

Throughout the late 18th century and the early 19th century, most people reflecting on history primarily think about the rise of the United States. Many people forget about the history and cultural diffusion which took place only a few hundred miles away from the US. During this time, the first successful slave revolt took place. This monumental piece of history took place in Haiti. Before its independence, Haiti was split under French and Spanish rule. What Haiti is famously known for is their huge role in the sugarcane market. With the use of slaves, the French and Spanish were able to prosper their countries, while oppressing the people of another. That all changed on January 1st, 1804, when Haitian slaves successfully revolted and won their countries independence.ⁱ However, that is what Haitian history is famously known for. This paper on the other hand will talk about equally important Haitian history, which is typically not discussed.

During the period of revolution in Haiti, approximately 20,000 Haitians immigrated to Louisiana, most finding residence in New Orleans.ⁱⁱ Also during this time, New Orleans experienced a cultural rejuvenation due to all the culture the immigrants brought with them. This instance of cultural diffusion changed many aspects of New Orleans life, all the way from basic interactions between people to how certain tasks like farming were carried out. However, the diffusion this paper will focus on is the diffusion of the art of architecture from Haiti to its implementation in New Orleans.

Before the mass immigration of Haitians to New Orleans, most of the city's architecture consisted of Spanish architecture. Due to the Great New Orleans Fire of 1788 and another fire in 1830, Spanish architecture quickly began to fade, and Haitian architecture rose. By 1830, the majority of New Orleans architecture was based off two famous Haitian architecture styles, shotgun houses and gingerbread houses.

The most prevalent style of home in New Orleans is the shotgun house. The shotgun house is a style of house suspected to derive from Port Au Prince, Haiti. The shotgun house has lots of history behind it, the most notable being its connection to slaves. Shotgun houses have a relatively standard construction in that they are one room wide and are built longer rather than wider. While this may seem insignificant, this is a similar construction to slave shacks in Haiti. Slave shacks were typically narrow buildings that were built in the shape of a cube. The typical slave shack was 12' on each side and was very close to a neighboring slave shack. It is believed that the architecture of slave shacks influenced the architecture of shotgun houses.ⁱⁱⁱThe construction of shotgun houses is very similar to that of a slave shack. Shotgun houses are one room wide, like a slave shack, and are very close to its neighboring house. The difference in a shotgun house is the added luxury of length. Even this added luxury of length is believed to have significance. This added luxury of length did not appear in Haiti or New Orleans until the appearance of freed slaves, thus the assumption that freed slaves continued the architectural style of slave shacks in their new homes but added length. In this, the shotgun house was born.

While the first true shotgun house originated in Haiti, this style of architecture soon moved with Haitian immigrants to New Orleans. The New Orleans shotgun house is identical to its partner the Haitian shotgun house in almost every way. Multiple shotgun houses in Haiti were measured to be on average 13'x65'.^{iv} Its New Orleans counterpart is on average 13'x64'.^v The individual room sizes in New Orleans homes were on average 12'x12', matching the dimensions of the typical slave shack.^{vi} However, the beauty of art comes in its differences, not its similarities. The art of Haitian architecture experienced a development in the initial construction of shotgun houses, but the development did not stop there. Once in New Orleans, the art of Haitian architecture continued to diversify with immigrants adding a second level to shotgun

houses and the addition of balconies. In the end, Haitian immigration brought a new style of art to Louisiana, a style which continues to be implemented in different and unique ways.

As well as shotgun houses, Haitian immigration brought another style of house that was and still is popular in both Haiti and New Orleans. This style of house is referred to as gingerbread houses. While shotgun houses were heavily slave influenced, gingerbread houses were primarily occupied by the middle class and evolved around influences of the middle class. The style of this home is defined by “graceful outlines with a sturdy structure that may be of wood, brick, or a mixture of the two”^{vii}. Even more, the style incorporates an abundance of fancy woodwork, bulls eye windows, domes, and balconies. However, it could be said that the style of house is most famous for its unique color combinations. These typically include green, red, yellow, blue, and maroon.

While gingerbread houses were full blown houses in Haiti, its New Orleans counterpart was similar but different. In New Orleans, instead of full-blown houses, the gingerbread architecture is more so an addition rather than a full house. For example, the gothic like woodwork that gingerbread houses are well known for has been added to many parts of the city’s architecture. Even more, the style in which balconies were built for gingerbread houses 200 years ago is still incorporated in other styles of architecture today.

As of now, New Orleans does have a few full gingerbread houses, however, many of the worlds gingerbread houses are collapsing. It is believed that only 40% of gingerbread houses remain in vital condition.^{viii} This is primarily due to two factors. The first is the unforgiving earthquake that hit Haiti, thus collapsing many of the gingerbread houses. The other is their primarily wooden structure withering after hundreds of years. While much of this form of art is crumbling, many are determined to protect and continue the fame of gingerbread houses. As a

result, multiple teams have been instituted to preserve the remaining gingerbread houses, including the one's in New Orleans. While the situation may appear to be gloomy, if one were to visit New Orleans, they would certainly see the presence of gingerbread houses, whether that be a full-blown house or the incorporation of gingerbread architecture. Above all, with the ongoing implementation of certain gingerbread features in other kinds of architecture, gingerbread houses will continue to be represented in some way throughout New Orleans.

