TOWN FORM

by

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(ABSTRACT)

American town form consists of primary form - the layout of streets, lots and other features determined for a town at its inception - and secondary form - the fabric of building and usage that a town acquires over time. This thesis explores the primary and secondary form of ante-bellum Western Virginia towns, and offers several interpretations of the cultural meaning recorded in town form.

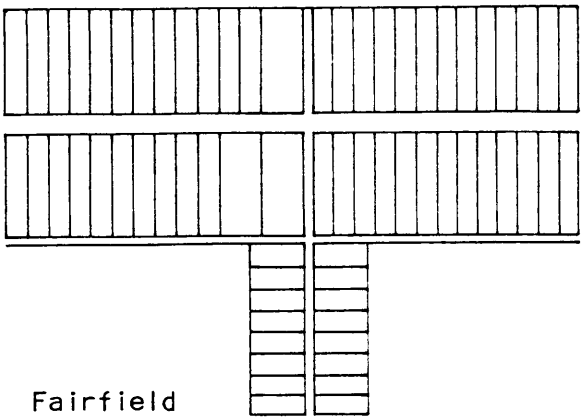
American town form has traditionally been studied through town plats and maps of towns. Occasionally this approach has borne fruit, but more often it has reduced towns to inanimate two-dimensional entities. In addition to form as it exists in plan, the layout of streets and lots and other features hereafter termed "primary form", towns have a form that is acquired over time, a highly-ordered fabric of building and usage that exhibits similarities from town to town. This other form is hereafter termed "secondary form", and its existence as a subject worthy of study is the premise of this thesis.

The notion of primary and secondary form, being a point of methodology, applies to every American town. Some of the more specific observations in this thesis are based on data from the towns of transmontane Virginia and the southeastern portion of West Virginia - a study area that was economically, ethnically and developmentally distinct from Eastern Virginia and (to a lesser extent) the western reaches of West Virginia during the ante-bellum period. Towns established during the late-nineteenth century onward are not considered here, since they differed in kind from earlier towns, as will be explained later on. Although the database for this thesis is limited temporally and geographically, it is reasonable to assume that what is true for the ante-bellum towns of Western Virginia is at least in part true for towns in other parts of Virginia and West Virginia, and elsewhere in the region and the nation.

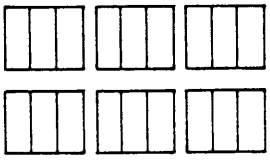
Primary town form is the plan of the town, the layout of streets, lots and other features that appears in the plat made at the town's inception. It is the outcome of disparate topographic, economic and cultural factors, or, more correctly, of the idiosyncratic response to these factors by the author(s) of primary town form. Due to the many variables involved, primary town form exhibits considerable variety. Nevertheless, it is argued in this thesis that all traditional Western Virginia towns are an elaboration of a single type - the Northern European linear village. Therefore, rather than proposing a typology of town form, this thesis asserts an essential unity. All observable town form falls between two poles: the "linear grid", which is a faithful recreation of the basic linear type, and the "checkerboard grid", which does not express linearity strongly. These terms will be used as though they signify types, and for the sake of convenience they may be thought of as types, but in reality linear and checkerboard grids form the two ends of a spectrum of variation, the two poles of a continuum.

The linear grid was a simple expression of the principal residential/commercial street that constituted the essence of Northern European villages (Figure 1). Because it was ingrained in tradition and had a lucid economic rationale, the linear grid was the more popular Western Virginia town form, and by the second quarter of the nineteenth century it was the only form in use.

The checkerboard grid was a rectangular field of nearly identical streets and blocks without a clearly defined commercial spine (Figure

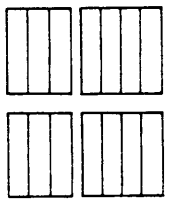


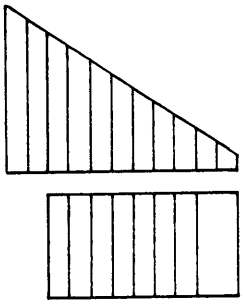
Fairfield
1798
Rockbridge Co.



Luray
1812
Page Co.

Springfield
ca 1830
Roanoke Co.





Hillsville
1842
Carroll Co.

Rollinsburg
ca 1851
Monroe Co.

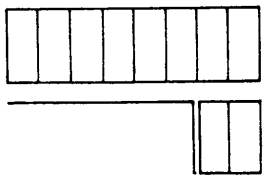
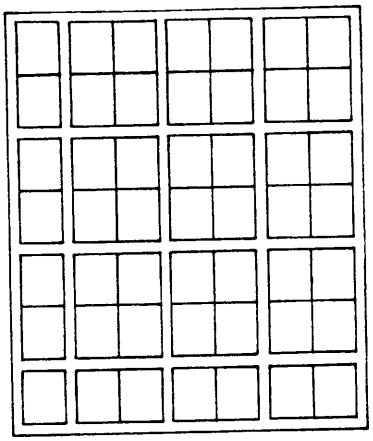
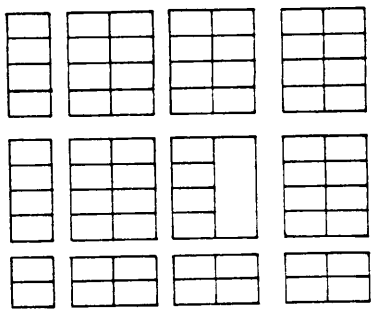


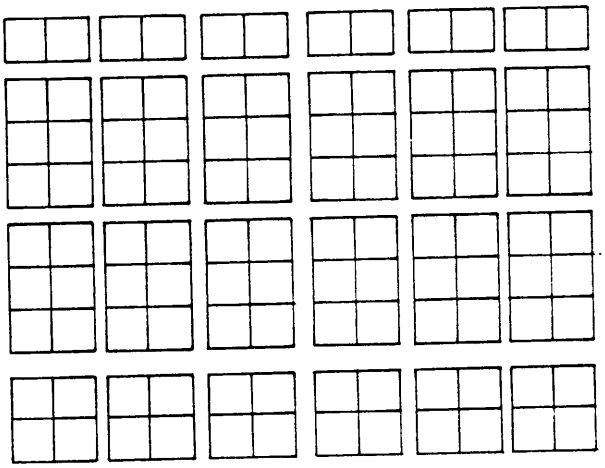
Figure 1. Five linear grid towns from Western Virginia.[1] Scale 1:600.



