Cabin Architecture in the
Valley of Virginia

W. David Dunn, Jr.
Archaeology 377
5/25/84
Dr. McDaniel
One way to judge the extent of cultural development in a society is to judge the societies technological abilities and how these abilities are put into use. By studying the cabins which existed in the Valley of Virginia around the turn of the 20th century, one can see how technologically inclined the people were at constructing the type of architecture they knew best - the cabin, and therefore learn something about their culture. "Houses must be considered a product of culture, not merely as technological or decorative elements." 

The cabin, hut, or house of round or squared logs, the familiar log cabin of Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln, a common type of dwelling construction in Scandinavia, Russia, Switzerland, and parts of Germany for centuries past, was brought to the New World by the first Scandinavian immigrants in 1638 and, independently, by the Germans about 1710. 

Scandinavian log construction is best known for pine logs left round or hewn to square or hexagonal shape with no interstices between the logs. The logs are notched either on top or on both sides with the ends extending to a uniform length. Even though log construction is of Scandinavian descent, Scandinavian log work is, on each point, different from the American Tradition. The first group to adopt the cabin in America was the Scotch-Irish who came in 1718. One might think that because the English were the first to colonize in America that cabins originated in England, but they were rarely used there. Early scholars who were unsure about the history of the cabin thought American log construction came from the settlement of New Sweden. Uniquely enough, it is in Bohemia, western Moravia,
and Silesia (now Czechoslovakia) that log construction of exactly the American type can be found. 7

Before an explanation of cabin types is made, the distinction between a log cabin and a log dwelling house should be made. Primarily, it is construction, not size, which determined whether a structure was a log cabin or a log dwelling house. Also, whether the logs were left round or not helped in the distinction between a "cabin" and a "dwelling house." The distinction was best made by Thaddeus M. Harris in his work: Journal of a Tour into the Territory Northwest of the Alleghany Mountains: Made in the Spring of the Year 1803.

The temporary buildings of the first settlers in the wilds are called Cabins. They are built with unhewn logs, the interstices between which are stopped with rails, caulked with moss or straw, and daubed with mud. The roof is covered with a sort of thin staves split out of oak or ash, about four feet long and five inches wide, fastened on by heavy poles being laid upon them. If the logs be hewed, if the interstices be stopped with stone, and neatly plastered; and the roof composed of shingles nicely laid on, it is called a log-house. A log house has glass windows and a chimney; a cabin has commonly no windows at all, and only a hole at the top for the smoke to escape. 8

The underlying factor determining this difference was the use of superior construction techniques and features. 9

The two major cabin types to be discussed are the Square Cabin Type and the Rectangular Cabin Type. The square cabin has a floorplan of roughly sixteen feet square although the fact that the dimensions are square is more important than any particular size. The sizes most often seen are 16' * 16', and 16' * 18', while others less often seen are 14' * 16', 15' * 15',
15' * 17', 18' * 18', and 21' * 21'. The square cabin has a gable roof and an external chimney in the center of one gable end. Rarely is this cabin design partitioned into two rooms. The front door is placed either near the center of the front wall or slightly towards the end of the house away from the chimney. Occasionally, a second door will be present in the gable end opposite the chimney, and rarely is there a rear door. A shed type addition may accompany a square cabin to the rear or on one end and may have a second external chimney built on to it. Front porches are not common on square cabins. In Southern Virginia, square cabins have been found of both log and frame construction. The square cabin is extremely common all along the eastern Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.

