

Greek Revival design style made its mark in Ravenna

19th Century architectural heritage remains evident throughout community

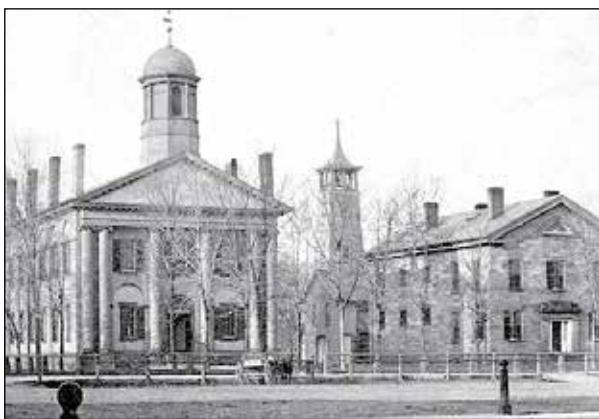
By JACK SCHAFER AND ROBERT BRUEGMANN

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 stand a 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 northeast Ohio, most of the architecture of the eastern seaboard had followed European fashions in architecture, particularly the Georgian 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 Greek Revival style that was dominant across much of the Western world in the 1830s-1850s.



Portage County's first courthouse, built in 1830 by Zenas Kent, included a two-story colonnade supporting a classic Greek pediment.

Nowhere did this style have a greater popularity than in the United States, and Ohio in particular. For 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



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



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

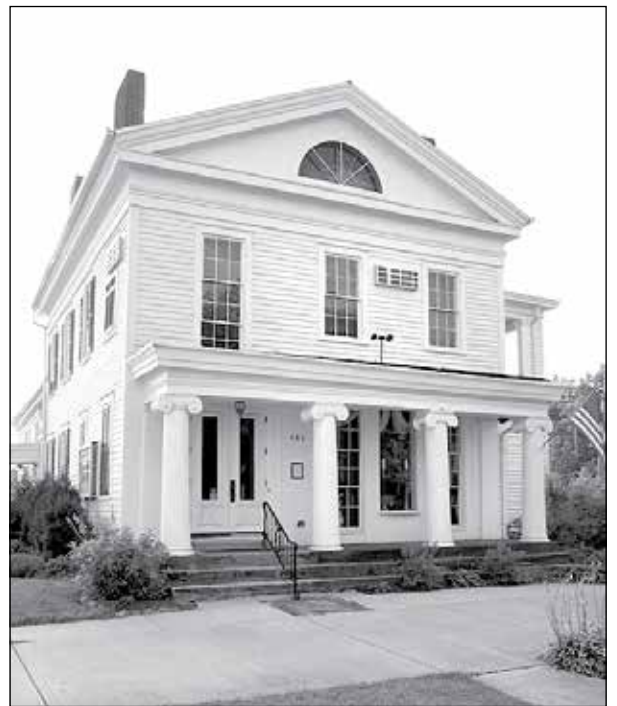
elaborate stone temples and translated them into much simpler designs that could be adapted and built by local carpenters and masons in brick and wood. These buildings can be seen from one end of the country to the other, in great public structures such as the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus and small commercial buildings, and from the magnificent antebellum mansions of the South to very modest houses seen in the boom towns of the American West.

Portage County's first courthouse was a fine example of this phenomenon. Built in 1830 by Zenas Kent, it was a two-story building with a two-story colonnade across the front 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 spoiling 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."

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 Hawksley.

Unfortunately, over the course of the last 150 years



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."

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 city. 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.

Also unfortunate is the fact that much of the city's Greek Revival heritage has been all but invisible because so many buildings have been remodeled or otherwise altered. Many similar houses in Hudson or historic Aurora have been beautifully restored and landscaped and have plaques on their fronts so that everyone is aware of their historic value. Despite the efforts of the Ravenna Heritage Association, which did a survey of historic buildings in Ravenna in the 1980s, few Ravennans realize that the city has a similar architectural legacy. Fortunately, a lot of the changes to the buildings have been cosmetic. With luck, a growing recognition of Ravenna's remarkable architectural legacy will prompt owners to peel away some of the inappropriate remodeling, apply a new coat of paint and improve the landscaping so that the world will be able to see once again Ravenna's proud Greek Revival heritage.

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