

"The Development of the 'Farmer's Mansion' in Kansas: A Regional Case Study  
of Vernacular Architecture, 1850 - 1900."

Matt Cantril

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A photograph of a home in Lafayette County, Missouri circa 1830. Photograph by Dr. M.J. Morgan. May 12, 2013.

Notice how simple the form of the home is; two stories tall with a room on either side of the houses.

This study includes maps of the country, information from books and online articles as well as photographs and diagrams of homes. The I-House was an early form of architecture throughout the History of the United States. This home migrated with the North Midland group.

## Intro:

“If you’ve lived or traveled much in the eastern half of the United States, you’ve certainly see hundreds of [I-Houses] - you just don’t know it.”<sup>1</sup> The I-House, also known as the “farmer’s mansion” for its symbolic representation of success, has been a prominent type of architecture in the United States for some time. The so-called farmer’s mansion was most popular throughout America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the I-House was most prevalent during these two centuries, its form was replicated in our country from the late 1600’s to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> This architectural archetype for America was commonly built throughout the country, including Kansas. The I-House was adaptive for several reasons: its simplicity in building, versatility and its image of success in rural communities.

In Kansas, the I-House can often be found in the eastern, northern and south-central regions of the state. Migration has been the most critical factor in the appearance of these homes in Kansas. Having moved with a group called the North Midlanders, it is likely that locations with the highest population of this group harbored where these houses used to be. The proximity to lumber as well as railroads is also an incredibly significant factor for the prevalence of the homes, due to their requirement for wood.

## What Form Does the I-House Follow?

The I-House has been categorized as vernacular architecture. This means that the form is “usually far simpler than what the technology of the time is capable

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. “The I House in Rural America.”

<sup>2</sup> George O. Carney. “I House.”

of making.”<sup>3</sup> It has not been considered as a style, due to its simple and unembellished form; rather it has been categorized as a “versatile and long lived form.”<sup>4</sup> Its adaptability made it a common house type throughout the United States, from Pennsylvania to as far west as Texas.<sup>5</sup> The home is always seen with a “rectangular block” base that is two stories in height and one room deep, as shown in Figure 3 on page 6.<sup>6</sup> The I-House was made with stone or bricks around a log and wood frame. This made timber and other resources necessary to construct these homes. The simple plans made the form easy to build with the correct material. In addition, the design of the home made it ventilate well in hot, sticky climates and the versatility is shown when the North Midlanders began to add the double chimneys, one on either side. These fireplaces made it much easier to keep the home warm throughout.<sup>7</sup> This is shown in the Robert Ashton House, in Figures 1 and 2.

Like most inventions, the form progressed over time. That being said, during the earlier years the form was incredibly plain. These early plans had little amenities with “little aesthetic expression,” aside from glazed brick patterning on the outside, known as diapering.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the design differs per region but there are many common similarities that are seen in nearly all the buildings. The most standard form had side facing gabled roofs, meaning they meet at the top sloping on both sides<sup>9</sup>, and a height and length that was at least two times the depth, as shown

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<sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

<sup>4</sup> James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. “The I House in Rural America.”

<sup>5</sup> George O. Carney. “I House.”

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Foster. “American Houses.” Pg. 73.

<sup>7</sup> James Shortridge. “Peopling the Plains.” Pg. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Foster. “American Houses.” Pg. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus and Encyclopedia

in Figure 3. The floor or bottom of the blueprint had a hall and parlor as well as kitchens, most often, and other types of rooms and spaces in additional wings in the back.<sup>10</sup> The second floor was also one room in depth. This upper region had a minimum of two bedrooms.<sup>11</sup>

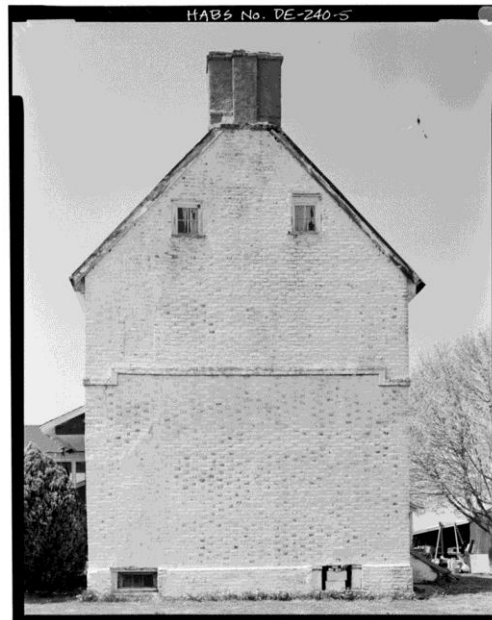


Figure 1. A photograph of the Robert Ashton House, New Castle Delaware, circa 1700. No known Photographer or date of when the photo was taken. [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov). Notice the simplicity of the form and the high chimney.

