



The Miner's Cottage – an architectural oddity found in Shullsburg

By Cory Ritterbusch

A visitor to Shullsburg will recognize that a predominant building material here is limestone. Due to its ease of access, many of our most prominent buildings utilized limestone, making it Shullsburg's foremost "vernacular" architectural element. Another vernacular style in Shullsburg are "Miners' Cottages."

Miners' Cottages are small, cozy homes built by miners. Miners' Cottages can only be found in mining communities. With Shullsburg being the center of the lead trade during the 1800s, we have many remnants from that era. Traditionally, miners were laborers who worked at low wages and could not afford expansive homes. Thus, they built small one-story homes that were simple to build, and usually built by the miners themselves. Typically, they were built on small lots that the miner owned. Miners were not foreign to the hard work of digging and the mineral riches found would be 100 percent his ownership. Therefore, they had basements – sometimes very deep ones. Today, nearby Galena, Illinois, Mineral Point, Wisconsin, and Shullsburg offer nice examples of this brand of architecture in the Midwest.

Here in Shullsburg around 25 Miners' Cottages owe distinct characteristics to the vernacular style of the 1800s. Many have had second stories added and additions of rooms and porches, making it difficult to see the original design. It is quite common for someone to remodel a kitchen today only to find hand-hewn

beams, square nails and primitive construction methods beneath the outdated décor. A typical kitchen size today would have been large enough for the main living area of a Miner's Cottage. The best example of a primitive miner's cottage in original condition is at 133 W. Church Street behind Turpin's Hometown Grocery Store. The best restored example is at 352 W. High Street. Many others are scattered around town. Look for unorganized additions, something called add-on architecture. A cottage at 221 E. Church Street is a wonderful example of three Shullsburg vernacular elements: limestone construction, Miner's Cottage design and add-on construction. Three matching homes on Hope Street are two-story miner's cottages. Built at a time when the average home size was increasing, even miners' cottages followed suit. Some cottages even turned into storage sheds. Many more fell to razing during the need for larger square footage since the baby boom.

Other areas in the United States where these exist include former mining towns in Colorado, Jerome, Arizona, Butte, Idaho, Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, and the Old Lead Belt of Missouri, among other isolated locations. Perhaps with the tiny house movement happening today, these small houses can be appreciated again the restoration and care for them can be a worthwhile venture for those willing to live in a unique building and enjoy the low cost of living that they provide.