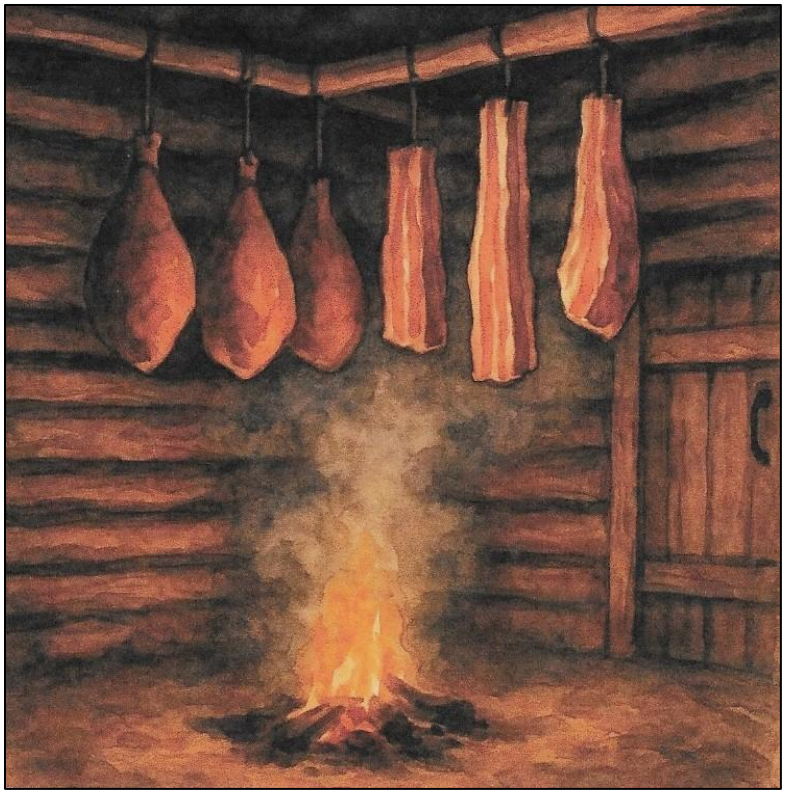
Early Nelson County Smokehouses

By Lynn Coffey



Meat being smoked inside a log smokehouse

Smokehouses, another throwback to an earlier era, were once commonplace on nearly every rural property. Before the hum of refrigerators, meat preservation in Virginia was a seasonal ritual; part necessity, part tradition, and a matter of survival.

Each fall, one of the most anticipated and communal events on the farm was hog-killing time. It was a multi-day affair that involved family, neighbors, and every set of capable hands. In the mountains, people raised and butchered hogs to feed their large families because the meat was easier to cure than larger cuts of beef. Although the term “smokehouse” was considered an expression for any outbuilding where meat was kept before and after curing, other names such as meat houses or salt sheds were used as well.

I always thought smokehouses had inside fireplaces with outside chimneys but in doing research, I found very few smokehouses actually had chimneys. If a smokehouse *did* have a chimney, it was small, not like a home fireplace chimney. If the butchered meat was to be smoked, it was suspended from thick beams with iron hooks or tied up with heavy twine. Below, a small fire of sassafras, green hickory or applewood smoldered slowly; not hot enough to cook the meat, but steady enough to dry and infuse it with flavor. Corncobs were also burned for the abundance of smoke they produced. The idea was to produce a lot of smoke and not much heat to cure the meat. These low fires were safer than a roaring flame. It was monitored continuously and was kept going for several days to weeks, depending on how long the meat needed to smoke. Smoke repelled insects and discouraged mold. Smoking wasn’t just functional -- it was personal. The type of wood used, the timing of the smoke, and the spice mix defined each family’s signature flavor that was kept within the family and wasn’t shared.

Inside, the building's air was dark and still, rich with the scent of wood smoke and salt. They were typically built slightly uphill from the springhouse and far enough from the barn or home to ensure fire safety. It needed to sit on slightly raised ground to avoid standing water where mold or rot could spoil the meat. Shade kept temperatures moderate which was important during warm spells and the building needed to be accessible during heavy winter snows. Smokehouses had no windows and a tight-fitting door so the thick smoke was confined to a small space. Many didn't smoke the meat at all but just salted the hams, shoulders, and sidemeat and hung them from the rafters of the building, thus the term meathouse or salt shed. I began noticing that many of these meathouses were built over top of ground houses or early ice pits. Lowell Humphries of Montebello offered a good explanation by saying it made good sense to house two buildings over just one roof, thus saving time, money and space.



