

# ARCHITECTURAL RESOURCES OF GEORGETOWN

The “Williamson County Courthouse Historic District,” was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. It encompasses one of the finest collections of high Victorian commercial architecture in Texas. The district includes approximately 50 structures which were constructed primarily between the years 1885 and 1930, when Georgetown experienced its first Golden Age. This was a period when Georgetown had successfully weathered its frontier settlement days, and the community offered great promise in the years ahead. A lively host of commercial establishments clustered around an impressive county courthouse, Southwestern University had located on the eastern edge of town, and most important of all, the railroad had come to Georgetown (in 1878). It was a time of real prosperity for some and a time of anticipated prosperity for many others and the buildings that survive from this period help to convey the significant period in history. However, the city’s beginnings a few decades earlier were less grand.

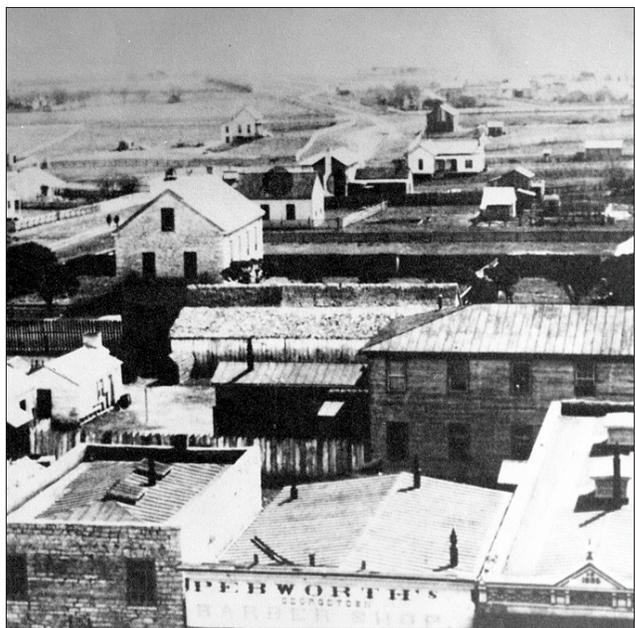
Georgetown was founded in 1848, and named the county seat of Williamson County that same year. At that time the “town” was little more than an undeveloped tract overlooking the confluence of the San Gabriel Rivers to the north. Founding father George Washington Glasscock donated 173 acres of land which was quickly surveyed and marked off in a uniform grid of blocks and lots and offered for sale at a public auction on July 4, 1848. This grid system of development, with a central public square donated for governmental purposes, is typical of county seats throughout the state.

New property owners found themselves in possession of attractive sites with abundant trees and foliage and an ample water supply, but few resources other than natural ones on which to draw. Crude shacks and log buildings initially served as residences and commercial and governmental establishments as well. Most early settlers had neither the financial means nor the time to devote

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: This historic overview is adapted from a :  
: Narrative: “Physical Development of His- :  
: toric Downtown Georgetown”, by Linda :  
: Flory Butler (September, 1983). The text :  
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: Carol Kennedy in 1982. :  
:.....

to erecting a refined structure. Immediate shelter, in the most basic sense, was a priority so that early inhabitants could go about the business of settling the land and establishing the town.

Farming the surrounding land appeared to be the principle endeavor of most Georgetown families at this time, according to census records of 1850. Other occupations listed in the census records were merchant, trader, grocer, hotel keeper, and lawyer. The commercial and mercantile establishments were concentrated in the center of the



*Close-in residential areas developed early in Georgetown’s history. Many of the houses had modest details and were set in small fenced-in yards.*

community around the square. The expanded labor force included a comparatively large number of blacksmiths in addition to a tanner, gunsmith, wheelwright, and millwright, each serving a critical need in the settlement activities of the young town.

