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## SHUTTERS AND BLINDS

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The terms “shutter” and “blind” are often used interchangeably. Technically, however, there is a difference. Both shutters and blinds may be used to protect or screen a window or door opening. Both are likewise normally constructed with a top and a bottom rail as well as side stiles ([fig. 1](#)). But if the rectangular area enclosed by this framing is filled with slats or louvers, then we have a “blind.” If, instead, there is a solid panel, without slats or louvers, then we have a “shutter.”

The function of blinds (as opposed to shutters) is primarily that of ventilation - for the purpose of shielding a window or door from the sun while still admitting a current of air. In hot weather, blinds were once customarily shut during the day to keep the cool night air inside. At the same time, the angled slats or blades allowed a shadowy light to filter through to the interior. In the evening, the blinds were then opened to the night breezes. Blinds also afforded protection against the rain at the same time that they facilitated free circulation of air. In the Caribbean and other tropical areas, blinds are extensively employed in much this same way even today.

Shutters, on the other hand, were employed literally to “shut up” a house or store - to secure it, in other words, against burglary or the elements. Since solid shutters are obviously easier to execute than slatted blinds, they were also often used on secondary structures that did not have the ventilation requirements of a residence.

Despite their widespread use in early America, blinds and shutters have received surprisingly little attention in print. No general publication on the topic currently exists, although *The Old House Journal* has featured a few articles dealing with the maintenance and repair of blinds and shutters. (These are listed below under “Care and Repair of Shutters and Blinds.”)

### Historical Notes

Blinds or shutters were found, either inside or out, on virtually every structure of any distinction in early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Alabama. This included not only residences, but churches, courthouses, schools, and commercial structures. While blinds or shutters were most commonly used at windows, they oftentimes screened door openings as well.

### Shutters

In Alabama the use of shutters - as distinct from blinds - was confined primarily to stores, warehouses, and other structures requiring a high degree of protection. Alabama homeowners overwhelmingly preferred slatted blinds when they could afford them. (This is in contrast to the Middle Atlantic and Northern states, where paneled shutters were frequently employed on residences, especially at the first-floor level.) Two rare early Alabama folk dwellings which feature solid paneled shutters instead of blinds are the Bartlett Smith house in Henry County and the William P. Mollett house in Dallas County ([fig. 2](#)). At the Mollett house, the shutters occur at the windows of the lean-to or shed storage rooms, while windows in the two-story main block of the house are flanked by slatted blinds.

On more primitive structures such as log cabins or slave quarters, batten shutters - vertical strips of planking secured by two or three cross pieces - were utilized as a practical alternative to glass windows.

Until well after 1900, countless country stores and plantation commissaries were equipped with heavy shutters that were closed at night over the display windows at the front ([fig. 3](#)). Such shutters were almost universally of wood, and were variously paneled or solid. In some cases where masonry construction was involved, as in a warehouse or an exceptionally large store, the shutters might be fashioned of sheet iron.

### **Blinds**

Alabama's warm climate obviously explains why blinds were preferred for residential use. But blind construction techniques did not remain static. During the 1800s, there was a gradual shift from the use of fixed or stationary blades (or slats) to swivel or rotating blades which more effectively regulated the circulation of air ([figs. 4 and 5](#)). At the same time, the framing members of the blinds - that is, the top and bottom rails as well as the side stiles - tended to become lighter in proportion. These developments were facilitated by the growth from the 1840s onward of steam-powered "sash, door, and blind" factories which could mass-produce blinds more cheaply than before, and in great quantity. Alabama saw the establishment of several such manufacturers after 1850.

As a very general rule, earlier blinds are more likely to have fixed blades and to be heavier in their construction than those constructed, say, after 1850. There are, however, exceptions either way. Movable blades may occur on blinds dating from the 1820s and 1830s, though in general both blades and framing members will be heavier in appearance than their later counterparts. Conversely, fixed-blade blinds continued to be used up to, and probably even after, the Civil War - though to an ever lesser degree as rotating blades became more affordable ([fig. 6](#)).

