

## Log Houses in Bucks County

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### *Introduction*

Any settlers in a new frontier must give immediate thought to shelter. Bucks County provided the raw materials to afford protection from the weather. The first shelters were undoubtedly made from boughs, bark, sod, and thatch. There are several documented examples of settlers occupying “caves” dug into hillsides. As soon as possible, “real” houses were constructed. The English settlers built huts and houses like the traditional structures they had known at home. Using the ax and the saw, they produced timber frame houses covered with clapboards. Other European settlers who came from heavily forested countries such as the Swedes and Finns (and later the Germans) had come from a tradition which employed log construction. Finding the virtually unlimited forests of Pennsylvania, they built log houses in America reminiscent of those structures they had known at home.

Horizontal log construction was brought by many different groups to North America, but the variety that became dominant on the eastern frontier was that of the Pennsylvania Germans, though modified through synthesis with techniques from English framing. Since there is no necessary connection in origin between technology and form, the most usual form of the log cabin was not German, but English or Irish.<sup>1</sup> This type of log house is virtually extinct in the southern half of Bucks County and the surrounding region.

Traditional sources suggest that the “culturally conservative Englishmen required several generations and much hard labor with handsaws before they discerned the merits of notching logs and building a pen to live in. The Scotch-Irish, who filtered through German settlements on their way to more remote frontiers early in the eighteenth century, adopted the log cabin and made it their own.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Accounts*

This interpretation may be inspired by a seventeenth century account. On November 17, 1679 two Dutch travelers Jasper Dankers and Peter Slutyer arrived at the falls and were disappointed by the “falls”. More importantly they left a description of the types of houses which they found in the region. The English Quakers, they said, lived in houses made of thin clapboards nailed over a wooden frame, and sometimes plastered over with clay. These houses were “...so wretchedly constructed that if you are not so close to the fire as almost to burn yourself, you cannot keep warm, for the wind blows through them everywhere.” By comparison, houses built by the Swedes were “tight and warm”. These houses were noted as being “blockhouses, being nothing else than entire trees split through the middle, or squared out of the rough, and place in the form of a square, upon each other, as high as they wish to have the house, the ends of these timbers are let into each other, about a foot from the ends, half of one into half of the other.”

This documentation appears to have led to generalizations about log houses in Bucks County, which have proven to be incorrect. The two most common misconceptions about log houses is that they were only constructed in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and that their use was limited to first the Swedes, and then the German settlers.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry H. Glassie *Vernacular Architecture*, Indiana University Press, September 2000, page 166

<sup>2</sup> Louis B. Wright, *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies 1607- 1763*, Harper & Brothers, New York 1967}

Log houses were not only found in the German settled areas of the county. Whether it took several generations for the “culturally conservative Englishmen” to adopt the log house is still unclear. Logic would suggest, that settlers presented, would be an easier, faster, more energy efficient and more comfortable building. They would adopt that type of building a lot faster. However long it took, the log house was adopted as the first home for many English settlers during the eighteenth century, if not earlier.

Richard J. Webster’s chapter on “Architecture” in *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* states that log was perhaps colonial Pennsylvania’s most common vernacular building material. Webster cites an unnamed traveler noted that on a trip from West Chester to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1798 that, except for five brick or stone examples, all the houses he encountered were log.<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest detailed descriptions of a house comes from Ambrose Barcroft's letter to his father in England dated March 1, 1722/23. <sup>4</sup> Barcroft, who bought 450 acres of land in Solebury Township, wrote his father a long letter grumbling about the high cost of buying land, building a house, and purchasing household goods. He wrote that *"The House I have built is near 9 yards long and 6 wide within. The walls of oke trees of about 12 inchis Diamiter, laid one upon another and one let into another at the four Corners, and the Seams fill'd with mortar. 'Tis cover'd with Shingle which with a little repair will last 20 years and is a handsome Dry Roof. Tho' such a house be not the handsomest 'tis very warm, and that is enough for the present. Tho' we recon the Timber nothing, the Expence is considerable in day wages as above [Barcroft earlier stated that a laborer received 1s.8d. per day in the Winter and 2s. in the Summer; a carpenter, joiner or mason got 2s.6d. and 3s.6d. per day and meals. In discussing the construction of his four bay barn, Barcroft had previously stated that if he did not use his indentured convict servant who was a carpenter, it would cost him nearly L 30 to have the barn built] and in Nails at 10d. per lb. and other necessarys, and it is impossible for new hands to do such work."*

In addition to dispelling the “English did not build log house” myth, this account also dispels the notion that every settler could, and did build they’re own house. Barcroft states that building was done by experienced carpenters and not "new hands".

