

*The Movable Dwelling and
How It Came to America*



The origin of a word often throws a new light on the way we use it. Take the word *dwelling*. If we are using it as a noun—if we are speaking of the dwelling as a house—we should really say, “dwelling place.” The verb *to dwell* has a distinct meaning. At one time it meant to hesitate, to linger, to delay, as when we say, “He is dwelling too long on this insignificant matter.” *To dwell*, like the verb *to abide* (from which we derive *abode*), simply means to pause, to stay put for a length of time; it implies that we will eventually move on. So the dwelling place should perhaps be seen as temporary. Our being in it is contingent on many external factors.

How long do we have to stay in a place for it to become a dwelling? That may seem an unimportant question, yet I think we should try to answer it. I would say we stay long enough for our presence to become customary. A place becomes a dwelling when it is part of our customary behavior. To stay there overnight or even two or three nights will not do. But when we stay there because we have a steady job or are a student then it becomes an element in a customary or habitual way of life.

This way of defining the word is born out by the usage of the verb *to dwell* in other languages. In English (it is hard to see why) we say “live” in a place. Both French and German retain the equivalent of *to dwell* and find it very serviceable. In French you do not say, “Où vivez vous?” you say “Où habitez vous?” Just as in German you do not say, “Wo leben Sie?” but “Wo wohnen Sie?” Both expressions imply an habitual action, and indeed both of them are closely related to the words for custom or habit: *habitude* and *Gewohnheit*.

This usage suggests a certain detachment from the dwelling. Habits and customs are of course important and often very pleasant, but we do not think of them as really basic elements of our existence. They are adapted, they are acquired, but they are also discarded when we tire of them. And this is true also of the contemporary dwelling. No matter how comfortable or convenient it may be, we know that the time may well come when we find it wise to change: this is perhaps the best moment to sell. Perhaps a new job demands that we move or the neighborhood threatens to deteriorate or the children have grown up and left home. So we look for another dwelling; and since other people feel the same, another suitable dwelling is not usually hard to find.

What I am suggesting is that the home and the dwelling are two separate things, though they usually coincide. This truth is obvious to all modern Americans, but I believe that there was a time when people did not make this distinction.

This brings me to a second word. *Chattel*, an article of personal, movable property, is related to *cattle* and to *capital*, but the relationship with *cattle* is the older of the two. At a remote time in Roman history all land and all power belonged to the family or clan or tribe. The only thing corresponding to individual private property was the few head of cattle (or sheep) which the

man of the household grazed on common land. What made this property desirable was that it could be disposed of without consulting the larger group. The cattle could be accumulated and bought and sold and given to any son or daughter the man chose. Cattle were negotiable and could be translated into cash, and one reason they were negotiable was that they were mobile, they could be moved. So they represented two very important freedoms: freedom from the authority of the community and freedom from territorial or environmental constraints.

In the course of centuries many more things were defined as chattels, and in the Middle Ages the dwelling was likewise defined as chattel under certain conditions. This meant that it could be disposed of independent of the land to which it was often closely tied. If according to established laws of inheritance a man was legally obliged to leave his land to his eldest son he could, if he wanted to, leave his dwelling to his widow or to his daughter or to the church. As the word *movable* implied, he could also move it to another site. But this did not hold true of all dwellings: usually only the more modest kind, those built of wood, could be separated from the operation of the farm. The farm or the estate itself could not be alienated—that is to say, disposed of—for it was to descend to his children.

This notion that the dwelling was independent of the land and was legally (and even literally) mobile naturally produced a distinctive kind of dwelling, particularly in towns and cities: houses which were built to be rented or used for a variety of profitable purposes. They tended to be simple in construction and uniform. We can think of those early rental units as the medieval equivalent of the contemporary trailer—not only in their mobility but in their standardization and construction and in their appeal to working-class families with a job somewhere nearby.

