

ADAPTIVE FEATURES OF "CRACKER" HOUSING IN NORTH-CENTRAL FLORIDA

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During the period from about 1880 to 1920, a style of folk housing called "cracker architecture" evolved in the Southeastern United States. Such houses are characterized by having highly-pitched roofs, porches on several sides, and breezeways between sections of the house. Often the houses were built in several parts at different times and a section of porch might become a breezeway separating an older section from a later addition.

This study examines cracker houses in North-Central Florida and considers cracker-style architecture as an adaptation to the Florida climate. Four houses were analyzed in Marion and Alachua Counties (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). The four are similar in design, although two are two-story and two are single-story structures. The plan of the E. L. Smith house is typical (Fig. 2).

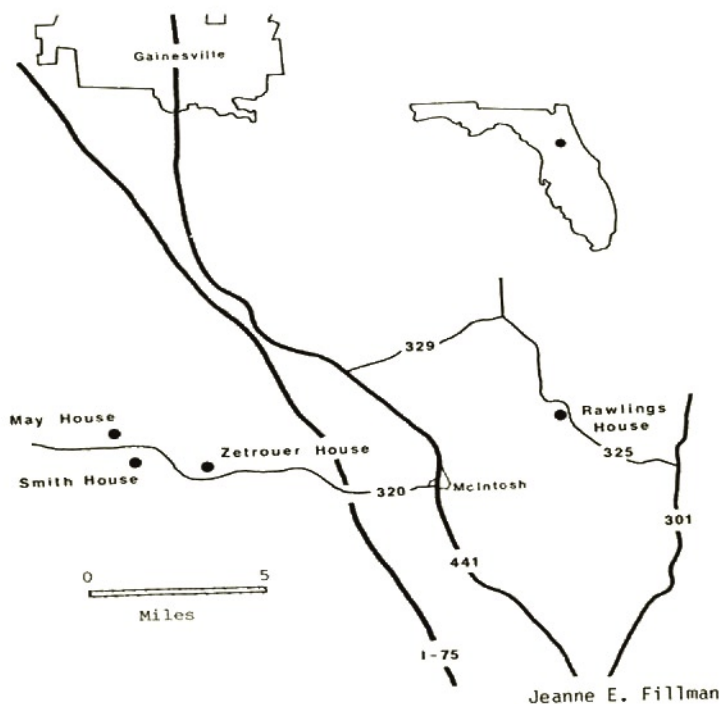


Fig. 1. Location of study sites.

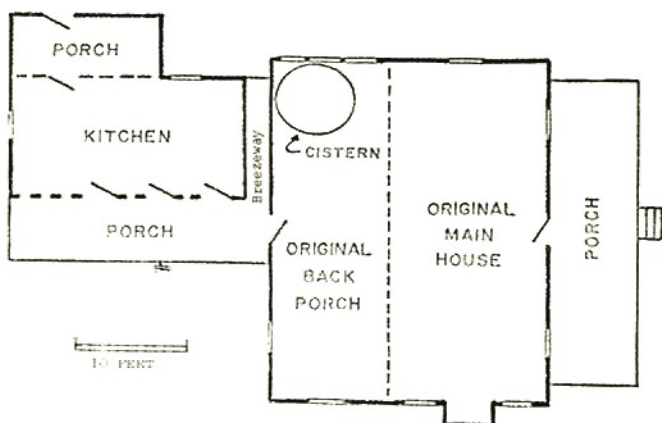


Fig. 2. Plan of the E. L. Smith house. North is at top. The chert cistern held drinking water which drained from the roof.

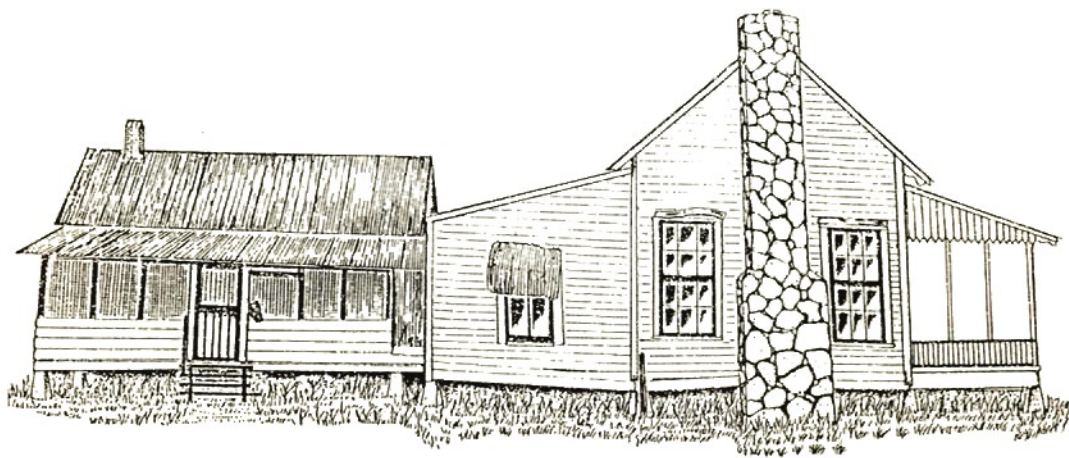


Fig. 3. The E. L. Smith house, view looking north.

