

Reuben Cuff's Domestic Landscape, Part II: The House and the Shifting Landscape of Home

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The previous article, "The 1798 Connection" in Vol. 54, No. 1 of this newsletter, tied Reuben Cuff (1764-1845), son of a slave, preacher, and one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal general conference, to a stone house in Lower Alloways Creek Township. It drew conclusions about Cuff's relative economic standing from the 1798 Direct Tax List. This article will look at the life of Reuben Cuff as revealed by his house and other records.



Figure 1. Cuff-Dubois House in Lower Alloways Creek Township, looking southeast. The stone section was a one-story house where Reuben Cuff and his family lived in 1798. Richard Dubois built later frame additions between 1830 and 1890.

Reuben Cuff's one-story, stone house (Figure 1) evidenced the highest level of workmanship of the day. That and its stone building material translated into the high valuation for a one-story house found on the 1798 tax list. It was also uncommon for its square floor plan (Figure 2). The vast majority of regional houses in the eighteenth century had rectangular plans. Though altered around 1840, physical evidence in the Cuff house points to an original three-room layout known as the "Penn Plan." This was less often

chosen than the one-room “hall” and the two-room “hall/parlor” in the eighteenth century, and was generally utilized for more elaborate houses, such as the Salem County example of Seven Stars Tavern (Figure 3).¹ The evidence for a central stack of corner fireplaces speaks clearly for a two-room deep arrangement. But the edge between two sets of contemporaneous floorboards suggests a partition that would have created a third room.

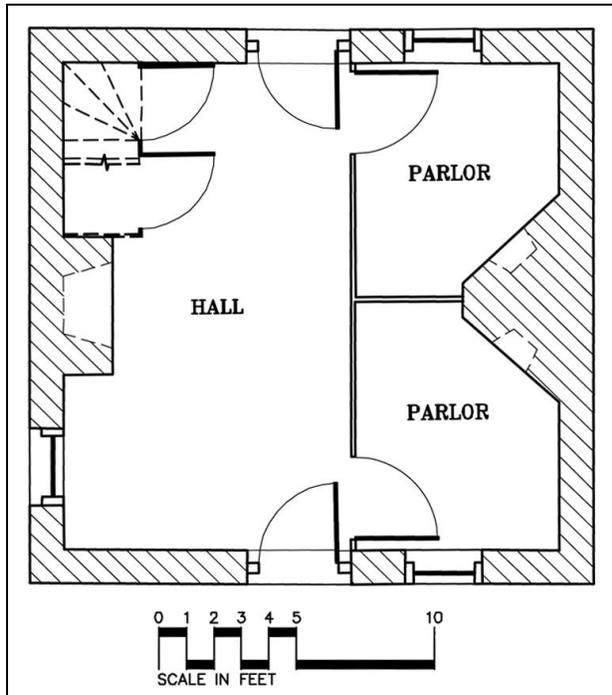


Figure 2. Probable original floor plan of Reuben Cuff's house prior nineteenth-century alterations.