But there were from the earliest times two types of houses. The dwelling was, of course, much more numerous, but the other kind is the kind which architectural historians usually know more about. To greatly oversimplify, we can say that this second kind was in many ways the complete opposite of the first. It was identified with a family over generations—so much so that another term for a dynasty is *house*—like the house of Windsor or the house of Rothschild. It was as large and as permanent as possible because it was a symbol of power and status in the community. It was not uncommon for town and city authorities to prescribe the size and design of the houses of the rich and powerful and to insist on a certain grandeur in appearance. Furthermore, there were features to these houses which clearly indicated the rank of the occupying family: the presence of a tower or dungeon meant that the occupant was a judge of a certain type of court of justice. I need not say much more about these houses except to repeat that they were built of stone. Both words—*manor* and *mansion*—derive from a root meaning lasting, enduring, and in Wales the word for such a house—whether a manor or a prosperous

homestead—included the word *stone*. Architectural history naturally has more to say about these houses than about the peasant or worker dwelling. For one thing the so-called mansion has usually been protected by the family, and its history is a matter of record. For another, the various symbolic features—tower, dungeon, moat, courtyard, ceremonial entrance—eventually become elements in an architectural style. But the most striking difference is this: whereas the dwelling by its very poverty has few ways of preserving and providing for the long-range future, the mansion is deeply involved in both concerns. It is at once a monument to the history of the family and its power and wealth and a legacy for future generations to honor and preserve.

Much of the story of domestic architecture in the Western world, and especially in America, can be written in terms of the contrast between these two kinds of houses. Clearly there is a class distinction between the point of view of the family of wealth and position and that of the family of job seekers and job holders perpetually on the move. There is also an obvious distinction, transcending class, between two ways of honoring the past and the future, of thinking of history. But the distinction which I find most interesting in America is a much simpler one: the distinction between the house built to last, built as a permanent part of the environment, and the house with a life expectancy of a generation or less, the house which serves a limited purpose in the lives of its occupants.

In other words, what I think worth exploring is the fluctuating fortunes of stone and wood as building materials; specifically the low standing of wood in medieval Europe, its almost total rejection during the Renaissance, and its triumphant reemergence in America. We should explore the development of the dwelling and how we made it the standard house, part of the standard way of life, of the United States.

Our American housing tradition derives from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, but ultimately from what is sometimes called Atlantic Europe—that forested region of Europe north of the Alps and north of the Loire. Atlantic Europe thus includes Scandinavia, Germany, England, the Lowlands, and northern France. A thousand years ago, despite the influence of the Roman Empire, this was still a rural landscape, largely covered by forests and moor. It was therefore a region of wooden houses and a region where there was a flourishing culture of wood. This culture persists in many different forms in contemporary America, and in one way or another most Americans take part in it.

We enjoy being part-time carpenter and repairman, patching up a structure we secretly know will eventually collapse or go up in flames. Perhaps we really enjoy wood's temporary quality; that is what makes it seem alive and responsive.

I suspect this has always been the case; we seem always to have built our

wooden dwellings rapidly and with the idea that we can eventually change and improve—or abandon them. Archeologists tell us that though medieval carpentry techniques were highly developed in the building of boats and bridges and churches, the construction of the average peasant dwelling was slipshod and entirely without art. Few dwellings were expected to last more than a dozen years, and it was not unheard of for men to set fire to their own houses by way of holiday celebration. They could easily be replaced. All that was worth salvaging were the four cornerposts, beams, and rafters. The mud and brush walls, the thatch roof, and the few items of furniture were quickly reproduced. Americans lament that their houses are not allowed to grow old, and in fact the age of the average American is greater than that of the house he lives in. But even so our houses last much longer than did those of our medieval ancestors.

Impermanence was thus the chief characteristic of those early wooden constructions. A second characteristic was mobility. It was simple to disassemble a dwelling which was little more than a crude frame of a half dozen posts and beams and which had no foundation, no floor, and no ceiling. Many medieval accounts tell of dwellings being moved to where the next job was or onto a patch of vacant land. Whole villages moved when the soil was exhausted or when they were threatened by enemy attack. The image of the peasant family rooted for generations in the same spot is being modified by modern historians. As we will see, it is better suited to the peasant of the Renaissance or even of the nineteenth century than to the peasant of the Middle Ages.

