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Chapter 14

Rural Adaptations of Suburban Bungalows, Sussex County, Delaware

Susan Mulchahey Chase

Scholarship on the bungalow as an architectural form has relied heavily on two sources of information.¹ First, scholars have made extensive use of popular literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such prescriptive literature, most especially the substantial body of writing devoted to the design of houses, cottages, and bungalows, is frequently taken as normative. In fact, the actual behavior of builders and home owners may, and often does, differ from what the literature would lead one to expect. Second, scholars have based conclusions about many twentiethcentury architectural forms on the examination of urban and suburban models. While the bungalow is popularly thought of as a suburban house form, the American version of the style originated as a summer vacation cabin built in a rustic, wooded setting and, as the following discussion demonstrates, was eventually erected in agricultural landscapes as well.²

To depend largely on popular literature and suburban models may easily lead one into false conclusions about the interior arrangement of space within a bungalow when such conclusions are based upon the dwelling's exterior appearance. Recent field studies in rural Sussex County, Delaware, offer a persuasive argument in favor of caution. One may be tempted to believe that if a dwelling exterior conforms to the pattern of a particular architectural form—in this case the bungalow that the interior will, as a matter of course, also conform to the style's usual arrangement of interior space. The rural bungalows provide unambiguous examples of interiors that do not follow the expected pattern.

During the opening months of 1990, an extensive program of fieldwork was conducted in rural Sussex County to evaluate a 1985 survey that had identified 539 cultural resources dating from 1945 and before. The 1990 evaluation effort assessed the possible eligibility of sites for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Of the survey total, 436 sites survived, and, of these, fourteen were dwellings identified as examples of "early-twentieth-century domestic architecture." Three of the houses were square-type dwellings (popularly known as "four-squares"), three were Colonial Revival–style houses, and eight were examples of the bungalow type.³

Three of these bungalows were examined intensively, and they articulate a particular rural interpretation of the bungalow type. They are a significant departure both from the suburban ideal that is usually associated with the bungalow and from the traditions that prevailed on the rural landscape where they were constructed. Each of the three dwellings possesses the major exterior characteristics of the bungalow. Each has a long gable roof, full front porch, and deep, overhanging eaves. The interiors, however, set the houses apart from the suburban bungalows that they resemble on the exterior. While Wilmington's suburban builders produced structures that had fireplaces and builtin furniture, the rural bungalows have few of these expected features. They follow far more closely the long tradition of one or two largely unadorned rooms common among many rural Sussex dwellings. While presenting an external appearance that conforms to the suburban pattern, the rural bungalows adhere to an older pattern in interior planning and details.

Various interpretations of the bungalow form are found throughout the world. The form is marked by wide diversity, varying with the country, climate, and society in which it is built, yet always carrving the bungalow name.⁴ Publications and surviving structures from the first three decades of the twentieth century identify the primary exterior characteristics of the suburban American bungalow. Most striking initially is the low-pitched roof, projecting in deep, overhanging eaves and supported by substantial, though simple, brackets. The ground-hugging outline of the one- or one-and-ahalf-story house is graced by a broad porch that ranges across the front and is anchored solidly at the corners by heavy pillars. The fenestration and door placement varies among structures, although there is regular use of bay windows to add light to the interior and interest to the design.

Capitalizing on the image of a safe, snug home, many interior plans had fireplaces with rustic hearths and such built-in furniture as cupboards, buffets, bookcases, and window seats. A sample of house plans published between 1910 and 1924 indicates that the average bungalow had five or six rooms, including a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and two or three bedrooms plus bath. Of these typical dwellings, 80 percent had fireplaces, 41 percent had at least one bay window, and 93 percent had some sort of built-in furniture.⁵

The public for whom the early-twentieth-century bungalow was intended was comprised largely of those individuals who earned enough to own their own homes but who needed to husband their resources. Paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams recognized this inclination toward frugality when it published *Cottage-Bungalow* in 1910. The pamphlet was filled with decorating advice and offers of assistance from the company's Decorative Department. Clearly identifying the bungalow clientele, the pamphleteer acknowledged that "busy with other interests, few people have the opportunity to investigate the full possibilities of practical and artistic home decoration, while only those of large means can afford to employ . . . expert decorators and designers." The assistance of the Decorative Department was, the writer continued, "by no means intended only for expensive homes."⁶

