

Louisiana Architecture: 1945-1965

Post-War Subdivisions and the Ranch House

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Post-WWII Population Growth and U.S. Housing Shortage:

Without a doubt no American industry was harder hit by the Great Depression and the Second World War than housing. Over this protracted sixteen year period, annual housing starts fell to less than 10% of what they had been during the boom days of the “Roaring Twenties.” Numerous architectural practices and construction firms simply “went under.” But during this same time span, the American marriage rate actually increased, in fact sharply. And by obvious extension, so did the birth rate. Add to the mix nine million service men returning from the war expecting to marry, settle down and start a family. It comes as no surprise that the marriage rate in 1946 was at an all-time high, followed by an eighteen year baby boom.

As the baby boom generation took off, the U. S. housing market was not merely stretched, it was in full-blown crisis. Literally millions of families were living with relatives and friends. Emergency measures included over 50,000 people making temporary shelter in disused Army Quonset huts, and in Chicago, 250 surplus transit electric trolley cars being sold for makeshift housing. Some newly married couples sub-let from other renters. All of this led to crowded houses and apartments, which, especially in the summer, in the days before air-conditioning, made for something less than domestic bliss. Cooped up with in-laws, in hot urban apartments (with probably a baby on the way), newly married couples wanted freedom and space – their own front door that *they* could open and close when *they* wanted to.

Actually, the prospect of a dream home had been dangled before them for a while. As Shreveport, Louisiana columnist Helen Stranahan wrote in 1948: “One of the bright prospects which helped make the war years more endurable was the ‘house of the future.’ As an escape from the grim news shouting from the radio and leaping from the printed page, the entire family, at times, turned to the newspaper stories and magazine articles describing their home of tomorrow – the dwelling place with all the special characteristics and scientific gadgets the designers, engineers and manufacturers had been working on for years.”

The American Response:

How much housing was needed nationwide? Official estimates went as high as five million houses or apartments. And they were needed now, not in a year or two. This huge need, along with the coming together of improved financing and assembly line mass production, created the much noted post-war housing boom in America. The faces of our towns and cities were changed forever as filings were made for subdivision after subdivision, and thousands upon thousands of detached single family houses were built. In the nation as a whole, more than six

million single family houses were built in the 1950s, accounting for 81% of all new residential starts. The vast majority were in a new genre called the ranch house (see below).

The European Response:

The post-WWII housing shortage knew no boundaries. If it was a crisis in the United States, it was infinitely worse in war-devastated Europe. Even nations that had not been conquered, or did not see military action directly on the ground, suffered great damage from dropped incendiary bombs and primitive Nazi ram-jet ballistic missiles. As British architectural historian Lesley Jackson observes: “The massive physical destruction inflicted on so many European cities meant that governments were faced with an acute housing shortage In addition, because of the displacement of large populations, the shortage was on an unprecedented scale.”

In addressing the housing crisis, all western industrialized countries responded in much the same way – all, that is, except the United States. Indeed, in the light of history, it is instructive to view the overall European approach to housing as a counterpoint, a contrast, to the American approach. Essentially, the European approach focused upon large apartment blocks, in or near cities, built or sponsored by government. The American approach focused on huge numbers of single family free-standing homes, built by private enterprise, on vast tracts of privately owned vacant land (generally farmland), often at some distance from urban cores.

The reasons for the totally different approaches to the post-war housing crisis are rooted in long-standing differences between the nations of Europe and the United States. For one thing, open land in “old” Europe was scarce and precious. This was an ancient continent filled with small countries with huge populations. Consider England. With a land mass about the size of Louisiana and Arkansas combined, it had, in the post-war years, over 50 million people! Then there were ancient titles, active land leases of literally hundreds of years, entailed property and scores of fragmented owners. Putting together an open swath of land big enough to build even a small American style shopping center would have been difficult.

Then there was the issue of transport. Car ownership was not as widespread as in America, and gasoline was horrifically expensive. Europeans were accustomed to a clean and efficient system of public transportation (trains, regular buses). This tended to limit city expansion to contained directions and areas.

So it was that the British government built vast housing estates like Roehampton, near London, and the French government built Le Corbusier’s *Unite d’Habitation* in Marseilles. Various communist governments built mile after mile of depressing five story poured concrete apartment blocks across the Soviet Empire. The Soviet architects believed that a five story apartment building was the ideal residential walk-up. After all, six stories *might* require an elevator. In sum, as American suburbanization historian Kenneth Jackson concludes, “Nowhere in Europe was there the land, the money, or the tradition for single family home construction.”

Financing the American Dream:

It was all in the financing. Today's idealistic new urbanists have been known to lament America's response to the post-war housing shortage. The whole system created by Congress, they say, had an anti-existing structure, anti-urban bias. The very way the government set up the post-war mortgage financing system drove the market in the direction of new unplanned, single family house-on-lot developments (sprawl), and away from more enlightened planned communities, apartments, terrace homes, neighborhood revitalization, mixed use, and the like. The reality is a bit more long-term and a bit more nuanced.

The home mortgage was a relatively new instrument. In the nineteenth century, home ownership was the preserve of people fairly high on the social scale. Families of means generally bought their homes, or paid to have them built, outright. By the 1920s the system had broadened to include short-term loans – three to ten years with a large down-payment (30-50%) and the whole principal due at the end. This “balloon payment” feature meant that families without enough capital had to re-finance from time to time. It was this rather loose arrangement that populated the bungalow suburbs of the day. In the prosperous “Roaring Twenties” it worked fine. With the Depression, it collapsed.

It was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who said, “A nation of homeowners, of people who own a real share in their land, is unconquerable.” So it was that he pushed the National Housing Act of 1934 through Congress. Its ostensible purpose was to stimulate construction without direct government spending. It established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which, importantly, neither built homes nor lent money. Rather, it induced lenders to make loans to homebuyers by insuring them against any financial loss from, say, a long gone “sour,” a bad loan or a foreclosure. And this was backed by the full weight of the United States Treasury.

In 1938, Roosevelt's New Deal went further when it established the Federal National Mortgage Association, a quasi-public financial entity popularly known by its nickname, Fannie Mae. Fannie Mae provided government money to local banks to give them further inducement and wherewithal to make more loans and thus raise the national level of homeownership.

