

THE EARLIEST BARN OF ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY

By Anne McClung

Remarks to Historic Lexington Foundation, May 18, 2019

WHENEVER I WRITE about our county, I always feel compelled to quote a childhood friend and best-selling author who says this about our environs:

There is in this valley a beating heart. It is always and ever there. And when I am gone, it will beat for you, and when you are gone, it will beat for your children and theirs, forever. Forever. Until there is no water, no air, no green in the spring or gold in the autumn, no stars in the sky or wind from the north It is the narrative of this world, and the scrapbook of your own small life, and, when you are gone into ash and darkness and the grave, it will tell your story.”ⁱ

The log barns that are scattered across our countryside are a case in point. They tell a story of the souls who built them long ago. Between 1717 and 1735, 250,000

ⁱ Robert Goolrick, *Heading Out to Wonderful* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Press, 2012), p. 292.

Anne Drake McClung has lived in Rockbridge County all her life and has been studying, photographing and writing about it for most of that. She has an M.A. in sociology from the University of Virginia. Her most recent book is *Dried Apples and Other Vanishing Memories*. In Rockbridge, you see, Dried Apples was a person as well as a culinary treat.

Scots-Irish came to this country from Ulster. Many of them began their new lives in Delaware and southeastern Pennsylvania. It is speculated that the Scots-Irish brought with them no housing culture or tradition, let alone one of log. It was in Delaware that they were exposed to the Swedish-Finnish log construction, and those who settled west of Philadelphia to that of the Germans.

Those interested in log building construction know there is more to it than meets the eye. Social geographers or demographers who are studying log buildings can find helpful clues to tracing the diffusion of various ethnic groups throughout the country. Each detail of a log structure is telling.

The Scots-Irish are to be admired for their tenaciousness in learning this primitive method of joining logs to make a home or a barn. They learned and borrowed techniques from both the Swedes and the German in addition to developing their own variations of constructing buildings to house themselves and their livestock.

Last summer a filming crew from the British Broadcasting Corporation came here to Rockbridge, and I had a hand in helping them with a small part of their documentary that centered on the influence and influx of the Scots-Irish into our area. My part talked about these settlers as well as some history of the log structures that are so plentiful here in Rockbridge County. As we discussed the Scots-Irish



Rockbridge County. Photograph by the author.



Olsen barn near Rapps Mill.
Photo by Ellen Martin.

and their influence, particularly on our infrastructure, I realized just how tough these folks were. They were hard-scrabble. They had guts, that's for sure. They were God-fearing. And my favorite saying about them, which appeared in a McClung genealogy, was

that they kept the Sabbath, and everything else they could get their hands on!

They assembled hundreds of log structures, homes and barns that are still with us today, some well over two hundred years old. Even though they had no building skills when they came to America, they acquired them, and their cabins, barns, and outbuildings dot our countryside today and remind us of our heritage.

A good many of the log structures throughout our area were not built as residences but as farm outbuildings. And one of the most common and most interesting are the double crib or double pen barns as seen on the next page. They come in many variations, but the basic construction is the same. There are usually two square pens, say 20 feet by 20 feet, on either side of a breezeway or passageway. Crib barns were typically built of unchinked logs and their roofs were of undressed wood shingles which, in time, were replaced with tin or asphalt. The cribs served as storage for fodder or pens for cattle, sheep and other livestock and may or may not have had hay lofts above them.

When settlers brought the craft of log construction with them into the frontier, they successfully adapted it to regional materials, climates and terrains. It was fortuitous that the Scots-Irish brought their newly found crafts when making their settlements because trees came with the land and were available for the cost of time and labor. Although many species of trees were chosen for structures, chestnut was favored. It was the wood of choice because of its desirable qualities of being light in weight compared with the oaks, and of being easy to split, easy to work, and very durable.



The migration pattern of the Scots-Irish down into our valley.

