

MENNONITE FARM BUILDINGS

An Architectural History Theme Study



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On the cover: Early Mennonite homes in the West Reserve, as depicted by a newspaper artist, ca. 1878. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

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PREFACE

This booklet has been adapted from a larger publication developed in 1984 by the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism. That study, *Architectural Heritage. The MSTW Planning District*, should still be available in public libraries.

That original study was intended to assist various local governments (Rural Municipalities of Stanley and Thompson and Towns of Morden and Winkler – hence the acronym MSTW), formed into the MSTW Planning District, to gain a better understanding of the architectural heritage of the area, and thus to undertake better educational, tourism, designation and conservation programs. To that end, this original work also contained a substantial selected inventory of buildings in the area, and sections focusing on other aspects of the region's history.

A major part of the study focused on farm buildings, and especially on the prevailing architectural traditions of one of the most common pioneer settlement groups in the region – Mennonites from Russia and other parts of eastern Europe. It is that section of the original report that has been adapted here, to enable readers to get a better sense of the traditional architectural styles and forms, materials and construction practices, that define this important aspect of Manitoba's architectural history.

There are many other areas of the province that have similar Mennonite building traditions, and this booklet, while focused on the area around Morden and Winkler, certainly contains information that applies to those places as well.

MENNONITE BUILDINGS

The Mennonites, like most other early immigrant groups who settled in Manitoba, brought their building techniques and traditions with them. In Manitoba, the Mennonites were unique in their establishment of farm-villages and their construction of the unified home/barn unit, both the products of over 200 years of development in Europe. For almost half a century these settlements dominated the character and landscape of much of southern Manitoba.

Gradually, as the Mennonites were assimilated into the mainstream of Canadian society, their traditional way of life and manner of building was modified to conform to local Canadian conventions. Today less than twenty villages remain in Manitoba, and within these, only remnants of the early architectural designs survive to offer testimony to the early days of settlement. Over half of these surviving villages are to be found in the MSTW Planning District.

Traditional Mennonite architecture played a much greater role than simply one of providing accommodation for its owners and their possessions. They were an important part of Mennonite culture. To appreciate and understand the nature of these architectural designs and the role they played in Mennonite life in the province, it is necessary to know something about the origins of the Mennonite village in Europe.

ORIGIN OF THE MENNONITE FARM VILLAGE

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, a religious group called the Mennonites (named after one of their leaders, Menno Simons), was formed in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Like many other minority religious groups during this period, the Mennonites were often cruelly persecuted. Eventually thousands fled to the sparsely populated lowlands of Prussia and Poland. Here they were welcomed by noblemen and landlords, anxious for peaceful and industrious residents to assist in the economic development of unproductive swamplands. The Mennonites were granted religious tolerance and long term leases to land but they were not allowed to intermarry or mix with the indigenous Catholic population. As a result the Mennonites began to develop their own separate and distinct cultural identity.

It was here, in the Vistula and Nogat River deltas of Prussia and Poland, that the Mennonite farm village had its origins. When they first arrived, the Mennonites found a number of medieval "swamp" villages still existing in the marshes. It was on the plan of these existing villages that they patterned their own settlements. Each farmer's land-holding was limited to a long rectangular strip which extended from the high ground along the river or canal banks back into the marshlands.

Cultivation, land clearing and drainage progressed gradually from the farmstead into the hinterland until it was no longer economic to do so. As a consequence of this property division, the settlements were loosely organized with all the farm buildings in a single long row with the narrow plots of land stretched out behind them. The basic appearance of these early Mennonite villages was not unlike the early river lot settlements of French Canada.

Because the farm buildings within these settlements could only be located on the few and narrow areas of high ground along the canals, dams, riverbanks or on man-made mounds, multifunctional buildings became a necessity. The attachment of all farm buildings – house, barn and sheds - eventually became a distinguishing characteristic of these villages. This compact arrangement was not completely foreign to the Mennonites in any case. In the lowland areas of Holland, where many had originated, land had also been at a premium and a similar arrangement of buildings was common.

