HOUSES

First Log Farm Houses

The first farm houses of Franco-Manitoban settlers were log, like those of other settlement groups. These first Franco-Manitoban buildings were often built using a log-connecting technique distinct to the Red River Settlement, known as Red River frame (Figure 3). This technique, used by the Hudson's Bay Company and then by settlers until about 1870, involved the placement of short squared and mortised logs set into upright log posts. The resulting buildings were straightforward in appearance, modest in size, with simple gable roofs and small window openings, sometime with shutters (Figure 4).

Figure 3.
Red River frame construction details,: 1 is the
tongue and 2 is the tenon.

Figure 4.
Pierre Delorme House, St. Adolphe area, 1857.

Another log-connecting technique used in many early Franco-Manitoban buildings is known as dovetail notching. In this procedure, which was actually more sturdy than Red River frame, complex notches (shaped like a dove's tail) were cut at the ends of logs and interlocked to form solid joins, especially at corners (Figure 5). This technique can be seen in images of early Franco-Manitoban houses (Figure 6).

Figure 5.
Detail of a dovetail notch, commonly employed in pioneer French buildings.

Figure 6.
Illustration of Jean-Baptiste Charette House, built in 1811 and demolished in 1952. Dovetail notches are visible at the corners on this early house. The illustration also shows the typical simple form, gable roof and basic window openings that characterized such buildings.
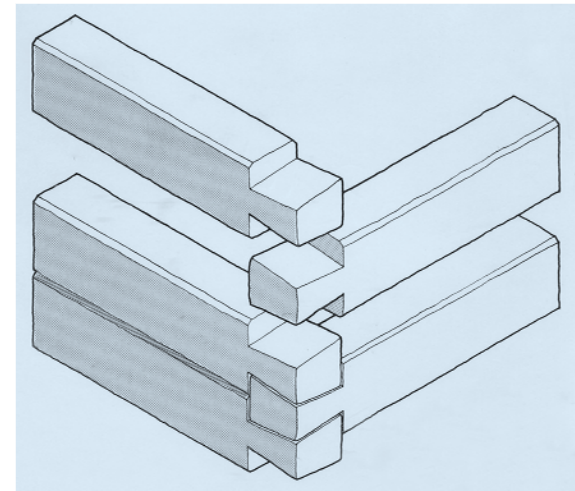
Log houses were still being built in the late 1800s, as Franco-Manitoba pioneers opened new areas for farming. One especially good example still stands in the R.M. of De Salaberry (Figure 7). Built in 1872, the La Fournaise House is one of the oldest extant buildings in the area, and a rare surviving connection to that area's pioneer roots. Its construction of oak logs, locally cut, reveals early architectural forms and building technologies. And its construction by Gabriel La Fournaise, who married a local Cree woman, is a vital expression of Métis culture in the area. In recent times, the house was carefully dismantled, the logs marked, and then in 1978 reassembled and set it in an oak stand on the property. The structure contains its original finishes and many period furnishings. In addition to the log house, the site contains numerous other modest wooden structures including a shed, bake oven and a small structure used to shelter an artesian well.

Figure 7.
La Fournaise Log House,
R.M. of De Salaberry, 1872.

