

Showing Local History Before 1900 Through Architecture

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When we think about the importance of architecture we tend to think about buildings constructed on a grand scale - Versailles, Buckingham Palace, the White House. But it is the ordinary, the everyday constructed spaces of individual homes that tell us more about the values of a time and place, for our homes encode the values of our civilization and - in time - also come to reinforce them.¹

Buildings are as individual and as interesting as are people. Like people, some buildings are small and delicate, some are tall and thin, and others are large and heavy-looking. Both people and buildings have different features—small or large eyes (windows) and different shaped mouths and noses (doors and projections). Buildings, like people, have different colors, shapes, and features (windows, doors, columns, foundations, decorations, etc.)

The way people dress is another clue to understanding their personalities and the fashion of the times. Buildings can be fancy with lots of jewelry (ornamentation), or plain and neat-looking. Thus, buildings like people, are decorated differently, making some look grand and important and others plain and ordinary.

Buildings each have a unique history. Like people, buildings age and change with the times. Some buildings are given “surgery” to restore them to their original state; others buildings “die” from neglect, accidents and disease. Another possibility is that a building of one style may later undergo a major transformation into the style of another time period, making it look entirely different.²

The architecture of the United States has consisted of a wide variety of styles throughout its history. Home styles in the U.S. are regionally diverse and the shapes they have taken on have been influenced by many other types of architecture. The result is an eclectic mix of different home styles can often be found within the same neighborhood, even on the same street or block of that street.³

Architectural style is often an important key to understanding how a community or neighborhood has developed over time. During the 19th century, when many of the United States’ residences were built, most architectural styles in use were first developed in the prosperous mercantile cities in the United States or Europe. As styles took hold in new parts of the United States undergoing economic growth, local architects and master builders began incorporating characteristic features into the design of their buildings.⁴

Federal style (1780-1840)

After gaining our independence from England in the Revolutionary War, the new United States modified the British Georgian style, named after the ruling kings by that name, into what

is commonly called the Federal style. This name is not surprising, given the fact that we were a new federal union of several states. This style is also known as Adamesque, named after the architect/decorator Robert Adam. Federal-style buildings are found throughout the cities and towns of the eastern seaboard, but particularly in New England seaports, where merchants were growing rich from their profitable trading ventures. This style evolved into what became known as the Neoclassical style for use in public buildings such as the Executive Mansion (later to become known as the White House) in Washington, D.C., and for elegant private residences like Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.⁵

Geneva has several wonderful examples of the Federal style of architecture. This is not at all surprising in that Geneva's first growth coincided with the Federal period. Several homes and buildings, including the Geneva Historical Society's home building, on South Main Street are of this style. This is especially true for the brick row houses surrounding Pulteney Park and nearby on South Main Street. The early plan of Geneva featured a village square laid out in 1793 at the direction of Captain Charles Williamson, the Pulteney land agent. This was the center of town during these years. These brick buildings tended to have some kind of store, business or bank in the ground level floor and private residence in the upper part.⁶

Greek Revival style (1825-1860)

Following the War of 1812, a huge transformation took place in the United States. Interest in any association with British styles waned greatly in America. There was a strengthened sense that we Americans were distinctively different from the British and our nation underwent an extended period of great economic growth. In New York State, there was the stimulus from the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. More immediately in the central Finger Lakes, there was the completion of the first sets of locks on the Seneca River between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes in 1820. Many prosperous Americans believed that ancient Greece represented the spirit of true democracy—not the British with their limited monarchy. Many Americans sympathized with Greece's own struggles for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s. Thomas Jefferson intended for government and public buildings to emulate Greek temples such as the Parthenon of the Acropolis. This became the basis for a new style of architecture, named Greek Revival. This Greek Revival style became the dominant style (1825-1860) for many domestic buildings in those areas—including Seneca Falls, Waterloo, and Geneva—that were becoming rapidly settled during this time period. Americans largely began to think that the United States could, and should, inherit the beauty and grandeur of ancient Greece, not only in architecture but also in the very names of newly-established towns such as Ithaca, etc. In 1842, architect Alexander Jackson Davis complained that the Greek Revival style was used for so many buildings that “it was difficult for strangers in American towns to distinguish between a church, a bank and a hall of justice” as well as the private residences of many wealthy doctors and lawyers. This Greek Revival style inspired the first great American professional architects.⁷

