

# *Dog Trot Comfort:*

## *A Note on Traditional Houses*

### *and Energy Efficiency*

*By Howard W. Marshall*

A hallmark of folk architecture is that it “fits in” with the surrounding physical and cultural environment. Like ballads and baskets, folk houses vary according to regional and ethnic configurations, and express a personally meaningful style.

Many students of architecture are drawn by the functional and inventive ways that people have traditionally coped with the details of survival. People in different regions have developed ways of taking advantage of natural energy sources and the landscape's innate character to find comfort. Climate and locally available building materials affect house design and construction. The same style of house may be made of heavy, hewn, oak logs tightly chinked and sealed in horizontal weatherboarding in the cold climes of Missouri or Indiana, but it might be built of light pine poles and left unchinked and cool in Georgia or Mississippi. A two-room house in Massachusetts may hug the ground and have a huge central fireplace to add radiant warmth, while in tidewater North Carolina the same dwelling sits high off the ground, its chimney outside the gable end to keep *out* as much heat as possible. The environment, then, plays a vital part in determining building traditions and appropriate forms of shelter.

The dog trot house has long been the symbol of traditional homes of the southern United States. Known to specialists as the central hall house, it features a distinctive hallway (“dog trot,” “turkey run,” or other suggestive name) through the middle of the one-room wide, one-story dwelling. Two rooms of roughly equal size flank this passage. Chimneys frame the gable ends, and wide, shady porches and wings added to the rear of the house are standard. Often thought to be strictly log, these houses are made of frame and other materials as well. Like most other buildings of folk architecture, the dogtrot is an extension of the basic one-room house that originated in medieval Europe.



1 Shellhorse dog trot house, Tift County, Georgia.  
All photographs by Howard W. Marshall, American Folklife  
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2 Widdon frame dog trot house with hall enclosed, Georgia.

3 Floor plan of Widdon house.

4 Shellhorse log dog trot house.

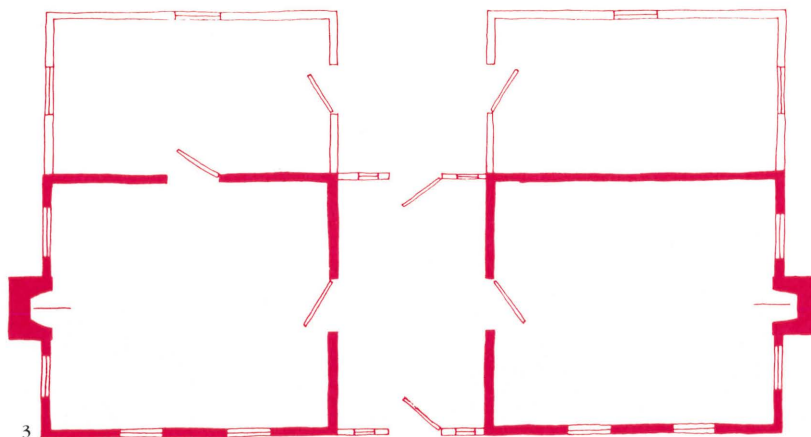
5 Detail of saddle-knotched logs at corner of shellhorse log dog trot house.

6 Bledsoe house, Hartsburg, in Missouri's Little Dixie Region, showing how the central breezeway was enclosed in response to Missouri's cooler temperatures.

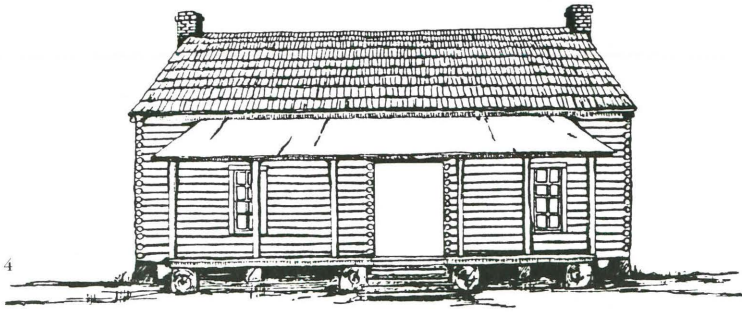
7 Floor plan of Bledsoe house.

8 Another example of a Missouri frame dog trot house with enclosed breezeway. It was built in the early 19th century in the Mississippi River bottoms, Boone County.

At its core, the dog trot house has a perfect air-conditioning system. By channelling breezes through the central hallway, the architecture relies on nature—not mechanical contrivances—to cool the interior. In the 17th and 18th centuries the breezeway provided a refreshing area for meals, family activities, and sleeping, especially in the South. Doors and windows could be set so as to pull air throughout the house. Nineteenth-century settlers from the Southeast took the dog trot design to the Midwest and enclosed the distinctive breezeway to protect themselves from the cold, snowy winters. Later in the 1800s the introduction of rural electrification made the open hallway obsolete. Today, the old dog trot houses found on midwestern farms are virtually undetectable without a visit inside, since the painted wood siding hides the old hallway from view.

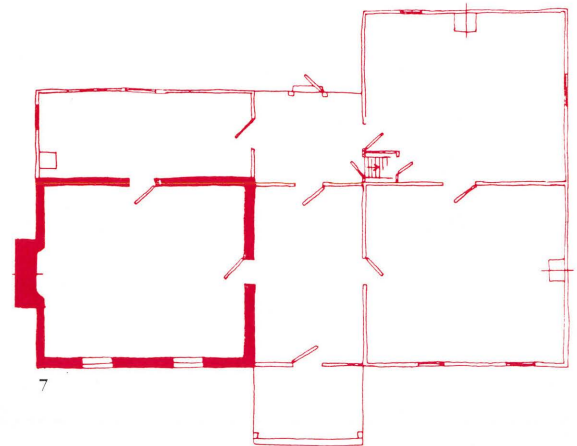
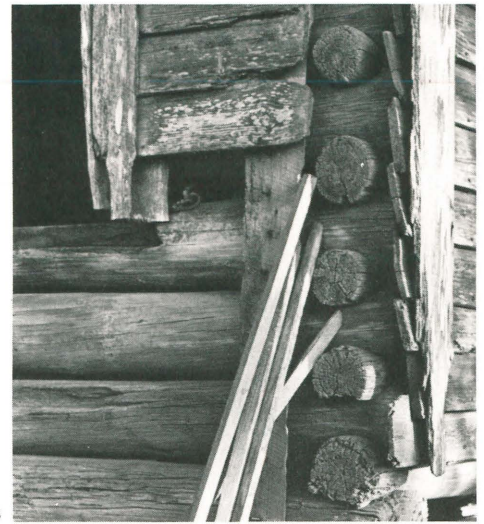






In 1926 Mr. and Mrs. Allen Shellhorse bought Wesley Phelps' log dog trot house near Tifton, in the Wiregrass region of southern Georgia and lived in it for four years. Phelps had closed in the original breezeway, added frame wings and horizontal siding and had replaced the south log wall with a frame one without the chimney. Mr. Shellhorse noted how much cooler the dogtrot house was to live in than his modern dwelling with its many electric fans.

Folk houses like the humble dog trot seem noble indeed when their qualities of energy efficiency are combined with their importance as artifacts that embody deep meanings and long traditions for people in everyday life.



#### Suggested Reading

Glassie, Henry. *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968.

Jordan, Terry G. *Texas Log Buildings: A Folk Architecture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978.

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Roberts, Warren E. "Folk Architecture." In Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

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