Bungalow designs were flexible and varied. Contemporaries seemed to prize this "limitless adaptability [as] one of [the style's] chief beauties . . . the desires of the owner and the demands of the situation being the only guides to planning such a house. The result . . . is a large amount of individuality among the houses of the bungalow type."⁷ As one bungalow builder stressed, the interior could be modified "to suit individual tastes without changing the outside appearance."⁸

Magazines as well as design books featured the bungalow in articles and floor plans. As early as 1908. for example, House Beautiful carried advertisements for booklets of bungalow plans available by mail. One California architect claimed that his plans were "practical in any part of the country" and could be made "suitable for building . . . in cold as well as warm climates."9 In 1919, the Ladies' Home Journal initiated a house-plan service that offered readers the opportunity to purchase for one dollar the working drawings, details, and elevations necessary to create a complete set of blueprints.¹⁰ In addition, plans and construction materials were available from a number of companies manufacturing ready-made houses. Perhaps best known among the producers of prefabricated homes was Chicago's Sears, Roebuck and Company. The combination of mass media and mass production helped plant on the rural landscape the bungalow, a house form most often linked to the suburban periphery of cities.

The simple, adaptable design and relatively low construction cost made the bungalow attractive to city dwellers eager to move to the new developments springing up around American cities. Between 1880 and 1920, Wilmington's population grew from forty-two thousand to a hundred and ten thousand, dropping slightly to a hundred and seven thousand in 1930.¹¹ As the urban population grew, trolley companies extended service into the countryside surrounding the city. Developers began to subdivide land along the trolley lines, creating residential communities distant from the city and yet linked to it by ties of employment made possible by public transportation. In offering suburban building lots to Wilmingtonians, the real-estate development companies promised fresh air. pure water, and the benefits of home ownership. Developers sought to create a suburban landscape, an environment so strikingly different from the city that families moving from a crowded city landscape of crowded, narrow streets lined by narrow row houses would immediately recognize the relief that suburban subdivisions offered. The new suburbs were clearly distinguished from the city by their architecture, and the bungalow was a popular favorite in this new suburban setting.

Builders in the Wilmington vicinity erected a variety of bungalows in the new suburbs. The impulse to adopt the style was encouraged by a series of floor plans published in Wilmington's *Sunday Morning Star*, beginning in January 1910.¹² In the following months, the newspaper published several sets of plans whose exterior characteristics and interior features paralleled designs published nationally. Of the eleven bungalow floor plans displayed on the real estate pages of the *Sunday Morning Star* in 1910, ten had fireplaces, five included bay windows, and two offered built-in buffets. The bungalows that survive in Wilmington's suburbs conform to these patterns, incorporating both exterior and interior features expected of the style.

Throughout the period, newspaper advertisements for new suburban developments around Wilmington linked the suburbs and the bungalow. In 1909, the developers of Gordon Heights described their subdivision as "The Best Place for a Suburban Home"¹³ and offered "Desirable Residence and Bungalow Sites."¹⁴ The Ashley Syndicate advised that "bungalow hill," a section of Ashley, was "an ideal place to build,"¹⁵ and E. B. MacNair stood ready to assist in the building process. "We have at Hillcrest and Gordon Heights," he proclaimed, "30 plots of land on which we want bungalows built."¹⁶ To encourage such construction, he offered to sell an Aladdin bungalow for a hundred dollars. Developers of other suburban tracts made similar suggestions. A. K. Taylor, the man behind "Brack-Ex—The Wonderful Suburb," used the sketch of a bungalow and asked "How About A Bungalow Like This at Brack-Ex?"¹⁷ Repeatedly during the 1920s and 1930s, real-estate advertisements connected the bungalow with suburban home sites that were only a single, five-cent trolley fare from work in the city.¹⁸

Although Sussex County is remote from Wilmington, lying some ninety miles south of the city, its residents nonetheless had access to styles and changes in Wilmington, including architectural developments like the inexpensive, easily built bungalow. As Wilmington's *Sunday Morning Star* declared in 1905, "Since the establishment of rural mail service even the remotest sections [of Sussex] have been in touch with current events through the medium of the daily papers."¹⁹ The ready availability both of plans in newspapers and magazines and of prefabricated building materials enabled residents to bring the bungalow, a new dwelling form, to their rural setting.

