

# HOUSES

The three stages in the development of residential architecture around Brandon, illustrated in the previous two figures (1 and 2) and also in Figure 3, can be easily distinguished, but they are difficult to date precisely. Although log houses were generally the first type of house built in the area, many log structures continued to be constructed after the turn of the century, while the small-scale 1½ storey house was the most prevalent house-type for the first fifty years of settlement.

A detailed analysis of the three stages in residential design will indicate what economic and cultural circumstances promoted their development. It will also show what construction differences gave all three a sense of individual character.



**Figure 3**  
Six years after settlement on the prairie. An elaborate house and a large frame barn now dominate this neat little farmyard. (Provincial Archives Manitoba.)

# Initial Structures

Upon arrival along the unoccupied slopes of the Assiniboine River, the pioneer settlers in the Elton-Cornwallis area built their first shelters, crude lean-tos and hastily constructed log or sod shanties. Frequently situated so that a dugout could be fashioned from an embankment or a hillock, these first structures provided room for one or two people. They were only inhabited during the first stage of settlement, while the land was cleared and a small crop was sown.

This stage of settlement, during the late 1870s and early 1880s, was difficult and it took some time before homesteaders were able to adjust to the hard work and the harsher climate on their new farms. Some remained until the 1890s in the initial conditions of settlement, living in shacks and subsisting on meager crops. Many settlers, however, adjusted to the difficulties of their new life and within a few years were able to harvest good crops and even encourage family relations from the east to venture west. The stability of their lifestyle at this time permitted many homesteaders throughout the west to consider the construction of a better house. Well-crafted 1½ storey log houses were usually constructed, although some sod houses were also built (Figures 4 and 5).



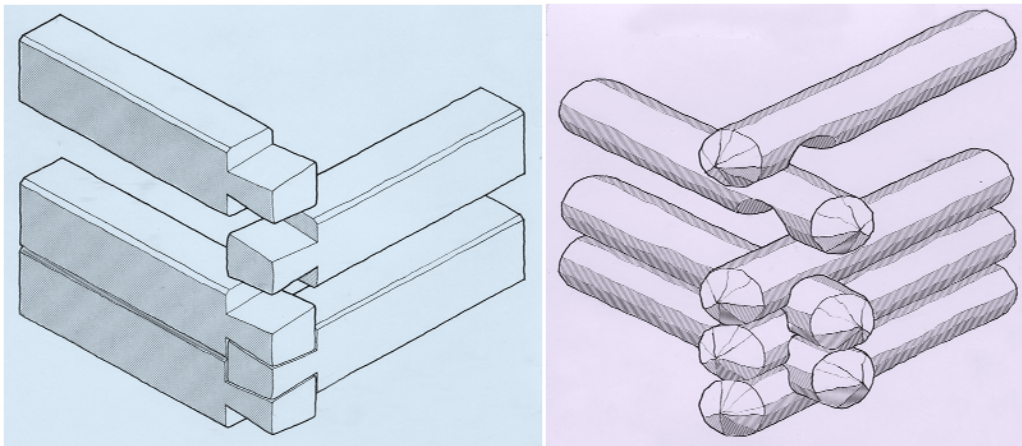
**Figure 4**  
Log home under construction, Somerset,  
ca. 1900. (Provincial Archives Manitoba.)



**Figure 5**  
A Sod home, ca. 1900. (Provincial Archives  
Manitoba.)

Log cabins usually had a single large room on the ground floor in which space was provided for cooking, eating and family gatherings. The top floor was usually divided into two bedrooms; one for the parents and the other for the children.

A simple medium-pitched roof and a small rectangular plan characterized the form of early log houses. Constructed by placing large logs one atop the other, log buildings required a corner joint that locked the walls together. Only a limited variety of notches were popular in the Canadian west during the nineteenth century. Dovetail joints and saddle-notch joints were the two most common methods of connecting log walls (Figures 6 and 7). While both notching procedures could produce joints of exceptional quality, the saddle-notch in this area was typically the earlier and less refined construction method. One of the first settlers in the area, the Reverend George Roddick, built a log cabin with saddle-notched corners although it is unclear whether he used a top or bottom notching procedure (Figure 8).



**Figure 6**

Dovetail construction (left) entailed cutting a wedge-shaped joint at each end of the squared logs. The logs were lapped at the corners and joined in an interlocking system that created a strong neat corner and ensured a waterproof joint.

**Figure 7**

In saddle-notch construction (right), round logs were lapped and, at the corners, curved notches were cut about a foot back from the end of the log. The location of the saddle-notch on the bottom of the log was more desirable as it allowed water to drain downwards, reducing the possibility of rain gathering in a top-notch and rotting the joint.





**Figure 8**  
Reverend Roddick log cabin, SE 17-9-18W, ca. 1879. This house was probably one of the first built in the planning district, and this image suggests the rough pioneer experience. (Murray McPherson.)

Dovetail joining in Manitoba was usually more sophisticated than saddle-notching. Within the region there were no log houses located during the survey although a photograph of Reverend Roddick's second house reveals dovetail joinery (Figure 9).



**Figure 9**  
Reverend Roddick log house, SE 17-9-18W, ca. 1900. This dovetail-joined log house was dismantled in the 1950s. (Murray McPherson.)

