

EUROPEAN FOLK ARCHITECTURE IN WISCONSIN: THE TRANSFER OF OLD WORLD
BUILDING TRADITIONS TO A NEW WORLD SETTING
By William H. Tishler

INTRODUCTION

Many parts of 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 were seeking 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. Here, this heritage shaped a diligent work and land ethic, plus progressive attitudes toward government, social reforms, 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 the common buildings of rural areas--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.

WISCONSIN'S OLD WORLD ARCHITECTURE

More than half of the over thirty ethnic groups that settled in Wisconsin built structures that retained distinctive Old World architectural characteristics. These included an adherence to traditional building arrangements and siting patterns from their homeland, the use of long-accepted construction materials and methods of building, 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.

The Germans. 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. This technique incorporated a timber framework or skeleton, filled 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, threshing barns, stables, granaries, commercial structures, house barns and churches. As such, the many surviving examples--the largest known concentration in the United States--represent an extraordinary 19th century, American regional construction phenomenon.

The British, Irish and Yankees. 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 east coast. 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 farmstead, built by an Irish-American settler from Massachusetts, incorporated a farmhouse patterned after early Massachusetts Bay Area dwellings in both its floor plan and in the size, location and detailing of its massive 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 southwestern Wisconsin's lead mining region, Cornish masons skillfully fashioned adaptations of structures from their homeland with locally-quarried limestone. Recent research by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has verified striking similarities between several buildings in the early settlement of Mineral Point and English prototypes from Cornwall. Two dwellings in this community, the William's house, patterned after rural Cornish miners' cottages, and the Thomas/Carbis house derived from the two-story structures of Cornwall's urban laborers, are surviving examples of this important relationship.

Central Europeans. While French explorers and fur traders were among the first Europeans in Wisconsin, French settlement was actually minimal. However, some rare examples of their folk architecture have been found in early French-Canadian settlements along the State'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 piece sur piece construction--a log joinery method widely used in French Canada. This technique consisted of 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 distinctive Old World traits of this group are rare. One notable exception is in Eau Claire County where an Austrian immigrant built a huge stone barn patterned after those found in the countryside near Vienna, where he has lived as a boy. The barn's massive stone walls and jerkenhead 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, in spite 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 Graubunden built sturdy stone farmhouses and churches from locally-quarried dolomite. Sited

against the surrounding valley hills, the houses are of two types: an early two-story version with an entrance in the three-to-five bay lateral wall facade, and a later upright-and-wing form. Many have a distinctive masonry pattern which appears to be unique for the area.

The Low Countries. Large numbers of immigrants from Europe's Low Countries--the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg--came to Wisconsin. In this new setting, they continued the impressive masonry building tradition of their homeland. While not one of the state's largest 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 building houses, agrarian outbuildings and other structures. These traditional Belgian buildings retain important cultural ties to their homeland and include diminutive wayside, or votive chapels, outdoor bake ovens and majestic churches--the latter forming the traditional nucleus of their settlements. While not representative of a widely-used construction method in Belgium, their many log outbuildings indicate an acceptance of new American building influences where economy and practicality dictated. Further south, a colony of Luxembourgers that settled in two of the counties bordering Lake Michigan utilized native fieldstone in 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 completely 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.

The Nordic Groups. Since the 1840's, the State's sizeable Fenno-Scandian population played an important role in shaping the built environment of rural Wisconsin. Here, the forests provided abundant timber for continuing their centuries-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 of their densest settlement. 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 "loft" or sva houses--a medieval folk building with an upper gallery overhanging the first floor--have also been found.

The Norwegians also demonstrated interesting regional variations in log construction that were based on available wood types. In southern Wisconsin, logs were loosely fitted and the interstices 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 wood did not lend itself to the construction of tight, straight walls. Further north in the state, however, where more easily-crafted 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 building was skillfully executed by Finnish-American carpenters. This remote forested

landscape, part of the upper Midwest region that contained America's largest concentration of Finns, provided a new setting for their legendary wood building tradition. Here the familiar geography, with its abundant timber resources, became the setting for an extensive array of extraordinary log farmsteads. These were usually made up of a loose grouping of small, unpainted structures that included their characteristic sauna and isolated hay barns. The early buildings typically incorporated the northern European log construction technique of skillfully-hewn, tightly-fitted timbers for houses and other buildings where heat retention was required. Of the many ethnic groups which utilized log construction methods, Finnish immigrants became the most highly-regarded for their joinery skills and innovation with wood.

Near the settlements of Finns, scattered pockets of Swedish immigrants were to be found. Their traditional vernacular buildings, while fewer in number, employed the same construction principles, with the exception of some rare examples that incorporated the "stovewood" building method. This technique utilized logs sawn 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, Bohemians, and Yankees. But only the Swedes were known to have used the technique because of a familiarity with it from their homeland. While both efficient and economical, it did not become widely-accepted in Wisconsin; nonetheless, given present evidence, Wisconsin has more surviving stovewood buildings than any of the other states.

