

# How the Log Cabin Became an American Symbol

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Many Americans have a special fondness for the log cabin, viewing it as the home of heroic pioneers, or at least a great weekend escape. But it wasn't always this way. The log cabin was originally disdained here in America—and it took decades of pop culture and political shifts to elevate the structure to the vaunted status it holds today.

## THANK THE SWEDES

While there's plenty of imagery portraying log cabins in the English colonies of Plymouth and Jamestown (established in Massachusetts and Virginia, respectively), these depictions couldn't be further from the truth. The English had no history of log cabins—they preferred more “refined” frame houses, and would sometimes squat in subterranean dugouts until they could be built. In fact, the log cabin was first constructed in the New World in the short-lived colony of New Sweden, established in the Delaware River Valley in 1638. Such structures had been around continental Europe for centuries, and the Swedish colonists were simply using a skill that had been passed down through generations.

Log cabins might have remained a Swedish anomaly in the New World had it not been for the German and Scots-Irish who adopted them after arriving in the mid-1700s. But none of these log cabins looked much like the quaint, cozy structures we revere today. They often had dirt floors, were crawling with lice and other pests, and were prone to drafts; as one traveler remarked around 1802, the gaps between logs were "filled up with clay, but so very carelessly, that the light may be seen through in every part." Yet as uncomfortable as these cabins were, they offered impoverished immigrants an invaluable slice of freedom. Cheaper and far easier to construct than finer homes, the log cabin thus became the go-to home for newcomers to the New World, helping millions of desperate refugees turn their dreams of settling in America into a reality.

But the practicality of the structure did nothing for the log cabin's public image, or that of its inhabitants. Benjamin Franklin wrote that there were only two sorts of people, "those who are well dress'd and live comfortably in good houses," and those who "are poor, and dirty, and ragged and ignorant, and vicious and live in miserable cabins or garrets." Dr. Benjamin Rush, Surgeon General of the Middle Department of the Continental Army and a signatory to the Declaration of Independence, said the cabin dweller was "generally a man who has out-lived his credit or fortune in the cultivated parts."

As for cabins themselves, they were generally seen as "rude" and "miserable," and no self-respecting American would deign to live in one. Not permanently, at least. Cabins back then were temporary stepping stones meant to be abandoned once something better could be afforded; barring that good fortune, they were to be covered with clapboard and added to as the cornerstone for a finer home.

### **LOG CABIN PRIDE**

But the log cabin and its inhabitants' public image got a makeover after the War of 1812. The nation had just defeated the British for a second time, and Americans were feeling good, forging their own identity and distinguishing themselves from the old world. Log cabins—ubiquitous and appropriately rustic—started taking on an all-American sheen.

Soon enough, writers and artists were portraying them in a positive light. One notable example is James Fenimore Cooper's 1823 novel *The Pioneers*, where the house of protagonist Natty Bumppo is described as being "a rough cabin of logs." That scene in turn is thought to have inspired artist Thomas Cole's 1826 painting, *Daniel Boone Sitting at the Door of His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake*. Together, these works helped spark an entire movement that saw the pioneer as a hero. Log cabin dwellers were no longer disdained for their rough edges; these same edges were what made them romantic and distinctly American.



A "Harrison & Tyler" woodcut used in the 1840 campaign  
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Similar shifts occurred in the political realm during the 1840 election. President Martin van Buren faced an uphill battle for reelection that year, and a politically aligned newspaper thought it

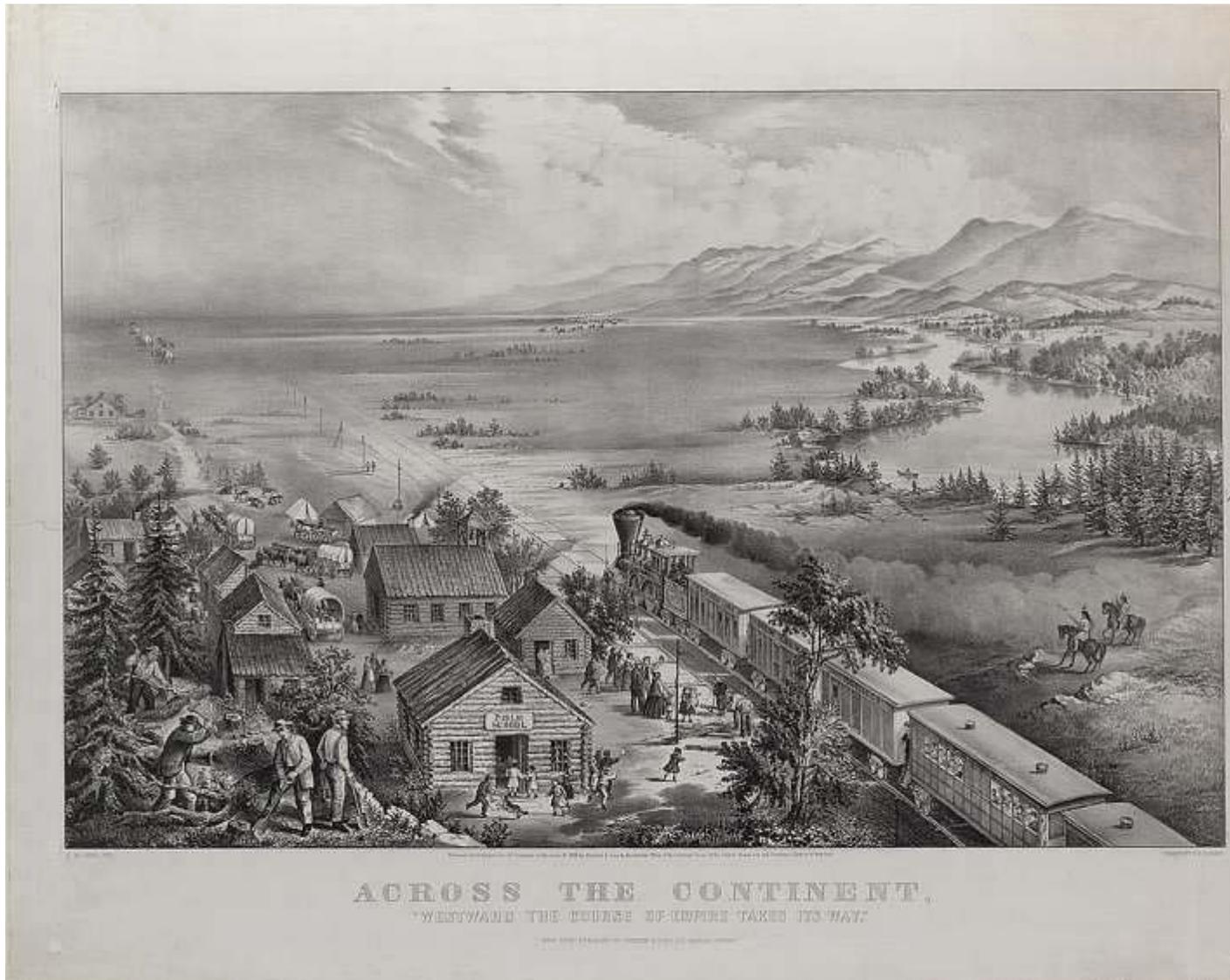
could give him a leg up by launching a classist attack against rival William Henry Harrison: “Give [Harrison] a barrel of Hard Cider, and settle a pension of \$2000 a year on him, and my word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days in his Log Cabin.” In other words: Harrison was an ignorant hick.

