



The Michel B. Menard House (1838) in Galveston is a superior Texas example of the Greek Revival approach, with colossal columns and a porch that extends across the façade.

## Porches of Galveston-Houston

BY JOSEPH MANCA



The columns of the Menard House are of the Ionic order.

**THE CITIZENS OF THE** new Republic of Texas wasted little time in erecting fine domestic structures, and a number of outstanding houses from this period exist in Galveston and Houston. During the 1830s and 1840s, the Greek Revival dominated American architecture, and the style flourished in Texas, reflecting the shared tastes of the recent settlers. Compared to the previous Federal period, the Greek Revival manner was characterized by broader proportions, a more emphatic horizontality, and an increased archeological awareness. Sometimes ancient Greek forms served as models for design, but the aptness of the term is also based on more general similarities with classical Greek architecture, including calmness and a simplicity of detail. In the American context, builders often suggested antiquity by painting their (usually wooden) houses white, evoking, at a distance, the appearance of stone.

There was a particular and striking connection between classical revival architecture and the domestic porch. From the time of the Italian Renaissance, architects had adapted the porticoes of Greek and Roman public architecture to the design

of domestic structures. The porch was widely diffused in America by the 18th century, from humble cabins to mansions, and was adapted to the new classical style. A wide range of middle-income and wealthy Americans built Greek Revival homes, their spread abetted by design books prepared for carpenters, and these houses were often graced with porches that were at once impressive and functional, accommodating leisure activities and providing an escape from the stifling heat of the interiors during the summer months. Many of the earliest houses in Galveston and Houston had such porches. A German-American visitor named Ferdinand Roemer noted in 1846: "A porch of this kind [resting on wooden pillars about two feet above the ground], at least on one side of the house, is a necessity in every Texas home ... as it affords protection against the direct rays of the sun and at the same time permits the air to circulate freely."

The oldest of these classical porches in Galveston is found on the Michel B. Menard house, which dates to 1838. Menard had moved from Quebec in 1829 and carried on the Indian trade, specu-



Galveston's Samuel May Williams House (1839) may lack the monumentality of the Menard House, but nonetheless remains a fine example of a classical, Gulf Coast cottage.

## Post-Independence, Greek Revival was the Gulf Coast's porch of choice

lated in land, and opened a sawmill. He was a signer of the Texan Declaration of Independence in 1836, and served as the principal leader of the Galveston City Company, which was chartered by the young republic to sell land to new settlers. The property surrounding Menard's house originally comprised about ten acres; although now diminished in size, enough space remains to suggest its original verdant setting. The main block of the house, from 1838, is two rooms deep and first consisted of a parlor and dining room downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs, the pairs of rooms accessible by halls on the right side. Menard made additions in about 1845, including new wings on either side of the original structure and an El in the back.

The Menard House is a superb Texan example of the Greek Revival manner, with freestanding, colossal columns in the Ionic order and a porch that extends across the façade. The window and door surrounds are of a characteristic Greek Revival type, with ears on the upper corner and low-pitched pediments. The house plan, with a side hall and two rooms on each floor, is compatible with an estab-

lished national type, yet the second-story balcony and the hipped roof were more widespread during the Greek Revival in the South than in the North, and other details, such as the tall windows that rise from the floor level, made special sense in the Gulf Coast location.

The house has three porches, one before each block, including a sturdy little porch fronting the office on the left. The Ionic capitals on the main block, which served as models for the capitals on later additions, are particularly striking. These capitals were based on the Ionic versions at the Athenian temple of Artemis Agrotera, on the Ilissos River, of which only traces now survive. Architect Minard Lafever of New York published the form in his influential *Modern Builder's Guide*, of 1833, and this was the likely source for the Texan craftsmen. The Menard capitals have a similar arrangement of egg-and-dart elements, graced with delicate tendrils on either side. The scrolls in the Greek fashion run parallel to the façade, although the ancient Greeks usually angled the volutes of the capitals on the very ends of the facade. Like the ancient model, the columns of the Menard

House are fluted, and as with the original Greek temple itself, the first section of the Menard House was tetrastyle, with the four columns projecting out to form a spacious porch.

