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William and Joellyn Gibbons chose poplar bark for their 21st-century home on Blowing Rock, N.C.'s Main Street (porch pictured here). Architect Jeff Harbinson gave the home an elegant look closer to Adirondack than to the shaggier "old Linville" style.

Building with Bark



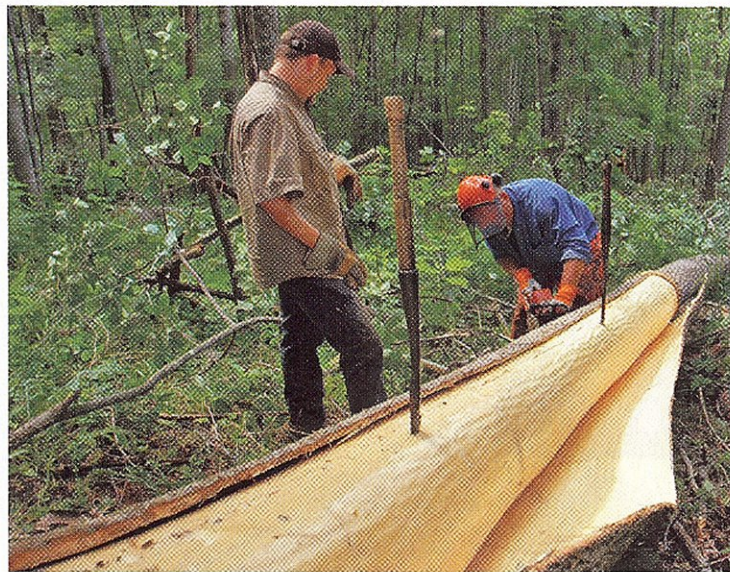
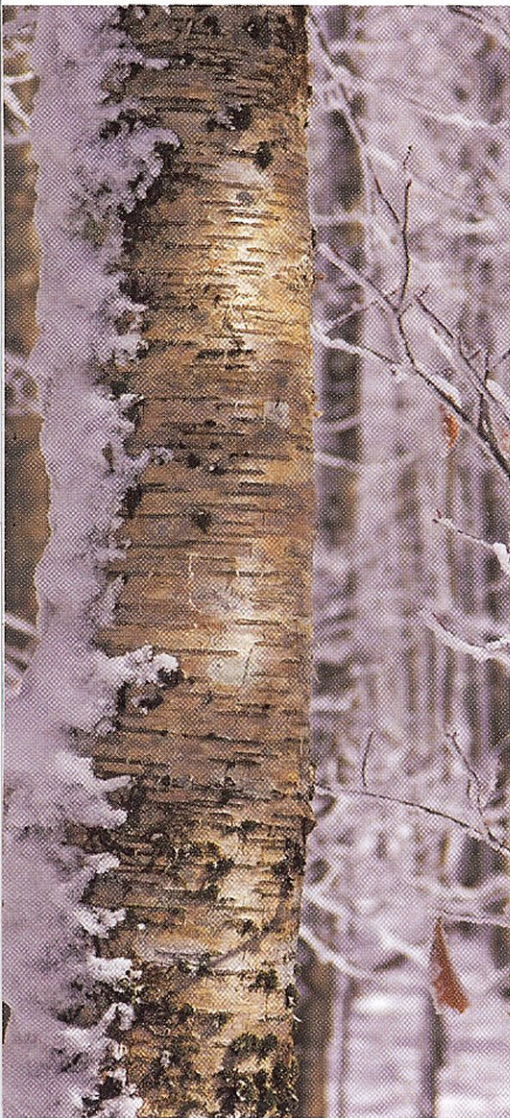
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT. Bark used in a post-Civil War retreat in Linville, N.C.; architect Henry Bacon; the by-hand process of bark removal; yellow birch bark, used for rustic furniture.



THE FIRST BARK DESIGNER

The squared bark shingle style is unique in the rustic realm because it originated with the work of a single architect, Henry Bacon. He is the same society architect who designed the famed Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Bacon's proximity in time and space to several leading families in the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina, and, more importantly, in the emerging mountain resort town of Linville, North Carolina, was fortuitous.

