

Vernacular Architecture Forum

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Staunton, Virginia

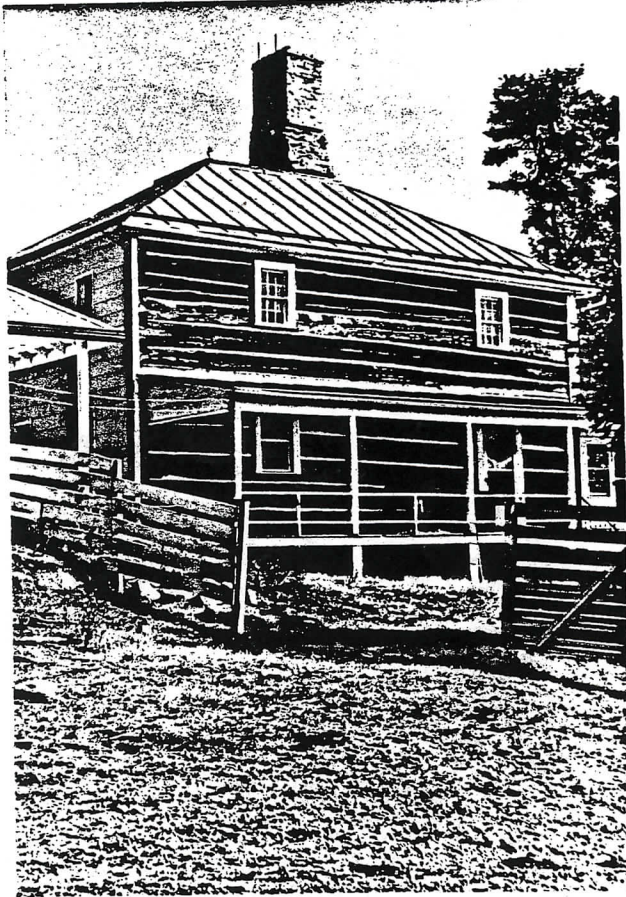


Fig. 4: Fort Egypt, south facade.
 Photo by Dell Upton,
 VHLC, 1978.

