

STYLE



The picturesque Queen Anne style survived into the 20th century in Carson City, exemplified by the Herman Springmeyer House, circa 1908, with its fanciful conical porch roof.

A Frontier Find

NEVADA'S CAPITAL BOASTS AN ARCHITECTURAL BONANZA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JAMES C. MASSEY AND SHIRLEY MAXWELL

Carson City, the capital of Nevada, has grown into a modern mini-metropolis, but it's still a town that cherishes its frontier beginnings and post-Civil War past. Its old buildings are a remarkably sophisticated collection of the architectural styles that captured America's fancy after the Civil War, often rendered in an unmistakably western vernacular.

Tucked up against the Sierra Mountains in western Nevada's high desert country, the town was founded in 1858 and named for the nearby Carson River. (The river, in turn, had been named for Kit Carson, legendary trapper, guide, and fighter.)

Carson City is a hop-skip-and-a-jump from Lake Tahoe, Reno, the storied ghost town of Virginia City, and the long-abandoned gold-mining camps that built the West. Yet it is emphatically not a ghost town. (For the record, its historically significant metal was silver, not gold.) And while it has its share of neon-spangled casinos and slot spots (this is Nevada, after all), there's more than gambling to this little city.

Architectural Riches

Carson City's historic building stock runs the gamut from churches, schools, and other institutional buildings—such as the imposing Nevada State Capitol and the U.S. Mint (now the Nevada State Museum), which was constructed in 1864 to turn gold and silver from the fabled Comstock Lode into



TOP: One-story-plus-mansard-roof houses, like the 1875 Belknap House, are uncommon. Note the handsome pair of bay windows at the side. **BOTTOM:** The U.S. Mint, home of the famed Carson City silver dollar, was designed by Alfred B. Mullett using distinctive local sandstone. The 1869 building is now the Nevada State Museum.

coins—through modest settlers' homes, commodious Victorian mansards, and substantial Queen Anne houses.

Meandering through the city's residential historic district west of Carson Street provides tantalizing glimpses of what the town may have looked like in successive decades of the 19th century. (A helpful Kit Carson Trail Map at the Visitors' Center gives dates for selected buildings.)

Stone Surprises

As in many parts of the timber-rich United States, wood was by far the most common house-building material in Carson City, with brick a distant second. Here, however, these mundane choices are overshadowed, if not outnumbered, by the distinctive use of local sandstone, quarried by convicts from the Nevada state prison and used in the construction of buildings large and small, public and private. Sometimes laid as rough-hewn blocks, sometimes given a flat, polished surface, the shimmering, multihued stone lends an unexpected pastel glamour to the town.

RIGHT: The Forman-Roberts House Museum is noted for its exuberant Gothic Revival ornament. Built in 1864 in Washoe City, it was moved here via railroad in 1874. **BELOW:** The 1863 Ormsby-Rosser House is typical of small early houses in Carson City.



One of Carson City's best-loved landmarks is the small Gothic Revival Forman-Roberts House on Carson Street, originally constructed in 1864 in nearby Washoe City (which, like many early mining towns, was short-lived). Saloon keeper James Doane Roberts and his British-born

wife, Annie, had the house transported to Carson City in 1874, probably by flat car on the brand-new Virginia and Truckee Railroad. In Nevada's up-and-down mining economy of the 1870s, moving houses from town to town was fairly common.

The two-story clapboard-covered

house could well have been inspired by A. J. Downing's 1842 architectural pattern book, *Cottage Residences*, but it has a Western flavor all its own. Its lacy, jig-sawn wooden ornament (a fine example of Carpenter Gothic detailing), absurdly steep gables, pointed-arch windows, and bright yellow paint job have made it a favorite with locals and visitors alike. Preservation groups rose up in its defense when it was threatened with demolition to make room for a park in 1969, and the little landmark is now a house museum surrounded by a miniscule public park.

Literary Landmark

The Orion Clemens House (1863-64) on Division Street is a large, L-shaped, gable-fronted frame residence sporting Italianate brackets and deep cornice returns. Over the years it has lost its shapely Italianate window trim and acquired a covering of stucco over the original wooden siding. Orion Clemens was the first (and only) secretary of the Nevada Territory. He intended his new house to serve as a part-time governor's mansion, because he often was called upon to serve as acting governor. Clemens was the elder brother of Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens), and Twain spent some time there during a stint as a reporter for a Virginia City newspaper. Twain's impressions of his brother's house can be found in his autobiographical travelogue *Roughing It*.

Materials in Spades

The Rinckel Mansion on North Curry Street (1876) is one of only a few brick



ABOVE: Frame gable-and-wing houses are common. This one on Ann Street is enhanced with wooden quoins on the gabled front.

residences in Carson City—and the only known architect-designed house in town. Built by Charles H. Jones for a German immigrant who made his fortune in the Comstock mines, the imposing two-story house is crowned with impressive iron cresting.

Sandstone in distinctive pink, green, and brown tones is used to good effect in the Thomas J. Edwards House (circa 1883) at the corner of Minnesota and Musser Streets. Typical of 1880s vernacular style, a pretty two-story side bay and a welcoming front porch with graceful arches between the square posts relieve the austere lines of the gable-fronted house.

The 1875 Belknap House on North Nevada Street is a simple but handsome example of the Mansard style in frame and clapboard. (In more elaborate, citified forms, Mansards are referred to as Second Empire—or even “General Grant Style,” in recognition of their popularity during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant.) Arched hoods shield the dormer windows, and dignified modillions underline the cornice—but there’s a note of Western whimsy in the flat, applied “dentils” on the frieze and the curvy pendant trim on the porch.

One-story L-shaped cottages enlivened by spindlework and Carpenter Gothic trim are representative of the respectable work-



TOP: No fewer than three bay windows adorn the 1875 Olcovich-Meyers House, designed in a late Italianate style with Gothic Revival gables. **ABOVE:** The warm-toned local sandstone is used in major public buildings and in a few houses, including the circa 1883 Edwards House, where it was laid in a random ashlar pattern.

ing-class houses of the 1870s and 1880s. They were often the homes of folks who had their own ideas about design and decoration, aided perhaps by a drawing or two from the architectural pattern books that circulated even to the late-19th-century Nevada frontier. They provide a delightful sidebar to Carson City’s old-house scene.

An intrepid pedestrian could take in all this post-Civil War charm on foot.

Those who are willing to hop into their cars and venture beyond the city limits (and well beyond the Victorian era) will be rewarded by the unassumingly handsome sandstone buildings of the Stewart Indian School campus (circa 1890-1930, and a National Historic Landmark).

Carson City has rightly been called Nevada’s hidden treasure—and it’s more than worth the hunt. ■

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