

# **Constructing A Cracker House**

## **By Linda Clayton & Joy Coleman**

### I. Lesson Summary

#### **Summary**

Early Florida Pioneer homes were very different than today's modern homes. In this lesson, students will learn about the differences of an early Florida Cracker house and more modern houses they live in today.

#### **Objectives:**

Students will:

1. Construct a model of an early Cracker House.
2. Compare and contrast pioneer homes with modern homes.
3. Write an expository essay explaining why they would/not want to live in an early Florida Cracker House.

#### **U.S. History event or Era**

Antebellum Period (1821-1861)

#### **Grade Level**

4<sup>th</sup> Grade

#### **Materials:**

Lesson handouts, their choice of construction materials (Ex. Popsicle sticks, Lincoln Logs, toothpicks, cardboard, wood, etc.)

#### **Lesson Time:**

We will allow the students 2 weeks for them to complete their model. They will construct their models out of class.

## **II. Lesson Procedures**

1. In a whole-group setting read and discuss the handout, "Cracker Farmhouses".
2. On a Double Bubble Thinking Map, students will compare and contrast cracker houses and modern Florida houses.
3. Students take notes from viewing photographs and reading the handouts. If they prefer, they may draw a sketch of what they want their model to look like.
4. A parent letter of explanation about the project will be sent home and brought back with a parent signature documenting that the parent is aware of the criteria.
5. Students will gather material and construct their model and bring it to class at the required time.

### III. Activities

1. Reading the handout and discussing.
2. Double Bubble Thinking Map
3. Construction of their model.
4. Bringing their model to class.

### The Old House Web



**The Grant House in Brevard County was transported by boat from Jacksonville and erected on its site on the Indian River in 1916. Described locally as a Cracker house, the wood-frame building is a museum of life in Florida before air-conditioning.**

In these days of "shabby chic" home decor and "grunge" fashion, "Cracker" houses are making a comeback in the Deep South. Florida developers are trying to capture the casual, homey style with modern developments sporting metal roofs, cedar siding and deep shade porches. The St. Petersburg Times dubs the mini building boom, "Cracker Chic."

While pioneers to the Deep South found an inhospitable land of searing heat, merciless biting insects and semi-tropical rains, settlers to these new "rustic" deed-restricted, gated communities leave air-conditioned homes to stroll on paved streets and sidewalks leading to swimming pools and clubhouses. Promotional literature for one of the planned developments, Riverwalk, near Gainesville, boasts of a "Key West style of architecture in keeping with the charm of the old Florida Cracker homes." Another, Seaside, claims that the pricey development is "more than design. It is a way of life."

Long time regarded as a poor relative in the family of American architecture, Cracker style is now being celebrated for its inventiveness and energy efficiency.

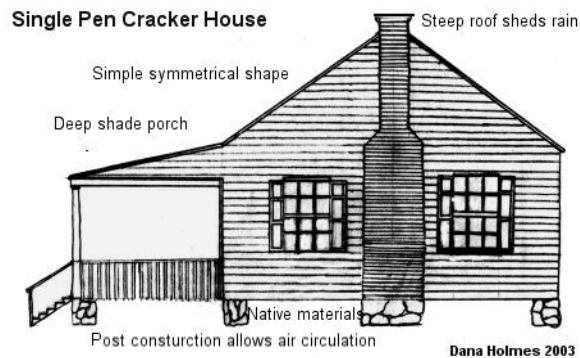
#### **Cracker Style**

In its simplest form, a Cracker house is a wooden shelter built by the early Florida and Georgia settlers. Lured to Florida by cheap and plentiful land, these pioneers

arrived with few provisions and needed to erect shelter quickly and cheaply. The brush provided abundant supplies of cedar and cypress. Rocks or bricks made of oyster shell and lime served as pilings to keep the shelters off the ground. A wide shade porch wasn't just an embellishment. In pre-air-conditioned Florida, the porches provided relief from the relentless sun.

