

STUDY OF LOG CABIN HOMES REVEALS  
INTERESTING CHARACTERISTICS

Builders preferred hilltop location;

Most placed south.

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Until recent years no one supposed that so many log structures – homes, barns, cribs, churches – could be found in the Upper Cumberland.

In 1982 the Upper Cumberland Institute at Tennessee Technological University began surveying historic homes in this region of Tennessee under contract with the Tennessee Historical Commission/State Historical Preservation Office.

When the survey of 11 counties was completed, the computer at the Tennessee Historical Commission counted 898 log structures more than 50-years old. DeKalb County, with 177 structures, had the largest number, Fentress County, with 18, had the lowest count, Overton, Smith and Morgan, had 162, 113, and 60 log houses, respectively.

The earliest log houses in the Upper Cumberland were built just before 1800. None of these still exist; they were temporary structures built quickly and crudely. J.W. Bowen, born in 1811 and writing history of Smith County in 1887, described these:

“In its primitive construction and rudest form it was built of round poles from eight to 10 inches in diameter...The floor, if there were any besides the ground, and often there was not for months, was made of timber split three or four inches thick...The chimney was made of wood (,) the back and jambs filled up some distance with rough stones, and finished in the stem with sticks and mortar made of clay...

“These cabins,” Bowen wrote, “often consisted of a single room used for all purposes.”

Later Bowen reminded his readers, settlers were “able to build the ‘hewed log’ house, though living in the cabin for a time. A few of these (hewed log houses) erected in the first decade of the present century, and even earlier, still remain...Nearly all of them however, have been weather boarded and sealed.”

Notice that Bowen distinguishes two types of structures with two different words – “cabin” and “house.” Modern historians agree with Bowen’s distinction of two generations of log houses.

John Goodpasture, one of the earliest settlers in Overton County, built both generations of log houses. He settled on Buffalo Creek near Hilham in 1800. First he constructed a crude “log cabin, such as was common among pioneers.” In 1804 he abandoned the first structure and built a two-story house of hew logs covered with weatherboard.

The first settler in Smith County was William Walton, a veteran who received 3,840 acres of bounty land at the confluence of the Cumberland and Caney Fork Rivers after the Revolutionary War. He built a log house on the east bank of the Cumberland River, and operated a ferry across the river and a tavern on the riverbank.

Walton had lived in a two-story log house at Mansker's Station (Sumner County) before he moved to Smith County, but his home in Smith County has not been described and it no longer stands. In 1797 the traveler Francis Bailey described Walton's house as a "mansion," so it must have been large, if not sophisticated.

"Dixona" operated as a lodging house and tavern during Dixon's lifetime (he died in 1816), and Louis Philippe, later king of France, stayed a night at Dixona during his travels through the United States in 1797.

In 1858 James Vaughn, owner of Dixona, added brick wings with fireplaces to the gable ends of the log house, and decorated the façade with a two-story portico. The log walls of the original structure were still exposed. The portico of the remodeled structure is of the late Greek Revival period, as are the center entry doors with sidelights, and the decorative curvilinear cornice brackets are Italianate.

Joseph Bishop was another of the early settlers in the county. His Cumberland River (around 1796), is a two-story poplar log structure with central door and one bay on each side. The floorplan is central hall design, and there is one gable-end chimney built of stone. At some later time weatherboard siding was added to the logs.

Other instances of smaller, but well-constructed log homes are numerous. The two-story Hatcher House on Eagle Creek in Overton County and the Maynard house at Oakley may be the earliest structures still standing in that county; oral history places their construction in the 1790's. The Hatcher House, built of white oak with the half-dove notch, measured 25 x 17 feet on the interior.

The Hatchers owned slaves, a general store and a blacksmith shop, and the house was used as a hotel at one time. About 1850 a weather-boarded frame addition more than doubled the size of the structure. The Maynard house was also remodeled and modernized with a weatherboard addition about 1880.

