

Suburb Gracie
("The Lakes")
Baton Rouge
East Baton Rouge Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1138

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
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Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington , DC 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. LA-1138

SUBURB GRACIE ("The Lakes")

Locations: 136 shotgun and L-shaped houses located in the fourteen square blocks bound on the south by North Street; on the east by North 17th Street; on the west by North 13th Street and on the north by Fuqua Street. USGS Baton Rouge West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 15:675350:3370:400

Present Owner: J.R. Whitaker, et al.
980 South Carrollton Avenue
Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana

Present Occupants: Various:

1. 825-827 Frisco (Perry Smith, Emmet Smith)
2. 855-865 Frisco (Emma Ford & Unoccupied)
3. 1360 Gayosa Street (Emma Johnson)
4. 1660 Gracie Street (Thelma Williams)

Present Use: Rented dwellings

Significance: Since the early 1900s, the Whitaker Family has owned and rented shotgun houses to black families, who refer to the area as "The Lakes." William C. Whitaker started buying property in a localized area of eastern Baton Rouge in 1905, building some new shotgun houses. He moved in others and also utilized already existing shotguns in situ. A shotgun house is one-storied, and usually one room wide and three rooms deep, with a front gabled roof and a front porch raised on piers. The shotgun was prevalent in southern Louisiana since the early 1800s as both a plantation and urban dwelling. Most of these shotguns are single, but there are also seven double shotgun houses with either continuous or separate porches. There are also twenty L-shaped houses similar in construction to the shotguns. Still owned by the Whitaker family, this unusual concentration of 136 shotgun and L-shaped houses provides a streetscape of typical, low-income urban dwellings and is representative of Southern vernacular architecture.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: It can be assumed, because of the Tax Assessment Rolls, that shotgun houses existed on Whitaker's property;

however, the actual dates of construction are unknown. An analysis of the succession of William C. Whitaker indicates that twenty-two of the forty-three parcels of land he owned were located in Suburb Gracie. Whitaker's earliest recorded purchase dates from 1905. Of the twenty-two lots, fourteen were "together with the buildings and improvements thereon," and one "with improvements." Whether this refers to any of the existing shotguns is purely conjectural. Whitaker's son, J.R. Whitaker, said that his father bought, and moved in, some of the shotguns from other locations or had his workers duplicate a few basic shotgun forms. He also said that much of the Suburb Gracie property was bottom land and had to be filled in before construction could begin.

2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners:
 - a. Frisco Street: No listing with the Baton Rouge Permit Office.
 - b. 1360 Gayosa Street: "A certain square of ground situated in Suburb Gracie and in the part of the city of Baton Rouge laid out by Gates and Newcomb and designated as Square 5. (The Permit Office added Lot 8-B for 1360 Gayosa).
 - c. 1660 Gracie Street: Lot H, Square 19 Suburb Gracie. Conveyance Records, Book 135, pp. 343-359, June 24, 1924. Succession of William C. Whitaker.
"The following lots of parcels of ground situated in Square 19 being bounded by Gracie, Decatur, Centre and Persimmon Streets. ...Lots Nos. "G" and "H" measuring each 54 feet front on the south side of Gracie Street by a depth at right angles and between parallel lines of 109 feet."
Neither the vendor nor sale price is mentioned. Because the previous owner is not listed, it was not possible to trace Gracie Street back any further.

Conveyance Book 23, Page 360, May 15, 1899
\$400 Miss E. Burke to L.B. Aldrich
"Sale of 1/2 square of ground...west half of Square #5 bounded on the north by Gayosa Street, on the east by Perdido Street, on the south by North Street and on the west by Pearl."

Conveyance Book 44, Page 187, November 24, 1909
\$2600 L.B. Aldrich to William C. Whitaker
"A certain square of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon...Square #5.
4. Builder or contractor: Henry Smith has worked for the Whitaker family for 42 years as foreman. He and his workers have remod-

eled, maintained and built shotguns.

Because of the nature of this survey, notes on the original plan and alterations are being incorporated into the architectural description.

B. Historical events and persons connected with the structure:

William C. Whitaker was a cotton farmer until the boll weevil destroyed his crop in the early 1900s. After the infestation, Whitaker became a banker and real estate developer, providing low-rent housing for blacks in an area of Baton Rouge called Suburb Gracie. Some of the property that Whitaker purchased probably already supported several shotgun structures. Whitaker apparently duplicated two of these shotgun forms, the single and the double forms. There are very few double shotguns. These simple, rudimentary buildings had a well in front and a privy in back. In some areas, it was necessary to fill "bottom" land. Because of the streams and lakes in the area, the tenants call this area "The Lakes" and the shotguns, "Cottages." Rents initially amounted to \$4.50 per month.

