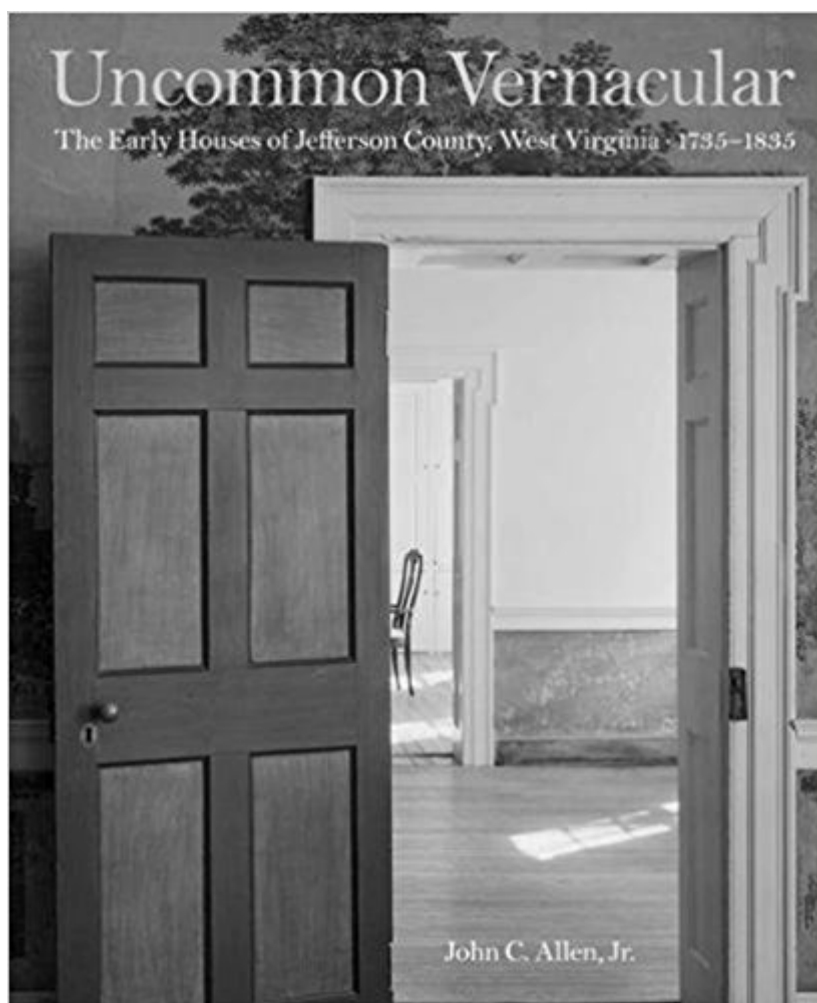


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# Uncommon Vernacular: The Early Houses Of Jefferson County, West Virginia, 1735-1835



## Synopsis

Within the picturesque borders of Jefferson County, West Virginia remain the vestiges of a history filled with Civil War battles and political rebellion. Yet also woven into the historical landscape of this small county nestled within the Shenandoah Valley is an unusual collection of historic homes. In this fascinating architectural exploration, John C. Allen, Jr. details his expansive seven-year survey of Jefferson County's historic residences. By focusing on dwellings built from the mid-eighteenth century to the arrival of the railroad and canal in 1835, Allen unfolds the unique story of this area's early building traditions and architectural innovations. The 250 buildings included in this work—from the plantation homes of the Washington family to the log houses of yeomen farmers—reveal the unique development of this region, as Allen categorizes structures and establishes patterns of construction, plan, and style. Allen's refreshing perspective illuminates the vibrant vernacular architecture of Jefferson County, connecting the housing of this area to the rich history of the Shenandoah Valley. Varying features of house siting, plan types, construction techniques, building materials, outbuildings, and exterior and interior detailing illustrate the blending of German, Scots-Irish, English, and African cultures into a distinct, regional style. Adorned with over seven hundred stylish photographs by Walter Smalling and elegant drawings, floor plans, and maps by Andrew Lewis, *Uncommon Vernacular* explores and preserves this historic area's rich architectural heritage.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"During my career at the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office I have realized that while great architecture exists within the state's boundaries, not many people knew about it. Now they will. And, although I have visited many buildings included in this book or read their National Register of Historic Places nominations, I could never turn to a reference volume that provided a comprehensive review through floor plans, drawn elevations and photographs. Now I can. John Allen has captured the wonderful architecture of Jefferson County in this, the first publication that documents in great breadth the character and quality of architecture found in West Virginia's eastern panhandle region of the Shenandoah Valley. Focusing on the period 1735-1835, Allen confirms that architecture found in Jefferson County embraced the popular architectural styles of the era. Each building's description and analysis is accompanied by meticulous drawings and rich photographs. Walter Smalling, Jr., photographer, and Andrew Lewis, illustrator, have created a wonderful record of this architecture. Both serious student and casual reader will enjoy exploring these pages. I look forward to adding this volume to my collection and sharing it with others."

