



VICTORIAN RENAISSANCE

by Susan Larkin

Metropolitan Pittsburgh is American's quintessential Victorian City. From its steelworker houses to its mansions, our City was built at the height of the Victoria era — when labor was cheaper than material — when the superb craftsmanship wrought by legions of skilled immigrant masons, plasterers, and carpenters flourished.

PITTSBURGH BOASTS SOME OF THE MOST ASTONISHING ARCHITECTURE that the Victorian era had to offer — from the magnificent old Allegheny Country Jail and its attached County Court House, designed by architect Henry H. Richardson — to the legions of row house neighborhoods that nestle in the flats and wander up the hillsides.

One of these areas is The Mexican War Streets. This neighborhood is a federal and city historic district Victorian-era rowhouse neighborhood located on Pittsburgh's North Side, in the heart of what used to be the City of Allegheny. The City of Allegheny flourished independently as a home to thriving industries such as iron, glass, rope, flour, oil, cotton, wool, brass, pottery and leather. The cotton industry attracted the family of young Andrew Carnegie in 1848. The department store Buhl and Boggs played an integral role in Allegheny's social and economic vitality. Ridge Avenue was home to so many wealthy industrial tycoons, it became known as Millionaires Row.

When the City of Allegheny (annexed by Pittsburgh in 1917) was first surveyed and planned as a county seat in 1784 and 1788 under orders from Benjamin Franklin, this area served as part of a Reserve Tract of 3,000 acres to be used as payment for Revolutionary War veterans. One of those veterans was a man named Robinson, whose descendant — “General” William Robinson — laid out the Mexican War Streets neighborhood in 1848, following the Mexican-American War. In a rush of patriotic fervor, Robinson named the streets after the

Mexican-American War battles Resaca, Monterey, Buena Vista, Palo Alto and the generals Sherman, Jackson and Taylor.

The area was originally used as “out-lots” to stable horses and keep pigs, chickens, and cows. Along with the deeds to the property went grazing rights in Allegheny Commons, now called West Park. Structures built in the alleys were the first homes in the neighborhood.

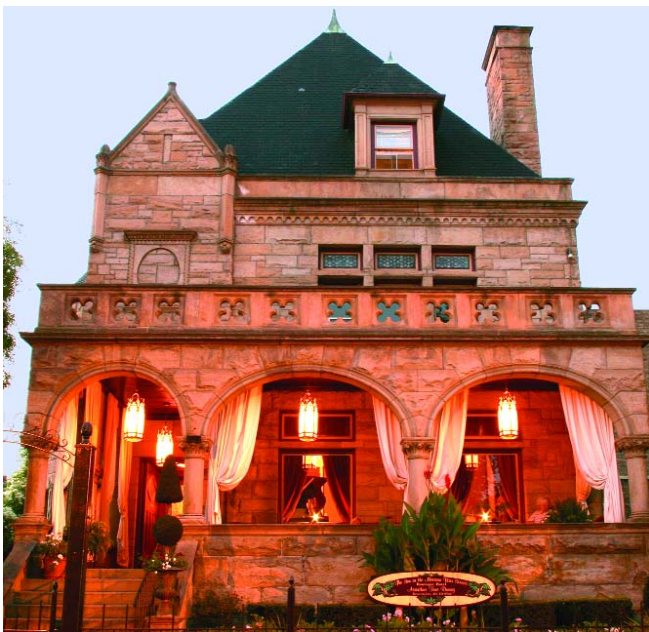
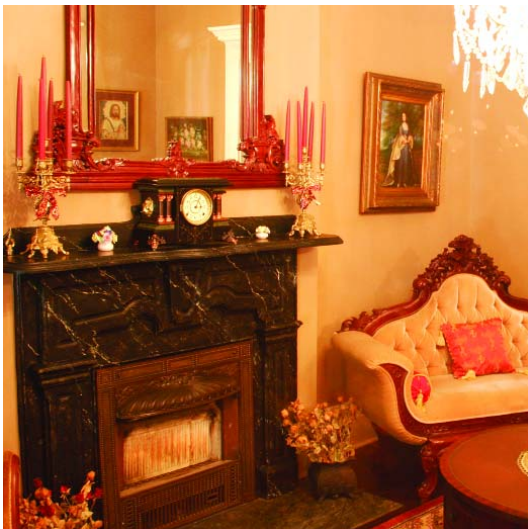
After the Civil War, a housing boom took place. Starting in the early 1870s, larger brick homes were built on the main streets and by 1890 virtually every lot had a house. Small homes on Taylor Avenue were built for the widows of Civil War soldiers; a slaughter yard occupied the far side of Buena Vista Street where a row of Richardson stone houses now stand. The main Allegheny Police Station still occupies the corner of Taylor and Buena Vista. A stunning firehouse remains on Arch Street.

