

# Log Building Construction in Mecklenburg County From 1920 to 1945

By Stewart Gray for the Charlotte - Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission

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## Introduction

In 1992 I was talking with Tom Mayes of the National Trust for Historic Preservation about the Ramah Presbyterian Church Hut located in Huntersville, North Carolina. The Hut was to be moved about 100' to the north to allow for a new Educational Building. Tom and I had both grown up in the neighborhood, and we shared an interest in the local history and in the historic built environment. Tom mentioned that the design and construction of the Hut had nothing to do with the local log traditions. That thought stuck with me until Spring 2005 when I visited the Providence Women's Club, Community House (1939). While I had seen pictures of the Community House and knew that the two buildings were both front-gabled and featured round-logs, I was not prepared for the striking similarities in the two buildings. With the exceptions of add-on kitchens, the buildings are nearly identical. Far from being neighbors, these two buildings were located on the opposite ends of Mecklenburg County. Several other early-20<sup>th</sup> century log buildings were known to exist in Mecklenburg County, but a cursory review of local and state-wide architectural history literature failed to identify any trends or movements that would have directly led to the construction of these buildings. The following question formed the basis of the survey:

What was the origin of this building type in Mecklenburg County?

1. Was there a movement sponsored by the government, churches, or some other institution that led to the construction of round-log buildings in Mecklenburg County from 1920 to 1945?
2. Were there popular architectural styles that influenced the construction of these buildings?
3. How prevalent are these buildings in Mecklenburg County?
4. What other factors may have contributed to the adoption of this building style?

## Objectives

The goals of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission in sponsoring this report are to identify historically significant properties in Mecklenburg County and further the understanding of the county's history.

### **Methodology**

The two properties that inspired this survey, the Ramah Presbyterian Church Hut (1937) and the Providence Women's Club, Community House (1939), had been previously documented by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission. A Survey and Research report for the Community House was produced in 1994. A Survey and Research report for Ramah Presbyterian Church was produced in 1979, and it includes some information pertaining to the Hut. The 2001-2002 Survey of African-American Historic Sites in Mecklenburg County conducted by the author and Dr. Paula Stathakis identified two additional early 20<sup>th</sup>-century log buildings.

The survey structure was, by necessity, dynamic. Having spent several years working for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, I knew that this type of building was rare. A traditional windshield-survey would have been nearly impossible. Instead I began interviewing people associated with the four identified log buildings and those who had spent time studying the county's built environment. Leads led to more fieldwork, which consisted of visiting the properties, making notes and taking photographs.

As the discovery and identification of the buildings proceeded, I examined the national and local literature that pertained to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century log building construction. While there are some very important and helpful studies of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century log and rustic architecture, a lack of literature specific to North Carolina and Mecklenburg County led me to examine both local motives and popular images and ideas that may have influenced the construction of these buildings.

Any of the surveyed properties that has retained a good degree of integrity should be considered as a significant historical resource in terms of Mecklenburg County. Given the rarity of these buildings, even those that have been altered or are in poor condition may offer important information in understanding the buildings as a group. Built in rural areas and in some of the neighborhoods of the county's small towns, these buildings are helpful in understanding the agricultural/rural nature that has characterized Mecklenburg County for most of its history.

**Log Construction in Mecklenburg County from 1920 – 1945**  
**Early Log Construction Traditions in Mecklenburg County**