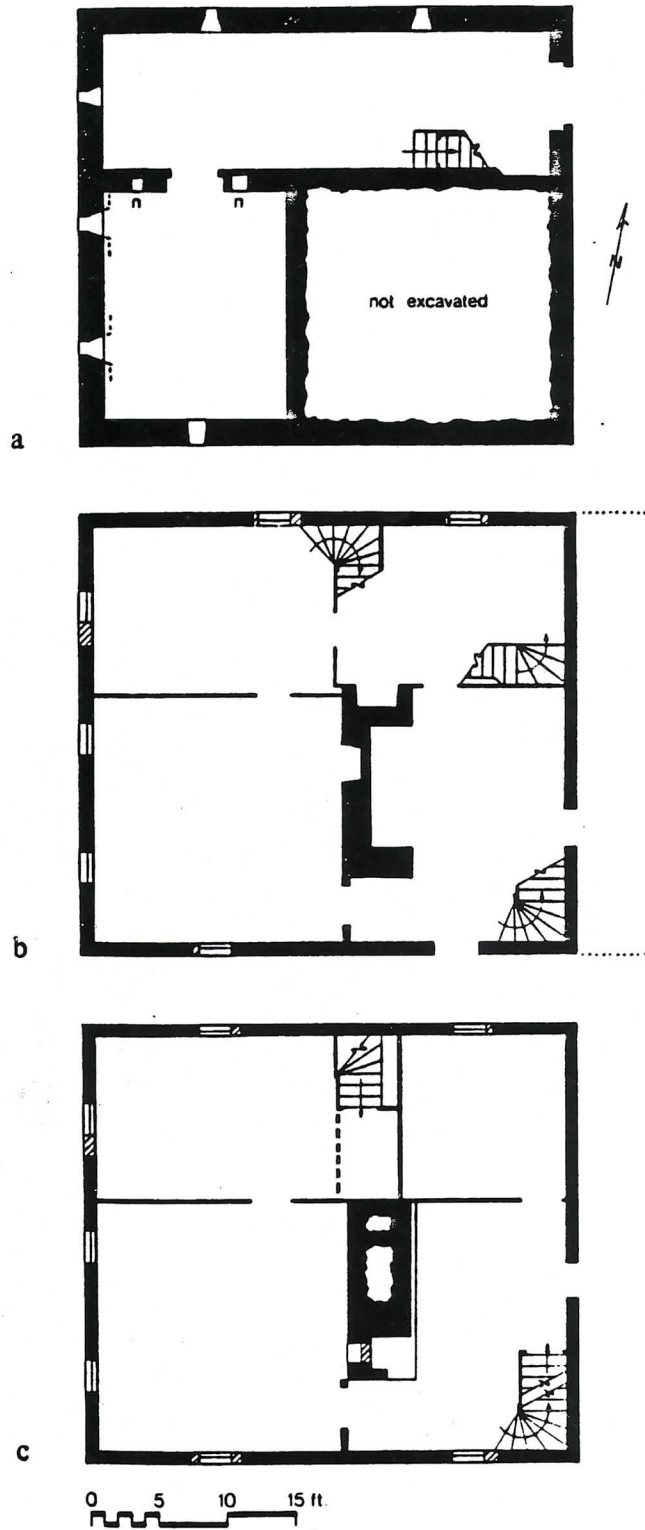


Fig. 5: Fort Egypt. Floorplans, top to bottom: cellar, main floor, second floor. Drawings by Ed Chappell. Courtesy U. of GA. Press. Photo by Willie Graham CWF, 1987.

FORT EGYPT, Page County

Two houses long known as Fort Egypt and Fort Stover are among the most familiar German-American buildings in the Shenandoah Valley. Both were drawn and photographed by HABS in 1940, when each was in a slightly different condition. Fort Egypt is perhaps the largest and most intact house of relatively unacculturated character ^{of} Pennsylvania.

The original four-room form remains largely unaltered, although naturally the building has not been left alone in the last two hundred years. Low horizontal windows were replaced with more conventional vertical sash windows during a Federal-era remodeling, but the original two-bay arrangement of facade openings survives. This modest fenestration is somewhat surprising given the size of the house (36' x 32'2"). As expected in an Ernhaus or (probably less appropriately) Flurkuchenhaus, the off-centered door provides direct entry into a narrow Kuche, and the front window lights a square Stube, the chief entertaining room. As in most sizeable American Ernhaus, a narrow unheated chamber (Kammer) is located behind the Stube. A fourth room, perhaps a workroom, is partitioned from the rear of the Kuche and provided with a small fireplace. The semi-subterranean ground floor is a classic example of a high-quality German-American cellar with two insulated storage rooms, the inner one made superior by the use of a stone vault.

Typically, the house began with a highly tectonic interior. Chamfered joists were exposed and set on summers that were similarly finished. Partitions and doors were constructed with boards and battens, the latter decorated with cyma moldings. The oversized logs of the exterior walls and probably the stonework of the chimney were left exposed inside.

It is very likely that the Stube was originally heated with a five-plate iron stove backing into the 9-foot-wide Kuche fireplace. The 18th-century German-American preference for such heating devices is nicely illustrated by a small elevated second-floor fireplace intended principally to provide coals for a stove in the larger room. (A comparable situation exists, with a surviving stove, on the second floor of the Schiefferstadt House, in Frederick, Maryland, which was visited by the VAF in 1981.)

In the early 19th century, the interior was refined with board ceilings in three first-floor rooms, a new and cleaner partition between the Stube and Kammer, and a chair rail in the same three first-floor rooms and several second-floor rooms. Also, a rear stair was added, causing adjoining parts of the first-floor partition and upper flooring to be cut out.

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Interestingly, though, the old Kuche seems to have remained largely unchanged, conceivably still retaining its rustic function despite the new elaboration of the other rooms and the fact that it continued to serve as the principle circulation space. It is worth observing that most of the old doors and hardware survived the remodeling, and some culturally distinct building techniques remained in the age of neoclassical frivolity. Most prominent are second-period doors with tapered battens dovetailed into the boards.

Questions for inquisitive observer include whether there were one or two Federal remodelings and why a second stair was thought necessary. Could the latter be the result of the two left-hand rooms becoming a pair of entertaining rooms while their neighbors continued to be used in a relatively rough-and-ready fashion? The siting of the house and the much later outbuildings are also worth considering in relation to the slope of the hillside and the position of arable fields and the south fork of the Shenandoah River.

