The Marvin, Sackett House, N.Y. Built 1840 typifying the Greek Revival style of architecture predominant in Franklin Square quarter.

Saratoga’s Grecian Columns: The Pillars of Society

By TULA LEWNES

On a recent historic house tour in the area of Saratoga Springs, I feasted on the interiors and exteriors of a wide range of styles from Italianate, Second Empire, Victorian Gothic, Romanesque Revival, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival to spectacular $1 billion landmark mansions with Doric porticoes and gardens with open colonnaded pergolas—Greek Revival structures that were built from 1820-1860.

Attic temples abound within the beautifully preserved 19th century Erie Canal village known as Vischer Ferry. The Greek Revival architectural style appears in the majority of homes within its boundaries that border the Mohawk River on the south, the Van Vranken Road and its extension to the river on the east, the Niagara Mohawk power lines on the north and on the west about 1/8th of a mile from Stony Creek extending to the river. They dominate the area in extraordinary numbers as they do the Franklin Square quarter of Saratoga Springs. The National Museum of Dance typifies one of them with its interior classical columns in refined lines and proportions—majestic tributes to terpsichorean artists in the Hall of Fame.

In the 1840’s when the Erie Canal was enlarged, there was a population explosion and a frenzy of building activity. It was a time when America had gained its feet and was striving forward with conscious vigor and confidence. The system of government was crystallizing. Wherever there was a thriving and bustling community, the Greek Revival house took root and became more and more popular with the passage of time. The idea was to build a house that resembled a Greek temple since the Greek forms were thought to embody purity and the
The Rose Garden. A gift from Spencer Trask to his wife Katrina. Modeled after a formal Italian garden featuring an open colonnaded pergola, great varieties of roses, four wooded areas, with sculpted ponds and hand crafted statuary.

ideals of democracy. The architectural emphasis moved to the gabled end, where a large triangular pediment was supported by Ionic or Doric columns or pilasters.

Simpler and cleaner than Georgian, they were usually painted white. Many were made of wood frames with clapboards on the exterior. Some colonial style houses had Greek pediments added to their porches to make them conform to the popular style of the period. The columns and capitals were always decorated in one of the classic Greek orders: Ionic, Doric, or Corinthian.

The Greek Revival penetrated all sections of the country. From Georgia to Maine and from the Atlantic coast to the old Northwest and the lower Mississippi Valley, the style was adapted to public buildings, churches, commercial structures and small houses, the great mansions of southern plantations to almost all types of buildings, including privies.

The leading architect for Greek Revival architecture in New York was Minard Lafever. He wrote three books that helped spread and encourage this style: The Young Builder's General Instructor (1829), The Modern Builder's Guide (1833), and The Beauties of Modern Architecture (1825). Browsing through these architectural manuals one recognizes the plates of the two-paneled doors and the Greek T-molding that are so evident in the houses of that period. It was probably with these very same books in hand that the pre-Civil War architects and builders set about constructing these simple, dignified structures.

Prior to 1820, America had copied mainly English architecture. With the economic expansion and the seemingly limitless natural resources that were

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being developed and exploited and the industrial power that has since carried America to national greatness was being established, an eclectic form of architecture—the Greek temple—became the highest architectural ideal for a whole generation of Americans. They were motivated not merely by a taste for the style, but perhaps more importantly by its romantic associations for the ancient Greeks who were by now endowed with a halo of political, moral, and cultural perfection, and the modern Greeks who were earning the sympathy of the new nation by their struggle for independence against Turkey in the war of 1821-27. An increased interest in archaeology also endeared them to this style.

The names given to the then-new towns, such as Athens, Troy, and Ithaca, are likewise an American tribute to Greek heroism.

Question: What were the names of the three daughters of a philhellenic dowager who had aspirations for them to one day become the pillars of society?

Answer: Ionia, Doria, and Corinthia.