

Simplicity and Survival: Vernacular Response in Newfoundland Architecture

by Shane O'Dea

In 1853 the Rev. William Grey wrote his colleagues in the Oxford Architectural Society to acquaint them with the state of architecture in Newfoundland: "Here you must know that we are in some respects perhaps even two centuries or so behind the mother country, — in all respects, at least a quarter of a century" (Grey, 1853: 156). Perhaps this was an accurate if somewhat unfavourable account of the situation. But the circumstances should not be surprising because Newfoundland, at the time Grey wrote, was not more than half a century removed from an economy and way of life which had little time for the aesthetics of style or even, somewhat paradoxically, for the development of structure.

As a consequence, simplicity in style and survival in structure characterize Newfoundland architecture. The settlement process and the economic base of Newfoundland were markedly different from those in the neighbouring colonies of Nova Scotia, Quebec and New England. Life in Newfoundland was harsher, living less sophisticated and these differences were manifested in the architecture. The survival in structure is seen in the tilt and its architectural offspring; the simplicity in style is seen in the vernacular response to fashionable styles.

The term tilt is now used in Newfoundland to describe any temporary or rough shelter and, as most such shelters are or were generally always constructed of vertical logs, to refer particularly to shelters constructed in that manner. The term itself comes from an earlier, even simpler form of shelter which Julian Moreton (1863: 80) calls a "back-tilt" and describes as "a punt's sail strained along the ground on one side, and supported at an angle of about forty-five degrees from the ground by stakes. The ends are walled in with boughs, and the whole front is open; whence its name, being a back-shelter only." Anspach (1819: 468), describes a more developed version of the tilt: "Tilt-backs, or linneys, are sheds made of studs, and covered either with boards or with boughs, resembling the section of a roof, fixed to the back of their dwellings towards the wind."

The vertical-log mode is also found in such secondary buildings as sheds, stores, barns, stages and root cellars. The root cellar, with its logs framing an excavation and roofed with sods, is very similar to the cellar houses used at the beginnings of settlement in New England (Isham/Brown, 1900: 13). Another form of the vertical-log root cellar is found in Greenspond where the soil is so thin as to prevent excavation. There the vertical-log structure is set on top of the ground and banked around with sods. A similar system is used to construct the Labrador Tilt, although this term ("Labrador Tilt") can also be used to describe a house constructed entirely of sods.

The size and general form of tilts vary with their intended function but a surviving example on the King's Cove Road will serve as representative. This tilt is one of

a group of three built about 1950 by a Bonavista man for use in winter logging operations. One of the structures is a barn used for woods ponies, another a sawmill and the third a dwelling. The dwelling is approximately eighteen feet by twelve feet and six feet at the ridge. The walls are made of unrimmed spruce trees set into the earth. The roof is constructed of "slabs" — those half-round boards left after a piece of timber is squared — and covered with a tarpaper or "felt." The window is unglazed although it may well have been glazed at one time and since been broken. Alternately, it could have had, as did many tilts, a shutter hung on leather or cloth hinges. The door is built of a number of vertical boards and opened by a draw-string latch. No chimney is apparent but it is likely that a stove was used for heating and cooking. A limited framework of diagonal poles provides an additional degree of stability to the walls. This tilt appears to be a typical example of the winter tilt of the woodsmen as well as the summer tilt of the fishermen. Migratory fishermen built such tilts all around the Island in the early years of the Newfoundland fishery, and continued to do so on the Labrador coast when that fishery developed. The tilt also served, as both Mannion (1974: 143) and Mills (1977: 81) have pointed out, as the initial dwelling — the house that was built to provide the family's shelter on a temporary basis until the permanent house was constructed.

