Louisiana House Types

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Perhaps nowhere else in the United States does the landscape so clearly reflect the imprint of varied cultural strains as it does in Louisiana. French expansion followed the waterways, and to this day the cultural pattern of the lowlands stands in marked contrast to that of the pine hills, settled originally by overland migrants from the deep and border South. The theretofore sparsely populated prairies of southwestern Louisiana received an influx of settlers from northern states during the last quarter of the 19th century; the cultural imprint is highly reminiscent of the Mid-West.

The diversity of cultural pattern is obvious even to the casual observer; to the trained geographer it presents a challenge in the matter of a critical evaluation and classification of the elements responsible for the differences. The logical approach to culturogeographic regions would appear to be through the quantitative and qualitative consideration of the cultural forms of the landscape, by a method analogous to that employed by anthropologists in arriving at culture regions, or in establishing culture relationships.¹

For Louisiana, house types are an element of culture possessing great diagnostic value in regional differentiation. Hence, they were employed as

¹ The term “culturogeographic” is advanced to fill the need for a word importing the cultural forms of the geographic landscape. A culturogeographic region differs from a geographic region in that only cultural forms are considered.

² Notably exemplified in the works of Erland Nordenskiöld and members of his school. A recent and stimulating study along these lines is “An Analysis of the Material Culture of the Tupi Peoples,” S. Klimek and W. Milke, American Anthropologist, N. S. 37, 1935, pp. 71-91.
the opening wedge in the attack, and it is with the identity and distribution of house types in Louisiana that this paper is concerned.

**METHODOLOGY**

The first attempt at classification involved the detailed analysis of several hundred houses. A card file was devised, embracing headings for each of the constituent elements of the individual house: plan, roof, chimney, porches, appendages, paint, windows, height, etc. As each of these elements was encountered in new form it was given a card and number under its proper heading. On the field sheets each dwelling was analyzed by means of the index. The location of each house was recorded to the nearest tenth of a mile, to permit of relocation and to facilitate mapping.

Almost the sole virtue of this system is its completeness. It is slow; it involves an unwieldy mass of data; and its very detail obscures the ready perception of the essential form of the structure. In place of the index system there was gradually developed a largely graphic method of representing the form of the dwelling. A few strokes are sufficient to indicate all essential details concerning plan, roof, porches, appendages, height, etc. Separate columns on the new field sheets provide for the classification of each structure according to broad categories of age and class. Qualities other than the aforementioned were largely neglected, being noted only where regionally conspicuous. The defection is not so serious as might first appear, since it was early learned that certain elements show little variation, and may be disregarded.

Employing the new system it was possible to proceed much faster, some 1,700 houses being registered on the banner day. The state was thoroughly traversed (see route, map, Fig. 1), with a grand total recording of about 15,000 houses. To effect a thorough sampling every dwelling visible from the road was included, and old roads were alternated with modern highways.

Urban centers were disregarded in the enumeration, not because they are not significant, but because they introduce complexities out of all proportion to the areas they occupy. Also cities, and even large towns, frequently maintain a large measure of independence of local cultural environment, exhibiting the varied ideas of a heterogeneous population, and aping the practices of groups far removed. Louisiana is a highly rural state; the inclusion of urban centers could in nowise seriously alter the results. At most, cities would appear on the maps as inconspicuous islands.

The analysis of the field data brought forth many difficult problems. Neither houses nor other cultural forms can be classified in a manner exactly analogous to that used by biologists. The biologist never finds the tail of a lion grafted to the body of a cow; the classifier of cultural forms has no such assurance. He must judiciously generalize, and he can never be completely objective. Without the necessary historical and comparative data he cannot safely accept apparent genetic relationships. In his morphologic data he must look for central themes, and must temporarily obscure minor variations in the individual forms. The correctness of his selection of central themes or motifs may find support in the facts of distribution. That is, should he find that what he suspects to be the minor variants of a theme have a common areal distribution, he may with some assurance group them together.

A preliminary examination of the field data revealed that virtually every structure would fall into one of four general classes: (1) those with sideward-facing gables; (2) those whose gables face the front; (3) those having pyramidal roofs; and (4) those with shed roofs. The latter two classes are numerically insignificant, while the first two show considerable
regional overlap. It was immediately evident that further division was necessary.

Of those structures with sideward-facing gables one element showing great diagnostic possibilities was the method of construction of the front porch. The statistical proof of the assertion lies in the marked areal concentration of the variants of porch construction. Another element showing similar diagnostic qualities was the open passage of the familiar “two pen and a passage” (Fig. 6), while still another was two-storey construction. Other elements, such as appendages, failed as distinguishing markers of types largely because they did not show sufficient variation or segregation.