Within the city of Geneva itself can be found several good examples of the Greek Revival style. These include the massive Van Brunt-Foote House (built 1835 and 1847, at 46 Delancey Drive)⁸ and a much smaller but also beautiful Greek Revival at 10 Delancey Drive. One of the most beautiful Greek Revival style homes in the United States, however, is the Rose Hill Mansion. Overlooking Seneca Lake on the east side (in Seneca County), the house as we know it today was built in 1838 by William Kerley Strong and is owned by the Geneva Historical Society. Also in Seneca County, in Ovid, we have the famous Three Bears complex

which consists of three side-by-side Greek Revival buildings built about 1845 (the papa and baby bears) and 1862 (the mamma bear) for use as half-shire county seat buildings.

Gothic Revival style (1840-1880)

In 1837, Queen Victoria ascended the throne of the British Isles and Empire. Because of her long reign, the period roughly 1840-1900 became known as the Victorian era. During these years industrialization brought new building materials and techniques. Architecture saw rapid changes. A variety of “Victorian styles” emerged, each with its own distinctive features. The most popular Victorian styles spread quickly through widely published pattern books. Builders often borrowed characteristics from several different styles, creating unique, and sometimes quirky, mixes. Buildings constructed during the Victorian era usually have characteristics of one or more of these styles: Gothic Revival, Italianate, Second Empire, Queen Anne (including its variants known as Stick, Eastlake, etc.), and Richardsonian Romanesque.⁹

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, styles in literature, art and architecture rapidly changed in both Europe and the United States. One of the more pervasive currents was the Romantic Movement, which proclaimed the superiority of the Christian medieval past. With almost religious fervor, romanticists extolled the symbolic virtues of Gothic architecture and fostered its revival. This explains the advent of the Gothic Revival style (1840-1880). By the 1830s, a growing taste for the romantic, fostered largely by the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the growing dissatisfaction with restraints of classically-inspired Greek Revival architecture, turned the Gothic Revival into a popular movement. Alexander Jackson Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing became the country’s most prolific Gothic Revival architects¹⁰. Medieval cathedrals and castles were the inspiration for many masonry public buildings and homes of very wealthy Americans. An outstanding example of such a private residence was the all-marble Lyndhurst in Tarrytown, NY.¹¹ Most people, however, could not afford to have a home built of masonry. Local contractors instead made ready use of the large local supplies of lumber and factory-made architectural trim made by new machines invented (such as the jig saw or scroll saw) during this Victorian era, to build wooden residences in what became commonly known as the Carpenter Gothic (Revival) style. Grant Wood’s famous painting “American Gothic” shows a typical board-and-batten Carpenter Gothic cottage in the background.¹²

Sitting side-by-side on Cayuga Street in Seneca Falls, we have a Federal-style house surrounded by Gothic Revival houses on either side. Charles Lansing Hoskins lived in the federal-style house (center) that he built in 1836. In 1870, he bought the Gothic Revival cottage (north of his house) for his widowed daughter Laura Hoskins Hubbell. He remodeled it with aspects of later styles, such as Second Empire, adding a bay window and porch overlooking the Seneca River. The Gothic Revival house to the south of his house was built for another of his daughters when she married.¹³