The next stage in the development of vertical-log construction occurs when it is used in the creation of permanent structures. It is at this stage of evolution that one should cease to talk about the tilt and begin to talk about full-studded structures: the distinction is between temporary structures with unrimmed logs and the permanent ones constructed of squared logs. The squaring allowed the logs to fit together more tightly as well as to allow for clapboard sheathing on the exterior, with wide vertical or horizontal board on the interior. As early as 1676 such sheathing and clapboard was sawn locally or imported from New England, a fact which John Downing mentions in his *Brief Narrative* (CO 1/38). These permanent structures had greater security from deterioration since the studs were tenoned into a sill which, in many cases, was placed on a low foundation of stones or supported by posts or "shores" in the manner of a fish flake. A more advanced form of diagonal framing than that used in the tilt can also be found in certain structures in which diagonal braces are let into the studs. The floor joists are set on a plate nailed to the wall and carried through the studs for additional support. As in the case of the tilt, the gaps in the walls are filled with moss, paper or rags to provide a tighter, more windproof house.

A study of the geographical distribution of surviving examples of studded structures in conjunction with the range of people who used the form makes clear that full-

studded construction is not merely used for temporary buildings but has an important place in the development of Newfoundland architecture. Tilts and full-studded structures have not only been found in every bay around the Island of Newfoundland but also along the Labrador coast. Full-studding is not ethnically, socially or occupationally restricted in its distribution as it was used in Newfoundland by all the major immigrant groups — English, Irish, French and Scottish. While both the studded structures described above come from areas of essentially English background, there are also those found on the Cape Shore in Placentia Bay which were built by Irish settlers in the middle of the nineteenth century. That the French used the tilt is apparent in an early eighteenth century engraving of Placentia showing a structure with rounded logs, two openings for windows and a sodroof. Full-studding is also found on later houses in the Bay St. George area.

In the matter of social distribution it would seem that wealth was not a restriction. The Percy house in Brigus, which was built by a merchant sometime about the end of the eighteenth century and which may have served as a bank, had a typically vernacular classical facade behind which was a full-studded wall. Further evidence of the use of full-studding can be found in a military plan of the late eighteenth century for the erection of temporary barracks at Fort William in St. John's. This somewhat substantial structure was to be built of round logs driven into the ground. These last two examples suggest that the full-studded mode of construction was probably standard rather than exceptional, in the sense that it was as commonly used in some rural areas as frame construction until the first decades of the twentieth century.

There is a problem with the use of such a primitive structural form, a problem which poses the question why it is found so extensively in Newfoundland long after its disappearance from Europe. That it was used in Europe is fairly clear from the eleventh century church at Greenstead in Essex, and from the Norwegian stave churches of about the same period (Hansen, 1971). However, no other European buildings built in this form survive and it is difficult to offer definite conclusions, so only possible connections can be suggested. The most likely relationship is that it is an antecedent form to what is known as close-studded construction (in which there is a significant space between the timbers) which, in its turn, is antecedent to timber-frame construction.

Based on such a premise, one might suggest that Newfoundland's use of the full-studded form is a survival of an early medieval building practice and that the first settlers carried on working in the manner of their ancestors, with their descendants following their techniques. Such a suggestion, however, is complicated by the fact that the regions in southwest England from which most of the early settlers came (the impact of the Irish was not really felt until the end of the eighteenth century) had been for years areas in which the standard mode of building was in stone. To postulate such a mode of transmission is to postulate not form survival but rather form recollection.

The more reasonable suggestion is that the use of full-studded construction is an unsophisticated response