### Where did this Home get its Name?

The I-House was commonly built and has been called many different names. A few of the popular titles include: the farmer's mansion<sup>12</sup> and the Georgian I-

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald Foster. "American Houses." Pg. 73.

<sup>11</sup> George O. Carney. "I House"

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

House.<sup>13</sup> The farmer's mansion, as stated earlier, relates to the symbol of "economic attainment." This was seen as a huge goal to achieve, and when someone reached this statement of success, everyone could see it.<sup>14</sup> The Georgian I-House is another name because some believe it progressed from houses brought to America in the 1700's. This form of home also had "symmetrical center-hall[s]," which the I-House is believed to have copied. These Georgian I-Houses were brought through culture hearth by the English settlers, meaning we could trace their lineage all the way back to England.<sup>15</sup>



Figure 2. A photograph of the Robert Ashton House, New Castle Delaware, circa 1700. No known Photographer or date of when the photo was taken. [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

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<sup>13</sup> James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. "The I House in Rural America."

<sup>14</sup> George O. Carney. "I House."

<sup>15</sup> James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. "The I House in Rural America."

Notice the double chimneys as well as the difference in length and width of the home.

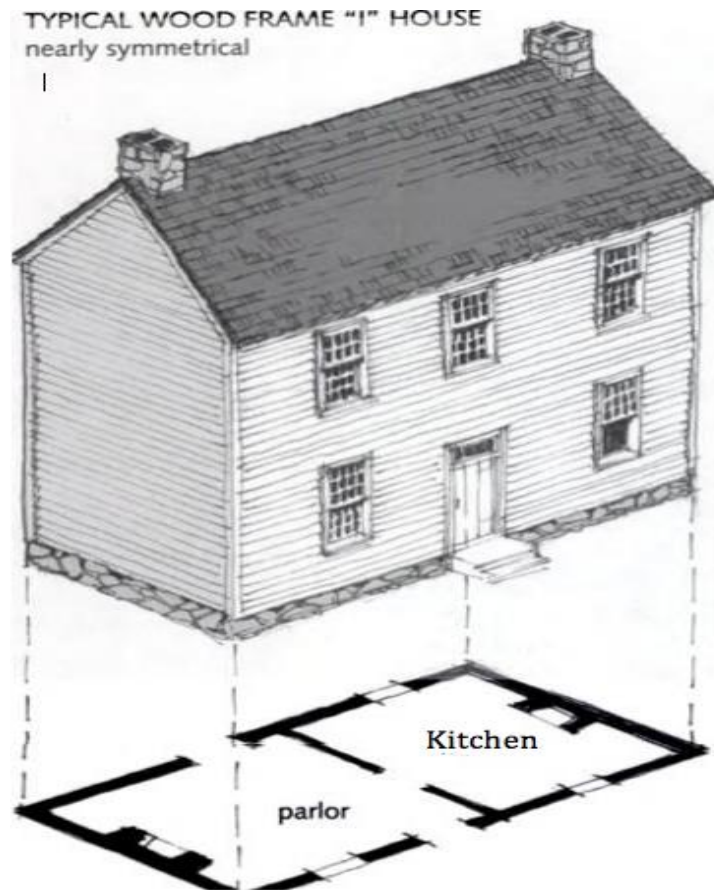


Figure 3. A diagram of an early I-House, circa 1850. Diagram by Gerald Foster (2004). American Houses: A Field Guide to the Architecture of Home. Notice the basic form that the home has taken.

Although there are several names for this house, the actual meaning behind the name "I-House," refers to where it has been most commonly found. While these houses have migrated with people all over the country, from "New England to

Pennsylvania, Virginia and the Upper South,”<sup>16</sup> they are most often associated with the Midwest. This form is most often found in the capital “I” states in the Midwest region. These states include Indiana, Illinois and Iowa. The name does not suggest, by any means, that the I-House originated, nor is it restricted to these states. The term that we use today was used first by a cultural geographer by the name of Fred Kniffer. He coined the title, I-House, in 1936 in a study of Louisiana house types.<sup>17</sup>

#### Who Brought the I-House to Kansas?

Knowing that the I-House was prevalent in the states Iowa, Indiana and Illinois helps us to triangulate locations where these houses were built in Kansas. The group of people that migrated from the “I” states are titled North Midlanders, and this group moved in enormous numbers to Kansas.<sup>18</sup> The North Midlanders moved especially during the conclusion of the Civil War. It was said “a constant tide of movers passed throughout the streets, going West,” after the end of the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> North Midlanders “came in numbers that dwarfed those from other groups.” To put this into perspective there were more people from only Illinois that came to the central plains, than from the entirety of Europe or from all the Upper Southern and Yankee states. This is only from *one* of the north midland states. The North Midlanders may have come in huge numbers following the war, but they were also one of the earliest groups in the Kansas region.<sup>20</sup> Through the dialect of people we can follow where certain groups migrated. In Figure 4 on the following page, we can

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<sup>16</sup> James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell. “The I House in Rural America.”

