

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Buena Vista is a huge two-and-a-half story frame Greek Revival plantation house with a documented date of 1859. The name means "good view," which is indeed still the case. The house is in a remote location well off the road, and the view is of the gently undulating countryside of rural DeSoto Parish. Buena Vista has received very few alterations and even retains its original kitchen dependency.

A building contract, which is very general in nature, reveals that the owner, Boykin Witherspoon, contracted with M. Robbins on November 29, 1859 to build Buena Vista. Robbins apparently built several large houses for the area's wealthiest planters, including Land's End (N.R.) and Welcome Hall, which is gone but documented in photographs. These three houses reveal that Robbins had a penchant for columns resting on high brick bases with the gallery floor recessed behind the bases. There is also a house just inside Caddo Parish which has this distinctive column treatment, and one suspects it is a Robbins house as well. Also of interest in connection with Robbins are the identical Gothic-inspired balustrades on Buena Vista and Welcome Hall.

Like Land's End, Buena Vista is a two-and-a-half story house with a one story gallery across the front. The seven bay gallery has a full entablature and octagonal columns resting on brick piers the height of the gallery floor. The gallery floor begins about a foot behind the columns. The column capitals feature four bands of molding. The delightful Gothic balustrade has balusters carved in a pointed arch shape with a sharp spike in the middle of each pattern. The unusual multi-shaft newel posts are formed of pie shape sections that appear to be glued together. The towering aedicule style front doorway has a heavy cornice ornamented with dentils and a secondary tiny denticular cornice below the transom. The pilasters framing the door are fluted, while those defining the entire doorway have an inset molded panel with a delicate almost oriental-looking pointed arch top. The capitals on all four doorway pilasters have a complex molding profile, as do the pilasters which frame the ends of the gallery. The shoulder molded front gallery windows are floor-length and are so tall that they could be used as doors. The gallery also has a high elaborately molded baseboard. Windows elsewhere on the house are ornamented with molded pediment shaped tops.

Each of the side elevations has a three sided bay window with the angles marked by pilasters with molded capitals. Windows are on all three sides with multi-layer molded panels below. These windows retain their original shutters, as do almost all the other windows on the front and sides of the house.

The original four bay rear gallery is a miniature version of the front gallery, complete with its own Gothic balustrade. One of the columns is not in place presently, but is on the property and can be replaced easily. A rear wing added by the previous owners has been taken off, but where it attached has not yet been repaired. Also, a tiny window for a bathroom has been added to the rear, and a window was made into a French door.

Buena Vista has a central hall plan with two rooms on each side. The front parlors are much larger than the two rooms in back. The floor plan upstairs is similar, except the rooms are of more equal size, and the builder shortened the central hall to allow for a front central bedroom. The scale of the interior reminds one of the grand mansions of Natchez, Mississippi. The hall is fourteen feet wide, and the distance from one bay window to the other is sixty-five feet. The hall culminates in a graceful staircase with straight runs ascending a full three stories to a capacious semifinished attic. The two front parlors open into the hall via wide sliding pocket doors with heavily proportioned shoulder molded surrounds. The shape is defined by no less than four layers of molding, and the surround is as wide as a chair back. The same treatment is found on all interior doors and windows. The two front parlors feature wooden aedicule style mantels that are eight feet wide but only of conventional height (in this case forty-five inches). This heavy proportioning is reinforced by the oversized flutes in the pilasters. Another unusual feature is a decoratively cut back to the mantel shelf. It has an overall curving shape with a pediment shaped center. The remaining two mantels downstairs are in a conventional aedicule style, while the four upstairs have a slight shoulder mold. Other noteworthy interior features include a decorative paneled treatment under the staircase; high, elaborately molded baseboards; and original closets (upstairs and one under the stair).

A photo in W. Darrell Overdyke's Louisiana Plantation Homes (1965) reveals that the west front parlor originally had a cornice and a large molded ceiling panel with a simple round medallion at the center. Only small fragments of these features remained when the present owners acquired

the house, and they have been packed away for possible future reference.

