ADVENTURES

IN WESTERN NEW YORK HISTORY

Buffalo Homes

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An 1810 pioneer kitchen

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BUFFALO HOMES

by Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.

The history of Buffalo houses is largely that of the changing tastes of successive generations. What is popular to one generation becomes old-fashioned and out-of-date to the next, and an old house often may be converted from a single-family dwelling, to a rooming house, and then to a place of business, which may ultimately be torn down. Eventually, if a house manages to stand long enough, its style may again be popular.

The village of Buffalo that was burned in 1813 was a frontier town of wooden buildings which were put up with limited resources to meet the immediate and basic needs of the inhabitants. Until 1825 and the completion of the Erie Canal the Village struggled along maintaining a meager existence. Then more people and prosperity began to arrive as Buffalo became a gateway to the West. This growth resulted in the change from village to city in 1832.

Scarcely any examples remain of the typical house that was built in the 1830's and 1840's. The building lots were usually no wider than 25 feet, and the houses erected on these filled the entire width of the lot. We used to call these houses "row houses"; today we call them "town houses." These houses, usually brick, were built close to the sidewalks and two or three stories high. Smaller houses had the first floor six feet above ground, a plan which meant that the basement floor was only about two feet down. These narrow houses were only wide enough for a door and two windows at the first floor, and three windows on the second and third floors. Since the house filled the full width of the lot, these houses had common sidewalks. Therefore, there were no windows on the sides unless the house stood on a corner lot. The front door, which was set toward one side, opened into a hallway running back and housing a stairway providing access to the various floors. A parlor, or living room, occupied the remaining front half of the first floor. On the street side the two windows featured double-hung (vertical sliding) sash divided into six panes of glass usually 10″ wide and 15″ or 16″ high, the largest size of glass that was readily available. On the wall opposite the front was a wide opening that led to the dining room, which was about the same size and had two windows looking out into the rear yard. A small room occupied the remainder of the width. In some cases it served as a serving pantry for the dining room; in other instances it served as a bedroom.

Left: Row houses on Swan and Michigan Streets c. 1855. Right: Many free-standing houses had wooden or cast iron balustrades at the edge of the roof. The first floor is a half-story above the grade.

Bedrooms occupied the second and third floors, the largest being directly above the parlor-living room. Bathrooms were as yet non-existent. Chamber pots and wash stands holding a basin and a large pitcher formed part of the furnishings of each bedroom. On bath days a portable tin tub would have been set in the kitchen, since this was the warmest room in winter or, less frequently, in the bedrooms. Hot water was heated at the kitchen fireplace for filling the tub. The kitchen was located in the basement, and cooking was done in a large fireplace and adjacent brick bake oven. Food shopping was a daily event for the housewife, for refrigerators and freezers were in the distant future.

Fireplaces and/or small stoves in the principal rooms heated the house. Coal or small pieces of wood were burned in the fireplaces, each of which was fitted out with a metal grate (a basket-like affair). The shallower the depth of the fireplace the more heat was provided for the room. Small decorated stoves were more popular, for they gave off heat from all sides, and since the fire was completely enclosed, smoke was not the annoyance that it was apt to be from an open fire in the shallow fireplace. A stove pipe connected to a chimney flue carried any smoke out of the house and also radiated more heat into the room in the shallow fireplace. In the more modest homes this stove pipe would run up from the stove almost to the

ceiling, then level off and run across the room, through one or more adjacent rooms, dispersing heat along its route before ending at a hole in the wall to enter the chimney flue. Candles and oil burning lamps were used for lighting. The parlor usually had a hanging oil lamp or chandelier suspended over a center table which served as the center of family activities after dark. Women did all sorts of sewing, children did their lessons, men read the paper; all clustered about the table under the light.

The architecture of ancient Greece was the inspiration for many of the buildings in the 1830's and 1840's. Ancient Greece was a citadel of democracy, and the Americans looked upon themselves as natural heirs. this style is called *Greek Revival.* Greek-inspired decoration was often confined to an Ionic or Doric column set at each side of the front door, or possibly used to support a porch roof. There might be an ornamental wooden or cast iron balustrade at the edge of the roof over the bay window on the front or side of the house. Several of the larger individual houses had two-story columned porches across the front. The Wilcox House on Delaware Avenue is an example of this period.