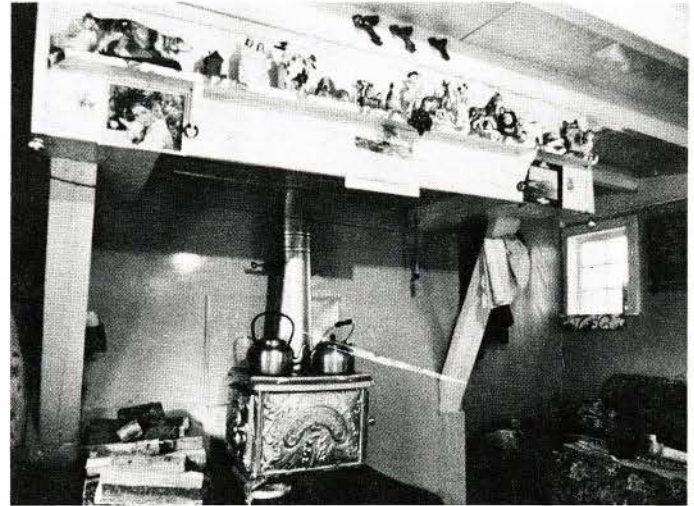


Plate 1

of the initial settler to his situation. He arrived in Newfoundland as a migratory fisherman, possibly only intending to spend the summer at the fishery, needed some reasonable form of accommodation, saw the acres of small but usable timber around him, and constructed with it in the simplest manner possible. Being unversed, one presumes, in the requirements of frame construction he created a simple palisade by driving timbers into the earth and providing them with a roof. It is interesting to note that the full-studded mode is found also in Quebec where it has a number of variants and all are dated as seventeenth century (Gauthier-Larouche, 1974: 67). This might confirm the theory that full-studded construction is the response of the unsophisticated and that the unsophisticated man is found in all races. Alternatively, it might be presumed that the form actually survived in Europe until the nineteenth century but that it was such a primitive form that it went unrecorded, and unnoted. The British military plan for temporary barracks at Fort William would support this latter suggestion.

Only further research in both North America and Europe will provide answers to the problems of origins. What is clear and what is remarkable is that the form survived in Newfoundland until the first half of the twentieth century and was used throughout the Island by all classes and occupations in the nineteenth century.

Another feature of domestic architecture which is evidence of unusual survival is the settle fireplace. In both early English and Irish Newfoundland houses there was frequently a fireplace large enough to allow a bench to be placed on either side of the hearth within the chimney opening. As far as can be determined, the settle fireplace survived until about 1860 and disappeared about the same time as its smaller counterpart the open fireplace — a fireplace approximately three foot square whose fire was set on dog irons on the hearth. The coming of the stove saw the departure of the fireplace except for the purpose of heating. Two somewhat primitive versions of the settle fireplace are known to survive. One, in King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, is an open hearth without jambs (Pl. 1). The smoke is carried out through a stone hood which projects from the chimney and

REPRESENTATIVE PLANS OF EARLY HOUSES
IN RELATIONS TO ETHNIC ORIGIN AND ROOF TYPE

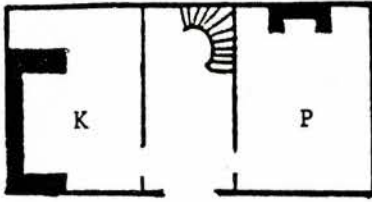


Figure 1a – Carbonear, English 2½ storey Gable, c. 1810.

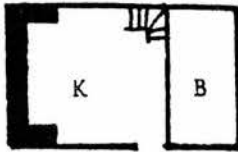


Figure 1b – Carbonear, English 2½ storey Gable, c. 1800.

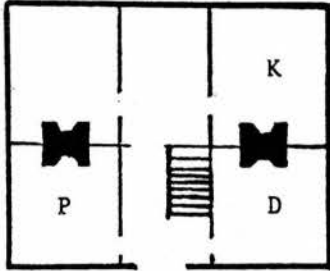


Figure 1c – Fogo, English 2½ storey Gable, c. 1820; St. John's, English, 2½ storey Gable, c. 1834; Brigus, English, 2½ storey Gable, c. 1870.

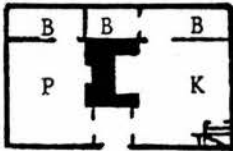


Figure 1d – Portugal Cove, Irish, 1½ storey Hip, c. 1850.

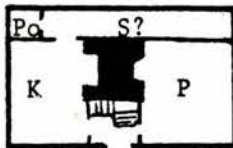


Figure 1e – Carbonear, English, 2½ storey Hip, c. 1820.

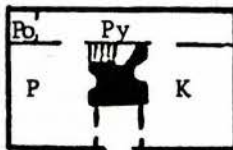


Figure 1f – Oderin, English, 1½ storey Hip, c. 1832.

(Proportionate dimensions
are approximate).

Po – Porch
Py – Pantry
P – Parlour
B – Bedroom

D – Dining Room
K – Kitchen
S – Stable

which is carried on two heavy sticks set diagonally from the base of the chimney to the outer edge of the hood. This arrangement is all the more unusual in that it is one of two such fireplaces in the same dwelling, each serving a single family.

