

## **HISTORIC FUNCTION:**

Gilbert Billard was exiled from France in 1852 for having participated in an uprising against Napoleon. Billard was sent to Devil's Island off the coast of French Guinea, South America. He and others escaped from the secluded prison. With the help of the Dutch government Billard found his way to New York. His wife met him there too after having still been in France during her husband's imprisonment.

In the summer of 1854, Gilbert and Antoinette Billard with their two sons, Francois and Jules Benoit (subject of this house and property,) traveled to Kansas City. By 1859 the Billard's rented a farm and then soon joined a gold rush party bound for Colorado. One of the sons, Francois, enlisted and fought in the Civil War but was killed March, 1862 at the Battle of Glorieta Pass, New Mexico in the fight for Apache Canyon. After five years of searching for gold, Jules Benoit and his parents returned to the farm at Oakland (Topeka, KS). By 1866 Gilbert Billard built a two-room stone house using stones from Deer Creek. Today Deer Creek flows into the Shunganunga Creek approximately 1 ½ miles southeast of the Billard house. Gilbert Billard died April 29, 1870 at the age of 54.

In 1873 the small house was greatly changed and increased in size by Jules Benoit (J. B.) Billard. He added a living room to the south side of the two-room house constructed by his father. J. B. married Hermance P. Laurent in 1875. She was born in Provence, France. J. B. became a mayor of Topeka from 1910 – 1913. Their three children were Reamer, Robert, and Phillip.

Phillip Billard has local fame for having flown an A. K. Longren biplane built in Topeka, Kansas. Phillip served in World War I but was killed in action flying over France near Issoudun. Phillip Billard Airport in Oakland is named in his honor. A Longren biplane was donated to the Kansas Historical Society on July 24, 1938 exactly 20 years after Phillip was killed in France. (See photos for Phillip Billard and a biplane ca. 1914-1918.)

In 1931 J. B. and Hermance Billard's son, Robert, extended the living room of the house twelve feet farther south, built a wing across the north end and added the turret at the northwest corner. In 1954 the original two rooms of the house were being used as a dining room and a den.

Source: Topeka Daily Capital. May 16, 1954 p. 11A

Accessed at KSHS Library and Archives: Newspaper Microfilm #T1721

---