Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

Charles Kaufman Store and Residence
Clarion, Pa., 600-602 Main Street

Vernacular," in the language of architecture, refers to a building without a particular style, crafted with little embellishment by a builder rather than an architect. Since the 1970s, architectural historians have increasingly studied this everyday type of architecture for what it reveals about how people lived. These buildings hold the key to a great deal of local history — history that teaches us about the past in a very human way.

The Charles Kaufman building in Clarion stands out because it looks so much like its rendering in the 1877 Caldwell's Atlas of Clarion County (p. 105). The structure, sensitively updated in 1998 by Pittsburgh architect Kirk Ralston, has been maintained with loving care by granddaughter Virginia Kaufman. An inquiry about when it was built revealed a considerable family archive which details the story of a German/Jewish family in a small Western Pennsylvania town.

German Jews who emigrated to the United States in the 1850s were often welcome citizens in their adopted homes. In fact, Charles Kaufman* (1832 – 1916) was esteemed in the town of Clarion: he was a Past Master of the Masonic Order, active in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the local bank, and served on the borough council and school board. He arrived from Baden, Germany, in 1852 and soon found his way to Clarion. In 1855, he married Rosa Weil of Cincinnati (her family had lived in Pittsburgh before settling there). They had 11 children, eight surviving to maturity.

Kaufman set up a store a few blocks from the building pictured and his business and family grew. In 1865, he purchased lot #32 in the Clarion plan and the four- to six-room house standing on it. Between that time and 1877, when the drawing was made for the atlas, Charles and Rosa Kaufman added the front portion toward Main Street and an addition to the south facing Sixth Avenue.

Well-known in the county and literate in German and English, Kaufman often helped German-speaking residents with their documents and correspondence, and he was called by the courts to act as an arbiter. He provided, without remuneration, for several families who suffered during the Civil War. He invested in lumber and a flour mill, and even established satellite stores in nearby towns. Upon Kaufman’s death, the newspaper reported: “Practically the entire town attended the funeral,” where he was eulogized by Rabbi J. Leonard Levy of Pittsburgh’s Rodef Shalom Congregation.

Photographs survive of Charles and Rosa with their young children and his father c. 1883, and again in 1905 with their eight remaining adult children. Although Kaufman encouraged his children to work in the store, they followed other pursuits. While some descendants remain in Western Pennsylvania, others are dispersed across the U.S.

About 1935, Charles’s son Myer M. Kaufman bought Judge James Campbell’s 19th-century law office building — it was in danger of being demolished — and moved it to the rear of the family’s property. The small wooden structure is still used today.

* No relation to either department store magnate Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr., or Pittsburgh-born playwright George S. Kaufman.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.