

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Brisbois House

AND/OR COMMON

Brisbois House

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Water Street

__ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Prairie du Chien

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Third

STATE

Wisconsin

CODE

55

COUNTY

Crawford

CODE

023

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: None

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

(Curator: Michael Douglass, Villa Louis, 608-326-2721
The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

STREET & NUMBER

816 State Street

P.O. Box 65
Prairie du Chien,
Wisc. 53821

CITY, TOWN

Madison

__ VICINITY OF

STATE

Wisconsin

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Crawford County Register of Deeds (Vol. 202, p. 477)

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Prairie du Chien

STATE

Wisconsin

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic American Buildings Survey

DATE

1934, 1961

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress

CITY, TOWN

Washington,

STATE

D. C.

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Brisbois House is a two and a half story, symmetrical, five-bay structure constructed of native grey limestone and situated on St. Feriolo Island, on very low riverfront property, with its west front facade overlooking the Mississippi River. The rectangular building has thick stone walls but a definite Federal character in the rather light handling of the entrance trim, and in the interior woodwork.

Most of the following descriptive information is taken from drawings of a Historic American Buildings Survey team. Their report dated the structure as 1815, and did not measure either the front or rear entrance porches or the c. 1905 south addition, as they apparently did not consider any of them historic.

The walls of the house are constructed of a local variety of grey limestone, having somewhat of a buff cast. The walls are between 18-24 inches thick and the stone is coursed regularly on the front elevation, but the sides and rear show a more free disposition of stonework. The sills on the exterior are oak. All mortar and plaster was made of lime burned from clam shells. The original platform which ran around the first story of the house, apparently from the center rear door, around the southeast corner to the dining room door at the southwest corner of the house, was removed, and is now replaced with the c. 1905 one-story wooden addition.

The structure is 39'2" long and 28'2" wide, five bays long, with gable roof and interior end chimneys, located in the center of the house, but not directly opposite each other. A rather high first story exposes basement windows of three lights and there is no differentiation in materials between the basement and first story. The treatment of all the windows with flat arches is identical, six-over-six sash. The windows on the second story are slightly shorter than the first story.

The columned front doorway is approached by a flight of six stairs, and a rectangular transom of four lights and sidelights with three panes frame the 10-paneled door. Symmetrically molded trim with corner blocks, and slender, engaged fluted Doric columns compose the doorway. It is now protected by a porch with gable roof and pediment, fluted corner columns matching those of the doorway, and a balustrade of turned spindles. The HABS report omitted this porch as non-historic, however, the workmanship is fine, and the columns of the porch match those of the doorway very well. The porch is, according to Don Munson, a post-Civil War addition.

There are two small square windows under the gable on each end of the house. The east elevation has two exits, one center from the hall, and one from the kitchen. On the north end of the east (rear) side is the entrance to the basement, with a thick stone lintel above double doors. It was long believed that this large basement was used for fur storage, but more likely a root cellar. On the south side of the house, there is an original exterior door that exited from the west end of the dining room onto the original platform or porch which ran along the whole south end of the house. The HABS report stated that the cornice and roof were not original, and that report's drawings have louvered exterior shutters on the windows.

(Continued)

8 SIGNIFICANCE

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 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 type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)		
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION				

SPECIFIC DATES C. 1840 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Brisbois House is undoubtedly the most pretentious of the structures surviving in Prairie du Chien from the first half of the 19th century, and is probably one of the earliest stone houses in Wisconsin. This house has long been claimed to have been constructed c. 1808 by Michael Brisbois, a French Canadian who came to Prairie du Chien c. 1781, one of the first white settlers and landowners, and the most prominent businessman in the earliest decades of settlement. He superintended some farming, established the first bakery, was very active in community affairs, and was involved somewhat in the fur trade. It is believed that he may have long been secretly associated with the Hudson's Bay Company, well after 1816 when they were excluded from trade within American territory. However, it now appears that the house was probably built c. 1840 by members of the Brisbois family, but never associated with Michael Brisbois himself, who died c. 1833.

The house is constructed in native stone, with characteristics of the Federal style in its rather delicately worked entrance, and fine interior woodwork. It would be very unusual to find a structure of such sophistication in Prairie du Chien in 1808, when it was only a cluster of fur trading structures and primitive houses. However, it would be very logical for the Brisbois House to have been built c. 1840, at nearly the same time that successful Prairie du Chien fur agent, Hercules Dousman was constructing his large Georgian style brick mansion (1843), just north of the Brisbois House site. Joseph Rolette built a substantial two-story clapboard structure on the adjoining property to the south c. 1840 also.