Dating blinds on the basis of their construction characteristics can be tricky in any event, since adjustable-blade blinds also seem to have occurred earlier in some areas than in others. The dating process may be further impeded by the fact that one old building may have had two or three generations of blinds during the course of its history. (Hardware, which may also provide a clue, is discussed separately below.)

Blind construction also varies in other ways, especially if the blinds date from the early or mid-1800s. Thus while most blinds have two oblong slatted panels with a horizontal cross rail between, others may have only two single long, slatted panels enclosed by the side stiles and the top and bottom rails. Such single-panel blinds were especially popular in the Tennessee Valley area of northern Alabama. Extant examples are today found at Belle Mont (circa 1828) near Tusculumbia and at the 1845 Beaty-Mason house in Athens ([fig. 7](#)). Other blinds might be divided into as many as three or even four vertically-aligned panels, instead of the usual two ([fig. 8](#)). Still another variation found in blind construction may be that of having one panel with fixed blades coupled with a panel of movable blades, as at Huntsville's Dr. Thomas Fearn house.

Both blinds and shutters were sometimes used inside to screen window openings - the distinction, again, depending on whether or not louvers were present. Louvered doors - in essence, blinds - were sometimes also used to conceal a room or hallway from view while still allowing unobstructed ventilation. For example, louvered doors screened the entry to both the House and Senate chambers of the Alabama State Capitol during the 1850s. Louvered interior doors also occur at the Benjamin F. Marshall residence (circa 1855) in the Mobile suburb of Spring Hill, where they screen a rear hallway ([fig. 9](#)).

Folding inside window blinds or shutters - those which folded in accordion fashion against the reveal of a window opening - gained increasing popularity in the latter half of the 1800s, and seem to have come into vogue particularly between 1870 and 1900. Yet such blinds or shutters were by no means unknown at a much earlier date, a singular example being the handsome, fluted folding shutters which screen the sidelights of the circa 1819 Weeden house in Huntsville.

Both private homes and public spaces such as courtrooms and churches might be fitted out with interior blinds or shutters, usually arranged in tiers so as to cover the entire window (fig. 10). Each tier consisted of from four to six panels hinged in groups of two or three and split so that the panels could be folded back against the window reveal. Sometimes, a special recess was built into the window reveal to accommodate the folded blinds.

Folding interior blinds and shutters gave way rapidly after 1900 to rolled window shades and Venetian blinds. If visually less appealing than the old-fashioned folding blinds, these new devices had the advantage of needing only to be attached at the top of a window opening rather than at both sides, and were therefore easier to maintain and replace.

### **Blinds on Porches and Verandas**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century South, louvered blinds were often used in series to screen a porch from the sun as well as to insure privacy for a space that served as a kind of outdoor living room during the summer months (fig. 11). Sometimes, such blinds were found only at one or both ends of the porch; in other cases, they enclosed the porch entirely. Generally speaking, fixed-blade blinds were preferred, while the blinds themselves were stationary, arranged in a row between the porch supports. The use of such porch blinds has recently enjoyed something of a comeback, since they can also serve to conceal a porch that has been enclosed in the course of building restoration.

### **Shutter and Blind Hardware**

Wrought-iron strap hinges were frequently employed to swing both shutters and blinds during the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 12). These hinges, in turn, fitted over iron pintles which were securely attached at the outside angle of the window casing (fig. 13). Sometimes H or HL hinges might also be used. Patented cast-iron hinges with cam-action design were likewise employed. Later, especially for louvered blinds, smaller plate hinges generally supplanted the strap hinge.

Since hinges may have been replaced or relocated, a shutter or blind should always be examined for evidence, in the form of screwholes or mortices, of earlier hardware. Sometimes, this evidence may come not from the blind or shutter itself but from the corresponding window or door casing, where traces of earlier hardware may still be embedded in the wood. For instance, it is not uncommon that the iron plate which formed the anchor for a pintle will remain long after the pintle itself has been broken off. Similarly, chinked mortices in a window casing may suggest the size and location of early shutter hardware.