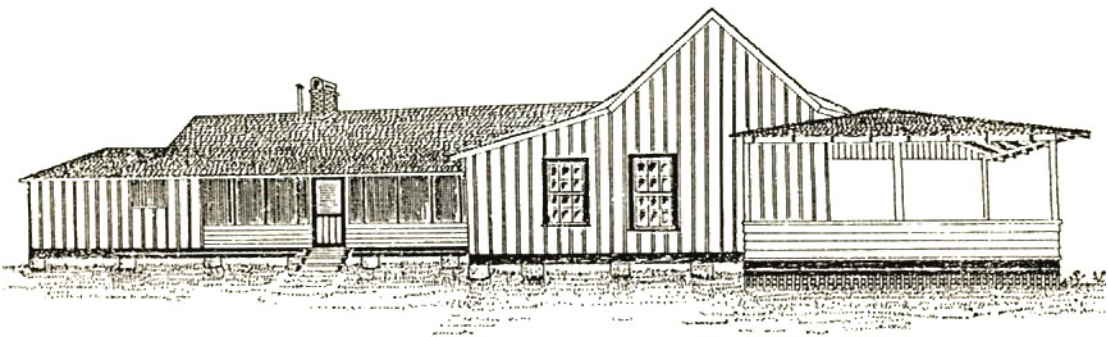


Fig. 4. The Marjorie Kennan Rawlings house, view looking north. The central, peak-roofed section was the original house. The section to the left is a kitchen and dining addition separated by a breezeway. Other additions are north of the original house.



Fig. 5. The May house, view looking east. A kitchen section (left) was added to the original two-story section.

The houses rested on wooden pilings. Pilings served three purposes: ventilation, protection from standing water, and protection from termites and other pests. The pilings on which the Smith house currently stands are a mix of original live oak blocks and concrete blocks. Concrete pilings replaced many original wooden blocks in the 1930's after severe weather destroyed some structures.

The walls of the houses are oriented along cardinal directions. Walls were made of local timber, such as cypress, heart pine, and oak. Heart pine, found in abundance in North-Central Florida, was the predominant building material of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mr. E. L. Smith remembers his grandfather, who built the farm, saying that the house lumber came from a small mill two miles from the farmstead. For working in the mill, he received finished wood in lieu of money.

Simple board-and-batten or clapboard construction was used in all four houses. These styles required little board preparation (as opposed, for example, to tongue-and-groove), yet insured good insulation. Wet weather would swell boards, resulting in a tight fit.

The walls were pierced by many windows for cross-ventilation. Window frames were wide, long, and spaced close together. Breezeways also promoted ventilation, and were found separating the kitchen from the main house. Some consider the kitchen separation a response to fire hazard, but persons interviewed in this study reported the separation was an adaptation to climate (i.e., ventilation function).

Though windows and breezeways helped cool the houses, notwithstanding interior rooms would become uncomfortably hot, and porches provided some relief. Wide and open porches, sometimes covering almost the entire length of the houses, are found in the study houses, and were typical of cracker architecture generally. On the Rawlins house, a wide porch shades the walls on the east side from the rising sun, and in the afternoon, a west side porch shades the late sun.

The high pitch of the cracker-house roof was also an adaptive feature to the Florida summer heat. The steep pitch provided air space above the living areas which acted as insulation. Originally the roofs were covered with cypress shakes, but later corrugated metal roofs became common.

The architectural features examined thus far show adaptation to the hot, humid Florida summer. But winter cold also had to be considered. For heating the sitting and bedrooms there were chimneys. These varied in style and design. In the Zetrouer house a massive (ten by six feet) chert and mud-base mortar chimney was built inside the original building some four feet from the wall. Other chimneys of different design were found in other parts of the house. An unusual feature of the May house is a chimney on the second floor, used apparently to heat second floor rear rooms. No first-floor base could be located for this construction. Trees and decorative vegetation also helped ameliorate temperature extremes. Deciduous trees, such as the pecan, provided summer shade, but allowed sunshine to fall on the house in the winter.

The features of cracker-style architecture in North-Central Florida are many. Floor plans varied among the four houses of the study, though multiple additions to the original dwelling were common to the plans of all. Other recurring elements include extensive use of porches, windows, and breezeways for ventilation; high pitched roofs of wooden shakes (later replaced with metal); and pilings of live oak, cypress, or heart pine. In the days before cheap centralized heating and air conditioning, these houses were well suited to the Florida climate.