It was not until 1857 that a courthouse stood in its designated central location. Official county business was originally conducted beneath an oak tree two blocks southeast of the square, at the intersection of 9th and Church Streets. Next, a log building located on the east side of Main Street across from the square, and later a wood frame residence served as the courthouse before a two-story, rubble stone building was erected on the square in 1857.

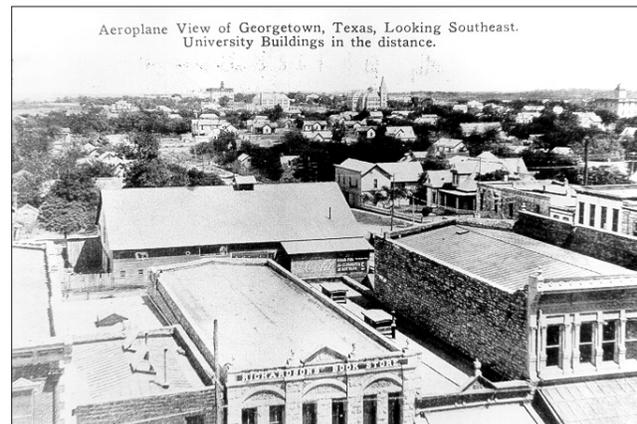


*As the town prospered, the crudely-constructed early structures were replaced with more finely crafted wood-frame buildings.*

As the town prospered, the crudely-constructed early structures were replaced with more finely crafted wood-frame buildings. These early “store houses” as they were called, were typically one or two story structures with a high false front projecting well above the gabled roofline. Building components such as finished lumber, doors, sashes, and blinds became available locally and carpenters and builders established a lively trade in Georgetown. By the late 1860s, limestone was being quarried locally for use in commercial building construction as is evidenced in the Makemson Hotel Complex and the Shaffer Saddlery Building.

The last two decades of the 19th century brought great and lasting changes to the appearance of Georgetown. It was a time of robust economic development activity and physical expansion. Having been established as the home of Southwestern University in the late 1870s and tied into a rapidly expanding railroad network in 1878, it was apparent to all that the county seat of Williamson County had a promising future.

City building codes were established and wood-frame commercial buildings were replaced with more permanent ones constructed of native limestone and materials such as brick, decorative pressed metal, and cast iron, imported by rail. Building to reflect not only their individual prosperity, but also the confidence they had in the future



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of Georgetown, building owners for the first time concentrated on aesthetic designs embellished with elaborate ornamentation.

Limestone, readily available in abundant supply and therefore inexpensive, was commonly used in random, rubble stone construction on the less important rear facades and party walls. These party walls can be seen on all sides of the square above the parapets. Dressed limestone, involving more time and labor, was a more expensive material and was reserved for the public facades of the structures. Several excellent examples of dressed limestone masonry can be evidenced around downtown Georgetown in the Makemson Hotel Complex, the M.E. Lockett Building, the Masonic Lodge, the McDougal-Booty Building, and the Hodges Building. Carved limestone detailing was a very labor intensive process requiring a high degree of skill on the part of the stone mason and was consequently, quite expensive. The P.H. Dimmitt & Co. Building and the Evans Building exhibit superb limestone carving and highly skilled stone masonry in their construction.

Pressed metal and cast iron became another important building material in turn-of-the century Georgetown. Decorative components could be mass produced in major manufacturing centers and shipped by rail, offering building owners an affordable option for achieving the high degree



*The Mesker Brothers began their manufacture and catalogue marketing of metal storefronts in 1884 and achieved remarkable success nationwide.*

of ornamentation, so favored in the Victorian era. Building owners were able to order decorative elements from catalogues at the local lumber yards, which would receive the goods by rail. The sheets of metal and cast iron columns were then transported to the building and nailed to wooden frames. One company in particular was a major supplier of metal components to downtown Georgetown. Metal work on the M.E. Lockett Building, the H.C. Craig Building, the Dimmitt Building, and the Mileham Building can all be attributed to the Mesker Brothers of St. Louis. Similarities in details on these buildings with others around the square suggest that several more represent the work of Mesker Brothers as well.

