THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN HOUSE
AS A
VEHICLE OF DISCOVERY FOR AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE

by
Charles Edward Clarke
B.Arch., Howard University
Washington, D.C.
May 1992

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF SCIENCE IN ARCHITECTURE STUDIES
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
JUNE 1995

Signature of the author _____
Charles Edward Clarke, Department of Architecture
May 12, 1995

Certified by _____
William L. Porter
Professor of Architecture
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by _____
Roy Strickland
Chairman, Departmental Committee on Graduate Students

The African-American House
As A
Vehicle of Discovery Of An African-American Architecture

by
Charles Edward Clarke

Submitted to the Department of Architecture on May 12, 1995
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Architecture Studies

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is three-fold:

(1) This thesis seeks to uncover evidence of a distinctly African-American architectural form. The primary building type observed will be the house, or the housing of African-Americans that was built by and for African-Americans. Because the greatest numbers of black people have resided in the southern United States throughout American history, most of the study will deal with the houses of blacks in that region. The position taken is that the house is a form of physical and spiritual self-expression. Simply stated, the study seeks to discover what it is about these houses that are of and by black folk that renders them peculiarly African-American.

(2) This paper will document the works of some lesser known black builders of the American past, particularly in the Southeast following the Civil War. The objective will be to look for the possible visible signs of the transmittal of material culture in order to find if there is a uniquely African-American built form in existence today, or if, in fact, one has ever existed. It will look primarily at the houses executed by these people, and develop what is hoped will be a significant body of knowledge that will aid in the future study of this and other similar subjects.

(3) This thesis seeks to answer a question very basic to my own personal and continuing involvement in the study of architecture, urban design, historic preservation, and African-American history: What are the determinants of an African-American architecture?

In order to make a case for a truly African-American architectural form, those factors that could bear directly upon its formulation must be known and described. A major portion of this argument is devoted to just such knowledge and description.

Thesis Supervisor: William L. Porter
Title: Professor of Architecture

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the host of people who made possible the successful completion of this thesis. Their care and genuine concern for me, combined with their unexpectedly high levels of interest in the topic, provided the impetus for continuation of an almost insurmountable task.

Financial support from my parents and family, the advice of Victor Dyzendio in the area of architectural preservation, the valuable resources at the Harvard African-American Studies Department, and the people at the Howard University Spingarn Center were greatly appreciated. Very special thanks go out to my advisor, Professor William L. Porter.

I cannot express the joy and gratitude I feel at this time for my best friend in the entire world, Melanie J. Bell, who stood by and encouraged me. Finally, I thank the Almighty God, from whence comes my strength.

Charles Edward Clarke

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

My initial approach to the development of a thesis on a subject that dealt with Africa-Americans and architecture to attempt to establish an appropriate vehicle by which the most knowledge could be gained. It became obvious, at least to me, that in order to uncover the hidden aspects of the culture of a people, it may be necessary to investigate them in a set of surroundings that allowed a formal expression of their spiritual and historical existence. These surroundings, however, must also allow for a degree of informal spiritual and historical expression of their existence as well. The need to observe the informal arose as a seemingly logical way to assure that the everyday, ordinary, nearly invisible occurrences of the African-American family did not elude any longer the eyes of those of us who have chosen to make careers out of designing buildings and landscapes for these people and others.

From the very outset of the research, the vehicle took on not one, but three distinct forms that arose from memories of my childhood environment as I grew up in an Afro-American neighborhood. These were:

(1) the church

(2) the street corner

(3) the house.

Early on, a great deal of attention was focused on issues that dealt with patterns or manners of use and behavior peculiar to African-Americans in each of these environments. This resulted from casual observations that led me to conclude somehow that black and non-black people used their immediate surroundings in inherently different ways, these being a result of cultural heritage and ethnicity.

The church, because of its almost strict formality (relatively speaking) in its historical use pattern, was discarded as a possible vehicle. It did not encourage ordinary

occurrences in the buildings of my childhood memory and its use was not on an everyday basis. At the other end of the spectrum, the street corner, never purposely designed for the use patterns that it seemed to encourage (car washing, car parking, car waxing, dancing, occasional gambling and beer drinking, girl watching, and socializing), was always the picture of informality. These strong mental images of the use of the street on an everyday basis contrasted with the once-per-week, rule-heavy formality that characterized the church activity and environment. Moreover, the elements of design and the physical embellishments of both the street corner and the church building were somehow borrowed from other cultures. It just did not seem that stained glass windows and 1974 Plymouths were representative of the spiritual and artistic past of African-Americans.

The answer to the problem of finding the appropriate vehicle, it seemed, would be to look for a building form that would reveal the spiritual and artistic past of African-Americans. It is a fact that behavior patterns and socialization patterns dictated, to a great degree, artistic expression. Quite obviously, spiritual songs sung in the African-American Baptist and Methodist churches in the South and elsewhere in America result from patterns of behavior that are deeply embedded in our history. The same can be said of blues music, which grew out of a compounding of the very inequities and frustrations that were the products of slavery. That which is generated from the old-time spirituals and from the blues, whether it be jazz, rock-and-roll, or soul music, carries the imprint of the contributions to it made by the African-American songwriter/artist.

There is a distinct African-American way of life that, not unlike the ways of life of other social and ethnic sub-groups of Americans, inevitably produces its own art forms. The pueblo dwellings of the Hopi Indian tribe of the southwest United States offers an excellent example of an artfully executed landscape that is a result of practical skill and socially transmitted behavior patterns. The living environment and its shape are here a reflection of the Hopi lifestyle and is proof of their existence here in America.

Thus, it became necessary for me to answer this question: What is the built form that is the best reflection of African-American people and their distinctive way of life? Is there a building type that encourages a social behavior that is recognizable by the prevalence of informal, street-oriented gathering and its offshoots? Among the most common of people within this sub-group we call African-Americans, what could possibly be the vehicle by which we study the relationship between them and architecture? The answer: the house, always the background structure of my childhood memories, always between the street corner and the church building, no doubt held the secrets for which I was searching.

Not being a very skilled investigator and being attracted to the most obvious of clues, my attention was turned to the type of house in which African-Americans were the most numerous and visible of users. Of course, the areas of investigation that surfaced as logical were urban, since African-Americans make up the majority of the population in the inner cities of America. What seemed to follow even more logically was that the subject of the study should be public housing in multi-family settings in order to best observe the behavior and socialization patterns of the most common people. My belief was that through this medium, I might uncover things that show peculiarities which could lead to better and more responsive design solutions.

Still convinced at the early stage that the vehicle was to be public housing, I determined that a close investigation of behavior might help me to discover a better way to respond as an African-American architect to the needs of African-Americans. It became obvious soon after I made the decision to search for an African-American response that, in order to be secure in the idea that the result would be peculiarly African-American, I must also study the behavior and responses to design of other ethnic groups as well. The intent was to contrast them in similar settings with the socialization and behavior patterns of African-Americans. This kind of study would reveal <u>whether or not</u> there were enough differences to justify the idea that I was helping to create an African-American architecture.

The purpose of studying African-American architecture would be to identify an architectural form that would represent African-American culture.

At this juncture in the development of the thesis, I met with some difficulty in my own mind about the appropriateness of public housing to the study. I began to realize that unlike the Hopi Indians and their experience with the pueblo, African-Americans were not the shapes and originators of this public housing environment that was about to be the center of my study. My own social and architectural biases had led me to the conclusion that the common folk that just happened to be African-American and just happened to have the misfortune of being economically disadvantaged should be forever identified with and relegated to public housing environments. I felt ashamed at my own insensitivity an lack of optimist and vision for a better life for people for whom I shared the same basic cultural heritage.

Somewhat confused at this point, I still felt that the house, in some form, was that vehicle by which most could be gained. Its inherent ability to closet, and at the same time, outwardly reflect the characteristics of its inhabitants, rendered the house more appropriate than any other building type as a source of studying the past and present lives of a people. Although we are Americans, being African-American implies that we give some attention to that which distinguishes us from other Americans- our African ancestry. This simple fact was the key in the shaping of many of our American art forms, such as the dances, culinary arts, and song styles, as well as some musical instruments that we now consider to be American. I realized even further that it was my task as well as my responsibility, along with other African-Americans within the architectural community, to observe carefully the environments and structures that are part of the black community and search for characteristics that can be traced to our African ancestry. Then, as these things are discovered, whether directly African or modifications of components that are derived from African culture, they reinforce the concept of an African-American architecture.

The significance of all this was that I had overlooked the possibility that African-Americans had ever in their history been directly involved in the building of their own environments, be it housing, religious structures, or other types. In fact, African-Americans had been involved in the process of creating their own environments throughout their history in America. Even though the period of Negro slavery in the United States and other places in the western hemisphere that bear directly upon the culture of blacks in the United States, African-American involvement in the building process was quite common.[1] In these places, whether on plantations or in freedmen's settlements where acknowledged African cultural activities such as iron working, pottery making, or even spiritual singing flourished, why should the making of the built environment by these people not be considered a representation of African culture, also? These are all practical skills that can be considered expressions of artistic heritage peculiar to a people.

The task became clear. In order to carry out this work, areas of the South which have long histories of African-American involvement from the point of original settlement must be identified. Conclusive evidence of the structures built in large part by African-Americans must be obtained and presented as part of this thesis. As these areas are defined geographically and the period of history when the structures were built is identified, observations of the structures can be made. With some general knowledge of the ancestor and their cultural heritage in Africa and the West Indies (points of the beginnings of the slave trade which brought black people to the New World), comparisons of the architecture of the ancestor to that of the descendent can be made. From this comparison, structures built by African-Americans in succeeding generations can be analyzed for their containment of African architectural survivals.

---

[1] Peter H. Wood. "Whetting, Setting, and Laying Timbers - Black Builders in the Early South," Southern Exposure, Vol. VIII, No. 1, (Spring, 1989), p. 4.

To be American, of course, is to be part of a vast system of external forces that work to make one a part of the melting pot that has come to symbolize America itself. We who call ourselves Americans are at once the same, yet we are different. We manage to build large monuments to remind us of our oneness[2], yet somehow, our experiences within our sub-groups, whether they be religious , ethnic, or nationalist instill in us a kind of need to build small monuments to keep us aware of our separateness. The house and all its trappings can be considered a small monument symbolizing an ethnic identity, such as in the case of the Hopi and their pueblo. Blues music can be a small monument symbolizing the unique experiences of an African-American tenant farmer in Mississippi. It becomes a form of ethnic identity. These forms of material culture have, for the most part, survived the onslaught of the melting pot's attack upon it so that they have not been absorbed and otherwise obscured.

This study will examine why it is that so many of the African and African-American antecedents of material culture survived the effects of the melting pot, yet that which could be called architecture has not found its place in the American mind. The fact that it may have been allowed to almost disappear makes my responsibility as an architect for and of the black community more clear. I must, along with the help of others, begin to rescue these obscure monuments by searching for clues among a landscape of ruins.[3] It is my sincere hope that these findings will lead to an enrichment of the meaning of the past, present, and future lives of all Americans, and particularly those of African ancestry. Perhaps, once these secrets of our architectural past are fully uncovered, it will be easier to make judgments about what is a proper response to the problem of providing living environments for black Americans that will reflect their particular social and behavior patterns in an artistic way.

---

[2] Philip Johnson. "Our Ugly Cities", The Writings of Philip Johnson, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1979), p, 157-158.
[3] Richard K. Dozier. "The Black Architectural Experience in America", AIA Journal, Vol. 65, No. 7, (July, 1986), p. 168.

It is necessary to briefly address some of the conditions that appear to have led to significant involvement of African-Americans in the making of the built environment in the southern United States. It is still not widely known by the general public, nor by a sizable number of those in the professions related to building, the contributions African-Americans made to the architecture of the American past.

As for the history of professional concerns as they relate to the practice of architecture, it must be noted that as a true profession, architecture in the United States, as we know it, is very young. The first records of architects being registered date as late as the very end of the nineteenth century. John A. Lankford is considered to have been the first known black practicing architect in America, opening an office in Jacksonville, Florida, 1899. The event coincided with a movement by Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to begin training of blacks to be professionals in the field of architecture. The trend among the white community to professionalize as early as 1860, with the establishment of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology School of Architecture, saw the beginnings of regulatory controls over the profession by the state.[4] This came at a critical time of economic and racial tensions in areas where free men of color were allowed to compete directly for jobs as artisans in the American building industry.[5] Many of the whites who felt threatened by free blacks stood to gain by any regulatory system that could exclude a segment of the competition for reasons of race. It must be realized, however, that 80%-90% of the artisans in Charleston, South Carolina, from 1826 until 1848, were black. The intense labor required to maintain the plantation was provided by blacks, whether it was agricultural or mechanical.[6] Blacks were instrumental in the building of many of the structures of the ante-bellum South, many years before there was a movement toward professionalism.

---

[4] Wood, p.6
[5] John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedon: A History of Negro Americans, (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 27
[6] Wood, p. 3

The experience of the black community in general with the field of architecture in both the professional and the academic worlds has in recent years begun to receive a reasonable amount of attention. The emergence of large numbers of black professionals in technical fields such as architecture in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s brought about an increased awareness of blacks' historical roles in these areas. The knowledge now being gathered by scholars as well as practitioners about the involvement of blacks in the making of American architecture has been, until recently, obscured. Just as other accounts of other histories have been obscured, the selectivity and discrimination exercised on the part of the largely white community of architectural historians was one in an effort to record the events of the past that glorified their predecessors who were predominantly white and predominantly European. Also, the perpetuation by America of two and one-half centuries of slavery and a forced system of illiteracy upon the black community saw to it that many of the efforts to record accounts of relevant African-American history were probably suppressed. The first comprehensive African-American history was written in 1922 by Carter G. Woodson, 59 years after the emancipation of slavery and 303 years after the first Africans were put ashore at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619.[7]

Thus, the issues that arise which serve to increase the difficulty of a study such as this must be viewed also as aids to the uncovering of evidence in a search for African-American architecture. Moreover, the implication that major parts of the story have not yet been told by existing historical accounts, of course, serves as motivation for continuing an energetic search.