An accessory normally found with early blinds or shutters is the holdback or clasp used to secure each open leaf against the wall. These may take various forms, from a simple hook and eye to hand-wrought S-shaped holders that rotate on a pin embedded in the wall to each side of the window opening.

During the Victorian period, roughly between 1870 and 1900, blinds frequently had other hardware accessories such as chains or slide bolts that could be engaged to help secure a pair of blinds when they were closed.

### **Determining When Shutters or Blinds Are Appropriate**

Because many people see both shutters and blinds as lending an aura of “quaintness” to any building, they are often used inappropriately, even in well-meaning restorations (fig. 15). Buildings that

originally had neither blinds nor shutters often sport them because they supposedly impart a feel of antiquity. Even where shutters or blinds are appropriate, they are often hung incorrectly or fail to match the size of the window or door opening.

As a matter of fact, the late 19th century brick commercial rows which still make up the core of countless towns across Alabama usually had neither outside blinds nor shutters in the beginning, although the upper-floor offices might be equipped with interior blinds.

Normally in restoration, blinds or shutters should not be employed unless there is clear physical evidence that the building in question was once so equipped. Such evidence may turn up in old photographs or be yielded through a careful examination of window and door casings.

If the exact style of the blinds or shutters is unknown, examination of the shutters or blinds on buildings of comparable vintage in the area may enable one to make an educated guess as to what kind of construction is appropriate. Moreover, care should be taken that the shutters correspond in size to the opening they purport to cover.

Admittedly it is more expensive to custom-make historically appropriate blinds than to buy readily available stock blinds. However, the extra expense may in the long run be worth it if a client intends to achieve a serious historical restoration. The rails and stiles of today's ready-made blinds are usually "skinnier" than their 19<sup>th</sup> century ancestors, while the louvers are usually spaced too closely together (19<sup>th</sup> century blades were 1 ½" to 2" apart on center). Such inaccuracies are readily apparent to the discerning old-building lover.

### **Proper Hanging of Shutters**

Once it has been determined that shutters or blinds are appropriate for a structure, care should be taken to hang the shutters in a convincing manner - even if the shutters are not to be functional. Improperly hung blinds and shutters is one of the most common - and needless - mistakes made by would-be restorationists. As the diagrams below ([fig. 16](#)) indicate, shutters should be hung at the inner edge of the window or door casing - adjoining the opening itself - rather than outside the window facing, as frequently happens. Thus the blinds or shutters would cover the opening properly when closed.

It is important to remember that the blades or louvers of a blind should slope down to the wall when the blind is open ([fig. 17](#)). Thus when the blinds are closed the blades should slant outward at the bottom, so as to shed rain. Carpenters typically make the mistake of hanging blinds in reverse, disregarding the logic of the blinds' practical function.

### **Care and Repair of Shutters**

Tips on blind/shutter maintenance and treatment are provided in the following articles appearing in *The Old House Journal*:

"Curing Drooping Shutter Louvers," *The Old House Journal*, December 1983, pg. 244.

"Interior Shutters," *The Old House Journal*, November 1983, p. 207.

"Restoring Shutters Working Order," *The Old House Journal Compendium* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1980), pp. 231-32.

"Round-Top Shutters," *The Old House Journal*, December 1983, p. 233.

"Tips on Stripping Shutters," *The Old House Journal Compendium* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1980), pp. 228-30.

