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EC85-411 Nebraska Homes of the Early Twentieth Century : A Heritage of Pride

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Nebraska Homes of the Early Twentieth Century: A Heritage of Pride



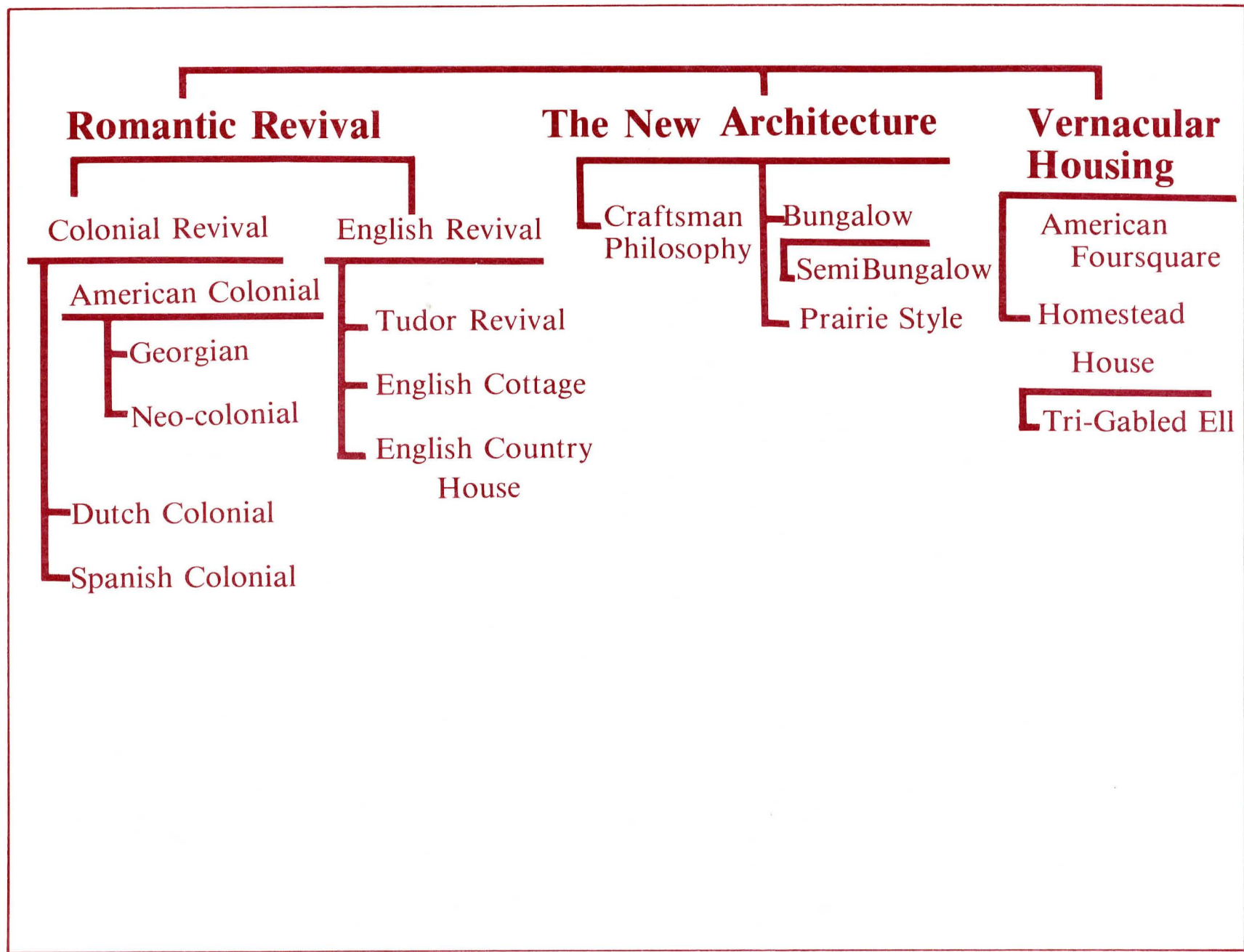
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Nebraska Homes of the Early Twentieth Century: A Heritage of Pride



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Housing and Interior Design

This publication describes styles of housing built in Nebraska in the early twentieth century and discusses the cultural and philosophical movements that influenced their design. Its purpose is to create a better understanding, respect, and appreciation of early twentieth century housing. A “terms to know” section is at the end of the publication.

Are you an “old-house-lover” or a “building watcher”? For many, there is a fascination with the diversity of forms and styles that people created to shelter themselves.

Some homes are on a grand scale and reflect the artistic fashions of the time. Other homes are more modest, and reflect current styles tempered by family preferences and resources, available materials, and skills of the local builder. Some homes are pure examples of an identifiable architectural style. Other homes are an **eclectic**^{1/} combination of design and decoration that represents either the homeowner’s preference or the builder’s interpretation of what would sell. Some homes exist today in much the same form as they were originally built. Other homes have been continually changed and modified to meet the needs and whims of a series of residents. Sometimes discovering the original style, design, or structure of these homes requires detective work worthy of a super sleuth.

