When 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.”

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 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...
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.

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.

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

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