Cultural Influences on Colonial Architecture in South Carolina

Sarah Hannah Newman, ‘10

South Carolina has a unique architectural history which is deeply tied to its pattern of settlement. The earliest permanent settlement in South Carolina began in 1670, but it was not until the 1730’s that the backcountry of the state was populated under the direction of Governor Robert Johnson. His plan called for the establishment of eleven townships throughout the colony of Carolina (figure 1). These townships were not heterogeneous mixtures of settlers, but rather groups from various homelands settling en masse in a particular area. Carolina became home to English, German, Swiss, French Huguenot, Dutch, and Scotch-Irish immigrants as well as small groups of Jews, Quakers, and Swedes. These townships, which prevented different groups from interacting on a significant level, enabled the peoples to maintain their native cultures, particularly through their architecture.

The pre-Revolutionary extant structures of the Low Country, Midland, and Upstate of South Carolina are evidence that the settlers preserved their native cultures by continuing the architectural traditions of their mother countries. While the builders attempted to recreate familiar architecture in their unfamiliar environment, the houses they built are not exact replicas of European dwellings because the settlers readily adapted their structures both in design and materials to their new environment. In order to assess the degree to which the colonial settlers incorporated the architectural styles of their homelands, two or three houses from each of the three regions of the state were selected for study. The houses included represent English, French Huguenot, Scotch-Irish, and Swiss-German settlement in South Carolina.

Houses studied in the Low Country include Mulberry Plantation, Middleburg Plantation, and Thorntree House, which represent English, French Huguenot, and Scotch-Irish settlers respectively. Mulberry Plantation, located in Berkeley County appears to be a transplant of the builder’s home in England to the raw frontier of Carolina (figure 2). Middleburg, however, is not such a strict reconstruction. Rather, it is evidence of the builder’s effort to adapt the structure to the sweltering heat of South Carolina. The French Huguenot builder employed local materials to construct a house that is a single room wide. This plan allowed for cross ventilation and was the precursor for the single house plan that became so popular in Charleston in the 18th century.

The Midlands of South Carolina was largely settled by German and Swiss immigrants in the townships of Orangeburg, Amelia, and Saxe Gotha. Two Swiss-German log cabins remain in what was formerly Saxe-Gotha, present day Lexington County. One of these, the Lawrence Corley log cabin was built in 1771 and maintains typical Swiss architecture in that the builder did not chink or daub the spaces between the logs. To protect from the elements and wild beasts, Lawrence Corley covered the interior of the walls with vertical wide boards, also typical of the Swiss style (figure 3).
While the Swiss and German settlers were the most prolific groups in the Midlands, the Scots-Irish were also present. In the 1730’s and 1740’s they settled primarily in Williamsburg and Kingston townships in the Low Country, but in the 1750’s, the new settlers abandoned the idea of settling in the townships and settled in an arc, stretching from present day Lancaster to Abbeville. A Scotch-Irish cabinet maker and his family were some of the first settlers of Fairfield County. Their home represents the epitome of practicality in its plan and decoration. Considered the first board house in the county, the structure is three stories with two rooms on each level and follows the I-house plan, meaning it has a chimney on either end. While European home designs typically placed the chimney in the center of the structures, many of the colonial settlers chose to place their chimneys on exterior walls because it allowed the heat to escape more efficiently in the summer.

The Guillebeau House is an example of an Upstate dwelling in which the builder placed the chimney on the exterior wall (figure 4). This home was built by a French Huguenot family, making the chimney placement even more noteworthy as the French Huguenots typically placed their chimneys in the center of their structures as can be seen in numerous houses in the French Creole settlements in Louisiana. The Guillebeau House is also remarkable due to its unique blending of cultural styles. The house was constructed just outside of the town of New Bordeaux in an area also populated by the Scots-Irish. The construction method is evidence that the Scots-Irish helped Andre Guillebeau build his home. While the house plan and roofing technique are distinctly French, the log construction and type of chimney shows Scotch-Irish influence. Additionally, the Guillebeau House is of architectural significance as it is the only extant structure in South Carolina which employs a poteaux sur sol construction method. In this technique, the builders laid the support beams atop stacked cypress blocks which could easily be replaced in the event that rot permeated these supports, rather than building on posts which were partially buried. Both the poteaux sur sol and poteaux en terre building methods were largely introduced by the West Indian Creoles in response to the hot, humid climate. Some of the early French settlers first built their homes directly on the ground as was typical of French architecture, but their houses rotted within a few years, causing them to adopt methods (i.e. poteaux sur sol and poteaux en terre) which raised the houses off of the ground.

The Bratton House, of Scotch-Irish origin, was also included in the study of the Upstate. It is evident that the builder relied on his knowledge of architectural styles from his homeland as he utilized a floor plan typical of Scotch-Irish homes in northern and western Scotland and Ireland. Additionally, the practicality of the design and utilitarian character of the decoration is characteristic of Scotch-Irish building.

The eight houses included in this study are evidence that the settlers of Carolina brought their architectural styles with them to the colony. This is not to say, however, that the colonial structures are exact replicas of structures in Europe. The settlers adapted their dwellings based on available materials and labor, as well as the climate. Additional modifications, such as those seen at the Guillebeau House, were the product of the intermingling of ethnic groups due to the proximity of their settlement. The townships, in which most of the immigrants settled, however, fostered an environment which allowed the settlers to preserve their native cultures through their architecture in their foreign environment.