

Chickee, Charleston and Shotgun Housing in the American South

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Geography/Climate

The Southern vernacular of the United States comprises three main building types within three distinct cultural building traditions, which responded specifically to the temperate climate of the region: the palm-thatch 'chickee' built by Native Americans in Florida; the 'single house' characteristic of Charleston, South Carolina, based on a classical European type; and the shotgun house, ubiquitous in the 19th century and said to have origins in Africa and Haiti.

Building Plan/Form

All three types adopt similar climate strategies, yet in strikingly different architectural forms. All include porches and shaded yards as principal areas for work and social life, creating an urban pattern that allows breezes to penetrate even compact cities. And all offer high ceilings and strategic openings to induce ventilation by drawing hot air up and out.

The Chickee

Among the diverse building traditions of the native peoples of the region, an iconic example is still built as garden structures by members of the Seminole tribe of Florida using traditional, local materials. The 'chickee' consists of a structural frame of rot-resistant cypress (*Cupressaceae*) logs covered by a thatch roof made of palmetto (*Sabal*) fronds. Historically, chickees often had a raised platform of small, split cypress branches to

provide working or social space – whether in a village or constructed remotely as a hunting or fishing camp in the exposed Florida Everglades.

This raised platform catches the breezes and provides some defence against insects, while the high-pitched, dense roof of the chickee shades and insulates from the sun and sheds rain while allowing heat to rise up and out. Chickees can be built quickly from common wetland trees joined or lashed together – and they can be disassembled just as rapidly, leaving behind no non-organic waste.

The Charleston Single House

The English and French settlers who arrived in the southeastern region of the United States brought with them a very different idea of architectural form from those of the indigenous population – building boxy, symmetrical houses based on Renaissance principles of proportion. The implicit model for a colonial house had a central stair hall with flanking rooms on two or three levels, and presented a formal façade to approaching visitors. In the warm, humid climates of many colonies – including those of India, South Africa and the Bahamas – wide roofs and porches surrounded a square house.¹ In the American colonies, the manor houses of southern plantations had sweeping verandas, sometimes on two levels, supported by tall, classical columns, creating a portico that almost engulfed the house. These elegant houses oversaw vast plantations worked by slaves brought from Africa, until the mid-19th-century Civil War abolished the practice.

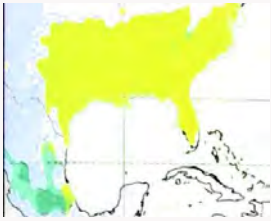
Below Garden structures known as 'chickees' are built in Florida by Seminole tribes and draw on local materials for their construction. The raised, open-sided platforms for socializing and work admit cooling breezes that provide shade from the sun, mitigating the heat.

Opposite Formed of a timber frame and thatched with palm fronds, the simple chickee structure shades and insulates its inhabitants. Its breathable roof allows heat to release and it can be disassembled as quickly as it is made, leaving no inorganic waste.









Seasonal average temperatures °C (F)

MAM	2
JJA	21 (70)
SON	19 (64)
DJF	6 (43)

Seasonal average rainfall mm (in.)

MAM	105 (4)
JJA	164 (6½)
SON	118 (4½)
DJF	92 (3½)

Opposite top Colonial settlers' homes such as this Louisiana plantation house were based on Renaissance proportion and presented a colonnaded façade.

Opposite bottom The characteristic single-storey, gabled shotgun houses built by Americans of African descent were adapted to suit the climate, with high ceilings and covered porches.

Below Urban lots are usually about 9–15 m (30–50 ft) wide and streets were built in a grid, seen in this aerial view of Charleston.

Quarters for these labourers would usually mean bunkhouses arrayed behind the main residence, along with kitchens, shops, stables and work yards.

Further modification of the plantation house characterizes the vernacular fabric of the port city of Charleston, South Carolina. There, these adapted mansions housed middle-class artisans and wealthy traders. The 'Charleston single house', arguably originating on the Caribbean island of Barbados, reduced the classical prototype to a single room in depth, which was turned 90° to fit on a narrow urban lot.² The gable end of the house faces the street, and the formal façade with a front porch, or 'piazza', faces a side yard or garden to the south or west depending on the orientation of the lot. From the pavement, visitors enter through a doorway to the piazza, walk past a front parlour, then turn to enter the formal front door leading to a central stair hall. The kitchen and servants' quarters stretched out behind the house, where they could be overseen by the owners.³

Architecturally, Charleston's single houses are narrow, and the main storey is elevated 600–1200 mm (24–48 in) off the ground. Every room opens to the piazza and garden, sometimes with triple-sash windows extending from the floor to a high ceiling, so they can be opened fully to allow the occupants to step out. Windows may have interior shutters, which can be closed in the heat of the day to block bright light and contain cooler air. Houses of the wealthy were built in masonry rather than wood, thereby affording a degree of thermal mass to moderate the temperature.⁴ The central hall also acts as a 'stack' to draw warm air from the rooms upwards, and attic spaces are ventilated with grilles in the house gable ends.

Piazzas were mostly used at night, when families sat outside and the house windows were opened to cool down the interior. On very warm days, the two-storey central stair hall could become a living space, and on hot nights beds might be dragged out to the piazza. Gardens also offer respite from the heat, and were often surrounded by brick walls, which were shaded by trees and flowering vines, keeping the space cool and pleasant⁵

The gracious life of Charleston was, of course, built on slavery, which supported both the plantations and the trade of the city. The stark divide between classes at that time is apparent in the differences between the main house and the quarters of the servants or slaves. The small houses behind the 'mansions' are low and mean – with no piazza, and little shade or ventilation.

Shotgun Houses

In contrast, when Americans of African descent built dwellings for themselves, they developed a characteristic house type with roots in Africa and the Caribbean, which was already adapted to warm, humid conditions. The 'shotgun house' is a long, narrow wood-framed structure, one room wide, with a porch entry on the gable end facing the street. Its rooms open in sequence from front to back, with windows on both sides for cross ventilation and no hallway. Shotgun houses generally had high ceilings and covered porch space that made a sociable working space in all weathers. In cities such as New Orleans, shotgun and 'double-shotgun' houses, which were made up of two attached single shotguns, were built on narrow urban lots with as little as 1 m (3 ft) between them, creating the vernacular fabric of the town.⁶

