

CONTINGENT CONTEXTS IN THE GERMAN COUNTRY SCHOOLS OF GILLESPIE COUNTY, TEXAS

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the origins and the cultural development of the 19th century German country schools of Gillespie County, Texas focusing on three selected school sites which have been preserved and maintained to the present day by the descendants of the original builders and students. By 1900, there were over forty rural schools thriving in close-knit rural communities which eventually would close through consolidation in the 1950s. Today, less than twenty remain standing preserved through private support as cultural heritage centers concurrently maintained to accommodate a wide variety of community activities. This study begins with an overview of rural education in Gillespie county followed by the analysis of three surviving schools evidenced by archival materials, oral histories, and on-site field documentation. The central thesis of this paper is the architectural qualities, functional purposes, and building technologies found in the rural schools of Gillespie County represents a contextual cultural response to social and physical needs, and delineates a syncretic method for merging embedded social traditions from the German source regions of the original colonists with the cultural and environmental conditions of the Texas Hill Country region. The sustainability of the schools as historical sites and active community centers is highly dependent upon the physical support of the living descendants of the families who attended the schools, and as their numbers diminish the future of the schools is uncertain.

KEYWORDS: Material Culture, Vernacular Building, Historic Preservation, Cultural Landscapes

In the introduction to his book *Poststructuralism and the Politics of Method*, Andrew Koch contends that knowledge is “a reflection of the conditions of human life. Our claims to knowledge are the products of our social and physical needs, environmental necessity, and conceptual ordering of reality.” (Koch, viii) Are distinctive and sustainable cultural landscapes, such as the one founded by the Germans of the Texas Hill Country, the result of “contextually contingent” knowledge? A term Koch uses to describe a poststructuralist view which negates any assumption of universally accepted standards for knowledge. To answer this question, it is necessary to understand the origins of the German immigrants and their founding of Gillespie County. Located in the west central area of Texas, Gillespie County was situated in the vast expanse of territory north of the Rio Grande won from Mexico by the Republic of Texas in 1836. In 1846, one year after Texas became a state, a group of around 120 Germans settled permanently in the area establishing the town of Fredericksburg. They belonged to an organized mass immigration movement directed by German noblemen seeking social, economic, and political freedom who hoped to recreate an independent “New German” community in the remote unsettled territory of central Texas.

Although the search for religious freedom motivated some Germans in the 1700’s, it was seldom an active consideration for the majority of German immigrants who reached Texas in the 1800’s. Social and economic improvement, along with political idealism, were the primary goals of these Texas settlers. (Lich, 16)

Seeking free land grants, the Germans endured exceptionally hard times according to Ferdinand Roemer who joined the colony in 1847. He described the living conditions as deplorable with colonists living on “a diet of bear meat, corn meal, and coffee.” (Morganthaler, 58-64) The first public building erected in Fredericksburg in 1847 was the Vereins Kirche (People’s Church) which also served as the first school. Over time, land was settled in the outlying county as it became apparent that the traditional farming methods widely practiced in Europe were not possible in the thin rocky soils of the Texas Hill Country. Ranching and grazing soon eclipsed garden crop farming as the main source of income, and numerous small communities sprang up throughout the county as the Germans relinquished European farm village settlement patterns and spread far into the countryside. Early buildings were small in scale and were often first log cabins copied from American settlers rather than the substantial farm estate homes of landed German farmers from the immigrant’s source regions in central and northern Germany. The modest means of the early settlers necessitated an expedient and affordable means of habitation and this approach to building carried forward in the country schools.

Though log houses were popular especially in the initial years of settlement, within a few years some German Texans began to choose to use the traditional German fachwerk, a heavy frame carefully fitted together with mortise and tenon joinery and infilled with stone, brick, or— in Texas— adobe. Those who chose to build in

this very traditional German style included farmers, carpenters, cabinetmakers, and even lawyers and a county judge. (Hafertepe, Kindle Locations 1294-1297)

The founding of schools very early in the establishment of the town of Fredericksburg and the surrounding county of Gillespie underscores the cultural importance of formal learning which was highly valued in the source regions of Germany which provided the bulk of the immigrants to Gillespie County during the years between 1840-1870.

