

Presto! Italian style's fast rise to fashion

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A new architectural style swept America in the mid-nineteenth century, dotting cities and towns across the continent with homes and public buildings crafted in a style borrowed from Italian villas. Launched in England, Italianate design took root in the United States in 1837, when Scottish-born architect John Notman designed the first noted Italianate home for the bishop of New Jersey.

The Italianate style quickly became fashionable, dominating American homebuilding between 1850 and 1880. In Indiana, it became the most common nineteenth-century architectural style, helped by the ease and low cost of applying its decorative elements to a range of buildings. Italianate's characteristic low-pitched roofs and overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, tall windows capped with arches, and elaborate door treatments adorned homes and commercial buildings throughout the state.

The Italianate style originated in the early nineteenth century as a reaction against the classical traditions that had



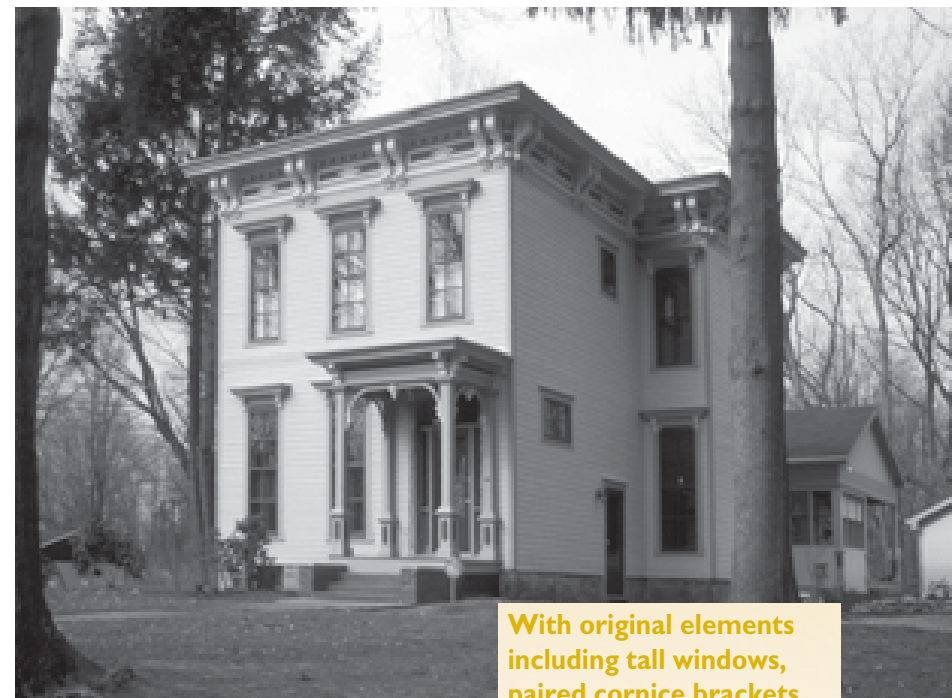
Laura Renwick

The 1886 Kaiser building in downtown New Albany typifies the Italianate style in commercial buildings. The well-preserved, two-story structure features an original storefront with large display windows and tall, two-over-two windows with segmental-arch tops and decorative hoods. Brackets adorned by lion heads line the cornice, where the nameplate proudly displays "Kaiser."

dominated architecture for two centuries. The Picturesque and Romantic movements influenced artists of all stripes—writers and painters as well as designers—and many sought out Italy as a source of inspiration.

English poets Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley visited and paid tribute to the Italian landscape in their works. Artists, including Thomas Cole and Thomas Moran of the Hudson River School, painted Italian landscapes. Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James described the Italian countryside in their popular novels. Before emigrating to America, Notman apprenticed in Edinburgh to an architect credited with introducing him to Italianate design.

Loosely based on the domestic architecture of medieval and early-Renaissance Italy, the Italianate style's grace,



Todd Zieger

With original elements including tall windows, paired cornice brackets and decorative wood porch trim, Evergreen Hill in South Bend remains an excellent Italianate vernacular example. Historic Landmarks holds a preservation easement on the 1873 farmhouse, rated "outstanding" in the state survey of historic sites.

charm, and adaptability propelled its rise. Pattern books by Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry W. Cleaveland endorsed the Italianate style in residential architecture, introducing it to the mass market. Downing's 1842 *Cottage Residences* advocated the style as being both picturesque and practical, while Cleaveland's 1856 *Village and Farm Cottages* proclaimed that "convenience, facility in doing the family work, and pleasantness of internal aspect and arrangements, were our first aim."

Many sources fit Italianate houses of the nineteenth century into one of three categories:

- Italian Villas borrow design features of Renaissance Italian farmhouses. They often feature a square tower and are

asymmetrical, allowing for a functional floorplan.

- Renaissance Revivals, symmetrical grand houses or mansions, reflect the influence of formal Renaissance *palazzos* in northern Italy.
- Vernacular Italianate buildings came into fashion later and melded elements of Italian Villas and Renaissance Revivals. Most Indiana examples fall into this category, featuring simple but distinctive detail.

The T.J. Jester House in rural Shelby County is an outstanding vernacular example. The home's symmetrical windows are tall and narrow, with flat limestone lentils and sills. The inset entrance is surrounded by elaborate trim. The carved wood panel door has a large window and an original doorbell, as recommended in Cleaveland's pattern book. Decorative brackets support the overhanging eaves of the cross-gabled roof.

A variation on the vernacular theme, the Italianate "cube" house, appears throughout Indiana. The cube house has a square, two-story plan, often with a square or rectangular cupola in the center of the roof. The 1858 Andrew F. Scott House, built by a bank president and located in Richmond's Starr Historic District, exemplifies the



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type and features most notably a rectangular cupola. The Scott house was willed to the Wayne County Historical Museum in 1977 and sold to private owners last year. An easement donated to Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana ensures the historical character of the exterior will be protected from change.

Indiana also offers examples representing high-style, or architect-designed, Italianate structures. The Jennings County Courthouse in Vernon, designed by Indianapolis architect Isaac Hodgson and built between 1857-1861, features white stone quoins, window hoods, and sills that contrast with the red brick walls.

While the Italianate style held sway in homebuilding, it caught on in commercial architecture, too, and remained popular into the twentieth century. Builders often applied Italianate adornment to two- or three-story brick commercial blocks with flat roofs.

Artisans first crafted ornamentation in wood or stone, but later these decorative touches were manufactured in stamped metal to allow for extravagant-looking decoration at inexpensive prices. First-floor storefronts of cast iron with large display windows, inset entries, decorative columns, and prism-glass



Greg Schindler

The Jennings County Courthouse in Vernon, with its decorative brackets and clock tower, evokes Italian Villas and that most famous *campanile* in Venice's St. Mark's Square. Architect Isaac Hodgson also designed the Morgan County Courthouse, an almost identical structure in Martinsville.

transoms were common, though many storefronts have since been altered.

After the financial panic of 1873, builders began favoring balloon-frame construction for Italianate homes, as opposed to more expensive brick construction. The decline of the Italianate style in residential architecture began in the 1880s as other styles, such as the Romanesque Revival and Queen Anne came into fashion.

The Italianate style was in vogue for half a century, leaving a distinct mark on Indiana's built environment. A watchful traveler journeying anywhere in Indiana will be sure to spot these Romantic American homages to Italian architecture.

Anderson Winterrowd chose the then-popular Italianate style when he constructed a home for his family on the foundation of an older house in Shelby County, c.1870. Now known as the T.J. Jester House, the home boasts several hallmarks of the Italianate style, including a cornice with overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets.