The Architecture of Chinsegut Hill
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Setting
Located in predominately rural Hernando County, Chinsegut Hill is one of the highest points in Florida. The spectacular view to the west, with USDA farming structures in the distance, looks more closely akin to the rolling hills and ridges of northern Georgia than central Florida. Immediately surrounded by stately oaks, the peak of Chinsegut Hill was leveled off over a century ago to accommodate the Manor House and gardens. Thick forests surround the site from the northwest to the south, which contain a wide variety of subtropical flora and fauna. At the time the first owners established themselves on the site, Hernando County was home to under a thousand people. In 1900, the county boasted 3,638, and today is home to over 100,000.

Some of the farm and U.S. Department of Agriculture buildings were constructed by the WPA and CCC during the 1930s and have integrity in and of themselves. Cabins have been built among the surrounding trees to support the present use of Chinsegut Hill Manor as a Conference Center. They are barely visible from the house and do not detract from it. The farm outbuildings and experimental agricultural station office are also remote from the house.

Mrs. Robins was reputed to have grown many varieties of flowers and shrubs and had more than 300 bushes in her rose gardens, but there are few remnants of these remaining near the house. The many exotic plants Mrs. Robins introduced to Chinsegut are likewise not apparent although the acorn she planted on May Day 1918 in memory of Nikolai Lenin is now a massive oak. The towering oaks and tall palms which surround the house frame it appropriately and add to its tropical ambience, thus reinforcing the appearance of a Southern Plantation House, albeit one further south than most.

Exterior Description
Chinsegut Hill Manor is a prominently sited two-story frame house surrounded by wide verandas opening off the rooms of both floors. It faces southeast and stands in a clearing surrounded by massive oaks and well-established shrubs, although its garden today is only a faint image of how it must have appeared when the Robins lived at Chinsegut. The wide verandas, central through hallways on both floors, and tall, operable windows and doors ensure good air circulation in humid or rainy weather. Two chimney systems, one in the center of the house, the other on the exterior of the west wall, provide fireplaces to six of the principle rooms. The kitchen is housed in an adjoining two-story structure on the northeast corner. Access is possible to the veranda of the main house from both floors of this building. The main frame of the house is comprised of heart of pinewood cut at the site, and the columns and chimneys were constructed from bricks made from yellow sand fired at the base of the hill. Construction crews painted the tallow bricks red to give the appearance of traditional brick.

The house faces southeast, responding to its physical environment by orienting the shortest elevation to the west, thus minimizing heat gain from the sun’s summer path.
The deep verandas which surround the house shelter the clapboard wall surface from both sun and rain and allow the through passage of air via the tall windows and screened doors on even the stormiest of days.

The house was originally crowned by a widow’s walk and belvedere. The widow's walk and roof deck were removed during a re-roofing subsequent to the re-roofing done in 1937.

The house and its attached kitchen wing comprise an irregular massing. The main house is a rectangular two-story frame structure completely encircled by wide verandas supported by circular wood columns. A gable roof covers this section oriented on an S.W. - N.E. axis. Originally there was a 15’ x 17’ deck on top of a dormer-like protrusion on the southern side. This was surrounded by a balustrade with slender spindles that matched the balcony and formed the widow's walk. A 28’ wide dormer on the north encloses attic bedrooms on the northern side of this half story.

Three-sided bay windows open from each gable end to the attic. The western bay window encloses the western chimney. The verandas are 14’ wide on the north and south and 12’ on the sides. The south veranda is recessed with exposed structural bracing from the column capitals back to the wall surface. The east and west and northern verandas were additions. This explains the triangulated ends of the spindle-work frieze. The decoration between the eight unevenly spaced Tuscan columns of the second floor veranda is the most fanciful element of the house and stylistically recalls Chinoiserie. The second floor columns are of a smaller diameter than the first floor but the slender verticality of the columns and balustrade spindles balances the horizontal lines of the roof and first floor fascia.

Fenestration is regular on the five bay south elevation although the house is not symmetrical about the hallway axis. The double hung sash windows with 4 over 4 lites windows extend to the ceiling height and are paired. Both the windows and columns are spaced unevenly on each side of the double entry doors. This irregularity of spacing is not readily apparent because the kitchen wing on the east and the porte cochere on the west create a visually dominant asymmetry.

The porte cochere extends from the western elevation and distracts the observer's attention from the most unique feature of this elevation—that of the attic level bay window which encloses the western chimney. The eastern facade is the most dissimilar. On both levels the verandas have been glass enclosed and the space thus contained opened to the house proper by partial removal of the original exterior walls. The attic has a bay window similar to the western façade but this one does not include a chimney. The chimney for the main fireplace on the interior of the house penetrates the roof on the northern side of the gable ridge.

