

Architecture on Newfoundland's Southern Shore: Diversity and the Emergence of New World Forms

by Gerald L. Pocius

In a recent essay dealing with the earliest architectural forms at Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, James Deetz points out that houses built during the first few generations of settlement in a frontier area are often marked by a great diversity of form.¹ This is especially the case when immigrants come from different building regions of the same homeland, or when different ethnic groups settle the same region. Building style becomes more homogeneous after several generations of altering old forms or adopting new ones.

The study of Newfoundland and vernacular architecture has often proceeded from the opposite premise: that a small number of house forms transferred from the European homeland led to the gradual development of a greater number of types on the island.² Given the fact that most immigrants to Newfoundland came from an extremely small area of the British Isles — the West Country of England and southeast Ireland — direct transfer of only a few house forms from Old World to New seems like the obvious explanation for the beginning of a vernacular building tradition. Researchers in many regions often assume that vernacular buildings are inherently conservative with regard to form, and that innovation is more likely to occur with modes of technology. This is too simplistic. The building of an Old World form during the first generation of settlement in the New World is basically a conservative act which lessens the disruption of migration. The technology used in those first houses may be new, but at least the form is familiar. However, innovation often quickly occurs to the form as well. Those initial house types which have clear Old World antecedents give way to more modern and distinctive New World forms. The first houses, clear results of conservative cultural transfer, are often as diverse in form as those in the homeland. However, within several decades, a choice is often made to be innovative — to build a smaller number of what are distinctively New World forms.

Within the architectural tradition of one region of Newfoundland, this proved to be the case. In spite of the supposed cultural homogeneity of the early settlers, their architectural tradition was initially quite varied, most likely reflecting a transfer of the diversity in the homeland. The choices of the merchant or fisherman newly arrived in eighteenth-century Newfoundland was not whether to adopt a form common to his new home, but which of the many familiar English or Irish house types he would build. After a generation or so of permanent settlement, that architectural tradition became much more uniform. Surprisingly, it did not involve the dominance of building forms distinctively English or Irish. Rather, a pervasive type emerged and came to characterize many areas of Atlantic Canada. Indeed, the influ-

ence from the Maritimes was often direct, and the Newfoundland architectural tradition has as many New World elements as Old.

During the summer of 1980, an intensive field project was conducted on the Southern Shore of Newfoundland, an area of coast south of St. John's dotted with fourteen communities and settled from the mid 1600s (fig. 1). During this field study, all the various houses in each community were recorded, and selected measurements and drawings were made for various types.³ Clear cases of transfer of English and Irish house types had been delineated in earlier studies, but this particular project was designed to ascertain whether these house types were pervasive or merely exceptional.⁴ An architectural typology was gradually developed as the summer progressed to accommodate every house on the Shore. This field survey was followed by a three-month search of various documentary sources related to the region: newspapers, court records, land grants and the like.

While fieldwork produced much new information, the consulting of various kinds of archival sources proved less fruitful. Documentary sources are often rich in data dealing with other aspects of material culture such as food, clothing or household furnishings, but little important information was located on the houses themselves. These sources rarely mention such matters as: house dimensions, elevation, chimney placement, fenestration, construction techniques and materials, interior layout or finishes. In many cases, oral history did add to the architectural history, but the only archival sources that proved especially useful were historic photographs.

In spite of the early attempts at establishing permanent colonies on the island, no extant structures remain today from the seventeenth century. This can be attributed in part to the small numbers of dwellings that were initially built in each community; even today, settlement is not extensive. A greater factor in this dearth of early structures is a wide-spread tradition of dismantling older dwellings so that their materials might be reused in the construction of newer forms.⁵ In an area like the Southern Shore — as in other regions — some initial work has been done on the earliest seventeenth-century house types, but with virtually no historical archaeological work to add to the picture, conclusions remain largely conjectural.⁶

Not until the late 1700s does a clear notion of Newfoundland vernacular architecture in regions like the Southern Shore emerge from documents and from historic photographs. This early formative period in Newfoundland architecture is marked by great diversity, as area builders experimented with the many styles with which they were familiar. During the late eighteenth and