<sup>17</sup> George O. Carney. “I House.”

<sup>18</sup> James Shortridge. “Peopling the Plains.” Pg. 124.

<sup>19</sup> Drew E. VandeCreek. “Settlement and Immigration in Civil War Illinois.”

<sup>20</sup> James Shortridge. “Peopling the Plains.” Pg. 124.



see that the dialect of the North Midlanders spread from the “I” states into parts of Kansas.<sup>21</sup>

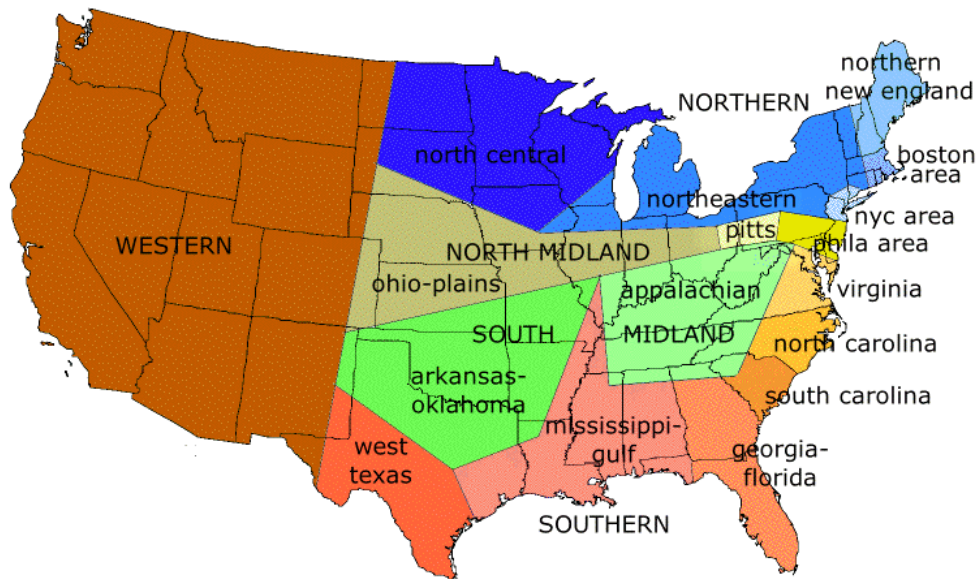


Figure 4. A map of dialect by region in the United States, circa late 1800's. Map by Dr. C. George Boeree (2004). [www.webspaceship.edu](http://www.webspaceship.edu). Notice how the North Midland dialect has spread from the “I” states into, and throughout the state of Kansas.

#### Where Could this House be Likely Found?

Due to the mass western migration of the North Midlanders after the Civil War, this form of home can be found throughout the state of Kansas. However, the need for materials made it essential that many of these settlements had to be somewhat near lumber and/or railroads. It has been recorded that a large number

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<sup>21</sup> George C. Boeree. “Dialects of English.”



of the migration was prominent in south-central Kansas, which Figure 5 shows has a forest, abundant with lumber.<sup>22</sup> From studying the map, it is easy to conclude that many of these homes could have been prevalent in the northeast corner of the state of Kansas as well. Not surprisingly, there were also many railroads departing from the same corner, in the northeast, that spread throughout the state, as shown in Figure 6. The ability to receive the lumber resources required to build these houses makes the possibility of their prevalence throughout the state much more likely.

