



Restoration and Maintenance Techniques
For The Pre-1939 House

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The Rise & Fall of the Mansard Roof

by Sarah McNamara



THE MANSARD ROOF is the hallmark of the Second Empire style of architecture, a period which, in America, lasted only from the 1860s to the 1890s. Adapted for use on just about every style of house, the mansard was a grand and fashionable roof during its brief lifetime.

CHARACTERIZED BY STEEP SIDES, dormer windows, and multi-colored slate tiles, a mansard needs two rafters for its different slopes. These slopes may be straight, convex, concave, or both (S-shaped). Dormer windows, in a single or double row, may be rectangular, pointed, gabled, or round. Slate tiles and iron cresting are the finishing touch.

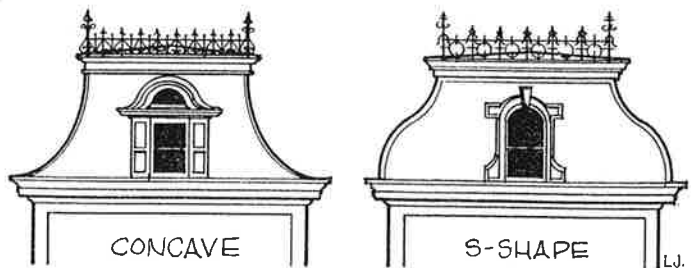
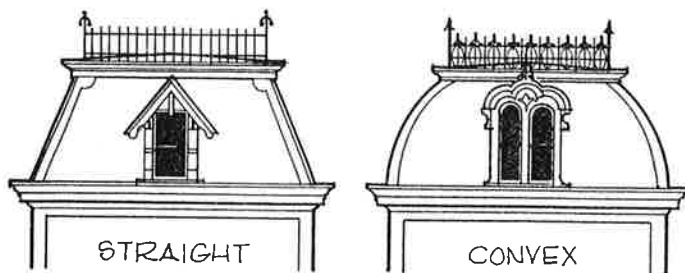
DURING HIS REIGN from 1852 to 1870, Louis Napoleon and his wife Eugenie rebuilt Paris, then considered the cultural center of the world. Grand avenues were lined with tall, ornate apartment buildings topped by mansard roofs --

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Mansard *cont'd from front page*

hence its nickname, "the French roof." The architecture of the French Second Empire is marked not only by mansard roofs, but by large bays or pavilions, rich ornamentation, tall windows with arched pediments, and such classical details as quoins, belt courses, and bracketed cornices. Second Empire buildings are at least two, usually three, storeys tall (they had to hold up those ornate roofs!) and are symmetrical square blocks. The various combinations of these details produced a rich and diverse architectural style.

THE TWO INTERNATIONAL Expositions held in Paris in 1855 and 1867 exposed the Second Empire style to the rest of the world. Drawings and engravings of the new Paris made their way to Europe where the style was immediately imitated. Architects in Germany, Italy, and England built mansarded buildings, but it was in America that the Second Empire style really caught on.

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A perfect example of the American Second Empire, the Gardo House in Salt Lake City was razed to make room for a bank.

Whose Idea Was This?