A sense of community and social responsibility was very important to the Germans of Gillespie County, who placed great emphasis on the traditional values of church and school. (Kohout)

As the town of Fredericksburg grew during the 1850s the Germans operated rudimentary private schools. In 1854, the State of Texas passed laws which formed the foundation of a public education system laying out a framework for the establishment of “common Schools” which received state money and were further supplemented with local revenues managed by locally elected trustees.

The 1854 law was a major commitment to establishing secular education in Texas, but for the most part, private schools continued as few places were ready or able to organize a public education system. In Central Texas, however, counties with predominantly German populations were successful in starting common schools. The Germans who emigrated to Central Texas in the 1840s had come with the enlightened and progressive ideals of 19th century Europe and were adamant in their desire for free public schools. Gillespie County, with impetus from the 1854 school law, converted its rudimentary semi-private school, and starting with six common districts, established a public education system. (Fisher 1986, 23)

Numerous small rural communities through Gillespie county formed common schools and by 1900 there were over 40 country school districts. At first, basic instruction was conducted in the homes of individual settlers and often the teacher would take up residence with a family, especially if the teacher was unmarried. Eventually, permanent school buildings were built on donated property, often constructed by the community members themselves, at locations which were benefited by proximity to water, accessible to existing roads, and within practical distances to settlements where the students resided. A location defensible from Indian attack was often a high priority in the selection of site and the disposition of the buildings in the mid-1800s. The Gillespie County common schools flourished during the first half of the 20th century until the passage of the Gilmer Aikin Law in 1949. This law consolidated 4,500 loosely structured public school systems throughout Texas into 2,900 state administered units and by 1960 forced the closing of the original German common country schools.

As a result of the district mergers, countless rural schools-houses became obsolete in short order, and without a systematic plan for their continued use, many of them disappeared from the cultural landscape. Given the prevailing concept of local control, most school boards simply sold the structures. (Utley 2013, 117)

After the “consolidation” the country schools’ students were transferred into the Fredericksburg ISD. However, many of the former common school buildings throughout Gillespie county remained active community centers for 4H Clubs, community gatherings, polling places, family reunions, and weddings. More than places for regular school activities, the rural school locations continued to be useful places of gathering for the extended family groups who had attended the schools and shared a strong bond of kinship associated with the historical significance of each small school. By the 1970s, less than 20 schoolhouses remained intact and although owned by the Fredericksburg Independent School District, cooperation within the local communities associated with the schools insured the survival of some of the structures. In 1999, citizens became concerned that the school buildings would be lost if the district sold the land upon which 12 historic schools stood to private buyers. Working with legislators, the newly formed *Friends of the Gillespie County Country Schools* instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 which changed state laws allowing school properties to be donated to governmental or non-profit organizations at no cost. Today, the Friends oversee 12 historic German country school sites which are accessible on the Gillespie County Country Schools Trail. Three of these school sites are presented showing how the architectural qualities, functional purposes, and building technologies found in the rural schools of Gillespie County represent a contextual cultural response to social and physical needs demonstrating what Koch described as a “conceptual ordering of reality.”

Distinctive Features of the Gillespie County Country Schools

Several innovative local conventions or typologies in country school design and construction emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. Apart from the schoolhouse proper, a second structure known as the “teacherage” was often constructed, either as an addition to the one room schoolhouse or a separate structure, which became the permanent residence of the teachers who were hired by the school trustees. Records of the various county school districts show a high turn-over rate in teachers during the early years. Rural teaching was often an itinerant profession and the teacherage better accommodated a married teacher with a family, reduced the time of travel to the school location each

day, and afforded the teacher in residence the opportunity to maintain the building and the grounds.