There were a host of subsequent federal housing acts through the 1940s and beyond, all generally liberalizing mortgage terms for buyers (mortgage terms of 25 to 30 years, lower down-payments, etc.). The G I Bill boosted home purchases by: (1) authorizing the Veteran's Administration to guarantee mortgages for returning WWII veterans, and (2) allowing veterans to buy a home with no down-payment.

By the 1950s individual homeownership had become something of a right. With an acute post-war housing shortage (millions of units needed), overcrowded neighborhoods and existing houses at a premium, huge numbers of detached individual homes on tracts of previous vacant land appeared everywhere. This was the only direction such a mammoth housing effort could reasonably have gone. And the numbers worked. As one transplant from New York City to suburban New Jersey remarked at the time, “We had been paying \$50 per month rent, and here we come up and live for \$29 a month. That paid everything – taxes, principal, insurance on your mortgage, and interest.” No doubt, the FHA insured fixed-rate mortgage, along with a good

paying union job, was a ticket to middle class standing for many a blue collar family. And with good roads, and land cheap and plentiful, there was no financial reason for builders to create high-density housing developments. Neither would the customer have desired them.

Rapid, Assembly Line Construction:

In the years after WWII, the United States housing industry underwent nothing less than a revolution in size, power and capacity. Before the war it had been the most neglected of industries. Afterwards it emerged as a titan, transforming the American townscape as nothing had before.

Credit for the revolution is generally accorded to New York developer William J. Levitt, of Levittown fame. Levitt has been called “the Henry Ford of housing” because he brought Ford’s pioneering techniques in mass producing the inexpensive Model T to mass producing low-price suburban homes. The analogy is fair and apt. But it can be argued that Levitt went beyond Ford by embracing a business model, pioneered in the nineteenth century by Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick for the production of steel, known as vertical consolidation. Under this model, the industrialist keeps costs down and production up (and reliable) by controlling every step in the production of a particular commodity for market. Vertical consolidation well and truly eliminates the middle man and his added costs.

Before the war, the U. S. housing industry was a patchwork of small-time businessmen – independent contractors who employed subcontractors and purchased materials very much on a “by-the-job” basis. Each produced three to five houses per year. Many were designed and built at the behest of individual property owners and were, at least somewhat, customized. The owner chose the style as well as numerous individual features – screened porch, slate roof, Gothic casement windows, etc. Sometimes the owner purchased two lots and built a larger home. Single-lot jobs (with smaller houses) filled in around it. Sometimes owners did not build for years; thus, when they did build, it was a house of a later style or genre. All of this produced the older suburbs that today’s preservationists prize – neighborhoods that show depth of time, variety and richness.

Levitt thought the whole system, if you could call it that, absurdly inefficient. Levitt’s first major opportunity to change the construction system came in 1941 when he and his brother Alfred (an architect) won a Navy contract to develop a war worker’s community in Norfolk, Virginia. At first the job went badly, due as Levitt saw it, to: 1) the antiquated system of construction oversight and, 2) unionized laborers whose wage demands, he felt, far outstripped their productivity. To meet the Navy’s tight deadlines while making a reasonable profit, Levitt completely reorganized the job. In the process he began developing a business model that would serve him well in the post-war years.

Levitt broke the construction process down to its essentials and identified 27 individual jobs, or steps, needed to construct a building from beginning to end. He then trained 27 teams of men, each to perform just one step. Instead of Ford’s assembly line, in which car bodies moved along by conveyor with each worker installing one part, Levitt’s specialized construction teams

moved from site to site, each performing just one job – pouring concrete, framing up wall studs, installing windows, installing doors, etc

Levitt's wartime experience enabled him to refine and expand his techniques in rapid automated construction. He emerged after the war as perhaps the nation's leading expert on mass housing. He formed a new company and commenced construction of Levittown housing developments beginning in New York State. (He also did developments in Pennsylvania.) And the company flourished, quickly supplying thousands of low-cost homes to returning war veterans and their families. In those days an average working man's wage was about \$3,000 a year. A basic Levitt Cape Cod model sold for \$7,990. And they were sold on favorable terms, nothing down. The Levitt organization even threw in a free television and a Bendix clothes washer.

Importantly, Levitt controlled every step in the process – from buying land, to laying out streets, to building the homes, to providing for neighborhood amenities such as churches, schools and swimming pools, to marketing and selling the homes, to providing mortgage financing for buyers. The Levitt organization also provided for all the needed building materials – right down to manufacturing its own construction nails, lest a dilatory nail supplier disrupt the Swiss watch efficiency of the construction operation. Levitt even provided for all of the lumber by acquiring thousands of acres of timberland in Oregon to supply its New York State housing developments. By 1948, the Levitt organization was building 180 new houses per week! By 1955, Levitt-style developments were responsible for fully three-fourths of the nation's total housing starts.

Levitt also assured smooth and trouble-free production of his manufactured homes in another way. In an era generally friendly to labor unions, he paid excellent wages, with production bonuses, but he refused to have anything to do with organized labor. He felt that unions were there to protect the slowest and least productive of workers.

Levittown-like suburbs were an explosive phenomenon. Their impact was huge and its effects are still with us. Two simple facts bear this out starkly: 1) After 1950, eighteen of the nation's largest urban areas lost population, and 2) by 1970 more Americans were living in suburbs than in cities. It was nothing less than a mass migration – indeed, an upheaval.

With his unparalleled success, Levitt inspired a host of imitators. Together they created what we think of as modern suburbia, with Levitt himself, arguably, its inventor.

The Layout of Post-War Subdivisions:

The new Levittown-like suburbs were only half as densely populated as the old pre-war suburbs. Older suburbs, sometimes called streetcar suburbs, generally followed the established square block-street grid pattern of the city. Their lots tended to be narrow and deep; so the houses presented their shorter side as the street façade. The new post-war auto-dependent suburbs were based upon two rock-solid realities: cheap land and cheaper gasoline. Their blocks tended to be larger, much wider and sometimes irregular in shape. Individual lots were much wider and larger as well. Houses presented their long side to the street as if trying to

convey the idea of an idyllic country home with at least a semblance of its own grounds. Suburban party-wall row houses were definitely a thing of the past.