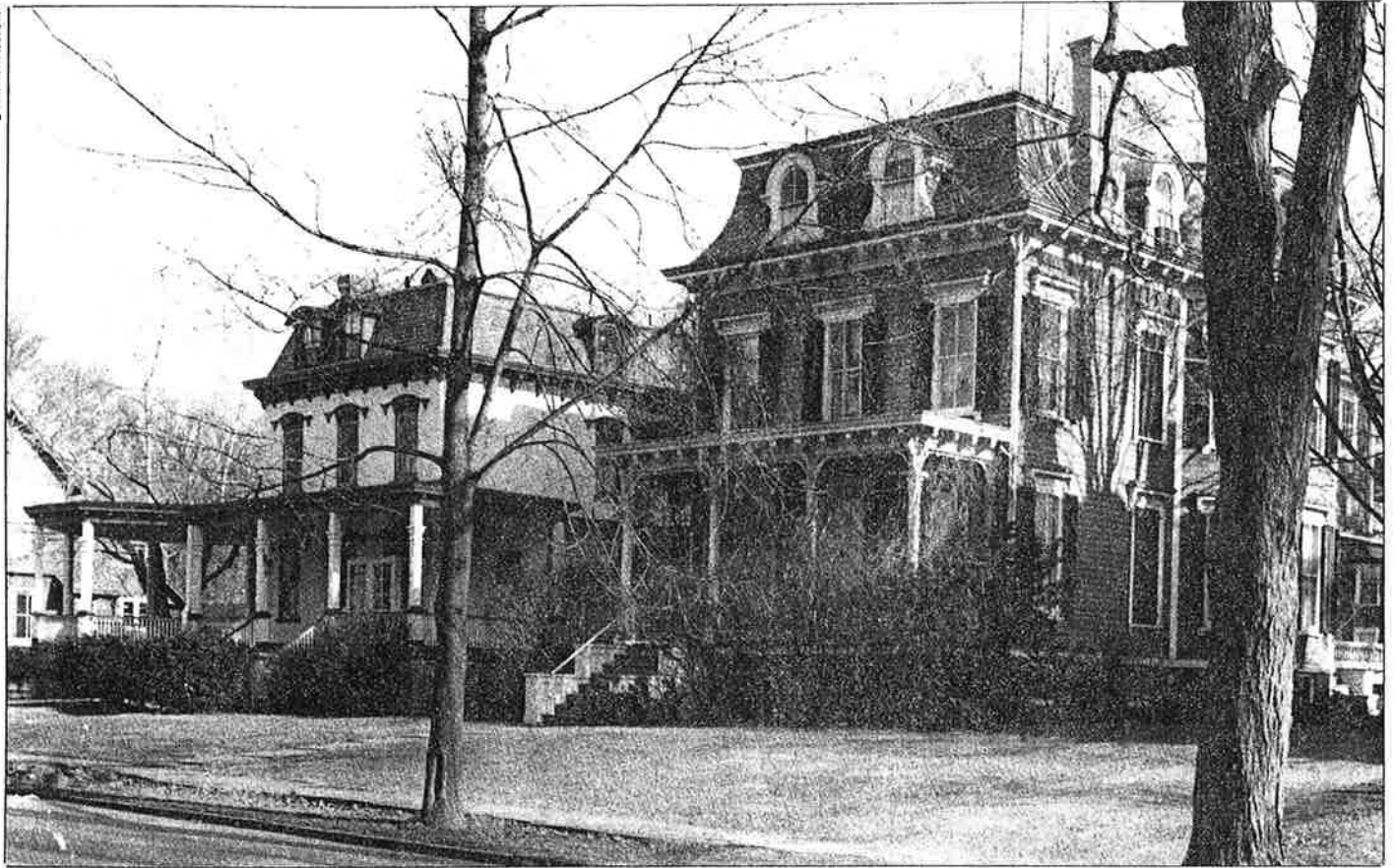
THE MANSARD ROOF was not a new design when it took Louis Napoleon's fancy. It was derived from Italian sources and had been in use since the early 1500s. The man who popularized the roof and gave it his name was Francois Mansart (1598-1666), one of the top architects of his time. Although he had no formal training, he garnered knowledge from apprenticeships with his father, a carpenter, his uncle, a mason, and his brother-in-law, a sculptor. Mansart became famous for applying classical details to buildings that were not necessarily designed for them. Although his work was of the finest quality, he had a reputation for being unable to adhere to plans and budgets, a trait that cost him many jobs.

THE MANSARD ROOF became popular because it turned unusable attic space into a livable extra floor. Unlike a peaked roof, a mansard allows for efficient use of the attic, and its characteristic dormer windows let in an abundance of light. In France, homeowners were taxed by the number of floors in their houses. Since the top floor of a mansarded house is actually the attic, the mansard roof provided a tax break!