A final interesting aspect of Buena Vista is the juxtaposition between the axuality of the interior and the asymmetrical articulation of the exterior. Because one of the parlors is wider than the other, the entrance doorway is off-center and the windows are irregularly spaced. By contrast, the front and rear doors are on axis, and the sliding doors are set enfilade and are placed so as to line up with the side bay windows. Thus one can stand in one bay window and have a sixty-five foot axial vista through the doors to the opposite bay window.

Contributing Element:

The contemporaneous kitchen building located to the rear of the house is listed as a contributing element. It is a two room pitched roof building with pegged construction and strap hinges on the batten doors and windows. The onetime massive fireplace is gone, but is revealed by ghost marks on a painted board wall.

Significant Dates 1859
Architect/Builder M. Robbins
Criterion C

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

Buena Vista is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in a parish known for the style. It achieves this distinction because of its mansion-like size, scale and pretension and its wealth of Greek Revival woodwork.

DeSoto Parish was settled between roughly 1840 and the 1850s by individuals from South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia and other nearby states. Of course, Greek Revival was literally the rage at the time, and DeSoto settlers embraced it with a vengeance. Although many examples from this architectural flowering have been lost, including the impressive Keachi Female College, an astounding number survive. Excluding New Orleans, DeSoto is one of three parishes considered to be major centers of Greek Revival architecture in the state. Whereas other parishes average about a half dozen Greek Revival residences, DeSoto boasts at least twenty, not to mention four churches, a temple fronted store, and a Masonic hall. This special heritage really represents the parish's architectural apogee. With the exception of a few landmarks, there has not been an architectural flowering in the parish since then.

Of the twenty or so Greek Revival residences in DeSoto Parish, all but five are one or one-and-a-half story cottages. Although many of the latter are quite impressive, none have the monumental stature of the five two story residences. In contrast to the more typical galleried cottage, Buena Vista is a full two-and-a-half stories and was built on a grand scale, as noted previously. In fact, of the five two story examples, it and Land's End (N.R.) are the two "mansions" of the parish due to their size, scale and pretension. The staircase at Buena Vista is a particularly noteworthy element in this regard. Whereas the typical staircase is largely functional and an adjunct to the central hall, the one at Buena Vista, as it sweeps to a full three stories, was clearly meant to be seen. Sliding pocket doors are also a feature seen on only more pretentious Greek Revival residences. Buena Vista is also remarkable for its wealth of Greek Revival woodwork, such as: (1) probably the finest doorway in the parish, featuring both fluted and paneled pilasters as well as two bands of dentils; (2) exterior pedimented shaped windows; (3) shoulder molded floor-length gallery windows; (4) eight mantels, in three different styles; and (5) elaborate, heavily proportioned, shoulder molded door and window surrounds on the interior. For these reasons, Buena Vista contributes mightily to the distinctively Greek Revival heritage of DeSoto Parish.

Historical Note:

Boykin Witherspoon, of South Carolina, began buying parcels of land for his plantation in 1839, and by the eve of the Civil War had emerged as one of the wealthiest planters in the parish. On November 29, 1859 he contracted with M. Robbins to build the present house.

The contract is as follows:

State of Louisiana, Parish of DeSoto
Nov 29 1859

Memorandum of an agreement or contract this day made & entered into between M. Robbins of the one part & Boykin Witherspoon of the other part (both citizens domicited [sic] in the State & Parish above written). Witnesseth that the said Robbins on his part agrees and binds himself to do the carpenters work in a workman like manner according to such plan and specifications as said Witherspoon may furnish or desire, the said Witherspoon on his part obligating himself to pay said Robbins one hundred dollars per month together with board & lodging for himself & horse and to pay monthly for the hands now in the employment of said Robbins or such of them as he may wish to keep, the same wages as he may have to pay the owners of said hands. The said Witherspoon having the right to put such of his own negroes as he may wish to work on said house under the direction & control of said Robbins.

Witness:
C. A. Edwards

B. Witherspoon
M. Robbins

Bibliographical References

Building contract dated November 29, 1859. Copy in possession of present owners. Reproduced in W. Darrell Overdyke, Louisiana Plantation Homes, 1965, New York, Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc.

Historic Structures Survey, DeSoto Parish, Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office.