William J. Levitt has been hailed as “the man who invented suburbia.” But he did not invent the new suburban landscape. Credit for that belongs mainly to the United States government. In an effort to address the Great Depression, and prop up the comatose housing industry, President Herbert Hoover convened in 1931 the President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership. Conferees drew upon almost a century of housing reform, both English and American, including the City Beautiful Movement, the Garden City Movement, the work of landscape pioneer Frederick Law Olmsted, and, most especially, the new town of Radford, New Jersey, dubbed a “Town for the Motor Age.” They developed a set of principles to guide in the production of safe, healthful, attractive, naturalistic and affordable residential neighborhoods. These would become the backbone of federal housing programs throughout the New Deal and beyond, most notably through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created in 1934.

For instance, the old grid pattern was condemned as monotonous and, indeed, perilous. Instead, developers were to avoid sharp corners and dangerous intersections, create long blocks that eliminated unnecessary streets, follow the natural lay of the land, and create curving streets to add visual interest. There were also guidelines for house setback and generous (countrified) lot sizes. In its continually expanding role as the master of federal housing loan guarantees, the FHA pushed these principles ever forward. So it was, on the eve of WWII, that the new suburban model, with its moderately priced houses, on large lots along curving streets with large and irregular blocks and cul-de-sacs, was in place.

Decline:

The early 1950s through 1965 was perhaps the great golden afternoon in America’s single family home building boom. But beginning in the mid-1960s various factors came together to work a sharp decline in the construction of traditional subdivisions. The Vietnam War was one. Paying for this escalating conflict drove inflation apace; in 1966 it was two percent, by 1973 it was six percent. The following year it was in double digits. With materials and labor costing ever more, the price of an average single family detached home was rising twice as fast as wages. In an effort to quell this inflation, the Federal Reserve tightened money policies, causing a “money crunch,” which further disrupted the already weakening housing market.

The federal government took another step in 1964 by enacting the Tax Reform Act. Among other things, this act provided new incentives for private lending for multi-family housing. Other factors favoring multi-family units were a sizable drop in the overall birth rate and a rise in divorces. In other words, families were smaller and more and more people were living alone. Increasingly, these factors shifted the housing market away from traditional subdivisions and towards apartments and condominiums. Land prices were rising, and what was arguably the final blow came in 1974 with the Arab oil boycott. The cheap gasoline that for a generation had fueled rampant suburban growth was now a thing of the past. The great era of the ranch house was at an end.

This market shift registered strongly in at least one Louisiana city. Alexandria subdivision developer W. A. Carruth, Jr. spoke of this market change in an interview with the authors. As the 1970s dawned he found it increasingly difficult to sell new detached houses in the local market. Accordingly, he shifted his development company entirely from subdivisions to apartments and townhomes.

African-American Subdivisions:

In 1956 baseball legend Jackie Robinson led the Brooklyn Dodgers to the world championship. Later that same year, he and his wife attempted to purchase a suburban home near New York. Being “forbidden neighbors,” they were “shut out,” writes historian Andrew Weise (*Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*). Robinson recalled what he termed “the usual bag of tricks” – house sold yesterday, house taken off market, etc. Eventually the Robinsons, due to the efforts of local white families, were able to buy just across the state line in Connecticut.

A comparable Robinson in the South might well have chosen to live in one of the many first-class African-American subdivisions developed throughout the region in the mid-1950s. Historian Andrew Weise argues a key difference between post-WWII suburbanization in the North and South. In the South, blacks “bargained for separate areas where they could develop their own neighborhoods” – what the author calls “separate community building.” By contrast, many of their Northern counterparts settled (or attempted to) in historically white communities.

As more and more blacks entered the middle class in the post-war years, they too pursued the American dream of a home of one’s own in the leafy suburbs. They too had served in the military and were entitled to GI Bill benefits of a guaranteed mortgage and no down-payment. Weise contrasts two models for black suburban development in the South – Atlanta and Dallas. In Atlanta, African-American leaders were in the forefront of developing suburban “places of their own” (black realtors, developers, etc.). In Dallas, whites were essentially in charge of the process. In the Dallas model, the white establishment was pursuing the equal in “separate but equal” so that things would remain separate.

Weise’s trail-blazing research and analysis sheds light on an intriguing aspect of 1950s suburbanization – for there is a strong tendency to equate the cozy image of idyllic suburban life with whites. In short, there was an African-American equivalent of the *Leave it to Beaver/Father Knows Best* world. That said, however, one should not overestimate it. Yes, the number of blacks in suburbia surged by almost one million in the 1940s and ‘50s. But still, in 1960, they constituted only five percent of the United States suburban population.

Origins:

While Levitt built Cape Cod houses by the thousands in the East, most post-war subdivisions featured street after street (and cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac) of a new distinctly American archetype – the ranch house. Ranch houses have their origins in early twentieth century interpretations of the nineteenth century ranch houses of California and the Southwest. These early works actually looked like the low-slung rambling ranch houses of real working ranches. Although, as ranch house historian Alan Hess notes, the designers “carefully rearranged and edited the historic type.”

One of the first works in what might be called “ranch house revival” appeared in 1903 with the Bandini House near Pasadena, California, designed by Greene and Greene, known best for their exquisite Craftsman houses. Cliff May, a musician-turned furniture maker-turned house designer, did much to popularize the type, in large part because of his self-promotional skills, suggests Hess. May had grown up around nineteenth century working ranches in California. His first “ranch revival” house was built in San Diego, in 1931, after which he designed numerous fairly high-end ranch houses in California, as did other architects. And at the same time designers were adapting traditional ranch house designs to give them a more modern look (as did May in the 1950s). Out of this revivalism and adaptation came the ranch house as we know it today. In its simplest form, it is far removed from its original source of inspiration. But rustic and rambling examples can still conjure up powerful images of the West.

Dissemination:

Cliff May’s association with *Sunset* magazine, the ultimate western lifestyle magazine, did much to spread the ranch house to a wider audience. In 1946, *Sunset* published the best-selling *Western Ranch Houses* by May and the editorial staff, with pictures and text on nineteenth century ranch houses and plans for new rustic, rambling houses that bore a resemblance to their namesake. But clearly the word was already spreading, for in that same year, a national housing survey found that the typical American looking to buy favored “the low, rambling . . . Ranch House which has come out of the Southwest.”

