

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

DATA SHEET

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	SEP 17 1975
DATE ENTERED	NOV 12 1975

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
John Shell Cabin

AND/OR COMMON

Same

2 LOCATION

(Shell Branch of the Laurel Fork of Greasy Creek)

STREET & NUMBER

S of Chappell on
approximately 15 miles southeast of U.S. 421 on Ky. 2005

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Chappell

VICINITY OF

05

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Kentucky

CODE

21

COUNTY

Leslie

CODE

051

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
			<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER: in process of

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

renovating for occupator

NAME

Mr. John Caldwell

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Chappell

VICINITY OF

STATE

Kentucky 40816

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Leslie County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Hyden

STATE

Kentucky

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Survey of Historic Sites in Kentucky

DATE

1971

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Kentucky Heritage Commission

CITY, TOWN

Frankfort

STATE

Kentucky

7 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

The Shell cabin is located on the Shell branch of the Laurel Fork of Greasy Creek in Leslie County, Kentucky. It is situated on the side of Gray Mountain, just north of the Leslie-Harlan County line and less than six miles north of Pine Mountain. The area is mountainous and heavily forested with only a few houses located in the immediate vicinity. The only other residence within sight is the one-story modern frame house that belongs to the owners of the cabin.

The Shell cabin is a saddlebag house constructed of hewn logs with half-dovetail notching set on a pile of stacked rock foundation. The two units composing the house are of unequal height and size and contain two rooms on the first floor, a loft in the upper story on the left side, and a full second story on the upper level of the right wing. The wing on the left has a central door with one window on either side and one window at the rear. The right wing has a central door, with one small "cut-out" window above. (Photo 2)

Dividing the two pens is a central stairway reached from the outside. The position and steep angle of the stairway is typical of early saddlebag structures. There is a central stone chimney which accommodates fireplaces in both halves of the house. The right section has corrugated metal roofing; the left contains wood shingles.

A small area in front of the cabin is presently enclosed by a fence and used as a pig pen. Farm buildings near the house include a hewn log smokehouse of an early date, a pole stock barn, and a larger barn off the main road approximately 200 yards from the house.

Two early 20th-century pictures, one appearing in the Kentucky Rifle (photo 8) and another in a newspaper (photo 9), show a frame addition to the front. The fence enclosing the front of the property (photo 8) and the stock pen across the road no longer remains. Most of the outbuildings visible in the photograph are no longer extant.

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 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) Folk Culture	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES c. 1850

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Mr. Chappell

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The John Shell House is located at the foot of a forested hillside deep within the Appalachian mountains of southeastern Kentucky. This "formative" saddlebag house can be said to represent a kind of log construction typical of pioneer residences in Kentucky of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Log houses continued to be built in the eastern part of the State throughout the 19th and even into the 20th century because of the availability of timber and lack of cost involved. The cabin is relatively unchanged since its construction in the mid-1800s. The countryside, at one time heavily logged, has now been allowed to revert back to a wilderness state.

The primitive cabin was the home at one time of John Shell, who, to many Kentuckians, personifies qualities and characteristics of the rugged, independent mountaineer. Shell, never one for farming, led a subsistence life, taking occasional jobs that would buy only the necessities he could not make himself. He lived to be over one hundred years old and gained fame in 1919 when he was brought to the Louisville State Fair as an "attraction." He did not enjoy the experience -- promoters kept the money he earned -- and he was more than happy to return home to Leslie County and anonymity. However, for a brief period he was a reluctant celebrity whose lifestyle and mountain humor fascinated a curious public. In an interview with a Lexington newspaper, he was asked about his life and replied:

It must have been hard times that have kept me alive; I don't know of anything else it could have been. I've taken it tough and rough. I am an old hunter. I hunted the coon and the deer. I took the weather as it came. Many nights I have lain out. Sometimes the snow covered me when I got up. There were no roads even in those days, we took things as they came. Hard times surely are what have made me live so long.¹

The harsh region in which Shell made his home attracted a fair number of settlers in the early period of heavy immigration to the State -- roughly from 1780 to 1810. The most favored area of settlement was, of course, the rich fertile Bluegrass lands to the west. However, those people who chose to live in the mountains, Scotch-Irish primarily, in time developed a unique culture, protected or guarded from outside influence by the barrier presented by the series of sharp ridges making up the Appalachian chain. The region was eventually penetrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the coal and timber industries. The result was tremendous physical and social change as land was bought up for logging or mining, displacing many local residents.² John Shell was to witness these changes which so affected Leslie County and the area around Greasy Creek.

