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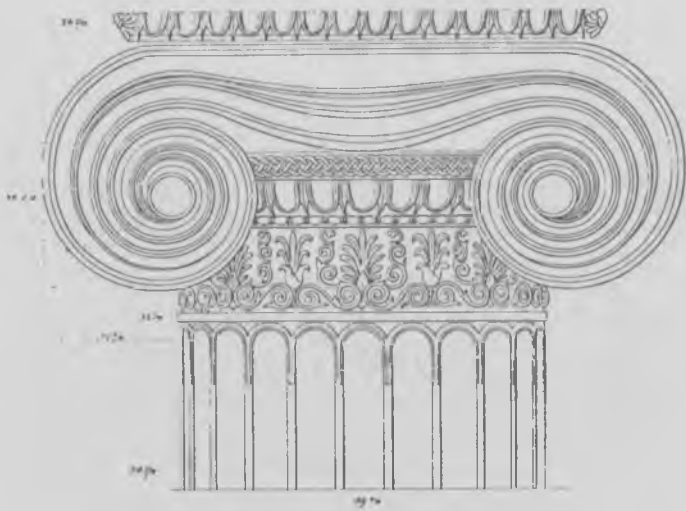
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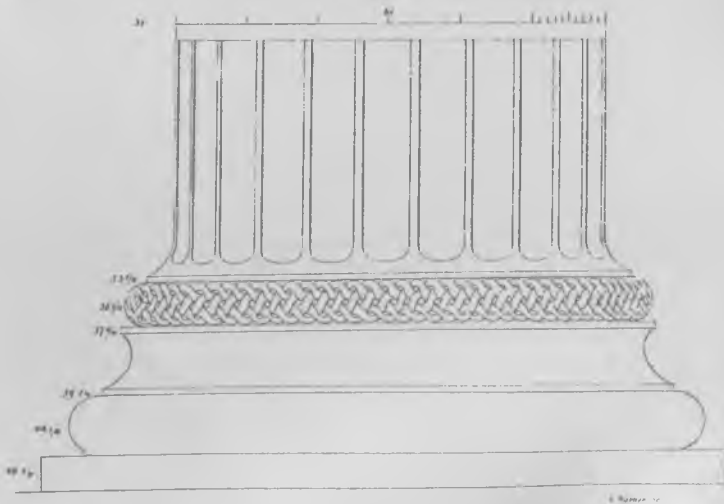
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GREEK REVIVAL PERIOD ARCHITECTURE



by Martha H. Simms

What better means does man have of expressing his hopes, dreams, and beliefs than in the style choice of his housing? If his aspirations are merely to eke out a meager, hand-to-mouth existence in a forbidding and mean environment, he will express his feelings and fears for his future existence by setting up his household in a cave or a sod shanty. If his faith in his future is sufficient, he will choose a more comfortable means of sheltering himself and his family.

When the Egyptians sought to express their faith in an improved life after death, they built tombs that survive to this day but homes that were swept away in the next flood of the Nile. When the Greeks set out to express their belief in the freedom of man's soul in this life, they built temples so beautiful that they have inspired others through the ages.

When the Dark Ages descended on civilization, those who could do so fortified their homes until residences became castles. Early settlers on the North American continent sheltered their families from the savage onslaught of weather and unfriendly natives by building similarly fortified, though much smaller, structures with narrow apertures, more easily defended than those with wide, expansive openings to the environment.

So it was that the first prepossessing dwellings built by settlers in this area were copies or adaptations of their previous homes. The resulting architectural style has been dubbed "Federal." In the Fall, 1980, issue of this publication, Federal residential architecture in Huntsville and Madison County was extensively discussed by Huntsville's nationally known restoration architect Harvie P. Jones.

In Huntsville and Madison County 1830 - 1845

COVER: *Greek Revival portico of the Fearn-King house at 517 Franklin St.*



OAKLAWN (2709 Meridian Street) as it appeared in 1934--photograph by W. H. Manning for the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Greek Revival architecture has been called the only architectural style original to the United States; but perhaps, a more correct assessment would be that it was the *first* architectural style original to the U. S. Certainly it expressed the spirit of the citizens of the new nation as they moved into the second quarter of the nineteenth century. They had won, if one uses the term loosely, two wars with one of the greatest nations the world had ever known. They had proved that they could draw up a form of government that guaranteed some measure of freedom to most citizens. They were able to devise an economic system that appeared to provide the necessities of life to most, and to some, prosperity only dreamed of in the past. They were free. They were free of most of the shackles that had bound man in the old world. They turned to classical Greece for an academ-

ic basis for their intellectual ideals; and they turned to classical Greek architecture for architectural expression of their feelings.