When they did so, however, they adapted the bungalow into a particular Sussex County version of the form, joining predictable exterior features with unexpected interior characteristics. While their outward details suggest the Sussex County bungalows as examples of the form so closely associated with the suburbs, their arrangement of space inside deviates substantially from the suburban bungalow form. Compared to the forty-eight traditional farm dwellings identified in the 1990 fieldwork, it is readily apparent that relatively few farm families adopted the new form that the twentieth century offered, but those that did, did so in a particular and noteworthy way.

The landscape on which this interpretation of

a suburban house form began to appear in the early years of the twentieth century could hardly be considered suburban. In 1900, the Bureau of the Census classified 47 percent of Delaware's population as urban, that is, as living in settlements of twenty-five hundred people or more. In the same enumeration, only 3 percent of Sussex County's population was counted as urban. The suburbs that had developed on the periphery of the state's largest city, Wilmington, by 1930 resulted in over half (52 percent) of the state's population being classed as urban, compared to 4 percent of the population of Sussex.²⁰

Houses on Sussex farms followed a long tradition in residential architecture. For perhaps a century, the typical rural dwelling (fig. 14.1) was a more or less symmetrical two- or two-and-a-halfstory, three- or five-bay, single-pile structure of frame construction. Often clad in shingles produced from locally harvested cedar, it had a one-story kitchen wing extending from the rear of the structure and either a single, centrally located interior chimney or a pair of interior chimneys, one in each gable end. The rooms of a typical farmhouse followed a traditional pattern, established as early as the eighteenth century, of two rooms placed side by side.²¹ Such houses were sited some fifty to a hundred and fifty feet from the road in farmyards encircled by the various barns, sheds, and other outbuildings that made up the farm complex. It was in this landscape, shaped by the agricultural pursuits of its residents and by long-established architectural traditions in house styles, that the bungalow appeared.

The rural builders of bungalows treated the country road as if it were a city street. While neighboring farmhouses, following long-established tradition, are built away from the road, the bungalows adhere to a suburban pattern in size, orientation, and utilization of space. They sit as if on small lots along the road, often with sidewalks leading to the front doors and hedges marking the yards.

The McCabe house (fig. 14.2) was built around 1910 and moved to its current site before 1924 when the present owners' parents bought the property with the building in place. While the farm on which the house is located had only forty-six acres, less than the average seventy-seven acres for Sussex at the time, it was typical in the crops cultivated: corn, beans, chickens, and strawberries.²² Sited like a suburban dwelling—it is only twenty feet back from the county road—the bungalow represents

Fig. 14.1. J. Layton Farmstead, Selbyville Vicinity, Delaware.





Fig. 14.2. McCabe Bungalow Exterior, Roxana Vicinity, Delaware.

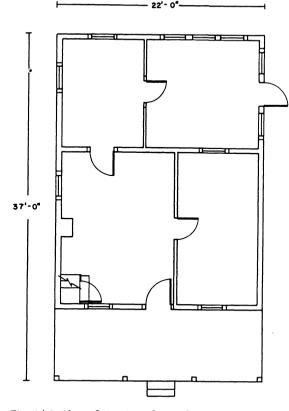


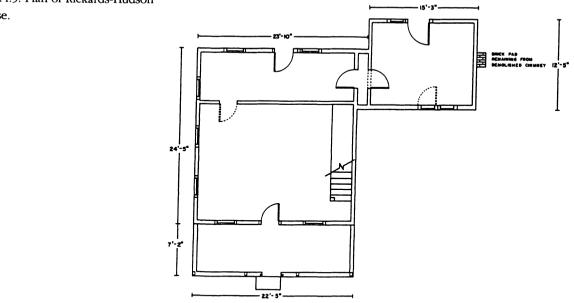
Fig. 14.3. Plan of Interior of McCabe House.

an incisive version of the style. Its sweeping gable roof ends in wide, overhanging eaves that shelter a broad porch across the entire front. The interior (fig. 14.3), however, departs markedly from the one that one might expect to accompany the bungalow exterior. With neither fireplace nor built-in furniture, it is instead singularly plain and built in a traditional plan of two rooms plus a rear lean-to. This contrast of spare interior with stylish exterior forms the pattern for the rural bungalows of Sussex County.

