Ask the Expert – "Windows"

Q: I would like to replace the plastic-framed windows on my historic home. While they will be wood-framed, I'm confused by the number of panes. Can you help?

Historic windows tell us about their buildings, by their size, proportion, and placement. Imperfections in and reflections from the glass suggest age. Selection of windows is one of the most important factors in maintaining consistency with your home's historic architecture. Keep in mind, however, that it may be appropriate to retain consistency with an early alteration to your house rather than the earliest date of your house.

In Cazenovia, we are concerned for the most part with windows from the 19th and 20th centuries. We see panes of glass (the individual "lights") in windows starting usually smaller in the Federal period with up to 12 individual panes (4 panes in three rows) over 12 in a window sash. Panes were typically 7" x 9." As glass making technology improved, it became possible to manufacture larger panes of glass which influenced window design.

During the dominantly Classical Revival (late Federal and Greek Revival) period, a preference emerged for a taller proportion than the squarish panes of the 18th century. Typical were six-over-six panes, although nine-over-six and other lesser heights were used. The panes became larger and taller with Italianate styles of the 1870s, and taller in proportion through the end of the 19th century.

As with every period and style, there was variation in sizes and proportion. And, a more expensive house could start with larger panes. For example, Lorenzo had 12" wide by 17" tall panes on the primary facades, while smaller houses of the same period have 7" by 9".

After the American Civil War, Italianate houses had large panes with very few imperfections in the glass. The dominant window sashes in Cazenovia were two-over-two and the popular one-over-one vertical slider, or "double-hung" window. And, by the turn of the 20th century, large expanses of glass appeared in store fronts (wonderful examples on the North side of Albany Street) in commercial buildings and so called "landscape windows" in residences.