

Ralph Richterkessing Farm, Residence
4600 I-70 North Service Road
St. Peters
St. Charles County
Missouri

HABS No. MO-1919-A

HABS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RALPH RICHTERKESSING FARM, RESIDENCE

HABS No. MO-1919-A

Location: Ralph Richterkessing Farm, 4600 I-70 North Service Road, St. Peters, St. Charles County, Missouri.

Significance: The Ralph Richterkessing house is the principal building on a farm complex that is representative of German agrarian culture in Missouri. The brick house is an example of Missouri-German vernacular architecture that was prevalent in St. Charles County and other regions of the state.

Architectural Character

The Ralph Richterkessing house, the principal structure at the farm, is an example of vernacular Missouri-Germanic architecture influenced by popular tastes of the early twentieth century. Building patterns employed by German immigrants are indicative of the diversity of forms they transplanted from their native regions. With more than fifty dialects of spoken German identified, numerous architectural variations are also noticeable. One scholar observed, "Each variant reflects a local area with its own matrix of folk customs, folk dress, and potential differences in style in all aspects of material culture ranging from the decoration on a wooden spoon to a house or barn."¹ While differences exist, certain qualities make Missouri-German architecture a readily recognizable type. German settlers in Missouri took great effort in constructing buildings; their consistent attention to craftsmanship and use of durable materials helps distinguish their architectural contributions from those of other immigrants.

A story and one-half with side-gable orientation, the compact form of the Richterkessing house is two rooms wide and two rooms deep with a one-story frame addition to the rear. Constructed of solid masonry, the foundation is stone and the brick walls are laid in the common bond pattern. In their quest to establish a sense of permanence in their new homeland and create architecture that would serve future generations, Missouri-Germans typically selected brick or stone for their building materials. Because quality stone was in short supply on the upland prairies of St. Charles County, brick was substituted in its place when builders could afford it. Consequently, brick farmhouses soon symbolized prosperity for their successful farming families. Of the several buildings comprising the Ralph Richterkessing farmstead, brick was limited to the construction of the residence thereby further emphasizing its importance. A

1. Renn, 64.

concentration of Hanoverians in St. Charles County also accounts for the widespread use of brick, a common building material in deforested and urbanized Germany.²

As a result of Missouri-German builders' preferences for brick construction, local masons practiced their skills regularly and developed a high level of craftsmanship. Brick provided a sturdy and relatively maintenance-free medium that could be manipulated into a variety of decorative treatments and therefore remained the material of choice for generations of Missouri-Germans. Because their building materials, techniques, and traditional house forms changed little throughout the years, it is difficult to date Missouri-German buildings precisely. Persistent vernacular patterns and an absence of written documentation divulge only general references for determining the age of most rural buildings. However, a number of stylistic details like those incorporated in the Ralph Richterkessing house ease the task of assigning an approximate construction date.

While real estate records are available and establish the history of ownership for the property, no written records documenting origin of the residence have been uncovered. Building permits were not required for structures in these rural areas, local builders did not need architectural plans, and the family did not collect information from knowledgeable relatives regarding the architectural history. Tax rates for the county were not consistent, so the valuation for the property fluctuates from year to year. However one source--the 1875 plat map for St. Charles County--does reveal a structure at the same location as the Ralph Richterkessing house but, based on physical characteristics, it is likely this is not the same residence. Evidence suggests the Ralph Richterkessing house was constructed about 1905 by his father, John D. Richterkessing shortly after he purchased the land (refer to the discussion of the Richterkessing family in HABS No. MO-1919).

Additional clues may be obtained from the nature of the building. Those present in the architecture of the Ralph Richterkessing house support its construction at the turn of the twentieth century, however its exact construction date is not known. The Ralph Richterkessing residence exhibits architectural elements that are not incorporated in the design of the neighboring Erwin Richterkessing residence built approximately a quarter of a century earlier. The newer and more ornate Ralph Richterkessing residence suggests the Richterkessing family's efforts to combine traditional building patterns with popular culture. It follows the vernacular form of late nineteenth century Missouri-German architecture but employs more fanciful elements.

2. van Ravenswaay, 221, 72.