There are many wonderful examples of the Gothic Revival style in Geneva. These include the Balmanno Cottage (built 1830, at 583 South Main St.) and St. Peter’s Memorial Church (built 1868, on Genesee St.) and the Love House (built 1872, at 165 Washington St.) With its many gables and tall chimneys and steeply slanted roof, the latter has distinctive Gothic Revival characteristics. Significantly, incorporates qualities of other styles with its slate roof and rounded stone arches over its windows.¹⁴

Italianate style (1840-1885)

The most popular housing style in Victorian American was the Italianate style (1840-1885). This style is also known as the Tuscan, Lombard, Bracketed and even American style. It was inspired by the lavish style and rich design details of Italian villas. Like the Gothic Revival style, the existence of many pattern books helped to make this a very popular style in the United States after 1855. There were two major reasons for its great popularity in the U.S. First, Italianate homes could be constructed with many different building materials, with the style adapted to modest budgets if necessary. Second, the new technologies of the Victorian era made it possible to produce quickly and affordably cast-iron and press-metal decorations. The Italianate style became a common style for barns, town halls, and libraries, as well as private residences. Not surprisingly, Italianate buildings can be found in every part of the United States, except for the deep South. There are fewer Italianate buildings in the Southern states because the style reached its peak during the Civil War decade, a time when the South was economically distressed.¹⁵

There are at least two excellent examples of this style in Seneca Falls. One would be the Weatherlow House at 95 State Street. It is especially striking with its wooden cupola and its brackets “supporting” the roof of the main structure, the front porch, and the roof of the cupola.¹⁶ The second example is the former Seabury S. Gould house at 28 Cayuga Street. Like the Weatherlow house, its painted white brackets stand out in nice contrast to the red brick.¹⁷

Geneva has many examples of this style. A most noteworthy one is the Dunning House (built 1869, at 25 Genesee Park). It has a flat-topped tower and what appears from street level to be a flat roof. Beautiful cast iron balustrades enhance the roof of both the tower and the house.¹⁸

Second Empire style (1855-1885)

Between roughly 1855 and 1885, the major new style of architecture was the Second Empire (Mansard) style. The name of this style comes from the rule of Napoleon III in France from 1852-1870. While it might seem ironic that Americans could embrace a name of an emperor, Napoleon III’s regime was pledged to guide the French people internally towards justice and externally towards perpetual peace.¹⁹ The Second Empire buildings had tall mansard roofs that were modeled after the opulent architecture of Paris during Napoleon III’s reign. French architects used the term “horror vacui”—the fear of unadorned surfaces—to describe the highly ornamented Second Empire style. This style was practical in cities—their height allowed for additional living space on narrow city lots. This style in the United States had many similarities to the Italianate style, but the most distinctive aspect of the Second Empire style was its mansard roof.²⁰ So, once again, we had a new style that borrows much a previous style but adds distinctive new characteristics.

Within Seneca Falls, there are several good examples on the same block of Cayuga Street just north of Trinity Lane (30, 32, and 54 Cayuga St.). These houses comprise part of what local folks aptly referred to as “Mansions Row,” given the bulky-sized appearance of Second Empire homes.

Two good examples in Geneva are the Affleck-Nester House (built 1868, at 53 Genesee St.) and the David Moore House (built 1872, at 57 High St.). Both have the characteristic mansard roof pierced with dormer windows.²¹

Queen Anne style (1880-1910)

With the demise of the actual French Second Empire, we have the rise of a new architectural style in the United States—namely the Queen Anne style. The Queen Anne style was the architectural fashion of the 1880s and 1890s. Historically, this style became popular during the latter years of the reign of Queen Victoria and had little association with the Queen Anne who reigned during the early 1700s. Builders and homeowners named the style Queen Anne because they associated the historical Queen Anne with elegance and grandeur. Builders made extensive use of mass-produced pre-cut architectural trim to create fanciful and sometimes flamboyant houses. Most Queen Anne designers relished decorative excesses. Some builders, however, showed restraint in their use of these embellishments. In this style the roof is steeply pitched and irregular. The overall shape of the house is asymmetrical. Two special versions of the “basic” Queen Anne style were the Victorian Stick style and the Eastlake Victorian style. The fancy spindles and brackets and the angularity of roofs, etc. of the Queen Anne style served to make Queen Anne style homes very expensive and difficult to maintain. That helps to explain why many that survive today have vinyl siding and do not still have their fancy spindles and brackets.²²