The other primitive version is in a substantial house in Brigus which was built about 1850. The fireplace is located in an addition to the main house, which is an unusual feature in a Newfoundland home where the kitchen is normally an integral part of the house. The fireplace is open at the front and at one side, the open corner being supported by a very sturdy tree trunk. Neither this fireplace nor the one from King's Cove have settled in the chimney opening.

Such settle fireplaces, where they are in the principal kitchen-cum-living room, are now occupied by wood-burning stoves or oil ranges. The idea of having such a warm, enclosed room about the fire persisted in some places after the disappearance of the actual stone fireplace. In Branch and Admiral's Beach, St. Mary's Bay, there are houses, built at the beginning of the twentieth century, which have stoves set in small rooms, rooms about the same size as the open area of a settle fireplace. These houses never had large stone chimneys which perhaps suggests that the tradition of a room about the fire persisted long after the original technology had been replaced.

Considering the matter of style as opposed to structure one must be aware that for two centuries Newfoundland architecture struggled to be functional before it could afford to move to considerations of style. And those considerations of style, when they came, came late and came as adaptations to a situation so that they seldom were straightforward borrowings from another culture. This applies as much to those buildings from which one would expect a self-consciousness of form — the churches — as to those from which one expects little more than an awareness of function — the houses. This slow adaptation of style can be seen in both the houses and churches built around Newfoundland and Labrador from the middle of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth.

The Newfoundland house evolving as it did, from the structural primitiveness of the tilt, retained a marked degree of the traditional in its form well into the twentieth century. The basic elements of plan, roof-type and decoration responded only slightly to contemporary architectural developments — fashionable styles were slow in coming, and simple in application.

Nonetheless, all styles are encountered in rural Newfoundland as they are in the capital city, St. John's, but, because of the different nature of the setting, there is frequently a difference in the interpretation of the style. Only in major towns with a substantial population does one find the clustering of houses and shops that is common in the capital. The demands on space were not as great in the outports, with the exception of the demand that one grow one's own vegetables making it necessary to have a garden near the house. The contrasting situation in St. John's where such produce could be obtained and where there was a greater division of labour, encouraged attached housing. An equally important reason for

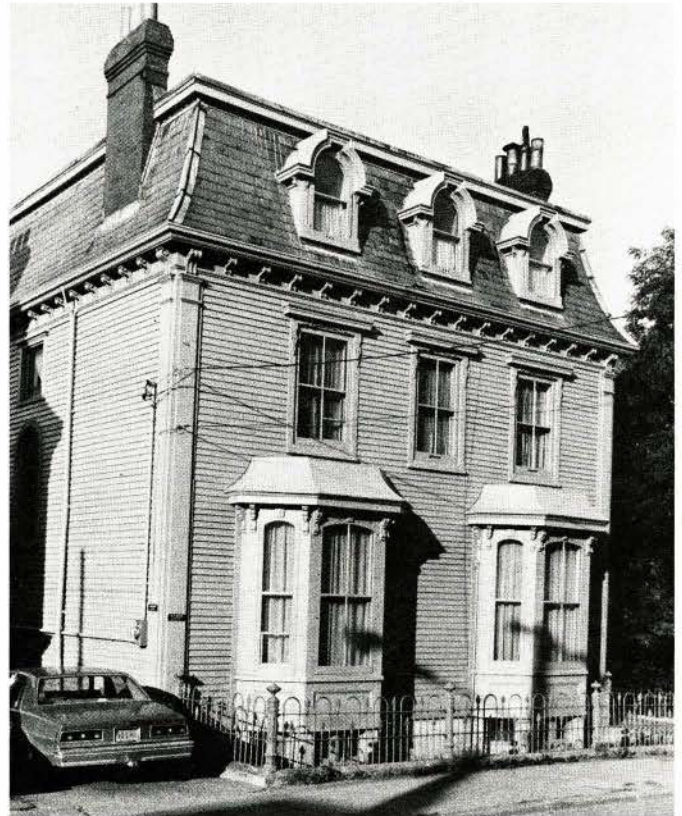


Plate 2

the predominance of the detached as opposed to the attached house in the outport was the outport's economic base: the fishery. In most outports fishing was done by all and secondary industries or occupations were few. Fishing premises then, such as a loft or store for the fishermen or a range of stores for the merchant, were immediately beside the house. Comparatively unrestricted by space, the outport house could and did grow in every direction producing structures like Bleak House in Fogo. Except in cases where two members of the



Plate 3



Plate 4

same family wished to co-operate in the occupancy of the same piece of ground, the semi-detached house is rare in Newfoundland outport.

