COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

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Americans have been building homes for more than four hundred years. Colonial architecture spanned more than two centuries of this time and spread over a great part of our Country.

When we speak of Colonial Architecture just what do we mean? This term has been applied to styles that flurished along the Eastern seaboard in the sixteen hundreds. Then there was a gradual transition about 1700. Any house built before 1783 could be called Colonial or Early American.

Buildings from the very beginning had definite reasons for being constructed in their particular style; namely, the purpose or need of the builder, the skill or knowledge used and the available material.

PRIMITIVE SHELTERS

Very primitive shelters were used in all the early settlements of North America. When the Colonists first landed on the shores of this country they had neither the time nor the facilities to construct substantial frame, brick or stone houses such as they had lived in in the Mother Country. In order to survive they were forced to build very crude shelters for protection against the cold, wind and snow of the Northern climate. Homes of this type have long since disappeared and were followed by dwellings made of frame and masonry.

Many serious and conscientious students have long assumed that the first homes of the settlers were log houses built of horizontally laid logs and chinked with clay resembling those of

the later frontier settlements. A careful study of documents concerning the earliest dwellings found in the Colonies given us a very different picture.

The ideas for the first shelters were not new inventions and did not come from the Indians but were transplantations of crude conical huts such as were used by the shepherds, goat Herders, peat diggers or charcoal burners found on the moors and meadows of the English country side. They were not made of frame or brick but were constructed of branches, rushes, turf, palings, wattle, clay or mud.

A square pit was dug into the ground, six or seven feet deep and as large as needed. The earth was cased all around with timber and lined with the bark of trees to keep the soil from caving in. The floor was covered with planks and the roof with spars covered with bark or green sod to keep the room as warm as possible. Sometimes they were only half excavated with the upper wall built of sods.

In 1631 the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts Bay speaks of "some English wigwams which have taken fire in the roofs covered with thatch and boughs."

Another type of home is mentioned by Edward Johnson who was one of the first settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Company. "They burrow themselves in the earth for their first shelter under some Hillside, casting Earth aloft upon Timber, they make a smoky fire against the Earth at it's highest side - yet in these poor wigwans (they sing Psalms, pray and paise their Gods) until they can provide them homes."

When Philadelphia was founded in 1682 similiar shelters "were formed by digging into the ground, near the verge of the river front bank, about three feet in depth thus making half their chamber underground, and the remaining half above ground was formed of sods of earth or earth and brick combined. The roofs were formed of layers of limbs or split pieces of trees overlaid with sod or bark or river rushes."

An effort was made in 1685 to put an end to such dwellings but not all were immediately destroyed and as late as 1760 there was still one standing.

Many of these conical huts were of wattle with or without daubing. Wattle was a woven or twisted net work of rods or twigs plated together, and daubing was a coarse sticky substance which was painted or smeared over the framework.

In the Plymouth colony in 1621 a storm is reported by a Mr. Bradford, "Caused much daubing of our homes to fall down," and in 1623 he mentions a fire. "The fire broke out of a chimney into ye thatch and shortly after, when ye vehemence of ye fire was over, smoke was seen to arise within a shed, yt was joined to ye end of ye storehouse which was wattled up with bowes in ye withered leaves where of ye fire was kindled."

From this description we can see that the wattle was on stakes or posts driven into the ground as had been done in the medieval period in England, Houses built of frame did not appear until several yesrs later.

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These small turf huts were sonn elongated by using a ridge piece supported on forked poles or cratchets. An example of this was found in the earliest church in Jamestown. There is a specific description of the first early Virginia settlers. "In foule weather we shifted into an old rotten tent, for we had few better. This was our church till we built a homely thing, like a barn, set upon cratchets, covered with rafts, sedge, and earth, so was also the walls; the best of our houses were of like curiosity, but for the most part farre much worse workmanship, that could neither well defend winde or raine."

"Because of necessity all the first settlers followed these modes of building. Even gentlemen arriving here from Europe found their new abodes very mean structures compared to those they had left behind.

The frist shelters seem to have been built of trunks of trees or planks standing vertically, similar to palisades.

This method was followed by the settlers of East Jersey, one of whom wrote in 1684. "The poor set up a house of two or three rooms themselves, the walls of cloven timber set on end in the ground, the other nailed to the raising, which they plaster within."

In none of the early records of the English Colonies in America can there be found any evidence of a building constructed of horizontal logs. It is also quite significant that this form of construction was never used in England. There is no reference of any log house appearing in America before 1669 to 1680.

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It has been tempting to put the colonists into log houses with the idea borrowed from the Indians, but it is a proven fact that none of the tribes of Indians with whom the colonists came in contact lived in log houses. The long house of the Iroquios and the Creek were of quite different construction and even these did not begin to appear until after the founding of Georgia.

The swedes and Finns settled in Delaware in 1638 and it is reasonable to suppose that the idea of the log house was a transplantation of dwellings that had been used for a long time in their own country. New Sweden from the beginning traded with both New England and Virginia. Through the interchange of ideas with the Sweded and Finns a superior form of construction resulted.