Professionally trained administrators and better educated teachers brought with them to the rural areas different expectations for living quarters. The “teacherage” was proposed as a solution to the problem of housing teachers and also as a model home for the edification of farm families. (Maxcy 1979, 267)

Schools closer to towns were less likely to have a teacherage as boarding places were close enough to reach by horse and wagon each day. Often a saddle barn and fenced areas for horses were built as many students rode them to school. Wells were dug and cisterns were installed to collect rainwater from the building roofs, a necessity for clean drinking water in times of drought.

A unique building type developed at many of the German country school compounds. Known as the “pavilion”, these covered gathering areas were originally built as large open air “pole structures” and were at first covered with tree limbs and foliage until shingles and tin roofs were applied.

The permanently constructed wood framed pavilions began to appear in the early 1930s at various school complexes in Gillespie County and were most likely inspired by the open air “tabernacles” common throughout the rural areas of the United States originating in the years following the Second Great Awakening to accommodate worshippers attending outdoor revival camp meetings. As with the adoption of the American log cabin and the teacherage, the tabernacle, introduced to the Texas Hill Country by settlers from Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee, would have been known to the Germans of Gillespie County as many were constructed in nearby counties including McCulloch, Mills, and San Saba. Beginning with temporary stages erected for May festival celebrations, the permanent pavilion structures were built with a stage specifically designed for performances of singing, dramatic plays, and musical concerts by both students and parents at the onset of spring planting as classes concluded for the year. At some schools, elaborately painted stage curtains were created featuring a scenic landscape surrounded on the borders by the names of sponsoring businesses. Known as “school closings” each community used the pavilion, as well as the other school buildings for elaborate community celebrations at the end of the school year when students went to work on family farms and ranches.

The ending of a school year was an occasion for a big all day celebration. School closings were celebrated with BBQ, plays, and dances. BBQ, at one time, was prepared in three foot deep x four foot wide pits dug out of the ground. Meat was donated by members. The trimmings were brought by the women. The meat and drinks and other items were sold during the day. Admissions was charged for the plays and dances. Students were treated by local merchants. The students would be given two to three tickets for free refreshments, drinks, ice cream, etc. The money raised at these school closings was used for improvements and repairs of the school grounds and building. If not enough money was raised parents paid a certain amount per child to meet expenses. (GCPBC 1983, 10)

An important aspect of the country schools was to function as places of community gathering and social interaction beyond regular classroom activities, a concept uniquely associated with the German country schools. Still used today, the outdoor barbeque “pit”, which was often covered with a pole supported roof, was designed to prepare enough meat to feed a sizable group of people. The southern barbequing tradition, which dates to antebellum times, was also borrowed by the Germans to feed large gatherings of people during holidays and festivals becoming an enduring social tradition up to the present day. The common country school districts were populated by tightknit communities of extended family enclaves that over time developed each school site into multiple-use social centers which reflected the communal spirit of each group. Baseball fields were constructed for contests with rival schools, and shooting matches, singing festivals, and literature clubs, all social traditions highly prized in the German communities, were organized and held at the school sites. Gatherings at the rural churches and schools constituted the only social interaction many people had beyond the isolated daily life on the family farm or ranch. As populations grew and shifted, new roads were built, and creeks ran dry, many of the historic country schools were torn down and rebuilt, and disassembled and moved to other locations. Once established, the schoolhouses were enlarged and new buildings were added over time creating a spontaneous eclecticism of styles, materials, and configurations to accommodate an ever-increasing complexity in use and social meaning.

