ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS: VICTORIAN FOLK COTTAGES IN GREENVILLE

Anna Kate Hipp*

The house has been, and continues to be, the dominant symbol of American culture. Over the centuries individuals have found expression in their own personal ideas of what the perfect house would be. The range of variety extends from the simple log cabin based on the original dwellings of our forefathers to the most fanciful structures inspired by classical, European, and ultra-modern concepts.

The house has been, and continues to be, the expression of the taste and the perspective of the people who build and use them. The personality of the occupant is indelibly stamped on the style and architecture of each dwelling.

History usually discusses the houses of the elite, the wealthy class. The "cottages" of Newport, Rhode Island, the mansion at Biltmore, the masterpieces on the Battery in Charleston, the elegant townhouses of Manhattan - all have been studied, dissected, and published again and again.

Until recently the houses that expressed the taste and pocket books of the common people were simply ignored. They were left to their own to become the victims of urban renewal or blight. Small Town, USA, and her architecture were taken for granted with no real research on that segment of our society.

Perhaps it is much more difficult to "get into the heads" of the people who built their own houses. These people could not afford the renowned architects, or even the local architect, to plan and create a home for them. These people had to depend upon their own powers of observation and creativity to produce the house of their dreams.

The products of this architecture were derived neither from the

*Anna Kate Hipp is on the board of The Friends of the Reedy River, Brookgreen Gardens, the Southern Environmental Law Center, and Success by Six. Her paper was presented to the Greenville County Historical Society on May 4, 2003 as an illustrated lecture. It was originally written for and presented to The Thursday Club.

drafting tables of professional architects nor based on blue prints. These structures resulted from the collective memory of the people. These often humble dwellings truly represent "architecture without architects."

The word Victorian conjures up many images. One Greenville example is the Norwood (or Funderburk) house on Belmont Avenue. With its towers, elaborate trim, shingles, and porches, it is the ultimate example of the Victorian house and one of the finest examples remaining in Greenville. The era from 1875 to 1900 witnessed the building of these large, intricate, often fanciful structures.

As style will have it though; there was another group of society, less affluent but equally creative which was watching, adapting, and ultimately creating its own Victorian style.

After over two decades of observing and absorbing ideas, by 1900 this growing group of middle-class tradesmen, grocers, railway conductors, butchers and bakers were planning their new homes. Even though they had few resources to hire the designers or the architects employed by their more affluent neighbors, these individuals began to introduce into Small Town, USA, a new style of home - the **Victorian Folk Cottage**.

During the earliest years of the twentieth century, Greenville was a perfect example of Small Town, USA. In 1900 Greenville was a small part of a larger country where the average life expectancy was 47, only eight percent of homes had a telephone, and the average wage was 22 cents an hour. In this land of opportunity sugar cost four cents a pound, eggs were 14 cents a dozen and coffee cost 15 cents a pound. In 1900 the American flag had 45 stars, the population of Las Vegas, Nevada, was 30; and marijuana, heroin, and morphine were all available over the counter at the corner drugstores.

At the time the Victorian Folk Cottage was emerging, Greenville grew from a village with five cars in 1900 to a town with over 1,000 cars by 1915. The speed limit was 15 mph. In 1900 there were about 400 working telephones, but by 1916 that number had increased to 2000. The town boasted two local newspapers to aid in its

communications network. As cars, telephones and newspapers developed so did the surrounding industry.

As early as 1907 civic leaders were expressing concern for the Reedy River and its polluted environment. The textile industry was beginning to dominate the landscape, and its by-products were flowing daily down the Reedy. Poe Mill was one of the most successful textile ventures. The employees and their families lived in Poe Mill Village that had a population of 2,500. The mill villages expanded into modern suburbs each maintaining its own elementary school.

By the turn of the twentieth century Greenville had its share of grand houses. In addition to the flamboyant Victorian on Belmont Avenue, there were Whitehall, the Kilgore-Lewis House, the Graham residence, and Cherrydale; which now rests proudly on the Furman Campus.

This paper is not interested in these well-documented, elegant homes of the upper class. Emphasis is to be put on the small Victorian Folk Cottages that abound in Greenville in all states of repair and disrepair. These charming, sometimes rather primitive homes are the best examples of architecture without architects.

In order to identify and appreciate these Victorian Folk Cottages, a knowledge of why the timing was right for this construction cycle is necessary. Also, a few terms must be defined as well.

Four events or circumstances were critical to the construction of the Victorian Folk Cottage:

First and foremost was the ability to observe, the ingenuity, and the talent of the owner/builders. This talent enabled them to dream the dream of their own home and to execute the project.