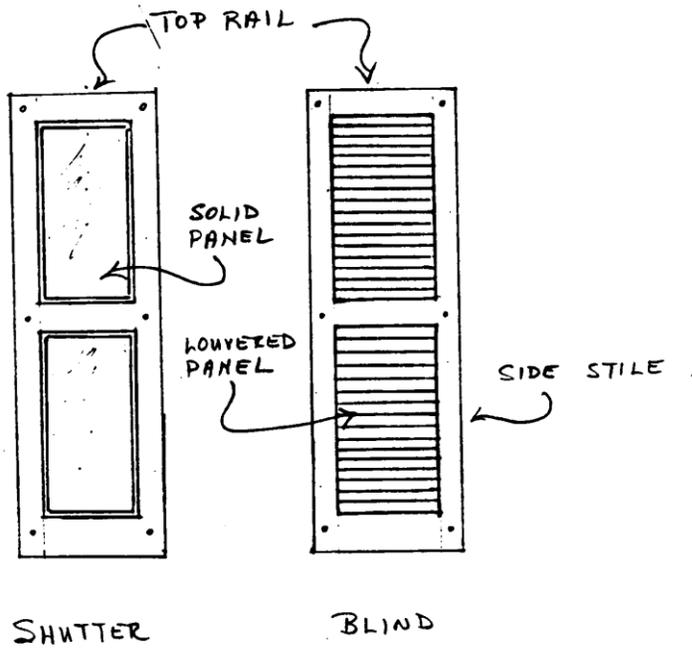


Figure 1 - Typical shutter and blind construction.

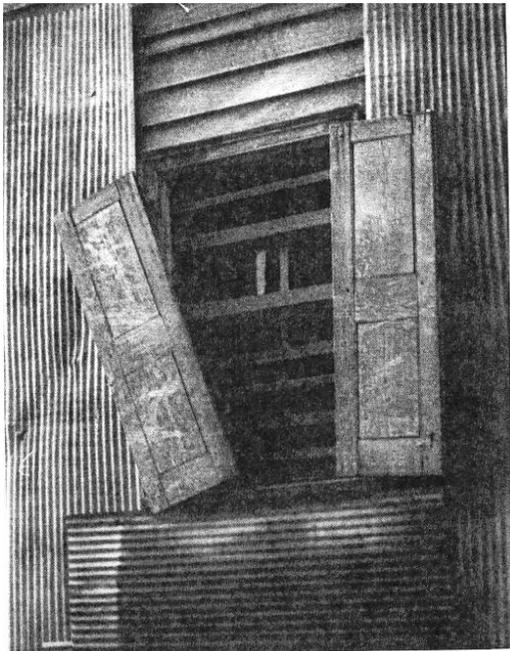


Figure 2 - Paneled shutters at abandoned William P. Mollett house, Dallas County.

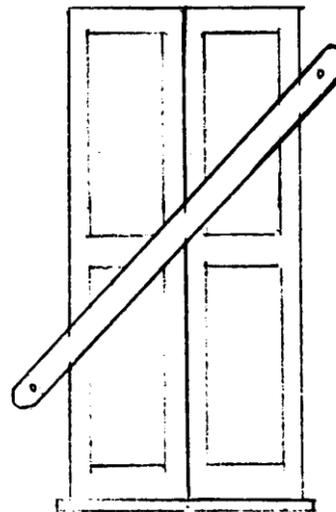


Figure 3 - On many 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial structures, paneled shutters were secured, when closed, by a diagonal iron strap or bar, secured inside the building by means of iron pins.

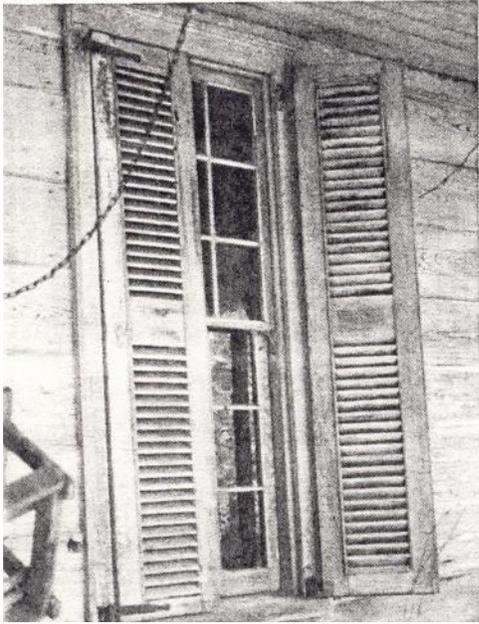


Figure 4 - Fixed-blade blinds with strap hinges, Caleb Johnston house (ca. 1835), Conecuh County. Each blade is fitted into a pair of diagonal slots along the inner plane of each side stile. Strips of raised molding nailed over the mortise joints along each side of the louvered panels hold the blades in place.



