HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN FOLK ARCHITECTURE: THE ADAPTATION OF OLD WORLD CONCEPTS TO A NEW AMERICAN SETTING

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Many parts of rural America continue to reflect the values and traditions of the European immigrants who came to this country during the 19th century. This cultural transfer is perhaps most evident in the Midwest—an area settled by numerous ethnic groups who sought a better life from the region's abundant opportunities and availability of inexpensive land. Of all the Midwestern states, Wisconsin probably retains the greatest diversity of surviving 19th century European cultural influences. This heritage helped shape a diligent work and land ethic and progressive attitudes toward government, social reform, education and the quality of life. Distinctive Old World traits were also perpetuated in religion, music, art, food preferences, crafts, festivals and architecture. The latter—particularly in a remarkable array of rural buildings—survives as the most widespread, durable and purest vestige of the State's immigrant culture and will represent the focus of this paper. Recent research, combined with extensive on-site documentation, has provided a better understanding and appreciation of this resource—one that is increasingly regarded as a great national treasure.

More than half of the over thirty ethnic groups that settled in Wisconsin erected structures that retained distinctive Old World architectural characteristics. These patterns of building included an adherence to traditional structure arrangements and siting characteristics, the use of long-accepted construction methods and materials, the retention of specific early building types, the repetition of customary plans and room layouts, and the utilization of familiar interior and exterior decorative elements. This cultural transfer varied over time, of course, since most builders, by choice or circumstance, adapted their construction practices to the conditions of their new Wisconsin homeland.

While immigrants from every part of Europe came to Wisconsin, the Germans soon became the state's largest ethnic group. Subsequently, of all the states, Wisconsin would always maintain the greatest proportion of Germans in its population. Settling throughout the state, German builders utilized a wide range of materials and construction techniques. However, their unique architectural contribution was an impressive array of structures built in the ancient half-timber or Fachwerk tradition utilizing a timber framework topped with clay or brick, to form a continuous wall. In Europe, half-timber technology evolved as a response to shortages of wood and was popular in northern and eastern Germany where most of Wisconsin's Teutonic immigrants had lived. In spite of an abundance of wood in their new environment, Fachwerk was often used by German carpenters for constructing houses, agrarian buildings that included house barns, threshing barns, stables and granaries, as well as commercial structures and churches. As such, the many surviving examples—the largest known concentration of this method of building in the United States—represent an extraordinary 19th century American regional construction phenomenon.
As the tide of westward settlement reached Wisconsin, immigrants from Great Britain and native-born Americans of British stock moved into the state. Here, they generally utilized established building techniques brought from the eastern United States. Anglo-Americans with adequate financial resources preferred fashionable, frame houses that incorporated Greek Revival and other prevailing stylistic features. Others reflected their prosperity by building substantial masonry buildings. These included cobblestone dwellings erected by newcomers already familiar with this method of construction in the east. Settlers of more modest means generally built rather ordinary log houses, particularly when locating in remote rural areas. Several Yankee farmhouses utilized other traditional New England features. These included attaching several buildings together to create rambling, linear, living and work spaces reminiscent of New England's connected farm buildings. One noteworthy formation, built by an Irish-American settler from Massachusetts, incorporated a farm house patterned after early Massachusetts Bay Area dwellings to both its floor plan and in the site, location and detailing of its massive interior fireplace. The end-loaded barn, an unusual type for the state, was also designed from known precedents in New England.

While important elements of Wisconsin's early population came from Ireland, Scotland and Wales, no buildings have been found that portray traditional folk house types from these countries. Settlers from the Cornwall region of England, however, did reflect Old World traits in their dwellings. Settling primarily in southeastern Wisconsin's lead mining region, skilled Cornish masons fashioned adaptations of structures from their homeland with locally-quarried limestone. Recent investigations have verified striking similarities between several buildings in the early settlement of Mineral Point and English prototypes from Cornwall. Two dwellings in this community, the Willium's house, patterned after rural Cornish miners' cottages, and the Thomas/Carter house derived from the two-story structures of Cornwall's urban laborers, are surviving examples of this important relationship.

French explorers and fur traders were among the first Europeans in Wisconsin, but extensive French settlement never actually occurred. However, several rare examples of their distinctive folk architecture have been found in early French-Canadian settlements along the St. Mary's major rivers, including the Fox at Green Bay, the Wisconsin River in Richland County, and along the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien. The notable feature of these buildings was the use of plate sur plate construction—a log joinery method used in French Canada. This technique employed hewn, horizontal timbers with tenoned ends secured into grooved upright logs placed at the corners and window and door openings.

