

Gothic Revival

1840–1880



Identifying Features

Steeply pitched roof, usually with steep cross gables (roof normally side-gabled, less commonly front-gabled or hipped; rarely flat with castellated parapet); gables commonly have decorated vergeboards; wall surface extending into gable without break (eave or trim normally lacking beneath gable); windows commonly extend into gables, frequently having pointed-arch (Gothic) shape; one-story porch (either entry or full-width) usually present, commonly supported by flattened Gothic arches.

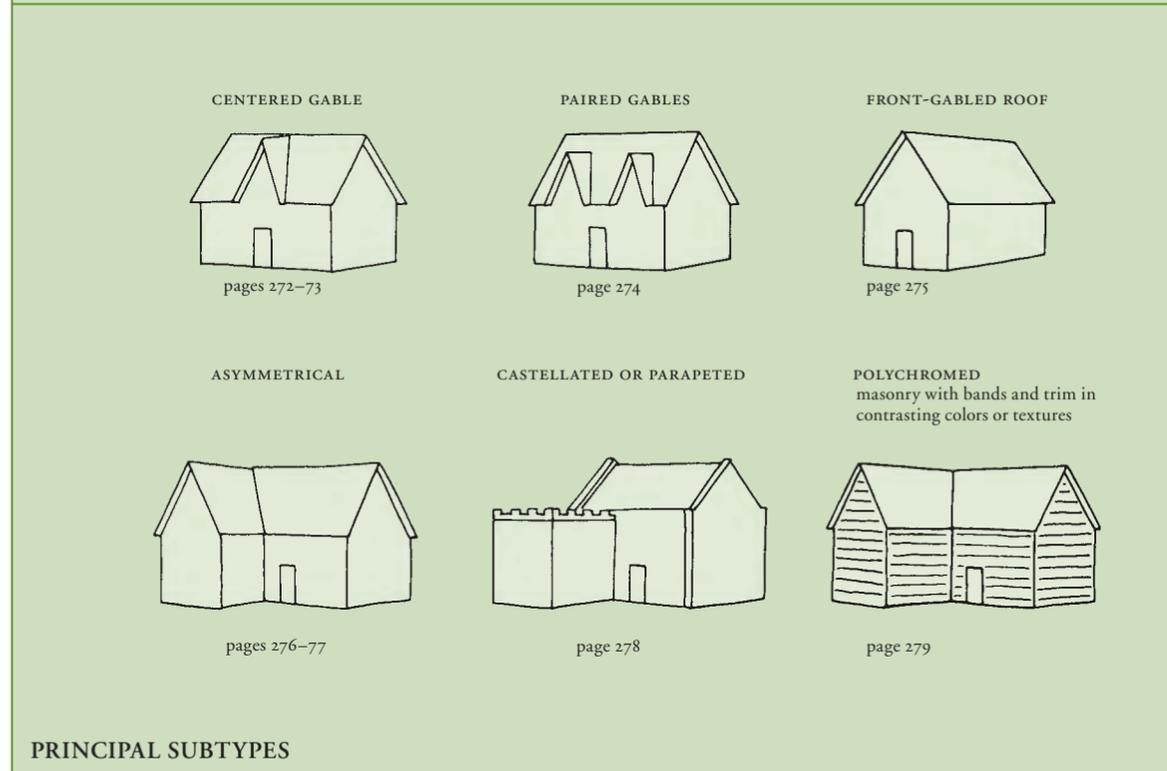
Principal Subtypes

Six principal subtypes can be distinguished on the basis of roof form, ground plan, or detailing:

CENTERED GABLE—These are symmetrical houses with side-gabled or hipped roofs having a prominent central cross gable. The plane of the cross gable may be either the same as the front wall or projected forward to make a small central wing. Smaller cross gables, or gable dormers, sometimes occur on either side of the dominant central gable. In some examples these are enlarged to give three identical cross gables. This subtype makes up over one-third of Gothic Revival houses.

PAIRED GABLES—Similar to the preceding subtype but with two, rather than one or three, cross gables. The two gables are sometimes extended forward into projecting wings. About 5 percent of Gothic Revival houses are of this type.