Over time, the implementation of these two styles has slowly but surely developed to satisfy modern needs and wants. For example, it is not uncommon for modern shotgun houses to have a second floor or basement. Even more, modern shotgun houses are no longer as narrow as their historical counterpart. While shotgun houses of the past were typically 13' across, modern houses have been built at 20' across and sometimes more. The figures below compare a modern shotgun floorplan to an old shotgun floorplan.

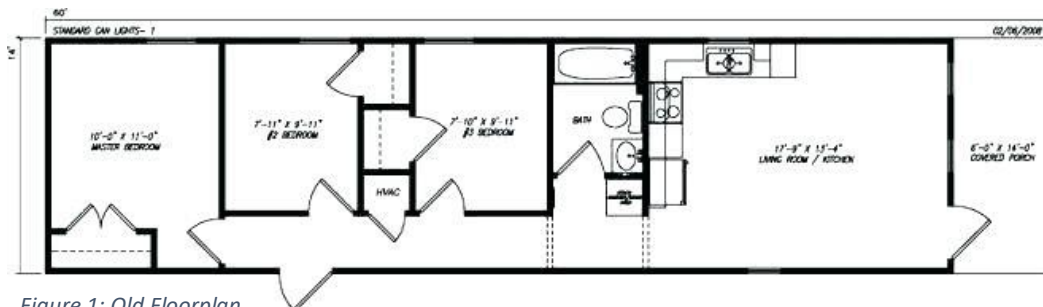


Figure 1: Old Floorplan

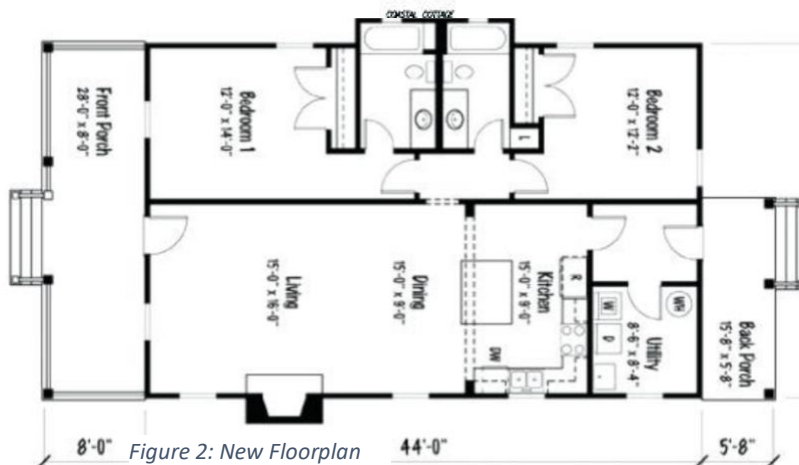


Figure 2: New Floorplan

Over time, the construction of modern shotgun houses morphed to include two room width, rather than one, and the addition of a back porch. However, this is only one example, and the differences between past shotgun houses with that of new can vary on a case by case basis. As for gingerbread houses, while the population of full-blown gingerbread houses continues to deplete, their features are becoming ever more popular throughout New Orleans, specifically the gothic like woodwork. Gothic woodwork no longer only appears on shotgun houses or gingerbread houses but almost all other styles of architecture in New Orleans. Beyond woodwork, even gingerbread style chimineas, windows, balconies, and doors are being incorporated throughout New Orleans architecture. In the end, this continuous and growing use of gingerbread features as well as the continuous building of shotgun houses just goes to show the extent in which Haitian architecture continues to diffuse throughout New Orleans, even after 200 years.

Ultimately, shotgun houses and gingerbread house features continue to act as the base of New Orleans architecture. However, this form of art was not diffused without difficulty. Through successful slave revolts and mass immigration patterns, Haitian immigrants managed to diffuse a style of art, which has taken over an entire city. Shotgun homes continue to be the most popular house in New Orleans, while gingerbread features continue to be incorporated all across New Orleans. Even some shotgun houses incorporate gingerbread features, such as bright colors and the addition of fancy woodwork. In the end, the 18th and 19th century includes much more history than just the rise and fall of governments, it also includes the diffusion of an art form that has continued to be implemented for centuries.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/haitian-independence-proclaimed>.

ⁱⁱ *River of Faith: 300 Years as a New Orleans Catholic Community, 1718-2018*. Clarion Herald Publishing Company, 2018, clarionherald.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/page26.pdf. Pg. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20831835>, 69.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 57.

^v *Ibid*.

^{vi} *Ibid*.

^{vii} "Haiti's Gingerbread House's." *Watchtower ONLINE LIBRARY*, wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/101994570.

^{viii} Revolvly, LLC. "*Gingerbread House (Architecture)*" on *Revolvly.com*. [www.revolvly.com/page/Gingerbread-house-\(architecture\)](http://www.revolvly.com/page/Gingerbread-house-(architecture)).

^{ix} By. "Acfirehire.info." *Acfirehireinfo*, acfirehire.info/shotgun-house-floor-plans/.