But it was not an American who is credited with introducing to the United States the Greek Revival as an architectural style. To this country came a well trained English architect, Benjamin H. Latrobe. Latrobe and Thomas Jefferson developed a strong professional relationship, and their association resulted in marked changes in the styles of both men. They corresponded over a long period, although it has not been established that they ever collaborated on a commission. Latrobe's Bank of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, designed in the spring of 1798 and constructed 1799-1801, is generally regarded as the first Greek Revival building in the United States. Latrobe's pu-

pils, Robert Mills and William Strickland, further developed this stylistic trend. (Mills claimed to be the first native born American to be trained specifically as a professional architect.¹) Washington, D.C., the seaports of the east coast, and Nashville are some of the locations of their professional work. It may be of interest to the reader that Latrobe included a complete bathroom with bathtub, wash basin and water closet in a Philadelphia residence designed by him in 1810.²

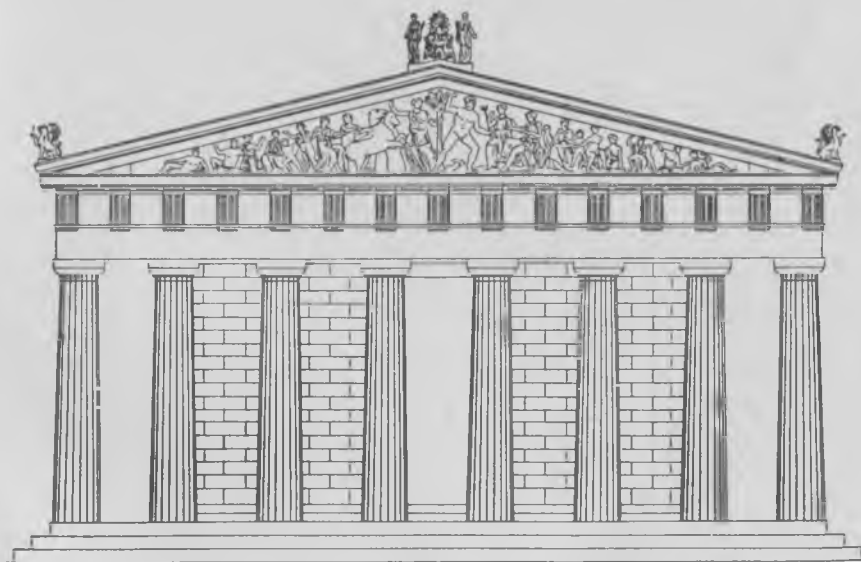
Classical Greek architecture was the vehicle for American expression of the manner in which early nineteenth century Americans chose to live: vehicle, merely, for the materials, methods and means of expression were as American as the designers. Details were frequently impure in application, and designers moved freely from Greek into Roman orders and back again. It is in the adaptation

of the Greek spirit that a truly native American style originated.

Huntsville and Madison County Alabama, lay on the frontier of the United States at the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The area had been settled by two kinds of pioneers: the wealthy landowner who moved from the eastern states and the poorer small farmer who sought to improve his fortunes in the new land. Both had encountered hardships at first; both were, after a generation, better off financially and spiritually. There was great hope and anticipation, great commitment to the ideals of freedom and free enterprise, great confidence in the future. Many had traveled extensively, and many had just arrived from

1 Talbot Hamlin, *Greek Revival Architecture in America* (New York: Dover, 1964). p.19

2 *Ibid.*, p.32



Elevation of the PARTHENON (447-432 B.C.) on the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, which served as the model for numerous Greek Revival designs in the U. S.

the affluent eastern seaboard. The citizens of the area were ready to build homes that would express their ideals and ambitions. They were ready to break with memories of the old world, particularly England and English styles. They were ready to shelter their families in the fashion of true Americans. They were ready for Greek Revival architecture.

Yet only seventeen documented buildings exist today in Madison County that can be called Greek Revival in design or are known to have been built during the years 1830 to 1845. A turn through the pages of the history of this area supplies some of the reasons. The new nation suffered an economic panic and severe depression about 1836. Judge Thomas Jones

