ARCHITECTURE IN PENNSYLVANIA

By G. Edwin Brumbaugh

WHAT shall we say of Pennsylvania's contribution to architecture?

There are some who say that Pennsylvania has never had an architecture of her own; that our best buildings have been laboriously imitative of Europe, our art imported. They clamor loudly for a native American style. In reality these detractors are harmless disciples of novelty, but their failure to understand the nature of architecture shuts out from them a veritable store-house of romance and history, scattered over hills and valleys of unbelievable beauty, by peaceful streams, and even in sordid and forgotten by-ways of our towns and cities.

Pennsylvania from the beginnings of settlement has always had an architecture of her own, always completely appropriate. Imitative? Yes. That is what makes architecture interesting and vital. We might almost say that that is what makes architecture. No designer works in a vacuum. Consciously or unconsciously he draws upon his reservoir of observations and experiences, modifying, improving, sometimes degrading the source of his inspiration. When a man decides to build, he does not consciously erect something alien to his taste. And since taste is the product of environment and education, his building inevitably tells us something about his background.

History becomes suddenly very real, very human, when we first detect the unmistakable signs of Germanic influence on an ancient farmhouse in southeastern Pennsylvania, or the equally plain mark of an English Quaker on a delightful stone house in Bucks County. It is still possible to walk through the rundown districts of east Philadelphia, and let the doorways, cornices, and dormers of decaying houses tell us whether their original owners belonged to the Church of England, or were their political rivals in the Society of Friends.

When we realize that buildings always remind us of the people that produced them, how could the architecture of Pennsylvania be
other than rich and varied? No other colony gave asylum to so many different national strains, Dutch, Swedes, Finns, English, German, French, Swiss; nor to so varied an assortment of religious beliefs. And make no mistake, religion is a potent influence in architecture. You know the list: Church of England, Quaker, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed, Dunker, Amish, Mennonite (there are seven different kinds of Mennonites in Lancaster County alone), Schwenkfelder, Ephrata Sabbatarian, Moravian—but why go on? Remember only that each left some characteristic trace, however slight, upon our buildings, and contributed something to the rich pattern of our architecture.

Geography also helped to shape the pattern. The English, essentially seafarers and merchants, first took up lands close to the Delaware, great tidewater channel to the sea. Here we find most of their lovely brick architecture; houses, churches, public buildings. Where else can you find a building like our Philadelphia State House, not a large structure (the main block is only one hundred and seven feet long and two stories high), yet acknowledged one of the Nation’s most monumental buildings? But English buildings were not always brick. The Quakers of Bucks County have given us a definite type of narrow stone farmhouse, one room deep, often expanded over the years to a length of three or four rooms, all in a row. The late Ralph Adams Cram, distinguished architect and scholar, called these houses perfect examples of simple and completely functional architecture. The Quakers have also preserved unspoiled their splendid meeting houses, unique among ecclesiastical structures.

Log buildings, except for the isolated “block houses” of New England, are almost peculiar to Pennsylvania. The researches of the late Dr. Henry Mercer led him to ascribe our log houses to the Swedes and Finns. But this type of construction was also known to the Swiss and Germans. Moreover, the latter gave us interesting medieval framed buildings (with a skeleton, or frame, of hewn timbers, sheathed outside with hand-split clapboards, and filled between the timbers with stone and clay). The Dutch travelers Daenkerts and Sluyter saw such houses in the Delaware valley in 1689, and we have four original examples still standing at Ephrata. There are also three early sheathed log buildings of German origin at the famous Cloisters.
Generally, the Germans built in stone, and their sturdy and characteristic farmsteads dot all of southeastern Pennsylvania for seventy-five miles beyond Philadelphia. Here geography intervened again. The long, forested wall of the Blue Ridge swept diagonally across the province from northeast to southwest. On the other side of this misty barrier roamed savages with whom the benevolent Penn had made no treaty. They were subject to the fierce Six Nations of the northern wilderness. For years the course of pioneering turned southwestward in front of the Ridge into Virginia and the Carolinas. A few hardy traders and settlers, with the intrepid Scotch-Irish in the van, penetrated the valleys beyond. But they did not build the great stone houses of the Germans, with central chimneys and five-plate stoves, steep roofs, and encircling hoods. Their houses were small and rude. Strangely enough many Scotch-Irish cabins were of logs. There were no log prototypes in northern Ireland. By and large, the earliest finished architecture is east of the Blue Ridge, but when the pioneers had subdued the Indian threat, they proved that they could appreciate beautiful and dignified buildings. Witness the Presbyterian houses of worship like the handsome Peace Church just below Carlisle. Nor can we overlook the fine houses erected in Carlisle and other inland towns near the turn of the century.

We have not time to trace the route of the National Highway or the intricate system of canals, noting the buildings which they fostered. We can but mention the Greek Revival although volumes have been devoted to its fascinating story. Scarce a hamlet in Pennsylvania is without one or two good examples! And today the march of changing style is still at work, giving appropriate form to the buildings which record our civilization, just as they have always recorded it, from the day when the first Dutch settlers landed at the mouth of the broad Delaware.