The next major cabin type, the rectangular type, has as its most usual dimensions 16' * 22' and 16' * 24'. Other common dimensions are 14' * 23', 15' * 20', 15' * 24', 16' * 26', 17' * 24' and 18' * 23'. The rectangular cabin has a gable roof also with an external chimney in the center of one gable end. This cabin may have only one room, but it is most commonly divided by a light partition into two rooms. Both the fireplace and the front door are located in the larger room. The front door is located near the center of the front wall or displaced on the front wall toward the chimney end of the house. There is usually a rear door directly in line with the front door as well. Shed additions are common on rectangular cabins as they are placed almost always in the rear in "lean-to" fashion, and if there is a chimney on the addition, it is not likely to be very large. Ell additions and front porches are more common than on square cabins. Rectangular cabins are found occasionally in the
The ground floor room of a typical mountain cabin contains a bed, a table, a cupboard, a bench, possibly a "boughton" couch (used as a bed at night) and several chairs. The chairs are usually mule-eared, slat backed, with seats woven of hickory splints or strips of inner tube. The interior walls of a cabin are most typically whitewashed and papered on both the ceiling and the walls with newspaper or covered with planed boards nailed on vertically. Domestic items such as clothes, firearms, and framed oval daguerrotype of ancestors can be found hanging on the walls. Floors in the cabin are almost always composed of boards nailed over "sleepers" which are logs hewn flat only on the top. The standard roof type for the mountain cabin is a gable roof. The gable roof is formed with rafters butted at the ridge either on a plank or a plank ridge pole. Horizontal roofing boards are nailed over the rafters and split shingles are nailed to these, (to this day, split shingles are common in Southern mountain cabins.) The gable ends were, rather than built of succeedingly smaller logs, covered with vertical boards. More common, however, were horizontal overlapping weatherboards nailed to vertical studs framed in between the top log in the end wall and the end part of rafters. Many cabins built around the early 20th century had lofts accessible either by a ladder or by a staircase. The loft was usually unheated although some did have small fireplaces. Spinning was formerly done in the loft, but it is mostly used for storage of trunks, medicinal herbs, dried fruits, smoked meat, and odd items such as old harnesses and license plates. Only the older children used the loft for sleeping quarters as
the parents slept in a low bed in the corner on the ground floor. The stair leading to the loft was usually boxed-in and often had the cabin’s only closet underneath it. Normally it was placed along one wall opposite the fireplace.

The exterior construction of the cabin, until WW I, was mostly of horizontal log type, though a few older ones were of frame construction. Of the cabins built in the past half century, however, the majority are frame with only a few log type. The basic Southern Mountain log construction is characterized by hardwood logs hewn flat on the front and back; less commonly they are split in half and then hewn on the outside. Almost all of the logs used in cabin construction were cut in some way. Characteristically, wide interstices, spaces, were left between the logs which were filled with mud and stones or covered with boards. They were finished off with a lime plaster. Of the various methods of joining the logs at the exterior corners of the cabin, V-notching, square notching, saddle notching, diamond notching, full dovetail notching, and half dovetail notching, the one most prominently found in Virginia is V-notching.

The cabins found in the Valley of Virginia, as cabins found all over the Eastern U.S., were often enlarged by additions. Cabin additions can be viewed as a new type of cabin or as an appendage to a basic type. Two kinds of additions are the lean-to addition, and the shed addition which often serves as a kitchen. These are normally built on to the rear but may be put on one end. A front porch is an addition which balances the rear shed and also provided another room for the summer.

Upon examination of cabin types and construction, we see large English, Scandinavian, and Scotch-Irish influence in the
architecture of the Valley of Virginia. It is helpful to study mountain cabin architecture because it is a product of culture and a good tool by which we can learn about our ancestors. To study early architecture is very culturally beneficial because the ideas, expressions and artistic tastes of those who lived before us are reflected in their architecture, a special form of technological expression.
ENDNOTES


4 Shurtleff, p. 4.

5 Glassie, p. 345.

6 Ibid., p. 345.

7 Ibid., p. 345.

8 Thaddeus Mason Harris, Journal of a Tour into the Territory Northwest of the Alleghany Mountains, Made in the Spring of the Year 1803. (Boston; Manning and Loring, 1805), p. 15.


10 Glassie, p. 349.

11 Ibid., p. 353.

12 Ibid., p. 353.

13 Ibid., p. 353.

14 Ibid., p. 341-2.

15 Ibid., p. 342.
16 Glassie, p. 341-2.
17 Ibid., p. 347.
18 Ibid., p. 341.
19 Ibid., p. 341-3.
20 Ibid., p. 343.
21 Ibid., p. 345.
22 Ibid., p. 348.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

Figure 1

Methods of joining logs at corner
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.

CABINS OF SQUARE TYPE
APPENDIX C

Figure 9. Southern Mountain Cabins of the Rectangular Type.
A. Half-dovetail cabin located west of Allen Gap, Greene County, Tennessee (August 1964). This is one of the few observed mountain cabins that has an earth floor. Like many other early log houses, this cabin has been converted into a tobacco barn. B. Half-dovetail cabin with front porch and rear shed addition situated in the Shelton Laurel area north of Marshall, Madison County, North Carolina (June 1963). In the front corner at the fireplace end of the cabin there is a trap door in the loft floor to give access via a ladder to the loft.

Recent cabins, usually—but not always—frame, which have a stove for heating and cooking rather than the traditional chimney. The stove is served by a narrow brick flue usually built against the inside or outside of one gable wall. Another area of variation is in the doors. The square cabin typically has no rear door, though a few were observed which did have one; this rear door was not always in line...
The Types of the Southern Mountain Cabin

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
I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

W. Daniel Dunn, Jr.