Tradition Building: Timber framing vs. Log Construction in the High Hollows area of Rockbridge County, Virginia

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Anthropology 332
Dr. McDaniel
Winter 1984
The fact is, the people of this whole region devote more of their time to hunting than they do to agriculture, which accounts for their proverbial poverty. You can hardly pass a single cabin without being howled at by half a dozen hounds, and I have now become so well educated in guessing the wealth of a mountaineer, that I can fix his condition by ascertaining the number of his dogs. A rich man seldom has more than one dog, while a very poor man will keep from ten to a dozen.

(Lanman 1856: 400-401)

For the historical archaeologist, architecture as an artifact is virtually invaluable. The hope for a standing structure of the period on a site is immeasurable in the mind of a historical archaeologist. Architecture is often an immediate indicator for an archaeologist's questions concerning social, economic, and cultural aspects of a particular group of people on a specific site during a certain period of time. Unfortunately, in the situation of the High Hollows area in the Upper Shenandoah Valley on the western slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains, few standing structures are available to the archaeologist or the anthropologist. Yet, it is fairly well-known that of the domestic structures that were present in this area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some were of frame construction while others were of the log house type. For this student and paper, the ideal goal is then
to acquire information leading to the reasons and decisions contemplated and chosen for one of these types of construction over the other. In turn, some conclusions from such information can be reached concerning the values, beliefs, and standards of the people who lived in this High Hollows area.

It seems appropriate in the introduction of this paper to restate an important fact concerning a related subject which may or may not be readily apparent to the reader. This has to do with an extremely unfortunate and widespread fallacy presently being referred to as "The Log Cabin Myth." In a book with precisely that title, Dr. Harold Shurtleff emphatically states on the first page of Chapter One "...that the earliest English colonists, from Newfoundland to Virginia, first built temporary shelters of tents, Indian wigwams, and huts or cottages covered with bark, turf, or clay, and, as soon as circumstances allowed, replaced them by framed houses."\(^1\) It was not until 1638 that the log cabin type structure was brought to North America by the first Scandinavian immigrants and then in about 1710 by the Germans. Even the term "log cabin" has not been found in any manuscript or in print before 1770 (interestingly enough, the first mention comes from a 1770 record of Botetourt County, Virginia). Dr. Shurtleff goes on to state that "...the Scotch-Irish who began coming over in large numbers after 1718 seem to have been the first
English-speaking race to adopt it (the log cabin).³ The point remains that the general public truly misunderstands this fundamental yet absolutely essential fact in American architectural history. For our purposes, the clarification of this myth proves the importance and awareness of traditional architecture present in the approach of the early colonists towards the basic necessity of shelter.

For the student of early domestic Virginia architecture, it is widely known that there was a great deal of traditional influence, directly and indirectly, from the Pennsylvania Germans and the Scotch-Irish. Therefore, an examination of the styles of architecture of these peoples seem necessary for a general understanding of the course of architectural forms in Virginia. Pennsylvania, obviously named after an Englishman, William Penn, was inhabited by Swedish and Finnish peoples before Penn's first contingent arrived in 1682.⁴ These people and the Germans of the eighteenth century were documented as well equipped and prepared to build homes of log construction, while Penn and the English-speaking settlers built framed houses exclusively after their first temporary shelters. Migration and immigration into Virginia came from all directions. The Germans and Scotch-Irish came from the northwest out of Pennsylvania into the Valley of Virginia, while the English came down out of the north from New Jersey to the Williamsburg area and from the east in the Jamestown
and Roanoke Island areas. In the early eighteenth century, there seems to have been a fairly obvious east/west split in the architecture of Virginia. The western mountaineers were apparently constructing log dwellings of German origin as opposed to the Tidewater area framed houses of English character. Yet, by the late eighteenth century, Dr. Shurtleff proposes that log cabins were plentiful throughout Virginia, both as pioneer dwellings in the Valley, and for slave quarters on the Tidewater. He supports this with a theory that the "log-wall construction of the rude, round-log type" was brought to Virginia at a time when the importation of slaves from Africa was rapidly increasing, creating the need for some cheaper form of housing.  