Documentary evidence suggests that the Rickards-Hudson bungalow (fig. 14.4) was built between 1928 and 1930. At the death of Samuel D. Rickards in 1928, his eighty-acre farm was divided equally among his three children, Samuel, John, and Dora. Samuel, a bachelor, apparently received the portion of land containing the farm dwelling; his brother lived in Philadelphia, and Dora was married and shared a home with her husband. Shortly after he took possession, tax records indicate that Samuel made improvements to his property. He may have renovated an older house to look like a bungalow; the present owner reports that the bungalow incorporates an earlier building. The current house has a twelve-foot-by-fifteen-foot wing that dates from the early nineteenth century, and it is possible that Samuel Rickards built the bungalow as an addition to the smaller, older dwelling. Samuel was single at the time of his father's death



Fig. 14.4. Rickards-Hudson Bungalow, Dagsboro Vicinity, Delaware.



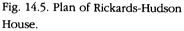




Fig. 14.6. Miller-Hudson Bungalow, Williamsville Vicinity, Delaware.

in 1928, but by 1930 he was married, and his efforts to improve the house may have been in preparation for the arrival of his bride. Samuel and his wife, Lizzie, farmed the entire eighty acres, cultivating crops typical of the period. They raised chickens and strawberries; the crops were substantial enough to warrant chicken houses and a strawberry pickers' house on the property.²³

The Rickards-Hudson house is not built close to the road like a suburban bungalow. Instead, it is oriented like neighboring farmhouses, set back fifty feet in the midst of a yard that once held a complex of outbuildings-a barn, chicken houses, a smokehouse, and a strawberry pickers' house, none of which survive. The interior (fig. 14.5) follows the pattern of rural bungalows in its plain design. It is based on a traditional single-room plan with a lean-to kitchen at the back; it totally lacks the interior features, such as fireplace or built-in furniture, common to suburban bungalows.

The Miller-Hudson house (fig. 14.6) was built in 1928 by Levin and Margaret Miller on a five-andthree-quarter-acre lot adjacent to their hundredand-thirteen-acre farm.²⁴ The bungalow served as the main dwelling for the farm, which produced chickens, corn, tomatoes, and strawberries for distant markets as well as butter and eggs for the local general store. The farm's success in these endeavors provided the Millers with the means to buy a bungalow plan, the Westly (fig. 14.7), from Sears, Roebuck and Company. Using timber cut on

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Fig. 14.7. The Westly Model Bungalow from Sears, Roebuck and Company, Showing the First-Floor Plan. (From Houses By Mail, A Guide to Houses by Sears, Roebuck and Company [National Trust for Historic Preservation], 123.)

their own land and milled locally, the Millers built a suburban-style dwelling with sidewalk and hedge on their rural lot. Departing slightly from the Sears exterior, on the dormer balcony the Millers used balusters brought from Philadelphia by Charles Hudson, their son-in-law. They adhered to local tradition in their use of exterior shingle, long produced in Sussex from local cypress, although Levin Miller's daughter suggested the color scheme: "I got that idea [for dark brown shingles and white trim] from up around Philadelphia."

Sears house plans were noted for their flexibility and versatility, and, after the Millers purchased the plans, they modified them by adding four feet to the length of the house, removing the fireplace, adding a porch to the rear, and relocating the bathroom from the second floor to the first. The most significant change, however, was to the front entry. Originally, the floor plan called for a front entry hall with a staircase at the rear of the hall. The Millers shifted the staircase to the opposite interior wall and moved it closer to the front door. In so doing, they eliminated the wall that would have separated the entry hall from the living room, creating a traditional two-room plan at the front of the house. Thus, while retaining the exterior appearance of the Westly, the interior of the Sears design (fig. 14.7) was heavily modified so that the plan of the Miller-Hudson house (fig. 14.8) is much closer to a traditional plan. The divergence from the usual bungalow room arrangement and furnishing in favor of a traditional interior form fits the pattern of Sussex County's rural bungalows.