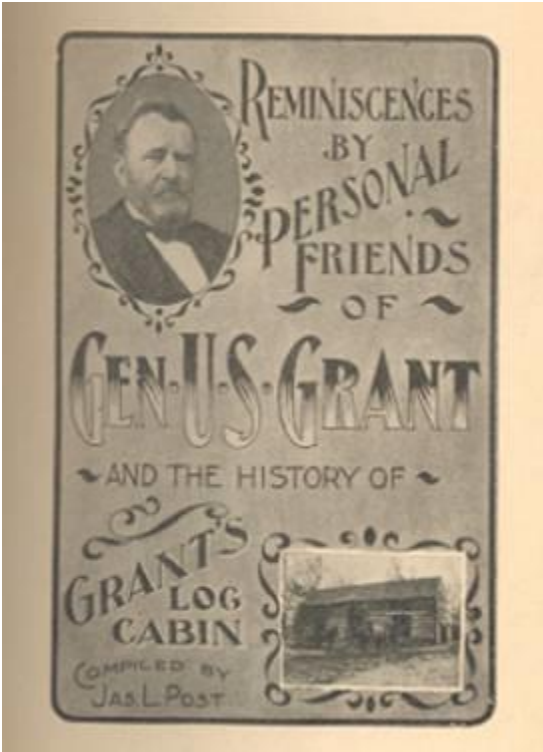
The origins of log building construction in the New World are still debated. What is clear though is that log construction technology moved down the Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania and into the Shenandoah Valley and into the North Carolina Piedmont and Appalachian Mountains. These log buildings in the North Carolina Piedmont are notable for the prevalence of the half dovetail notched corners, and squared or hewn sides. The conformity of notch design in North Carolina is notable when compared to the limited variety of notch designs found in neighboring Tennessee and Virginia. <sup>[1]</sup>

In terms of log traditional log buildings, Mecklenburg County is typical for the North Carolina Piedmont. Practically all of the surviving 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century log buildings in the county feature square hewn logs and half-dovetail notches. These basic construction traits can be found on the county's oldest surviving log buildings, such as the 1780 Hugh Torrence Store<sup>[2]</sup> and the 1780 McAuley Log House. The same log construction technique continued to be utilized into the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the construction of substantial two-story homes, such as the 1811 Potts Place in northern Mecklenburg and the nearby 1829 Beaver Dam. As sawmills sprang up and frame construction became prevalent, log construction continued to be used in rural Mecklenburg County. Despite the overwhelming trend toward frame construction the tenacity of the log building tradition in house building is demonstrated by the 1881 McAuley House<sup>[3]</sup>, which again employed square-hewn logs notched with half-dovetails. Therefore, in Mecklenburg County extant buildings demonstrate at least one hundred years of relatively unchanged home building technology.

It is easy to assume that the same factors that encouraged log construction in homes led to log barns and other outbuildings. While difficult to date, single and double pen log barns are associated with both early 19<sup>th</sup>-century farms, such as the 1831 plantation Cedar Grove, and later homes, such as the ca. 1881 Edward M. Rozzell House, the ca. 1875 Jordan Farm, and the ca. 1900 Frank Vance Farm. The frequent association of log outbuildings with late 19<sup>th</sup>-century farmhouses seems to indicate that limited traditional log construction in Mecklenburg County continued until 1900.

### **Origins of Rustic Architecture in Mecklenburg County**

As early as 1840 the "log cabin" had begun to capture the imagination of the American people. With the Log Cabin Campaign of William Henry Harrison, Americans began to associate log buildings with the valor of "humble beginnings" and republican ideals. America's early mass media quickly recognized the iconic power of the log cabin image, and that image remained pervasive. In the 1930s Harold R. Shurtleff wrote, "By the turn of the century (1900), after many illustrations and countless picture postcards representing Puritan or Cavalier at home – always in a log cabin- had been distributed, a sort of psychological predisposition grew up to make a log of every timber."<sup>[4]</sup> This prevalence of the "log cabin" in popular culture was surely one of the factors that influenced the building of Mecklenburg's early 20<sup>th</sup>-century log buildings.



This title page from the 1904 *Reminiscences by personal friends of Gen. U. S. Grant and the history of Grant's Log Cabin*, illustrates the degree to which log cabins had become icons of America's past

Around the same time that traditional log construction was dying-out in Mecklenburg County, a popular movement concentrating on rustic, naturalist designs and materials was developing in other parts of the country. Inspired by the plans and ideas of A. J. Downing, a mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century designer of buildings and landscapes, wealthy Americans such as J.P. Morgan built elaborate "camps" in the Adirondack Mountains. These buildings, many of which featured log walls, were designed to blend in with the natural features of the landscape and to utilize materials such as timbers, bark and rough stones which had been worked very little<sup>[5]</sup>. Rustic architecture was also adopted by the growing National Park Service beginning in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when stone and log buildings were erected in the western parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone.<sup>[6]</sup>



Canyon Ranger Station, 1922, Yellowstone National Park, 1922 photo.