Many of the larger houses were the same type as the row house, except in Buffalo they were free standing from the neighboring houses, a development which allowed windows on the sides, a narrow two-story extension on the rear housed the kitchen and servants' rooms. This row type of house has largely disappeared. A few examples, but altered by the many changes made by successive generations, can be seen on Swan Street just east of Michigan, and on South Division between Michigan and Elm Streets, as well as in a few other isolated locations in downtown Buffalo.

Plaster, painted white or some other light color, covered the walls and ceilings of the rooms. In the principal first floor rooms a plaster cornice would join the walls with the ceiling; in the center of the ceiling was a plaster medallion from which a lighting fixture usually hung. Occasionally walls were papered, but, more often, only a wallpaper border was used around the doors and windows and below the cornice. Woodwork was painted to harmonize with the walls, but doors were generally finished to resemble mahogany or walnut if they were not actually made of these expensive woods. In the 1830's wall-to-wall carpeting began to be used to cover the floors in middle class homes. It was usually made up of strips approximately 24" wide, sewn together. Woven straw matting was frequently used in bedrooms in the same manner as carpeting. By our stand-

ards the rooms were under-furnished, pictures on the walls were few, and only a few decorative objects might be found in the living room. Closets were largely non-existent, and seasonal clothing was kept in bedroom cupboards called "clothes presses"; out-of-season clothing was stored away in trunks.

By 1850 the desire for individual houses, buildings completely separate from one another, was firmly established. Also by this date the style that drew its inspiration from ancient Greece was old-fashioned, and two new styles were coming into favor: *Italianate* and *Gothic.*

Both of these new styles provided the new house owner with features he considered a welcome relief from the *Greek Revival* style. There was a "picturesque" quality brought about by irregularity: a building no longer needed to be a simple rectangle in plan; for example, a room could project outward. The roof became more important, extending two or more feet beyond the walls. A greater variety of room arrangements was possible.

The *Gothic* style enjoyed a limited popularity. It owed its inspiration to buildings of England built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I — and earlier. The roof had a steep slope with edges forming a peak, or more properly, a gable. This sloping edge was decorated with a fancifully sawed piece of wood called a vergeboard because it was on the edge, or verge, of the roof.

This Gothic style house on Delaware Avenue has a bay window on the left, and fancifully shaped vergeboard, sometimes called "gingerbread."

A Gothic styled library in the Bronson Rumsey home on Delaware Avenue.

Windows with pointed arch tops were occasionally used. Sometimes a tower would be included at some point. Porches were in greater evidence. Millard Fillmore lived in a Gothic styled house located where the Statler-Hilton Hotel now stands.

The *Italianate* style drew its inspiration from the medieval villas built in the hills of the province of Tuscany, around Florence in Italy. The slope of the roof was more like that of the earlier houses, but its overhang or projection beyond the walls was supported (or so it seemed) by scrolled brackets of wood. Sometimes a tower, or campanile, rose above the main roof; more often an observatory was located on the center of the roof. The observatory was a small structure usually from six to eight feet square and accessible from the attic. From it the owners of the house could look out upon their neighbors. The windows occasionally had round tops. Both flat-topped and round-topped windows were often ornamented with elaborate decorations of foliage or geometrical designs usually made of cast iron. The front door was often a double one.

Generally it was the rich man who built a house in one of these new styles, and thus was much envied by those persons of more modest means. Obviously the more modest houses were smaller, with less and simpler ornamentation. The bay window made its appearance in the 1850's. In

Italianate homes like this one on Franklin Street often had roof observatories. Ornamental wood brackets help support the roof overhang.

addition to supplying more light in a room, it provided the occupants a better view up and down the street.

In the years just before the Civil War several features came into being basically more important to the homeowner than new architectural styles. One was a water supply system whereby water was taken from the Niagara River and pumped up to a reservoir located at Niagara, Connecticut, and Vermont Streets and Prospect Avenue and distributed via underground pipes to the city. This meant, that water no longer had to be hand-pumped or taken by buckets from wells for household use. Water for cooking and washing could now be brought into the home by pipe. At this time bathrooms, as we now know them, first made their appearance inside houses, although only in those of the rich.

