

# Photo of the Month

J.B. Steele House, 303 South First Street



John Bell Steele House  
303 South First Street, Rogers, Arkansas  
I-House with Italianate Embellishments, Built Approximately 1885  
Photograph by the Rogers Historical Museum, 2010

Understanding vernacular architecture is important to the history of Rogers. Vernacular architecture, which is sometimes called folk architecture, is defined in basic terms as the architecture of the people. It is designed and built by communities, families, and individuals, but not by architects or by mimicking the forms of new design trends. These buildings reflect the heritage, resources, and ingenuity of local individuals. But this does not mean that they were crude or plain.

Vernacular architecture constantly changed over time to reflect society and technology. It was often embellished with popular architectural elements. It should be remembered that it took great skill to not only harvest and produce building materials, but also to create lasting structures that were both functional and aesthetically pleasing. As simple as it may sound, vernacular builders aimed to stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer while also creating a distinctive home.

The John Bell Steele House located at 303 South First Street is pictured at right and is an important example of vernacular architecture in Rogers. Identified as an I-House, it was built in approximately 1885. This house was present during the early days of Rogers and continues to be part of the growing community. As an example of vernacular architecture, this home can help us understand what I-Houses are, where they came from, and about the people who built them.

There is a basic form for all I-Houses. They are all two rooms wide, one room deep, two stories high, and have side facing gables. The facades usually have three to five bays (bays are window and door openings) and most are symmetrical. Rear wings, ells, or sheds were often added for kitchen space and extra room at the back of the home.

The roof was usually moderately pitched and some examples have gambrel roofs. Some gable ends also have two bays. Porches varied in size from region to region – some are small stoops at front entrances while others may be two stories and the full width of facades. Chimneys could often be found at each gable end, but some versions have central fireplaces. The placement of all of these elements varied

regionally. Many examples in the Ozarks reflected the central hall plan, which featured rooms flanking both sides of a wide hall. This form was typical of the Upland South.

These homes could be built with logs, timbers, dimensional lumber, bricks, or masonry. It truly reflected the use of locally available materials. As such, the tradition seemed to provide for flexibility over strict adherence to a particular form or finish and ingenuity in building practices was an important part of all vernacular architecture. Early examples were usually plain with little aesthetic expression. But by the mid nineteenth century the increased availability of manufactured architectural elements presented the opportunity for home owners to dress up facades with various styles such as Greek Revival, Gothic, or Italianate.

The interior of the home featured rooms that were generally sixteen feet square or slightly larger. This room size and floor plan was easy to heat and cool, but it also reflected the log building tradition. A log sixteen feet long proved to be the size of timber that a man could harvest, move with a mule, and then raise in place with the help of another individual.

I-Houses in the United States generally date from 1700 to 1915. Many of the examples in the Ozarks date from 1855 through 1912. However, the I-House form originated in England before the form became common in the colonies. The home style as a folk tradition was carried from the Tidewater region into New England and westward. Settlers from the Upland South were instrumental in bringing the I-House into the Midwest and Ozarks.

In fact, the I-House became the predominate form of vernacular architecture in the eastern half of the United States by the nineteenth century and came to reflect agricultural prosperity. The home could be embellished in many ways and presented a large, impressive facade for a house that only contained four rooms.

The name I-House may refer to its relatively tall, thin profile as seen from the end or to the long narrow floor plan. It is also attributed to a cultural geographer named Fred Kniffen in 1936. He conducted a survey of this type of house and found so many of them associated with builders from the states of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa, that the name "I" stayed with them.

John Bell Steele's heritage is seen in the I-House he built in Rogers. He was known as Jack and grew up in Bedford County, Tennessee. He moved to this area before the Civil War and had worked as a wood turner before Peter Van Winkle had hired him to operate a lathe at the mill. After serving in the Civil War Steele married Peter Van Winkle's daughter Mollie. The couple eventually moved to Rogers to be a part of building the new town and picked a house lot near a spring on the east side of the rail road tracks. They built their new house patterned after the old Van Winkle family home at War Eagle, which was lost during the Civil War.