---

[7] Franklin, pp. 23 and 29.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Two areas of concern contribute directly to the thesis. These are:

(1) A study of the African antecedents (particularly those of the West African settlements) to the development of African-American material culture, in built form as well as other forms. Houses, their parts, foods, and musical traditions all become necessary to the development of the theme.

(2) A search for some of the earliest evidences of an African-American material culture in built form and the evolution of that form as it exists in the American landscape of today. The house becomes the primary vehicle for conducting research.

If evidence of the existence and persistence of sufficient African antecedents to the building and design traditions of African-Americans can be found through the study of the environment built by and for African-Americans, then there exists an African-American architecture.

Much difficulty lies ahead in the search for an African-American architecture. The problem of trying to sort out particulars amidst the vast array of architectural precedents, coupled with an extensive search among the ruins could, it would seem at the outset, lead to an infinite number of dead ends, theories, conjectures, incongruities, and conflicting historical accounts. I must say here that such is the nature of this beast. When attempting to thread together events involving the history of slavery in America, incidents that occurred during the actual slave trade, historic archaeology, generally accepted architectural history of the world, oral history, and pictorial accounts of southern living, it must be recognized early on by both writer and reader of this thesis that accuracy is patiently and slavishly sought after, but sometimes not achieved. Historian John Storm Roberts probably stated it best:

Errors of enthusiasm are one thing- errors of fact are another. If I have made many of the latter, I may perhaps comfort myself by remembering the obvious mistakes I have encountered in the works of famous authorities of all sorts.[8]

[8] John Storm Roberts, Black Music of Two Worlds, (N.Y.: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1974), p.v.

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF AFRICAN ANTECEDENTS TO VARIOUS ASPECTS OF NEW WORLD CULTURES

> That millions of Africans would leave no trace of their own architectural heritage on the New World they helped to colonize is untenable. Under conditions of close proximity, one would expect an exchange between African and European. If the African adopted certain techniques from the European. If the African adopted certain techniques from the European, we should be prepared to expect the reverse.[9]

The persistence of cultural heritage's of all types over hundreds of years in the New World can be in no way denied. America, as we have come to know it, has made as its trademark the ability to satisfy and accommodate peoples of varying historical backgrounds. The degree to which this idea has been adhered to with regard to those transplant Americans of African ancestry has been limited. This is due mainly to the fact that the transplantation was involuntary on the part of Africans, the only group to come to this continent, for the most part against its wishes. They came not to seek the same dreams as other immigrant groups, but instead to make possible and true the dreams of those others. Forced into a system of chattel slavery, they in most instances arrived here literally naked of all visible physical and cultural clothing.

Many of what are though to be lost traces of African culture are in fact not lost, but simply and very neatly obscured. The same is true of Americanized European culture and other cultures as well. The basic difference between the obscurity of what can be generally classified as African in origin and that which is of European or some other origins is very clear. The Europeans in the New World colonies were in power to make decisions as to what must survive in America. The African slave had no choice in the matter of preserving

---

[9] Carl Anthony, 'The Big House and the Slave Quarters-African Contributions to the New World", Landscape, v. 21, (Autumn, 1986), p.14.

the culture of any group, especially his own. Although the slave was ordered or allowed to use and remake parts of the total structure of the white-ruled society, he was in most situations instructed not to propagate any strong reminders of his African heritage. The slaves came from complex social and economic backgrounds within the African continent.[10] Therefore, it is not unreasonable to surmise that African slaves were tenacious in their efforts to preserve something of their own cultures, even if it mean defying the new system.[11] Historian Peter Wood describes the frustrations of Okra, a Georgia Sea Island slave who attempted to build a house like the one he had in Africa. The little huts, constructed of clay plaster and thatch, with twelve by fourteen foot dimensions, was torn down by the "Massa," who expressed anger at the idea of such blatant African cultural expressionism.[12]

In order to better illustrate the very special conditions under which African culture attempted to survive and subsequently was assimilated into a generalized American mainstream, it is necessary to observe European examples of musical, language, and architectural derivations in America. The general acceptance of these examples of cultural origins and assimilations is due to the fact that preservers of the history were mostly white people. Their political and economic power throughout most of American history, combined with educational opportunity and the freedom to choose which parts of the past would live forever in their writings, insured the salvation of their cultural beginnings from obscurity. These examples will be followed by a few which point out antecedents to some African beginnings. These are not widely known in American society and have escaped the annals of general American history. Whatever the least reasons for such ignorance of important parts of American life and heritage are, perhaps these are the greatest:

---

[10] Franklin, p. 28.
[11] Wood, p. 6.
[12] Ibid.

(1) The insistence of the majority race in our society to reject the notion of any African, and thus African-American, contributions to history.

(2) The fear by the master of slave upheaval and rebellions in the event that literacy among the blacks was allowed to proliferate; this suppression of a skill (which is now considered basic to American life itself) during a time in which many African contributions were perhaps being developed and absorbed produced an atmosphere conducive to poorly recorded oral accounts and only the most rare of written ones.

Cultural landscapes in the United States are very complex combinations of myth and reality that form obstacles which are extremely difficult for an historical investigator to overcome. The unusual power of the American image of romance and the good life among the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, no doubt, led to the replication of Spanish architectural types in the boom years of Miami, Florida, in the 1920s. Developer George Merrick, in his effort to help establish Miami as a premier resort area in the world, imported these European ideas into what is a very inappropriate climate.[13] The masonry structures (fig. 1, 2, &3) were originally designed for very practical use in the hot and arid region of southern Europe. The climate of Miami, which is hot and humid by contrast, was obviously not a major consideration in the development. What is obvious is that the obsession with the myth of the romantic Mediterranean was perhaps, the major consideration in Merrick's selection of design and materials.

Over the years, the American public has come to accept Miami as simply an American resort phenomenon. The absorption of various traces of other cultures into the American landscape inevitably leads to the inaccuracies commonly applied to it, such as "Mediterranean" architecture. Actually, the architecture of Spain is a curious mix of cultures itself. To trace its beginnings would be an exercise in the acknowledgment of

---

[13] Nixon Smiley, Yesterday's Miami, (Miami, Fla.: E. A. Seeman Publishing, Inc., 1973), pp. 76, 80, 85, and 87.

Figure 1

George Merrick's rendition of "Mediterranean" architecture in Miami, c. 1920. Reprinted from Yesterday's Miami, by Nixon Smiley, p. 49.

Figure 2.

George Merrick's rendition of "Mediterranean" architecture in Miami, c. 1920. Reprinted from Yesterday's Miami, by Nixon Smiley, p. 80.

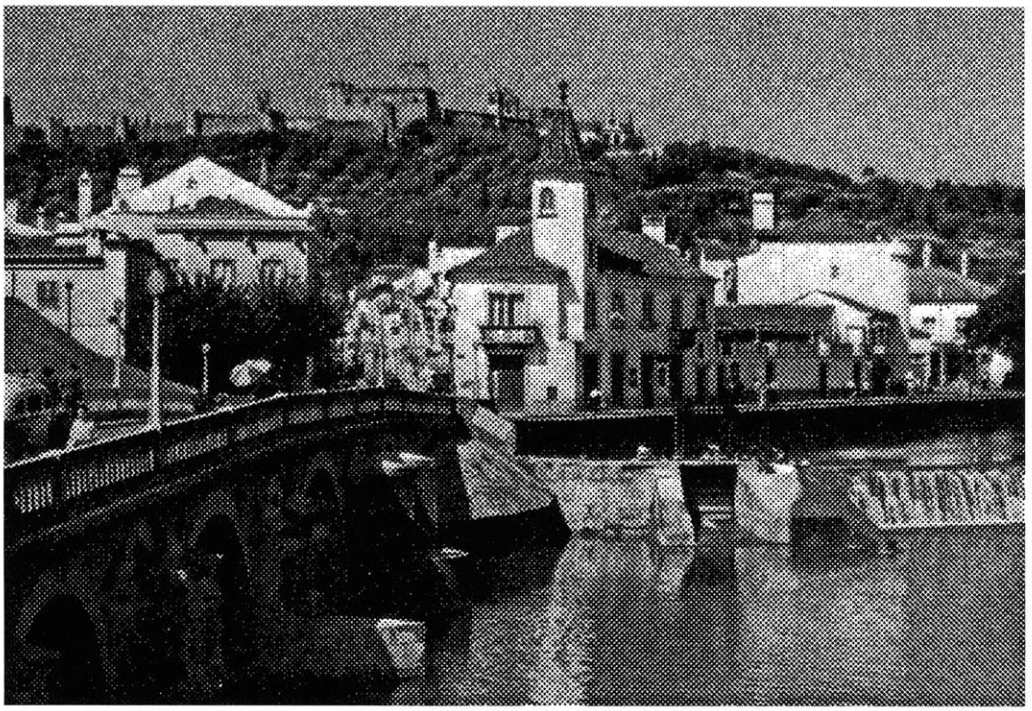

Figure 3.

A view of a castle and the architecture of the southern Mediterranean in Europe. Reprinted from Urban Development in Southern Europe: Spain and Portugal.

borrowings from temples of the Roman Empire before the eighth century Moslem conquest, mosques characteristic of Moslem worship, the Christian church and liturgy, and the walled nucleic cities of Islam.[14] Prior to its Islamic beginnings, the heritage's of untold numbers of Central Asian and Northern African societies undoubtedly bear heavily upon Spain and its development.

America has a way of adapting the remnants of other societies to its own particular needs and amusements. This is nowhere more prevalent than in the area of American musical development. The European traditions in many phases of American music is well documented. There are some examples of obscure beginnings, however, in both song and instrumental categories, to what are now considered simply part of American tradition. The minstrelsy, particularly the blackface minstrelsy, was an unusual form of theatrical and musical entertainment that was born in the 1830s in New York and had historical precedents in the British comedies and dramas of the 1700s.[15] White entertainers and musicians, in reaction to poor reviews and non-acceptance by the upper-class followers of American attempts to establish opera in the early nineteenth century, sought a surer means of economic success. In what were called African Opera Houses, whites blackened their faces and sang "Negro songs" as they performed comedic impersonations of Negro stereotypes. These insufferable comedies led to what is now recognized as the American minstrel show.

Instrumentally, Americans owe very important debts to Europe, many of which white historians will acknowledge. The prominence of the fiddle in American music of today dates back to colonial Virginia in the 1750s.[16] Negro slaves entertained at social functions for whites and played many instruments. The fiddle was an adaptation of a classical

---

[14] Ibid.
[15] W. Wiley Hitchcock, Music in the United States: A historical Introduction, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p. 107.
[16] Ibid.

stringed instrument to the intonations of the Scottish bagpipes, and remains an important part of America's music in the southern United States.

The making of the American form of English has proven, over the decades, to be a perpetual process. Words from other languages are either broken or borrowed directly to accommodate new ideas in American lifestyle. This is pointed up well when the question is put forth as to the origin of particular words. The meshing of language is perhaps best realized when viewed in an area where the landscape is synonymous with the assimilation process. In Louisiana, a region which as absorbed people of various backgrounds, it is to be expected that special and unique word forms should arise. For example, in 1775, the British expelled a group of French Catholic settlers from what is now Nova Scotia, Canada, and what was then called Acadia. These people were sent to the French West Indies and later allowed to resettle in the French areas of Louisiana. Over the years the name Acadian remained, but was pronounced "Cajun" in its Americanized form.[17]

Because of the way that history is recorded in the United States, many of the African antecedents to the language, music and architecture of America are more difficult to trace. The most recent American historians have made attempts to rectify the situation, but obscure details remain unknown to the American public. John Hope Franklin, in From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, describes the commonly acknowledged American terms goober, yams, canoe, and banjo, as measures of the persistence of African language in the United States.[18] Even the southern dialect, or drawl, can be in part attributed to the black slave "mammy" and her version of English as it was handed down to the white children who were placed in her care. These white children were also allowed to associate regularly with the black slave children, no doubt further reinforcing the dialect and language crossover and destroying cultural barriers.

---

[17] Franklin, p. 27
[18] Franklin, p. 28

Musical traditions of Africans and their influence upon the United States are also acknowledge, but the extent of the total contribution of the African continent is perhaps greater than most Americans, until the most recent decades, and especially since the 1960s, care to realize. The banjo, xylophone, and drum all have their principal development traced to African origin.[19] Used to accompany the songs and dances of New World peoples such as those of African ancestry in the islands of the West Indies, as well as North America and South America, these instruments have come to be identified as American, much of the time without giving credit to their originator. The banjo, derived from banja, bandor, banjar, and banjer, was the principal instrument used for the entertainment of the slave and the master during the height of slavery. The banjo is now primarily identified with the American forms of bluegrass, country, and jazz (fig. 4 & 5).