The whole structure must have appeared in 1838 to be a miraculous flowering of classical ideals, a temple-like, gleaming white home that rose up overnight in this windy, sand barrier island. Menard's porch, both in detail and in overall form, attained the level of a classical portico, which might have increased the illusion that the house was an ancient tempio. The Menard House brought the new, but timeless, ideal of Greek classicism to this frontier of Anglo-American civilization.

The Samuel May Williams House, although lacking the monumentality and archeologically inspired detail of the Menard House, is a noteworthy survivor from Galveston's earliest years and a fine example of a classical, Gulf Coast cottage. Williams was, along with Menard, a director of the Galveston City Company, having arrived in Texas in 1822. He became wealthy by the mid-1830s through financial deals, and by the



A side view of the Williams House's front porch.



The Nichols-Rice-Cherry House (from around 1850), now located in Sam Houston Park and here seen decorated for last Christmas, originally had a two-story porch that wrapped the entire house. Today, only the front porch survives.

time of the construction of his house in Galveston was serving in the House of Representatives in Austin, the Republic's then capital. Williams later operated the Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Texas, which he led until his death in 1858.

Williams built his house in the same area as Menard did, a suburban lot 20 blocks away from the town's main business center that offered quiet and distance from the docks. New Orleans was struck by yellow fever in 1837, and Galveston was devastated by the disease in 1839. It was thought that refuse in the water and unsanitary streets caused yellow fever, so Menard, Williams, and other investors in the Galveston City Company built far enough from the commercial center of Galveston to enjoy the clean, healthful air of a suburban neighborhood. Like Menard's, Williams' house faced east, toward the main part of town, allowing the prevailing breezes to waft through the dining room and adjoining central hall. Their porches were important components of this quest for fresh, cooling air and the desire for impressive architectural styling.

The Williams House is decidedly more regional than the Menard House. The wood-framed structure once stood a full story above grade on brick piers. That ground floor was reduced in height during 1903-1911 when, in a massive feat of engineering, the city's grade eleva-

tion was raised, requiring that houses be lifted up on new foundations or, like the Williams House, have their piers filled in. The structure—with its full-length porch on the front, overhanging roofline, dormer windows, hipped roof, and utilitarian ground floor that could be bypassed via a staircase to the main floor above—is a raised cottage typical of the Gulf Coast. The French doors leading out from the two front rooms onto the porch link the house to Louisiana traditions.

The vernacular, local quality of the design is apparent in the moldings and in details such as the doorway surround of the main entrance, which is based on craftsmen's inventiveness and not on pattern books and broadly established types. Williams lived in Louisiana before coming to Texas, and the style of his home was in keeping with the architecture of his former state. The Williams House is graced with Tuscan Doric columns on the porch, and the solid simplicity of the overall effect is consonant with the broader Greek Revival style. The porch's south side, early but of uncertain date, extends the portico around the house and would have allowed a good view of the Gulf into the early decades of the 20th century, before further development of the area.

The city of Galveston, despite damage from hurricanes, preserves many of the kinds of structures that graced early Houston, the architecture of which most

often fell victim to economic progress. Houston was founded two years before Galveston, although the earliest extant domestic structures postdate the time of the Republic. As in Galveston, antebellum porches were commonplace.

Two such examples from the 1840s and 1850s survive in Houston. The Nichols-Rice-Cherry House, from around 1850, was built for Ebenezer B. Nichols, a business partner of William Marsh Rice, and originally stood downtown facing Courthouse Square. Later lived in by businessman and philanthropist Rice, the house was moved more than once, and was finally brought to Sam Houston Park in 1959.

