

## Houses Chapter 2

Contributed by Administrator  
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&ldquo;Few farmhouses have serious architectural appeal, yet their very simplicity evokes an indefinable charm.&rdquo; - Henry J. Kaufman, *The American Farmhouse* Significant Houses Part 2: The Farming Village Today&rsquo;s Monroeville is a community of 20 square miles some 13 miles east of Pittsburgh. The land is part of an elevated plain that forms a transition between the flatter agricultural plains of the Midwest and the Appalachian Mountains to the east. Its topography is characterized by hills and ridges, wood-covered valleys, and steep slopes. The land in frontier days was covered with a dense and heavy forest, and thick underbrush, all of which had to be cleared for farming. Most of the early settlers were farmers, and they were largely self-sufficient. They had to be. Carving farms out of the hilly, thickly wooded land was hard work, and they grew what they needed to survive. Little surplus food was grown, as transporting cash crops was a difficult, given the transportation problems of the time. While log houses continued to be built even after the civil war, in time they were to give way to more substantial farmhouses of wood or stone. The local housing was, like the farmers themselves: simple, straightforward, and pragmatic. Farmhouses might start with a small rectangular box, but with increased prosperity they were made larger and more comfortable by the addition of wings and ells. These farmhouses would evolve into a style that was to be called Western Pennsylvania Vernacular. Typically, such structures were characterized by 1½-stories with a gable roof, sometimes in a "L" or "T" in plan, with center or end chimneys, and multi-paned double-hung windows. Windows were surrounded by sills and lintels, sometimes with stiles on either side to hold shutter hinges. Ornamentation was sparse, if used at all. Farmhouses were accompanied by a cluster of outbuildings, e.g., a springhouse, smokehouse, outdoor bake oven, privy, and barn. In time, more substantial farmhouses came to dominate the landscape. Made of stone, or of wood frame and siding, they typically were built on a foundation of local stones roughly fitted together. Inside walls were generally plastered. The kitchen was used to prepare and cook food and to serve as an all-purpose room; an outdoor oven might be used for baking. The fireplace was large and dominated the room. The hearth, being the only source of heat, and possibly of light, became the natural center of home life. Thread could be spun, candles poured, and mending done by women sitting by the fire, while men repaired harnesses and farm tools on long winter nights.