It is believed that Michael Brisbois had a home on the site of the present house which was washed away in a great flood in 1807. It was the belief of the owner just previous to the Historical Society that when most of the log structures along the riverfront were wiped out in 1807, Michael Brisbois determined to building a more substantial house to replace the one he lost in the flood. This owner, a local historian, challenged the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to dispute this 1808 date without evidence to the contrary.¹ When the original Historic Sites Survey inventory was prepared in 1959 the house was described as the 1808 Michael Brisbois House. Until recently the house had been generally accepted to be from the early nineteenth century. In 1934 the Historic American Buildings Survey measured the house and dated the structure 1815, without explanation, and later described it as "early nineteenth century" in a 1941 publication. The WPA Guide to Wisconsin, 1941, dated the house 1815.

¹ Letter Ray Sivesind, Dir., Historical Sites and Markers Div., State Historical Society of Wisconsin to Blanche Schroer, HSS, June 24, 1975.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE 2

All the framing timber is of white pine, members being secured with wooden pegs. Interior doors are constructed solidly of white pine, one side having a molded sticking, the other side being plain. All doors were originally painted white, according to the HABS report. The interior of the first story has a center hall with stair, and the living room occupies the entire north side, with a stone fireplace on the north wall. This fireplace has a mantle constructed of white pine, with face, back and hearth of hard limestone, and paneled pilasters supporting an entablature (fireplace drawn by HABS). The dining room, with a fireplace in its southeast corner and an exit at the southwest, occupies the southwest front, with the kitchen on the southeast rear of the first floor.

On the second floor there is a central hall with stairway, and storage area at the west end of the hall. There are four bedrooms, the northeast and southwest have fireplaces. On the north the rooms are of equal size, the southwest room is the largest, and the southeast has a stair to the attic.

On the interior all the windows are deeply recessed, since the walls are very thick, and they have fine architrave trim. Built in under all the windows on the second floor, except the hall, are pine cabinets with paneled doors. A dado extends at windowsill height along the interior walls. All the interior doors on the first floor have seven panels, those on the second floor have a five-panel design. Some original wrought iron hardware--hinges, and latches--remains, (some of it was also drawn by the HABS team).

For many years the house was the residence of several generations of one family and the interior plan has not been substantially altered. The house, since its purchase by the Historical Society has been unused except for a short period when it was opened to the public in 1957. It is in fairly good condition, however, a large cleat near the roofline on the front facade attests to foundation troubles. Also, some floor beams had to be reinforced several years ago, almost inevitable problems since the area floods every year. The interior needs restoration, and now houses a collection of nineteenth century furniture, probably not original to the house.

There are several small frame outbuildings east of the house. They are undated and their associations with the house are unknown.

The national historic landmark plaque is mounted beside the front door.

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ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

After the State Historical Society of Wisconsin purchased the Brisbois House, a staff researcher located a substantial number of Brisbois family papers that led him to conclude that the house was constructed in 1842, because of the large amount of building material purchased by B. W. Brisbois that year. However, the amount of material purchased was far in excess of the amount needed for this particular house and undoubtedly was used on another Brisbois property as well.²

Michael Brisbois is known to have owned this property, on the riverfront, just south of the Astor Fur Warehouse (1828) and north of the Rolette House (1840). Michael Brisbois is believed to have lived in a cabin situated on the Indian mound east of the present house for a number of years until his death c. 1833.³

Michael Brisbois' son, B. W. Brisbois was a well-to-do businessman in Prairie du Chien and he is now believed to have built this house and lived there with his mother.

In 1905 the owner constructed the present wooden one-story addition on the south side. The Historical Society of the State of Wisconsin bought the house c. 1955. It was open to the public for a short time in 1957, but requires restoration work and has been closed since. Present plans call for developing it as a research and study center.

²ibid.

³Interview with Don Munson, Curator Villa Louis, May 27, 1975.

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ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 1

Budahl, Lee "Architecture Before 1900 in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin," unpublished master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1967.

Evans, Constance M., and Earll, Ona B., La Prairie des Chiens Prairie du Chien, 1937.

Historic American Buildings Survey report, 1934.

Interview with Don Munson, Curator, Villa Louis, Astor Fur Warehouse and Brisbois House, May 23, 1975 and September 23, 1976.

Letter, Ray Sivesind, Director, Historic Sites and Markers Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin to Blanche Schroer, Historic Sites Survey, June 24, 1975.

Original Historic Sites Survey report, prepared by Charles E. Shedd, JR., NPS, February 16, 1959.