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THE FRONT-GABLED LOG CABIN AND THE ROLE OF THE GREAT PLAINS IN THE FORMATION OF THE MOUNTAIN WEST'S BUILT LANDSCAPE

JON T. KILPINEN

Students of American material culture have often viewed the arid, largely treeless Great Plains as an innovative source region of various aspects of western culture, especially those that gained expression on the landscape. While barbed wire and sod construction are two familiar examples, another exists in the front-gabled log dwelling, the dominant traditional building form of the Mountain and Inter-mountain Western frontier. Because the front-gabled log dwelling was indeed common on the Plains and reputedly absent in the forested, eastern United States, scholars have

identified the Great Plains as the source region of this vernacular floorplan. Recent field and secondary research, however, has established the presence of the front-gabled log dwelling in the humid East, if not as the dominant frontier house type, then at least as a minority one. For this reason, though the front-gabled log dwelling became increasingly more common west of the humid prairies, it seems more accurate to describe the Great Plains as a zone of reinforcement, rather than one of origin or innovation. Viewed in this manner, the Great Plains nevertheless exerted a significant influence on the built landscape of the Mountain West.¹

Walter Prescott Webb's 1931 *The Great Plains*, probably the best known historical work on the region, may have been the first to promote the premise that the history of Great Plains settlement was essentially the story of successive pioneer innovations. According to Webb,

The Great Plains offered such a contrast to the region east of the ninety-eighth meridian, the region with which American civilization had been familiar until about 1840,

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FIG. 1. *Front-gabled log dwelling in the Big Hole Valley near Wisdom, Beaverhead County, Montana.* Photograph courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen, 1989.

as to bring about a marked change in the ways of pioneering and living. . . . [One] sees what may be called an institutional fault . . . roughly following the ninety-eighth meridian. At this fault the ways of life and living changed. Practically every institution that was carried across it was either broken and remade or else greatly altered. The ways of travel, the weapons, the method of tilling the soil, the plows and other agricultural implements, and even the laws themselves were modified.²

Throughout the book and in subsequent works, Webb recorded this process of adaptation on the Plains. While Webb described such material innovations as the Colt revolver, barbed

wire, the disc plow, and the windmill, other Plains scholars, like Everett Dick, chronicled the unique adoption of sod construction during the region's settlement.³ To this day, the sod dwelling remains a powerful icon of Great Plains pioneer settlement.

Given this prevailing view of the Plains region as one of pioneer innovation, something Webb went as far as calling "a far reaching truth,"⁴ it is not surprising that over the years scholars have attributed the origin of other western cultural traits to the Great Plains. Such has been the case with a common landscape feature of the North American Mountain West—the front-gabled log dwelling. This dwelling type's reputed absence in the eastern United States has prompted many

