

Look Up!

by

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Look Up! That could be the watchword for appreciating architecture in downtown Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. As a matter of fact, those words could work for appreciating the architecture in many of the towns in the Susquehanna Valley where an abundance of houses from the mid-19th century have been preserved. “Looking up” serves observers when they visit charming older sections of towns like New Berlin, Mifflinburg, Muncie, Carlisle and Gettysburg as well as Lewisburg.

As the twentieth century dawned, houses became more or less standardized into forms with pointed gables facing front or square-fronted structures with straight roofs over wide front porches. But the previous century had offered a much wider variety: “vernacular” houses in this area came in many styles and shapes. During the course of the 1900’s, levels of prosperity and the influence of styles in Europe began to influence local architecture, but whatever the style, the distinguishing features usually appeared at second-floor level, or even at the roofline.

Early in the nineteenth century, so-called Federal houses, (sometimes termed Greek Revival houses) were similar to the Georgian style houses that predominated in England as well as in America in the eighteenth century. The pattern for Federal, as well as Georgian houses, was two stories, with five windows under a low-sloping roof on the second level and two pairs of windows downstairs flanking a center doorway. Gradually, carved brackets began to appear to suggest support for that roof. With these houses, gables appeared at each end of the house, allowing the center door to open to the street.

But early builders began to use the space directly under the roof to add another small area above the second floor and to ventilate it with tiny windows that perforated a decorative frieze. Thus in between those sets of brackets, many

houses had what were locally called “lie-on-your-stomach” windows. The imagination of early builders worked some beautiful



“Lie-on-your-Stomach” windows at 60 S.2nd st. Photo by Tom Greaves

variations on that theme, providing little windows in a variety of shapes. And, obviously, without looking up, the observer would miss the whole show, even if appreciating it meant peering through branches of trees.

During the middle of the nineteenth century local taste changed to something less austere. Influenced by styles that were beginning to appear in Eastern cities (we were, after all, connected by the canal system and soon by railroads), some homeowners began to want so-called Italianate-style houses; others wanted houses in the newly popular Queen Anne style. Either style had more decoration than did Federal houses. Italianate-style houses had decoratively carved window hoods, ever more heavily ornamental roof brackets, and elaborate entranceways. Queen Anne-style houses were full of fantasy, having turrets and towers, balconies and multiple gables at the roofline. The basic form of these embellished houses was often asymmetric, rather than regular and rectangular. This was the dawn of so-

called Victorian architecture in America. And although in these embellished styles there was plenty of detail to enjoy on each floor of houses, the real action was seen at the upper levels: that's where you saw those turrets, the delightful little balconies, unusual decorative windows, the Italianate roof brackets, roofs with as many as six or seven little gables, fanciful designs in the roof tiles--one surprise after another.

As the century advanced, another style with much embellishment began to appear. Because this style reflected architecture that was admired in France during the reign of Emperor Louis Phillippe, it was often called the "Second Empire" style and one of its distinguishing characteristics was the Mansard roof. This roof was a



Mansard roof at 217 N. 3rd St. Photo by Tom Greaves

sort of box-like extension that rose from what would have been an upper-floor roof. The delicately shaped box was pierced with windows within elaborate dormers.

At one point buildings with Mansard roofs could be seen everywhere—on commercial buildings, such as banks and other institutions as well as private residences. This roof came to be another frequent characteristic of the Victorian style of architecture. Some homeowners even renovated their Federal-style houses by adding Mansard roofs, including the dormers, thus completely transforming the original appearance.

A detail not to be missed without a look upwards was the prevalent decorated chimney and/or chimney pot that could be seen above houses in these heavily decorated styles. Originally designed to improve the draft of the chimney, they eventually appeared in pairs or clusters as decorative features, especially for houses in Queen Anne style, which abounded in all sorts of architectural detail.

Consequently, the next time you travel down a charming street of well-maintained homes built in the previous century, enchanted by the fine entrance-ways, handsome brass door-knockers, attractive floral arrangements at the doorway, and carefully groomed hedges, don't permit yourself to ignore the wonders to be seen above.

