

Upper Delaware Valley Cottages

A Simple Regional Dwelling Form

*Houses are significant in so far as they reveal the living conditions of a period and the capacity of the people who occupied them. They are a record of human society and of the particular genius of a given community.*¹

Research, surveys, and preservation activities provide much of what we know about small vernacular dwellings built in 19th-century America. Unfortunately, these modest dwellings rarely attract sufficient study and are often subject to drastic modification or demolition. As a result, their “collective knowledge” may be lost or relegated to photographs. Some writers believe these simple regional dwelling forms were so engrained in the collective knowledge of the builder/craftsman as to make new designs superfluous.² It is assumed that evolutionary changes that occurred were more a product of experience than suggestion or planning.

In Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA) there is a particular 1½-story cottage dwelling type that still survives. Its profusion makes it a dominant rural dwelling type in the upper Delaware Valley. Through further study and preservation, we may better understand its origins and increase its chances for survival.

Cultural geographers have defined vernacular structures as those built according to traditional precedents, i.e., without formal design, and influenced by local building materials and environmental conditions. When legislation for the national recreation area was passed in 1965, amidst all the controversy a unique opportunity emerged to study the origins and ethnic influences of the region’s domestic (vernacular) architecture. Settlement of the upper Delaware and the evolution of vernacular architecture that resulted were the product of diverse cultures from a variety of other, earlier settlements.

The typical 1½-story upper Delaware Valley cottage is a variation on the “hall and parlor” house plan, though one-room-plans and

two-room-plans were also common. Prior studies have identified similar types of dwellings built by the English, Dutch, Flemish, and Germanic peoples, who are collectively indigenous to an area encompassed by Connecticut, Long Island, northern New Jersey, southeast New York, and eastern Pennsylvania — the cradles of 18th-century America.³ Two distinct types of cottage have been identified — English Cottage in New England⁴ and East Jersey Cottage (EJC) in northern New Jersey.⁵ The British Cabin, as defined by Glassie and others, from the lower Delaware Valley may be yet another possible style.⁶ All are potential progenitors of the Upper Delaware Valley Type (UDVT) first named by Norman Souder in the formative years of Delaware Water Gap NRA.⁷

They have in common wood framed, 1½-story, gable ends with floor plans that are two rooms wide and one room deep with eave-side entrances. Such houses, however, were also built of stone. Other possible differences among these examples include the date when erected, roof pitch and overhang, window type and placement, chimney types and locations, and method of heating.

In sorting out differences and similarities among these examples, the EJC and UDVT appear to share a common ancestry. It is primarily the use of frieze band windows at the second floor level of the UDVT that differentiates the two; under close comparison their similarities far outweigh their differences.

Indeed, the cumulative changes in the construction and appearance of the EJC as settlements moved westward may have actually culminated in the UDVT and could explain one possible origin for this cottage form. While Souder coined the phrase “Upper Delaware Valley Type” to describe such cottages as the Daniel Clark House in his 1967 architectural survey of the park, he did not fully discuss the origins or variations of the UDVT. His broad and cursory survey simply indicated the UDVT was important because of its profusion in the area. Variations in



Daniel Clark House, built c. 1865.

the UDVT can likely be attributed to owner/builder preferences, economic conditions, and the technology of the day—or simply fashion trends at the time. While these variations owe little to the EJC, the basic form of the UDVT cottage could have evolved, in part, from the westward migration of the EJC.

The predominance of the Greek Revival style in the early- to mid-19th century had an effect, if somewhat delayed, upon the appearance of cottages built in the park and surrounding areas. Not surprisingly, UDVT cottages with Greek Revival detailing are not at all uncommon. Stylistic features were simple in execution, probably to reduce costs, and usually occurred near the roofline in the use of expanded cornice detailing and paneled frieze boards punctuated by a single three-pane window sash, called “eyebrow” window. Early and late versions of the UDVT cottage likewise show the respective influences of Federal and Victorian styles. Style, however, should not be viewed as the overriding character-defining feature of the subject cottage, for an equal number of examples were left unadorned. While only the earliest examples have fireplaces on one gable end, most were heated by wood stoves and have interior, gable end chimneys. Early examples have six-pane sash window units but later examples exhibit two-pane sash used in three, four, and five bay examples.

On occasion, builders repeated certain examples, creating identifiable phases or subtypes. Company towns, not unlike Walpack Center in the park, are good examples of plain, but nearly identical, repetitive dwellings. Sometimes the subject cottage evolved from the

expansion of an earlier dwelling. In Millbrook Village, for example, the Garris House was expanded linearly from a cabin into this house type. Such a linear expansion into this popular house type speaks much to the aspirations of the owner. It also serves to illustrate that looks can be deceiving when dating historic buildings.

Much information remains to be uncovered on the original range of the UDVT cottage (within this region), their historic appearances, and the differences between examples. Indications are that only a fraction of those built remain; and of those still in existence, most have been substantially modified into contemporary dwellings. Currently, only a few of the UDVT cottages exist in their original state. Within the park, some 14 examples still remain; but only the Garris House has been restored to a period appearance. The others remain mothballed.

The UDVT cottage was a dominant vernacular dwelling type in the park and the surrounding area. Like all other architecture of the region, it is a hybrid — a cross-fertilization of the cultures and the traditions of those who settled the area. The very simplicity of this cottage type reflects a deliberate intention to live modestly. Delaware Water Gap NRA has provided one of these examples a refuge from extinction. Those that remain warrant preservation too.

Notes

- ¹ J. Jakle, R. Bastian, D. Meyer, *Common Houses in America's Small Towns*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 1.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Peter Wacker, *New Jersey's Cultural Landscape Before 1800*, (Newark, NJ: New Jersey Historical Society, 1970).
- ⁴ Lester Walker, *American Shelter*, (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1981), 78.
- ⁵ Thomas Wertenberger, *The Founding of American Civilization*, (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1938), 69, 153.
- ⁶ Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968) 47, 52 & 53.
- ⁷ Norman Souder, *Historic Structures Report on Historic Structures of Delaware Water Gap NRA*, (Philadelphia: National Park Service, Office of Archeology & Historic Preservation, 1967).

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