The use of gas for illumination meant more pipes in the house. Pipes were run through the walls to outlets in rooms and to a central lighting fixture in the ceiling. These fixtures were lit by opening a valve and

The William G. Fargo home had an expansive mansard roof and open porches.

lighting the gas jets to create a flame. Cooking stoves began to make their appearance in the kitchens, replacing the cooking fireplace and brick bake oven. Although these stoves were made of cast-iron and fueled with wood or coal, the tasks of cooking were easier.

About the time of the Civil War another related style made its appearance — first for the homes of the well-to-do, and then gradually appearing in smaller versions. This style originated in France and crossed the Atlantic a few years before the outbreak of the war. It has come to be called *French Second Empire* in deference to the name of the French government at the time. Its distinguishing feature is the use of the mansard roof. This type of roof starts sloping from the top of the wall inward and upward at a very steep angle; when it has risen about six feet, the roof angle changes to a flat slope. Dormer windows usually appear in the lower portion. The advantage of this type of roof construction is that it provides more floor area on the top floor of the house.

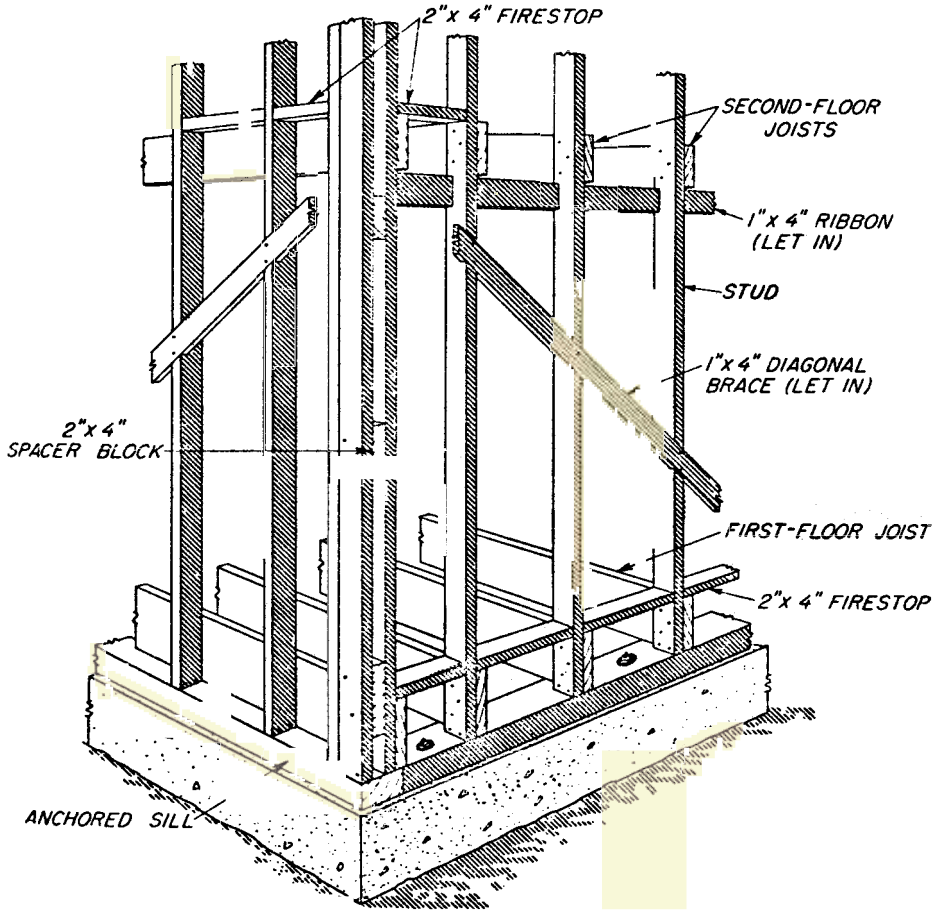
A bay window graced the sitting room of the Hon. E. G. Spaulding home.