It is easiest to understand the African contribution to American art forms by looking directly at the American artistic development of the black community. The Afro-American version of Christian spiritual music, and the blues are blends of African ingredients that are difficult to pinpoint, thus must be categorized as simply "African."[20] The numerous tribal differences of the Africans that came to the New World as slaves, for reasons mentioned before, were not significantly recorded for history and the assimilation process became not only a meshing of African and European, but one of a meshing of African and African as well. The blues, termed by writer, LeRoi Jones, as the blackest of black music, is a product of this mixture.[21]

The plight of the historian whose job it is to find the specifics of the origins of blues music is akin to the plight of the investigator who is in search of an African antecedent to

---

[19] Franklin, p. 25
[20] Roberts, p. 19
[21] Roberts, p. 159

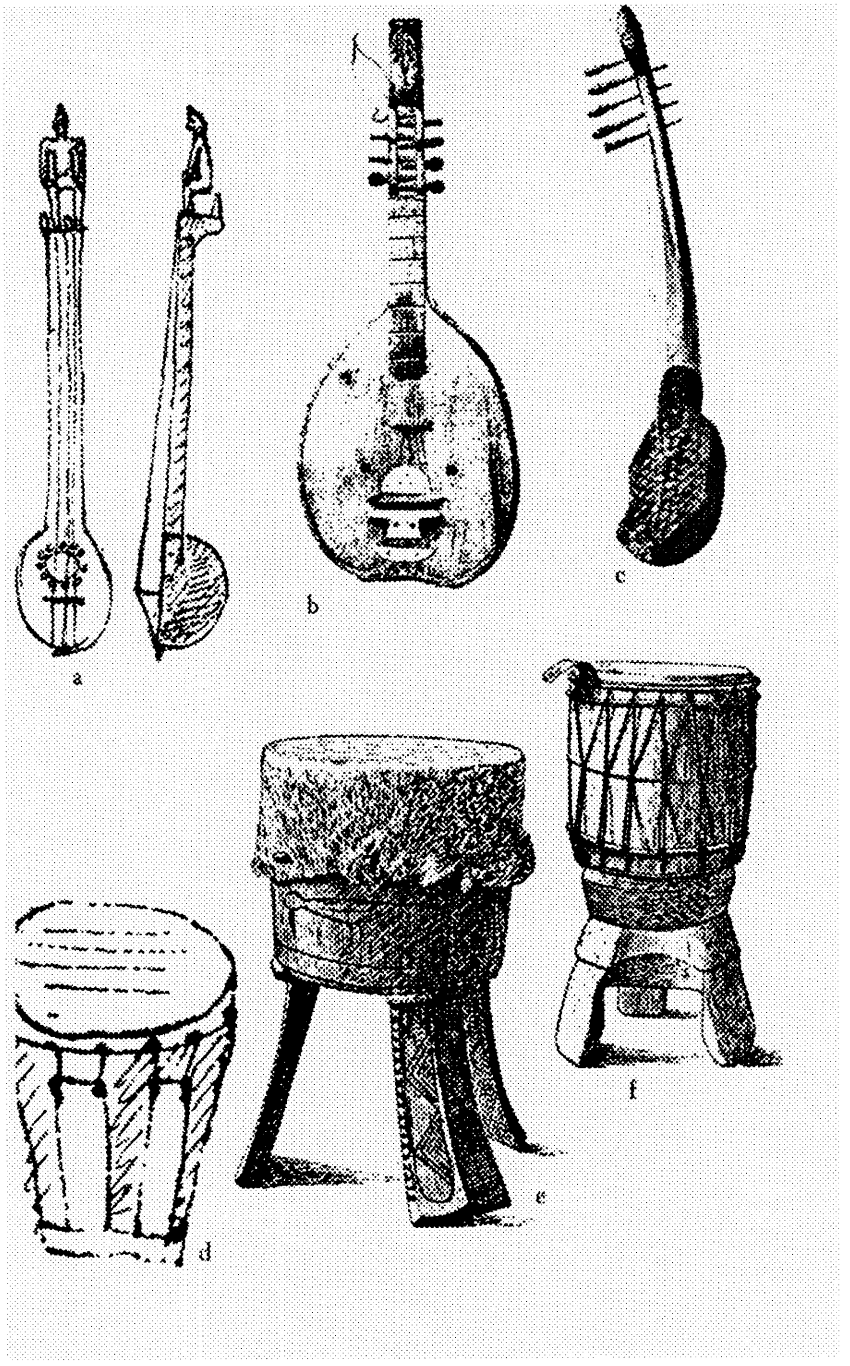

Figure 4.

African instruments - ancestors of the drum and the banjo. Reprinted from The Slave Community, by John W. Blassingame, p. 35.

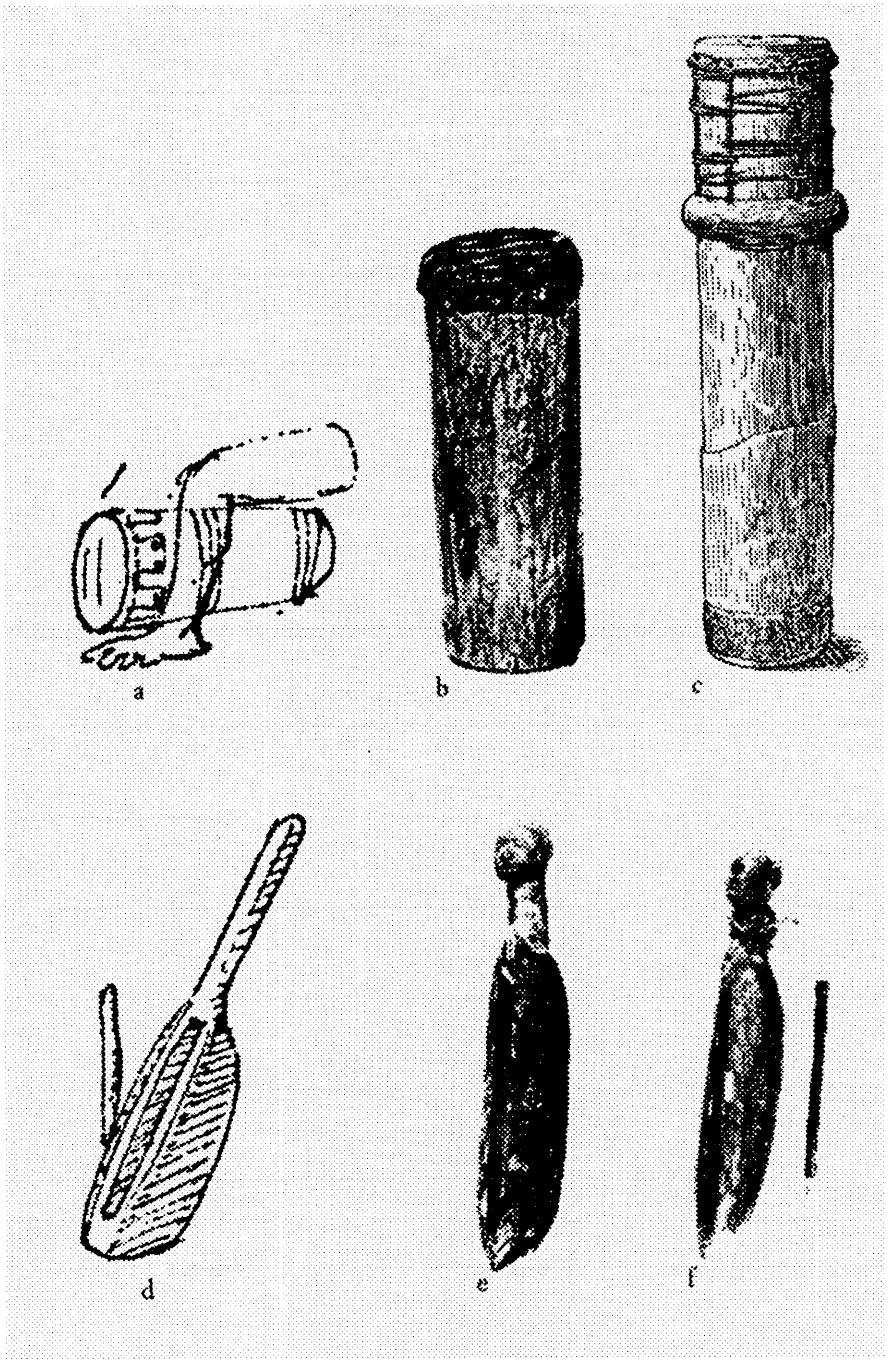

Figure 5.

African beginnings of American musical instruments. Reprinted from The Slave Community, by John W. Blassingame, p. 34.

American architecture. Just as the musical historian looks at the primary applications as they exist within the black community, it is logical that the architect conducts his search in a similar fashion. Contrary to much of the prevailing scholarly thought within the American architectural community throughout history, the African slave in many instances was transferred from a very complex system of living in which applications of basically sound design and construction methods were common. The Yoruba, inhabitants of West Africa (what is now Nigerian, Dahomey, and Benin), during the eighteenth century, when the slave trade was at its height, are a tribal people who supplied the Dutch, English, and French traders with slaves from the inner portions of the continent. They also lost some of their own number to slavery as their tribe was weakened by conquest in 1750.[22] These slaves were seasoned in the Colonial West Indies on the islands of Haiti, Jamaica, and Barbados before being brought to the North American shores and sold into the southern agriculture industry.

In an effort to show the similarities among the slave cabins of the new world that were built by blacks, the vernacular architecture of the French colony of Haiti, and the Yoruba building traditions of the eighteenth century, historic archeologist John Vlach has made some interesting observations:

> *...Since the Yoruba arrived first in the greatest numbers, it would appear that the cultural amalgam that produced Haiti's architecture is primarily Yoruba in nature, with supportive influences provided by later arriving Central Africans. The Yoruba architectural repertoire is quite extensive, with structures ranging from common houses to palaces. But despite the variety, all of the buildings are based on a two-room module which measures 10 x 20 feet. Often a series of these small houses will be strung end to end or gathered around an open courtyard or a series of small impluvia. This latter compound arrangement can be quite extensive, but the houses are still clearly the same single dwelling unit. The compound is called Yoruba, agboilem "flock of houses." They are an urban or village assembly of the same kinds of volumes that family members build when farming on their own plots in the countryside. this two-room house is essential to the Yoruba architectural system and consequently was not easily forgotten even under the rigors of slavery. The common slave house in Haiti was also a rectangular gable-roofed house made*

[22] John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.3.

with wattle-and-daub walls and roofed with thatch. More importantly, it was built to the same dimensions found in Yorubaland. The similarity of materials used in tropical environments, but the 10 x 20 foot dimensions represent the impact of a West African architectural concept.[23] *(fig. 6 & 7)*

Vlach goes on to explain the probable connection between the Haitian caille and the American vernacular. (fig. 8)

The importance of the African proxemic tendencies is also encountered in a building type that developed in Haiti as the result of a three-way interaction among Arawak Indians, French colonials, and African slaves. This house is the prototype of the American shotgun. It contains the gable door and porch of the Arawak bohio, the construction techniques of French peasant cottages, and the spatial volume of a Yoruba two-room house. This building, called a caille, is found primarily in southern Haiti. It was firmly established as a common dwelling form by the late seventeenth century, and its dimensions have not varied appreciably to the present. The contemporary caille contains two rooms and a porch. The entire house measures on the average 10 x 21 feet with each room close to 10 x 8 feet, and the porch between four and five feet deep. The eighty square feet of floor space in each room of the Haitian caille is significant because the interior dimensions of Yoruba rooms come close to 9 x 9 feet, or eighty-one square feet of space -- a difference of only one square fool. Hence, we see that despite slavery and the significant adjustment of building technique and secondary modifications (moving the doorway to the gable side), the caille remains proxemically African.[24]

Vlach dates the arrival of the shotgun house in New Orleans as during the first decades of the nineteenth century. He also holds that the diffusion among the large numbers of urban free blacks in New Orleans of the of the shotgun occurred with the house experiencing very little modification in form. This was reinforced by the increased population of blacks with the arrival of 2,060 black immigrants in 1809.[25]

The shotgun house embodies several important elements of design, not the last of which is its porch. Probably a variation of similar attachments to dwellings still seen in Nigeria today, the porch has very special meaning to the architecture of the United States. Nigerian architect, Jasper Ememe, who now resides in Atlanta, Georgia, regards the porch

---

[23] John M. Vlach, The Afro-American Traditon in the Decorative Arts, (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), p. 125
[24] Vlach, pp. 125 and 128
[25] Vlach, p. 129

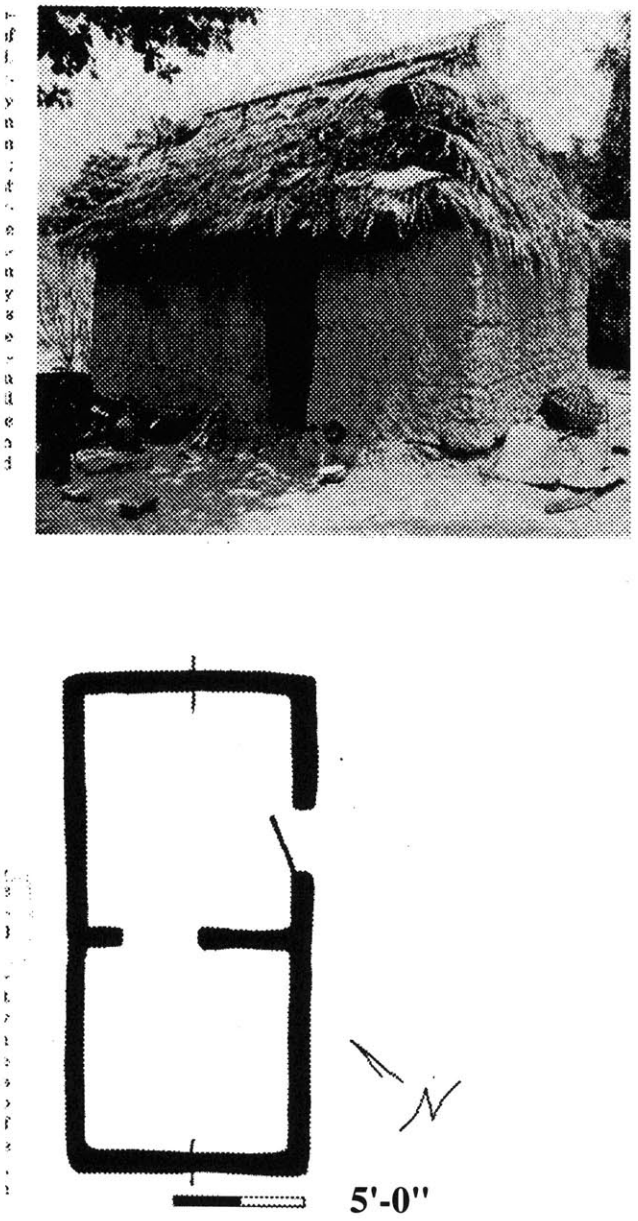

Figure 6.

The Yoruba hut, Alefunfun, Nigeria, c. 1974. Reprinted from The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts, by John M. Vlach, p.125.