The Florida Cooperative Extension Service notes the energy efficiency of the style it calls "Florida Vernacular:" Site orientation for shade, wide, covered porches, crawl spaces beneath the homes for ventilation, and windows that took advantage of cross breezes. Floor cracks "helped with house cleaning, and raised first floor was used to keep hounds (hunting) and chickens (food), which in turn provided service of consuming fleas and other pests," according to an extension publication on energy efficiency.

The simplest of these cabins were called single pen houses. As money permitted and family size dictated, these "single pen" square cabins often were added to, producing such fanciful names as "saddlebag" and "dog-trot" house.



Transplanted Yankee Ronald W. Haase has done much in the past decade to publicize -- and preserve -- the homes of Florida's early pioneers. Haase moved from New Hampshire to take a job as a professor of architecture at the University of Florida in the 1980s.. His book, "Classic Cracker" is an enthusiastic and detailed account of Haase's search for these wood-frame homes. Haase's research inspired him to design contemporary homes based on the energy efficiency and environmental synergy of Cracker farmhouses.

### Types of Cracker Houses

**Single Pen:** A log cabin with a single room with one door and a few windows. Window glass was often not readily available and mosquito netting or shutters were employed to keep out insects, making for a dark interior. A stone or block chimney was often placed at one of the gable ends of the house. A broad porch provided a relatively cool spot to sit.

**Double Pen/Saddlebag:** When more space was needed, an addition was built on the single pen house. If the addition was on the wall opposite the chimney wall, then the house was called a double-pen house. If the addition was made on the same wall as the chimney, then it was called a saddle-bag house. Like the single-pen house, these houses were one room deep, usually one story high, incorporated porches, and had steeply pitched roofs to shed rainwater.



**A dog-trot homestead, with the classic open breezeway between pens  
(Photo: Historic American Building Survey)**

**The Dog-Trot House:** This familiar form of Cracker farmhouse has two pens separated by a central outdoor hall or breezeway. All parts are joined by a common room. A large shade porch spanned the front of the house, and additional porches and rooms, especially a kitchen, were sometimes added at the rear of the house. Chimneys were placed at each gable end of the house. The house was normally raised above grade and had large windows in each of the two front rooms, but lacked a front door.



**A child of sharecropper Ed Baggett walks in the dog-trot near Laurel,  
Mississippi. (Photo: Historic American Building Survey)**

### **The Florida Plantation House**

In contrast to the grand Greek Revival Plantations in other southern states, Florida's early plantation homes were simpler affairs. A prime example of this is the Kingsley Plantation (pictured below), Florida's oldest surviving plantation house, built in 1789. Sitting on a coquina (oyster shell) block foundation, the house consists of a rectangular great room with two fireplaces, and a large room attached at each of four corners. Porches run the length of the north and south sides of the house. An outside stairway leads to the second floor bedrooms and an attic. A trapdoor opens from the attic to the open-air observation deck. Typical of these early plantations, the kitchen is in a separate house attached to the main house.

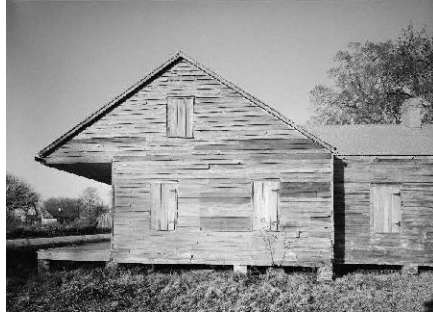


**Kingsley Plantation**

### **The Creole Cottage**

These cottages are included are Cracker style houses for their folk characteristics and double pen or saddlebag layout. The Creole cottage typically has a built-in roof overhang and double front doors. Two rooms deep by two wide, the small wood-framed houses were built by Acadian settlers to the Louisiana Bayou. Unlike Acadian

cottages in Canada, these homes had lower ceilings, as attic space was seldom used for sleeping in the south. A continuous pitched roof line covers the cottage and front porch. The house was serviced by one central chimney.