Figure 5 - Typical late 19<sup>th</sup> century blinds. (Compare with Figure 4).

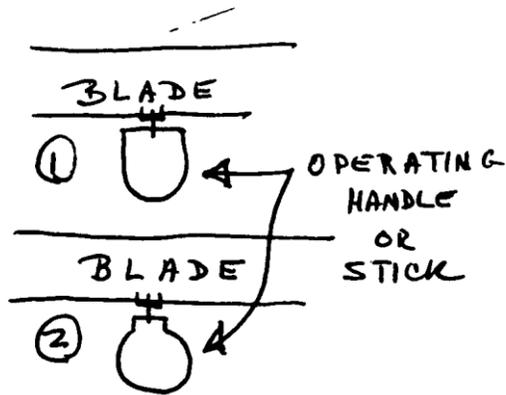
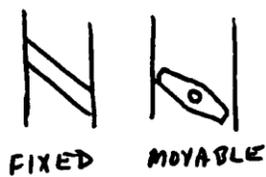
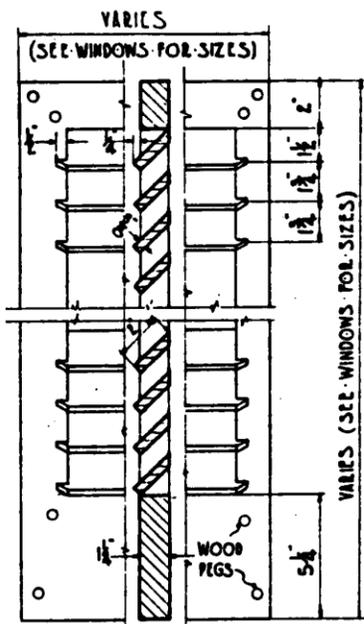


Figure 6 - Profile of typical fixed and movable blind blades. These were usually from 1 1/8 to 2 inches thick. Right: Profile of two characteristic types of operating sticks used on movable-blade blinds.



WEST ELEVATION  
SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"

338V-11-10-F-14-101  
 J. G. BEATTY MASON HOUSE  
 117 E. BAY STREET, TROY, COUNTY, ALABAMA  
 1934  
 1/4" = 1'-0"



DETAILS OF SHUTTER  
FOR ALL WINDOWS  
SCALE 3" = 1'-0"

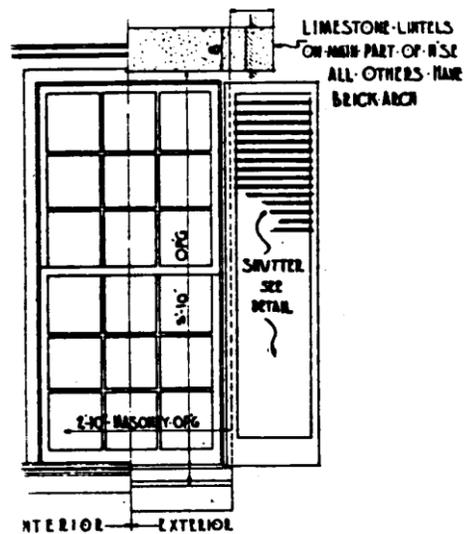
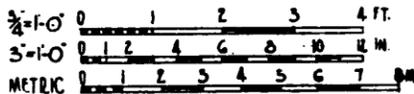


Figure 7 Single-pane blinds at Beatty-Mason house, Athens, as drawn in 1934 by the Historic American Buildings Survey. On the drawing the term “shutter” is incorrectly used for what are actually louvered blinds. The three-part windows on the front of the house required two sets of blinds for each window: one set to protect the narrow sidelights, and another set to cover the large central window opening. Note that each leaf comprising the inner pair of blinds is vertically split and hinged so as to fold back against the mullion separating the main window opening from the flanking sidelights.

