

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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WHEN WAS MY HOUSE BUILT?



When was my house built? This is a question often posed to historians. Certainly, one way of assessing the age of a structure is architectural styling right down to the molding detail. Generally speaking, houses in our area which are Federal in style would have been built in the 1820's-1830's. Likewise, Greek Revival houses were generally built in the 1840's-1850's. That's not to say there wasn't any overlap or that some homes might well be basically Federal but with a Greek Revival entrance.

In fact, I learned a long time ago that everything is transitional. We also find that during the 1840's-1850's there was a mild Gothic Revival influence in this area. This may be seen through a house on the Albion-Eagle Harbor Road near the canal guard gates. Basically, it is a Gothic-shaped house with Gothic window treatment and Greek Revival pilasters and overhang. Indeed, transitional!

The next predominating style of the 19th century was Italianate which was used locally during the 1850's, 1860's, 1870's and even into the 1880's. Our left-hand photo shows a house in this style which was once located on South Main Street in Albion. The former home of Dr. Arnold Wage, it was torn down in the mid-1940's to make way for Marti's Restaurant. It is plain to me that the front porch was a later addition. Italian Villas did not generally have porches of this configuration. One give-away is the high pitched roof over the steps which does not match the rest of the house. In general, Italianate houses have very low pitched roofs. In other words, people made architectural changes years ago much the way we do now. Surprisingly, in some cases when the original house was not very old. Therefore, dating a house can be tricky.

Another style found to some degree in our area and in many ways reminiscent of Italianate, is Second Empire which was popular in the 1870's with Mansard roofs. In the 1880's we find that the East-lake Style became popular as part of the International aesthetic movement. By the 1890's Queen Anne pre-dominated in home design, followed by Colonial Revival throughout this century.

The other photo with the article shows a house in the Queen Anne Style which was once the home of A.J. Richards on East Center Street in Medina. This house was torn down in the early 1970's to make way for a supermarket parking lot. It is quite typical of Queen Anne architecture. Here, the porch is all original, complete with turned posts, spindle grill work and a curved corner. Roofs on such houses are high-pitched and no two windows appear to be the same. In fact, in a house like this it is possible to find many different architectural styles. For example, the paladian window over the front door in the second story is a Colonial Revival feature.

During this century, many styles have been

used besides Colonial Revival. From the turn of the century through the teens and twenties the American Four Square was popular as well as the bungalow and houses in the Arts and Crafts mode. During the 1920's Spanish Revival and Tudor houses were occasionally erected. During the 1930's and following World War II the Cape Cod Style was to be seen. By the 1950's the modern one-story Ranch Style house appeared, followed by the split level of the 1960's.

Construction techniques also help in dating a house. Early homes of the 1820's, 1830's and 1840's will be of the post and beam form of construction. Corner posts will often be seen projecting into a room and even bark remains on rafters that were only smoothed on one side to accept roof boards. Supporting beams in the cellar may also still have bark on them and hand-hewn marks will show on squared timber with wooden pegs. Random width planks were attached to the frame to accept siding and interior finish. Planks were often used in partitions rather than studs.

By the mid-19th century baloon frame construction came into use. Wall studs will extend from the foundation to the roof line. The floor joists were then attached to the studs. By the turn of the century platform framing became widely used as we know it today. In this form of construction, a platform is built on top of the basement wall with each individual story in baloon framing being built separately. It has been within the last fifty years that 2x4's have actually been decreased in their dimension. If you have full 2x4's, your house was probably built before World War II. Wire nails were introduced in the 1890's while square nails were used before that time.

Houses of the 1820's, 1830's and 1840's will most certainly have split lath while houses after the mid-19th century will have sawed lath. Wire mesh lath was introduced in the 1890's. Dry wall was first used in the 1930's to plaster on instead of lath. By the late 1940's it came into use as the finish wall surface.

Wiring is another way to date a house. If you have knob and tube wiring (most unlikely) or traces of it, your house was probably wired during the late 1880's or 1890's. Turn button switches date from this time frame. Push button switches can be found in homes wired after the turn of the century, up through the 1920's. By the 1930's toggle switches became popular. If your house has combination gas and electric fixtures, it could have been built any time between 1890 and 1910. Natural gas was first distributed locally in the late 1850's with electric power first being generated in the late 1880's.

To check on who has owned the property, make a visit to the County Clerk's office where you can find the title or deed recorded. Here you may research the title by referring to the grantee index for the buyer or the grantor's book for the seller.