

# UP FRONT



By Lu Donnelly

## The Second Empire Style

As in fashion, certain architectural styles were only popular in certain eras. The Second Empire style was one of these, fashionable in the United States during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1877) and rarely found later than 1890.

The Second Empire name refers back to France under Napoleon III, whose reign (1848-1870) brought a renewed luster to Parisian fashions in clothing and architecture. Architects and those charged with building public spaces in the U.S. traditionally traveled to Paris to observe and understand what was then considered good design. What they found after 1857 was Ludovico Tullio Joachim Visconti and



Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Smithsonian American Art Museum



Former Negley House, Fifth at Amberson avenues, Pittsburgh. Lu Donnelly

Hector-Martin Lefuel's addition to the Louvre, the "New Louvre." Napoleon III's rebuilding of Paris acted as testimony to the power of his empire, but also brought attention to the older portions of the Louvre. The building itself contained offices, cultural facilities, and apartments. This multiplicity of uses inspired others to copy the style for buildings serving an array of functions.

The distinguishing feature of the Second Empire style is the mansard roof. The slightly sloped roofline allowed more of a building's attic to be nearly free of sharp angles and thus more usable. The roofline had become popular in 17th-century France when buildings were taxed by their number of stories. Francois Mansart developed it to allow a full story of usable space behind what was technically considered the "roof." Mansard roofs may be concave, convex (bell-shaped), or flat.



1400 Pennsylvania Avenue, Pittsburgh. Lu Donnelly

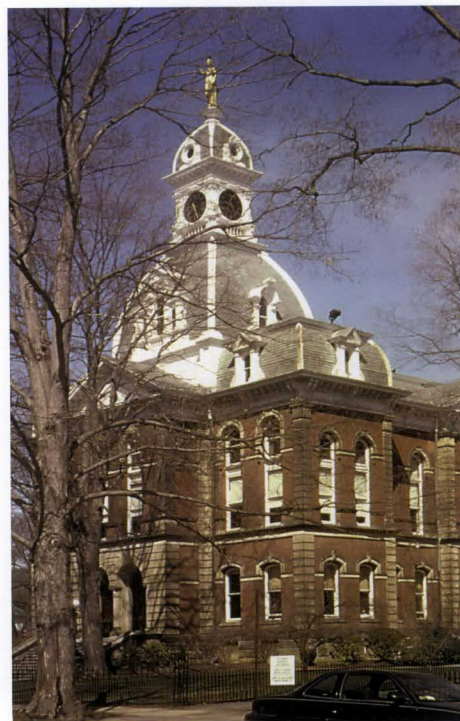
The U.S. could claim a handful of major buildings in the "French style" before the Civil War, especially James Renwick, Jr.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1859-1861 (now the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C. In Pennsylvania, the style was especially popular after Philadelphia's City Hall was completed in 1871. Designed by John McArthur, Jr., with Thomas Ustick Water, it has been called the "world's tallest



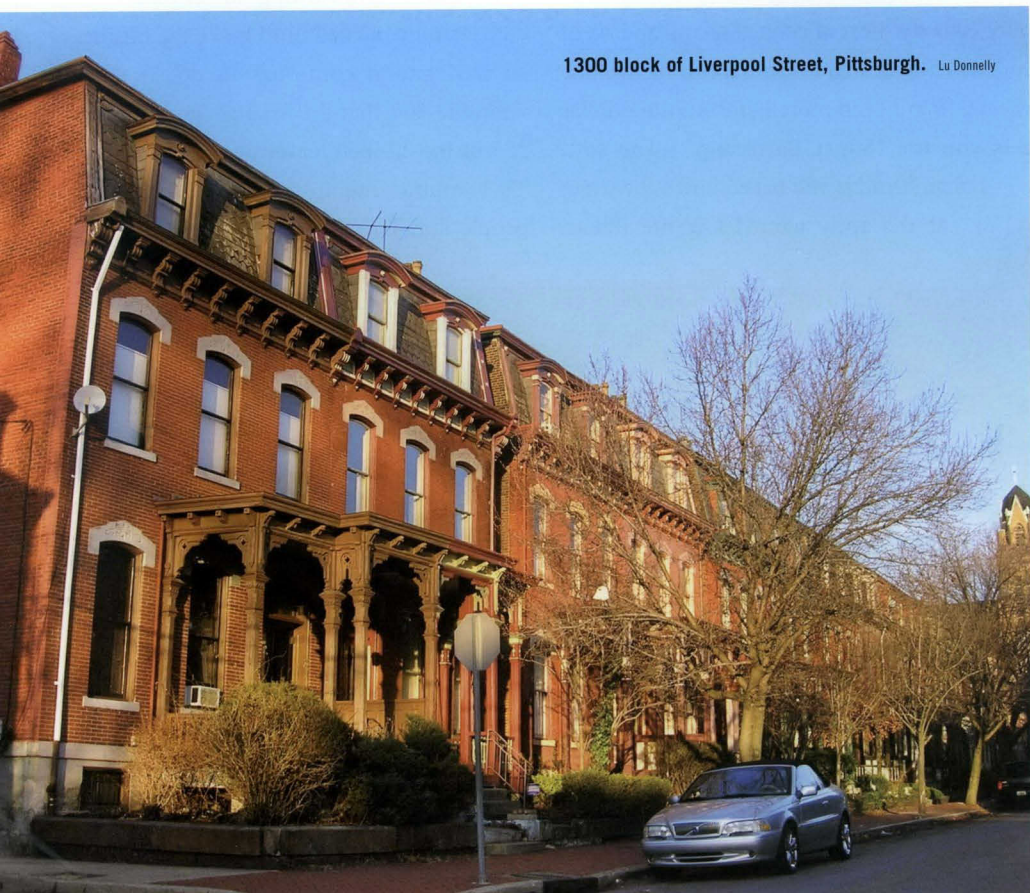
masonry structure without a steel frame” and was on view for the Centennial Exhibition in 1876. Pattern books of the period popularized the style across the Commonwealth and encouraged those with post-Civil War wealth to “modernize” their residences. One of the best examples of this is the former Negley house on Fifth Avenue at Amberson Avenue (opposite). While its style dates from the 1870s, the house suffered a fire in the mid-1980s and so its glamorous Second Empire-style roof was rebuilt in 1996. The French style suited many levels of dwellings in Pittsburgh as this handsome example at 1400 Pennsylvania Avenue (opposite) and the rowhouses around the corner in the 1300 block of Liverpool Street attest (below).

The style’s reach extended beyond the urban areas of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia to a half a dozen courthouses in Pennsylvania. Between 1869 and 1883, newly constructed courthouses in Indiana, Elk, Warren, Cambria, and Huntingdon counties embraced the Second Empire style, three of them designed by Milton E. Beebe (1840-1922) of Buffalo. One of these is the Warren County Courthouse in the city of Warren, begun in 1872 (right).

Today, buildings in the Second Empire-style are often seen as too expensive to maintain and are frequently demolished. The survivors are tangible reminders of the go-go era of the 1870s, a time when the horrors of the Civil War had faded, the country was looking forward to its centennial, and wealth



**Warren County Courthouse, Warren, Pennsylvania.**  
Lu Donnelly



**1300 block of Liverpool Street, Pittsburgh.** Lu Donnelly

was being accumulated at an astonishing rate. Unfortunately, the style peaked just as the country endured the Panic of 1873, one of the worst financial depressions in U.S. history, and a series of scandals in the Grant administration. Association of the Second Empire style with these twin traumas caused its popularity to wane almost as quickly as it had grown.

**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 and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at Carnegie Museum of Art, February through May 2006.