This endless variety and the stories represented intrigue the “old-house-lover.” An individual home can reveal a history of its residents. To be in the same place—to touch the physical environment—provides a link to preceding generations. To be in the homes of past Nebraskans is to begin to understand

these people and their way of life. This past is a rich heritage and a foundation for the future.

Some old houses are considered historically significant as the site of important events, or because of the importance of past residents. Others gain significance through architectural or structural innovativeness or achievement, or the sheer weight of age. There are countless other houses that are merely old, but equally deserving of respect, rehabilitation, and/or preservation. Not only are old houses a rich cultural, social, and perhaps familial heritage, but they are also resources that society cannot afford to waste.

Early Twentieth Century Housing

The early part of the twentieth century was a time of growth and development. There was a building boom across Nebraska and across America. The building industry was moving from mostly custom to more speculative building. This led to an increasing interest in style and features that would “sell”. Pattern books featuring sketches, plans, and elevations of homes popularized fashions in home design. Companies selling ready-made or “mail-order” homes advertised in mass circulation periodicals. These trends helped make well-designed, quality-built homes readily available to the American middle class.

Homes of the early twentieth century are sometimes described as the first modern homes. The homes of this era introduced many

^{1/} Words in bold are described in the “Terms to Know” section at the end of this publication.



of the convenience features common in today's housing. Houses were designed with an emphasis on comfort and utility, with open floor plans. Features included indoor bathrooms, kitchens with built-in cupboards, basements with laundry areas, built-in closets, and central heating.

The early twentieth century is sometimes referred to as the "post-Victorian" period. In architecture, especially domestic architecture, it could be described as a transition time from ornamental, **picturesque** Victorian housing to plainer, simpler housing that emphasized function and utility. This was perhaps the beginning of the Modern Movement. There were a number of factors that affected the style of early twentieth century homes, including:

1. A reaction to the excesses of Victorian art and ornamentation that had made houses more costly to build and maintain.

2. A cultural interest in nature, natural materials, and rustic art. This grew out of a philosophical emphasis on truth and honesty in both design and workmanship.

3. Rapid growth of industrialization that affected all aspects of life. However, this also created a superficial nostalgia for a simpler life style.

4. Growth in the number of mass circulation periodicals that offered articles and advertising geared toward housing, home furnishings, and interior decoration. These magazines popularized fashions and trends across the country.

5. The growth of the middle class that produced a growth in modest single-family homes and the development of suburbia.

6. The popularity of pattern books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that made well-designed home plans readily available. Many pattern books were backed up with mail-order architectural services that provided working drawings and specifications adapted for the individual, a list of suppliers, and plenty of advice.

7. The growth of the ready-made, mail-order, or catalog housing industry, in which a person could order a kit for a house that would supply almost everything needed to build a house, pre-cut and perhaps partially assembled. Mail-order houses, the forerunner of today's manufactured houses, offered economies of scale, reduced on-site assembly time, and required fewer or less-skilled local craftsmen.

8. The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia which produced a long-lasting wave of patriotism and nostalgia for the Colonial period. In architecture, this led to interest in building forms that expressed an American identity.

9. The 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition or World's Fair that created a strong popular interest in classical architecture and white buildings.

In Nebraska, in 1898, the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition was held in Omaha. This was a take off from the 1893 Columbian Exposition. It helped popularize, locally, the white, classical architecture featured in the Chicago Exposition.

Styles of Housing

The many diverse influences on domestic architecture produced equal diversity in style. Architectural historians have used a variety of terms and systems to classify and describe the styles of the early twentieth century—and they don't all agree! An important factor in the study of early twentieth century architectural style is the fact that style became more democratic and available to the common person. Pattern books were particularly influential in promoting house styles nationwide. The current fashions were no longer limited to the architect-designed homes of the wealthy. As a result, styles were mixed, adapted, and recombined. This resulted in a rich tradition of diversity, but created a difficult task in describing and classifying the housing styles.

In 1982, *The Old House Journal* published a series of articles on the 'Comfortable House',



their term for post-Victorian architecture. (See complete bibliography in Leader's Guide F, a supplement to this publication). The editors of this journal used a classification system that recognized both the architect-designed homes of the trend setters and the vernacular architecture of the ordinary person. In addition, *The Old House Journal* system recognized broad style movements and dealt with both transitional and combined styles. Many of the terms and classifications used in the rest of this publication are based on *The Old House Journal's* system.

Most early twentieth century housing styles can be grouped into three broad movements: Romantic Revival, the New Architecture, and Vernacular Housing. The first two of these movements were philosophical, describing what a house should be, what it should do, and what it should represent, rather than simply what it should look like. As a result, some very different styles resulted within these movements. The third movement, Vernacular Housing, really describes different house forms or shapes that were built. Vernacular houses frequently had stylistic or decorative features that reflected the philosophies of the other two movements.

