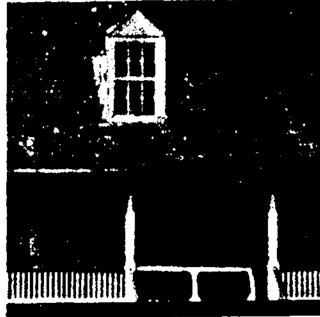
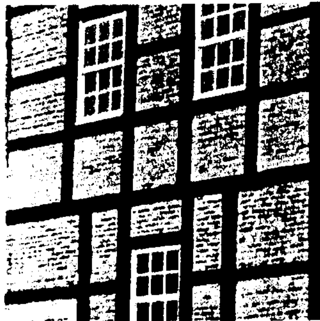
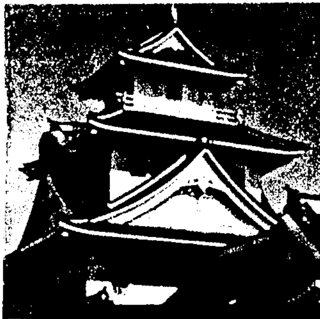
AMERICA'S ARCHITECTURAL

ROOTS

ETHNIC GROUPS THAT BUILT AMERICA







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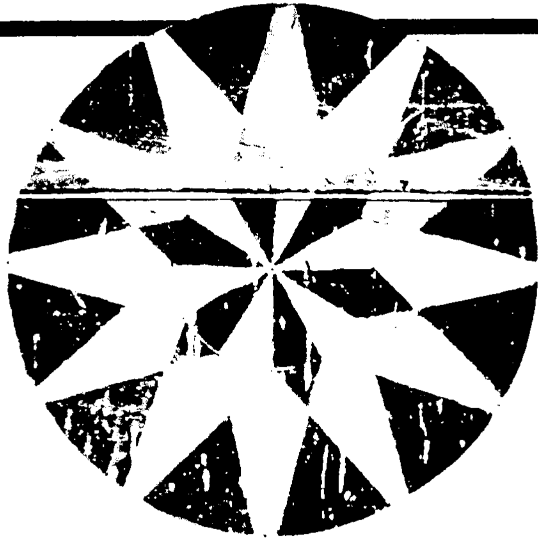


GERMANS AND SWISS

Edward A. Chappell

Most of the German-speaking people who moved to America in the late 17th and 18th centuries came from the Palatinate area of the Rhineland, the large majority first settling in southeastern Pennsylvania. Because of the considerable geographic diversity of the immigrants and prior movement of people within the Rhineland region, however, the transplanted culture was less than homogeneous. Some of the most celebrated Germanic buildings in Pennsylvania and the South, for example, were built not by immigrants from the Palatinate but by pietistic groups from Westphalia, Moravia, Bohemia and Silesia.

With few exceptions, the earliest buildings were so impermanent that now only archeological investigation can reveal anything about them. By the mid-18th century, sizable numbers of affluent German-Americans began to build houses of a quality sufficient to survive into the 20th century. These are primarily detached buildings set amid rural landholdings, more akin to the single farmsteads of minority source regions such as areas of Switzerland, Bavaria and Lower Saxony than the agricultural villages of the Palatinate. Already somewhat different in form as well as setting from their 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 now occasionally called a *Flurküchenhaus* or, perhaps more properly, an *Ernhaus*. These buildings feature direct entry into a rectangular first-floor kitchen, with a *Stube* (square entertaining room) 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 that show the scars of built-in seats 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.

Opposite: Traditional geometric painting on the interior of the R. M. Schlegel Barn (19th century), Berks County, Pa.

Centerview Farm barn, Augusta County, Va., a 19th-century fore-bay barn type that originated in Pennsylvania.

Roofs generally had a simple gabled form but were supported by complex framing systems paralleling those found along the Rhine. In Pennsylvania roofs were sometimes covered with flat shinglelike tiles, with the attic space used for storing grain and curing meat. This drawing together of specialized work and storage spaces in the house is more commonly illustrated by the presence of vaulted or carefully insulated cellars, sometimes incorporating a natural spring.