As one of America's most highly regarded architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bacon brought his fresh knowledge of classical Greek architecture to the backwoods, and in a series of architectural commissions for his friends, he married those clean, spare, and compelling lines to the organic rustic look. Although bark had been used for shelters for millennia, it appears to have been Henry Bacon who, in 1895, specified for the first time that the bark be squared into regular pieces for use in his simple yet substantial and beautifully proportioned designs; the bark was hand hewn lengthwise and on top, and cut with a handsaw on the bottom, which gave it a clean edge that was refined for its day. In addition to commissioned homes constructed during the era of Bacon, various churches and inns of the day also displayed the squared bark shingles, and the style quickly spread to other resort towns along the North Carolina mountains. —CM/NC



A new book celebrates the revival of an old architectural style: bark, made popular while American chestnut trees still grew in the mountains. Many years after blight destroyed those trees, yellow (tulip) poplar has made a bark comeback possible.

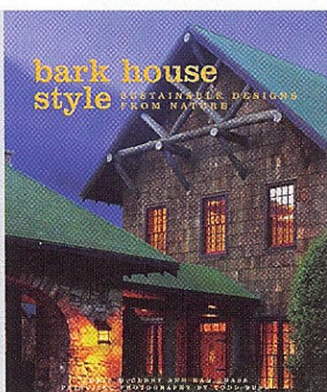
TEXT BY CHRIS MCCURRY AND NAN CHASE
MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD BUSH



An early 20th century bark home in Blowing Rock, N.C., re-barked with fresh poplar, still retains some of its original chestnut shingles.

BUY THE BOOK

"Bark House Style: Sustainable Designs from Nature," by Chris McCurry and Nan Chase, 2008, Gibbs Smith, Publisher. Hardcover \$30. 800-748-5439, gibbs-smith.com.



THE BARK SHINGLE

Today's poplar bark shingle is naturally elegant, which is due in no small part to its clean, regular dimensions and its tight and attractive pattern of ridges and crevices.

Strange to say in this computer-driven machine age, bark shingles are shaped by hand. Only a skilled woodsman can judge just where to make the cuts so that there is no splitting or cracking as each one is prepared for kiln-drying, shipment, and use. Shingle widths vary from four inches to four feet, and lengths are ordinarily either eighteen or twenty-six inches. A bark "panel," in contrast, is much larger – up to five feet wide and as long as twelve feet.

The poplar bark shingle has substantial thickness – usually between ½ and 1½ inches – so that it can be applied without having to be bonded to another building material as a laminate. On the other hand, when applied as exterior cladding on a building, it must be laid over a nailing substrate such as plywood, with dark-colored roofing felt between rows. The shingles are nailed to the substrate in a regular pattern and in overlapping rows, leaving an exposure of anywhere from six to twenty-four or thirty-six inches.

The bark shingle differs from the "bark intact slab," which is also used as exterior cladding in rustic architecture – both materials have bark, but the shingle is bark alone, while the bark slab includes part of the tree and is a product of the first cut of a saw over a tree. —CM/NC

FROM THE INTRODUCTION

Bark house style can certainly be called rustic. It shares important characteristics with other early rustic architecture built by style-conscious settlers: Adirondack, western "cowboy," and the Hansel-and-Gretel gingerbread of the Pacific Northwest.

Hallmarks of the rustic style are the reliance on locally gathered natural materials, like wood and stone, and the visual harmony of buildings with the land around them; the elevation, through superior craftsmanship, of unrefined or unfinished architectural elements like posts and beams, brackets and moldings into treasured art forms; and a romanticism about the charms of sylvan innocence in the midst of a machine-driven society.

In that last respect, the original bark house style was also a lifestyle, one of classic elegance and high society amid the deep, remote wilderness: the refinement of white linens, afternoon teas, and elaborate dinners and dances; of decorous fresh-air pastimes like carriage rides and croquet, played out against the lush primeval backdrop of moss-covered boulders and dark, soaring timbers. Imagine those long-ago scenes – before cell phones, before television, even

before radio – when the tinkling sounds of merriment drifted into the forest and melded with the murmurs of swift-running creeks and the haunting cries of wild animals and unseen birds. With the modern revival of bark house style comes the invitation to relax like this again, to dream, to dedicate oneself to companionship and well-nourished ease in the bosom of nature. 🌲