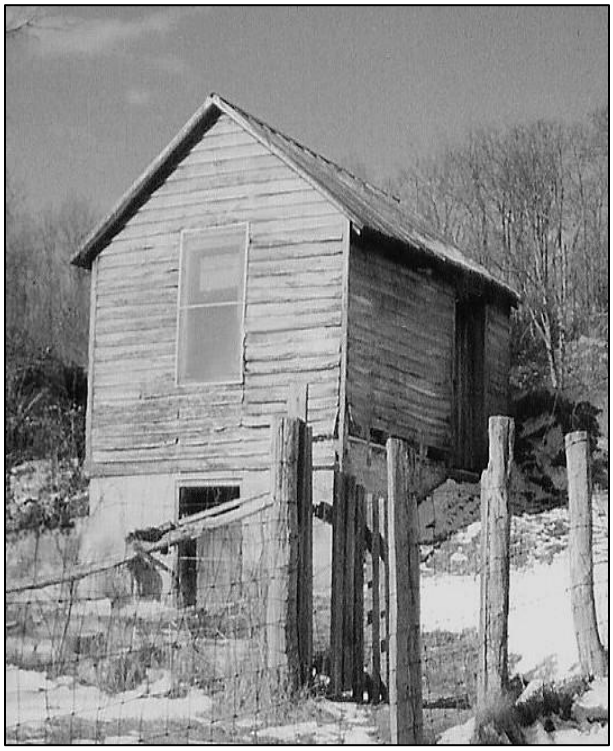
Seaman's ground/meathouse on Fork Mountain

The meat house at the Mitchael and Louise Seaman's farm on Fork Mountain was like many others in that it was built over the top of a ground house or root cellar. Barbara Brooks, Mitchael's daughter, said the building is now probably over 50 years old and she can remember when her family salted the hog meat and hung it to cure inside the house. She remembers as a young child, watching her father hang the slaughtered hogs on wooden poles down by the creek and butcher them. The meat was then cut up and brought back to a log corn crib to be salted for a few months before it was hung inside the meat house. The salt would thickly cake on the meat and Barbara said her dad would wash each piece in an iron pot filled with water that was suspended over an open fire and add Borax to loosen the caked-on salt. The meat was then patted dry and put into homemade pillow cases to keep the insects away and hung in the meat house until needed. In later years, they had another butcher the hogs and the family would pick up the meat and bring it home for the salting process before hanging it up to cure.

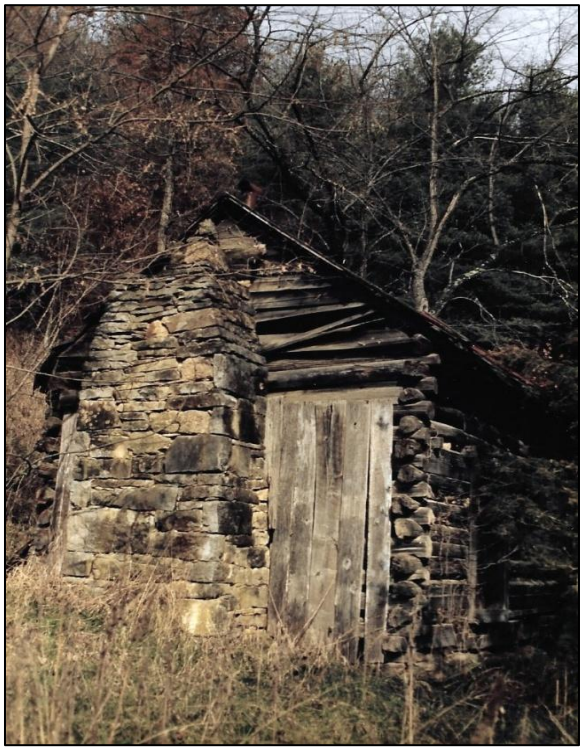


Seaman's log corn crib where the meat was salted and then hung in bags from the meathouse rafters

Two more smoke/meat houses that were also located on Fork Mountain in Montebello are the ones that belonged to Melvin Bryant and his brother, Frank. Like the one at Mitchael Seamans, Melvin's meathouse was on top of a ground house while Frank's was built of logs and *did* have an inside/outside rock chimney.