Wooden ornamentation such as the exterior spindlework frieze, sunburst typanum, decorative scroll brackets, as well as interior features like the paneled pocket doors, cornerboards, baseboard, and other trim is typical for the era and was widely available and mass produced. These goods probably were catalog ordered directly from the manufacturer and shipped by rail to any local lumber or building supplies store in nearby St. Charles or St. Peters via St. Louis. The Saint Louis & Kansas City Northern Railway crossed the Richterkessing premises on the 1875 plat and by 1905, the Wabash Railroad had gained control of the route.

Numerous ornamental wooden details combined with brick embellishment provide a sense of style to the dwelling. Unlike its older counterpart, the Ralph Richterkessing house lacks a corbeled brick cornice but does feature double-hung windows in segmentally arched openings--many flanked by louvered shutters. The segmental arches on the north and east, or primary facades, are formed of brick stretchers and capped by headers in contrast to those on the west and south facades formed by double courses of headers. The elongated placement of the bricks on the primary facades exaggerates the arch form and suggests the residence was constructed near the close or turn of the century when the segmental arch became more curvilinear. According to Charles van Ravenswaay, "Toward the close of the nineteenth century the segmental arch became rounder and so commonly was is sprightly form used that it is one of the signatures of German construction in Missouri as elsewhere."³

Four brick chimneys built into the end wall and capped with a corbeled top are paired on either side of the roof ridge, their design and placement characteristically express Missouri-German architecture. Details found in the segmental openings, the round windows in the gables, and the chimneys of the Ralph Richterkessing house indicate the attention German-Missourians customarily devoted to their brick architecture.

German immigrants played a vital role in the development of the brick manufacturing and the brick tradition in St. Charles County. Due to the predominance of brick structures in Missouri-German settlements, it is believed that brick kilns were among "the first commercial enterprises established in any locality by these industrious people."⁴ Census records for the brick industry in St. Charles County recorded that three of the four brickmakers or brick moulders in 1850 were of German birth and by 1860, the numbers increased to eleven, representing half of all

3. Ibid., 231.

4. Renn, 66.

those employed in the trade. The source of bricks for the Ralph Richterkessing house is unknown, but they could have been supplied by any number of local manufacturers in an area where bricks were highly valued. Mortar tended to have a whitish or cream tint because of the yellow quality of indigenous sand used in its creation.⁵

The exterior of the Ralph Richterkessing house is too eclectic in its character to identify it as one particular architectural style. While features representative of at least two architectural styles can be recognized, the house remains largely vernacular. The most prominent feature of the Gothic Revival style is the steeply-pitched intersecting central gable. The sharply pointed cross gable, pedimented dormers, projecting chimneys, and slender lightning rods emphasize the vertical effect and contribute to a picturesque silhouette in the Gothic Revival manner. The style is reinforced by individual quatrefoil windows positioned in the peak of each gable.

The pair of semi-circular arched windows in the central gable reflect the influence of *Rundbogenstil*, a German interpretation of Romantic Classicism in the round arch or Romanesque Revival style. The incorporation of the round arch openings was a conscious effort on the part of the Richterkessing house builders. The exterior arched openings mask the more conventional rectangular openings on the interior which provide a receptacle for the lower sash of the double-hung window when it is opened. The round arch is less common than the ubiquitous segmental opening in Missouri-German architecture. Segmental arches prevail as they do on both the Richterkessing residences, thus elevating the status of the round arch. This duo of semi-circular windows is an integral design component to the Ralph Richterkessing house, one stressed by their highly visible position.

Both Gothic Revival and *Rundbogenstil* share origins in academic architecture but in the case of the Richterkessing residence, the Missouri-German vernacular tradition dominates the form of the house and high style exterior features are secondary. Symmetry of the Ralph Richterkessing house is emphasized by its even rectangular spaces and balanced fenestration, including two central front doors framed by a pair of double-hung windows.

