

The Stabilization of the Peter Burr House.

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The Peter Burr house, located a short distance north of Route 9 in Bardane, has been identified as the oldest frame structure in Jefferson County. The house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981 by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. In the nomination form, its historic importance or significance is attributed to three factors: 1) The Peter Burr house is one of less than a dozen structures in the state that survive from the pre-1760 period, constructed around 1751, only twenty years after the arrival of the first white settlers; 2) The Peter Burr house is associated with the prominent Burr family, being built by Peter Burr, an early settler from Connecticut and a cousin of Aaron Burr; and 3) The Peter Burr house is an extremely rare example of an early settlement homestead; the remaining 5 structures of this period in Jefferson County are stone or partially stone and are more representative of the manor house or large estate-oriented building. In addition, a 1988 survey conducted by Dr. Charles Hulse indicates the presence of significant archaeological deposits on the site of the house. I would like to point out that while it is only necessary to meet one criteria of significance, the Peter Burr house meets all four criteria of significance for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The remarkable significance of this building has been recognized by the editors of a pictorial guide to the historic sites of the state, who list the Peter Burr house immediately after Harpers Ferry as one of the most significant historic buildings in the county (Cohen and Pauley 1985) as well as by the National Park Service, who completed an Historic American Building Survey (HABS) on the buildings in 1983.

The early date and nature of its construction make the Peter Burr house particularly well-suited to a study of vernacular architecture. As defined by Herman (1987:13), "Vernacular architecture is the architecture of common usage and communication. The surface issues are to determine what a building or group of buildings are in terms of their structural, stylistic, or spatial character. At a deeper level, though, one must address how those various elements are brought together in individual buildings and manipulated as media for expressions of thought, everyday interaction, and the signification of social and cultural relationships and meanings." In other words, while buildings are built to serve as shelter, they also display what we think about ourselves and our role in society. While this is particularly obvious in public buildings (witness the recent controversy over the color of paint to put on the top of the courthouse columns), cultural 'messages' are also encoded in the more modest homes of people living in the countryside.

Buildings also 'learn' through time, altered to fit new circumstances as well as opinions. The Peter Burr house, as with all historic houses in the county, has been altered from its earliest, 1750s appearance. Peeling away these alterations can be likened to an archaeological excavation, with each layer related to a different period of time. Often, these changes reflect changing family circumstances rather than broadly defined historical events influenced by great men. Put another way, a long term fall in grain prices will have more effect on a regional economy than political decisions made in a nearby city. Individual houses grow and change through time, often related to a family's economic situation and household size and composition. For example,

archaeologists have noted building changes often take place when a son takes over from his father as the head of the household.

Beyond these individually oriented changes, most landholders building a house operate with similar notions of the appropriate materials to use in house construction, and the number and types of rooms a house should contain. This house "template" or pattern, is shaped and sometimes altered by our common cultural heritage. For example, during the 1600s and early 1700s, most houses constructed in America were of the hall/parlor plan. These are represented by the plans at the top of this slide. While occasionally entry into the house was through a small porch or entryway, typically access into the house was directly into a room, often referred to in room by room inventories of the period as a hall. This term is related to medieval not modern usage, when the hall operated as the center of household activity. Cooking, eating, reading, conversation and often sleeping all occurred in this one room and in many houses, it was the only room of the house. Some houses contained two rooms - the hall, and the parlor or chamber, entered from the hall, which often contained the best in household goods and occasionally functioned as a room for visiting guests as well as a sleeping chamber (Cummings 1986:221-2). Upton (1986:317) reports that according to room by room inventories dating between 1721 and 1730, 27 of Virginia's 34 wealthiest individuals lived in houses with only two ground-floor rooms, while two individuals lived in houses with only one main room. These small houses sometimes had one or two rooms upstairs, typically referred to as chambers. While these rooms might contain some bedding, often the better bedsteads were kept in the downstairs rooms, while the upstairs rooms could serve as storage for everything from tools to food.

Not only were these houses small, but built of post in the ground construction, they were constructed as "impermanent" buildings. None remain in the Chesapeake region, where it took an historian, several archaeologists and a vernacular architectural historian to reconstruct the appearance of these houses (Carson et. al. 1988). Since the posts and often the sills supporting these buildings sat directly in the dirt, most of these buildings rotted away before they could be used by a second generation of settlers. Archaeological evidence of these houses is usually confined to a grouping of postholes, a scattering of small artifacts and, if you're lucky, evidence of a small root cellar in the middle of a room. What archaeologists have also documented as a key ingredient of these houses is a constellation of outbuildings, often consisting of one larger building serving as servant and/or slave quarters as well as barns, dairies, root cellars and a number of other functions (Neiman, 1986).