The only hewn log buildings that the English were known to have built were called blockhouses. These structures served two purposes: as military fortification, and as prison restriction. The blockhouse was either mortise or half cornered, and the projecting ends at the corners were squared off smooth by the broadaxe (Diagram A). The English framed house meant a house with a timber frame, consisting of sills, posts, studs, plates, girders, joists, rafters, beams, and braces (Diagram B). The beams were framed or fitted into one another by workmanlike joints, some of which were strengthened by wooden trunnels or pins. The Scotch-Irish are generally attributed with the first "logg cabin" around the mid-eighteenth century. In a letter to a friend, Martha Washington reports
of her husband in Botetourt County, March 7, 1778, "The General's apartment is very small he has had a log cabin built to dine in which has made our quarters much more tolerable than they were at first." The first appearance of the term in that same county in Virginia was in April of 1770 when the county court voted, "...to agree with a workman to build a log cabin twenty-four feet long and twenty wide for a Court House, with a clapboard roof..." Like the Scotch-Irish, the Pennsylvania Germans came from lands where framed houses were a luxury (Diagram C). For these people, as settlers on a frontier, the log cabin was economically feasible, defensibly sturdy, and good, solid protection from the elements.

At this point, it seems very clear that by the early nineteenth century both log cabins and timber framed houses were being constructed in Virginia. It also seems, though, that an east/west regional division was present, but realistically speaking, examples of both forms of construction throughout the state was highly probable. Subsequently, for the western part of Virginia, Rockbridge County and the High Hollows area in particular, the fact that it is believed that both log and frame type buildings were present is understandable and plausible. The following is an account which holds highly in favor of the dominant existence of the log structure in our area. Samuel Kercheval, of German descent, settled in the Shenandoah Valley with his father as a small boy in 1773. About 1776, at the
age of six or seven, he was sent to Maryland to school, in charge of his uncle. *History of the Valley*, first published in 1833, is Kercheval's book which contains this passage recalling his arrival in Maryland:

> At Bedford everything was changed. The tavern at which my uncle put up was a stone house, and to make the change more complete, it was plastered in the inside, both to the walls and ceiling. On going into the dining room I was struck with astonishment at the appearance of the house. I had no idea that there was any house in the world which was not built of logs: but here I looked round the house and could see no logs, and above I could see no joists; whether such things could be made by the hands of man, or had grown so of itself, I could not conjecture.

If Rockbridge County is geographically and historically in the Shenandoah Valley, this report from a man knowledgeable enough to write a book on "the Valley" is extremely pertinent for this architectural inquiry.

Henry Glassie, a well-known authority on American folk architecture, seems to be in general agreement with most of the conclusions observed in Shurtleff's work. In particular, Glassie's paper entitled "The Types of the Southern Mountain Cabin", begun in 1961, deals with an area that includes the Blue Ridge from northern Virginia to northern Georgia, including the Great Smokies and their foothills; the southern and central Valley of Virginia; and the eastern escarpment of the Alleghenies in Virginia and West Virginia (Diagram D). Glassie believes that the
basic cabin types share with the other Southern Mountain houses types certain characteristics of construction. He goes on to state that Southern Mountain log construction is characterized by logs, usually hardwood, hewn flat on the front and back, or, less commonly, split in half and then hewn on the outside. Glassie specifically reports that, "... less than three per-cent of the over five hundred log houses surveyed within this area were built of unhewn log." This is a very convincing statistic for the log construction argument in our area of concern. The predominant method used to join the logs at the corner in Virginia was the V-notch. The half-dovetailing process was more confined to Tennessee and North Carolina. Both types of corner-timbering are closely related. Both are notched on only the bottom of the log, and in both the ends of the logs are cut off flush producing a box corner (Diagram E).

Of the two types of mountain cabins discussed by Mr. Glassie, the square and rectangular, both are found in our area of Virginia. "The square cabin is extremely common all along the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge in Virginia. It is found only occasionally in the Valley of Virginia..." (Diagram F). The rectangular cabin appears more closely to Rockbridge County and as Mr. Glassie puts it "...most commonly in those areas in which the Pennsylvania influence was greater than that of the Tidewater. It is found occasionally through the Valley of Virginia..."
and the eastern Alleghenies..." (Diagram G). Glassie's conclusions are basically cultural. Firstly, that the common external chimney is of English influence, while the usual height of the Southern Mountain Cabin is of Pennsylvania German influence. Secondly, the techniques used to construct the cabins were mainly Pennsylvania German, in log examples, and Anglo-American, in frame examples. Glassie also agrees that Southern Mountain folk architecture is, then, predominantly "Tidewater-English and Pennsylvania German; yet the majority of the mountain people are of Scotch-Irish ancestry."

