

An Era of Elegance & Grandeur

Part I: The Building of a Victorian City

Introduction

What is Victorian, exactly? The word Victorian often refers to the highly ornate style of architecture, furniture, and fashion that developed during the reign of England's Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901). Although separated by land and sea, styles and etiquette set forth by Queen Victoria dominated nineteenth century America. At the same time, industrialization in Europe and America led to innovative changes in the production of material goods and architecture. The era's influence on American culture is clearly visible today in the grand estates, towering churches and inviting commercial districts of our hometowns – Millionaires Row (Historic West Sixth Street) in the City of Erie offers passersby several examples of Victorian architecture to admire. Have your walking shoes ready as we walk through Erie's downtown and admire the view!

Grand Buildings of Erie

There are a variety of Victorian architectural styles that can be found throughout Erie City and County, 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 times usually have characteristics of one or more these styles: Gothic Revival, Victorian Italianate, Romanesque, and Queen Anne.

Gothic Revival

The Gothic Revival – the revival of the style of the Middle Ages (500 - 1500 A.D.) – began during the eighteenth century in England. In America, however, **most** Gothic Revival buildings were built between the 1830s and 1860s.

1. Although it was constructed in 1930, the First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant is a superb example of Gothic Revival architecture. Discussion of the new church building began in 1927, when two strong, independent downtown Presbyterian churches met to discuss uniting their congregations. Universal approval of this union resulted in the formation of a joint committee to build a new church edifice on land that stretched from Sixth to Seventh streets near their intersections with Myrtle Street. On February 8, 1929, the congregation of Park Church, formerly located at South Perry Square, united with the congregation of Central church, formerly located at Tenth & Sassafras Streets, to become the Church of the Covenant. On June 16, 1929, the newly formed congregation celebrated the laying of the cornerstone for the new church building. The congregation celebrated the dedication of the new church building on December 14, 1930. The Gothic Revival architecture employed here is much more sophisticated than that of the earlier Romantic Era. It emphasizes great height, steeply pitched roofs, and irregular, complex massing. (Source: www.firstcovenanterie.org)

2. The Cathedral of St. Paul at 133 West Sixth Street was built in 1866, and is a great example of Victorian Gothic architecture – a style of architecture to develop from the Gothic Revival movement. The congregation’s first church building, a brick structure constructed by Erie masons William and James Hoskinson at a cost of \$3,500, was replaced under the supervision of Reverend John Franklin Spalding. The building’s architects used materials of contrasting color and texture, and emphasized vertical elements such as pointed arches, steep roofs and exceptionally tall spires (the pointed roof of a tower), all of which are characteristics of the Victorian Gothic style.

Did You Know? Restoration of the cathedral’s stained glass windows was completed in 2002. Among the windows preserved is the Frederick Wilder Metcalf memorial window, an authentic Tiffany stained glass window created by Tiffany Studios. Several other windows exemplify the craftsmanship of Lamb Studios of Clifton, New Jersey, the oldest continually operating stained glass studio in the United States (1857).

Victorian Italianate

By the late 1860s, the Italianate style became the most popular house style in the United States, and it remained the most common style for construction of homes, barns, town halls and libraries until the 1870s for two main reasons: the Italianate style was suitable for many different building materials and budgets, and the development of cast-iron and press-metal technology made producing decorative elements like brackets and cornices more efficient. It was not until the late 1870s that the Italianate style's popularity fell in favor of Late Victorian styles like Queen Anne.

Several examples of Italianate style architecture dot the City of Erie and the county.

