



AUTUMN HALL™

Wilmington's Architectural Distinction

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Wilmington is situated within the northern extent of the Tropics at the confluence of the Cape Fear River with the Atlantic Ocean. Because of its warm, and humid climate, combined with seasonal maritime winds and weather, the area experienced the introduction of architectural, as well as structural, distinctions at an early period that are no common to other regions of the United States.

Of particular note is the long-standing use of braced frame construction, a system of heavy corner posts, beams and angular bracing, which carry the weight of the structure rather than using light-weight studs to form bearing walls. Although this type of construction was typical of many Atlantic coast settlements, it persisted at the hands of many traditionally-trained builders of the Cape Fear even into the early twentieth century.

A second element in the architecture of the city was the presence of basements that were possible because Wilmington is set on high bluffs above the river and has a surprisingly low watertable. Early houses were raised above the ground several feet to allow air to circulate between the ground and the house, and wooden grilles inserted in the foundation kept out animals and debris. This became especially popular during the mid-nineteenth century, through the influence of European fashions and narrow lots, houses were built on raised basements, partly under and partly above ground. The encircling walls of solid brick withstood moisture and insect infestation, and created additional household space with windows rather than the dark storage cellars of northern climes. In addition, the berm effect of the lower walls kept the ground-level rooms cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

A third innovation, taken directly from roots in the Caribbean, was the introduction of porches which provided additional outdoor living accommodations and shelter during hot or stormy weather. In some cases porches were built along the long front and rear elevations, in others across each side of the house; while in two-story dwellings the porch could incorporate galleries at both levels, on all sides, or have porticos rising the full height of the structure.

The Coastal Plain of the Carolinas, though lacking any kind of stone suitable for construction (stone was brought in from Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania), did have the natural resources (clay) for making bricks and the forests provided cedar, cypress, oak, and pine that were naturally impervious to decay or could be coated to prevent insect infestation. In rural regions roofs frequently were covered by split shingles, whereas in built-up areas slate or metal became common both for their resistance to fire and for their relative permanence. In Wilmington, the use of standing seam metal roofing was exceedingly popular and became a character-defining element of its historic buildings. Scuttles opened through the roofs and platforms were built near the chimney stacks to enable the flues to be cleaned. Later enclosed belvederes crowned the roof ridges and added distinction to the architectural design.

Architectural features brought about by successive fashions – Georgian, Federal, Greek, and Gothic Revival, Italianate and eclectic styles – reflected the cultural development of the Cape Fear residents, but encapsulating the traditional structural fabric, they hid the traditional technology developed by regional builders. While Wilmington was quick to adopt the latest design, there were aspects of architectural styles, particularly the Italianate, that builders and residents tenaciously used for decades: low hip roofs, canopy porch roofs, wide overhanging eaves supported on brackets with intervening vents, and Tower of the Winds column capitals.

In the progression of architecture during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, creative and recreative styles have superseded construction types and it is the visible arrangement of interrelated design elements that defines both modern and revival architecture today. For this reason it is important to identify the specific details and material mentioned above since they constitute Cape Fear architecture, unique distinctions that continue to reflect our cultural and environmental influences today.



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Characteristics of Historic Architecture of the Cape Fear

A. Georgian (1740-1805)

Heavy timber framing; mortise and tenon, pegged joints; raised above basement; handmade technology; handmade bricks laid in Flemish bond with oyster shell mortar; heavy timber framing; mortise and tenon, pegged joints; raised above basement; large chimneys, usually interior end; beaded weatherboarding; symmetrical, center-hall plan; small panes of glass (crown glass until the 1830s), often in 6/9, 9/6 or 6/6, sash set in molded three-part architraves; gable roofs; close-set eaves; small gable-roofed dormers; bold, heavy moldings copied from pattern books; stairs with turned balusters and molded handrails; six-panel, raised-panel doors; iron wrought by blacksmiths included nails, H&L hinges and locks.

Mitchell-Anderson House (c. 1738), 102 Orange, with many later changes.

Burgwin-Wright House (1771), 224 Market, on stone (not local) foundation of colonial jail.

Coastal Cottage (mid-18th C), 6 Church. eaves extended later; atypical interior, central chimneys.

St. John's Masonic Lodge (1805), 114 Orange. hip roof; belt course between floors; Flemish bond brickwork above English bond foundation; stepped brick cornice.

B. Federal: (1800-1830+)

Light, attenuated, slender design and detail; details smaller, lighter and more delicate; symmetrical; still mostly a handmade technology; heavy timber framing; mortise and tenon, pegged joints; raised above basement; large chimneys, usually interior end chimneys; center hall, hall-and-parlor, and side-hall plans; gable roofs with close-set eaves; gable roof dormers; also hip roofs; hand-split lath; beaded siding; flush sheathing under porches; entrances with transoms or fanlights and flanking sidelights, framed by delicate three-part architraves; small window panes often in 6/9, 9/6 or 6/6 sash; diminution of fenestration; often double piazzas; delicate, chamfered porch posts and simple balustrades, square-in-section; fixed-louver blinds with wrought iron hooks; six-panel doors with delicate moldings; interior decorative panels beneath windows.