Substantial changes in Sussex County agriculture at the turn of the century exerted a key influence on the rural landscape, both in terms of crops cultivated and in terms of economic well-being. The production of fruits, vegetables, and poultry made possible by improvements in farming complemented by improvements in rail service made the new crops a lucrative source of income. Sussex farms able to take advantage of agricultural progress could produce greater quantities of such crops with the assurance that their output would reach market in good time. As a result, they and their families enjoyed a level of prosperity that allowed them to make changes to their homes.

Physical access to distant places increased with improved highway and rail transportation. Publications insured regular, frequent exposure to urban changes, both in Wilmington and in the nation. Inhabitants of Sussex County were aware of Wilmington's growing number of suburban developments, many of which included the bungalow as a new housing style. The bungalow's thrifty, easy-to-build design made it attractive to both rural and urban dwellers, who were encouraged by the simultaneous proliferation of bungalow advertisements, floor plans, and decorating ideas published in the popular literature.

The contrast between exterior and interior in these three Sussex bungalows is a powerful ex-

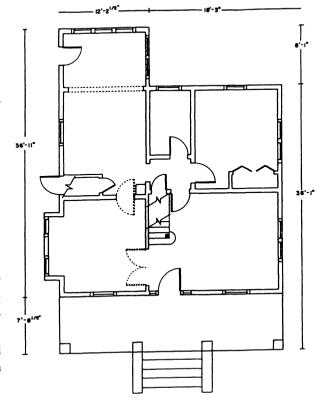


Fig. 14.8. Floor Plan of the Miller-Hudson House.

ample of the reluctance of people to depart from tradition, a reluctance that Henry Glassie recognized in his discussion of Delaware Valley folk building of the eighteenth century. He concluded that "people are most conservative about the spaces they must utilize and in which they must exist." While one may change the exterior features of a structure, he writes, one does "not change the arrangement of the rooms or their proportions."25 This speaks directly to the circumstances of the rural bungalows. The exteriors are fashioned to conform to twentieth-century design trends. Exterior designs common to the developing suburbs appear full blown on the agricultural landscape. But within the entry door lies a more traditional arrangement of one or two unadorned rooms, not the segmented interior of the bungalow with its complement of built-in furnishings. While presenting a contemporary appearance to the world, the bungalow owners revert to a familiar, older form of organization for the interior space in which they live.

It is the juxtaposition of modern exterior with traditional interior in all three of these houses that strongly suggests ambivalence on the part of the owners about accepting all aspects of the new style. Their willingness to adopt a modern appearance but reluctance to transform the interior space is an example of the not uncommon effort to mediate popular ideas and traditional values. The bungalows provide important testimony of an attempt to bridge the gulf between the safety and comfort of the familiar and the conventional and the risk and anxiety of innovation and change.

While the scholarship that focuses on the bungalow as an architectural form provides information to complement the data gathered in the field, most writers give only limited notice to the interiors of the dwellings. Clay Lancaster, for example, proposes the architect-designed bungalow as the ideal and dismisses the suburban dwelling, whose more modest style is generally associated with the "bungalow" label.²⁶ Such unflattering comparisons between the suburban versions and the "sophisticated example" provided by high-style houses rely heavily on bungalow design books and catalogs for prefabricated houses for information about the numbers and types of rooms and their details; woefully little use is made of actual dwellings as sources.

In *The Comfortable House: North American Suburban Architecture, 1890–1930,* Alan Gowans limits discussion to exterior characteristics, based on the essential features of the "original" bungalow form from India.²⁷ While creating a checklist of the hallmarks by which one may identify a bungalow, such scholarship does not add measurably to one's knowledge of how interior space was arranged.

Examining the organization of space within urban bungalows, Frances Downing and Ulrich Flemming provide a method for assessing the interiors of houses.²⁸ Their discussion and analysis, however, appear to be relevant only to an urban or suburban setting. Their argument that functional requirements "determine the nature and size of the spaces in a plan" as well as relationships between spaces or between interior and exterior does not hold in the case of the rural bungalows. The interior of the Sussex County houses met the functional needs of the occupants but lacked the segmented spaces found in similar urban dwellings. Downing and Flemming's contention that long, narrow urban lots imposed certain context requirements and limitations on construction of bungalow buildings also applies to the rural bungalows. Despite the generous size of most rural building plots, the Sussex bungalow owners constructed houses that had the same appearance as like urban dwellings restricted by the dimensions of city lots.