All of this makes the Peter Burr house an even more unique survivor of early settlement in Jefferson County. Peter Burr the Second, as I shall refer to him here, came to the county probably in the late 1740s from Fairfield, Connecticut, where the family had been for three generations (Jacobus 1930: Vol. 11:131, 136, 142-4). His father, Peter Burr the First, was born in 1699 and was an older brother of the Reverend Aaron Burr of Princeton, New Jersey. Vice-President Aaron Burr was the only son of the Reverend Burr, who was to become President of Princeton before his early demise in 1757. Various lines of historic evidence suggest that a number of individuals came to Jefferson County together from Fairfield; some of these persons were well-to-do or prominent members of the Fairfield community. For example, a 1754 deed refers to Andrew Burr, Esquire, Chief Judge of the Fairfield County Court, and a Thaddeus Burr, Esquire, " Justice of the Peace of Fairfield County as witnesses (Frederick County Deed Book 3,

Folio 420). Thaddeus Burr was a first cousin of Peter Burr the First. I have been unable to determine how Andrew Burr may be related. It is difficult to say why a group of individuals from Connecticut chose this county - maybe it was the lure of land speculation and the money that could, in the right circumstances, be made from it; possibly it was the absence of hostile Indians, which were plentiful on the western Connecticut/New York frontier (Rosenberry 1962:79-109).

While the evidence for this period of settlement in the county is scarce, it can be determined that Peter Burr acquired a grant from Lord Fairfax for 406 acres on which the house now stands in June of 1751, and the house was probably built shortly before or after this date. The earliest Jefferson County references to Peter Burr the Second, born in 1727, illustrate his role in attempting to establish a Presbyterian church along Elk Branch near his home. Peter Burr, along with John Wright and Mesrs Tully, as trustees of the church, acquired one acre from John Engle and his wife in 1770. This congregation reportedly met in a small log church located about 1/2 mile west of the current Elk Branch church, inside a Block House. Philip Vickers Fithian, who served as a supply minister to Elk Branch in February of 1776, refers to "...a Settlement of my Countrymen. Mr Burr, Tully, Conklin, Boyd, Sayre, Garrison, with their Families, and others. dined at Mr. Burr's. He is a good-Liver, as it is commonly said. Appears to be a modest, sensible Man, & is in high Repute -- " (Albion and Dodson 1934:181). Fithian spent one night during his stay at Mr. Burr's. This early attempt to establish a church on the Elk Branch had failed by 1783; in 1787, Peter Burr was one of four grantees to a plot of ground for a Presbyterian church in Charles Town granted by Charles Washington (Graham 1904:69, 106). There are also references to Peter Burr supplying provisions to the Berkeley County authorities during the Revolutionary War years. Peter Burr the Second died in 1795 and left his house and a portion of the original 406 acre grant to his oldest son, Peter Burr the third, born in 1764. This Peter Burr left the property in the hands of three trustees in 1799 and emigrated to Ohio. After passing through the hands of four different owners, David Moore acquired the property in 1804. During his ownership, the Baltimore and Ohio railroad was built through a wooded area on the 110 acre tract around 1839. Upon Moore's death in 1845, the property was left to his nephew, Samuel Moore (Jefferson County Will Book 10, Folio 502). After passing through several owners, the property was purchased in 1886 by John D. McGarry, a great grandson of Peter Burr the Second (Magazine of the Jefferson County Historical Society Vol XLI: 4-8). More recently, the property passed into county ownership when the Development Authority purchased the property from Mr. and Mrs. Holden, the latter a direct descendant of Peter Burr. Last year, the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission acquired the house, a one acre parcel of land [7.5 acres], and a 50 [40] foot right-of-way in an effort to preserve this important historic property, declared a Jefferson County Historic Landmark by the Commission in 1976.