May and *Sunset* magazine were only part of the media saturation. As the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office observes in its on-line ranch house presentation, “You could not pick up a popular magazine at the time without seeing or reading something about the new ranch house.” In addition to enticement articles in magazines such as *House Beautiful*, *McCall’s* and the like, Americans were inundated with ranch house plan books. Seeing a good thing, *Popular Mechanics* in 1951 published a book, *Popular Mechanics Build-it-Yourself Ranch-Type House*. According to the magazine, this “dream house” was in response to requests from readers for the plans of a “modern ranch-type house.” And, of course, no one familiar with real Western ranches would have recognized it.

Defining the Ranch House:

Cliff May would be delighted to know that ranch houses have become rather trendy-- thanks to the fascination with all things “Mid-Century Modern.” Ironically, a young generation with no memory of the period is in the forefront of the MCM (as it is known) preservation movement. And when they say MCM, they often have a ranch house in mind. (The magazine of the MCM crowd is *Atomic Ranch*.)

But what exactly is a ranch house? Realtors are specializing in them across the country. What exactly are they marketing? Because ranch houses appear in a variety of shapes with a variety of details, developing a definition can be challenging. Add to this the fact that, by-and-large, architectural historians and historic preservationists have only begun to turn to the study of ranch houses within the last few years. In short, the full story of this iconic and uniquely American house is a work in progress.

The following list of characteristics is based largely on Alan Hess’ *The Ranch House* (at present the definitive treatment) and the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office’s ranch house study (in the beginning stages). Please note that a house need not have all of the following characteristics to be classified as a ranch house. A very plain basic ranch house may have only a few of the characteristics. The word “generally” is important.

- A ranch house by definition is a one story dwelling with a low spreading horizontal emphasis. (Photo 1)
- Roofs are low hip or low gable, generally with moderate to wide overhanging eaves. (Photo 1)
- Ranch houses generally are sited with their long side parallel to the street. (Photo 1)
- Ranch houses are generally asymmetrical (massing and/or placement of openings). Some of the best examples ramble across the landscape with an interesting interplay of parts coming together at different angles. Houses such as these are known today as “ramblers.” (See Photos 2 and 3 for “ramblers.”)
- Ranch houses generally have zoned interiors (public and private spaces kept separate) and the public spaces generally utilize open plans. Rather than a box-like room for the living room, one for the kitchen and one for the dining room, these rooms generally open into each other in some manner.
- Unlike earlier houses where the kitchen was a smallish room at the back of the house, in a typical ranch house the kitchen is part of the open floorplan mentioned above. It moved to a more prominent place and was no longer totally functional, becoming a prime gathering place for family and friends.

- Ranch houses often open up to the landscape at the rear via sliding glass doors and extended patios.
- Ranch house windows appear in a variety of sizes, types and combinations. Probably a majority in Louisiana have expansive windows on the façade. Popular treatments include windows formed of four horizontal panels, appearing singly and/or grouped together (Photo 4), and a façade picture window, often flanked by jalousie windows of four horizontal panels (Photo 5).
- Some ranch house have facades that “turn their back” to the street – i.e., with small high windows on the façade (Photo 6).
- Ranch houses generally feature more than one exterior material (for example, brick veneer body and a clapboarded gable). The contrast between materials is typically highlighted by different colors. (Photo 7)
- Some ranch houses feature rustic or informal materials or details (board and batten siding, shake shingles ornamenting a gable, etc.). (Photo 8)
- Chimneys (where they exist) make a strong architectural statement. (Photo 9)
- The place to house the car moves up front, typically in the form of a carport (but sometimes a garage). Quoting the Georgia SHPO on-line Powerpoint, “Clearly the automobile has now become a member of the family!” In many cases, the carport is an integral part of the house design. (Photo 10)
- More traditional looking ranch houses sometimes feature lacey cast-iron porch posts and window details (Photo 11), while other more “modern” ranch houses used striking geometrical forms, especially for carport supports (Photo 12).

Ranch House Styles:

Various stylistic features from earlier periods (American Colonial, Dutch Colonial, English Tudor, etc.) can be “tacked on” to the basic ranch house form, giving it a new personality. These features may be rather slight, but sometimes they can be quite extensive.

Then there is the “contemporary ranch house.” Some examples are so far removed from the ranch house prototype that some would argue they are not ranch houses, but simply contemporary houses (the later a term used at the time). Finally, perhaps the majority of ranch houses are just that – ranch houses. They are not dressed in any particular style.

Importance of the Ranch House:

It is estimated that about 70% of the new houses built in the United States in the 1950s were ranch houses. “Few building types every housed as many Americans,” concludes Alan Hess. “Beginning in the 1950s, the Ranch House became one of the most widespread, successful and purposeful of American housing types – a shelter of choice for both movie stars in the San Fernando Valley and aerospace factory workers in Lakewood.”

The ranch house addressed a major housing problem successfully and addressed it to the complete satisfaction of the vast majority of Americans. With its generous floor plans, modern bathrooms, gleaming new kitchens, air-conditioning (not yet central), and grassy lawns, it provided a standard of living that was the envy of other populations. In its less expensive forms, it provided the possibility of homeownership for millions of blue collar Americans. In short, it came to represent the American Dream – a home of one’s own.

THE LOUISIANA STORY

Population Growth and Subdivisions:

As went the nation, so went Louisiana. The state’s population grew by almost 1,000,000 from 1940 to 1960 (from 2,363,880 to 3,257,022). By way of comparison, Georgia’s population grew by 820,000 in the same twenty years. And by 1960, 63% of the state’s population lived in urban areas (compared to 41% in 1940).

All available primary sources (interviews, period newspaper accounts) indicate that the housing crisis was acute in Louisiana. Alexandria native and longtime realtor Joe Betty Sterkx recalls realtors, as a temporary measure, subdividing houses to make tiny apartments. In Baton Rouge, the newspaper reported former barracks at Harding Field being used for housing. Baton Rougean Mary Frey Eaton recalled difficulty finding housing as late as the early 1950s when she and her husband returned to the city to live.