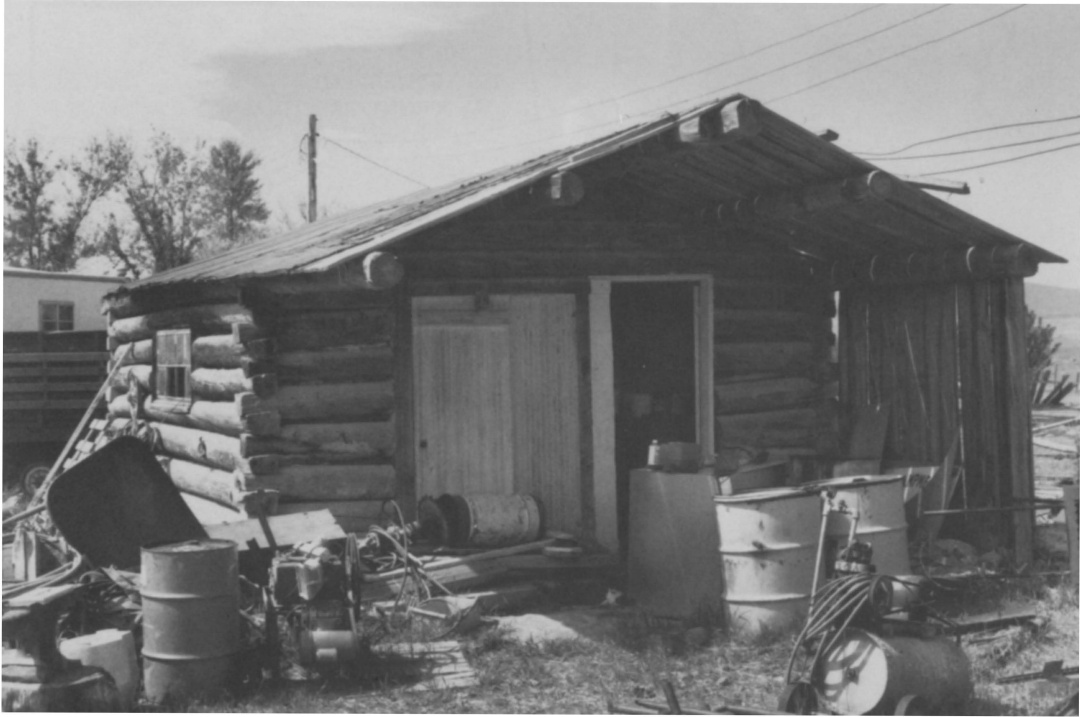


FIG. 2. Gable-entry cabin with cantilevered roof projection in the North Platte River Valley near Saratoga, Carbon County, Wyoming. Photograph courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen, 1989.

to look to the West—and the Great Plains—for its origins.

THE WESTERN FRONT-GABLED LOG DWELLING

The western front-gabled log dwelling is a rather simple architectural form, consisting most commonly of horizontal notched logs set in a small, rectangular, single-pen (or one-room) arrangement (Fig. 1). The floorplan's key diagnostic feature is its single door in one of the gable walls. With this door placement, other notable traits emerge, including relatively low eave walls, occasional hillside dug-out construction, and cantilevered gable roof projections (Fig. 2). While various combina-

tions of these features occur throughout the West, one factor remains remarkably constant—the positioning of the only door in one of the dwelling's gable walls. Of some eight hundred western log dwellings I have observed in the field or in historic photographs, over 54 percent are small single-pen cabins with gable entrances, making this floorplan by far the most common traditional type in the Mountain West. In some western areas, small, front-gabled cabins account for 60 or even 70 percent of all traditional houses. In districts like the Beaverhead Country of southwestern Montana, nearly three-quarters of all log dwellings are small, front-gabled cabins.⁵ Jennifer Attebery, in her study of log construction in the Snake River Basin, encountered similar