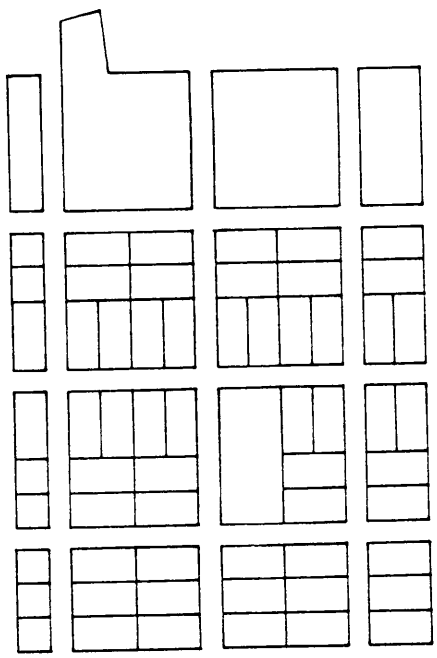
Crowsville
1787
Botetourt Co.



Union
1799
Monroe Co.



Antwerp
1801
Roanoke Co.



Pearisburg
1806
Giles Co.

Figure 2. Four checkerboard grid towns form Western Virginia.
Scale: 1:600.

2). The typical checkerboard grid looked much like a transplanted section of the large grids of Virginia's leading eighteenth-century trading towns (such as Richmond, Fredericksburg and Alexandria). Impressive and urbane on paper, the weakly-inflected checkerboard grid eventually yielded to the linear grid, which provided a better match of primary form (plan) and secondary form (built expression). In other words, linear grids and checkerboard grids both developed into linear towns.

There seems to be a linkage between linear and checkerboard grids and competing tendencies in traditional Virginia culture. The linear grid appears to be the product of a vernacular mind-set, conservative and practical, whereas the checkerboard grid appears to be more academic, more in emulation of Classical precedent, more a conception of what a town ought to be. The vernacular-academic opposition may in turn represent a fundamental difference in the socioeconomic groups responsible for town form. Checkerboard grids were often the expression of men of power and wealth, autocratic county juntas. Linear grids, on the other hand, were the modest schemes of small landowners. These sets of congruent oppositions are at best tentative, but a cursory analysis of the history of Western Virginia town form and town formation substantiates them.

The checkerboard grid was the form most often used for the early courthouse towns of Western Virginia. Courthouse towns were capitals in miniature, somewhat artificial in nature; they subsisted on the sporadic influx of people and trade that attended court days in addition to the steady traffic of the major roads upon which these

towns were usually located. Although Virginia town establishment law was generally successful in curbing speculation, there nevertheless appears to have been something speculative about checkerboard grids. The checkerboard grid town of Antwerp (1801) in present-day Roanoke County, one of the few traditional towns of the region promoted by an outside agency (Richmond entrepreneur Samuel Adams), was so speculative as to have been a veritable swindle. Sited on a steep hillside above a swamp, trumpeted in the press, Antwerp died after its first lot sale, and its promoter returned to Richmond, presumably a wealthier man.

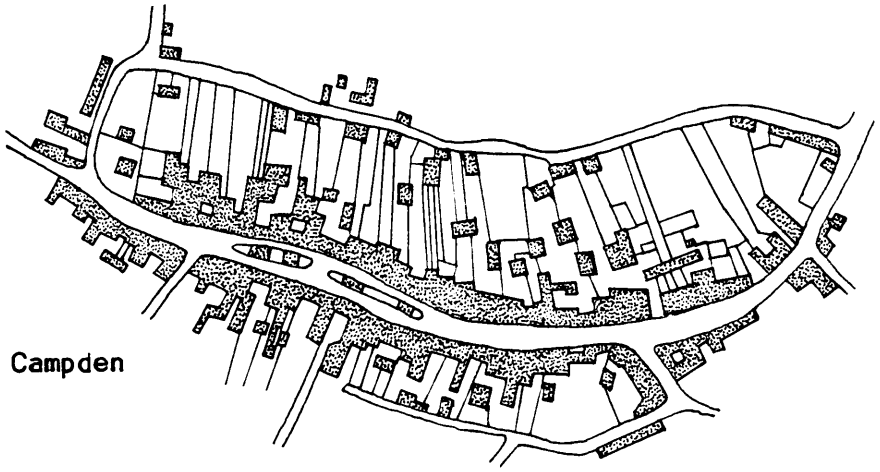
Linear grid towns often filled the economic niches in the hinterland between courthouse towns. They seem to have had sound (if modest) industrial and service components, as even the name of one of these towns - Mechanicsburg - suggests. The streamlined practicality of a linear grid did not necessarily ensure its survival as a town. Springfield, established on the Montgomery-Roanoke county border in circa 1830, was sited on an untraveled road. Although it had a grist mill and potential for a tanyard, Springfield dwindled away until today it survives only in a few property lines.

The linearity so boldly expressed in the linear grid and tacit in the checkerboard grid was most likely of Northern European origin. John Reps has traced the development of town planning in medieval and early modern England and its uninterrupted continuation in North America.[2] The similarities between an American linear grid town and a Northern European linear village are striking: a single street defined by houses built up against it, with lots of uniform or roughly

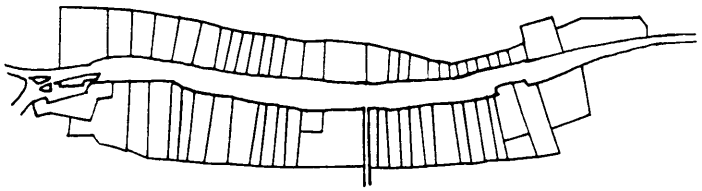
uniform size extending back to the town boundary or a rear alley (Figure 3). The mechanism for diffusion of European material culture into Western Virginia has been well documented. During the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, immigrants from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Germany flooded into the Shenandoah Valley and points beyond, bringing with them their traditions and recreating an environment with which they were familiar.

Linear and checkerboard grids differed in size. Owing to their additional ranges of lots, checkerboard grids were larger than linear grids. The size of checkerboard grid towns may have been in part a reflection of optimism, an initial reading of the economic potential of an area by early town promoters. Linear grid towns, which tended to be much smaller, were also established later, in the developmental history of a given area, when economic potential could be more realistically appraised. Barbara Bailey has proposed such a model to explain the diminishing size of towns platted in Northeastern Oregon between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth.[6] For Virginia, a comparison of the average sizes of towns established by the legislature during the periods 1760 to 1778 and 1800 to 1804 shows a drop from 68.3 acres to 29.5 acres.