# Small Houses

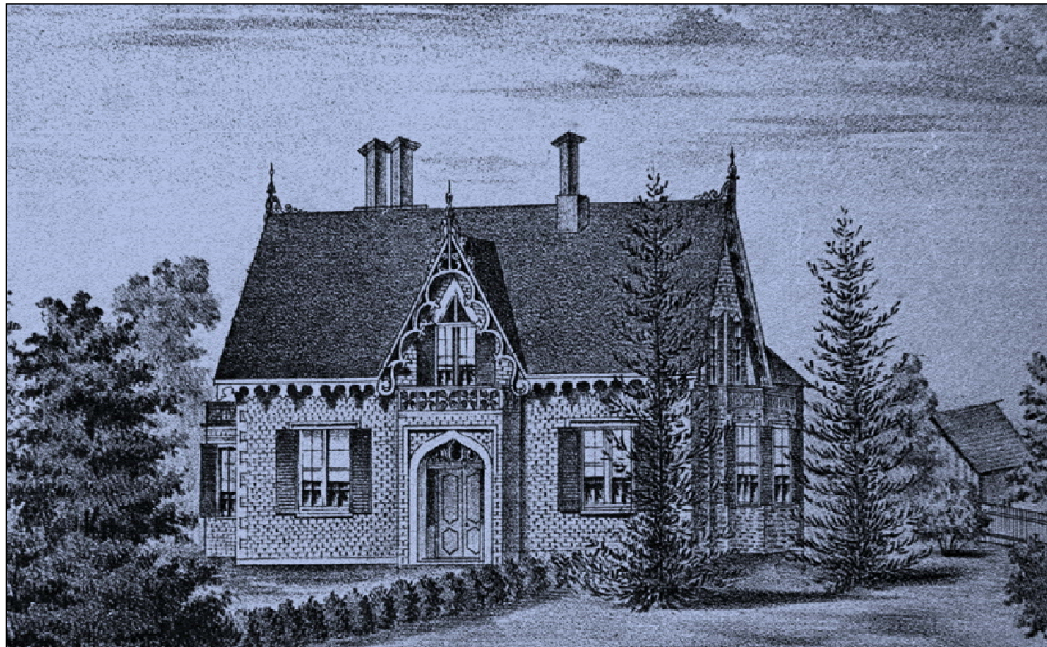
The C.P.R. passenger trains that began arriving at Brandon in 1881 brought with them the first large groups of settlers to the planning district. Hundreds of immigrants from Ontario, Québec, the Maritimes, and the United Kingdom poured into and through Elton-Cornwallis before 1885. Those settlers of Scottish and Irish origin from southern Ontario formed the majority. Their first dwellings were, like their predecessors', rudimentary constructions. However, local timber sources for log cabins were soon depleted and it became necessary for settlers to begin building with another structural material.

Although milled lumber had been available from the Rapid City mill since the 1870s, the difficulties encountered with transporting loads downriver usually made construction with logs quicker and more practical. With the growth of Brandon and the introduction there of a number of saw mills, the situation was drastically altered. Cut lumber was soon readily available to all parts of the region. Log houses certainly continued to be built into the 1890s by poorer settlers. However, the ready-made quality of milled lumber not only provided easier construction than with logs, but it also created a neat finished appearance that was prized by settlers wishing to leave behind their pioneering lifestyle. The advantages of frame construction impressed settlers, and the majority of residences built in Elton-Cornwallis after 1880 were constructed using lumber.

Before 1900, 1½ storey houses in the planning district were generally modest structures with minimal pretension of architectural style. These houses were usually rectangular in plan and had a gable roof of medium slope. Within this basic form two types of house, distinct in floor plan and external character, can be identified.

# Ontario-Gothic Houses

The first type was based on houses familiar to settlers who had migrated from southern Ontario (Figure 10). An abandoned house at SE 28-11-17W is a typical example of this residential type (Figure 11). The front of the house was on the long side of the rectangular floor plan (Figure 12 and 13). The door was nearly always centrally placed creating a symmetrical facade that was accented by a central gable (Figure 14). Internally the house contained a central hallway, sometimes running from front to back, effectively dividing the ground floor in two, with rooms on each side.



**Figure 10**

A large southern Ontario house in the county of Norfolk. This house form was usually enhanced with Gothic-style forms that were in vogue throughout southern Ontario during the 19th century. Bargeboards, pointed windows and steeply-pitched gables were typical elements incorporated in symmetrically-planned houses. (Historical Atlas of the Counties of Halde-mand and Norfolk, H.R. Page & Co.)

