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PORCH LIFE Before Air-Conditioning

Eleanor N. Hutchens

Although rich in porch scenes, American reminiscence rarely gives full value to the main reason people built porches: to cool off. A walk through the older streets of Huntsville, with glances at the dates on historical markers, reveals the successive efforts of generations to lighten the summer load of heat and humidity in a climate where the latitude is shared with northern Africa. We who lived here in the second quarter of this century, before the immense relief of air-conditioning, can appreciate those efforts. We enjoyed their final fruits.

The Virginians who founded Huntsville built their houses tastefully plain, with no projections visible from the front. Long wings might extend backward, as separate kitchen, shed-porched servants' quarters, and utility rooms; but from the front all was decorous English restraint. Inside the heat of summer accumulated. Brick walls held the winter chill awhile, but toward the end of June they became warm all the way through.

Thermal strategies there might be: front and back doors aligned to lure an air current through the hall, blinds at the windows to be closed on the east side in the morning and the west in the afternoon so that air but not sunrays could come in. Members of the family who slept upstairs the rest of the year might move downstairs for the summer. These slight alleviations still found the house a close, humid box at the end of the day - when lamps had to be lit and radiated even more heat within the rooms. A walk in the garden made a temporary escape, but then one had to go back into the house and swelter through the night.

The fortunate fled to Monte Sano, where they had built frame cottages with porches.

With the Greek Revival of the 1830's, Federal houses began to sprout porticoes, large or small, that gave a more welcoming look to their facades. The Weeden House, among many, acquired a little porch. Miss Howard Weeden, born in the 1840's, may never have seen the house as it is today, restored to Federal purity.



The new Greek Revival houses had, in addition to larger rooms and higher ceiling which made for airier interiors, porticoes ample for family seating, but without the railings that made later porches semi-private.

As stylistic changes progressed, people in houses old and new must have discovered that summer demanded porches where the whole family could cool off. The servants had known this all along, sitting in relative comfort on their long porches in the back wings on hot evenings. It may have been their example, as well as that of the new styles and such influences as the coastal architecture of New Orleans and Charleston, with its multiple galleries and balconies, that brought the porch to the fore.

Likewise, suggestive of New Orleans, were the balconies of commercial buildings on and near the Court-house Square. They served the upstairs apartments of lawyers, cotton brokers, and others who did business below. The middle west side of the Square, now demolished, had not only these balconies but, at the rear, several stories of porches overlooking the Big Spring and its small, shady park. The Huntsville walker today can only remember or imagine the charm of these old and well-planned structures.

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With the coming of Victorian styles, big, sittable porches could form part of the original house plan, not so much as entrances, like the Greek Revival porticoes, as outside rooms. (The later bungalow had the same advantage.) Owners of Federal houses could only add them on, and some did. My great-great-grandmother, whose house stands back from the southwest corner of Eustis and White, in the 1890's moved the small Greek Revival portico from the front to the back and wrapped a large, comfortable porch across the front and around a corner. Both are still where she left them.



Around 1900, a wonderful invention, the sleeping porch, erased the dread of going back into the house after enjoying the cool of the evening out in front. Not usually visible from the street, sleeping porches were commonly upstairs at the back of the house, screened on three sides and furnished starkly with cots for all members of the family. It was bliss not only going to sleep there, but waking up at delicious dawn. The worst of the summer heat was beaten.



Sleeping porch

Certain houses built in the first quarter of this century achieved what was probably the ultimate in summer comfort before air-conditioning. They had open front porches, screened side porches and sleeping porches, and removable cloth awnings over windows and sometimes porches. Oscillating electric floor fans moved any air that needed moving, so that the lack of a natural breeze no longer meant suffocation within. These were usually large white frame houses whose graciousness has lasted past the need for their elaborate protections.

Cooling off on the front porch was a gradual sinking into peace. After supper the family, sometimes still fanning themselves, drifted out to the rockers and swings which were designed partly to simulate breezes. Deep twilight brought lightning bugs up from the grass, giving their casual flashes higher and higher as

the yard darkened. Conversation was quiet and sometimes more and more confiding: the recollections of the old, in voices that carried their wonder that what was so vivid to them could have happened so many years ago; the reflections of the middle-aged, often calmly analyzing the characters of absent relatives living and dead; the diffident plans of the



young, who in daylight would state them in confident terms if at all; and occasional chirps from drowsing children. That tranquil intimacy of three or four generations in the cooling dark was an experience like no other. The scripted scenes of courting couples and hearty visitors cannot touch it.

This is not a history of the American porch. For that, see the readable and well-illustrated account in the July-August 1990 Old House Journal. I have merely tried to suggest to the many walkers of Huntsville something special to notice in their preambulations: the human need that created our porches and the soothing relief they provided for broiling summer days.