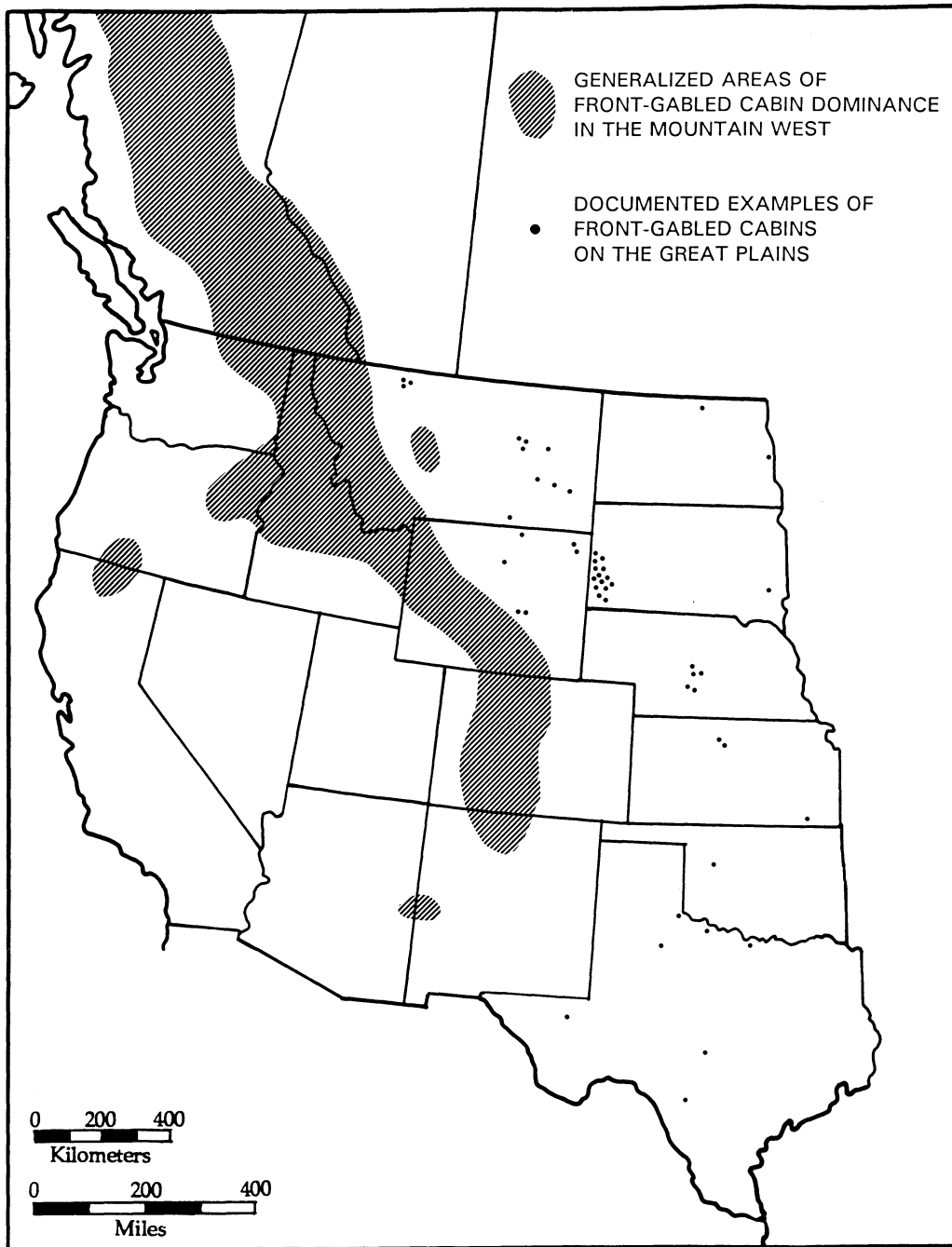


FIG. 3. Small front-gabled log dwellings in western North America. Through most of the American and Canadian Rocky Mountains, over 50 percent of all log dwellings exhibit this floorplan. An early, cursory survey of the Great Plains, however, reveals a widespread survival there as well, especially in eastern Montana and the Black Hills of South Dakota. The latter area might well be considered an outlier of the Mountain West. Sources: Kilpinen, "The Origins" (see note 5), p. 101; Jordan and Kaups, *American Backwoods Frontier* (see note 22), pp. 202-03; numerous other secondary sources; and field research conducted by the author. Map courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen.



FIG. 4. *Hewn-log gable-entry dwelling north of Devil's Tower National Monument, Crook County, Wyoming.* Photograph courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen, 1990.

percentages of front-gabled cabins in all but a few areas of central and southern Idaho.⁶

Where exactly in the West is this cabin found? Actually, there are few areas where it is *not* found, for the front-gabled single-pen appears on the western landscape from as far south as Arizona and New Mexico to as far north as Alaska and the Yukon Territory (Fig. 3), with notable concentrations occurring in the Colorado and Montana Rockies, on the Okanogan Highland of Washington and southern British Columbia, and in the Cariboo and Chilcotin country of central British Columbia.⁷ In fact, so pervasive a landscape feature is the front-gabled cabin in Alaska and the Yukon that it has virtually reached the status

of regional icon.⁸ Any number of posters, advertisements, postcards, and wall murals, for example, depict the gable-entry log cabin side by side with images of dogsleds and mountain men. About the only area of the West where gable-entry dwellings are not common is the Great Basin, especially those portions settled by Mormons. There, builders overwhelmingly chose to construct eave-entry dwellings, as Leon Pitman discovered in his survey of Mormon folk housing.⁹ About 60 percent of the dwellings I observed in heavily Mormon southeastern Idaho, for instance, were eave-entry or English-plan cabins, as was the case with Attebery's findings for the same approximate locale.¹⁰ The Mormon folk housing area seems

to be exceptional, however; for the majority of the Mountain West the traditional dwelling of choice was the front-gabled cabin.