FRONT-GABLED ROOF—About 10 percent of Gothic Revival houses are simple gabled rectangles rotated so that the narrower gable end makes up the front facade. Some have additional cross gables added to the roof slope over the *side* walls, but many lack such cross gables.



PRINCIPAL SUBTYPES

ASYMMETRICAL—About one-third of Gothic Revival houses are of compound asymmetrical plan. L-shaped plans with cross-gabled roofs are the most common form, but there are many less regular variations. Small secondary cross gables, or gable dormers, were commonly added to one or more wings. After 1860, square towers were occasionally used.

CASTELLATED OR PARAPETED—The four preceding subtypes all have normal roof-wall junctions in which the eaves project outward beyond the wall. A fifth subtype, more closely based on English Medieval models, has either flat roofs with scalloped (castellated) parapets, or gabled roofs ending in high parapeted walls rather than overhanging eaves. Frequently both of these roof types occur on different parts of a single house. About 5 percent of Gothic Revival houses are of this type. These features are far more common on Gothic Revival churches and public buildings; most surviving houses are high-style landmarks, typically constructed of masonry.

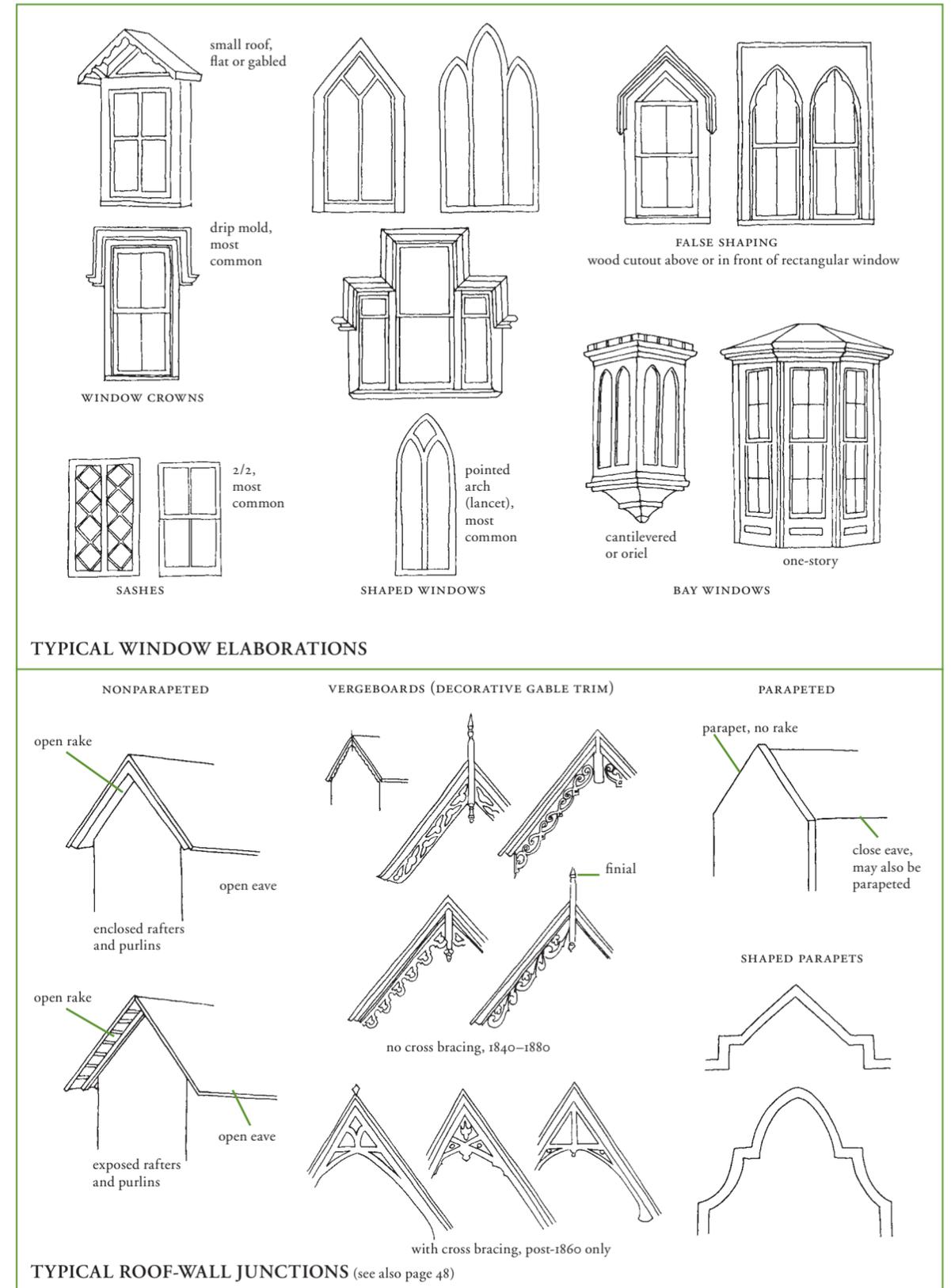
POLYCHROMED—A final 5 percent of surviving Gothic Revival houses show distinctive linear patterns in masonry wall surfaces. These decorative polychrome patterns are produced by bands of contrasting color or texture in the brick or stonework, and occur principally around windows and as horizontal bands on wall surfaces. This feature is particularly characteristic of the last phase of the Gothic Revival, from about 1865 to 1880. It is sometimes treated as a separate style called High Victorian Gothic. Like the castellated or parapeted form, it is most common on churches and public buildings. The complex masonry construction was suitable only for high-style, landmark houses. These were once far more common in the prosperous industrial cities of the northeastern and midwestern states, but most have been destroyed.