Cave Creek School: Figures 1-3

The first structure erected at Cave Creek in 1881 is a one-room wood building measuring 12' x 16'. Shortly thereafter, a stage and a pole frame “pavilion”, 24' x 66', was added to this building. “The roof consisted of cedar and tree limbs for shade.” (GCPBC 1983, 10) The present schoolhouse (Fig. 1,2) was built in 1896 and consists of a wood frame structure measuring 20' x 36'. Most likely, the original exterior was wood shingles and board siding but it is now re-covered in embossed tin siding panels and a tin roof, as were many buildings of the late 1800s in the region. More resilient and requiring less maintenance than wood, metal building cladding insured the long-term survival of many of the country schoolhouses. Typical of the era, water was collected in an underground cistern, heating was provided by a wood stove,

and gas or kerosene lanterns were used for lighting until electricity was installed in 1942. School began in mid-October and ended in May. Classes ran from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm, students walked or rode horseback or buggies to school, fenced pastures and corrals for animals were part of the school site as were outhouses, saddle barns, and outdoor cooking pits. "In 1932 or 1933, the pole frame structure was improved with a tin roof and concrete floor." (GCPBC 1983, 10) (see Fig. 1, 3)



Figure 1: Cave Creek School Site Plan (Shacklette, 2016) & Aerial Photograph (Google Earth 2015)

The teacherage dates to the early 1930s replacing the original 1881 structure and it provided living quarters until 1944. Modern restroom buildings (Fig. 1:7) and additional storage buildings (Fig. 1:6) have been added to most of the surviving rural school complexes. Except for the teacherage-stage area (Fig. 1:2&3) all buildings conform to a NW axis unlike other school sites that generally feature more S-SW exposure. (see Fig. 1,4,7)



Figure 2: Cave Creek School Looking South-West (Shacklette, 2016)



Figure 3: Cave Creek School Pavilion & Stage adjoining the Teacherage at right (Shacklette, 2016)

Crabapple School: Figures 4-6

The Crabapple community is one of the earliest settlements founded by the original immigrants of 1845. “That there was a school as early as 1867 is evident from the commissioners’ court minutes which lists Crabapple one of the ten schools of the county then in existence.” (Gold 1945, 81) The first schoolhouse (Fig. 4:3) was constructed in 1878 from limestone quarried at nearby home sites and wood hauled from Austin by mule train. It was comprised of a large room and a smaller room with a fireplace. After the second year of school the teacher married and moved into the larger room and classes were taught in the smaller room. As enrollment grew a second larger one-room schoolhouse, 18’ x 26’, was built in 1882 west of the original school and it too was constructed of local limestone. (Fig.4:1) “After the second building was erected, the first building was used as a teacherage.” (GCPBC 1983, 31) The teacherage also served as the Crabapple post office from 1887 to 1910. The second school building was also used as a Lutheran church until 1897. In 1910, enrollment at Crabapple peaked at 60 pupils attending grades 1 through 7. Water was drawn from the nearby church well until a cistern was dug in 1936. The teacherage was expanded with a 10’ x 17’ wood framed kitchen addition extending eastward. This addition is clad in embossed tin siding panels like the schoolhouse at Cave Creek. (Fig. 6) This metal siding is seen throughout Fredericksburg in buildings dating from the 1880s onward and it was a cost effective and yet aesthetically compatible alternative to the preferred random coursed ashlar limestone common to the Hill Country of Texas.

