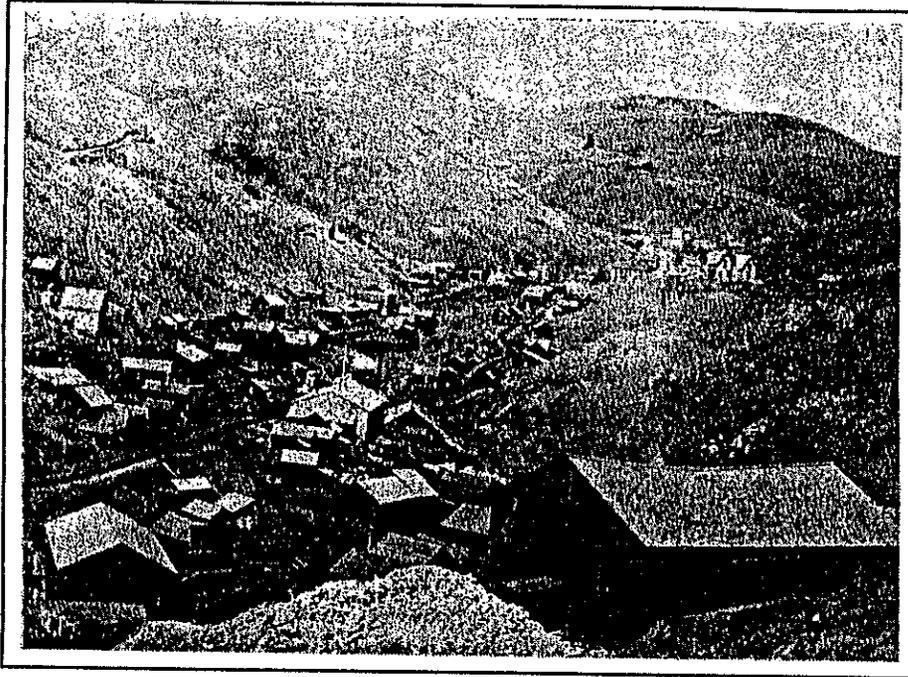


**CHAPTER 1:**

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF CENTRAL CITY**



**DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR CENTRAL CITY**

**Chapter Cover Photograph:**  
**The Gregory Gulch, circa 1885-90.**

## CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CENTRAL CITY

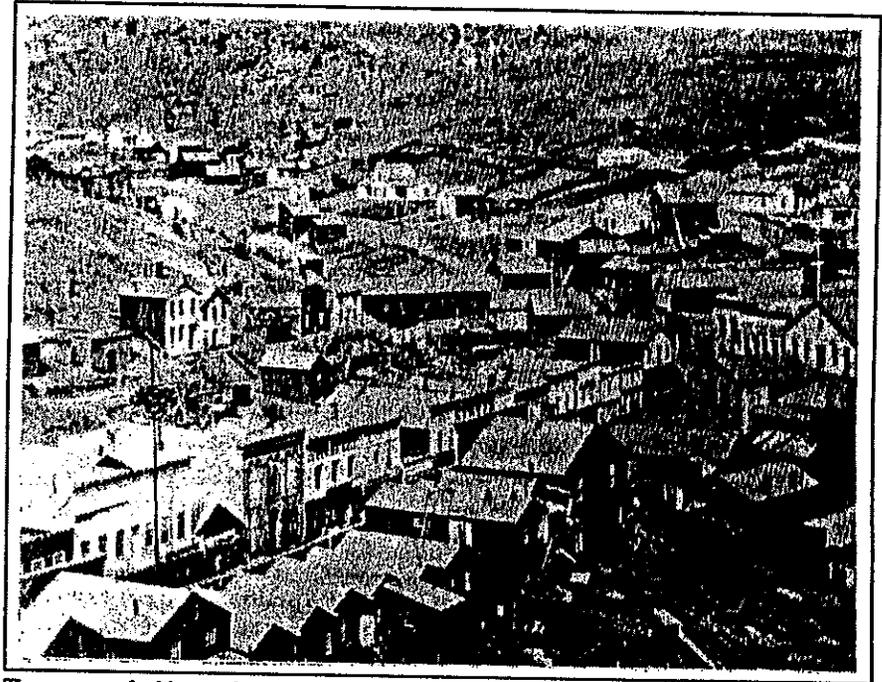
The Central City/Black Hawk National Historic Landmark District consists of the three mining towns of Central City, Black Hawk and Nevadaville as well as portions of Gilpin County. Located 35 miles west of Denver, Colorado, these communities are accessible through Clear Creek Canyon, which winds its way through the foothills of the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. Traveling from the eastern plains, the first town reached is Black Hawk, which is connected directly to Central City and Nevadaville to the west via Gregory and Nevada Streets. These three communities, sitting at an altitude of approximately 8,000 - 9,000 feet, form a unique historic district, significant in the fact that they represent the "boom town" era of frontier urban expansion in the West.

