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Greek Revival Georgia Style

Architectural firm Historical Concepts re-creates the past in the Deep South.

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Off the coast of Georgia, just southeast of Savannah, there is a string of barrier islands dotted with saltwater marshes and maritime forests, bounded by sinuous rivers and the broad plane of the Atlantic. From Tybee Island in the north to Cumberland Island in the south, the islands are a stopping point for migrating shorebirds and a passageway for northern right whales heading to their winter calving grounds.

These islands have been the home of diverse communities: Native Americans, Spanish missionaries (who called them the "Golden Isles"), English colonists, and American millionaire industrialists. The region has played a significant role in American history, from providing rice to Boston's Colonial soldiers during the Revolution to serving as a Civil War battleground. This is where Sherman's "March to the Sea" concluded.

Between Ossabaw Island and St. Catherine's Island, a secluded, environmentally conscious development has recently arisen. It is called Hampton Island, and its first home is a new Greek Revival known affectionately as the "Big House."

The house was initially intended as a compact one-bedroom hunting lodge for the property's then-owner. Before building, the owner traced the lineage of the land and chose a location on the North Newport River at the terminus of the ancient Ferry Road, one of the oldest roads in the area. The owner then approached Jim Strickland, design principal and founder of Historical Concepts, a Peachtree City, Georgia, architecture firm. Strickland and his design team knew they would need to modify the initial plans for the structure to better address the challenges posed by the site. "It was clear that with the possibility of tidal surge the house would have to be built up high," Strickland says, "but doing so would change the dimensions of the house dramatically." The result is a house fronted by Doric columns and raised on a redbrick pedestal that appears as if it were a plantation home from the region's prosperous ante bellum era.

The second floor has the more formal rooms, and the first floor is rustic and built with the threat of flooding in mind. There is clear precedent for such a design, as old homes in coastal Georgia were regularly built on raised-basement foundations. At the nearby Woodmanston Plantation—a rice plantation dating back to 1772—the now-lost main house was believed to have been built this way. The curators of Woodmanston Plantation acknowledge not only that such an arrangement affords flood



Locals once relied on ferries to travel throughout the region and to transport rice and cotton to inland markets. The ferries were so important that islanders often built their homes facing the water. The front and rear façades of the "Big House" are virtually identical; only the slightly smaller scale of the windows distinguishes the land side from the river side. Louvers on the first floor imitate shuttered doors and windows and can blow out in a storm surge. The stairs are supported by a primitive-looking trestle, and the newel posts are a simple oval shape, a detail characteristic of regional homes.

protection but also that a raised foundation was believed to protect the home's inhabitants from "harmful vapors."



TRADITION AND INNOVATION

The entry to the Big House is through a second-floor veranda, up a grand set of stairs of which Scarlet O'Hara would approve. But inside, tradition meets with innovation. Rather than the entry hall and staircase one would expect upon entering a Greek Revival, visitors encounter a large centrally located living room. Symmetry and formality are the overall aesthetics at play here, with doors and windows directly opposite each other and twin fireplaces flanking the room. The living room floors are salvaged 12-inch heart pine. "They are not straightedged or tongue and groove," Strickland points out. "They are hand-planed, fitted together by hand, and then rubbed with good old-fashioned wax, making them look like they have been here 150 years or more."

Floor-to-ceiling windows were a common element in Greek Revivals, and in the living room they reach almost to the height of the 15-foot ceilings. "A 6-foot 2-inch man can stand in the open window," architect Jim Strickland says. The sashes are counterweighted, just as they would be in an old home, and disappear into a pocket in the ceiling when the windows are opened. The lighting fixtures are a mix of vintage and new pieces. Sidelights and transom lights set into ornate pediments around the door bring in light and allow views of the river and the wild southern landscape.

Stylistically appropriate sidelights and transom lights are set into grand pediments around the front and rear doors, bringing in light and permitting views toward the river. Transom windows over interior doors allow for ventilation; southern breezes blow through just as they have in Georgia homes for generations.

Four rooms radiate off the living room at the outer corners: the dining room, master bedroom, kitchen, and study. Traditionally, the kitchen would have been located on the first floor or in an out-of-the-way addition, but kitchens today are far too important not to be close at hand. This posed a challenge for Strickland, as the kitchen would be the most utilitarian room accessed directly off the living room. "The relationship between the formal public rooms and the rustic private rooms was especially hard to achieve," Strickland says. To ease the progression between the living room and kitchen, Strickland specified a faux finish on the back of the kitchen door to give its entry a more formal look.

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The only set of interior stairs is in the kitchen, providing an appropriate transition to the unpretentious first floor. Unlike the sophisticated second floor, here rough plasterwork and a brick floor make the rooms feel ancient, as though they were part of an old summer kitchen and cellar. This comfortable, unassuming space houses a two-car garage, two storage rooms, and a large gathering room with a fireplace. The board-and-batten construction harkens back to the historical ferry piers that once stood just a few yards away.

GOOD NEIGHBORS

The Big House is the crown jewel for Hampton Island, a development that has been called the first conservation-centered community in the state. It was created by Atlanta developer E. Wade Shealy, Jr. Soon after he and his business partners purchased the island's 4,000 acres in 2003, Hampton Island Preservation, LLC, donated 826 acres to the Coastal Georgia Land Trust; 80 percent of the land has been placed into conservation easements so that it will remain undeveloped. All homeowners on Hampton Island must go through an interview process and demonstrate a dedication to preservation before joining the community. In this way, the land's natural beauty and character will be preserved and future generations will continue to enjoy one of Georgia's little-known Golden Isles.



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THE GREEK REVIVAL STYLE

The Greek Revival style arose in the United States in the 1820s, while the War of 1812 was still a fresh memory and Americans were actively rejecting British influence in matters of taste. At that time in our history, Americans were feeling a special

empathy for the Greeks, who were in the midst of a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. This feeling of kinship was heightened by the perception that Greece was the cradle of democracy and America was the present-day embodiment of that democratic spirit.

The iconic Greek Revival house looks like nothing so much as an ancient Greek temple, with sturdy columns supporting a heavy pediment shading a wide entry portico at the gabled (front) end. But the style also included tidy clapboard farmhouses with front-facing gable and corner pilasters as well as city row houses built of brick that sported small columned porches directly over their front doors.

The style spread across the United States with the migration of Americans westward, and the expansion of the railroads, and thanks to the wide distribution of carpenters pattern books, the style became accessible to local builders and craftsmen. Even though a Greek Revival building speaks of permanence and of the continuation of the democratic spirit, the style itself did not endure. By the time of the Civil War, it was already on the decline. After the war, Italianate and ornate Victorian aesthetics put an end to Greek Revival as a domestic architectural style.

THE OYSTER HOUSE

South of the Big House, also on the North Newport River, is a post-and-beam house that is as countrified as its neighbor is classic. It was also designed by Historical Concepts, whose design team envisioned it as an old oyster factory converted into a camp-style house.

As in the Big House, the living room is the central feature, but here it is even more integral thanks to the open floor plan. On the first floor, the living room is open to the kitchen; upstairs, a wraparound balcony offers access to the bedrooms through simple sliding "barn" doors. With six bedrooms of bunk beds and three master bedrooms, the Oyster House can sleep as many as 20 people-more if you include hammocks on the verandas on the first and second floors. Historical Concepts furnished the Oyster House with resilient materials such as exposed cast-iron plumbing, brass lighting fixtures, and bunk beds salvaged from merchant ships. Windows and glass doors encircle the entire perimeter, giving the sensation that the building is composed of glass and ensuring that the river and forest are always in view.

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