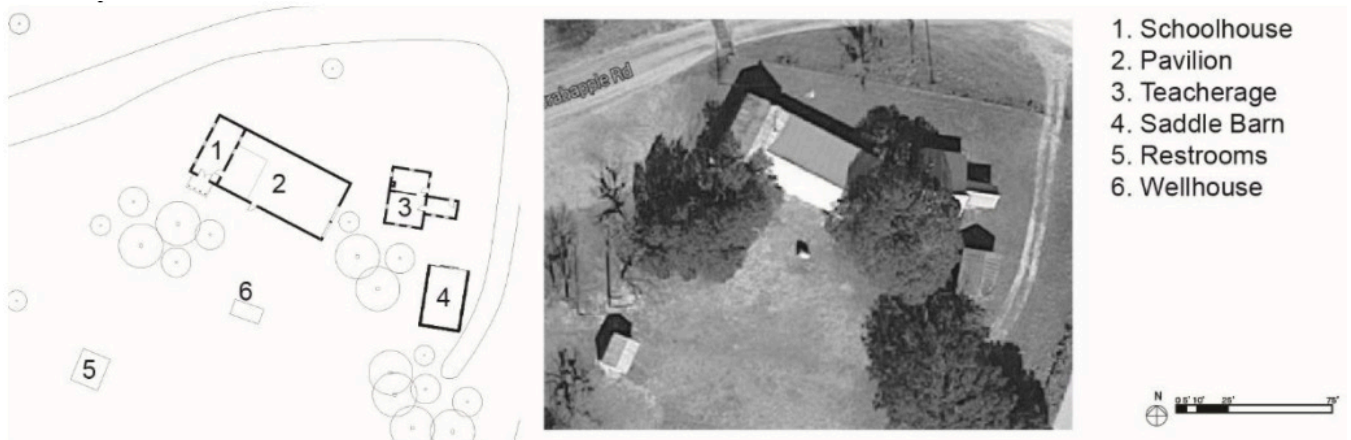


Figure 4: Crabapple School Site Plan (Shacklette, 2016) & Aerial Photograph (Google Earth 2015)

It is not known exactly when the current pavilion structure was added to the original schoolhouse but the methods of wood joinery used would indicate the early part of the 20th century. (Fig. 4:2) A similar pavilion at Pecan Creek school was built in 1935 and it too is enclosed so this may help to date its construction. It is also likely that an earlier structure similar to the pavilion at Cave Creek may have existed. Sometime after its construction the open-air pavilion

was encased with board and batten siding featuring operable hopper style openings which would allow light and ventilation during warmer months. (Fig. 5) Enclosing the pavilion made it suitable for additional overflow class space and community activities during fall and winter months. Some of the other country schools in the area adopted this approach as fluctuating enrollments and funds for new buildings were often scarce. A saddle barn of galvanized steel cladding over wood frame, and a structural clay tile restroom facility date to later years. When Crabapple consolidated with the Fredericksburg ISD in 1957 enrolment was then less than 25 students. Since then, community clubs continue to meet regularly in the buildings, and space is rented out for weddings, reunions, graduations, and birthday parties.



Figure 5: Crabapple School North Elevation of Enclosed Pavilion and Schoolhouse (Shacklette, 2016)

The Crabapple School shows an architectural typology first created by the Germans of Gillespie County in the 1870s which continues to remain a viable and sustainable place for community activities 60 years after the schools were shut down. The second limestone schoolhouse was constructed in 1882 for \$600, which is equivalent to about \$13,500 in 2017, suggesting a remarkable rate of return for a structure that has remained in continual use for 145 years, even when considering maintenance and upkeep.



Figure 6: Crabapple School North Elevation of Teacherage, Pavilion, & Schoolhouse (Shacklette, 2016)

Rheingold School: Figures 7-10

The Rheingold community was established in 1859 on North Grape Creek 14 miles northeast of Fredericksburg. The first school building was a 12' x 14' square log cabin built in 1873 and it is typical of early German buildings in the mid-19th century. (Fig. 7&9) The 22' x 40' wood frame schoolhouse existing today was constructed in 1900 and the original log cabin was converted to the teacherage and was enlarged with a matching wood frame addition in 1881 extending to the west and doubling the size of the original cabin. A second addition of limestone, estimated to be from the 1920s, measuring 10 feet wide was added to the north running the full length of the first two structures. (Fig. 10) At one time, the wood frame schoolhouse had a south facing porch and center door which has since been removed and the door rebuilt as a window. The pavilion, was "started in 1936 and finished in 1938" (Shacklette, Dec. 30, 2016) with materials

and labor donated by the community. As in the case of many of the school pavilions of the era, it may have had a dirt floor and hand hewn wood shingles before the additions of tin roofing sheets. “The school building, teacherage, and a later pavilion, were all built with materials and labor donated by the families of the community.” (Pue, D8) Enrollment at Rheingold peaked in the 1934 with 78 students and attendance eventually dwindled to less than 20 by 1949 when the school consolidated.

