

East High Street: An Open Museum of Architecture and Enterprise

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In nineteenth-century America, with the rise of an entrepreneurial spirit and the wealth associated with the industrial boom, architectural design rose in both prominence and grandeur. In Ohio, entrepreneurs and industrialists often built their showpiece residences on major thoroughfares. Cleveland's "Millionaire Row" down Euclid Street and Cincinnati's Dayton Avenue impressed visitors with their high-style architectural masterpieces. Likewise, the residences on East Town and East Broad streets in Columbus were the pride of the city. Although once impressive, these architectural monuments of wealth and power have largely disappeared. Today, Cleveland's former grand avenues with impressive homes and manicured lawns have been replaced with warehouses, retail stores, and parking lots. Cincinnati and Columbus' primary streets have declined in prestige due to changing economies and demographics. Conversely, Springfield's East High Street could possibly be the best preserved of these striking thoroughfares. It still retains much of its late 19th and early 20th century glory, displaying an open museum of architecture and enterprise to all who travel the street.

In the 1830s, Springfield extended the original High Street a block east to merge with the Chillicothe Road, thus creating the section that would later be renamed East High Street. One block south of the National Road, following a gentle ridge leading to the east of the original Springfield settlement, it was known during its heyday as Prospect Hill. With a breathtaking view of the Buck Creek valley to the north, Mill Run to the south, and within easy walking distance of the city proper, it was an optimal piece of property for development. Brothers Gustavus and William Foos recognized the advantages of this elevated parcel of land, and their development of the area coincided with the period of industrial growth that followed the Civil War. As industrial entrepreneurs accumulated wealth, they began displaying this opulence in homes built on the newly added section of High Street.

Initially, the elevated ridge and walking proximity to the city proper were the main advantages of the Foos Addition, which developed rapidly. The 1870 *Atlas of Clarke County Ohio* shows over twenty-five homes between the railroad crossing and Greenmount Cemetery. As the demand for residences on the East High increased, a street railway extended along its length with double tracks up to the cemetery, and a single line extending beyond. In the era before the automobile, the streetcar provided easy access for residents who sought the rural atmosphere of the periphery but desired easy access to the banks, factories, and stores of the central business district.

Since the first lots to be developed tended to be closer to downtown, a drive down East High Street is akin to traveling through time. Closer to town are the Italianate homes built in the 1870s and 1880s, with their low-pitched hipped roofs, arched windows, and brackets supporting the overhanging cornice. The Weimer House, built in the early 1870s, is a classic example of this style. Weimer was born in France and immigrated to the United States in 1849. A successful merchant, he learned the tailor's trade in New York City before moving to Springfield after the Civil War. The post Civil War expansion of industry fueled an economic boom that allowed him and his wife Sarah to build their grand home on East High. A walk down the block uncovers more of this Italianate influence in the houses built by Weimer's neighbors.



The Weimer House at 648 East High Street displays most of the classic features of an Italianate house.



Two-over-two windows and bracketed cornices on a neighboring house farther down East High.

Farther down East High the Queen Anne style of the 1880s and 1890s is represented on the street. Multiple gables, turrets, wrap-around porches, and decorative siding shapes characterize these homes. The recently restored Dimond House at 915 East High displays many of these Queen Anne traits, most notably its asymmetrical design and multi-paned windows. Built in the late 1880s for Harriet Bushnell Dimond and her husband Dr. Henry Dimond, this house was designed by Mathisen, a New York architect from the prominent Robertson office. Midwestern communities did not typically showcase the work of East Coast architects, but East High Street residents had connections. For the Dimonds, this was through Harriet's parents, Asa and Ellen Bushnell, who commissioned Robertson to build their house across the street.

As the grandest of the East High Street houses, the Bushnell House was built as the residence for Asa, a two-time governor of Ohio, and his wife Ellen. Asa was active in manufacturing, banking, and politics, and his home clearly established his leading role in the community. The house, built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style in 1896, borrows the ideas of motifs used by the American architect Henry Hobson Richardson who in turn was inspired by the multi-colored stonework and rounded arches of the Southern French Romanesque. The arched porches, decorative gables, and carved details evoke the quality of a medieval cloister, as powerful American industrialists turned to European styles to lend sophistication to their homes. A beautifully designed and built residence, it holds its own with any of the mansions from other industrial centers in the United States.



The varied decorative wood patterns found on the Dimond House (currently under restoration) are a distinctive Queen Anne feature, although the dominance of wood shingles places it as a Shingle Style house as well.



The well preserved Bushnell House, now Richards, Raff, and Dunbar Funeral Home, exemplifies the Richardsonian-Romanesque style.

Near Greenmount Cemetery the homes date from the turn of the century, with Frank Lloyd Wright's Westcott House initiating a number of houses with flat roofs, rows of casement windows, and horizontal trim. This house, currently under restoration, signals the break with European styles and the confident establishment of a homegrown American style. Burton Westcott commissioned the Chicago architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, to design a home that was not focused on a grand imposing façade overlooking the street. Rather, Wright created open living spaces with natural light and extensions into the landscape. His low roof with broad overhanging eaves, rows of casement windows, and cantilevered porches are designed to promote comfortable living. Wright consciously avoided the symbols and forms of Europe, determined to produce a distinctly American style. Moving farther east on High Street, one sees additional homes that were influenced in their design by Wright's unique design vision.



Wright's Westcott House on East High, built 1907-1909, is a stark contrast to earlier architectural trends on East High.



Further houses on East High, as the above depicts, illustrate Frank Lloyd Wright's influence, displaying similar eaves, windows, porches, and landscaping.

East High Street stands as a remarkable record of the captains of industry and commerce who built their residences on Springfield's most prominent street. Their wealth, aspirations, and cultural values are clearly displayed in the homes they built. As one moves up the street, the house styles change with their date of construction so that the changing culture reads like an unraveling scroll. Preserving these visible facets of history not only serves to maintain one of the beautiful streets of Springfield, but stands as an open museum to educate citizens and cultivate interest in Springfield's alluring heritage.