

New York Row Houses: Federal Facades

The prevailing style in New York between the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783 and the 1830's was "Federal."

Influenced primarily by the work of the English Adams brothers, it was based on the enduring and universal classical ideals of architectural restraint and harmonious proportions found in the ruins of Greece and Rome. Modest scale, architectural simplicity, and often rich ornamental details were the distinguishing features of the Federal style, fostered by an urgent need for new housing, the high cost of labor, and as yet unpretentious attitudes.

Most row houses built before 1830 rose two full stories above a high basement, topped by a pitched roof with two picturesque dormers. With rising land costs most dormers have a subsequently been replaced with a full third story. In general, the height of the house was not much greater than the width. They were twenty to twenty-five feet wide by thirty-five to forty feet deep with a large back yard or garden in the rear.

The front of the typical Federal-style row house was usually red brick laid in Flemish bond, and often painted red or occasionally in gray or cream with painted white mortar lines between the bricks. Modest doorways and window trim and lintels were in brownstone, granite, or marble to provide a simple and pleasing contrast. In the late 1820's and early 1830's, with the opening of extensive granite and marble quarries near New York, the finest houses employed these costlier materials instead for the trim and basement façade.

The basement, often referred to as an "English" basement, was constructed of bricks or brownstone either in simple slabs with beveled joints or in rusticated blocks. The parlor rose above the street over the basement and was approached by a low flight of brownstone steps known as the "stoop", a concept inherited from the original Dutch settlers. The stoop served a practical as well as decorative purpose by providing a canopy over the service entrance beneath.

Hand-wrought iron railings up the stoop and along the sidewalk above the basement dugout were safety measures and added a decorative note. Pineapple, pinecone, or acorn finials often crowned the vertical fence shafts. Four-sided "hollow cage" newel posts to either side of the stoop railing were sometimes topped by a small pineapple or a large, hollow urn terminating in a pineapple, the symbol of hospitality. Boot scrapers were often incorporated into the newel post or railing.



The most elaborate feature of the row house front was the handsomely crafted wooden front door with six or eight deeply set panels, often edged with an egg-and-dart pattern or beading, and including a brass or silver doorknob and knocker. A delicately leaded rectangular top light and, often, leaded sidelights were also characteristic of the period. The fanlight doorway, which appeared in New York only in the 1820's and early 1830's, was commonly associated with the Late Federal style on the homes of the wealthiest.

Most Federal-style windows were modest in scale, small paned, and double hung, usually six over six, and were approximately the same size on the first and second floors. Shutters or window blinds, usually painted green, offered relief from the summer sun and cold weather. In the Late Federal period double or triple hung parlor windows that dropped to the floor were introduced for added elegance and light.

Another important visual element on the pitched-roof house was the cornice at the roofline, which marked the top of the house front and defined its height and width proportions. Just below the cornice a plain or fluted twelve- to eighteen-inch facial board ran the full width of the house, most often with an egg-and-dart or dentil molding at the base.

New York's continuous growth and search for improvement through re-development has all but obliterated the city's Federal-style buildings. The finest remaining example of the late-eighteenth century row house is the James Watson house at No.7 State Street, once part of an elegant row of houses facing the Battery. The Charlton-King-Vandam Streets area between Sixth Avenue and Varrick developed during the 1820's and 30's, some blocks of the West Village, which evolved from fashionable country estates in "Greenwich" following the yellow fever epidemic of 1822, and a few streets in Brooklyn Heights, are among the only remaining vestiges of this prodigious period. The Seabury Treadwell house at No.29 East Fourth Street, now known as the Old Merchant's House," is the only surviving example of the late Federal style typical of the Bond Street area's patrician past. It's original Greek revival interior marks the transition between Federal New York and the emergence of a rich and diverse period of revival styles.

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