

## Design Review & Historic Preservation in Savannah

### Historic Porches and Stoops

#### Introduction

The porch has played a significant role in much of America's domestic architecture. The tradition of the porch or covered area, particularly during the Greek Revival period, is rooted in classical spaces such as the peristyle (a colonnade) and the columned portico, both central elements of the ancient Greek architectural tradition. It is perhaps for this reason, along with the porch's usefulness in the southern climate, that the porch form is so prominent in the southern home, with the legendary (and often romanticized!) veranda.

In Savannah, with several exceptions in town and in outer lying areas, the stereotypical imposing, formal portico was not constructed in large numbers, but rather was reserved for large insitutional buildings such as churches or civic buildings. Examples include: the U.S. Custom House (1853) designed by John Norris; the Telfair Academy (1820) designed by William Jay; and the First Baptist Church (1833) designed by Elias Carter. The Aaron Champion house (1840-44) designed by Charles Cluskey in the Greek Revival style features a most impressive two story portico and is an anomaly in residential architecture in Savannah. It is notable for its Tower-of-the-Winds columns, which Norris also used on the U.S. Custom House and on the Andrew Low House. (Tower-of-the Winds is a variation of the Corinthian order with water leaves in the capital instead of acanthus leaves.)

Instead, the row house, with various influences with regard to architectural detailing, dominated the Nineteenth Century Savannah street scene. The high stoop performed the role of the formal entry, while the rear or side porch allowed for air

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*This porch, located at 204 West Park Avenue in the Victorian District, is an example of a vernacular porch with exuberant detailing. The house was constructed in 1893 for Emma Appel.*



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circulation by capitalizing on cross breezes and overlooked the rear garden. As noted by John Linley, author of *The Georgia Catalog*, this variation in house form, which differed from the famous Charleston single house, illustrates the integral connection in both Savannah and Charleston between urban planning, house design and climate.

The striking difference between Savannah's elegant rowhouses and Charleston's equally elegant detached houses...may well be the result of differences in their city plans. In Charleston, the streets were multidirectional. Few of the lots were serviced by alleys, so driveways were a necessity if privies were to be cleaned and if horses or carriages were to be kept. Space being at a premium, the drives were usually incorporated into a small garden on the side, and the typical house--high, deep and narrow, with tiered porches preferably facing south or southwest--opened to the garden on the side instead of the street or to the rear. In Savannah, residential lots were arranged so that either the front or back of the house would receive the desired southern orientation, and the alleys eliminated the need for driveways; so the more traditional and practical row house was easily adapted in that city to the local climate and conditions (Linley, 94-95).

Some of the most lavish porches in Savannah were placed on Romantic Revival homes of the late Nineteenth Century. Some were quite elaborate, as seen on the Charles Green house (1853), a Gothic Revival structure which has a very decorative iron trimmed porch, and on the Augustus Wetter house (1861), now demolished, which was an Italianate house with porch ironwork cast in Philadelphia. It has been written that cities such as Savannah that had cast iron porches frequently imported them from elsewhere, usually from the north: "Relatively cheap to manufacture, but difficult to deliver because of their weight, iron verandas...could be acquired by anyone who lived in a location serviced by a river, canal, or railroad" (Moss and Winkler, 84).

An 1857 advertisement for Hutchinson and Wickersham, a New York iron foundry, touted

the use of iron in porch design: "The Iron Verandah [sic] offers advantages which no other material can possibly furnish. Its graceful and open fabric lends ornament to the dwelling, it permits a consultation of all tastes, it impedes no current of air, and it is at once substantial and elegant" (Moss and Winkler, 84).

The Hugh Mercer house (1860) and the Noble Hardee house (1867), both Italianate mansions on Monterey Square, have massive multistory rear porches, which are both more utilitarian than ornamental in nature. These massive rear porches made up for the fact that the front entrances were one story entrances used for greeting guests. Typically, rear porches functioned as private gathering spaces and places to do chores and in which to store items.