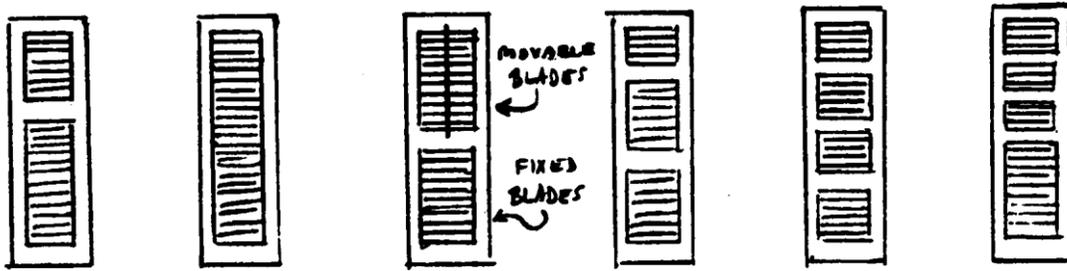


Figure 8 - Variations in blind design (ca. 1820-1860). Normally the intermediate rails line up with muntins of the window sashing.

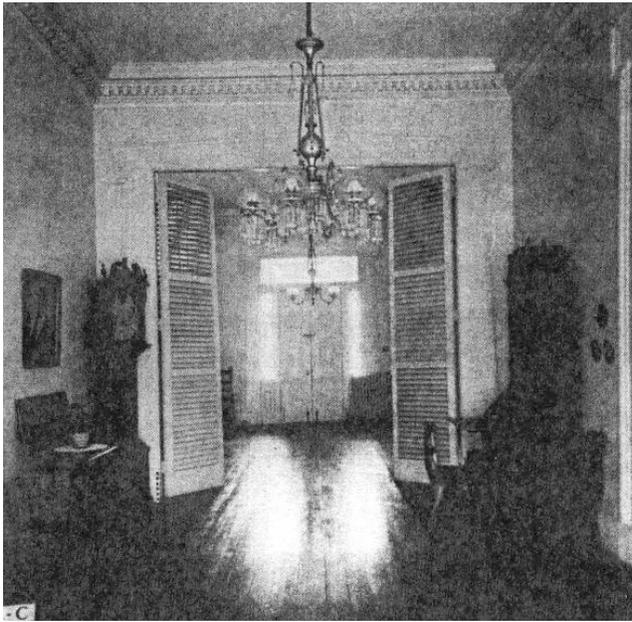


Figure 9 - Louvered doors at the Marshall-Eslava house, Mobile, used to screen the rear portion of the central hall.