A residential shift to the suburbs occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, and urban planners tore down old city centers to build new, suburban style shopping malls; clearing great swaths of occupied city homes to build new highways leading to homes in the suburbs.

The heart of the vanished City of Allegheny, its main shopping district and Market House were demolished in the 1960s to make way for Allegheny Center — a now defunct shopping mall — and a series of non-descript high rise apartment buildings. More than 5,200 stores, houses and churches were torn down to build Allegheny Center and Interstate 279 in a failed attempt to build a “new City on the North Shore.” >>

Opposite page: This highly decorative ceiling with its plaster crown molding caps the dramatic 14-foot walls of the front parlor in one of the grand homes facing West Park.

VICTORIAN RENAISSANCE



The Mexican War Streets neighborhood also suffered greatly during this time. By the 1970s, well over half of the houses in the Mexican War Streets stood empty. The entire neighborhood was slated for demolition to provide access roads to the new expressway.

A few stalwart homeowners refused to allow the wrecking ball to demolish a neighborhood they felt was full of charm and potential. Through the efforts of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, the city and national historic districts were created in the Mexican War Streets, and a renaissance began.

Nearly all of the architectural types popular in the Victorian-era are represented in the Mexican War Streets: Italian Renaissance with its linear lines, symmetrical façade and carved trim; Richardson Romanesque, characterized by the arches and massive stones of Romanesque European churches reinterpreted by architect H.H. Richardson; Queen Anne, with its mix of shingles and brick, and its use of turrets; Second Empire with its characteristic mansard roofs; Gothic Revival with its extravagant carvings and arched windows.

Interior spaces are every bit as detailed as the exteriors, as these houses reflect the ornamentation desired by middle-class patrons of the era. >>



PHOTOFRANK KOWNAKI

PHOTOFRANK KOWNAKI

PHOTOFRANK KOWNAKI

Top: The parlors, diningrooms, and bedrooms, found in the War Streets are quite generous in size. Middle: The Boggs Mansion, now the Inn on the Mexican War Streets, is a true example of Richardson Romanesque architecture and is one of only two surviving residences designed by the renowned Pittsburgh firm Longfellow, Alden & Harlow. Above left to right: Formerly Engine Company Number Three, this historically significant structure was designed by Bailey and Anglin, built in 1877, and is an example of High Victorian Italianate architecture, characterized by wide projecting eaves with decorative brackets and arched windows. It is now an artists' studio; This West Park facing house reflects the Victorian passion for extra ornamentation. The window hoods are cast iron later additions to dress the facade; This circa 1906 house has elements of every popular architectural style and ornamentation of the time. For eight decades it was the Wickersham Music Studio, built for Miss Wickersham, daughter of a J&L Steel magnate; One of dozens of grocery stores in the neighborhood, Searights & Sons is a unique residential space; One of the first brick houses built in the War Streets, it dates circa 1866.

VICTORIAN RENAISSANCE



Left to right: One of the few true Gothic Revivals defined by its pointed arches of the window hoods and the gothic embellishments of the turret; This Second Empire has the distinctive mansard roof and arched dormer; Typical of the War Streets, a structure often had a mix of styles i.e. Richardson first floor, Italianate on the second floor, and Second Empire on the third; This restored Richardsonian Romanesque brackets the Richardson row on Buena Vista and was the parsonage to what was once the Westminster Presbyterian Church across the street; Another member of the Richardson row is undergoing a total renovation; An example of the earlier vernacular wood frame houses undergoes a gut-job and facelift.



Above left and right: Generous rooms sizes allow restorers to create 21st Century baths and kitchens from the 19th Century spaces.
Far left: This pair of stunning Eastlake walnut doors spent decades covered in paint; Another spacious parlor and a second floor library.

Decorative fireplaces, once necessary to heat the home, made of ornate painted slate or highly carved marble characterize most rooms. Ceilings are 10 or more feet high, and are often graced with elaborate plaster crown moldings and medallions. Windows are large to let in as much natural light as possible. Interior doors are ornately paneled and topped with transoms. Rooms are gracious in size; parlors and dining rooms each measure 18 by 15 feet; and master bedrooms 15 by 20 feet are common. What most houses originally lacked were bathrooms, having been built when outhouses were the order of the day. The abundance of bedrooms in these old homes, a minimum of four and often six, allows restorers to create a sumptuous bathroom where an old bedroom used to be.

Today, the old rowhouses of the Mexican War Streets are still being

lovingly restored to their original glory by homeowners who appreciate what historic city living has to offer. According to Karl Owens of Howard Hanna Real Estate, the Mexican War Streets have become a very desirable address. People are relocating from suburbia, as well as out of state, realizing that the neighborhood is a sound investment both economically and socially. Its proximity to downtown Pittsburgh and nearby cultural amenities — such as the Andy Warhol Museum, the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Science Center, the National Aviary, the Mattress Factory and Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild — makes the neighborhood a destination of choice for those seeking accessibility and architectural distinction.