8-1971

The Log Cabin Syndrome

Stanley South
University of South Carolina - Columbia, stansouth@sc.edu

Publication Info

Published in *The Conference on Historic Site Archaeology Papers 1970*, Volume 5, 1971, pages 103-113.
http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/

6

THE LOG CABIN SYNDROME

Stanley South

In the previous article the process of historic site development using as exhibits parapets, palisades, and ruins anchored in archeological research was contrasted with log cabins moved from their original sites and replanted as focal points at interpretive centers. Excellent explanatory exhibits rooted in archeology, such as those parapets, palisades, and ruins at Jamestown, Virginia; Brunswick Town, North Carolina; Fort Frederica, Georgia; Bethabara, North Carolina; Fort Raleigh, North Carolina; Charles Towne, South Carolina; and Camden, South Carolina were contrasted with the "log cabin syndrome" where old log cabins are "... planted in a cluster like pseudo-historical mushroom towns springing up overnight, regardless of the historical focus or archeological merit a site might otherwise possess". Having thus introduced the "log cabin syndrome," we will, in this paper, examine it somewhat closer to determine the reasons behind this desire to preserve a tie with the past through log cabins.

In his book, The Log Cabin Myth, Shurtleff (1939:5) points to the strong emotional ties Americans hold for log cabins and their use as a symbol of democracy and the colonists' struggle with the wilderness. He points out that "Americans today feel a sense of outrage when told that neither Captain John Smith nor Governor Bradford nor any of the founding fathers dwelt in a lob cabin, or ever saw one" (Shurtleff 1939:6). This obsession with the log cabin as a symbol of early American pioneer life has been termed "log-cabinitis" (Shurtleff 1939:5).

As early as 1770, Moravians at Bethabara, North Carolina, erected a stone marker on the site of the Hans Wagner log cabin which had been torn down in 1768, it being the first cabin they lived in when they moved to North Carolina from Pennsylvania in 1753 (Fries 1968: I, 381, 411). Such an early historical awareness of a log cabin site is seldom on record. Excavation at that very site in 1967 revealed the small storage cellar dug in front of the fireplace in that cabin on November 18, 1754 (Fries 1968: 112), thus verifying the traditional site location.

In New York in 1850 the Washington's Headquarters building in Newburgh was set aside in order to save it, thus opening an early historic site to the public (Wirth n.d.:10). Many other early examples could be cited to illustrate that the business of marking or preserving log cabins and other historic sites, the "log cabin syndrome," is not a new phenomenon but has roots extending beyond the threshold of the American Revolution. It is not surprising that in these times of national interest in preservation of historic sites and structures, that the "log cabin syndrome" should emerge from the "log-cabinitis" that has long been with us. This paper deals with horizontally laid log structures commonly termed "log cabins" and does not include the entire range of historic houses, a topic outside the scope of this paper.

With this in mind the criteria used by The National Historic Landmarks Program in determining the significance of a historic site or structure can

be summarized, and from this base, we can begin to develop a scale with which to evaluate efforts at saving log cabin structures. Criteria for determining the significance of buildings, sites, objects, or districts are abstracted here from a leaflet "The National Historic Landmarks Program" (United States Department of Interior Leaflet).

1. Structures or sites where events occurred that have broad cultural, political, economic, military, or social significance.

2. Structures or sites connected with the lives of significant individuals.

3. Structures or sites associated with an important event representing an ideal or idea.

4. Structures that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen of value for the study of a period, style, or method of construction, or a notable structure representing the work of a master builder, designer, or architect.

5. Objects that figured prominently in significant events or are related to significant individuals.

6. Archeological sites that have produced information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures or relating to major theories and ideas.

7. When preserved or restored as integral parts of the environment, historic buildings not sufficiently significant individually by reason of historical association or architectural merit to warrant recognition, may collectively compose a "historic district" that is of historical significance to the nation in commemorating or illustrating a way of life in its developing culture.

8. A historic site, district, structure, or object must possess integrity. For a historic or prehistoric site, integrity requires original location and intangible elements of feeling and association.

9. For a historic structure, integrity is a composite quality derived from original workmanship, original location, and intangible elements of feeling and association.