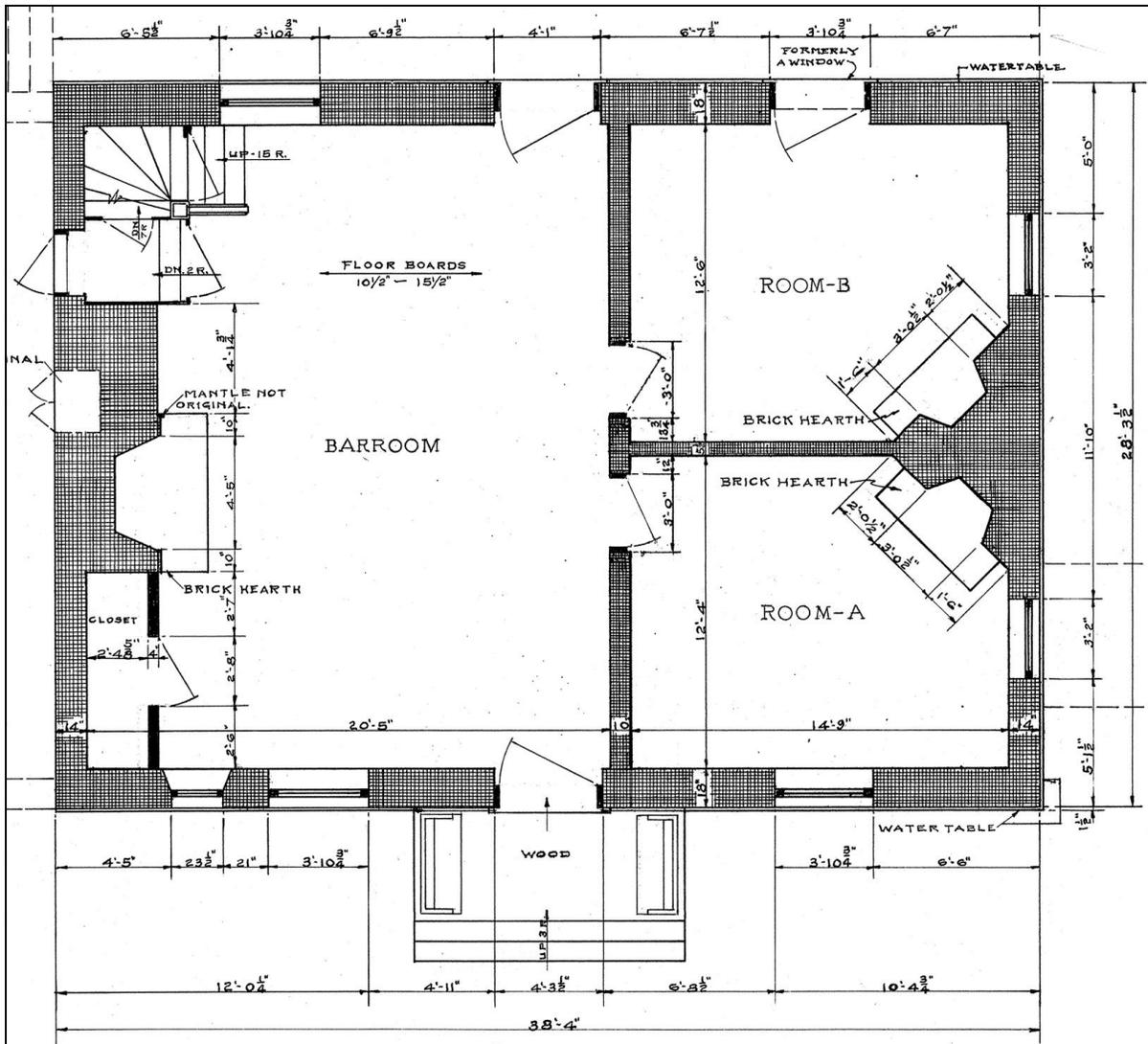


Figure 3. Seven Stars Tavern, Pilesgrove Township, showing a three-room layout known as the "Penn Plan."

If so, in Cuff's house, the now missing partition walls were more than likely constructed of vertical, beaded-edged wood boards stained red. The two small parlors were heated with back-to-back corner fireplaces, and would have been used for sleeping, an office, or more private entertaining. They would have been accessible from the hall but probably not from each other. The largest room, or hall, would have contained a large fireplace in the south gable wall, a window in the same wall, and a stair to the garret in one corner. The hall would have served as a more public all-purpose gathering space. The end wall was removed when the house was enlarged.

Local examples of the three-room plan tend to be much larger than this one, however—850 to 900 square feet on the first floor—versus Cuff's 400 square feet. In addition, they were never common.² Cuff's parlors would have measured only roughly eight by nine feet. As such a small example, and as a stone example, it would be a very rare expression of the three-room idea, one of several housing options in the minds of eighteenth-century Delaware Valley builders and one that dates back to the time of William Penn.³

There is no documented time of construction, so dating must be done by considering physical evidence and comparing it to local houses of known dates. The earliest documented example of a double-pile (two-room deep) house in Salem County was built in 1742 (Figure 4).⁴ The 1760s has been cited as the period of double-pile construction in Salem County.⁵ Corner fireplaces were known to the Swedes who settled in the Delaware Valley prior to English settlement, and were common in seventeenth-century England, as well. Here, they were going out of fashion by the late eighteenth-century. Cuff's stone house therefore could easily date from the 1740-1760 decades, or even earlier, as William Penn advocated for this layout from the beginning of English settlement in the Delaware Valley.