1. Located in Girard, the R.S. Battles Farmhouse is an Italianate structure built by one of the county’s wealthiest and most influential families. When Asa Battles Sr. died in the spring of 1848, Rush Sobieski Battles, the youngest of six children, inherited the bulk of his father’s estate and responsibilities - he acquired the responsibility of caring for his mother and two unwed sisters, Alcina age twenty-eight and Lucina age twenty-four. Like his father, he began farming and improving the land. He planted orchards and vineyards and began experimenting with grape hybridization and cross-pollination. In 1852, Rush Battles began to read law with S. E. Woodruff of Girard and in 1854 was admitted to the Erie County Legal Bar after graduating from the National Law School in Pughkeepsie, New York. He set up his business with his mentor and began practicing law in Girard. In March of 1857, Rush Battles entered into a contract with a local builder by the name of Erastus Slater to build a new home for himself and his family that would be reflective of his new status in the community. For the sum of \$550.00 and one acre of land, along with room and board, Erastus Slater agreed to do all the “carpentry and joinery work”. The plans were drawn up by William Blackford and the house was to have “the style and elevation of, along with the same style for Cornice, Verandah, Brackets, and Observatory as used on the house owned by Moses Koch of Erie.” Work began one month later and in April of 1858, Rush and his family moved into the new home.

2. The Wood-Morrison house at 338 West Sixth Street was built in 1849 by William Maxwell Wood, M.D., United States Navy. At the time it was built, it was the only house on the north side of Sixth Street between Myrtle and Chestnut, and was considered one of the finest in the city

because of its many “modern conveniences.” This square, Italianate style two-story brick house included features such as “deafening” (sound proof) baths, water pipes and gas fixtures. The decorative ironwork on this home was inspired by Dr. Wood’s knowledge of and fondness for New Orleans. Architects and builders Dudley and Hawk designed the home with twelve rooms and nine fireplaces.

A key figure in acquiring California for the United States through secret missions between the U.S. and Mexico, Dr. Wood came to Erie from Baltimore in 1847 to serve as surgeon onboard the U.S.S. Michigan, the first iron-clad warship on the Great Lakes. Built at Pittsburgh, transported in pieces to Cleveland, and assembled at Erie’s harbor, the U.S.S. Michigan was launched in 1843.

Dr. Wood, appointed the first Surgeon General in the U.S. Navy in 1869, performed surgery in the basement of his home. Patients entered by an outside stairway to the east of the porch. President Zachary Taylor was a patient of Dr. Wood in 1849, when he contracted a serious illness while visiting Erie on his way to the New York State Fair. The President remained at the Wood residence recuperating for a period of time. The City of Erie was temporarily considered the governmental seat of the United States during this time, because both President Taylor and Vice President Fillmore were located here. Dr. Wood also wrote many books pertaining to travel, and his son Charles was an internationally known poet.

This tract of land was acquired by the Morrison family in 1865. It remained in their hands for almost one hundred years. The property included the land to the west, where the Watson-Curtze Mansion now stands, and the property to the east, which held a barn. The Morrison family kept horses, cows, and chickens.

Captain William Leverett Morrison, one of the inhabitants of this home, was the last commander of the U.S.S. Michigan (Wolverine). He attained the rank of U.S. Navy Captain while commanding the U.S.S. Michigan from 1910 to 1917. He was then called to be Lieutenant Commander of the U.S.S. Utah during World War I. A civic leader, Captain Morrison oversaw the raising of the Niagara in 1912, served two terms as a representative in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, and proposed that Presque Isle become a state park. He served as the first Superintendent of Presque Isle State Park.

Romanesque

The Romanesque style was initiated by American architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838 – 1886), and was most used between the 1870s and 1890s. During Richardson’s life, and within the decade following his death, private and public buildings were constructed in the Romanesque style, however, because it was an expensive style, it never became widespread. The style is characterized by the use of massive geometric shapes, straightforward treatment of stone and broad roof planes. The overall effect depends on mass, volume and scale, rather than decorative detailing. Houses in this style are primarily found in larger cities in Northeastern states. Historic West Sixth Street features four houses in the Richardsonian Romanesque style: the Strong Mansion (109), the Taylor Mansion (150), and the Downing-Galbraith Mansion (259), the Watson-Curtze Mansion (356).

1. The Watson-Curtze Mansion stands as a symbol of the upper class lifestyle of the 1890's in Erie. This was a time when Erie was nearing the peak of its industrial development. The businessmen and industrialists who took advantage of this era to accumulate their fortunes enjoyed the privileges of an elegant lifestyle.