In another important work, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States, Glassie focuses more on house plan types. In this book, he initially claims, "Architecture, because of the natural tenacity of its fabric, the immobility and complexity of its examples, and the practical conservation of its builders and users, has maintained its regional integrity and is of greatest use in the drawing of regions." Glassie continues on to relate plan types to regional divisions, and this correlates well with the previously defined regional splits in exterior material construction. After all, the placement, emphasis on, and subsequent use of different spaces inside a house can tell just as much about a family or group of people's lifestyle as can the material with which they chose to build the exterior. In this context, Glassie remarks of Virginia, "During the movement out of the Tidewater, the number of
houses built of brick diminished as did the number built
with hip or gambrel rather than gable roofs; the I house,
particularly in its central hall subtype, and the exter-
nal gable end chimney became even more prominent."
Glassie later elaborates, "...throughout the rolling Valley
the houses are predominantly of the English I type brought
over the Blue Ridge from the low country west of the Chesap-
ake Bay." 15 Floor plans and interior spacial arrangements
can and have been extremely instrumental in drawing conclu-
sions about a group's culture, but this essay shall only
mention their significance and focus on external distinc-
tions and considerations.

By this point, with the information thus far presented,
it would appear that the average house built in the High
Hollows area of Rockbridge County must have been one
dating to the mid-nineteenth century of V-notched log
construction and Scotch-Irish origin. In a survey and
paper entitled "The Architecture of Denmark and the High
Hollows", Christopher Quirk (Washington and Lee, 1982)
discovered the following results. Of twenty-three stand-
ing structures surveyed in an approximate area of four
square miles, ninety per-cent of them date from the mid-
nineteenth century on. From the original forty-six
structures once present in this area, the remaining
twenty-three entail approximately seventy-five per-cent
log construction, fifteen per-cent frame type and ten per-
cent brick. Ten of the log buildings were available for
close enough inspection to discover that eight were of the V-notch type, while two employed the half-dovetailed form of corner notching. Consequently, the introductory research and the actual evidence still available in the Hollows area are virtually one and the same. The question therefore remains: What does this tell us about the settlers of this area and their cognitive approach towards architecture?

Mr. Quirk draws the obvious yet significant conclusion that these Scotch-Irish settlers were of a lower economic status and were quite conservative in their overall lifestyles. It does seem more than clear that financial capabilities and restrictions had to have influenced log construction over timber framing, but there is still room for supplementary factors leading towards this same decision. The apparent isolation of this area can account for some lack of variety in the methods of construction. Yet, the fact remains that frame and brick houses, although heavily outnumbered, were being built in this same vicinity in the 1850's. It is even documented in one instance that the bricks used for the Miller-Knick house, supposedly built in 1849, were manufactured "on a hill directly behind the house." I feel this decision lies deeper in the mind-sets of these settlers and more specifically in their allegiances to traditional heritage and custom.

In a very short essay entitled "Lower Delaware Valley", Jewett A. Grosvenor begins with this anecdote:
The Massachusetts colonist disregarded the abundant supply of stone about him and built a timber house. The early Pennsylvania colonist, hailing from a different part of England, settled in a land heavily wooded with a plentiful supply of the best timber heart could wish and used it merely to construct a log cabin for temporary shelter until he had time to quarry stone or bake bricks and build a dwelling of a type like that to which he had been accustomed in the Mother Country.