(Continued)

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John Shell Cabin

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

As a child John Shell came with his father Sam Shell to Kentucky in the early 1800s from North Carolina, although he is said to have been born in Tennessee.³ His father first settled in Bell County, later moving to Harlan. While traveling around eastern Kentucky, he built water mills and operated a mill himself with son John's help at Port Fork in Baxter, Kentucky.⁴

After his marriage to Betsey Nantz, Shell moved to a one-room log house on the Little Laurel Creek in Leslie County. They moved only once after this, down the creek about a mile to Greasy Creek on land originally patented by a family named Chappell. Ownership later passed to H.M. Lewis, who sold it to the Shells. The Chappell house was better constructed than their previous home and by necessity was much larger to accommodate the Shells' ten children. Nearby on Greasy Creek, Shell set up his own water mill -- the first, it is said, in Leslie County.⁵

Mill-wright was not Shell's only occupation. In true mountaineer fashion, he was a man of many trades -- a merchant, beekeeper, gunsmith, wood-carver, and herb collector. Once or twice a month he rode muleback to Jonesville, Virginia, where he peddled honey, ginseng, wooden vessels that he carved, and other wares.⁶

In his old age Shell was cared for by Sam Creech and Creech's nephew John Caldwell. Shell had lost ownership of the cabin and approximately 300 acres of land in a judgment against him for selling timber he did not own. Creech and Caldwell bought the property with the provision Shell be permitted to remain at the cabin until his death. He died in 1922.

¹ From John Shell File, Kentucky Historical Society, quoting from the Lexington Ledger. (n.d.)

² Caudill, p. 10. For full treatment of the effect of coal and timber industries on eastern Kentucky, see Chapters VI, VII of Caudill's Night Comes to the Cumberlands.

³ Shell claimed to have been born September 2, 1788. A more likely date is sometime between 1805 and 1810.

⁴ Brewer, p. 201.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

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ITEM NUMBER 9 PAGE 2

Brewer, Mary T. Of Bolder Men. Hyden, Kentucky: Leslie County News. (no date given).

Interview with John and Lottie Caldwell, July 16, 1975.

Caudill, Harry M. Night Comes to the Cumberlands. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962, p. 255.

Dillin, Captain John G.W. The Kentucky Rifle. York, Pennsylvania: Trimmer Printing Company, 1959 (1924 copyright).

Fetterman, John. "The People of Cumberland Gap." The National Geographic Magazine. November 1971, pp. 592-597.

Interview with Lynwood Montell, Director, Center for Intercultural and Folk Studies, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky, July 1975.

The National Geographic Society, American Mountain People, 1973, pp. 43 - 45, 85.

John Shell Biographical file, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.

The Kentucky Rifle by Capt. John G. W. Dillin
York, Pennsylvania: Trimmer Printing Co.,
1959 (1924 copy right)



HOME OF JOHN SHELL, RIFLEMAKER, LESLIE COUNTY, KENTUCKY

(Plate 35)



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1 NAME

HISTORIC

The John Shell Cabin

AND/OR COMMON
Same

2 LOCATION

approximately 15 miles southeast of U.S. 421 on Ky. 2005

CITY, TOWN

Chappel

____VICINITY OF

COUNTY

Leslie

STATE

Kentucky

3 PHOTO REFERENCE

PHOTO CREDIT

DATE OF PHOTO

from The Kentucky Rifle by John G. W. Dillin,
NEGATIVE FILED AT 1925.