A detailed investigation of the Dupont Farm House, in the St. Georges area of the R.M. of Alexander, provides a clear sense of these kind of buildings at the micro level. Built in the late 1880s, this small and modest farm house was built on a squarish plan (17 feet by 20 feet, to a total floor area of only 340 square feet) (Figure 8). A steep staircase in one corner led to the attic level. Elevations and a cross section of the house (Figures 9, 10 and 11) show a similar modesty of form and detail.
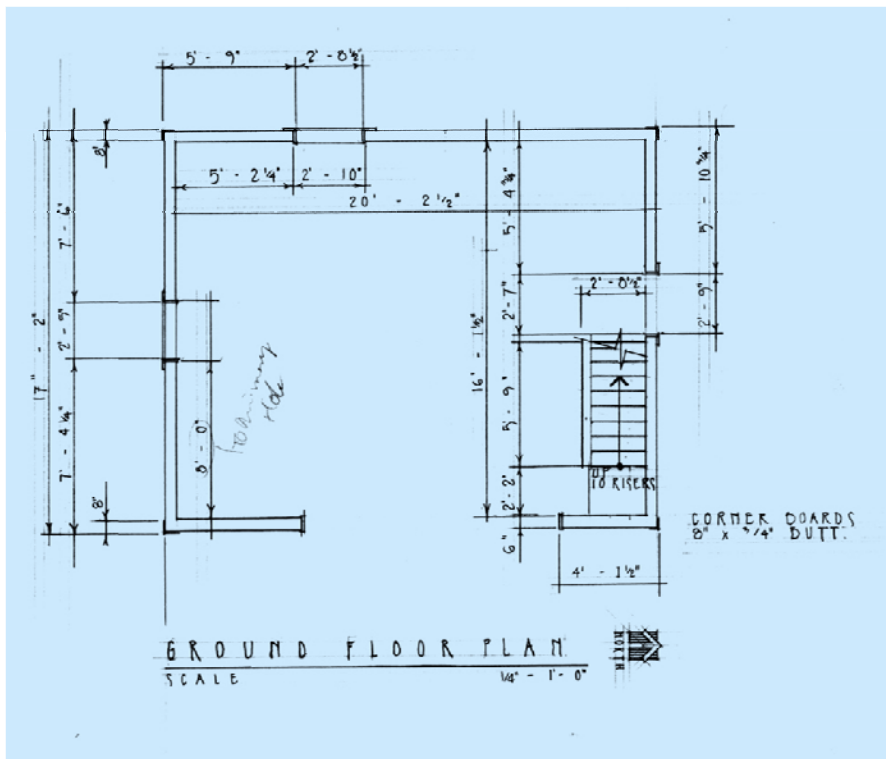

Figure 8.
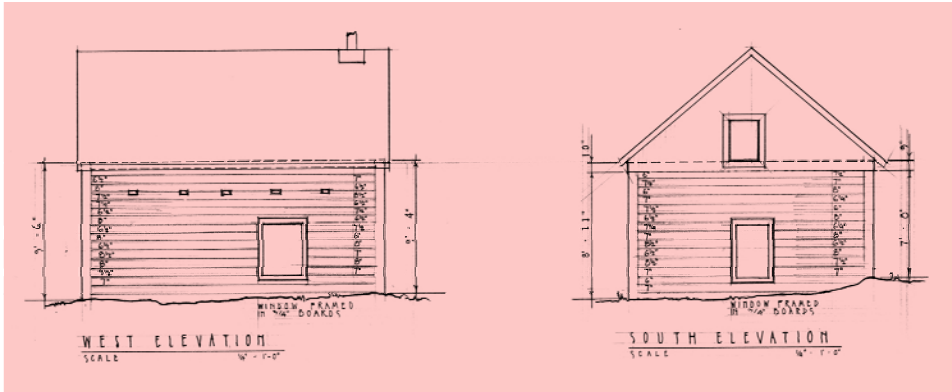Dupont Farm House, St. Georges area, floor plan.

