

UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Log Chapels

Log structures fascinate us. Some people feel drawn to the organic materials, which are so close to the form from which they spring from the earth. To others, log structures symbolize rugged individuality and our frontier spirit. To still others, they are touchstones of those who came before. Whatever the motivation, people today go to great lengths to uncover, research, and preserve them. In the 19th century there were so many log structures, from barns to schoolhouses, that they were considered temporary, expedient buildings,

useful until something sturdier and roomier could be built. They were often covered with wood siding to mask their humble beginnings. Buildings of stone were more prestigious; those of brick were less fire-prone. Log structures were often disassembled so the timbers could be used elsewhere on the farm or in the village, but sometimes left to molder and return to dirt. All of these factors make the survival of three area log churches—St. Patrick's Church, Schellsburg Union Church, and St. Severin's Church—amazing.

St. Patrick's log church was built between 1805 and 1806 in Sugarcreek Township, Armstrong County. A group of Irish

immigrants from County Donegal settled and named Donegal Township just over the Butler County line in 1796. They raised the money to buy 200 acres and began burying their dead along St. Patrick's Road (PA 4007) in 1801, building the log church four years later. The structure, measuring 22 by 35 feet, took probably 30 men skilled with the broad axe to cut the timber, drag it into place, square the oak logs, and hew out the corner notches. They used poles called skids and human brawn to heave the heavy timbers into place and settle them into the notches. Records show that Patrick and Charles Duffy hauled boards from a sawmill in Butler, while Patrick McElroy made the shingles and obtained the

St. Patrick's Church in Armstrong County

All photos by Lu Donnelly.



Right: The interior of St. Severin's Church has a small balcony.

Bottom: St. Severin's Church in Clearfield County near Drifting, exterior.



nails for the roof and interior finishes. A small balcony and simple wooden benches fill the silent space.

The church has survived all of its successors in this vicinity—brick churches built in 1847 (burned 1872) and 1876 (burned 1929). After each disaster, the congregation returned to the simple, un-electrified log church for worship. The third replacement, a stone church dedicated in 1930 just over the hill, was closed by the diocese in 2007 and sold

last year. The little log church has outlived them all¹ and it remains a symbolic guard to the surrounding cemetery. Mass is said three times a year in the log church: Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day.²

The Old Log Church in Schellsburg, Bedford County, was built at the same time as St. Patrick's. It measures 25 by 30 feet, but is two stories with a gallery in the upper space. As at St. Patrick's, four men in the area each took responsibility for one wall.³ In 1812, a

pulpit, stairs, and pews were installed; the gallery was added two years later. Unlike St. Patrick's, the interior walls of this German Reformed and Lutheran church are covered with plaster and the interior is light-filled due to a dozen large, double-sash windows: four on each side, three in the pulpit end, and one above the entry of the gable-roofed structure. Although not used regularly for worship, the building is used several times a year and is often open for viewing.

UP FRONT

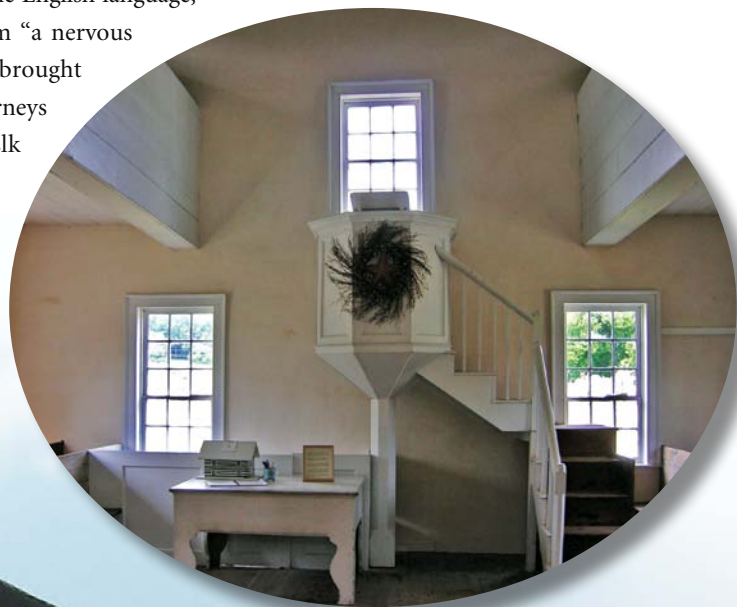
St. Severin's was built nearly 50 years after the two previous churches, which was late to be building in log, even in a remote area like northern Clearfield County. Its name honors the donor of the land, Severin Nebel,⁴ who was named for one of the many St. Severins in the Roman Catholic pantheon. By the 1850s, the railroad was uniting eastern and western Pennsylvania, but Clearfield County was still considered "wild country" by Boniface Wimmer (1809-1887), who became the Benedictine Abbot at St. Vincent Archabbey. He had arrived in the U.S. in 1846 and began immediately to work among German immigrants. In July 1853, he wrote to Gregory Scherr at the Bavarian Abbey at Metten that the monks at St. Vincent were "building seven

churches in our different parishes," including Coopers Settlement, which is the location of St. Severin's in Clearfield County.⁵

So although this small, rectangular church of pine was no doubt built by local woodsman, it received a chalice, ciborium, and vestments from Boniface Wimmer himself. Its first priest, German-speaking Maurus Zacherl, "an innocent, zealous, and talented priest who already had mastered the English language," died within a year from "a nervous condition," no doubt brought on by his 55-mile journeys from St. Marys in Elk County through the "wild country."⁶ This is the largest of the

three log churches, although it appears smaller as it is dwarfed by the surrounding forest; it measures 24 by 40 feet and is the only one with a cupola.

