

Matthew A. Cochran

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Professor Peter Barr

### Damon-Ash House

The Damon-Ash House at 456 State Street in Adrian, Michigan, includes many features typical of the Gothic revival style, but the structure is closer to the Greek revival style. In addition, the porch seems more typical of the Craftsman-style structure because of the knee-bracing on the posts.

The Gothic-revival style began in the early 1800's in a rebellion against what was around at the time in England, classic forms in a rigidity style (Baker 1994). Horace Walpole redesigned his country house outside of London in the Gothic Style, naming his estate Strawberry Hill (Barr). The style was made popular in America by architect Alexander Jackson Davis and his friend Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing promoted the Gothic revival style in two mid-century publications: *Cottage Residences* in 1842 and *The Architecture of Country Houses* in 1850. The first Gothic-revival house in America was Alexander Jackson Davis's 1832 Glen Ellen, in Baltimore, Maryland. Most Gothic-revival house was constructed between 1840 and 1870; examples from the 1870's are less frequent (McAlester 1984). The interest in the Gothic-revival style began to diminish in America after 1865, although some began to spring up during the 1870's due to the writings of the English critic John Ruskin, who emphasized continental rather than English examples as models (McAlester 1984). The Gothic-revival style never gained the popularity that the proceeding style of Greek-revival did—especially in Adrian, where

only the Farrer-Gempel-Porter House at 512 South Main stands as an approximation of the Gothic Revival style from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Key features to look for in the Gothic Revival style include, but are not limited to, steeply pitched, inverted V-shaped roofs, carvings over the windows or as verge boards that hang under gable peaks. These carvings became popular as the steam powered scroll became available. Board and batten siding is often placed on the houses to emphasize the verticality of the structure. Also often a one-story porch spans the entire façade of the house. Windows and doors often have drip molding that would help with the run-off of the water so it wouldn't leak into the house. They would also typically have pointed arches or decorative crowns. There are also tall chimneys that would be typically painted to resemble expensive cut stone. The front of the house will either be asymmetrical, castellated, or either has centered, paired, or front gables.

Underneath the Gothic exterior lies a technical advancement: balloon-framing, which is a lightweight, closely spaced assembly of relatively small boards that could be nailed to sill, plat, and rafters. Houses built using this technique could be erected more quickly by two men than the heavy timber frame of earlier houses by twenty (Foley 1980).

Greek-revival style was the dominant style of American domestic architecture during the 1830s through 1850s. Architectural models of Greek democracy were thought to appropriate in the new republic, as Americans rejected traditional ties to England in the decades following the War of 1812 (McAlester 1984). Some of the features of the Greek-revival style are porch roofs that are emphasized with a wide band of trim. This represented the classical entablature and is usually divided into two parts: the frieze

above and the architrave below (McAlester). Most Greek-revival houses will have porches supported by square or rounded columns in a classical order. Most doors will also have beautiful decorations on the trim of the front door.

The Damon-Ash house is a beautifully decorated house from the inside and outside. The house has a front gabled, steeply pitched roof. In front of where the roof comes to a point lays a teal and white decorated verge board with cross bracing. The color of the house is an orange-brown color with the windows and overhang in the color of teal. Under the decorated verge board, on the exterior wall is a board and batten siding. Around the back of the house is an addition that was added in 1988, and that extends south from the original structure. According to the Sanborn Insurance Maps, there was a room that extended from the backside of the house in 1908 that was taken off by 1916. The current owner, Pam Bacon and her husband put the addition back on when they purchased the house.

A front wrap-around porch with white square posts and diagonal bracings extends from the front of the house. When Pam Bacon and her husband purchased the home in 1984 they started the remodeling. At that time, the rough, cedar, board-and-batten façade was stained olive green color. With the remodeling the color was changed to an orange brown and the board and batten front was smoothed out and painted over to give the house a unified look. Also at that time, the front left corner of the house had a small walkway and three windows. With the remodeling, the windows on the side facing the street were taken out and replaced with a single screen sliding door. On the adjacent corner, the window was taken out also and a sliding screen door was put in its place. The walkway was replaced with a stone patio and brick walkway. Some of the bricks used in

the walkway are the original bricks that were used in the streets of Adrian, when, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it had brick roads.

The inside of the house fits neatly within a box-like shape, which is characteristic of the Greek Revival style (Walker 1997). But the interior also has characteristics of the early Gothic Revival style, including a central hall on both floors. When you first walk into the house you look down a corridor with the staircase that leads to the second floor to the left and to the right is a sitting room. The corridor leads to another gathering room. To the left of the gathering room are two bay windows facing the south side of the house. To the right is a richly textured, plastered wall in an off-white color and with rectangles that stick out of the wall like shingles would project off of a roof.