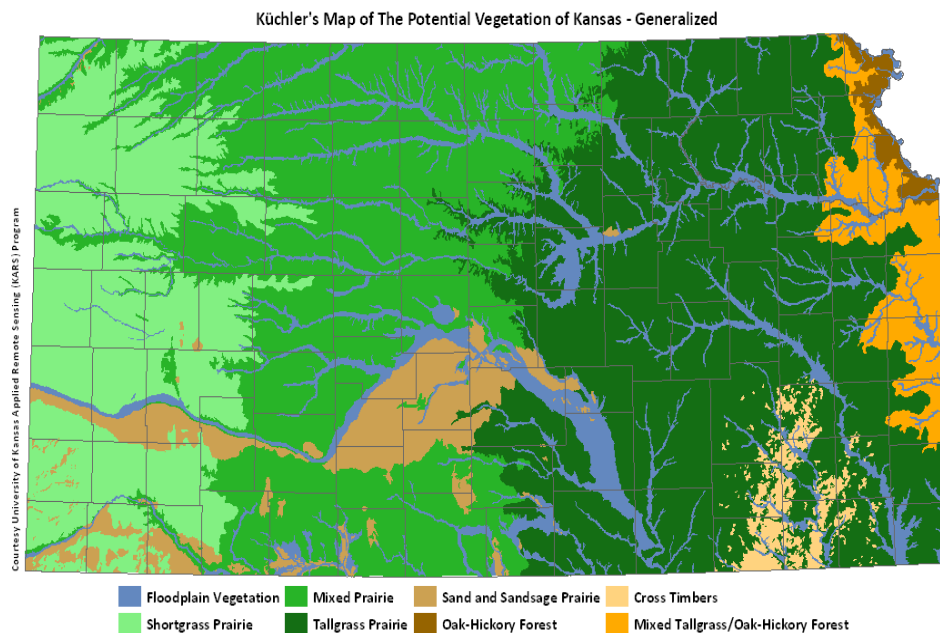


Figure 5. A map of vegetation in Kansas. Map by A.W. Kuchler (2007-2012). [www.kansasnativeplantsociety.org](http://www.kansasnativeplantsociety.org)

<sup>22</sup> James Shortridge. "Peopling the Plains." Pg. 125.

Upon looking at the northeast corner and the south-central brown shades, we can see that both have timber.

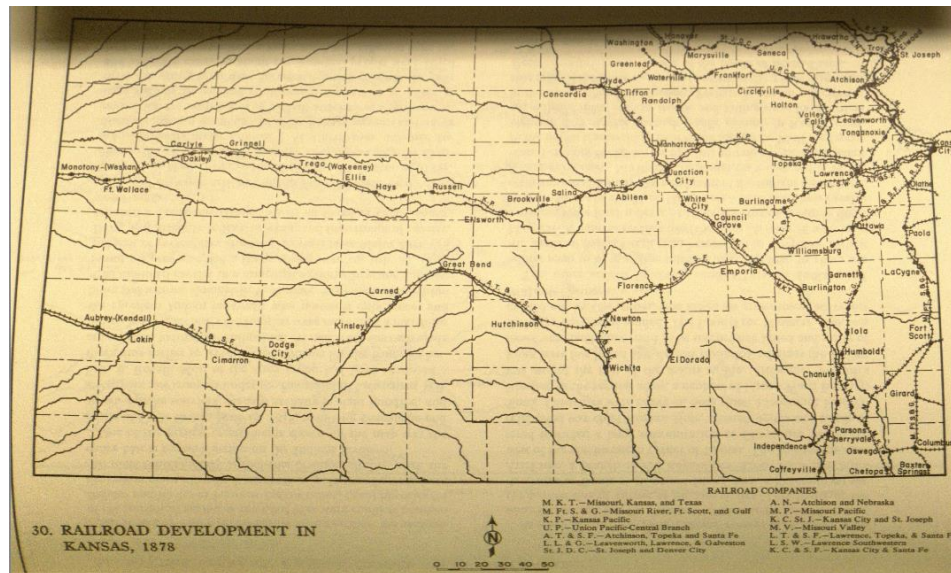


Figure 6. A map of railroads in Kansas by circa 1878. Map by Homer E. Socolofsky and Huber Self (1972).

Notice the enormous numbers of railroads in the northeast corner of the state, by the Oak-Hickory Forest, as shown in the Figure 5.

## Conclusion

The farmer's mansion, also known as the I-House is a large part of U.S. History, especially in the state of Kansas. This simple form of a home exemplifies Zelinsky's Law, the idea that the first people to settle an area leave their footprint on the region for years to come.<sup>23</sup> The I-House follows this concept very clearly because of the evidence that it is still in our presence today. It was a symbol of "economic attainment"<sup>24</sup> during its prime, and now we can use it to follow the development

<sup>23</sup> "Ethnic Geography"

<sup>24</sup> George O. Carney. "I House."

and migration of a people in the state. The home was used for several reasons: its versatility, image of success and the simplicity in its form for the builders. We have found that it was prevalent in many regions for several reasons; in Kansas, access to Missouri lumber was an enormous factor. The versatility of the I-House is shown in its prominence throughout the country. Its abilities to insulate with double fireplaces and ventilate in hot areas, shows the versatility that this form of home had. Its consistency, surviving from the 1600's to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century show how capable and applicable this home was as well.

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