The presence of two individual front door openings is noted on many residences throughout the Missouri Rhineland region. The Missouri-German vernacular two-door facade may share a common evolution with other traditional building patterns. While scholars have questioned the two-door fronts, their theories

5. van Ravenswaay, 223, 227.

remain largely speculative. Architectural studies focusing on these facades have demonstrated that when American builders of various ethnic backgrounds adapted or expanded house forms for changing needs, two front doors sometimes resulted.⁶

One explanation supporting the rise of two-door facades is attributed to economics. Practical builders reduced costs when halls (especially central halls and the individual front doors leading to them) were eliminated. With the removal of the central passage, the floor plan became more compact and two doors became a necessity for granting access to separate front rooms formerly serviced by the hall. Individual entrances to the divided front rooms also maintained separate spaces for different uses. A guest could enter either a formal or less formal room from the front porch, depending on who was calling on the family and the nature of the visit.⁷

Additional theories can be offered explaining the evolution of the two-door facade in America, however housing precedents in Germany suggest Missouri-Germans used the form because it was familiar. In a paper presented to the Vernacular Architecture Forum, Dennis Domer and Adena Patterson stated, "Over five million Germans immigrated to America, and the two-door house can be found almost wherever Germans settled." Through their research Domer and Patterson concluded German-Americans were comfortable with this inherited form and perpetuated it in rural America quite naturally. In Germany, the "Nurwhonhaus" featured two doors that divided spaces and separated activities, such as the stube (parlor) from the kitchen-entry room. Because the doors identified two zones, German-Americans found advantages for retaining their use: one door led to the more formal, public room

6. Dennis Domer and Adena Patterson presented a paper at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the Vernacular Architecture Forum that reviewed several two-door house theories including those offered by Henry Glassie in "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," (in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, edited by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Fred Kniffen in "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 55, December 1965); and James Shortridge in *Kaw Valley Landscapes* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1977), though it is not within the scope of this report to discuss each individually. Domer expanded his views in a manuscript proposed for publication in *Material Culture*, titled, "Genesis Theories of the German-American Two-Door House."

7. Henry J. Kauffman, "The Riddle of Two Front Doors," *Pennsylvania Dutchman* 6 (Winter 1954-55), 27.

or parlor and the other to the casual and private domestic sphere, generally relegated as the dining or family room.⁸

To an outsider, the two front doors of these Missouri-German houses may reinforce symmetry, but are more likely to present a dilemma as one ponders which door to use. However, to those acquainted with the custom of two doors, they transcend mere facade treatment and signal a predictable interior spatial arrangement. Consequently, the two-door house was a common and favored house-type among German-Americans because it reflected the accepted "social values of privacy and hospitality in an agrarian setting."⁹

In the case of the Ralph Richterkessing house, the family allocated one of the rear rooms for kitchen use, thereby freeing both front rooms for social purposes. Through this designation of spatial use, both front doors led to areas for entertaining with the eastern living room and dining room on the west situated behind their respective doors. This arrangement was especially convenient when the double pocket door was opened so the interior spaces were continuous. As two doors were supplanted by one-door facades among neighbors in the community, succeeding generations of the John Richterkessing family used these rooms differently. The dining room behind the west door became a living room and the living room to the east was converted to a bedroom. Nevertheless, the western entrance was preserved for use by guests; the eastern door was used by family, if by anyone.

Description

Exterior

The Ralph Richterkessing house faces toward the south. The lower level of this main facade has six bays that includes two doors and a pair of flanking windows. The two center bays contain sash doors behind storm doors and beneath transom windows. A decorative porch stands in front of the two doors. It has a shed roof with a gable peak, turned-post supports, and a turned-post balustrade. A spindlework frieze spans under the roofline on each side of the porch. Further decoration includes a sunburst motif in the porch gable and on the sides of the shed roof. Four steps ascend to a wood-surfaced porch floor. The four flanking windows are one-over-one double-hung in a wood sash and segmental arched openings made up of one row of stretchers and a row of headers. Wood shutters remain hinged to the frame on the exterior of each window. Other decorative woodwork on the

8. Domer and Patterson, 16.

9. Ibid., 19.

facade includes an etched garland design in the panel between the window sash and the segmental arch.

Centered over the porch on the second level is a steeply pitched cross-gable with two bays of round-arched windows. Near the gable peak is a quatrefoil window in a circular wood frame. Flanking the center gable are gabled dormers with one-over-one double-hung windows. The pediment in each dormer is decorated with an etched design that displays an inverted "S" with scrolls on either side. The frame around the dormer windows has square panels with a bull's eye motif on the top corners and in the middle. A decorative wood scroll connects the window frame to the sill on each side of the window.