Variants and Details

Fanciful decorative ornamentation, cut from wood by the newly perfected scroll saw, is a dominant feature in most Gothic Revival houses. Windows, roof-wall junctions, porches, and doors were the principal sites for such decorations.

WINDOWS—Most Gothic Revival houses have at least one window with Gothic detailing. When only a single window is elaborated in this manner, it usually occurs in the most prominent gable. Such windows might have a pointed-arch shape or might consist of two or three such arches clustered together, or might even be designed as small projecting bay windows (oriel). Full-scale bay windows are also common on the first-floor level. In less elaborate houses, cut-out patterns were frequently used on or above rectangular windows to give a pointed-arch effect. A characteristic window crown called a drip-mold is found above many Gothic windows, both arched and square. Originally designed to protect windows from water running down the face of the building, this molding covers the top of the window and continues downward along the side before turning outward so that water will be deflected away from the window frame.

ROOF-WALL JUNCTIONS—Decorative vergeboards, making an inverted V beneath the eaves of the steep gables, are a distinctive feature of most wooden Gothic houses and came in almost as many designs as there were Gothic carpenter-builders. After about



1865 this feature became less popular and was generally replaced by decorative trusses at the apex of the gables. Gothic cornice detailing showed fundamental changes from the preceding classical styles (Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, etc.). The latter usually have boxed cornices with the rafters enclosed, while most Gothic Revival houses have open cornices with the rafters either exposed or sheathed parallel to the overlying roof.

PORCHES—One-story porches are found on about 80 percent of Gothic Revival houses.

DOORS—Doors commonly show pointed arches or other Gothic motifs as well as decorative crowns similar to those found on windows. Elaborate paneled doors are common but simple batten doors, mimicking modest Medieval prototypes, also occur.