Mesker Brothers began their manufacture and catalogue marketing of metal storefronts in 1884 and achieved remarkable success nationwide, selling over 5,000 storefronts in a twenty-three year period. The Williamson County Sun Buildings and the Hodges Building bear the mark of F. Heireman of Austin on cast iron columns. The popularity of pressed metal as a decorative element can be evidenced by the fact that virtually every turn-of-the-century building in downtown Georgetown features some degree of pressed metal ornamentation on the front facade. Arrival of the railroad facilitated expanded retailing activities as well. Local merchants could stock their stores with products from regional and national manufacturing centers. Downtown Georgetown became an important commercial center for the surrounding area, which supported widespread agricultural and ranching pursuits. First floor storefronts were devoted primarily to retail activities with the second floors utilized for residential and more commonly, professional occupation. Attorneys were particularly attracted to available spaces with close proximity to the courthouse.

Once the construction boom began it swept throughout the central business district and lasted into the early 20th century. The county constructed its fourth courthouse in 1879, a stylized example of the French Second Empire style designed by architects Preston and Ruffini. This high Victorian structure was deemed too small in the early 1900s and razed to allow construction of the present structure in 1910. The current courthouse, visible

for miles in all directions, is a restrained example of Beaux Arts Classicism, designed by Austin architect Charles Hall Page. When completed, the imposing structure featured terra cotta pediments with base relief carving and a terra cotta balustrade encircling the roof. These decorative elements were removed from the structure in 1965 to relieve fears of potential safety hazards.

Though the boom period ended in the early 20th century as the population declined slightly between 1910 and 1920, this robust Victorian era left its mark on the city. The growth trend resumed in 1930, but setbacks from the Depression, World Wars, and a regional drought weighed heavily on the local economy. Financial activities in this agricultural region became decidedly conservative and the face of downtown Georgetown changed very little throughout the 20th century.

The advent of the automobile and resulting increased mobility of the local population coupled with the development of regional shopping centers and malls in nearby Austin caused a tremendous decline in downtown Georgetown retailing. As sales declined and businesses closed, repair and maintenance of commercial buildings relaxed substantially. Professionals abandoned the second floors for modern offices in outlying commercial

areas and the vacant spaces were boarded up. Downtown Georgetown joined a national trend and took on a shabby, neglected appearance. Folding to the pressures of the 1960s and 1970s, many small towns across the country essentially died, but the determined spirit that founded Georgetown had been rekindled and the city was in the midst of a major revitalization which insured the future of this pioneer Texas town.

In 1975, the city established the Town Square Historic District, charging the then Historic Preservation Commission with responsibility of reviewing alterations to ensure that historic resources were preserved. Then in the 1980s, in response to these challenges, downtown joined the Main Street Program, a self-help downtown revitalization effort conceived by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission. These efforts, coupled with growth in the county, helped revitalize the downtown core.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the downtown faced yet another challenge with “big box” retailers locating along Interstate 35. These new, out-of-town businesses—including retail stores, restaurants, and hotels—competed for both the local consumer’s and tourist’s dollar.



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Photo: 2008*

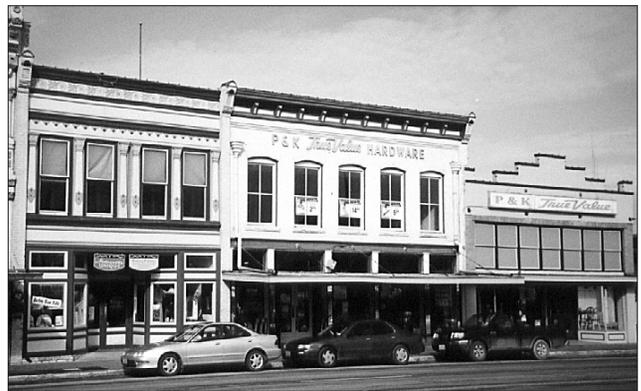
## Architectural Styles and Building Types

The sources of architectural styles in a small town are often indirect and difficult to trace. Buildings of mixed influence are common. In particular, with commercial buildings the means and desires of the building owner, the available building materials, and the skills of the local builders may have had a more direct influence on the design of a building than any recognized architectural style.

