

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICENATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1** NAME

HISTORIC

French, Colonel William Henderson, House

AND/OR COMMON

French, Colonel William Henderson, House; "Legend Valley Farm"

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

1 mile east of W.Va. Route 20

___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Athens

☒ VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Fourth

STATE

West Virginia

CODE

54

COUNTY

Mercer

CODE

055

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

___ DISTRICT

☒ BUILDING(S)

___ STRUCTURE

___ SITE

___ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

___ PUBLIC

☒ PRIVATE

___ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

___ IN PROCESS

___ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

☒ OCCUPIED

___ UNOCCUPIED

___ WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

☒ YES, RESTRICTED

___ YES, UNRESTRICTED

___ NO

PRESENT USE

☒ AGRICULTURE

___ COMMERCIAL

___ EDUCATIONAL

___ ENTERTAINMENT

___ GOVERNMENT

___ INDUSTRIAL

___ MILITARY

___ MUSEUM

___ PARK

☒ PRIVATE RESIDENCE

___ RELIGIOUS

___ SCIENTIFIC

___ TRANSPORTATION

___ OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Mr. and Mrs. James W. Foster

STREET & NUMBER

Box 348, Athens Star Route

CITY, TOWN

Princeton

☒ VICINITY OF

STATE

West Virginia

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Mercer County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

Main Street

CITY, TOWN

Princeton

STATE

West Virginia

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

___ FEDERAL ___ STATE ___ COUNTY ___ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE



DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

☒ EXCELLENT
☐ GOOD
☐ FAIR

☐ DETERIORATED
☐ RUINS
☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☐ UNALTERED
☒ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE
☐ MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Like most houses constructed in the United States during periods when certain architectural styles were in vogue, the Colonel William Henderson French House, located in mountainous southern West Virginia, is an adaptation suited to the peculiarities of location and circumstances of the builder. Because the house was constructed during the 1850s by one who could afford hiring professionals and purchasing quality materials, it is not at all surprising that it is well built, large and of fine lines. Since the family of its builder was established in Virginia before the Revolution and followed patterns of migration westward, it is not at all surprising that the French house has Greek Revival overtones strongly influenced by local conditions.

Bilateral symmetry is modified to a floor plan which incorporates an "ell," formed by the placing of simple rectangular blocks set against each other without transitional features or re-entrant angles. Although there is no long or pedimented portico, there are three porches, those on the south and north sides running the length of the structure and that at the entrance on the east covering the area between the main door and windows on either side. Horizontal patterns are evident throughout, there is a hipped roof of low pitch, and all doors and windows have flat lintels.

Beginning with the foundation, the following provides additional descriptive materials about the exterior. The foundation itself is of large sandstone blocks from the area. Called the ground, or first, floor by the occupants, this level is fairly well lighted by 6/6 double-hung windows on the south elevation and smaller openings on the other sides. The four windows on the east (in line with those on the two floors above) are slightly obscured by a series of wooden bars placed by the original builder.

The second level has porches on the east, north and south elevations. The latter is supported by high brick pillars, and its floor forms the roof of a porch for the ground level. Each of these porches has small, rounded columns and railings of various designs formed by crossing horizontal, vertical and diagonal elements. The entrance on the east has a roof supported by four, closely placed columns with pilasters at the elevation's face. Each porch, as with the entire structure at the roofline, has an interesting cornice of slightly curved brackets and circular (square on the north porch) wooden blocks between. Windows here are slightly longer than those on the third level but, like those above, are 6/6 double-hung sash and have shutters. The main entrance is served by double doors which have sidelights.

The third floor is a repeat of the second in its openings and exterior design, including a sidelighted window above the main entrance. As with the second floor also, the window on the southeast corner is false; it appears to be behind closed shutters, but the builder really enclosed part of the chimney and wall in order to retain symmetry.

The three floors on the interior have a great deal of symmetry in room placement. In the main section there are two large rooms on each level, those on the second and third floors being separated by a wide hall and stairwell. The kitchen on the ground level as well as the two rooms above (library and bedroom) have fireplaces served by the same chimney on the south wall, and although the root cellar behind the kitchen does not have a fireplace, the parlor and bedroom on the levels above have them on the north wall.

The ell includes a dining room on the ground floor, morning and associated rooms on the second and a bedroom and dressing room on the third. Each of the main

| PERIOD | AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING | <input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499 | <input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC | <input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION | <input type="checkbox"/> LAW | <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599 | <input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS | <input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE | <input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE | <input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MILITARY | <input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799 | <input type="checkbox"/> ART | <input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING | <input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC | <input type="checkbox"/> THEATER |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE | <input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY | <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1900- | <input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS | <input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION | | |

SPECIFIC DATES c. 1855

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Colonel William Henderson French House stands as a reminder of the early development of what is today southern West Virginia, for its builder was an active area businessman, land owner and realtor. Mr. French was much more, though, especially in his service as a political leader, and he was one of the better remembered military officers of the Confederacy in western Virginia. Aside from personal contributions, it might be said that his house also added to Mercer County's note, for it is one of the finest antebellum structures in this part of the state and possibly the oldest, continuously used home now standing in the county.