The apparent western concentration of this floorplan has led some students of traditional American architecture to conclude that it was a western type by origin, and if not created in the western mountains themselves, then at least developed on the Great Plains. Mary Wilson, for example, identifying the widespread occurrence in the West of front-gabled log cabins with substantial cantilevered roof projections, dubbed these structures "Rocky Mountain Cabins," since most examples she observed fell within that geographical area. She acknowledged, however, that front-gabbling was also quite common on the Great Plains. Furthermore, seeming to accept the notion that traditional eastern architectural forms underwent great change on the Plains, she suggested that this area might be the source region for front-gabbling in the western United States. Though she granted that established eastern house types were never entirely absent in the West, Wilson nonetheless concluded that a distinct cabin type—the front-gabled log dwelling—first appeared on the nineteenth-century American Plains.¹¹

Wilson likely based her conclusions on the depictions by various authors of front-gabled cabins throughout the Great Plains, which, if considered alone, point rather convincingly to a Plains origin for this floorplan (Fig. 3). Roger Welsch, for instance, noting the presence of this architectural plan in his thoroughgoing study of Nebraska log construction, attributed its occurrence on the Plains to the scarcity of timber, which resulted in generally shorter walls and consequently necessitated the shift of the door from the eave to the gable wall.¹² Others have identified gable-entry dwellings in Texas, Oklahoma, eastern Montana, North Dakota, and Alberta.¹³ I have observed additional examples in southeastern Montana and in and around the Black Hills, in the very heart of the Plains region (Fig. 4). Wilson herself noted that from "the Great Plains and

into the Far West, the single pen [log dwelling] most commonly appears as a front-gabled structure with a single door in the front wall."¹⁴ At the very least, these widespread observations discredit any theory of a mountain western source for the front-gabled cabin, if indeed they do not strongly support a Great Plains origin.

LOG CABINS EAST OF THE GREAT PLAINS

Critical to any Plains origin theory would be the absence of the front-gabled cabin in the eastern United States. This, however, was not the case. Ample precedents exist in the East of gable-entry log structures. For example, any number of traditional log outbuildings—including single-crib barns, free-standing kitchens, smokehouses (Fig. 5), and chicken coops¹⁵—exhibited the same characteristic gable entrance as the western single-pen dwelling. Terry Jordan, describing such an architectural plan in Texas, noted that "the [free-standing] kitchen is entered by way of a door in a gable end. . . . [This] tradition . . . is found all through the South."¹⁶

Still another example of the eastern occurrence of the front-gabled cabin existed in the temporary shelters used by American soldiers in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Historians of the Valley Forge cantonment of 1777-78 have described the soldiers' quarters as cabins having "a door at one end, with fireplace and chimney facing it at the other."¹⁷ Archaeological excavations of the Valley Forge area have confirmed this configuration,¹⁸ and contemporary reconstructions of these winter quarters at the Valley Forge National Historical Park in Pennsylvania closely resemble the front-gabled cabins of the Mountain West (Fig. 6).¹⁹ Likewise, during the American Civil War, winter encampments again employed this simple, practical floorplan. In a study of the war's camp architecture, Dean Nelson observed that the "predominant form of winter house was the single-room log hut . . . with a

