The architectural style known as "Federal" or "Adamesque" was used by architects and builders in this country from about 1788 to the 1830s. It is a complicated style to identify for several reasons. First, because it is derived from the same Classicism as the Georgian style, the differences between the Federal and Georgian are subtle. Second, very little architecture of the Federal period has survived, and most of what remains does not have the architectural integrity to illustrate the style. It is probably safe to say that most of the buildings of any style built before 1830 in the entire United States have been demolished either by natural catastrophe, neglect, or development pressures.

The best remaining example of the Federal style is in Philadelphia, at a house called "Woodlands." As you can see from the photograph of the south elevation, it is similar to a Georgian house on the exterior with a pedimented portico and symmetrical window placement. However, the interior plan of the 1780s has oval rooms, square rooms, oblong rooms with niches, and a curving stairway. A plan of this type was first designed and popularized by a famous Scottish architect of the era, Robert Adam (1728-1792). He began designing buildings in the 1750s in England and Scotland, influenced in large part by his archaeological explorations at the palace ruins of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in Spalato (now called Split) in Croatia. Here he discovered that the Roman ruins, previously considered sacrosanct, represented only a sliver of the existing types of Roman ruins. He showed that Roman architects were often quite free with their interpretations. Adams was thus inspired to focus on a different...
portion of the Classical canon and to interpret it in his own distinctive way. As we’ll see again later with Henry Hobson Richardson’s works at the end of the 19th century, works like Adam’s and Richardson’s are of such originality and confidence that they attract constant imitation. In Europe, the style popularized by Robert Adam and his brothers came to be called “Adamesque.” The style itself is characterized by oval rooms on the interior, delicate fanlights over the entry doors, and subtle ornament on both the interior and exterior. In the United States, the style achieved widespread popularity soon after the American Revolution, giving it the name of the Federal style.

In Western Pennsylvania, we find very little that can safely be labeled Federal architecture. The best remnants appear to be in Washington County. A fabulous stairway in the Baird-Acheson House (also called the Round Corner) snakes up four stories in an ellipsis of such beauty that it would have been proudly preserved in Boston or Providence. Unfortunately, the stairs have been ignored and the building surrounding them has been disfigured. Only the doorway and stairway remain intact. The Roberts House in Canonsburg is characterized by the doorway fanlight and delicate entablature for which the style is known. Although graceful fanlights remain above many doorways in older homes, very few Adamesque interiors have been preserved. The Dorsey House in Centerville Township had one of the most complete Adamesque interiors in the region until it burned down in 1993.

In short, the Federal style can be considered to be the last hurrah of Classicism. After 1830, the dominance of Classicism broke into a multitude of 19th century styles chosen for various purposes: Gothic Churches, Greek Revival banks, Tudor revival country houses. The 19th century is replete with a bewildering variety of stylistic choices for architects and their patrons that we will explore in future columns.

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.