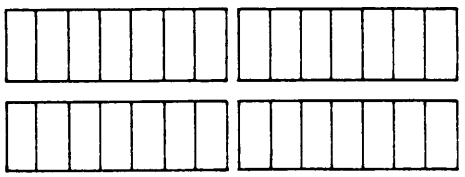
An incidental determinant of primary form was the particular topography of a town site. Most towns were located on preexisting roads, and consequently they took on a particular road's arbitrary orientation with respect to north and south, although occasionally towns were deliberately oriented on a north-south axis and the existing incoming road shifted to suit the plan. Towns were usually



Chipping Campden



Milton Abbas



Newbern

Figure 3. Two English linear villages and a western Virginia linear grid town. Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, attained its present size and form during the Middle Ages when it was an important center for the English wool trade. The rear alley bounding the town on the north side is known as The Back End.(3) Milton Abbas, Dorset, was established in 1786 as a new town for villagers displaced by the creation of a park for a nearby manor house.(4) Newbern, Pulaski County, was established in 1810 by Adam Hance.(5) Scale: 1:600.

located near running water, which was essential for early industries such as milling, tanning, and hemp processing, and for the watering of droves of livestock that passed through towns on their way to market. The availability of springs was also important in town siting. Most towns had springs set aside for public use, with customary proscriptions against bathing, washing clothes and watering livestock.

Research in primary town form has heretofore concentrated on town plans in their entirety. A neglected aspect of primary form has been the lot. The lot was the commodity for sale in towns. Lot size varied widely, but half-acre lots were most common, followed by quarter-acre lots. The lots in a typical Western Virginia town were usually of uniform size, although some towns had specialized smaller or larger lots at important street intersections or around public squares. Some towns had multi-acre outlots at their periphery which were subdivided into regular-sized lots as the town expanded.

Lots took on two shapes: squarish and narrow. Common dimensions for squarish lots were eight poles by nine or ten poles (132 feet by 148.5 feet or 165 feet). Squarish lots were associated with checkerboard grids and were commonly grouped in blocks of four. When checkerboard grids went out of favor, squarish lots did also. Narrow lots were associated with linear grids, although they sometimes appeared in checkerboard grids. Squarish and narrow lots coexisted from the beginning in Virginia - they were both used in the towns established by the town acts of 1680, 1691 and 1706. Some important early towns with squarish lots were Fredericksburg (1721), Richmond (1737) and Alexandria (1749). Williamsburg, designed by Governor Nicholson in

1699, had narrow lots. Philadelphia, an important market center for the Virginia back-country, had lots of varying size, but the most common were three poles by twelve poles (49.5 feet by 198 feet).[7]

It would seem that the narrow lot was the more functional of the two lot types. It was better suited to commercial activity, since more narrow lots could be squeezed in along precious commercial street frontage. The narrow lot may also have encouraged the formation of a continuous wall of building fronts, a more urban and prosperous streetscape. The utility of the squarish lot (if any) is less apparent. It was less constrained than the narrow lot and therefore possibly better suited to industrial usage. Rather than encouraging the vernacular wall of building fronts, those who used the squarish lot in their plans may have wanted to foster an idyllic domestic townscape similar to that William Penn had envisioned for Philadelphia. If so their intentions were unrealistic, since the people who settled their towns quickly recreated traditional crowded townscapes.

Another aspect of the primary form of Western Virginia towns was rectilinearity. Rectilinearity can be explained in part as the result of the status of the surveyor and the profession of surveying in traditional Virginia society.

Surveyors were responsible for regulating the fundamental Virginia commodity - land. Their knowledge of the complicated bureaucratic procedures by which land was acquired gave them considerable power (it was no coincidence that the sons of gentry and would-be gentry - George Washington foremost among them - were launched in their political careers through an apprenticeship in surveying).

Instruction in surveying was standard in the curriculum of Virginia colleges and academies. Surveying itself, with its reliance on mathematics and high-tech gadgetry, was considered a quasi-magical art by the layman.

Since they were the arbiters of land use and spatial planning, surveyors were called upon to lay out Virginia's towns. Virginia town plans were easily executed in terms of the surveyor's craft: simple concatenations of identical rectangles measured out in poles (sixteen-and-a-half feet), or quarter lengths of the standard measuring instrument - Gunter's chain. It was probably in the surveyor's interest that lots be easily surveyed, since the surveyor was sometimes paid by the lot, and irregular lots meant more work for less pay.

Actually, not all towns were laid out by certified surveyors: during the colonial period, according to Sarah Hughes, as few as half.[8] This did not result in non-rectilinear towns. The proprietors who laid out their own towns very likely had received instruction in surveying in their youth, or were otherwise familiar with the rudiments of the art. Should a proprietor have wanted to have his town professionally surveyed, as, for instance, in preparation for legislative recognition, he could have done so without great inconvenience. Resurveys of professionally and non-professionally surveyed towns occurred frequently.

In a traditional Virginia culture obsessed with order and regularity, a surveyed plat was not only desirable for a town, it was essential to the town's official and economic existence. The initial success of a town hinged on lot sales. The lot purchaser needed

assurance that he was investing in a town with a good chance for future prosperity. The situation of the town with respect to roads and waterways and to regional markets and resources certainly ranked highest in the lot purchaser's mind, but the character of the town was also important. It had to present an orderly and prosperous appearance to potential patrons of the lot owner's workshop or commercial establishment. A rectilinear grid that harnessed townsmen's natural proclivity to build against the street eventually created an even wall of buildings, a streetscape as far removed as possible from the "straggling" appearance that was the literate traveler's universal snub.

The town proprietors and the surveyor who laid out towns knew this. They packaged their product to appeal to initial purchasers - there were few irregularities in the plan to cause confusion. At the lot sale, the plat of the town was displayed to help lot purchasers visualize their lot in context. Display of the plat may also have served to impress lot purchasers with the professionalism of the venture. After the sale the plat was kept in the trustees' minute book (the predecessor of our town council minutes). This inclusion in the minute book was required by law in the case of towns recognized by the legislature. The book and the plat were accessible to the public.

The correlation between orderliness and economic success was not limited to the material culture of town form. During the period of traditional town formation, Virginia domestic architecture shifted from the irregular and asymmetrical to the regular and symmetrical, a transformation begun by the wealthy but emulated by other classes. In

a deeper sense, rectilinear town formation may have been an act of imposing order on a chaotic landscape. The hopeful grids of Western Virginia's earliest towns lay in islands of cleared land among primeval forest, the stronghold of wolves and savages and other real or imagined threats to European civilization.

The meaning of primary town form remains difficult to decipher. A single account of the decisions involved in the forming of traditional Western Virginia towns would aid interpretation of the material record considerably. In fact, the authors of town design have not been identified conclusively, although incidental references point to the promoter(s) rather than the surveyor or some outside authority as the party responsible. For instance, the town of Luray in present-day Page County was laid out in 1812 by William Modisett on lands of John Ruffner. According to marginal notes on the town plat, Modisett laid out the town "agreeable to [the] instructions" of William Marye, Jonas Ruffner and John Whiting (three of the town's four initial trustees). Town trustees were responsible for a protracted manipulation of the original form of Christiansburg in Montgomery County which involved the adding and rearranging of lots and the laying out and repositioning of roads and alleys.