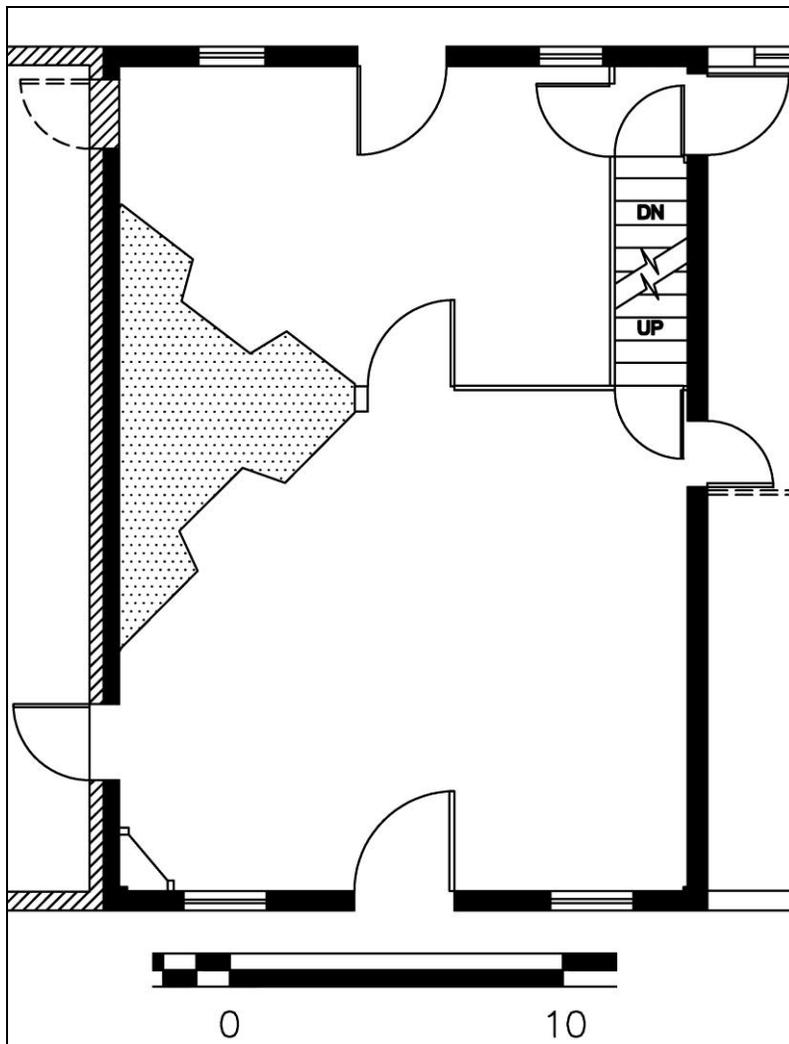


Figure 4. A Salem County double-pile house built in 1742 (Shivers/Shinn house in Woodstown). The shared stack of corner fireplaces was common until the Revolution.

In the Cuff house, eighteenth-century building craft survives. The floor joists above the rooms were exposed, hand-planed smooth and finished with beaded-edges. The exposed undersides of the flooring above were planed smooth as well, and the floorboards (of uneven thicknesses) were gauged and ploughed over the joists to lie even on the top. Such an open, finished and decorated floor framing system was in keeping with the post-medieval architectural taste commonly practiced in eighteenth-century

Salem County.⁶ Above the hall was a one-room, unfinished garret under the roof accessed by either a winder stair in the corner of the hall or a simple ladder. Hewn rafters in the raised roof were reused from the original house. One double-hung window with characteristically wide, colonial-style muntins survives from the original house. The tax list recorded a kitchen, but it is not clear where it was; it could have been an attached shed on the hall side of the house or even in the basement.