By the 1700s, the Mennonites had transformed much of the swampy lowlands into productive farmland. Using the diking procedures developed in the Netherlands, the Mennonites quickly began to prosper (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Through their efforts in draining swamplands bordering the Vistula and Nogat Rivers, the Mennonites won the respect of the Polish and Prussian governments and earned greater religious freedoms.

Their growing affluence, however, soon aroused the jealousy of the Polish middle classes. By the 1770s, increasing discrimination in economic and religious matters prompted many Mennonites to make plans for another major move.

Hearing of their plight, Catherine the Great of Russia invited the Mennonites to settle the sparsely populated lands north of the Black Sea, recently won from the Turkish Empire. In return for their settlement in Russia, Catherine offered the Mennonites assurance of religious freedom, property ownership, and, as a pacifist group, freedom from military service. The first Russian colony, Chortitza, was established near the Dnieper River in 1788 (Figure 2).

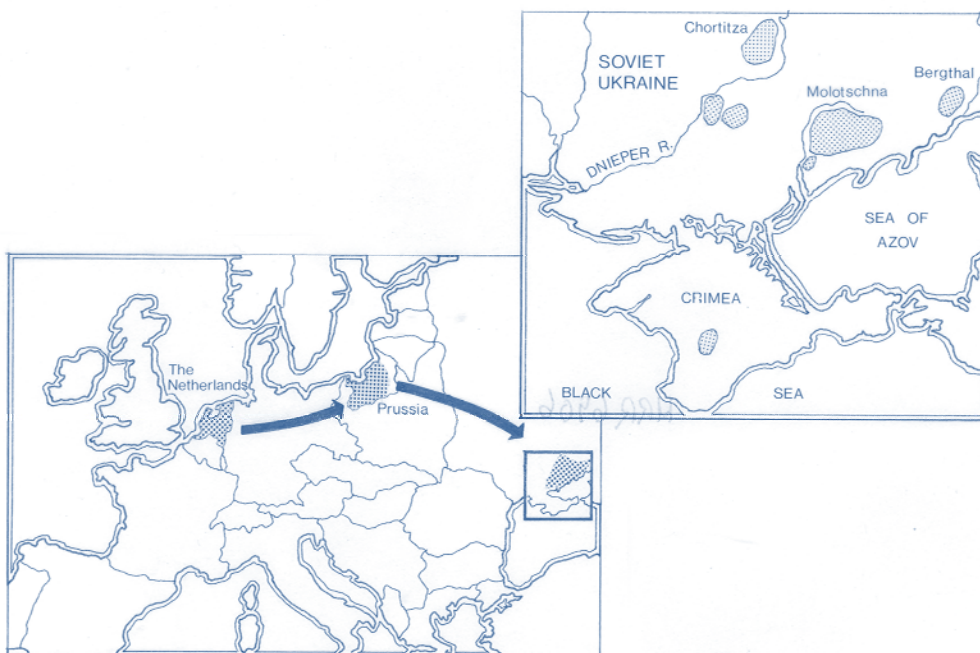


Figure 2
Mennonite movements in Europe and colonies in southern Russia.
(From F.H. Epp, 1974: 162)

Twenty years later another major colony was started along the Molotschna River, 160 kilometers to the southeast. By 1835 Chortitza had 15 villages, Molotschna 58 villages, and several daughter colonies were in the process of being formed.

The Mennonites initially established the farm villages in Russia exactly as they had in Prussia and Poland. However, repeated attacks by the nomadic Tartar population in the region soon forced a transition from a loose to a compact village organization. Under the new circumstances the previous system of land ownership that permitted each farmer to work his own large field had to be reformed. To produce more equitable distribution of the land surrounding the community, all the fields belonging to an each farmer (Figure 3).

Individual families received several narrow fields of varying quality around the village, as well as a village lot where farm buildings and garden plots would be located. The linear arrangement of the dwellings was maintained, as was the attachment of the house and farm buildings. This unification of buildings was well suited for the small village lots and the whole structure could be easily secured from the inside to discourage thievery. Johann Cornies, a prominent Mennonite reformer active during the mid-nineteenth century, standardized the village plan further by establishing rules for the location and construction of buildings, including churches and schools.

