

Hendricks Churchill

# CountryLiving

## How to Spot a Saltbox Style Home

*And why is it called a saltbox to begin with?*

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From cozy sweaters to quaint small towns bursting with fall foliage, there are some things that just feel quintessentially New England. Chief among them, of course, is the saltbox house. Sturdy and simple, with clean lines and eye-pleasing symmetry, these historic homes dot the country backroads of the lands where British colonists first settled, and are a foundational form of American residential architecture.

“I love how unique and recognizable the saltbox exterior is,” says Rafe Churchill, a principal at Connecticut-based architecture and interior design firm Hendricks Churchill. “The asymmetrical profile, simple trim, and large center chimney clearly share a sense of what to expect inside.”

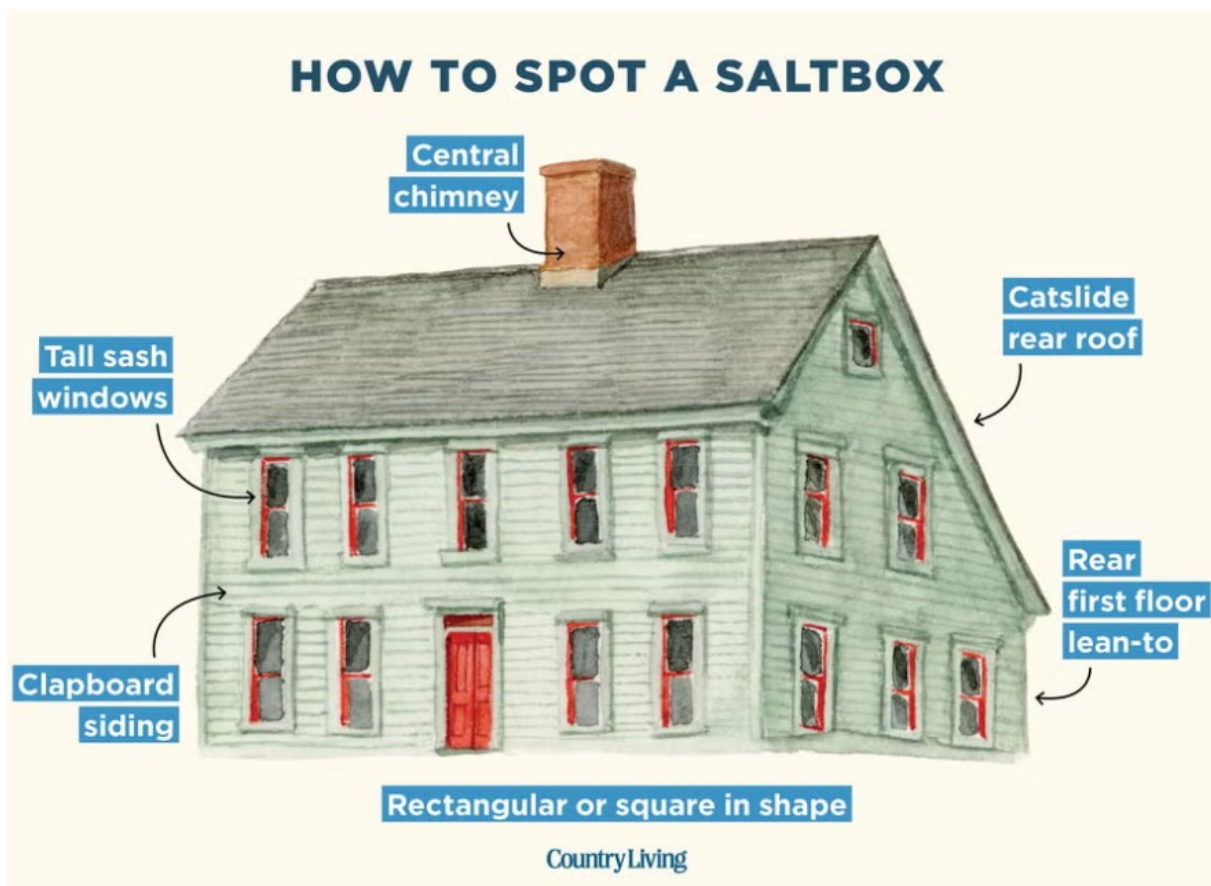
For a deep dive into the saltbox architecture style, including where homes of the style are most commonly spotted and what’s behind the saltbox name, read on.