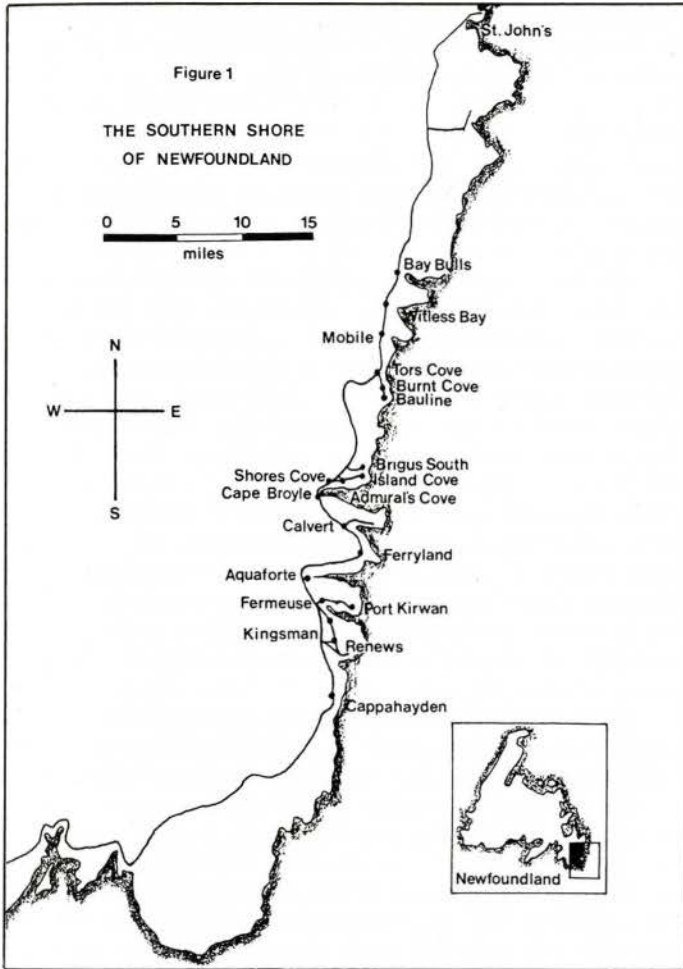


Figure 1 — The Southern Shore of Newfoundland.

early nineteenth centuries, evidence exists that substantial structures were built in the region by wealthy residents such as merchants and clergymen. These residences seemed to follow mercantile dwelling forms found in both England and Ireland. Others were directly influenced by the wood-frame building traditions of the Maritimes.⁷

Evidence indicates an active stone building tradition centered in Ferryland, reflecting this outpost's former importance in the region. While stone was rarely used in Newfoundland outpost buildings, Ferryland boasted not only several stone dwellings and outbuildings, but a lime kiln as well. Probably the most magnificent example of a stone mercantile dwelling was Sir Arthur Holdsworth's house, demolished around 1920. Family tradition claims that it was built around 1770, and an 1837 sale advertisement for the plantation describes the house as "60' by 24', consisting of a parlour, counting house and shop on the ground floor, and four rooms on the 1st floor, with spacious attic over the whole, fitted as a ware-room for Dry Goods."⁸ At least four other buildings on the property — a stable, cooper's shop, barking house and a row of fishermen's cottages — were also constructed of stone. James Whelan petitioned the Ferryland court in

1787 to build a house of similar size — fifty by twenty feet — without specifying the materials to be used, but whether it was actually built is not known.⁹

What is today called the Freebairn-Coffey house in Ferryland is another smaller example of this stone building tradition among larger upper-class structures. Although one source claims that it was built for a resident named Tessier,¹⁰ local tradition maintains that this building was the early Anglican rectory situated on the hill above the location of the old Church of England. An examination of the house indicates extensive renovations in the 1890s, but an earlier date seems likely, given the use of stone and the presence of reused eighteenth-century floor boards in the upstairs walls.

Besides these large stone dwellings with their obvious British influences, large frame merchant dwellings were being built in the early nineteenth century. Few of