America Goes Mansard

AMERICA LOVED the Second Empire style. The flamboyant style projected the kind of image the United States government wanted. City and state governments adapted the style during its heyday as well. Alfred B. Mullet, supervising architect of the United States Treasury Department during Ulysses S. Grant's presidency, built many Second Empire federal government buildings. The State, War, and Navy Building in Washington, D.C., now known as the Executive Office Building, was one of Mullet's creations. Another good example of his work is the Old Post Office in St. Louis. Philadelphia City Hall, built by John McArthur, is the largest example of Second Empire style in the United States today, and was indeed the largest building in America when it was built between 1874 and 1881.

SOME OF THE GREAT HOTELS built in the late 1800s were in the Second Empire style. The San Francisco Palace, destroyed during the Great Earthquake, was seven storeys high and paved with marble. The United States Hotel and the Grand Union, both in Saratoga Springs, were huge, highly ornamented buildings with mansard roofs. Both were torn down in the 1950s when they were thought to be too expensive to run. Businesses adopted the style, too, though very few of these buildings remain.



Two handsome mansarded homes in Poughkeepsie, NY. Note the characteristic sweeping verandahs that mark American mansards.

The Domestic Mansard

WHEN CIVIC LEADERS start a trend, it doesn't take the public long to follow. Houses with mansards began popping up everywhere from New York to Nevada. People took the most striking feature of the Second Empire style -- the roof -- and adapted it in order to give domestic architecture a more contemporary look. It's a common fallacy that mansard roofs were used only on the mansions of the wealthy, but actually they can be found on all sorts of houses. The Victorian architect Samuel Sloan once said, "The French roof is in great request. Public and private dwellings and even stables are covered with it and no man who wants a fashionable house, will be without it."

PLAIN OR ORNATE, mansarded houses can be free standing, in rows, or semi-detached. They were built of wood, brick, granite, marble or brownstone. They can be clapboarded, painted, shingled, or stuccoed in just about any color. Unlike the Second Empire public buildings, mansarded homes often had spacious porches or verandahs. Mansards were even added to existing buildings.



A simple French roof in Maumee, Ohio.



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A grand, polychromed mansardic house in Georgetown, Colorado.

The Fall From Grace

UNFORTUNATELY, the Second Empire style fell from grace almost as quickly as it reached its peak. Because the style became popular during Ulysses S. Grant's presidency and was promoted by Mullet, his chief architect, it was closely associated with the scandalous politics of the era. The Second Empire style was given the derisive nickname the "General Grant" style (even though Grant lived in a brick house with a flat roof), and people began to despise the

style as much as they despised the Grant presidency.

AFTER ITS DEMISE, the mansard roof was considered an architectural perversion, even though it served a very practical purpose and added considerable interest to skylines around the country. Lewis Mumford even called the mansard "a crowning indignity"! People began demolishing the grand buildings and replaced them with newer, more fashionable designs. Only recently have people come to realize the importance of saving the remaining examples of that architectural era.

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Neighborhood Housing Services



Top left: Mansards grace row houses in many American cities. Top right: Even with asphalt shingles, this Staten Island mansard is striking. Bottom left: Note the bays and tower typical of the Second Empire style on this house in Rhinebeck, NY. Bottom right: An unusual 1½ storey mansarded house in Utah. Notice the roof on the garage in the background! Cover photograph courtesy of the Utah State Historical Society.