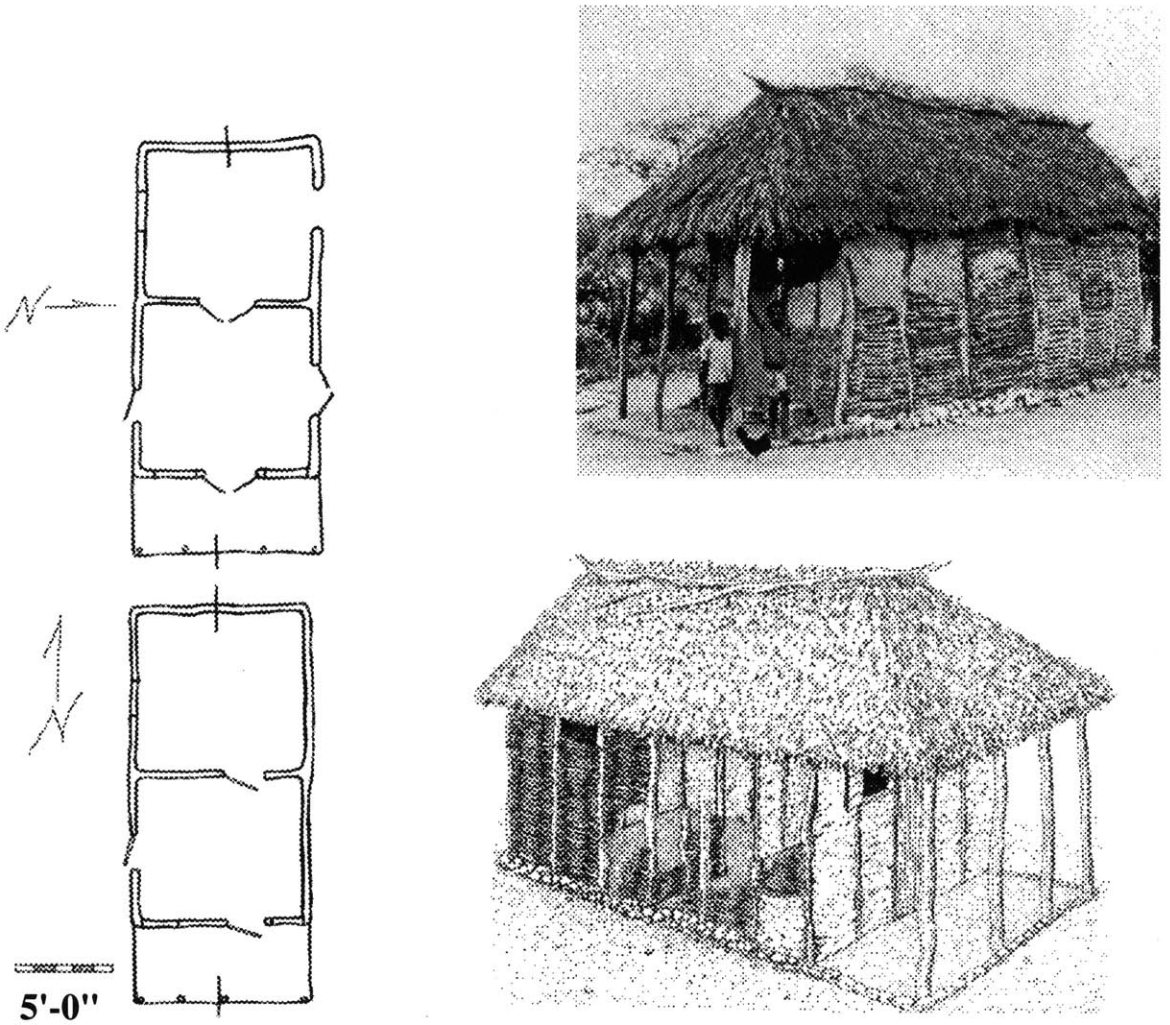

Figure 7.

Hatian similarities to the Yoruba hut. Reprinted from The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts, by John M. Vlach, p. 127.

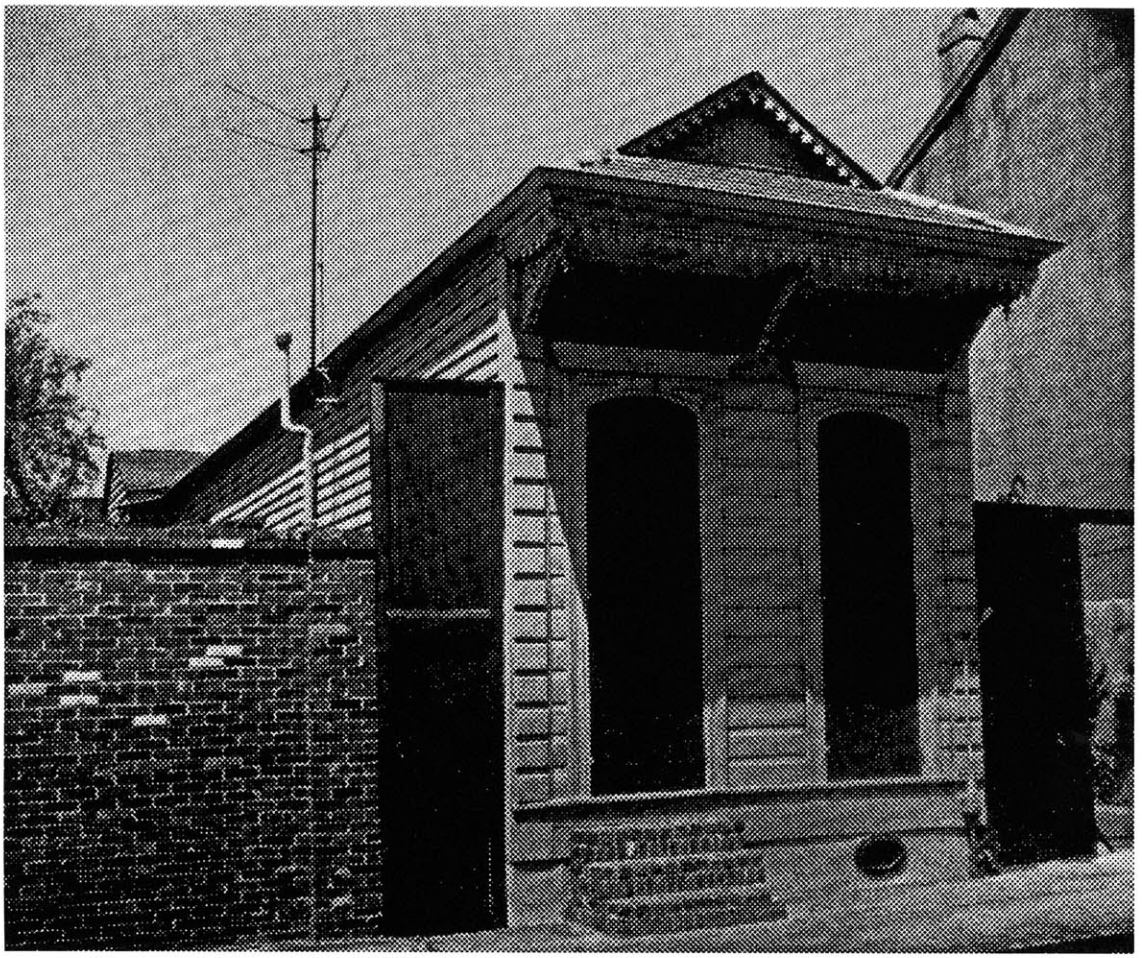

Figure 8.

Urban Haitian house similar to the Yoruba hut. Reprinted from The Afro-American, by John M. Vlach, p. 129.

as a derivative of the West African veranda, which is called obi (pronounced o-bé) by the Ibo tribe. The yoruba also employ verandas in their architecture. In his book, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia, Henry Glassie comments on the similarity of eighteenth century vernacular houses of Virginia and America, stating:

> *The porch of the nineteenth century, however, was a living space between indoors and outdoors, a room that stretched the length of the facade (for all the world like a verandah in Yorubaland) providing a place to escape from the inferno inside, to rock and watch the action on the road.*[26]

Afro-American architectural historian, Carl Anthony, in his article, "The Big House and the Slave Quarters, Part 2- African Contributions to the New World," writes that the verandah is widespread in West African rain forest architecture. The article further points out the importance of the verandah to the Carolinas and Virginia, and its probably evolution from modest versions in the West Indies to grandiose version in American upper class residences.[27] (fig. 9, 10, & 11)

To find these examples of adaptation and evolution of African verandahs to New World architecture, it is necessary today to compare the ordinary buildings of Haiti and other Caribbean Islands with the modest houses of the African-Americans of St. Helena Island. (fig. 12 & 13) St. Helena is one of very few places on the North American continent where African culture remains largely unchanged, and the only area of the United States where there exists the Gullah society, characterized by its peculiar mixture of English and African languages.

The obvious implications of Africanisms contributing to American language, music, and architecture are now, at the very least, worthy of recognition. At most, as in the case of architectural precedents, they are worthy of considerably deeper investigation due to the

---

[26] Henry Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia, (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 137.
[27] Anthony, p. 12

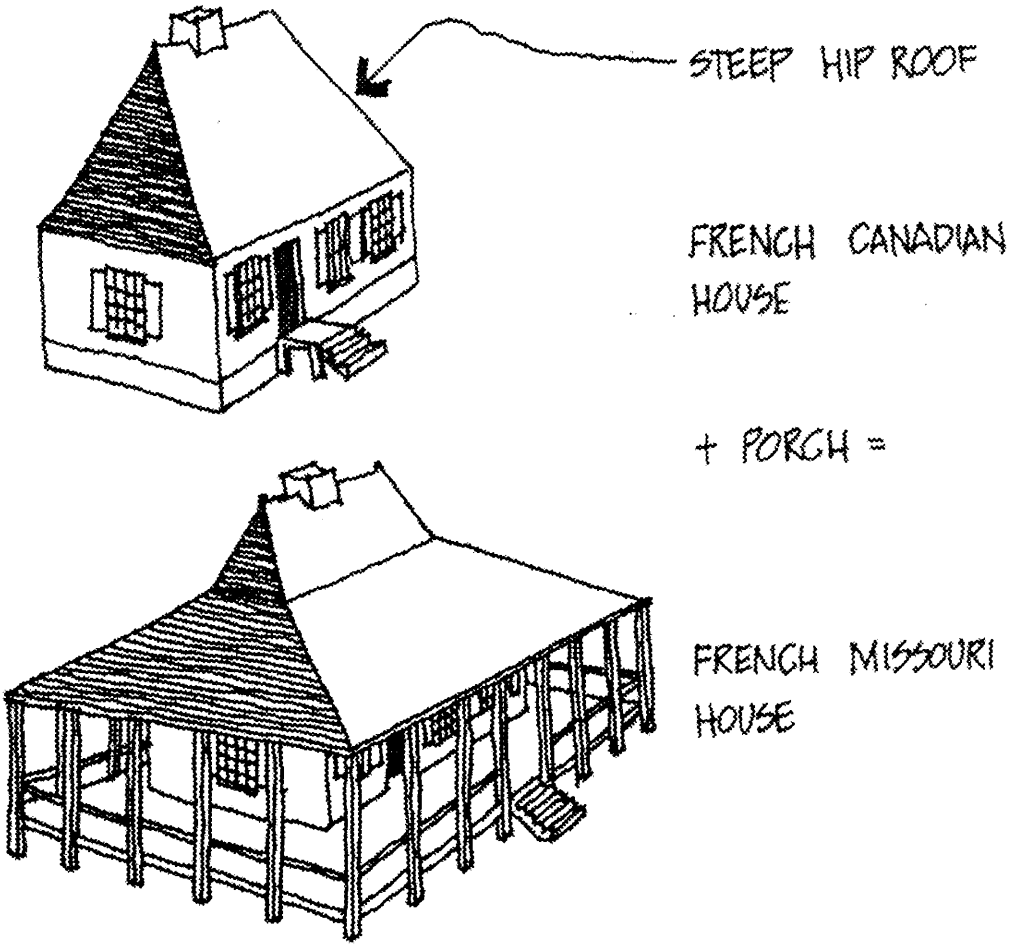

Figure 9.

Adaption of the West African Yoruba and/or Ibo veranda design to the French Canadian and French Missouri Houses. Reprinted from The Big House and The Slave Quarters-African Contributions to the New World, by Carl Anthony, p. 13.

Figure 10.

Destrehan Plantation, c. 1787, designed and built by a free black craftsman identified only as "Charles" in the contract. Photograph courtesy of the Harvard Center for Afro-American Studies, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.

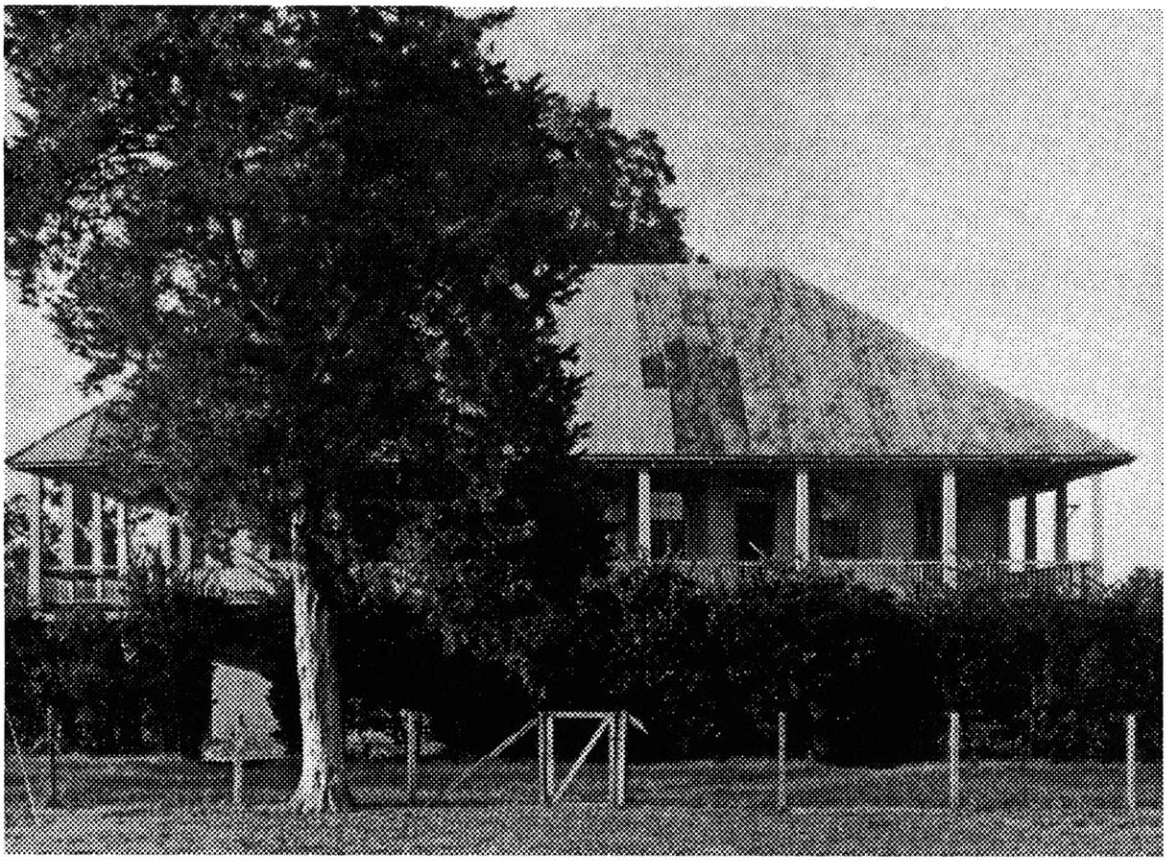

Figure 11.