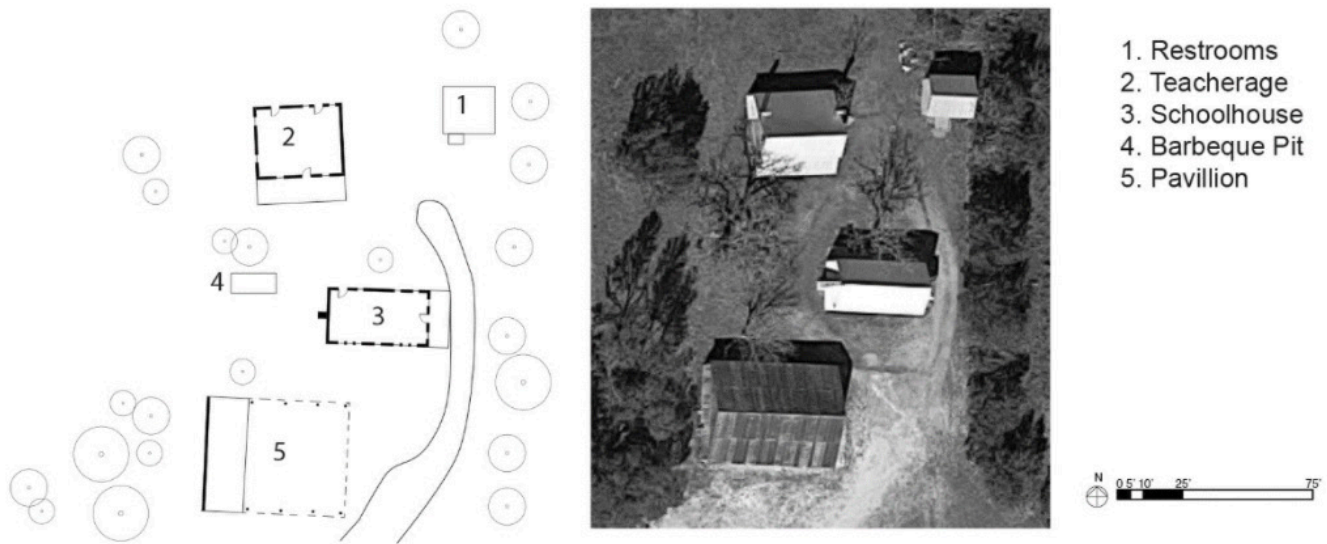


Figure 7: Rheingold School Site Plan (Shacklette, 2016) & Aerial Photograph (Google Earth 2015)

Of all the remaining 12 schools under the jurisdiction of the Friends of the Gillespie County Country Schools, Rheingold represents the fullest range of building technologies used by the trustees and community members during the common school era in Gillespie County. The original log cabin school was stuccoed on the south side and sided over with vertical wood boards perhaps to downplay the rustic origins of the school. The log cabin was sometimes seen as a crude type of building necessitated by the hardscrabble conditions in the early years of settlement. The wood frame addition uses manufactured wood siding on the south and west façades as does the 1900 second schoolhouse, (Fig. 8) and the limestone addition on the north side of the teacherage conveys an appreciation for the permanence and regional prestige associated with masonry construction. (Fig. 9&10) Wood framed buildings of milled lumber were easier to transport as roads improved and fast to erect onsite. An inherent advantage is larger glazed openings, less practical in either log or stone construction, increasing the amount of daylight to the interior rooms which is logical in the era before electricity became available. Within the last few years, the original red oxidized tin roofs on both the schoolhouse and teacherage have been replaced with galvanized steel, and modern restroom buildings have been added for convenience. (Fig. 7:1)



Figure 8: Rheingold School Pavilion & Schoolhouse (Shacklette, 2016)

