Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

The Georgian Period

The key to understanding architectural styles is knowing that they are the inventions of historians trying to categorize the un-categorical. Architects don't organize themselves into categories. They are individualists: they pick and choose from the history of architecture or create something entirely new. Although they occasionally mimic ancient styles, more often they merely suggest rather than imitate them. They also, darn it, mix styles, taking one element from group A and one from group B. The best architects depend on their sense of proportion and rhythm to integrate new materials with their stylistic choices. It can be frustrating to the amateur architectural historian, and even those of us who have been looking at buildings for a long time, to identify a single style when analyzing a building. Academic architectural historians discuss influences instead of labeling buildings with a single style. Nonetheless, there are shorthand terms we all use to evoke a picture in the reader's mind.

When one reads the term “Georgian,” one thinks of formal symmetry, red brick, five evenly spaced window openings, and black shutters. Of course, it is never that easy. To truly analyze a building, you have to consider much more than the trimmings applied to the outside; you have to understand when it was built (age), the way it was built (structure), the way the rooms relate to each other (plan), how big it is in relation to the things around it (scale), and what it is made of (materials). Because there are regional variations to all of the styles, you may see a Georgian building from New England and one from Western Pennsylvania that look nothing like each other. To further complicate things, many architectural styles are based on Roman and Greek architecture, but each generation of designers and historians looks either at different aspects of the ancient architectural vocabulary or interprets it in a different way. So that while both the Georgian style and the Federal style use Roman antecedents, the Federal style interpreted them differently than the earlier Georgian style. Finally, it is often the case that a new architectural style develops as a reaction to an earlier style, usually on political or cultural grounds as well as aesthetic. These transitions are never straightforward; rather, they tend to overlap and blur so that there are many buildings that possess elements of two or three different styles simultaneously.

The Georgian style is so-named for the four Georges on the throne of England from 1714 until 1830. The earliest Georgian buildings in America were copied from English architectural books that were subsidized by wealthy patrons and published as art books. These books illustrated grand architectural spaces and were proudly displayed in their patrons' libraries, but they were also used in a practical way to explain construction requirements to builders.

This drawing of the Meason House appeared in the 1936 book, The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania by Charles Morse Stotz. The History Center has many of Stotz's original papers and illustrations.
Philadelphia has famous Georgian houses such as Cliveden and Mount Pleasant, but buildings from the 1700s in Western Pennsylvania generally would have been log houses or forts rather than stylish homes. Brick and stone had to be made or quarried on-site because both materials were too heavy to transport on packhorses or in Conestoga wagons. Local craftsmen, whether intentionally or unwittingly, sometimes strayed from the finer points of the models they were imitating.

There is one house in the region that holds its own against the 18th century mansions of Fairmount Park in Philadelphia: the Meason House. Located in Fayette County, the Meason House was designed by Adam Wilson in 1802 as the centerpiece of a large iron plantation. It has many elements of the Georgian style including robust classically derived ornamentation, formal symmetry, and the only seven-part plan remaining in the state.

Houses built in more isolated regions are characteristically American, because the workmen building them were more free to deviate from the formal styles. A farmhouse built in southeastern Washington County named “Plantation Plenty” emulates the houses of Newport, Rhode Island, and has several other features common to Georgian buildings such as the rooftop balustrade and bridged chimneys. (For more information, see the Summer 2001 issue of this magazine.) Neither of these examples has the Palladian window that is also common to the style, but that would make things too simple, wouldn’t it?

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