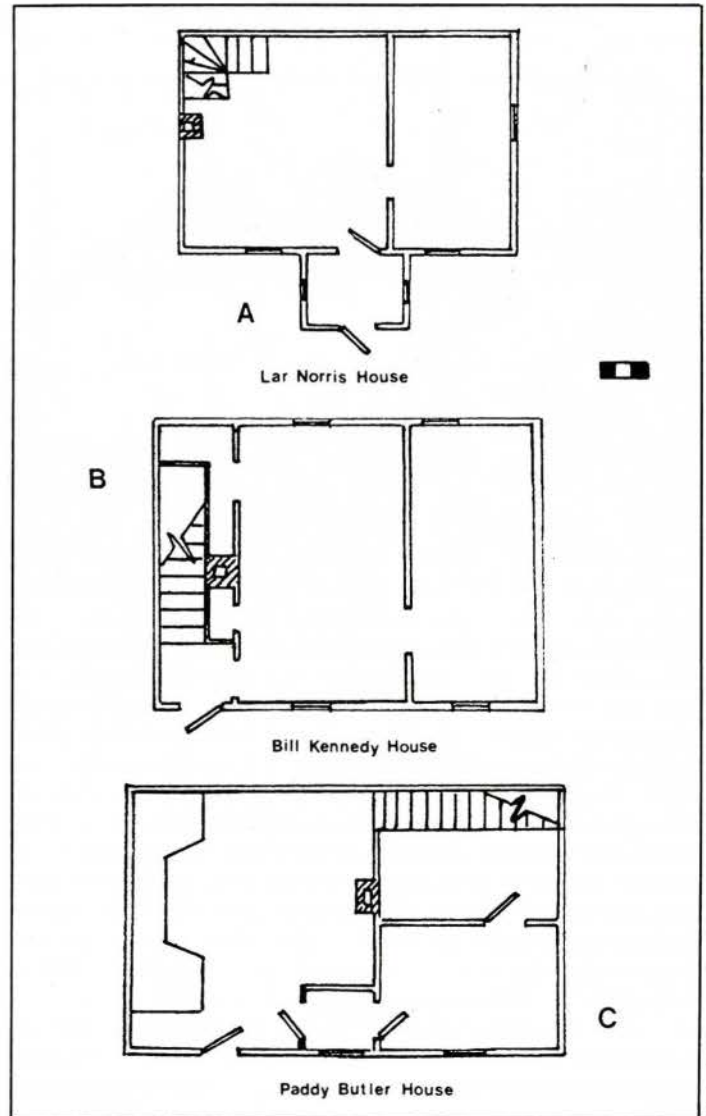


Figure 2 — (A) Lar Norris house, Witless Bay, Newfoundland; (B) Bill Kennedy house, Petty Harbour, Newfoundland; (C) Paddy Butler house, Witless Bay, Newfoundland.

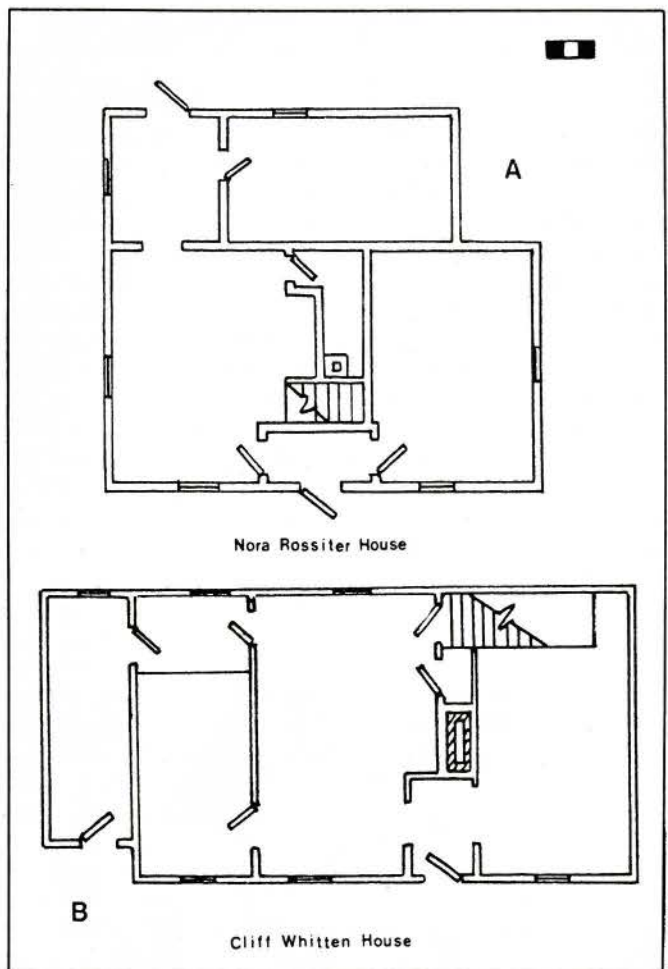


Figure 3 — (A) Nora Rossiter house, Calvert, Newfoundland; (B) Cliff Whitten house, Petty Harbor, Newfoundland.

these exist today on the Southern Shore, although photographs and oral history verify the existence of many of them. Like the stone dwellings, these forms were directly imported to Newfoundland, for house frames were frequently shipped to St. John's and sold at auction on the city's wharfs. From there, they could be transported to the appropriate harbor. Local folk tradition often asserts that houses built using such a technology had their frames imported from England or Ireland, but the scarcity of wood as a building material in the British Isles makes this origin unlikely. In addition, documentary research indicates that house frames came primarily from the Maritimes. Along with planking of all sizes, house frames imported from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and even Prince Edward Island were frequently advertised in the early St. John's newspapers.¹¹

With the importation of house frames came the actual diffusion of form, and dimensions listed in the various documents seem to indicate that these houses were the typical larger Loyalist house from the Maritimes. Most likely these included the standard saltbox, as well as more Georgianized forms. An example of the latter is Harold Power's house in Calvert, which today resembles

a modern bungalow. Closer investigation reveals that is the remaining first storey of a large mansion owned by a Sweetland family around 1800. According to tradition, the frame was imported and the house originally had a full Georgian floor plan, balanced offset chimneys, and a steep hipped roof. Sweetland sold the house to John Keough, who reduced the structure to two stories. It was later made into a one-storey dwelling, and the back rooms were removed.¹²

Besides these larger mercantile dwellings, smaller two-room-plan structures typified more fully the Southern Shore building tradition during this late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century period. These variations of hall-parlor plans were constructed in most cases using a vertical-stud or log technology, and were generally smaller than the houses of the merchants. Two building traditions — those of merchants and fishermen — seemed to exist, both related in terms of form, but differing in technology. The smallest hall-and-parlor dwellings could measure thirteen by twenty feet with gable-end chimney and corner stairs; Lar Norris' house in Witless Bay is one of the few surviving examples of this earlier form (fig. 2A). Larger examples would range in size up to sixteen by twenty-four feet.