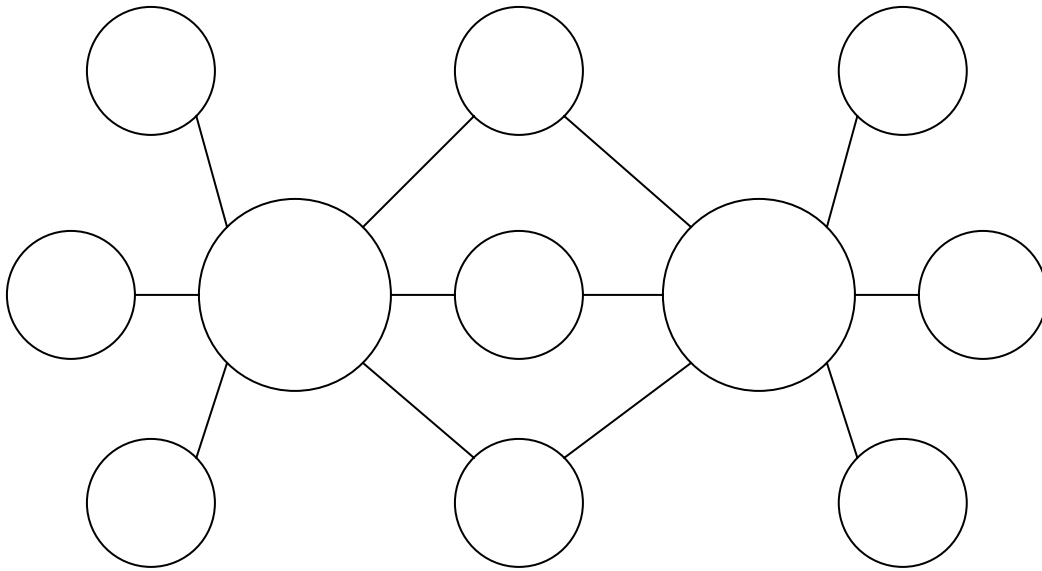


**Louisiana Creole cottage in saddlebag form. Note the porch overhang, typical of this style.  
(Historic American Building Survey)**

Double houses were found on plantations throughout the Bayou Lafourche Region. The exterior construction is cypress board and batten because of the wide availability of native cypress. These double houses were built after the Civil War, most probably in the 1870s, by Burch A. Wormald. Originally two families occupied one structure, but sometime in the 1890s, they were turned into single family units. With the change, the basic four room unit was opened up by inserting doors in the partition walls. Front rooms then became sleeping rooms, and the back was reserved for cooking, eating and washing. These houses are the oldest tenant houses on the plantation. Originally there were 26 double houses, divided into two rows of 13, and separated by the plantations road and railroad track. Beginning in 1904, seven of the structures on the Western side were "broken down" or moved to make room for four rows of "shot-gun" houses.



**Row of double Creole houses, circa 1875, on the Laurel Valley Sugar Plantation.  
(Historic American Building Survey)**



**Double Bubble Thinking Map for the Compare/Contrast Activity**

### **III. Assessment**

In class the students will be assigned an order in which they will share with the class their construction model and give details stating why this particular construction was conducive to Florida lifestyle during the particular time-period.

Writing Prompt:

Early Pioneer houses were very different than modern houses of today. Think about the many differences. Explain to the reader of your paper why you would or would not like to live in an early Pioneer Florida Cracker House.

#### **IV. Resources**

[www.oldhouseweb.com/stories/detailed/12106.shtml](http://www.oldhouseweb.com/stories/detailed/12106.shtml)

Ronald W. Hasse. *Classic Cracker: Florida's Wood-Frame Vernacular Architecture*.  
Pineapple Press: Sarasota, FL (1992)