A member of a Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote, "The Lord has been pleased to turn all the wigwams, huts and hovels the English dwelt in at their first coming into orderly, fair and well built homes." But we must not forget that free grants of land in the Colonies to the common man was much more favorable here than in England.

FRAME HOUSES

The Colonial mason or carpenter had learned his trade through a long apprenticeship and he became his own architect using materials found in the locality in which he decided to live.

The first homes were purely utilitarian, extremely simple in design and appearance. Most of them were copied from Europeon styles but had to be modified because of the climate and materials available. Continued:

In the North East Colonies these were generally Constructed of wood around a central chimney. In Pennsylvania there was a preference for field stone, while the Southern Colonies often used bricks with a chimney at either end.

In 1611 we find the first frame houses in Virginia being erected by English Colonists. By 1617 There remained only five or six. The Deputy Governor wrote that every year they had to rebuild or repair the old cottages because of decay in the damp climate. There is no document concerning a wooden house still standing in Virginia that was constructed in the early seventeenth century.

There are detailed descriptions of a house built in Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1638 for Deputy Governor Samuel Symonds. The report is quite long so I will just list a few of the details. "Indifferent whether it be 30 or 35 feet long and 16 or 18 broade. Wood chimney at each end, made very strong to beare a heavy load of clay for security against fire. Two lower dores to be in the middle of the house, one opposite the other, and in every place soe high that any man may go upright under. Stairs best placed by dore. It Makes no great matter though there be no partition upon the first flore, if there be make one biger than the other. For windows let them not be over large and as few as conveniently may be with shutting draw-windows having respect both to present and future use."

The contract for an artisan's house built in 1640 has been preserved. It was to be 16 foote long and 14 foote wide, and a story and a half with a single room in each story, clap boarded on the outside and a chimney of hewen timber without daubing. The contract Continued:

price was twenty-one pounds.

We find from Ipswich, Mass., records that houses of this type and size were commonly erected in Mass., between the years 1665 and 1670.

By 1650 better homes were being built in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut for the wealthier members of the community. The initial portions of some of these houses are still standing.

In the second half of the seventeenth century in New England we find some written documents and authentically dated buildings that have been preserved. Many have been restored, rebuilt or modified and for many there are engravings, early photographs or drawings, showing the architectural style which is essentially medieval. Structure is the significant element, form and details continuing from the Middle Ages.

There are ten well preserved houses in Essex County, Mass. dating from 1651 to 1695. All these were originally simple houses, rectangular in shape, having one or two rooms, a steep gable roof and a huge, usually center chimney. In front of this space was a porch(enclosed) and stairs winding up to the second floor with a door at both top and bottom to keep out the drafts.

Many houses of one room were subsequently lengthened beyond the chimney, functional considerations took presidence over symmetry in determining the size of the rooms. Sometimes additions were made in the form of a lean-to at the rear of the main roof. By the close of the century many of the homes were being built with a lean-to from the start.

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In 1720 larger American homes were built, many in the Georgian style which came into being furing the reign of King George I of England, but many smaller ones were still being built by masons and carpenters who began to adopt some of the decorative designs of the larger homes. This change did not always result for the better so consequently some of the charm of the Early American home was lost. Some of the builders could not resist adding ideas of their own which many times resulted in ludicrous mistakes.

Because of social aims and ambitions we have a variety of Colonial homes that are neither Early American nor Georgian, but a combination of both; namely, Dutch, Northern Early American, Greek, Revival, Cape Cod, Salt Box, Southern Early American and Georgian. As a result we have three major architectural designs that mark the Early Colonial house, the Dutch Colonial, Cape Cod and Salt box. We can recognize most houses built after 1700 as being essentially one of these three types despite the material used and its location.

Houses were predominately timber framed structures made of huge oak posts and beams. Between the studs was a filling for insulation, often chopped straw and clay. The outside often clap boards, oak was mainly used in Rhode Island, Conn., and the middle and Southern Colonies but cedar was the preferred choice in Mass. and pine the second. Later we find plaster worked in relief as a covering for the frame and filling. Several of these houses still remain in their original form. We have an early description of this:

"The outside is covered with plastering or what is commonly called rough-coat, but instead of pebbles-broken glass is used.
(or rough-cast)

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The glass appears like that of common junk bottles, broken into pieces of about half an inch in diameter, - the sharp corners of which penetrate the cement in such a manner that this great lapse of years has made no percepitable effect upon them. The figures of 1680 were impressed into the rough cast to show the year of its erection, and are now perfectly legeble. The surface was also variegated with ornamental squares, diamonds and flowers-de-luce."

The roofs of the first rude shelters were covered with thatch, the same material was used for many frame houses up until 1664, then because of the severity of the climate in New England we find hand riven wood shingles being used which proved to be both durable and weatherproof.

The chimneys of the early frame homes were built of wood and clay. This persisted in some sections up until 1706. By the middle of the 17th century many being erected of brick or stone.

Only two original doors from the seventeenth century have been preserved. They have wide boards of two thicknesses, the outside vertical, the inside horizontal. These are studded with wrought iron nails in diagonal lines as were found in England.

