

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

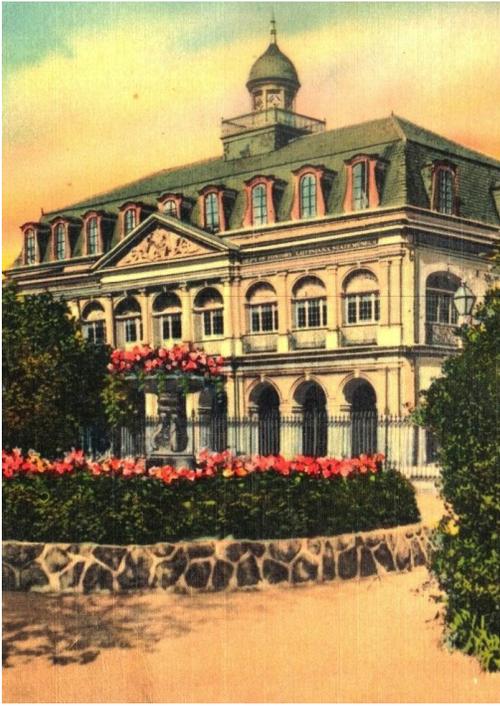
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

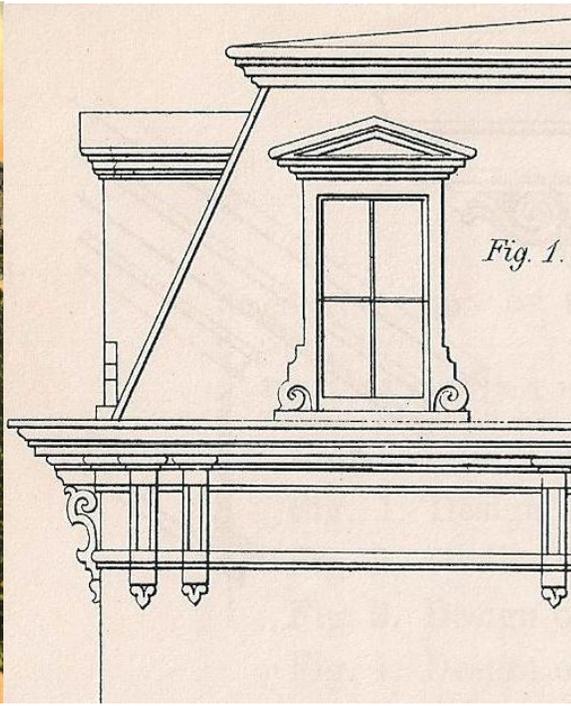
They All Taxed For You: Shotguns, Camelbacks and More

The Louvre in Paris, the Cabildo and Presbytère in the French Quarter, 1960s motor hotels, Lake Avenue apartments and early “Popeye’s Fried Chicken” outlets have what in common? The answer, of course, is the Mansard roof. After all, what exemplifies this architectural style more faithfully than Hawaiian black lava rock topped with red synthetic roof tiles? Architects and the late Al Copeland may have disagreed on this subject, but the history of the Mansard is still most interesting.

The Mansard roof refers to a type of hip roof with two slopes on each of its four sides with the lower slope being much steeper, virtually vertical. The upper slope is usually not visible from the ground and is pitched just enough to shed water. For all intents and purposes, this is an additional story disguised as a roof. Sometimes, for decorative effect, the pitch is curved with impressive dormers. In modern commercial construction, the upper pitch has often been substituted with a flat roof.



The Cabildo in New Orleans



Mansard elevation, 1868

The architect, Francois Mansart (1598 - 1666), popularized the roof style known as Mansard, a misspelling of his name. The central portico of the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre is a fine example. In the years that French houses were taxed by the number of floors beneath the roof, the Mansard style afforded a clever way to avoid paying the tax collector. A revival of Mansard occurred in the 1850s rebuilding of Paris, and that era is called Second Empire. Steep Mansards in the French style with scrolled dormers were added to the Cabildo and Presbytère in 1847 (along with cupolas) and are, according to the late Sam Wilson (renowned New Orleans architectural authority) the oldest examples of Second Empire architecture in the United States. Both of these two historic structures originally had flat roofs.