Its architecture is by any measure finer than that found in other extant examples in early 19th-century Galveston or Houston. The interior has spectacular woodwork, with the repeated use of the Grecian anthemion (stylized honey-suckle) motif, which is seen in the double parlors and elsewhere in the formal lower rooms. Margaret Culbertson, author of *Texas Houses Built by the Book*, has shown that the main doorway surround derives from a plate in Lafever's *Modern Builder's Guide*.

The capitals of the porch are, roughly, of the type of Ionic order from the aforementioned Athenian temple, although these are distant variants on the original classical model; here the tendrils are less delicate, an added bead-and-reel motif

runs near the banding of the neck of the capital, and the volutes are wider compared to the width of the fluted columns. No attempt is made to harmonize these capitals with the design elements of the doorway surround.

The two-story porch originally wrapped around the entire house, although only the porch on the façade survived the various relocations. The porch's presence on three sides is shown in a watercolor view of 1852, where the six columns of the façade appear clearly. As for demonstration that the exterior element went around the whole structure, paneled lower sections and windows above all open to allow passage.

These floor-length openings make no sense unless there was a porch on each level from which to exit. Moreover, the schematic view of the house in a lithograph map of Houston in 1873 shows the house with a double-level porch on all four sides.

A final porch to consider is more vernacular, and more local: The Kellum-Noble House, which is on its original site, was built by brick manufacturer Nathaniel K. Kellum, who also operated a saw mill and tannery on the property.

Fittingly, bricks are used extensively in the construction, and are utilized to form ornamented details of the vernacular "Doric" capitals of the lower story. The house, having served a number of functions, fell victim to fire in the 1950s



The porch of the Kellum-Noble House (1847), also in Sam Houston Park, is more vernacular, and more local, in its design.

and is heavily restored. The stocky brick piers of the ground level and the wooden columns of the upper level surround the entire house, creating an extensive two-level porch that wraps around the L-shaped structure. The brick piers are delightfully naive, and two stepped bricks form the echinus of the capital.

The piers are not evenly spaced around the house, as there are several intercolumniations used. The brick material would have constituted a prestigious material for Houston in the 1840s, and the house, because of the grandiose porch, has a more imposing appearance than the surprisingly limited square footage of the interior spaces would have achieved on its own.

Along with the wide doors and the short central hall passageway that forms a dogtrot-like breezeway through the ground floor, the extensive porch helps break down the barrier between indoors and out. An exterior staircase on the right side offers the sole access to the porch of the upper floor, and doors offer direct entrance into several of the rooms on both the lower and the upper stories.

The access to rooms via doors from a porch on various levels is derived from the galleries of the French Mississippi Valley, which became diffused among a broader Anglo population. Despite the vernacular elements and local expression of the Kellum-Noble House, the thick proportions and simple ornament mark

it as sharing in the broader American Greek Revival.

A basic conservatism, characteristic of the South in general during this time, continued to pervade domestic as well as commercial architecture in Galveston and Houston, and the Greek Revival, with porches usually sporting simplified Doric columns and capitals, continued to be built to the end of the 19th century and beyond. The growing impatience in the Northeast with the established Greek Revival style is indicated by the remarks of a 21-year-old Bostonian visiting Galveston in 1859; Horace Scudder complained of the port city that "even the aristocratic houses were nothing but ugly Grecian boxes with pillars."

Tastes were changing elsewhere more rapidly, but Galveston and Houston stayed longer with traditional classical forms and what architect Andrew Jackson Downing had denounced already in 1846 as the "Greek temple disease." At any rate, the veranda had come to be regarded as a necessity, and styles of domestic architecture that dominated after 1850 or so, beginning with the Gothic Revival and Italianate styles, incorporated porches in new and picturesque ways. The American porch continued to flourish with a great number of revival styles, and its progress was not slowed until the advent of air conditioning and of 20th-century social changes that made sitting outside less desirable or necessary. ■



This doorway surround at the Nichols-Rice-Cherry House was copied from a book illustration.