Lazarus-Hill-Divine House (1819) 314 Grace. most academic Federal style in city, but with Greek Revival and Italianate changes.

Hogg-Anderson House (ca 1820) 112 Orange. first use of symmetrically molded door surround with corner blocks; use of fixed porch louvers to screen western sun.

Cassidey House (c. 1828) 1 Church. unusual "Dutch" gambrel roof—only one in the city.

Destrac-Rankin House (c. 1842) 19 S 2nd. Original entrance in second story with wide transom and sidelights; steps originally rose from street to porch at second level.

C. Greek Revival: (1820-1860)

Heavier details, still mostly a handmade technology; heavy timber framing; mortise and tenon, pegged joints; raised above basement or on brick piers; temple form: symmetrical; gable roof terminating in pedimented portico supported on classical columns; trabeated door and windows; also tri-partite window openings; center hall plan; interior end chimneys and interior chimneys that pierce the ridge of the hip roof, creating back-to-back fireplaces; central entrance with two- or four-panel door flanked by paneled sidelights and surmounted by wide transom; windows of 6/6 sash with larger panes; low-pitched hip roofs with wide overhanging eaves, some with dentil course; roofs covered with standing seam metal with low profile crimps; one- and two-story porches sometimes with piazza rooms in rear; full-width front porches; two-story porticoes; wide cornices emphasize



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horizontal lines of facades; corners defined by full-height paneled pilasters; heavy, classical marble mantels with ogee openings; turned (manufactured) stair newel and balusters; straight-run stairs; symmetrical moldings with corner blocks; ogee opening mantels of marble or wood.

Orton (1735; 1840) Cape Fear River, south of city.

Ballard-Potter-Bellamy House (c. 1846), 121 S 2nd. Brackets and vents added when roof was raised c. 1880.

Wessell House (c. 1846), 508 S Front. Ionic order pilasters at corners are unique in city.

John A. Taylor House (c. 1847), 409 Market. Unusual design, but classically derived, probably from pattern book; marble facade divided into bays by pilasters; secondary elevations have pressed brick walls and narrow joints set between marble pilasters; classical entrance in antis; double front doors feature nail heads similar to Greek temple doors; transom and sidelights contain etched glass; belvedere built between interior chimney stacks; rooms have acanthus leaf designs on door and window lintels, and molded plaster cornices.

Mearns-Bridgers-Kerchner House (c. 1840; 1889), 416 S Front. Similar entrance to Taylor House; 3rd story added after move in 1889; extraordinary interior with double parlors divided by Tower of the Winds columns; windows enframed by full-length pilasters.

Poplar Grove Plantation (c. 1850), US Highway 17, Scott's Hill.

D. Gothic Revival: (1839-1950)

First style reflective of the Romantic Movement most often used for ecclesiastical structures; symmetrical facades; accentuation of height by rows of windows separated by buttresses; pointed or arches; central tower; steeple and pinnacles; stained glass; steeply pitched gable roofs; roofs covered with standing seam metal with low profile crimps; roofs also covered with slate; battlements or crenellated walls; molded hoods over windows and doors; crocketed ornament above entrance; often stucco scored to resemble stone; stained rather than painted wood.

St. James Church (1839-1840), 25 Market. First Gothic style in city; highly academic and revolutionary in region; walls and tower topped with pinnacles and battlements.

St. Thomas the Apostle Church (1847), 208 Dock. A copy of St. James, but without tower and ornament.

St. John's Masonic Hall (1841), 125 Market. Unusual use of Gothic ornament on commercial structure; blind crocketed lancet window heads; all evidence of Gothic on facade obliterated by 1907 modernization.

First Baptist Church (1859-1870), 421 Market. Asymmetrical; not stuccoed, built of machine-made brick with narrow mortar joints; window hoods have foliated corbels; vast interior space.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church (1859-1869), 603 Market. Hybrid Gothic-Greek Revival; early 20th century stained glass windows.

Chestnut Street Presbyterian (1858), 710 Chestnut. Carpenter-Italianate; board-and-batten walls like Carpenter Gothic, but with paired round-arch windows; originally had sand paint to simulate stone.

Mt. Lebanon Chapel (1835), Airlie Rd, Wrightsville Sound. Vernacular; Greek Revival with later, Gothic Revival features added; Greek pediment and heavy stepped cornice.

First Presbyterian Church (1927-28), 121 S 3rd. Neo-Gothic period popularized during late 19th & early 20th centuries for urban churches & universities; exterior walls of granite; large clerestory windows and east rose window of Cathedral glass; chapel in Norman style; educational wing in Jacobean style.