Chimney placement could also vary in these early hall-and-parlor types. Some versions contained a slightly off-center chimney, with the smaller room — the parlor — backing onto it. Another type, however, was characterized by a gable-end chimney, with a door located at the chimney end of the side wall. Several late nineteenth-century examples of this latter type are located in Petty Harbour (fig. 2B). Paddy Butler's house in Witless originally followed this form, though later alterations included the removal of the end chimney (fig. 2C). A more symmetrical version of the hall-and-parlor house also developed around 1800. The two major rooms were constructed of equal size. Such dwellings had a central chimney with stairs often behind the chimney, along the back of the house.

The symmetrical hall-and-parlor houses frequently had an original file of rooms across the back, often called a "back kitchen" or "linhay" (Pl. 3). These rooms could simply have a flat roof, as with the Nora Rossiter's house in Calvert (fig. 3A). In other cases, however, the roofline of the house was extended down across the back kitchen at the time of building to produce a small saltbox form. Paddy Crane's and Albert Harvey's homes in Ferryland exhibit this form (Pl. 4).

Besides the two-room, or two-room-plus-back kitchen house types, a three-room plan was also constructed, primarily in the English section of Petty Harbour, and to a lesser extent in Witless Bay. Historic photographs indicate its existence in other communities, and the type is characterized by three rooms on the ground floor: bedroom, kitchen and parlor (fig. 3B). Such houses have an off-center chimney, and no back kitchen or linhay (Pl. 1 and 2). It is obviously a Newfoundland interpretation of the standard three-room plan found all over the West Country and Ireland, and

built by British settlers in other parts of the New World. Although a central location for the chimney seems to predominate in areas like the Southern Shore, examples do exist of end, and slightly off-end placement. Lizzie Morry's house in Calvert was a hall-and-parlor-plan dwelling with end chimneys.¹³

Domestic architecture on the Southern Shore between 1750 and 1860 was characterized by great diversity. Frequent travel and trade between the Old and New World ensured that new ideas about building forms could constantly be introduced and that no single form or tradition would predominate. Perhaps this early diversity of house form is best illustrated by examinations of the architecture of a specific community during this period. A map of a portion of Ferryland is unique in that it shows both land holdings and actual structures (fig. 2). Although undated, it was probably drawn during a land survey sometime between 1827 and 1837, when the Holdsworth plantation was for sale. If an 1835 date is assumed for the map, then the buildings depicted were constructed during the early formative period in question.¹⁴

How accurate are the houses depicted on the map? A comparison of the drawing of the Holdsworth house (fig. 2H) with existing photographs reveals that similari-

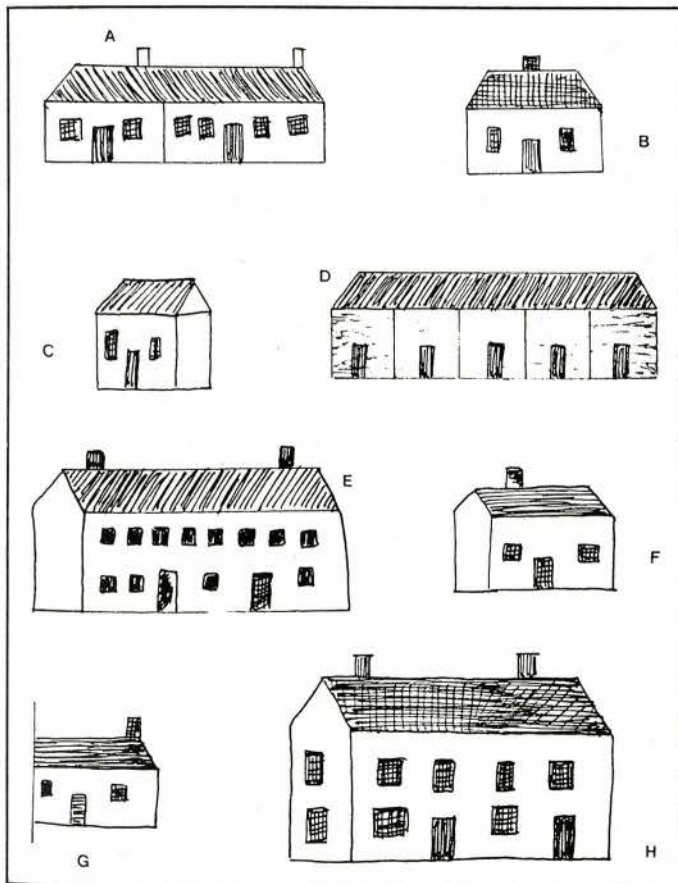


Figure 2 — House types depicted on the Holdsworth map of Ferryland, drawn about 1835.