Figure 9.
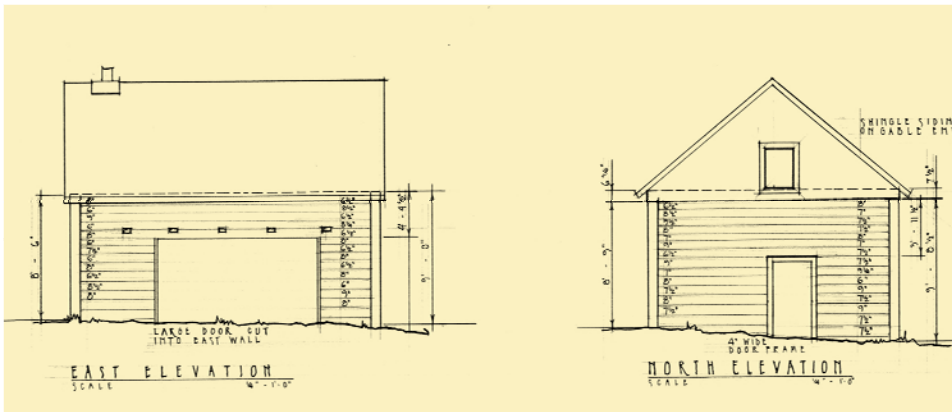Dupont Farm House, St. Georges area, west and south elevations.

Figure 10.
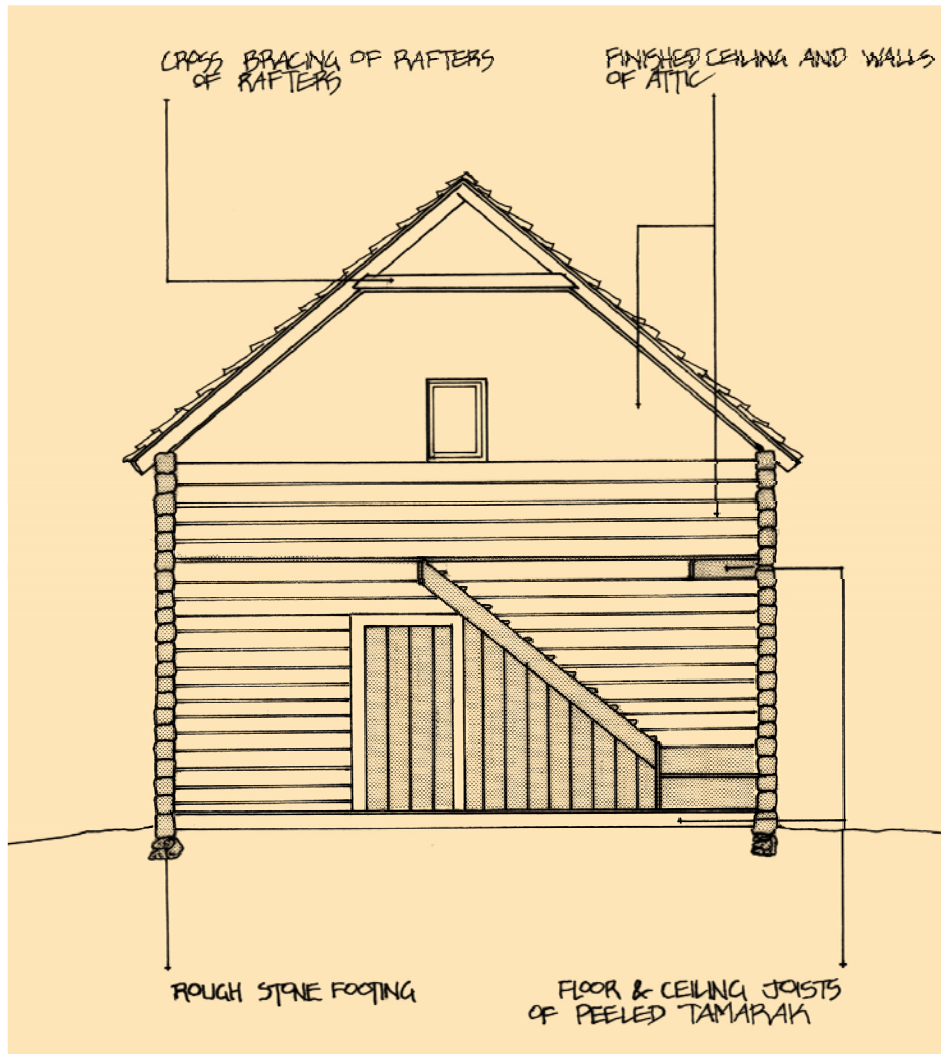Dupont Farm House, St. Georges area, east and north elevations.