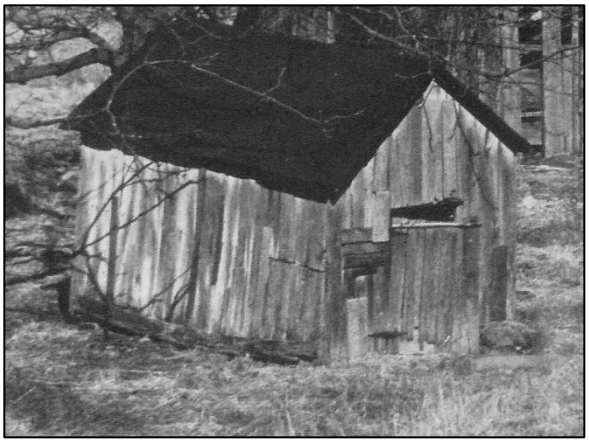


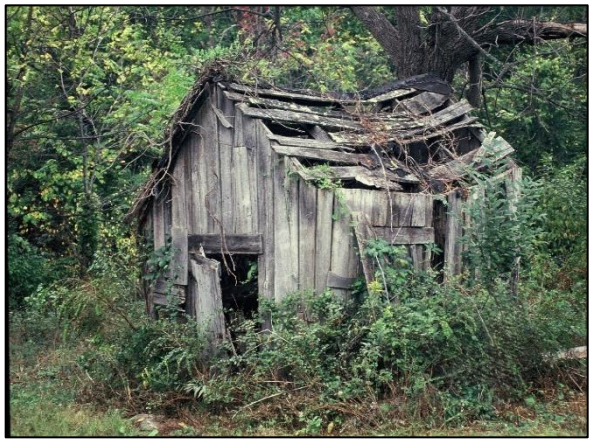
Melvin Bryant's meathouse on top of ground cellar



Frank Bryant's smokehouse with rock chimney

In the Love community, Johnny Coffey had what he called a salt shed where he salted his hog meat and hung it from the ceiling to cure. Although the building is now gone, I remember going in and seeing a trough on the back wall and a wooden counter along one side where the salting took place. Many's the time I visited his house to see him carving slices of cured sidemeat (bacon) and frying it up crisp for his breakfast. Just like the salt shed, Johnny is now gone but the photos and the memories remain in my heart forever.

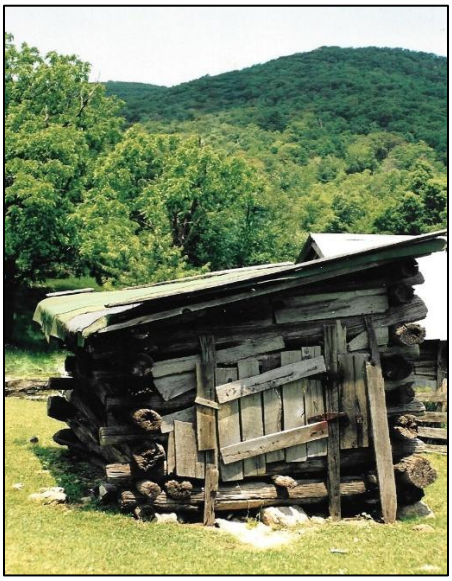




Johnny Coffey's salt shed while it was still intact and later, as it aged and went back to nature

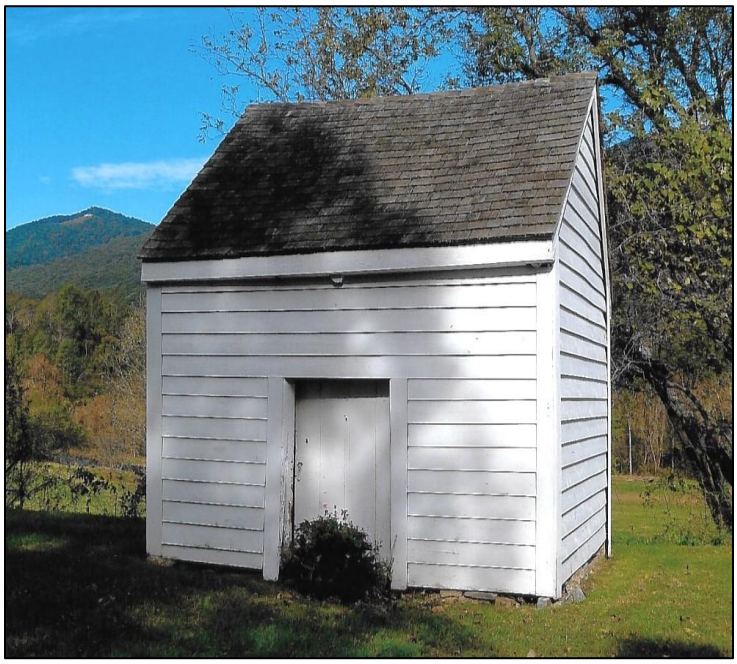
Another iconic homeplace first belonged to Averill Campbell and later to the Matthew Campbell family. We first became acquainted with Matthew's three children who lived out their lives on the 300-acre property when my husband Billy was the pastor of Mount Paran Baptist Church in Montebello. Owen, May Bell, and Jimmy were members of the church and continued to live the sparse life of their ancestors without any modern conveniences. They never had a driver's license and chose to walk everywhere they needed to go through the mountains. No electric, no telephone, with wood heat and water from the spring. In this modern age, the Campbells were truly a marvel. They butchered their hogs in the cold winter months and salted and cured the meat that was kept in a small log building until needed. As each of the Campbell children passed on, so did a way of life that is now only a thing of the past in our area.