Samuel Preston wrote: “There were 2 old houses stand[ing] in my time in Solebury and 2 in Buckingham. I have been in them all.” These included a log house in Solebury, which was described as being on the land settled by Tobias Dymock “now” Moses Eastburn’s built of hewed logs. Preston described the construction as each log being “cut out on the under side which was the narrowest and the one below it sharp to fit it the point between them made tight with fine moss - some of these logs now remain, they were dovetailed together at the corners.” Two of the other old houses were built of stone, and the other one was frame construction.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Primary Evidence - Newspaper Accounts*

Newspaper advertisements from the *Pennsylvania Gazette* dating to the eighteenth century verify the presence of log houses throughout areas of Bucks County that were settled by non-Germans. Eighteenth century newspaper advertisements indicate log houses were built throughout southern Bucks County. On February 24, 1763 James Rue’s estate along the Neshaminy Creek in Bensalem, with a large stone house and log house, was advertised for sale. According to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertisements from

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<sup>3</sup> *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* edited by Randall M. Miller and William Pencak, Pennsylvania State University Press and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

<sup>4</sup> reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Volume 27, 1960

<sup>5</sup> Bucks County Historical Society manuscript collection

October 1783, Peter Praul's estate, also located along the Neshaminy Creek in Southampton Township, had two dwelling houses, one of which was stone and the other of hewn logs along with two framed barns.

On January 21, 1784 John Vandyke advertised his property in Warrington Township, Bucks County, between Craig's tavern and the Cross Roads, containing 80 acres of land with "a good *log house* and barn". Several months later on March 10, 1784, the executor of the estate of John Samuel (deceased) offered 100 acres situated in Buckingham Township (possibly in what is now Doylestown Township), Bucks county, bounded by lands of George Walter, John Fell, Jonathan Fell, and others. There was on the premises a good square *log house*, log barn and stone spring-house.

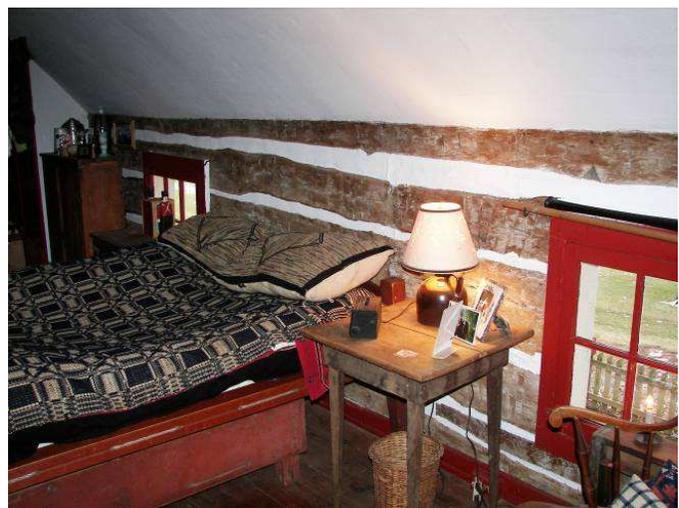
One documented eighteenth century log house is located on Woodhill road in Upper Makefield Township. It is a two bay, single cell unit with no kitchen fireplace. There is a stone kitchen wing appended to the west end and a large later stone house appended to the east end.

*The Pennsylvania Gazette* December 7, 1769

TO BE SOLD, A VERY valuable plantation, containing 128 acres of land, about 40 or 50 acres of good woodland, the rest cleared, situated in Upper Makefield township, Bucks county, 30 miles from the city of Philadelphia, and 5 from Newtown, and very convenient to several places of worship.

There is on it a log dwelling house, a large log barn, with a stable in each end, and a threshing floor in the middle; a never failing spring of good water, near the door; a young bearing orchard, 8 or 10 acres of good watered meadow, and as much more may be made; the plowland very good for grain, and convenient to several merchant mills.