10. For a historic district, integrity is a composite quality derived from original workmanship, original location, and intangible elements of feeling and association inherent in an ensemble of historic buildings having visual architectural unity.

11. For a historic object, integrity requires basic original workmanship.

12. Structures, sites, and objects achieving historical importance within the past 50 years will not, as a general rule, be considered unless associated with persons or events of transcendent significance.

We can use as a hypothetical example for examination a typical log cabin to be found in almost any locality. Interest begins to center on this lonely relic and an effort is launched to "save" it. As has been mentioned elsewhere, this phenomemom is widespread. Of the five archeological sites we have dealt with in the past two years, sponsoring groups have moved or are in the process of moving, log cabins to four of these sites, with the fifth group having plans underway for rebuilding an entire town before the historical and archeological work was undertaken. Similar situations are also known from other areas and where log cabins are not plentiful or available, the "log cabin syndrome" becomes the "old house syndrome," a closely related phenomenon.

The first step to take with our hypothetical relic is to determine its age. This can be done through documents, tradition, a study of the structure, and archeology on the site. We may find that what we have been taking for a respectably old log cabin is actually on old tobacco barn later converted into a log dwelling. An illustration of the need for caution is seen in a personal example. In the western North Carolina mountains, there is a log cabin nestled in a picturesque spot on the bank of a stream at the foot of a steep mountain. Many people stop to look at it and comment on how fortunate that it has been "saved." The only catch is that as a boy I watched as the broad ax cut the notches and waited with anticipation as each log was custom fitted into position. I sometimes wonder how long it will be before this cabin too becomes delapidated with age and neglect and becomes of interest to some group determined to "save" it. The point is that there are log cabins of all ages, from the present to the seventeenth century, with appropriate architectural and construction details that allow for their age to be determined.

Suppose that we have been able to determine a verifiable age for our log cabin through documents and/or an examination of the site, and this cabin dates from around the middle of the nineteenth century, then we may ask:

1. Does our cabin represent an event of significance? No.
2. Is it connected with the life of a significant individual? No.
3. Does it represent an event connected with an ideal? No.
4. Is it an architectural type specimen? Yes.
5. Is it related to significant objects? No.
6. Is it related to a significant archeological site? No.
7. Is it part of a "historic district"? No.
8. Does it have integrity by being on its original location? Yes, so far.

9. Does it have original workmanship? Yes, but it has been gutted and altered through the years by different owners.

10. Does it have age beyond fifty years? Yes.

Our survey has revealed a "yes" to four of the ten questions, but our group is going to move the cabin for use as a reception center to the site of a significant battle that took place two hundred years ago (seventy years before the cabin was built). In doing this it loses its site integrity. What about the original workmanship for which a qualified "yes" was obtained? In order to move the cabin most economically, it will be totally taken down, reconstructed on its new site, and a new chimney built to go with the logs. In doing this the small claim to original workmanship is lost. We are now left with "yes" answers relating to "architectural type specimen" and "acceptable date." What of the "intangible elements of feeling and association"? What about integrity? These, of course, are lost in this effort at preservation.

At this point a new element enters the scene with the idea of moving several log cabins to the site of the battle and thus creating a pseudo-historic district which, from a tourist visitation point of view, seems like a good idea. A pseudo-historic district, it is argued, is better than no historic district, and log cabins are being saved in the process. Not only that, but a souvenir shop, visitor center, toilet facilities, and equipment shed can each be put into its own log container with one of the group serving as a house museum. What tourist, afflicted with "log-cabinitis," could possibly resist the lure of such bait dangled by the well-meaning historic preservation group? Thus the "log cabin syndrome" flourishes.