Edward A. Chappell



Fig. 6: Fort Egypt. View of farmstead looking west. Photo by Willie Graham, CWF, 1987.

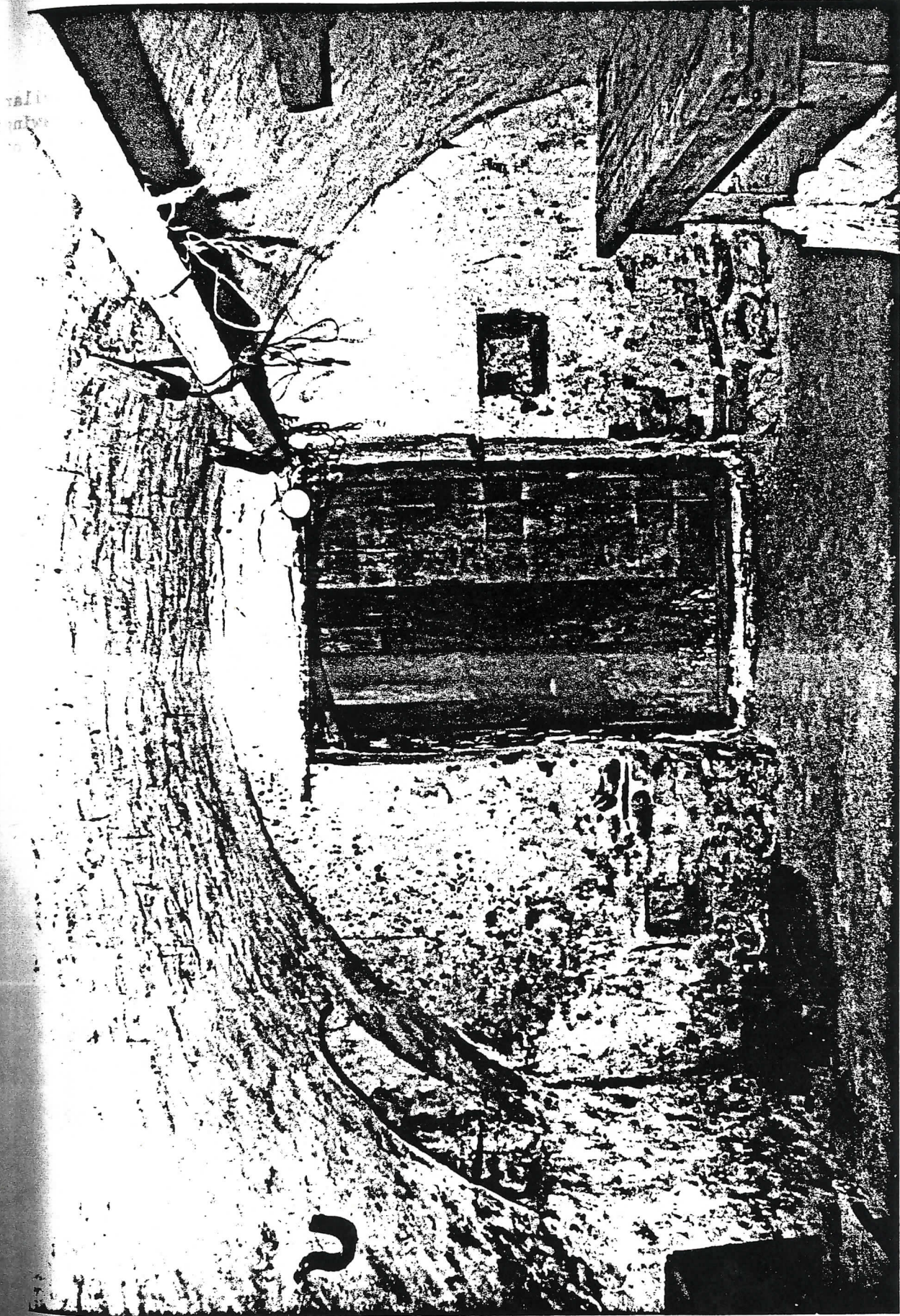


Fig. 7 Fort Egypt, vaulted stone cellar. Photo by Ed Chappell, 1977.

