

The Log House Program at the Mercer Museum



Dear Educator:

Thank you for choosing the Mercer Museum as your field trip destination. We hope it will be both educational and fun for your students. The Log House Program allows students to experience home life in the Delaware Valley 200 years ago. Students will have opportunities to try everyday Colonial-era tasks. Costumed interpreters help students imagine they are in a different time and place by taking on the persona of a late colonial log house dweller. The program is designed especially to develop historical thinking skills, including concepts of sequence, duration and distance in time.

The following are suggested pre- and post-visit activities for students visiting the museum. The activity suggestions were created to make their experience more meaningful. Included in these supplemental materials you will find a brief history of the Mercer Museum Log House.

We would be interested in any feedback you can provide us as to how to make your visit, and these materials, more valuable and useful. Please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

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The Story of the Mercer Museum's Log House

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“This is the ancient home of all our ancestors, the birthplace of most of the force brains (shaped, of noble character) and devotion that began at the beginning to make this country what it is, the first house built by the first comer into the Great Forest, and there is not a great man in the United States today from one end of it to another, who would not take off his hat to it.

It was, therefore, quite timely that this building, fast going into decay, should be preserved as one of the landmarks of a generation that has passed away.”

~ Henry Chapman Mercer during the “Presentation of a Log House by the Citizens of Doylestown to the Bucks County Historical Society” on October 6, 1911

Following a 1994 fire that destroyed the original log house, the museum set about rebuilding the structure. The ambitious task of rebuilding an authentic period log dwelling led to months of research. Although the exact origins of the original house are difficult to discern, it is believed that the dwelling was constructed by Elijah Russell in the early 19th century at Main St. and Lacey Ave. in Doylestown. The house was about 16' x 24', or 384 square feet. It had two doors, three sliding sash windows, a small fireplace that also accommodated a ten-plate stove, and a crawlspace or cellar under the stone foundation.

Hoping to preserve it, Henry Mercer moved it to the museum grounds in 1911, three years before actual construction began on the museum. When moving it certain concessions were made. The owner permitted none of the foundation stone, and perhaps none of the chimney stone, to be moved. Many of the logs were rotted and replaced. Railroad ties and telephone poles were procured for this purpose and pieced into the walls, though most of these failed to connect securely with the corners of the log “crib.” Because the cutting and piecing weakened the overall structure (a log house is only as strong as its corner joints), concrete piers were placed in each corner of the interior to provide reinforcement. The original windows and doors were also inserted, although photographs reveal that the windows were put in upside down. When the restoration was completed, the house bore a general resemblance to the original but much had been changed. More changes were made when the building was again restored in 1968. Careful examination of the building after the fire revealed just how little remained of the original, early 19th century structure.

Because of the changes that had occurred in the building, it was decided not to simply rebuild, with its historical inaccuracies, the Russell-Mercer Museum log house. Instead, it was felt that a building that reflected an earlier period, the late 18th century, might be more in keeping with the museum's scope and with the types of educational programs that the museum might conduct. Thus, the new house is meant to depict a typical log dwelling of the period, with features adapted from what we know of the Russell house, from Henry Mercer's own documentation of other Bucks County log houses, from research into original tax lists and estate files, and from consultations with historic preservation professionals.

The reconstructed log house has been built on Mercer's concrete foundation, using the same dimensions as the original building with the exception of a shallow crawlspace and new stone foundation.

Research has revealed that the size of the Russell dwelling was a bit smaller than the “average” Bucks County log house of the late 18th century but was not unusually tiny. The average appraised value of such houses (for tax purposes) in the period was about \$160, representing the economic status of a small yeoman farmer, or tradesman, of the lower middling class.





Log House Construction—The Historical Background

Log houses were architectural creations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America, though they continued to be built in some regions well into the 1800s. The term “log house” can often be confused with the term “log cabin” which was generally a more temporary shelter consisting of one floor, that was built in a haphazard fashion made of unfinished logs. These temporary structures served until a more substantial log house could be constructed. Log houses were built as permanent structures and were constructed with much care and consideration.

The introduction of log houses to North America has been variously credited to the Swedes and Finns (earliest settlers in the Delaware Valley), and to early German immigrants. In truth, many northern European peoples had long experience with log house construction prior to the beginnings of colonization in the New World. The Pennsylvania Germans were perhaps most responsible for the widespread adoption of the log house as a family farm dwelling by American settlers. Germanic log-building techniques were taken up in the eighteenth century by the many thousands of settlers of English and Scots-Irish descent who passed through eastern Pennsylvania on their way west and south.



Activity 1- What Can I Live Without

Create a list with your students of the things they have in their homes that they feel they cannot live without. Tell them to think about not just “things” such as, toys and television, but actual parts of their home, such as different rooms in their houses or devices that help make things work inside the house. Your students may include things such as:

- ◆ Electricity (Lights)
- ◆ Bathroom
- ◆ Water
- ◆ Beds
- ◆ Computer
- ◆ TV

Inform your students that even though they think they cannot live without these things, families who lived over two centuries ago *did* live without them and they did survive. When visiting the museum students will have the opportunity to experience a place without many of the things they think are essential to their lives today.

Activity 2- Comparing Chores

Discuss with your students what some of their chores are at their homes. What types of chores are they responsible for? Do any of them have chores to do similar to those in the pictures provided? (See images on the following page) Do they think chores today are easier than chores during Colonial times? Why or why not?



Pre-Visit Materials: The Log House Program



Open-Hearth Cooking



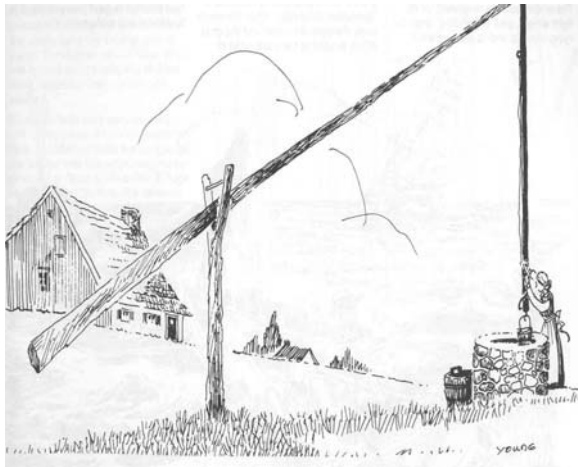
Cooking Over a Fire



Lumbering



Laundering



Fetching Water From the Well



Shoemaking & Repair





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Post-Visit Materials: The Log House Program



Activity 1- Making Butter

At the museum your students learned about a tool from the Colonial-era called the butter churn. Some had an opportunity to try the churn and others watched how this tool was operated. Making butter was an everyday task for Colonial families, but you can actually make your own butter right in the classroom! Combine heavy cream and several ice cubes, and a pinch of salt for taste into a baby food jar. Shake the jar until the contents turns the consistency of butter and pour off the whey (the liquid part). The butter is ready for everyone to taste. It tastes great on crackers or bread. Enjoy!

Activity 2- My Colonial Journal

Have the students create their own Colonial Journal. In this journal they will make daily entries for one week. In their entries they are to imagine and write as if they are a part of a family that lived during the Colonial-era. They can write about their daily life on their farm, their chores, what their home was like, and much more. They can draw on the experience they had at the Log House. They can illustrate their journal with their own drawings and pictures.

For younger students, instead of writing a journal, talk about the different things they remember from their visit to the Log House. How is their house different than the Log House? Would they like to live in the Log House or in their house? Why or why not? Have the students draw a picture about their favorite part of the Log House visit.



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Post-Visit Materials: The Log House Program



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