This small house would have been quite crowded for Reuben Cuff's family. Cuff fathered eleven children and raised at least one other child, Phoebe Gould, born in 1789.⁷ In 1798 Reuben was thirty-four years old with five children by Hannah Pierce, his wife of eight years. Hannah bore three more children by 1804, the year she died. Reuben and his second wife, Lydia Iler, had three children between 1806 and her death in 1814.⁸ A one-story, 400 square-foot house with a garret and a kitchen is a small space for that many people to occupy by today's standards, and there would have been little privacy. It is likely that the parlors were used for sleeping but the hall also contained beds as well as chairs and tables for entertaining visitors. As a preacher, Reuben would have had a busy social life. Most of the children probably slept in the garret above, where a myriad of household items and provisions would have been stored as well. The kitchen would have been used for not only cooking but for household industries such as cloth-making and food processing.⁹ Having a separate kitchen for the messy daily business of cooking and other daily industries would have kept the hall and parlors free for display, entertaining and sleeping. With such a growing family, it is also possible that Cuff built a frame, post-1815 extensions found within today's overall house to accommodate his growing family before he left the township. According to the tax assessor's valuation of his house, and by the fine appointments of its surviving interior, Reuben Cuff had prospered. As one of only three identifiable persons of color who either owned or occupied a house and land in the township, Reuben Cuff stands out.

The house is located amidst farm fields, a seeming unlikely spot for a preacher of high repute (Figure 5). However, his collection of farming tools, livestock and crops listed in his probate inventory of 1845 confirms that in addition to his well-known preaching and church organizing activities, he was also a farmer. Most people farmed in those times, whatever their main occupation. To this day his house remains within the agrarian setting of farm fields that he ploughed and planted. Several land transactions, and a modest inventory worth \$416.51, including a loan and a mortgage, suggest that he held uncommon economic status for a man of color.¹⁰



Figure 5. Setting of the Cuff-Dubois House, looking south, in 2008.

Tying this property to Reuben Cuff has proved problematic. That this stone house was his is a conclusion based upon logic, not direct evidence. In 1798 Reuben asserted that he owned and occupied the only stone house in Lower Alloways Creek, thirty-eight acres of land and a barn. The one colonial stone house in Lower Alloways Creek today, this one, fits the description of that house. The deeds for this parcel traced back to Solomon Dubois, whose land was divided among his heirs Richard Dubois, Susanna Stretch, Jacob Dubois and Ann Irelan in 1821.¹¹ The deed trail stopped there. How Solomon Dubois acquired this parcel and on what basis Reuben Cuff claimed the house and land in the 1798 tax record are open questions.¹² The fact that when

Sometime before 1830, Reuben Cuff left his Lower Alloways Creek homeland and moved to Upper Alloways Creek Township. His reason for leaving is not known, but possibilities include Richard Dubois' inheritance of the property, an increasingly racialized society, and the formation of African-American settlements in the early nineteenth century.

In 1798, one person, William Davis, was identified “(black)” on the Lower Alloways Creek tax list. Not so Reuben and his brother Mordecai, though they were reportedly the offspring of a freed slave and a widow of a prominent white family. This may reflect racially ambiguous attitudes of the time, together with the status of their white heritage and deep roots in that territory. By 1876, whatever ambiguities about race existed in 1798 were gone, with maps clearly identifying persons of color—portraying a racialized landscape. Reuben Cuff's relocation may be related to the trend of free-black settlement formation in Salem County and elsewhere in southern New Jersey that began in the early nineteenth-century for purposes of church organization, mutual support and protection, and to assist southern blacks to freedom.

In 1830, the census counted him among “Free Colored Persons” with a family of five. The only female in the household was between 36 and 54 years of age, and could have been his third wife, Ann Gould, whom he married in 1816, the same year as the A. M. E. founding. There is a boy under ten, a boy 10-23 (possibly their son Burgoyne), and a man 24-35 (possibly son Richard or Reuben, Jr.).¹³ Ten years later,

he was still in Upper Alloways Creek with a somewhat different family of five, including the addition of a female under 24 years of age and a boy under ten. His son Burgoyne was in a separate household with a family of three.¹⁴ The location of Reuben's Upper Alloways Creek home is not yet confirmed, but in 1876, a cluster of "colored" people, including "J. Cuff Col.," were living in Quinton Township (formerly part of Upper Alloways Creek) in the vicinity of Berry's Chapel, "E. Cuff Col" occupied a house in Pentonville, Upper Alloways Creek, and "B. Cuff, Col." (probably Reuben's son Burgoyne) owned three houses near Quinton's Bridge, one associated with 86 acres of land.¹⁵ In 1850, three neighboring households were occupied by Burgoyne Cuff, farmer, Jonathan Cuff, farmer and landowner, and Ann Cuff, a 70-year old widow (likely Reuben's), so perhaps the family resided in Quinton's Bridge.¹⁶ It is not far from Berry's Chapel, reputed to be among the Underground Railroad stations in Salem County serving the Greenwich line.¹⁷ More likely than not, he would have been involved, because black church communities were principal operatives.