Outport houses generally always have a center-hall plan, although the main door is seldom used. The principal entry is through the back porch into the kitchen which, in most cases, was the most used room of the house. The centrally-placed entry and essentially symmetrical facade is the norm in most nineteenth century Newfoundland houses. Variation comes in the floor plan and with what lies beyond the front door. Generally, Newfoundland-English houses have a central-hall plan with the stairs rising from the back of that hall (Fig. 1A). In houses of single-room depth the chimneys are located in the gable-end; in houses two rooms deep, the chimneys are often set just behind the ridge of the roof and allow a fireplace to face into each of the pairs of rooms in the building (Fig. 1B). Newfoundland-Irish houses tended to use the massive central chimney and, consequently, eliminated the possibility of a central hall (Fig. 1C). With the central chimney all that was possible was a limited entry leading, on either side, into the kitchen and parlour. With a less massive chimney it was possible to set a cramped stairs in the entry, but this has only been encountered in a Newfoundland-English house (Fig. 1D).



Plate 5

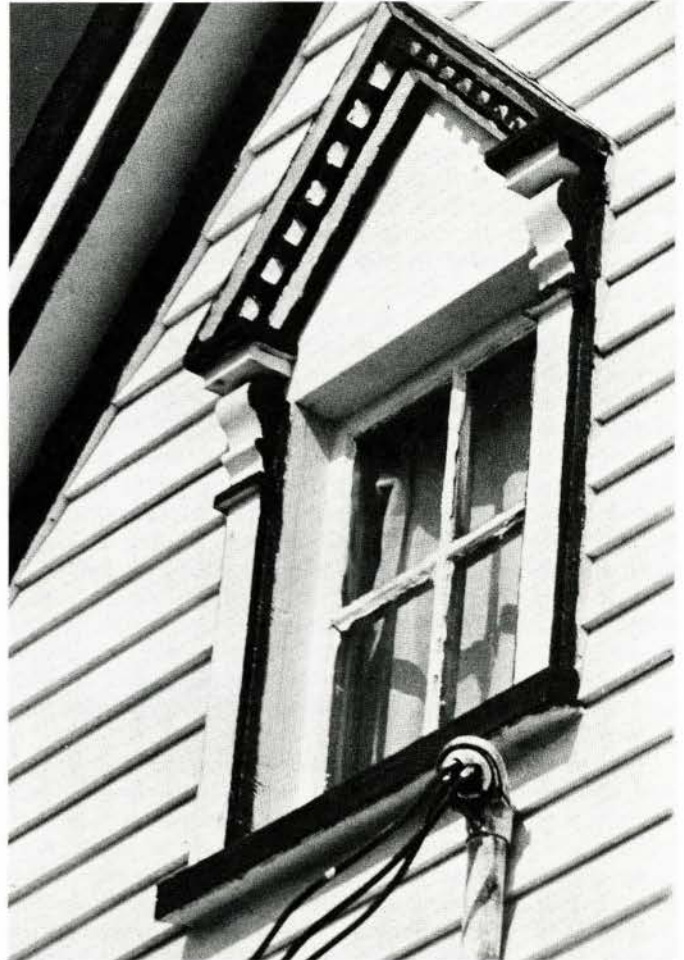


Plate 6

The stairs in the Newfoundland-Irish house could rise from a corner of the room or mount the shoulder of the chimney. In most cases such stairs were completely enclosed and were sealed off by a door (Fig. 1E).

A distinctive feature of the houses of both ethnic groups was the linhay or lean-to which was added to the rear of the house. In most houses the linhay provided three extra rooms serving varying purposes such as bedrooms, storage areas, sculleries and, in some cases, a shelter for animals. The linhay also provided the rear, and everyday entrance to the house.