### **1922 Ranger Station in Yellowstone National Park**

In the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while many Mecklenburg County farmers continued to live in and use traditional log buildings, architect Henry Bacon was introducing rustic and picturesque architecture as a popular style into North Carolina. Bacon, who worked with the New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, utilized bark siding and unpeeled tree trunks and limbs in the construction of the 1900 Van Landingham Cottage and the 1913 All Saints Episcopal Church, both located in Linville.<sup>[7]</sup> Also in the North Carolina Mountains, E.W. Grove built the rustic Grove Park Inn, inspired by the mountain lodges he had seen in Yellowstone Park. As was typical for many historic building styles, these high-styled, architect-designed homes and hotels of the wealthy inspired popular imitation.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pattern books featuring house plans were widely available and allowed for the distribution of the Queen Anne Style across the nation.<sup>[8]</sup> By 1900, pattern books began to appear featuring log buildings as well as other rustic architecture. The first such book might have been Log Cabins: How to Build and Furnish Them by William S. Wicks, published in 1899. Other titles followed such as How to Build Cabins, Lodges, and Bungalows; Complete Manual of Constructing, Decorating, and Furnishing Homes for Recreation or Profit, published in 1934 by Popular Science magazine, and the 1939 How to Build and Furnish a Log Cabin by W. Ben Hunt.

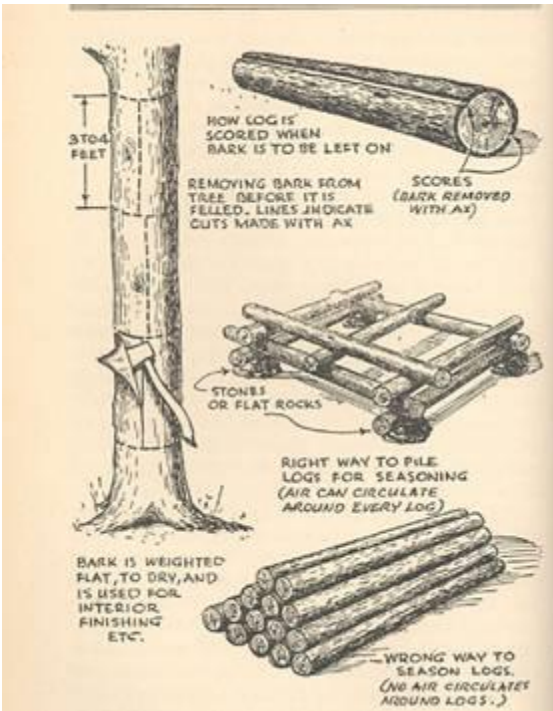
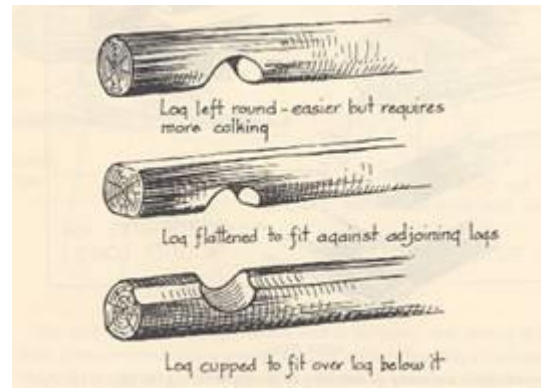
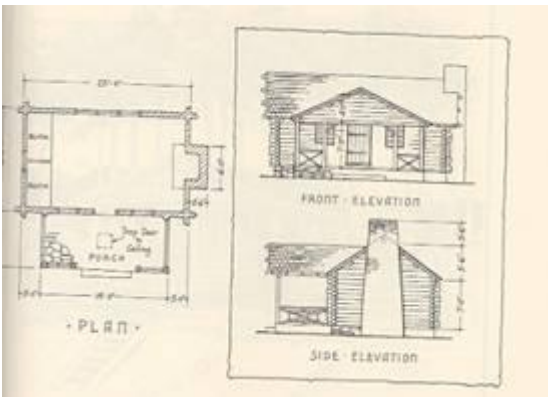


Illustration from *How to Build Cabins, Lodges, and Bungalows; Complete Manual of Constructing, Decorating, and Furnishing Homes for Recreation or Profit* (1934)



