

Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: the Connected Farm Buildings of New England

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Book Reviews

Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn: The Connected Farm Buildings of New England, by Thomas C. Hubka. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984. xiii, 226 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

In *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn* Thomas C. Hubka wrote a marvelous book. It is architectural history of the most engaging sort, the kind that becomes virtually a full-scale cultural history of the people who inhabited the houses and worked in the barns. Hubka asks a deceptively simple question: why did Maine farmers connect their houses to a long string of outbuildings in the configuration still familiar on the Maine landscape today? Over two hundred modern informants in the countryside where the buildings still stand gave the answer every tourist hears: the connected structures protected farmers doing their chores from the bitter Maine weather. But Hubka found this simple explanation unsatisfying. An answer that did justice to the evidence in the buildings and in farm literature required him to reconstruct the work lives, the building practices, and the cultural aspirations of the nineteenth-century farm families who erected and occupied the connected buildings in southern Maine and southeastern New Hampshire where the pattern was most common.

Hubka had a lot to tell about the construction and placement of farm buildings, about the furnishing and adornment of the houses, about the organization of the yards around the buildings, and about the rhythms of farm labor; but the interpretive heart of the book is the answer to his initial question, why the connected buildings? Between 1820 and 1850 the most ambitious Maine and New Hampshire farmers began moving buildings scattered about their plots to form them into more orderly patterns, and then to join the buildings and erect new structures, creating various geometrical designs. Between 1850 and 1880 the connected array became a regional orthodoxy, and virtually every farmer of any wealth rearranged his buildings.

One reason they did so, Hubka argues, is that they were under unrelenting pressure from western farm areas that made survival on the thin New England soils increasingly precarious. New Englanders struggled to keep their heads above water in the competitive agricul-

tural markets, but always were in danger of going under. They adopted modern agricultural methods without a modern crop or adequate soils to sustain commercial agriculture. All they could do was to hold on to the complex mixture of diverse crops and home industries which had traditionally been the New England way. Under the circumstances they adopted every little improvement that would add to their efficiency. The connected line of buildings with their convenient adjoining yards, Hubka says, helped farmers to manage the constantly varying tasks which each day brought and the large collection of tools which those tasks required.

Hubka never explains exactly how the connected buildings served this purpose, nor why other farmers in other regions of mixed agriculture failed to connect their buildings. Furthermore, his picture of desperate farmers barely holding on in the face of western competition runs contrary to the rest of his story. On nearly every page of the book, except where he talks about the struggle for survival, he is telling of farm improvements, of bigger houses and more buildings, and of efforts to adorn farm structures and to bring greater comforts into the home. The buildings themselves do not speak of poverty and despair but of prosperity and hope.

He is much more persuasive when he offers cultural reasons for the rearrangement of the buildings. The farmers of southern Maine had imbibed an improving spirit. They not only wanted to grow crops more efficiently but to make their farms appear more handsome. They reoriented the buildings toward the road for the benefit of passers-by and arranged them into patterns that recalled great estate houses with their attached wings, or that resembled equally elaborate town houses. Farmers put fan lights above the doors of the barns, added siding, and painted the barns white, to create an effect like the matched and balanced structures of the great estates. Only the fronts of the barns and little houses were decorated and painted, because the whole array was for show. Though sober and conservative in their taste, the Maine farmers wished to demonstrate that they did have taste, and were not totally unaware of aesthetic refinements. From the evidence Hubka himself provides, it seems that the reasons for connecting the buildings were more social and cultural than practical and economic. The desire for dignity more than for efficiency moved the buildings into line and then painted and decorated them.

Though Hubka seems to say otherwise, the economic pressures on these farmers were not the pressures of impending want. The pressure was to live at the standard required of people aspiring to middle-class respectability: to install a pump and a stove in the kitchen, to turn one room into a parlor, and to fence and landscape a front yard.

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Hubka admires the energy and ingenuity of his subjects in achieving respectability within the limitations of their resources. His book is the best kind of tribute to nineteenth-century rural life. It deserved the Abbott Lowell Cummings Award from the Vernacular Architecture Forum, and was the appropriate focus of a traveling exhibit, "A Good Stand of Buildings." His words, the photographs he reproduced, and the diagrams and renderings of farmsteads and buildings done by himself, enable us as well to understand and to honor these resolute and ambitious people.

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

American Log Buildings: An Old World Heritage, by Terry G. Jordan. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985. 193 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$28.00 cloth.

Students of American cultural history have long been intrigued by the causes and consequences of the transit of civilization from the Old World to the New. Log construction and its associated architecture has been one type of material culture to which cultural geographers, folklorists, and other students of traditional life have frequently turned in order to delineate the specific contours of cultural transmission. In a masterful synthesis based on a decade and a half of fieldwork in this country and in Europe, Terry Jordan, Walter Prescott Webb Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Texas, examined both these issues. He systematically traced the European roots of American log buildings and their role in the formation and development of colonial American culture.

In monitoring the origins of American log construction and its diffusion in the colonial era, Jordan tested four explanatory concepts previously used by scholars investigating the transmittal of European culture to North America between 1600 and 1775. These four models are first effective settlement, colonial cultural simplification, syncretism, and cultural preadaptation. Jordan's data lend credence to the validity of each of these concepts, but they most strongly support the idea of first effective settlement, argued in different ways by Wilbur Zelinsky and Fred Kniffen. Central to Jordan's evaluation of these four theories is his concern to settle a long-standing controversy over the precise European cultural hearth for American log building. Several theses of European origin have been proposed—Finno-Scandian, Alpine-Alemannic, German-Slavic, British—but the debate has centered between proponents of Scandinavian origin and those who insist on German antecedence.

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