DOCUMENTED GREEK REVIVAL STRUCTURES (1830-1845)
IN HUNTSVILLE AND MADISON COUNTY

Compiled by Martha H. Simms

- ATWOOD House: 420 Randolph Avenue: ca. 1832
Two-story, brick, altered.
- BAKER-WESTMORELAND House: 209 Lincoln Street: ca. 1837
Two-story, stuccoed brick, altered.
- *BIBB House: 300 Williams Avenue: ca. 1830
Two-story, brick: HABS, 1935.**
- BRADLEY-DARWIN House: 450 McClung Avenue: ca. 1835
One and one half-story, frame, altered.
- *COMMERCIAL Building: 301 Franklin Street: ca. 1832
Three-story, brick, altered.
- *FIRST ALABAMA BANK OF HUNTSVILLE: West Side Square: Designed 1835,
completed 1840: HABS, 1935; National Register, 1974.
- *HOLLOWELL House: 601 Franklin Street: ca. 1835
Brick, raised cottage.
- LANE-COOPER House: 511 Adams Street: ca. 1835
Brick, raised cottage, altered.
- *LEROY POPE WALKER House: 413 McClung Avenue: ca. 1835
Two-story, brick, altered.
- LEWIS-SANFORD House: 601 Madison Street: ca. 1832
One-story, brick, two-story wing.
- McCLUNG House: 416 McClung Avenue: ca. 1838
Two-story, brick, altered.
- MILLER-O'NEAL House: 203 Lincoln Street: ca. 1830
Brick, one-story, altered.
- *OAKLAWN: 2709 Meridian Street: ca. 1844
Two-story, brick, flanking wings: HABS, 1935; National Register.
- OTEY House: Meridianville, Alabama: ca. 1845
Two-story, frame: HABS, 1935.
- *STEELE House: 808 Maysville Road: ca. 1840
Two-story, stuccoed brick: HABS, 1935; National Register, 1974.
- WHITE House: 312 White Street: ca. 1836
Two-story, brick, one-story wing, altered: HABS, 1935.
- *WITHERS-CHAPMAN House: 2409 Gaboury Lane: ca. 1840
One-story, frame: National Register, 1978.

* Illustrated ** Historic American Buildings Survey

Taylor, local nineteenth century historian, probably exaggerated very little when he wrote that "in the course of a year or two the debtors outnumbered the creditors."³ Census figures show that between 1830 and 1840 Madison County lost 2,000 persons. Part of this loss can be accounted for by emigration into previously Indian-held lands in south and west Alabama and into lands as far west as Texas.

In spite of economic disaster, the community set upon construction of a new courthouse on the Public Square. Taylor's account follows:

The old brick courthouse on the public square had become dilapidated and insecure, and after discussing ways and means for several years the commissioners finally let out the contract for the building of a new one. George Steele, a fine mechanic and a scientific architect, planned the building and drew up its specifications. Geo. Steele had come here from Virginia young and poor, but by his energy and mechanical skill contributed largely to the development of architectural taste among our people and soon made a wide reputation and acquired wealth...Our fellow citizen William Wilson and James Mitchell were awarded the entire contract, and broke ground for the new building in the month of July, 1836, and the first court was held in the new courthouse in the fall of 1838. The excellent blue limestone of the foundation was quarried on Russell Hill. The whiter limestone of the steps into the hall and of the upper stone work was quarried on the spurs of Monte Sano, and the paving material from "Round Top." Messrs. Wilson and Mitchell's contract included grading the site of the new courthouse and removing the old one,...The bricks for the courthouse were made by Messrs. Wilson and Mitchell (locally)....The courthouse cost about fifty-two thousand dollars, and when finish-

This COMMERCIAL building (ca. 1832) at 301 Franklin Street displays modified pilasters and a rectangular transom, features typical of Greek Revival design, in this photograph taken prior to 1880.



ed it was considered one of the finest edifices of the kind in the Southern States. Messrs. Wilson and Mitchell quarried the stone in the mountains, made the brick, superintended hauling and transportation of all the material, and also directed and managed the inside work and plastering.

While the courthouse was in progress of construction George Steele was building the bank edifice, now occupied by the National bank, which is another monument to the skill and fidelity of the builders of that time.⁴

³ Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, *A History of Madison County, 1732-1840* (University, Alabama: Confederate Publishing Company, 1976). p.106

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.114-15

This lengthy quotation is interesting for its description of local skills, use of local materials, and most importantly, for the introduction of Huntsville's best known nineteenth century builder-architect, George Steele. The Greek Revival courthouse was replaced in 1914 by the predecessor of the present one; but its neighbor, the bank building mentioned in Taylor's account, survives.

It is the oldest building in the state in continuous use as a bank and is unquestionably the most famous Greek Revival building surviving in the area. Today it houses the downtown offices of First Alabama Bank of Huntsville and stands on the southwest corner of the Courthouse Square. It was designed in 1835 and constructed between 1837 and 1840 at a cost of \$76,000 including land. George

Steele was the architect as well as builder. How fortunate that the owners of the bank have chosen to preserve and enhance the exterior rather than deface it by "modernization." Preservationists may well say a prayer of thanksgiving.

The substantial white limestone facade, the idealism of the six-columned portico with graceful, uncomplicated Ionic capitals, the simple, yet imposing entablature supporting the copper roof, and the satisfying scale of the design evoke better than words the intent of the builder to provide the citizens of Huntsville and the area with a place of security, dignity and grace, enduring into the foreseeable future. The bank is recorded in the 1934-35 Historic American Buildings Survey and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



The FIRST ALABAMA BANK OF HUNTSVILLE as it appeared in the late nineteenth century before the front facade was altered by the addition of side doors and second story windows.