We now observe that: (1) the cabin has lost its integrity through dismantling and removal from the original site, (2) is not connected with any significant person, event, or idea, (3) is not related to an archeological site or significant object, (4) its workmanship has been violated, (5) it is located on a site where it is in disconformity with the type of log cabins made at the time the battle was fought, (6) it has lost what "intangible elements of feeling" it may have had, (7) it has no historic "association" with the site on which it sits or with the other cabins in the cluster, and (8) its function as a unit in a "historic district" is a false one arising from the pseudo-historic nature of our log cabin cluster. Since this is the case, are our efforts not a waste of time? The answer does not lie with a simple "yes" or "no." The relative value of such a depressing prospect can best be judged by a comparative scale of log cabin criteria ranging from excellent to poor. With this in mind, we present an outline which will hopefully be of use to those who have been, and will continue to be, caught up in the "log cabin syndrome." This outline presents a scale whereby log cabin salvage efforts can be evaluated to hopefully act as a guide in making decisions regarding undertaking log cabin projects and once begun, to aid in achieving a result as high on the scale as possible. The ten topics listed here are in decreasing order of significance, with the best first and the worst last.

I. Restoration as a Log House Museum

1. The cabin has a verifiable age through documents and/or archeology.

2. It has architectural integrity in that it has not been drastically violated through alterations, additions, or gutting. It may have interior details of extreme interest, wainscoating, moulding, stairs, ceiling, fireplace, and other details of original workmanship that are relatively undisturbed through preservation beneath later paneling, etc.

3. It is a fine example of an architectural type specimen representing, for instance, a particular style of German mortised hewn log construction characteristic of the mid-eighteenth century.

4. It is a survival of one of many such cabins built by German immigrants into the area representing, for example, the struggle of these people to establish a foothold on the Carolina frontier after pressures of various kinds drove them from Pennsylvania.

5. The cabin was the home of a prominent citizen of the area, and a state governor was born there, thus connecting it with significant persons and an event.

6. One room was used by a committee who made the decision to fix the capitol of the state at a particular site - a significant event.

7. It is standing on its original site with little violation and encroachment by later structures, thus maintaining its integrity and its "intangible elements of feeling and association."

8. Objects associated with the cabin, such as furniture, have survived, and are in the hands of those who will make them available for use in the restoration. Drawings and/or photographs from an earlier time reveal the position of various objects within the cabin. Objects not surviving are listed in an inventory of the house made when its most prominent figure was living there.

9. Exterior drawings and photographs taken at various times are an excellent guide for restoration, and living informants were witnesses to past appearance and events associated with the cabin. They also remember being told by their grandparents significant details of the cabin that relate to what happened 140 years ago and this oral history involving the location of a structure is verified through historical archeology.

10. The ownership of the cabin has been transferred to the historical group interested, and an active membership is working toward obtaining funds through grants, donations, campaigns, and projects to finance the historical research, architectural recording, and archeological investigation necessary before any restoration is undertaken.

Needless to say, such a project is an ideal one but many of the requirements outlined here were present at the Vance Birthplace State Historic Site in North Carolina, and many other projects are also anchored with equally firm roots. We have an obligation and a responsibility to save and preserve such structures. The interpretation of this house in its original setting as a house museum restored to a particular time range would be a good treatment for such a fine log structure as we have described. An unobtrusive visitor center could serve as an introduction to the historic structure, but this should never force itself on the visitor as some centers have done, dwarfing the historic structure into insignificance by the pretentiousness of the interpretive center. This allows the log structure to maintain its integrity by not having its interior violated by the intrusion of foreign elements such as display cases and interpretive signs.

II. Restoration as a Log House Museum with Interpretation within the House

The house is the main focus but some interpretation must be done in the house itself through exhibit cases, signs, displays, etc., usually in one section of the house only. The services of a full-time, competent guide to conduct tours is ideal to allow for a minimum of interpretive devices within the house itself which is having its integrity as a house museum violated by the presence of the interpretive devices.

Needless to say, original materials found in the attic, basement, or elsewhere should be used in the restoration, but replacements of the same time period are used when available and reproductions that are carefully researched and executed are called on when required. These should deplicate the originals as to material and quality, and if redwood is used where pine was originally, it should be made to give the appearance of pine. If red colored cement is to be used as a practical alternative to clay daub chinking, it should look as much like daub as possible. In other words, if foreign, out of context, violating materials are used, they should be so used as to almost avoid detection if at all possible, so as to eliminate the violation.