Susan M. Pierce, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Within this handsomely presented book, author John Allen shares his rapture for the eighteenth and early nineteenth century architectural gems he has uncovered in Jefferson County, West Virginia. Some known, others discovered; some sophisticated for their time and place, others a unique marriage of English precedents from coastal Virginia and German influences that flowed south through the Shenandoah Valley. Beautifully supported by Walter Smalling's handsome photographs and Andrew Lewis's excellent elevation drawings and abundant floor plans, *Uncommon Vernacular* opens for the casual reader and scholar alike a rich though largely underappreciated vein of America's architectural heritage. In so doing, Allen has struck pure gold.

Dr. William J. Murtagh, First Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places

Detailed text, extensive photographic documentation, and meticulously drawn plans and renderings collectively present early and extant conditions in a manner that provides a comprehensive historical record.

Joan M. Brierton, Historic Preservation Specialist

This book is beautifully and engagingly written.

Keith D. Alexander, Historic Preservation Program Coordinator, Shepherd University

John C. Allen, Jr. works as a preservation coordinator and architectural historian near Shepherdstown, West Virginia. He serves as the chairman of the Historic Landmarks Commission of Jefferson County, West Virginia. Andrew Lewis, the illustrator, is a licensed architect living in Rectortown, Virginia. His architectural work has been recognized with many awards over his twenty-four-year career. Walter Smalling, Jr., a Washington architectural photographer, began his

professional career with the National Park Service and has worked as a freelance photographer since 1988.

Architectural historians, rejoice! This book presents the most comprehensive, accurate, beautiful, and important study of historic houses in [any county of] West Virginia ever published. I waited for two months for this book, and I'm absolutely stunned. What a gorgeous volume author John Allen and West Virginia University Press have produced! First, let me briefly discuss the studied area. Jefferson County, West Virginia contains an enormous stock of pre-Civil War houses. From the small stone houses of early German settlers traveling down the Great Wagon Road, to the grand estates of the Washington and Fairfax families, to the townhouses of important merchants in Shepherdstown, Charles Town, and Harpers Ferry, this book covers them all. There's still so much to be discovered and restored in Jefferson County, and this book does justice to that concept. Regarding the book itself, this is NOT an architectural catalog, and it is a study of domestic architecture (houses), not churches, courthouses, or other public structures. It's written in a narrative style, split into chapters dedicated to farm houses, town houses, construction techniques, architectural details, and interior design. It's so comprehensive in its coverage of the built environment that you might forget that it's not actually a catalog, but a study of cultural, historical and artistic contexts. Now, here are the REAL standouts you will take away from this book: First, this is a study of what IS. Not a study of what WAS or what COULD HAVE BEEN. In other words, the 250 sites included in this book are ALL still standing. This is no directory of lost glory. You can find each and every structure mentioned in the book still standing today, though many will be altered. The author makes clear in his methodology that the building selection includes extant farm and town structures built before 1835. Why 1835? The author concludes from close examination of stylistic evolution that regional characteristics largely disappear after that date. An 1850s building in Harpers Ferry looks essentially the same as an 1850s building in San Francisco. Second, the photography and graphics in this book are among the best I have ever seen. Many of the colonial structures studied in the book are illustrated with archival HABS photographs, but once we move past 1780, the photographs (all monochrome) are native to this book and are simply superb. The photography of fine architectural details is world class. The conjectural illustrations of so-called "restored" elevations are beautiful, and the plans are comprehensive. These devices give the reader an idea of what the pristine structures looked like, before alteration. The graphics add real value to the book as a research tool. A quick note about dating: How architectural historians date structures is still very much personal, as there is no universally accepted standard. Sometimes, if there is a section of a