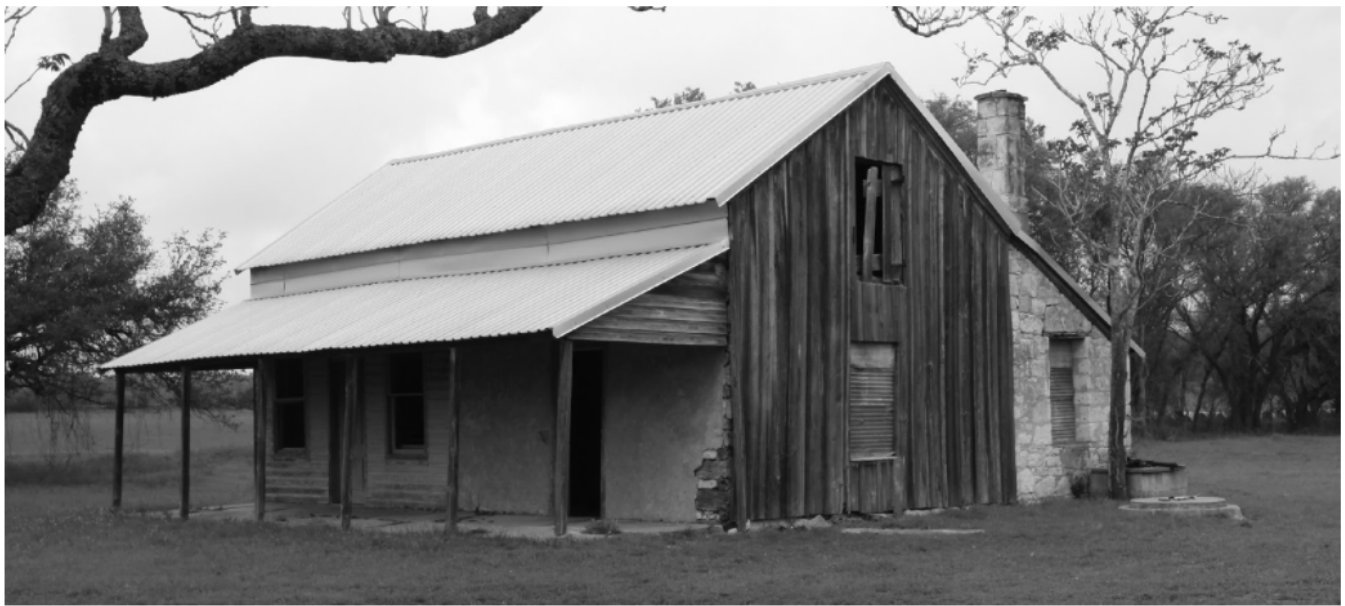


Figure 9: Rheingold School Teacherage South-East View (Shacklette, 2016)