Somewhat more incidental but perhaps more conclusive evidence is provided by the towns of Florence and Pendleton in Botetourt County. Both these towns were surveyed by Botetourt County Surveyor William Anderson in the year 1804 within several hundred yards of each other on the banks of the James River. The fact that the two towns differed so dramatically, even in lot shape and size, suggests that

their plans were dictated to Anderson by the respective town promoters (Figure 4). Surveyors may have been involved in the design of some towns, however, especially courthouse towns.

One thing seems certain - the state legislature was not involved in determining town form other than in the general sense of encouraging the professional survey of lots and streets. A possible exception to this occurred in 1777 when the General Assembly established the towns of Effingham (Cumberland Court House) and Scottville (Powhatan) in Piedmont Virginia, and Lexington in Western Virginia, and gave detailed specifications for their form. The three towns were to be composed of six three-hundred foot square blocks bounded and separated by one-hundred foot wide streets, for total dimensions of nine-hundred by thirteen-hundred feet. It is not clear whether the plan for these towns was the creation of the legislature or whether it was merely adopted by that body. At any rate, only Powhatan followed the specifications precisely. Lexington kept the size and shape called for in the act of establishment, but it juggled the blocks around inside those parameters to come up with a different plan (Figure 5). Cumberland Court House ignored the plan entirely.

Town form in Western Virginia was not the creation of government policy as was the case in Colonial Latin America. It was not determined by the professional practices of surveying; surveying handbooks in use during the period of traditional town formation did not address town form at all. Primary town form was the creation of individual minds operating at the local level. Like other aspects of material culture, primary form was disseminated by the movement of peoples

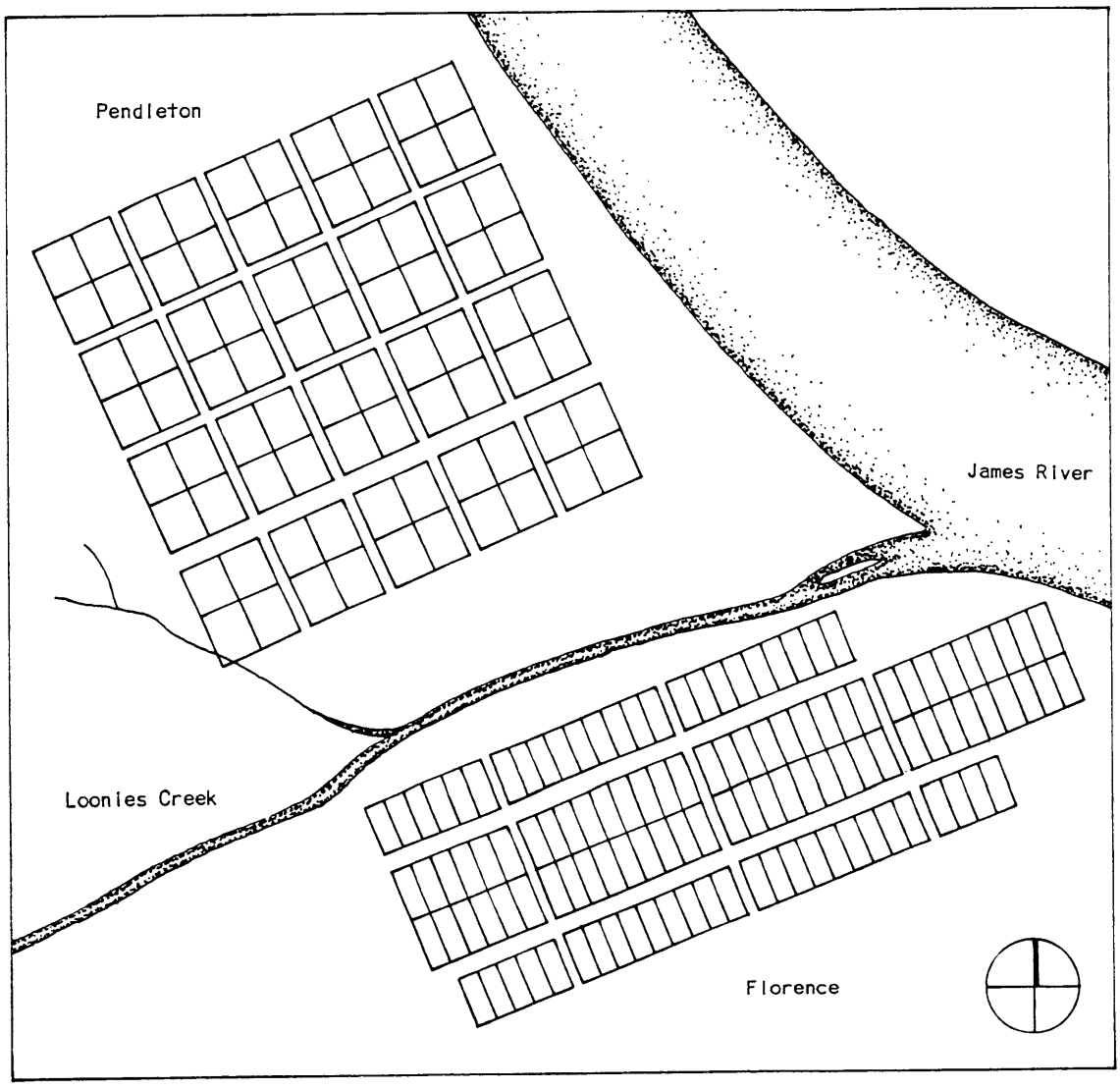


Figure 4. Pendleton and Florence (1804; Botetourt Co.). Scale 1:600.

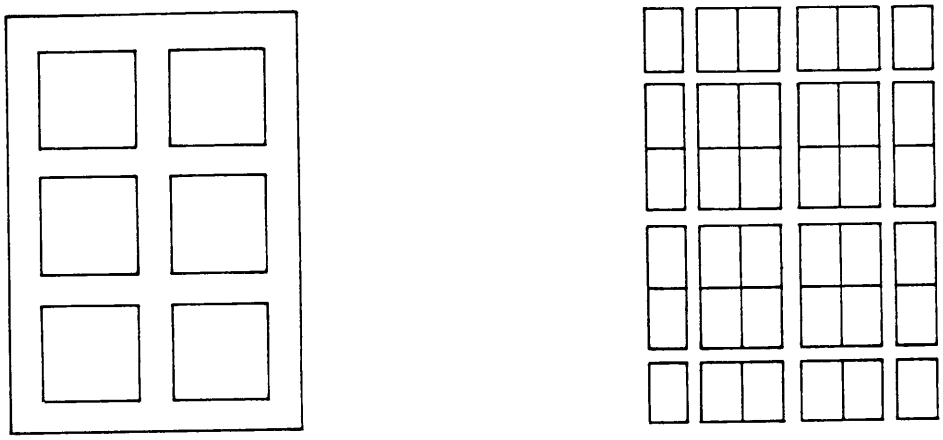


Figure 5. On left: plat of the towns of Powhatan, Cumberland Court House and Lexington as specified in their acts of establishment. On right: plat of Lexington as laid out. The Lexington plan represents a more efficient use of space. Scale: 1:600.

through America. Edward Price assumed the same in his work on American courthouse squares.[9] He proposed the existence of a typology and the transmission of whole types. The four courthouse square types Price identified had clear configurations of lots and streets that would have been recognizable to the eye of likely culturebearers, and so his assertion of type-transmission seems plausible. For town form in its entirely, however, this study proposes a transmitted grammar from which town form was assembled. Type-transmission may still have occurred (courthouse square form constituting a subset of general town form), but for the most part it was a geometric kit - not a finished product - that travelled westward in Virginia and in the nation.