Romantic Revival

The first movement could be termed "*Romanticism*" or "*Revivalism*". It is also referred to as "Eclectic" or "Academic" or "National Revival". This movement was based on a nostalgia for the past and a feeling that a house should evoke an emotional response. That emotional response was based on a historical association. The Romantic movement was especially a response to patriotism, and the need for American identity through association with the Colonial period. Also a part of the Romantic movement was the need to express culture, tradition, and roots through one's housing. Because the early twentieth century was a time of rapid immigration of non-English speaking people, Anglo-Saxon roots were either asserted or a source of aspiration. Thus the Romantic movement saw

an increase in the revival of English forms of housing.

Some housing of the Romantic or Revival movement were attempts at historically accurate reproductions. More commonly, Revival housing was interpretive. Sometimes also called "Period Houses", these homes borrowed the decorative vocabulary of the imitated period, applying motifs and features to contemporary houses. While Revival housing of the early twentieth century used similar shapes, proportion, and materials of the Colonial and English house forms, the interior layouts reflected contemporary space needs. Generally, Revival housing was larger than the original, with fewer rooms and more open plans. The models for early twentieth century Romantic or Revival housing were the homes of Colonial America, particularly New England, and the rural or farm homes of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, particularly England.

Colonial Revival

Colonial revival housing can be grouped into several categories. A style referred to as "true" Colonial, American Colonial, or Georgian Colonial Revival is based on the classical architecture of seventeenth century England and America. Dutch Colonial Revival homes have distinctive **gambrel** roofs, a style common in English, Dutch, Flemish, and American housing of the seventeenth and eighteenth century and in the traditional American barn. Spanish Colonial Revival styles included the Mission Revival and reflected the Spanish heritage of many parts of the country.

American Colonial. The *American Colonial* style homes tended to take two broad forms. One was the traditional *Georgian Colonial* form emphasizing symmetry. The house was essentially rectangular, with two full stories. The main door was on the long side of the rectangle and window placement was equally placed to give formal symmetry. These homes had a low **hipped roof**, or occasionally a high-pitched **gabled** roof. Many features were bor-



Examples of American Colonial

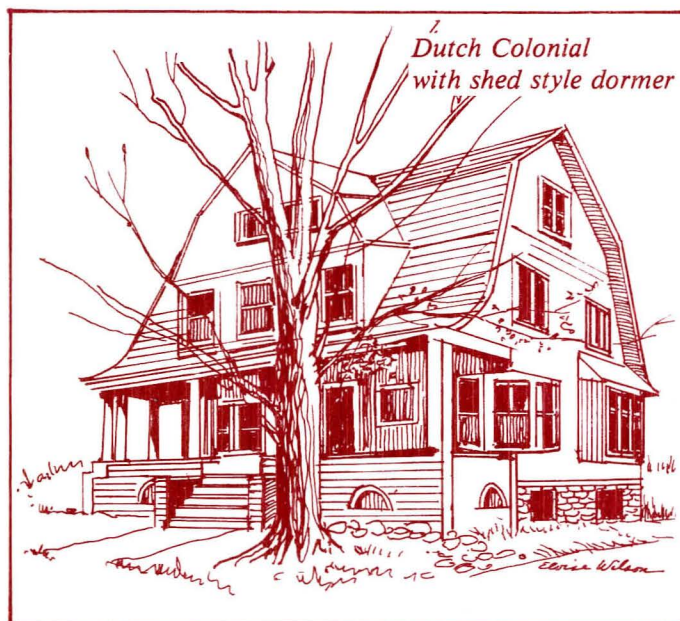




rowed from Greek architecture; including triangular **pediments**, classical columns and **cornices**, and **porticos**. Other features included **fan lights**, **dentilled moldings**, **pilasters** and **Palladian windows**.

Neo-colonial. A second form of American Colonial homes is sometimes referred to as *Neo-colonial*. These homes tended to be asymmetrical with the **picturesque** form of Victorian homes combined with Georgian features and decorative details. These homes sometimes represented a transition between nineteenth and twentieth century styles or an **eclectic** combination of architectural features. Even today, Georgian or Colonial decorative details such as **pediments** over porches or **fan lights** are popular on a wide variety of housing types.

Dutch Colonial. A Colonial Revival home with a **gambrel roof** is usually called a *Dutch Colonial*. Flaring **eaves**, extending over the front and rear of the house, were also common to the Dutch Colonial Revival style. Dutch Colonial homes tend to have a rectangular shape and formal symmetry, similar to the Georgian Colonial.



The **gambrel roof** was originally adopted as a solution to the problem of how to provide ample headroom under a pitched roof. With a **gambrel roof**, the attic became nearly a full additional story of usable living space. In addition, shorter **rafters** could be used and the roof and wall of the second story were one unit. These two factors reduced construction costs.