An examination of those buildings that survive from the early part of the nineteenth century shows that the double-pile or Georgian plan, that is, the house two rooms deep, was generally only occupied by the merchant or substantial planter. When the Second Empire Style came to Newfoundland after 1885 and, to draw on Grey again, "in all respects, at least a quarter of a century (behind the mother country)", it had a considerable influence on Newfoundland popular architecture and some influence on the vernacular (Pl. 2). But there is an anomaly, the double-pile plan came with the vernacular form of the style, although such a plan was not a feature of the urban or fashionable version. It may be that this plan was slowly making its appearance among the peo-

ple, and began to manifest itself most clearly only coincidentally with advent of the Second Empire.

Irregular floor plans, characteristic of the Queen Anne or "Vernacular" Revival (1876–1890) began to influence the vernacular outport house at the beginning of the twentieth century. One variant of this plan form involved the use of an entry in the gable, a feature previously rare in Newfoundland architecture.

There appears to be a correlation in Newfoundland architecture between chimney placement and roof form. The central chimney seems to dictate the use of the hip roof and this seems to transcend ethnic boundaries (Cover). The central chimney form is associated with the Irish, but in at least two examples where it is used by the English, it is used in conjunction with the hip roof (Fig. 1F). A caution against such generalizations is suggested by two farms in the Freshwater Valley on the outskirts of St. John's in which the builders, who were both Irish, put central chimneys in gable-roofed houses. One hip-roofed house in Bonavista, built about 1850, has its chimney in an end wall. These examples however do appear to be the exception.

The rationale for the common use of the hip roof is somewhat difficult to determine. The framing of such a roof is a more complex procedure than that for a gable roof. In addition, the hip roof produces more joints to be subjected to leaks and considerably reduces the amount of attic space. Kevin Danaher, (1975: 54) in discussing the use of hip roofs on Irish thatched houses, suggests that its function might have been to prevent moisture penetration for which it was better than the gable roof but that, in the matter of wind resistance, it was not as efficient. Whatever might be the reasonableness of Danaher's suggestions, they cannot have a great deal of validity in the Newfoundland context — a context in which there is considerable moisture driven by considerable wind. Evans (1942: 58) points out that the hip roof is more common in Ireland south of the Boyne, the gable, north of it. This southeast corner was the source area of most of Newfoundland's Irish population (Mannion: 1973). Thus it might be suggested that the use of the hip roof by the Newfoundland Irish is a matter of persistence of tradition. This tradition persisted only until about 1870 when the hip roof seems to leave the Newfoundland landscape, having been preceded by the disappearance of the massive central chimney. The architectural inefficiency of the hip roof and abdication of the fireplace to the stove explain this pair of changes.

An additional point needs to be made here about another group of houses using the hip roof — the merchant houses. Two examples: Sweetman's Blenheim House in Placentia (1786) (Pl. 3) and the Commissariat in St. John's (1819) will serve as illustrations. While the small houses of the fisherman or farmer might have hip roofs which owe something to a tradition of thatching, the large houses of the merchant owe their roofs to another tradition. These houses were built in imitation of the English country houses of the beginning of the eighteenth century, in which a high hip roof was a prominent feature. Neither of these two examples followed the contemporary fashions, rather in a somewhat conservative manner, they followed the fashions of a cen-

