City of Jacksonville
Historic Preservation Commission
FALL 2009 NEWSLETTER

Advantages of Historic Districts: What's in it for me?

The purpose of a National Register Historic District is to preserve the character and heritage of a community by maintaining areas of cultural, architectural, and historic significance. Jacksonville has had a National Register Historic District since the 1977.

Jacksonville's Historic District is managed by the Historic Preservation Commission, a group of up to 11 city residents plus ex-officio representatives from City Council and Jacksonville Main Street. Their goal is to preserve and promote the historical and architectural structures in Jacksonville's historic district as well as the rest of our city.

There are a lot of misconceptions about the Commission and the district itself though. Here's hoping to clear that up:

1) "How can they tell me what to do?" It's not about telling people what to do, but fulfilling the obligations set forth by the City in establishing the Preservation District years ago. By ordinance, the Commission has to issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for work proposed on properties within a designated district. These are usually for improvements that require building permits anyway. The Commission tries to work with owners on solutions that satisfy everyone and that enhance the historic flavor of the building, neighborhood, and community. Since there is more than one solution to any challenge, Commission members try to offer a variety of options that meet both the owners budget and the Secretary of Interior Standards for Historic Preservation. This is also one of the responsibilities that a homeowner willingly assumes by buying property in the Preservation District. The Commissions helps owners of Historic District properties protect their investment by ensuring everyone does their part as prescribed by the Ordinance.

2) "They won't let me modernize anything." Sure they will! Being in a historic district does not prohibit most upgrades inside or out. Contrary to rumors, no one dictates colors, but if you cannot decide, the Commission is here to help. Fences, roofs, gutters, and porches often need work. Obviously, lasting improvements that enhance curb appeal benefit everyone involved. The Commission offers great ideas on how to do all these things in cost-efficient and attractive ways that can help properties look even better.

Historic Districts offer tax incentives for improvements that are not available to older structures outside a Preservation District.

For most interiors, the Commission has no say. But, if an owner plans to use Historic Property Tax Credits or the 20% Tax Credit, a State Historic Preservation Officer must review the property before work begins. They will suggest which interior elements should be retained before work begins. Typically, they have no restrictions on kitchen or bathroom upgrades and often also provide insight on improvements that can save even more money.

3) "They make me spend more money." Another myth! The reality is that fixing the old items is often much less expensive than buying new. There are plenty of affordable craftsmen around who can help with doing restoration work that owners cannot handle on their own. Yes, it requires a bit of talent, research, and patience, but the costs of newer products and energy efficiency can usually be matched or beat. In fact, following the Secretary of Interior Standards can offer additional savings through incentive programs only available in Historic Districts.

For homeowners, a Historic Property Tax Freeze is available to provide savings by locking property taxes at pre-improvement rates for eight years with a four-year phase in to regular rates, for over eleven years of financial benefit. It is possible that this incentive can be passed on to a new owner who did not complete the work themselves as a selling feature for the property. For income producing property, there is a 20% Federal Tax Credit that also applies to rental units. This benefit allows 25% of expenditures to be deducted from Federal Income Tax. Contact any Historic Preservation Commission member or Jacksonville Main Street for information on these programs. Neither of these incentives are available for non-preservation friendly improvements or any non-landmarked properties outside the Historic Preservation District. Remember to call before you begin work; waiting until after work has begun may exclude you.

4) "It's not worth it." Ah, but it is. In fact, trends show that buyers are very interested in properties that have retained their historic integrity. When properly maintained, historic property retains its value well, adds more character and unique style to a neighborhood, and lasts longer than newer improvements.

What Style is Your House?

Italianate 1840-1890

The Italianate Style comes from villa architecture of the 15th century Italian Renaissance period. When the Italianate style moved to the United States, it was reinterpreted again to create a uniquely American style.

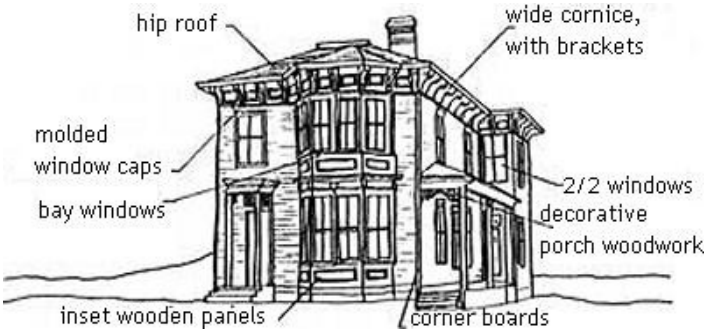
Most Italianate structures in the Midwest date to the late 19th century. Italianates was the favorite style in part because it could be constructed with many different materials and adapted to fit many budgets. New technologies of the day enabled cast iron and pressed metal decorations to be affordable and quickly produced. After the 1870s, trends turned to the Victorian and Queen Anne styles.

Three Italianate types are most frequently seen: the traditional two story, five bay centered entrance house with a gabled roof parallel to the street to which a verandah has been added across the front; the nearly square two story three bay house with very wide eves supported on brackets and with a flat roof; and the villa form composed of several interlocking blocks grouped around an off-center square tower.

All these variations typically have the wide bracketed eaves, low pitched roofs, and large two-over-two or paired windows with ornamental caps. Bay windows are common as are two panel entrance doors. Wood insets below the windows and shutters are typical, as are corner boards. Long one story porches with sawn decorative fretwork on the front are common, but smaller porches over the entrance are also seen. Square cupolas are also often included. The structure itself is usually rectangular and symmetrical in shape.

Italianates are usually of wood, although brick and stone examples can be found. The wood frame homes are not always built with heavy posts and beams typical of pre-Civil War buildings. Lighter "balloon framing" was used to allow more complex floor plans and roof patterns for this and all the subsequent domestic styles.

Ornamentation is often influenced by Classical sources. Quoins are often seen at the corners of exterior walls, but Romanesque and other styles are also used. Exterior colors may vary from white to pastels to earth tones. Originally, trim would not have been picked out with separate colors, though it is seen today.



Another variation of the Italianate is the octagon house. The octagon house was the invention of Orson S. Fowler in the 1850s and is an American house form not frequently seen. Fowler was not concerned with matters of style, but the octagon's popularity during the height of the Italianate period means that most octagon forms are also Italianate in style. The interest in octagons, touted for their economy and sunlit rooms, was over by the 1870s. Awkward-shaped rooms were hard to furnish.

Italianate was also a popular style for commercial buildings, with similar ornamentation as houses. Typically of brick, commercial structures usually feature an elaborate cornice and brackets.

"What Style is Your House?" was a regular feature of early HPC Newsletters. Over the next several issues, one style will be featured in each edition. Some of the information will be re-run from previous HPC Newsletters, and some will be new, but still worth reading and saving for future reference!