This French family had its American beginnings in the early part of the eighteenth century and, as with so many others, took part in the general westward migration both before and after the Revolutionary War. William H. French was the grandson (on both sides) of militiamen of western Virginia who were locally active during the Revolution, and his father was prominent in both the political and social realms of what became Giles County, Virginia (in fact, he was appointed its first clerk in 1806). Shortly after turning twenty-one, William was appointed a deputy sheriff of the county.

As western Virginia's population expanded, formation of new political subdivisions was spawned at an ever increasing pace. In 1837 Mercer County was formed from parts of Giles and Tazewell, and William Henderson French was among the petitioners for the division. Between that year and his death in 1872, French became the largest landholder in Mercer County and was involved in such schemes of land dealing as selling property and transporting persons from England to settle in the area. He also had the distinction (considered so at that time at least) of being the county's largest slaveholder prior to the Civil War.

A Whig until the 1850s, William H. French was elected on his party's ticket as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates from the district of Giles and Mercer in 1842, 1843 and again in 1845. His political career apparently suffered when he switched to the Democratic party at a time of growing civil unrest in the county. He may not have appreciated the sentiments of much of the area's electorate when his secession sympathies and Democratic preference led to his defeat for a seat as a delegate to the Secession Convention of 1861. That election, ironically, pitted him against his brother, Napoleon B. French, then a member of the Virginia Senate and later a Confederate officer.

Southern sentiment led to a blow to William's political career, especially during "test oath" controversies and disfranchising movements in post-war West Virginia. In 1865, he was unseated from elected membership to the West Virginia Legislature's session scheduled for Wheeling, and his political fortunes never recovered, for even after being allowed the vote again and running for membership at the state's constitutional convention set for 1872, Colonel French was defeated.

With the start of the Civil War, he joined the Confederate army and was commissioned to head a cavalry company organized as "Captain William H. French's

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7. DESCRIPTION (Continued)

rooms is served by a fireplace on the west wall, and there is a built-in closet between the fireplace and the south wall on the second level and built-in closets on either side of the third-floor fireplace. This feature is included in the south third floor bedroom of the main section, and the library has a built-in bookcase. Second and third floor rooms have original board flooring.

Until the house was restored in the early 1970s by the present owners, the structure underwent little change and was allowed to deteriorate. The house has since been made livable by modern standards (baths added in former dressing rooms; plumbing, heating and electric being expanded; an entrance from the main section to the ell being made on the third floor), but no major alterations have been made.

8. SIGNIFICANCE (Continued)

Company, Virginia Volunteers." Eventually, the group became part of the 17th Regiment, Virginia Cavalry, and French was promoted to colonel on January 28, 1863. He and his unit saw much activity in their home area of southwestern Virginia, but it also participated in the larger maneuvers which carried it through the Valley of Virginia as part of General Albert Gallatin Jenkins' cavalry which led Lee's advance toward Gettysburg.

It was during the early 1850s that William H. French planned to marry and took up the project of building a substantial house for his intended. For some reason the marriage did not take place, but French had hired a contractor from Richmond to design and build the fine house which today bears his name. Many of the elements were prepared locally, yet a great deal of the appointments and materials were transported along the James River and thence by land over the mountains and onto the old Red Sulphur Pike which passed in front of the selected site between Concord Church (present Athens) and Princeton. The grand structure had Greek Revival lines modified to suit the location, and its three floors with its many rooms and large entrance hall made it one of the finest in the area. The land dealer and politician was hereby established in household as well as society, and his visitors could attest to luxurious surroundings and service.

To mention an additional facet of note of Colonel French's home, it is said that it served as some sort of a hospital at times during the Civil War, and the evidence seems quite clear that two Confederate soldiers, wounded in a nearby ambush, died in the main entrance hall.

The French house was saved from continued deterioration and possible destruction in the early 1970s by the present owners. Restoration has brought the name of Colonel William Henderson French again to the minds of Mercer County's citizenry, and the nearby grave of the former businessman-politician-soldier is now marked for posterity.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Fowler, Carol. "French Mansion Enduring Example of Stately 1850s Living Standards,"
Bluefield (W.Va.) Daily Telegraph, January 14, 1973.
Johnston, David E. A History of Middle New River Settlements and Contiguous
Territory. Huntington, W.Va.: Standard Printing and Publishing Co., 1906.
(pp. 169-70, 176-77, 180-81, 206-07, 322-23, 339, 347-48, 402-05, 463, 487-89)
McCormick, Kyle. A Brief History of Mercer County. (pp. 8-10)
Martin, James H. "Colonel William Henderson French, C.S.A." Address delivered

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 5 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A 1 7 4 9 7 6 4 0 4 1 3 8 6 2 5
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
C

B
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
D

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

| STATE | CODE | COUNTY | CODE |
|-------|------|--------|------|
| STATE | CODE | COUNTY | CODE |

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

James E. Harding, Research Analyst

ORGANIZATION

West Virginia Antiquities Commission

DATE

October 6, 1975

STREET & NUMBER

P.O. Box 630

TELEPHONE

(304) 296-1791

CITY OR TOWN

Morgantown

STATE

West Virginia

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE ☒

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

Edward M. Davis

TITLE

West Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

November 10, 1975

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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CONTINUATION SHEET