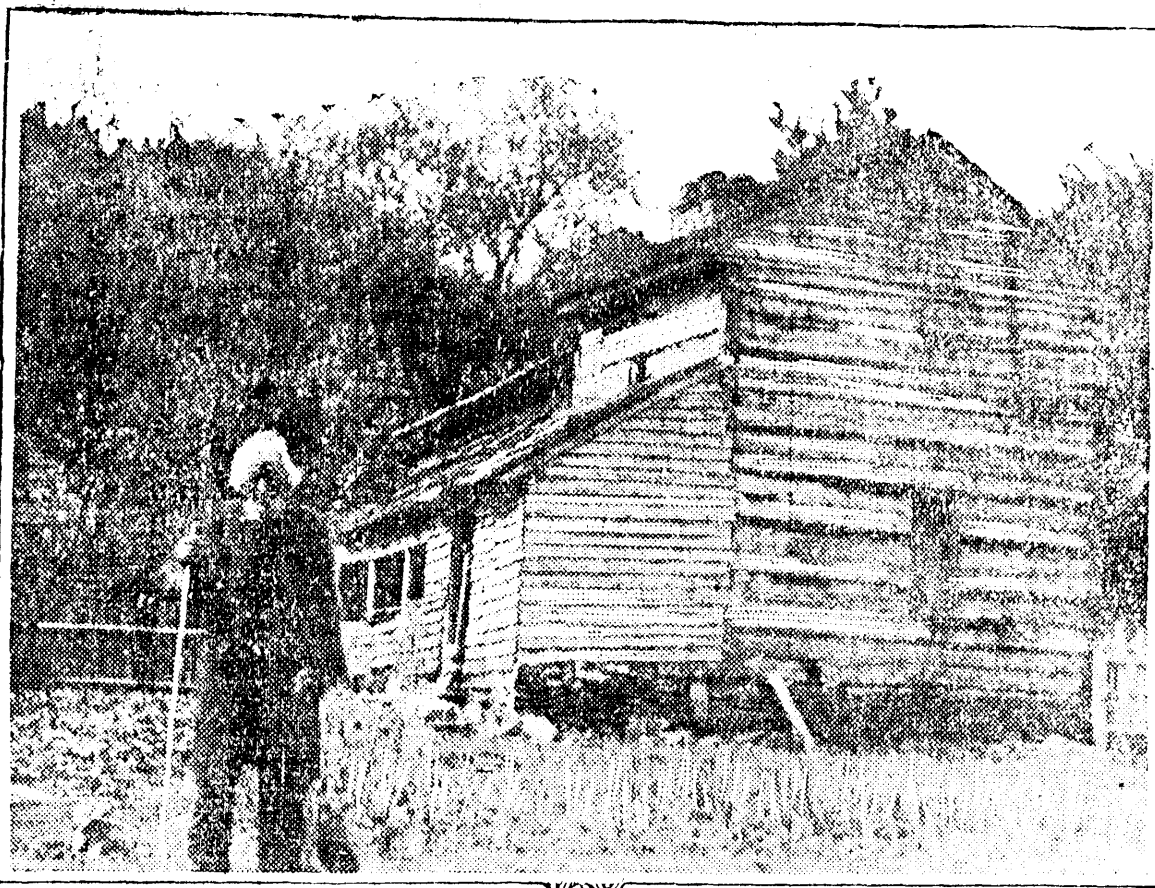
4 IDENTIFICATION

DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC. IF DISTRICT, GIVE BUILDING NAME & STREET

PHOTO NO: 8

Shell cabin is in right foreground of picture.

Claims To Be Oldest Man In The World



John Snell, who claims to be the oldest person in the world, in front of his house at Greasy Creek, Leslie county, Kentucky.

Is John Snell the oldest man in the world? The National Geographical society has been asked to investigate and report on Snell's claims of being the oldest person alive in all the world.

Although "Uncle John" believes his age is 116 in September, other old men in the vicinity insist that

Uncle John certainly must be about 130 years old. They base their reasons upon the good authority of a tax duplicate signed by John Snell in 1809, when he would have had to be twenty-one years old in order to have to pay taxes.

The above picture of Uncle John's first venture with the camera man

the first picture in existence had made and it was a real treat, as he expressed it. His posing was unlike any amateur's. He posed as if he were an adept at the business.

The old man is an interesting talker, retaining his mental qualities extremely well.



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CITY, TOWN	VICINITY OF	COUNTY	STATE
Chappell		Leslie	Kentucky

3 PHOTO REFERENCE

PHOTO CREDIT
copy of newspaper clipping, not identified by
NEGATIVE FILED AT name or date.

DATE OF PHOTO
c. 1920

4 IDENTIFICATION

DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC. IF DISTRICT. GIVE BUILDING NAME & STREET

PHOTO NO. 9

View of front (enclosed by frame addition), and side of cabin.