Darker and richer colors became fashionable for the interiors of houses. Wall papers became more popular, and there appeared a greater profusion of pictures, ornaments, and furniture. White paint had become very old-fashioned; even on the exteriors, houses that were originally white, or white-trimmed, were repainted in colors.

The area in Buffalo bounded by Niagara, North, Michigan and Chippewa Streets has many houses of these mid-nineteenth century styles, many built of brick. But the majority of the houses were made of wood. An 1865 census showed Buffalo with a population of 94,000 persons; there were 22,000 families housed in 14,000 dwellings, and for every three wooden houses there was only one of brick. There were at this date thirty-nine log dwellings still in use.

Wood was plentiful in the United States, and therefore wood was cheap. In Chicago in the early 1830's a new method of using wood for building was developed that gradually spread across the country. This

was called the "balloon frame." Prior to this development wooden buildings were constructed with a heavy timber frame which utilized large units of wood, 8" x 8" and larger, to make the basic skeleton of the building. This form of framing can be seen in old barns. But the balloon frame used much smaller units of wood. The 2" x 4" was the most commonly used size in the balloon frame and is a standard term used in construction today. The wood cottages were homes for the workingmen and were built in great numbers on the east side of Buffalo and in the Black Rock and Riverside sections using this method.



Wall framing used in balloon frame construction rested on an anchored sill.

Niagara Street near Amherst Street in the early 1870's.

The workingman's cottage had scarcely any stylistic pretensions. It was a simple, small building, twenty feet square or less, containing a living room or parlor, kitchen, one or two bedrooms, and a store room. The roof sloped up from the side walls to a ridge in the center; if the slope were moderate there was just a low attic space above the living area, but if the roof slope were steeper the attic space could be finished for use as bedrooms. Heat came from a stove in the living room and a cooking stove in the kitchen. A privy, sometimes free standing in the rear yard, sometimes attached on the rear, was used for toilet facilities. The cottages were built close together with just enough space for a walk between.

After the Civil War the central heating system began to appear, eliminating the need for stoves and fireplaces in each room. This consisted of a furnace in the basement, which was simply a brick or cast iron enclosure in which coal was burned, with ducts leading from the enclosure to the various rooms, where hot air was discharged through registers in the floors or baseboard. Another variety of heating system was introduced in the early '80's; this was steam heating. In addition to the cast iron coal-burning enclosure in the basement, another smaller enclosure heated water until it turned to steam. Since water was involved, the cylinder was called a "boiler" instead of a furnace. Steam circulated through pipes to iron radiators, which gave off heat to the rooms.

In the early 1880's a new style appeared that for some unknown reason was called *Queen Anne*, after the English queen of the early 1700's. Houses were "artistic" and therefore variety was the secret. Roofs sloped upwards at least at a 45-degree angle, exteriors were covered with shingles — often of several different shapes — as well as clapboards. These houses featured porches with roofs supported by turned woodposts of a variety of shapes and ornamented with an abundance of turned wood-spindles. Windows were no longer all one size. Occasionally, there were turrets, sometimes there were balconies projecting from the building or recessed into it. Machine carving made possible wooden panels depicting foliage, which were placed on the exterior, often at the peak of the walls in the triangular space where the sloping roofs formed a gable. Colored glass worked into a design often was used in at least one window such as in the entrance hall or on the stair landing. In this type of house the woodwork, if not of "Golden Oak", emulated it, with a yellowish varnish finish. The ice box stood in the kitchen or adjacent to it in a rear hall. Ice was made by mechanical means in ice houses, cut into cakes weighing 25 and 50 lbs., and delivered daily by an iceman who placed a cake of the desired size into an insulated wood cupboard called the ice box, where milk and vegetables and fruit were kept.

Golden oak woodwork, colored glass windows and gas lighting were used in the G. W. Bartlett Library in 1889.

Left: The Linwood Avenue home of William Crosthwaite had a Queen Anne style roof and distinctive porches, 1901. Right: A Mission style home on Tillinghast Place.

In Buffalo about this time a type of architecture appeared called *Mission* style, after the string of buildings erected down the coast of California in the eighteenth century by Spanish mission priests. Living room and dining room ceilings were often ornamented with wooden beams, not hand-hewn but built up of smooth thin pieces of wood. On the exterior the great overhangs of the roof were supported by exposed rafters.