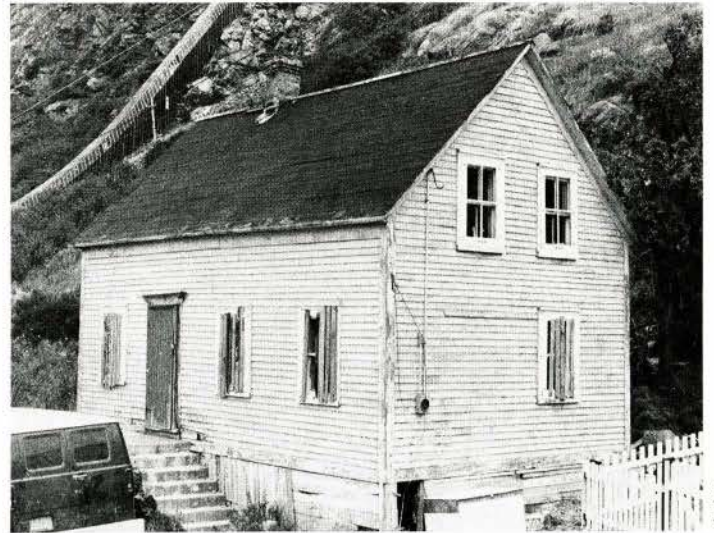


Plate 1 — Double-parlor house in Petty Harbor, Newfoundland.



Plate 2 — Stacia Power house in Bay Bulls, Newfoundland. A classic three-room Irish-English form.

ties are great. Chimney placement is accurate, as is fenestration. The lower windows on the drawing seem to be larger than those in the photograph, and there are fanlights over the door. However, the drawing on the map is reasonably correct, and the differences on the photograph may simply be later alterations. It thus seems plausible to hypothesize that the other structures on the map, none of which survives, are accurate with regard to proportion, height, fenestration, and chimney placement. At least six recognizable house types appear, most of which were recorded during the Southern Shore fieldwork.

Culetan's house (fig. 2A) is a one-storey or storey-and-a-half version of Lizzie Morry's house in Calvert, with end chimneys and two windows flanking either side of a central door. An end-chimney, hall-and-parlor house is added onto the gable end. Another dwelling (fig. 2G) near the present-day location of Tom Hynes' house provides an additional example of this end-chimney, hall-and-parlor type. A large structure on the high road (fig.

