

## Part 2: Old Kentucky Home Architecture

### Prep Time:

5 Minutes to print “Old Kentucky Home Structure Report” Attachment

### Materials:

Narrative about the Old Kentucky Home (below)

Links to online resources about Thomas Wolfe, the Old Kentucky Home, and architecture  
Old Kentucky Home Structure Report

### Procedure:

1. Share the information about the architecture of the Old Kentucky Home (below).
2. Ask students to recall their tour to the Thomas Wolfe Memorial, focusing on the architecture of the house.
3. Focusing on the Old Kentucky Home, ask students to complete the Old Kentucky Home Structure Report

### Narrative:

#### **The Old Kentucky Home in Asheville, NC**

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Tom describes the Old Kentucky Home as “a big, cheaply constructed frame house of eighteen or twenty drafty high-ceilinged rooms” with a “rambling, unplanned, gabular appearance, and was painted a dirty yellow.” It was in this house that Thomas Wolfe grew up and spent most of this childhood.

In 1883, wealthy banker Erwin Sluder began construction on a five- to- seven room residence on Spruce Street, likely as a wedding present for his daughter and new son-in-law. The Queen Anne style was featured in numerous architectural books and took hold throughout Asheville, especially on Spruce Street. Asheville was a well-established resort town by the 1880s and the growing economy meant more houses of the latest fashion. Queen Anne style buildings feature a variety of colors and textures, often use numerous materials, shapes, and ornaments, and most have at least one bay window, along with high-ridged roofs and turreted towers. To add visual appeal, architects included various sized porches to the structures.

By 1889, the house received major renovations and began taking on boarders. The early alteration of the house shows how rapid Asheville was becoming an urban environment. Eleven rooms were added to the house, as well as the main front bay, and central heat through the basement. The main staircase was also rebuilt when the rear portion of the house was expanded, and the painted-glass windows were added to resemble the original windows. It is at this time that tile was put around the fireplaces throughout the structure. The house looked like this when Julia Wolfe purchased it in 1906.

“Frame vernacular” best describes the Old Kentucky Home. A frame vernacular is a house design inspired by the latest fashion of the day, but uses locally available materials. The construction is wood balloon framing, where long studs run from the bottom of the

structure to the top plate, or the roof connector. The frame stands on brick piers and walls that are covered with stucco, some of which is marked to resemble blocks. The brick wall foundations create a basement or cellar level. The exterior of the house is clapboard, or weatherboard, with the additions being covered with vertical tongue and groove boards. The siding was yellow with white trim and bluish porch ceilings while Tom grew up in the boardinghouse.

When Tom describes the house as “gabular,” he is referring to the many gables on the roof. They include a variety of decorative scroll work and various circular patterns, along with crown molding. The main roof is a cross gable style with grey-black slate tiles cut hexagonally and laid to create diamond flower patterns using gray-green and red slate tiles. At the roof eaves, there are ornamental brackets, which wrap all the way around the house. At the front of the house, are ornamental fish-scale wood shingles.

Large windows are another feature of Queen Anne style, of which the Old Kentucky Home has many. The main feature of the front façade of the house is a two-story canted bay window with dentil panels. All of the windows have a molded hood or a pediment, some flat and some with scroll brackets. Many of the upper windows have colored glass featuring various colors, including blue, gold, pink, aqua, rose, green, and violet. The sleeping porches contain either casement style windows or single sash windows. The house kept this appearance until 1916, when Julia Wolfe renovated. She added indoor plumbing, electricity, a several bedrooms, water closets, and bath closets. Due to the belief that the night air restored health, three sleeping porches and a sun parlor were also added.

There are numerous porches throughout the Old Kentucky Home, including three enclosed porches which Julia added in 1916. The popularity of the porches reflects Asheville’s popularity as a health resort for those with tuberculosis and other lung ailments. Julia expanded the front porch, getting rid of the Queen Anne design and opting for a simpler porch. The house remains this way today with little alteration.

The house plays a part in Thomas Wolfe’s novel *Look Homeward, Angel*, as the main character, Eugene Gant, grows up among the large windows and the many porches.

### **Suggested Activities:**

- Ask students to conduct a report on the architectural style of their house, or of another house in their neighborhood.
- Have students write a story that features several elements of the house. For example, Tom wrote about the “ugly Victorian bay window” during the chapters on Ben’s death. The event caused his description of the house to be shown in a negative light.
- Use the Home Structure Report worksheet for a close reading of their house, or a house in their neighborhood.