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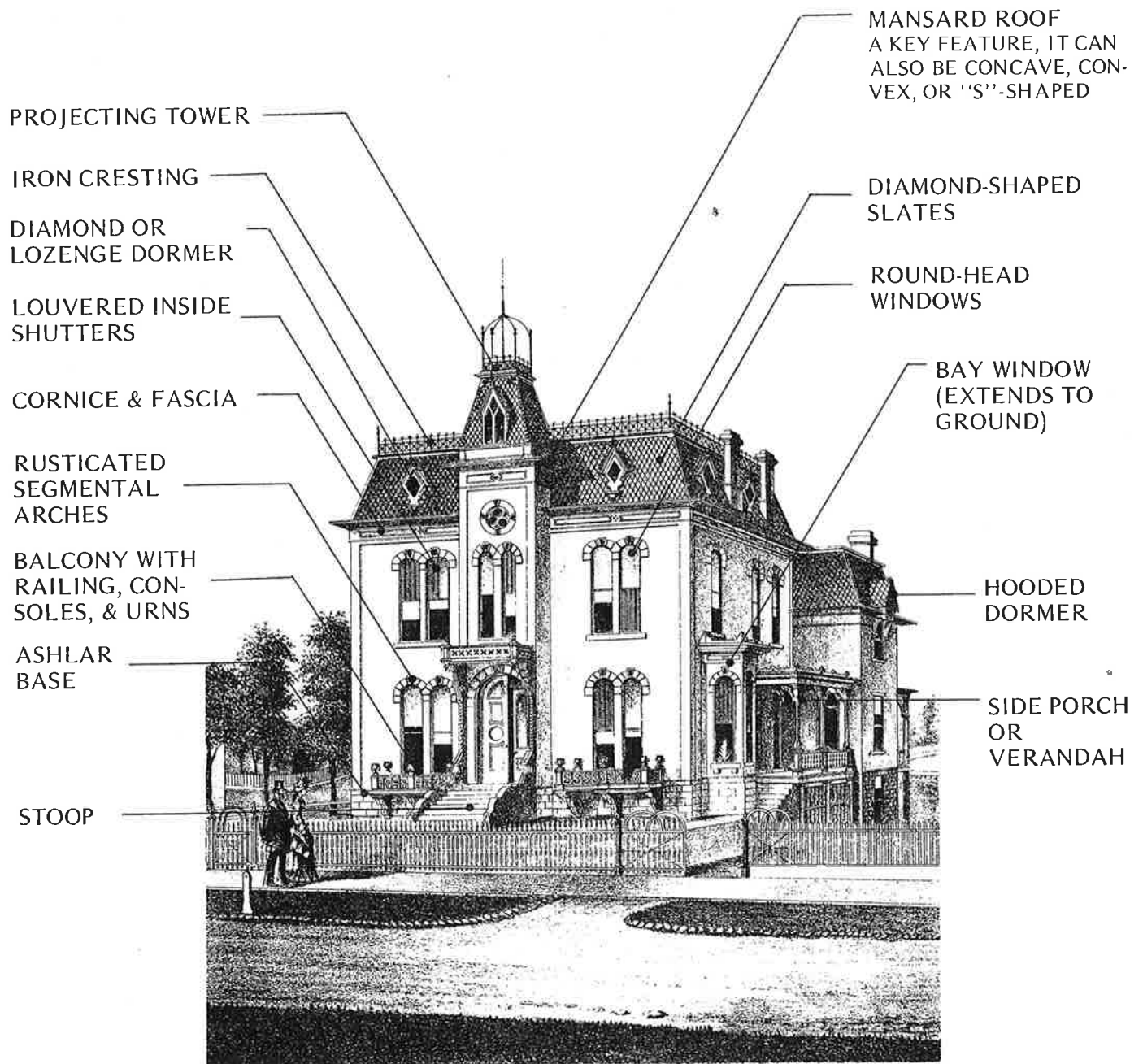


Reading The Old House

The Second Empire or Mansard Style

BY JAMES C. MASSEY

The Mansard Roof is named after the noted 17th-century French architect Francois Mansart. It was a most functional device to increase the usefulness of the attic storey with better light and headroom. On top of the steeply pitched lower surface is a low hip, frequently looking flat.



Most popular in the 1860s, '70s, and '80s, the Second Empire (sometimes called General Grant) Style derives from the French Second Empire period (1852-1870), which reinterpreted earlier French styles. Besides the ever-present Mansard, look for boldly ornamented forms, ornamental columns and pilasters, and solid overall forms.