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## THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTHPORT

The history of the town of Southport, like the history of most towns, is written in its landscape. To understand the landscape, it is necessary to know something about the development of its settlement and building patterns.

The earliest settlement was located at the edge of the river clustered around Fort Johnston. The first houses were simply a handful of small cottages, the houses of river pilots who had found the site a safe anchorage for their ships. When Smithville was laid out in 1793, most of these dwellings probably sat askew the new property lines.

Development of the new town in the early nineteenth century was mainly confined to the area closest to the river. Since the Cape Fear was the primary source of livelihood and transportation for most citizens, new houses and stores were erected along Bay and Moore Streets. The siting of the first court house on East Moore Street in 1809 encouraged the growth of shops and law offices in the area around the court house. Bay Street developed with a mixture of docks and houses stretching along the river side. The main road to Wilmington was a trail rambling out of town from East Moore Street. Some building activity might have developed along this road except for the fact that Smithville's main transportation route was the river.

With two or three important exceptions the early dwellings were small one story frame structures. The river pilot and his family could ill afford to build in a style or manner beyond the most modest needs. The problem of finding adequate housing in this early period was frequently aggravated by shortages of building supplies. Most building materials had to be floated down river from Wilmington. There were no saw mills in the area. Nails and other hardware were difficult to obtain. These problems could have been overcome by competent carpenters and masons; however, early building efforts were often hampered by the lack of men in Smithville skilled in the building trades. With reconstruction of Fort Johnston and the building of the new court house the shortage of skilled craftsmen ceased to be a serious problem. The dependence of outside supplies of building material remained a constant source of irritation and delay until the late nineteenth century.

The small frame houses were of a traditional type popular in eastern North Carolina in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The one story house type had two principal rooms, an all-purpose room known as the hall, and a more formal parlor. A narrow passageway may have divided the

hall from the parlor. The kitchen was connected to the dining room at the back of the house by an open breezeway. The upstairs space was used for bedrooms or storage. Most houses had a low shed porch on the front.

The houses may have been small but they were comfortable and well built. Comparing the contemporary quality of architecture in 1905 with that of the antebellum period, one long-time resident noted that although the architecture of the early period

*... was of the simplest kind, still in every house were evidences of an aesthetic taste. Especially their taste ran in the direction of mantle pieces and stair cases with carved ballusters for altho the houses were of one story there were always finished rooms in the attic as was plainly evident by dormer windows which existed in every house and at these modern times are always leaky did not leak from the time they were built till the houses were in ruins . . . they were built by careful and skillful mechanics and many of our modern mechanics could learn lessons from an inspection of this old work and would see at once that the houses and all parts of them were built by workmen who did honest work and built not only for money but also for reputation.'*

None of these small houses has survived. The Adkins-Dosher House (9) and the Swain House (57) are two descendants of this early house type. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this house type seemed a little antiquated for many residents. However, the hall and parlor cottage was still being built in the poorer sections of Southport well into the twentieth century.

Although wealth was not alien to Smithville, it was certainly rare. A few large two story houses of elegance and style were built on Bay Street but the whole scale of building remained modest throughout the ante-bellum period. The two and a half story Walker-Pyke House (27) was built in the first or second decade of the nineteenth century and is probably the oldest surviving private residence in town. The house appears to have been built as a summer residence for a Wilmington merchant. Across the street on the site of the Brunswick Inn (28) stood the two story summer house of Governor Benjamin Smith. Built by Benjamin Blaney, the Smith house survived until 1858 when it was torn down to make room for the present structure. The old house was described as a "large and palatial residence." In plan, the house had a central stair passage with a pair of drawing

rooms on one side and a large dining room thirty or forty feet long on the other.<sup>2</sup>

As Smithville became a fashionable summer resort in the last decade before the Civil War, building activity increased. A new brick court house (77) replaced the earlier wooden one. Next to the court house, St. Philips Episcopal Chapel (78) was erected. The church originally was a rectangular structure with its main entrance on the gable end facing Moore Street. The applied pilasters and pediment of the facade are characteristic of the Greek Revival style.

To accomodate the summer visitors, several boarding houses were built on Bay and Moore Streets. On the waterfront, the Stuart House opened its doors to tourists in 1842. The two story boarding house was destroyed about twenty-five years ago. In the 1850's the Carolina House was built at the corner of Bay and Howe Streets. This two story structure, which was unfortunately demolished in May 1978, became a favorite residence of summer visitors who had sailed down from Wilmington. Back on Moore Street, boarding houses such as the Bell-Clemmons House (92), catered not only to summer visitors but to those in town with business at the county court house.

New structures were built on the military reservation in the 1850's. Many of these new frame buildings at Fort Johnston were covered with vertical boards and battens. The board and batten style gained popularity throughout the United States through the influence of publications on domestic architecture by A.J. Downing. At Fort Johnston, the new hospital (38) was sheathed in this way. The Carolina House was also covered with vertical boards and battens.

