



BUILDING HISTORY

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For early settlers, creating a house out of trees took more work than collecting and constructing a raupo house (covered in the last *BUILD*). Even small trees first needed to be felled. Then, depending on the tools available, the wood was used as rounds or split into slabs for assembly into a building.

Few log-walled houses

New Zealand did not seem to adopt the 'log cabin' so popular in frontier North America, although a few examples were found such as that at Wilkin River. Cultural beliefs coupled with active insect life (two-toothed borer) led to the development of a more readily repairable wall system – laying logs horizontally but supported between a series of double upright poles. These poles could be small round wood or even ponga logs. A lining of raupo, toetoe reeds or cabbage tree leaves could then be used to reduce draughts and create a warm interior.

Slab houses safer but a bit draughty

Europeans brought with them the ability to cut and disassemble the large trees found throughout New Zealand at the time. Kauri, rimu, totara and



Sayer wood-slab whare at Dalefield, near Carterton.

Using the trees – slab and log houses

Although a young country, New Zealand buildings reflect a long heritage. In this series we're looking at some of the many materials that have been used in our buildings, this time it's timber slabs and rounds.

kahikatea could be readily split into slabs about 2 inches (50 mm) thick and 10–12 inches (250–300 mm) wide. The slabs were largely self-supporting, though often assisted by a light timber frame, as in the Sayer whare.


The most important advantage over raupo reed construction was the reduced fire danger, although greater effort was required to ensure a warm interior. The chimney could be corrugated iron or even timber, but would be lined with stones or bricks.

The chimney was generally at the end of the house and, though its placement wasn't critical, it needed to be roomy to keep the fire well away from the slab walls.

The slab house was not expected to last forever. *Brett's Colonists' Guide and Cyclopaedia of Useful Knowledge* (1883) suggested after initial erection: 'The following summer, if means will allow, a weatherboard house can be built, and the

slab house devoted to other purposes; as a stable or cow house it should last fifteen or twenty years.'

The roof could be clad with thatching or split timber shingles (a smaller version of the wall slab).

Today only a few slab cottages remain. Three are listed on the Historic Places Trust electronic register (www.historic.org.nz), although there are others. 



Log-walled whare at the Christchurch Exhibition in 1906. Photograph by James McDonald, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (ref C.001712).



'Log cabin' at Wilkin River, Lake Wanaka. Photograph by George L. Adkin, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (ref B.023521).