Street layout and lot size and shape are not the only elements of town form. In fact, primary form, taken alone, can be misleading. An example of this is the way in which checkerboard grid towns developed into linear towns; townsfolk ignored the idealistic spaciousness of checkerboard grids and built the crowded main streets they were comfortable with, leaving back streets and lots untouched for a generation or more. The real form of a town - the fabric of building activity and land use - is referred to in this thesis as "secondary form". Secondary form encoded a breadth of cultural meaning not unlike that of primary form. It too changed over time, either as a response to outside influence, or according to the clockwork of individual towns.

The building activity that took place within town lots was a variety of secondary form. A lot was first and foremost domestic, and

on it, placed as close to the street as possible, stood the house. Immediately behind the house stood ancillary structures that were functionally integral with the household: a detached kitchen (later a kitchen ell attached to the house), a smokehouse or meathouse, a dairy, and a wellhouse, springhouse, or cistern. Behind these were structures devoted to animal husbandry: stables, barns, henhouses, etc. A kitchen garden and an orchard took up the rest of the back yard. At the very back stood the privy, leaning against a fence that bounded the lot (the fence reminiscent of the wall that enclosed Northern European village lots). If the lot owner were an artisan or professional there might also be workshops and offices, although these often stood on the street beside the house. In short, the typical town lot functioned as residence, farm and factory rolled into one.

For small towns, little difference existed between lots on the main street and lots on back streets so far as usage was concerned. The main street might be more densely built up, and commercial activity might occur on it alone, but otherwise it was characterized by the same mix of residential, agricultural and industrial activity that took place on back streets. For towns that had back streets and lots it was not infrequent for a single owner to buy up a full block of lots. Deed records for ante-bellum Blacksburg indicate that the Croy family bought lots wholesale and over time sold them off or granted them to newlywed offspring or elderly relatives, creating a Croy family village within the larger Blacksburg. Also in Blacksburg, merchant William Thomas bought a four-lot block on which he located his tanyard. The tanyard structures occupied only one lot of the four

- the others may have been devoted to tanning pits, temporary storage, or the hovels of workmen.

Other important aspects of secondary form were the locational strategies used in the placement of significant buildings. Courthouses, academies and churches represented the political, intellectual and spiritual life of the community, and they were usually sited prominently on high ground - in the center of town in the case of the courthouse, on the periphery in the case of academies and churches.

The courthouse and its attendant buildings were the focus of county seat towns. They often occupied specially designated public squares in an axial relationship to the principal streets of the town. In some towns courthouses were placed so that the main street rose uphill to them (Fincastle, Abingdon, Christiansburg, Floyd, and Princeton are some Western Virginia examples dating from 1770 through 1838). In Salem, which was not established as a county seat, the principal intersection occupied the highest ground along the main street and so made an obvious courthouse site when Roanoke County was formed in 1838. The courthouse for Page County was built on a lofty site above the steeply-situated town of Luray when Luray became the new county's seat in 1831.

The brick academy buildings of the ante-bellum period were often the largest buildings in Western Virginia towns. They required extensive grounds for recreational activity, future growth, and for ornamental plantings which added to the decorum of the institution. Consequently they were usually placed on the edge of town. When they were built on incoming roads they demonstrated to travelers the sophis-

tication, resources and aspirations of a town. Academies in the Western Virginia towns of Blacksburg, Romney and Salem occupied sites that were on axis with certain town streets (Main Street in Blacksburg, and Romney and Academy Street in Salem.) Roanoke College in Salem terminated College Street, the principal cross street of the town. The College of William and Mary with its axial relationship to Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg may have provided the prototype for the arrangement, or it may simply have been the implementation of Renaissance notions concerning the relation of an important building to its urban context. Courthouses were the only other class of building that regularly received such special designation.

The phenomenon of church siting in Western Virginia towns was more complex than the siting of courthouses and academies. Churches were usually placed on peripheral and elevated sites like academies, but for deeper cultural and symbolic reasons in addition to practical considerations.

This is not to say that churches relegated practicality to unimportance. Newly-formed congregations without financial resources often received their first church sites - inexpensive peripheral lots - through donation. Many early churches were located on farmland adjoining a town that remained in private ownership. Reenforcing these centrifugal factors was the fact that town and church space requirements were mutually exclusive. Downtown space was crowded and costly. Churches needed room for burying the dead, for accommodating horses and buggies, and for outdoor preaching.

Cultural reasons for peripheral church placement were equally

compelling. The noisy, muddy, foul-smelling and vice-ridden surroundings of a typical town were not conducive to worship. Pastoral sites outside town were. Such sites were sometimes the location of camp meetings that preceded the formation of permanent congregations. Tradition - the peripheral placement of churches in English and perhaps other Northern European villages - may also have contributed to peripheral church placement in Western Virginia towns.

The peripheral sites that churches occupied were also very often hill-tops overlooking towns. Elevated siting can be understood principally as a symbolic act. It invested struggling young congregations with an authority bolstered by scriptural precedent - the holiness associated with mountains and high ground. It separated the sacred (the church) from the profane (the town). This dialectic began to break down in Western Virginia towns in the late ante-bellum period, when congregations moved to larger and more elegant quarters in the heart of the downtown. Increasingly worldly churches found they had more in common with increasingly Christianized towns.

Peripheral church placement may also have had an element of symbolism. To understand that symbolism, the peculiar history of religion in Virginia must be considered. During the colonial period,the established Anglican Church shared power with autocratic county governments. In towns like Fredericksburg and Winchester the church building of the Anglican Church was built in the same precinct with county buildings. When dissenting Protestant sects (Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans) built churches for town congregations (before and after the disestablishment of the

Anglican Church of England in the 1770s and '80s) they shunned sites near the seat of secular authority, whether political or economic. Peripheral siting of churches in Western Virginia and elsewhere may have been the physical embodiment of the doctrine of the separation of church and state (Figure 6).

