They Can’t All Be Victorians: When Old Houses Have No Style

Tuesday June 7  10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
They can't all be Victorians

When old houses have no "style"
A DISCUSSION OF ORDINARY BUILDINGS FOR
ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

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I am a historic structures reviewer for the PA SHPO -- first for FEMA and now for HUD funded projects
So, I have had a picture window view of some very downtrodden buildings and also some quirky and not so classic designs
A few standouts from the “Bad Rehab Hall of Shame”
Many of the buildings that cross my desk are so altered they no longer represent any style or type.
While those bad rehabs and severe alterations present problems for architectural historians, the bigger issue is how to evaluate buildings that are outside of any style guide

• What we will discuss today is the special challenge of “ordinary buildings”

• An estimated 90% of the world’s buildings are created without architects
Some buildings that are outside formal styles, clearly fit into the context of “vernacular architecture”

Alleghany Mennonite Meetinghouse, Berks Co.

Hans Herr House, Lancaster Co.
Vernacular architecture is rather loosely defined as a traditional building method dictated by culture, region, climate, ethnicity and human and community needs.

Depending on the context, also called:

- “primitive architecture”
- “indigenous architecture”
- “ancestral architecture”
- “traditional architecture”
- “folk architecture”
- “popular architecture”
- “ethnic architecture”
- “informal architecture”
- “anonymous architecture”
- “non-pedigree architecture”
So, vernacular architecture is a broad concept that includes very diverse buildings of all eras, but does not seem to fit all of the common buildings that defy description by style.

Some building types represent a specific function or corporate design, more than a cultural tradition or specific style.

Bungalows and Foursquares are common residential house plans, defined by form and floorplan, rather than cultural tradition.
Architectural historians develop typologies and methods to describe and understand the cultural significance of buildings.

So what do we do with those buildings which defy easy categories?

Buildings that are too plain, too modern, or just too ubiquitous to fit neatly into established styles, types or vernacular tradition?
And here to answer all those questions and more are our speakers:

**Jerry Clouse**
Architectural historian

Historic Structures Group Leader for McCormick &Taylor Inc., engineering, design, planning and environmental consultants with extensive experience in the evaluation of cultural resources

Author of *Philip Haun & His Legacy of Agricultural Re-building in Western Cumberland County*, presented at Vernacular Architectural Forum

**Lu Donnelly**
Lead author of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*

Director of the Allegheny County Survey of Historic Sites

Co-author of 5 local histories and 19 National Register of Historic Places nominations

Project director/exhibit coordinator for *Barns of Western Pennsylvania: Vernacular to Spectacular* at the Heinz Architectural Center
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Jerry A. Clouse, Senior Architectural Historian, McCormick Taylor, Inc.
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Dating houses with no readily identifiable style. Some markers that may help that determination.

**Background**

Many rural PA houses lack identifiable style, show a melding of ethnic & Georgian influences, usually 2 ½ story with 3-5 bay facades

- **Germanic Continental style house** — 1-2 story, 3-room plan around a central fireplace, asymmetrical fenestration & single door into kitchen, no hall, c. 1765-c. 1810

- **Transitional PA German houses** — usually 2 ½ story, 4-5 bay, both asymmetrical & symmetrical fenestration & single door into parlor, abbreviated hall, c. 1790-c. 1820

- **Two-door, 4-bay house** — usually 2 ½ story, shows architectural blending, superficial Georgian façade, symmetrical fenestration, front doors into both public & private spaces, no hall, sometimes just one door, common 1840-1890

- **Pennsylvania farmhouse** — usually 2 ½ story, commonly 3 bays, most have center doors, common 1830-1900, some embellished with contemporary architectural treatments—Examples can also be found in villages and towns of SE & SC PA
What questions do you ask when you want to learn the date and the style of a house?

