What is a Workers Cottage?

The workers cottage is a small-sized house type built of wood or brick by the tens of thousands from the 1880s to 1910s to provide affordable working-class and middle-class housing in the growing industrial cities of the Midwest.

Workers cottages are typically built with a narrow rectangular footprint to fit a 25- by 125-foot Chicago city lot. With a gap for a walkway alongside the building, a workers cottage on a standard lot most often measures about 20 feet wide by 30-60 feet long.

Most workers cottages feature a simple gable (peaked) roof oriented toward the street. The entry door is typically located to one side of the front facade balanced by a set of windows or a projecting bay. The upper level usually features a window or set of windows in the center.

A workers cottage is usually 1½ or sometimes 2½ stories with a smaller floor or attic on the upper level. The height of the eaves (and relative size of the upper floor) varies considerably among workers cottages.

Many workers cottages have been modified over the years, which can make them challenging to recognize and interpret. In the 1890s homeowners often added space by raising the entire building to add an extra floor underneath. Due to the sturdy balloon-frame construction of wood workers cottages, this was not as difficult as it may seem. When looking at the house now, you may see a clue to these alterations in different construction materials used on the first and second floors, or a tall staircase to the main entry.

More recent changes may include extra apartments in the basement or attic, roof dormers and pop-tops. If the roofline has been altered, it may be challenging to recognize as a workers cottage.

Layers of History

Frame workers cottages were originally finished on the exterior with wood clapboard, or occasionally vertical board-and-batten siding. Some houses featured decorative fish scale siding at the top or in panels on the front facade.

Clapboard
Board and Batten
Fish Scale

In the 1930s-50s, many homeowners covered the clapboard with asbestos shingles or asphalt sheets to protect the wood houses against fire or to cover deteriorated wood.

Asbestos-Cement Shingles
Asphalt Sheet Patterns

Perma-Stone and other brand names of artificial stone date from the same time period. A thin layer of concrete mixed with binders and colorants was applied over a layer of lath and wire mesh attached to the brick or wood wall, then pressed in metal molds to create a wide variety of realistic or unrealistic simulated stone patterns. Permastone was used to weatherize the building, repair crumbling masonry, cover alterations, or simply change the look of the house.

Permastone / artificial stone

In the 1960s-90s vinyl and aluminum siding became popular. The thin panels snap together and could be easily applied over other siding.

Vinyl / Aluminum Siding

The siding on many Chicago workers cottages conceals a legacy of earlier cladding materials. The outer layer of recent siding may make it difficult to recognize the age and historic character of the building underneath.

Have you identified an exceptional workers cottage in your neighborhood? Stumped by an unusual building? Please share with the Chicago Workers Cottage Initiative at contact@workerscottage.org!
Workers cottages were originally built in a full spectrum of sizes according to the needs of the owner and builder. Most are 1½ stories. Taller buildings which have two or more full-sized floors (not including the smaller attic floor) may be considered a “cottage-style 2-flat” or possibly a “2-flat workers cottage,” though the term describes the size of the building, not the exact number of units. Even 1½ story cottages may have an extra apartment in the basement or attic. A basement-level apartment that is partially above ground and has a separate entry is often called a “garden apartment” or an “English basement.”

The original floor plan of most workers cottages was partitioned into a series of larger common rooms with smaller bedrooms lined up along the opposite wall.

**Workers Cottage Features**

The strong diagonal lines of the gable roof provide much of the character of the workers cottage style. The steep roof and low eaves give the house a snug feel.

The gable is the most common roof style, though there are several other roof forms. Some cottage roofs may have been modified over the years and no longer easily fit into one of these categories.

Rooftop dormers are a relatively-recent modification to enlarge the upper floor. Ideally, dormers should be set back from the front to preserve the diagonal rooflines and the “cottage” look of the house.

Localized workers cottage variations can be found in some Chicago neighborhoods, with different roof pitches or facade ornamentation.

A rectangular or octagonal bay window to the side of the front entry is an original feature of many workers cottages. A roof extending over the entry and/or a landing may be attached to the projecting bay.

Some workers cottages originally included a portico over the front entry, or porch and landing. Enclosed porches and rear extensions are most likely later additions to the building.

**Historical Details**

Though workers cottages were originally built as simple housing, many featured mass-produced wooden or stone ornamentation in the Victorian or Craftsman styles popular when they were built. Fragile details which survive nowadays are rare and worth preserving.

Brick workers cottages built in the 1880s-1890s often feature ornamental carved limestone lintels above tall Italianate windows, elaborate wood brackets and rows of small blocks called dentils under the roofline. Craftsman-style brick cottages built after 1900 often featured arched window openings and decorative brickwork panels above or below the windows.

Some frame cottages originally featured wood filigrees under the gables, rooftop finials, ornate window surrounds, fish scale siding, dentils and other machine-made wooden flourishes. Lost details may have deteriorated or may be hidden behind layers of later siding. Traces of wood pieces, construction records, and historic photographs may be the only evidence nowadays of whether a frame cottage was elaborately or plainly decorated when it was new.