

## **Folk Architecture and the I-House**

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Folk architecture refers to structures which do not follow architectural pattern books or blueprints for guidance, nor are they designed by professionally trained architects. They are usually constructed from materials that are available locally. Folk traditions are learned by a family member, another member in a community, or through an apprenticeship. Builders of folk architecture pass on their construction skills from one generation to the next. Folk builders use “a systematic method of design facilitated by a highly structured, traditional mental language (or architectural grammar).”<sup>1</sup> Local design styles are often manipulated by a folk designer to suit his particular needs so no two forms of a particular type of folk architecture are identical. Folk architecture varies from region to region and is influenced by the local environment including the climate and natural resources available in the area. In the South, for example, where pine was once abundant, wood was the predominant building material and porches served as outdoor rooms in order to keep families cool in the hot summer months. In addition, early settlers who came to the Eastern United States from Northern and Central Europe contributed to the regional patterns in material folk culture. English settlers influenced many forms of folk-housing that developed in some of these areas including the I-house. Depending upon what region in England settlers came from also impacted the way the I-house was constructed, such as the placement of the chimney.

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<sup>1</sup> Hubka, Thomas. “Just Folks Designing: Vernacular Designers and the Generation of Form.” *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, edited by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986: 428

When looking at a folk structure like the I-house, it is important to document both its primary and secondary characteristics. The primary characteristics define the form; when evaluating a folk structure this refers to the height and depth or general floor plan of the structure. Secondary characteristics include a building's facade, trim, porches, and other stylistic features.

From section to section the I-house varied in construction material from brick and stone to frame and logs. Chimneys might be central, inside end, outside end, or paired on the ridge, with regional dominance of specific practices. The floor plan was found to be highly variable. Lateral and rear appendages, front and rear porches, galleries, even classical columns appeared in great variety. But these qualities all I-houses unfailingly had in common: gables to the side, at least two rooms in length, one room deep, and two full stories in height.<sup>2</sup>

The Industrial Revolution and urbanization rapidly changed the role of folk construction throughout the Eastern United States. By the end of the Civil War, mail-order housing became available. Local materials were no longer a necessity for building houses and architectural pattern books became widely distributed. Montell and Morse have noted in *Kentucky Folk Architecture*, "Local builders could still manipulate the mail-order house kits to conform to local preferences. Thus the folk or vernacular process continued and is present in some instances even today."<sup>3</sup> Folk architectural types are becoming more and more of a rarity—wood decays, buildings are torn down and new construction is put in its place, highways and suburban developments are installed where older traditional folk housing once stood. For this reason, it is important to document and preserve the folk structures that remain extant today. Not only is it important to document the primary and secondary characteristics of these structures, it is also necessary to record

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<sup>2</sup> Hubka, Thomas. "Just Folks Designing: Vernacular Designers and the Generation of Form." *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, edited by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986: 428

<sup>3</sup> Montell, William L. and Michael L. Morse. *Kentucky Folk Architecture*. Kentucky: the University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, 1976: xi, xii.

information about the various owners and families that inhabited these buildings, the way the rooms and land surrounding the structures were used, and how the structures changed or were modified over time. The preservation and documentation of these structures helps to provide a cultural and historical record for future generations while providing a sense of continuity within a community.

### **The Chesser-Williams House**

I was first introduced to the Chesser-Williams house during a conditions assessment of the structure I conducted for an historic building materials course. The Chesser-Williams house is an I-house located in Gwinnett County in the Hog Mountain District, in the town of Buford, Georgia. The I-house is found throughout the United States and “of all old folk types, the I-house is by far the most widely distributed, notably as a rural dwelling.”<sup>4</sup> The Hog Mountain district of Gwinnett County was an agricultural and rural community. The builder of the Chesser-Williams house is unknown. The house is constructed from a braced frame adhered together with cut-nails and wooden pegs. Therefore, it must have been constructed sometime in the mid-nineteenth century since cut nails were not available before 1830 but not readily available until the mid-late nineteenth century. The Chesser-Williams house has had multiple owners; however, the most documentation exists for two families: the Chessers and the Williams. Unfortunately, the Gwinnett County Courthouse burned in 1870 so the earliest owner of the house can only be traced as far back as 1875 to William H. Bonds. Bonds appears in the 1870 Census records although the town in Gwinnett is not recorded. In 1870 William Bonds was listed as a

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<sup>4</sup> Kniffen, Fred B. “Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion.” *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, edited by Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986: 9

thirty-nine year old farmer, married to wife Nancy, age thirty, with one daughter, Dinah, age one.

