

A Formal Occasion

An architect revisits the stately symmetry of colonial architecture in North Carolina.

BY JENNIFER SPERRY PHOTOS BY DENNIS KALE

It was a distinguished style, pleasing for its reliance on proportion and symmetry. As Virginia and Lee McAlester write in *A Field Guide to American Houses*, “Georgian is among the most long-lived styles of American building, having dominated the English colonies for most of the 18th century.” Rooted in the classical details of the Italian Renaissance, Georgian archi-

ture gained prominence in England (1650–1750) as the country’s baroque style declined. Reaching American colonists around 1700, it offered a more fashionable house option and became the predominant house type before the Revolution, during the reign of King George III.

New World architects and carpenters learned Georgian particulars from

comprehensive pattern books as well as inexpensive carpenter handbooks showing doorway, cornice, window, and mantel detail, write the McAlesters. Identifying traits include a paneled front door surrounded by a decorative crown and pilasters; windows, typically five-ranked, with double-hung sashes and arranged in symmetrical rows; and a prominent cornice

Architect James Collins designs a stately Georgian house in North Carolina. Opposite: The semicircular portico is a hallmark of the Georgian style.



An outdoor room carries the Georgian style with its columns and oval windows.



Intricate Cornice

The Georgian home's entablature also benefited from architect Jim Collins' thoughtful research. Out of many possibilities, this pivotal Georgian feature was modeled after the cornice on the Burlington County Courthouse in Mount Holly, New Jersey. "It's based on the cornice section of the entablature of a Corinthian order," says Collins. "However, we substituted Greek key molding for the typical dentils and curved or arcuated brackets with guttae (small cone-shaped ornament) for the more typical scroll bracket modillions. The modillion band was made larger to accommodate the curved brackets with guttae.

"I asked Charles E. Peterson [FAIA], an authority on early American architecture and technology, how he would describe this cornice and the curved brackets with guttae," he continues, "and he used the term 'arcuated frieze.' It's not uncommon to Georgians, but this arcuated frieze has never been used in Greensboro before this house."



emphasized by decorative moldings. By the year 1780, Georgian houses were prevalent from Maine to Georgia, with regional variations in roof shape, building materials, chimney placement, and other details.

Architect James Collins is well-versed in the particulars of this architectural style, not only from his work and training, but also from 16 years spent surrounded by many notable Georgians while living in Philadelphia. Congress Hall, the 1786 Hill-Physick-Keith House, the 1761 Mount Pleasant House, the 1765 Powel House, and the 1818 Meredith House in Washington Square are among the city's architectural treasures. This particular familiarity proved beneficial when a North Carolina couple tasked him with designing a home with "a Williamsburg feel" for their property in Greensboro's Irving Park district.

"What they really meant by 'Williamsburg' was they wanted a Georgian home," explains Collins, who welcomed the chance to re-immense himself in the pedigreed colonial vernacular along with builder E. S. Nichols. Another source of inspiration informing the Georgian look was the couple's furniture collection, built in the American Chippendale tradition by the wife's grandfather. "It was exciting to know that the house would ultimately benefit from a seamless connection between furnishings, fixtures, and architecture," says Collins.

Working collaboratively with the wife, an interior designer, he presented drawings of architectural detail culled from Philadelphia-area buildings as well as Georgians in other states—



Above: Six-over-six windows carry the Georgian theme through the house. Below: Outdoor spaces abound, including this handsome brick courtyard.



sometimes they viewed examples in person. "I like to base drawings on something I've actually seen, but I also use books with measured drawings," says the architect, whose résumé includes documenting historic dwellings for the Historic American Buildings Survey. "I always learn so much from studying and measuring interior and exterior elements; I discover how things were constructed and delight in seeing the subtle details," he says.

While Collins' vision for the home's exterior was in keeping with Georgian ideals, the overall layout varies from the more standard box shape. Carving out bedrooms for the family's four

young children, among other lifestyle requirements, caused the architect to add two long extensions on either end of the home's central rectangle, forming an H. On the first floor, one extension houses the master suite, and the other an expansive music room.

With painted white fronts and large bay windows separated by Tuscan pilasters, the wings mimic the look of sunrooms and screened porches commonly found throughout Greensboro. More specifically, notes the architect, "We wanted the rooms to resemble screened porches that had been in-filled, which seems to occur as houses age and homeowners desire more indoor climate-controlled space." He decided to recess each extension's second story in order to lessen the home's mass, leaving room for decorative balustrades inspired by a home in Wiscasset, Maine.

Familiar Georgian elements include six-over-six windows arranged symmetrically, a slate roof with pedimented dormers, and common bond brickwork with a Flemish header every sixth course. "The front door, entryway fanlight, and sidelights are all based on Georgian architecture found in the Society Hill section of Philadelphia," explains Collins. The sidelights are unusually wide, he adds, to let as much light into the entry hall as possible. Operable wooden shutters—paneled on the first story and louvered on the second—lend additional authenticity.

An element specifically requested by the homeowners is the front entrance's semicircular portico, which is typically Georgian; however, Collins took the opportunity to infuse a unique regional touch. Topping the ionic columns are Tower of the Winds capitals, derived from the Tower of the Winds in Athens, Greece, and first introduced to North Carolina by A. J. Davis and Ithiel Town in the State Capitol building. "These capitals were used in the South during the nineteenth century because the Tower of the Winds version was easier for local craftspeople to carve than a Corinthian capital," he explains.

While intricate parts of the gracious exterior originate from Georgian precursors along the East Coast—expanding Greensboro's own architectural diversity—the influence of Philadelphia shines through most, particularly in Collins' eyes. And when an Irving Park neighbor sent Collins a note applauding the home's details, proportions, and workmanship, it was a fitting coincidence that the author also mentioned his home city of Philadelphia. **NOH**

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