For terms of sale enquire of SAMUEL McNAIR, living on the premises, who will make a good title to the purchaser.



There survive a number of advertisements for log houses occupied by those of Welsh extraction as well. The October 24, 1787 *Pennsylvania Gazette* included an advertisement for several tracts of land owned by Thomas Jones. He had a farm in New Britain Township containing better than 400 acres of land with two large stone houses and barns, two apple orchards, and a large nursery of apple trees. He had another tract of land lying in Hilltown Township containing 136 acres, having thereon a squared *log house*, a log barn, and a log spring-house near the dwelling.

On January 7, 1789, Jacob Bennett, the Bucks County sheriff, advertised two adjoining farms for sale in Falls Township in the . One containing 205 acres, that boasted “an elegant large two story Brick House and Kitchen, a large frame barn, stables, hay house, and other useful necessary buildings, all now in good repair, beautifully situated on the river Delaware, about 4 miles below Trenton; the other contains 180 acres, with a small *log house*”. The same newspaper advertised another log house at private sale in the same township on February 24, 1790. This house was located in the manor of Pennsbury on the post road leading from Bristol to Trenton, and where the road turns off to Bordentown ferry, on the Delaware River. (The tract of land was designated lot number 10 in the plan that divided the manor) It contained over 217 acres of land with a log-house and barn erected thereon, and was in the tenure of John Crozier.

Philadelphia County and the adjacent portions of southwestern Bucks County had its log houses as well. On February 1, 1792 a three-acre lot lying in Southampton Township adjoining the Buck Tavern with a large *log house* was advertised for sale.

On March 12, 1794, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* contained a notice for the sale of a tract containing about 180 acres of land, in Byberry Township, Philadelphia County, with two dwelling-houses. One of them was a two story stone building, with two rooms on each floor, and a stone kitchen at one end, situated near the center of the farm. The other was a *log building*, erected at one end of the farm with a frame barn. Any person interested in the property could apply to John Jackson or Benjamin Vandegrift, in Bensalem Township, Bucks County, or Thomas Paul, at Number 11, Vine Street, Philadelphia.

Some advertisements give excellent descriptions of the houses for sale. The October 14, 1795 *Pennsylvania Gazette* included Israel Shaw’s sale of a lot in “Quakers town”, containing one acre and a quarter with “a good *square log house*, 25 feet front and 27 deep, 2 stories high, with 3 rooms on each floor, and a cellar under the whole, a good kitchen and stove room” adjoining the house.

Another detailed advertisement appeared in the November 16, 1796 *Pennsylvania Gazette*. John Martindell offered his 83 acre tract of land, situated in Lower Makefield, within four miles of the county seat of Newtown, bounded by the lands of John Knight, Jonathan Carlile and others. According to the newspaper, “They are on the premises of a *log dwelling house*, two rooms on a floor, with a fire place in each, a shop adjoining, a well of good water near the door, a wagon house, with a crib below, and granaries above, a large and commodious barn, lately built, cow houses adjoining, about 200 bearing apple trees, chiefly grafted fruit, with a pear, peach, plumb and cherry trees, and a *log house* on one part of the place, suitable for a tenant.”

Perhaps by the late eighteenth century many log houses became relegated to secondary use. The December 7, 1796 *Pennsylvania Gazette* included Samuel Johnson’s notice for a property in the township of Buckingham, within a quarter of a mile of Buckingham Meeting-house with a two story *stone messuage*, thirty-two feet by twenty, and a *log kitchen* adjoining.

The newspaper included another Bucks County log house for sale on January 25, 1797. This “good log house” was on a 60-acre tract owned by Joseph Sackett located in Wrightstown Township. Sackett lived on an adjoining 147-acre farm.



Log house in Fallsington prior to (above) during deconstruction

*Primary Evidence - Lower Bucks County Tax Records*

Tax records from the 1790's in the distinctly English Quaker communities of Falls, Upper Makefield, and Wrightstown Township show that a large percentage of the houses in existence were log houses. As

the heavily forested sections, central and upper Bucks County developed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Newspaper and other documentary sources indicate that many settlers were still constructing log houses. On July 17, 1821, the Doylestown Democrat newspaper advertised a log house and frame barn on 10 acres in Bristol Township.