### What is a Saltbox Home?

As a subgenre of Colonial architecture, a saltbox home typically keeps with the eye-pleasing symmetry of a two-story frame with a central front door and an equal number of windows on each side. Where it differs, though, is in the rear. There’s just one level in back, and it is covered by the long end of a lopsided gabled roof known as a “catslide” roof. The catslide roof often sits over a lean-to expansion that was added later on, after the house was first built. (In these instances, you’ll likely notice a slight change in pitch in the back roof line.)

Other key exterior design characteristics of a saltbox include a central chimney and clapboard siding. As many saltboxes from the mid- to late-1800s were constructed in the Georgian style, they’re also often rectangular structures, with vertically oriented multi-paned windows, a minimally adorned front door, and a shingled roof.

What a saltbox is not, though, is a tiny home. (Not necessarily, anyway.) “It is important to mention that a saltbox house is in fact larger than many historic houses,” Rafe explains. “It is essentially a traditional two-story rectangular house at the front facing side of the house, and a long sloping roof over what is basically an addition.”



### Why Is It Called a Saltbox?

In Colonial-era kitchens, salt was not available in quite the abundance we take for granted today. The seasoning was so prized, in fact, that it was stored in slanted wooden containers that were affixed to a wall for display. Saltbox architecture takes its name from these receptacles, as the similarly slanted roofline is its key design feature.

### The History of Saltbox Homes

As early British colonists began to build a new life on American soil in the mid-1600s through mid-1700s, they were confronted with significantly limited resources and harsh weather conditions. The Colonial style of architecture emerged as a simplified and streamlined version of buildings back in England. Rectangular and square shapes were easy to frame, and more energy was focused on sound construction rather than decorative adornment—hence the resplendently simple beauty of early American residences.



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Though the high-pitched gabled roof of a saltbox helped protect against heavy winds and snow, the catslide detail did not necessarily add more protection. “There are theories about the sloping roof facing prevailing winds and limiting heat loss,” Rafe notes, “but that idea tends to fall apart when, driving through a historic village, saltbox houses are seen on both sides of the road.”

### The Interiors of a Saltbox

The simple beauty of a saltbox home extends to the inside as well. “I like the main level layout around the center chimney,” Rafe says. “Two large rooms at the front of the house give a sense of openness not found in most buildings dating this far back. The main level ceiling of exposed timbers and boards along with wide pine floors also hold my attention.”

In traditional saltboxes, a large fireplace used for cooking and heat was located in the kitchen. The second level was typically a lofted space used as sleeping quarters.

### What are the Disadvantages of a Saltbox Home?

The low ceilings of an original saltbox can be tough to navigate. “Growing up in Woodbury, Connecticut, a family friend lived in a historic saltbox dating back to 1760,” Rafe recalls. “Most memorable was the low ceiling in the kitchen—my father, at 6’ 3”, could not stand up straight in the room.” Also, with the long roof on one side, there are fewer opportunities for windows, which can make the interiors a touch dark. That said, advances in construction can combat these disadvantages in new-build saltboxes as well as renovations of historic saltboxes.



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Where are Saltbox Houses Most Common in the US?

Saltbox homes are most commonly found in the Northeast, particularly in what is now Massachusetts and Connecticut. Some of the most historically significant examples of the saltbox architectural style include the John Adams Birthplace in Quincy, Massachusetts, and the Glebe House Museum in Woodbury, Connecticut.

Do I Capitalize Saltbox?

No. Saltbox is not a proper noun, so it is written lowercase, as cottage or bungalow would be. A saltbox of the Georgian style would be described as a "Georgian saltbox." Here, Georgian is capitalized because the Georgian historic period for which the style is named is a proper noun.