The peasant of Atlantic Europe appears to have been very loyal to the tradition of the wooden dwelling, even in regions where wood was scarce and stone or clay was plentiful, and something of that loyalty was carried over to America in the seventeenth century. Jefferson complained that ignorant Virginians objected to brick houses for reasons of health, and as late as 1795 the Salem diarist William Bentley noted that the house of a certain Mr. Lee "was demolished from the prejudice against brick houses."

But the preference for wood was not shared by the more prosperous classes. The medieval clergy and the medieval aristocracy were outspoken in their admiration of stone. The theological doctrines which endorsed stone and masonry were extremely learned, and in their time no doubt very convincing.

The schism in architectural design lasted throughout the Middle Ages, with neither point of view getting the upper hand. But beginning in the sixteenth century, masonry somewhat abruptly became much more general. The two most obvious reasons for the shift were the renewed interest in classical architecture inspired by travel to Italy and then a serious shortage of wood throughout Atlantic Europe. Many forests had been destroyed by a growing population, the increase in the size of cities demanded more and

more timber, and so did the building of fleets of naval and commercial ships. Finally, there was a great demand for wood as fuel in manufacturing.

The response to these developments was a great change in building methods. There came a wave of conservation legislation: a limitation on the amount of wood peasants could use in construction, the use of different kinds of wood, and most important of all a movement to replace wooden structures by structures of stone or brick. Though it started with the building of hand-some houses in the city, it soon extended to include village dwellings and even whole villages and towns. This housing revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—which the English call the Great Rebuilding and the French call the Victory of Stone over Wood—had a drastic influence on the attitudes toward the dwelling. Simone Roux, in her recent historical survey of housing, says,

It was the triumph of the heavy stone house, the Mediterranean solution imposed on the rest of Europe. . . . Here we were, reconstructing in stone that which we had originally built of wood and mud. A house weighing from four hundred to five hundred tons, meant to last for centuries without expensive upkeep, was hereafter to serve as a symbol of permanence, of solidity, of reassuring protection. It stood for the complete shelter, the perfect hearth or home, the guardian of generations of accumulated memories. The [masonry] house tied the family to the land; the heavy construction called for a large outlay of money, it represented a large investment in permanent prestige. The stone house, ideally adapted to the needs of a static society, became the center of innumerable small investments.¹

No one can doubt that this reform in housing was by and large a benefit. The architectural revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not only produced handsome cities and towns and palaces and mansions, it also replaced dark and unsanitary cottages with stone dwellings which were larger, better designed, and more sightly. Still, we must not lose sight of the virtues which were thereby outlawed. For all their squalor medieval peasant dwellings had a remarkable flexibility and mobility—not only in that they could be taken down and reassembled elsewhere, but also in that they could easily change function and change tenants. If their life span was brief it allowed for frequent replacement. When the old dwelling collapsed, the new one was apt to be better and was certain to be cleaner. And finally, the temporary nature of the dwelling, its negligible material value, meant that it could be lightheartedly abandoned when the crops failed, when war threatened, or when the local lord proved too demanding. Its flimsiness protected the family from dangers of staying put. If people could not fight misfortune, they could at least escape it by leaving house and environment behind.

The more we learn about that victory of stone over wood, the more one question seems to demand an answer: was colonial America likewise engulfed in the Mediterranean architectural tide? There was of course no great rebuilding in North America, for there was no building, no architectural tradition to