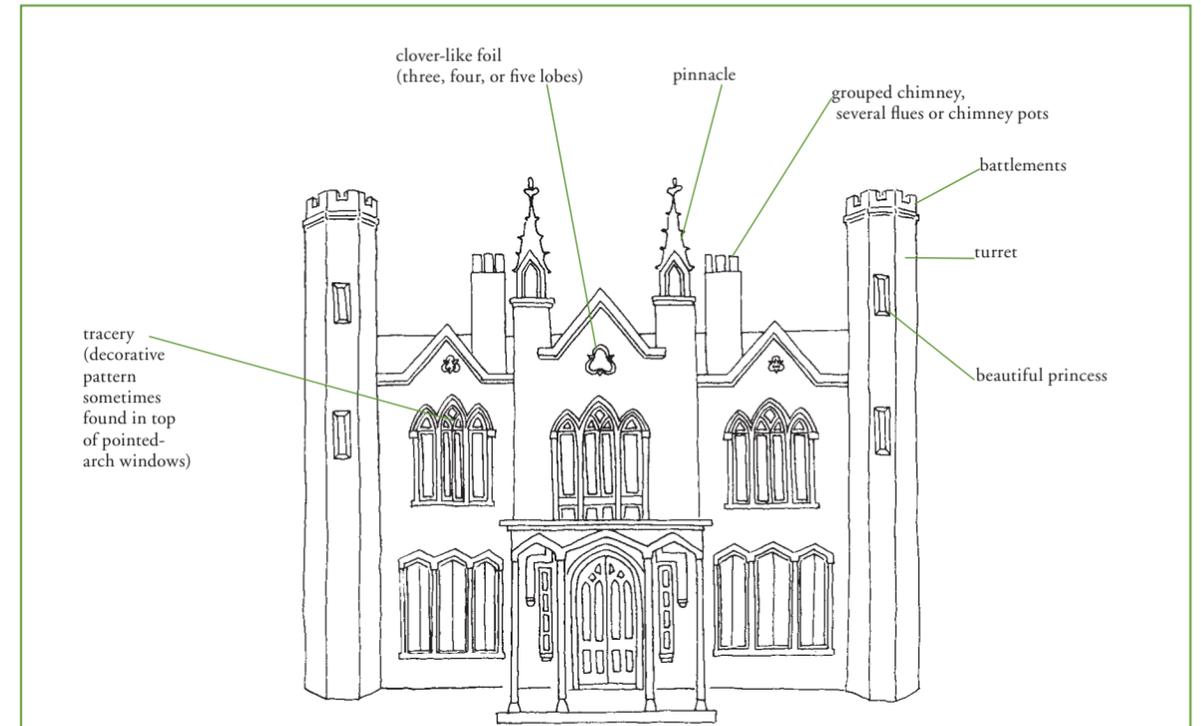
WALL CLADDING AND DECORATIVE DETAILING—Gothic Revival houses are of both wooden and masonry construction but wood-frame Carpenter Gothic examples predominate. These were usually covered with horizontal cladding, but vertical board-and-batten siding was also common. The latter material was widely advocated by contemporary pattern books for its verticality, which was considered suitably Gothic.

Occurrence

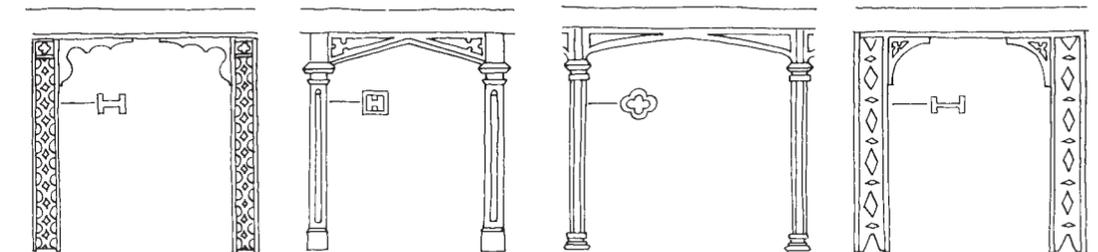
Most Gothic Revival houses were constructed between 1840 and 1870; examples from the 1870s are less frequent. The style was never as popular as were houses in the competing Greek Revival or Italianate styles, yet scattered examples can still be found in most areas of the country settled before 1880. Surviving Gothic Revival houses are most abundant in the northeastern states, where fashionable architects originally popularized the style. They are less common in the South, particularly in the New South states along the Gulf Coast. In this region Greek Revival houses dominated the expansions of the 1840s and 1850s, while the Civil War and Reconstruction all but halted building until the waning days of Gothic influence.