Secondly, at the turn of the century the prevalence of the railroads allowed the transport of goods to even the smallest village. Greenvillians benefitted greatly because of the presence of two railway lines into the town. The trains delivered to Greenville not only heavy equipment and tools to aid in construction but also mass produced building supplies. Planks for floors, exterior siding, precut trims and standardized windows could all be purchased "ready made."

Thirdly, in the world of architecture a new form of construction called "Balloon Construction" simplified the actual structure of the house. The heavy timber framing of the past was being replaced by light, two-inch boards held together by wire nails; thus facilitating the actual construction. The simple fact was that it was becoming easier to build a house.

Finally, property was being made available for purchase as large estates were broken into small lots.

Now for a few definitions. Illustrations will be provided later.

1. A Victorian Folk Cottage will never have more than one-and-a-half stories. If a Victorian structure has two full stories it becomes a Victorian house.
2. Most Victorian Folk Cottages have a hipped roof. A hipped roof is simply a roof which slopes upward from all four sides of a building. In contrast, the more common gabled roof is composed of two sloping sides supported on each end by a triangular surface.
3. In this part of the country the Victorian Folk Cottages were constructed with heart, rough sawn, southern yellow pine.
4. The roof was made of wooden shingles or some type of metal.
5. A verge board was a projecting board placed against the edges of the gable incline. These often served as decoration.
6. Patterned wooden shingles - often called fish scale shingles - were sometimes found on the gables of Victorian Folk Cottages.
7. Turned spindles served as porch supports on Victorian Folk Cottages - serving both functional and decorative purposes.

The typical layout of the interior of the Victorian Folk Cottage was very simple:

A **central hall** ran the length of the house. A person could literally stand at the front entry and look out the back door into the back yard. Two rooms were placed on either side of the hall making a total of four rooms.

If the **hall** were wide, it could be used as the family parlor. If not, one of the other four rooms filled that need.

Generally the first room on the left side of the hall, after entering the front door, had white trim - contrasted to the dark stained wood found throughout the remainder of the house. This was called the **Ladies' Parlor** and would serve as the family living room.

The second room on the right side of the hall was **the kitchen** or "keeping room." Kitchens were very basic at the turn of the century. Cupboards were what are now called pie safes. The pie safe was merely a wooden cabinet with screen wire in the doors to allow for circulation of air for the food stored inside. The refrigerator was an "ice box." The ice was delivered regularly from the local icehouse. A small cast iron stove with two burners generally used wood for fuel.

The bathrooms were out in the yard or in an alley that ran behind the house.

There was a fireplace in each room. Two fireplaces generally shared one chimney. Two chimneys were typical on each cottage.

The ceilings were 10 to 12 feet high. The walls and ceilings were constructed of gypsum plaster applied to wood laths.

The floors were made of wide planks of tongue and grove pine. There was no sub flooring.

The trim and molding were generous in width and often embellished with pseudo-Queen Anne decorations.

With a sense of a "place in time" - that is, the United States and Greenville at the turn of the 20th century - and a knowledge of architectural terms, the identification of some of the Victorian Folk Cottages in Greenville is now possible.

The Victorian Folk Cottages of Greenville are located in several neighborhoods. The "tour" that follows will look at four of these areas and introduce the reader to the little cottages and the people who built them.

The tour begins on David Street, which was deeded to the City Council of Greenville in 1896 by C.A. David. The David family were residents of 109 James Street for 40 years - since 1856 when the house was purchased by Joseph Alexander David and his wife. James Street

was named for the oldest son in the David family, James, who had been killed in the Civil War.

The house at 109 James is the home often referenced as the Earle Townhouse, and was the childhood home of Mary Simms Oliphant Furman. This lovely home rested on a 15 acre lot before the turn of the twentieth century. The property, bordered by Rutherford Road and Buncombe Road, extended from Poe Mill to what today is roughly the location of the Salvation Army Store. This property was virtually a sanctuary for all manner of wild life, vegetation and growths of oak and hickory trees. From the Buncombe Road side of this great expanse of property, David Street was carved.

David Street which runs perpendicular to James Street was not listed in the Greenville *City Directory* until the 1903-1904 edition - seven years after it had been deeded to the city. During those seven years, ten houses were built on the three-block-long street. Professions of the occupants included junk dealer, substitute carrier for the Post Office, a clerk at the Poe Mill Store, employees of Poe Mill, a gardener, a carpenter and an herb doctor. Ten years later in 1914 the occupations included the owner of a meat market on Buncombe Street, a policeman, a traveling salesman, a mill builder, a dressmaker, and a machinist at the Mountain City Foundry Company. This was truly a cross section of the rising blue-collar workers. Without a doubt these people were the first in their families to have a "home of their own."

The development of this area began for obvious reasons. The street was near the railway station at the end of Washington Street, near Poe Mill out on Buncombe Street, and near downtown Greenville. These homeowners were able to get easily from their new homes to their jobs. Modest as their houses were, they were their own - and in retrospect they were amazingly well built.