It was a lie—the wealthy Harrison actually lived in a mansion—but most of the public didn’t know it, and his rivals assumed voters would scorn Harrison’s poverty. They were wrong: Millions of Americans still lived in log cabins, struggling day-in-and-day-out, and they were *not* impressed. (“No sneer could have been more galling,” John McMaster wrote in his 1883 *A History of the People of the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War*.)

In no time at all, Americans rich and poor were displaying their Harrison love and log cabin pride by holding cabin raisings and patronizing specially-constructed log cabin bars, marching in massive parades with log cabins pulled by teams of horses, and purchasing heaps of Harrison-themed, log cabin-stamped merchandise, including tea sets, hair brushes, and hope chests. With his eye on the prize, Harrison gamely played into this fib, telling frenzied crowds that he’d rather relax in his log cabin than run for president, but that he had heeded their call to run for the White House. That fall, he won handily.

Though Harrison died 32 days into his term, his log cabin campaign became a reliable template for candidates in the years ahead.

Franklin Pierce downplayed his family's wealth in 1852, instead focusing on a brief time spent in a log cabin as a baby. James Buchanan did the same in 1856, and Lincoln's log cabin youth was brought up consistently come 1860. "Like President Harrison, Mr. Lincoln has spent about one third part of his life in a log cabin," one biography read.



"Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way"  
FRANCES FLORA PALMER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Log cabins became an even more persistent presence in the arts, culture, and commerce in the decades ahead, making cameos in iconic images like Frances Flora Bond Palmer's 1868 painting *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, in which the cabin is the symbol of an ever-expanding American empire. The log cabin also figured into tales high and low, such as *The Log-Cabin Lady*—a prescriptive memoir about escaping low-class drudgery—and *The Log-Cabin Bishop*, an uplifting account of a man who brought religion to the frontier. The *Log Cabin Library* dime novels even peddled swashbuckling adventures to young boys.

#### **FALSE MEMORIES**

Most powerful in terms of ingraining log cabin adoration in young Americans, though, were the scores of false histories that projected the log cabin back onto Plymouth and Jamestown. Historians of the late-19th century had heard so much about the log cabin that they just assumed it was key to American growth and expansion, leading to assertions like John G. Palfrey's 1860 claim, "[Settlers] made themselves comfortable in log-houses," and images like W.L. Williams 1890s painting, *Plymouth in 1622*. The latter shows the colony as a smattering of log cabins and was widely distributed to elementary school classrooms, cementing the image of a cabin-laden Plymouth.



A set of 1970s Lincoln Logs  
TINKER\*TAILOR LOVES LALKA, [FLICKR](#) // [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

From then on, the log cabin was portrayed as the ultimate proverbial rag from which the rich nation of the U.S. had emerged, as when historian Warder Stevens declared in 1916, “The story of America is written in log cabins.” It’s this tradition of myth-making and believing that inspired subsequent outpourings of log cabin nostalgia: Lincoln Logs in the interwar years, log cabin chic of the 1990s, and today’s reality programs showing urbanites fleeing to the woods.

These days, the log cabin is emblazoned on money and sewn onto flags; it fascinates modern artists like Will Ryman (who created a gold-resin-covered log cabin at the New Orleans Museum of Art); and it appears in music of all genres, from country crooner Porter Wagoner's 1965 track "An Old Log Cabin for Sale" to T-Pain and Lil Wayne's 2008 romantic rap "Can't Believe It." That said, perhaps the log cabin itself is the nation's greatest rags-to-riches story; it went from being sneered at as a poor immigrants' hovel to being revered as an American icon. Not bad for something that writer John Filson, discussing Boone's home circa 1784, described as "not extraordinary."

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