wall that dates to 1750, an historian will date the entire structure to 1750. Realtors are good at this, hoping to cash in on the prestige of age. Other times, if one column of an entrance structure received a nail in 1877, an historian will date the entire structure to 1877. The ultra-purist architectural historians like to do this. This particular author is more of the LATTER than the former, meaning that his dating of buildings is exceptionally conservative. Many of the houses featured in this book were substantially built BEFORE the author's stated build dates, based on common evidence (such as letters, tax records, deeds, contracts, etc...). This is not a flaw, but it's important to establish the author's point of view. The author does not make use of dendrochronology since few of these structures have been dated using the technique. Here's the bottom line: Buy this book if you have any interest in the domestic architecture of frontier Virginia. This book is appropriate for professionals as well as interested amateurs. It is a real gem of a volume. This book immediately brings to mind Maral Kalbian's equally superb study of Frederick County, Virginia. The book is beautifully edited, cloth-bound and printed by West Virginia University. Exceptional work.

For anyone interested in architecture, the history of rural eastern America, or history in general, this book is a wonderful glimpse at the origins and events that unfolded behind, and in many cases dramatically shaped, the rural and small town landscape that exists in Jefferson County, West Virginia today. This book is packed with beautiful and thought-provoking pictures and illustrations that show not only the structures as they exist today, but provide insight - through its deeply researched and artfully drawn illustrations - into what once was but no longer exists. This project is both aesthetically stunning and historically important. It is at the same time a story of how our history has shaped our landscape and an artful catalog of architecture worthy of and in need of preservation.

I have only read a few chapters so far, but it is interesting to see how factors, such as transportation methods and political influences, caused changes in architecture. Many houses in Jefferson County are unique to even neighboring counties. The author is disheartened, as am I, about the loss of some of these historic structures. Hopefully, this book will help motivate people to preserve and restore not only houses in Jefferson County, WV, but across our nation. My fear is that only those of us who already believe in historic preservation will read the book. I wish it were required reading in our schools. Architecture is ignored unless one decides to major in it in college. The houses in this book are from the lowly to the mansion, but all are wonderful. The author really spent a lot of time researching and documenting the houses he wrote about. You can tell this book is a labor of love.

The paper is thick and of high quality. Photographs are high quality. My only regret is that I waited so long to order a copy.

Lovely book; very descriptive and many photos/drawings. Mr. Allen certainly did his homework and I thank him for the time and effort he put into this. For those who are not familiar with Jefferson County, WV, it is the home of Harpers Ferry (John Brown's Raid in 1859) and also the location of many Washington (as in George) homes. The county seat, Charles Town, was named for his brother, Charles, whose home is located there and who donated land in the center of town. The two streets at the main intersection of Charles Town are named "George" and "Washington" and many others in the city limits are named for other members of the family. There is also a "Congress" and a "Liberty" street - very patriotic. Charles Town is located about 55 miles northwest of our nation's capital.

The finest county inventory I've seen! Minor quibbles. The organization makes it easy to focus on a specific characteristic, but \*very\* difficult to focus on an individual house, especially disappointing in the county with the documented work of John Arris and incredibly beautiful hall at Harewood. The author's use of the term "millwork" to describe the hand-planed and careful on-site installation of decorative woodwork is a major solecism. Uncommon Vernacular will live on in your bookcase and in your hand, like Waterman's Mansions of Virginia and Early architecture of North Carolina, for the value of its photographs long after much of its text is deemed outdated or dubious or both. A fantastic, must-buy book.

I think it is wonderful, but then I am his mother. It is into its second printing, so that shows its value. Johnny has spoken to Directors of Colonial Williamsburg, Mount Vernon Ladies, Museum of Shenandoah Valley, West Virginia University, and many other historical groups.

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