Dean Hall, main house for the William Carson rice plantation along the Cooper River, Charleston, S.C. c. 1827. Verandas recall African antecedents. Reprinted from Charleston, Come Hell or High Water, by Robert N. S. Whitelaw and Alice V. Lenhoff, p. 208.

Figure 12.

Lifestyles and culture of past ages continues on St. Helena Island. Reprinted from Face of and Island, by Edith M. Dabbs.

Figure 13.

Residents of St. Helena rest on the veranda, which incorporates no overt European design attitudes. It is probale that here West African and West Indian cultural traits are strongest on the North American continent. Reprinted from Face of an Island, by Edith M. Dabbs.

lack of attention given it in the American architectural historical past. The following chapter looks at this subject as it relates to the evolution of the African-American house as part of the cultural landscape of the United States.

CHAPTER III

THE CULTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN HOUSE PRIOR TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The assembling of African-American history is a task that requires the making of coherent wholes out of fragments.[28] Accounts of earliest communities of blacks are usually those of the slaves held on the larger plantations of the American South. As it was necessary for the plantation owner to keep a record of possessions bought and sold, accounts of the most basic components of the material culture of the slave community found their way into these records. The historic archaeologists responsible for the uncovering of the remains of plantation artifacts conduct most of their work in the areas where the slave community prevailed, simply because, in general, there was no effort over the years to maintain and preserve the dwellings of people unfortunate enough to occupy the base of society.

The degree to which the slave was allowed to retain aspects of African cultural heritage in the plantation atmosphere can be most fairly and best measured through examining the particular determinations of individual plantation owners. Also, these determinations must be examined against the backdrop of the very beginnings of the slave trade. An investigation for evidence of a peculiarly African antecedent to the houses built by black people should logically begin from a point in history when black people in the New World were least American and most African. Surely, within the context of the eighteenth century plantation system in the mid-Atlantic colonies of North America, which eventually

---

[28] James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten - The Archeology of Early American Life, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), p. 138.

reached from Virginia to Georgia, the first inclinations of the blacks to recall some of that which they knew at home must have been strongest.

The search for signs of an African-American archetype must focus on areas where plantation owners and overseers were lenient enough to allow and where the slave was insistent enough to ensure the development of an African-based form. Observances must be made of incidence of some initial African-European contacts so as not to overlook the fact that some things African may be in existence in American architecture today. Parallels must be drawn between the remnants of the housing of the plantation slave and that of the freedmen's settlements in order to make judgments about similar and different natures of two black environments. The housing and general architectural vocabulary built by and for blacks after the Civil War era must be observed for possible traces of a peculiarly African cultural heritage with emphasis given to the very important contributing factors of economic mobility and degree of political self-determination. Also important to this subject is the question of aspiration to and acquisition of portions of the upper and middle class American dream, long held by white society. The time to which this part of the study speaks, at the height of hope for a better life following the episode of a slavery, is perhaps the time in which many reasons can be found for the retention or abandonment of African-American material cultural expression in the form of architecture.

> *The African-American influence in plantation settlement patterns is more difficult to document than that of the Euro-American planter. Although the evidence of African-styled architecture has been observed in a variety of contexts, notably South Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana (Anthony, 1976), the evidence of a similar influence in plantation layouts is slim and remains untested. The possibility of this influence, however, is suggested in the community layouts of slave quarters at two ante-bellum plantations on the Atlantic Seaboard. The arc-shaped arrangement of slave dwellings at the Kingsley plantation (Fairbanks, 1974) and a horseshoe-shaped arrangement recently uncovered in coastal South Carolina are suggestive of traditional African village layouts found in several areas of Africa (Denyer 1978:20).*[29]

---

[29] Theresa Singleton, "The Archeaeology of Afro-American Slavery in Coastal Georgia", (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1990), p. 113.

In further analysis of the Kingsley findings, Singleton notes that much speculation is involved; however, archaeologist Thomas Wheaton, investigating the slave rites of the Yaughan and Curriboo Plantations of coastal South Carolina in 1980, found indications that blacks have had more control of the built environment than was heretofore considered.[30] The prevalence of what appears to be a mud wall construction method, with the absence of interior hearths, indicate a close relationship to West African design and living patterns associated with the Yoruba mud hut. The sizes of the rooms closely approximate those of Yoruba, Haitian, and shotgun houses, and the lack of interior hearths points to the outdoor activity which characterized Yoruba culture and today characterizes parts of African-American culture which will be described later.[31]

The thread of evidence that led Wheaton to surmise that the dwellings were built by blacks and not controlled by whites lies in the nature of the construction and layout procedure. The buildings of at least one of the larger areas of the excavation are randomly arranged in site layout and do not all conform to exactly the same measurements, as probably would have been the case had the owner supervised construction.

The planning and design, however, generally fit the scheme found later in the shotgun and earlier in the Yoruba compound. The accommodation of additional rooms and porches, similar to the extended family concept of the agboile compound of the Yoruba, is strong evidence that an African-American design attitude in the way of housing was born very early in slave culture. The Curriboo and Yaughan plantations date from the year 1745 and continue into the early nineteenth century.

The clash of African and European traditions in architecture led to interesting developments in the subjects of assimilation and acculturation. In many cases it may never be known the extent to which African architectural antecedents played an integral part in the

---

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

evolution of the American landscape. Even, when in the past, whites could have laid claim to style and attitudes of architecture used by blacks, they chose to abandon them out of a feeling that would not allow them to identify with techniques used by the supposedly lesser race. Blacks, surely, whether in Africa or America, can place no sole claim on particular techniques of building, just as whites cannot; but the use of the mud wall and the thatched roof by blacks led to white judgment of both of these as inferior. The mud wall, as old as the world itself, and the thatched roof, a primary rural European housing component for centuries, are signs that the clash of cultures led to significant ignorance and oversight.[32]

When there is an incidence of cross-cultural contact, natural tendencies dictate that the people from the cultures involved cling to their native attitudes, sometimes in the absence of reason. Wheaton points out this very fact in his analysis of the architecture built by the European slave traders on the West African coast during the early 1700s. The housing built by and for Europeans in the hot equatorial climate was apparently the same housing built for the cooler European weather as the builders gave no thought to modification of the architecture to suit the new conditions.[33] This may also be a reflection of an early rejection by white of any worthy attributes of the African lifestyle. The eventual acceptance of the virtues of African ingenuity, however, is evidenced by the presence of the verandah in America.

Cross-cultural contacts, by nature, are suggestive of modification of the cultural aspects of all parties involved. The concept of the verandah in its most basic African form, as described by Emene, does not include the ornamentation of its components that is visible in the grandest American adaptations.[34] As can be seen in the Gullah buildings of St. Helena (fig. 13), or the "Yucca" and Melrose buildings of Metoyer (fig. 14 & 15), the columns and roof elements designed by those black builders incorporate few, if any,

---

[32] Wood, p. 7.
[33] Anthony, p. 13.
[34] Ibid., p. 15

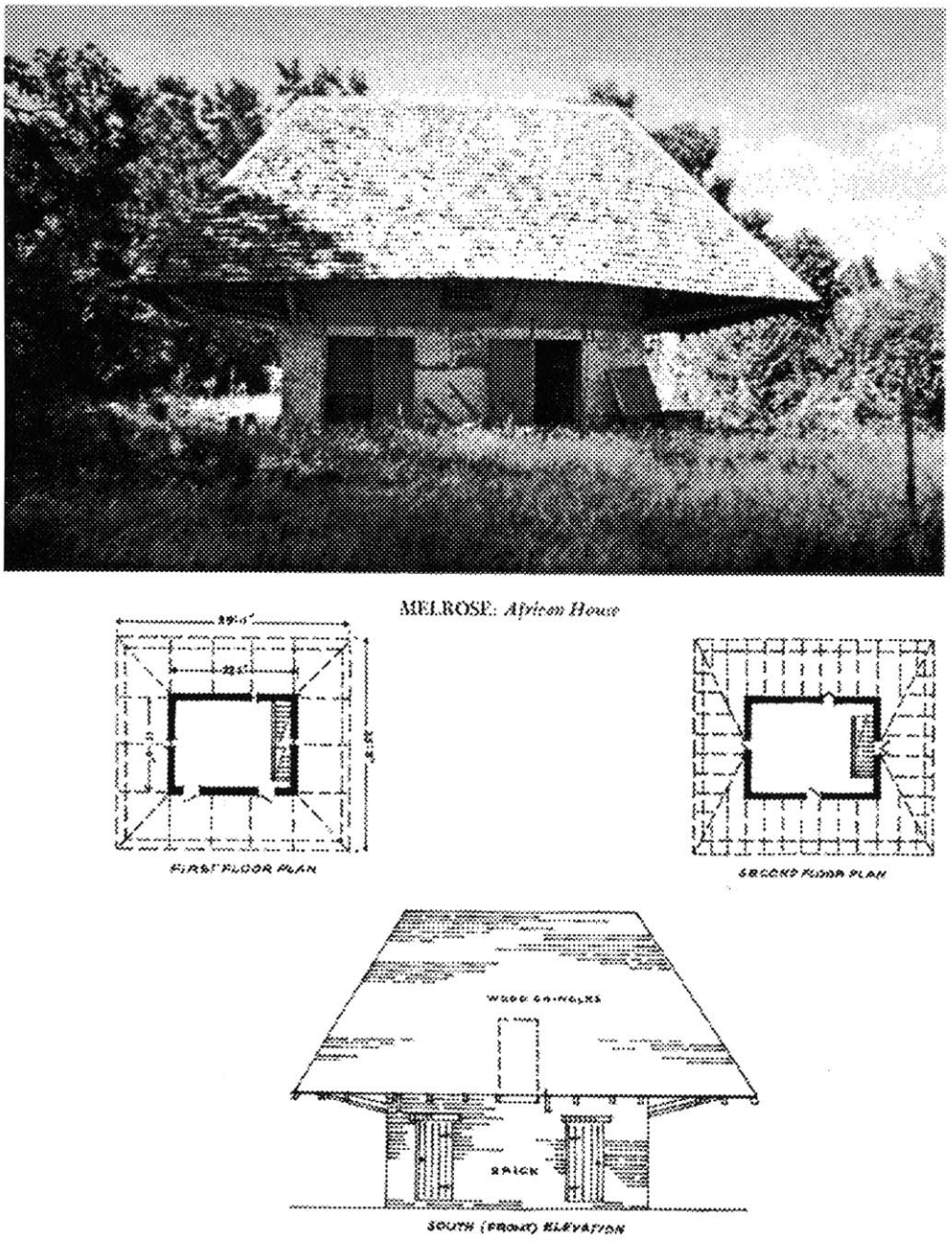

Figure 14.

"African House", Melrose Plantation, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. Built by Augustin Metoyer, a free man of color and plantation owner. c. 1840. Photograph reprinted from Louisiana Plantation Homes: Colonial and Antebellum, by W. Darrell Overdyke, p. 129

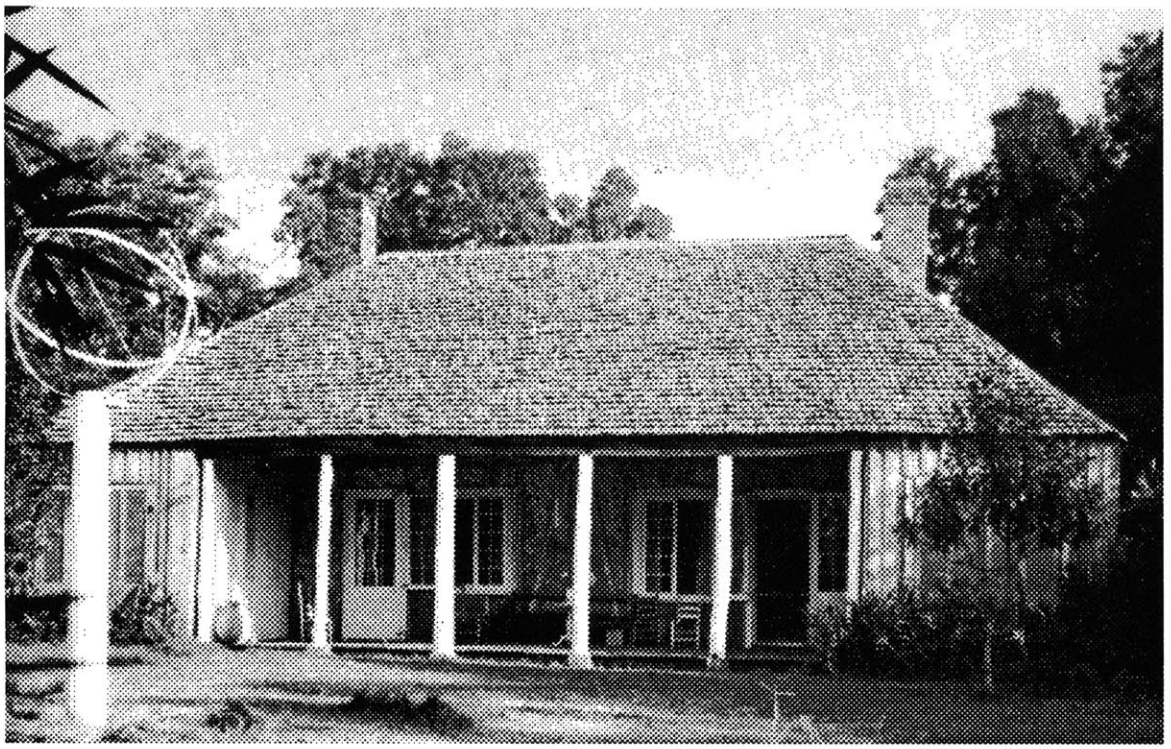

Figure 15.