The earliest houses built to meet the housing crisis tended to be small box-like affairs sometimes called “GI Specials.” (This was true across the country.) These simple, unadorned houses were typically of frame construction. Their footprint was like that of a box – i.e., no projections. One suspects that most are long gone. Survivors tend to be notably altered. An important exception to the foregoing is a neighborhood near Chennault Air Base in Lake Charles, where the houses survive with fairly good integrity (Photo 13).

By circa 1950 new ranch house subdivisions were mushrooming on the peripheries of Louisiana cities. New Orleans had fewer places in which to expand because of its geographical location (the Mississippi River on one side and Lake Pontchartrain on the other). Post-war suburbs in New Orleans were located toward the lake. Most of the large Lakeview neighborhood

dates from this period (although there are earlier houses), as do the string of subdivisions located along the lake (Lake Vista, Lake Terrace, etc.) Downriver from this area are side-by-side 1950s subdivisions in a part of town known loosely as Gentilly -- Pontchartrain Park, for African-Americans, and Gentilly Woods, for whites.

Shreveport and Baton Rouge, with the state's second and third largest populations respectively, had room for seemingly limitless expansion. Baton Rouge was hemmed in only by the Mississippi River to the west. A map published in 1955 pinpointed some 30 to 40 "major subdivisions" to the north, east and south. They are identified in the caption as some of "the larger of 137 major subdivisions in the city and parish." Of particular importance to the city was the annexation in 1959 of adjacent subdivisions known collectively as Broadmoor – for it would make Baton Rouge larger geographically than Shreveport. It appears from the *Baton Rouge States-Times* that the two cities were in a spirited back-and-forth race as each annexed new subdivisions. Broadmoor gave Baton Rouge a 3,427 person population boost and a 6.5 square mile edge. At the time of annexation, there were 958 houses in the neighborhood, when nine years previously, in 1950, there had been none.

The Levitts of Louisiana:

Were there any Levitt-like developers in Louisiana? Who were they? How did they operate? In what ways were their operations like Levitt's and how did they differ? Answering these questions is challenging because there is practically no documentation on the builders of Louisiana's post-war subdivisions. The key players are deceased. For example, the names W. Hamilton Crawford and Crawford Homes kept cropping up as the authors began to do research. Probably the biggest player in Louisiana, Crawford died in 1993 at age 87. His daughter knew of no surviving company records, and everyone she could recall who had worked for her father was deceased.

What primary source information the authors could obtain on Crawford came from three sources: (1) a promotional booklet for a Crawford subdivision in New Orleans called Gentilly Woods; (2) an article written by Baton Rougean Tom Bartkiewicz based in part on an interview with the late Ralph Sims, a longtime Crawford Homes employee and Crawford personal friend; and (3) retired Baton Rouge architect Bill Brockway, who bought a Crawford home in Baton Rouge in the 1950s, where he and his wife still reside today.

Happily, the authors were able to interview a major builder-developer in Alexandria, W. A. Carruth, Jr. His story is below, following what could be pieced together about W. Hamilton Crawford.

Born in Mississippi, Crawford made his way to Baton Rouge in 1941. Like Levitt, he began in wartime building. From a plant north of downtown Baton Rouge (no longer extant), his company built prefabricated barracks and hospitals. At least by the early 1950s, he had launched

Crawford Homes and was building subdivisions in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. (These are the two cities documented at present.)

Crawford's operation seems to have been similar to Levitt's in many ways and different in others. He obtained timber from his own lumber mill in southern Mississippi. At his plant (the same one that operated during the war), workers manufactured whole wall sections, with studs, siding, insulation, sheetrock, windows, and doors all in place. Houses, recalled Bill Brockway, were spray painted. The walls were brought by truck to the job site and assembled on pre-poured concrete slabs. Interior dividing walls were done in the same manner. Brockway recalls that the roofs were not pre-fabricated.

Whether Crawford Homes actually marketed the houses seems to have varied. Bill Brockway indicated that Crawford Homes did not actually sell him a house. The houses were sold through realtors on something like a franchise basis. Crawford Homes provided realtors display boards, one for each model offered. Each board included a drawing of the house, floorplan, material selection and a price. The above-referenced Bartkiewicz article, presumably based on Ralph Sims' recollections, notes that Crawford's housing package "included everything from the dishwasher to the mortgage." According to Bartkiewicz's research, models were given numbers that corresponded to their square footage. (See photo 14 for a popular Crawford Home model.) Each lot, notes the author, "boasted a signature Louisiana live oak."

W. Hamilton Crawford's building activities reached beyond Louisiana, but the extent is not documented. Bartkiewicz reproduces primary sources showing a Crawford Homes development in Louisville, Kentucky called Highgate Springs. He also relates that Crawford worked with the National Housing Center in Washington, D.C., had a mortgage company in that city, and an office in the Seagram Building in New York City. In the 1960s, Crawford developed a community in Maryland called Crofton, with its buildings inspired by Colonial Williamsburg. Today, Crawford's own luxurious home survives in Baton Rouge, as well as various subdivisions with Crawford Homes models.

Alexandria's W. A. Carruth, Jr., age 82, is still building in his hometown. Carruth attributes some of the names and looks of his developments to his longtime interest in history. (He graduated from Louisiana College with a major in American history and a minor in European.) Carruth became a builder by chance. It all started in the early 1950s when someone asked to buy a small house he had built for his family. Then he built his family another home and sold it to someone. Apparently he and his family moved frequently, for the foregoing happened several times.

Carruth's first major development was Camellia Place, in 1956, on forty acres in Alexandria. But it seems that he did not build every house in the subdivision. Some of the lots were sold to others for development. The next year he was one of several builders to establish the Homebuilders Association of Central Louisiana. (Homebuilder associations were established

all over the country in the 1950s. To promote their products, they sponsored Parade of Homes tours, which, of course, continue today.)

Carruth's operation began with purchasing the land and ended with selling the houses. In regard to the latter, he did not involve himself in arranging financing. Generally he purchased twenty acres at a time to develop. His company did the infrastructure, but had city engineers approve the work, for Carruth realized the area would eventually be annexed into the city. Like Levitt, he had specialist crews – in his case, one foundation crew, one bricklayer crew, and two framing crews. In peak years he employed some 65 men. Lumber came from a lumber yard he started for that purpose.