The number of Austrians who settled in Wisconsin was relatively small. In deference to their German cousins, they usually preferred cities and towns rather than farms. Thus, rural buildings with distinctly Old World traits of this group are rare. One notable exception is in Sauk County where an Austrian immigrant built a huge stone barn patterned after those found in the countryside near Vienna, where he lived as a boy. The barn's massive stone walls and jerkinhead roof give it a decidedly different appearance from barns found elsewhere in Wisconsin.

The Swiss emigrated to Wisconsin throughout the nineteenth century, and only California can claim a higher percentage of Swiss stock in its population. Settling in virtually every county, the Swiss were attracted to small towns and rural areas where they were instrumental in developing the state's dairy industry. Their best-known settlement is at New Glarus in southern Wisconsin where remnants of a recent flurry of Swiss "re-creations," little survives of their original folk architecture. Further north, on the prairies of the Swiss Valley settlement in Sauk County, their most distinctive architecture can be found. Here, settlers from Canton Greubelbund built sturdy stone farmhouses and churches from locally-quarried dolomite. Sited at the base of the surrounding valley hills, in a manner reminiscent of similar preferred locations in their homeland, two types of houses can be found. The earliest consists of two-story dwellings with an entrance in the three-to-five bay lateral wall facade. Later, these were often expanded with a one-story wing reflecting the common upright-and-wing farm house form that was prevalent in much of the Midwest. Many have a distinctive masonry pattern which appears to be unique for the area.

Large numbers of immigrants from Europe's Low Countries—the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg—came to Wisconsin. In this new environment, they continued the impressive masonry building tradition of their homeland. While smaller in number than many of the state's other ethnic groups, Wisconsin's Belgians, as one historian noted, "...formed the largest rural settlement of their nationality in the United States." Here, he added, "New Belgium took on the foreign look of Old Belgium." Throughout their northeastern Wisconsin settlement area, they utilized stone and brick for constructing houses, agrarian outbuildings and other structures.
These traditional Belgian-American buildings retain important cultural ties to their homeland and include distinctive wayside, or votive chapels, outdoor bake ovens and episcopal churches—the latter forming the traditional nucleus of their settlements. While not representative of a widely-used construction method in Belgium, their many log buildings indicate an acceptance of new American building influences where economy and practicality dictated. In a few rare examples, however, houses built initially of logs were later clad with brick to verify their owner's lingering preference for the familiar masonry dwellings they had known in Europe. Further south, a colony of Luxembourgers settled in two counties bordering Lake Michigan where they utilized native fieldstone to build their handsome dwellings. These large and distinctive two-story, rectangular houses were characterized by massive stone walls, outside doors opening to a transverse central hallway, the symmetrical arrangement of windows, and chimneys in each gable end wall. In some examples the stone walls were covered with a generous layer of lime mortar—the same treatment used for finishing the thick walls of the stately St. Mary's Catholic Church, a landmark edifice for the surrounding rural Luxembourgish congregation.

Since the 1840's, the State's sizable Penno-Scandinavian population played an important role in shaping rural Wisconsin's built environment. Here, the abundant forests provided virtually an endless supply of timber for continuing their century-old, North European wood building tradition. Norwegians provided the greatest number of settlers from this group and, by 1860, 44,000 were living in Wisconsin. This represented nearly half of America's Norwegian population, and thereafter their numbers continued to dominate settlers from other Nordic countries in the state. The Norwegians were prodigious log builders and many examples of their work survive in western and south-central Wisconsin areas where their settlement density was highest. Typical survivors include one and two-room log dwellings, frequently modified with frame additions as their pioneer-occupant families grew and prospered. Several rare examples of "split" or "real" houses—a medieval folk building type with an upper gallery overhanging the first floor—have also been found.

The Norwegians demonstrated an interesting regional variation in log construction that appears to be based on available tree types. In southern Wisconsin, logs were loosely fitted and the intersections chinked with mud or lime mortar—not a common characteristic in Norway, but more representative of Yankee and Central European log construction. Presumably this log fabrication method was influenced by the predominant oak wood species in the area. Heavy, difficult to hew, and having a tendency to twist as it dried, oak timber did not lend itself to the construction of tight, straight walls. Further north in the state, however, where more easily-chinked coniferous wood was abundant, the Norwegians built structures that reflected the traditional Scandinavian technique of tightly-fitted logs without any mortar chinking whatsoever.

