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WHERE WE LIVE

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Home front

Architecture of houses has changed through the decades

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The houses were small at first, but as Southwest Florida grew so did the square footage.

More than a century after homes first started popping up throughout the Florida wilderness, some experts say there may be a movement afoot to return to the cottage-style homes of yesteryear.

Old Florida homes were tiny compared to today. There was always a front porch and every room had windows to let in the cool Gulf of Mexico breeze.

“The original look of the buildings down here were Florida Caribbean style. They weren’t very ornate. They were very simple with some small decorative details,” said Matthew Kragh, a Naples architect who has experience restoring historic homes.

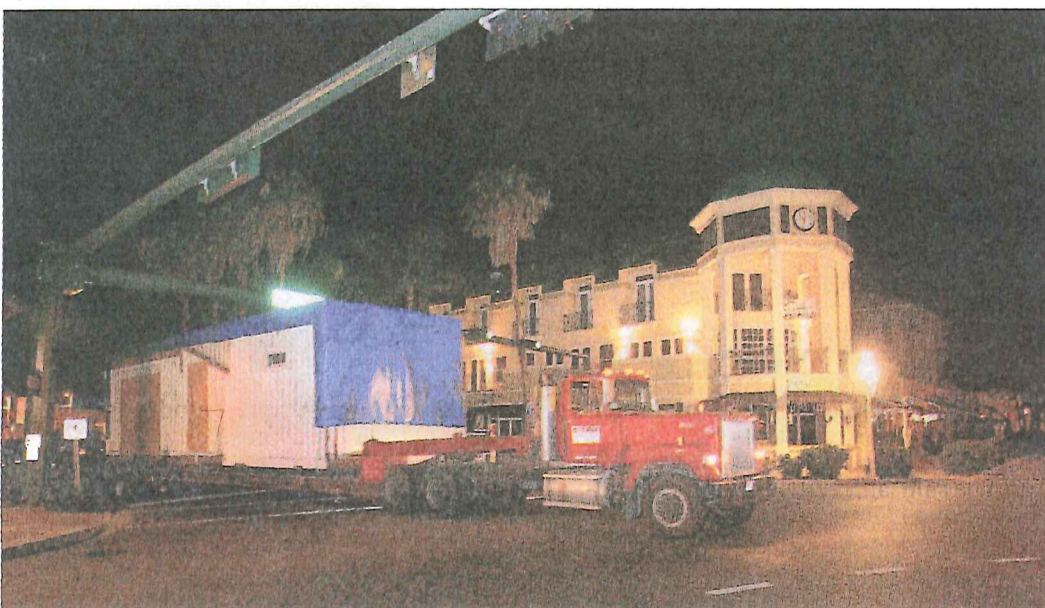
“Back then less was more.”

Lodge McKee, a longtime Neapolitan and history buff, said the homes were originally built with the expectation that owners would be in town for a couple of months during the season.

That meant the houses were relatively compact and sparsely decorated. The bedrooms often had small closets — big enough, McKee said, to hold a suitcase of full of clothing — and often times the only thing in the living room was a fireplace to keep homeowners warm on a chilly winter night.

As for the dining room, McKee said that was often combined with the most important room of the house: the front porch.

The porch — screened in to keep the mosquitoes out — always faced the street, and McKee said homeowners



Three views of the historic Haldeman House, constructed in 1886 as a cottage on 12th Avenue South, starts with the top photo showing the home when it rested just south of the Naples Pier until April 2006. The home is named after Walter Haldeman, the owner of the Courier-Journal newspaper in Louisville, Ky.

After a failed attempt by Naples preservationists to preserve the house at its original location, Chris Busk, a Bonita Springs landscape architect, said he would move the house to Pennsylvania Avenue in Bonita Springs. In the middle photo, the historic home begins its move through downtown Naples on the night on April 4, 2006, at 1:30 a.m., on its way to Bonita Springs, where it arrived at its new home at 4:40 a.m.

Below, using a photographic technique called light painting, the Haldeman House is pictured at its new resting place.

would spend their days out there watching their neighbors pass by.

“It was a real clique of people here,” said John Mayer, a Naples Historical Society board member. “They got together twice a day.”

The historic Palm Cottage is one of the few remaining historic cottages left in downtown Naples. The house was built in 1895 and features several small, enclosed rooms upstairs — bedrooms were big enough for a bed and a suitcase — and a living room, dining room and library downstairs.

And much like homes of that period, woodwork throughout of the house was crafted using Dade County pine, a hard wood typically used to make furniture. Dade County pine — which is sometimes referred, Mayer said, as Lee County mahogany — is no longer readily available because almost all of the trees have been cut down.

Palm Cottage isn’t the only piece of early architecture that survives. One other home from Naples early days is still standing, just not where its owner built it more than 125 years ago.

Constructed in 1886 as a cottage on 12th Avenue South, the Haldeman House sat in Old Naples near the Naples Pier until April 2006. The home was originally built by Confederate Gen. John S. Williams, but was later given to Walter Haldeman, one of Naples’ early developers.

The home stayed in the Haldeman family for more than a century, but in 2004 the family trust put it on the market. A Naples resident bought the home and said he’d pay anyone who wanted

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to move it and preserve it.