Platted town boundaries set up a dialogue between the various elements of the town. The placement of buildings inside or outside town was an act pregnant with meaning. In addition to church congregations and academies, certain social classes located outside the town boundaries. Prominent merchants built their commercial/ residential establishments in the heart of the downtown during the early ante-bellum period, but by the end of the period they were buying farmland adjacent to towns and building mansions identical to those of the rural aristocracy. Ministers of religion also located on the periphery of town, sometimes near the churches and academies in their charge, sometimes further from town at shady and secluded sites. At the other end of the social spectrum, after the Civil War, freedmen established communities on the outskirts of towns. These communities persist to the present day, although they are now engulfed in later development.

The character of secondary form was the province of architecture. The architecture that existed in traditional Western Virginia towns did not exist only in towns, since the same building types and house plans occurred in the countryside. The earliest architecture in towns was undifferentiated. Simple house-like buildings served as stores, taverns, workshops, schools, churches and courthouses. The domestic

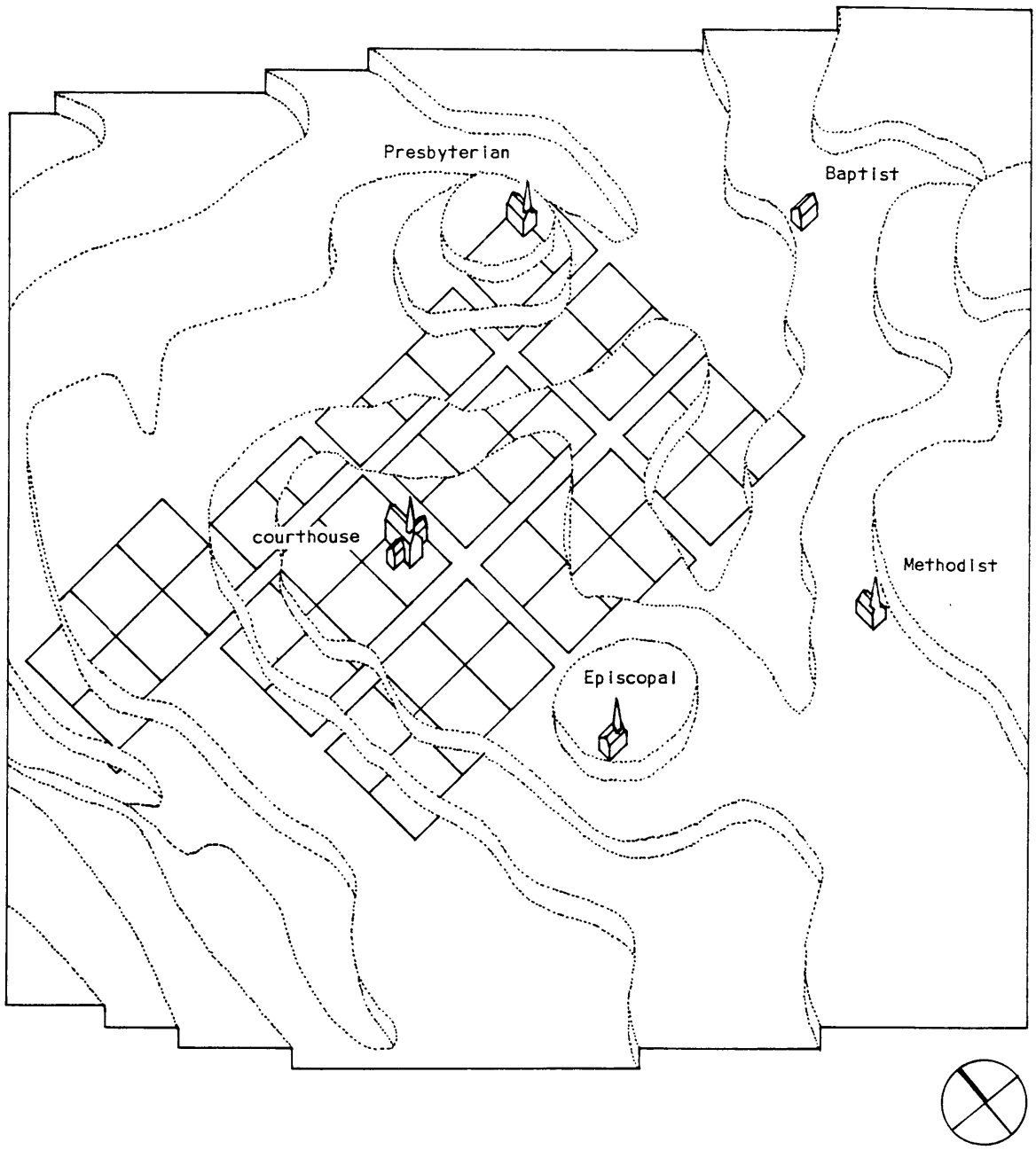


Figure 6. Fincastle, Botetourt County. The diagram shows the peripheral and elevated siting of churches in relation to the 1770 plat of the town. The earliest church site was that of the Church of England (1771), used by the Presbyterians after 1795. Later church sites included the Methodist (1803), the Baptist (1831), and the reorgranized Episcopal (1837). The Baptist Church was sited within an 1822 extension of the town plat. Also shown is the courthouse (sited in 1770) which occupies the highest point on Main Street. Scale: 1:400. Contour interval: twenty feet.

character of early town architecture was implied by the town establishment legislation of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, which specified house-like buildings as minimum lot improvements.

As towns matured, their buildings gradually became more expressive of the activities they housed. This differentiation was in part dependent on the accumulation of wealth. Growing congregations, for instance, could eventually afford to abandon their provisional log or frame meetinghouses and move to larger, more elegant brick buildings with distinguishing architectural features such as steeples and temple fronts. The stage a town was at in its particular development determined the extent of differentiation in its architecture.

An exception to this model was the appearance in Western Virginia towns of a new commercial architecture during the mid-nineteenth century. The new commercial buildings extended far back into their lots and were entered through their gable or short ends (Figure 7). They often had colorful signage and false fronts to enhance their consumer appeal and to exagerate their scale; later they incorporated large display windows and distinctive inset and corner entries. The origins of this new commercial architecture remain obscure (it may have arisen in the wharf districts of maritime and riverine towns), but its rapid diffusion throughout America was well documented in lithographs and early photographs.