Although the foundations and walls were of locally quarried stone, the columns, bases and capitals were brought from Baltimore to the Tennessee River by oxcart, then barged to Triana, and up the canal (visible now only as a part of the Big Spring Park) to the west and rear of the bank building. Heavy poplar timbers, mortised, keyed and locked into the limestone walls, are as sound today as when originally installed. Door and window jambs and lintels, as well as all exterior woodwork, are of red cedar and have been retained wherever possible. The windows had interior wooden shutters which folded into niches in the woodwork. The fifteen foot tall door is original; there is evidence that its original position was on tracks so as to slide for opening and closing as it does today.⁵ Several of the original simple Greek Revival mantels are still in place in office areas.

When the second floor living quarters of the cashier and his family (originally required by state law) were removed, workmen discovered a layer of saw-

5 In a renovation of the building which took place in 1966-67, the author was privileged to be asked by M. Beirne Spragins to work with the contractor in an unpaid advisory position. The confidence of workmen was earned by successfully opening up a southeast office firebox to its full original woodburning size with a minimum of effort and without disaster. After that event, a pleasant sharing of experiences and observations developed. It was a consensus of opinion at that time that the original entrance doors were set to slide on tracks similar to the Lafever design in Plate 25 of *The Beauties of Modern Architecture*. George Steele used sliding doors in his own home Oak Place, ca. 1840.

dust between the joists. This was apparently an early attempt at soundproofing and insulation. Such innovative practices were typical of Greek Revival architects. A semidetached structure at the rear, designed as living quarters for the servants, was remodeled in 1951 for directors' and employees' offices. In the basement were detention cells for slaves who had been impounded for their masters' debts. The original bank vault rested on solid limestone and was walled and roofed with blocks of limestone six feet thick. Interior brick walls were built about one foot inside the stone walls and surmounted by a masonry arch. Needless to say, the bank has been redesigned to meet modern banking needs, but the exterior remains almost exactly as George Steele built it.

Many architectural details are common to residences built in the Greek Revival period. Consideration of these elements will make the study of the individual houses more interesting to the observer, because it is often in the very differences that the spirit of the style is best understood.

The methods of constructing residences changed very little as the Federal style was supplanted by the Greek Revival. (See the Fall, 1980, *Quarterly* which contains a detailed examination of the Federal period in Madison County.) The builder of the classical period, 1830-1845, had available to him new style-books and handbooks. During the latter part of the period, he had catalogues of millwork from which he could order doors, windows and trim. Nevertheless, building techniques varied little during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Floor plans, however, under-

went considerable change. Local Federal plans originated in the tightly integrated, Georgian-influenced schemes adopted by settlers from memories of their previous homes in the East. The second generation recognized the necessity of adapting to the warmer climate in Alabama. Higher ceilings were used which allowed summer heat to rise, leaving cooler air near the floor in the space occupied by people. Windows were larger and more numerous, permitting more fresh air to enter and creating better circulation. Rooms also were larger. Wealthy landowners with Federal style houses had discovered that the lowly dog-trot cabins of the less fortunate were actually better planned for comfort in the hot, damp seasons, so very wide center halls, which create a natural draft of air, became com-

mon in houses of the period. Usually two rooms flanked these halls on each side. If the house was two-story, it contained eight rooms, four large, almost square rooms on each floor. Wings of one or two stories could extend to the side or rear. Porches were frequent features of Greek Revival houses. It is important to remember that the simple, spacious effect of these plans was not only practical, but expressed very well the philosophy of the classical Greeks.

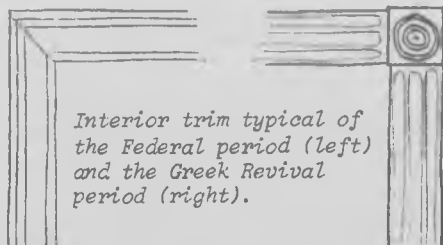
It is also in the trim of these houses that Greek Revival styling is obvious. Using any of the numerous builder's guides and imagination, if not always taste, in the combination of decorative elements, the builder-architect could achieve variety as well as fashion in the design of a

LEROY POPE WALKER House (ca. 1835) located at 413 McClung Avenue



Greek Revival residence. Many of these decorative features could be ordered from machine shops for local installation.

In general, the mitered window and door trims of the Federal period gave way to the corner rosette into which vertically fluted trim was butted. In the Huntsville area, doors of the Greek Revival period usually feature two or three vertical panels, while in other areas of the region, door panels may be otherwise arranged. Hardware was often ordered from distant suppliers in this period. The mortised lock became more common, although rimlocks continued to be used for security on principal doors. Door-knobs of Staffordshire and other ceramics, of cut and pressed glass, and even of silver have been observed on interior doors in local Greek Revival resi-



Interior trim typical of the Federal period (left) and the Greek Revival period (right).

dences of some pretension. Mantels were generally simplified in design; the highly carved and decorated Adam-influenced wooden mantels of the Federal period were replaced by those portraying more nearly the entrance of a Greek temple. Heavy plain wooden elements featuring, at most, Ionic or Tuscan columns were typical. In wealthy homes, marble mantels were used in rooms frequented by guests, but the simpler, heavier Greek temple design prevailed even though the materials differed

This mantel in OAK PLACE, the George STEELE house on Maysville Road, illustrates the massive, plain interior detailing that was popular during the Greek Revival period.



from those used in plainer rooms and houses.

