

Greek Revival Architecture in Seneca County

Following its official creation as a county in 1804, Seneca County underwent rather rapid economic growth. Prosperous businessmen and farmers wanted beautiful homes and there was a growing need for various government buildings. Not surprisingly, many of these new buildings were constructed in the Greek Revival style which was the dominant architectural style in the United States between 1818 and 1850. Much of its popularity is due to its strong ties with classical tradition in general and democracy in the Greek city-state of Athens. (The picture at left is a 2006 view of the Acropolis of ancient Athens.) The style emphasizes the use of beautiful columns and windows placed in symmetry.



attention on a building not from the long side but rather the short gabled end (showing the peak of the roof) usually with the gable end facing the street, like in a Greek temple. This was the first truly national style of architecture in the United States. Although good examples of this style are found throughout the United States, perhaps the most famous examples are Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello and the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

GABLE END TO THE STREET

PANELED PILASTERS OR WIDE CORNER BOARDS

CLAPBOARDS OR FLATBOARDS

BLINDS

6/6 SASH

OFF-CENTER ENTRY
FLAT PILASTERS, ENTABLATURE,
SIDE & TRANSOM LIGHTS,
4-PANEL DOOR



Historical Society.

The most famous private residence in this style in Seneca County is the Rose Hill Mansion. The Rose Hill Mansion was built in 1839 on a prominent site overlooking Seneca Lake nearly straight across from Geneva. Rose Hill Mansion is a National Historic Landmark and is considered one of the finest examples of Greek Revival Architecture in the United States. Restoration began in 1965 and has been opened to the public since 1968 under the supervision of the Geneva Historical Society. Twenty-one of the 26 rooms can be viewed and are furnished in the then-popular Empire style. Largely because of its meticulous attention to period detail throughout the mansion and grounds, in 1974 Rose Hill Mansion was given special recognition by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Visitors can tour the house and grounds between early May and late October, thanks to the efforts of the Geneva

The Greek Revival style can be found in many public buildings throughout Seneca County. The so-called Three Bears in Ovid are probably the only set of three side-by-side set of



public buildings in this style in the entire United States. The Three Bears are also listed on the National Historic Registry. The largest of the three buildings, known as the Papa Bear, was the courthouse. The smallest building, known as the Baby Bear, was the first clerk's office. Both of these buildings were built in 1845. As was typical of public buildings at the time, the Three Bears were built of brick. Bricks for both buildings were produced locally at John B. Seeley's farm. The use of

local materials not only kept costs down but also served to benefit local suppliers. The middle building, called the Mama Bear, was built in 1860-1862 and was first used as a second clerk's office. The exterior beauty of the Greek Revival style has been kept largely intact, although there have been some minor interior alterations over the years. The Papa Bear served as one of two courthouses for Seneca County for many years, with court sessions alternating between the two county seats of Waterloo and Ovid. The Baby Bear has been the "home" of the Grand Army of the Republic since about 1874, and then the Caywood Camp of the Sons of Union Veterans. The Three Bears complex is listed on both the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places due to its historic and architectural significance.

As Seneca County government has been moving away from usage of the Three Bears, a group known as the Friends of the Three Bears has emerged to spearhead efforts to maintain the buildings and to put them to use to enhance tourism, promotion of local history and other beneficial economic uses. On November 20, 2003, the Preservation League of New York State designated the Three Bears as one of New York State's "Seven to Save," the nonprofit group's annual list of New York's most threatened historic places. Thanks to the efforts of The Friends of the Three Bears it is likely that in the near future the Three Bears will be preserved and become a great tourist mecca as has been true of the Rose Hill Mansion.

Seneca County is fortunate to have two outstanding examples of Greek Revival architecture. As other architectural styles have become dominant since 1850, there is a growing need to preserve these gems of Greek Revival style. Their stately magnificence stands as very visual reminders of all that is good about living in a democratic nation. Their continued existence adds to the county's growing tourist economy.

[This article was written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]