After a failed attempt by Naples preservationists — including the Naples Historical Society — to preserve the house at its original location, a Bonita Springs landscape architect said he would move the house to Pennsylvania Avenue in Bonita Springs. Chris Busk, the architect, restored several historic Bonita Springs homes, such as the 1915 Williams-Packard home and a 1913 fishing cottage.

Southwest Florida's love affair with cottages continued through World War II, but after the war Southwest Florida's neighborhoods — as well as neighborhoods throughout the country — saw a shift in the types of homes that were being built.

That shift ushered in the birth of the ranch-style house. These homes — usually long, close to the ground with a flat pitched roof — were first built in the 1920s, but grew in popularity following the war.

Ranch-style homes were popular, McKee said, in newer subdivisions such as Aqualane Shores and Coquina Sands.

“(Developers) built standard models of those homes and they were very active in Florida,” McKee said. “So much of the development that took place (in that era) was of that sort.”

The ranch-style area continued on through the 1980s, but long-low homes weren't the only thing popping up. There also was a move afoot to turn a fledgling island community into a Polynesian oasis.

Herb Savage, a longtime Marco Island resident, began designing homes on Marco Island with the Mackle brothers in 1976. Savage said in a 2009 Marco Magazine interview that the planners



MICHEL FORTIER/FILE

Naples artist Paul Arsenault strolls past Palm Cottage on his way to work on a painting in this 2005 file photo. The Palm Cottage house museum, on 12th Avenue South near the Naples Pier, a treasured symbol of Naples history and heritage, is listed in the National Register for Historic Places and is maintained by the Naples Historical Society.

“wanted to follow a Polynesian theme.”

Savage at the time said his vision for Marco Island was full of influences from his travels, and his architectural designs remained constant.

But the ranch and Polynesian phase didn't last forever. By the 1990s people started looking toward Mediterranean design when it came to designing their homes, Kragh said. The Mediterranean-style started on

Florida's east coast, and Kragh said he thinks tourists “started to identify that with what Florida feels like.”

“I think it just spreads like a virus and it was everywhere,” Kragh said. “It's frustrating as an architect.”

But the push to build bigger homes didn't just come from a desire for more space, it also had to do with getting the biggest bang for a buyer's buck.

“The driving force between

the changes in the size of house and the style of houses ... has been the steadily increasing value of land beneath the house,” McKee said. “We're still in that mode today where you might have to pay \$1.5 million for (the land) and if I'm going to do that, I'm not going to be happy with a 1,700-square-foot house.”

That's troubling for a preservationist like McKee. The desire to build bigger homes means buyers are tearing down small-

er cottages to make way for new homes, leaving about 60 structures that make Naples' historic district historic.

And while there's no way to bring old houses back once they've been torn down, Kragh said there's an increased interest in either restoring old homes or recreating the old Florida experience.

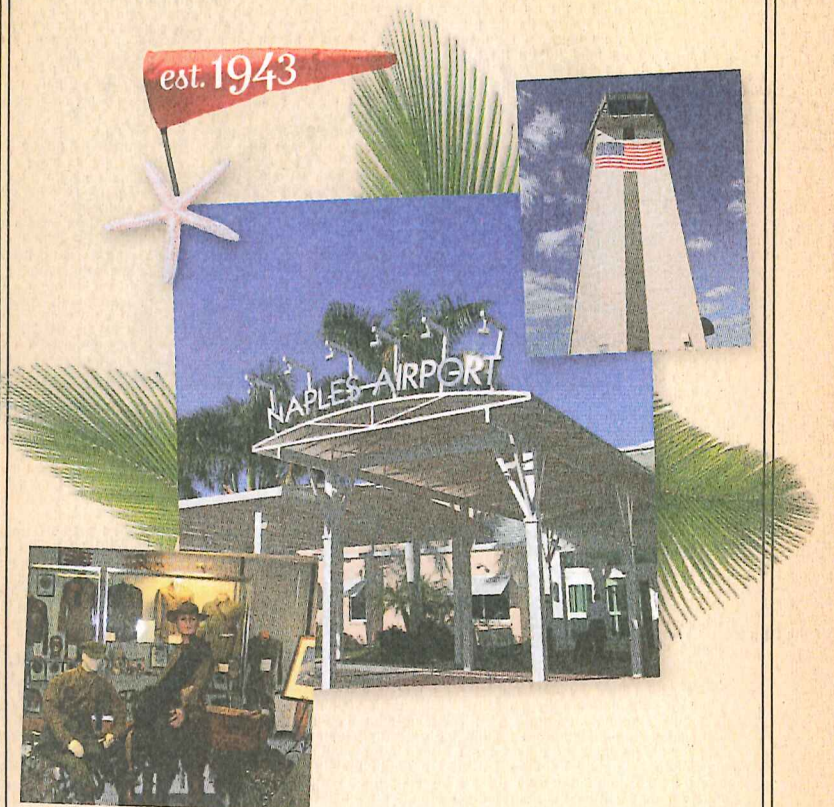
“The trend has changed; (people) want the old Florida house again,” Kragh said.

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