Spanish Colonial Revival



A drawback to the **gambrel roof** was a problem of light to the second story. In Dutch Colonial Revival homes, **dormers** were commonly used to add light. **Shed style dormers** might run the full length of the roof, or intersecting **gables** or **gambrels** might be added.

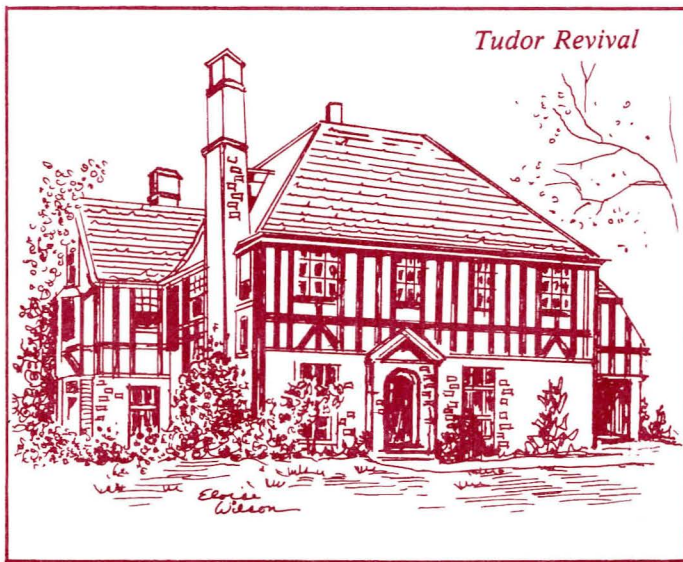
The simple rectangular shape and low-lying profile of the **gambrel roof** made the Dutch Colonial Revival house seem to hug the earth. The simple lines of the Dutch Colonial were also adaptable to the addition of a variety of decorative and architectural features borrowed from other styles. Pattern books sometimes showed a basic Dutch Colonial home with a choice of several stylized exteriors. This added to the popular appeal of the Dutch Colonial Revival.

Spanish Colonial Revival. The *Spanish Colonial Revival* was strongest in the far West, Southwest and Florida, where the original Spanish settlements occurred. However, many fine examples exist elsewhere in the country, including Nebraska. Included in the Spanish Colonial style was Mission Revival, Mediterranean, Venetian, Andalusian, and even Pueblo. Although these sub-styles had distinctive features, they are less common in the midwest. Sometimes the names were used interchangeably.

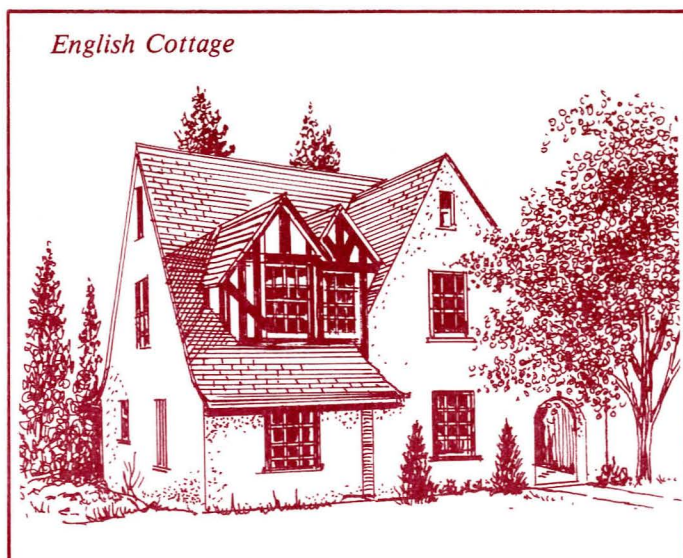
The most distinctive features of the Spanish Colonial House were the low-pitched tiled roof in orange/red to red/brown and the white stuccoed or painted concrete walls. Exposed wood, such as posts, was dark-stained. Doorways and windows were frequently round-headed and might have decorative, wrought iron grillwork. Some Spanish Colonial homes had features borrowed from early Spanish missions: scalloped **facades**, arcades, and bell-towers. These houses are sometimes referred to as Mission Revival. As with other styles of the period, Spanish Colonial decorative features were found in a wide variety of home styles.

English Revival

The English Revival style houses generally fell into three related style categories: Tudor, English Cottage, and English Country House. Although aspects of the English Revival styles can be found in houses built by people at various economic levels, they were particular favorites of the newly prosperous—or those who wanted to give that impression. English Revival housing symbolized taste, culture, and status to many people. Those people who were not so impressed sometimes called the style “Stockbroker Tudor.”



Tudor Revival. The Tudor Revival style took its name from the Tudor dynasty that ruled England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The style is sometimes called Elizabethan, because of the growth of domestic architecture during the long reign of Elizabeth Tudor. The most distinctive feature of Tudor housing was **half-timbering**. Other features included massive, textured, or steeply pitched roofs, large high chimneys, numerous **gables**, **clipped gables**, heavy decorated **verge boards** and **oriel windows**. Windows frequently featured small diamond-shape panes. Stucco, brick, and stone exteriors were common.



