Imagine strolling along tree-lined Park Avenue in Meadville and coming upon an elaborate Queen Anne house with a window piercing the chimney stack on the façade, a convex-roofed tower, and an amazing assemblage of porches and window shapes. You think, “What an imaginative architect or local builder!”

That afternoon you visit nearby Saegertown. As you drive along Euclid Street, there is an almost identical house! You return home and pull out your architectural style guide by Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780, A Guide to the Styles, and there on page 121 is a third version of this “unique” house ... in Calvert, Texas. What is going on?

You’ve just discovered empirically what academics are busy studying these days: pattern-book houses across the nation. As Daniel D. Reiff’s new book, Houses from Books, tells us, pattern-book houses were being built as early as the 1850s. These three houses, and versions in Illinois and Wisconsin, were all built according to the architectural plans of George Franklin Barber (1854–1915) of Knoxville, Tenn.

Between 1887 and 1913, Barber sold more than 20,000 architectural plans through magazines such as Harper’s Weekly. He also published a monthly journal called American Homes. His plans helped small-town clients with more money than architectural savvy to hire their own contractors and build houses which Barber’s ads called “handsome and artistic.” The ads further proclaimed that only Barber’s plans “stood between you and a hideous monstrosity!”

In the case of the two houses above, the architect’s plans were reversed so the porch could face the street corner. In Meadville alone, two more Barber designs featuring his Colonial Revival patterns can be found on Chestnut and Grove streets. These two — and a third in East Brady overlooking the Allegheny River — are grand houses, among the largest in their towns.

Although pattern-book architects were often overlooked in academic circles, a new scholarly interest has unearthed the full range of pattern-book houses and storefronts around us. Michael Alcorn of the School of Architecture at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, located nearly 1,000 Barber houses in 42 states for a recent exhibit; 125 different Barber designs were represented. Western Pennsylvania has approximately a dozen known Barber houses, and probably many more that simply aren’t documented. In fact, the practice of using architects’ plans as templates continues to grow. Most of today’s housing developments are spun off from a handful of architects’ plans customized to the consumer’s whims, and books of house plans are available by the dozens at bookstores.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.