Grosvenor's following statement is one which he describes as "a very bromidic observation". He claims that we are all creatures of habit. His point is that in no one particular area is our addiction to hereditary custom more likely to come to the surface than in matters of architecture. Grosvenor further claims that this tendency on the part of the first settlers to stick to their own several architectural traditions has been pointed out more than once. In agreement with this, I feel that, in many instances, this allegiance has carried not only across the Atlantic but throughout the centuries in the kinships and lineages of these early settlers. I also get the feeling that in many societies and cultures such as those found in the High Hollows, the prevailing attitude might well have been of the type, "if a log house was good enough for my father and his father etc., then, it's good enough for me!" Another traditional factor which must be taken into account and pursued is that these Scotch-Irish settlers were descendants of a strictly wooden culture. Their view of many
material items such as furniture, wagons, fences, and even toys being of wooden substance was most common and natural. Similarly, in their architecture, a house might not have been a home unless it was made of hewn logs joined at the corner with a single fireplace, a sleeping loft and a tin roof. Monetary and economic considerations cannot be disregarded or ignored, and Mr. C.A. Weslager ties this factor and the element of tradition together well in a passage from a book simply entitled *The Log Cabin in America*. Speaking of the Pennsylvania Germans, Weslager remarks with a tone of pride and respect:

They had little money to buy building materials or to hire carpenters, and it was not by chance or choice, but through necessity that they built log cabins, not with the infinite care given the construction of a village house in Germany, but in a manner adequate to meet their immediate needs. If by chance the immigrant came from a city or a part of Germany where log housing was not in wide use, there was always one of his countrymen, familiar with log building techniques, willing to give the newcomer a hand in raising a cabin.
ENDNOTES


3Ibid., p. 4.
4Ibid., p. 123.
5Ibid., pp. 158-159.
6Ibid., pp. 25-26.
7Ibid., p. 184.


10Ibid., p. 345.
11Ibid., p. 353.
12Ibid., p. 355.
13Ibid., p. 362.


15Ibid., p. 75.


17Dean Simpson's, National Historic Landmarks Survey records. Files of standing structures in Rockbridge County.


19Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Also, a special thanks to Pamela H. Simpson, who allowed me access to her survey files and partially directed my bibliography and answered many of my questions.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

[Signature]
1. Mortised Cornering of Hewn Logs, Blockhouse Type
2. Halved Cornering of Hewn Logs, Blockhouse Type
3. Notched Cornering of Round Logs, American Log-Cabin Type
A HOUSE FRAME AND ITS PARTS
Restored frame of the Thomas Clemence House, Manton, R. I., built c. 1680. Drawn by Helen Mason Grose.
A PENNSYLVANIA-GERMAN LOG CABIN OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

At Potter's Bank, Center County. Front view and detail of chinking with split oak and clay. The daubing has fallen out.
The Types of the Southern Mountain Cabin

Central Valley of Virginia; and the eastern escarpment of the Alleghenies in Virginia and West Virginia. It does not include the Cumberlands, the southern tail of the Blue Ridge, and most of the Tennessee Valley, as these Appalachian areas received less direct Pennsylvania German influence and are a part of a different architectural complex, which is comparatively southern in orientation. This
Fig. 11.
FIGURE 7. SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN CABINS OF THE SQUARE TYPE.
A. V-notched cabin situated south of Fletcher, near Hood, Greene County, Virginia (July 1963). By May 1966 this cabin had fallen to ruins. B. This cabin was built of balloon (light, sawed, nailed together) frame covered with vertical boards. When the shed was added to the chimney end both parts were covered with weatherboards. It is situated between Crozet and Whitehall, Albemarle County, Virginia (A). The shed, with a central chimney room, is larger than the frame (B). However, several plans in the Deep Valley of Virginia show either N. and W. chimneys in a door in what is almost a square room, but the large chimney is at the former entrance to the house.

The m and 16' 26', 17', etc. may be smaller than shown.
C. Weather-boarded frame cabin with late rear shed addition, situated west of Allen Gap, Greene County, Tennessee (May 1966). A cupboard is built into the partition. This cabin has Greek Revival trim of the type very common in the rural North during the second quarter of the nineteenth century (see Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* [New York, 1964, reprint of 1944], generally pp. 258-310), but rare in the Southern Mountains. While built by a carpenter who had some awareness of the nonfolk architectural mainstream of his period, this is a perfect example of the rectangular cabin type. D. V-notched cabin with front porch and rear shed addition, situated north of Fairfield, Rockbridge County, Virginia (July 1963).

with the front door (Fig. 11A), but in a few cases it was (Fig. 11B). This could be the result of influence from the Scotch-Irish rectangular cabin, although square cabins in the English-Tidewater tradition did occasionally have rear doors (Fig. 11C). Similarly a very few