On May 11, 1988, a devastating fire struck the Cabildo Mansard, destroyed the cupola and the entire third floor, but it has since been masterfully restored and reopened to the public. In 2005, the Cabildo survived Hurricane Katrina with relatively minor damage. It was also the year the Presbytère's cupola returned, absent since its destruction during the Cat 4 Hurricane of 1915. The local architectural firm of Yeates & Yeates Architects, L.L.C., was in charge of the restoration.



The gambrel, or Dutch Colonial roof

A gambrel roof is usually a symmetrical two-sided roof (meaning no hip, but a gable on each side) with two slopes on the other two sides. Like a Mansard, its lower slope is quite steep with its upper slope at a shallow angle. Also known as a Dutch Colonial roof, it derives its name from the Medieval Latin word *gamba*, meaning an animal's leg. During World War II, much was written about Betty Grable (hips but no gable) and her gorgeous "gams". The gambrel roof style also hid an extra floor under an apparent roof, and attempted (like the Mansard) to fool the taxman.

The next tax evasive architectural style, and one quite prevalent in the South, is the shotgun. The Neville Brothers grew up in a shotgun dwelling, and Delta bluesman Robert Johnson is said to have died in one. The prolific New Orleans version was often built of cypress with ornamental millwork ordered in the latter half of the nineteenth century from the Roberts & Co. Catalogue. These distinctive exterior millwork brackets were affordable even to homeowners of modest means.



New Orleans Shotgun

One popular theory is that New Orleans assessors in the nineteenth century adopted a rule that measured property taxes proportional to a lot's front footage. City lots were narrow and deep to minimize taxes, and the shotgun house was perfect for that situation. Problem is, no one can seem to locate that particular tax code.

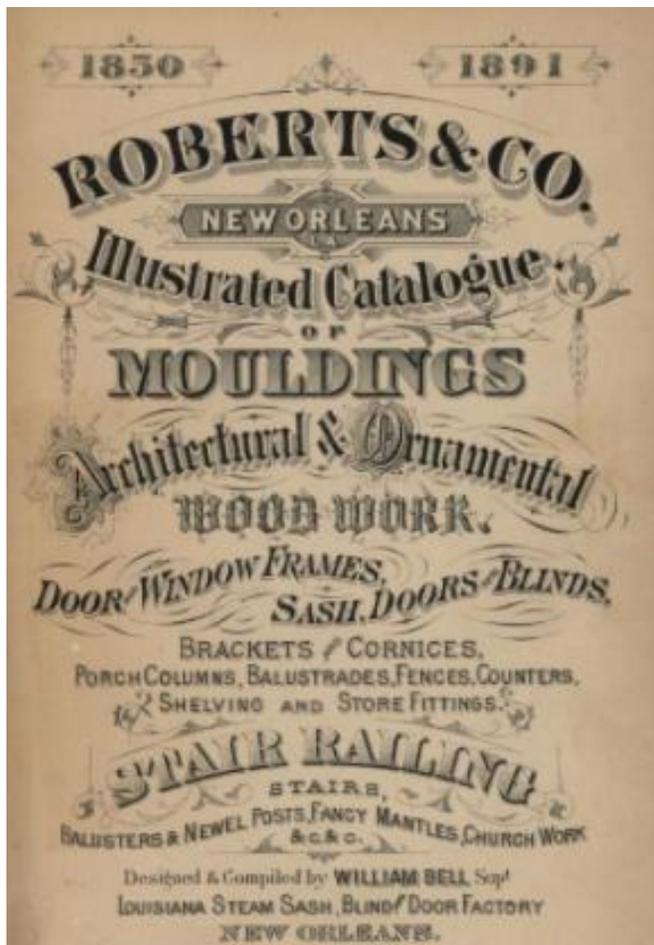
Another convincing reason for the style was cheap construction costs and excellent airflow before air-conditioning. The traditional shotgun is a three to five room home with no hallways, high ceilings and fireplaces. Conventional wisdom states that the name came from the ability to fire a shotgun from one end of the house to the other without hitting anything along the way. But some researchers, such as John Michael Vlach, believe both the architectural style and the name may have come to the Crescent City via Saint Domingue in the early 1800s. Vlach, back in 1975, argued that the shotgun could be traced to an architectural style originating in seventeenth century maroon communities on the island of Hispaniola (today's Haiti and the Dominican Republic). These vernacular versions of the shotgun are called the *ti-kay* and appear to be a cultural blend of indigenous Taino (Arawak) home construction, West African proportionality and Euro-French building techniques. He also claimed the name may have originated from a Dahomey term *to-gun*, meaning a "place of assembly".