The trees used for these early barns were felled with axes, measured with nothing more than a stick, and sawn to the desired length with a crosscut saw. The trees themselves weren't much taller than twenty-four feet, so sometimes, if more cribs were needed, two were built, and thus were called double-crib barns.

Whatever the style of barn, the next step after the timber had been chosen and cut and dragged to the building site by mule or horse or oxen, was that of hewing. Hewing was a German tradition and allowed for a closer fit of the logs. It is important to note that not all barn logs were hewn; some were used as nature provided. But those that were hewn required skilled handling of a felling or poleax and a broadax. A log was scotched and two lines were marked off on one side of the log. A string, usually dipped in pokeberry juice, stretched the length of the log and twanged, just as a chalk line is today. The felling ax was used to score the sides of the log



Examples of double-crib log barns. Above: Phemister Barn on Bethany Road, near Kerrs Creek. Left: Unidentified barn; from the notes of Royster Lyle Jr.

to the depth indicated by the pokeberry line. Then the broadax split away the chunks between the scores. Both sides of the log were treated in this manner.

The illustration by

Peter Drake at the top of the next column shows how the hewing was accomplished.

The next step in the construction process was to notch the ends of the logs to join each log to another. All of the log structures here show one of four types of notching. V-notching, perhaps the most common, is seen particularly on the older, more crudely built barns. Saddle notching is another common form. Sometimes, either because of wear or level of skill, the V-notch and saddle notch are hard to distinguish. Both styles are attributed to the less skilled Scots-Irish. There are two kinds of

Illustration by Peter Drake

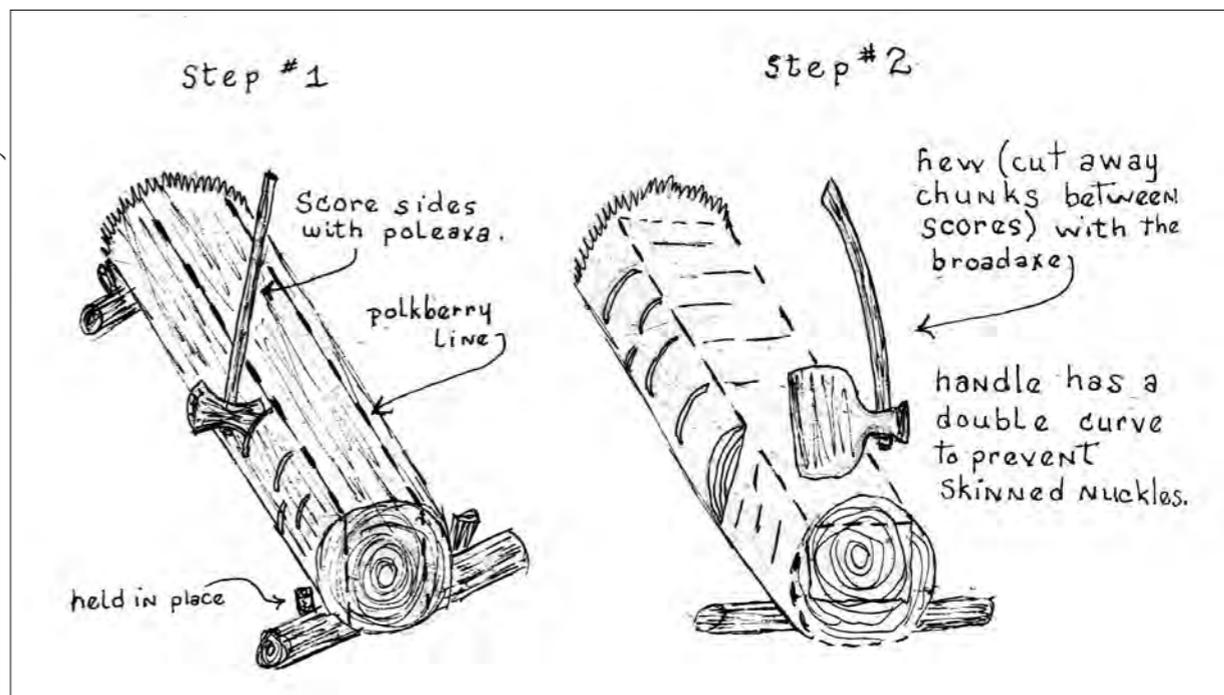
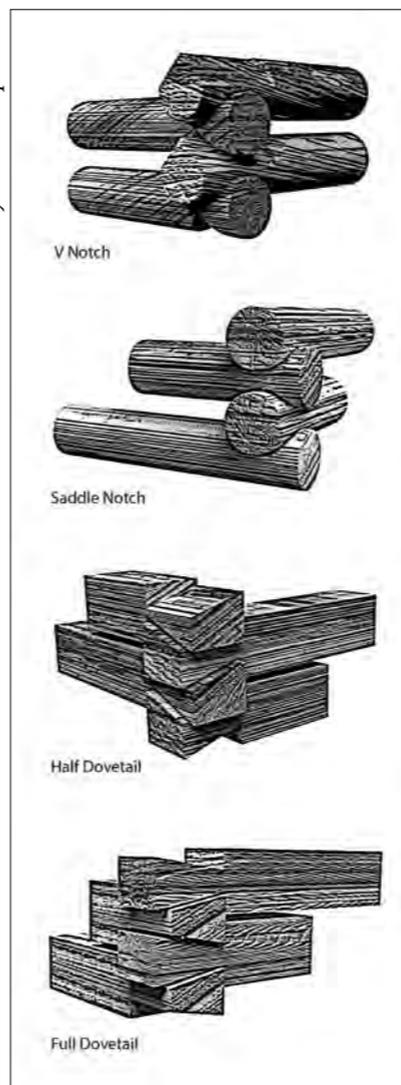