English Cottage. Sometimes called Cotswold Cottage, the *English Cottage* style home was generally smaller and simpler than the Tudor Revival home. Characteristic features included prominent, steeply pitched roofs that covered most of the second story, and sharply pointed front **gables** with little overhang. Windows were limited in number or grouped to leave large expanses of wall. Large chimneys topped with chimney pots were typical. Stucco, brick, and stone were typical materials. Roofs were slate, wood shingles, or sometimes tile. Sometimes shingles were curved at the edges to imitate thatched roofing.

English Country House. The *English Country House*, sometimes called English Country Estate, tended to be similar to the Tudor or English Cottage house. However, the English Country House tended to be larger, more sophisticated, and more restrained in style than the other English Revival houses. **Picturesque** details such as **half-timbering** were usually absent. The emphasis was on the sculptural forms of steep textured roofs, numerous **gables**, horizontal clusters of windows and unbroken expanses of wall.

The New Architecture

The second major movement of early twentieth century architecture is called Utilitarianism, Reformist, Progressive, Modern, Natural Romantic, or the New Architecture. Sometimes proponents of this movement were referred to as architectural rebels. The movement is also called Craftsman after one of the major philosophies of the movement.

Craftsman Philosophy

The Craftsman philosophy had such a major impact on domestic art and architecture that it is sometimes identified as a house style. In particular, bungalows (described below) are commonly called Craftsman houses. However, Craftsman was really a philosophy that influenced style of a number of house forms.



English Country House



The Craftsman philosophy was an outgrowth or American interpretation of the English Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century. The philosophy's strongest proponent was Gustav Stickley, who published *The Craftsman* magazine, a popular periodical. Key elements of the Craftsman philosophy were honesty and simplicity. A home was to be a simple and honest expression of the structure, materials, and lifestyle of the residents. Structural honesty meant that the elements of the structure were left exposed and became decorative elements. Examples of this were exposed **rafters** and **knee braces** under roof **eaves**. Honesty in materials meant the use of simple, natural, and rustic materials that were not highly finished. Examples included field-stone, hand-split shakes, unfinished or stained wood, stucco, and cement. A Craftsman house was designed to harmonize with its surroundings and reflect the American pioneer spirit. Although the Craftsman philosophy was part of the "New Architecture," it was in many ways compatible with the patriotism of the Romantic Revival.

Bungalow

The *Bungalow* was one of the most popular styles of the early twentieth century. The origin of the word is Indian, loosely meaning "from Bengal." It was popularized by the British in India, and was used to describe a low house surrounded by porches. In America, the word "Bungalow" is frequently used inter-

Bungalow





changeably with “cottage” and is used to describe a modest, one-story house with wide projecting roofs and large porches. These porches were frequently set off with large columns. A typical Bungalow is rectangular with the front entrance in the **gable** end.

The Bungalow was typically built of plain, simple, materials. Wood shakes or lap siding was common, as was stucco. Foundations and chimneys were frequently cobblestone, fieldstone, or brick. Large porches were frequently set off with large columns.

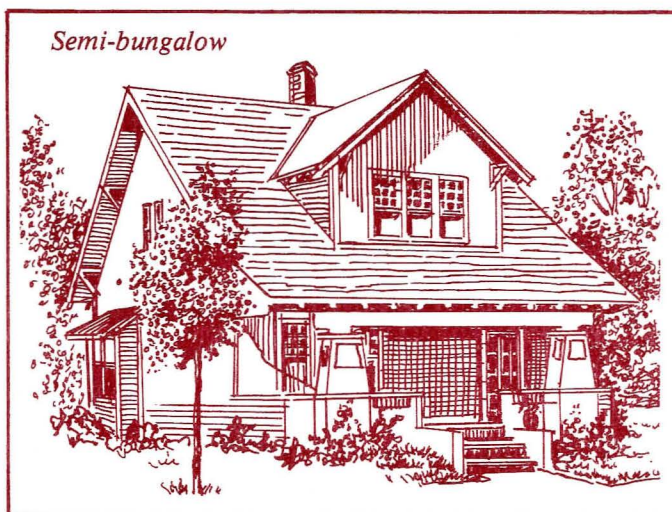
Despite the popularity of the Bungalow, it was not an inexpensive house. The one-story plan was popular for its absence of stairs, but it increased building costs. The one-story structure required more roof and wall area than a comparable size two-story house, thus increasing costs. More land was also required. The Bungalow was sometimes called the least house for the most money. However, one-story plans remain popular, as evidenced in today’s ranch-style homes.

The Bungalow was a popular house form for the expression of the Craftsman philosophy. However, Bungalows were also combined with numerous other architectural styles, including Spanish Colonial, Japanese, Swiss Chalet, Prairie (described below), and even Colonial. Bungalows frequently showed regional influences. In particular, the California Bungalow was a popular version, strongly influenced by Spanish and Oriental architecture.