According to the National Register inventory, the NHL District represents the NHL themes of "Westward Expansion of the British Colonies and the United States, 1763-1898;" and "The Mining Frontier in the Rockies: Colorado and Wyoming." The District maintains national significance due to its association with events critical in the settlement of the Rocky Mountain and Intermountain West within these theme categories. The towns evolved because of the hunt for precious metals.

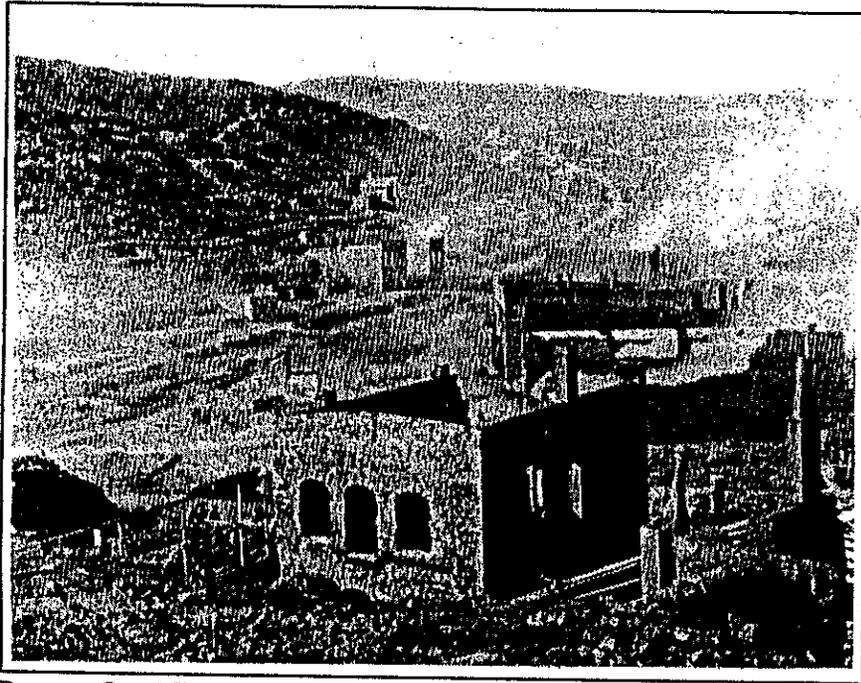
### Historic Overview

In 1857, a national financial crash led to an economic collapse that drove people out of the eastern cities to the western United States. Rumors of gold strikes in the Rocky Mountains spread quickly throughout the East, and men and women looking for financial opportunities headed west. By the fall of 1858, Auraria and Denver, at the eastern base of the Rocky Mountains, were established settlements.

Many prospectors operated from these bases, scouring the nearby mountains, working the streams for loose gold. On May 6, 1859, John H. Gregory staked the first mining claim in the Central City vicinity, which was to become known as the "richest square mile on earth." The spot, marked by the Gregory Monument, is near the city limits of Central City and Black Hawk. When word of the strike reached the press by June of 1859, the population exploded to 10,000 and may have reached 20,000 in July of that year.