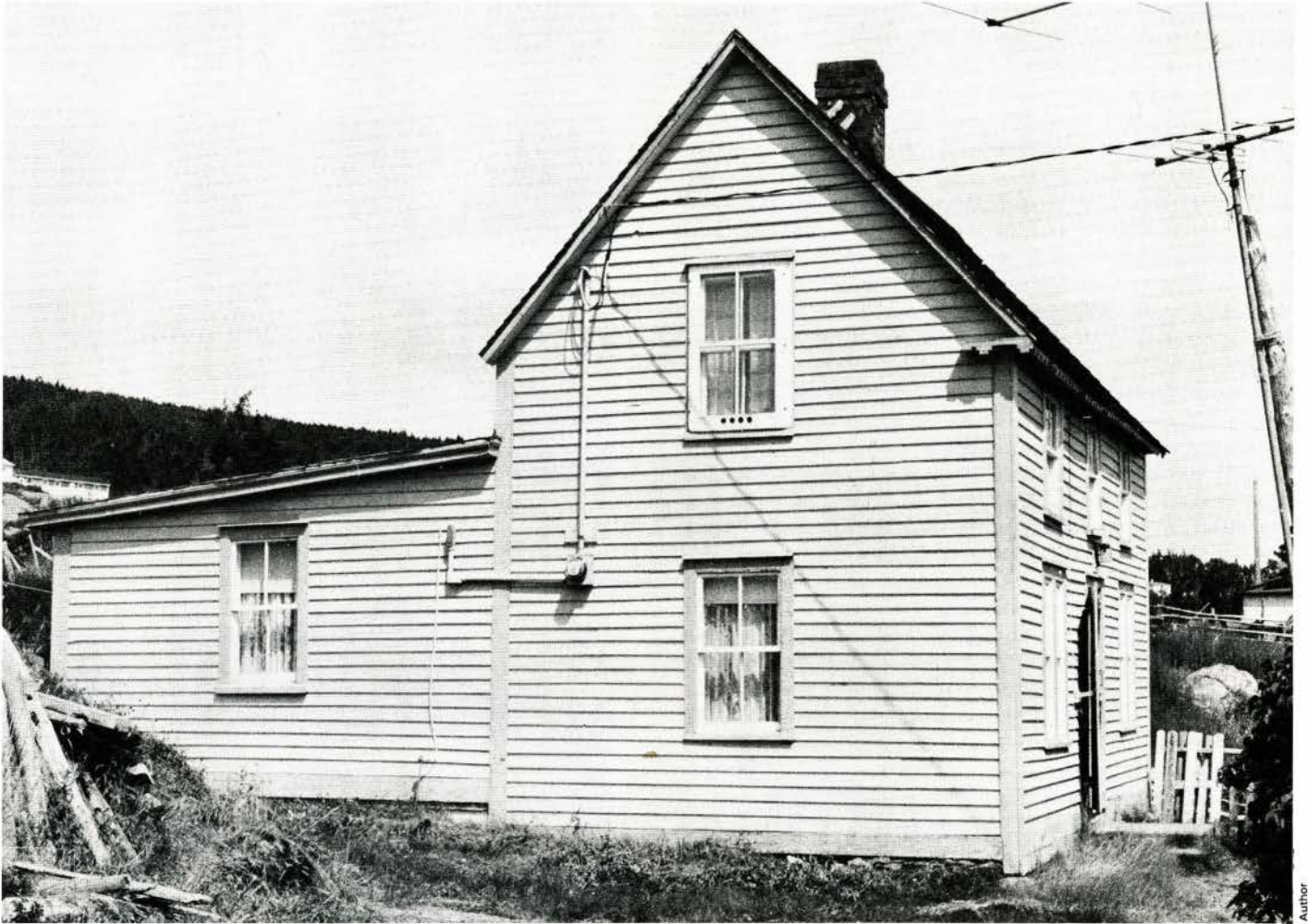


Plate 3 — Joe Martin house in Cape Broyle, Newfoundland. Hall-and-parlor type with back kitchen.

2E) has no identification, although it may be a large stone row house with end chimneys and several doorways leading to each individual unit. A house along a pathway (fig. 2B) shows a symmetrical-facade, central-chimney, hall-and-parlor plan, while nearby is a much smaller dwelling (fig. 2C) identified as "Gates old house". It may be similar in form to the Lar Norris house in Witless Bay. Near the old burial ground is a hall-and-parlor-plan house with an off-center chimney (fig. 2F).

Finally, a row identified as "Fishermens house" (fig. 2D) shows small dwellings built of stone, according to the property sale advertisement. These structures were most likely one-room cabins, following the one-room building tradition of both the homeland and the New World.¹⁵ No such types were located during fieldwork, yet they may have been more pervasive in the past as housing for the large number of summer migratory fishermen.

The number of architectural forms constructed during the formative years of Southern Shore development is only in part the result of direct Old World influence. Though many elements are obvious transfers from the

West Country and southeast Ireland to Newfoundland, a major difficulty in discussing architectural influences is the cultural homogeneity of many aspects of both regions. It is often difficult to isolate cultural traits distinctively English or Irish. Social and economic contact between the two regions has a long history, and styles were often transferred from one area to another. To make matters more complex, other forms most certainly were borrowed from nearer building traditions like those in Nova Scotia.

The diversity of form that marked the first generation of permanent building types on the Southern Shore gave way to the adoption of one particular house form by the mid-nineteenth century. This type was built to one and a half or two stories and was characterized by two large rooms in the front of the dwelling, service rooms across the back, and a central chimney. The Rose Williams house in Bay Bulls (fig. 4A and Pl. 5) is representative of this form. It contains a large central hearth, winding stairs in front of the chimney, and a back kitchen with pantries.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the common house form on the Southern Shore and this two-room-plus-service-room floor plan, but it was usually one and a half stories in height, with central stairs, and end stove chimneys (Pl. 6). This form seems to have developed throughout the Maritimes as well as in Newfoundland, and is formally related to the Cape Cod type found in New England. Although the Newfoundland version is similar in floor plan to the early Cape Cod dwelling, the roof is less steeply pitched, and the first- and second-floor walls are often greater in height.¹⁶ Paddy Kavanagh's house in Ferryland exhibits the standard later floor plan (fig. 4B).

Perhaps this form developed independently in Newfoundland from the earlier smaller two-room houses, influenced in part by the larger structures imported from the Maritimes by local merchants. Yet, the fact that it also developed in the Maritimes at roughly the same time may indicate that Newfoundland was simply part of a larger regional trend that produced similar forms.

