
Aimee Seavey

In roof form, chimney placement, and cladding, Georgian houses are much like their Colonial predecessors. However, they are bigger, typically two stories high and two rooms deep, and the roofs only moderately pitched. Many were unpainted and often shingled, but some scholars believe they were originally painted in blue-green, salmon, and mustard-yellow colors. What chiefly distinguishes Georgians from
Colonials is their civility. As the colonists prospered, their houses became better mannered.

Georgian houses are best identified by the orderly plan of their windows and doors. The window placement on the front facade is absolutely regular. The windows march across the second story, usually at even-spaced intervals and almost always in odd numbers of three, five, or seven across. The lower-story windows appear directly below the uppers with the doorway in the center, making the facade exactly symmetrical. The windows themselves are double-hung, typically with nine to 12 panes per sash.

Decoration is restrained and focuses on the doorway. The door itself, sometimes a double door, is no longer planked but paneled. Flattened columns flank the door and support an overhead crown, which is most commonly straight or triangular, but is sometimes curved or scrolled. In the high Georgian style, a row of square-toothed dentil molding typically parades along the cornice under the overhanging roof eave.
Georgian houses are like British regimental officers. They are solid, unblinking, upright, and true – and little prone to imagination. They occasionally appear in fancy dress, wearing roof balustrades or pedimented dormers, for instance, but they are essentially soldiers, stoutly defending the good citizens living within their orderly walls.

ADAM-STYLE HOUSES, ALSO CALLED FEDERAL (1780-1820, locally to 1840)
If Georgian houses are soldiers, Federal houses are burghers and princes. The two styles are closely related, but Federal houses can usually be distinguished by their freer, more elaborate detailing. For quick identification, look at the arrangement of glass below the crown of the front doorway: if there is a row of small rectangular windows, the house is almost certainly Georgian; if there’s an elliptical or semicircular fanlight, it’s probably Federal.

On closer inspection, the entire facade is more “glassy.” Vertical sidelights often flank the entrance, making the doorway larger. To
balance it, a large, tripartite Venetian or Palladian window sometimes appears above the door on the second story. The panes in all windows are now bigger, sometimes as large as a foot across, and often number six per sash instead of the usual nine or 12 in Georgian’ houses.


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To draw attention to this generous glasswork, Federalist builders sometimes crowned their windows with lintels or recessed them in arches. They also dropped the top-story windows down from the eaves, where they had crowded against the roof in Georgian houses, thus freeing space for more decorative cornices. Dentil moldings remain popular, but now friezes are sometimes added. These friezes commonly
depict free-flowing garlands or swags or a stylized pattern of urns, lotus buds, sheaves of wheat, or medallions. Similar decoration may also appear on doorway surrounds.
These Adam-style design elements signal a break from the flat planes and resolute squareness of older Georgian houses. The earlier bas-relief doorway surround becomes elaborated into a small porch in Federal houses, and for the first time bays, bows, and balconies appear on the facade, especially in later high-style examples and in the brick and stone town houses on Boston’s Beacon Hill.

Dignified, imposing, sophisticated, and sure, Federal houses have an air of self-satisfaction well suited to a people who had but recently won their freedom and intended to make the most of it.