Thomas G. Jacobs purchased the property from William H. Bonds in 1875. The house passed from Jacobs to B.E. Strickland in 1878. Strickland sold it to William F. Mitchell in 1879. That same year Benjamin Chesser, a Civil War veteran, purchased the property. The U.S. Census records of 1880 and 1900 list Benjamin Chesser's occupation as a farmer. Chesser sold the house and ninety acres to L.M. Brand in 1901. He also sold an additional twelve acres to Owen G. Davis that same year. L.M. Brand sold the property to J.B. Clack in 1905; that same year the property was sold to C.W. Bradford. Bradford passed the house to D.C. Bradford in 1913; he passed it on to W.E. Bradford in 1924. That same year W.E. Bradford sold the property to John Newton Williams and the house has remained in the Williams family ever since. The house passed to John Newton Williams's son James Earnest Broadus Williams and then on to his son, Jerald Williams. Jerald Williams is the house's current owner; he was born in the house in 1935.

The home is currently situated on thirty acres and once contained eighty acres according to Jerald Williams, until his grandfather sold off fifty acres sometime before he was born. Jerald Williams's father once farmed the land and his crops included corn and cotton. Jerald described several outbuildings once located on the property including a smokehouse, corncrib, and notched log barn. Jerald's mother lived in the house until the mid-1980s with only a cold water sink and no indoor plumbing. Jerald recently agreed to donate the house to the Gwinnett Environmental and Heritage Center for them to use as an educational museum for children and other visitors. If all goes according to plan, the house will be moved six miles from its current location in the next year or so.

## **Architectural Summary of the Exterior and Surrounding Landscape**

The main section of the I-house measures approximately 40' x 16.' The attached kitchen measures 15' x 18'. The house contains 1,570 square feet. Three side light panels flank both sides of this main door to the house. There is no evidence that the exterior of the house was ever painted except for remnants of green paint on the trim surrounding the front door. Additionally, remnants of decorative paintings exist on the exterior of the building. The front facade of the house is adorned with acorns and oak leaves under the front eaves and two scalloped borders flank both sides of the front entrance way. Cut nails are seen throughout the exterior; newer portions contain wire nails. The exterior is made up of clapboard siding, sills, and joists, and the wood is circular sawn. The house's roof is constructed from standing seam metal. The roof decking contains lines of nails that run horizontal indicating that the original roof was constructed from shingles. Sure enough, an earlier historical photograph of the Chesser family standing in front of the house shows a shingled roof. One of the finer details on the house is the eave returns. The chimney is made of granite and is located on the south facade of the house. The soft mortar that holds the chimney together is made up of clay, lime, and water. Remnants of two additional chimneys exist on the west and north exterior sides of the home. Stone piers are the foundation on which the sills rest. There are three porches attached to the house's exterior; each porch has a metal roof. The most prominent one is on the front (east) facade of the house. This porch was built in the 1950s and has a shed roof; however, the earlier historical photograph of the house at the time the Chesser family occupied the residence shows a hipped-roof porch with more decorative fretwork and a banister surrounding it. This porch measures 31' 1" x 9' 11." The other two porches are

on the north and south exteriors off of the kitchen and side doors lead into the kitchen from these two secondary porches. The north side porch measures 5' 8.5" x 10' 2." The south side porch measures 5' 10" x 18' 5." The main windows on the home are nine over six single-hung windows.

Today, oaks and pines are currently scattered throughout the yard. An outhouse with diamond shaped seats is located on the west side of the property about 110' from the house. Remnants of a well are located on the south side of the property about 30' from the kitchen addition. The home sits close to the main road which was paved in the 1950s and is currently set back 31'10" from the street. Until the late 1950s Jerald Williams's parents maintained a swept dirt yard. It was not until the late 1950s that their property and the majority of their neighbors planted grass lawns.

### **Architectural Summary of the Interior**

Except for room 104, all of the rooms on the first floor contain hand-planed wood boards on the floors, ceilings, and walls. The rooms on the first floor contain rudimentary electrical wiring—light bulbs hang from the ceilings. Room 101 measures 15' x 15.' This room has four nine over six single-hung windows and contains wall-to-wall carpeting. The room's walls are painted mint green; paint chipped off of the north wall shows a pink layer of paint. A dark green layer of paint is also evident. The ceiling is painted white. According to Jerald Williams this room never contained any decorative paintings like those in the hallway and parlor. Room 101's south wall contains a mantel, now boarded, but once serving as a fireplace. Room 102 serves as the home's hallway; carpet lines the floor. Room 102 measures 15' 3" x 7' 3." Room 102's three doors, which lead to room 101, 103, and 105, are painted with a well preserved faux wood-grain design. Acorn trim

