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# Review of "Architecture and Artifacts of the Pennsylvania Germans: Constructing Identity in Early America" by C.G. Falk

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Cynthia G. Falk

**Architecture and Artifacts of the Pennsylvania Germans: Constructing Identity in Early America**

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008, xiv + 241 pp., 103 b/w illus.

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In November 1794, a European traveler, Théophile Cazenove, visited the home of a prosperous Pennsylvania German farmer named Leonard Elmaker. Despite the farmer's wealth, Cazenove described the scene inside the Elmaker home with distaste, noting that "the whole family (seven children) were having a very bad dinner around a very dirty little table, and the furniture in the main room was not worth 200 dollars" (47). According to author Cynthia G. Falk, Cazenove's account echoed the common view of Pennsylvania Germans as industrious but ignorant and "overly thrifty" (47). Such stereotypes privileged ethnic identity as the main factor characterizing the group. Studying reports such as Cazenove's, along with other primary documents (probate inventories, wills, contracts), architecture, and material culture, Falk explores how Pennsylvania Germans used objects to express various sorts of identity in the late eighteenth century.

Falk's primary interest is how outsiders of the time used material culture to characterize the Pennsylvania Germans versus how that group created its own collective and individual identity. She notes that although the Pennsylvania Germans of the eighteenth century were often seen as a homogeneous group (as they still are seen today), they were of diverse social and economic status, religious affiliation, occupation, and other factors. In particular, Falk looks at architecture and artifacts to argue that status, not ethnic identity, influenced the choice of material objects. Pennsylvania Germans of the late eighteenth century were more concerned about improving their lot in the New World than in maintaining strong attachments to the old. To support her argument Falk looks at three main attributes: ethnicity and European heritage, social and economic status, and religious affiliation and personal piety.

Falk wisely defines material culture broadly to include buildings, furniture, clothing, foodways, household items, and religious objects. Lack of documentation frequently frustrates scholars of vernacular culture, yet Falk effectively analyzes objects and primary sources from this large range of evidence to gain a sense of the cultural significance that artifacts held for their owners.

For readers unfamiliar with the scholarship on Pennsylvania Germans, Falk provides a thorough review of the literature. She notes that scholars have often focused on language, religion, and folk objects to present the Pennsylvania Germans as a unified ethnic group. (This trend began in the mid-nineteenth century, when German-Americans, who could trace their family's arrival to colonial times, wished to distinguish themselves from more recent immigrants.) When early scholars of Pennsylvania German culture encountered evidence of objects not obviously German, they explained their presence as evidence of a move toward assimilation in the dominant Anglo-American culture. Falk sees the situation as much more complex, however. Part of a growing and diversifying economy, late eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Germans chose what they wanted from their own and other cultures. Falk draws widely on more recent scholarship, including the field work of William Woys Weaver and Charles Berggren, who have shown that Pennsylvania Germans used architectural forms other than the entry-kitchen type house traditionally associated with the group.<sup>1</sup> She also builds on the research of Cary Carson, who has argued that in the late eighteenth century Americans of various backgrounds opened themselves up to outside influences that had less to do with ethnicity than with status and gentility.<sup>2</sup> Those with aspirations to refinement erected buildings or purchased artifacts that spoke of status rather than ethnic background. One example of this process was the construction by Pennsylvania Germans of the so-called German-Georgian house—a stone, center-passage house with a symmetrical façade.

By studying documents such as the federal direct tax records of 1798, Falk also debunks assumptions of the time that Pennsylvania Germans tended to live in

smaller, meaner houses than their non-German counterparts. She finds that oftentimes people with German surnames owned slightly larger and more valuable houses than people with British surnames. Overall, Falk concludes, the kinds of houses people of German and British descent lived in did not differ much; most members of both groups lived "in small houses in poor condition," whereas wealthier members of both groups lived in larger Georgian houses (48). This evidence overturns the late-eighteenth-century notion that Pennsylvania Germans were uniquely frugal. Furthermore, Falk notes that writers describing houses and furnishings of the wealthy "were really not concerned with issues of ethnicity. Instead they saw the buildings as manifestations of social and economic status" regardless of nationality (110).

Falk also addresses the reasons why late-eighteenth-century commentators wanted to present Germans as industrious, economical, and, sometimes, ignorant. As Republican ideals were being shaped in the new United States, those envisioning a nation built on agrarian self-sufficiency and democracy, such as Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, wanted to portray farmers in a positive light, as honest, frugal, and virtuous. Others, especially European writers who supported increasing commerce, tended to present farmers negatively, as crude and uncivil. Despite the difficulty of assessing the intentions of a people who did not explain themselves, Falk persuasively employs the available evidence to counter prevailing accounts of Pennsylvania Germans in the era of the new Republic.

Another important factor in Falk's argument is the manifestation in architecture and artifacts of the role of religion in shaping identity. Most Pennsylvania Germans were protestants, and although they embraced a range of denominations—from the monastic Ephrata community to the more worldly Mennonites, Moravians, Lutherans, and members of Reformed congregations—most shared similar concerns. Falk states that by the late eighteenth century, "Christian dictates regarding simplicity became intertwined with ideas about virtue, republicanism,

and excess" (172). Prosperous individuals, regardless of religious affiliation, needed to balance an appropriate display of status and luxury while avoiding intemperance. In particular, buildings erected by Moravian, Lutheran, and Reformed congregations became more stately and refined as the century progressed.

Falk's book is beautifully produced, with an abundance of large, sharp, black-and-white photographs and numerous floor plans; it offers readers an excellent model for combining the study of artifacts and documents to understand better the forces that ethnicity, social and economic status, and religious affiliation exerted on the selection and creation of objects. This volume also demonstrates the importance of looking at architecture and objects together rather than as separate topics of investigation. It is a welcome addition to the study of vernacular architecture and material culture, and to architectural history in general.

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#### Notes

1. William Woys Weaver, "The Pennsylvania German House: European Antecedents and New World Forms," *Winterthur Portfolio* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 243–64; and Charles Bergengren "The Cycle of Transformations in the Houses of Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1988.

2. Cary Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?" in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1994).