The new commercial architecture had its greatest flowering in the Western United States where in the late-1840s the commercial districts of rapidly- developed mining towns were built entirely of end-entry and falsefronted store buildings. In Western Virginia the appearance

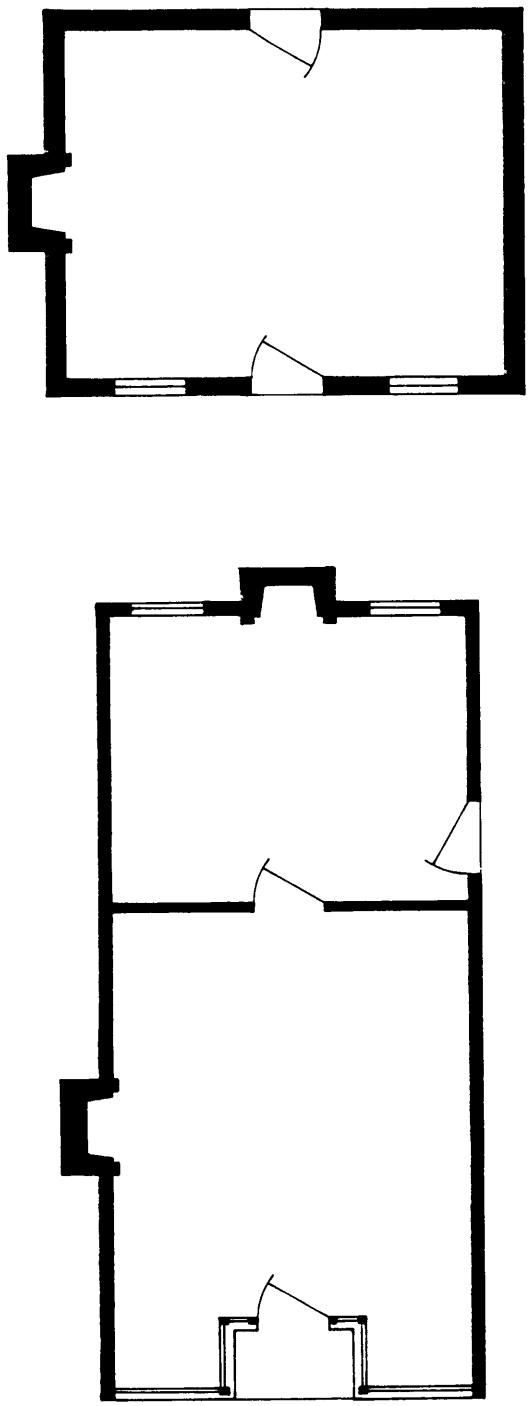


Figure 7. Typical store plans of the mid-nineteenth century. Above: a house-like store building entered on its non-gable side. Below: an example of the new commercial architecture of the time, entered through its gable or short end and divided into a front room for sales and a rear room for office, living or storage.

of the new architecture was less dramatic, probably because a commercial infrastructure of house-like store buildings was already in place and required only gradual renewal. Still, the new architecture appeared in Western Virginia as early as it did in the Western United States. The Southwest Virginia towns of Salem and Christiansburg each had a two-story end-entry store building by the mid-1850s. Blacksburg had three (Figure 8). To the north in ante-bellum Staunton, new commercial buildings clustered around the railroad depot - a part of town thereafter known as the Wharf. By the end of the nineteenth century, most Western Virginia towns had acquired main streets that were clearly commercial in character.

In the years after their establishment, towns matured from quasi-corporate ventures to bona fide communities with a degree of self-determination. They quickened the life of the surrounding countryside; a visit to town to shop in the stores or to race and trade horses on the back streets was the highlight in the weekly routine of country folk. By the same token, towns preyed on the surrounding countryside. Travellers and commentators as far back as Mrs. Royall (1826) and as recently as Thorstein Veblen (1923) have decried the rapacious manner by which small-town merchants profitted at the expense of country folk.[10] To the cultural meanings suggested for church placement may be added the possibility that peripheral siting represented a rejection of the whole idea of towns, an attempt by

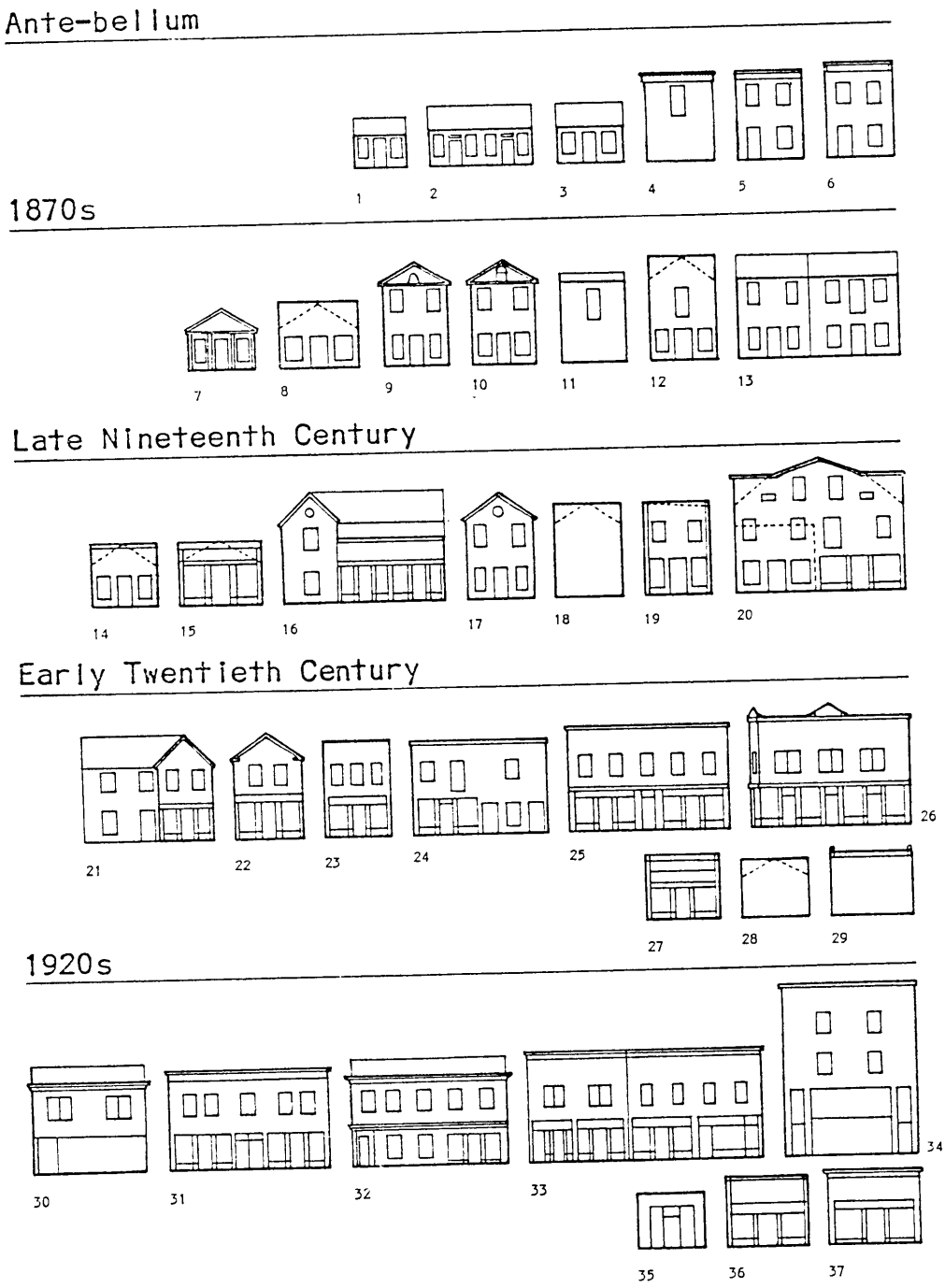


Figure 8. Commercial architecture of Blacksburg, Virginia up to the 1920s. Key on following pages.