The development of architecture in Smithville from the 1790's until the 1870's was slow, often retarded by the shortage of building material, competent craftsmen, and money. With but a few exceptions, domestic architecture was unpretentious and conservative. Old house plans, developed in the mid-eighteenth century, held on tenaciously in Smithville through most of the nineteenth century. Public and commercial buildings faintly echoed the stylistic tendencies of the day. There were a few Federal and Greek Revival details here and there but for the most part architecture in Smithville was dressed with few ornaments of style.

In contrast with the slow and often stagnant growth of antebellum Smithville, the new town of Southport bustled with building activity in the late nineteenth century. In the twenty-five years after 1887, the appearance of the town was radically transformed. In 1900 there were approximately 260 houses in Southport, over half of them built in the

previous eleven years. From 1889 to 1896 alone, one hundred new houses were under construction. Older houses frequently received repairs and improvements. Carpenters and masons, who once suffered months of unemployment, found themselves busy year-round as "the work of improvement in houses and buildings seems to be epidemic, repairs are being made in all parts of the city."<sup>3</sup> In 1889 twenty-five new houses were built; a dozen more received substantial alterations or additions. In the decade after 1889, there was an average of over ten new houses under construction in Southport each year.

\*The old problem of an inadequate supply of building materials was overcome in the early 1890's by the development of local brick and lumber companies. In February, 1890 the Southport Brick and Tile Company was organized by J.A. Pullan and W.H. Pyke of Ft. Wayne, Indiana and William Weeks, a former ship carpenter turned real estate agent. The brickyard was located two miles east of the town on Walden Creek. In April the newspaper noted that "the demand for brick is so urgent that the Southport Brick Company is making brick by hand at its works. The machinery is arriving but orders cannot wait."<sup>4</sup> In late September the Southport Lumber Company was formed. The new company proposed "to build a first class mill, making all kinds of mouldings for house furnishing, besides a planing and saw mill." The rapid completion of the mill was urged for "the Lumber Company will have plenty of orders to fill as soon as they can get to work, for there will be five or ten new houses erected when parties can buy the materials here without having the river delays."<sup>5</sup> Six months later the mill was in operation with the planer "smoothing off quantities of rough board daily."<sup>6</sup> Narrow machine-cut boards of oak, hickory, and poplar were used by local carpenters for wainscoting and ceilings in new houses. Most of the interior woodwork found in houses of this period probably came from the Southport Lumber Company.

All sections of town underwent new building. The small older houses on Bay and Moore Streets were either pulled down or moved to make room for larger houses. On Bay Street the Corlett House (6), Stevens-Taylor House (19), and J.J. Adkins House (20) all date from the late 1880's and probably replace earlier houses on their sites. Several new blocks were completely developed in three or four years. The houses in the 100 block of North Lord Street were built between 1889 and 1894. Other streets such as West Nash and West West Streets had houses built on them within a very short period in the early 1890's. New streets and subdivisions were opened up. In 1891 Brunswick Street was

widened and new housing along the harbor soon developed. That same year W.B. Stevens advertised lots in "Cottage Place, an attractive subdivision" in the northwest section of town. Lots 66 feet by 100 or 200 feet could be purchased for \$15 to \$150. The first contract for a house in this area was made later that summer.<sup>7</sup> The Pkye and Weeks subdivision at the upper end of Atlantic Avenue was developed a few years later. In 1895 Atlantic Avenue was opened up extending into the new subdivision. The next year Howe Street was extended through the property of S.M. Robbins.<sup>8</sup>

Architectural development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Southport was characterized by a general increase in the scale of building and an overwhelming uniformity in the plan, details and ornament of new houses. The Victorian penchant for bay windows, jigsaw ornament, and irregular massing was incorporated into the local building tradition but it can scarcely be said that the carpenter-builders of the period were consciously emulating the national styles. To apply the terms "Stick" or "Queen Anne" styles to Southport architecture would be misleading. Builders such as A.J. Robbins, Henry and Joseph Daniel, and George Davis were working in a native tradition that changed very slowly. Most house plans that were used in the 1890's were developed decades earlier. The so-called "double cottage" plan, a one story house with two rooms on each side of a central passageway, was popular in eastern North Carolina in the early nineteenth century. Dozens of houses of this type were built in Southport in the 1890's. The R. Doshier, Sr. House (209), C.G. Smith Cottage (244), and Foley Cottage (248) are three examples. The side passage plan, a two story house with two rooms on one side of stair passage, was a popular urban plan for over one hundred years. The narrow lot of the James Burriss House (229) on West Nash Street may have been one of the reasons the builder selected the side passage plan for the house.

If most carpenter-builders clung to traditional house types, there was at least one man who worked with new types. W.T. Ottoway seems to have been keenly aware of the Victorian sensibilities. His designs step out of the local vernacular tradition by his experimentation with irregular massing and unconventional floor plans. In the T. St. George House (226), the convergence of a number of small wings creates a jumbled irregular roof line, a feature that pleased the Victorian sense of the picturesque. Another house designed and built by Ottoway, the T. Carr House (238) is also outside the traditional pattern of local architecture.