Whitaker established a considerable housing development in Suburb Gracie. The Tax Assessment Record of 1923 lists him as having 67 lots with a value of \$39, 830 and 149 improvements valued at \$62,450. Through the years the Whitaker family has maintained a protective relationship with its tenants. One long standing tenant commented, "Why, Mr. Whitaker has been our doctor, lawyer and banker." It is interesting to note that in the 1960s, when a low income housing project was built two blocks away from "The Lakes", none of the Whitaker tenants even applied for tenancy.

C. Sources of information:

1. Old views: Photograph by Ewing, Inc., May 19, 1926, showing flooding on Gracie Street.
2. Primary and unpublished:
 - a. Conveyance Records, Parish of East Baton Rouge, Government Building, Centroplex, 222 St. Louis Street, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70821.
 - b. Assessment Records of East Baton Rouge Parish, 1905 and 1924, Government Building, Centroplex, 222 St. Louis Street, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70821.
 - c. Interview with J.R. Whitaker, Henry Smith, Thelma Williams and Emma Johnson, June, 1978.
3. Secondary published:
 - a. 1922-1923 City Directory, Baton Rouge, Vol. IX, Piedmont Directory Co., Asheville, N.C.

- b. Kniffen, Fred, "Louisiana House Types," Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Vol. XXVI, December 1936, #4, pp. 173-193.
- c. Pepe, John and John Stubbs, The Shotgun House: Origins and Evolution, paper, Louisiana State University, undated.

(The original and continuing records of "The Lakes" were destroyed when the Whitaker family house was torn down, several years ago. Records on maintenance and remodeling exist only from 1944).

- 4. Sources not yet investigated: Over half of the present tenants of "The Lakes" either grew up there, had relatives who lived there, or have been long time residents.

Prepared by Sibyl McCormac Groff
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
Summer, 1978

and

Denys Peter Myers
Architectural Historian
Historic American Buildings Survey
July, 1979

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character:

These 136 houses represent different shotgun forms and illustrate typical southern low-income urban streetscapes. Shotgun houses are one room wide and three rooms deep. Double shotguns are two single shotguns that share a party wall. The front porch can be continuous or separated. Twenty of the 136 houses are L-shaped examples, not shotguns.

2. Condition of fabric: good

825-827 Frisco-constructed during the mid 1950s.

B. Description of exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This double shotgun house is 24'2" x 32'3" with a shed addition in the back (west) measuring 3'3". The two separate porches measure 8'2" x 5'6". This one-story dwelling has four bays and stands with its gable end toward the street.
2. Foundations: Raised on brick piers with a concrete foundation on the front (east).
3. Walls: Stained dark brown cypress. The front is clapboarded: the other three sides are board and batten. The trim on the windows and porch doors is painted white.
4. Structural system: wooden frame
5. Porches: Plain concrete steps lead to simple gabled porches with plain posts. Floors are concrete. The north porch is screened.
6. Openings: The two front doors each have four lights above three recessed horizontal panels. Between the entrances are two four-over-four-light double-hung sash windows. There are two similar windows on each side of the house. Panelled doors on the sides of the structure provide access to the kitchens. At the rear, there are smaller four-light windows, and two small wooden doors leading to the sheds where hot water heaters are kept.
7. Roof: The asbestos-sheathed roof has an eleven-louver rectangular vent in its front gable and an eight-louver rear gable vent. Small gabled roofs cover the separate porches in the front (east).

C. Description of interior:

1. Floor plan: On each side, behind the porches, are three aligned rooms. A door leads from the second bedroom to the bathroom, while another leads to the adjacent kitchen. The walls and ceilings are sheetrocked and the floors are made of pine.
2. Improvements to the house:
 - 1958 - screened porch at 827 (north)
 - 1967 - washing machine outlet at 825
 - 1968 - water heaters
 - (from Records of J.F. Whitaker, et al.)

855-865 Frisco Street-

Henry Smith said that this double shotgun house is one of the earliest, but records do not reveal the exact date.

B. Description of exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This one-story, square shaped, double shotgun measures 30' x 32' with a 14' x 15½' shed on the left rear (west). It has four bays.
2. Foundations: Brick piers.
3. Walls: Stained dark brown cypress (two-by-fours). The siding is board and batten, except on the gable ends, where clapboard is used. The trim on the doors, windows, and plain cornice is white.
4. Structural system: wooden frame
5. Porches: Two separate set of three steps in line with the two front doors lead to the porch. The north steps are wooden, the south steps are concrete. The porch extends across the front of the shotgun and has a planked ceiling and wooden floor.
6. Openings: The front (east) facade has two doors each with five horizontal recessed panels. Each is flanked by two double-hung windows with four-over-four-lights. Each side (north and south) has three similar windows. The back of 865 has the original cypress plank door with a diagonal brace.
7. Roof: The asbestos-sheathed roof is pitched with its ridge parallel with the street and the gable ends facing north and south.