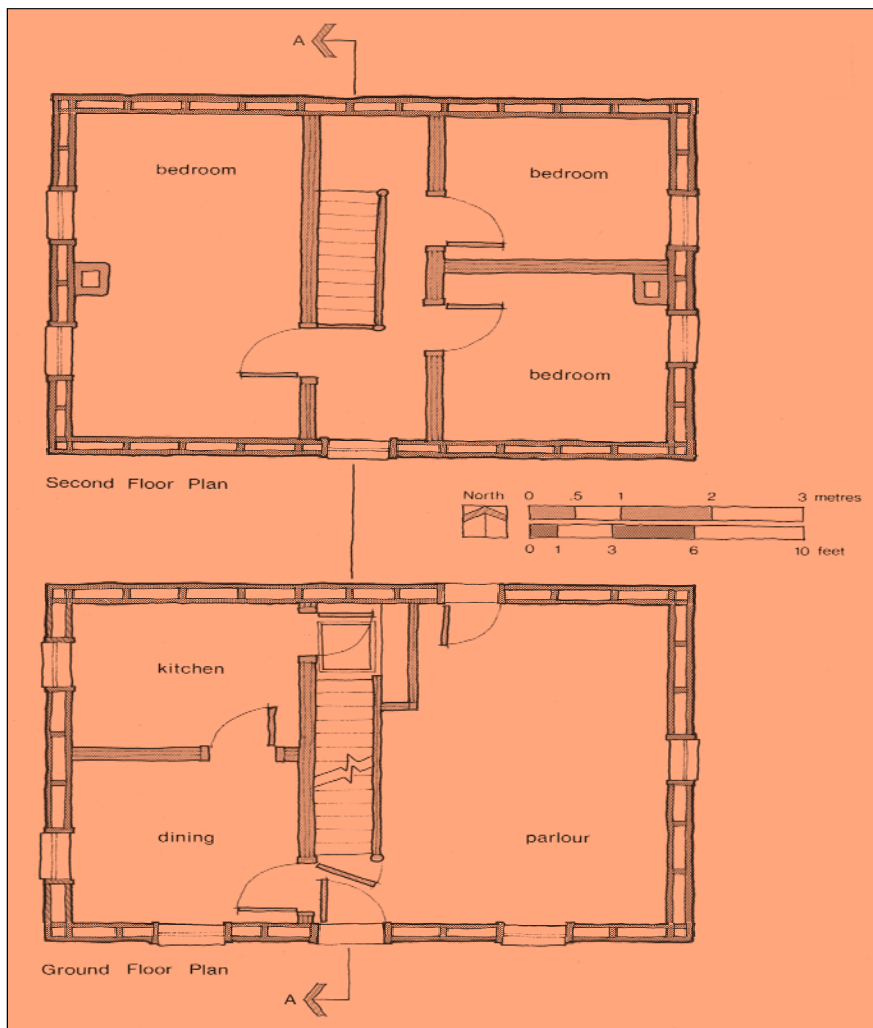




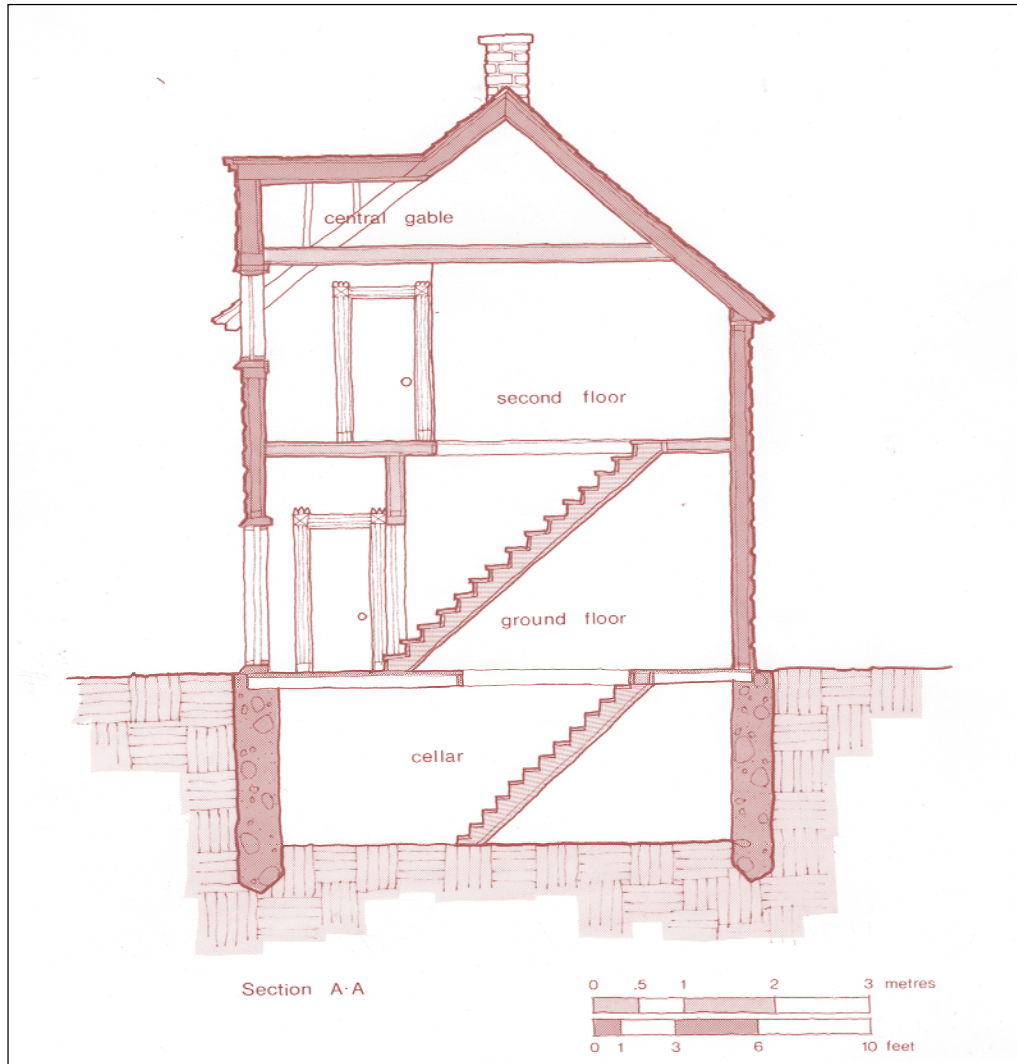
**Figure 11**

Symmetrically-planned 1½ storey house, SE 28-11-17W, ca. 1885. Although abandoned and in disrepair, the presence of square nails and pedimented window caps date this house as a pre-1900 construction.