Few builders followed up the initiative set by

Ottoway. A.E. Stevens, president of the Southport Lumber Company, constructed a house of unique design on North Atlantic Avenue. The machine cut interior woodwork of the Stevens House (259) attests to the fine quality of work produced at the saw mill. The introduction of the machine-cut woodwork tended to undermine the native woodworking tradition. After 1890 the standardized interior finish was the rule in Southport.

By far the most prolific builders in the boom years of the late nineteenth century were the Daniel brothers and A.J. Robbins. The Daniel brothers had been apprenticed to their father Enoch Daniel, a ship's carpenter, in the years following the Civil War. A.J. Robbins married into the family in the 1890's. Together, these three master carpenters were responsible for more than thirty new dwellings in Southport from 1889 to 1896.

The Richard Doshier, Sr. House (209) is typical in plan and ornament of dozens of houses put up by the Daniel brothers and Robbins. In plan the house is characteristic of many "double cottages" built in the 1890's. A narrow center passageway divided the house. On each side are two rooms. Each of the four rooms has its own fireplace. The two chimneys are set axially along the wall separating the front rooms from the back ones. At the back of the house, a covered breezeway connects the house with a kitchen. The architectural details inside and out are ubiquitous in late nineteenth century Southport. Outside there is a bracketed frieze, prominent cornice, and narrow pilasters at the corner of the walls. Inside details feature arched and bowed window and door architraves, unsophisticated mantelpieces, and narrow, machine-cut, beaded boards.

Although Robbins was not the most imaginative builder, his work showed the competence of a skilled craftsman. He would often repeat a house design if it suited his client. In the spring of 1895 he built E.H. Cramner a substantial one and a half story house on Atlantic Avenue (263). The new house (263) he completed for Daniel Bender in October of the same year was almost an exact replica of the Cramner House. Around 1910 Robbins built four identical one story houses on Atlantic Avenue (249, 250, 262, 261). At this rate of construction, he seems to have been speculating in the housing market rather than building for specific customers. Robbins, like the Daniel brothers, worked in the local building tradition. House plans remained straight-forward simple arrangements. When fashion dictated, a bay window was added or a center gable was placed on the roof. These minor stylistic considerations did little to affect the traditional building pattern in domestic architecture.

The brick buildings of the commercial district of Southport followed the boom in domestic architecture. In the first decade of the twentieth century with the influx of outside capital and the development of new businesses, there was a need for substantial commercial buildings. The availability of brick at the Southport Brick and Tile Company and the prestige of having a brick store led many businessmen to select this material for their new commercial structures. One of the earliest brick buildings of East Moore Street was the Southport Bank (72) which opened in 1905. The facade of the building is laid with smooth machine-made brick in a common bond. The side and rear walls are laid in rougher brick with a 1: 7 bond. This rather plain style was copied in other buildings on the block, notably Watson's Pharmacy (71), the Harper-Northrup Building (66), and the Hood Building (69). The inspiration for this type of architecture can be found in several commercial and public structures built in Wilmington at the turn of the century.

Colonial Revival stylistic details were filtering into the Southport builder's repertoire by 1910. No houses were completely built in this style; that would break too much with traditional predilections. Small elements of ornament, however, could be incorporated just as details of earlier styles had been judiciously adopted. New houses, the Robbins-Chadbourne House (21) and the Almgreen House (59) for example, show elements of classical

detail. Porches are supported by columns instead of turned posts; modillions replace frieze brackets in the eaves; and, roofs feature pedimented bays. Once this last great wave of building peaked in the years before the First World War, architectural activity waned. One or two commercial buildings were constructed in the 1920's and a few new homes in the bungalow style (96, 203) were erected in the late 1930's but little more.

The flourish of building activity in the late nineteenth century was due to the concomitant growth in population and relative wealth in Southport. As with the antebellum period, domestic and commercial architecture vaguely followed the prevalent national styles. Elements of each style were incorporated into local building tradition and interpreted in various ways. If style and ornament were only incidental to the Southport builder, then house type was of primary importance. It was this intimate knowledge of traditional house types that the carpenter-builder carried with him to each new job. Some master carpenters were willing to experiment but rarely did they break away from the traditional framework and build a house of imaginative design. Despite this lack of imagination, the workmanship of most carpenters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained at a high level of competence. The Depression ended the era of the great master carpenters of Southport.

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<sup>1</sup>W.G. Curtis, *Reminiscences of Wilmington and Smithville—Southport, 1848-1900*, n. d., pp. 47-48

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>*Southport Leader*, November 15, 1894.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, April 17, 1890.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, October 30, 1890.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, June 25, 1891.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, April 23, 1891; August 20, 1891.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, October 31, 1895; September 17, 1896.