C. Description of interior:

1. Floor plan: This double shotgun has the standard three-room plan. As the house is unoccupied, it is possible to examine the original construction. In the front room (northeast corner),

the post has two supporting diagonal wooden braces. Plain vertical boards divide the inner spaces. Horizontal boards were placed midway on some of the interior walls for additional support.

The flooring is pine, and the walls are covered with cardboard and wall paper. The front room of 865 has a small fireplace with an arched cast-iron frame with a small sunburst motif in two corners of its spandrels. The wooden mantelpiece has a shallow bracket-supported shelf. The motif on the fireplace is the last surviving example in "The Lakes".

2. Improvements to the house:

1945 - wired for electric lights
1946 - gas and heat
1950 - added bathroom and sink, modernized kitchen
1966 - built extensions - two bedrooms on the back
1968 - water heater
(from Records of J.F. Whitaker, et al.)

1360 Gayosa Street-

B. Description of exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This two-bayed single shotgun measures 14' x 35'3". It has one story.
2. Foundations: Cemented-over brick piers.
3. Walls: Stained dark brown cypress. Board and batten constructions on all sides except on the clapboard-gabled street end. The doorway and window trim is painted white.
4. Structural system: wooden frame
5. Porches: Four concrete steps lead to the screened-in front porch, which extends the width of the house.
6. Openings: The front door has three lights above and recessed paneling. It is flanked by a four-over-four-light double-hung sash window. There are two windows on the east, and three on the west (including one in the bathroom shed). In the back, five concrete steps lead to the kitchen door.
7. Roof: The gabled roof, with its end facing the street (north), is covered with asbestos. In the gabled end is a rectangular eleven-louver vent.

C. Description of interior:

1. Floor plan: This three-room single shotgun has a shed containing bathroom facilities added off of the second room. The pine floor boards measure 4" across. The walls are sheetrocked and

painted. Although the original fireplace has been removed, the wooden mantel with supporting brackets still remains in the front room.

2. Improvements to the house:

1945 - electric lighting
1950 - gas
1957 - rewiring
1957 - new floors
1957 - added shed with bathroom and sink, screened in porch
1970 - sheet rocked walls
(from Records of J.F. Whitaker, et al.)

1660 Gracie Street-

B. Description of exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This one-story, L-shaped house is 24'2" x 22'5½". The three-bay structure is block shaped, as the ell is filled in with a screen porch. The bathroom shed on the rear is 5'7" deep.
2. Foundations: brick piers.
3. Wall construction: Stained dark brown, this cypress house has board and batten construction on all sides and clapboard siding in the gabled ends of the roof. The trim on all openings is painted white.
4. Structural system: wooden frames
5. Porches: Four concrete steps lead to the porch in the ell on the front (north). Five wooden steps lead to a small porch with a shed roof in the back (south).
6. Openings: Two doors lead off the porch - one to the west and one to the south. Next to the latter is a four-over-four-light double-hung sash window. Similar windows are located throughout the building. One is on the east facade, two are on the west facade, and another is on the north facade, in the bedroom. The bathroom has six-over-six-light double-hung sash.
7. Roof: The pitched roof is sheathed with tin. There are ventilation louvers in the gable.

C. Description of interior:

1. Floor plan: The main door opens into a bedroom. The west (right) door from the porch opens into another bedroom, behind which is the kitchen. Both bedrooms have doors leading into the kitchen. Behind the kitchen, in the shed addition, is the bathroom. The flooring is 3" pine planks, and the walls and

ceiling have been sheetrocked and painted over.

2. Improvements to the house:

- 1946 - gas and electricity; remodeled, adding shed with bath and toilet
- 1952 - screened-in porch
- 1960 - replaced bath tub, lavatory and sink
- 1968 - sheetrocked inside
- 1969 - hot water heater installed
(from Records of J.F. Whitaker, et al.)

D. Site:

1. General setting: "The Lakes" derives its name from its proximity to a lake, now separated from the development by a super highway. The streetscape is still characterized by well-kept shotguns.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the City of Baton Rouge, Parish of East Baton Rouge, Department of Public Works, Division of Community Development. Under the auspices of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth Anderson, Principal Architect, the project was completed in the summer of 1978 at the HABS field office, Department of Architecture, Louisiana State University. The team was comprised of Sibyl McCormac Groff (Columbia University), project supervisor/historian; Timothy Allanbrook (Rhode Island School of Design), project foreman; architect Late Johns (Arizona State University) and student architects William J. Graham (University of Maryland); Robert D. Louton (University of Arkansas) and George W. Steinrock, Jr. (University of Detroit). David J. Kaminsky was a project photographer.

Prepared by Sibyl McCormac Groff
Project Supervisor
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