In 1845 at the age of 81, after a long life of preaching, farming, and building community, family, and wealth, Reuben Cuff came home to Lower Alloways Creek to rest in the Cuff family graveyard in Canton, not far from his 1798 home (Figure 6) and very close to his father, Cuffee.



Figure 6. Reuben Cuff's gravestone in the Cuff Graveyard in Lower Alloways Creek

The evidence of Reuben Cuff's house, land and personal property place him as a middling landowner within the context of his cultural landscape, but also as an actor of exceptional economic standing among

African-Americans of his time and place. His status makes sense considering his far-reaching influence upon the religious life of African-Americans in Salem and Cumberland Counties in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries.

Part III will examine the Cuff legend and the Padgett connection in Lower Alloways Creek.

¹ Gabrielle Lanier and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*, (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 21.

² Gabrielle Lanier, *The Delaware Valley in the Early Republic: Architecture, Landscape and Regional Identity*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 138-139. Lanier discussed the type as represented in Mannington Township, Salem County.

³ *Ibid.* William Penn promoted this plan, often termed the “Penn Plan,” to Pennsylvania settlers in 1684.

⁴ Janet L. Sheridan, “‘Their houses are some Built of timber’ : The colonial Timber Frame Houses of Fenwick’s Colony, New Jersey,” M. A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 2007, 93. The frame Joseph Shinn House in Woodstown is dated by a cast-iron fireback in the parlor.

⁵ Rebecca L. Culver, “Souvenir Map of Historic Sites in Mannington Township,” Mannington Bicentennial Commission, n.d.

⁶ The alternative was the Georgian plastered ceiling and no visible framing which appeared first in houses of elites. The author has seen many examples of such exposed, finished joists in the county, some built as late as the early-nineteenth-century.

⁷ *The Christian Recorder*, May 31, 1877; Steward and Steward, 113.

⁸ William Steward and Theophilus G. Steward, *Gouldtown, A Very Remarkable Settlement of Ancient Date*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913, 113-114.

⁹ Julie Riesenweber, “Order in Domestic Space: House Plans and Room Use in the Vernacular Dwellings of Salem County, New Jersey, 1700-1774.” (Master’s Thesis. University of Delaware, 1984), 84-87.

¹⁰ Inventory Book E, Page 322, Salem County Clerks Office. Deed Indexes, 1796-1845.

¹¹ Division of Lands Book D, Page 66, Salem County Clerks Office.

¹² Deeds at the Salem County Courthouse, which begin at 1796, the unrecorded deeds in the collection of the Salem County Historical Society, the Dubois papers in the collection of David A. Fogg, and deed records at the NJ Archive.

¹³ 1830 U S Census: Upper Alloways Creek, Salem, New Jersey, Page: 378; NARA Roll: M19- 81; Family History Film: 0337934, Ancestry.com. 1830 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Fifth Census of the United States, 1830. (NARA microfilm publication M19, 201 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Steward and Steward, 114.

¹⁴ 1840; Census Place: *Upper Alloways Creek, Salem, New Jersey*; Roll: 226; Page: 261; Image: 461; Family History Library Film: 0016520, Ancestry.com. 1840 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Sixth Census of the

United States, 1840. (NARA microfilm publication M704, 580 rolls). Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ *Combination Atlas Map of Salem and Gloucester Counties, NJ* (Philadelphia: Everts and Stewart, 1876; Reprint, Gloucester County Historical Society, 1970), 34. Berry's Chapel and Pentonville, also known as Guineatown, were two of several free black settlements in Salem County (Robert Craig, *New Jersey Black Historic Places Survey*, 1982-1984, 53. In the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, Trenton.

¹⁶ 1850; Census Place: *Upper Alloways Creek, Salem, New Jersey*; Roll: *M432_462*; Page: *171A*; Image: *343*, Ancestry.com. *1850 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009. Images reproduced by FamilySearch. Original data: Seventh Census of the United States, 1850; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M432, 1009 rolls); Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Emma Marie Trusty, *The Underground Railroad: Ties That Bound Unveiled* (Philadelphia: Amed Library, 1997), 315.