In the northern reaches of Wisconsin, a more recent phase of log construction was skillfully executed by Finnish-American builders. This remote forested landscape, part of the Upper Midwest region that contained America's largest concentration of Poles, became the setting for an extensive array of extraordinary log dwellings. These usually consisted of a loose grouping of small, unpainted structures that included their characteristic gable, and isolated bay lattices. With the exception of the latter, these larger structures typically incorporated the North European log construction technique of skillfully-bay, notched numbers secured at the corners with dovetail or double-notch corner joints. Of many ethnic groups which utilized log construction methods, Finnish immigrants were the most highly-regarded for their joinery skills and innovative use of wood.

Near the settlements of Floss, scattered packets of Swedish immigrants were to be found. Their traditional vermicular buildings, while fewer in number, employed the same construction principles, with the exception of some rare examples that incorporated the "brokenwood" building method. This technique utilized logs saved into short uniform sections which were then laid up in a bed of wet lime mortar, like stacked firewood, to create solid walls. This unusual form of building was used by other ethnic groups in the state, particularly Poles, Germans, French Canadians, and Yankees. But only the Swedes were known to have used the technique because it had been familiar in their homeland. While both methods achieved the same result, it did not become widely-accepted in the state. Nonetheless, given present evidence, Wisconsin had more surviving stoverwood buildings than any of the other states.

Wisconsin also served as an important setting for Danish and Icelandic settlement. However, their surviving pioneer structures are rare and since these groups adopted prevailing American building methods quickly, they do not appear to reflect traditional Scandinavian architectural features in their patterns of building.
Immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived somewhat later than their other immigrant counterparts and they continued settling in the state well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Poles, who represented the largest East European contingent, were concentrated primarily in Milwaukee and Central Wisconsin. While later versions of their agrarian log buildings are still being used, few early houses, barns and commercial buildings reflecting Polish folk architectural antecedents survive. Two notable buildings deserve mention, however. The first, a one-story cottage dating from 1864, represents the earliest-known Wisconsin dwelling built by a Polish immigrant. This modest structure was constructed of logs with whitewashed interior walls that were later covered with cardboard and wood paneling. A shallow root cellar was dug under the floor, and access to the attic was by an outside ladder. The structure's rectangular shape, on-center lateral wall entrance, ladder access to the loft, and raised planting beds adjoining the exterior walls, are all features found in Polish peasant houses. The second example, a remarkable stovewood general store and saloon, was erected in 1869 by John Meksiatski, an immigrant from northeastern Poland. In addition to its commercial function, the building served the surrounding logging settlement as a rooming house, social hall and reception center for newly-arrived immigrants. Because of its distinctive method of construction and rich ethnic history, the building was recently the focus of an extensive, privately-funded restoration program. At the formal ceremony celebrating completion of the restoration, hundreds of area residents, Meksiatski descendants and local political leaders gathered to pay tribute to one of Wisconsin's most fascinating ethnic buildings.

A recent survey of the large and cohesive Bohemian settlement in Central Wisconsin, near Lake Michigan, has revealed a rich array of surviving pioneer architecture. The large number and integrity of these buildings, which represent a remarkable continuation of the centuries-old Bohemian skill in fabricating sturdy log structures, appear to be unique in America. Here, four basic log house types can be discerned. While nearly all were later covered with clapboard siding, many reflect Old World characteristics in their log fabrication details, widespread use of roof overhangs and forebays, gable eavestop decorative elements, interior refinements, and close proximity to adjacent public roads. Distinctive patterns can also be found in Bohemian summer kitchens, grain and equipment storage shelters, and huge double-crib log barns. The latter, remarkably similar in size and shape, have low foundations, massive log walls, and identical roof structural systems.

Russian immigrants, never a dominant ethnic group in any Wisconsin county, constituted about five percent of the state's foreign-born population in 1920. Arriving later than many other other immigrant groups, they settled in urban centers, although a few rural enclaves were established in northern Wisconsin, where the Russians quickly adopted local building materials and forms. However, traditional, architectural elements were used in their religious edifices and several handsome Russian Orthodox churches have distinctive Old World features and symbols incorporated into their design.