Ahead of the gathering room is the dining room where, according to the current owner, there are three different kinds of evidence of a ghost. First, the Bacon family cat sometimes sits in the far right front corner of the dining room talking to the corner. Second, once, when their younger child was sitting in the room, he looked over and noticed his cup began to slide over on the table. As he looked around to see if the table was uneven, the cup stopped moving. But a couple seconds later began to move again. And finally when the addition of the house was first added on, a family friend came to stay with them and spent the night. In the middle of the night, he awoke to find a short, older lady standing at the foot of the bed, whose name came to him with “bell” in it. And it turns out that in 1911 a couple named Fred E. Ash and Mabel Mae owned and lived at the same residence! But the good thing about the story is that the ghost is a friendly ghost. Apparently it is a motherly style ghost that loves the men who are around in the house!

To the right of the dining room lays the master bedroom with another doorway that once led to the sitting room, but was redesigned to hold a library for books. On the left is a sliding glass door that leads out into the brick patio area. Next to the dining room is the kitchen, which is a mix of designs by the current owner and also of the previous owner George VonWahlde, who, in the 1970s, was also responsible for transforming the exterior of the house from the Greek Revival style into the Gothic Revival style. There are many wooden cabinets and a hardwood floor with peg holes in the strips of wood so that he would swipe ash and dust into a pile and literally lift up the wooden flooring and sweep the mess into the basement. Then he would replace the wooden flooring and secure it with the pegs.

Next to the kitchen is the Bacon's addition, which houses another sitting room, a long bathroom, and a set of stairs that lead to a Mrs. Bacon's art studio above and a basement below. Down in the basement is a low ceiling with pipes and wooden boards running on top. There are many rooms downstairs for storage that would have been used for vegetable or potato storage in the old days. In the far back room is a peculiar room. On the floor is a huge boulder that they literally built the house around. On the west side of the wall is a hole that was covered up by bricks. The hole was most likely a place where an old fireplace was located.

Even though the Damon-Ash House was not built until 1855, the history of the land under it dates back almost to the founding of Adrian when, in 1825, Addison and Sarah Comstock bought 480 acres (Lindquist, 2). Just two years later, Elias and Adeline S. Dennis purchased a large tract of land adjacent to Comstocks, including the property where the Damon-Ash House now stands. Following Elias Dennis's death, his widow

sold the property to Langford and Ambrose Berry, who platted out the Dennis Street and State Street area known as Berry's Southern Addition, and sold lot 13 to B. F. Condit for \$240.00, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1849. Then, according to the abstract of title, in February 1853, the land was purchased by Luke R. Damon, a train conductor, for \$500. A few years later, in 1855, a house was built on the property then known as 26 State Street.

The house has had quite a few owners over the years. The cost of the property skyrocketed when Frederick Avery bought the estate from Luke Damon on March 29, 1866, for \$5000. Later, in May of 1880, Frederick Avery passed away and the land was handed over to his wife Mary J. Avery. When Mary Avery passed away, while traveling to El Reno, Oklahoma, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1910, she left her estate to her sons George E. Avery, a firefighter for the city according to the city directories, and Edward Avery. A year later, in 1911, they sold the land and house to Fred E. Ash and his wife Mabel Mae for the price of \$3000. When Fred and Mabel were unable to make the mortgage payments during the economic depression of the 1930s, the land and house was given to foreclosure and sold by Lenawee County Savings Bank to Clarence W. Fuss and his wife Lilia L. Fuss on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1938. In 1955 Clarence died and the house was deeded over to his wife Lilia, who, in turn, sold the house on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963 to a couple named John W. and Marilda N. May. According to the abstract of title, in the spring of 1965 the couple filed for a divorce and sold the house to George VonWahlde and wife Mary. George is the person credited with transforming the look of the house from the Greek revival style into the now Gothic revival style that is currently seen according to a survey of land by Adrian College. In June of 1970, George and his family decided to move from the estate. They sold the property to Douglas and Helen Orton for the price of \$25,500.

Not long after, in October of 1975, the Orton's sold the house to Robert and Billie Goedert for the price of \$31,000. Then finally in 1984 Pam Bacon and her husband purchased the home for \$65,000.

In conclusion, the Damon-Ash House was built by Luke R. Damon in the popular Greek Revival style, in 1855, and then remodeled more than a century later by George and Mary VonWahlde in a style that was not common in this part of Adrian: the Gothic Revival. Thanks to Von Wahlde's efforts, visitors to the historic Dennis Street and State Street neighborhood can see not only outstanding examples of the styles that residents of Adrian loved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but a hint of what they spurned.

### Bibliography

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Lindquist, Charles. Adrian, *The City That Worked*. Adrian: Lenawee County Historical Society, 2004.

McAlester, Virginia & Lee. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984.

Walker, Lester. *American Shelter*. Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1997.

### Archival Research

Abstract of Title of 126 State Street, Adrian, MI 49221 (in the possession of the homeowners).

Lenawee County Historical Museum:

- Adrian City Directories
- Adrian Telegram Newspaper obituaries
- Land Survey Cards by Adrian College

- Personal interview with Pamela Bacon Fall of 2004
- Sandborn Insurance Maps