Window glass became available in larger sizes, so windows of the period usually have fewer, larger panes than Federal houses. Sometimes these fashionable features were incorporated in the front or more formal rooms, while the older and probably cheaper sizes went into the plainer rooms used principally by the family.

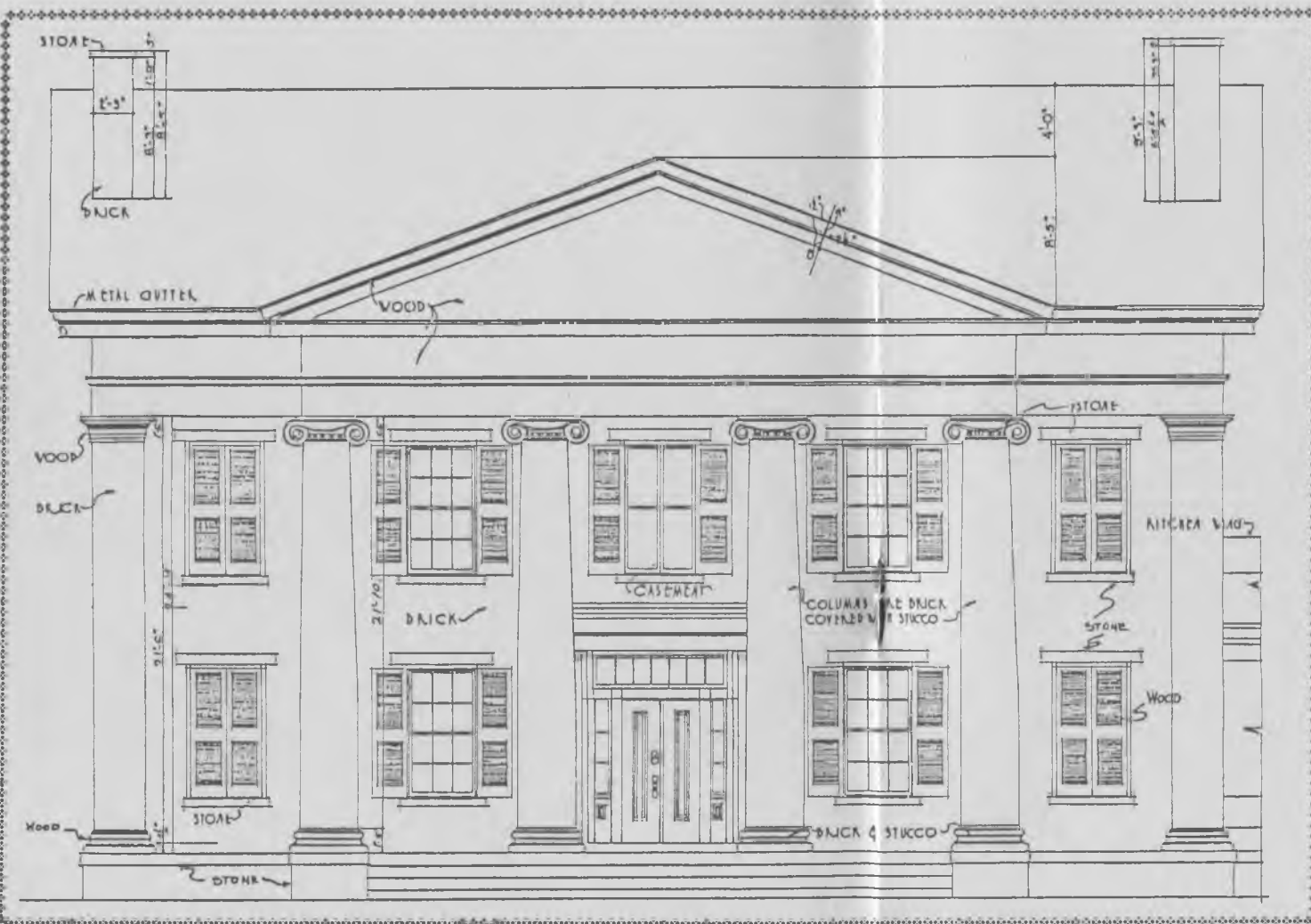
Baseboards were higher in the Greek Revival period than in the Federal. In some cases, careful calculations appear to have been made to work out proportions to fit the Greek ideals as outlined in classical literature. In other words, baseboards were installed to the "correct" depth for the height of the ceiling so as to give the "perfect" proportions invented long ago.

Staircases became more graceful in most cases; risers were not so steep, and treads were wider and longer. Staircases in some of these houses seem to have been designed so that beautiful ladies in crinolined skirts could glide, rather than climb, up and down. Handrails, balusters and newel posts had to be larger, of course, creating a total effect that is frequently heavier than

the Federal counterpart. Chair rails are unknown in this area during the Greek Revival period.