Whether these churches survive because of their rural sites and the lack of development pressure near them, or the sanctity of their surrounding cemeteries, is debatable. One reason these simple structures have thrived



Above: Schellsburg Old Log Church, Bedford County, features a "wineglass pulpit."

Left: Schellsburg Old Log Church, Bedford County along the original Lincoln Highway, which bisects the adjoining cemetery.



New Life for Old Log Churches

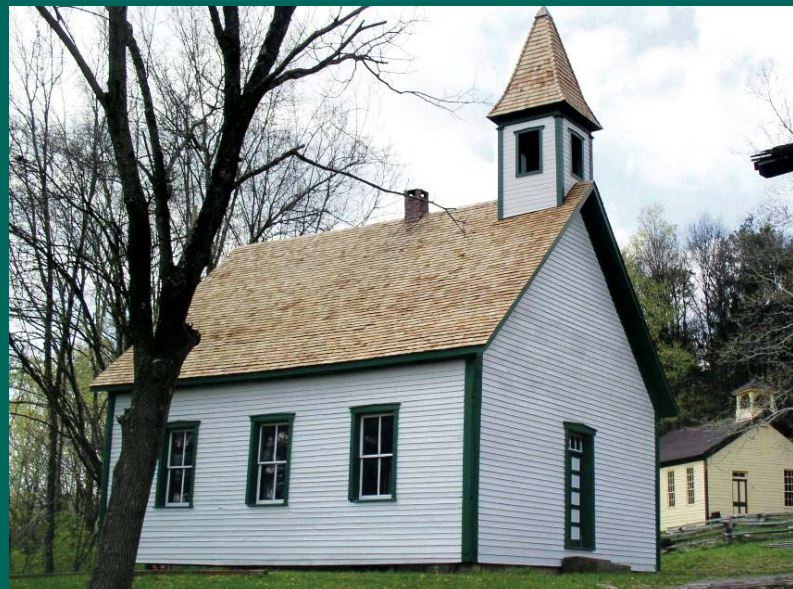
The Fairview Methodist Episcopal log church at Meadowcroft Historic Village is disguised as a frame building, and only by seeing the image of its dismantling does one realize that it too is a log church. Built 20 years later than St. Severin's (1870) it has always been sheathed in horizontal siding to hide the fact that it was built using a rural technique frequently used for barns and well past the time when log construction was popular. While the three churches in the column have managed to survive in situ, Fairview Methodist Church was disassembled and rebuilt at Meadowcroft Village in 1997, a different way of assuring its survival. After hosting services for 80 years near Jollytown in Greene County, the church is again ready to welcome visitors. For more information on Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village, visit www.heinzhistorycenter.org/meadowcroft.aspx or call 724-587-3412.


Above: Dismantling the church before it was reassembled at Meadowcroft Historic Village in 1997.

Photo courtesy of Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village.

The Fairview Methodist Episcopal log church at Meadowcroft Village is disguised as a frame building.

Photo courtesy of Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Historic Village.



in the 21st century is the dedication of their parishioners and neighbors and a profound understanding of their historical importance. It is clear from visiting each of them that architectural pyrotechnics are unnecessary in man's pursuit of spiritual sustenance. Each of these austere spaces evokes an unadorned holiness. 

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-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 and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art. She is now project manager for the Pittsburgh Architects and Buildings Project, an on-line database in collaboration with the Athenaeum of Philadelphia.

- ¹ The logs have been rechinked and replaced as needed three times: in 1926, 1988, and 2005.
- ² Sunday services for the new parish of St. Patrick's are held in a modern building at 915 State Route 68 in Brady's Bend.
- ³ They were John Schell (donor of the approximately six acres), John Mowry, Jacob Hillegass, and George Rock.
- ⁴ It is unclear which of the many St. Severinus's Mr. Nebel is named for, being Alsatian it is likely the Bishop of Cologne, but it could be Severinus Boethius or Severinus of Agaunum. Three St. Severins are of French heritage, including St. Severinus (Severin) of

Bordeaux (c. 420), a Benedictine bishop of Bordeaux (405-420). St. Severinus of Cologne (c. 403), who was Bishop of Cologne, was reputedly born in Bordeaux. There is also a St. Severinus of Agaunum (c. 507), an abbot of Burgundian birth, who reputedly was able to miraculously heal Clovis, suffering from an illness no other doctor could cure.

- ⁵ The other locations are: Ligonier, Mahoning, Kersey, Williamsville, Derry, and St. Marys. Wimmer arrived in Latrobe in 1846 and by the time of his death in 1887 had founded 10 Benedictine abbeys, 152 parishes, and numerous schools. He did not believe in parishes taking on debt, so may have specified the use of available and affordable materials for construction of the church.
- ⁶ Wimmer's letters preserved in the St. Vincent Archabbey archives are dated May 12 and July 29, 1853, and November 28, 1854. Fr. Zacherl died November 28, 1852. It is 55 miles one way from St. Marys to Drifting.