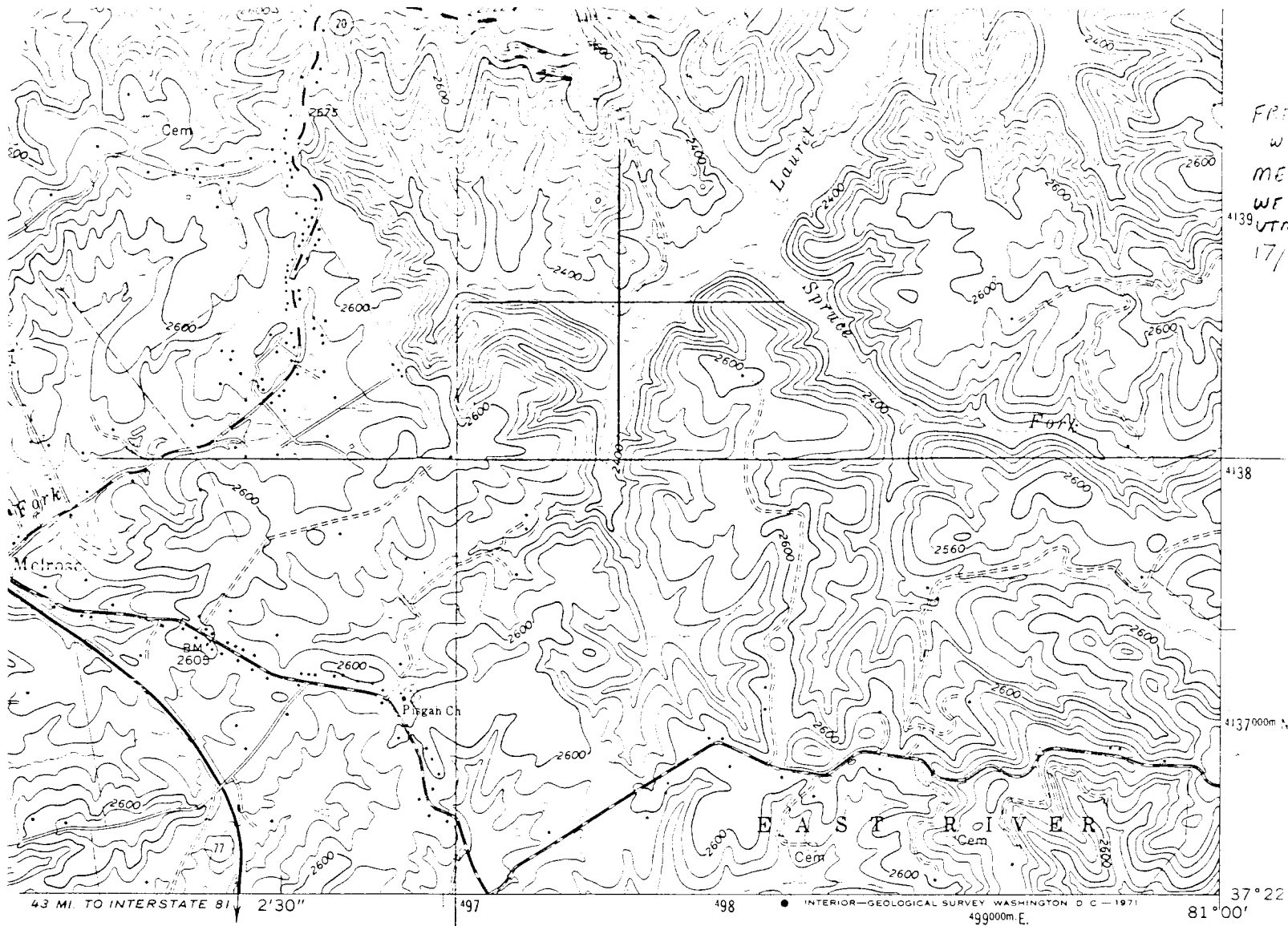
ITEM NUMBER

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES (Continued)

September 16, 1961. Copy on file with the West Virginia Antiquities Commission,
P.O. Box 630, Morgantown, W.Va.

Roberts, John. "Remodeled Home--Beautiful Link to Past," Princeton (W.Va.) Times,
August 21, 1975.



FR
W
ME
WF
UTR
17/

Form No. 10-301
(Rev. 10-74)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES PROPERTY MAP FORM

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SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- ENCLOSE WITH MAP

1 NAME

HISTORIC French, Colonel William Henderson, House

AND/OR COMMON French, Colonel William Henderson, House; "Legend Valley Farm"

2 LOCATION

CITY, TOWN
Athens

☒ VICINITY OF

COUNTY
Mercer

STATE
West Virginia

3 MAP REFERENCE

SOURCE U.S. Geological Survey (Athens, W.Va., 7.5' Quadrangle)

SCALE 1:24000

DATE 1968