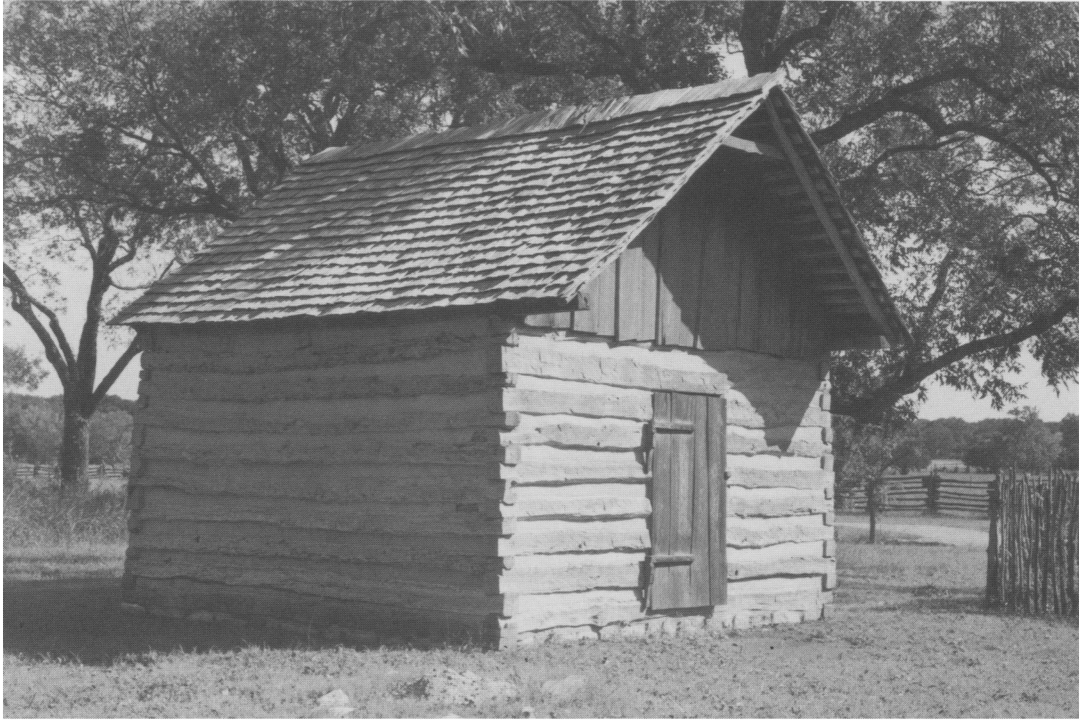


FIG. 5. Hewn-log smokehouse with gable entrance at the Lyndon B. Johnson Boyhood Home and Johnson Settlement, Johnson City, Blanco County, Texas. Photograph courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen, 1990.

single doorway set in the gable end.”²⁰ Pictorial accounts of the Civil War have also depicted front-gabled cabins like those of the western United States.²¹ Such “necessity” housing types often duplicate earlier crude pioneer dwellings.

Despite this notable presence in the East, few scholars have specifically recognized the front-gabled cabin as an eastern dwelling form, that is until recently. Jordan was the first to do so when he noted that the gable-entrance arrangement was present in the American log cabin building era as a minority type. After additional investigation, he gave this floorplan equal billing with the more traditionally accepted eave-entry English and Scotch-Irish floorplans. Finally, in a joint project with Matti

Kaups, Jordan cartographically depicted the widespread occurrence of the gable-entry single-pen in the eastern United States, noting examples in such places as western Tennessee, southern Indiana, southern Michigan, southern Wisconsin, and Upstate New York.²² In addition to these occurrences, I have observed examples of or located references to several other eastern specimens in southwestern Virginia, western Illinois, northwestern Indiana, western Michigan, southern Minnesota, northwestern Arkansas (Fig. 7), and northeastern Missouri.²³ Cumulatively, this evidence supports Jordan’s contention that the eastern settlement frontier experienced at least a minority tradition of front-gabled dwelling construction.



FIG. 6. Revolutionary War soldiers' huts at the Valley Forge National Historical Park, Pennsylvania. These reconstructions, based on historical and archaeological data, closely resemble the gable-entry cabins of the American West. Photograph courtesy of National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, VAFO-5881.

FINNISH LOG CABIN ORIGINS

If this building tradition did not have its roots on the Great Plains, then where did it originate? According to Jordan and Kaups, the heritage stemmed from northern Europe, specifically from eastern Finland. Its diffusion to North America resulted from the Swedish colonization of the Delaware Valley to the south of Philadelphia beginning in 1638, which involved a substantial percentage of Finnish colonists.²⁴ This transfer was a fairly simple one. The Swedes, and especially the Finns, had known the techniques of forest habitation for centuries. Arriving in North America, they discovered environmental conditions to which their agriculture and settlement sys-

tem was already suited. In other words, as geographer Milton Newton would have said, a case of preadaptation existed.²⁵ Along with the front-gabled dwelling, or Finnish-plan cabin as Jordan has thus called it, came such other features as log construction itself, the particular carpentry technique known as V notching, and the worm fence. As more numerous settlers from the British Isles came into contact with the New Sweden colony, they adopted these already preadapted traits. These groups then spread this material culture complex west over the next two hundred years, effecting a diffusion of Finnish-derived, but no longer ethnic, log construction throughout the entire Upper South and Lower Midwest.²⁶ In this diffusionary process, the



