: The structure is currently in poor to fair condition. It will remain structurally stable as long as the primary piers hold up. It is currently not occupied and unable to be locked completely. Several of the historic brick piers supporting the structure are failing or have already failed. Some have been replaced with various materials including cast cement blocks, modern brick, wood beams and even tree stumps. Two floor joists have badly rotted in around their joint. The plank flooring throughout the home is typically sound with a few weak places inside the interior of the home; the flooring is especially weak around the chimney bases where there is apparent water damage. The weatherboarding of the structure appears at least original to the 19th century if not to the time of the homes initial construction. Some boards have been replaced, a few are broken or missing, exposing in places the interior framing system of the structure. The interior walls are typically sound. Non-historic wooden shutters protect most of the windows. The corrugated metal roof leaks in places, mostly around the chimney, and is rusting and corroding but was sound enough to mostly survive the recent hurricanes and storms that have plagued the state of Louisiana and local area.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions: The main structure of the building is approximately 12 X 12 meters excluding the front porch and rear gallery. The front porch (south facade) dimensions are approximately 9.9 X 2.2 meters roughly centered on the breezeway. The rear gallery (north facade) dimensions are approximately 14.2 X 2.2 meters and runs the length of the rear of the home.

2. Foundations: The foundation is most accessible from the north, east and south facades. The house rests on mostly brick, wooden and cast cement piers. The earliest piers are constructed with handmade low temperature fired brick that is very similar in size, shape, color and texture to many of the brick remnants and in situ cisterns found across the historic town of Pleasant Hill landscape. Interestingly, several of these early brick piers appear either scorched from a past fire event, or coated heavily in an unidentified black biological growth. The floor sills are significant milled beams, joined in each corner with simple lap joint notching. They appear circular sawn. The floor joists are narrower milled timbers, which also

29 The circular saw was first introduced to the U.S. early in the 19th century but did not achieve popularity until the middle to later portion of the century. Not coincidentally, this is the
appear circular sawn. The joists meet the sills and each other with mortise and tenon joints. Both methods of joining beams were contemporary for north Louisiana buildings dating from the 1830s to the 1880s. This method was gradually abandoned with the widespread use of balloon framing.\textsuperscript{30} The original brick piers appear to be made from handmade brick, while more contemporary replacements are the typical orange/red modern cast bricks with three cylindrical interior cavities contemporary to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Several piers have been replaced entirely by new material, including cast cement trapezoidal piers common to mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century construction and repair techniques. More vernacular repairs include the use of wooden posts, stacked board fragments, stacked (and un-mortared) bricks and a few sawn tree trunks, one of which is badly decayed.

3. Walls: The exterior walls are sheathed in board-and-batten style weatherboarding. The same style sheathing appears extant in the known 19\textsuperscript{th} century photograph of the structure. Additional unrelated photographic evidence indicates these construction materials were available at least as early as the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{31} 19\textsuperscript{th} century cut nails may be seen alternately protruding loosely from these timbers or securing their boards faithfully. 20\textsuperscript{th} century wire nails are more prevalent throughout the boards, however these are typically repairs for lost or decayed cut nails and likely also helped secure the asphalt shingle siding seen extant in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century photographs of the structure. The most visible decorative feature of the exterior walls, evident in both historic photographs and contemporary appearance, is the use of a multiple plank cornice giving the false impression of more pronounced eaves.

4. Structural system, Framing: The timber framing system of the home is, judging by visible gaps in the weatherboarding and more readily visible indications underneath and inside the attic space of the home, typical of pre-balloon framing techniques. Round and square pegs may be seen joining the timber frames from inside the attic and underneath the home.

\textsuperscript{30} Lane, \textit{Architecture of the Old South}, 81-82; Martin, \textit{Folk and Styled Architecture in North Louisiana}, 17.

\textsuperscript{31} For just a few examples see Davis, William C., ed. \textit{The Embattled Confederacy: The Image of War 1861-1865}. 10.
Few joints are currently visible through the weatherboarding, however substantial vertical post timbers may be viewed through exterior and interior board gaps. In one visible instance a vertical post has been clearly joined to a sill with a mortise and tenon joint. Diagonal downbrace timbers support the corner posts of the structure.