Only a small number of immigrants from the Baltic states settled in rural Wisconsin. While examples of traditional buildings from this group are rare, a few noteworthy structures built by Latvians and Lithuanians have been found. The former erected log dwellings with conforming timbers from the state's northern forests. Like their neighbors in Finland, they utilized well-crafted joinery techniques and incorporated asanas on their farmsteads. The only distinctive Lithuanian building in the state is an unusual house situated on a remote hilltop in Central Wisconsin. Built by a Latvian and Katalina Uilka, immigrants from the Kurss region, the house was initially built as a horse barn shelter in 1932. During the past fifteen years, as the family expanded, the dwelling was enlarged and covered with a layer ofpitch lime mortar. In his speech, he added decorative wood details to the porch, roof, windows and doors to create a striking and curvilinear house filled with embellishments, according to an interview with his sole surviving son, who was inspired by the folk architecture of Ulka's Lithuanian homeland.

In adapting these buildings, countless immigrants expressed extraordinary ingenuity, perseverance and above all, hope for a brighter future. Yet, while seeking a better life in their new Wisconsin homeland, they never completely relinquished their European ancestral building traditions; thus their varied architecture portrayed a remarkable myriad of remembered values and images. Overall, the state's incredible array of ethnic pioneer structures represents an exceptional American cultural resource.

Over time, however, complex forces of change have taken their toll on this unique legacy. Recent modifications in agriculture, for example, have had a devastating impact on rural vernacular architecture. Once abundant buildings are quietly vanishing from the landscape at an alarming rate. In response to this tragic loss, preservationists have taken steps to save this heritage. They proposed
the development of a huge outdoor museum to portray the heterogeneous architecture and culture of the state's European settlers. While patterned after the great open-air museums of Europe and America, this development was to have an important difference. Whereas previous folk museums had featured the heritage of a single nation, region, or locality, Wisconsin's museum would be multinational and multicultural. An attractive 576-acre site was selected for the project and it was given the name "Old World Wisconsin." To develop concepts for the museum and prepare the master plan for its construction, the University of Wisconsin's Department of Landscape Architecture was contacted and the author became the project director with responsibility for overseeing all planning activities.

Working with teams of students, initial planning activities proceeded in three phases. The first involved a meticulous analysis of the site to determine the land's suitability for development. Next, secondary sources of literature were consulted to research Wisconsin's major ethnic groups. This investigation examined their folk architecture, settlement history, traditions, cultural traits, and additional data that would be useful in portraying immigrant groups for the project. The third activity involved a study of other outdoor museums to better understand their physical makeup and operation. Based on this information, a master plan was prepared that incorporated three major features: an entry center to orient visitors upon their arrival; a village area where community activities would be centered; and a series of scattered ethnic farmsteads connected with unpaved roads. The latter would include complete operating farms with typical houses and associated agrarian outbuildings, furniture, household goods, tools, and machinery. Only authentic buildings would be used and each farm would be operated by interpreters in period attire who would wear historically appropriate corsets and livestock. To preserve the more fragile interior areas of the site, development would remain on the periphery and the central area would be managed as a natural conservation area.

To implement the plan, another phase of research was undertaken for each farmstead unit. This involved considerable field work in rural settlement areas to analyze a sample of surviving farms from each major ethnic group. These farmsteads were visited by research teams who carefully documented, with photographs and measured drawings, early buildings and farmstead siting characteristics. Additional information was researched pertaining to early plants, crops, fences and other landscape features, interiors, and family histories (the latter used oral interviews). Based on a statistical analysis of the field measurements and supplemental information, representative farmstead site plans were then prepared. The historical accuracy of these plans was assured since they were derived from the documented ethnic settlement patterns and reinforced with traditional historical data from a variety of public and private sources.

Fund raising then proceeded, with money coming from federal, state, and foreign governments, private organizations and businesses. Following this, construction began by using actual buildings that were dismantled and moved from their original locations. In almost every case, those structures eventually would have decayed or been destroyed had they not found a new setting at Old World Wisconsin.

The museum opened as part of America's Bicentennial Celebration in 1976. Many now regard this ambitious project as one of the nation's outstanding historic preservation achievements. Popular with both European and American visitors, it has drawn special delegations from several countries, including Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, members of the German Bundestag, dignitaries from Norway and Finland, and representatives from a variety of cultural groups in Europe.

Old World Wisconsin is a bold and successful approach to conserving elements of America's rich and colorful ethnic heritage. It provides special insights into the nation's history and compensates for the lingering tie to the past found in cities, villages and rural areas across the land. Here, old cultures in a New World setting shaped the nation and they continue to give insights, diversity and quality to our way of life.