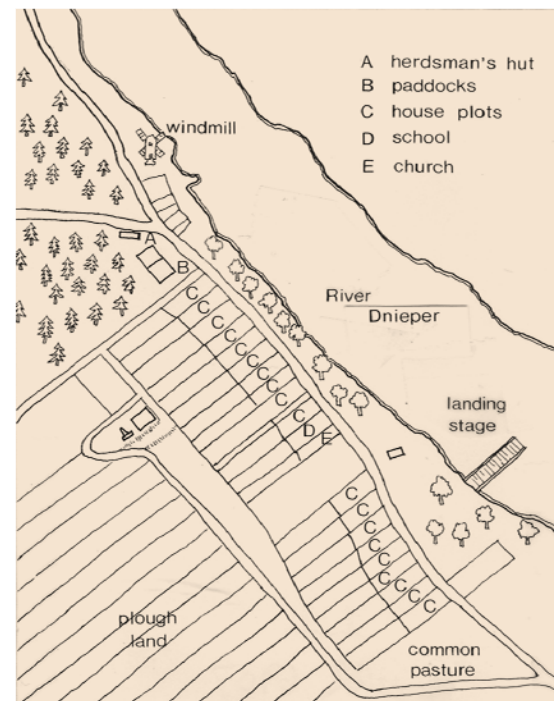


Figure 3
Village plan of the village of Insel-Chortitz, in the original Chortitza. (Based upon a map in Osterwick 1812-1943. Clearbrook, B.C.: A. Olfert nd. P. 9)

To ensure economic viability, and still maintain the small rural nature of the villages, the inadvisability of property was adopted as a basic village principal. This prevented a farmer from dividing his land among his sons and reducing the farmland into uneconomically-sized units. Village population growth was accommodated, instead, by the creation of new villages. In this way village size, lifestyles and traditions were maintained while allowing for the growth and well-being of the colony.

Under Catherine the Great, and her grandson Paul, the Mennonites were granted, with only minor restrictions, self-government. Using the village as the basic unit of government the Mennonites formed their own system of administration, eventually establishing and operating their own schools, hospitals, orphanages and other social institutions. A village "shult" or mayor was elected annually by a council made up of village landowners. He was aided by two elected assistants, the "Braunt Shult" or fire-Marshall, whose duties included among others, the administration of the village fire insurance system and the operation of the communal pasture.

The village "Shulten" formed a district assembly called the "Gebietsmat" which elected an "Awa Shult" to oversee regional affairs and represent the colony before the Russian authorities. The church was closely involved with most aspects of village life and usually only members of the church in good standing sat on the various councils.

The farm village and its related architecture clearly played a major role in the development and preservation of Mennonite religious and cultural beliefs. The close proximity of neighbors in the village contributed to a communal spirit as well as to social cohesiveness. The agricultural economic base of the villages allowed the inhabitants to enjoy an isolated but often fruitful existence, free from unwanted external influences. The conformity of architectural designs themselves reflected an appreciation for simplicity and order, and prevented social stratification based on the show of personal wealth.

Under this intricate system and with the benefit of rich farmland, the Mennonite colonies in Russia soon began to thrive. By the 1850s many of the early house/barn units were being replaced by more substantial brick and stone structures (Figure 4). A few settlers even became successful entrepreneurs, owning factories and sometimes large farm estates. However, this prosperity, due to changing international politics was relatively short-lived.

During the early 1870s, the Russian government, alarmed at the rising power of her neighboring German nations, set in motion a program to "Russify" her colonists. Laws were passed which required the use of the Russian language in administrative and official correspondence. Soon, Russian was a required subject in all schools. The passage of the Universal Military Service Act in 1874, finally forced many of the Mennonites to make plans for yet another move. Some travelled to the region east of the Ural Mountains in central Russia, but for most, North America was the chosen destination. Within the next ten years, 18,000 – over one-third of the Russian Mennonite population – left for North America. Of these, 8,000 found their way to Canada and the new province of Manitoba.