is painted on the foyer walls and a faux black wainscot adorns the wall. The hallway also contains a steep, narrow, uneven set of stairs which leads to rooms 201 and 202. The staircase is 11' 4.5" in length, its width is 3' 1" and the individual step length is 8.5." Room 103 served as the house's parlor. The room measures 15' 3" x 15' 2." There are two six over six single-hung windows and two nine over six single-hung windows in the room. This room contains an elaborate decorative medallion painting which covers the entire wood paneled ceiling and is accented by a decorative apple frieze—one of the apples has a bite taken out of it. The walls are also painted and there is a faux wainscot for the bottom trim. There is also a constructed mantel piece where the fireplace once was. Over the mantel, a trompe l'oeil scene of country life adorns the north wall and a painted frame surrounds the picture.

Room 104 is the rear kitchen addition and measures 15'x 18" and 7' 6" high. The few wood floor boards along the south wall that are not covered by vinyl measure 1' x 6" wide. The room contains six over six single-hung windows. There is a closet on the kitchen's east side. On the southwest corner of the ceiling it is possible to see where the wood stove was once located. Room 105 is a small room off of the kitchen once used as the kitchen's pantry. The room measures 5' 4" x 7' 4" and consists of wood paneled walls with a vinyl floor. The ceiling is made of wood panels. There is one four over four single-hung window on the north wall of the room.

Room 201 is located on the second floor's south side. The quarter-turn stairs surround part of the north wall and a small portion of the west wall. The stairs' railing separates the floor of the room from the stairs area. Room 201 measures 15' 3" x 22' 8." The windows are single hung and have no trim. Two of the windows are boarded up.

There are two six over six single-hung windows on the south wall and one nine over six single-hung window on the east and west walls. The floor and ceiling are wood paneled in room 201 and 202; although, the wood is not hand-planed. There is no evidence of wallpaper or paint on the walls in room 201 or 202. Very basic electrical wiring is evident. The door in room 201 is 2' x 8.5" inches wide and connects this room to room 202. Room 202 is the most structurally unsound and because there are no lights in the room it was difficult and dangerous to measure the interior. Room 202 roughly measures 17' by 15.' There are four windows in this room that have been boarded up, two on the north wall and one each on the east and west walls. The windows appear to be nine over six single-hung from the exterior of the house.

### **Decorative Paintings on the Chesser-Williams House**

The liveliest feature on the house is the decorative paintings on the interior and exterior most likely painted during the time the Chesser family lived there. Eugene Smith, who is the great grandson of Benjamin Chesser, and the house's current owner, Jerald Williams, who grew up in the house, both explained that the decorative paintings were completed by an itinerant German folk painter in exchange for room and board while it was owned by the Chesser family. Eugene Smith recalls his mother telling him the story about one of Benjamin Chesser's children who was five years old who stood watching the painter. The painter said to the boy, "Did you bite that apple?" He was joking with the boy about one of the apples in the apple frieze in the living room that he painted with a bite taken out of it.

Decorative interior painting became popular in the eighteenth century, particularly faux wood-graining and marbling on doors and wainscots. By the mid-nineteenth century

with the advances in paint technology interior painting was even more widespread as was wallpaper. Many of the painters were experienced in plain and ornamental house-painting including graining, marbling, stenciling, and freehand painting as well as wallpaper installation. Numerous painters also decorated furniture, signs, coaches, and even ships along the coast.<sup>5</sup> James H. Craig, in his documentary work, *The Early Arts and Crafts of North Carolina 1699-1840*, for the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art, compiled newspaper advertisements placed by painters as well as advertisements for apprentices for hire to the painting trade. Additionally county court minutes list new apprentices to the painting trade—as young as a four year old African-American boy and as old as a young man of seventeen. All of the advertisements and court minutes Craig compiled span from 1788-1840.<sup>6</sup>

Knowledge of these painters is limited and they seemed to have “varied significantly in training and manner of operation” according to decorative paint historian Laura A.W. Phillips.<sup>7</sup> Some of the painters were itinerants, “while others were resident artists who practiced their trade in their surrounding neighborhoods.”<sup>8</sup> Some of the painters appear to have been highly-trained while others were self-taught. Books were readily available on graining, marbling, stenciling, and house and ship painting by the nineteenth century. One documented painter, Fred Swanton, who painted four houses in Middle Tennessee sometime around 1886-1888, was originally from Buffalo, New York

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<sup>5</sup> Little, Nina Fletcher. *American Decorative Wall Painting*. New York: Old Sturbridge Village in cooperation with Studio Publications, 1952: xv.

