

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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## ORLEANS COUNTY CLERK'S BUILDING One of a Kind



Recently, I was asked by the Orleans County Buildings and Grounds Department to write up some information as to why the Orleans County Clerk's Office/Legislative Building is significant architecturally. As the county is in the process of putting together a grant proposal for this building's upkeep, it was necessary to give credence for its National Register designation. It occurred to me that while writing up this data for state officials to read, that many local people might also like to be aware of the significance of this unusual building.

Here in part, is what I submitted: From our early beginnings in this country, Americans have generally had the notion that our State Houses, Court Houses and other related municipal buildings be of the Colonial or Greek influence in style. This association with classicism was only natural because of ancient Grecian Democracy. And certainly, order and dignity are visually achieved through bold simplicity and symmetry in architecture. The Orleans County Court House 1857-58 is not unusual in that line of thinking.

However, when it came to building a new County Clerk's Office in 1882-83 our County Board of Supervisors turned to something much more imaginative in appearance. Although unique in its particular public visage, the County Clerk's Office was an expression of the most popular style at that time, which was Eastlake. It was designed by Isaac G. Perry of Binghamton, N.Y. who later became the Capitol architect and designed the million dollar staircase in our Capitol in Albany.

This Victorian short-lived style of the 1870's and 1880's was propagated by the English designer Charles Locke Eastlake (1836-1906) who published several books on art and decoration. The best known was *Hints On Household Taste* (1808), in which he advocated quality materials, fine workmanship and integrity of design with the media and machinery of production. Hence, the general appearance of buildings, furniture and decoration in the Eastlake style is rectilinear. In essence, this was a reaction to curvilinear design and the status quo of earlier styles. American architects and designers seized upon this approach to design which the industrial revolution made possible. The Eastlake Style lent itself to the new machine age and could be produced mechanically rather than through hand craftsmanship, including decorative embellishments. It was a part of the late 19th Century aesthetic movement and the first style to express the industrial revolution.

The Orleans County Clerk's building is a significant example of that philosophy. Eastlake architecture was generally reserved for resi-

dences and store fronts, perhaps because of *Hints On Household Taste*. However, we see all the characteristics of the Eastlake Style beautifully transposed to a public building. That makes the County Clerk's Building unique in Western N.Y. What typifies Eastlake Architecture? These buildings are somewhat eclectic in nature. Notable features include angular high-pitched roofs with seemingly awkward angles and dormer windows tucked in to break the skyline line. Towers are atypical which makes the County Clerk's Office even more unique. The tower finials are a creative Eastlake design. A noteworthy feature is the extraordinary castiron cresting on the ridge of the main roof.

Windows come in various shapes, combinations and sizes, most normally square-headed. However, the County Clerk's Building has several round-headed windows and transoms of a Romanesque influence. What is quite typical, are relatively small panes of colored glass in the upper portion of window sash held in place by wooden mutins rather than lead. Bands or stripes between floor levels which often introduce a different material are also common. The County Clerk's Office not only has stripes created by decorative brick work but also stone. In fact, many decorative embellishments which are totally superficial are achieved through the manipulation of brick work. In residential architecture we can see the profuse use of turned spindles in railings and grills. Although subdued, we can see the use of turning employed in the Clerk's building to decorate several outside window jambs which coordinate with the front door casings. The two identical front entrances placed apart from each other is innovative. We also note the unusual columns aside the louvers in the tower with unmistakable Egyptian revival capitals. After all, this is eclecticism!

Inside, we note the Eastlake Style woodwork most notably panels filled in with wainscott in diagonal patterns. Interior woodwork including casings and cabinets display beaded mouldings and chamfered corners which are all expressive of the Eastlake Style.

In summation: This is one of the best examples of Eastlake Architecture to be found in our entire region and perhaps the only municipal building of this style in Western N.Y. It was the first totally fire-proof building to be erected in Orleans County. on a regional time line of fire-proof structures, it ranks as an exceedingly early example of this form of construction. Isaac G. Perry who designed this was revered in his own time and is acclaimed as a renowned regional architect of the 19th Century.