**Figure 12**  
 Symmetrically-planned 1½ storey house: ground floor and second floor plans. New settlers in the west could hardly afford the time or money to construct elaborate stone houses. Instead, they often chose lumber.



**Figure 13**

Symmetrically-planned 1½ storey house: section. A cellar, like the one in this house was a typical feature in most residential structures in Canada. The damage to the structure caused by frost heaving was a continual problem in the cold northern climate. In this instance a fieldstone foundation extended six feet below grade creating a full basement



**Figure 14**  
Gothic-style pointed windows and central gables with bargeboards were usual motifs of the symmetrically-planned small-scale house.

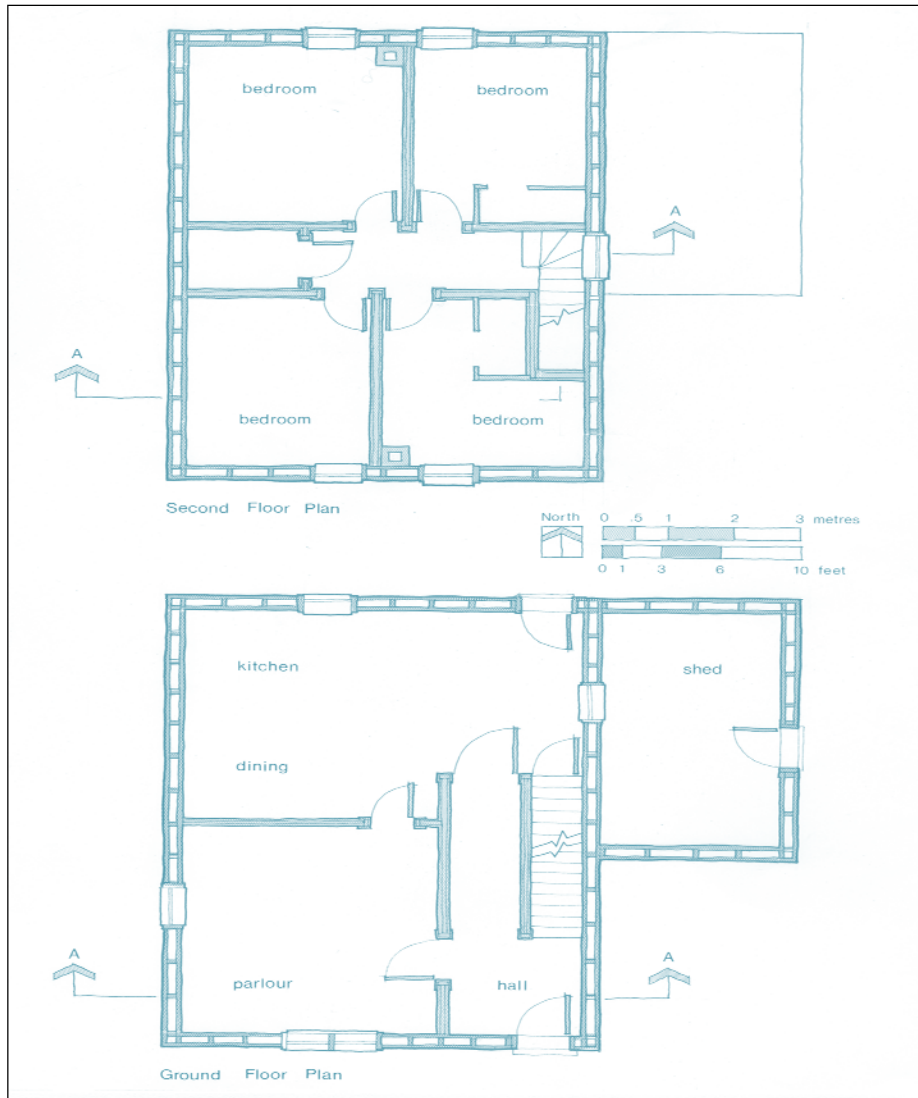
## Side-hall Houses

The second basic house type built before the turn of the century in Elton-Cornwallis was plainer in appearance than the type transplanted from southern Ontario. A house at NW 3-12-19W is a fairly well-preserved example of this type of small-scale frame construction (Figure 15). One-and-a-half storeys like the previous type, the basic differences between the two relate to their internal planning and the consequent changes in fenestration patterns. This second type of rectangular house had its front on the short side of the floor plan (Figure 16). To make the most efficient use of interior space, the front door would be placed to one side creating an asymmetrical and vertically massed front. Internally, on the ground floor, the hall was located to one side at the front of the house (Figure 17).



