

German building left influence on Shenandoah Valley

Foundations of style

By Donna Dunn

The sensible square houses that dot the Shenandoah Valley countryside, sometimes in places of prominence, sometimes in forgotten fields, hearken back to a time when German immigrants first saw the land that would become the home for generations of descendants.

The way in which they built their homes tells much about their lives, said Edward Chappell, a historian who spoke at the Wayside Inn last week. The program, Feast on History, was sponsored by the Preservation of Historic Winchester and the Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society.

Chappell, who works with Colonial Williamsburg and has done research across the state, said the development of the Shenandoah Valley illustrates how diverse cultures can come together to create a new environment.

"The interplay of cultures is a subject that has really riveted the world in recent years," Chappell said. "The valley is a wonderful place to look at that diversity."

Chappell said studying the development of Virginia provides an avenue for understanding how a variety of distinct cultures can meld to create an entirely new culture.

"How did so many diverse people come together to create somewhat of a unified culture?" he said. "This is what makes a distinct kind of landscape where a number of cultures come together."

The German immigrants who first came to the valley brought with them a distinctive building style, but it was not merely a copy of the architecture that they had left in the Old World, he said. The New World Germans built and decorated in a manner that fit their new life.

These early buildings helped to define the structural style for years to come, Chappell said.

The Shenandoah Valley is "distinct because of those wonderful mountains and topography, but also because of the built landscape," he said.

Unlike settlers in the Tidewater region, valley settlers could not always find a level place to build their homes, Chappell said. So, houses were built into slopes or hills, blending in more naturally with the topography.

The German houses looked quite simple from the outside. Basically a box in shape, the houses had an off-center door and an unadorned facade, Chappell said.

The entrance opened to a large kitchen area, which was the main living area for early families. Fireplaces in these kitchens could be up to 8 feet wide, making them the

centerpiece of the room. "Work activities are not removed from social activities [in these homes]," Chappell said.

The basic floor plan allowed for four rooms: a kitchen, a living room and two smaller bedrooms. The rooms were heated with fireplaces, except in the living room, which often had a stove, Chappell said.

Many houses were built from the limestone found in the area. These homes featured log construction, with exposed ceiling beams on the inside.

These houses paralleled construction in Germany in that they were generally sensible dwellings with an asymmetric design and a two- to four-room plan.

But the Shenandoah Valley houses differed in many other ways. Unlike houses in Germany, few valley houses had exposed framework on the outside that cut German houses into sharp lines and angles.

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Edward Chappell
historian



Daily staff photo by Rich Cooley

This house located near Hudson's Crossroads has an off-centered entranceway often seen in early Germanic building in the Shenandoah Valley.

German

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The layout of the New World house in reference to other structures also differed from Germany. Valley homes were set apart from barns and other structures on the site. In German villages, the house and barn, along with any other structures formed a tight unit, often creating a courtyard or common area, Chappell said.

The plain exteriors of these early German settlements often housed more imaginative interiors, Chappell said. Locks were sometimes shaped to look like claws or animals.

"Germanic hardware tends to be much more imaginative and humorous than the unimaginative English hardware," Chappell said.

The greatest illustrations of their imaginations took the form of painted surfaces and woodwork.

The German settlers became famous for their Fraktur, a form of penmanship that illustrated birth certificates, wedding certificates and other documents. Like medieval monastic art, these fanciful illustrations often featured elements of nature such as flowers and birds.

This creativity in ink extended to painted walls and furniture. In one home in Page County, a wall was painted with swirls of color that unwound to become a snake. In other places, paint gave a three-dimensional feel to a wall.

"In the valley, you get a wonderful tradition of decorative painting,"

Chappell said.

Woodwork also added texture to German-influenced houses. Mantels in these houses piled carving upon carving, reaching toward the ceiling. Some of these mantels resembled a wedding cake in their layers, said Chappell, who called them "riots of carving and color."

After the American Revolution, the Germanic-style house began to change, Chappell said. The houses became more symmetric and many had a fireplace at both ends of the house instead of in the middle.

"There is a kind of synthesis of Germanic and Anglo affections," Chappell said.

Soon, the "I-house" became popular. This house, named because it was found often in Iowa, Indiana and Illinois, had a symmetrical two-story structure with a center passage. What is often seen as a traditional valley farmhouse fits the I-house format.

Some are square, others have an L-shape. The floor plan for this house is "as rational as the exterior suggests," Chappell said.

Although the distinctive German styles of building began to merge with other forms of architecture, the influence of the early Germans remains.

German descendants can still ride along the Valley Pike and enjoy the limestone fences and houses that form the foundation for architecture in the Shenandoah Valley.