"Outside doors were something more than a convenient means of plugging a hole in the wall. For example it not only kept out the wind and the rain but animals, Indians, witches, and it is whispered even the Devil himself." Special designs of the inside doors were invested with magic properties.

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In a few houses was found a door without steps or hinges - built for a purpose. When a death occured in a family, the door was unscrewed and the coffin passed through to the waiting hearse wagon. Then the door was again screwed into place. At Thornbury, the home of Mr. Herbert Spackman in Chester County, Penna. we can find such a door. The house was built in 1709.

During the 17th Century the interior of the walls of a frame dwelling was frequently sheathed with wide grooved boards. The partitions were made of a similar covering.

In the 17th Century not many glass windows were to be found. The "current shutting-draw windows" which I described in the plan for Governor Samuel Symonds house in 1638 "having respect both to present and future use" were no doubt sliding wooden panels which would later be changed for glass.

In 1621 we find a Plymouth, Mass. resident sending a message to England,"Bring paper and linseed oil for your windows" and in 1629 emigrants were advised to "be sure to furnish yourself with glass or glasse and lead for windows."

After 1650 in the better homes we find hinged casement windows with leaded panes, diamond or oblong in shape. Many of these have been preserved. Sometime around 1714 sash windows were introduced into the colonies.

Some houses contained a "Soul Window." This was an oval or round window near the roof that was left open at the death of the head of the house, so the soul could depart.

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The early fireplace was made of roughly dressed stone. Openings were sometimes decorated with soapstone, marble or even Deft tiles were used as early as 1725. Early fireplaces had no mantel, but after 1700 a wooden paneling often framed the opening and later homes had a shelf perched on top of the moulding, thus becoming the mantel piece or shelf. After 1725 it often became the custom to build cupboards in the chimney nook. The cupboards in the small houses were often open but many had doors, "particularly the parson's cupboard which held the bottle of toddy!"

The first bake ovens were built at the back of the fireplace and it was not until after 1775 that ovens began to appear at the side of the fireplace.

The hall of the Colonial home was the center of the family life and it served many purposes. Here friends and neighbors were entertained. It was used as a livingroom, diningroom, kitchen, workroom and sometimes contained a bed. After the lean-to was introduced it became the kitchen, where the cooking, candle making, spinning and weaving were done.

The parlor was used only occasionly to entertain the minister or extremely important guests. The chambers above were for sleeping. Truckle or trundle beds for the children were frequently to be found in the bedroom of their parents. Servants and apprentices used the space under the slanting roof of the garret. In homes along main roads the garrets sometimes became a dormitory for weary travelors. Continued:

The dating for Early Colonial houses calls for great skill and knowledge. In the absence of documentary evidence there can be few more difficult tasks than attempting to estimate the year a house was constructed. By summing up the materials used, geographical location and the individual whims of the Colonial builders we are sometimes able to find a clue. Even old maps, wills or original deeds cannot always be relied upon. The house to which any one of these applied could have been burned and another built on the original site.

Some houses have their dates built in. In a brick house the date of construction or the initials of the owner may have been worked into the gable or chimney. These were made of separate bricks covered with saltpeter and baked near an open fire until the surface became glassy and white. Occasionally anchor irons were made in the form of figures indicating dates. Or we may find numerals cut into the stone walls of a cellar or the timber of the central chimney foundation.

One of the simplest clues lies in hand wrought nails. If these are found the house must have been built before 1795.

The Caleb Pusey House 1683 is the oldest English built house in Pennsylvania. It is of brick and stone construction and has great archeological interest.

Another interesting one in our vicinity is the Brinton 1704 house. In the spring of 1648 William Brinton, a Quaker, embarked with his wife and son William, for Penn's Colony. They were fleeing the religious struggle in Great Britain. As time went on

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Mr. Brinton prospered and was able to acquire more than a thousand acres of land.

His son married Miss Jane Thather at the Birmingham Meeting, then held in the Brinton cabin. His father deeded the land to him in 1697 and here he built a stone house for his wife and six children, the stone coming from a near-by quarry.

The walls were twenty-two inches thick and a steep roof was pierced by dormers and pent eves over the first floor windows on the North and South sides of the house. The windows had leaded sash, twenty-seven in number, quite unusual for the time.

When the West Chester Historical Society received this house as a gift from the descendents of the builder, little of the early building remained. A careful study of the old house was made by an architect, Mr. Edwin Brumbaugh. After the removal of modern wood and plaster and a large serpentine wing, it now stands as it was originally, a medieval dwelling.

"Those who know that old houses have personalities derived from the living and the loving, the borning and the dying, the reunions and the leave takings that have gone on, generation after generation, within their walls, whose worn doorsteps and shining baluster rails bear mute witness to the myrid comings and goings of children, and of old people now long dead - these need no telling of the comforting feeling of continuity, the endless flow of life concentrated in and permeating the place that shelters them now."

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Those who love old houses do not need to be told of the necessity for preserving the atmosphere - the feeling of belonging even in modifying the structure, as too often we are compelled to do.

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