Illustrations from *How to Build and Furnish a Log Cabin* (1939)

Another possible source for inspiration in Mecklenburg County may have been the Boy Scouts of America. With the Mecklenburg County Council chartered in 1915<sup>19</sup>, men and boys throughout the county were exposed to “log cabin” plans and building instruction found in the first three editions of the Handbook for Boys, and in supplementary books such as *The Boy Scouts Year Book*, published in 1917. Even though “log cabin” construction was dropped from the handbook after 1927, log building techniques continued to be included in supplemental Scout publications like the 1931 *Preparing the Way: Pioneering*.

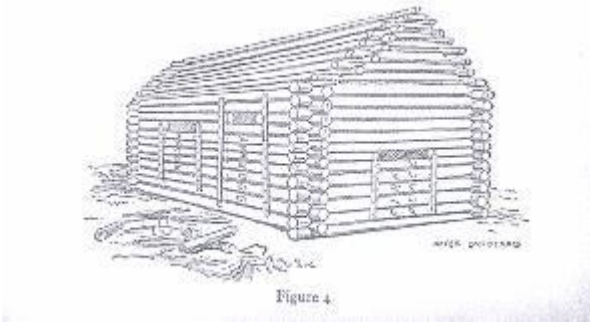


Illustration from *Handbook for Boys*, the handbook for the Boy Scouts of America. Published around 1920

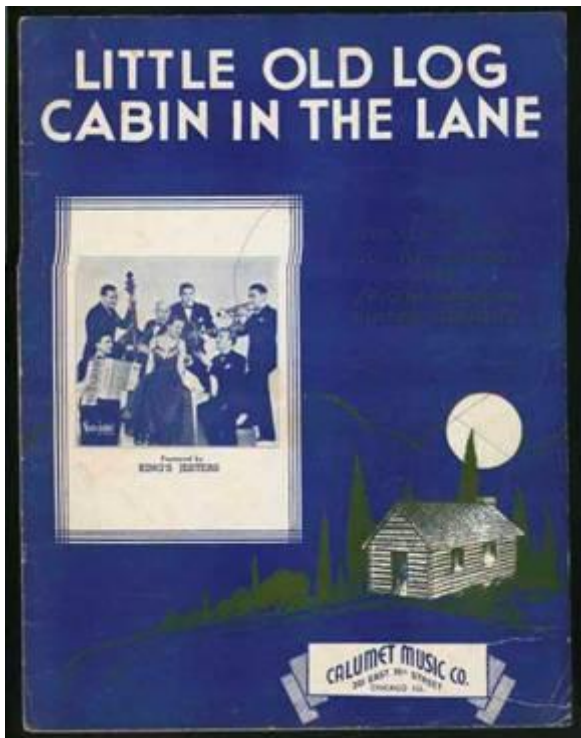
Other less instructional sources for log building designs and inspiration may have come from the exploding consumer culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Log cabin images appeared on everything from sheet music to whiskey bottles. Log Cabin Syrup, named to honor (or capitalize on) the humble beginnings of Abraham Lincoln, came in a tin container shaped and printed to resemble a log cabin.<sup>[10]</sup> The container's spout was shaped like a central chimney. While these products may have been consumed in many households, Lincoln Logs may have given the general public their most personal and hands-on experience with log building. Designed by John Lloyd Wright (son of Frank Lloyd Wright) and patented in 1920, Lincoln Logs sold by the millions<sup>[11]</sup>.



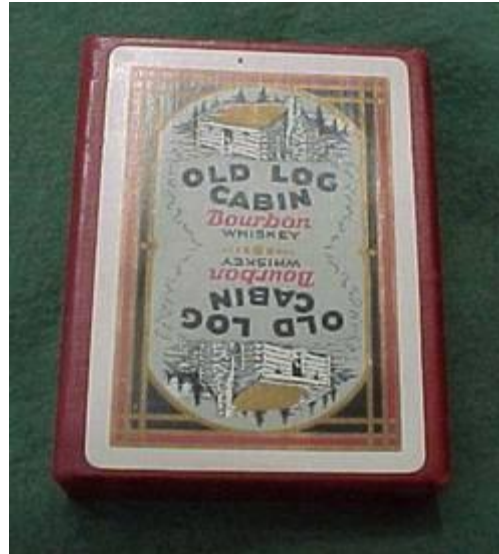
Log Cabin Syrup Container



Old Log Cabin Whiskey Bottle



Undated Sheet Music



Old Log Cabin Playing Cards



Patented in 1920, Lincoln Logs brought three-dimensional log buildings into many homes.