If indeed this type developed throughout Atlantic Canada during the mid-nineteenth century, then it could well have been the final form of a New England architectural inheritance. In the Maritimes, the central-stairway, two-room-and-service-room plan was influenced by the classic Cape Cod house brought to the region by the Loyalists in the 1770s. Similar Cape Cod dwellings seem to be rare in Newfoundland, and cultural borrowing rather than independent development may well be the appropriate explanation.

Whether it developed or was borrowed from the earlier two-room forms already built, this Cape Cod variant became popular in Newfoundland as the nineteenth century wore on, and it might be considered a New World form. Those types that could be directly associated with Old World building gave way to a house type that was clearly a Newfoundland form, regardless of its origin.

Several trends are clear in the development of architecture on the Southern Shore. During the earliest years of settlement, and until around 1860, a great diversity of house forms were built. Large merchant dwellings of stone or frame construction, as well as the more common dwellings were built according to schemes borrowed from the Old World or the nearby Maritimes. However, it seems that the New World influence eventually dominated. Architectural diversity diminished in favor of a type that may have originated in New England, and was later altered by Maritime builders.

A regional house form enabled immigrants to adopt a distinctive type that was neither English or Irish. It was an expressive form that mediated possible cultural conflict. The architecture of the Southern Shore reflects an early concern to arrive at a new form that could easily be accepted by both groups. Not surprisingly, others have commented on the blending of other English and Irish traditions on the Southern Shore.¹⁷ Attempts to delineate one geographic region as the origin of a New World building tradition often requires the surveyor to select only a few diagnostic architectural features that

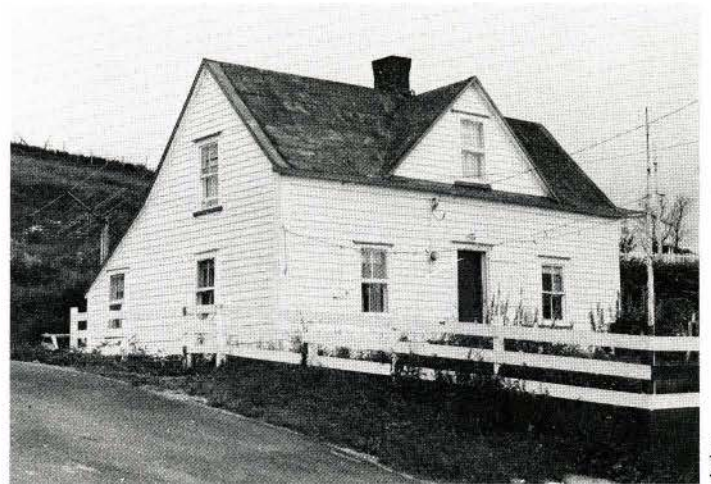


Plate 4 — Paddy Crane house, Ferryland, Newfoundland. A small saltbox form, originally with walk-in hearth.

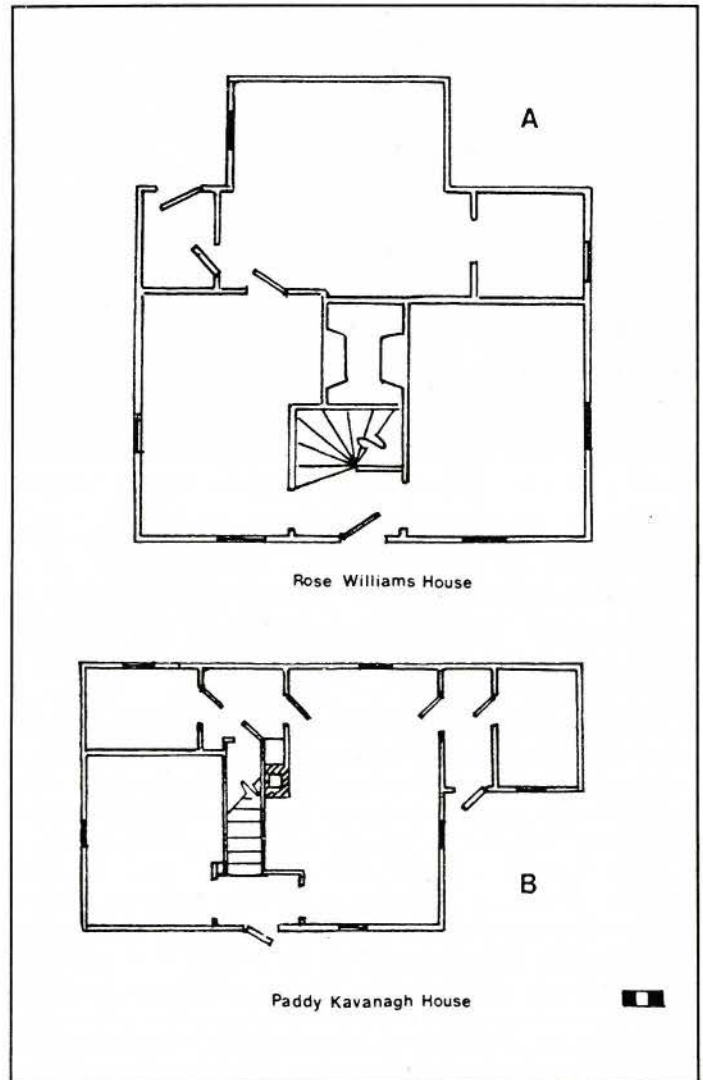


Figure 4 — (A) Rose Williams house, Bay Bulls, Newfoundland; (B) Paddy Kavanagh house, Ferryland, Newfoundland.