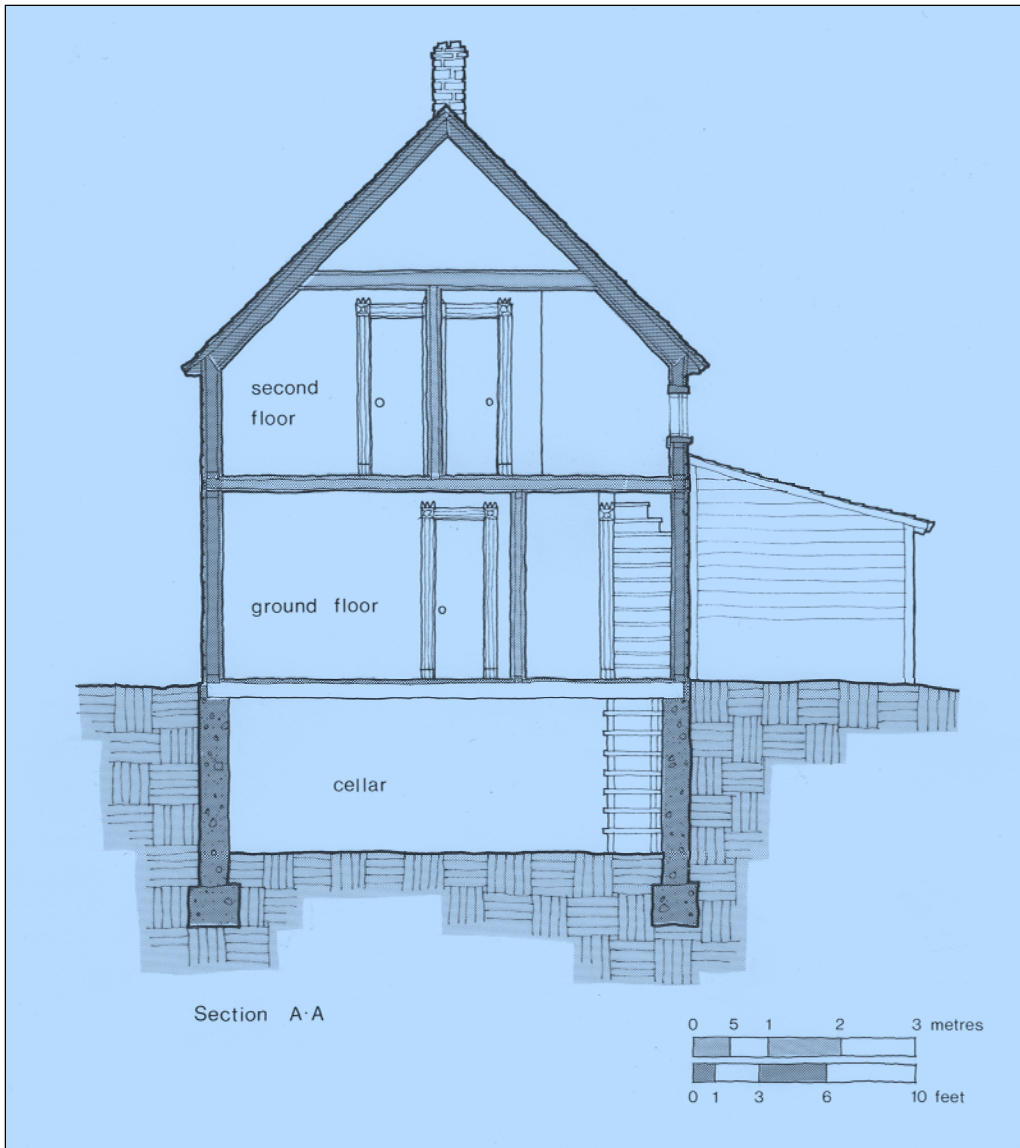
**Figure 15**

Side hall-planned 1½ storey house, NW 3-12-19W, ca. 1900. Although round nails in the main structure of this house imply that it was built around 1900, its basic form, planning and fenestration reflect the basic rectangular house type built fifteen years earlier.