Figure 11.
Dupont Farm House, St. Georges area. Cross section showing wall and roof materials and configuration, as well as stairs to attic.

Small Wood Frame Farm Houses

By the 1870s and certainly by the 1880s, Franco-Manitoba farm families were looking to more substantial and impressive buildings to replace their pioneer log structures, which by this time were seen as antiquated. It is during this period that distinct French architectural forms and features began to make their way into the farming landscape of Manitoba.

The most important feature of this generation of farm houses is reflected in the frequent adoption of a few distinct roof shapes. In one version the roof was slightly revised by the addition of flared edges to the simple gable form, giving the building a certain whimsical quality (Figure 12). In another, the use of a gambrel shape gave a building a completely new appearance. A gambrel is a two-sided roof with two slopes on each side (Figure 13). The upper slope is positioned at a shallow angle, while the lower slope is steep. This design provides the advantages of a sloped roof while maximizing headroom inside the building's upper level and shortening what would otherwise be a tall roof. The name comes from the Medieval Latin word *gamba*, meaning horse's hock or leg. The term gambrel is of North American origin, the older, European name being a curb roof.

The third roof shape that was occasionally employed on Franco-Manitoba farm houses was called the Mansard (Figure 14). This sophisticated form, difficult to build, was rarely used outside larger urban centres, where it was more often seen on large institutional buildings. Europeans historically did not distinguish between a gambrel and a Mansard, but called both types a Mansard.

Of the three French roof types noted here, it was the gambrel that appears most often in rural Manitoba (Figure 15).

Figure 12.
Quebec farm house, showing the flared gable roof edges commonly employed on French houses.
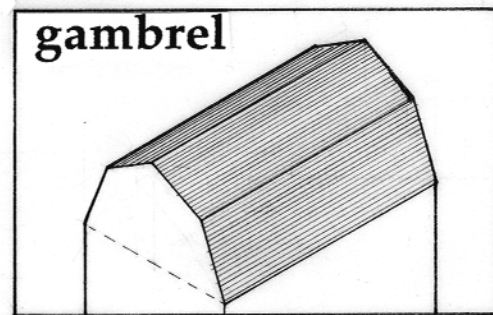

Figure 13.
Illustration of a gambrel roof shape, common on Franco-Manitoba houses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
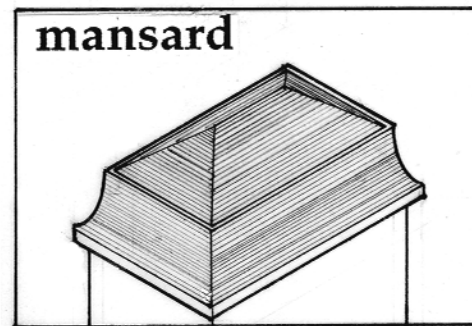