The Campbell homeplace under the shadow of Spy Rock. Closeup of the log meat house

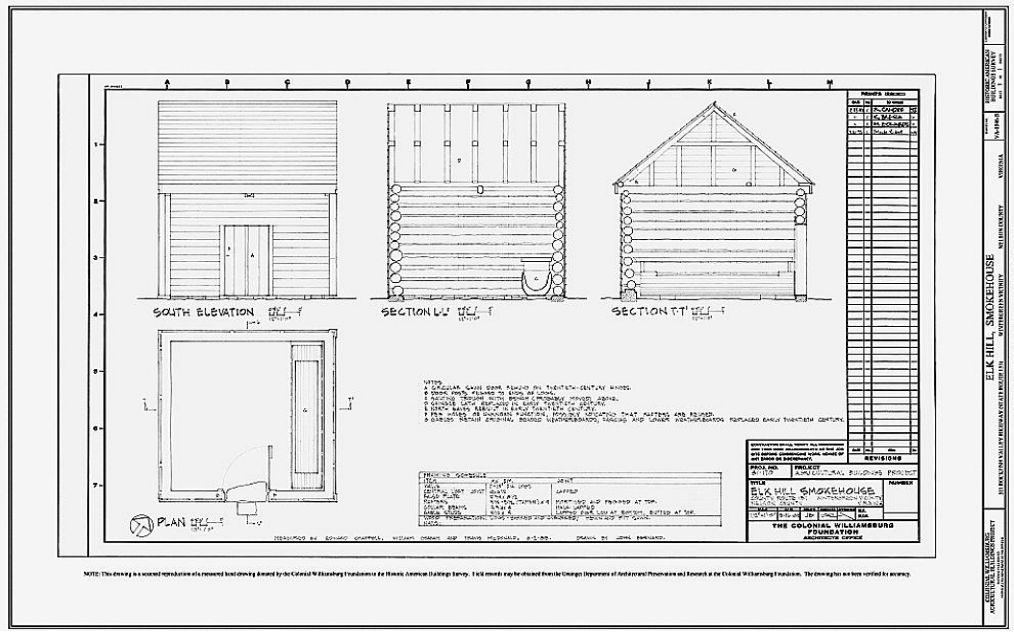
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Elk Hill, an early twentieth-century double-pile house that seems to contain an early nineteenth-century L-house at its core, is located on the highest point of a ridge between Highway 151 and the Rockfish River.

The farm has numerous outbuildings, including an early log smokehouse that dates back to mid-nineteenth-century. The building is located behind the main house, on the brink of the ridge and inside it contains a bench and a salting trough.

At left; photo of Elk Hill smokehouse



Early drawing from Colonial Williamsburg showing plans for the smokehouse at Elk Hill

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Stately Pharsalia at the foot of dePriest mountain

Pharsalia is an 1814 home built by Major Thomas Massie for his son William as a wedding gift. It is located in the Tye River Valley and sits on the shoulder of dePriest Mountain. In its heyday, Pharsalia's working farm was part of a family-owned tract in excess of 10,000 acres. In addition to the original family smokehouse still on site today, is the smokehouse from William Massie's father's home, Level Green, that

was disassembled and moved to the property in early 2000 for complete renovation. The farm's meat house where they hung the cured meat is located over top of the ice pit and is now used as a "Gentleman's Club."



The original smokehouse at Pharsalia





Two views of the wooden pegs inside the smokehouse where meat was hung to cure



The smokehouse formerly located at Level Green restored at Pharsalia in 2000



Pharsalia's meat house over top of the ice pit, where cured meat was hung

Like Pharsalia, the meat house at High View/Mill Hill Farm in Beech Grove is located over top of the same building that houses its early ice pit. Thinking about it, this would have been a convenient place to keep the meat cool once it was cured, much like the meat houses that were built over ground houses.



The meat house at High View Farm was located over top of the ice pit

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Edgewood plantation in Wingina still maintains many of the outbuildings of the original home that burned in 1955. The antebellum smokehouse, circa 1790, is larger than the dairy and dovecoat buildings. The 14 x 14-foot building is centrally located between the other two structures standing in a row along the main entrance to the farm. Pyramidal in form, the smokehouse has weatherboard siding with a slate roof and vertical slat vents located on the north side of the building. The roof is supported by a king post truss and vertical vents.



Early photograph of the Cabell family at Edgewood



Center building is smokehouse with dairy & dovecoat on either side



Closeup of the antebellum smokehouse at Edgewood



Billy Byers' meat house/ground house in Montebello





Billy's meat house/ground house with canned green beans in ground house portion



Stately Glenthorne, circa 1787



The early smokehouse at Glenthorne Farm





Glenthorne Farm sign and the interior of the old smokehouse with rock foundation and large wooden sills. Rafter pegs for hanging meat still showing some residual salt

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