Vlach further surmised that the slave insurrection in Saint Domingue

beginning in 1791, triggering the 1809 exodus of more than 9,000 Haitian refugees to New Orleans, also brought with it this type of dwelling; and we do see "long houses" in the rear areas of the French Quarter and in Faubourg Tremé as early as the 1810s.

This theory, however, has been rejected by a large segment of the city's architectural community. The city's Notarial Archives show scant evidence of this style prior to 1840, and while there existed a few shotgun-like houses constructed in the 1820s, they scarcely indicate a catalyst for the many thousands built in New Orleans in the 1840s and 1850s.

Soon shotgun doubles (or "double-barreled shotguns") came along (sharing a common center wall), and many were built as part of the city's rental stock. By the late twentieth century, shotgun ownership had changed. Right before Katrina, the shotgun-dominant Lower Ninth Ward was almost 60% owner-occupied. Shotguns comprise over 60% of the building stock in the Bywater. They are a New Orleans phenomenon.



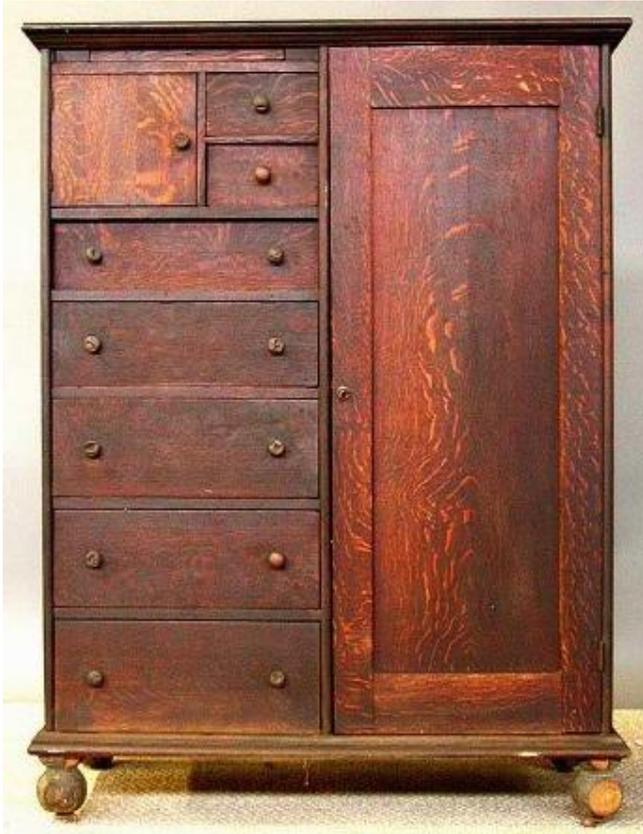
Roberts & Co. Illustrated Catalogue of Mouldings

It wasn't long, it has been argued, that citizens were once again complaining about taxes. Two-story homes should pay more, but

(once again) what about a house that didn't have a full second story? This created a new tax loophole known as the Camelback (and the Camelback double). But is this true? A Camelback is a dwelling with a "hump" at the back, a second story but only toward the rear. Were the assessors really so myopic that they wouldn't notice that second story, just because it was set further back?