While there is no detailed tax lists for lower Bucks County in the eighteenth century, a number of townships did have tax lists during the last decade of the eighteenth centuries, which indicate the material houses were constructed of. Three townships; Bristol, Upper Makefield and Wrightstown, had such tax lists in 1796 and were evaluated to determine what percentage of houses were made out of log.

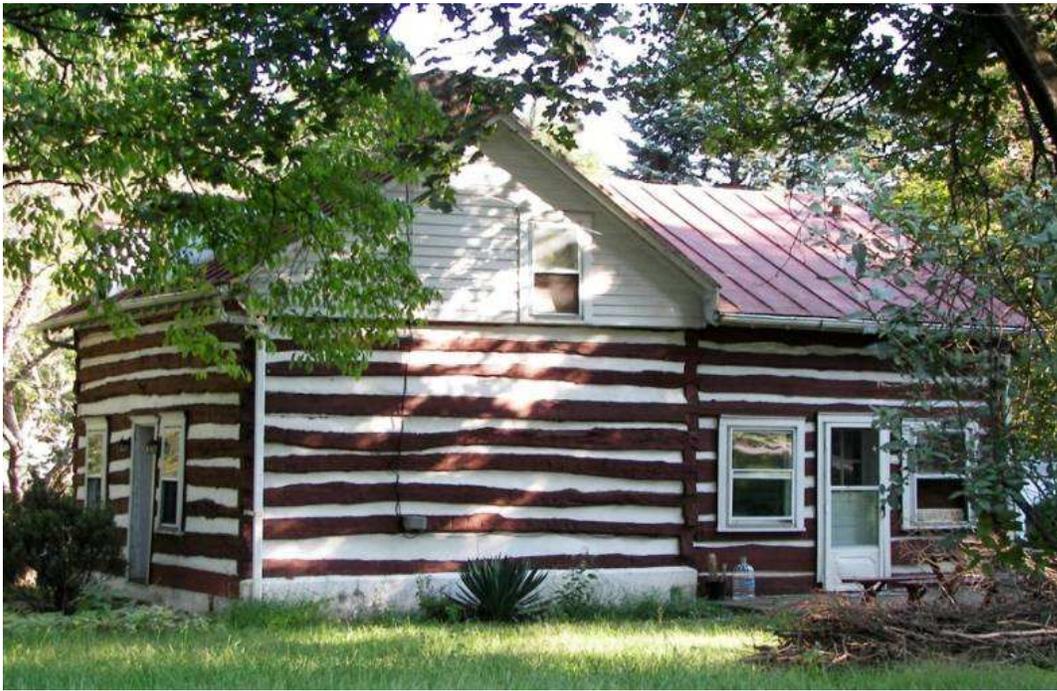
Bristol Township had 42 log houses, which accounted for 44.7% of the houses in the township. This was the highest of any building material. By comparison there were only 20 of the “more English” frame houses (21.2%) in Bristol Township. Wrightstown had 14 log houses that accounted for 25.9% of houses while having only a slightly greater number of frame houses (18 houses or 33.3%). Upper Makefield Township had 40 log houses accounting for 32.0% of the houses and an additional 2 houses described as log & stone (another 1.6%) and one of brick & log (another 0.8 %); making a total of 43 houses (34.4%) which were at least part log (34.4%). By comparison, there were only 18 frame houses (14.4%).

The 1798 Tax reveals that there were about 250 houses and 82 barns in Falls Township at that time. Of the houses, only about 175 were described by their size and construction material.

What appears is not quite what most people expect. Two story stone houses -- which most people consider the typical eighteenth century Bucks County farmhouse, totaled less than ten percent of the houses. Instead, one hundred of the documented houses were log; all but five of which were one story tall.

The 1798 tax for Warminster Township was more detailed. It divided houses between houses occupied by the owners and tenements, or tenant houses. The tax list notes that there were 16 log houses, or 22.6%, and an additional 5 log tenements for another 7% of total houses. The tax list specifically describes four of the log houses as “old”. Two small stone tenements were similarly described.

