

## LOG CABIN NOTCHES

### Copyright

Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr.  
Big Stone Gap, Virginia  
Oct. 25, 2015

- 1) V notch – Attached is a photo of a V notch done on an out building, hence the limited attempt to bring the spacing between the logs closer together. It is standing on the left of the road that runs from Holston to Mongle Springs. I will make no attempt to improve on the description provided by the photo. The salient practical features are that it is unstable to outward forces, and can be pulled apart outwardly; and that it can be made with a broad ax with limited skills being necessary. It was the oldest notch used, and I do not know (knot no) the origins, but do know that the earliest Indians (the Xuala) in the area (Saltville) built log cabins. Perhaps we borrowed the design from them.
- 2) In our area (really your area, as it does not include Wise Co.) the highest quality log cabins were built from about 1810-1820 to about 1840. The frontier period was over, and people had the leisure and the money to do the best job on their homes that was technically possible at that point in time. The full dove tail joint came to North America from Scandinavia via the Maritimes and New England, and reached the TriCities about 1810-1820. I have no photo of it, and my powers of description are limited. I am scanning a drawing of the end on one log done in preparation for a dove tail. I am no mechanical draftsman, either. The trick with this joint is that it had a double slope to the joint, with the slant tending to pull the joint inward. This tended to lock the joint inwardly, and went a long way to relieve the outward instability of the joint. Sometimes this joint was further stabilized by taking a gimlet and by boring a hole downward through the joint and by then driving a peg into the hole. The problem with this joint was that it required a saw to execute, and a very skilled craftsman. Each joint was tailor made and the level of skill required would best be described as that of a cabinet maker. PS – I have found a photo, but it is not magnified enough. If you can find my book “Bear Grass”, look on page 68. That house is still standing at the mouth of Livingston Creek, but is framed up. I have taken a magnifying glass, and those joints are a full dove tail. The man who taught me about joints, (Dale Carter) doubts the authenticity of this cabin due to this joint being used. Note the port hole in the upper side for shooting at Indians. This house represents a theoretical problem with the dating system I have outlined. The porthole and the full dove tail are incongruous. However, the Livingstons were the wealthiest and most progressive people around, and perhaps they were the first people to use the full dove tail in our area. If you can not lay your hands on the book, let me know and I will scan the photo for you.
- 3) The half dove tail – About 1840-1850 the ‘better’ people began to move to brick homes, leaving the log cabins to the middle and lower classes. They got lazy, and

compromised on the trouble it took to make a full dove tail, and made the bottom of the joint a straight un sloped cut back. This joint required a lot less time and skill, and was stable enough for the less than perfectionist. This represented the first degeneration in log cabin construction. I would make a parallel with today. When I was a boy, a quality home would be built by a framing carpenter, who owned a 10 point saw and an eighteen ounce hammer. When he had the house framed, a finishing carpenter moved in, and he had a twelve point saw and a twelve ounce hammer. By the time I was grown, the finishing carpenter was gone and forgotten, and the framing carpenter did it all.

- 4) The dap-out joint – home construction stopped in our area in 1861, and did not resume until about 1870-1875. By this time the steam driven saw mill was available (think of Pap Hawley), and most homes were built of frame construction. Only the poorest and least progressive people still built log cabins, and they gave up making functional joints all together. By the Twentieth Century, the sentimental or the wealthy wanting a mountain cabin, started building log cabins again, but no one was left who knew about making good joints. All they did was to take an ax and to dap out a concavity similar to the machine make toy Lincoln Log joint. It is the ultimate in the cultural degeneration of the log cabin.
- 5) The sawed half joint – many industrially built log cabin kits use a joint today that is created simply by sawing out half the thickness of the log. Most of these joints are reinforced by drilling and by sinking a dowel perpendicularly through the joint.



**V KNOTCH**

[SCROLL TO NEXT PICTURE](#)



**HALF DOVE TAIL  
KNOTCH**

END