With formation of the Civilian Conservation Corp, (CCC) and the Work Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression, log building experienced a renewed



vitality. The National Park Service was seen by the Roosevelt Administration as a “well-organized and highly professional bureau” that could be used to implement relief projects.<sup>[12]</sup> With the Park Service providing intensive assistance to the nation’s state parks, the log building tradition of the NPS continued in state and local parks throughout the country.<sup>[13]</sup> Where logs were available, log buildings may have been built because the WPA made construction funds available to local communities for public buildings if the communities would provide construction materials.<sup>[14]</sup> While there is no evidence that these government programs led directly to the building of any log buildings in Mecklenburg County, the high profile of these projects may have had an influence on the building of the Community House and the nearly identical Ramah and Mt. Zion huts. The record of the North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration states that:

Much interest was shown in rural community centers...it was urged that all structures at these centers be built from native materials, such as logs or native stone, and that the people interested furnish the necessary manufactured material so that it may be possible to do work on rural community centers under the ERA program.

### **Mecklenburg County’s Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Log Buildings**



**5930 Lakeview Drive, 1925  
Charlotte**

The first revival-style log building constructed in Mecklenburg County may have been a house on Lakeview Drive in South Charlotte. This ca. 1925 house was originally part of a golf course and served as a clubhouse. With dormers piercing a complex gambrel roof, a wide hipped front porch, and wide banks of Craftsman Style windows, this building shares very little with the county’s traditional log designs. Large and perhaps architect-designed, this building is the county’s best example of the later Rustic Style. By 1925 the Rustic Style had evolved, moving away from the primitive and encompassing elements of the popular architectural styles and the Arts and Craft Movement.<sup>[15]</sup> Adhering as it does to the characteristics of a nationally popular

movement, it contrasts greatly with the more “primitive” buildings identified in this survey. Like all of the buildings identified in the survey, the logs were left round and are attached by saddle notches. The logs are chinked with mortar.



Lingle Hut, 1931  
219 Watson Street, Davidson

Lingle Hut is the oldest of the church or community auxiliary buildings identified during this survey. This building was built at the Calvary Presbyterian Church in Davidson. Calvary Presbyterian was a church associated with the Davidson Cotton Mill, and ministered to the mill workers. A Davidson College student, John Howard, served the church as a pastor and in 1931 organized the building of the hut for a Men’s Bible Class. The YMCA contributed \$200 towards the building. In 1933, a log kitchen was added. <sup>[16]</sup> The Lingle Hut features round-log construction on a continuous rubble foundation with a rubble exterior chimney, which is typical for the buildings identified in this survey. The building features exposed dimensioned lumber rafter ends. The building’s hipped roof is unique among the log buildings surveyed, however, it is a prominent roof design found in the neighboring mill houses. The building is also notable for the use of some extremely small diameter logs, and short window openings. It is speculative, but the use of smaller logs may have reflected that this building was built in a town, not in the countryside. Unlike the Ramah Hut, the Community Club, and the Bethel Hut, which were built with the help and cooperation of farmers, the Lingle Hut was built by and for mill workers.



**Mt Zion Hut, 1932**  
**19600 Zion Avenue, Cornelius**

The Men's Bible Class at Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Cornelius dedicated their log hut on October 18, 1932. Mt. Zion's membership in 1931 was 832 members, making it the largest rural Methodist church in North Carolina. The 30x50 foot front-gabled building was constructed from logs provided by a local farmer, Will Potts. Typical of all of the surveyed buildings, the Mt. Zion Hut features round logs connected with saddle notches. The building is three bays wide, with a symmetrical façade. The east elevation is four bays deep and features a replacement exterior chimney. The west elevation features a shed-roofed one-room log wing. As opposed to the framed gables of traditional Mecklenburg County log buildings, the gables of the Mt. Zion Hut are constructed entirely of logs. The building was moved a short distance in the 1990s and sits upon a new block foundation. The logs have been painted, and the interior was altered with the addition of a drywall ceiling.