The state also served as an important center for Danish and Icelandic settlement. However, their surviving pioneer structures are rare and since these groups quickly adopted prevailing American building methods, they do not appear to reflect traditional Scandinavian architectural features.

Eastern Europeans. Immigrants from eastern Europe arrived somewhat later than their other immigrant counterparts and continued to settle 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 still survive. Two notable buildings deserve to be mentioned, however. The first, a one-story cottage dating from 1887, 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 oblong 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 1899 by John Mecikalski, an immigrant from northwestern 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 recently has been the focus of an extensive, privately-funded restoration program. At the formal ceremony celebrating completion of the restoration in June, 1987, hundreds of area residents, Mecikalski's many 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 area at the central portion of the state 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 exterior decorative elements, interior refinements, and close proximity to the 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 support 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 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 in their designs.

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 Estonians and Lithuanians have been found. The former erected log buildings with coniferous timber from the state's northern forests. Like their neighbors in Finland, they utilized well-crafted joinery techniques and incorporated saunas on their farmsteads. The only distinctive Lithuanian building found to date has been an unusual house situated on a remote hilltop in Clark County. Built by Mikolas and Kathrine Ulka, immigrants from the Kaunas region, the house was initially built as a simple log shelter in 1901. During the next fifteen years, as the family expanded, the dwelling was enlarged and covered with a layer of pink lime mortar. In his spare time, Ulka added decorative wood details to the porch, roof, windows and doors to create a striking and ornate house. These embellishments, according to an interview with his sole surviving son, were inspired by the folk architecture of Ulka's Lithuanian fatherland.

AN OUTDOOR MUSEUM OF ETHNIC FOLK CULTURE

In shaping these buildings, countless immigrants expressed extraordinary ingenuity, perseverance and above all, hopes 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, and 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 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. This author was asked to be the project director and oversee 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 raise historically appropriate crops 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 with surviving farms from the major ethnic groups. A sampling of representative farmsteads was visited by research teams who carefully documented, with photographs and measured drawings, early buildings and farmstead arrangements. Additional information was recorded pertaining to early plants, crops, fences and other landscape features; interiors; and family histories (the latter used oral interviews, early photographs and other local records). 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, these 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 Margreth 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 complements other lingering ties to the past that are 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.

Summary
EUROPEAN FOLK ARCHITECTURE IN WISCONSIN:
THE TRANSFER OF OLD WORLD BUILDING TRADITIONS
TO A NEW WORLD SETTING
By William Tishler

European immigrants who came to America during the 19th century brought with them many diverse Old World architectural traditions. In Wisconsin, where more than 30 ethnic groups settled, this legacy flourished and survives in the many folk buildings remaining in rural areas of the state. These often reflected structure types, forms, construction methods and materials from their builder's homeland. As such, they represent a unique American historic resource--but one that is rapidly disappearing from the landscape.

In this paper, the author presents an overview of his recent research, in both Europe and America, that has documented hundreds of these structures, studied their Old World origins, and investigated their transfer and adaptation to new conditions in pioneer Wisconsin. It begins with a brief analysis of early European settlement in the state. Next, it discusses characteristics of Wisconsin's 19th century ethnic folk architecture. In shaping these buildings, countless immigrants expressed extraordinary ingenuity, perseverance and hope for a brighter future. Yet, while seeking a better life in their new Wisconsin homeland, they never completely relinquished European ancestral building traditions, and their varied architecture portrayed a myriad of remembered values and images. Included in this presentation are the Germans, Wisconsin's largest ethnic group. Their most unique architectural contribution can be found in hundreds of surviving Fachwerk structures. The buildings of the British and Yankees, who generally utilized established construction features brought from the east coast, are also noted. Central Europeans, including French from Canada who built with the piece sur piece horizontal log method, and Swiss and Austrian immigrants who erected distinctive stone structures, are then discussed. From Europe's Low Countries, Luxembourgers and Belgians replicated Old World buildings using stone and brick. The latter, who constitute the largest rural settlement of their nationality in the United States, also quickly adopted new log construction techniques where economy and practicality dictated. Settlers from the Nordic countries, especially Norway and Finland, continued their wood building tradition in a variety of skillfully-built log structures. The Bohemians left a sizeable legacy of traditional structures, but folk buildings from other Eastern European immigrant groups are rare because they quickly adopted new American building techniques. Nonetheless, several remarkable structures built by Poles, Russians, Estonians and Lithuanians have been found in the state.