Existing scholarship offers excellent background information regarding the context out of which bungalows emerged as a separate, identifiable architectural form and provides the vocabulary with which to consider the bungalow as a document of the society in which it was built. The evidence of the rural bungalows of Sussex County, however, suggests that one must go beyond external appearance in drawing conclusions about the interiors of structures. Field studies of actual buildings make clear that exteriors embodying the essential characteristics set out in plan books and popular literature as the hallmarks of bungalows may shelter interiors that do not adhere to plan book patterns. In addition, while the exterior and interior of urban and suburban bungalows may complement one another in worthy examples of the style, the incongruence between the exterior appearance of the rural bungalows and their interior details confirms that the bungalow is a less predictable architectural form than has previously been imagined.

Notes

- 1. The author would like to thank Bernard L. Herman, Gabrielle M. Lanier, and Margaret H. Watson for the assistance they provided by reading and commenting upon earlier versions of this paper.
- 2. See, for example, William T. Comstock, Bungalous, Camps and Mountain Houses (New York: William T. Comstock, 1908).
- Susan A. Mulchahey, Rebecca J. Siders, Gabrielle M. Lanier, Nancy K. Zeigler, and Bernard L. Herman, National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Evaluation: Baltimore Hundred, Sussex County, Delaware (Newark: Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy, University of Delaware, 1990).
- 4. Anthony D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984),
 2.
- Sbrewesbury's House Plans (Chicago: The Shrewesbury Publishing Company, 1924), 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 17, 20, 21, 24, 25, 28, 29; Katherine Cole Stevenson and H. Ward Jandl, Houses by Mail—A Guide to Houses from Sears, Roebuck and Company (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1986), 71, 72, 76, 86, 114, 120, 122–27; Jud Yoho, The Craftsman Bungalow Book (Seattle: The Craftsman Bungalow Company, 1913), 19, 24, 25, 31, 47, 50, 55, 56. See also a Wilmington newspaper, Sunday Morning Star, for plans published during 1910. Always on page 14, floor plans for bungalows appeared in issues published on Jan. 9, Jan. 23, Feb. 20, Feb. 27, May 8, July 10, Nov. 6, Nov. 20, Nov. 27, Dec. 18, and Dec. 25 that year.
- 6. Cottage-Bungalow (Cleveland: Sherwin-Williams Company, 1910), n.p. See also Walls and how to decorate them: The Alabastine Book (Grand Rapids: The Alabastine Company, 1911), n.p.
- 7. The Book of Little Houses (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 42.
- 8. Yoho, The Craftsman Bungalow Book, introduction, n.p.
- 9. Clay Lancaster, The American Bungalow, 1880-1930 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 148.
- Alan Gowans, The Comfortable House: North American Suburban Architecture, 1890–1930 (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 67.
- 11. U.S. Bureau of Census, *Decennial Population Census of the United States* (Washington: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1880–1930).
- 12. Sunday Morning Star. See n. 5 above.
- 13. Sunday Morning Star, May 30, 1909.
- 14. Sunday Morning Star, May 23, 1909.
- 15. Sunday Morning Star, May 21, 1911.
- 16. Sunday Morning Star, September 14, 1913.
- 17. Sunday Morning Star, July 5, 1914.
- 18. Sunday Morning Star, July 7, 1916; June 3, 1917; May 26, 1918; Mar. 27, 1921; Apr. 12, 1931.

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- 19. Sunday Morning Star, Feb. 12, 1905.
- 20. U.S. Bureau of Census.
- 21. Bernard L. Herman, Architecture and Rural Life in Central Delaware, 1700-1900 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 19-21.
- 22. Interview with owner, Virgil McCabe, May 15, 1990.
- 23. Interview with owner, Mabel Hudson, Mar. 1990.
- 24. Interview with owner, Helen Miller Hudson, Levin and Margaret Miller's daughter, Mar. 9, 1990.
- 25. Henry Glassie, "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture,* ed. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 407.
- 26. Lancaster, *The American Bungalow*, 142, 155. See also King, *The Bungalow*, who depends throughout on published pattern books.
- 27. Gowans, The Comfortable House, 76-77.
- 28. Frances Downing and Ulrich Flemming, "The Bungalows of Buffalo," Environment and Planning B 8 (1981): 269-93.