It should be noted that Greek Revival styling was rarely extended to the more utilitarian parts of the house and almost never to the outbuildings. Even when these are of the period, separate kitchens, servants' quarters, and children's rooms can be expected to have been treated only to plain, even crude, and old-fashioned detailing. Unless this is kept in mind, the novice observer may assume that these areas belong to an earlier period than the rest of the house.

Only three of the buildings on the accompanying list of local Greek Revival period structures are of frame construction. The common explanation is that the others were destroyed by fires over the years. Undoubtedly many were. But it must be remembered that brick was easily made of the native red clay and may even have been less expensive than timber which required much labor to turn into building supplies. The brick buildings of the period are of solid masonry construction with exterior walls at least twelve inches thick and interior walls at least eight inches thick. It may be of interest that shaped bricks were common here. They were used in



Front elevation of the BIBB house drawn in 1934 by Wilfred Van Valkenburgh for HABS. Representative of Greek Revival styling are the massive proportions, symmetry of the facade, pedimented portico with two-story Ionic columns, corner pilasters, and entrance having a rectangular top-light and double doors each with a single full-length panel.

the construction of cisterns as well as for decorative purposes, such as the tall columns that form the porticoes of Oaklawn on Meridian Street and probably the Bibb mansion on Williams Avenue.

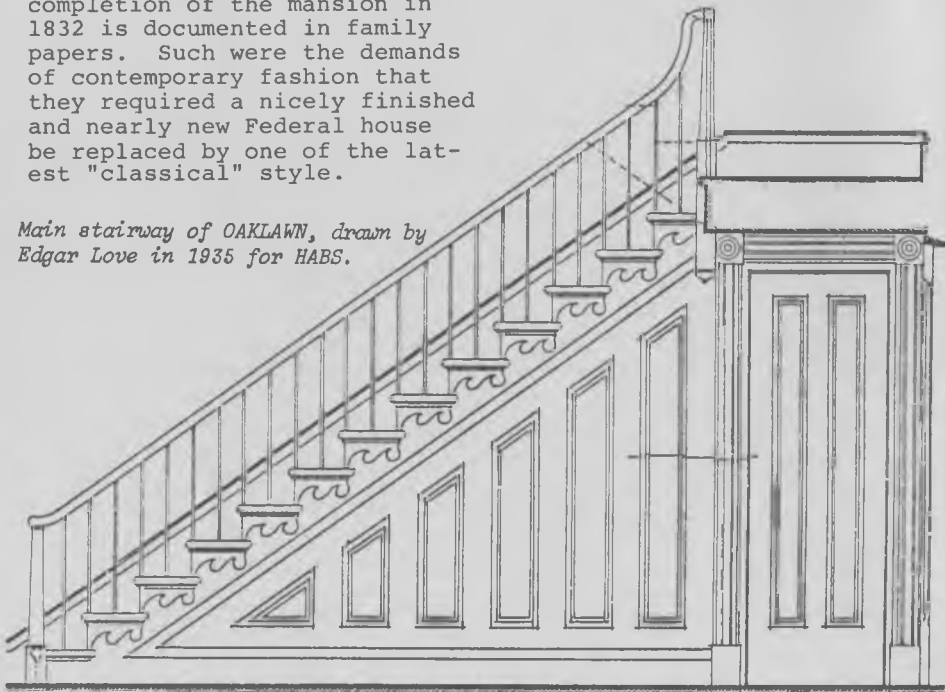
Governor Thomas Bibb, second governor of Alabama, is supposed to have copied his Limestone County mansion Belle Mina in designing the Williams Avenue house which was to be a gift to his daughter Adaline Bibb Bradley. Differences between the two magnificent residences are so obvious, even to the casual observer, that it can only be assumed that he deliberately made "improvements" if that was the case. Recently the present owner of the Bibb house identified the remains of a Federal house incorporated as part of the basement rooms of the Greek Revival mansion. Bibb bought the house of John Reed in 1821: completion of the mansion in 1832 is documented in family papers. Such were the demands of contemporary fashion that they required a nicely finished and nearly new Federal house be replaced by one of the latest "classical" style.

Architectural news was made recently when it was confirmed by Harvie Jones that the unusual framing of the attic of the Bibb house, which is similar to that used in the construction of covered bridges, is almost unique in residential construction.

Exterior walls of the Bibb house are twenty inches thick. Thirty-six inch partition walls between the two front rooms and the central entrance hall accommodate folding doors. A stair hall behind the entrance hall features a winding stair to the four upstairs rooms. Main rooms measure approximately twenty by twenty-two feet. A wide porch extends across the rear.

The classical Greek Revival two-story portico is supported by Ionic columns, the whole perfectly proportioned and ma-

Main stairway of OAKLAWN, drawn by Edgar Love in 1935 for HABS.