Number 16 David Street is a classic example of the Victorian Folk Cottage. Records indicate that around 1914 it was deeded to Louis St. John David by his father, Charles Alexander David, who was living in the "big house" at 107 James Street. C.A. David was a well-loved cartoonist and newspaper columnist for *The Greenville News*. Five years later, in 1919, Louis David sold the house to Mrs Florence Wertz

Dacus, the wife of Robert Dacus who was a pharmacist on Buncombe Road. Mrs. Dacus paid $1,000 for the property. The deed gave her the privilege of connecting with sewer lines, indicating there were no bathrooms in the house at the time of purchase. She owned the house until 1944.When she sold the property; no privilege for a sewer connection was attached to the deed, confirming that Mrs. Dacus had added a bathroom and connected to the sewer line between 1919 and 1944. Records indicate that after Mrs. Dacus sold the house at least six more people owned the property down to 1999.

This is 16 David Street as it appears today. The hipped roof, the verge boards, the gables, the windows, the porch, and the fish scale shingles illustrate the truly Victorian Folk Cottage features of this one-story house.

During this period 16 David Street was rental property for several decades, and at some point was divided into two units. One of the windows in the left bay was changed into a door, providing a private entry for the second set of tenants. By 1999, the 12-foot ceilings had been dropped to just about the window frames, the plaster walls had been covered with sheet rock and painted in shocking colors ranging from deep purple, to bubble-gum pink, to bright blue. Two substandard bathrooms had been placed at the end of the entry hall, blocking the view from the front door to the backyard. A strange galley-

type kitchen had been tacked on the back of the building. The house had "fallen on hard times." This crumbling, dirty structure was about to be foreclosed on by the bank. Nobody wanted her. In spite of this state, its basic Folk Victorian characteristics persevered. In 1999 the sad, dilapidated house caught the attention of Reid Hipp, who purchased it and began its restoration.

A few blocks east of David Street is land that had originally been a part of the large and impressive land holdings of Colonel Elias Earle. Some of this estate had been subdivided by the turn of the twentieth century but little actual building began before 1915. According to the *City Directory* of 1904 there were only 12 houses (two of which were vacant) on Earle Street. There was nothing east of Main on Earle Street at that time. Today Earle Street is a part of the James Street/Earle Street Historic District.

In those 12 homes in 1904 an interesting array of professions and jobs was represented. A traveling salesman for Lawton Lumber Company, a physician who had an office on South Main Street, a contractor who had his office in his home, a printer working for the Baptist Courier, a weekly newspaper which was the precursor of Keys Printing, and a farmer. There were a few "colored" people (indicated by an asterisk by their names in the City Directory) living on the street. Research indicates most of these individuals worked in some capacity for Lipscombe Russell Wholesale Grocers. Thus Earle Street was in an area of Greenville not dominated by the socially and financially successful textile executives, bankers, and large business owners but populated by the "average" man.

In 1905 before any real development and building began on Earle Street a small Victorian Folk Cottage was constructed between Robinson and Wilton Streets. The address today is 215 West Earle Street. Typically the house originally had a single story, one central hall running front to back, hard wood floors, plaster walls and four main rooms. It was a classic Victorian Folk Cottage.

Sometime in the past the house was divided into two parts, each of which currently rents for $375. The central, main entry door was converted into a window; and the side windows became doors for each

rental unit. Two bathrooms were installed at the end of the central hallway, and kitchens were tacked on the side and back of the house. The high ceilings, the wide woodwork and trim, and the hardwood floors still exist even though the apartments are carpeted wall to wall. The current owner is an absentee landlord and, therefore, has little interest in the charm and historic nature of the house. Regulations, which apply to historic districts, prevented covering the exterior with siding and other "modern" alterations.

215 West Earle Street

Across town, not far from Christ Episcopal Church, another neighborhood was developing in the early 1900s.The James Boyce estate was being subdivided. Without question the owners of these new homes were a financial notch above the new homeowners on David Street or Earle Street.

In 1907 the Boyce Lawn Subdivision marked the beginning of development on a large scale. The land between East North Street and East Washington Street was a major part of the Pettigru Street Neighborhood. Many of the streets were named for faculty members of the Furman Theological Seminary.

Located just to the east of downtown Greenville; this area remained, prior to 1912, the exclusive neighborhood of just a few very

large homes. One of these homes, which was owned by textile magnate Lewis W. Parker, is now the Poinsett Club.

