

The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project

The Shotgun House

Many of the residential homes built in Davis Bottom were an architectural style commonly known as the "shotgun" house. This single-story, wood-frame home was built throughout the Southern United States from the 1860s to the 1920s. Shotgun homes are inexpensive, rectangular structures designed to fit narrow lots on urban streets. The two shotgun houses at 710 and 712 DeRoode Street (photo right) are the focus of the archaeology, architectural surveys and 2D graphics featured in The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project.



Figure 1: Shotgun houses at 710 (left) and 712 (right) on DeRoode Street, Davis Bottom. Courtesy, Kentucky Archaeological Survey, 2010.



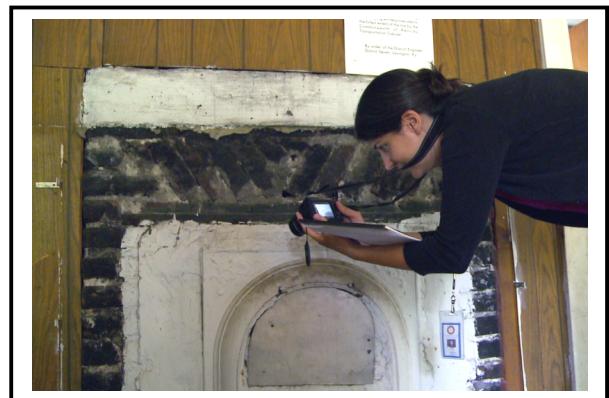
There are several theories as to the origins of the "shotgun" house form. Some scholars suggest its roots in ancient West Africa, Haiti and New Orleans (Vlach 1986). The term "shotgun" house may be derived from ancient African languages, or a modern description (unknown origin); the straight alignment of doorways would allow someone to fire a shotgun from the front door and out the back door without hitting any walls.

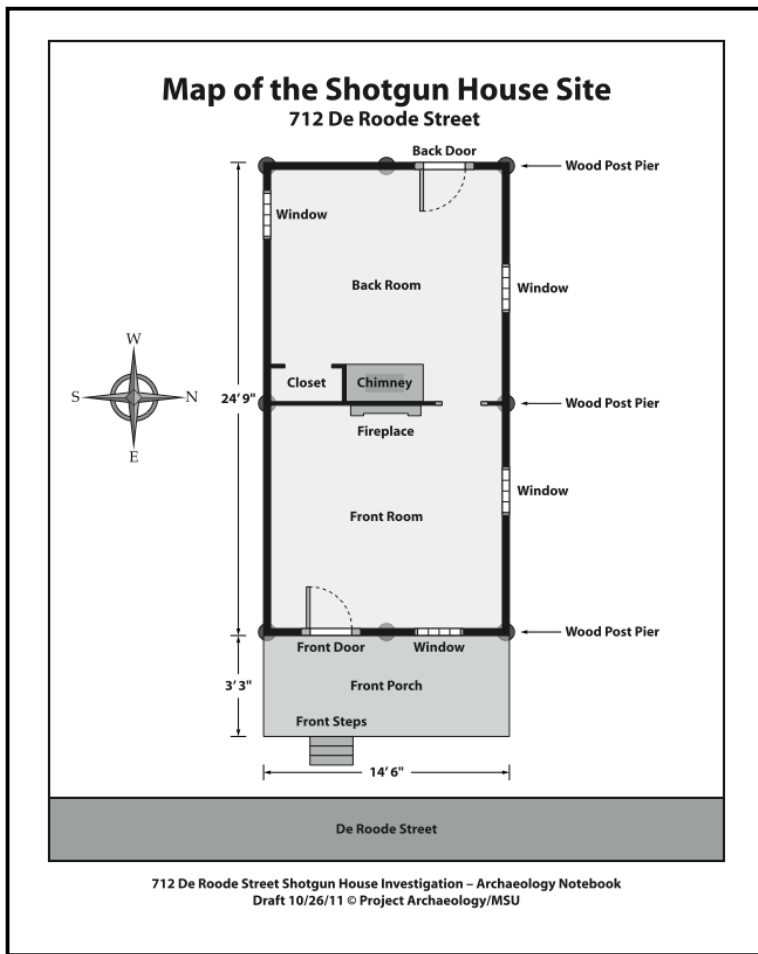
Figure 2: Shotgun homes in an unidentified African American community from "A Comprehensive Plan of Lexington," 1931. Courtesy, Lexington Public Library.