Figure 4
Typical brick house/barn unit in one of the more prosperous of the Russian villages. (Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives)

MENNONITE VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MSTW DISTRICT

When the Mennonite immigrants who had chosen Manitoba first arrived in the West Reserve in 1875, they immediately set about to re-establish the traditional order which had served them so well in Russia, and which had been guaranteed them by the Canadian government. One of the first and most important tasks they faced, after disembarking from the steamboat near Emerson, was the selection of the new village sites. While the women and children remained behind in temporary barracks, group leaders went out to investigate the land in the reserve. High ground in close proximity to a water source as well as the presence of well-drained prairie land for the production of crops and low-lying meadows for good livestock pasturage, were important considerations in choosing a village location. With these considerations in mind, the choice of the west half of the reserve was natural. The Pembina Hills spawned several flowing creeks and had abundant stands of timber. The prairie land to the east of the hills was fertile and well drained. Only one of the villages in the MSTW district, Blumenfeld, proved to be poorly located and had to be moved when the site became too wet during the spring.

Although the Dominion Lands Act required that quarter-section homesteads be registered according to individual settlers, a special hamlet privilege granted to the Mennonites allowed them to pool the land around a village site and re-survey it in the traditional village pattern (Figure 5).

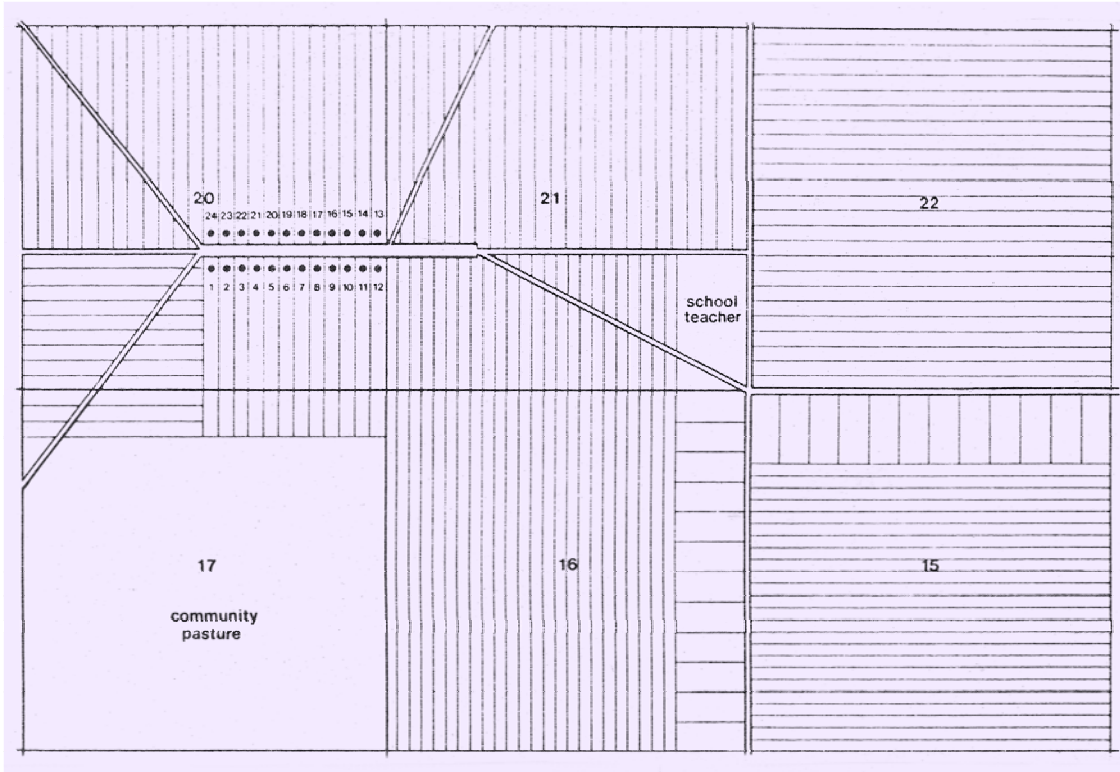


Figure 5
 Original village plan of
 Blumenfeld, showing the field
 strips, village lots and the
 community pasture. (MSTW
 Planning District Background
 Report: Rural Communities)

Most of the farm-villages consisted of a single street with narrow building lots extending back along one or both sides of the street. In the MSTW District, the latter was by far the more common type. Arable land around the village was divided into long narrow strips or "Koagels" and distributed equally among the farmers according to quality and location. The poorer low-lying areas were reserved for the community pasture.