By World War I the bungalow was being built at the fringes of the built-up portions of the city. The word "bungalow" is derived from the native name given to the low houses of the Bengalese in India. The Bungalow became the new cottage of the workingman. Living was generally confined to one floor, but the moderately sloping roofs could occasionally enclose enough space so that on the upper floor some additional useable area was obtained. This additional space was often large enough to make a small apartment of three or four rooms, which could be rented. A bungalow having these was called an "income bungalow."

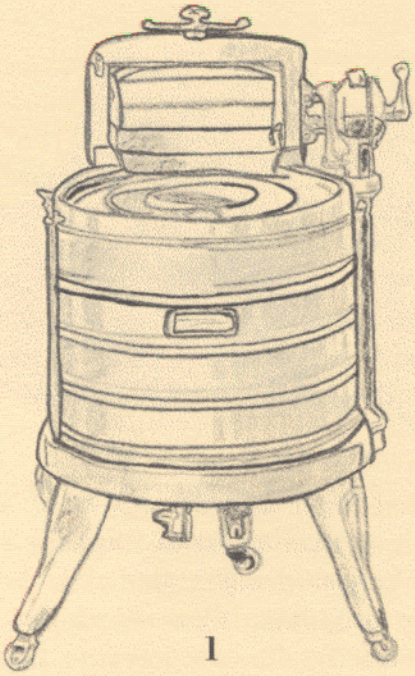
Flats made their appearance by the 1920's. In these two-family houses one family lived downstairs and another lived upstairs. The economical house owner could pay for his two-flat house by living in one flat and renting the other. The living room, dining room, and kitchen occupied the front half of the flat and three bedrooms, sometimes four, occupied the rear half. Across the front of both floors were porches, the roof for the first floor becoming an open porch for the second floor.

The house of early colonies also began to serve as inspiration at the turn of the century for new houses in Buffalo. But the new houses were not literal copies of the real colonial houses; they were adaptations. The colonial influence reappeared in modified form in details at entrances and windows, in porch columns, in wood cornices.

About a decade before World War I, Buffalo's best known houses were built. Four Prairie houses, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect from the Mid-West, were built for executives of the Larkin Company. The highly individualized designs are characterized by a strong horizontal feeling with ribbons of windows and great overhanging roofs with a slight slope. There is a vague oriental feeling about these houses, which were expensive and custom-built. A number of houses built shortly thereafter in North Buffalo obviously owe their design inspiration to the Wright houses.

After World War I a certain restraint crept into the design of houses. Designs and details were used from the historical styles of England, France, and the original American colonies. But these designs tended to be more "correct," more nearly identical to the originals. Flats continued to be built, but front porches were now enclosed with windows to form sun

The William R. Heath home on Soldier's Place was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1903. It has a great roof overhang and large porches.



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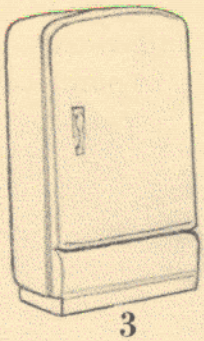

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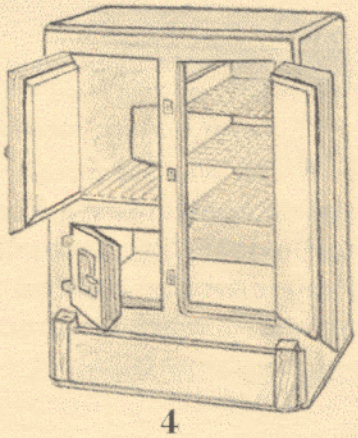

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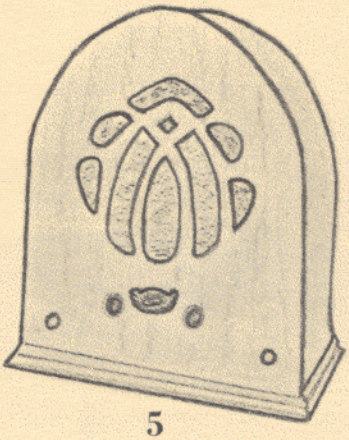