Castle Village, begun in 1961 and completed over the next four years in phases, was at that time Carruth's biggest development and the first in which he built all the houses. The first phase, with ranch houses strongly in the Swiss Chalet style, was inspired by a subdivision he saw in Norman, Oklahoma. (His in-laws lived in that state.) Carruth brought home pictures to guide him as he began work. He offered five Swiss Chalet models, which were built side-by-side on streets named Hansel Lane, Gretel Lane, Gingerbread Lane and Candy Lane (about 30 total). Buyers could choose a model only; there was no picking and choosing details to create your own look. (See photos 15 & 16.)

Carruth delighted in telling the authors of his marketing skills to demonstrate the weight load for his pre-fabricated roofs in Castle Village's first phase. Some locals questioned whether the two-by-fours he used for roof trusses would be of sufficient strength. The builder responded by setting up an on-site demonstration of a crane lowering a car onto the roof!

Obviously buyers were impressed. The Swiss Chalet ranch houses went over "so big" (Carruth's words) that he sold every one the first weekend. The typical price was \$18,750 (including the lot). Carruth's houses in the first phase of Castle Village were intensively Swiss Chalet, but he says that the novelty soon "wore off." In subsequent phases, he toned down the details considerably. By the last phase, he was building basic ranch houses.

African-American Suburbanization:

Post-war black suburbanization in Louisiana is an almost completely untold story ripe for research and development. To the best knowledge of the authors, the only subdivision that has received any attention is Pontchartrain Park in New Orleans. It followed the Dallas model described above – i.e., the developers were white. But research conducted for this document revealed various "Negro subdivisions" on the perimeters of Baton Rouge and Shreveport as well. Did these all follow the Dallas model? Did black realtors and/or black developers play key roles in other subdivisions? Who were these individuals? What role did the black community play in pushing for equal opportunities in the post-war market? These are issues for extensive research in the future, in primary printed sources and interviews with individuals who were there on the ground, so-to-speak.

“It was the first time Negroes could buy what you’d call modern housing,” observed Philip Baptiste of Pontchartrain Park, his home since 1958. In Pontchartrain Park, or the Park, as it is fondly known, middle class black New Orleanians acquired equality in post-war housing. This piece of the American dream traces its origins to the development of a large municipal recreational park of the same name. Elected mayor in 1964, DeLesseps “Chep” Morrison, for pragmatic reasons, was committed to improving facilities for blacks – i.e., addressing the equal side of separate but equal. Recognizing that public recreational facilities for the city’s large African-American population were largely non-existent, the Morrison administration sought to develop a full-size park solely for blacks. The targeted site was a huge tract of land near Lake Pontchartrain at some distance from the city center.

Apparently the Morrison administration wished to develop an adjacent subdivision for blacks as well. While the history of Pontchartrain Park is better known than any other black post-war subdivision in Louisiana, the full story is yet to be documented thoroughly. It is clear though that the black community tried to have a voice in the matter. In April 1948, black realtor Gerald Pratt wrote to the city’s Director of Planning: “There is at the present time a syndicate comprised of Negro industrial insurance men who are very much interested in taking over the balance of the 140 acres, to be developed into a first-class negro housing development”

But this activist role never came to pass, for reasons at present unknown. In the summer of 1950, the City of New Orleans, in partnership with the Crawford Corporation of Baton Rouge (see above), purchased the land. The city paid \$200,000 for the proposed park land, while W. Hamilton Crawford paid the remaining \$157,000 for the land on which his company would build a subdivision.

Pontchartrain Homes, Inc. was specifically created to market the homes in the new subdivision. It was headed by Edgar Stern, a wealthy and prominent white New Orleanian well known for giving both his time and money to African-American causes in the city. (His wife happened to be Edith Rosenwald Stern, daughter of Julius Rosenwald, who invested a notable amount of his fortune to build schools for African-Americans throughout the rural South.) Stern’s partner in Pontchartrain Homes, Inc. was Charles Keller. Keller and his wife Rosa also were wealthy white New Orleanians who made many contributions to the African-American cause in the city. (The latter is particularly true of Rosa Keller.)

Pontchartrain Park subdivision, built by the Crawford Corporation of Baton Rouge, was dedicated on June 16, 1955. The 185 acre recreational park, complete with an 18-hole golf course, debuted earlier in the year. Interestingly, Pontchartrain Park was located immediately adjacent to a new white subdivision, Gentilly Woods, being built by Crawford at the same time. The models for each, ranging from a small one bedroom to larger three bedrooms, are roughly the same in terms of size and quality

Much can be learned about the houses of Pontchartrain Park subdivision via advertisements in *The Louisiana Weekly*, a black newspaper, and in the city’s main newspaper,

the *Times-Picayune*. A press release prepared by Pontchartrain Park Homes for the public opening bears quoting at length:

There will be a \$150,000 demonstration home area containing nine model homes, four of which will be completely furnished. Approximately 40 other homes [are] in various stages of construction. Site preparation [is] in progress for more than one hundred others which have been sold in advance through a unique midtown exhibition and sales center. Inside the sales office, prospective buyers will find a one-stop center for information, purchasing, financing, selecting colors and materials, and other home-buying details.

The Crawford Corporation built some 850 homes along the curving streets of Pontchartrain Park (Photo 17). The neighborhood wraps around three sides of the large recreational park. And while there were other black subdivisions in and around New Orleans, none were of the quality of the Park. The houses in Pontchartrain Park were more expensive, and there were outstanding recreational amenities in the adjacent park. Blacks who could afford Pontchartrain Park (teachers, Dillard University professors, postal workers, etc.) found their way there quickly and in large numbers. There they could live the American dream in a new suburban home, with a yard, and all the modern conveniences. Among the many African-Americans who grew up in the Park and went on to “make names for themselves” was Dutch Morial, who became the city’s first African-American mayor in 1978,

Tragically, Pontchartrain Park was severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005) and the subsequent inundation caused by levee failure. Heroic efforts to bring back the neighborhood are on-going, but at present only a minority of houses appear to be occupied.