In the traditional Rhenish manner, builders raised walls of rubble stone or exposed heavy timber framing called *Fachwerk*. By the late 18th 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. Log walls were a part of the vernacular building tradition in some areas of Switzerland and present-day Germany, but seldom are precise parallels for common American log joinery found there. Interiors were generally characterized by expression of building parts: Walling material was often exposed, ceiling framing was almost never hidden behind plaster, and hardware was emphasized with decorative silhouettes of a variety not seen in Anglo-American buildings of the same era.

Despite apparent similarities in the form of most early houses, others reveal no strict adherence to a single type. From New York to North Carolina, 18th-century German houses still exist that are recognizable by their parts rather than by a completely familiar form. Most significant, 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 German planning.

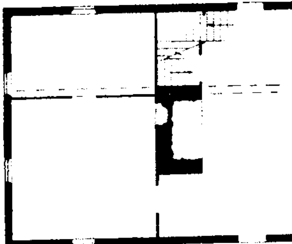
The variety of room configurations among the earliest surviving houses deserves investigation because around the end of the 18th century dramatic changes took place, reflecting powerful acculturative pressures. For perhaps a generation, essential aspects of the old forms and structures were retained but combined in ways that emphasized exterior symmetry and allowed the removal of work functions from the main floor.

Fort Zeller, Lebanon County, Pa., a mid-18th-century *Ernhaus* with a spring and food storage facilities in the cellar. This German house type was entered through the kitchen; the *Stube* was opposite a large chimney.

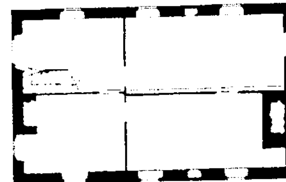
Front door latch at Fort Zeller, a restrained example of 18th-century German-American ironwork.

Miller's House, Millbach, Pa., probably the largest single-family German-American house surviving from the 18th century. Its form, however, is like that of smaller houses built with internal chimneys.

Snapp House (late 18th century), Shenandoah County, Va., a log three-room *Ernhaus* with direct entrance into the cooking room on the left.



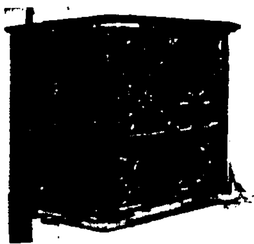
Yancy House (late 18th century), Rockingham County, Va., a three-room *Ernhaus* with a central chimney serving as a cooking fireplace for the kitchen at right.



Spangler House, Lebanon County, Pa., an 18th-century stone house of incontestable German credentials and appearance but not an *Ernhaus* form.

Kitchen of the Philip Dellinger House (c. 1815), Shenandoah County, Va. The exposed ceiling framing, masonry fireplace and log walls are typical of German immigrants' tendency to express individual building parts.

Detail of an iron door strap on a smokehouse at Tulpehocken Manor, Lebanon County, Pa., an example of the German affinity for rich decoration of mundane objects.



Stove in the Schiefferstadt House (mid-18th century), Frederick, Md. This five-plate cast-iron stove was a type commonly used to heat the *Stube* and remains in its original location on the house's upper floor.

Michael Braun House, Rowan County, N.C., an example showing changes in building design resulting from late 18th-century acculturation

Henry Glassie has suggested that the Pennsylvania farmhouses with two facade doors built well into the 19th century were still influenced by memories of the German 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 for the one- and two-room houses of their less successful neighbors. The change in materials is highly evident in Salem, N.C., settled by Moravians in 1766. In 1769, for example, a large dormitory for single men was built with *Fachwerk* walls; in 1786 both a dormitory for single women and an addition to the men's building were constructed with Flemish-bond brick walls.

During the earliest decades of the 19th century, when a homogeneous American form overwhelmed recognizable German forms, 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, nonfunctional woodwork, achieved principally through the manipulation of Adamesque design formulas. More important, the new woodwork and decorative 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 18th-century German 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. When earlier German-Americans faced great pressure to conform, they responded with an intense although largely personal expression of affection for old cultural distinctions. ⊡

R. S. Lam House, Augusta County, Va., a quintessential American I house type that replaced the *Ernhaus* for most affluent German families in 19th-century Virginia. (All previous photos by Edward A. Chappell)

Single Brothers' House (1769), Salem, N.C., a Moravian *Fachwerk* building extended by a brick addition in 1786. (Old Salem, Inc.)