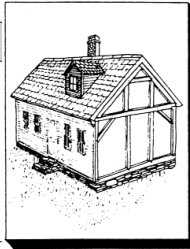


Historic House Plans

by John Leeke



Authentic historic houses suitable for renovation are getting harder to find. But Building a new house based on the proportions and details of a historic house is an alternative. This month I'll help you find stock plans based on early houses and explore ways to develop your own plans.

A lot of house plans are described as "traditional" in style. Yet they are often a mix of details and proportions from different historic periods. The result is called "eclectic" when it works, or a "mish-mash" when it doesn't.

Of course, houses have always been built by combining styles. The builder or designer draws on traditional trade practices and uses existing patterns to satisfy the client's desire for current fashions and to plan for future needs. Then, as now, it worked sometimes and sometimes it didn't.

Given the costs of building a house today, you look for a safe path to success. One good approach is to focus on plans that are based on an actual early house or to follow closely the styles of early periods.

We've all heard the names of American periods of architectural style: Elizabethan, Colonial, Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, Victorian, and several others. I can't even begin to describe and define them here in this brief column. (A good comprehensive book on the topic

is *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, by Carole Rifkind published by Bonanza Books in 1980.)

Stock Plans

When buying and using stock plans, you trust others to help you decide many of the details that add up to a well-styled building. The designers I've listed here are known for their ability to capture the essence of period styles in their designs. While their plans are based on early building, they are adapted to modern standards of comfort and safety. A folio of several designs can cost between \$5 and \$35. A set of drawings for a design costs between \$100 and \$500. Suppliers include: McKie Wing Roth, Jr. Designer, Inc., P.O. Box 130, Gardner, ME 04345; 800/232-7684 for orders, or 207/582-3718 for information. Historical Replications, P.O. Box 12529, Jackson, MS 39236; 800/426-5628. Russell Swinton Oatman Design Associates Inc., 132 Mirick Rd., Princeton, MA 01541; 508/464-5530.

Using Stock Plans

Builder Tim Rozelle, of Camplin & Rozelle, York Village, Maine, had a good experience building with stock plans from Home Planners, of Farmington, Michigan. Tim's experience with those plans was so positive, he's moving ahead this spring with construction of a Victorian reproduction

from stock plans by Heritage Home Designers, of Wharton, Texas.

But what about local codes and site consideration? "There are specs in these plans that wouldn't fly up here in Maine," says Rozells. "Codes change from town to town and you have to accommodate these codes and the site," he explains. In fact, most stock plan designers make it very clear in their literature that it's up to you to specify site and foundation work. Some offer this as an additional service, but a local architect or designer may cost less.

Develop Your Own Plans

If you're the independent type, you may want to develop your own plans by copying the design of a historic house. (Two of the designers listed above started as builders.) Builders who develop their own plans say it is a three-step process. First, find that right house to base your plans on. Second, document the house. Finally, adapt the design to modern living.

When you set out to find a house to copy, your own sense of historic style may lead you to an appropriate one. If you're at a loss, two government programs can help: the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and the Historic American Building Survey (HABS).

The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the nation's cultural resources. Many historic houses are included. Some are museums open to the public, others are privately owned. To find which houses in your area have gained this recognition, check with your State Historic Preservation Office or write to the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, CD 20240.

Museum houses. As far as museum houses are concerned, the people who run them may be less than receptive to the idea of your measuring their historic buildings. They have two concerns. First, this may damage the building. It may not seem like measuring a building would cause damage, but a ladder can mangle weathered clapboards or an indiscreet helper may leave notes written on the building itself. Collections of interior furnishings would need to be moved or protected. This protective attitude stems from a strong commitment to preserve the building from all sources of avoidable deterioration.

Second is their proprietary interest in the building. Often they have spent fortunes researching, restoring, and preserving the building. If anyone is to make commercial gain from their house, they may want a share to help with their expenses. You may be able to work out an agreement with the museum, or they may just decline to help you out.

I don't want to sound too discouraging about museum houses. In any event, it's always worth asking, as some will be delighted with your interest.

Historic American Building Survey. The Historic American Building Survey (HABS) is a big collection of documentation on historic buildings from across the country. Documentation typically includes plans, elevations, and details but the levels of documentation vary from building to building. For instance, some only have a written description and a few photos. The main collection is in Washington, D.C., but many states

have a partial catalogue of the collection. The catalogues include 8-1/2x11-inch photocopies of full-size drawings.

The material is in the public domain so you can copy and use the material any way you like. The best way to use the material, short of going to Washington, is to see your state catalogue of the collection. Again, your State Historic Preservation Office can help you find the catalogue. Or, write to The Library of Congress, Division of Prints and Photographs, Washington, CD 20540, for the free list of state catalogues.

One of the benefits of using HABS is that a good part of the documentation for your building may already be done.

Documenting the original. The minimum documentation needed of the existing building includes drawings of floor plans, principal elevations, and photos of all exterior and interior walls. I have done this work for my clients and it's expensive. A typical residential sized building might cost between \$1,000 and \$5,000 depending on the complexity of the building and the detail needed. This begins to make the cost of stock plans look good.

Document If Yourself

Documenting the house yourself won't cost less (if you figure your time is worth money), but the exercise will help you learn the building and its details.

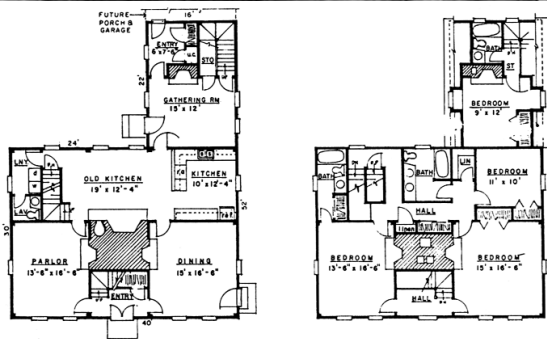
Dennis Robillard, a builder from South Berwick, Maine, reproduced the Parson Capen house back in 1981. The original is in Topsfield, Mass. He spent one day by himself at the house taking measurements. Then he brought his whole crew down for a day. Robillard said that the trip was very beneficial because the crew got a feeling for the character of the house. They saw how they could each focus on the details of their trades.

Adapting the original design to modern life is a critical step. "We updated the house quite a bit," Robillard said. "I'm 5 foot 9 inches tall, and I had to duck under the summer beams in the original house. You may have the experience to adapt the design yourself. If not, bring in an architect or engineer to help."

Connection With the Past

Our society's growing interest in the architecture of its past helps us sell the historically inspired houses we build today. But more important, we modern-day builders connect the people we build for with their past. Historic proportions and details in a new house help provide that sense of humanity that turns a house into a home. It comforts the people who live and work there. ■

John Leeke, of Sanford, Maine, restores and maintains historic buildings. He also consults with contractors, architects, and owners working on older buildings.



The Warham Williams House, built in 1750, can be reproduced from plans from Russell Swinton Oatman Design Associates of Princeton, Mass. With its pedimented windows and doorway pilasters that support a broken-scroll pediment, this house marks the beginning of architectural refinement in North America.