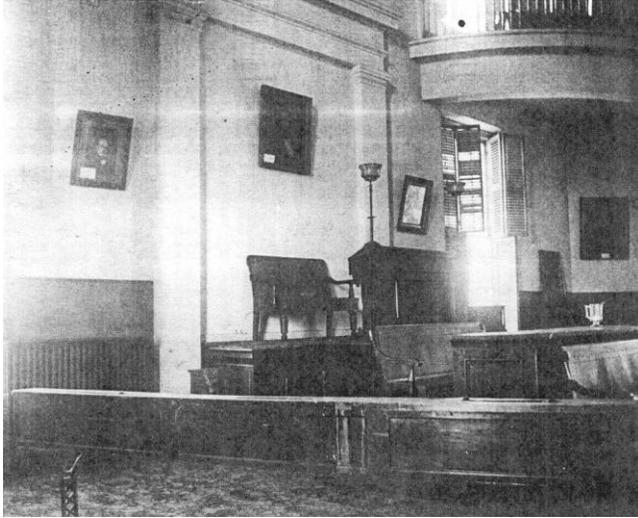
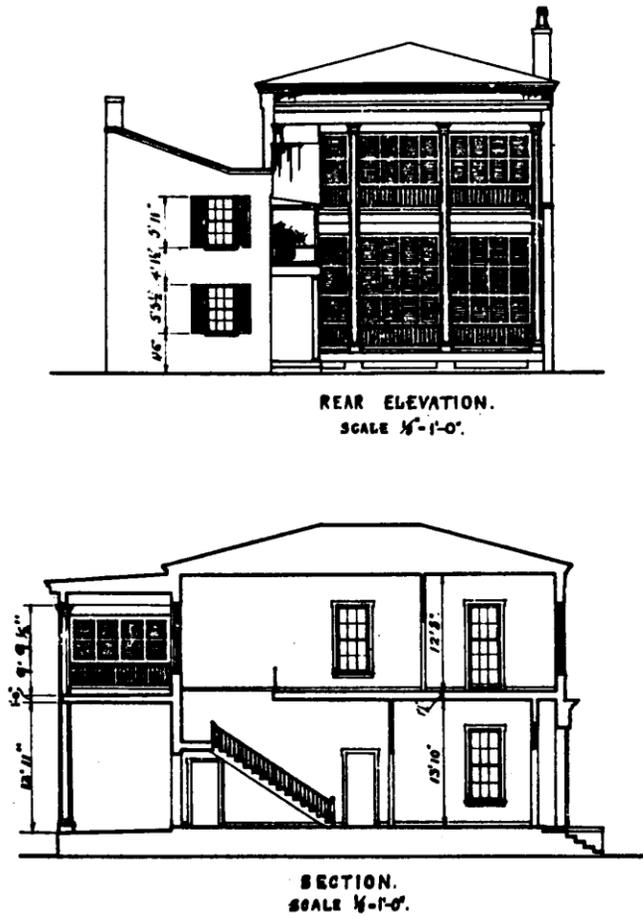


Figure 10 - Interior folding blinds, Senate chamber, Alabama State Capitol (from ca. 1905 photograph).



### THE RESIDENCE.

KENNETH. ENGWALL, DEL.

Figure 11 - In this 19<sup>th</sup> century Mobile residence recorded by the Historic American Building Survey, louvered blinds were employed to screen the rear porch.

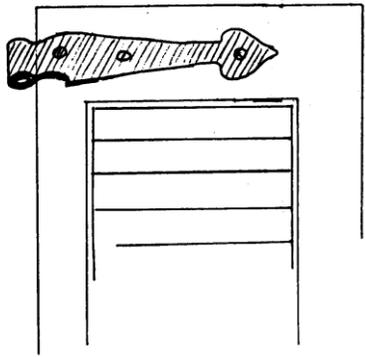


Figure 12 - Wrought iron strap hinge, Shepard house (ca. 1830), near King's Landing, Dallas County.

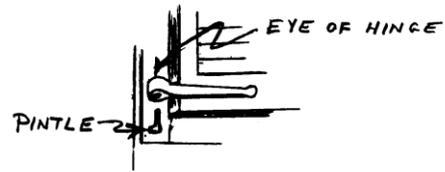


Figure 13 - Pintle and eye wrought iron hinge, Shepard House, Dallas County.

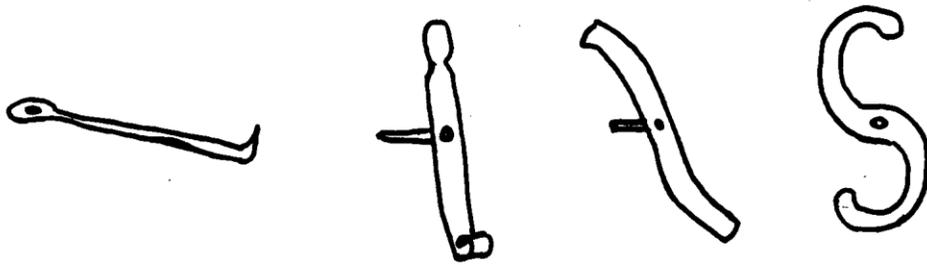
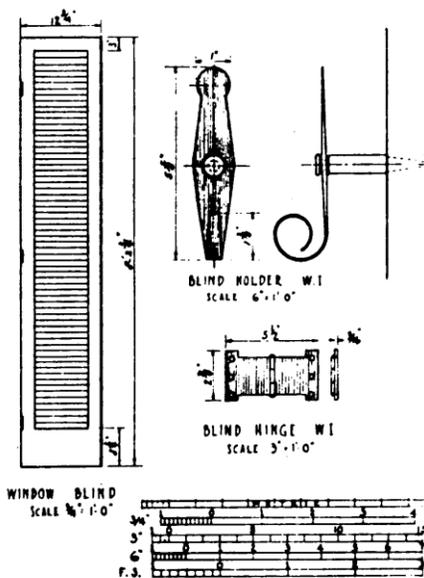