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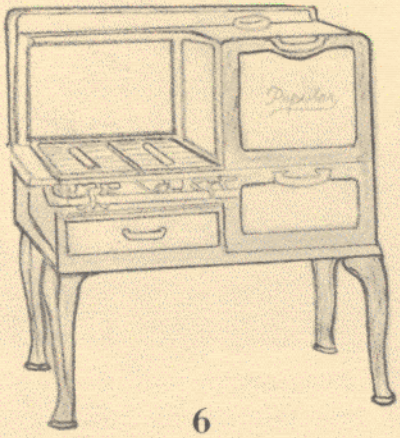

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Appliances used in early 20th Century homes. Clockwise: (1) 1930 Electric Washer with wringer; (2) hand operated wooden washing machine; (3) 1950 steel refrigerator; (4) 1930 porcelain lined wooden ice box; (5) 1931 6-tube radio; (6) 1930 gas range with top oven.

porches. Sun porches also appeared on single-family houses. The mid-nineteenth century workingman's cottage was often expanded, first by building extensions on the rear, then by raising the roof and adding a second floor and making a flat of the house. The refrigerator came into the home, replacing the icebox. Lighter colors, paler colors, and pastel colors reappeared on painted and wall-papered walls. Rarely was a house built in what we call the *modern* style, namely a style without historic precedent. Each building style was called "modern" when it was first introduced, and it awaited a later generation to give it a specific name.

About 1940 the restored Virginia village of Williamsburg was opened to the public. After the Revolution the state government was transferred to Richmond and this village subsided into obscurity. Prosperity and growth stopped and throughout the nineteenth century its people were not able to tear down the old buildings; rather they made whatever changes that were needed to accommodate the changes in their way of living. Then in the 1930's the old buildings were put back to the way they were before the Revolution. They were furnished with old furniture, the same age as the buildings, and then the public was invited to come and see how the colonists lived. Reproductions of the old furniture, fabrics, paint colors, and accessories were offered for sale so that people could reproduce

Colonial Williamsburg in their own homes. The whole project was an instant success and was responsible for a number of imitators in Buffalo and throughout the country. People not only made their living rooms and dining rooms "authentically Colonial," they built their houses to look "authentically Colonial."

World War II brought a stop to home building. When it ended and so-called normal living returned in 1950, it was the ranch house that became the popular dwelling. This was a natural desendant of the bungalow. Living was on one floor, but a foot or two closer to the ground than in the bungalow. Roof lines were similar but slightly flatter, and the ends of the rafters were not exposed on the outside. The picture window came into the living room, often framing an oversized lamp. Two-family houses were built, but they were "duplexes". Both family units in a duplex had two floors, so that the two families lived side by side. A variation of the ranch house called the split-level was introduced, part of which is built on a one-floor plan, and part on a two-floor plan, but in the latter part the lower floor is slightly below ground. Finally, the row house has reappeared, now called the town house or garden apartment. Thus, in a sense, Buffalo has come full circle in its type of house building.

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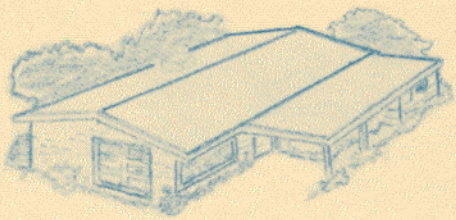
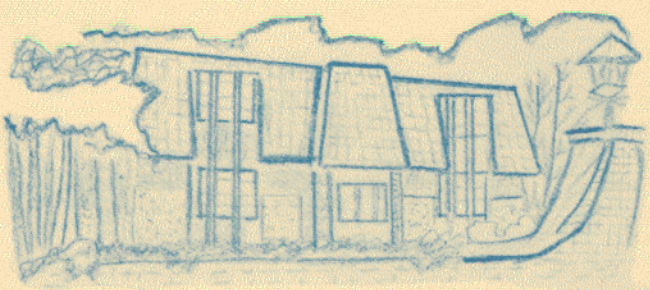
Split level house.



Ranch house.

Colonial styled two-story house.



Mansard styled house.

POPULAR MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY HOUSING STYLES