III. Restoration of a Log House for Exterior Viewing

This type of restoration utilizes the log structure for some purpose other than a museum. This might be for an office, a home, or storage. In fact, the restoration of an historic structure in an authentic manner on the exterior, with non-violating adaptation of the interior as a home is, to some people, a far better use of a historic house than as a house museum.

IV. Restoration as a Log House Museum on Other Than the Original Site

It seems more the rule than the exception to move log structures from their original locations. This is dictated by many factors, such as saving the house from destruction because the land was sold for new construction, placing it on a site where a greater visitation will be possible, etc.

V. Restoration as a Functional Building on Other Than the Original Site

This is a frequently chosen alternative where the log structure is seen as a visitor center, office, or equipment storage shed to attempt to remain authentic only on the exterior of the building. The interior, however, if adapted for an office, is much better completely adapted for the modern purpose rather than trying to fit a modern office among the furnishings and plan of a log cabin home. This alternative produces neither a good office nor a valid or attractive restoration. A receptionist's desk alone, however, often can be worked well into a restored livingroom setting without the fact being very obvious. Taste is the main guide in this respect and many local historical groups have persons of excellent taste who could guide them, provided they choose one oriented to restoration practices and techniques and not one encumbered with a burden of preconceptions as to what looks "old."

If the functional use of the structure is as an equipment shed, then only the exterior is presented in its restored condition for viewing. Use as a gift shop, ice cream parlour, camera shop, etc., is an alternative sometimes chosen, but here again, concern is more with the exterior than with the interior integrity of the cabin.

If utilized as a museum, exhibit cases and interpretive displays virtually exclude any attempt to use the interior for anything but this purpose.

VI. Moving a Log Cabin to Another Site Completely Intact

This can be accomplished at considerable cost when proper care is taken and professional advisors are on hand through all phases of the project. For the historical society president to hire the first house mover he finds to move an historic cabin is not the approach recommended. The cabin move, complete with chimney, can be accomplished, for there are movers who, with competent guidance, can accomplish this successfully. This step of moving the log cabin is a serious one, however, for it does severely violate the integrity of the house.

VII. Moving a Log Cabin to Another Site by Dismantling it Completely

Sometimes log cabins are dismantled and moved to a new site, the chalk marks used to key the logs are "washed off in the rain," and the pile of logs remaining and the cabin made from them, is sometimes a product virtually devoid of any redeeming value. However, through persistence, perserverence, and a great deal of money, any dog of a log cabin can be torn down and the logs used in some manner to make a log building. The point is that if this alternative is chosen, then we are at the point where the extreme cost of rebuilding, plus the total loss of integrity, begins to seriously outweigh any historical value the termite-ridden logs may have had to begin with.

VIII. Dismantling a Log Cabin for Salvaging the Logs

Sometimes the best that can be done for a log cabin is to salvage the logs, treat them with proper preservatives for prevention of further decay and insect damage, put them in a protected place, and use them in some future restoration where such logs may be needed. Many logs have been allowed to rot when a little care could have saved them. Some well-preserved log houses have been raped of their fine logs, resulting only in their more rapid deterioration. With proper care and understanding, such timbers can again become vital parts of a log cabin structure.

Wainscoating and other interior details, such as doors, can be salvaged for use in restorations. In fact, this type of thing is one of the primary reasons that many of the early houses are devoid of their interior details, these having been robbed for use in private and public restorations. Historical societies undertaking restoration of log cabins and other houses are well advised to closely watch their materials, for nationally prominent restorations have been robbed of fine eighteenth century window casings, mantels, and moulding while restoration was underway.

IX. Log House Replication Based on Documentary and Archeological Research

In the absence of the log structure known from documents to have stood on a particular site, and with the presence of photographs, drawings, descriptions, plus archeological data establishing the exact site location, it is conceivable that an undertaking could be launched to replicate a hewn log structure. This would be a very unusual case, however, with abundant documentary and archeological evidence being required, plus the availability of trained broad ax craftsmen. Such craftsmen have been developed at Old Salem, Inc. in North Carolina through the process of replication of half-timbered structures. Elaborate techniques, utilizing materials and methods never employed by Colonial craftsmen, have emerged in order to maintain visual and actual accuracy in the replication of construction detail while keeping in the interest of economy and maximum investment returns. Such knowledge and

techniques take years to develop and is not something that can be undertaken casually by the town carpenter who happens to be available.