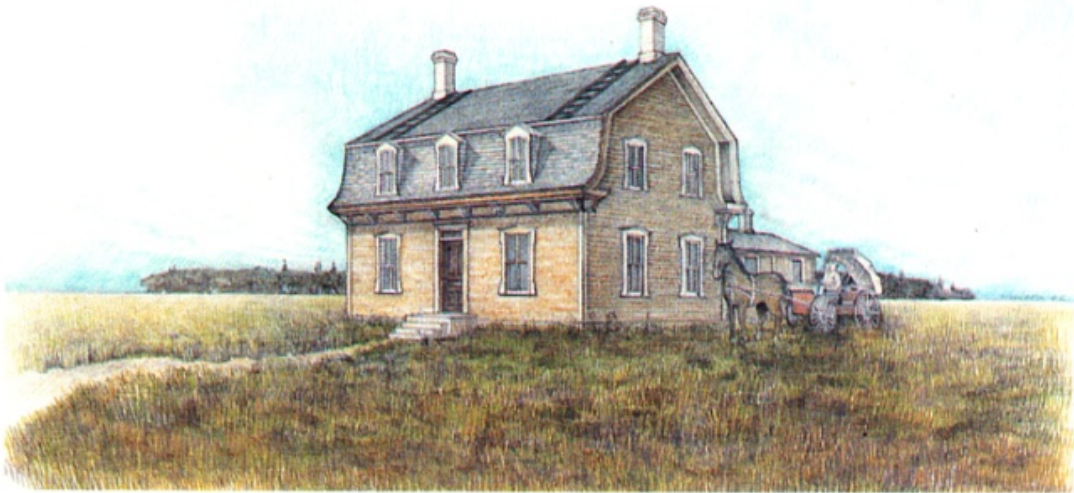**Figure 14.**
Illustration of a Mansard roof shape.

Figure 15.
Benjamin Bohémier House, 1888, now restored
at the St. Norbert Provincial Heritage Park.

Other good remaining examples of Franco-Manitoban farm houses that employed the distinctive gambrel roof form are in Lorette (Figure 16), St. Pierre and in the R.M. of Morris, near Aubigny.

The vernacular Goulet House (from about 1870, Figure 17) is a fine example of early French domestic architecture in Manitoba. Its Red River frame construction is masterfully exhibited in its hand-cut log walls, while its vertical board-and-batten siding and gambrel roof are typical of early Francophone structures. The family home, built by Moise Goulet, a Métis freighter who transported goods by Red River ox cart from the United States to Canada, was originally situated alongside trading routes near the Rat River and doubled as a resting place for fellow freighters. In 1985 it was moved to its current location, where it is now part of the St-Pierre-Jolys Museum, and restored.

The Robert House (Figure 18) in the R.M. of Morris is one of the oldest buildings in that municipality. The house was built in 1880 by Sevoine (also spelled Celevenne) Robert, who came with his family from Quebec to Manitoba in 1880. Still on its original river lot, it is the house roof that bespeaks its cultural origins. Set near the Red River north of Silver Plains, the house remains with Robert family descendents.

A third example, from the R.M. of De Salaberry, the Maynard House (Figure 19) shows the interesting form that can be created with the use of an L-shaped plan and thus of intersecting gambrel roofs.

Figure 16.
The distinct facade created by the use of a gambrel roof is evident on this farm house in the Lorette area. In this case the lower edge of the gambrel is also flared. The use of the gambrel form over the main door further emphasizes the French origins of the house.

Figure 17.
Goulet House, St. Pierre.

Figure 18.
Robert House, Aubigny area.

Figure 19.
Maynard House, St. Malo area.

At the same time, prevailing Manitoba vernacular farm house types were also employed by Franco-Manitobans. An example like the Turenne House, from 1871 (now standing at St. Norbert Provincial Heritage Park, Figure 20), reveals the typical attributes. The house is oriented so that the primary facade contains the main entrance and flanking windows; the resulting simple symmetry gives the house a modest formality. Two chimneys pierce the basic gable roof at either end, one for the stove in the kitchen and the other for the chimney in the main living area. A close inspection of the roof's eave ends suggests a minor but distinct detail that suggests even in this simple and plain building a sense of Gallic pride – the ends are "returned" inwards, suggesting ever so slightly the flared ends of the traditional Quebecois farm house.

Figure 20.
Joseph Turenne Farm House, 1871.

A few other farm houses are suggestive of this type, including a farm house in the Rural Municipality of St. Francois-Xavier (Figures 21 and 22) and the Chartier Farm House in the Aubigny area of the R.M. of Morris (Figure 23).