Melrose, "Yucca". Plantation house owned and built by Augustin Metoyer in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, c. 1833. Note the similiarity to African House (fig. 15). Reprinted from Louisiana Plantation Homes: Colonial and Antebellum, by W. Darrell Overdyke, p. 129.

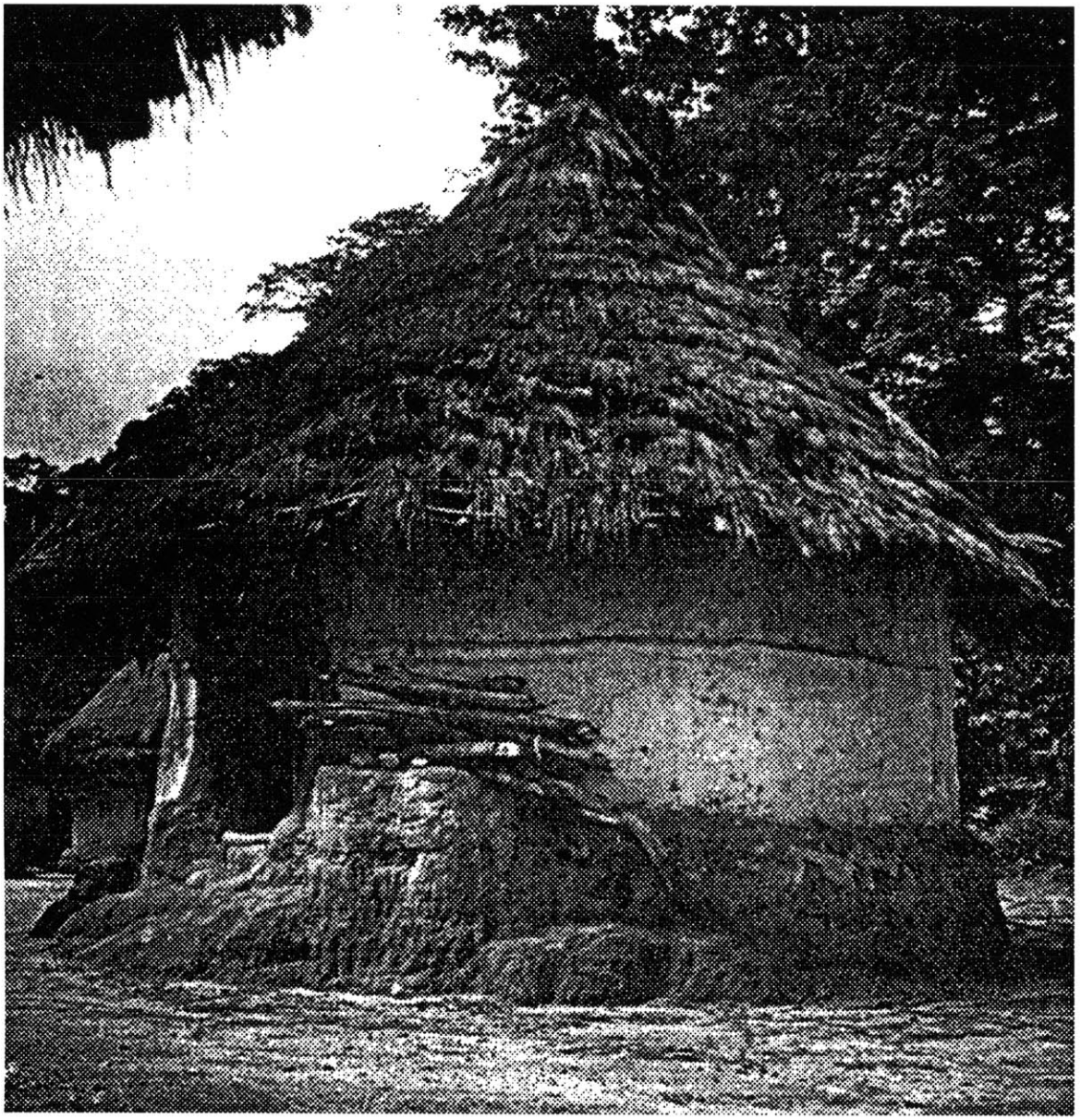

Figure 16.

"Camroon Chief's House" West African design prelude to African House (fig. 15). Photograph courtesy of the Harvard Center for African-American Studies, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.

European design elements. Unlike the elaborate works of some plantation houses that used verandahs, these show no sign of the Greek classical orders. This, perhaps, makes them, in great part, African-American. Where cross -cultural contact has lead to the incorporation of classical European elements, the verandah becomes simply more American through adaptation, not less African in origin.

The investigation for symbolic references to African-American architectural traditions found in the historical accounts of slave life must be compared to the similar references found in accounts of the lives of those blacks who were free during the time of slavery. Free people of color, in the absence of the restrictions imposed by the slave owner, could exercise some choice in the construction of their environment. Drawing parallels between the buildings of free and enslaved blacks may be the true measure of the persistence of Africanisms in what would come to be known in the atmosphere of freedom as the folk housing of blacks and of other social ethnic subgroups.

Many freed blacks moved outside of the heartland of slavery, settling in the territories to the west or in the states of the northeast. One common practice of the white community after the Revolutionary War was to grant freedom to slaves in return for service in the military. The citizenry of the town of Plymouth, Massachusetts, did so for Cato Howe, granting him and three other blacks a one and one-half mile strip of land in order that they settle it as they pleased. They established a small community on the property in March of 1972, with Howe deciding to live out his life there.[35]

The records of Howe and his family live on in the accounts given by the Massachusetts military, by his own personal inventory of modest possessions, and in the remains of the tiny settlement excavated in an archaeological study in 1975. This study led

---

[35] Deetz, p. 142.

to some interesting discoveries about the architecture and settlement patterns of free blacks.[36]

In a spirit of non-conformity to the popular Anglo-American pattern of settlement which, even at that time, saw the building of houses far apart when land was plentiful, these black men built their houses in the center of a 94-acre tract of land.[37] Unlike the common practice of the day, each man did not build his house on his own division, but in close proximity to the other three. This method of community formation may have reflected a more communal living pattern that had its beginnings in the culture of slavery, or even further back in the histories of these men in the culture of West Africa.

Although the excavation of this site, known as Partying Ways, reveals that the superstructure was of "typical New England" exterior,[38] the dimensions of the foundation plans and the implications of much outdoor activity in the absence of an interior hearth (cooking must have occurred outdoors on open fires), show a very close relationship to the Yoruba hut (fig. 17). Many factors bear heavily upon the decisions of these men to build in this way, not the least being the scarcity of material and financial resources; yet, the evidence for whatever reason, points to the idea that some of the same tendencies that slaves had when allowed to readily express their ideas and culture were perhaps also the tendencies of at least some of their free counterparts.

Houses built by the Maroons (members of six West African tribes who escaped without ever being enslaved) of the Suriname rain forest of South America are examples of the same kind of close, communal living pattern Deetz describes at Parting Ways. Also, similarities between the shotgun house streetscape of urban Mobile, Alabama, (fig. 18) and the streetscape of the Maroon villages (fig. 19) is probably no accident. These Maroons were brought to the New World from West Africa by Dutch slave ships, in the seventeenth

---

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid, p. 152.
[38] Ibid, p. 151.

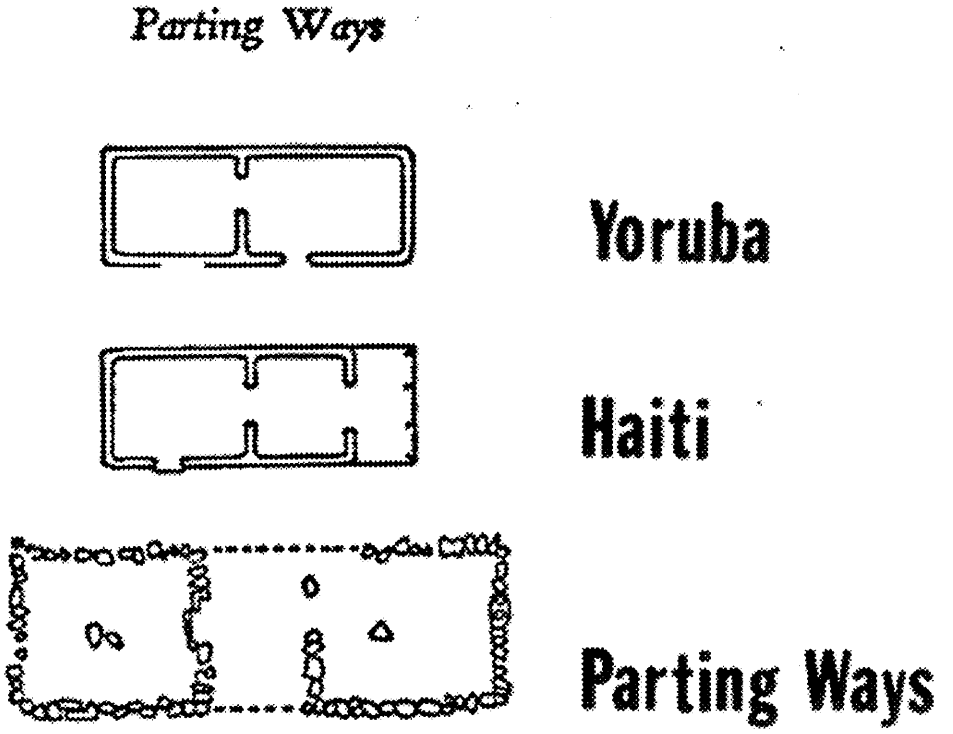

Figure 17.

Parting Ways settlement. Planning similarities to the shotgun house and the Yoruba hut are evident. Reprinted from In Small Things Forgotten - The Archeology of Early American Life, by James Deetz, p. 151.

Figure 18.

Shotgun row houses of Mobile, Alabama, with transitional front porch. c. 1937. Reprinted from The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts, by John M. Vlach, p. 124.

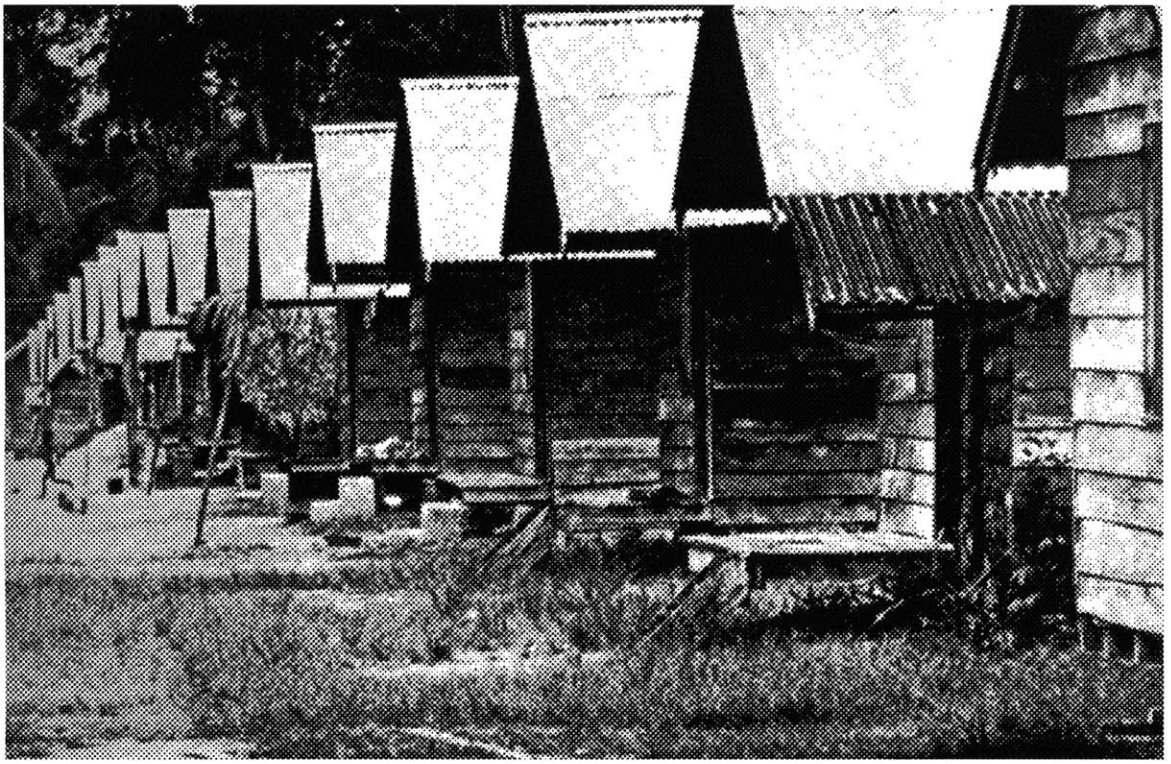

Figure 19.

Row houses of the Saramaka maroons in the Suriname rain forest of South America. Built by descendants of escaped Africans who were brought to South America by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century. The resemblance to the Hatian urban house is striking. Reprinted from Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest, by Sally and Richard Price, p. 25.

century, and today carry on a culture that has changed very little since its introduction to the New World.[39] Further investigation may reveal that the houses hold even more design similarities to those of blacks in Haiti and New Orleans than is suggested by the Stereoscope in Figure 19.

Studies of the culture of the African-Americans have been conducted in the past regarding the evolution of the house. In 1912, W.E.B. DuBois, in his concern for the plight of the black man in the South, saw that the "country" houses of these people had not changed significantly over the years and was obviously the lineal descendant of the slave cabin. In some cases it was that very same cabin.[40] These living areas were by no means comfortable for blacks to inhabit, but again, the economic lot of these people had not changed appreciably since slavery and it dictated much of the way that they would build and live (fig. 20).