- What features are present?
- Size, height & number of bays?
- Does it have symmetrical fenestration?
- Are there hints of previous architectural treatments?
- What is the pitch of the roof?
- Are there apparent changes?
- When would you date the initial construction?
Joseph Stayman House
Hampden Township, Cumberland County

Details
• 4-bay, 1-door stone house
• Nearly symmetrical fenestration
• 9/6 windows 1st floor
• Tall attic windows
• Moderately steep roof pitch

Research
• 2-room deep
• Abbreviated hall
• Room use shows a blending of German & Georgian features
• Appears on 1798 Direct Tax
• c. 1790 build date
Ziegler/Whistler House
Lower Mifflin Township, Cumberland County

Details

- Asymmetrical facade
- Single-bay stone addition to right
- Large space to left of front door indicates location of former interior wall & center chimney
- Former date board located in gable end

Research

Originally Continental style
First section constructed c. 1800
Stone Addition c. 1920
Shed-roof Addition c. 1970
Old Derry Street House
Swatara Township, Dauphin County

Details
• Frame, 3-bay
• Symmetrical façade
• With pent roofs in gable ends
• 9/6 sash windows on 1st floor

Research
• Front door to side
• Summer-kitchen off porch
• c. 1810 build date

View looking west, showing porch connection to banked summer kitchen
Christlieb/Brown House
Lower Mifflin Township, Cumberland County

Details
• 3-bay stone section +
• 3-bay frame section
• Symmetrical façade
• Moderate roof pitch

Research
• Stone section built c. 1815 with side-hall plan
• Frame section added c. 1892 with double-stacked porches
• Front porch added c. 1930
Details

- 3-Bays,
- Banked to north gable side
- Weatherboard
- Asymmetrical fenestration
- Single, off-center door

Research

- Haun ledger shows building expenses 1837-38
- Former owner notes 2-room plan
- Logs beneath weatherboard
William McElwain House
Hopewell Township, Cumberland County

**Details**

- 4 bays, 2 front doors
- Common entrance via integral porch
- 3-room, first floor plan
- 2-tiered porch

**Research**

- Haun ledger shows built 1855
- 3-room plan
- Kitchen ell to rear
- Porch infill c. 1990
David Haun House
Hopewell Township, Cumberland County

Details
- 2-bay log/brick section +
- 3-bay brick section
- Nearly symmetrical façade
- Moderate roof pitch

Research
- Haun ledger notes log section encased with stretcher-bond brick 1856
- Survey shows spikes holding bricks to logs
- 3-bay addition with 2-tiered porch added 1856
Philip Haun House
Hopewell Township, Cumberland County

Details

- 4-bay, single-front door
- Symmetrical fenestration
- Interior gable-end chimneys

Research

- Haun ledger shows house built 1855
- Owner states 1st floor has 2-room plan
- Front porch added c. 1920
Philip Haun House – Façade Detail
Hopewell Township, Cumberland County

- Common Bond
- Projecting brick sills
- Enclosed transom above front door
- Turned porch posts
Doll-Fleck House
Cumberland Township, Adams County

Details
- 4-bay, 2-door house
- Symmetrical façade
- Moderate roof pitch
- Wrap around porch
- 2/2 double-hung sash

Research
- Balloon frame
- Kitchen behind east parlor
- Deed & tax records indicate c. 1860 build date
Daniel Heckman House
Lower Mifflin Township, Cumberland County

Details
• 4-bay, 2-door stone house
• Symmetrical façade
• Moderate roof pitch
• Two-door house, w/public door on outer façade
• Two-tiered front porch

Research
• Date stone beside porch entrance
• 3-room plan
• Build date 1866
Conclusions

✓ Many rural PA houses built between 1765 & 1900 lack easily recognizable architectural styles

✓ Houses can be roughly dated based upon characteristics such as the symmetry of fenestration, roof pitch, number of front doors, etc.

✓ Court records, tax records, ledgers, and interior inspection can verify the age and type of house
Twentieth Century Houses

How to Analyze Them
We’ve taken you through two centuries of Pennsylvania’s buildings with no style.

We’re sure you have questions!
What style is it?
Defined by form or surface details?
Just enough Gothic Revival detail?
Defined by form or function?
Eclectic firehouses or style examples?
Does “eclectic” save the day for Victorian-era architectural blends?
Is everything its own category?
Thank you!