The oldest remaining building in the municipality, the Chartier House was built in 1877 by Flavien Chartier. Chartier was one of the first settlers to the Aubigny area who came from Quebec in 1877. Logs for the house are thought to have come from land further east and were brought down the river as the Chartiers moved west into the municipality. While in a slightly deteriorated state, due to its age and log construction, the house still suggests the simple effective forms—box-like form and gable roof—that defined so many pioneer farm houses from that early period. The river lot is still owned by the Chartier famil,y and has been the farm to five generations of family descendents.

Figure 21.

Farm house in the St. Francois-Xavier area.

The simple straightforward form is seen here.

Figure 22.

Farm house in the St. Francois-Xavier area.

Detail showing the roof return detail suggestive of French flared roofs.

Figure 23.

Chartier House, Aubigny area.

Large Farm Houses

By 1900 many Franco-Manitoba farmers, like their compatriots from other groups, were looking to build even bigger and better accommodations on their farm sites. But this time it was to prevailing North American forms and details, rather than ancient French traditions, that French farmers looked for inspiration. New construction techniques and materials that were commonplace at this time throughout North America were also to be found on this generation of Franco-Manitoba farm houses. Three examples of these new large houses from the De Salaberry area are included here for comparison – the Desrosier Farm House (Figure 24), the Prefontaine/Dotrement Farm House (Figure 25), and the Desaulniers Farm House (Figure 26).

The Desrosier Farm House, in the St. Malo area of the municipality, combines several of the new trends in large-house building in rural Manitoba at this time. Known as a Four Square, the house is large and commodious, with the style attribution a reflection of its square plan and box-like form. Like others of its type, the Desrosier house features a large pyramidal roof with gabled dormers that allow light into the attic storey. The construction technology employed for the walls of this house also recalls an interesting aspect of Manitoba's architectural history from this period. Built with formed concrete blocks, the walls from a distance give the appearance of a grand stone building. The use of formed concrete blocks, also called "imitation stone," was a fairly popular technology from about 1890 to 1910. Itinerant block-makers with metal forms ranged across the countryside. They set up shop in an area or community, and over the course of about 20 years erected scores of buildings. The potential for decorative surfaces permitted by the block molds made the technology very desirable.

Figure 24.
Desrosier Farm House, St. Malo area. The house is a typical Four Square type, a popular architectural expression for large farm houses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries throughout Manitoba. In this case the house also boasts concrete block walls, a novel attribute of house building from this period.

Built for the Prefontaine family in 1920, the enormous farm house show in Figure 25 is the most impressive example in the De Salaberry area, recalling how sophisticated urban architecture could be transferred to farm settings with great effect. Although not yet ascertained, the house seems to have been designed by an architect. Boasting solid walls of buff brick and limestone finishes, the house also has high levels of interior integrity, recalling the days when the house was the active centre of a thriving dairy operation, first by the Prefontaines and then the Dotrements, who also farmed hogs and beef cattle.

The Desaulniers House is important for its architecture, being the best remaining local example of a distinct Franco-Manitoban house type common in the southeastern region of the province. This kind of house is a slight variation on the popular Four Square type found in many areas of Manitoba, defined by an uncomplicated square plan, two-storey form and large hipped roof. In the southeast, Franco-Manitobans (like Josephat Desaulniers, born in 1879 in Shawinigan, Quebec, who built this house) undertook a slight variation on the theme. With a slightly taller form and a distinctively truncated roof (like a widow's walk) that usually was trimmed with metal cresting, these kinds of houses are important expressions of sophisticated local French design sensibilities.

Figure 25.

Prefontaine/Dotrement House, St. Pierre area, built in 1920. This large, grand house was likely designed by an architect.

Figure 26.

Desaulnier House, St. Pierre. This house suggests an important French revision of the popular Four Square farm house form that was common across Manitoba. Here, and seen in other Franco Manitoba farm houses of the period, the main house block is tall, and a distinctively truncated roof (usually trimmed with metal cresting), gives the house a sophisticated French sensibility.