The Mt. Zion Hut may have served as a prototype for the very similar Ramah Hut and the Community House.



Shelton House, 1934  
312 S Thompson Street, Davidson

Built in 1934 by a Mr. Shelton, this is the only front-gabled house found in the survey. This design alone sets the building apart from Mecklenburg County's traditional log buildings; however, front gabled designs were common in the pattern books of the 1930's. A full set of blueprints survive for this house although the design was flipped on its axis. Details specified in the plans, such as peeled-pole handrail and a wallboard ceiling with faux beams, have survived intact. The house retains its original divided sash windows and panel front door. As is typical, the house features round logs and a rubble foundation and chimney. Built on a slope, the house has a partial basement enclosed by sections of vertical log curtain-walls set between stone piers. Unlike most revival log buildings, the Shelton house features a frame gable, covered with vertical siding.



Ramah Presbyterian Church Hut, 1935  
Ramah Church Road, Huntersville

The Ramah Presbyterian Church Hut was built in 1935 to serve the Men's Bible Class. This building is very similar in design to the Mt. Zion Hut and the Community House. All three are front-gabled with a chimney centered on the right side elevation. The Ramah and Mt. Zion huts each feature a log kitchen attached to the left side elevations, near the rear elevation. These three buildings and the Lingle Hut all functioned in a similar manner and were all constructed with local material by volunteer labor.

The Ramah Hut is covered with a shake roof, which was probably the original roof material for most of the surveyed properties. The hut features peeled log rafters with exposed rafter ends, and the original board front door. The building was move a short distance in the early 1990s. Original rock from the foundation and chimney was re-used. A wheelchair ramp attaches to the front door, and modern metal replacement windows were recently installed.



**Dr. Hood Cabin, ca. 1935**  
**829 Concord Road, Davidson**

This side-gabled log cabin was built in the rear yard of a substantial ca. 1930 brick house. It is the only identified example of a secondary log residential building. Dr. Hood was Davidson College's first psychology professor and may have built the cabin for entertaining. The remains of a shuffleboard court are still discernible in front of the cabin.

The building features the typical round logs with saddle notches, exposed rafter ends and board-and-batten door. Like the nearby Lingle Hut, the windows are notably short, in this case four-light sliders.

**O. Bright Bland Log House Ruin, ca. 1935**

Lawing School Road

No picture available

O. Bright Bland, an African-American stone and brick mason, built this one-and-a-half-story front-gabled house for himself and his family on his sixty-acre farm.<sup>[17]</sup> This is the only identified revival log house associated with Mecklenburg County's Black community. Now a ruin, the log house was built on a site that sloped to the rear. A tall stone foundation allowed for a large cellar. Not substantially different in design from the other buildings found in

this survey, the O. Bright Bland Log House demonstrates that the appeal of the “log cabin” was felt by both blacks and whites.



**Page House, ca. 1935**  
**6305 Rumble Road, Derita**

There is no visible chinking on this side-gabled house, which may indicate that the logs are actually used as siding over framing. The house features a cantilevered log porch roof. An engaged porch on the southwest corner of the house is supported by a peeled cedar trunk and has been closed-in with siding. The current owner believes the house may have been built by a Mr. Page in the 1930s. With its paired windows taking up much of the façade, the log elements of the house are less prominent when compared to examples such as the Hood Cabin and the church huts. Whereas those buildings are first and foremost log buildings, the Page House could be classified as a mid-century house design executed with log siding.



Providence Women's Club, Community House, 1939  
Community House Road, Mecklenburg County

The Community House was built in 1939 as a meeting place for the Providence Women's Club. Local farmers contributed the logs for this building, and constructed it during the fall, when the demands of the farm work had lessened.<sup>[18]</sup> This building is very similar in design to the Mt. Zion and Ramah huts, perhaps indicating that ideas and designs for improvements for community or church projects flowed easily among the rural residents of Mecklenburg County.