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E. Italianate: (1851-1890)

Wilmington's favorite style; often a Greek Revival form on which are applied vents and brackets at the attic level; technological revolution and mass production brought intricate designs available for not much money; low-pitched hip roofs covered with standing seam metal with low profile crimps; wide eaves supported by rectangular, curved or sawn brackets; attic vents of wooden louvers, sawn wood or cast iron; still using heavy timber framing; mortise and tenon, pegged joints; raised on brick piers or above basement, often containing dining room and kitchen; center hall and side hall plans; interior end or interior chimneys that pierce the hip roof, creating back-to-back fireplaces; central entrance with four-panel single or double doors flanked by sidelights and surmounted by wide transom; tall, windows sometimes arched; more often trabeated door and window openings; windows with 2/2/2 double-hung sash of large panes; often floor-length windows leading to porch; one-story, full-width porches employing Tower of the Winds column capitals; cast-iron piazza supports often from Robert Wood, Philadelphia; canopy porch roof sometimes painted to simulate awning; belvedere (It: beautiful view); stuccoed walls scored to resemble stone blocks; heavy, classical marble mantels (also slate or wooden mantels painted to resemble marble) with ogee openings; turned (manufactured) stair newel and balusters; straight-run stairs; heavy door and window moldings sometimes paneled; heavy, intricate plaster cornices; elaborate gasoliers (gas available by 1853).

Fanning House (c. 1844?), 208 Orange. Large, pendant brackets support unusually wide eaves; pronounced diminution of fenestration; raised basement; if date is correct, first Italianate villa in city.

Savage House (1851), 120 S 3rd. Side-hall plan based on A. J. Downing's Cubical Cottage, published in 1850; identical in form to MacRae-Dix (108 S 3rd) and MacRae-Willard (602 Orange) houses; originally had casement windows.

Zebulon Latimer House (1852), 126 S 3rd. Rusticated corner quoins; cast iron window hoods installed about 1882 when Latimer's sons built twin houses across Orange Street.

Eilers House (1852), 124 S 5th. Machine-made pressed bricks in running bond and narrow, narrow joints; elaborate cast iron steps signed Robert Wood, Philadelphia; vents without brackets; dog-tooth brick cornice.

John Conoley House (1859), 15 N 5th and Von Glahn House (1860), 19 N 5th. Combined Greek and Italianate elements; Greek: paneled bays and pilasters with angular caps; Italianate: vents and brackets, Tower of the Winds columns, canopy porch roofs, arched transom over arched door; segmentally-arched window surrounds at second level.

Stemmerman's Grocery and Residence (before 1866), 136 S Front. Brick, stucco removed; cast-iron vents without brackets.

Wessell-Hathaway House (1854), 120 S 5th. First of the frame Italianate dwellings; brackets without vents; belvedere originally atop house lost in fire.

City Hall-Thalian Hall (1855-1858), 102 N 3rd. Combined Greek Revival and Italianate elements; colossal Corinthian cast iron column caps carry pediment; metal modillion cornice; bays delineated by pilasters; round arch windows containing paired sash and circular transoms; cast metal hoods.

Bellamy Mansion (1859-61), 503 Market. Combined Classical and Italianate styles; several similarities with City Hall-Thalian Hall, but tends toward eclecticism; effusive decorative plasterwork.

DeRosset House (c. 1841 and 1877), 23 S. 2nd. Highly academic classical porch with Doric columns and Greek entablature; marble mantels in double parlors; Italianate updates added in 1874: solarium; vents, brackets and belvedere incorporated when roof was raised.

F. Second Empire (1870-1885)

Similar details to Italianate style with brackets (vents not used because attic was an occupied space) and topped by a Mansard (French) roof; dormers; towers; one-story, full-width porches; decorative porch posts; canopy roof porch; segmentally arched windows often paired; also trabeated door and window openings; windows with 2/2/2 double-hung sash of large panes; often



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floor-length windows leading to porch; sometimes arched windows; interior chimneys that pierce the roof, creating back-to-back fireplaces; central entrance with four-panel single or double doors surmounted by trabeated or semi-circular transom; popular in both urban and rural settings; inspiration for Charles Addams' haunted houses.

Martin Huggins-House (1870), 412 Market. Massive house; traditional Italianate design with concave mansard roof and arched dormers; paired arched window above central entrance bay; rope molding.

Henry and Edward Latimer Houses (1882-1883), 202 and 208 S 3rd. Continuing popularity of Italianate style; manufactured pressed brick laid in running bond with narrow joints; stamped metal hoods; arched transom and entrance; paired scrolled brackets; attic vents on Henry Latimer's house removed when Mansard roof and arched dormers were added; twin carriage houses along rear alley behind residences.

Costin House (c. 1855 & c. 1885), 20 S 5th. Italianate, symmetrical and boxy: window hoods, attic vents, brackets, canopy porches and curved steps at each end of porch; Second Empire: Mansard roof with stamped metal shingles, and dormers.