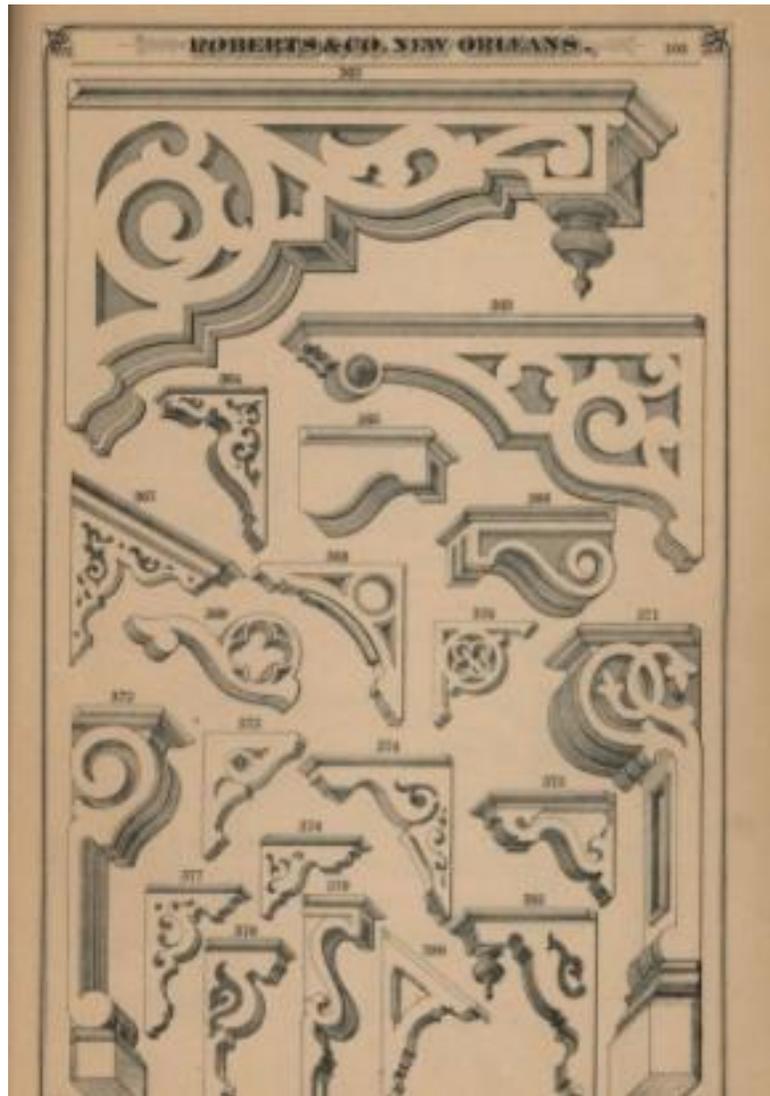
Supposedly, special rules were devised as to how far back the "hump" should arise. Fact is, the Camelback did not originate as a form of tax avoidance. It came about as a need for additional square footage. There were no Camelbacks until after the Civil War and the Peonage Act of 1867. Slave cooks were no longer preparing meals in the city's detached kitchens. One-story shotguns were being connected to separate two-story kitchen structures to increase the overall size of the dwelling and to bring the kitchen into the homes of rising middle class families. Still, there were always other ways lawmakers and assessors could find to raise tax revenues.

At one time, taxes were based on the number of rooms in a residence. This eliminated closets, which were taxed as a separate room. This problem was solved by the addition of an "armoire" or "chiffarobe," a Southern solution to clothing storage. The "chiffarobe" is a piece of furniture that combines a chest of drawers with a long vertical space for hanging clothes, its name created by combining the words "chiffonier" and "wardrobe." A "chiffonier" is a French piece of furniture (from the French for a "rag-picker"). This suggests that its original intended use was as storage for odds and ends, rags (*chiffons*) and such. A "chiffonier" is quite a different piece of furniture in North America: a tall, elegant chest of drawers, often with a mirror attached on top.



A "chiffarobe"

A "chiffarobe" was mentioned in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird". Set in 1935, it was the same year that Elvis Presley was born in a two-room shotgun in Tupelo, Mississippi.



*Not tax brackets, but the other kind -
available from Roberts' Catalogue*

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"They All Taxed For You: Shotguns, Camelbacks and More"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2007, 2015 and 2017