Floor Plans

Scholars conducted extensive surveys of many shotgun homes in Davis Bottom before demolition and construction for the Newtown Pike Extension Project began in 2010. The Davis Bottom History Preservation Project features two homes at 710 and 712 DeRoode Street, which were documented with extensive archaeological research and architectural surveys.

Figure 3: Amanda Abner photographs a fireplace during an architectural survey of 712 DeRoode Street conducted by The Division of Environmental Analysis, Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, on September 17, 2010.





The home at 712 DeRoode Street had a floor plan similar to many shotgun homes in Davis Bottom. One family owned the property from 1920 to 2010. The original house, built between 1920 and 1925, was 28 feet long and 14.6 feet wide with two rooms, a center chimney and a front porch (Faberson 2011).

The front door is on the left side, which does not align with the middle or back doors on the right side. This “unaligned” door floor plan is unusual. The front door may have been moved at a later date.

A kitchen and indoor bathroom were added to the back of the house, perhaps when a water line was built sometime in the 1940s.

Figure 4: Map of the shotgun house at 712 DeRoode Street. Courtesy, The Kentucky Archaeological Survey, 2012.

Wood post piers



Dr. Tanya Faberson, Principal Archaeologist, Cultural Resources Analysts, conducted extensive investigations of the shotgun homes at 710 and 712 DeRoode (see *Archaeology* pages on this website). During excavations, her team discovered post molds and the remnants of wood-post piers. “All of the shotgun houses, or the remains of the shotgun houses, had been build up on these wood post foundation piers,” says Faberson. “And what that tells us is that these particular buildings were probably lifted up off the ground, which makes sense in an area that is frequently flooded,” Faberson adds. Flooding was a major problem for lower sections of Davis Bottom. Wood post piers (many later reinforced with stone) were not only used for flood-control, but they were also much cheaper than limestone or brick foundations.

Figures 5 & 6: A wood post pier (top) in situ at 712 DeRoode Street, and (bottom) at the archaeology laboratory with a brick for scale. Courtesy, Cultural Resource Analysts, Inc. and The Kentucky Archaeological Survey, 2011

Architecture and Lifeways

Life was tough and cramped for residents who grew up in a shotgun house in Davis Bottom. From the 1860s to the 1940s, many homes did not have such utilities as indoor plumbing for running water or toilets, central heating, insulation, window screens or telephones. Residents often heated their homes and cooked using cast-iron, potbelly stoves that burned wood or coal. Flooding and fires were a constant danger. Seven houses were destroyed or damaged when a fire swept through a row of shotgun homes on the 700 block of DeRoode Street on August 4th, 1930. The blaze was caused by someone burning rags to drive off mosquitoes (*Leader* 1930).



Figure 7: Residents stand on the porches of two shotgun homes on Chair Avenue in Davis Bottom during a flood in 1932. Courtesy, Long (Robert J) and Lafayette Studio Employee Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky.

Residents adopted numerous strategies to cope with the elements and conditions. Newspaper and cardboard were often used as insulation. Neighbors shared water pumped from local wells, and often gathered for community meals. Children often slept on the front porch to escape summer heat. The small size of shotgun homes made front yards crucial work areas. Many photographs show men working on cars along DeRoode Street. Many backyards held privies (out houses), chicken coops, gardens and fruit trees. Canning fruits and vegetables was a common way to store homegrown foods. Archaeologists recovered thousands of fragments from canning jars from the privy behind 710 DeRoode Street.



Figure 8: Children behind the Laffoon family's shotgun home at 848 DeRoode Street, ca 1950s. Courtesy, Laffoon Collection, Davis Bottom History Preservation Project.



Figure 9: A 2D graphic of the shotgun house at 712 DeRoode based on field surveys conducted by scholars with the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet. Courtesy, The Kentucky Archaeological Survey, 2012

Contributing scholars:

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