Most commercial building types within the downtown share a basic two- or three-story boxlike form. They are rectangular in plan with load-bearing masonry walls. Facades and sidewalls are rectangular and roofs are flat. Individual buildings are attached, often sharing interior sidewalls. At street side, a continuous facade line is created with each building being set at the sidewalk edge. The width and depth of these buildings has been prescribed by the dimensions of the lots and properties. While buildings may span several of the 20- to 30-foot wide properties, the individual lot width is still expressed as a distinct bay or module. This helps give the town a consistency in scale.

Public buildings, including churches, are much fewer in number than commercial buildings. Like the commercial types, these buildings are also of load-bearing masonry but they are freestanding rather than attached. Unlike the commercial types with street level storefronts, each public building has a raised basement with a stepped approach from the street to the main level.

The most notable building types found in downtown and old town Georgetown are presented on the pages that follow. The key features of each type are listed, along with a brief description of the style. Property owners should review these descriptions carefully. In many cases the following design guidelines make reference to the characteristics of styles that are presented in this chapter. The property owner is encouraged to use the styles section in analyzing the overall historic character of their building, as well as distinguishing its character-defining features. Ultimately, this should aid in choosing an appropriate design solution for any proposed work.



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Photo: 2001*

## Italianate

• circa 1885-1900



*Because of its ornate details, such as bracketed cornices, the Italianate style was easily adapted to simple buildings and storefronts.*



*Decorative paired brackets and dentil courses are also typical to the Italianate style.*

Originally inspired by farmhouses found in Northern Italy, this blending of classical and romantic features became one of the most popular of the picturesque styles in the United States. Because of its ornate details, such as bracketed cornices, this style was easily adapted to simple buildings and storefronts. As the details and features of this style were capable of being interpreted in wood, masonry, or iron, it was also very adaptable in the various regions of the country. With this adaptability and the sensibilities of the times, its popularity grew for commercial buildings.

### Characteristics

- Tall, narrow, double-hung windows, often with arched or round arch heads (commonly referred to as “punched” windows as opposed to “ribbon” windows)
- Window panes are either one-over-one or two-over-two
- Protruding sills
- Quoins at building corners
- Double doors with glass panels
- Transom, often curved, above the front door
- Brackets, modillions, and dentil courses
- Flat roof with ornate cornices
- Decorative paired brackets



## Vernacular Commercial storefronts

• circa 1900-1920

Usually between one and four stories, the vernacular commercial building is divided horizontally into two distinct bands. The first floor is more commonly transparent, so goods can be displayed, while the second story is usually reserved for residential or storage space. The upper floor is typically supported by a steel beam that spans the glass opening. However, many one-story examples also exist. A kickplate is found below the display window while above the display window, a smaller band of glass, a transom, is seen. Also, the main door is frequently recessed.

These buildings have stone and brick facades. Ornamental detail exists, but is simple, limited to a shallow molding such as a cornice. Some cornices were made of masonry, while others were made of stamped metal. Many carry simplified Italianate detailing. In essence, these buildings lack distinctive detail, contrasting them with the revival styles that were also popular during this period.

### Characteristics

- Cast-iron supported storefronts
- Large display windows
- Transom lights
- Kickplate
- Recessed entry
- Tall second story windows
- Cornice



*A rock-faced example of a vernacular storefront.*

## **Greek Revival influences**

• circa 1880-1890



*Based on classical detailing that originated in ancient Greece, these buildings are known primarily for columns with Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian capitals.*

The Greek Revival style became quite popular during the middle of the nineteenth century. Based on classical detailing that originated in ancient Greece, these buildings are known primarily for columns with Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian capitals. Other Greek Revival detailing includes classical entablatures, simple window surrounds, and door surrounds consisting of transom and sidelights.

