
Architecture and Rural Life
in Central Delaware,
1700—1900

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in the latter half of the century, following the rapid and widespread acceptance of stair-passage plans, they endured as the predominant plan-type selected by middle income farmers for themselves.

Although hall and hall-parlor plans were used for the majority of houses in the first three generations of building on the coastal plain of New Castle County, other spatial options, or floor plans, were available and were used to a limited extent. The two major alternatives were houses two rooms deep rather than two rooms long, and dwellings with a three-room plan consisting of a large hall with two adjoining equal-sized rooms that could serve as parlors, storage rooms, or downstairs sleeping chambers. While no identified examples of these forms survive in the region from before 1750, their presence is well documented, and some such houses can still be found in the northern half of the county. These houses reflected the architectural influence of the Pennsylvania Piedmont.

Houses one room wide and two rooms deep have been called "double-cell" houses elsewhere on the Delmarva Peninsula and "Quaker plan" houses in the rural districts west of Philadelphia (Fig. 2:4).¹⁴ While these structures provide no measurably larger amount of household space than the more common hall-parlor plans, they do present themselves as a separate house-type. On the ground floor the front and the back rooms are entered directly from the outside. The front room appears to have been cast in the image of the old parlor and contained a hearth smaller than that in the hall, which was usually set diagonally into the corner of the room farthest from the doorway. The rear room was fitted out either with a second corner-hearth backed up to the one in the front room or with a large open fireplace capped with a beam lintel typical of the early hall. In either case, the parlor was either a bit smaller than or equal in size to the hall, and the stairs to the upper stories were placed against the wall away from the chimney pile, where they could be entered from the front parlor or through doorways from both rooms.

In the lower Delaware Valley the origins of the double-cell house have been ascribed to the architectural environment of early eighteenth-century Philadelphia, where row houses with one-room-wide facades crowded the city's streetscapes. The earliest surviving rural examples in Chester, Delaware, and northern New Castle Counties, however, suggest that they were contemporaneous with their superficially similar urban cousins. By the mid-eighteenth century in southern New Castle County the double-cell houses had been largely supplanted by the hall-parlor type.

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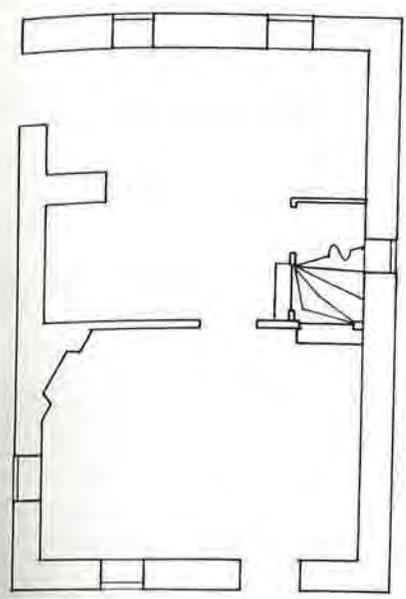


Figure 2:4. Double-cell-plan farmhouse in southeastern Pennsylvania: West Chester vicinity, Chester County (late eighteenth century).

In the villages of Port Penn and Odessa a variant of the double-cell plan continued to be erected as free-standing structures into the early 1800s (Fig. 2:5). The double-cell, village housing, which is concentrated in the period from 1790 to 1820, is characteristically of frame construction, with a free-standing masonry chimney rising through the center of the house and thereby allowing back-to-back fireplaces on each floor. By 1807, one householder had placed a bed and desk in the front first-floor room and a dining table, card table, chairs, and items related to food service in the back room; the owner kept mostly chamber furnishings on the second floor and filled the garret with textiles and spinning equipment.¹⁵ Although there was precedent in rural housing at this time for two-room-deep structures, the surviving village double-cell houses clearly owe a greater formal debt to prevailing ideas of urban housing.