X. Log House Replication to Represent a Structure "Of the Period"

The bottom of the barrel, so to speak, would be the replication of a log house designed to merely represent a structure "of the period." Such structures are being built with this "justification" in mind. In fact, this is sometimes the reason given for building a number of outbuildings such as the smokehouse, milk house, cooper shop, pottery shop, or loom house in conjunction with a standing historic house. These structures are said to be desired to show the visitor how such a complex of utility buildings might have looked if gathered onto one plantation and are intended to represent utilities "of the period." Needless to say, such contrived groupings of replicated houses represent the ultimate in abuse of the "log cabin syndrome" and are certainly not recommended as an alternative unless there is absolutely no other choice.

With these ten alternatives for the treatment of log cabins, those who find themselves involved with the "log cabin syndrome" can perhaps have a better idea of just where their project fits this scale. There is a constant balancing of historical values against monetary values in this process and often groups pour large sums of money into an old, unresearched relic of a log cabin, while under their noses, workmen are tearing down an old frame house which, if properly researched, may prove to be of more historical value than any log cabin in the area. We may find other more valid projects to be sponsored than the cabin that first catches the eye. We should remember that it costs from $10,000 to $20,000 per room to restore a log house, not to mention purchase and removal to a new site. It behooves us then, before we jump eagerly to the task of saving the log cabins, barns, and tobacco barns that dot our landscape, to take a long look at the step we are about to take. We should evaluate it from all sides, utilizing the resources, consultation, and literature bearing on the subject, for this involvement with historic site development is not simply a matter to casually be voted on at the monthly meeting of the historical preservation group.

A basic project of historical or archeological research may be a far more urgent goal than a cabin project. In the nineteenth century the first thought in interpreting an historic event or site was to "erect a statue." Some archaic thinking still dictates "statues" as an alternative to historic site interpretation, just as some immediately think "log cabin" when historic site development is mentioned. There are alternatives to log cabins, however, such as interpretations centered around the archeological features with ruins revealed as exhibits, fortifications revealed as parapets, and stabilized trenches or palisades replaced in the original ditches. Architectural interpretation through structures still standing on the site can be utilized, plus field exhibit cases, self-guided tours over the site, etc. Tours of historic districts can be organized, significant houses marked as to date of construction, and research done into private and public documents

to reveal data of primary significance to the understanding of local history, as could an intensive, systematic, oral history research project. These alternatives should at least be considered by the historical group before the step is taken to begin restoration of the log cabins in the area.

Historical preservation groups such as the Camden District Heritage Foundation, The Star Fort Historical Commission, The South Carolina Tricentennial Commission, and The Spartanburg Historical Preservation Commission are working with such state agencies as their department of archives and history, their archeological research institutes, departments of anthropology and archeology at the various universities, departments of parks, recreation and tourism, etc., in weighing their choices for historic site development through log cabins and buildings as well as through parapets, palisades, and other alternatives. National agencies are also being consulted, such as the American Association for State and Local History, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the National Historic Landmarks Program of the Department of the Interior. We fully realize there is no stopping the "log cabin syndrome," but hopefully historical groups can eventually come to make more informed evaluations of their alternatives before undertaking to add yet another restored log cabin or "mushroom town" to the landscape. It is hoped that the evaluation scale provided in this paper will be a step toward achieving this goal. Suggestions are welcomed for refinement of these criteria by those involved with the "log cabin syndrome."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fries, Adelaide L., editor

1968 Records of the Moravians in North Carolina. North Carolina Historical Commission, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

"The National Historic Landmarks Program"

n.d. National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C.

Schurtleff, Harold R.

1939 The Log Cabin Myth. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

South, Stanley

1970 "The Historical Archeologist and Historic Site Development." Notebook, Vol. II, Nos. 9-12. Institute of Archeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

Wirth, Conrad L., Chairman

n.d. The New York State Historic Trust (booklet). New York State Conservation Department, State Campus, Albany, New York.

Weslager, C. A.

1969 The Log Cabin in America from Pioneer Days to the Present. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J.