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Architecture Takes Cues
From Mississippi River

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An Ingrained Heritage

New Orleans Bargeboard Homes Carry a Historic Port Legacy

BY IAN MCNULTY

New Orleans architecture is known to take cues from the Mississippi River. One riverboat captain built two “steamboat houses” in the early 1900s near the riverfront to emulate the elaborate vessels he steered along the Mississippi. But another vestige of the city’s riverine heritage is built almost imperceptibly into homes all across New Orleans on a vast scale. It’s bargeboard, a humble though remarkable building material intimately linked to the Port and the city’s history.

“Even the name is evocative. It’s a constant reminder of our connection to the River,” says Maryann Miller, interim director of Operation Comeback, a nonprofit that rebuilds blighted New Orleans homes. Though there’s been no thorough survey of the number of homes built with bargeboard, Miller estimates it’s found in one in three properties Operation Comeback restores and is widely dispersed among the city’s historic housing stock.

As that name suggests, bargeboard is lumber originally used to make barges and flatboats which were in turn broken up and repurposed as building material. It was an early and intuitive form of recycling, one driven by the realities of River travel before steamboats made two-way traffic a widely accessible option.

“Nineteenth-century farmers along mid-America tributaries built new kinds of boats – the keelboat and the flatboat – to funnel the vast production of their river valleys downriver to New Orleans, the trade gateway to Europe,” writes New Orleans historian Sally Reeves. She describes the vessels as “square-ended, keel-less, flat-bottomed craft” that could carry a cargo of up to 50 tons.

Starting out anywhere across the Mississippi’s massive drainage basin, from Montana to New York, these craft might make numerous stops along the way. But once they reached New Orleans it was the end of the line. There was no practical way to get them back upriver against the current, so they were dismantled and sold for lumber.

Typically an inch thick and anywhere from 12 inches to two feet wide, this bargeboard made for some unconventional construction techniques. Often, building a bargeboard house meant lining up these rough-hewn, irregular planks as walls, slapping clapboard on the exterior, applying wallpaper directly to it on the inside and calling it a room. In many cases today it’s thoroughly hidden under successive layers of paneling and drywall, though extended window frames jutting out from the thick, solid wooden walls underneath

are clues to its presence.

Bargeboard can present problems for today’s carpenters and contractors, especially when it comes to installing electrical wiring, indoor plumbing or insulation. Some curse it and many recommend removing it, though others find its history inspiring.

One example is Ben Gauslin, a New Orleans web developer with a background in architecture. He knew the dilapidated bargeboard cottage he bought in the Faubourg St. John neighborhood would throw some renovation curveballs his way, but he was also fascinated by the unusual and distinctly New Orleans character of the construction. Gauslin remodeled his house with a modern interior of clean lines and sleek styling. But he left one wall exposed to show the bare bargeboard, which makes a reliable conversation piece.

“Every visitor from my former life as an architect has been blown away when they learn about these houses with inch-thick walls made of boards that floated down the Mississippi,” he says.

Lincoln’s Logs

It was the seemingly endless stream of such flatboats and barges that helped build the Port and, literally, build

much of the city itself. Tulane University professor Richard Campanella delved into the history of this early River traffic while researching his 2011 book "Lincoln in New Orleans," a richly detailed account of the two flatboat journeys a young Abraham Lincoln made down the Mississippi in 1828 and 1831. Lincoln was of course bound for greatness later in life, but Campanella describes his river adventures as being rather commonplace for the time.

"It was very much a rite of passage for young men then," he says. "You showed your manliness and abilities and wherewithal by building your own flatboat and making this journey, taking the family commodities downriver and returning with money." Campanella's research shows the port had a designated area where flatboats could dock – an area starting near today's Julia Street Wharf and stretching upstream past the Crescent City Connection bridge – and the craft were typically broken up nearby.

"Anyone in need of lumber knew they could go down to these areas and get it," he says.

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the maiden voyage of the *Steamboat New Orleans*, which proved that paddlewheelers could navigate the Mississippi River. Ultimately, steamboats and later barge tows replaced flatboats as the preferred method of commerce on the Mississippi. Nevertheless, in the early days of the steamboat age, the paddlewheelers actually helped increase flatboat and barge traffic to New Orleans, Campanella says. That's because steamboats made the return



Ben Gauslin, at his bargeboard home in Faubourg St. John

trip from New Orleans much easier, while flatboats and barges remained an accessible, efficient way to get goods and people downstream.

"Flatboats and steamboats coexisted for years in a symbiotic relationship," he says. "Flatboats continued because they were so cheap. They cost you your time and labor but the lumber was essentially free."

These vessels were built beside the Mississippi and its tributaries, sometimes churned out by specialized workshops though often simply by someone who wanted his own conveyance downriver. They used the trees at hand, and this means

an array of lumber from distant forests worked itself into New Orleans homes, from fir to poplar.

Recycled and Repurposed, All Over Again

It was pine bargeboard that New Orleans photographer Dwight Marshall and his wife, the jazz singer Ingrid Lucia, uncovered in their Mid-City home.

"It was amazing when we started peeling away the layers. There was wallpaper from the '20s, then burlap under that, then all this bargeboard deeper in," Lucia says.

Their home was damaged by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flood, and when they set about making repairs they decided to reconfigure with a contemporary addition. The work called for removing some walls, and this produced a crop of bargeboard that Marshall was determined to work back into his redesigned home.

"I kept a stash of it in the backyard under a tarp because I was afraid it would get damaged by rain," he says. "Looking back that was a bit unnecessary. This wood has been in a lot more water than some rain. I mean, it started out as a boat."

Marshall planed the wood, revealing its beautiful, honey-colored luster, and repurposed the broad planks as trim, as the steps and railing for a new staircase and for a bedroom floor, adding its historic texture throughout.

Like old cypress cut from the great swamp forests around New Orleans or iconic, locally forged St. Joe bricks, bargeboard has worked its way in to the building heritage of the city. Early flatboat skippers might have scoffed at the notion that wood they rated as cheap lumber for one-way river trips is prized today, but in many cases this building material has proved its practical worth.

For instance, Miller of Operation Comeback recalls one house that was cut in two by a crashing pecan tree, yet the building didn't collapse thanks to the sturdy bargeboard girding its structure.

"We're saving buildings that saved themselves, we're able to restore them because they're still around," Miller says. "In many cases the houses are still around this long because they were built with that strong bargeboard." ↴

