

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

1995

**Review of *Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920* By Fred W. Peterson**

Barry Newton

*University of Kansas Main Campus*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Newton, Barry, "Review of *Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920* By Fred W. Peterson" (1995). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1064.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1064>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Homes in the Heartland: Balloon Frame Farmhouses of the Upper Midwest, 1850-1920.* By Fred W. Peterson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992. Preface, introduction, conclusion, notes, selected bibliography, index, photographs, figures, maps. xi + 296 pp. \$35.00.

This book traces the range and development of farmhouses in the upper mid-west from the period of settlement by European immigrants beginning in the 1840s and follows this process in five states until the 1920s. It is the result of the author's extensive field research over a period of nearly twenty years, during which time 7659 dwellings were catalogued, photographed, and categorized.

The text examines the influence of balloon frame construction as part of the increasing use of industrial methods and transportation on the development of rural life. Peterson shows particular skill in understanding the process of initial settlement and the gradual adaptations and extension to the dwellings that occur as the farm and its family enlarge and become more successful. He explains in detail how the methods of balloon framing assisted these purposes and enabled families to make dwellings that suited their practical needs and moral and aesthetic choices. He also shows how the influence of architects' pattern books and builders' and farmers' journals influenced the form of the dwellings, drawing on inhabitants' letters and diary entries to convey a detailed representation of the lives and ambitions of farm families.

Like many other authors, Peterson chooses to use the idea of *type* as a means of categorizing as well as understanding dwellings. He is

obviously well versed in the literature on *type* from Vidler to McAlester. As with most attempts at a detailed typology of dwelling form, however, the establishment of criteria and a wish for simplicity can lead to a series of unexpected problems. Peterson tries to use only the "basic shape of a structure and its floor plan." He therefore identifies ten types based on plan form, roof form, and height, which leads to some unfortunate outcomes. A very large two story gabled house (p. 79) has almost an identical plan to a two story four square (p. 183). A more useful analysis would need to account for a distribution of other key elements, such as the position of the main entrance, staircase, and fireplace.

Despite these concerns, the book should be recommended for its simple and clear discussion of balloon frame construction, its considerable attention to a comprehensive survey of a large number of farmhouses, and its author's ability to use a wide range of sources in enlarging our understanding of the life of generations of farm families in the Upper Midwest.

BARRY NEWTON

School of Architecture and Urban Design  
University of Kansas