

American Small House Style Guide

FL  **RENCE**
ALABAMA



American Small House (1935-1950)

As seen in McFarland Heights, Cherry Street, Wood Avenue, College Place,
and Locust Street Historic Districts

Summary of Characteristics

Also called Minimal Traditional style, the term “American Small House” refers to a house type that first developed out of housing shortages during and immediately following World War II. Returning white servicemen were given long-term mortgages backed by the newly created Federal Housing Authority (FHA) to purchase homes (returning African-American GIs were routinely denied this benefit). The FHA loan program favored traditional styles based on historical precedents and small, modest floorplans. To meet that demand, developers and architects dedicated themselves to designing small houses that met these guidelines. Sometimes called “tract housing,” many of these houses were constructed in entire neighborhoods unto themselves, developed in groups of essentially identical houses built on a single tract of land. Built at the height of the automobile age, these were some of the first houses to feature attached garages.



Size and scale

American Small Houses were often very simple and one-story (sometimes a half-story can be seen in the attic space). A predecessor to the Ranch house style, these houses are very similar to what are sometimes called a Compact Ranch, otherwise known as a "Ranchette." These two house styles are close in size and scale with the most discernable difference being the presence of Modern elements on the Compact Ranch, such as a large picture window on the façade. The FHA loan program favored more "traditional styles," therefore American Small Houses often feature more traditional window placement and arrangements.



One of the only ways to tell the difference between an American Small House and Compact Ranch is the absence of a large picture window on an American Small House

Roof forms

Although many examples of the American Small House are symmetrical, in keeping with the original side-gabled folk form, there was experimentation with different roof forms. Some were influenced by other styles, such as Tudor Revival or Colonial Revival. Other American Small Houses feature gable-front-and-wing roofs, as was popular in the earlier Victorian era, however, in the case of the American Small House, the roof was low-pitched by comparison to the earlier folk form. Entry porches may be uncovered or covered with a simple portico or small porch.



American Small Houses were minimal in stylistic elements but could borrow from other popular 20th century styles, such as Tudor Revival (as seen above and below) or Colonial Revival (to the right)



Minimal decoration

A key component of the American Small House is its lack of ornamentation. In the FHA's 1940 version of *Principles for Planning Small Houses*, the word "simple" is used four times in the first five sentences. It suggests avoiding unnecessary gables and dormers, breaks in the roof form, and elaborate cornices. It states, "All nonessential features can profitably be omitted." Porches, bay windows, platforms steps, and sometimes a chimney and shutters are all that the FHA suggested.



American Small Houses are sometimes called Minimal Traditional because of their simplistic styling on otherwise traditional forms

Materials

Cladding on American Small Houses can be simple clapboard or asbestos tiles (shown to the right), and to a lesser extent brick and stone veneer (pictured above).

To make the house appear larger, the FHA recommended cladding a house all in one material, a departure from earlier Craftsman, Tudor, and Victorian era styles that used a variety of materials and textures on exterior walls. Foundations could be brick or concrete block, and windows and doors were generally wood. Porch posts could be wood or on later examples/alterations may be cast iron.



Materials used on an American Small House were often more economical, such as a stone or brick veneer on a frame house (as seen above), or a material like asbestos (pictured to the left)