Semi-bungalow

A second version of the Bungalow, called a *Semi-bungalow*, turned the Bungalow sideways, putting the front entrance in the long side of the rectangle. This style usually had a partial second story and often had **dormers**. The long slope of the roof and wide **eaves** were used to create porches.

The Semi-bungalow is not always distinguished as a separate style from the Bungalow. Semi-bungalows were built of materials similar to the Bungalow, and frequently reflected a



Craftsman influence. There are many outstanding examples of the Bungalow and Semi-bungalow styles in Nebraska.

Prairie Style

The *Prairie Style* is frequently associated with architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. However, other architects employed the style. Prairie architecture was largely a regional style, most popular in the mid-west.

The Prairie Style was similar to the Craftsman movement in that it was also a philosophy. In fact, the philosophy of the Prairie Style was related to the Craftsman ideal. The basic idea of the Prairie Style was that the house should be part of nature. Prairie Style housing took its inspiration from the prairies, and the key elements were low, broad, and horizontal—houses that paralleled the prairie.





Vernacular Housing

Thus, the Prairie Style house used a variety of architectural features to accomplish a horizontal feeling. The roof line was especially important, and shallow-sloped, **hipped roofs** were common. Lower storys had **pent roofs** or ledges to parallel the main roof line. Large overhanging **eaves** were common. Windows were grouped to create alternating horizontal bands of transparent glass and solid wall.

Because the Prairie style house was to blend with nature, various devices were used to integrate the house with the site. **Facade** walls extended to lot lines. Porches, terraces, decks, and balconies were used as transitional spaces between indoors and outdoors. Building materials, such as stucco, stone, brick, and wood were finished in earth tone colors and textures.

The irregular shape and form of the Prairie style house resulted from the fact that it was designed from the inside out. The Prairie Style philosophy emphasized organic form, designing a house from the center out. Interior spaces were open and flowed into each other.

Vernacular architecture is the architecture of the common, local, or traditional building style. Therefore, vernacular architecture can be associated with any locality or era. Vernacular architecture tends to evolve as builders borrow and combine different styles and structural systems. Generally, vernacular architecture tends to be built to suit occupant needs and activities rather than fashion, to employ simplified construction techniques, and to reflect the economic resources of the occupants.

The American Foresquare, Homestead House, and Tri-Gabled Ell are three distinctive house *shapes* or forms typical of early twentieth century vernacular housing. Frequently these homes were built with decorative features from one or more of the popular house *styles* of the period.

Vernacular architecture is sometimes overlooked in studies of architectural styles. It is not designed by famous architects nor is it found in grand public buildings. However, if the purpose of the study of domestic architec-



American Foresquare



ture is to understand more about the residents of the homes and their way of life, then vernacular architecture is most important. Probably the majority of people lived in these simple, utilitarian, and comfortable homes.

American Foursquare

Practically every neighborhood that developed in the early twentieth century has examples of the *American Foursquare* style. A simple square home, commonly two-stories, this house was economical to build and adaptable to a variety of decorative features. The American Foursquare is typically topped by a low **hip roof** with broad **eaves**. One or more **dormers**, frequently with **hip roofs** were common. Large porches, running the full length of the front **facade**, were also typical. Painted, wood lap siding was the common exterior finish, although stone, brick, and cement block were used occasionally.

The box-like shape, wood framing, two-story structure, and limited ornamentation allowed a generous amount of space to be constructed for a reasonable cost, so American Foursquare houses tended to be large and roomy. Full attics and basements were typical.

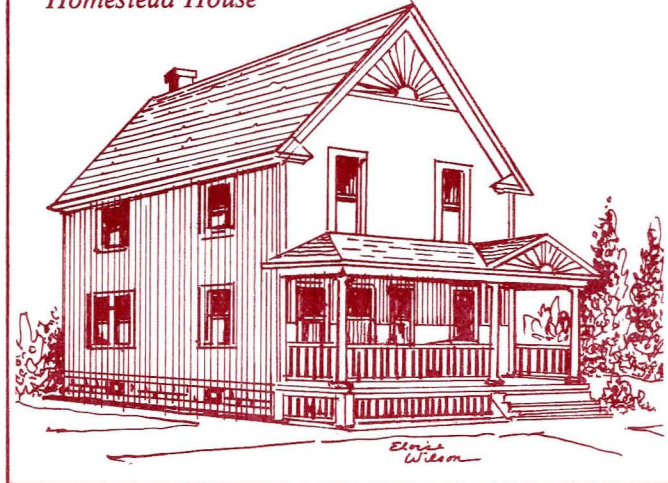
The American Foursquare is sometimes called the "classic box" or "plain house." It was popular within the Craftsman movement as it represented simplicity and honesty. American Foursquare houses also were built with Georgian Colonial, or Spanish Colonial decorative features.