Comments

The Gothic Revival began in England in 1749 when Sir Horace Walpole, a wealthy dilettante, began remodeling his country house in the Medieval style, complete with battlements and multiple pointed-arch windows. Over the next century, others followed his lead and such Picturesque country houses became common in England. Although a handful of earlier houses with Gothic detailing were built, the first documented, fully developed domestic example in America (Glen Ellen in Baltimore, Maryland) was designed by Alexander Jackson Davis in 1832. Davis was the first American architect to champion Gothic domestic buildings; his 1837 book, *Rural Residences*, was dominated by Gothic examples. This was also the first house plan book published in this country. Previous publications had shown details, parts, pieces, and occasional elevations of houses, but Davis's was the first to show three-dimensional views complete with floor plans. Davis's book had only a small circulation but his ideas were picked up by his friend Andrew Jackson Downing, who expanded them in pattern books published in 1842 (*Cottage Residences*) and 1850 (*The Architecture of Country Houses*). Downing's writ-

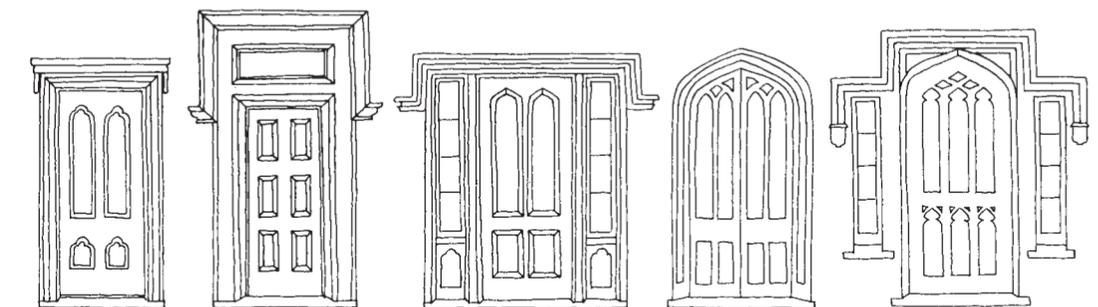


HIGH-STYLE ELABORATIONS



TYPICAL PORCH DETAILS

Space between porch supports most commonly has a flattened arch or side brackets that mimic such an arch



TYPICAL DOORS

CENTERED GABLE

1. Santa Clara, California; 1875. Landrum House. A small wood-clad example; the triangular pediments over the first-story windows are out of character.
2. Denison, Texas; ca. 1883. Eisenhower Birthplace. A small and simplified example. The centered gable has a matching gable on each side.
3. Jackson, Mississippi; 1857. Manship House. Note how the centered gable is extended forward from the main plane of the front facade to form a covered entrance.
4. Brownwood, Texas; ca. 1875. Adams House. This sandstone example has windows with flattened Tudor arches and drip-molds. The porch may have been modified.
5. Woodstock, Connecticut; 1846. Roseland. A landmark example with board-and-batten wood cladding, elaborate porch supports, oriel windows, and two facades elaborated with gables or gable dormers.
6. Salem, Massachusetts; 1851. Brooks House. An elaborately detailed house with foil windows, diamond-shape window panes, drip-molds, and castellations above the porch.
7. Wernersville, Pennsylvania; mid-19th century. A combination of the Gothic Revival form with Italianate cornice brackets and arched windows.
8. Rushford, Minnesota; ca. 1875. Note the decorative trusses at the apex of the gable and gable dormers (see also Figure 1); these are common on post-1865 examples.



PAIRED GABLES

1. Ashe County, North Carolina; ca. 1880. McGuire House. This very simple example has wood cladding that dramatically follows the lines of the paired gables. The porch shows later modifications.
2. Demopolis, Alabama; 1858. Ashe House. Both this house and Figure 3 have very delicate lace-like porches and vergeboard details.
3. Columbus, Mississippi; 1880. Episcopal Rectory.
4. Brunswick, Maine; 1849. Boody House; Gervase Wheeler, architect. This house has some applied stickwork (not visible in the photo) and is transitional from the Gothic Revival to the Stick style. A very similar design by Wheeler was published in Downing's 1850 book, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, figure 130.²



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FRONT-GABLED ROOF

1. Georgetown, Colorado; mid-19th century. A very modest example complete with pointed arch window and drip-molds on all front windows and door.
2. Cleveland, Ohio; mid-19th century.
3. New Orleans, Louisiana; ca. 1869. Rountree House. An unusual example with a two-tiered porch and the full-length windows often found in Gulf Coast houses. The Tudor arches between the lower-story porch supports are carefully detailed.
4. Cuba, New York; mid-19th century. Note the wraparound porch and matching side gable. The elaborate window crown shape featured on the gable windows was rarely used prior to ca. 1860.