The houses with frontward-facing gables were divisible on the basis of width: the “shotgun” house, a single room wide; and the bungalow type, two rooms in width. Though each of these types shows individual differences, such as a variety of methods for construction of front porches, the data failed to reveal significant areal concentration.

Houses with pyramidal roofs are sparingly represented over most of the state, but nowhere do they reach dominance. Houses with shed roofs belong almost exclusively to one simple unvarying type, highly restricted in distribution.

Summary forms were prepared, embracing the above-mentioned type and a number of sub-types, based on differences in width, length, etc., some fifty in all. Also, provision was made for cognizance of age and class. Each field sheet was independently summarized, totaled, and the percentage of each type and sub-type computed.

Still, fifty types defied handling. It seemed advisable to reduce the number by both combination and elimination. It was deemed permissible to disregard variation in length, width, and type of appendage, where the diagnostic element or elements remained obviously the same. Since for

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**Fig. 2.** Built-in porch type.

**Fig. 3.** Built-in porch type.

**Fig. 4.** Attached porch type.

was the essential thing, age and class were justifiably omitted from consideration. Types differing too widely in form to permit of combination stood alone, or were eliminated, if their percentage distribution fell consistently below twenty.

After combination and elimination there remained nine types or, better, groups of morphologically similar types:

1. **Built-in Porch.**—For a very considerable group of houses with sideward-facing gables this feature appeared statistically as the critical element. In this type the front porch is an integral part of the structure (Figs. 2, 3, 5). The use of this feature as a criterion of type is justified by its

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*Grateful acknowledgment is made to Mr. J. A. Ford for his skillful execution of the series of house-type drawings.*
two types are similar or vary within the same limits, as regards other elements. Included within this second type are four closely related methods of attachment of the front porch (Fig. 5), their combination into a single type justified by their coincident areal distribution.

3. Porchless.—This type differs from the preceding two only in the absence of a front porch. Its inclusion as a type was dictated by its attaining a twenty to sixty per cent frequency over an extensive area (Fig. 15).

4. Open Passage.—Referable to the same general class of houses having sideward-facing gables, and at least occasionally exhibiting all the varying characteristics of the three preceding types is the fourth. Its distinctive trait is the presence of an open passage running from front to rear (Fig. 6).

It is to be found in the primitive double log pen and in the more modern frame house. In addition to the distinctive open passage this type is characteristically marked by a high gable, with the steep roof projecting on either end and extending downward to form porches on either side. Included with this type is the single log pen (Fig. 7) and its frame equivalent, the inclusion justified by morphologic similarity (high gable and steep projecting roof) and coincident distribution.

5. Mid-Western.—The genetic implication of this name is justified in fact. Its morphologic distinction rests in its two storeys, a feature strikingly foreign to the simpler folk house types native to Louisiana. United by this common feature are two different structures showing similar areal extent. The first, and numerically much more important, is the "i" (Indiana-Illinois-Iowa) house (Fig. 8). It possesses the features of side-

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Fig. 5.—Four common methods of attaching porches. Figures a, b, c, and d, illustrate the four common methods of attaching porches, while figure e illustrates the built-in porch.

Fig. 6.—Open passage type; double log pen.

Fig. 7.—Single log pen.

Fig. 8.—Mid-West or "i" type.

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\[4\] It is not intended to imply that this house type is restricted to, or originated in, the three states named.
ward-facing gables and one-room depth, in addition to its two storeys. The second and numerically less significant two-storey house is square with a pyramidal roof.

6. Shotgun.—The folk-term here employed is commonly used in Louisiana to designate a long, narrow house. It is but one room in width and from one to three or more rooms deep, with frontward-facing gable (Fig. 9). Additional data will very likely suggest several sub-types.

7. Bungalow.—Like the preceding this type belongs to the general group of houses possessing frontward-facing gables. It differs in having a width of two rooms. It is two or more rooms deep (Fig. 10). The type appears to be recent in Louisiana, and if it has roots in older folk types of the state they are not obvious.

8. Trapper.—This type is so-called because it is constructed and used by the trappers of Louisiana’s coastal marshes and bayous. Its distinguishing feature is its shed roof (Fig. 11). It is commonly square with but a single room. Though most frequently constructed of tar-paper over siding, it is occasionally reproduced in palmetto thatch.