FIG. 7. Front-gabled log cabin on U.S. Highway 71, just north of Brentwood, Washington County, in the Boston Mountains of the northwest Arkansas Ozarks. Photograph courtesy of Jon T. Kilpinen, 1992.

tradition of the front-gabled dwelling—an elemental component of the building repertoire of the New Sweden Finns—spread throughout eastern North America, though always as a minority type.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GREAT PLAINS LOG DWELLING ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the front-gabled cabin's eastern heritage, the influence of the Great Plains on the built landscape of the Mountain West may seem greatly weakened. After all, it is certain that this dwelling type did not originate on the Plains, but reached this region and the mountainous lands beyond through continued

cultural diffusion from the East, especially through the process of relocation diffusion. Migrants from the Mountain South and the Ohio Valley—the so-called Midland culture region—moved west, bringing with them the characteristic front-gabled floorplan and dispersing it throughout most of the length of the cordilleran West, thereby creating the impressive distribution we see today (Fig. 3). Some settlers even transplanted this dwelling form to northern Mexico between 1850 and 1880. According to John Winberry, a gable-entry single-pen log house type found sporadically in northwestern Mexico replicates the front-gabled pioneer dwelling of the American frontier. It reached this area as migrants from the American South established



FIG. 8. Gable-entry single-pen cabin from the "C & A Homestead" in western Oklahoma's Dewey County. Photograph courtesy of Archives and Manuscripts Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, #10240 dtl.

a number of settlements in the Mexican states of Durango and Chihuahua in the latter half of the nineteenth century.²⁷ Diffusion, then, not pioneer innovation, introduced the front-gabled cabin to the western landscape.

Because of the adaptive virtues of the front-gable plan, however, the Great Plains region may still have played a significant role in the development of the Mountain West's architectural landscape. Key to this significance was the minority status of the Finnish-plan cabin in eastern North America. True, there is little doubt that a tradition of front-gabled dwellings existed in the forested East, but nowhere as prevailing a type as it later became in the West. Instead, the Finnish-plan cabin was limited mainly to the frontier and was not dominant even there. It yielded frequently to the

eave-entry plans of the English and Scotch-Irish, which became most common among eastern single-pen houses. The reason was twofold. First, in the eastern woodlands, the gable entrance of the Finnish-plan cabin did not offer a significant advantage over eave entrances. There was ample timber to construct walls of adequate height to place the door in the eave wall if a builder so desired. Moreover, most builders *did* so desire, since the population of the eastern United States was descended largely from English and Scotch-Irish immigrants, and eave-entry rather than gable-entry floorplans typified the building tradition of the British Isles. Thus, while these immigrants accepted the preadapted technique of log construction from the Finns and their imitators, they did not widely accept the tradition of front-gabbling, at least not for dwellings. But as is common in adaptive systems, the old Finnish-Delaware type survived as a part of a diverse repertoire, to be drawn upon as needed.

It was likely in this manner that the East developed as a region with a majority of eave-entry dwellings and only a minority of gable-entry ones, leading many investigators to look west for the source of the front-gabled dwelling. Why, then, would a minority eastern house type become the dominant plan in the West? Again, this can best be explained, I believe, by the comparative advantages of gable- and eave-wall door placement. In the East there was enough timber to build virtually any floorplan. Since no type exhibited distinct advantages, cultural tradition or preference determined the prevailing pattern. In the eastern United States, this meant that eave-entry plans became the most common. On the Great Plains, however, as timber became rarer and particularly concentrated along the major river courses, the advantages of placing the door in a gable wall increased. Welsch, mistakenly assuming that the front-gable cabin originated on the Plains, was nonetheless correct in pointing out that placing the door of the single-pen cabin in the gable wall resulted in lower wall heights and a need for fewer logs.