Commercial Architecture of Blacksburg, Virginia up to the 1920s. Inventory includes only those buildings documented in the historic and photographic record. Extant buildings identified at end of list.

Ante-bellum

1) Unidentified store.
2) Rufus Sarvey Store (first; 1840s?); Adjoining store.
3) David N. Bodell Pottery Shop (ca 1860).
4) William Lawson Store.
5) Unidentified store.
6) William Thomas Store/Residence.

1870s

7) Unidentified store.
8) Charles A. Deyerle Store (1875-76).
9) William B. Conway Store/Residence (1871).
10) Rufus Sarvey Store (second; 1875).
11) Unidentified store.
12) William M. Lybrook Store.
13) Unidentified stores.

Late Nineteenth Century

14) Shoe store.
15) Eakin Store (1880s?). Inset entry.
16) Unidentified store/residence. Inset entries.
17) Unidentified store.
18) Unidentified store.
19) Unidentified store.
20) Unidentified store (expanded C.A. Deyerle Store "8").

Early Twentieth Century

21) Unidentified store/residence.
22) Unidentified store (ca 1900). Inset Entry.
    Later corner entry.
23) Unidentified store. Inset entry.
24) Unidentified store (ca 1900). Inset entry.
25) Hardwick Building. Inset entries.
26) W.C. Ellett Store (1900). Inset entries.
    Angled corner.
27) Alexander Black Store. Inset entry.
28) Unidentified store (before 1907).
29) Unidentified store (before 1907).

1920s

30) Brown Brothers Store (1924). Corner entry.
31) Unidentified store (ca 1920). Inset entries.
32) Bank of Blacksburg Building (1920). Inset entry. Corner entry.
33) Corner Drug Building (1922-23). Inset entries. Angled corner.
34) Lyric Theater (1922).
35) Farmers and Merchants Bank (1922).
36) Luster-Black Store (1920). Inset entry.
37) Martin-Logan Store. Inset entry.

Address and Present Occupant(s) of Extant Buildings.

9) 117 N. Main St. The Clothes Rack.
17) 109 S. Main St. Sanderson's Cleaners.
19) 424 N. Main St. Eagle Express.
20) 401, 408 N. Mains St. Alex's T.V. Service; Trailways Bus Stop. Incorporates No. 8 (Charles A. Deyerle Store).
22) 201 N. Main St. Big Al's.
24) 217, 221 N. Main St. College Inn.
25) 207, 215 N. Main St. Silk Stockings; Partyrama.
26) 220 N. Main St. Arnold's Sandwiches.
27) 109 N. Main St. Mainstreet Bazaar.
30) 101 S. Main St. The Flower Box.
31) 302 N. Main St. Our Daily Bread.
32) 101, 105, 107 N. Main St. Capone's Jewelry; Helen's Florist; The Travel Company.
33) 239 N. Main St. Phoenix Restaurant; Corner Drug.
34) 216 N. Main St. Crickett's.
35) 205 N. Main St. Leonard L. Brown Insurance Office.
36) 115 N. Main St. The Paper Tiger.
37) 141 Jackson St. Blacksburg Chamber of Commerce.

congregations to escape to reassuring pastoral surroundings, to reaffirm the rural values that even we today in our urban world like to think we cherish.[11]

Whatever cultural meaning lay at the root of primary town form in Western Virginia, it lost its vehicle of expression following the Civil War. Railroad and land improvement companies headquartered in distant cities took over the process of town formation, and professionals - whether engineers, architects, landscape architects or city planners - took over the process of giving the vast new cities form. Some locally-initiated agricultural and small-scale industrial communities continued to form later in the century, but their plans were usually accretions of piecemeal surveys rather than complete layouts. The more deeply-rooted traditions of secondary form continued to flourish - our much-maligned commercial strips may be the descendents of nineteenth-century main streets, and further back, the commercial /residential streets of linear Northern European villages.

Other aspects of secondary form may have survived to the present, but in most respects our modern community planning seems to represent an antithesis to the mores of the past. Commerce no longer focuses on a single crossroads of the downtown - instead it diffuses to the suburbs. Residential and commercial development no longer cling to the street - the controlled spatiality that once signified prosperity has been replaced by a conspicuous consumption of space that signifies the same. The curvilinear has usurped the rectilinear, providing some relief from the control and rationality that have characterized our built environments for so long.

Notes

1. All town plans are from county records unless otherwise noted.

2. Reps, John W. Tidewater Towns, City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland, Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1972:1-43.

3. British Ordnance Survey. Chipping Campden. Sheet SP 13, 1960.

4. Sharp, Thomas. The Anatomy of the Village. Manchester, Eng.: C. Nicholls and Co. Ltd., 1946:22.

5. Kegley, Mary B. and Frederick B. Early Adventurers on the Western Waters. v. 2. Orange, Va: Green Publishers, Inc., 1982:285.

6. Bailey, Barbara Ruth. Main Street, Northeastern Oregon. Portland: Oregon Historical Society, 1982:58.

7. Garvan, Anthony N.B. "Proprietary Philadelphia as Artifact." In Handlin, Oscar and Burchard, John, eds. The Historian and the City. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963:195.

8. Hughes, Sarah C. Surveyors and Statesmen, Land Measuring in Colonial Virginia. Surveyors Foundation, Ltd., and the Virginia Association of Surveyors, Ltd., 1979:135.

9. Price, Edward T. "The Central Courthouse Square in the American County Seat." Geographical Review 58 (January 1968):29-60.

10. Royall, Anne Newport. Sketches of History, Life and Manners in the United States. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970 (1826):37; Veblen, Thorstein. Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times. New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923:147.

11. American intellectuals from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries tended to dislike and even despise the city, as discussed in White, Morton Gabriel. The Intellectual Versus the City, From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and the M.I.T. Press, 1962.

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Other sources noted specifically on the preceding page (Reps, Tidewater Towns; Hughes, Surveyors and Statesmen) were also used in a general sense.

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