

SMOKE HOUSE DOCENT TOUR



We saw evidence at the Bretz farm that there is coherence and order in the arrangement of buildings, though things may not necessarily be arranged in a linear fashion.

Here on the Walden farm we see most building at right

angles to one another, suggesting a similar kind of order. We can suspect however, that not all of the buildings were laid onto the landscape at the same time. How might one decide something about the time period in which individual buildings appeared? For that matter, how does a folklorist look at buildings? The white building near the center can give us some clues about age and use.



This is the smokehouse. It is square, measuring 12 feet 1 inch on each side. The overall appearance of the small building with the projecting gable overhang on one side appears in buildings serving many purposes.

This general shape might be used for a bake oven, a smoke house, a wash house a summer kitchen, etc. Folklorists think of such shapes in terms of “form,” enabling them to relate one building to other buildings serving different purposes. Since it is a smokehouse, it must safely contain a fire, tightly contain smoke, be properly ventilated to sustain the fire, be high enough to hang meat 6-8 feet above the fire, and be vermin free.



On the organized landscape of the farmstead, this nearby building has an important relationship to the smokehouse. This is the cold cellar building.

Butchering normally took place in late fall after the frost and before much snow. The freshly butchered meat was cooled

down here, prior to salt curing, and prior to smoking it was often cured in this cool environment in crocks or barrels for one-to-three weeks or more. After smoking, if it was to be kept for a long time, it was dry rubbed with a home-made preparation to protect it from vermin and then carefully wrapped in parchment or newspaper to be hung in this cellar for use in the coming winter.



These observations will tell us something about both age and use. (Well, it will tell us how old the building isn't.)

The circular marks on the board in the ceiling above the hook are from a circular saw, which came into general use in the decade of the 1850s. So in its present form, the

building is late 19th century or early 20th century. There are much fainter and also circular marks on the joist into which the hook is set. The large hook itself as a good

indication that the building did indeed serve as a smokehouse. A heavy coating of soot on the walls and ceiling will be another good indication.



As down to earth and functional as the building was in the round of daily life on the farmstead, the family communicated to the community something about themselves in the attention they gave to the details of the building. The fresh coat of white paint and the darker trim makes a statement about how we view ourselves, as does the workmanship of the decorative trim.

This decorative trim was created by drilling carefully spaced half inch holes in a poplar board, and then using a keyhole saw (a very narrow saw blade) to start in the hole and saw diagonally in two directions to create the teeth of the design. We spoke early of form as being stable and unchanging relative to how the building might be used. These trim details are matters of style, and do frequently change according to time, location and social position.