As the early work of DuBois begins to show, economic mobility played an important role in the housing decision of southern blacks. It must be noted that the change in blacks' attitudes about themselves and their future was primarily one of heightened hope and spirit after the Civil War. The system of tenant farming for ex-slaves was only an insulting, yet many times, unavoidable reintroduction to subservience. Most blacks wanted a better life than this seemed to offer.[41] The housing to which they had become accustomed was always small in comparison to the numbers of family members it needed to accommodate. Many times, as many as twelve lived in two or three rooms. Freedom meant that now, even if the larger quarters were not available or within financial reach, the dream of them could now possibly become reality.

---

[39] Sally and Richard Price, Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest, (Los Angeles, CA.: Museum of Cultural History, University of California at Los Angeles, 1980), pp. 13 & 14.
[40] W.E.B. DuBois, The Negro American Family, (Atlanta, Ga.: Atlanta University Press, 1908), p. 51.
[41] Ibid.

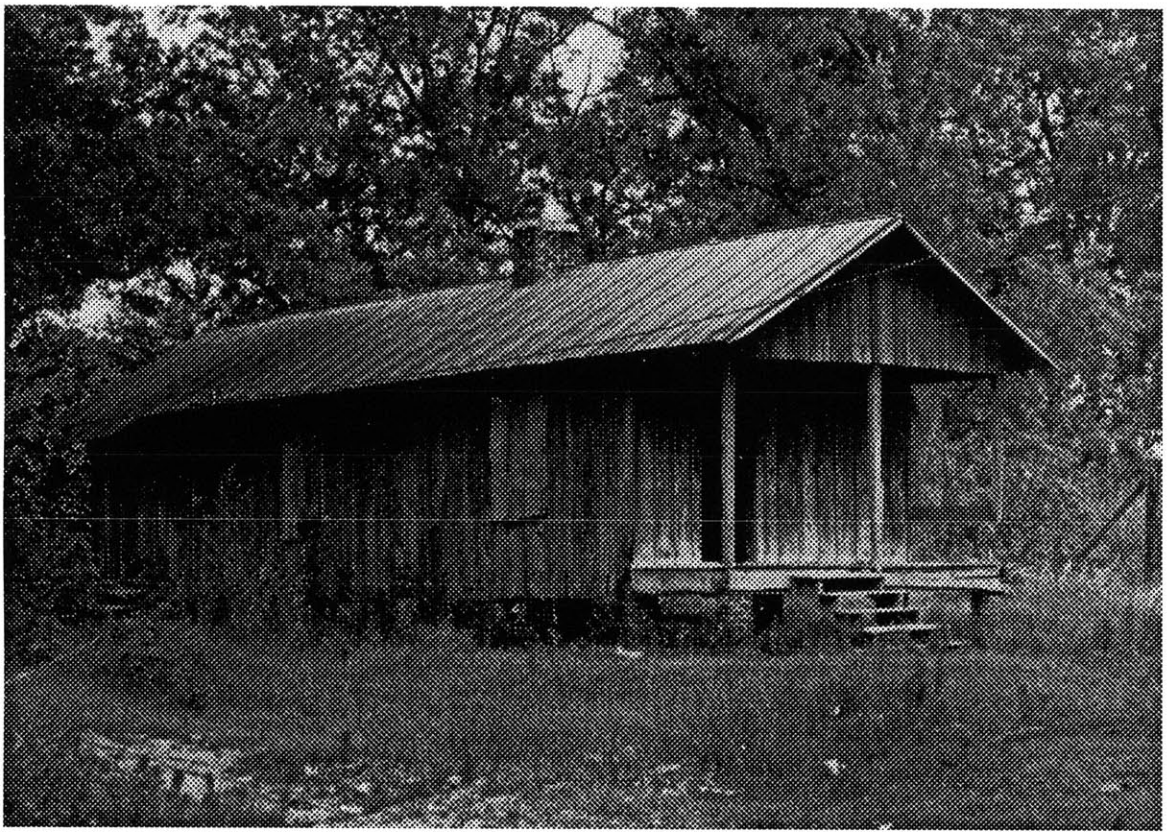

Figure 20.

Rural Cabin or Shotgun, Pritchard, Alabama, c. 1977. Reprinted from The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts, by John M. Vlach, p. 122.

One way of making the dream come true seemed to be, for many at least, to move away from the rural areas to the cities. After all, DuBois had remarked in his studies that the country house of the black family was bare, lonely, ugly, and repelling.[42] However, life in the post-bellum city of the South which DuBois describes was not much better. In observing the overcrowded conditions of St. Louis, Savannah, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Charleston in the Negro areas, visual evidence pointed to the fact that the move out of the country cabin was a move into a city cabin. Many of the cabins had only one or two rooms, were 14 feet square, and were built very close together.[43] The promise of a better job and financial situation, for many, was not realized; thus, the ability to choose from a wide range of living conditions still escaped these people.

In New Orleans, Louisiana, the urban housing conditions were also characterized by dwelling units of close proximity to one another. The Haitian caille, transplanted by immigrants to America as the shotgun, can still be seen in the inner city of New Orleans. Here, however, the blacks who occupied these dwellings were apparently not of the very lowest of economic classes when first constructed around 1810. There were many free blacks of relative wealth in New Orleans. These people did appear to exercise choice. Over the years, the shotgun was re-evaluated for its economical qualities and less elaborate forms of the building were built by southern land owners as cheap rental houses. The structures, built in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, can be found in cities and villages throughout the South and parts of the Southwest. Some were built in the oil fields of Texas, the coal fields of West Virginia, and the cotton fields of Arkansas and Mississippi.[44] Vlach acknowledges the shotgun as an African derived form, and also remarks on its contribution to the American folk housing traditions.

---

[42] Ibid, p. 55.
[43] Ibid, p. 59.
[44] Vlach, p. 131.

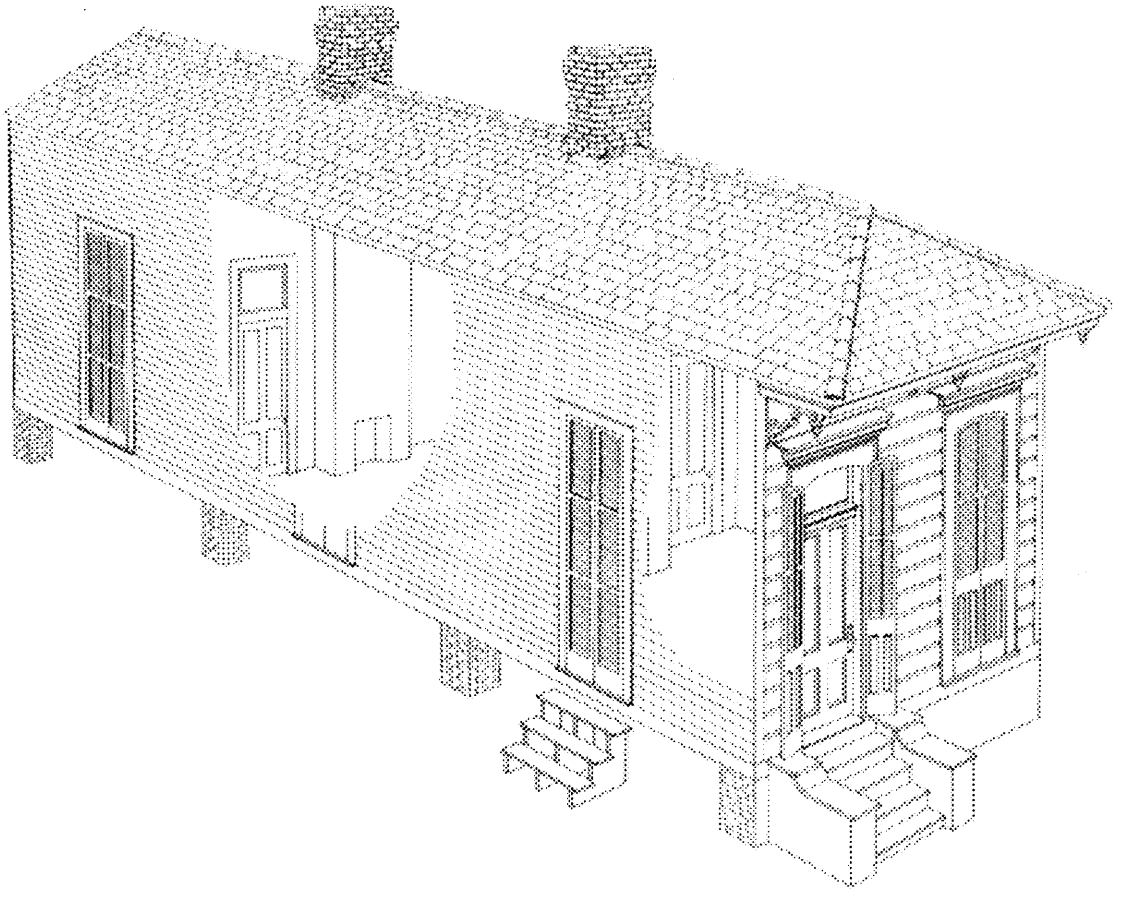

Figure 21.

Cross section of shotgun house. Reprinted from Shotgun Houses, by John M. Vlach, p. 57.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF POSSIBLE DETERMINANTS AND THE USAGE PATERNS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN HOUSE

Jackson, Mississippi, is one city where an American folk housing tradition has existed to the present. The shotgun house can be found in a stable inner-city black community. Most of the houses along or near Farish Street in downtown Jackson were built between 1890 and 1910 and conform to the design character of the New Orleans shotgun. The houses, numbering over 340, are of a two-room nature and in recent years have added the third room to accommodate indoor bath facilities. The dimension of these houses are similar to the Haitian and Yoruba huts, and reflect a similar usage pattern of outdoor living activity and extended families. It is these usage patterns that I will correlate with similiar and distinct African use patterns.

An in-depth observation of the Farish Street neighborhood was conducted by John Gaudet and Bob Luke of the Mississippi State University in 1989. They found that this neighborhood was built by and for blacks and that there were four elements that aided in the making of a stable and uniquely African-American environment. Those four elements, the house, the porch, the yard, and the street, all served independent, yet complementary functions in the formation of community and neighborhood.[45]

The house, is of a simple and hall-less design, not uncommon in the housing of the poorest residents of the American South. It holds the bedrooms and/or living room and is the most private of areas in the house, as well as the neighborhood. This function is obviously a direct carry-over from Yoruba, Ibo, and other West African cultures. The same is true of older sections of rural Haiti. In a hot and humid climate, such as these, the

[45] John Gaudet and Bob Luke, "Neighborhood-Identification", 1990, pages unnumbered

tendency for a great deal of outdoor living to take place is what encourages the minimal use of the indoor spaces during the daytime.[46] These indoor spaces are reserved for sleeping and private work. Because the families of Nigerian Yoruba and Ibos must farm during the day, the need for daytime use of the house is reduced. The same can be said of the economically strapped black American family, which traditionally in the past has had most or all of its members working. The quickly and easily expandable Yoruba huts into compounds for extended families has also an African-American tradition in some of the shotgun houses of Farish Street, which over the years have expanded to accommodate both extended families and new utilities.[47] Those things which characterize the house bear unmistakable similarities to African lifestyles.

The porch is the extension of the house toward the public domain. It serves as a viewing and main living area from which the street theater can be watched and talked about from porch to porch. This family gathering place is necessary in the very close proximity of house to street in order to serve as a buffer from the public to the private areas. The small unit dimensions, no doubt a product of the economic lot of black Mississippi residents of 1890, help to define and accentuate some of the basic social interactions of the people of this neighborhood to their environment.

The yard is that which enlarges the living space in front and the storage space in the rear of the house. It is used to define the edge of the private domain and borders on the street, which is the neighborhood stage set. The viewing of street activity from this African-American house is itself a major social activity. It appears that this function, which has its beginnings in West Africa, is a primary one, equal to that of providing shelter. This was probably a tradition unique to African-Americans upon introduction of this house type in its early forms to North America.

---

[46] Deetz, p. 148
[47] Gaudet, pages unnumbered

The economic mobility of these residents of Farish Street is and always has been low. The choice for the people who live here to seek a range of living environments, for the most part, does not exist. The fact that for over 90 years, these people and their ancestors have lived without the choice to improve their economic situation is a serious indictment of the system that promised freedom and democracy only a few short years before the first residents built these houses in the 1890s. Yet, these people appear to have salvaged a unique life experience that is related in a significant way, no doubt, to the architecture in which they must live. It has aided in the development of an unmistakably African-American living environment in America.

For the African-American who found a way to exercise choice, primarily through educational advancement, there was a very real urge to finally take advantage of the American dream as it related to housing. As pointed out earlier, the way of slavery had been one of forced conformity and assimilation by a great number of slave owners who felt threatened by blatant expressions of African cultures. In the case of the black artisan, this fact of life led to economic independence and freedom, in many cases due to the master's willingness to recognize the obedient slave who performed many duties that furthered the prospects of the master himself. Many black artisans could purchase their way out of bondage if they were allowed to secure enough funds performing their crafts.