9. Oysterman.—The distinctive feature of this coastal type is the pile-supported platform on which the house proper rests (Fig. 12). The latter is most frequently a single-room shotgun type, though occasionally it takes another form.
After combination into these nine types the unassigned residue was so small as to be disregarded without seriously affecting the final picture.

As the next step in the analysis of the data the percentage distribution of each house type was entered on a map. The base was a route map of the survey traverses, while the unit area, or rather distance, was the space covered by each field sheet, with an average of about thirty houses to each. On the basis of the plotted data isopleths were drawn, interpolation between the traverses resting on the judgment of the observer. Isoplethic intervals of twenty per cent were found to fit the data best. The unexpected ease with which the isopleths were entered is indicative of the correctness of the classification (Figs. 13, 14, 15, 16).

The final step was a synthesis of the distributions of the individual types, a map (Fig. 17) showing areas and extent of domination of one or two forms, and areas of mixture. For the sake of legibility it was found necessary to omit from the final map the lower percentage bracket, all below forty. The distribution of the bungalow type was not considered, for the reason that it may be regarded as a constant, and hence of no value in regional definition. It occurs everywhere in the state, but only in the vicinity of urban centers does it attain the higher percentage groups.

**DISTRIBUTION OF TYPES**

It may be worthwhile to point out certain facts with regard to the distribution of the individual types (see index to regions, Fig. 18):

The type distinguished by the built-in porch is rather closely confined to the flood plain of the Mississippi, fingering northward along the valleys of the Ouachita and Red (see Fig. 13). It would appear to be distinctly a Lower Mississippi Valley form, since it fades into insignificance before reaching the northern boundary of Louisiana. Its absence in the pine hills and prairies is noteworthy. In the coastal marshes it is confined to the agricultural “islands” associated with small areas of high ground.

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**Fig. 13.**—Distribution of built-in porch and Mid-West types.

**Fig. 14.**—Distribution of attached porch and trapper types.
The type with the attached porch (Fig. 14) also attains its greatest prominence in the flood plains, but it is by no means so confined, since it spreads generously into the pine hills and prairies. Like the preceding this type is sharply restricted in the coastal marshes, but unlike the former it reaches the northern boundary of the state in a broad band occupying the Mississippi flood plain. Observation indicates its presence at least as far north as Missouri.

The Mid-Western type is strikingly and sharply confined to the heart of the prairie region of southwestern Louisiana (Fig. 13), whither it was imported from the Corn Belt about forty years ago. Outside this immediate area it was encountered no more than a dozen times throughout the remainder of the state.

The open-passage type (Fig. 15) is restricted to the three pine hill areas of Louisiana: the Florida Parishes; the region between the Mississippi and the Red; and the belt along the western margin of the state (Fig. 18). There is no extension of this type into the valleys, the prairies, or the coastal marshes. As might be inferred from the map, the double pen extends into the neighboring states of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas. It is well known in the states of the deep and border South.

The porchless type is very localized, reaching mapable significance in only one section (Fig. 15). It should be pointed out that it is largely coincident with, and partially peripheral to, the type having the attached porch.

The trapper (Fig. 14) and the oysterman (Fig. 15) types are very specialized, and are entirely restricted to the navigable waterways of the immediate coastal region.

The shotgun house (Fig. 16) is strikingly associated with the state's waterways, attaining marked dominance along the coastal bayous, but also significantly extending in narrow bands far up the Ouachita and Red. The
island in the western part of the state may represent a case of mistaken identity, but more likely it marks a migrant group of people. The general distribution of the type would indicate that it belongs to the Lower Mississippi Valley.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The final map may seem to leave rather large areas unmarked, but it is intentionally so. The cores or centers of frequency distribution are clearly indicated; the intervening areas are properly undefined zones of mixture.

Possible objections may be forestalled by pointing out that this study is not intended to be descriptive of specific areas, but rather it is one step in the attempt to define the culturogeographic regions of Louisiana. Nor is it entirely a materialistic listing and classification of the house types of Louisiana. It is also an attempt to get at an areal expression of ideas regarding houses—a groping toward a tangible hold on the geographic expression of culture.

The study is avowedly confined to present-day Louisiana, with but slightest concern for time and extra-regional relations. The house types are set up on the basis of morphologic comparison and distribution. The difficult consideration of historical genesis, it seems likely, can but combine into families and genera, or divide into species and varieties—to use the biologic analogy.

The best indication of the soundness of the methodology would seem to be that it works. The maps exhibit no inexplicable anomalies, while the final results agree with the observations of those familiar with the state. That the general method is applicable outside Louisiana is confirmed by the experiences of several extended trips, where the same tendency for house types to cluster was observed.

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