Painted Ladies

Many of us have photographed the lovely “Painted Ladies” of San Francisco while on vacation, when less than an hour south of Pittsburgh we have an amazing collection of colorful Queen Anne houses. Those pictured here border the campus of Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pa., and include two former residences now owned by the college.

The first is the Duncan house, since 1943 W&J’s presidential residence at 238 East Wheeling Street. This large Queen Anne house was built in 1892 by James E. Duncan, a second-generation glassmaker whose family had been producing goblets, tumblers, pitchers, decanters, and lamps since 1874. After a fire at their Pittsburgh factory, they moved operations to Washington, Pa., and as president of the company James built one of the most beautiful houses in town. He asked the builders to press chunks of glass into the gable on the façade to put his stamp on the house and subtly advertise the family product.1

The second college-owned property is the Admission House, located at 130 East Wheeling Street and distinguished by its corner turret lit by an arcade of narrow, multi-paned windows. The usual assortment of window types characteristic of the Queen Anne style include a Palladian window on the third floor and an oval window on the second. The house, built for real estate magnate Andrew Happer in 1894, is grounded by a sandstone first story
and foundation with a graceful porte cochere on the west elevation.2

Most of these elaborate Queen Anne houses are found in the East Washington National Register Historic District, a residential section built between 1880 and 1900 by those who prospered in Washington County as sheep farmers and wool exporters, oil and gas drillers, or glassmakers. For instance, the house at 45 South Wade Avenue, built in 1896 for M.C. and Sarah Treat of Pittsburgh, was apparently used as their summer home. Oil producer Treat built this frame Queen Anne house, presently painted blue, with a corner turret, wrap-around front porch, and faceted bay windows on the first and second stories. Many of these houses, even those that appear most elaborate to us today, may have been built by local contractors using plans either copied from architectural journals or purchased from out of town architects. However, matching published plans with actual houses has proven very difficult.

The ebullient house painted turquoise with cream trim at the corner of East Beau Street and McKenna Avenue (500 East Beau Street) is partially hidden by foliage and street wires, but deserves pride of place for its assemblage of ornament from a fanlight to shingling. Mrs. E.A. McLeod’s name is attached to this house, which has a covered balcony on the second story and a three-story rounded bay on the south elevation (neither is visible in the photo). The home could be used to illustrate the Queen Anne style in an architectural stylebook.

The red clapboard house at 96 South Wade Avenue was built circa 1880 with a standing seam metal roof and horizontal cladding. The boards outlining each portion of the house are not structural, but meant to define each section and classify this house as Stick Style. The style was popular in the post-Civil War era; in fact, some see it as a bridge between the Gothic Revival and the Queen
Up Front

Anne styles. It is characterized by overhanging or jettied sections supported by heavy brackets as seen on the second story to the left of the porch, and the porch with simpler, straight-lined supports.

At 44, 48, and 149 South Wade Avenue there are other handsome and colorful Queen Anne houses and a more angular version of the style at 349 East Beau Street. All are worth including in any tour of Washington, Pennsylvania.

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1 Duncan’s son-in-law, Walter Hudson Baker (W&J class of 1898), donated the house in memory of his wife, Amy, who grew up there. The Duncan & Miller Glass Museum is at 525 Jefferson Avenue in Washington, Pa.

2 The Happer House served as the Piatt family’s funeral home from 1936 to 1984, when the college acquired it first as the alumni house. Unfortunately, the architects for these grand houses are still anonymous. Several local and national architects were active in the area during these years, but it has proved impossible to match their names to individual houses so far. The stone used on this house has been called Missouri and Cleveland sandstone in two different sources, but neither has been verified.
Black Gold

In 1859, Edwin Drake successfully drilled the first oil well north of Pittsburgh near Titusville, touching off the first oil rush. By the end of the Civil War, Pennsylvania’s petroleum industry produced four-and-a-half million barrels of oil a year. Drake’s innovations made commercialized drilling possible, made oil a viable commodity, and provided the grease that fueled a new industrial age. Initially stymied from drilling 1,000 feet into the bedrock by cave-ins, Drake decided to use a drive pipe or conductor, a 10-foot length of cast iron pipe driven into the rock, to protect the drilling tools. Though the method proved successful, Drake never patented this drilling method, which allowed other oil explorers to exploit the technology for their own riches. Cheap, abundant oil quickly changed the course of industry and provided investment capital for new ventures such as steel.