Although it might appear that the slave artisan was the most thoroughly assimilated of blacks after the Civil War, in fact some black artisans continued African traditions in isolated areas of the South such as the "African House" at the black-owned Melrose Plantation in Nachitoches, Louisiana.[48] (fig. 14)

The descendants of these artisans became the heirs to their knowledge and skills and, no doubt, used them to become some of the most important and respected, as well as relatively wealthy, members of the black community in the late nineteenth century. Their

[48] Wood, p. 6.

knowledge and skills were directed to the building of architecture in general in many parts of the country, and while doing so, they built for some blacks who were able to afford houses resembling those of wealthy whites. DuBois points out that this was true of the better areas of Atlanta in 1912, and appears to be the product of the dominant aspiration of blacks to secure a better lifestyle by emulating whites, even in the area of housing.[49]

Just as blacks chose the surnames of important whites such as Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, they chose to build in the style of well-to-whites in order to publicize their move into the mainstream of the American upper class (fig 22). The role of the black artisan in the community, as well as in the construction of houses and other buildings for blacks and whites, no doubt, contributed to the thinking of educators such as Booker T. Washington and others in the late nineteenth century. They viewed the crafts as the vehicle for elevating the black man from the depths of society through vocational educational training.[50] The subsequent establishment of agricultural, mechanical, technical, and normal schools for blacks like Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1881, saw the rise in acceptance by many in both the white and black communities of the role of the black man regarding labor intensive employment. In parts of the black community, however, this was frowned upon and higher education in the form of liberal arts was stressed. DuBois, instrumental in the propagation of this attitude, saw this movement as a step backward to subservience when applied to the whole race of blacks and felt that there were many more able to become professionals and educators of a higher degree. The subscription to the Washington line of thinking in some of the least progressive of the white political community no doubt helped further the cause of vocational educational institutions.[51]

---

[49] Dubois, p. 65.
[50] Dozier
[51] Roberts, p. 150.

Figure 22.

The Herndon Mansion, owned and built by Alonzo and Adrienne Herndon (african-americans), c. 1905, Atlanta, Georgia. Reprinted from An-Other Atlanta - The Black Heritage, by Dan Durett, p. 29.

As money poured in from white philanthropists such as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial School, as it was first named, embarked on many projects to complete what is now the historic central campus. Black students in the woodworking, metalworking, and brickmaking classes produced the materials and the buildings as they completed their course work. These important contributions to the black architectural experience in America cannot be in any way minimized in their overall beauty and significance. What must be said, however, is that the architecture of neither the housing nor the school buildings of Tuskegee represents any overt attempts at recalling African cultural heritage in built form. The prevalence of classical European design at not only the campus of Tuskegee, but at other black campuses as well, reflects a combination of economic dependency, aspirations to become part of the dominant group in society, years of assimilation and forced conformity, and political expediency.[52]

Perhaps some of the techniques of the artisans employed at Melrose were melded into a general vocabulary of artistic and practical methods that were used by the black artisans of Tuskegee. Because there was a majority of blacks in the craft unions from the middle of the nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, whites could have employed these techniques as well. What is important about assimilation is that some of the techniques that can be attributed to any particular culture, whether it be African or European, are intermingled, thereby becoming American.[53]

Whether or not Washington was at that time, or at any time ever aware of Africanisms that he could have had his students employ in the architecture of Tuskegee, he was no doubt willing to submit very readily to the tenets of design of the white American institutions he had seen. Washington also was mindful of the wishes of the philanthropists who contributed greatly to the building of Tuskegee. In America, economic power has

---

[52] Dubois, p. 78.
[53] Dozier

often, if not always, determined political conformity. It might be said that political conformity, just as it had determined the condition of plantation life for slaves for over 200 years before Tuskegee, was very much a determinant in the condition and aesthetic response of the architecture of Tuskegee itself.[54]

The fact that the better housing of the upper class blacks of early twentieth century Atlanta or the architecture of Tuskegee reflect a European design aesthetic makes these environments no less African-American in the fervor or spirit with which they were accomplished. What makes them perhaps more European and less African is that their closer identity with the attitudes, perceptions, and economics of choice. The basic feelings and rules that dictated and helped to articulate the folk housing of Yoruba villagers, Haitian slaves, American slaves, the ex-slaves of Parting Ways, or the residents of Farish Street in Jackson were in all likelihood more a product of economic expediency and African cultural heritage. LeRoi Jones probably explained it best with his assessment of the musical culture of the African-American community of the period during and immediately after the conclusion of the nineteenth century:

> *The entrance of Negroes into the more complicated social situation of self-reliance posed multitudes of social and cultural problems that they never had to deal with as slaves. The music (architecture) began to reflect these social and cultural complexities and change.*[55]

---

[54] Ibid.
[55] Roberts, p. 161.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

This thesis holds that if evidence of the existence and persistence of sufficient African antecedents to the building and design traditions of African-Americans can be found through the study of the environment built by and for African-Americans, then there exists an African-American architecture. As a means of concluding the research, much investigation has been done through the recognition and increased awareness of the living environments of African-Americans in both the recent and distant past. Concentration upon the African-American contributors to the settlement of the American landscape, the buildings they constructed, and their degree of acceptance in the academic and professional arenas of American life has been crucial to the establishment of background information for the thesis.

In order to gain the most and best knowledge about the architecture that has in the past been the result of the work of blacks, the thesis has focused on the houses built by African-Americans for the use of the African-Americans in the southern United States. Through this approach, the thoughts of the builders, as well as the design and building techniques incorporated in the structures, have been considered and documented in an effort to determine their origins. The express purpose has been to establish a specific area or areas of geographic location that have a combination of historical characteristic similarities in the New World, these being a sizable concentration of African slave populations prior to the mid-nineteenth century, evidence of the existence of some free black artisans and builders during slavery, and conditions conducive to the preservation of distinctively African art and built forms from the beginnings of the institution of slavery in what is now the United States.

The areas of African-American culture analyzed have been compared to the West African and West Indian cultures that preceded them. Several locations that can be generally classified as more similar than others to West African and the West Indies have been cited. The selection of Louisiana, Coastal Georgia, Coastal South Carolina, and ultimately, Jackson, Mississippi, is a testament to the close relationship their particular settlements bore in the past, or still bear, to those of what are now, Haiti, Nigeria, Dahomey, and Benin. Moreover, the attempt to concentrate effort on areas that probably prove to be more African than any in America has been a conscious one.

By analyzing the Yoruba hut, the Haitian caille, and the shotgun house of the United States, some determinants of a peculiarly African-American art form have been suggested, those being the parts of the Jackson, Mississippi version of the structure constructed by African-Americans around 1890. It must be stated here that these determinants, although very strong, are by no means intended to be considered by readers of this thesis as the only possible ones. It is hoped that future research of this and other very specific environments will lead to the suggestion of even more numerous and definite determinants, not to mention the further analysis of those that are outlined by this thesis.

In summary, it is necessary to point out the importance of this wide array of issues to the academic and professional architectural community in the United States and elsewhere. Recognition of the African-American contribution to American building in general, and heightened awareness of social, economic, ethnic, and cultural aspects of the shape of environments has been the intent of this work.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

There is a significant amount of evidence of the existence and persistence of African antecedents to the building and design traditions of African-Americans. However, that persistence of African antecedents in the architecture of African-Americans in the United States is not as great as it was in the time prior to and a century after the birth of the nation. African antecedents in the design and building traditions of the southern United States were to be found in the housing of a few black slaves with lenient masters and in those of free blacks. As the mixing of European and African cultures continued throughout history, much of what was readily identifiable in American architecture as African in origin became obscured due to reasons that were beyond the control of the slave. Perhaps the greatest factor in the subduing of the cultural persistence of blacks were the restrictions placed on them preventing their literacy, which would have perhaps contributed to a better accounting of their history in a written tradition, the denial of their right, by many slave owners, to build symbols of past African heritage, as in the case of the slave, Okra, and the aspirations many had to the lifestyles of whites, which in many cases brought about a denial by blacks of black traditions.

The African architectural heritage does persist in a number of African-American settlements which have not experienced an extreme amount of cultural mixing, as is in the case in the Suriname rain forest and on St.Helena Island. The persistence of Africanisms here is as great, it appears, as that which exists on the island of Haiti. The shotgun houses of Jackson, Mississippi, incorporate much of the same design attitudes seen in Haiti, and the analysis of the determinants of the African-American house in Jackson reveals a number of

elements characteristic of the lifestyle and design attitude of Yoruba, and perhaps even other tribal African societies.

Based upon the evidence presented here, therefore, there does exist an African-American architecture. What continues to serve to suppress this idea, however, is the relative isolation of examples that should be brought to the attention of all interested in the preservation and recognition of some of the small monuments on the American landscape. What exists in these isolated areas is an African-American architecture of physical content and substance, based heavily upon the conditions and the climate of a past life which must not be forgotten. What should begin to become apparent is that there is much in the determinants presented here that can be of value to any architect who tries to create an environment responsive to the historical character and meaning of the people who inhabit his structures.

It is a fact that the past holds the physical content and substance of African-American architecture. There exists today, in the main, an African-American architecture that is primarily of the mind. The energies of researchers in academia and of architects in practice, especially those of the black community, must be devoted to the continuance of the kind of work that will reflect and preserve the value of that which existed in the past. Through this means, the basis for the formulation of tenets of African-American architecture presented in this thesis will be the foundation upon which will be built future forms of African-American architecture.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anthony, Carl. "The Big House and the Slave Quarters, Part I and II - Prelude to the New World Architecture." **Landscape**. V. 20, Spring, 1976. pp. 8-25. Berkeley, California: Blair M. Boyd.
This installment traces the settlement patterns in the South and describes social and economic factors that influenced design of the built environment.

Baraka, Amiri Imamu (Leroi Jones). **Raise, Race, Rays, Raze**. New York: Random House, 1985.
Essays on the black American experience in politics, nationalism, and art.

Blassingame, John W. **The Slave Community**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
Focuses on plantation life of slaves in the ante-bellum South.

Chase, Gilbert. **America's Music from the Pilgrims to the Present**. N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1955.

Chermayeff, Serge. **Shape of Community**. Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1971.
Studies done on rituals, symbols, and the effects of external stabilizing factors on the shaping of community.

Dabbs, Edith M. **Face of an Island**. Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1985.
A collection of photographs by Leigh Richmond Miner, giving account of the present day conditions of culture on St. Helena Island; this black settlement of coastal South Carolina is largely unchanged in culture from the days of Africans introduction to the area in the eighteenth century.

Deetz, James. **In Small Things Forgotten - The Archeology of Early American Life**. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977.
An archeological study of a free black settlement near Plymouth, Massachusetts. The housing of these people and its relationship to Yoruba architecture of West Africa is outlined.

Dozier, Richard K. "The Black Architectural Experience in America". AIA Journal. V. 65, No. 7, July 1986. Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects. pp. 162-168.
A short history of the involvement of blacks in the architectural past of America.

Dubois, W.E.B. **The Negro American Family**. Atlanta: Atlanta University Presss, 1908.
A study of the lifestyle of the negro at the turn of the twentieth century with an in-depth look at the evolution of the Negro house and home.

Evans, Sally K. "Free Persons of Color". **New Orleans Architecture**, V. 4., p. 27 Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1974.
Attention is given to the free mulatto property holders of Louisiana during the time of slavery in America.

Fewel, Ben. "Ace Jackson". **Southern Exposure**. V. 8, No. 1, Spring, 1980. pp. 11-13. Durham, N.C., Institute for Southern Studies.
Revelations of a black craftsman about blacks' domination of the trowel trade unions in the early twentieth century.

Franklin, John hope. **From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans**. N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.
A comprehensive history of the Negro American from the beginning of the slave trade in Africa until the late 1960s.

Gaudet, John , and Bob Luke. "Neighborhood-Identification", 1990.
Unpublished report on the perception of neighborhood by urban blacks in Jackson, Mississippi. These students of the Mississippi State University School of Architecture focus on the shotgun houses of the neighborhood and their unique contributions to that perception.

Genovese, Eugene. **Roll, Jordan, Roll**. N.Y.: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1972.
A look at the survival of some African culture in the slave community despite the attempts of the slavemasters to destroy culture in order to force conformity.

Gluck, Julius F. "African Architecture". from **Peoples and Cultures of Africa**. Elliot P. Skinner, ed. pp. 230-244. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1991.
Summary of various architectural styles and building techniques indigenous to different geographical locations within the African continent.

Gutkind, Erwin Anton. **International History of City Development - Volume 3, Urban Development in Southern Europe: Spain and Portugal**. N.Y.: The Free Press, 1987.

Henri, Florette. **Black Migration: Movement North, 1900-1920**., p. 209. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1975.
His color had been the mark of enslavement and was taken to be also the mark of inferiority; for prejudice does not reason, or it would not be prejudice.

Johnson, Philip. "Our Ugly Cities", from **The Writings of Philip Johnson**. pp. 156-161. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1979.
A commencement speech given at Mt. Holyoke College, South Hadley, Mass., June 5, 1966.

Logan, Rayford W., and Michael R. Winston. **The Negro in the United States**. N.Y.: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1971.
Historical analysis of black Americans with some writing devoted to the development of urban areas and black neighborhood living conditions.

Overdyke, W. Darrell. **Louisiana Plantation Homes: Colonial and Antebellum**. N.Y.: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1965.
Pictorial analysis of the architectural history of Louisiana parishes.

Park, Robert E. **Race and Culture**. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950.

Park discusses cultural exploitation and deprivation of minorities in the majority society.

Price, Sally and Richard. **Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest**. Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California at Los Angeles, 1990.
A discovery and analysis of the survival of little-known culture of various maroon societies that emerged almost immediately after escape from European slave ships in 18th Century South America.

Roberts, John Storm. **Black Music of Two Worlds**. pp. 19, 21-24, 66-67, 159-160, 186. N.Y.: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1984.

Singleton, Theresa. "The Archaeology of Afro-American Slavery in Coastal Georgia: A Regional Perception of Slave Household and Community Patterns". Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainsville, 1989.
Settlement patterns and community organizations during first years of slavery in Georgia.

Smiley, Nixon. **Yesterday's Miami**. Miami, FL: E.A. Seeman Publishing, Inc., 1973.
A study of boom town development in the 1920's.

Vlach, John M. "The Shotgun House: An African Architectural Legacy, Parts I &II". **Pioneer America**. V. 8, pp. 47-70. 1976.

_____. **The Afro-American Tradition in the Decorative Arts**.
Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.

Whitelaw, Robert N. S. and Alice F. Lenhoff. **Charleston - Come Hell or High Water**.
Columbia, S.C.: The R. L. Bryan Company, 1975.
A photographic study of the city of Charleston, its architecture and the life of its early inhabitants.

Wood, Peter H. "Whetting, Setting, and Laying Timbers - Black Builders in the Early South". **Southern Exposure**. Spring, 1986, Volume VIII., No. 1., pp. 2-8.
Durham, N.C.: Institute for Southern Studies.
Contributions of blacks to the crafts industry in America, early indications of Africanism in American architecture.