<sup>6</sup> Craig, James H. *The Arts and Crafts in North Carolina 1699-1840*. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Old Salem Inc., 1966: 95-106.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, Laura A.W. “Grand Illusions: Decorative Interior Painting in North Carolina.” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV*, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991:157.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

and “formerly painted scenery and wagons for a circus before he left to start a new life as an interior painter.”<sup>9</sup>

The clientele was as varied as the painters themselves. As might be expected, some were wealthy landowners, and entrepreneurs who occupied large architecturally important houses. At the same time a surprising number can be described as “middle class” and lived in relatively simple vernacular dwelling...In short, decorative painting was commissioned by both those who could afford fancy wallpapers and other decorative devices as well to those who could acquire the services of a traveling painter in exchange for room and board and perhaps a little money.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes this form of painting was done using a combination of stencils and freehand painting. Stencils and rollers were also available for faux wood-grain painting. According to Maryellen Higginbotham, a wallpaper and paint historian at the Cobb Landmarks and Historical Society, decorative ceiling painting reached its zenith in the 1880s and 1890s. Many interior painters who painted on ceilings would trace their designs using handmade or purchased stencil patterns, or both, and then removed the stencils and painted free hand. From her research and fieldwork on decorative interior house paintings Laura A.W. Phillips speculates that the same itinerant painter may have painted three houses in North Carolina including the Rucker-Eaves House in Rutherfordton, the Edwards-Maxwell House in Alleghany County, a house in rural Chatham County, and the Damascus Methodist Church in Lumpkin, Georgia, as well as the Calhoun-Perry House in Texas.

All [these houses] were built between ca. 1870 and ca. 1900, and all appear to have been painted in the same approximate timespan, though not necessarily at the same time as construction. Each boasts elaborate stenciling combined with free-hand painting in a series of designs and repetitive motifs...With a collection of sixteen identified artistic traits, designs, and details, each exhibits a distinctive combination of at least nine elements, and most share twelve or more.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Van West, Carroll. “Middle Tennessee Houses and the Plain Painter Tradition: The Work of Fred Swanton in the Late Victorian Era.” *Tennessee Historical Society Quarterly* Spring 1994: 56.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, Laura A.W. “Grand Illusions: Decorative Interior Painting in North Carolina.” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IV*, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991: 57.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, Laura A.W. “Rutherfordton House Plays Role in Mystery Painting.” *North Carolina Preservation* 75, Spring /Summer 1989: 17.

Maryellen Higginbotham believes that the Chesser-Williams house may have also been painted by this same anonymous itinerant painter. Unfortunately, we may never know for sure whether this is the case or not. One of the features that appear on some of the interiors Phillips believes to be related, including the Old Damascus Methodist Church, is a technique called smoke painting. When one takes a careful look at the blackened areas on the ceiling outside of the red and gold medallion in the parlor of the Chesser-Williams house it becomes evident that smoke painting was employed by the painter here as well. “While the paint was still wet, the artist tracked candle or lamp soot at close range underneath the ceiling. The result was what has often been described as ‘smoky swirls’ which are fixed in the paint.”<sup>12</sup>

Most likely, this anonymous itinerant painter will never be identified nor the method by which he learned to paint revealed. There is a possibility that the itinerant painter apprenticed with another painter or may have learned from some sort of passed-down tradition; without proper documentation it is impossible to know for sure. Regardless of whom the itinerant painter was or where he received his inspiration or training to paint, the interior and exterior painted decor on the Chesser-Williams house is an important and charming feature of the structure.

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<sup>12</sup> Moyer, Matthew and Sandra Dixon. “A History and Commentary of the Old Damascus Methodist Church.” *Westville Living History Museum*, 1986.

## **An Outline of the Occupants of the Chesser-Williams House\***

**William R. Bonds** sold the house to **Thomas G. Jacobs** in 1875. Bonds appeared in the 1870 Gwinnett County Census records. In 1870 Williams Bonds was listed as a thirty-nine year old farmer, married to wife Nancy, age thirty, with one daughter, Dinah, age one. He is also recorded in the publication *A History of Gwinnett County Georgia* as a Justice of the Peace in the year 1866. Thomas G. Jacobs is recorded in the 1870 Gwinnett County Census records as a forty-one year old dentist (note: it was difficult to read the Census but I believe this is what it said). The value of his estate was \$3,000 and the value of his personal property was \$1,000.