Homestead House

The *Homestead House* style is probably the simplest and most truly vernacular house of the early twentieth century. This plain rectangular house was a result of the development of the nineteenth century farmhouse. It was also a simplified version of the Greek Revival house popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, the Homestead House moved into town.

The Homestead House was a simple, one

Homestead House



and a half story rectangle with a **gable roof** and little ornamentation. This was probably the easiest and most economical form of housing for the farmer turned builder to construct. The front entrance was typically in the **gable end**. Front porches were common. Homestead Houses typically had full attics and basements.

Clapboard or wood lap siding exteriors were common in the Homestead House. As the style became more common in cities and towns, more decorative elements were added. The simple **gables** of the Homestead house suggested the triangular **pediment** of Greek architecture, so classic and Colonial style decorative elements were popular.

Tri-Gabled Ell

A variation of the Homestead House occurred when an intersecting wing was added. This type of house is sometimes called the *Tri-Gabled Ell*. In Nebraska, this style is frequently called the *Tee Farmhouse*. The "L" or "T" shaped house provided more light and ventilation to the interior of the home. Frequently, the porch wrapped around two or more sides of the house. The entrance was often near the intersection of the two wings. The intersecting wings gave the house more visual interest, which was appealing to those who like the highly decorative and **picturesque** housing of the Victorian era.



Not every house built during the early twentieth century will fit into one of the house styles discussed. Many houses were combinations of several styles. However, the majority of houses built during the period reflect at least some of the elements of one of the described styles. Further, examples of early twentieth century housing styles can be found just about everywhere in the state of Nebraska.

This publication is not a complete architectural history. Rather, it is an introduction to architectural style and its cultural influences. Understanding why homes were built a particular way, learning the correct terms to describe their features and appreciating the cultural values they reflect, are the first steps to becoming an "old-house-lover".

Tri-Gabled Ell





Terms to Know

clipped gable - a style of gable roof where the ends of the ridge slant downward, creating a flat triangular segment at the roof peak

cornice - decorative elements or moldings placed at the top of the wall, where walls and roof join

dentils - pattern of molding used typically as part of the cornice, in a toothed pattern

dormer - a vertical framed structure projecting from a pitched roof, containing windows

eaves - part of the roof that projects or hangs over the side wall

eclectic - combination of styles without any organized pattern.

facade - the entire front exterior face of a building, usually the most decorated and containing the front door

fan light - fan-shaped or semicircular window, typically placed over a door

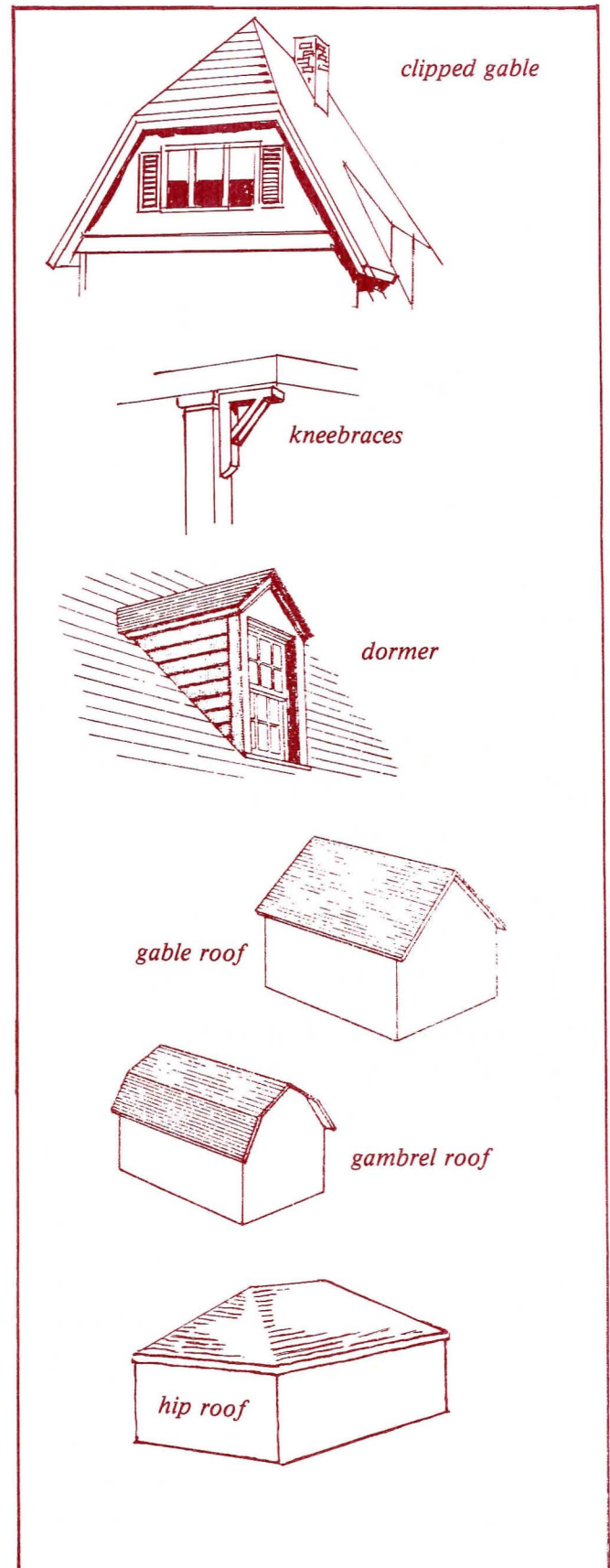
gable - a roof style that slopes from only two walls; the triangular portion of the wall at the end of the roof