begin with. But it is certainly true, as most histories of American architecture insist on telling us, that once the first harsh pioneer days were over, the well-to-do and ambitious colonists from Virginia to Maine started to build substantial urban and suburban houses in the fashionable style of the period. Tidewater Virginia came nearest to being overwhelmed by the new design philosophy. The eighteenth-century planters delighted in massive brick construction, and in fact the authorities in London in the middle of the seventeenth century ordained that every Virginia planter who owned a hundred acres had to build a brick house—with brick foundations—of specified dimensions. If he owned more than one hundred acres, his house had to be proportionately larger. What makes the history of the Tidewater area especially interesting is that it became the favorite target of the design innovators—much more than New England did. The strange constitution which John Locke drew up for South Carolina in the last years of the seventeenth century called for a baroque organization of space, and the design of Williamsburg was a model of Mediterranean order and would-be permanence. But these attempts to produce a Renaissance landscape in colonial America came to nothing. In Virginia as in New England, the vast majority of dwellings were of wood, built by amateurs, and few of them were destined to last for many years. Of all the architectural historians, Alan Gowans is the one who has most eloquently described the medieval—or late medieval—quality of early American architecture.² I think most of us now agree with his verdict. The social and economic conditions in the colonies were totally different from those in Europe. Abundant land meant that every settler looked forward to a substantial allotment of ground and that dissatisfied settlers could move to new and more promising places after a few years. The immense forests provided wood for building; the absence of stone suitable for masonry (notably in Tidewater Virginia), the cost of making or importing brick, and above all the scarcity of skilled carpenters and joiners combined to foster the production of wooden houses that were often hastily put together, lacking in solid foundations, storage space, and weathered lumber. The result was a stock of small, cheaply built, short-lived wooden houses easily taken down or moved, easily modified, and designed to meet the pressing need for shelter in a pioneer landscape. But the real novelty of these dwellings was not that they were cheaply built and quickly moved or disassembled—those after all were the characteristics of the medieval cottage. The real novelty was that these dwellings were built, occupied, and eventually disposed of as *commodities*, merchandise designed and produced to satisfy a definite market.

What kind of market was that? In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was a market composed of young, blue-collar families needing a place to live in a new environment. In those days this was assumed to be a farm, though in America it was a different kind of farm: not necessarily a perma-

nent home, but rather merely a place of land which a family could exploit profitably for a number of years before moving on to where prospects seemed brighter: better soil, better returns, better neighbors.

For example, in his *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century*, P. A. Bruce discusses the kind of house the first settlers built: a small, crude shelter with walls of vertical boards or slabs nailed to a horizontal board, and a pitched roof on top of the completed rectangle. The houses usually had two rooms, as well as a number of outhouses and barns and sheds. The farmer or planter at once started to raise tobacco. After two or three years he had exhausted the soil and there was nothing to do but move. Bruce comments:

The inclination to abandon old plantations and to take up new ones . . . encouraged a more active destruction of the woods but at the same time it fostered a spirit of indifference as to the manner in which they used it. The [settlers] neglected the fencing of their grounds, they failed to establish pastures for their cattle, or to lay off orchards and gardens, and even to plant corn. So frail were many of the dwelling houses in consequence of the purpose of its occupants to desert their estates as soon as exhausted . . . that special instructions were sent to the Governor to discourage by every means in his power the erection of such temporary habitations.³

What we glimpse in this passage is the typical ramshackle frame house in the midst of abandoned fields that we find throughout contemporary America; and when we know America well, we find nothing really sad in the spectacle. The deserted house, nine times out of ten, is a chrysalis from which its inhabitants have happily escaped to some brighter or more alluring prospect. Only in the Old World, with its dream of permanence, does the deserted house or the deserted field invariably speak of human tragedy.

Several of the essential traits of the American dwelling appear in Bruce's description of early Virginia: the frailty, not to say the flimsiness, of its construction; the temporary quality, the indifference to the immediate environment, the loneliness—and of course the lavish, almost exclusive use of wood. I would add two further characteristics: the absence of storage space in the dwelling itself and the absence of a solid foundation. Finally there is a trait which we all take for granted but which few foreign observers can begin to understand: the remoteness of many farms and dwellings from any community.