Designed by the firm of Green and Wicks of Buffalo, New York in 1889, the mansion was occupied by two different families before it became a museum. The first was Harrison F. Watson, his wife Carrie Tracy Watson, and their daughter Winifred. (Mr. & Mrs. Watson had an older daughter, Gertrude, who died at the age of eight from scarlet fever, before they moved into the home on West Sixth.) The Watson's moved into the house in 1891. Harrison Watson was the president of the H.F. Watson Company, which manufactured building, roofing, and lining papers and materials, as well as steam pipe and boiler packaging and coverings. The Watson family moved into their new home the same year the H.F. Watson Company was incorporated. Its main buildings were located along East 16th Street between French and Holland Streets. Over 400 men were employed at this location. New York, Chicago, and Nashville all had branch offices and distributing depots for the company. In 1894, Mr. Watson organized the Erie Dock and Transfer Company. One of the purposes of the new shipping company was to transport Watson Company products throughout the Great Lakes and beyond via barges.

In 1923, the house was sold to Frederick Felix Curtze by Winifred Watson Griswold (Mrs. Ely Griswold). Mr. Curtze was treasurer of the Erie Dime Savings Bank, and president of the Erie Trust Company, Heisler Locomotive Works, Union Iron Works and the Keystone Fish Company. The Curtze family, Frederick Felix, his wife Caroline, and two children, Louise M. and Frederick A., lived in the house until 1941. In 1941, after Mr. Curtze died, his family offered the Mansion to the School District of the City of Erie to be used as a museum. The Museum Department of the Erie Public Library moved into the Mansion, which then became the Erie Public Museum. The School District created the Erie Museum Authority in 1979. At this point, the Mansion became known as the Erie Historical Museum. In 2000, the Erie Historical Museum and the Erie County Historical Society merged to form the Erie County Historical Society & Museums. The goal of the new organization is to transform the Mansion into a fully decorated house museum.

The Mansion has 24 rooms, 17 closets, 5 bathrooms and 12 fireplaces. Most of the rooms are very different in design and style. Upon close inspection many unusual building materials and features can be found. There are mosaics (inlaid patterns made of bits of stone, glass or other material), friezes (hand-painted oil paintings on canvas that are attached to the upper portions of a wall) and stained glass windows.

Queen Anne

Of all the Victorian house styles, Queen Anne is the most elaborate and the most eccentric. The style is often called romantic and feminine, yet it is the product of a most unromantic era -- the machine age.

Queen Anne became an architectural fashion in the 1880s and 1890s, when the industrial revolution was taking hold of the American way of life. Americans, caught up in the excitement of new technologies, began to shuttle factory-made, precut architectural parts across the country

on a rapidly expanding railroad network. Builders combined these pieces to create innovative, and sometimes excessive and whimsical, homes.

1. Built by prominent Erie banker Judah Colt Spencer for his son William in 1876, this building is a transitional dwelling incorporating elements of both Stick and Queen Anne styles. The visible stick-work in the apex of the truss of the central dormer is merely applied decoration with no structural relation to the underlying construction. A grandson, another Judah Colt Spencer, later lived in the house.

A dominating figure in connection with finance, business and civic affairs, William Spencer occupied 519 West Sixth Street for many years. Mr. Spencer received his early education at the Erie Academy and went on to graduate from Princeton University as a member of the class of 1870 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Following an extended tour of Europe, Mr. Spencer returned to Erie and assumed a clerical position at First National Bank. In 1852, Mr. Spencer's father founded the First National Bank of Erie, only the twelfth bank in the nation of its kind. When Judah Colt Spencer died, vacating the presidential office, William Spencer became chief executive officer of the institution. He held this position until 1920.

Take a Closer Look!

How much do you know about your house or the neighborhood in which you live? Talk with your parents, or use local historical societies and museums to conduct research and learn about the history of your house and neighborhood. You might be surprised to learn who lived in your house or even who lived next door!

Draw It!

Design your own home! Architectural styles are ever changing. New designs and new materials help modern homes look much different from the homes of the past. Using new and old styles, design a home you would like to live in.

