Greek Revival design style made its mark in Ravenna

19th Century architectural heritage remains evident throughout community

CLASSICAL ATHENS IS NOT THE FIRST thing that comes to mind when thinking about Ravenna, Ohio, but the city actually has an important legacy from that ancient metropolis. In Ravenna and the surrounding countryside, the great many 19th Century buildings in the first great American national architectural style, the Greek Revival.

Consider the Seymour-Jennings house, currently housing Emma Marie’s restaurant on North Chestnut Street. Because of its location uptown across from the Ravenna Post Office and its use as a restaurant, this is the most conspicuous building in the Greek Revival style in Ravenna today. While most people looking at this house would agree that it has a dignity and grandeur on the street because of its proportions, its large windows and its columned porch, not many think about how unlikely it was that an ancient Greek temple would have served as the model for a frame house in a small city in Ohio. And, few people currently living in Ravenna have any idea how many other, mostly less grand, Greek Revival buildings still stand throughout the city.

In the decades before the settlement of northeastern Ohio, most of the architecture of the eastern seaboard had followed European fashions in architecture, particularly the Georgians or Federal styles, which flourished during the reigns of England’s King George I through King George IV from 1720 to 1820. Most of what we know as American “Colonial architecture” was built in these styles.

However, by the 1830s, the first period of growth in northeastern Ohio, European architects had started to ransack the history of architecture for new modes of expression that went back more directly to the fountainhead of classical architecture, which was ancient Greece. The result was the simpler, more severe, more dominant across much of the Western world in the 1830s-1850s. Unfortunately, over the course of the last 150 years, many of Ravenna’s grandest Greek Revival buildings have been victims of fire or demolished, often for decidedly undistinguished replacements. Even so, the Ravenna area still boasts a surprisingly large number of Greek Revival structures ranging in size from tiny city houses to substantial farmhouses in the countryside around the town. Many of these were built on small budgets that didn’t allow the embellishments of the more opulent buildings. In some cases all that remained were the general proportions and the severe rectangularity of the features. However, even the smallest of these buildings can have a solidity and presence that allows them to stand proudly on the street.

As a young man, the Garrettsville native began collecting and his judgments sound authoritative and mounted in his herbarium. For several years until the rest of his life.

By 1924, Webb had approached 2,000 sheets. Although his health had been recently restored by architect Rick Hawksley. The house immediately across the street remains from that collection of monumental Greek Revival houses, though it was later altered with the present front porch. This building has recently been carefully restored by architect Rick Hawkseye.

This residence, located on North Walnut Street at Cedar Avenue, near Reed Memorial Library, retains Greek Revival lines.

Garrettsville School. Its successor is the Garrettsville High School. The School shares the legacy of naturalist Roscoe Webb.

Born May 19, 1875, in Garrettsville, Roscoe was 20 years old, and continued his education at Hiram College briefly but was forced to leave. Later houses along North Chestnut Street, which was perhaps the grandest street in early Ravenna and was known as “Millionaires Row.”

The commercial structure at West Main and Meridian streets that houses the Commoner Lounge retains its original Greek Revival lines.

Ravenna’s proud Greek Revival heritage. The Seymour-Jennings house on North Chestnut Street, now a restaurant, was part of a series of Greek Revival and later residences once known as “Millionaires Row.”

The house across from the Seymour-Jennings house is the Portage County’s first courthouse, built in 1830 by Zenas Kent. It included a two-story colonnade supporting a classical Greek pediment.

Nowhere did this style have a greater popularity than in the United States, and Ohio in particular. A young republic the associations with ancient Athens were potent. New American cities sprouted up with names such as Athens, Troy and Delphi. In contrast to the opulence of the Roman Empire, the Greek city-states were associated with self-sufficiency, sobriety, intellectual and artistic achievement, and most importantly, democracy. Of course, there was a problem. Almost all of the existing Greek buildings were large stone temples. Very quickly, however, 19th Century architects produced “pattern books” in which they took these patterns and translated them into much simpler designs that could be adapted and built by local carpenters and masons in brick and wood. These buildings can be seen from one end of the country to the other, in great public structures such as the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus and small commercial buildings, and from the magnificent antebellum mansions of the South to the most modest houses seen in the boom towns of the American West.

This residence, located on North Walnut Street at Cedar Avenue, near Reed Memorial Library, retains Greek Revival lines.

The house across from the Seymour-Jennings house is the Portage County’s first courthouse, built in 1830 by Zenas Kent. It included a two-story colonnade supporting a classical Greek pediment. The builder was obviously looking at architectural pattern books to give the courthouse a sophisticated, monumental appearance appropriate to an important public building. But it is clear that he was either not able, or not willing, to be bound by classical rules of design, because many of the details here are far from orthodox. Rather than spoliating the effect, however, they give the building a kind of frontier creativity and charm.

Because it was a house and not a public building, the Seymour-Jennings house is simpler and less monumental. Constructed of wood, it has a lunette (semi-circular) window in the gable pediment and a one-story Ionic colonnade that serves as a front porch. This house once sat in a splendid row of Greek Revival and later houses along North Chestnut Street, which was perhaps the grandest street in early Ravenna and was known as “Millionaires Row.”

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