**Figure 16**  
Side hall-planned 1½ storey house:  
ground and second floor plans.



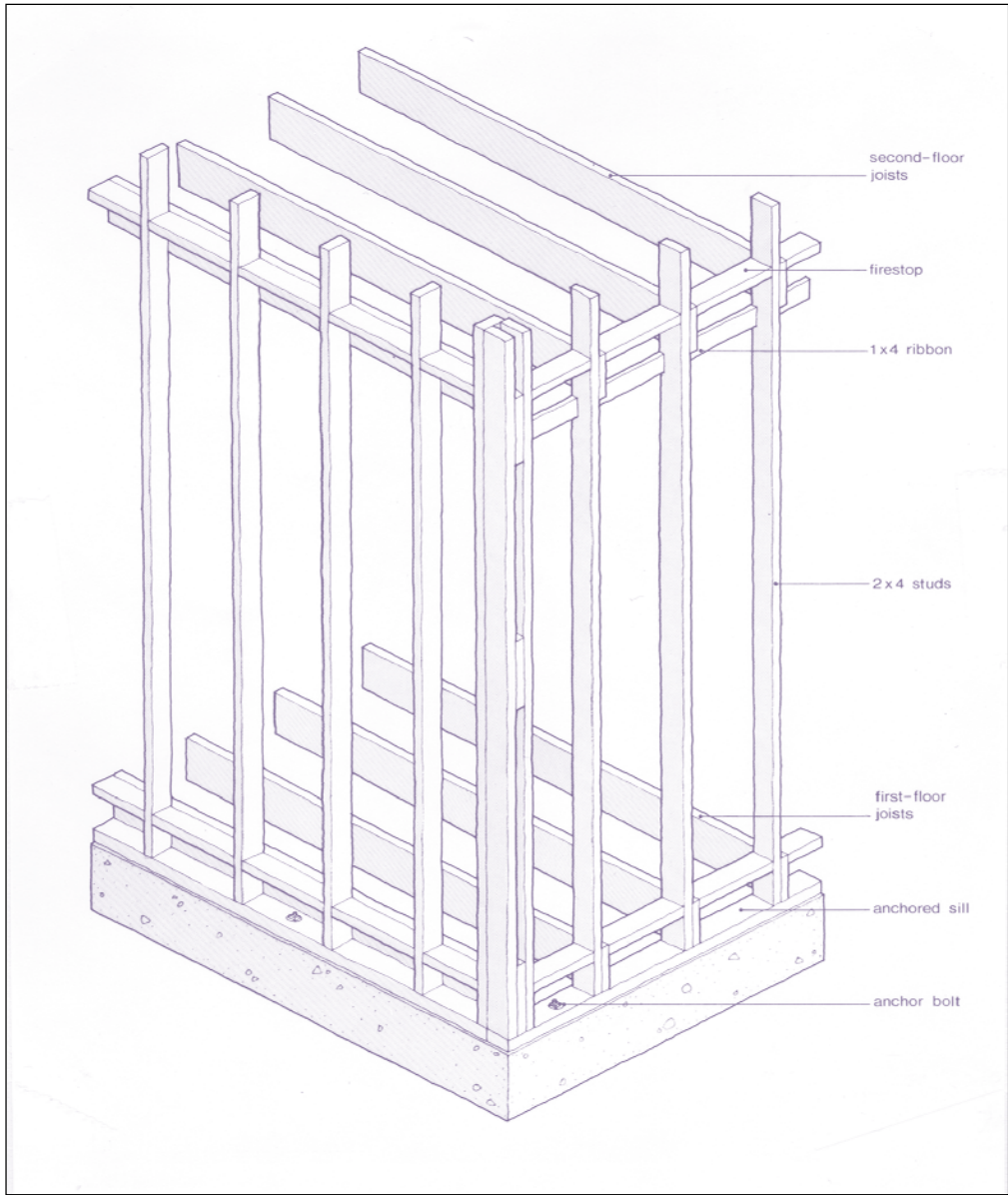


**Figure 17**  
Side hall-planned 1½ storey house:  
section.

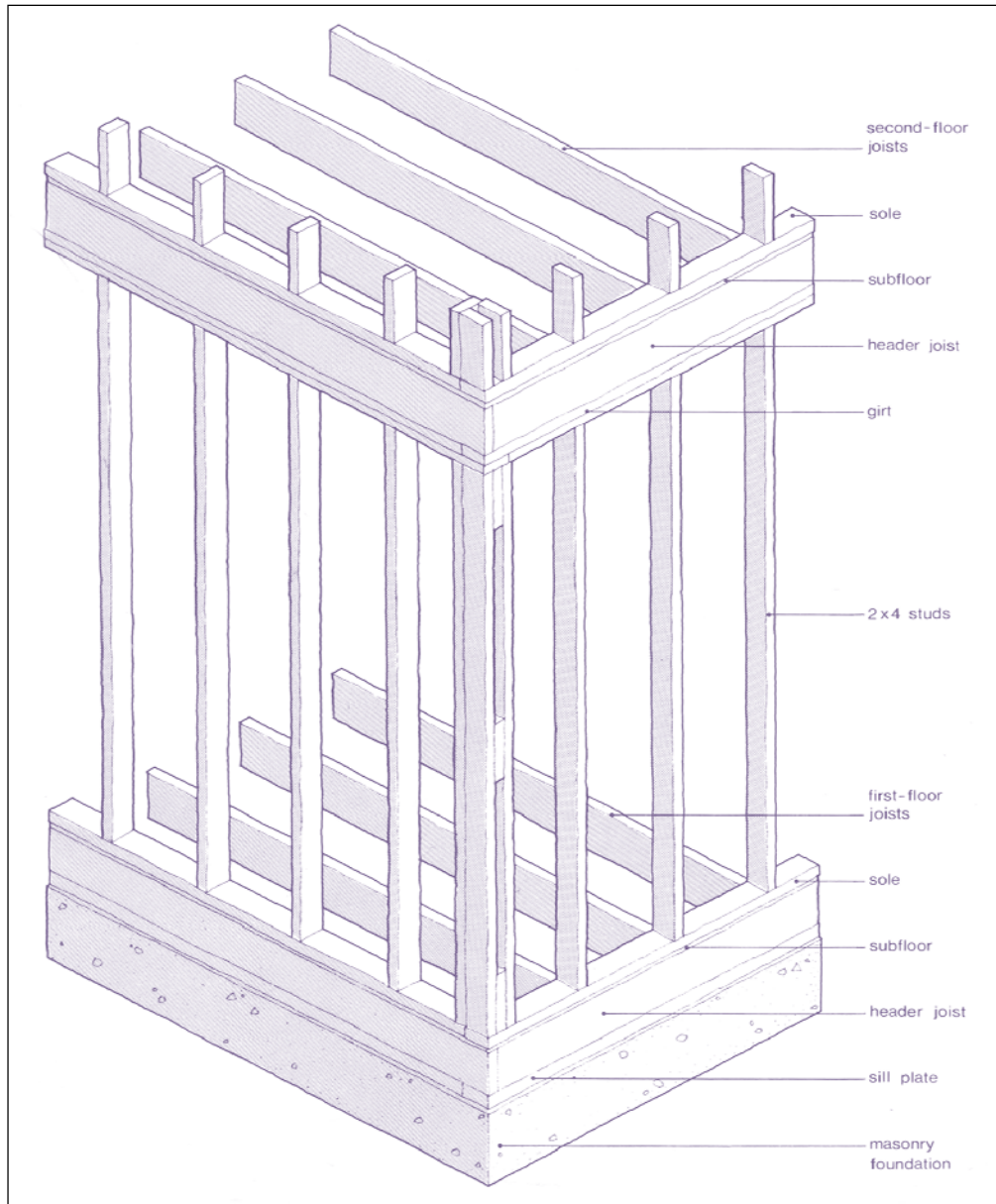
Until 1930, when these residences became less popular, both of the rectangular house types were usually constructed using a wooden frame sheathed with wood siding. There were two basic framing types common in the building of these small-scale structures. The first, balloon framing, was the most typical frame construction method used before 1890; platform framing succeeded balloon framing after 1890.