The Frank Gilliland home at Oak Hill in Overton County was another of the early structures, built by Adam Gardenhire about 1800. It was originally a story-and-a-half double pen dogtrot style with 24 x 18 foot pens. The kitchen with its huge cooking fireplace, still in excellent condition today, was located in a separate building behind the house. Log barns still exist on the property, but the log slave houses have disappeared.

Most of the log homes built at any time were single pen, although the space may at some time have been divided with a board wall. It was easier to build a one-room structure, and it was easy to add space to it. In three counties (Morgan, Overton, Smith) where a detailed survey was made, about 50 percent of the log homes were single pen, but most of

them had additional space provided. Approximately 75 percent of the houses in Morgan County had rear additions. Porches on the front were also common later additions.

A half story above the single pen was a common way of adding space, usually providing sleeping space as well as storage for the family. In Overton County, 54 percent of the structures were a story and a half high; in Morgan County, 60 percent had the half story. A corner box stair provided the usual method of ascent, but a simple ladder was sometimes employed.

The pens were either square or rectangular, with the rectangular shape being the most common. Rectangular pens were about 18 x 20 feet and square ones either 16 or 18 feet. Measurements were almost always even rather than odd numbers – 16 x 16, 18 x 22, etc. This characteristic was noted by Lynwood Montell in his study in Tennessee is not supported by evidence.

The two-story log house was the style most admired by contemporaries. The Federal style was copied in arrangement of the façade, with door in the center and one or two bays on each side. Chimneys tended to be on the gable end. Some two-story log houses were dogtrot, and it was easy at a later time to close in the trots and add a classical portico to simulate the classical style.

The type of wood used in the Upper Cumberland for construction was usually poplar or oak. In Overton County each of the woods was used about 50 percent of the time, and there were some examples where the two types of wood were mixed. Oak has been used for construction from earliest times in England, and the Druids of Celtic England even believed that the tree was sacred.

Popular, however, has more positive characteristics than oak, it is a tall, straight tree, growing as high as 200 feet with a 10 foot diameter. The wood is light in weight, and branches begin high on the trunk. The tree repels termites, roaches and other insects.

Only one chestnut log house was discovered in the surveys of the Upper Cumberland, although the wood was common in the area. Cedar was often used for log houses in the Nashville basin area, but the type cedar which grows in the Upper Cumberland is not large enough for home construction. Some barns and sheds of cedar were discovered, but no homes.

There were several notches for joining logs, but the half-dovetail was predominant in the Upper Cumberland and in East Tennessee. An example of master craftsmanship, this notch represented careful, painstaking construction, and it produced strong, permanent structures, locking the corners together and pulling toward the inside of the house. The Old Union Church at Hilham is a beautiful example of closely fitting half-dovetail notches.

One final element in the study of log homes in the Upper Cumberland was a survey of the location of the houses. The vast majority checked in Overton County were on a hill

rather than in a valley or creek bottom. It was often a long walk from the hilltop to the water source, and a valley or bottom would have provided shelter from winter winds. Nevertheless, the evidence is convincing that the builders preferred 86 percent of them were built on a high section of land.

Most houses faced in a southerly direction. Of 103 houses checked in Overton County, 49 faced south, southeast or southwest. Twenty-nine faced north, northeast, and northwest. The north-south direction was also dominant in Smith County, with significantly more buildings facing south than any other direction.

Log homes in the Upper Cumberland are not unique. They are similar to structures elsewhere in the state and in the South. A study of historic homes in the Upper Cumberland and in other places finds many common characteristics but also finds that our modern fantasy and styles are different from the historic structures.

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Abraham Buck Home:

Underneath its weather-board siding, the home of Abraham Buck was built of solid logs, as were most early homes here. And, like this one, many gained a clapboard covering in later years as pioneer families grew and prospered. The Buck home was torn down in 1927. It was located on land that is now Tennessee Tech's Shipley Farm.