Let us repeat the familiar story of the structural evolution of the classic American dwelling: not the architect-designed house or mansion (or whatever), but the type of shelter that most Americans live in. The first step was that makeshift slab house without foundation of the colonial South. The second step, dating from the early eighteenth century in Pennsylvania and like the slab house, identified with the pioneer, frontier community, was the

log cabin. It flourished in western Virginia and throughout the frontier South. Jefferson, whose architectural philosophy was definitely aristocratic and promasonry, described both types in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. "The greatest proportion of the private buildings of Virginia are of scantling and boards, plastered with lime. It is impossible to devise things more ugly, uncomfortable, and happily more perishable." He adds: "The poorest people build huts of logs, laid horizontally in pens, stopping the interstices with mud. These are warmer in winter and cooler in summer than the more expensive construction of scantling and plank."⁴

Both types seem to have been generally temporary, to be succeeded in a matter of years by a more substantial house, and in both cases the plan was simplicity itself, with no provision for storage within the building, no foundation, no use of traditional carpentry skills, and no concern for appearances. Eventually the log cabin or slab house became a barn or was allowed to fall down. The third step was of course the balloon frame—another frontier invention. It represented a radical change in construction techniques, and yet at the same time it was a logical development: like its predecessors it was quick and simple to build, it was indifferent to local or folk architectural traditions, and it was seen as temporary; not that it would collapse, but that it would soon be sold and passed on to newcomers. Solon Robinson and other writers on western pioneering thus advised families to build their balloon frame houses as impersonally as possible so that they would be acceptable to any prospective purchaser. In the course of a few decades the balloon frame achieved architectural respectability, but even as late as 1870 a writer telling of his journey through Arkansas and Texas noted that there was scarcely any real architecture in that region since most of the buildings were balloon frame.

The acceptance of the balloon frame by serious architects can perhaps be explained by the development of two even simpler types of dwellings: the ready-cut or mail-order house, which flourished from the 1860s until the present and which has been studied by many architectural historians in recent years, and the simultaneous development of an even simpler type of dwelling—the box house.

Superficially—that is to say, from the outside—the box house resembles the board-and-batten house. But whereas the board-and-batten house usually has an insulating wall of brick under the exterior and a plastered interior wall, the true box house has no frame, no interior insulation, and of course no foundation. I have the feeling that it first developed in the Chesapeake Bay region. Long before the Civil War it had spread along the Gulf of Mexico and even as far as California. Horace Bushnell, a native of Hartford, Connecticut, was astonished to see box houses being built in San Francisco in the 1850s. Charles Dwyer, who wrote a book about low-cost housing in 1855, noted that workers on railroads and canals lived in settlements of box houses.

This is how the box house is described by Dianne Tebbetts in *Pioneer America*:

Box construction is similar to plank construction that developed in medieval England. . . . In box construction . . . wide boards are nailed vertically [to sills laid on the ground] and a 2×4 is nailed horizontally along the top of these vertical boards. Additional vertical boards are attached to form a single thickness wall with *no framing at all*. Ceiling joists tie it together, and doors and windows sit in holes cut in the walls for them. . . . Inside the walls are usually heavily papered to keep out winter winds. What this manner of construction lacks in durability it makes up in economy, for it is the least expensive way to enclose a given volume. Box construction is fairly common throughout the Ozarks. . . . It is preferred as evidence of some prosperity over the sturdier log house. Accordingly the "hillman" who has money to spend prefers a box house of sawed native lumber with a cheap tarpaper roof.⁵

The New Mexico mining community of Madrid has a great many specimens of box houses. They were brought there in the 1920s from Tucumcari, two hundred miles away, where they had provided housing for workers on the Rock Island Railroad. I have yet to see a box house which is solid in appearance. The absence of any kind of frame saves money, but it allows the building to sag and bulge and reduces its overall strength. That is why the average box house is only one room wide and one story high. Inevitably it is associated with the poorest and most transient element in the population. Even today in much of the South it is usually called a rent house or a tenant house, and occasionally it is called a former slave cabin—even though few now standing are old enough to have accommodated slaves. I have a strong suspicion that many of the so-called frame buildings we see in pictures of the nineteenth-century boom mining towns were actually box houses. There was a time when the box house was one of the commonest types in the United States—far more common, I imagine, than the balloon frame. In the post-Civil War South the box house proliferated in lumber company towns, plantations, and railroad camps. The lumber towns, as might be imagined, produced them in great numbers, for the towns moved from place to place wherever the forest was exhausted, and they needed a mobile dwelling type.

