

Methods of Building a German-Alsatian House

The stone houses in Upper Quihi were built with methods settlers brought with them from Europe, but with materials that they could find in Medina County. Most of the important materials used in Alsace and western Germany were also found in Texas. Limestone was quarried in Medina County. Stucco could be made locally as well.

Local wood was used for the roof, doors, and window frames. Adapting to their new situation, settlers used adobe for mortar. The German-Alsatian houses in Texas, then, are not exactly like those found in Alsace.



c. 1870 German-Alsatian stone dwelling (HDR-AR-06A)



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The exterior stucco has worn away, revealing the stacked limestone walls of the house. The effort at coursing, or putting the stone in interlocking rows, is clear. The chimney is not added to the wall, but is built as a continuous part of the wall.

The roof is constructed with simple trusses. The truss extends through the stone wall rather than resting on top, providing stability. Plain sawn boards provide the decking for the roof. Plain sawing cuts straight through a log, the simplest way of cutting boards.

This house also included a loft. It was probably reached by a ladder inside the house since there are no exterior openings in the walls. The loft might have been for storage, space for sleeping, or both. In small houses, rooms usually had more than one use.

This view shows how uncut stones of various sizes were carefully stacked and joined with adobe to create a wall more than a foot thick. Stucco on both sides of the wall helped protect the adobe from the weather. As stucco wears off, the stones gradually fall from their places.

Credits

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German-Alsatian Houses in the Upper Quihi Rural Historic District

Quihi was one of the earliest of four settlements established by Henri Castro in the 1840s. Castro recruited many settlers from Germany and Alsace, a German-speaking area in eastern France along the Rhine River. The settlers had to cultivate at least 15 acres within three years to keep their land, so farming became the most common occupation in Quihi. Farmers raised a variety of crops as well as livestock.

As the population grew, more land had to be farmed. Farmers began homesteading farther north of the town site around 1870, following Quihi and Elm creeks. These northern farms became known as Upper Quihi. The settlers of Upper Quihi built a style of stone house that is unique to this area of Texas. By the early twentieth century, though, houses in Upper Quihi were no longer built of stone. This exhibit, and the corresponding exhibit guide, look at both kinds of houses, showing how domestic architecture in this culturally-unique region of Texas developed.

Style of German-Alsatian Houses

The structure of a house reflects the culture of the people who built it. People in every culture need a shelter to serve the same basic needs. Available materials, climate, and local traditions all shape how a house is built. Over time, a unique style of house develops out of this combination. When people immigrate to a new country, they often bring building traditions with them. In Upper Quihi, settlers brought to central Texas a distinct style of stone house construction common in Alsace and western Germany.



c. 1860 German-Alsatian stone house (HDR-AR-05A)



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A saltbox house has an off-set roof peak with one slope of the roof longer than the other. This shape is one of the distinctive common features in German-Alsatian houses. The plain white stucco on the walls is another characteristic feature.

German-Alsatian houses often had a loft above the main living rooms. The loft could be used for storage or more sleeping quarters. This house has an exterior entrance to the loft.

Interior design and construction is an important part of a house. Today, interior design can mean furniture and decorations. However, it also includes the way a room is constructed to make it easy to live and work in. Farm families in the late 1800s averaged 4 to 6 children. Space had to be used efficiently for a family of about six people to share a small house. German-Alsatian houses used some characteristic interior features to make the most of space.



c. 1870 German-Alsatian stone dwelling (HDR-AR-06A)

The hinges are hung so that this door opens out away from the house. Today, most doors open into the house, so space inside has to be left clear for the door to swing. Doors that open out, like this one, allow all the interior space to be used.



c. 1860 German-Alsatian stone house (HDR-AR-05A)

Storage niches like this were built into the stone walls to provide storage and save space. Niches near a fire place likely worked much like a kitchen cupboard.



c. 1860 German-Alsatian stone house (HDR-AR-05A)

When the roof reaches the front wall, it is so low that the slope has to be broken to accommodate an entrance. A steeply sloping roof is characteristic of German-Alsatian houses. The adaptation allows snow to roll off the roof more easily, an important feature in the climates of Germany and Alsace.



c. 1870 German-Alsatian stone dwelling (HDR-AR-06A)

The stone walls of this house are about a foot thick. This sets the windows much deeper than in a frame house. The window sills create convenient shelving and, like the niches, help to maximize space in a small house.

Evolution of Architecture in Upper Quihi

The railroad arrived in Medina County in 1881, making travel to and from Upper Quihi much easier. People, goods, and ideas all moved more quickly. Building material from far away could be cheaply brought to Upper Quihi. This made larger houses more affordable.

At the same time, the rooms in a house became more specialized. Even in working-class homes, it became common to have separate rooms that served a function: sleeping, bathing, cooking, etc. In Upper Quihi, the traditional German-Alsatian stone construction gave way to frame construction common through most parts of the United States.



Board-and-Batten house, early 20th century (HDR-AR-04C)

The frame structure and board-and-batten siding on this early 20th century house show how building methods and materials in Upper Quihi changed over time. The shape is still a lot like the saltbox form of German-Alsatian houses. Also, notice the porch roof extending over the façade, retaining the low profile of the stone houses.



1916 Frame House (HDR-AR-02A)

Later Upper Quihi houses such as this one had frame construction, horizontal wood board siding, and more windows. Shipping by railroad was faster and smoother than travel by freight wagon, making it cheaper and more reliable to ship breakable goods like windows.



c. 1860 German-Alsatian stone house (HDR-AR-05A)

This stone house has a frame addition that added space for a modern kitchen and a bathroom. In 1930, only 1 in 10 rural American homes had electricity. Due to New Deal efforts, 1 in 4 rural houses in America had electricity by World War II. This addition, built c. 1940, may reflect the availability of such improvements.



c. 1860 German-Alsatian stone house (HDR-AR-05A)

Kitchens changed drastically in the first half of the 20th century. Bringing in electricity and indoor plumbing allowed for appliances like sinks, refrigerators, electric stoves and ovens, and even toasters and mixers. All of those new conveniences required more space, so by the mid-20th century, Americans expected the kitchen to be a separate room.

Living Structures

Houses are living structures. They change as the needs and desires of the people living in them change. Materials age and are replaced. Sometimes changes occur inside a house, like adding electricity, or changing interior walls. Sometimes changes are visible on the outside, such as room additions or a new roof. The most valuable houses for historians have few changes because they tell us the most about the time and place in which they were built. Houses like these in the Upper Quihi Rural Historic District help tell the story of Alsatian immigrants coming to Texas.

If you would like to know more about architecture, Alsatian immigration to Medina County, or the settlement of the Castro Colonies, you can find more resources here in the Hondo Public Library.