Sometime between 1905 and 1910, a Victorian Folk Cottage was constructed at 702 East Washington Street. Today that house stands directly across Washington Street from the Fourth Presbyterian Church. Harold Francis Gallivan, freshly arrived from Massachusetts, built this "cottage" for his sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. John Coughlin. The Coughlin's had two children. When the Coughlin family moved to New York in 1922, W. T. Potter bought the home. The Potters had two children, Virginia and her brother Edmond. The Couglins and the Potters were the only two families to ever live in this house. Today this house is the office of Jack Thacker, an outstanding architect.

702 East Washington Street

Carefully preserved this Victorian Folk Cottage remains very much as it was when constructed. The original pine floors are in perfect condition, the glass in the windows is the original, and the woodwork and trim throughout the house have been beautifully preserved. In 1941 Mrs. Potter did change the typically very dark woodwork to dark green to match a grass cloth paper at the suggestion

of an interior decorator. It is easy to observe this house is almost identical to the cottage on Earle Street.

The fourth, and last, neighborhood is in The West End. Nestled parallel to Pendleton Street as it runs south out of downtown Greenville is a cluster of homes that at one time thrived because of their location near the Seaboard Airline Railway on South Main, the proximity of downtown, the accessibility to the trolley line that ran from downtown Greenville to most of the textile mills, and the presence of Furman University just down the road where the Governor's School now stands.

By 1900 a substantial row of commercial buildings extended on and near Pendleton Street in the area that we now define as The West End. The Hugeunot Mill and offices, the Markley Hardware Company, and the Wyatt Brothers Livery Stables were among the business establishments. Several significant homes were built in the neighborhood prior to 1900.

Around the turn of the century another estate was divided. Just as the land on David and Earle Streets, and the Boyce estates was being parceled into small lots, so were the landholdings of Mrs. T. E. Ware located just south and west of downtown Greenville.

Again research reveals that in this neighborhood it was the working class man who was building his first home. The 1907 *City Directory* lists a conglomeration of occupations represented in the homes on Ware, Rhett and McCall Streets: a clerk at Hudson and Jordan, a bookkeeper, the pastor of the Riverside Baptist Church, a stenographer, an employee of Poe Mill, an operator at the Southern Telephone and Telegraph Company, a clerk at the J. G. Perry Grocery and the pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church (which still stands on Rhett Street).

It is here that you find the greatest concentration of the often whimsical, well-built, charming Victorian Folk Cottages. They are alike, yet each has its own personality - the stamp of its original builder and owner. Perhaps the preservation of these little jewels was due to the decline of the Pendelton Street commerce, the closing of the railroad, and the relocation of Furman University.

Another major factor in the changing face of the neighborhood was the proposal to build a bypass around Greenville. Although this never materialized a great deal of land was taken by the highway department, causing other homeowners to sell out and move away from the project. The area became primarily rental property at that time. Left to suffer hard times the neighborhood experienced years of decline and neglect.

A blessing in disguise was the lack of change and alterations that took place around Ware, McCall and Rhett Streets. The majority of these homes were built between 1900 and 1910. This was a "full blown" neighborhood while just one or two small Victorian Cottages were appearing on David, Earle and Washington Streets.

At 708 Rhett Street is an especially charming cottage. The house has all the typical and expected features of the Victorian Folk Cottage - the open hallway (which now has a bathroom placed at the end), four large rooms on either side of this hallway, hardwood floors and wide, wonderful molding.

708 Rhett Street

On the exterior can be noted: the hipped roof, the gables, the decoration in the gables, and the decorative verge board. Although the porch has been altered, as was the case in almost all of the Victorian Folk Cottages, this one still has the delicate charm of the turned spindles.

The four cottages and the four neighborhoods that have been discussed give a taste of the excitement at the turn of the twentieth century when the working man was able to provide a home for himself and his family. Industrialization, the presence of the railroads, the changing techniques in building, and available land were all factors in the owners' success.

But above all the imagination, ingenuity and observation of these people aided them in creating well-built, comfortable, lasting, charming, and architecturally unique structures which truly personified the meaning of "architecture without architects."

Bibliography

Aheron, Piper Peters. *Greenville*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing (Images of America Series), 1999.

Ashmore, Nancy Vance, *Greenville, Woven from the Past*. Northridge, California: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1986.

David, C.A., *Greenville of Old*. Greenville, SC: A Press, 1998.

The Historic Resources of Greenville. Nashville, TN: South Carolina, Building Conservation Technology, Inc., 1981.

Jakle, Bastian, Meyer, *Common Houses in America's Small Towns, The Atlantic Seaboard to the Mississippi Valley*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee, *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

The South Carolina Room of the Greenville Library and numerous *City Directories*.

Special thanks to Mrs. Anne McCuen, historian; Mr. Martin Meek of Campbell Meek and Associates, Architects; Mr. Jim Thomas of Marshall Clarke Architects, Inc.; Mr. Jackson Thacker, Traditional Concepts, Inc.; and Mr. Reid Hipp, restorer of 16 David Street.