New Britain Township which then included much of what is now Doylestown Township and Borough in central Bucks County, had English, Welsh, and German populations. New Britain Township’s 1798 Direct Tax provides more information than many other lists. The list differentiated between “very old”, “old”, “new” and “unfinished”. There were 49 one or 1½ story log houses (29% of total houses) and six two story log houses (4% of total houses). Another eight houses (5% of the total) were at least partially log. The tax listed six log houses as being “very old”. Of the “unfinished” houses, three were log, seven were stone and one was stone and log construction. Somewhat surprisingly, less than a quarter of all log houses, or only fourteen log houses (including one stone and log house and one new house) were listed as being built of “squared” logs. This may reflect the fact that many log houses were covered in siding. There were only two frame houses (one of which was “unfin’d”) along with three stone and frame and one log and frame house. Among the other atypical descriptions were “log with stone ends” house and a “log & brick” house.



The only original log house with visible logs south of Doylestown in Bucks County

### *Log Houses in the Nineteenth Century*

By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Pennsylvania Correspondent & Farmers' Advertiser newspaper abounded with real estate advertisements for properties with log structures. There were nearly a dozen advertised in the last three months of 1810. Isaac Betts advertised 25 acres a half mile from the Buckingham Meeting House in Solebury Township between the upper and lower York Roads with a log house<sup>6</sup>. Also along the York Road in Buckingham Township, was a log dwelling and barrack for sale by George Chapman<sup>7</sup>. Thomas Smith had a log house with stone kitchen and log barn on 200 acres for sale in Buckingham Township.<sup>8</sup> Aaron Bradshaw and Jesse Dyer had a farm of 145 acres in Warwick Township adjoining the Poor House Farm with a two story, stone dwelling, stone kitchen, log barn, stone spring house, and a log house suitable for a tenant.<sup>9</sup> Mahlon Milnor had 10 acres with a "good log house" for sale in Falls Township in southern Bucks County<sup>10</sup>. Log houses were also constructed across the Delaware River. On November 15, 1810 Jacob Housel placed a notice for a small log house for sale in Amwell Township, Hunterdon County, New Jersey.

The variety of the types of log houses can be seen in two advertisements placed in the newspaper on the same day, December 3, 1810. Anthony Fretz of Tinicum had a hewn log house and log barn on 103 acres in the tenure of John Meyer for sale. Joseph Robinson of Warwick had a five-acre lot one mile from Doylestown with a square log house with a cellar under the whole, a log stable and barrack<sup>11</sup>. The

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<sup>6</sup> October 1, 1810 date of advertisement- property adjoined lands of John Ruckman and John Ely

<sup>7</sup> December 17, 1810 date of advertisement - property totaled 3-1/2 acres adjoining the York and Newtown Road and lands of Thomas Watson (Furlong area).

<sup>8</sup> November 5, 1810 date of advertisement- property adjoined lands of Samuel Johnson, Margaret Carey, and John Wilson. Other improvements on the property included a wagon house, spring house and lime kiln.

<sup>9</sup> November 12, 1810 date of advertisement

<sup>10</sup> December 18, 1810 date of advertisement

<sup>11</sup> The Robinson property adjoined lands of James Pool and John Mann on the road from Doylestown to Gilkie's Tavern

December 24, 1832 Bucks County Intelligencer included a sheriff's sale notice for James Clift's two acre property in Bristol Township with a one story house having stone ends and log sides.

Log houses throughout southern and central Bucks County (away from any German settlement) continued to be advertised for sale during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The administrator of Peter Vansant's estate in Bensalem Township placed an advertisement in the Bucks County Patriot for a property with a one and a half story stone dwelling house and three tenant houses "all frame or log" on February 18, 1823. The September 19, 1825 edition of the same newspaper advertised Joseph Twining's 50 acre property in Upper Makefield Township located on the road from Dolington to the River Road (now called Mt. Eyre road) adjoining lands of Noah Lambert and William Hill. The house on the property was a log house with three rooms on the lower floor, two having fireplaces, with a stone kitchen adjoining.

On September 17, 1827 an advertisement emerged in the Bucks County Patriot for two properties owned by Solomon Headley noting log houses. On an 80 acre farm located along the Bristol-Fallsington Road adjoining lands of John Booz and George Walker was a log house with a kitchen and a log barn. Headley also had a two-acre lot in the village of Fallsington with a two story log house and kitchen. On November 9, 1858 there was a sheriff's sale notice for a 1-1/2 log house in the village of Oxford in Middletown Township. The December 22, 1863 Bucks County Intelligencer advertised John Lake's estate at the intersection of the road from Fallsington to Newportville and from Fallsington to Tullytown. The house was described as a one story log dwelling, with two rooms on first floor, two rooms on the second floor and a frame kitchen.