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ASYMMETRICAL

1. Hartford, Connecticut; mid-19th century. Although the Gothic decorated gable clearly dominates, a hodgepodge of secondary influences is evident—Italianate brackets, Second Empire tower, Queen Anne porch supports, and pedimented windows.
2. Southport, Connecticut; mid-19th century. Bulkley House. Although similar to Figure 1, the details here are mostly of Gothic inspiration.
3. Selma, Alabama; mid-19th century. A carefully detailed board-and-batten example.
4. Brown's Valley, Minnesota, vicinity; ca. 1885. Similar in form to Figure 3, the ornate trussed gables identify it as a later example.
5. Iowa City, Iowa; 1877. Jackson House.
6. Rochester, New York; 1878. This house shows clearly the transition from the Gothic to the Stick style. Note the Gothic windows and door shapes with stickwork in the main gable and as supports under the upstairs bay windows. Also note the wide roof overhang with open eaves, visible on the right.
7. Newport, Rhode Island; 1841. Kingscote; Richard Upjohn, architect (rear addition by Stanford White). A handsomely detailed house with entrance canopy, castellations over the bay window, drip-molds, and diamond-pane windows.
8. New Castle, Delaware; 1852. Lesley Home; Thomas and James Dixon, architects.



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CASTELLATED OR PARAPETED

1. Aberdeen, Mississippi; ca. 1884. The Castle. A relatively modest wood-clad example, unusual for this subtype.
2. Fayette County, Kentucky; 1852. Ingelside; John McMurtry, architect.
3. Brookneal, Virginia, vicinity; 1848. Staunton Hill; John E. Johnson, designer. Note the symmetrical facade with its almost classical feeling.
4. Tarrytown, New York; 1838, major addition 1865. Lyndhurst; Alexander Jackson Davis, architect for both. This marble example is the finest Gothic Revival house surviving in this country—the result of a major 1865 addition to an earlier 1838 structure. Note the multiple parapets, castellations, pinnacles, foil windows, grouped chimneys, window tracery, and castellated tower. The interiors are equally elaborate.



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POLYCHROMED

1. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 1894. Moore House; Wilson Eyre, architect. A late example with strong early Eclectic influences.
2. Detroit, Michigan; 1876. Gillis House; Brush and Mason, architects. Note the banded surround above the pointed arch window to the right. This was a favorite polychrome motif (see also Figure 5).
3. Cleveland, Ohio; ca. 1878. Winslow House. This example combines the towered Second Empire form with elaborate polychromed Gothic detailing.
4. Brooklyn, New York; 1848. The Gothic influence is seen in the door surround and drip-mold over the windows of these town houses. This example is not polychromed and is included to show a rare early Gothic town house. A roof addition and cornice modifications are evident in the house to the right.
5. New York, New York; 1874. Governor Tilden House; Calvert Vaux, architect. This town house example has elaborate polychromed detailing.



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ings were far more successful, because the author promoted them with tireless public speaking and personal energy. Downing thus became the popularizer of the style.

This style was seldom applied to urban houses for two reasons. First, the writings of Davis and Downing stressed its suitability as a *rural* style, compatible with the natural landscape; it was not promoted as appropriate for urban dwellings. Secondly, its emphasis on high, multiple gables and wide porches did not physically lend itself to narrow urban lots. A few urban examples with Gothic door, window, or cornice detailing survive (Figures 4, 5, page 279), but most urban houses of the era are in the contemporaneous Greek Revival or Italianate styles.

Gothic Revival was in declining favor for American domestic buildings after 1865, although a small rebirth of interest during the 1870s was stimulated by the writings of the English critic John Ruskin, who emphasized continental rather than English examples as models. This High Victorian Gothic phase was principally applied to public and religious buildings, although a few surviving landmark houses reflect its influence (see the paragraph on the polychromed subtype, page 268).