Ranch House Styles in Louisiana (See photos 18-28):

While it is easy to focus upon the most visually interesting ranch houses, the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of Louisiana’s thousands upon thousands of ranch houses would best fit under the category “no style.” They are not “dressed” in a particular style. They are simply ranch houses. Based on a sampling of neighborhoods in the state’s cities, the authors of this document would make an educated guess that only a small minority (10% perhaps) are “contemporary” ranch houses, and probably 5% or less have American Colonial detailing (often very slight). In their sampling, the authors found only two Polynesian-style ranch houses and a few rustic ranch houses. Easily the most unusual “theme” ranch houses were those in Alexandria’s Castle Village (as discussed above).

The vast majority of contemporary ranch houses in Louisiana are in the style of contemporary subdivision houses built by Joseph Eichler in California. Some people include these in the ranch house category; others think they are far enough removed to simply be called

contemporary houses. The authors of these documents are including them in both essays (this one and the contemporary house essay). See contemporary house essay for background on Eichler and distinguishing features.

Local Variation:

In this period a house type developed in South Louisiana, particularly in Baton Rouge, that could be viewed as a local variation of the ranch house. It is a slab-on-grade one story house with a hipped roof, sometimes with a broken pitch, in the state's native French Creole tradition. (Some were designed by noted Baton Rouge architect A. Hays Town, see Photo 29.) Because some of the hip roofs are so high (the opposite of the ranch house's horizontal lines), others would be hesitant to call them ranch houses.

Date Range: 1945-1965

Geographical Distribution:

Once you start looking for them, ranch houses are seemingly everywhere on the Louisiana landscape. Admittedly, they are first and foremost associated with post-war subdivisions, where they exist side-by-side, along curving street after curving street. But there are also many ranch houses here and there on the outskirts of rural communities, or completely alone on the rural landscape.

Associated Property Types:

In the case of this historic context, the associated property types are found in the name of the context – subdivisions and the ranch house. Different styles of ranch houses are noted above.

National Register Guidance:

The National Park Service (NPS) accepted the first post-war subdivision for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. The honor belongs to Arapahoe Acres in Englewood, Colorado. NPS estimates that there are 20 to 30 post-war subdivisions now listed (probably toward the low end of that range). Paul Lusignan, NPS National Register reviewer, indicated in a phone conversation that all of these are for fairly distinctive subdivisions (for example, two Eichler developments in Palo Alto, California and other architect-designed subdivisions such as Arapahoe Acres). To his knowledge there have been no listings for what one would call typical post-war ranch house subdivisions. Both Lusignan and the NPS Register reviewer for Louisiana, James Gabbert, confirmed that recognizing post-war subdivisions and ranch houses by the National Register is still in the beginning stages. Most states, like Louisiana, are just beginning to evaluate these resources.

Preservation professionals have long wondered about the challenges inherent in dealing with such a vast patrimony. A given city might have 50 post-war subdivisions. None may be of

great architectural distinctiveness – just typical subdivisions of their day. Collectively, they are immensely important to that city’s growth and developmental history. How does one decide which ones might merit National Register consideration?

Subdivisions such as these may well be evaluated under National Register Criterion A, with the area of significance being “community planning and development.” The litmus test for which ones to nominate in a given locale most likely will be integrity. Which ranch house subdivisions in a given place are the best preserved? Or put another way, which ones retain enough integrity to, in essence, provide snapshots of the era?

Another possible avenue might be to examine the post-war subdivisions in a given city and determine which best express the suburban landscape aesthetic along with good representative ranch houses that express the variety of the type. Here again integrity will be an important factor.

Additionally, one could identify a particularly important developer (W. Hamilton Crawford is a natural), identify his extant subdivisions, and nominate the best surviving examples. Integrity will be a key factor here too.

If deciding which post-war subdivisions to nominate is challenging, even more formidable is making decisions on individual nominations for ranch houses. Paul Lusignan, who reviews for various western states, said individual ranch house nominations that had been accepted by NPS for Register listing thus far, to his knowledge, were for distinctive, architect-designed houses rather than the typical ranch house. James Gabbert, who reviews some of the southern states, indicated that NPS had just accepted a typical ranch house for listing in Arkansas. The context for evaluation was a very small community.

By far most ranch house candidates will be evaluated against National Register Criterion C, which reads in part: **“Properties may be eligible for the National Register if they embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction.”** The preparers of this document, based on decades of experience with the National Register, have found this statement to be interpreted to mean that a candidate should generally be a good example of its “type, period [style], or method of construction” within a given geographical context.

At the risk of stating the obvious, anyone assessing the Register eligibility of a ranch house under Criterion C should use the same compare and contrast thought process inherent in National Register evaluations for other buildings from other periods. A candidate might well be a typical example in a town or city where there are scores, hundreds, or even thousands of ranch houses that look roughly the same. This will be the easy one to call.

But perhaps a candidate is a particularly compelling, strongly articulated example of a particular style or type of ranch house – for example, a really good “rambler” or an intensively styled “colonial” ranch house – when compared to others in that locale. Then there would be a strong case, it seems, for individual eligibility.

Any successful Register candidate must also retain sufficient integrity to convey its significance. Per National Park Service guidance, integrity must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Essentially the thought process in evaluating integrity is as follows for Criterion C: For a given ranch house candidate, identify the features that make it an important example of a ranch house – that make it potentially significant under Criterion C. Then analyze the alterations. Are they serious in nature (for example, a new wing that impacts the main view of the house or the loss of “colonial” style features when the “colonial” styling is critical to significance) or minor (for example, a front door replaced)? Are the alterations visually dominant?

Using the example of a candidate being proposed as an excellent example of a “colonial” style ranch house, all the character-defining features may survive but they may be overwhelmed visually by alterations. Or old photos may show that the candidate has lost one of its “colonial” style details. How important was this detail when compared to the surviving “colonial” style details? These are questions inherent in the thought process for evaluating integrity under Criterion C.

In short, each integrity evaluation depends upon the candidate. A candidate may have received several alterations, but still retain sufficient integrity to be listed (for example, because it has many strongly articulated ranch house features and they, taken together, are visually dominant). At the other end of the spectrum, a candidate may have received only a couple of alterations and be considered to have “lost integrity” for Criterion C. In this case, the alterations are visually dominant.

The authors can think of only one alteration that would categorically constitute loss of integrity for a ranch house (at least in their professional opinion). The scholarly body of opinion is that ranch houses are by definition one story compositions. This is essential to their low-slung character. Hence the authors would suggest that the addition of a full or partial second story constitutes a serious enough loss of integrity to disqualify a candidate under Criterion C.