One variety of many types of log houses found in Bucks County is noted in an advertisement for Serick Titus' estate located on a 92 acre farm in Buckingham Township<sup>12</sup>. The Bucks County Patriot of October 31, 1825 contains a cryptic reference to a "two story stone Dwelling house, part frame and part hewn logs". The same newspaper noted that Amos Brigg's estate along the Durham Road in Newtown Township had a log tenement in addition to its frame dwelling house<sup>13</sup>. Another is briefly described in the advertisement prior to a Sheriff's sale of land in Doylestown, which was printed in the Doylestown Democrat on October 23, 1839. For sale was Jacob Conard's two story log house, described as "dashed on the outside". It was located on lands adjoining Benjamin Conard and the road from Doylestown to the York Road, situated 1-1/2 mile below Doylestown.

Joseph Flack was the owner of several adjoining properties in the Pebble Hill section of Doylestown and Buckingham Townships. After his death, his property was advertised for sale in November of 1825. While Flack apparently lived on a 65 acre parcel with a stone house, one of his farms, totaling 75 acres, had a "comfortable log dwelling house, barn and other outbuildings" while another 69 acre parcel had a "good log house, two stories high, log barn, and other necessary out buildings." Log houses continued to be built during this period. Peter Hoover's 1-1/2 story log house on Street Road in Buckingham was described as "nearly new" in a Bucks County Intelligencer newspaper advertisement from November 22, 1837.

The August 8, 1848 Doylestown Democrat notes that Jones Bodine was selling two lots located between Spring Valley and Bushington (Forest Grove) in Buckingham adjoining lands of Everard Roberts and Hazlet Gibson. One lot had a two story stone house (18' x 26') described as being built within the last

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<sup>12</sup> Possibly located on the northwest side of Ridge Road - Deed Book 52, page 25.

<sup>13</sup> The property was noted as being one mile from the Wrightstown Meeting house and 2-1/2 miles from Newtown and adjoining lands of Jesse Buckman and William Martindale.

three years having two rooms on the first floor and three rooms on the second floor and a kitchen adjoining. The other lot had a new log house with two rooms on the first floor and a garret over.

Log houses were well finished. The December 13, 1853 Bucks County Intelligencer advertisement for the Robert Service 74 acre estate on Street Road in Warrington Township noted a 2 story log dwelling, lathed and plastered in and outside...and a log kitchen attached.

One of the latest references to new log construction is found in the July 23, 1856 Bucks County Intelligencer. Jacob Berger's estate, which consisted of a farm of 36 acres and 130 perches, was for public sale. Among the improvements listed were "a new, substantial two story log Dwelling House, with a good cellar under the same". The farm was on the road leading from Richlandtown to Coopersburg, within one mile of the North Pennsylvania Railroad.

A few of the log houses have been researched. The Jonathan Paxson, Jr., house was built around 1814 at the bend in Stoopville Road on the north side just before the intersection with Linton Hill Road. This double chimney log and stone house was in ruins until recently renovated and greatly expanded.

Isaac Hicks purchased 53 acres from Isaac Smith and an additional 227 acres from the Timothy Smith plantation in Upper Makefield Township. This large 265 acre farm was sold by Hicks to George Brown in 1784 (DB22 p349), and by Brown to Jonathan Paxson, Sr., in 1786. The "mansion house" was located on the Timothy Smith property in Upper Makefield Township. Following the death of Paxson, the major portion of his farm containing the house and 174 acres were sold to Samuel Holcomb; a tract of 79 acres was sold by Paxson's heirs to his son Jonathan Paxson, Jr., in 1814 (DB48 p254). Presumably the 79 acres had no improvements at this time, although it is possible the log portion of the house was standing. Paxson owned the property until 1868 when it was sold to Charles Neal (DB141 p357).<sup>14</sup>



Current view of Jonathan Paxson House (left) and 1999 detail (right)

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<sup>14</sup> Mayer, Thomas C. A History of Land Ownership Newtown Bucks County, Pennsylvania 1683-1850;Newtown Historic Association, Newtown, PA 18940, October 1999