#### *Porches in Savannah's Neighborhoods*

The architecture following the antebellum and late Nineteenth Century periods, such as the Queen Anne style and the Arts and Crafts movement, were known for their signature porches. Victorian era designers modified the house floorplan, making the interior space more adaptable to "modern" living, with more private and internalized spaces. This in turn created a more complex floorplan; in response, porches were varied in shape, size and placement. At the turn of the century Americans were beginning to order and adapt house plans from pattern books. These pattern books contained plans that were used throughout

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*The figure above is a watercolor by Mary Comer Lane of the Charles Green house. It illustrates the integration of the porch space and the garden area.*



### The Importance of the Savannah High Stoop

The high stoop is a very prominent architectural feature of the Savannah rowhouse. It is possible that Savannah is among only a handful of cities in the country that developed substantial numbers of attached rowhouse structures. Similar ranges of rowhouses can be seen in cities such as Baltimore, Maryland and Brooklyn, New York. Other cities adapted the rowhouse to later styles, as seen in San Francisco, California.

Over the years many historic stoops were destroyed and have since been rebuilt. In recent years new stoops have been proposed for new construction. Because of the importance of the stoop form in Savannah, it is imperative that stoops be designed and rebuilt with historic stoop proportions and detailing in mind. In the case of restoration or rehabilitation, stoop designs should be based on historic photographs, where possible. The review process has revealed some of the pitfalls with regard to stoop replacement, which include:

1) **Stoop Height**--According to a physical survey, historic stoops generally did not reach over 9 1/2 feet in height. The stoops remained lower due to the depressed basement and lower basement ceiling heights. This pattern should be continued.

2) **Pier expression**--On masonry stoops, where the stoops were solid, the piers were expressed. The craftsmanship was accentuated by the banding of the stucco and the use of ironwork (see photograph below). These design details should be employed, especially on historic masonry structures.

3) **Masonry steps**--Large pieces of stone were often used for steps. The step tread (horizontal part of a step) had a lip over the riser (vertical part of the step). These details should be used, when possible.

4) **Newel post**--The newel posts on both masonry and wood stoops were placed on the last step rather than resting on the sidewalk or the ground. Traditional placement of the newel should be continued.



### Bibliography:

*Architecture of the Old South*, Mills Lane, The Beehive Press, Savannah, Ga., 1993.

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*The Georgia Catalog*, John Linley, The University of Georgia Press, 1982.

*Field Guide to American Architecture*, Virginia McAlester and Lee McAlester, Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

*Victorian Exterior Decoration*, Roger W. Moss and Gail Caskey Winkler, Henry Holt and Co., 1987.



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the country and were wildly popular because the houses could be assembled quickly. A number of Savannah neighborhoods have examples of such architecture. Many builders constructed vernacular interpretations of house pattern designs which often presented Victorian and Craftsman influences (and porches) but were much less academic stylistically. In some neighborhoods several styles have a strong visual presence, often on the same house! For instance, some houses have traces of both the Arts and Crafts and the Colonial Revival. Others have a Queen Anne shape or form and Arts and Crafts (Craftsman) detailing. Nonetheless, many buildings in Savannah's historic districts have some type of porch. The Victorian District and Thomas Square National Register Historic Districts have various examples of Queen Anne style porches. Ardsley Park-Chatham Crescent, Cuyler-Brownsville, Gordonston, Parkside, and Thomas Square Districts have various examples of Craftsman porches.

### Paint Colors on Porches

The following are tips for painting porches found in *Victorian Exterior Decoration*:

- Ironwork on Italianate porches is usually painted a black or black-green color, but research shows that it was not uncommon for the ironwork on late Nineteenth Century porches to be painted a dusty green or stone color.
- It was common practice to paint the ceiling of a Victorian porch sky blue and the floor a gray color.
- The foundation and lattice were often painted a dark earth tone.

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### MPC Historic Preservation Review Activity, Second Quarter, 2001

Historic Review Board.....	66 reviews
Victorian District .....	2 reviews
Cuyler-Brownsville.....	1 review
Site and Monument.....	2 reviews
Environmental Reviews .....	19 reviews

### Screening and Enclosing Porches

Historic photographs indicate that in Savannah wood louvers between porch posts were used during the late Nineteenth Century for shade. It is possible that the first types of screening were gauze or copper mesh. Before the widespread use of the air conditioner, the screened porch functioned as a sitting area. Today enclosing porches permanently for summer and winter use is popular. The use of an open or screen porch is the most historically accurate appearance of a porch. However, if one chooses to enclose a porch the following points should be considered:

- The open appearance of the porch should be maintained by the use of a material such as screening or glass.
- The porch structure such as the posts and any wood work should be retained by recessing the enclosing material behind the posts.
- The use of shutters or wood louvers as an enclosing materials is encouraged.