Figure 14 - Shutter and blind hardware. Above: Various types of iron holdbacks used on 19<sup>th</sup> century Alabama houses. Left: HABS drawing of blind hardware at Belle Mont (ca. 1828, Colbert County).



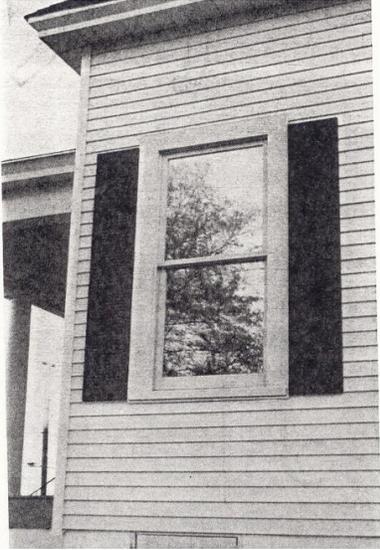


Figure 15 - As seen here, blinds are often used inappropriately. First, there is no evidence that this structure ever had blinds. Secondly, the blinds themselves obviously do not fit the window opening and have been improperly affixed against the outer edge of the window frame.

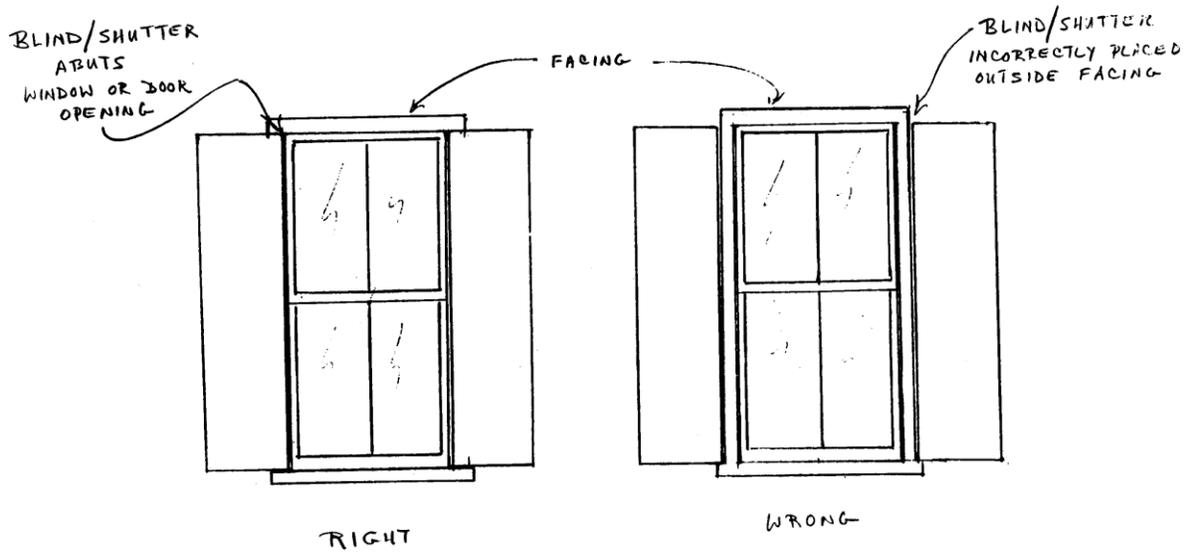


Figure 16 - Installation of window blinds.