The WITHERS-CHAPMAN house (ca. 1840) on Gaboury Lane illustrates how Greek Revival features could be adapted to a small frame cottage.

jestically breathtaking when seen through the foliage of boxwood, magnolia and dogwood. Nine generations of the Bibb family have made their homes there. Several years ago the present owner assented when the late Tallulah Bankhead knocked on the front door and asked permission to be photographed in front of the house--a far more impressive family home than the building two blocks north where Miss Bankhead was actually born.

At 413 McClung Avenue, the LeRoy Pope Walker house is an example of Greek Revival residential architecture that has been recently renovated and remodeled. The house is named for the first secretary of war of the Confederacy because he was its most famous owner, although Mr. Walker did not purchase the house until after the Civil War when he returned

to Huntsville to practice law. As originally built, the main entrance to the house was from McClung Avenue through a one-story, Greek-ordered porch. An unusual feature is the use of metal for the Greek-columned entry from the terrace on the west side of the house. Over the years several additions have been made--the whole now tastefully blended into a handsome mansion. It is in the well proportioned interior that the Greek spirit is most obvious. A graceful stairway curves to the second floor from the rear of the large entrance hall. The original rooms retain their period woodwork, windows and floors.

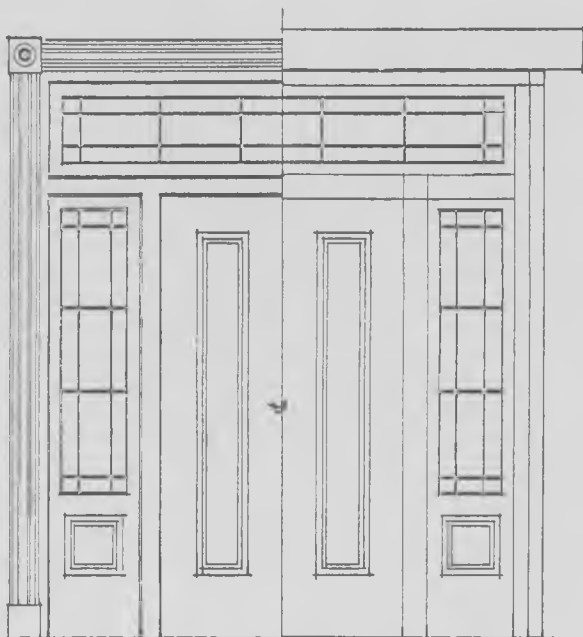
Raised cottages are interesting examples of another type of Greek Revival dwelling. More frequently found in seacoast cities and areas south of the Piedmont, these houses are dub-

bed "raised" because the main rooms (parlors and master bedrooms) are located one-half story out of the ground. The lower floor frequently contained the kitchen, dining room, and secondary bedrooms or sitting rooms. Thus the natural insulating qualities of the earth itself were utilized in the effort to combat the blistering heat of southern summers. Students of architecture may well ponder the origin of the design--was it climate alone? Federal townhouses from Boston south also utilized half-underground first floors for the location of similar rooms: perhaps raised cottages are "hold-over" designs from the earlier period.

Two lovely examples of the raised cottage design exist in Huntsville. The Hollowell house (ca. 1835) at 601 Franklin Street has had a change in its entrance porch and in its room layout on the ground floor.

However, the replacement porch is reasonably Greek Revival in appearance and quite appropriate. An addition was made in the 1950s to the rear of the house, while the construction of a ballroom on the ground floor required the removal of some of the original partitions on that floor. Floor length windows in the parlor on the main floor permitted an unobstructed view of the gardens which once lay south of the house.

The other raised cottage is the Lane-Cooper house (ca. 1835) at 511 Adams Street. Its entrance porch was removed and replaced early in its current ownership, and additions have been made to the rear. But on the first floor can be found the original cooking fireplace in a roughly finished room once used as the kitchen. Two rooms of the original house and a small storage room were on this floor. The design of this house may result in part from its



The front entry of OAK-LAWN showing the interior trim on the left half and the exterior, on the right. The Greek Revival avoided the curved line and the arch, creating instead strongly rectilinear designs such as this doorway with its rectangular top and side lights. Drawing made in 1935 by Edgar Love for HABS.

placement on a building lot that was steeply ascending to the rear.

Any treatment of the Greek Revival period in Huntsville and Madison County would be seriously lacking if attention were not drawn to the beautiful two-story brick mansion Oaklawn at 2709 Meridian Street. From the two-story pillared portico to the flanking one-story wings, no one would mistake the style of this Greek Revival mansion. The wide center hall extends almost fifty feet from the entrance doors. Interior doors are exceptionally wide, adding to the spacious effect of the rooms. Picture post cards depicting this magnificent house have been sold commercially; surely, it is the epitome of the southern plantation mansion as conceived by tourists.

Because trim in the Greek

Revival manner was easily ordered from suppliers and easily substituted for Federal trim and because Greek Revival porticoes and entrance porches could so easily be constructed, many residences throughout the country were "modernized" in the Greek manner during this period.