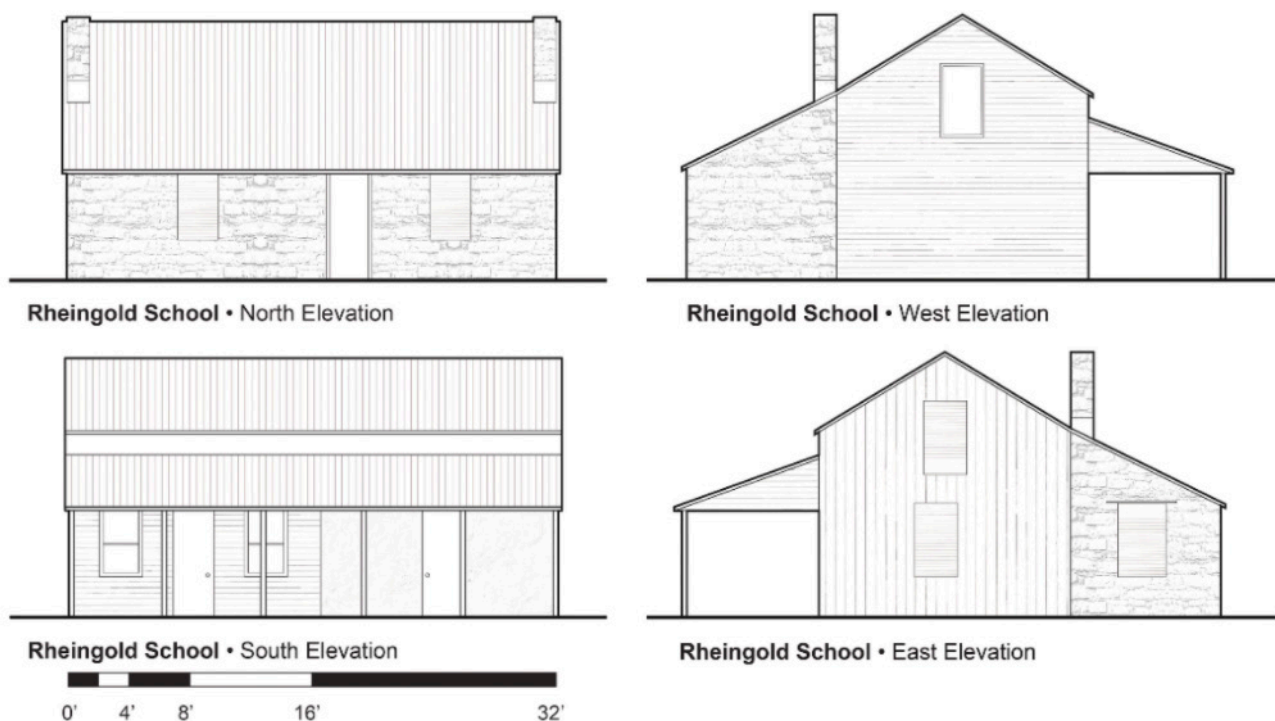


Figure 10: Rheingold School Teacherage Elevations (Shacklette, 2016)

The continued care given to Rheingold School in preservation and modernization call attention to the pivotal role volunteers and supporters have played in ensuring its survival over the past 68 years following the closing of the school. Community attention to maintaining adequate roofs, which prevent the inevitable destruction of structures, has contributed significantly to the survival of the schools and the schools will continue to remain viable community centers into the foreseeable future so long as local private support remains strong. The three case studies examined in this study, like many of the 42 common rural country schools of Gillespie county known to have existed, each began in the mid to late 1800s as single-room rural schoolhouses which necessitated an incremental process of adaptation, addition, and expansion eventually creating an aggregate complex of structures including teacherages, saddle barns, cisterns,

communal cooking pits, and the “pavilion” for public gatherings which are all unique elements only found in the German country settlement schools of Gillespie County. The process of adaptation and addition charts an ever-increasing complexity in a broadly conceived system for rural education which resulted from a local “knowledge” for building which formed a contextual cultural method for making places for social and physical needs. The modest rural school locations incrementally evolved into multifunctional centers for community celebrations and social interaction that lived well beyond the closing of the schools. The German tradition of compulsory education carried from the homeland was maintained in a difficult setting by borrowing American building forms and methods which were uniquely combined to create a system for rural education largely independent from external governmental, religious, and cultural influences. Incrementally evolving into multifunctional compounds for community celebrations and social interaction, the schools remained useful and important after closing as public schools in the 1950s because of volunteerism on the part of the descendants of the school attendees who value the utility of the structures, and have deep consanguineous attachments which have been forged between the schools and their respective communities for several generations. When asked about the future of the country schools Helen Birck, a school supporter and descendant who attended Crabapple and Cherry Spring Schools from 1955-1964, said “When we are no longer able to function as a club we worry.” (Shacklette, Dec. 29, 2016)) Each of the three case study schools are an example of how sustainably designed places result as much from human contexts as from special construction technologies. Today, each German rural school is a preserved cultural center contingent upon a complex network of community support which may become less certain as descendants move away and family lines die out.

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