

# *The Herr House*

## *A Gem of Domestic Architecture*

By Henry J. Kauffman

**A**lthough some attention is given today to the domestic architecture of Lancaster County, it is a sad fact that most of the tourists come here to savor the food and see the Amish. For the natives the surviving examples of domestic architecture seem too near to be important, and like many Philadelphians who never have seen Independence Hall, many gems of local architecture are unnoticed. One might expect the architecture of the Amish to have interesting details, but short of many small additions at the side or rear of the house, there is nothing to attract the attention of the passerby. Despite the lack of interest an important example of architecture has been preserved—the Christian Herr house. This unique structure is a witness to the courage, tenacity, and skill of early Mennonites who came to Lancaster County as early as 1710.

It is estimated that about 70,000 German immigrants arrived at the port of Philadelphia between 1727 and 1775. That is the period in which ship captains were required to register their human cargo. However, small contingents arrived before and after that time. An earlier group led by Daniel Pastorius settled in an area known today as Germantown. These people were known as “Deutsch” or Dutch to the English-speaking population. Most of them did not tarry in Philadelphia, but as soon as practical they set out for the back-country where the soil was rich and there were large walnut trees. Many of these immigrants came from rural areas in Europe and were well acquainted with the problems of tilling the soil.

It is likely that the first shelters were caves or the roofs of friends or relatives who came here at an earlier time. Having a knowledge of log house construction, their first permanent homes were built of logs. This was an expedient procedure for logs were supplied by clearing the land, and only an ax and a saw were required to construct such houses. These small log houses were rectangular with a fireplace and chimney of stone at one end. There were small openings (windows) covered with greased paper in the walls, and the only entrance was a "batten" door. None of the first houses survive. The only intact log structure is the house in Landisville which appears to have been built about the middle of the eighteenth century. Its original floor plan was typically Germanic, attested to by its off-center chimney, which is now removed.

The scarcity of log houses today—many are covered with clapboards—suggests that only a few were built. However, the Direct Tax of 1798 proves that at that time at least ninety percent were built of logs. The Direct Tax of 1815 has been analyzed, and 2,486 houses, or 30.4 percent were described specifically as "log." Another 33 percent were described variously as "frame," "wood," or "timber."

After the land was cleared of trees the next logical procedure was to gather stones which could be used to build small cabins. Although some historians refer to the Herr house as a "cabin," in retrospect it was a sizeable structure in its time. Its date of construction is recorded permanently in the stone lintel over the only entrance to the house: 1719.

Although the Herr house seemed to be decaying in recent years, it remained a reasonably sound structure because it had a good roof. An examination of the roof testifies to the fact that it is a Germanic structure. It is very long and has a very sharp pitch. The sharpness of the pitch is a northern European feature, so constructed to shed the heavy snows of the region. By looking at the gable end of the house it is evident the roof encloses two floors, an arrangement often called a "double attic." The Saron at the Ephrata Cloister has a triple attic as do many buildings surviving in Germany today. It is not known what kind of material was used to cover the roof; however, it might well have been thatch. Many buildings in Europe have thatched roofs today, a good one reputed to last as long as twenty-five years. The absence of a functioning potter at such an early date discounts the possibility of a tile roof. In the recent restoration hand-shaped shingles were used with a lap sidewise and at the end. Strangely, there were no pent roofs on the Herr house, nor was there a "kick" on the eaves. A "kick" is a sharp rise at the bottom edge of the roof, presumably to throw water away from the wall of the house, a matter of much importance in a log house, but of lesser import in one of stone.

The random shape of the stones in the exterior wall—partially concealed with an overlay of mortar—confirms the fact that they were gathered from the fields. Before restoration the exact shape and size of every stone could be de-



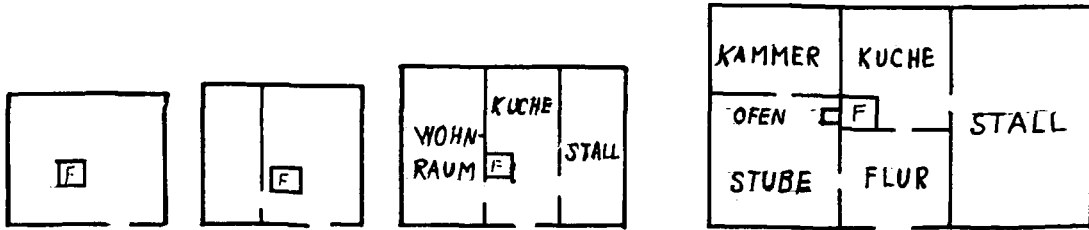
*The Herr House before recent renovation.*

terminated easily. It appeared to have been pointed carefully; however, much of the mortar might have been eroded by rains over many years. Some early stone houses and churches were covered completely with mortar to make them watertight.

In an earlier restoration the window openings on the first floor were enlarged and the stone stiles removed because they no longer were needed to support the new double-hung windows. In the recent restoration the stone stiles were restored and hinges were installed for the new shutters. Although it was a common procedure in early houses to use sills and lintels of stone or brick, a window framed completely with stone parts was a very unusual practice. Only a few houses in the "Dutch" country have this feature. New shutters of vertical boards were installed which is entirely consistent with the balance of architectural details. Casement sash have replaced the double-hung windows.