Balloon framing permitted quick and easy construction of the exterior frame and the addition of the roof before interior work was begun (Figure 18). The addition of the roof at this stage allowed work to progress inside during inclement weather. The actual construction procedure entailed the attachment of 40 x 80 mm (2" x 4") studs to a sill plate that was secured to the foundation. The stud walls extended in one piece up to the plate supporting the roof. Floor joists, supported by ribbon boards, were nailed to the individual studs.

The platform framing procedure eliminated the need for long 40 x 80s (2" x 4"s) and also permitted construction in stages (Figure 19). Each stud wall, which extended only one storey, was pre-assembled as a unit at each succeeding stage of construction. The individual walls were fitted into prescribed vertical positions and secured to horizontal plates.



**Figure 18**  
Balloon framing construction.



**Figure 19**  
Platform framing procedure. Each floor was built separately. The stud walls were assembled and arranged at each succeeding stage of the construction.

Platform framing continued to be used for the construction of small-scale frame residences in the area during the first three decades of the 20th century. At the same time, however, the two basic house types were occasionally built of stone or veneered with brick or concrete.

Fieldstone houses varied both in terms of appearance and construction procedures. Fieldstone rubble of different sizes bonded with large amounts of mortar resulted in rough walls that were often covered with plaster outside and wood lath and plaster inside. Neater, more elegant stone houses required the skills of a mason. Carefully-cut and faced stones, bonded with small amounts of mortar, created straight, solid walls. A house at NW 21-9-18W is a symmetrically-planned house executed in fieldstone (Figure 20).



**Figure 20**

Centrally-planned 1½ storey stone house, NE 21-9-18W. The well-cut blocks of this symmetrically-planned house recall the more elaborate stone houses of southern Ontario. The house was used from 1907 to 1915 as the Brandon Hills Post Office.



The use of brick veneer was not common for the construction of small-scale residences. Indeed, there are only two existing small-scale brick residences left in the planning district. Brick was expensive before the turn of the century and the construction procedures were labour-intensive. Erecting a frame for small-scale house and then covering it with brick was unaffordable for most farmers in the area. A house in Forrest is a more substantial brick veneer version of the second basic house type (Figure 21).



**Figure 21**

Side-hall planned 1½ storey house, Forrest. A more elaborate version of the second common house type is created in this Forrest house using buff brick veneer, extended proportions and detailing in the parlour window and gable peak.

# Large Houses

By the turn of the century, at the same time that the two small-scale house types were being transformed into larger, more detailed versions of their earlier forms, quite different types of houses were also being built. The depressed economic conditions that had allowed only modest house building had eased by the 1890s. From this time, until the First World War, the region was swept along with the widespread prosperity of the West. Rising grain prices and the development of Brandon as a large, important city provided the rural areas of the planning district with wealth and a sense of sophistication. Not only could well-to-do farmers now build larger houses with substantial materials, but they frequently could adorn these houses with finer architectural elements.

While modest houses built before 1900 can be easily divided into two distinct types, the large residences of the later period, because of their architectural diversity, cannot be readily categorized. Still, there were a number of features that were descriptive of most large houses built after 1900. Most were 2½ storeys high, square or L-shape in plan and had large roofs with broad overhanging eaves. The interior planning was typically based either on a central or side hall plan. The central configuration was more common and a symmetrically-composed south facade appears more popular than the more informal offset format. The construction procedures used to build these large houses had become more varied since the construction of the earlier small-scale residences during the nineteenth century. Wood frame with wood siding continued to be the most popular construction method. However, usually brick, but sometimes stone or concrete became common building materials for the larger house types.