5. Stairways: There are no exterior stairs, however the front and rear facades each have a set of steps leading from ground level and landing on the front porch and rear gallery of the home. Extending off the front porch are masonry steps constructed from a variety of historic and contemporary bricks. These steps are not evident in any known historic photograph of the structure. Extending from the rear porch is a set of framed wooden steps. These steps are not constructed from historic fabric.

6. Chimneys: One remaining brick chimney of the original two is extant between the east rooms of the home. The peek of the chimney protrudes approximately one meter from the peek of the gabled roof. The chimney features a simple decorative crown of bricks; many of these bricks are missing on the west façade of the chimney peek. In at least one visible instance, a fallen chimney brick still rests on the roof of the home itself.

7. Openings:

   a. Doorways and Doors: The external doorways of the home are not immediately visible from any of the four facades of the house. Four external doorways, one for each living area or “pen,” line the central breezeway at roughly regular distances with close but varying opening widths. The sill surround and doorjamb of the entryway into the southwest room on the house appear original with visible piecing done with cut nails. Each of the external doors is constructed in a board and batten style with three pegged crossbars holding three or more sawn timbers vertically in place.

   b. Windows: There are eight exterior windows on the home. From the vantage point of inside the home, one window is roughly centered on each exterior facing wall. This creates a total of two exterior windows per room, and two exterior windows per façade. The windows, while very old, may or may not be original to the home. Existing photographic evidence proves inconclusive. While windows that share the same room typically match, there are a few different types of windows represented within the house. This could be the result of vernacular repairs and replacements, or evidence of the use of scavenged structural material from the abandoned and deteriorating buildings of the original town of Pleasant Hill. There are extant examples of double-hung 6/6 and 4/4 windows. Non-historic board shutters, secured by mass
produced and commonly available contemporary hardware store hinges, protect the windows.

8. Roof: The roof is a simple side-facing gable. The approximate pitch of the roof is 30°. The roof is covered in corrugated metal, secured in two rows of sheeting per side excluding the porches. The metal roof is visible in all of the known 20th century photographs of the structure. Currently, the roof is badly rusting and corroded. The southeast corner of the front porch is missing its sheet of corrugated metal. This sheeting was apparently lost recently, likely during Hurricane Gustav of 2008. The roof is otherwise mostly intact although not entirely watertight.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor Plan: The building consists of four main rooms, commonly referred to in this style structure as “pens” separated by an open breezeway. Each end of the breezeway is completely open. Each of the rooms features its own doorway to the central passage. This basic arrangement distinguishes the structure as a true dogtrot house. Each room is also joined by interior passageways connecting rooms which share a common wall. It is unclear whether these passageways were original to the construction of the home. The northwest corner of the home apparently served as an interior kitchen space in the early 20th century.

2. Stairways: None.

3. Flooring: The interior plank floors are of milled lumber, which may or may not be all original. Most of the planks do not appear to be modern replacements; there are several weak spots in the flooring of the interior of the home, typically around the chimney and through the open passageway. The planks are in many visible cases not tongue and groove construction. Daylight is often visible between the floorboards. There are no extant remnants of artificial floor coverings inside the home.

4. Wall and Ceiling Finish: Typically, the interior walls are covered in a mixture of gypsum wallboard and milled plank boards. These planks often vary in dimension and are secured using a variety of cut and wire nails. Specifically, the walls of the home vary from room to room. The southeast rooms’ walls are mostly exposed milled planks. Uniquely, this room features a decorative stamped metal ceiling that has badly corroded. The northeast room walls and ceiling were covered with sheetrock or gypsum wallboard in the 20th century. This fabric is severely deteriorating due to moisture damage in a number of places. The northwest room (kitchen) is covered from approximately three foot high down in wainscoting. Above

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the wainscoting are large exposed wood planks nailed horizontally to the timber framing. Most of these boards have extant multiple remnant layers of wall paper coverings. The ceiling finish in this room is made up of identical wainscoting. In the Southwest room, the walls were sheet-rocked in the 20th century. Curiously, these walls are covered almost entirely with reproduction Civil War era newsprints and paper bills pasted to the wall. This covering, not to be confused with original fabric, was likely the product of Civil War reenactors using the home during reenactment and festival events.