The author found a handwritten contract between Dr. Thomas Fearn and architect George Steele which so provided for Dr. Fearn's residence, now 517 Franklin Street. The contract was dated 1849. There is no more perfect example in proportion and in detail of the Doric order than the one-story entrance porch at that house. The south rooms that Steele added are also delightfully done in the Greek Revival style.

Harvie Jones recently came into possession of copies of



The HOLLOWELL house (ca. 1835) at 601 Franklin Street is an example of the raised cottage type of dwelling.

documents that attest to a brick addition made by George and Galenius M. Steele in 1834 to the residence of William Atwood in Huntsville. The author was able to establish that William Atwood lived at that time in the two-story brick house which is at 420 Randolph Avenue. The owners gave permission for a careful examination of the recently, and beautifully, restored premises. There is clear evidence that the structure was not built as one unit originally, but is of the Greek Revival style and period. The present columned entrance porch is, however, a twentieth century addition.

Better known is the addition of the columned portico on the west facade of the LeRoy Pope house, 403 Echols Avenue, known as Echols Hill. In this case, the Greek details have been

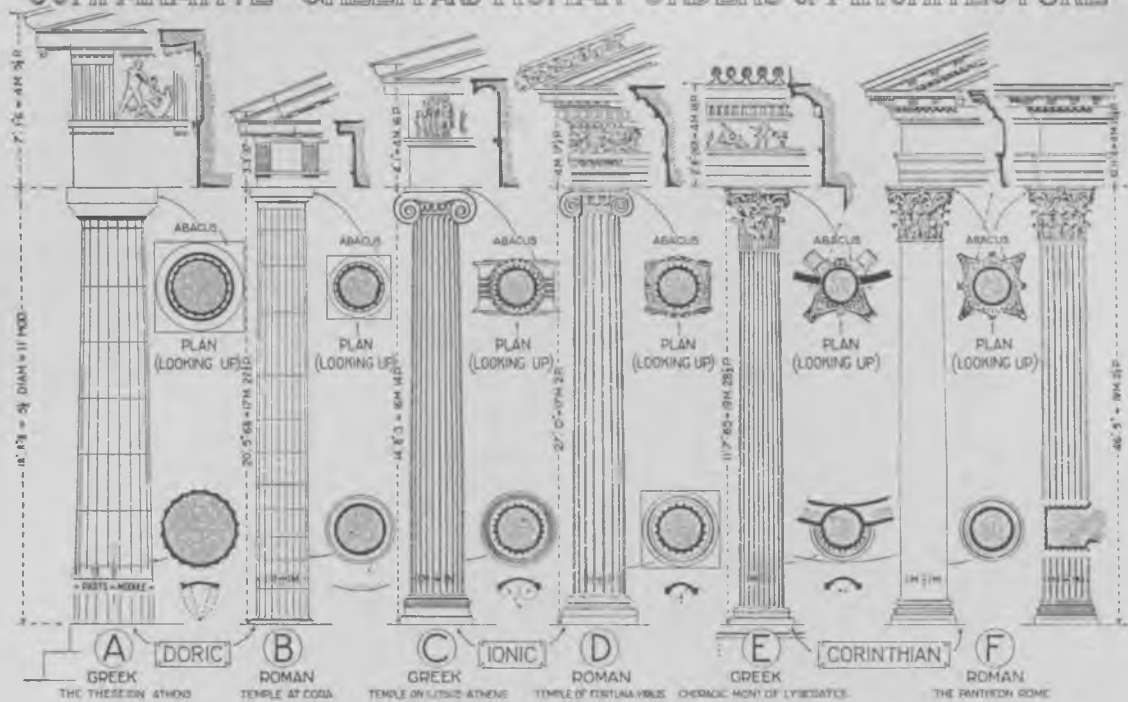
beautifully adapted by the very skillful designer to blend with the early (ca. 1813) Federal styling of this, the oldest documented mansion in the state of Alabama. (More information is available in materials listed in the bibliography following this article.)

Many other examples of the practice of remodeling exist. In the Weeden house are parlor mantels which, in their plain Greek Revival styling, contrast strikingly with the daintily carved mantels that were allowed to remain in lesser rooms when they were no longer the latest fashion. Numbers of Greek Revival-type entrance porches were added to Federal period houses. A visit, preferably on foot, to the Twickenham Historic District can be a fascinating treasure hunt of period styles. *



Interior doorway trim and transom in the entrance hall of OAK PLACE (ca. 1840) designed and built by architect George Steele for his own family. Steele was a leading proponent in Huntsville for the Greek Revival, as is evidenced by his designs for the second Madison County Courthouse, the First Alabama Bank, and Oak Place.

COMPARATIVE GREEK AND ROMAN ORDERS OF ARCHITECTURE



This plate, from Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* first published in 1896, illustrates the classical orders that were commonly employed, although often modified, in American practice.

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