Plate 5 — Rose Williams house, Bay Bulls, Newfoundland. Two-storey, central-chimney plan, with back service rooms.

will clearly produce the desired results. These initial New World forms are then assumed to be the models out of which the regional tradition develops. However, regions are not usually isolated from external building ideas after initial settlement, and major changes can well occur in architectural forms.

Though potatoes were still set in beds and children were protected against fairies and the wren was hunted by groups of men on St. Stephen's Day, houses on the Southern Shore had changed. That house forms were apparently altered to follow an Atlantic Canada-New England building tradition comes as no surprise, as other aspects of the economy in the nineteenth century shifted to a more regional focus. Indeed, it was part of the fundamental process by which groups of English and Irish summer fishermen became Newfoundlanders. North American researchers often attempt to isolate Old World elements in New World traditions, but it may ultimately be the new elements that developed on this side of the Atlantic that hold the more important significance for the growth of the culture.

Notes

1. James Deetz, "Plymouth Colony Architecture: Archaeological Evidence from the Seventeenth Century," in *Architecture in Colonial Massachusetts*, ed. Abbott Lowell Cummings (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1979), p. 56; also see: James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 102.
2. See David B. Mills, "The Development of Folk Architecture in Trinity Bay, Newfoundland," in *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*, ed. John J. Mannion, *Social and Economic Papers No. 8* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977), pp. 77–101.
3. This method obviously derives from Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), chapter three.
4. For the typical Irish house form in Newfoundland, see John J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 138–164.
5. Gerald L. Pocius, "Evolution, Devolution and Architectural Typology: Alterations of Vernacular House Forms on the Southern Shore of Newfoundland," paper presented at the Canadian Association of Geographers meeting, Corner Brook, Newfoundland, August, 1981. For an excellent study of a similar tradition, see Cary Carson, Norman F. Barka, William M. Kelso, Garry Wheeler



Plate 6 — Lundrigan house in Bay Bulls, Newfoundland. Typical one-and-a-half storey, central-hall plan with back kitchen.

- Stone, and Dell Upton, "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 16 (1981), pp. 135-196.
6. An example is: Robert A. Barakat, "Some Comments on Lord Baltimore's House at Ferryland, Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 72, No. 4 (1976), pp. 17-27.
 7. For survey of the architectural research of this region, see Shane O'Dea, "Architecture and Building History in Atlantic Canada," *Acadiensis*, 10, No. 1 (1980), pp. 158-163.
 8. *Royal Gazette*, St. John's, 5 December 1837.
 9. Ferryland Surrogate Court Records, 1787. Provincial Archives, St. John's, Newfoundland.
 10. Newfoundland Historic Trust, *Ten Historic Towns* (St. John's: Newfoundland Historic Trust, 1978), "Freebairn/Coffey House."
 11. Examples are found in: *Royal Gazette*, 29 September 1814; *Royal Gazette*, 10 March 1818; *Newfoundlander*, 14 February 1861; *Royal Gazette*, 5 June 1818 (imported from Nova Scotia); *Royal Gazette*, 11 May 1830 (imported from Pictou, Nova Scotia). The last two references were provided by Jeff Orr, who has supplied much additional background data on the Newfoundland-Maritime connection of this time period.
 12. Details about Harold Power's house can be found in: Gerald L. Pocius, "Calvert: A Study of Artifacts and Spatial Usage in a Newfoundland Community," Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, pp. 205-211.
 13. Pocius, "Calvert," pp. 203-206.
 14. Map in Provincial Archives, St. John's, Newfoundland.
 15. For a typical row of cabins in the homeland see: Great Britain Royal Commission on Historic Monuments, *Inventory of the Historical Monuments of the County of Dorset: Central* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1971), III, p. 16: Bishop's Caundle, cottages, number 8.
 16. Peter Ennals and Deryck Holdsworth, "Vernacular Architecture and the Cultural Landscape of the Maritime Provinces: A Reconnaissance," *Acadiensis*, 10, No. 2 (1981), pp. 91-94.
 17. See Thomas F. Nemeec, "Trepassey, 1840-1900: An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of Anglo-Irish Outport Society," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 70, No. 1 (1973), pp. 15-23.

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