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ESSEN LOG CABIN

REBUILD NEARS FINISH



CHRISTIAN GOODEN, POST-DISPATCH

Eli McDonald, of CCX contractors, installs roof tiles on the Essen Log Cabin in Wildwood on Thursday, July 30, 2026. A project to rebuild the historic cabin is nearing completion at the city's Village Green park.

Inside

MARKETS	A6
NATION & WORLD	A7
OPINION	A8
OBITUARIES	A9
SPORTS	B1
EVERYDAY	B7

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Restoration of historic structure has been 10-year saga for Wildwood

BY SETH NELSON
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

WILDWOOD — When city leaders set out to reconstruct a historic cabin in a local park, they had no idea they'd still be waiting to finish the project more than a decade later.

The restoration of the Essen Log Cabin — a two-story structure that is nearly 150 years old — should finally wrap up this month in the Village Green park. The project has been anything but easy.

Through the 10-year saga, the cabin has been stolen, recovered and damaged. And when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and costs rose, enthusiasm faded among elected officials to finish the restoration.

Now, they're ready for the project to be over.

"It's more of a relief than an exultation," said Joe Vujnich, Wildwood's planning and parks director. "When we get to the end of this project now, at least from my perspective, we're just happy it's done."

The cabin work is slated to be finished by Aug. 21, just as a new school year starts.

"It'd be a great opportunity for local school kids to come by and actually see what it was like to live in a cabin," Vujnich said. "It kind of grounds you to know that this is how our forefathers and mothers had to get by every day."

The Essen Log Cabin was built in 1878 by Gerhard Rudolph Essen, a German cobbler who immigrated to America eight years earlier and was one of the first settlers in the area.

Alongside his wife, Ellen, Essen

Please see CABIN, Page A5

Cabin

From A1

built the cabin in what was then called Melrose — a predominantly German enclave south of the current Old Eatherton Road in Wildwood.

John Essen, one of Gerhard's sons, would later build what is now called the Ball-Essen House, which is preserved as part of the Ball-Essen Farmstead Historic District in Wildwood. John's son, Francis, would move just east and help found Ballwin.

Even a century and a half after it was built, the cabin was in remarkably good shape, Vujnich said.

"It's unique, too, that it's a two-story cabin," he said. "There's not a lot of those anymore."

The cabin stayed in the same location over the decades, next to the Essen Family Cemetery, where 30 members of the family are still buried. Eventually, the family relinquished ownership of the property.

Then in 2015, the owners at the time offered to donate the cabin to Wildwood and asked to have it moved to a city park.

Most of the descendants of Gerhard Essen — still scattered around St. Louis County today — were enthusiastic about the idea, said Carl Essen, Gerhard's great-great-grandson.

"If you make history available to the youth, and the youth reaches in and grabs that history and studies that history," he said, "then all of a sudden they realize that their parents, if not their grandparents, were part of that history."

Members of Wildwood's Historic Preservation Commission visited the cabin in late November 2015, hoping to finalize plans.

But when they arrived, the cabin was gone.

Police determined that a thief had dismantled the cabin in the middle of the night and thrown it in a truck. Only the roof, rafters and floor were left behind.

The theft, which likely required accomplices, was an incredible feat. The logs are extremely heavy — and there were 50 of them, worth about $50,000 in total.

A few weeks later, police followed an anonymous tip to Wentzville, where they discovered the logs sitting outside an apartment occupied by Gregory Cole, 54.

"Cole admitted to the theft, stating he had grown up near the cabin and was familiar with it," says Wildwood's online history of the cabin. "His mother still lived in the area. He had planned to sell the stolen lumber."

Prosecutors charged Cole with theft; the state's court database has no records on how the case was resolved.

The theft presented more issues for the project than just a delay. Seven of the logs were damaged beyond repair.

"The gentleman and his cohorts who were stealing the logs, they didn't necessarily take the care that a professional would," Vujnich said.

And because the logs were stolen before officials could record their original arrangement, builders would need to figure out how to put the pieces together.



CHRISTIAN GOODEN, POST-DISPATCH

Essen Log Cabin stands near completion on Thursday, July 30, 2026, in Wildwood's Village Green park.

For three years, Wildwood struggled to find a contractor willing to take on the project. So in 2019, they laid out all the logs on top of a parking garage in the town center and started figuring out how the pieces fit together.

But when the pandemic hit in 2020, progress ground to a halt.

The project remained in limbo until 2023, when officials eventually landed on the new Village Green park in Wildwood as the best location. The park is next to the police station and City Hall — a safe location in light of the earlier theft.

By the end of that year, city officials had managed to find a donor for replacement logs. And in December 2024, Marthasville-based contractor Charrette Creek Excavating agreed to take on the project for nearly $300,000.

Charrette Creek's bid was the lowest by more than $40,000, Vujnich said. But the cost still shocked some City Council members.

As the council wavered, a quick rebuild of the cabin became even more necessary. The logs had sat in storage for almost a decade, largely exposed to the elements.

"We're at a juncture here," Vujnich recalled telling council members. "We either need to move forward, or we need to advise the Essen family that this is not a project we can take."

Final approval for the project finally came to a City Council vote in September 2025. Council members debated furiously over whether to accept the cost or abandon the project.

The project failed the first vote — more than half of the council voted against it. Then they continued the debate, and decided to vote again.

By the end of the night, two members switched their votes and the project passed 9-6.

Council member Joe Farmer, who voted against funding the cabin both times, said he still doesn't think Wildwood should have spent the money. And he doesn't believe the work will be done soon.

"Things keep adding up," he said. "They keep finding new things to do."

But despite the troubles, Vujnich believes the cabin is worth the effort and cost.

"Is this a life safety issue? Certainly not," he said. "But in a community that values historic preservation. It's important to a large, large group of people. Those are the people that have supported it through all these years."

All that's left now is to install new windows, finish the cabin's brick chimney, install a front door and stain the logs.

Carl Essen visited the cabin recently while crews were working on it.

"Coming in the front door, I put my hands on the logs maybe three feet above the ground," he said. "It was like I was touching the logs the same way my grandfather had touched them when he was a little kid visiting his grandma."

Seth Nelson
snelson@post-dispatch.com