The paper then notes how forces of change are threatening these resources. Finally, it describes an ambitious attempt to save and perpetuate the state's ethnic, cultural and architectural resources through the work at Old World Wisconsin--the state's huge outdoor museum. The author, who designed this project, describes the research, planning and development of the museum. Here some of the best examples of Wisconsin's unique folk building heritage have been restored, meticulously sited, furnished and interpreted in a rural village and a series of operating ethnic farmsteads. As the world's only multi-national, multi-cultural outdoor museum, this project provides a fitting tribute to the countless immigrants who settled in Wisconsin--a state that has always taken great pride in the ethnic diversity of its citizens.

Sommaire
L'Architecture folklorique européenne dans le Wisconsin: le transfert
de traditions architecturales de l'ancien monde à un cadre dans le Nouveau Monde
par William H. Tishler

Les immigrants européens qui sont venus en Amérique pendant le 19^{ème} siècle ont apporté avec eux de nombreuses traditions architecturales diverses de l'ancien monde. Dans le Wisconsin, où plus de 30 groupes ethniques se sont établis, cet héritage a prospéré et subsiste aujourd'hui dans les régions rurales de l'état. Ces bâtiments ont souvent montré les types structuraux, les formes, et les méthodes et matériaux de construction du pays maternel du constructeur. En tant que tel, ils représentent une unique ressource américaine historique, mais une ressource qui disparaît rapidement du paysage.

Dans ce document, l'auteur présente une vue d'ensemble de ses recherches récentes, en Europe et aux Etats-Unis, pendant lesquelles il a documenté des centaines de ces structures, étudié leurs origines 'ancien monde', et examiné leur transfert et adaptation aux conditions dans le Wisconsin des pionniers. On commence par une brève analyse de l'établissement des immigrants européens dans l'état. Ensuite, on discute les caractéristiques de l'architecture ethnique et folklorique dans le Wisconsin du 19^{ème} siècle. Dans le façonnement de ces bâtiments, d'innombrables immigrés ont manifesté une ingéniosité extra-ordinaire, de la persévérance, et l'espoir d'un avenir plus heureux. Cependant, en cherchant une meilleure vie dans le Wisconsin, leur nouvelle patrie, ils n'ont jamais complètement abandonné les traditions architecturales européennes de leurs ancêtres, et leur architecture variée représente d'innombrables valeurs et images qu'ils ont retenues. Cette présentation comprend une discussion des Allemands, le plus grand groupe ethnique dans le Wisconsin. Leur contribution architecturale la plus unique se trouve dans les centaines de constructions Fachwerk qui durent encore. Les bâtiments des Anglais et des Yankees, qui utilisaient généralement des traits de construction bien établis, apportés de la côte est des Etats-Unis, sont aussi notés. Les immigrants de l'Europe centrale, dont les Français du Canada qui construisaient selon une méthode pièce sur pièce de tronçons horizontaux, et les immigrés suisses et autrichiens qui ont érigé des édifices distinctifs en pierre, sont ensuite discutés. Les Belges et les immigrés du Luxembourg des Pays-Bas ont reproduit des bâtiments de l'ancien monde en utilisant de la pierre et des briques. Les Belges, qui constituent le plus grand établissement rural de leur nationalité aux Etats-Unis, aussi ont rapidement adopté de nouvelles techniques de construction en bois où des raisons économiques et pratiques l'ont dicté. Des immigrants des pays nordiques, surtout de Norvège et de Finlande, ont continué leur tradition de bâtiments en bois dans une variété d'édifices en bois habilement construits. Tandis que les Bohémiens ont laissé un assez grand héritage d'édifices traditionnels, des bâtiments folkloriques d'autres groupes d'immigrants de l'Europe orientale sont rares du fait qu'ils ont rapidement adopté les techniques américaines de construction. Tout de même, plusieurs édifices remarquables, construits par des polonais, des russes, des estoniens et des lithuaniens ont été trouvés dans l'Etat.

Notre étude indique ensuite comment les forces du changement menacent ces ressources. Après, nous décrivons une tentative ambitieuse de préserver et perpétuer les ressources ethniques, culturelles et architecturales de l'Etat par le travail à "Old World Wisconsin", le grand musée en plein air de l'Etat. L'auteur, qui a conçu ce projet, décrit les recherches, la conception, et le développement du musée. Dans cet endroit, quelques-uns des meilleurs exemples de l'unique héritage de bâtiments folkloriques du Wisconsin ont été restaurés, situé avec un soin méticuleux, meublés, et interprétés dans un village rural et une série de fermes ethniques. Comme le seul musée en plein air multinational et multiculturel du monde, ce projet rend hommage de façon appropriée aux immigrants sans nombre qui se sont établis dans le Wisconsin-un Etat qui a toujours été fier de la diversité ethnique de ses citoyens.