HABS photographs of the property, taken in 1983, indicate the excellent condition of the house at that time. Members of the McGarry family lived in the house in the early part of the century, and the family kept the house of their early ancestor in good condition by maintaining the roof and performing other maintenance on the house. However, the neglect that has occurred since that time almost lead to the loss of the property. As you can see, a large hole in the roof and the loss of support structures along the porch created serious structural problems. Fortunately, through financial support mainly from the Governors Community Partnership Grant, supplemented by the West Virginia Division of Culture and History and the local Arts and Humanities Alliance (aha!), the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission was able to

undertake some repairs. The end result of the past year's work is new exterior clapboard cladding on the east wall, new structural supports for the front and rear porches, repair of the roof, and stabilization of both chimneys, as well as reconstruction of the fireplace openings in the oldest [both] section[s] of the house. The Commission also stabilized a small stone springhouse located on the property, probably constructed in the 1800s.

The Commission has also begun the process of studying the building. The similarity of the Peter Burr House to other frame structures of New England has long been noted. This similarity also contributes to the preservation of this building when so many other early Virginia structures, built with posts in the ground, have deteriorated and no longer exist. Reconstruction work required on the east wall provided the opportunity to examine the framing of the building. The corner posts of the building, as well as the sills, is sited on a small but effective stone foundation of several courses. The framing is similar to that identified by St. George (1986:348) as evolving by 1700 from earlier forms in New England. While the steep pitch of the Peter Burr House has long been associated with its New England antecedents, this illustration indicates the changes in framing which occurred to create more head room in the second floor rear room. The first floor contained a brick and mortar infill, also often cited as another New England feature. While not unknown as a building technique in this region, its use is not common. The brick is hand-molded, and of various sizes, perhaps rejected for use in other building projects. Exposure of the east wall indicated that the infill of the second floor consisted of a lime and mud daub or mortar, while the steep attic pitch contained no infill of any sort. The large chimney of the older portion of the house, with its broad base and squat stack, is also reminiscent of the late 1600s buildings of New England recorded in 1924 by Kelly. Other building details, not obvious on a first inspection, are reflective of New England construction techniques. These include the use of purlins, running on the exterior of the roof rafters to provide a surface for roofing materials. Wooden details, particularly the detailing on the exposed corner posts in the second floor rooms, the beading on the exposed joists on the first floor, and the beaded clapboard on the exterior are all often found in New England houses of the early 1700s.

Preliminary examination of the house does appear to confirm that the eastern section, located on your right in this floor plan, is the original house. Containing four rooms, two upstairs and two down, the Peter Burr house was of a substantial size for a relatively new frontier settlement; in 1730 in New England, St. George (1986:353) indicates at least 40% of the population lived in a house with 3 rooms or less. While the use of the rooms in the Peter Burr house cannot be currently substantiated, it appears the southern room functioned as the hall described earlier - the room where cooking, eating, conversation and some sleeping occurred. Reconstruction of the stone chimney in this room revealed a small opening that may have been a warming oven. It is clear that the middle section of the house was attached later; a pocket in the girt, a horizontal support timber of the main section, indicates the location of a vertical support timber, removed to create a doorway to the middle section. Past studies have stated that Peter Burr added the middle section, for it also has walls with brick infill, and David Moore built the log section, for a stone in the chimney of that section contains the initials 'DM'. However, other possibilities exist. For example, perhaps Peter Burr added the middle section as a one room lean-to, similar to the Norton House in Guilford, Connecticut, illustrated here. The floor joists on the second floor room above are tied into the log addition; additionally, a lower roof and corresponding ceiling in the upstairs middle room make a small trap door the only entry between the two sections

upstairs. Another suggestion is that the log section coexisted with the first house, constructed as a animal shelter or barn and later converted into a kitchen with the addition of a chimney. Some barns were constructed of logs in the early period in Connecticut (Kelly 1924). In addition, early laws in Virginia required that the kitchen be a separate structure; by having no doors between the middle section and the log section, the letter of the law could be obeyed if not the spirit.

While all of these issues require further research and archaeology to be properly answered, the importance of the Peter Burr house to the history of the settlement of Jefferson County cannot be disputed. Vernacular architectural historians of the Chesapeake and Virginia note the change in house construction that occurs around 1750. Upton (1986:321) notes an increase in the use of the term 'dining room' to refer to one room, although it is clear by its furnishings that it is not set apart just for dining. The biggest change is the addition of a passage, what is now in modern terminology 'the hall.' The inclusion of this passage, as well as the differentiation of room use or function, became two standard features of houses as the eighteenth century drew to a close. Both were at a deeper level related to social relationships, and creating separate public and private spaces within the house. The passage was to serve as a place to meet guests, before determining what room to entertain them in. The Peter Burr house represents not only an earlier, different time, but a different way of looking at the world and of letting the world look at you. It is a way of life that no longer exists.

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