

The Cragg Cabin

A House With a Story to Tell

In 1832 John and Agnes Cragg left New Jersey arriving in Illinois to build a home and work their new land.



The land that John chose was in Section 19 of Braceville Township, later becoming Maine Township, several miles south of the park. This site had the advantage of being close to the Mazon River. He chose 320 acres which he bought at auction in Chicago for \$1.25 an acre in 1835. In the first year the Cragg Cabin was built creating a home for him and his wife and two children, one born in New Jersey and another in St. Louis, Missouri. Over time, three more sons and a daughter were born to this family in the Cragg Cabin. Of the six children five lived to adulthood.

The cabin is thought to be one of the first homes in Grundy County. It was a small home, and because of the size of his family, a second story was added. Second stories were rare on the prairie, thus the nickname "The Palace."

Mr. Cragg turned his land into a profitable farm along with other side ventures. He was township clerk, trustee, and justice of the peace.

The Cragg Cabin served as the county's first tavern, polling place, and post office. Travelers were treated with courtesies and comforts of a frontier inn. Stage coach passengers and drovers moving cattle to Chicago stock yards over the Overland Trail which ran from Bloomington to Chicago often were treated as guests. It is thought that the cabin may have even been part of the underground Railway (from 1831 to 1863). It was said hundreds of slaves found shelter under its roof on their way to freedom in the North.

Shabbona, chief of the Potawatomi Indians, located his summer camps across the Mazon River from the cabin and became a friend of the family. Shabbona's grandchildren played with the Cragg children every summer.

Keeping the Cragg Cabin Alive

In 1934 Mr. Harry L. Hough secured permission from Mrs. Jennie Cragg Button to move the cabin, what parts that could be used, to his home in Mazon. Mr. Hough built an almost exact replica maintaining the building as the historical "Cragg Cabin", showing it off to countless visitors. On the event of his death in 1966, the cabin became the property of Mazon High School.

Once erected at the school it was not maintained and in 1975 it was taken down and moved to the Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area where it was to be erected once more. Five years went by and unfortunately the old cabin logs were no longer usable.

In 1980-1981 teams of 12 fifteen to eighteen year old students known as the Illinois Youth Conservation Corps, joined with park personnel to rebuild the "Cragg Cabin" using new materials. The youth worked 30 hours a week in the summer's heat without the aid of modern tools over two summers and with the help of horses.

In 2017, it was evident that the IYCC rendition was falling apart. The Goose Lake Prairie Partners, Inc accepted the challenge of raising the needed funds to build a new Cragg Cabin. The group approached Todd Daggett, a local carpenter with cabin building experience. It was he who would build a new cabin. In October, 2021 Daggett moved the cut white oak cabin shell to the park to complete the work, using modern tools to speed up the process. February 2022 the cabin was finished.

The oak flooring and other parts of the new Cragg cabin were sawn from trees harvested from the original John Cragg cabin site and donated by the family of Philip E. Burgess. They are the fourth generation great-grandchildren of John Cragg. The window's seedy glass was donated and installed in the frame by Gordon & Backhus Glass and Lock.

On June 4, 2022, the Cragg Cabin was dedicated and presented to Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area by the Goose Lake Prairie Partners, Inc.

Every year, the first Saturday of June, The Prairie Partners call on Partners and friends to help with the Cabin Festival celebrating a simpler time on the prairie. Mark your calendar and join in the festivities. The group lectures to class visits and groups about life on the prairie in the 1800s.

Cabin Photo was taken by George Bedford, County Judge. "George Cragg sitting in front, age 75 years. Built by John Cragg in the year of 1834 near Braceville." In this photo, the cabin is probably 100 years of age. The ole' cabin stood through the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I and 39 U.S. Presidents.