Richardsonian Romanesque (1880-1900)

One last local architectural style of the late 19th century to discuss was the Richardsonian Romanesque (1880-1900). This style was one of the very few architectural styles that has been so influenced by one person--Henry Hobson Richardson--as to bear that person’s name. Drawing upon the ancient Romanesque style’s rounded arches, Richardson incorporated aspects of many previous styles. The style became most popular in the west and in cities that achieved their first maturity when this style was fashionable.²³ Geneva can proudly boast of four significant structures in the Richardsonian Romanesque style—the former Elks Club (built 1892, at 459 South Main St.)(originally built as the Collins Music Hall), Belhurst (built 1889, at Lochland Rd), the New York State Armory (built 1893 and 1907, at 300 Main St.), and the Smith Opera House (built 1894 and 1931, at 82 Seneca St.).²⁴ These four structures illustrate well the point that the massive stone walls and other features of this style were so expensive that this style tended to be limited to grand public buildings or homes of the wealthy.

¹ “Plantation Agriculture,” Lotsofessays.com

² “Historic Architectural Styles,”

http://arkansaspreservation.org/pdf/youth_education/architectural_styles_lessons_plan.pdf, p 4

³ “Architectural Styles Primer,” <http://exinearticles.com/?Architectural-Styles-Preimer&id=1881705>

⁴ “Local Architecture and Historic Preservation,” http://www.rchsonline.org/ar_basic.htm

⁵ John C. Poppeliers, et. al, *What Style Is It?—A Guide to American Architecture*, Revised Edition, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003, pp 28-29, and 33-38.

⁶ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, p 11.

⁷ *What Style Is It?* pp 41-45

⁸ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, p 30.

⁹ “Victorian House Styles,” <http://architecture.about.com/od.housestyles/ig/Victorian-House-Styles/>

¹⁰ *What Style Is It?* pp 46-48

¹¹ “1840-1880: Gothic Revival (Masonry),” <http://architecture.about.com/od/housestyles/ig/Victorian-House-Styles/Gothic-Revival-Ho...>

¹² *What Style Is It?* p 50

¹³ *Blue Form Survey: An Architectural and Historical Inventory of the Village of Seneca Falls Historic District, Seneca Falls, New York, 1989*, Seneca Falls: The Wilson Press, 1989

¹⁴ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, pp 48, 49, 51.

¹⁵ "1840-1885: Italianate House Style," <http://architecture.about.com/od.housestyles/ig/Victorian-House-Styles/Italianate-House-St...>

¹⁶ Edith Delavan, *Landmarks of Seneca County: A Photographic Exploration of Historical Styles*, Ithaca, NY: Cayuga Press, 2004, p 83.

¹⁷ *Blue Form Survey: An Architectural and Historical Inventory of the Village of Seneca Falls Historic District, Seneca Falls, New York, 1989*, Seneca Falls: The Wilson Press, 1989

¹⁸ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, p 58

¹⁹ "Second French Empire," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_French_Empire

²⁰ "1855-1885: Second Empire (Mansard) Style," <http://architecture.about.com/od.housestyles/ig/Victorian-House-Styles/Second-Empire-Ho...>

²¹ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, pp 68-69.

²² "Queen Anne Architecture," <http://architecture.about.com/cs.housestyles/a/queenanne.htm>

²³ *What Style Is It?* pp 78-83.

²⁴ H. Edmond Wirtz, *Treasures of American Architecture in Geneva, N.Y.*, Geneva: Geneva Historical Society, 1987, pp 70-75.