5. Openings:
   a. Doorways and Doors: There are four interior doors including doors for the two interior passageways and for two of three storage spaces. The doorways are framed with single plank molding.
   b. Windows: None.

6. Decorative Features: There are few decorative features associated with this home. All of the trim molding is very simple single board plank and appears secured with wire nails only, thus postdating the original construction period of the home. As before mentioned, the kitchen room of the house was finished in wainscoting and the ceiling of the southeast room is covered in decorative stamped metal sheeting.

7. Hardware: Very little of the extant hardware of the home appears original. It is also unclear whether the 70+ year old sinks were ever actually installed into the home or if they represent remnants of another structure (say an exterior washhouse), related or otherwise, no longer extant.

8. Mechanical Equipment:
   a. Heating and Cooling: There is no modern system of heating and cooling currently installed in the home. There are a few extant holes drilled through the plank floorboards and standing, capped metal pipes underneath the home. This suggests the former presence of a gas lines running to floor heaters or radiators. This was a common practice throughout the rural south. Otherwise, the shared chimneys of the two wings of the house provided the system of heating. Cooling was provided architecturally only, by the open breezeway of the home.
   b. Plumbing: There currently is no plumbing or running water for the house. The presence of two discarded sinks in the storage areas of the home, one standing but capped old water line under the kitchen room and a nearby exterior spicket indicate that water at one time
did run to the kitchen room of the house. Water was also obtained from at least one extant outdoor cistern prior to indoor plumbing. There is no evidence of the home ever having an interior bathroom.

c. Electric: The house was wired for electricity shortly after the availability of electricity became commonplace for the area, as indicated by the extant antiquated 80+ year old wiring systems running throughout the house. This wiring system has evidently been disconnected for some time.

9. Site: The structure is set north of LA Highway 175 approximately 30 yards. There are no other structures within the immediate vicinity of the building. A square cement cistern is located adjacent to the rear gallery. A distinct tree line is located approximately 100 yards from the rear (north) façade of the home. Between this tree line and the rear of the house is located a planted pecan grove of about 30 premature trees. East of the home is located an artificial pond used for cattle farming. The house is located on a slight rise in elevation that gradually declines in all directions. The area drains well in all seasons.

Part 3. Sources of Information:

Primary and Unpublished:


B. Secondary and Published:


Part 4. Measured Drawings:

Figure 1: Floorplan, O’Pry/Elam House. Drawing by W. Ryan Smith
Figure 2: North Elevation, Primary Facade, O’Pry/Elam House. Drawing by W. Ryan Smith
Figure 3: West Facade, O’Pry/Elam House. Drawing by W. Ryan Smith
Part 5. Photographs:

Figure 4: The O'Pry/Elam House ca. 1895. Courtesy Mr. Gene Poimboeuf.

Figure 5: The O'Pry/Elam House ca. 1930. Courtesy Dr. C. C. Hayley.
Figure 6: The O’Pry/Elam House ca. 1950. Courtesy Dr. C. C. Hayley.

Figure 7: The O’Pry/Elam House ca. 1950. Courtesy Dr. C. C. Hayley.
Figure 8: The O'Pry/Elam House ca. 1950. Courtesy Dr. C. C. Hayley.

Figure 9: The O'Pry/Elam House in 2009. Photograph by W. Ryan Smith.
Figure 10: The O'Pry/Elam House in 2009. Front (north) façade. Photograph by W. Ryan Smith.

Figure 11: The O'Pry/Elam House in 2009. East façade. Photograph by W. Ryan Smith.
Figure 12: The O’Pry/Elam House in 2009. South Façade. Photograph by W. Ryan Smith.

Figure 13: The O’Pry/Elam House in 2009. West Façade. Photograph by W. Ryan Smith.