Within each village, lots were laid out so that the buildings of individual farm units were placed about sixty metres apart and about thirty metres from the street to provide ample space for trees, gardens, and fences. Building lots were also reserved, usually in the village centre, for schools and church buildings. Towards one end of the village, and in a few cases, along a short side street, were the smaller lots of the "Anwohner" or non-farmer section. Generally, the homes of young married couples - still without farmland - tradesmen (Like shoemakers, tanners, watch-repairmen, and the village herdsman's hut would all be located in this area. In later years this would also be the location of a general store/post office or blacksmith's shop. The opposite end of the village street was traditionally reserved for the village windmill, necessary for grinding flour and sawing lumber, although mills were actually built in only a few villages (Reinland and Reinfeld were two examples) (Figure 6).



Figure 6
The Reinland windmill, one of the early landmarks in the West Reserve. Constructed by Johann Bergman in 1878-79, it was used for grinding wheat and crushing feed until it was dismantled at the turn of the century. (Reinland, 1976: 53)

Traditional house/barn units were constructed in all of the villages but social and economic developments led over time to variations in design and methods of construction. In general these developments followed a recognizable pattern. The initial, pioneer, period lasted roughly seven years, from initial settlement in 1875 to the arrival of the railroad in 1882. Villages during this period were generally little more than a collection of crude, hastily constructed shelters and impermanent log structures. Agricultural production was at a subsistence level while early crop failures due to grasshopper infestations and early frosts forced many settlers to rely on government loans simply to survive.

After these initial hardships, economic conditions improved rapidly. By the time the railroad arrived in 1882, livestock and crop production had increased to the point where all the government loans had been repaid, and new, larger dwellings were being constructed in all of the villages. With better agricultural yields and the improved access to markets and suppliers provided by the railway, the communities entered a period of relative prosperity. During this, second, period of village development, lasting roughly from 1882 to 1900, village life and architecture designs in the MSTW district followed traditional patterns. Large, well-maintained house-barn units were not set in shady tree-lined streets. Village administration and institutions followed the conventional "Shult" system, and for the most part, agriculture production still followed the strip-field system.

By the turn of the century, however, change had come to many of the villages. Agricultural methods were revolutionized with the adoption of farm mechanization, and later the adoption of the public school system and municipal government demonstrated that many of the Mennonites were breaking with their past. By 1900 most of the villages in the East and parts of the West Reserve were abandoning the strip-field system, and farmers had begun to move out of the villages to farm individual homesteads, a practice better suited to mechanized farming. In the MSTW district, where the most conservative "Altkolonier" group had settled, traditions were not so readily abandoned. In time, however, they too were forced to come to terms with the new ways.

Many of the Mennonite leaders felt that these social changes had become unacceptable and in 1916 plans were made to move the entire Mennonite population in Manitoba to new colonies in Mexico. The first trainload left four years later, and by 1925 over 3,200 had left the reserve - less than 1,000 Mennonites chose to remain. The villages were drastically affected - in some cases entire communities were abandoned. Only the timely arrival of the "Russlaenders" Mennonites from the old colonies in Russia fleeing the turmoil of the Russian Revolution - saved many of the remaining villages in the MSTW district from vanishing entirely. However, the social makeup of the population, new and established, had been so altered that traditional life-styles lost their significance and architectural customs continued to be disregarded. In the remaining villages and on the individual farmsteads, during this period, farm buildings took on a transitional, and by the 1930s, a contemporary appearance.

Although the three major stages of village development and related architectural types can be clearly distinguished in the MSTW District, the nature and timing of each period often differed, and generally overlapped each other depending upon the time of settlement and the economic progress of individuals. At any one time villages could contain buildings from several different periods. However, each period was characterized by specific building types and thus lend themselves quite easily to individual consideration.