Three-room-plan dwellings were occasionally built in southern New Castle County throughout the colonial era (Fig. 2:6). Reference to a house plan containing a partition wall near the middle and another, at right angles to the first, further subdividing half the dwelling into two smaller rooms was first published in 1684 as part of William Penn's colonization literature.¹⁶ This so-called beginner's house was provided with a chimney only at the gable end of the hall, thus leaving the two opposing chambers or storage rooms unheated. Three-room plans were built in the mid-Atlantic region as

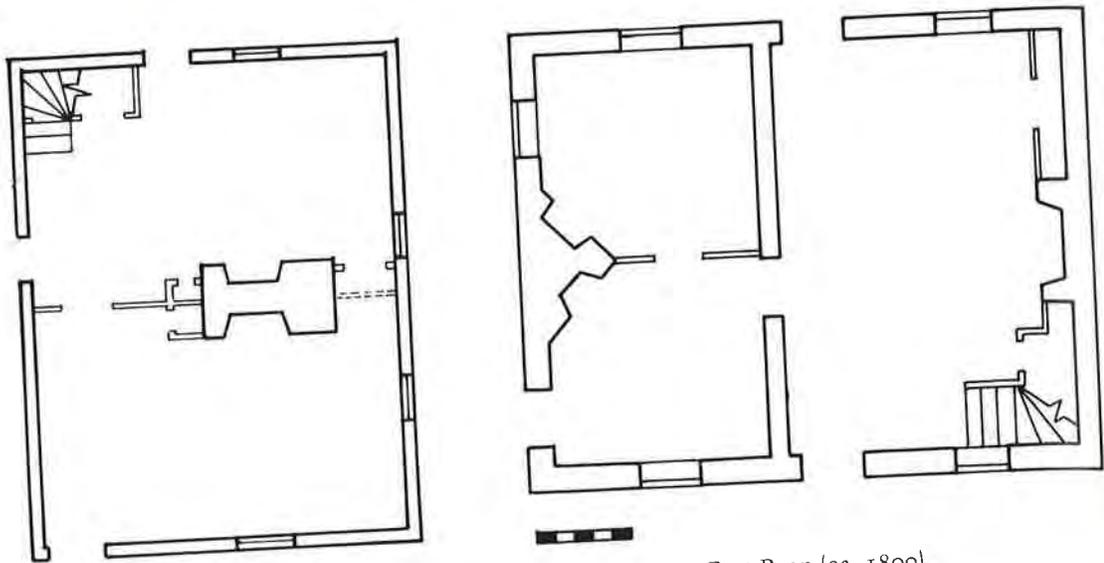


Figure 2:5. (Left) Double-cell village house: Merchant Street, Port Penn (ca. 1800).

Figure 2:6. (Right) Three-room plan: Townsend House, Townsend vicinity, Appoquinimink Hundred (ca. 1780). Built as a miller's house, the house contains three rooms on the first floor, with exterior access into a large, paneled hall and interior entry into two smaller inner rooms. The three-room arrangement was repeated on the second floor.

late as the mid-nineteenth century and as far south as central North Carolina (in the latter region they are still popularly known as Quaker plans). But by the mid-1750s the three-room-plan houses of New Castle County had been conceptually enlarged by the addition of a second chimney pile at the gable end, opposite the hall. As a result the two small ground-floor rooms achieved the comfort of downstairs parlors or chambers. At the same time, the three-room-plan house became increasingly square in its overall dimensions and demanded additional intermediate support, requiring the use of summer beams to enable the joists to span the breadth of the hall.

Finally, a few houses laid out in a four-room plan were built in New Castle County's lower hundreds and in neighboring communities to the north and east (Fig. 2:7). These houses were typically large, nearly square in their proportions, and contained two front and two back rooms. As with the hall-parlor plan, entry into the house was made directly into a common room containing both a fireplace and the stair leading to the upper stories. The common room could be richly paneled or relatively plain, but it does not