



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“Strange Roofs and Odd Gables” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Houses are a great example of popular culture. People tend to build houses in styles that are acceptable or fashionable at the time they're built. Because houses also tend to last for a long time, they're a good record of the past. As styles go out of favor, houses in that style become historical markers for that time period.

This short essay will teach you to recognize some of the most common house types from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries so you can identify when houses in your town were built. If you know when they were built, you can get a better idea of when your town was booming and when certain parts of the community were built.

Many colonial era houses look like Figure 1. The gables of the house are on the side, the windows and doors are symmetri-



Figure 1: Georgian/Colonial (1780) 18th & early 19th Century

cal, and the house shape is basically a big box. This one has a gambrel (barn-shaped) roof, but a regular roof was most common. Note too that the roof doesn't overhang the gables on the side at all. This is typical of a lot of really old buildings. The one pictured is from 1780.

In the early 19th century, Americans started building houses that looked like Greek and Roman temples. See Figure 2 for a house from 1839. Note that the gables are facing the front. Few homes were front gabled



Figure 2: Greek Revival (1839) 18th & early 19th Century

before the 1800s. Note too that the structure, although still basically a box, has been ornamented to look like a Greek temple. The large pediment on the top and the columns give it a classical look. Even side-gabled versions from this

period will have elements that are temple-like.

In the mid-19th century the dominant styles were Gothic Revival and Italianate designs.

Gothic Revival, seen in Figure 3, has the characteristics of a gingerbread or doll house. It is cross-gabled (both front and side gables), decorative carpentry work along the roofline, and arched, pointed, gothic-style windows. Most have a one-story porch as well.

Italianate homes were also



Figure 3: Gothic Revival (1857) Mid 19th Century Photo by the Author

common in the mid-19th century. They are generally square, box-shaped building with flat or nearly flat roofs that have a wide overhang supported by giant brackets. They

Figure 4: Italianate Mid 19th Century



also often have towers sticking out of the top or on the side. See Figure 4 for an example.

(continued)

Further Research

1. Find a copy of *The Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia and Lee McAlester. There's nothing quite like it. It covers all major (and some minor) house styles with hundreds of pictures and sketches. Simply the best.



Figure 5: Second Empire House
1850s-1870s
Note the mansard roof.



Figure 7: Tudor
Late 19th - Mid 20th Century

From the 1850s until the 1870s, a common house type was the Second Empire house, seen in Figure 5. Basically a box-shaped house, this style is easy distinguished by its unique roof-design. Known as a *mansard* roof, it is really part roof, part the top story of the house. This style is based on popular designs in France at the time. Most Second Empire homes were built in the 15 years after the Civil War, and for that reason, these homes are often called “Grant-style” because of the presidency of U.S. Grant.

The bungalow was a popular style in the first three decades of the Century. See Figure 8 for a picture of this very common style. If you have homes like this in your community, they

probably predate World War II. Catalog homes, which a person ordered through the mail, were also common during this period, as were colonial revivals that tried to recreate late 18th



Figure 8: Bungalow
1900s-1920s

In the last decades of the 19th century, Victorian-style homes became popular. They are vastly different from early home because they have a wild combination of gables, strange roof angles, and all sorts of other decoration. Think “horror movie” and you’ll be on track. The more accurate name for the most common Victorian home is a “Queen Anne” style, but the more general term “Victorian” is more common.



Figure 6: Victorian
Late 19th Century

The late 19th century also saw the arrival of the Tudor style house. This home was meant to look like medieval English homes. They are most commonly recognized by the stucco and beam look of the exterior. See Figure 7. These homes persisted until the 1950s.

In the early 20th century, homes got smaller as home ownership became within reach of many Americans in urban areas.

century designs.

After WWII, ranch style homes were common as the Baby Boom encouraged many new families to move to the suburbs.

This has been a quick and incomplete look at American house types, but I hope it will get you to think about when your town was settled and realize that the cultural landscape can provide clues about your local history. There are plenty of great books about these topics at most libraries.

Links:

- House Styles from About.com
- Victorian Houses
- House Styles
- Old House Style Guide

http://architecture.about.com/library/bl-styles_index.htm

<http://users.rcn.com/scndempr/dave/school.html>

http://www.frii.com/~phouka/oldhouse/ren_styles.html

<http://www.cmhpf.org/kids/Guidebox/OldHouseGuide.html>