# The American Four-Square House

A house at SW 22-11-17W built by Robert McKeand was a standard example of these large square-planned houses (Figure 22). The 2½ storey square block was topped by a large truncated pyramidal roof. The south facade was symmetrically composed, with three windows on the second floor that lined up above a more elaborate ground floor. Larger windows, detailed with stained glass, opened into the drawing and dining rooms of the ground floor. The finely-crafted wood porch, with its delicate wrought iron cresting was likely a later addition (Figure 23). The other sides of the house were more informally handled.



**Figure 22**  
McKeand House, SW 22-11-17W, 1900.  
The south facade of this large square-planned house has been overgrown with vegetation.



**Figure 23**  
McKean House. The porch ornamentation on this house incorporated Eastlake-inspired details.

The internal planning of this large square house was dependent on the central hallway (Figure 24). The straightforward floor plans were enhanced by some decorative features. The more formal drawing and dining rooms had ceilings with inlaid pressed panels that were hand-painted by one of Mr. McKeand's daughters. The central staircase was also animated with distinctive newel posts and balusters. Finally, door and window frames added a light sense to the basic regularity of the design.



**Figure 24**  
McKeand House: ground and second floor plans. The wide central hallway bisected both plans.





**Figure 25**  
McKean House: section. While the foundation was fieldstone, the floors of the main structure were constructed using concrete.

The McKeand house was constructed of concrete. While wood framing with wood or brick veneer were more common procedures, there was a period after 1900 when concrete was accepted as a viable construction alternative. Itinerant builders roamed the countryside with portable block-making machines and for ten years concrete buildings, usually of block, were quite popular. Instead of blocks, however, the walls of this house were constructed using 300 mm (12") thick formed concrete. The monolithic walls not only provided fireproofing but with the plaster and lath interior, they improved heat retention. This large square-planned house also contained a heating system that was common in Western Canada. Stove pipes ran vertically from the furnace through all the rooms and then to the attic where the base of the chimney was located. In this manner the metal stovepipes were used to transfer heat to the rooms.

While the size and detailing of this 2½ storey house distinguish it from the two basic small-scale residences, it was not actually the home of a rich man. The plain unpainted concrete and the sheet metal roof were improvised construction procedures. Although the porch was certainly an expensive item, most of the other architectural elements in the house, including the woodworking, stained glass and pressed metal ceilings were all common features in houses of this period. What distinguished this house from other large square-planned houses was the diversity of building materials, roof forms and ornamentation that characterized their designs. These features changed with time, and as more large houses were built, considerable architectural sophistication entered into their design.

A large elaborate frame house at SW 16-9-18W (Figure 26) had a more refined sense of design than the McKeand house. Probably built around the same time, this 2½ storey residence was more richly detailed. The exterior had a verandah extending along three sides of the main floor, twinned first floor windows, moldings and brackets under the roof overhang and grillwork surrounding the roof walk (Figure 27).



**Figure 26**

Roddick House, SW 16-9-18W, ca. 1910. This complex square-planned frame house has been abandoned for a number of years.



**Figure 27**  
Roddick House. The intricate post caps on the veranda created a sense of lightness.

Another large square-planned residence at SW 5-12-18W had a brick veneer finish that created a distinctive pattern on the walls (Figure 28). The inclusion of substantial quantities of expensive red brick indicate this farmer's status. Before 1910, yellow brick was more readily available than red brick, and the use of red brick at this time generally revealed a wealthy building. The workmanship of this expensive brick is somewhat inconsistent on this particular house, however. The quoins, especially, reveal some sloppiness. The walls create strange zigzags when seen together at the corners. However, a wrap-around verandah, now gone, probably concealed those irregularities. The brick detailing around the windows and doors is less ambitious, but more assured. The stained glass of the ground floor windows is a more elaborate reminder of the simple stained glass designs in the McKeand House.



**Figure 28**  
McPhail House, SW 5-12-18W, 1909. This brick veneer house was altered by the removal of a wrap-around porch.



Large square-planned houses remained a popular house type in the planning district from the turn of the century until after the First World War. During this same period, however, a different large house type gained popularity. Two-and-a-half storey houses with complex L- or T-shaped plans, constructed using substantial materials, were built by the wealthier farmers in the district. Like the simpler square-planned house, the L- or T-shaped house was usually constructed of brick veneer on frame and had a large impressive roof with overhanging eaves. However, because of the complexities of the plans, these larger houses required substantive changes to the roof shape, the fenestration patterns and detail application. A large L-shaped house at SW 17-11-19W exhibits a number of these features (Figure 29). The brick walls were topped by a truncated hip roof. The contours of the walls were enhanced by a horizontal brick string course that ran around the house at the second storey level. This feature was contrasted with the more animated string course of the ground floor which formed surrounds when it rose over window and door openings.

The large square, L- and T-shaped houses marked the climax of pre-1930 house construction in the planning district. After that date, because of monetary restrictions during the 1930s, technological changes affecting roof shapes and stylistic preferences that favoured a bungalow form, more modest farm houses were usually built. The houses built before 1930, however, reveal the vitality of growth that characterized the first fifty years of settlement in the area. Within forty years house development had progressed from humble log shanties and tiny frame shacks isolated in the countryside to the impressive brick houses constructed by wealthy bonanza farmers. With the barns and other farm buildings in the farmyard the old houses in the planning district are physical manifestations of the settlement years.



**Figure 29**

Coristine House, SW 17-11-19W, ca. 1890. The exclusion of a verandah that was originally planned for this house provides an unobstructed view of the interesting brick detailing.