The east facade has three window bays on the lower level and one bay of paired windows in the upper level. The lower bay windows are identical to those on the front and include the same decoration below the segmental arch. This facade also includes bulkhead doors that are placed directly below a first level window. The segmental arch over the bulkhead doors is made up of two rows of headers. A fluted mullion separates the paired upper story windows. Another quatrefoil window is centered in the gable and a metal lightning rod rises from the apex directly above it. Two flanking brick corbel-topped chimneys straddle the ridge. Star-shaped bolts located between the levels are attached to tie rods that are placed within the interior structure.

The windows on the west facade are almost identical to those on the east facade. Their placement is the same but on this facade, the panel between the arch and the wood frame lacks the decoration that was included on the main and east facades. Another difference is the segmental arch over each window. Instead of consisting of a row of stretchers and a row of headers, the arches on the west facade are simply two rows of headers. Embellishment on this facade includes a fluted mullion between the pair of upper story windows and a quatrefoil window located in the gable peak. A vertical brick furnace chimney stands between two of the windows and is designed to carry air from the furnace in the basement to the first floor. The chimney's foundation is concrete and the brick appears to be newer indicating that it was added to the house.

An addition occupies the majority of the north facade although one bay on the original brick wall remains exposed. The bay contains a double-hung window in a segmental-arched opening like the simpler bays on the west facade. The remainder of the rear wall is visible from inside the addition. One bay is an off-center door that originally opened from the outside. The decorative design that was displayed below the segmental arch on the main and east facades is also placed over this rear door.

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The transom has been enclosed. The door currently in the bay is a multipaned storm door.

The one-story frame addition on the rear is covered with white clapboards and stands on a stone foundation. The foundation under the first bay on the west side, however, is rough cut-stone, similar to the foundation under the main house. The portion under the rest of the addition is rubble stone. The addition includes one six-over-six double-hung window on each of its three sides. One multi-paned door with a wood sash is located on its west side and a panelled door and a storm door are located on the east. The addition has a gabled roof that extends over an open porch. A brick ridge chimney is placed near the northern end.

Interior

The primary rooms on the first floor of the Ralph Richterkessing house include a dining room, living room, bedroom, and kitchen. The off-center enclosed stairway is accessed through the north side of the kitchen's east wall. The addition includes a bedroom, bathroom, and storage. The interior trim is typical of turn-of-the-century houses. Door and window surrounds are wood and have bull's eye square panels on the top of each corner. Panelled pocket doors divide the dining room and living room. Transoms are placed over most doors. Wood base boards remain in all of the downstairs rooms with the exception of the kitchen which has been substantially remodeled. The addition's interior has been altered little except for the conversion of a fireplace into a stove flue. The trim in this section consists of low-pitched pediments over the window and door bays.

The spaces on the second floor consist of two bedrooms, a playroom, and spacious storage areas. The wood trim is similar to that on the lower level. From the exterior, the round arch windows disguise the rectangular-framed double-hung window on the interior. The frame is like those on the lower level with the bull's eye panel in the corners. The brick arch visible on the exterior is clearly noticeable outside the window.

The stone foundation is exposed on all walls in the unfinished basement. The floor is concrete. An interesting feature of the basement is a thick, raised-panel door with mortise and tenon joints. The iron hardware appears to have been hand-forged.

Existing Condition

The Ralph Richterkessing house stands substantially unaltered from its turn-of-the-century appearance. The most notable change is the interior which has been remodeled although the spaces and trim remain intact.

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History: This building was likely to have been constructed ca. 1905 by John Richterkessing, the father of Ralph Richterkessing. Ralph and his wife Ella acquired the property in 1946 and it remained in the family until 1992 when the Missouri State Highway Commission purchased the property.

Sources: Previous fieldwork by David Crampton, Archaeologist, Missouri Highway Transportation Department; Site visits by Prawl and Sone.

Historians: Stacy Sone and Toni Prawl, Architectural Historians, Missouri Highway and Transportation Department.