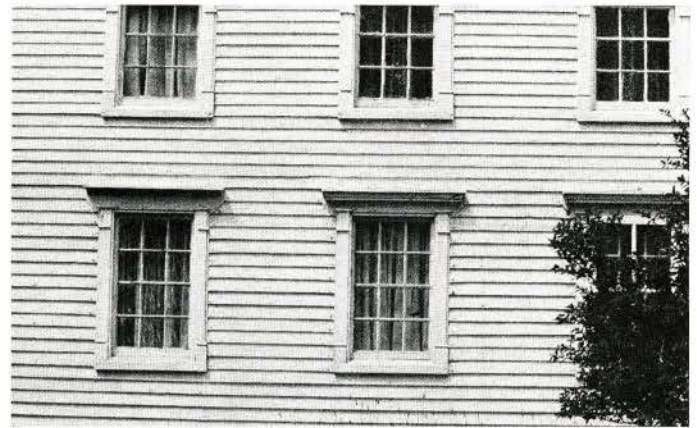


Plate 7

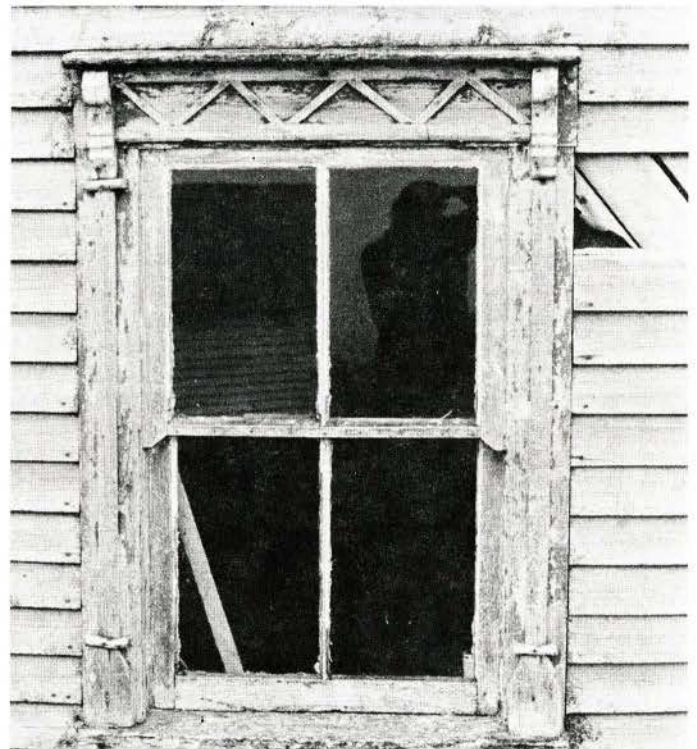


Plate 8

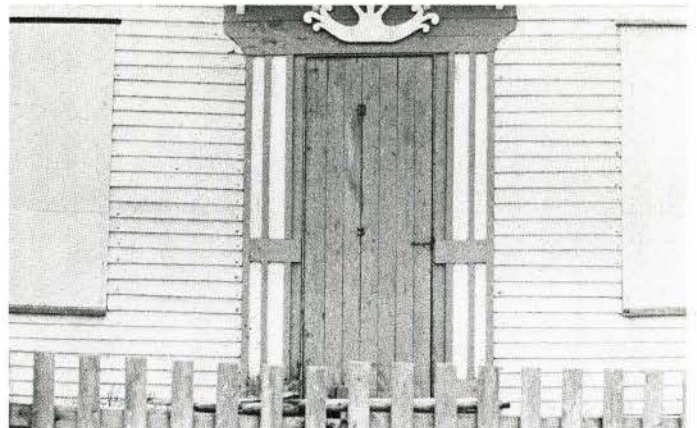


Plate 9



Plate 10

tury earlier and, in that sense, are in the vernacular tradition.

The place of the gable roof among the English-Newfoundlanders might be explained by consideration of their essentially urban origin as compared to the rural origin of the Irish (Handcock, 1977: 41-43). In the urban setting the attached house is the rule and the economies of this mode lead to gable-end chimneys (Pl. 4). Once in Newfoundland the Englishman would merely remove his architecture from the row of which it was a part and set it detached on his property.

The mansard roof, the hallmark of the Second Empire style appears in rural Newfoundland coincident with the 1892 fire in St. John's and possibly as a consequence of it — the mansard having become the fashionable roof form in the rebuilt capital. Apart from the fact that it was both new and attractive, the mansard roof could also be said to have the merit of practicality — if one ignored the difficulty of constructing it. Because the pitch was broken (a folk term for the form is "broken couple"), it allowed more headroom in the upper story. While many houses were undoubtedly built anew in the



Plate 11

vernacular form of the style, it is possible that many gable roof houses were re-roofed with a mansard. The more common form of the roof has open gables and, with a few exceptions, the houses are only two storey.