Illustration by Laurie Lipscomb



dovetail notches which are considered to be more sophisticated and are less common and mostly used with hewn timbers. The half dovetail is fairly uncommon and the full dovetail is actually a rare sight.

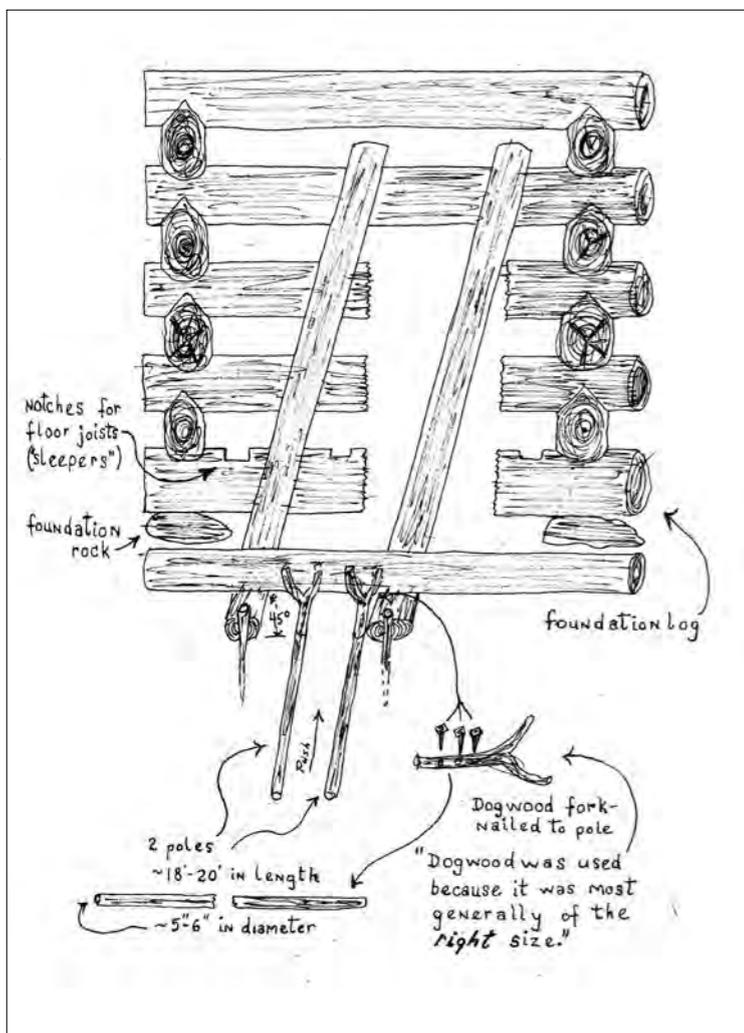
The illustration at the left by Laurie Lipscomb shows the four types of notching.