Generally speaking, ranch houses in middle to upper-middle class neighborhoods in Louisiana have little in the way of significant integrity issues. Exterior alterations, where they exist, are usually confined to maybe a door replacement or perhaps a carport alteration. The houses are generally of brick veneer; so substitute siding is not an issue.

It is in less affluent neighborhoods generally that alterations are more common. This is because complete or partial wood siding is more common, and hence there is a significant chance of substitute siding. Also, the houses were rather small when built, and as families grew, additions were made, some a one story wing, others a partial or full second story.

Bibliography:

Ames, David L. and McClelland, Linda Flint. *National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs*. National Park Service, 2002. www.nps.gov/nr/publications.

Bartkiewicz, Tom. "The Houses that Hamilton Built." *Atomic Ranch*. Summer 2006.

Brockway, Bill. Interview with Jonathan Fricker. June 18, 2009.

Crawford Corporation. *Gentilly Woods Plan Book*. (Available on-line at www.nutrias.org, the website of the New Orleans Public Library.

Easton, Mary Frey. Interview with Jonathan Fricker. June 22, 2009.

Carruth, W. A., Jr. Interview with Jonathan Fricker. September 10, 2009.

Gabbert, James. National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places staff. Phone conversation with Donna Fricker, September 2009.

Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. New York: Villard Books, 1993.

Hess, Alan. *The Ranch House*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004.

Historic Preservation Division, Georgia Department of Natural Resources. "The Ordinary Iconic Ranch House: Mid-20th-Century Ranch Houses in Georgia." www.gashpo.org.

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Lusignan, Paul. National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places staff. Phone conversation with Donna Fricker, September 2009.

Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. "Shreveport Subdivisions." *Shreveport Magazine*. March 1953.

Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. "Shreveport Perimeter." *Shreveport Magazine*. September 1954.

Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. "Home Building: \$27 Million This Year." *Shreveport Magazine*. June 1959.

Sunset Magazine, in collaboration with Cliff May. *Sunset Western Ranch Houses*. San Francisco: Lane Publishing Co., 1946.

Vertical Files. East Baton Rouge Subdivisions. State Library of Louisiana. These files contained valuable newspaper clippings from the 1950s and early 1960s.

www.redstickmodern.com. This website focuses on Baton Rouge, Louisiana's mid-century modern houses.

Widmer, Mary Lou. *New Orleans in the Fifties*. Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Co., 1991.

Wiese, Andrew. *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Wilson, Elizabeth S. "Postwar Modern Housing and a Geographic Information System Study of Scottsdale Subdivisions." www.scottsdaleaz.gov.

This document was prepared for the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation by:

Jonathan and Donna Fricker
Fricker Historic Preservation Services, LLC

First Draft: September 2009

Final Draft: February 2010

PHOTO GALLERY



Photo 1. This Baton Rouge ranch house illustrates several character-defining ranch house features: one story with a low spreading horizontal emphasis; long side parallel to the street; low pitch roof with moderate to wide overhanging eaves.



Photo 2. This Baton Rouge ranch house has a complex, rambling footprint. In today's ranch house jargon, it is a "rambler."



Photo 3. A smaller “rambler” in Shreveport. Note the period door.



Photo 4. Windows formed of four horizontal panels appear singly or in groups.



Photo 5. Note the picture window with flanking four pane windows.



Photo 6. This New Orleans ranch house turns its back to the street. Note the small windows high on the façade.



Photo 7. Ranch houses often feature contrasting materials.



Photo 8. A rustic-looking ranch house in Baton Rouge sheathed in board and batten.



Photo 9. Chimneys are not very common on Louisiana ranch houses. When they do exist, they are typically a strong visual element on the façade.



Photo 10. Carports are placed in a prominent position, as seen in this Mansura example.



Photo 11. Lacey decorative ironwork was quite popular for ranch houses. Note also the period doors and shutters on this Bossier City house.



Photo 12. Striking geometrical forms are sometimes seen on carport supports, as seen here in Monroe.



Photo 13. The earliest post-war houses tended to look like these near Chennault Air Base in Lake Charles – simple little “boxes.”



Photo 14. This small ranch house is a popular model offered by Crawford Homes of Baton Rouge. Seen in various Louisiana cities (this one in Lake Charles), the house has many quintessential ranch house features: deep overhanging eaves, a contrasting brick lower section (in this case, extending beyond the main wall in an angular fashion), and classic period carport supports.



Photos 15 & 16. Alexandria's distinctive Swiss Chalet subdivision, Castle Village, 1961, W. A. Carruth, Jr., developer.



Photo 17. A well-preserved ranch house in Pontchartrain Park, an African-American subdivision in New Orleans with houses from Crawford Homes of Baton Rouge.



Photo 18. A fairly typical “no style” ranch house in suburban New Orleans. The porch posts with their strong geometric patterns provide visual interest. The windows are typical of the period.



**Photo 19. Another “no style” ranch house (this one in New Orleans).
The breezeblock carport support is typical of the period.**



Photo 20. A New Orleans ranch house with colonial-style details.



Photo 21. A “colonial” style ranch house in Lake Charles.



Photos 22-23. A touch of the Polynesian tiki look in Shreveport.



Photo 24. There are relatively few rustic ranch houses in Louisiana. This “cowboy ranch” example, complete with a cactus garden, is in Baton Rouge.



Photo 25. A contemporary ranch house in Shreveport with the low broad gable roof synonymous with Joseph Eichler’s subdivisions in California. The house is unusual – for normally this type of contemporary ranch lacks expansive façade windows, preferring to turn its back to the street.



Photo 26. Also in Shreveport, this Eichler-style house does indeed turn its back to the street. Note how the carport is a major part of the design. In fact, it is about half of the façade.



Photo 27. An Eichler-style gem in Baton Rouge's Broadmoor subdivision.



Photo 28. Not all contemporary ranch houses sport the low broad gables shown in the preceding photos. But their roofs always make an emphatic geometric statement, as seen in this Shreveport house.



Photo 29. There are various one story houses with French Creole hip roofs in Baton Rouge post-war subdivisions that can be viewed within the ranch house tradition. A. Hays Town designed this one.