An article on these towns and their architecture appeared in the *Geographical Review* for September 1957.⁶ The writer identified at least three distinct types: the so-called bungalow (with a wide, encircling porch), the shotgun, and the log-pen house. The author suggested that the box house was popular in lumber towns because it was cheap and easy to build, suited to any size family, and easy to move by rail. The shotgun house, because of its narrowness (one room wide and two or more rooms deep), was well suited to small city lots and became very popular when moved to industrial cities.

The last chapter in the history of the box house tells of its use in remote company towns during the World War I, and then of its use for migrant farm

workers in the South, the Southwest, and California. We know far less about its spread and its development than we should, because it is very much part of the new American landscape.

The growth of large-scale truck gardening in the Sunbelt states fostered the growth of a very mobile work force. In the years before World War I the average farm worker was a single man, variously called a tramp, a blanket-man, or a bindlestiff. He slept wherever he could. But in the 1920s secondhand cars became relatively cheap, and instead of traveling under freight cars, the farm worker was more and more apt to travel in a car, accompanied by his family. And this of course created a demand for cheap, temporary housing: in other words, for box houses.

Most of these were probably built by small-time developers or speculators; the only reliable information we have about them is in the contemporary publications of the Department of Labor. Inevitably these box houses for transients were overcrowded, poorly maintained, and dangerous, and one of the programs of the New Deal was to replace them. The problem of course is still with us, but by the 1950s a new form of dwelling, a dwelling strikingly similar in one respect to its medieval forebears, came on the scene: the trailer or mobile home and even more recently the camper on the back of a pickup.

We are only beginning to recognize the impact of this new kind of dwelling on planning, on the community, and on work. I am convinced that the trailer or an improved version of it is, for better or worse, the low-cost dwelling of the future—lacking in solidity, lacking in permanence, lacking in charm, but inexpensive, convenient, and mobile.

Most of us, I suspect, find it easier to accept and even romanticize the box house and its American predecessors, at least those in rural areas, that have developed individuality and have been assimilated into the landscape. And yet I persist in seeing an underlying similarity among all those flimsy, short-lived American dwellings, each of which was denounced in its day as crude and disruptive and socially undesirable. All of them have served as dwellings for people who have to move to where the job is: migrant farm laborers, highway and construction crews, lumbermen, soldiers, and airmen. Whatever their form of construction, they have served as dwellings of old people, of young couples getting started in life; and almost always they have been seen by their occupants as temporary: something better and more lasting is to be that next step.

It is very tempting to analyze the dwelling entirely in socioeconomic terms; certainly dwellings do not lend themselves to analysis in terms of architecture or folk art. But the real significance of the temporary dwelling, of the box house, to take one example out of many, lies elsewhere. I think it has always offered, though for a brief time only, a kind of freedom we often undervalue: the freedom from burdensome emotional ties with the environment, freedom from communal responsibilities, freedom from the tyranny of the traditional

home and its possessions; the freedom from belonging to a tight knit social order; and above all, the freedom to move on to somewhere else. Now the environmentalism has become accepted Establishment philosophy, the value we stress are stability and permanence and the putting down of roots and holding on to our architectural heritage; and no doubt this is as it should be. Still, we cannot help but be reminded, whenever we look at our rapidly changing landscape and study our changing attitudes toward the home, that we have a second architectural tradition, a tradition of mobility and short-term occupancy that is stronger and more visible than ever. Not everyone can sympathize with this other, more popular tradition with its rejection of environmental loyalties and constraints, but all of us who think about architecture and its many bewildering manifestations are in a sense duty bound to try to understand the new kind of home we are all making in America.