The Community Club has retained a high degree of integrity. The saddle-notched logs have never been painted, and the building has retained its original board door and six-over-six windows. The entrance is protected by a gable roof supported by peeled posts. An original log shed-roofed kitchen is attached to the rear elevation, along with a frame bathroom. A replacement asphalt shingle roof covers the building.





**Bobby McConnell House, ca. 1940**  
**6216 Hunter Avenue, Derita**

Perhaps the most picturesque of all the buildings identified in the survey is the Bobby McConnell House. Derita resident Bobby McConnell kept bees and was involved in woodworking.<sup>[19]</sup> His interest in woodworking is demonstrated in this house, which features random lengths of logs that extend past the corners. Some of these log ends have been sawn at an angle, others beveled with an axe. The effect is distinctly rustic. The side-gabled house features a well-executed rubble chimney, a steeply pitched roof, and a log rear ell. The façade is asymmetrical, with the entrance protected by a small gabled roof, supported by log brackets. The façade is pierced by a bank of casement windows to the west of the entrance and a pair of casements to the east. The logs have been painted, and a masonry patio extends the width of the house. The roof is covered in asphalt shingles.

## **Conclusion**

Mecklenburg County's long tradition of log construction may have been a factor in the revival of log buildings during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the county's rural residents had frequent, if not intimate contact with log buildings in the form of barns and other outbuildings. In the 1920s and 30s, the county's log houses, most now lost or ruined such as the ca. 1870 Fincher Log House and the ca. 1770 McIntyre Log House, could have served as daily reminders to the rural communities of their log building heritage. However, the legacy of this long tradition may have been limited to creating a receptive environment for log buildings, because it does not appear that any of the

traditional techniques or designs survived in the newer buildings. Strong evidence suggests that the designs of the county's early 20<sup>th</sup> century log buildings were more influenced by popular styles promulgated in pattern books, by the Park Service, by the relief administrations during the Depression, and by popular images in the mass media and consumer products. At the same time, it is possible that some of the same factors that supported traditional log construction (the availability of material, simplicity of design, and the ability to utilize cheap or free unskilled labor) encouraged the adoption of log construction in the county, especially during the Depression.

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### Acknowledgements

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<sup>[1]</sup> John Morgan, The Log House in East Tennessee (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 11-13.

<sup>[2]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, Frances P. Alexander and Paula M. Stathakis "Cedar Grove and the Hugh Torrance House and Store" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1993)

<sup>[3]</sup> Dan L. Morrill, "Survey and Research Report on the Ephraim Alexander McAuley House and Farm" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1999)

<sup>[4]</sup> Harold R. Shurtleff; edited with an introduction by Samuel Eliot Morison, The Log Cabin Myth; a Study of the Early Dwellings of the English Colonists in North America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939) p. 199.

<sup>[5]</sup> Linda Flint McClellan, Presenting Nature: The Historic Landscape Design of the National Park Service (Washington: National Park Service, 1993), p. 53.

<sup>[6]</sup> William C. Tweed, Laura E. Soulliere and Henry G. Law, Rustic Architecture: 1916 – 1942 (National Park Service, 1977), Sec. III.

<sup>[7]</sup> Catherine Bishir, North Carolina Architecture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) p. 383.

[8] Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), p. 268.

[9] Website: <http://www.bsa-mcc.org>

[10] Press release: "Log Cabin Syrup Pours Preservation Dollars into Historic Log Cabins Public-Private Partnership With National Park Foundation" Columbus, Ohio: June 4, 1998.

[11] Website: <http://burlingamepezmuseum.com/classictoy/lincoln.html>

[12] Tweed, Sec. V.

[13] McClellan, pp. 229-230.

[14] "King County Landmarks: Works Progress Administration (WPA) Fieldhouses (1938-40), Des Moines, Enumclaw, North Bend, Preston, White Center" (2005), [http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file\\_id=2402](http://www.historylink.org/essays/output.cfm?file_id=2402)

[15] McClellan, p. 56.

[16] The Davidsonian, December 6, 1933.

[17] Paula Stathakis, "The African American Presence in the Mecklenburg County Built Environment, 1850-1950," (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 2002)

[18] Francis Alexander "Survey and Research Report on Providence Women's Club, Community House" (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission, 1994)

[19] Interview with Dorothy Robinson, 7-29-05.