FIG. 9. *Front-gabled prospector's cabin with cantilevered roof projection on Pine Creek in northern Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Mountains. Note how the roof projection prevents snow from accumulating directly in front of the cabin's door. Photograph courtesy of Idaho State Historical Society, #70-70.9.*

In fact, whenever this plan could be used to build a dwelling into a hillside, its timber-conserving advantage became even more dramatic. Eventually, both dugout and nondugout gable-entry cabins became common wherever timber was present on the Great Plains (Fig. 8), meaning a virtual reversal of house type patterns—from an eave-entry majority to a gable-entry one—occurred with westward settlement. Webb, though he overstated it at times, was indeed correct in his assessment of the impact of the Plains region on cultural innovation.

As this regional house type established itself along the rivers of the Great Plains in the mid-1800s and gable-entry cabins became more and more common, there occurred a substantial reinforcement of the front-gabled plan

among frontier builders, a reinforcement that carried over throughout virtually the entire Mountain West. There, though timber again became abundant in many areas, the front-gable tradition persisted, if not flourished, during the main log building era between 1880 and 1910. In many areas it likely persisted because of its substantial advantages over the eave-entry plan. In the western mountains, where heavy snows were prevalent, for example, the gable entrance of the Finnish-plan cabin had many virtues, especially if the plan was combined with a cantilevered roof extension over the door. The great snow accumulations and the subsequent spring melting would be shed away from the entrance of the house with obvious efficiency (Fig. 9).²⁸ This benefit alone could account for the widespread

dominance of the Finnish-plan in the West. The floorplan, however, strewns virtually the entire western landscape, including areas without heavy annual snowfall. Because such a substantial area—covering over thirty degrees of latitude—is involved, it is possible that the Finnish-plan cabin's snow-shedding virtue may not fully explain its western dominance. The widespread reinforcement this floorplan received over the twenty or so degrees of latitude of the Great Plains, and especially its river valleys, therefore also may have played an important part.

Thus, it appears certain that the front-gabled or Finnish-plan cabin so common in the Mountain West did not originate on the American Great Plains. After all, had "the Finnish-plan cabin . . . never existed in the East, it would be difficult to explain how it diffused so widely . . . through the western plains and mountains."²⁹ The source of this western floorplan lies in the forests of the Upper South and Lower Midwest, in the seventeenth-century Delaware Valley, and ultimately in the woods of eastern Finland. From there, the type spread west onto the Great Plains and into the Rocky Mountains, resulting in a classic case of diffusion. Nevertheless, the western American building tradition in which the gable-entry floorplan was the *dominant* type may indeed have had its origin in the Great Plains region, for it was there that the Finnish-plan cabin first exhibited pronounced adaptive advantages over the eave-entry single-pen plans of the English and Scotch-Irish. Accordingly, though we may revise our interpretations of western settlement, we should not underestimate the role of the Great Plains in the development of the built landscape of the Mountain West.

NOTES

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gestions, the author thanks Terry G. Jordan, William E. Doolittle, and Frederick Luebke.

1. Studies addressing the front-gabled log cabin in North America are rare, but include Jon T. Kilpinen, "The Origins of Traditional Mountain Western Culture as Revealed in the Built Landscape" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1994), pp. 89-105; Mary Wilson, "The Rocky Mountain Cabin," *Log Cabin Studies*, Part 1, Cultural Resource Report No. 9 (Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1984); Terry G. Jordan and Matti Kaups, *The American Backwoods Frontier: An Ethnic and Ecological Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 196-208; and Jennifer Eastman Attebery, "The Diffusion of Folk Culture as Demonstrated in the Horizontal Timber Construction of the Snake River Basin" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985), pp. 62-65, 74-75, 157-59.

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4. Webb, *The Great Plains* (note 2 above), Preface.

5. Kilpinen, "Origins" (note 1 above), pp. 100-02.

6. Attebery, "Diffusion" (note 1 above), pp. 74, 158, 208.

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9. Leon Sidney Pitman, "A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Folk Housing in the Mormon Culture Region" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1973), pp. 138-46.

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11. Wilson, "The Rocky Mountain Cabin" (note 1 above), pp. 55, 10-12.

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22. Jordan, *Texas Log Buildings* (note 15 above), p. 111; Jordan, *American Log Buildings* (note 13 above), pp. 24-27; and Jordan and Kaups, *The American Backwoods Frontier* (note 1 above), pp. 202-03.
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28. Jordan and Kaups, *American Backwoods Frontier* (note 1 above), pp. 198-99.
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