In the tradition of German and Swiss architecture the windows are very small in relation to the wall space between them. It is thought that the intention was to conserve the small amount of heat generated within the building, a matter of greater importance than adequate lighting

The off-center chimney assists in projecting the image of a traditional Germanic house. In his travels through Pennsylvania in the late eighteenth century the German traveller Schoepf pointed out that a house with chimneys on each end was inhabited by an Englishman whilst a house with a central chimney was occupied by a German. In traveling the "Dutch" countryside one can see occasionally an off-center chimney, but in most cases the interior arrangement of rooms has been changed to conform to modern living practices. The Herr house remains as an outstanding example of early room arrangement.

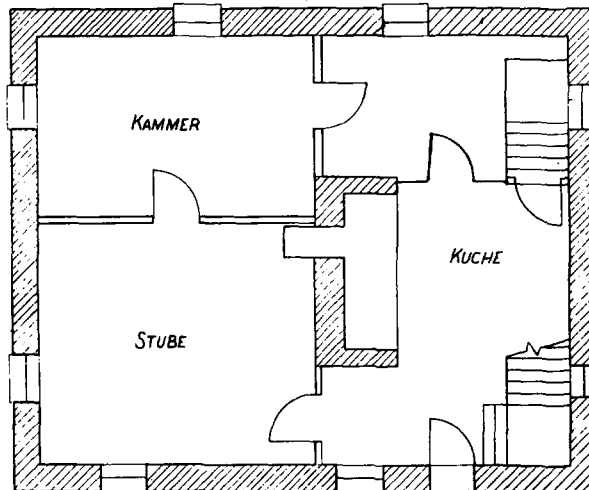


*Evolution of the farm house in Germany.*

The typical Germanic plan consists of two rooms wide and two rooms deep on the first floor. This plan evolved as indicated in the Germanic plan illustrated. The major difference would be the addition of a barn in Germany. The absence (or scarcity) of house/barn combinations never has been successfully explained by architectural historians.

Although the room arrangement on the first floor of the Herr house is similar to the German plan illustrated, the functions of some were different. In the German plan the first room inside the main entrance is a vestibule. The stair to the second floor probably was located there. Thus, this room functioned as a hall, its major purpose being an access area to other parts of the house.

*First Floor plan of the Herr House.*



In the Herr house one enters the kitchen directly inside the front door. A winding stair to the second floor is located there, making this room an access area to other parts of the house as well as serving as a kitchen. In addition, a stair to the cellar leaves from the kitchen. This stair replaced an outside one which now has been closed for security reasons. These outside steps were used to carry root crops into the cellar for winter storage. An arched masonry room, found in many Germanic and later houses, provided cool and damp storage for crops such as celery, turnips, carrots, etc. These storage areas have at least one window which was left open to provide fresh air for the area.

The kitchen is sparsely furnished as it was probably in its original state. The important items of furniture consist of two reproduction pieces: an open "Dutch" cupboard and a stretcher table. These are appropriately massive in size, the cupboard being an outstanding example of cabinet work, the table less attractive. Originally there must have been other articles of furniture; however, they would have had to be kept at a minimum for as many as ten to twelve persons might have gathered there. The main architectural feature of the room is a large walk-in fireplace. This entity had the double function of heating the room and cooking food for the table.

A small room is located back of the kitchen which might have been used for storage, or it well might have been a bedroom for aged parents. This room could be heated partially by leaving the kitchen door open. A similar room in the Plough Tavern in York is labeled definitely a storage facility.

By turning to the left inside the main door one enters a large room called the "Stube" or parlor. This is the largest room in the house. Along the south and west walls permanent benches have been installed, the corner being called an *Echbank*. Provision of these benches is consistent with medieval European architectural practices. Before these benches a reproduction "sawbuck" table has been placed on which some appropriate bric-a-brac has been arranged. In another corner, directly in back of the kitchen fireplace and connected to it, a ceramic stove has been set up. This facility supplied some heat for this large room, but how comfortable it became is another question.

In back of the parlor is the "Kammer" or bedroom. Although this is the second largest room in the house, it seems jammed full with a rope bed, a sea chest, and a schrank. The sea chest is typical of those used by immigrants to bring their worldly goods to their new home. A schrank is a large wardrobe for the storage of clothing. There were no closets in these old houses, so the custom was to use a moveable wardrobe. Because the schranks were so large, they were designed to be disassembled for moving. The parts consisted of two doors, two ends, two back pieces, a top and a base. These are genuine Pennsylvania products, a sizeable number having been made in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Some have attractive cornices as well as appropriate base mouldings. A variety of feet might be used: generally they were in the form of balls or



*The restored Herr House.*

brackets. Some are highly inlaid on the doors, usually with dates of manufacture and possibly the names of the men and women for whom the schranks were made.

A winding stair leads from the kitchen to the second floor. One fireplace is located there among a number of rooms, probably used for bedrooms by an overflowing family. A very crudely-shaped set of stairs leads from the second to the third floor, which probably was used for storage.

The Herr house is open to the public six days a week. It is closed on Sunday. Located about five miles south of Lancaster along Hans Herr Drive midway between Beaver Valley Pike (Route 222) and Penn Grant Road, the Herr house with its steeply-pitched roof is a landmark well worth visiting. There is an admission fee. It is administered by the Lancaster Mennonite Conference Histor-