### **Characteristics**

- Rounded columns with capitals
- Pediment roof
- Tall first floor windows
- Entablature
- Doors with transom, side and corner lights
- Gabled or hipped roof
- Frieze band windows

## Beaux Arts Classicism

• circa 1885-1930

The term “Beaux Arts,” or the French equivalent of “Fine Arts,” has come to mean both the period of elaborate eclectic design from 1885 to 1920, as well as that style advocated by the era’s premier architectural school in France: École des Beaux-Arts. This style is based on many classical building precedents that were then elaborated with lavish detailing.

### Characteristics

- Wall surfaces with decorative garlands, floral patterns, shields, or keystones
- Decorative brackets
- Pedimented windows
- Accentuated cornice
- Facade with quoins, columns, or pilasters (usually paired with Ionic or Corinthian capitals)
- Rusticated first floor (stonework joints exaggerated)
- Roof-line balustrade
- Arched windows
- Symmetrical facade
- Masonry walls (usually light colored stone)
- Low or flat pitched roof or mansard roof



*Beaux Arts details exist on the courthouse.*

## Richardsonian Romanesque

• circa 1840-1900



*Round arches and rough finished (rusticated) stone are key features of Romanesque buildings.*

The monochromatic brick or stone Romanesque building is highlighted by the semi-circular arches for doorways and windows. The arch is used decoratively to enrich corbel tables along the eaves. Each building has clearly defined forms and they are frequently of a very regular symmetrical plan.

### Characteristics

- Round arch openings
- Thick walls
- Decorative arches
- Sturdy piers
- Monochromatic stone finish
- Pronounced archivault trim
- Battlement parapet
- Hip roof with cross gables

## Queen Anne

• circa 1880-1910

The Queen Anne style is typically a richly decorated style with many variations, most often with an asymmetrical design. Queen Anne houses commonly have steeply pitched roofs that have irregular shapes. They frequently have towers, turrets, wrap-around porches, and other romantic complex details. The style was based on “decorative excess” and variety. This excess was made possible by power tools and mass-produced trim work.

### Characteristics

- Steep roof
- Complicated, asymmetrical shape
- Front-facing gable
- One-story porch that extends across one or two sides of the house
- Round or square towers
- Wall surfaces textured with decorative shingles, patterned masonry, or half-timbering
- Ornamental spindles and brackets
- Bay windows
- Stained glass decoration



## Folk Victorian

• circa 1870-1910



The Folk Victorian is a more middle-class, affordable version of the Queen Anne style, with basic symmetrical floor plans and simpler details. A very common style found in the turn-of-the-century when mass-produced wood features were available in smaller towns because of railroad expansion. Often trim and ornamentation was added to traditional folk houses. Unlike Queen Anne, typically there are no towers, bays, or elaborate moldings.

### Characteristics

- Square shape
- Porches with spindlework or jig-sawed detailing
- Gable-front and side wings
- Brackets under the eaves
- Details with Queen Anne or Italianate inspiration
- Low-pitched, pyramid style roof

## Craftsman/Arts and Crafts/ Bungalow

• circa 1885-1930

The Craftsman style is defined by simple design with low-pitched gable roofs with broad eaves, large front porches, and exposed wooden structural elements. Craftsman houses were bungalows that incorporated locally handcrafted wood, glass, and metal work. The style incorporates a visible sturdy structure with clean lines and natural materials. Craftsman houses include those that came from mail-order house catalogs, such as Sears.