The roofing material is now composition shingles although the 1937 re-roofing which included the widow’s walk enclosed deck was surfaced with asbestos shingles.
The north elevation is similar to the south but has a single entry door to the central hallway on both floors. The attic dormer has three double hung wood sash windows and is centrally located in the roof. A bathroom enclosure addition protrudes into the eastern end of the second floor veranda. The eastern bay of the six bay veranda is enclosed as a screened porch eating area and opens off the dining room. The windows to the bedrooms of the first and second floors of the western end are paired double hung wood sash and the windows to the dining room are paired, close together and balance the double doors from the room to the screened porch.

The two-story wing which contains the kitchen facilities joins the northern facade at its east end where the porch is enclosed by screening. This joint is unique in that the corners of both buildings touch at their apex and the joining walkway is enclosed by the hypotenuse of a triangle whose other two sides belong each to a separate building. There is a sizable basement underneath the east wing, said to be the first basement in Hernando County.

**Interior Description**

The interior is that of a house which has seen several ‘modernizations.’ The hallway which extends through the building from front to rear on both main floors contains the single flight of stairs from the first to second floor as well as a long narrow glass fronted cabinet that is part of a piece of furniture from Mrs. Robin’s childhood home. The piece has been “built in” along the west wall. Probably the finest antique now in the house, it was made in Brooklyn, N.Y. The two end pieces of the cabinet, which did not fit in the hall location, are not in the house.

To the east is the parlor and dining room. The moldings in the parlor are simple with convex central panels but in keeping with the fireplace surround of this room which has a turned pilaster each side of the fireplace opening. A single, raised panel door opens to the dining room behind this room. The dining room also has a fireplace across the interior corner similar to the parlor and both share the same central chimney along with the study and small room above.

The molding and wood trim of both floors of the house indicate a hierarchy of decoration. In the parlor and two western rooms and hallway, the corners of the architraves are decorated with a pressed wood square in a bunch of grapes motif. The trim of the dining room is classical but much simpler and together with the fireplace mantel indicates modifications may have been made to this room prior to when it was opened to the enclosed porch. upstairs the hallway and study have concentric circle designed trim. The grape motif is used in the bedrooms.

The most unusual feature of the stairway is the small square window which admits light from the stairwell to the storage room at the head of the stairs. Its corners are decorated with the grape motif pressed wood squares. The storage room was used as a linen closet which was quite flammable, so the window was installed to avoid the use of candles. All ceilings and floors of the house proper are butt edged wooden planks.
The architrave of the door to the porch from the first floor southwest room is plain butted wood planking. This is a singularly unsophisticated trim considering the modest detailing elsewhere in the house. The off-center brick fireplace and simple fireplace surround add emphasis to the supposition that the fireplace on the west elevation was added at a later date. It is likely that at the same time the door to the porch beside the fireplace was substituted for an existing window by an amateur carpenter, perhaps to accommodate Colonel Robins’ wheelchair after his paralyzing accident.

Both the bedrooms on the first and second floors in the northwest corners had bathrooms inserted into their northeast corners. These opened, as did the bedrooms, to the central hall and both also opened via shorter than normal openings (6′0″) to the neighboring bedrooms. These openings were trimmed in the same grape motif architrave as the other doorways in the bedrooms, but on the bathroom side the architrave corner moldings are concentric squares. Chinsegut Hill Manor House did not have electrical service until 1932. Until then all artificial illumination was provided by kerosene lamps and candles.

Little is known of the appearance of the basic house before the Robins’ enlarged it to create their winter, and later permanent, home between 1905 and 1924. Subsequent to 1923 the kitchen wing was enlarged by extension and enclosure of a porch.

The enclosing of the eastern porch with single lite double hung wood windows and opening of the second floor main room was done by Mrs. Robins during one of the Colonel’s trips abroad to create a larger study for him. She also had the dining room’s exterior wall removed, the porch floor leveled and the dining room flooring extended so the porch became an extension of that room.

The northernmost door of the first floor southwestern room was opened to the western porch some time subsequent to this addition's completion, possibly when the Colonel was paralyzed.

The interior finishes are of good quality. The moldings are wood of simple design and reflect a hierarchy of room use by the consistency of molding designs in various rooms. They range from pressed wood architrave corners having a bunch of grapes motif in the principle spaces to turned concentric circles in the upstairs hallway. The walls are plastered, and ceilings and floors planked wood that is beaded in some locations, for example, the ceiling of the study veranda enclosure. The windows of the main house have four over four lites and the doors eight lites. The transoms above the double entry doors on the south, on both first and second floors have multiple mullions. When the east porch was enclosed, an interesting triangular design was incorporated in the top of the end walls at the juncture of the inclined porch roof.

The fireplace surrounds reflect an interesting variety of styles and hierarchy of room use (as well as wood combinations) and suggest that what was the dining room was originally a room of less importance. The moldings of this room are the simplest in the house and so corroborate this suspicion suggesting further research is especially indicated in this area.