

GERMANIC BUILDING IN EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Edward A. Chappell

For: America's Architectural Roots, 1986

The character of scholarship on the subject of Germanic building in the United States is indicative of the attention given to the material culture of minority groups in general: it is rather spare and anecdotal. Yet the subject is a rich one, offering potential for understanding the process of cultural change as well as the recognition of widespread and long-lived traits existing outside the rushing stream of Anglo-American culture.

Most of the German-speaking people who moved to America in the century and a quarter after the late seventeenth century came from the Palatinate area of the Rhineland, the large majority first settling in southeastern Pennsylvania. There was, however, considerable diversity of emigration and prior movement of people within the Rhineland region, making the transplanted culture less than homogeneous.

By the mid eighteenth century, affluent German Americans began to build houses of a quality sufficient to survive into the twentieth century. These are primarily detached buildings set amidst rural landholdings rather than grouped in agricultural villages like those in the Palatinate. Already somewhat different from their Palatine predecessors, the American

houses were also recognizably distinct from those of English-speaking neighbors.

Among surviving houses in Pennsylvania and the subsequently settled areas of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, distinct components were often united in a form that has been called a Flurküchenhaus or perhaps more properly an Ernhaus. These buildings feature direct entry into a rectangular first-floor kitchen, with a square entertaining room or Stube on the opposite side of a large internal chimney. The latter was traditionally heated by a stove vented into and provided with coals from the cooking fireplace. Particularly graphic evidence of Rhenish patterns of room use is provided by some early houses which show the scars of built-in benches around two sides of the Stube. Among larger houses, optional rooms included narrow sleeping chambers behind the Stube, additional chambers in full second stories and, less often, a small heated room at the rear of the kitchen.

Roofs were framed with complex structures paralleling those found along the Rhine, and in Pennsylvania these were sometimes covered with flat tiles and used for the storage of grain and the curing of meat. This drawing together of specialized work and storage spaces into the house is more commonly illustrated by the presence of carefully insulated cellars, sometimes incorporating a natural spring.

In the traditional Rhenish manner, builders raised walls of rubble stone or exposed timber framing called Fachwerk. By the late eighteenth century, the savings in costly labor afforded by log construction made it the predominant choice despite its absence from the immediate background of most German Americans. Interiors were generally characterized by expression of building parts. Walling material was often exposed and floor framing was almost never hidden behind plaster. Hardware was emphasized with decorative silhouettes of a variety and richness not seen in Anglo-American buildings of the same era.

Despite the apparent consistency of form in most German American houses, other equally early houses reveal that there was no strict adherence to a single type. From New York to North Carolina, there exist eighteenth-century Germanic houses that are recognizable by their parts rather than by the presence of a completely familiar form. Most significantly, the kitchen sometimes lost its position as the principal entry space and was relegated to the cellar. In other cases, the kitchen remains on the first floor but the overall plan is barely distinguishable from an English or Dutch two-room house. In areas where Dutch and Germanic traits mingled early, sometimes the choice of a hillside site is the only clear evidence of Germanic planning.

The variety of room configurations among the earliest surviving houses deserves investigation because around the end of the eighteenth century dramatic new changes took place,

reflecting powerful acculturative pressures. For perhaps a generation, essential aspects of the old forms and structure were retained but combined in ways that emphasized exterior symmetry and allowed removal of work functions from the main floor.

Henry Glassie has suggested that the Pennsylvania farmhouses with two facade doors built well into the nineteenth century were still influenced by memories of the Germanic plan. In Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, lingering evidences of Rhenish planning were almost entirely abandoned and for those wealthy enough to build on a substantial scale, the All-American center passage I house became the predictable choice. Among the affluent, distance from their past was further established by using brick or weatherboarded frame walls, leaving log and stone for work buildings and the one- and two-room houses of their less successful neighbors.

Interestingly, though, it was during the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, when a homogenous American form overwhelmed recognizable Germanic forms, that the decoration of interiors and furnishings was carried to a level of richness and flamboyance previously unknown. To some degree this phenomenon was a reflection of a widespread stylistic trend toward the imaginative use of decorative, non-functional woodwork, achieved principally through the manipulation of Adamesque design formulas. More importantly, the new woodwork

and painting expressed the presence of an aesthetic not shared by most other Americans.

This seeming dichotomy between exterior conformity and interior expressiveness raises more general questions of how minority groups respond to pressures exerted by those who maintain political and economic dominance. In the strongest areas of eighteenth-century Germanic ancestry, there are still remarkable traces of minority culture ranging from the occasional use of dialect to the painting of barns with large-scale traditional motifs. These are now mere vestiges, but when earlier German Americans faced great pressure to conform, they responded with an intense though largely personal expression of affection for old cultural distinctions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baumgarten, Karl. Das deutsche Bauernhaus. Revised ed.  
Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985.

Bucher, Robert C. "The Swiss Bank House in Pennsylvania."  
Pennsylvania Folklife, v. 18, n. 2, Winter, 1968-69.

Chappell, Edward. "Acculturation in the Shenandoah Valley:  
Rhenish Houses of the Massanutten Settlement." Proceedings  
of the American Philosophical Society, v. 124, n. 1, Feb. 29,  
1980.

Glassie, Henry. "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in  
Delaware Valley Folk Building." Winterthur Portfolio 7,  
1972.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Edward Chappell is director of the Architectural Research Department at Colonial Williamsburg. He began fieldwork on Germanic buildings while a graduate student at the University of Virginia and has written several articles on issues of change in Rhenish American culture.