### Characteristics

- Low-pitched roof lines, gabled or hipped roof
- Deep overhanging eaves with exposed rafters
- Open front porches
- Columns supporting the roof
- Hand-crafted design details
- 1 to 1½ stories
- Double-hung windows with multiple lights in the upper window and a single pane in the lower, some stained or leaded glass
- Wood, stone, or stucco siding
- Exterior stone chimneys
- Built-in cabinets, shelves, and seating
- Exposed rafters and beams with elaborated ends and/or supported by knee boards



## **Prairie influenced**

• circa 1893-1920



The Prairie style has low, strong horizontal lines and open interior spaces. They are one and two story houses with a central portion that rises slightly higher than the wings. Prairie houses are typically long and low with broad, overhanging eaves and broad covered porches.

### **Characteristics**

- Low-pitched roof, hip roof
- Broad overhanging eaves
- Horizontal lines
- Prominent central chimney
- Open floor plan
- Extending walls form sides of terraces and balconies
- Clerestory windows
- Ribbons of windows
- Stylized, built-in cabinetry
- Wide use of natural materials, such as wood and stone

## **Ranch Style / American Ranch / Rambler / Rancher**

• circa 1920-1970

The Ranch style is a style that originated in the United States that became extremely popular with the booming middle class of the mid-twentieth century. It is noted for its long, close-to-the-ground profile, and minimal use of exterior and interior decoration. The houses fuse modernist ideas and styles with notions of the American West working ranches to create an informal and casual living style.

### **Characteristics**

- Single story
- Long, low roofline
- Asymmetrical rectangular, L-shaped, or U-shaped design
- Simple, open floor plans
- Attached garages
- Sliding glass doors opening onto a patio
- Large windows, often decorated with shutters
- Vaulted ceilings with exposed beams
- Exteriors of brick, wood, or stucco
- Large overhanging eaves
- Cross-gabled, side-gabled, or hip roof
- Simple and/or rustic interior and exterior trim



## **Mid-Century Modern**

• circa 1933-1965



The Mid-Century Modern style is a style derived from a further development of Frank Lloyd Wright's principals of organic architecture combined with many elements reflected in the International and Bauhaus movements and employs the goal of bringing modernism into America's post-war suburbs. It is noted for an emphasis on creating structures with ample windows and open floor-plans with the intention of opening up interior spaces and bringing the outdoors in. Many of these houses utilized then-groundbreaking post and beam architectural design that eliminated bulky support walls in favor of walls seemingly made of glass. Function is as important as form with an emphasis placed specifically on targeting the needs of the average American family.

### **Characteristics**

- Rectangular in shape
- Flat planes and roofs
- Large glass windows
- Open interior space
- Both single and multi-story
- Most commonly used materials are glass for the façade, steel for exterior support, and concrete for the floors and interior support.
- Contemporary interiors
- Attached garages or carports

## Art Deco

- circa 1925-1936 (classic period),  
1960s and 1980s resurgence

These were the buildings of the future: sleek, geometric, dramatic. With their cubic forms and zigzag designs, art deco buildings embraced the machine age. Art Deco architecture was a complete break away from older architecture. It was meant to reflect a style of its own: It embodied all that was thought of as “modern.” It represented the modernity of the machine age—all the amenities of modern society brought on by the industrial revolution. It represented modern simplicity, strength, forward motion, achievement, technology. Gone were the remnants of fancy, traditional, classic design/ornamentation.

During the roaring twenties and the early thirties, jazzy Art Deco architecture was the rage. Like any style, it evolved from many sources. The austere shapes of the Bauhaus School and streamlined styling of modern technology combined with patterns and icons taken from the Far East, ancient Greece and Rome, Africa, India, and Mayan and Aztec cultures.

### Characteristics

- Stylized floral patterns
- Segments of circle
- Repetitive geometric forms incorporating sharp angles, zigzags, chevrons, and other stylized geometric motifs on the façade
- Vertical emphasis on towers and other projections above the roof line
- Building entrances embellished with decoration extending to hardware and light fixtures.
- Smooth wall surfaces, usually stucco, with glass brick used in rounded or angular corner windows and panels/walls.
- Illumination through colored lighting is common