gambrel roof - roof style that has two slopes or pitches on each side of the ridge, a shallow upper slope and a steep lower slope

half-timbering - wall construction where framing members are left exposed and the spaces between them are filled with brick, stone or plaster; most twentieth century examples are decorative only

hip roof - a roof that is sloped from all four walls

knee braces - framing member placed inside an angle to add stiffness, typically used in the angle between wall and roof, or under the eaves





oriel window - window that projects from the face of the wall, typically on an upper story; may be supported by brackets or cantilevered

Palladian window - a style of windows where three windows are grouped together and the center window is larger and arched

pediment - wide, low pitched gable, used as a crowning element over doors, windows and on the building facade

pent roof - short roof section, attached to a wall and sloping in one direction; may be over doors or windows

picturesque - used to describe house styles that are asymmetrical and that use quaint or unusual details

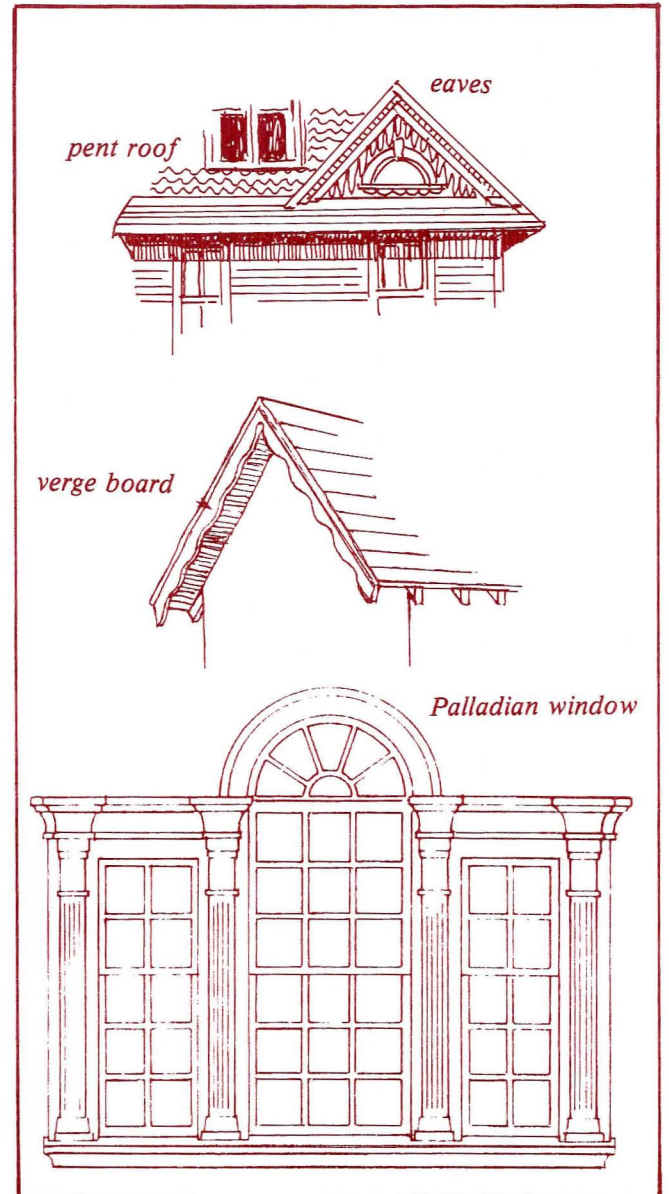
pilaster - rectangular column attached to a wall to add stiffness or strength, typically styled to resemble a classical column

portico - porch, typically with classical columns and pediment

rafters - sloping roof member used to support the roof covering, extends from ridge or hip to eaves

shed roof - roof having only one slope or pitch, commonly used for dormers and building additions

verge board - vertical board on the edge or end of the roof gable, sometimes decorated



If you are interested in the topic of this publication—early twentieth century Nebraska homes - you may wish to obtain a copy of the Leader's Guide F "Nebraska Homes: A Heritage of Pride." This Leader's Guide contains a lesson outline, visuals, and bibliography. The lesson outline is appropriate for a club or organization program of one-half to one hour in length. Contact the Cooperative Extension Service Office in your county.