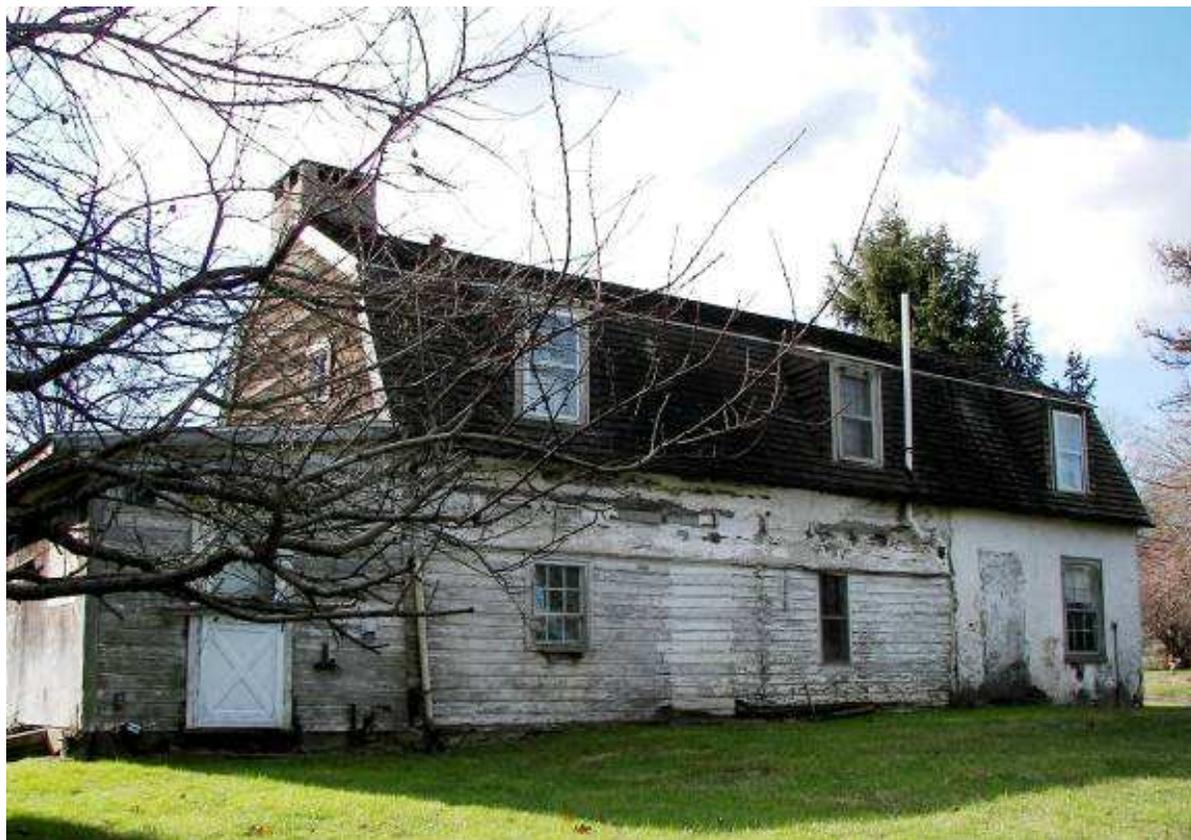


**Samuel Merrick Log House, view facing southwest.**

Among the documented examples of log houses in the non-German section of Bucks County are examples in Middletown Township and Langhorne Borough which was formerly part of Middletown Township.



There is also an abandoned log house (right) in Warwick Township that has a gambrel roof



## 1796 tax statistics

### Bristol Township

	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
Log houses	42	44.7
Stone houses	22	23.4
Frame houses	20	21.2
<u>Brick houses</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>10.6</u>
Total houses	94	99.9%

### Wrightstown Township

	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
Log houses	14	25.9
Stone houses	22	40.7
Frame houses	18	33.3
<u>Brick houses</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0.0</u>
Total houses	54	99.9%

### Upper Makefield Township

	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
Log houses	40	32.0
Log & stone houses	2	1.6
Stone houses	61	48.8
Stone & frame houses	2	1.6
Frame houses	18	14.4
Brick & log houses	1	0.8
<u>Undetermined</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0.8</u>
Total houses	125	100.0%