The house passes from Jacobs to **B.E. Strickland** in 1878. Strickland sells it to **William F. Mitchell** in 1879. William F. Mitchell sells the house to **Benjamin Chesser** that same year.

Benjamin Chesser was 49 when the 1880 U.S. Census was taken. His wife is listed as Amanda Jane and was 43 in 1880. Amanda's maiden name was Loughridge. She died in 1884 and is buried in the Hog Mountain Cemetery. In the 1880 Census their children are listed as follows:

Colonel W., son, age 14, at school  
Pink Riley, son, age 14, works on farm  
Emma Aslee, daughter, age 10, farm hand  
Robert B., son, age 9, at school  
Jourdegan, son, age 7 at school  
John J., son, age 5, at home  
Joseph T. son, age 3, at home

### **1890 Tax Digest Information for Benjamin Chesser Hog Mountain District, Gwinnett County, GA**

Acreage: 115  
Value of the land and buildings: \$518.00  
Total debts: \$150.00  
Value of furniture and household goods: \$55.00  
Watches, silver plates, jewelry: \$2.00  
Livestock: \$307.00  
Carriage, wagons, buggies, plantation and mechanical tools: \$79.00  
Value of all other property not before enumerated: \$4.00  
Aggregate value of whole property: \$1,115  
Amount of tax on poles: \$1.00

In the 1900 U.S. Census Benjamin Chesser is listed at 68 years old, his second wife, Hannah I. is listed as 36 years old. Her maiden name was Fountain. In the 1900 Census their children and farm hands are listed as follows:

Lee E. son, age 13, at school  
Jippie?, daughter, age 10, at school  
Pearl E., daughter, age 7, at home  
Rowe, son, age 4, at home  
Samuel D., son, age 2, at home  
Moon, Mack, border, 16, farmhand

**1901 Tax Digest Information for Benjamin Chesser  
Hog Mountain District, Gwinnett County, GA**

Acreage: 116  
Value of the land and buildings: \$696.00  
Value of furniture and household goods: \$40.00  
Livestock: \$89.00  
Carriage, wagons, buggies, plantation and mechanical tools: \$45.00  
Aggregate value of whole property: \$870

After Benjamin Chesser sold the property in 1901 he moved to Rainsville, Alabama according to Ken Berryhill the great grandson of Amanda Lockridge, Benjamin Chesser's first wife. Benjamin and Hannah are buried together at Town Creek Cemetery in Rainsville, Alabama (formerly known as Chavis, Alabama).

**L.M. Brand** purchased the property from Chesser in 1901. He then sold it to **J.B. Clack** in 1905. That same year it passed to **C.W. Bradford** and on to **D.C. Bradford** in 1913. Census information for C.W. Bradford and D.C. Bradford is unknown although they both appear in the Hog Mountain district tax digests for the years they are presumed to have owned the Chesser-Williams House.

**1910 Tax Digest information for C.W. Bradford  
Hog Mountain District, Gwinnett County, GA**

Acreage: 543  
Value of the land and buildings: \$3,200.00  
Debts: \$500.00  
Furniture and household goods: \$25.00  
Livestock: \$200  
Carriage, wagons, buggies, plantation and mechanical tools: \$50.00  
Aggregate value of whole property: \$2,975.00  
Poll tax: \$1.00

**1919 Tax Digest Information for D.C. Bradford  
Hog Mountain District, Gwinnett County, GA**

Acreage: 80  
Value of the land and buildings: \$800.00  
No other information is listed for D.C. Bradford.

In 1924 David C. Bradford passed the property to **W.E. Bradford**, that same month it was sold to **John Newton Williams**.

John Newton Williams's was married to Octavia Williams. The 1930 Census lists John Newton Williams at 62 years of age; no occupation is listed. His wife, Mrs. Octavia Williams is listed as 58 years old. **James Earnest Broadus Williams**, John Newton, Williams's son was born in 1906 and was married to Lillie Bell Williams. She was born in 1907. James Earnest Broadus Williams moved into his father's house with his wife sometime shortly after they were married. The son of James Earnest Broadus, **Jerald Williams**, was born in the house in 1935. Jerald Williams moved away from the house when he married Sue Tanner in 1954. Jerald Williams had one brother, Jack Williams who was also born in the house.

### **1939 Tax Digest Information for James Earnest Broadus Williams**

Acreage: 30

Value of the land and buildings: \$300.00

Household Furniture: \$50.00

Livestock: \$250.00

Agricultural implements: \$10.00

Aggregate value of whole property: \$750.00

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\* All census and tax records were researched at the Gwinnett Historical Society in Lawrenceville, GA.