

The Reddick Mansion: A Local Example of Ante-Bellum Italianate Architecture in Illinois

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The Reddick Mansion, located in Ottawa, Illinois, an impressive old-style mansion built by William Reddick, is an ornate and unique example of Italianate architecture. Finished in 1857 before the Civil War, the 22-room Reddick Mansion is one of the oldest Italianate-style houses still standing in Illinois today. The Italianate architectural design of the Reddick Mansion is not the only distinctive feature of this mansion. As distinct as the exterior of the mansion is, the mansion's interior, its location near Washington Park, and the Reddick complex itself, are just as renowned, and add to the overall historical significance of the Reddick Mansion. The Reddick Mansion is more than just a recognizable model of Italianate architecture in Illinois. It represents a significant contribution to Illinois' architectural history.



Reddick Mansion, Ottawa. Courtesy of W. E. Bowman (1866).

In 1855, William Reddick, farmer, businessman, politician, and philanthropist, commissioned the construction of his palatial mansion by Peter Nicholson of the architectural firm of Olmsted and Nicholson. Reddick felt the need to have an opulent mansion that he hoped would benefit him in his quest to be a United States senator by allowing him to entertain esteemed figures. The mansion was indeed built on a grand scale, reflecting the Italianate architectural style. The Italianate style is characterized by a wide-overhanging low-pitched roof that is embellished with ornamental brackets beneath the eaves, tall, rectangular windows, front porches supported with columns, and double entry doors with large glazed panels.

Standing three stories high, being fifty feet in height, and measuring fifty-five by sixty four feet, the Reddick Mansion is a rigid, graceful composition. The mansion's exterior is composed of red bricks and white Lemont limestone facing. The 14-inch thick outside walls consist of eight inches of stone or brick, a two-inch air space, and four-inch lining of studs, wood lath and plaster. The roof was low-pitched, almost seeming to be flat from the street. The bracketed cornice, although typical for the time period, varied from the norm in its elaborateness. Unusual for this time period are the polygonal bays on three corners of the house. A two-story porch links these bays on the east side of the house, adding to the mansion's overall unique exterior design.

The main floor or piano nobile, as Italians referred to such a stately main floor, stood above the street on a high basement and was reached by ascending a wide staircase. Upon walking through two sets of double doors that closed the vestibule, one would enter a magnificent center hall with a grand staircase secured by a walnut balustrade or handrail that led to the second floor. This staircase rose from the main floor in an open well to the top floor and was capped off by an art glass skylight in the roof that allowed light to filter through and illuminate the staircase. The interior of the Reddick Mansion was comprised of soft wood used throughout the flooring and

trim of the building. The trim had been hand-grained so it would look like other woods. In addition to the purchase of polished plate glass imported from France, fine white marble was imported from Italy because of its pure white color and lack of grains or veins. The home's only mechanical system was gas lights. Heat was supplied by five fireplaces that were equipped with stoves. The total cost for the construction of this distinctive residence was set at \$25,000, which is equivalent to \$750,000 today and is quite a sum of money for 1857 when the house was completed. It was one of the most expensive pre-Civil War houses built.

The Reddick Mansion, as a building and home, stands as an architectural and historical landmark in north-central Illinois. Located across the street from Washington Park, it was the only building that had been erected by the time of the Lincoln and Douglas debate. It was here that many people sat and observed the debate. Besides the main house, the Reddick complex also accommodated three other impressive structures located on the half block of land in the heart of Ottawa, the custodian's house, the former Reddick horse barn, and the Reddick carriage house, all three structures being two stories. The one-time family home was later converted into a public library, the Reddick Public Library, following the death of William Reddick and as designated in his will. Today, the Reddick Mansion houses the Reddick Mansion Association and the Ottawa Visitors Center.

Regardless of its use, the Reddick Mansion remains one of Illinois' architectural treasures. The Reddick Mansion is but one of few remaining pre-Civil War structures in Illinois. At a time when simplicity of design was the standard, the Reddick Mansion stood as a standard-setting structure in large part due to its highly elaborate Italianate structural design. No other residence of its type could match its colorful contrasts of light stone and red brick, or the complexity of its ornamental plaster cornices or centerpieces of the ceilings in the mansion, or the quality of its

fireplaces, or claim polygonal bays connected by a two-story porch, or its use of bay windows. Even the above ground basement sets the Reddick Mansion apart from other Italianate structures. When its location near Washington Park, where the first of the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates took place, is considered, the overall significance of the Reddick Mansion transcends any dollar value. The Reddick Mansion, which stands as a proud reminder of the past, is an irreplaceable Illinois landmark for present and future generations to enjoy. [From "Architectural Styles," <http://www.wvculture.org/shpo/ch/styles.html> (Nov. 24, 2003); Michael J. Lewis, *A Nicholson in America*; Ottawa Visitors Center, <http://www.visit-ottawa-il.com/reddick.htm> (Oct. 28, 2003); Paul E. Sprague, *The Reddick Mansion*; Paul E. Sprague and William B. Dring, "History, Significance and Feasibility for Adaptive Use of the William Reddick Mansion at Ottawa, Illinois"; C. C. Tisler, "Ramblin' Round," *Daily Republican Times*, Jan. 15, 1943.]