While other style features such as plan and roof-type remain fairly constant from community to community, decoration does vary depending on the skills and interests of local craftspeople. In a town like Grand Bank a degree of wealth allowed people to make use of designs from architectural pattern books and, in some cases, to import ready-made detail. In other communities local imagination influenced by the interacting factors of fashion and tradition produced a decorative pattern that is distinct to that community. Bonavista is a particular example of this in its treatment of the gable peak of mansard-roofed houses. In such houses the angle made by the gable is emphasized by a pair of triangular boards which rise to the peak with a decorative device placed in the gap between them (Pl. 5). On most houses this device is a turned roundel, but in one case a maltese cross has been used in place of the roundel. The other feature of note in Bonavista is the treatment of windows. On earlier houses, houses built about 1850, the drip mouldings above the windows are very pronounced because of their unusual depth. Whether this is a response to climate or to local building practice has not been determined. The window treatment of some later houses, in which the surround has a gabled upper portion supported on consoled pilasters, is a more elaborate development (Pl. 6). The use of classical pilasters in both door and window surrounds was common throughout Newfoundland from the end of the eighteenth century (Pl. 7). These surrounds were more correctly classical in early houses becoming steadily more stylized as the nineteenth century progressed (Pl. 8). The more usual form of surround was a moulded frame with varying degrees of ornateness. The most unusual and distinctive Newfoundland door treatment is that found on the Cape Shore; the greatest number and variety of examples being found on the houses in Branch. There the area of the architrave or transom above the door is decorated with a series of motifs ranging from a simple diamond pattern to abstract, quasi-naturalistic forms (Pl. 9). Closer to folk art than most Newfoundland architectural detail, they are remarkable examples of the workings of the folk imagination.

Even the most important structures in the community — the churches — were essentially vernacular buildings. This was certainly the case until about 1820 when the merchants and other members of the community found themselves in a position where they wished to assert their sense of commitment to that community and did so in the building of a fashionable or at least more stylistic church.

Previously the churches were very simple structures — "worship shelters" might be an appropriate term for them. The Anglican Church built in Placentia in 1787 was a particularly good example of this (Pl. 10). Built with the support of the man who was later to be William IV, it was a simple one-and-a-half storey hip-roofed structure. Its only distinguishing mark as a church was its somewhat rudimentary tower. Essentially the building was lit-

tle more than an elongated house with a tower attached. Decoration was limited to some classical trim about the doorway, a doorway which could just as easily have been found on a house as on a church.

Until about 1850 then, it was not really possible to distinguish between the buildings of the different denominations. After 1850 there appears (although this is a somewhat tentative conclusion) to be a tendency for Anglican churches to use a Gothic Revival style, and Catholic churches to use a Renaissance Revival style. This tendency may have been occasioned by a desire to emulate the styles chosen by the cathedrals of the two denominations in St. John's, where the Anglican (1847) was designed by George Gilbert Scott in an Early English form of the Gothic Revival, and the Catholic (1841) was designed by John Jones in a Renaissance form. From such major structures the styles spread through the Island. And, if one is to seek a similar St. John's antecedent for the United Churches, then George Street Methodist (1873) may well serve the purpose for its pepperpot tower can be found on many Newfoundland United Churches.

The same sort of transference that occurs in the case of churches, where the early ones are merely amended houses, occurs also in the case of the fraternal lodges where the transference is from the fish store. In Fogo, where this is most apparent, the lodges of the Orange Order and the Society of United Fishermen are both massive gambrel-roofed buildings of the same form as the fish stores of the Earles on the opposite side of the harbour (Pl. 11). A similar situation is found with some of the schools. The grammar schools of Harbour Grace and Carbonear were built about 1844 and were large, hipped-roof houses indistinguishable from any of the domestic buildings of the towns.

The great change in styles at the end of the nineteenth century did not come to many of the towns and outports because most of them had stabilized in terms of settlement and economic development by about 1850. Having already built substantial structures there was little need and, in the economic Newfoundlander's view, no necessity to replace them for the sake of fashion.

The process of change in Newfoundland architecture was a slow one, in some cases surprisingly slow. Old forms persisted long after an available technology had made them obsolete. Style was never crucial, except perhaps in the larger towns where, even there, it was somewhat outmoded when applied. The architecture of Newfoundland is characterized by a marked simplicity of style and a remarkable persistence of form, a form which, for reasons not yet fully determined, survived the transition from a stone-building to a wood-building culture.

Acknowledgements

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