Once a notching style was settled on, it was time to raise the logs into position. There was a method for that, too. When it was time to raise a barn, or other buildings, neighbors would gather for the task, and as one can



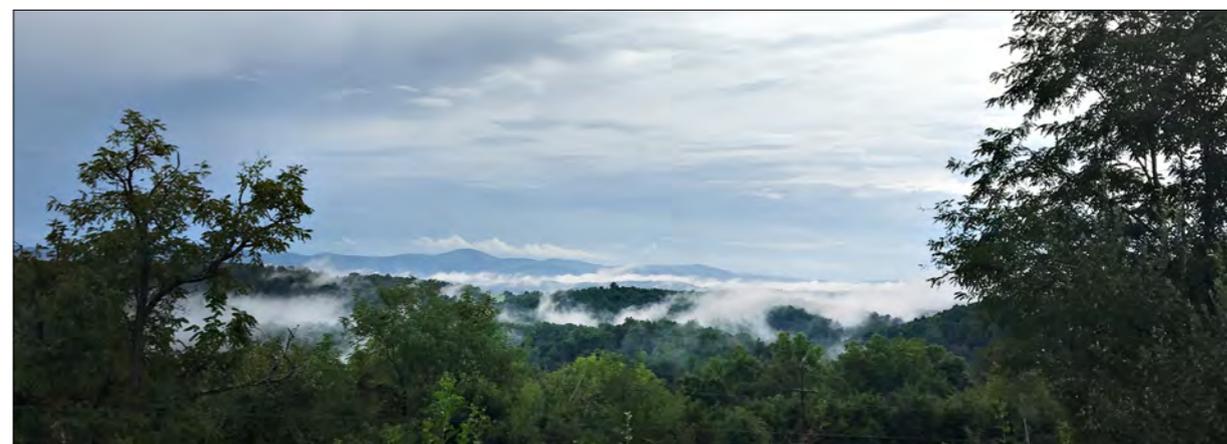
Example of "V" notches. Photograph by Laurie Lipscomb.

Illustration by Peter Drake



see from this illustration, with the aid of the forks, and many helping hands, a barn could go up fairly quickly.

We all should be truly grateful for the Ruth Anderson McCulloch Branch of APVA/ Preservation Virginiaⁱ for undertaking a survey in the early 1990s of all structures in the county fifty years and older. The Department of Historic Resources houses the database from that survey, as does Special Collections in the Leyburn Library at Washington and Lee University. A good many years ago I searched the database and came up with more than 500 properties that included some sort of log structures. And I know there are more in them thar hills!



On almost any drive, along any road, log structures will reveal themselves. Some are abandoned and so overgrown, having gone back to nature, that they are hard to see. Some are rebuilt and restored. Some are covered over with siding. But the numbers are really staggering. The symbolism of, and affection for, log structures remains very strong in Rockbridge County. Philip Clayton, a Rockbridge native, who has built some beautiful log structures, once reminded me of the romance we have with the log buildings: "I built my log and stone house using old log cabins and barns. I was able to reuse old logs and stones, the ax and chisel marks still visible on both. I've often looked at those old marks and wondered who made them, where did they eventually go, who are their descendants, and are they still here in the shadow of the mountain?"

Left: Deacon large barn on Blue Grass Trail. Photo by Ellen Martin.
Right: Plank Road barn. Photo by the author.



ⁱ The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, or APVA, was the original name of today's Preservation Virginia organization.