The core area, looking north ca. 1868, shows gabled roofs behind false fronts on Main Street. Upper story windows create a pattern that contributes to the visual continuity of the block. (Photo: Alan Granuth)



Downtown Central City on May 22, 1874, the day after the fire that destroyed most commercial buildings. The Roworth Block stands in the foreground. (Photo: Gilpin County Historical Society)

This boom was short-lived, however. After the surface gold was depleted, complicated extraction methods and the onset of winter drove most men into newer strikes or back to Denver. The prospect of golden riches, however, brought them back that next spring, and they began to lay the ground work for the communities of Black Hawk, Mountain City, Central City and Nevadaville. Log cabins and simple wood-frame buildings began to appear, housing schools, banks, theaters, newspapers, saloons, a post office and jails. By the late 1860s, mining operations had expanded, resulting in some of the first "bonanza barons" to appear in the Rocky Mountain West. Mining companies in the east dispatched managers along with their families to oversee the companies' interests in Central City. These new residents wanted Central City to rise above the image of a rough mining camp. Indeed, it soon developed into a cultural center with strong influences from eastern states, as seen with the "deluxe" Teller House of 1872 and the adjoining world famous Opera House. While mining activity expanded around Central City and Nevadaville during the 1870s, Black Hawk emerged as the processing and transportation center of the district, creating an economic and social interdependence which remains to this day.

The twenty-or-so remaining buildings in Nevadaville are a pale reflection of this historic town. Taken together, however, these three towns still physically illustrate the social and economic inter-relationship between the three major settlements of Gilpin County. At the peak of mining activity, they formed an almost continuous line of buildings, mines and cabins crowded together and forming an irregular linear community. The combined population of Black Hawk, Mountain City, Central City and Nevadaville was equal to that of Denver in the early 1870s. Buildings appeared wherever there was room, and the surrounding area was virtually cleared of trees to satisfy the demand for building and mining.

On May 21, 1874, a devastating fire destroyed most of the 1860s commercial district of Central City, as well as approximately twenty percent of its residential buildings. After destroying the frame shanties lining Spring Street, the fire spread to Main on both sides, down to Lawrence and Eureka, where the Register Building stopped it on one side of the street and the Teller House on the other. On Main Street, the fireproof Roworth Block was the only building to escape destruction; on Lawrence Street, Raynold's Court most likely stopped the

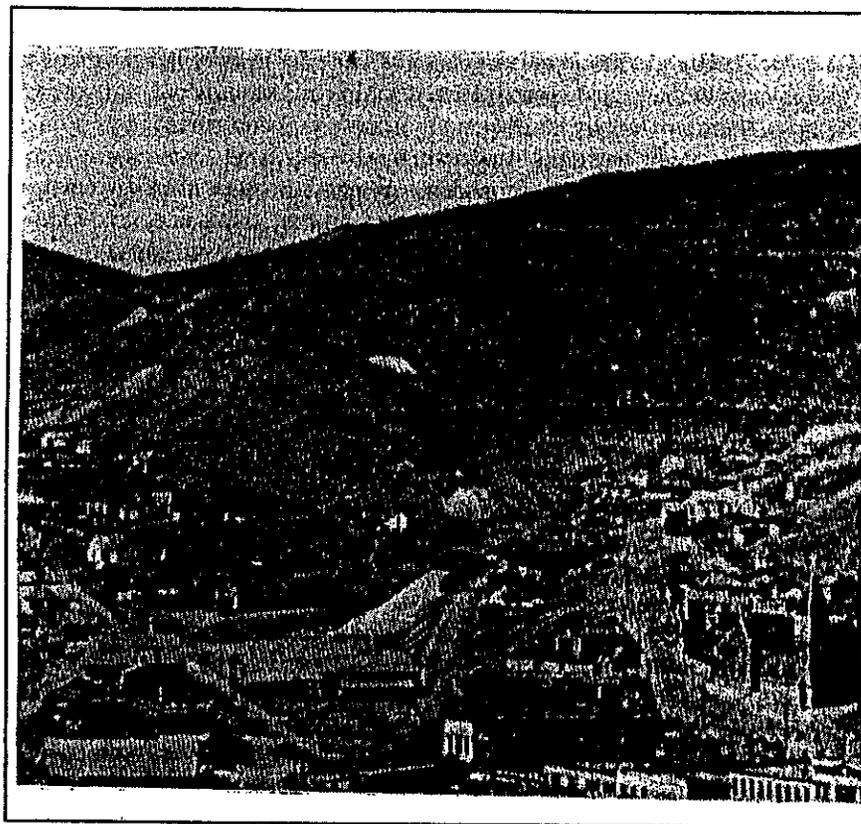
fire's path and survived. Rebuilding began immediately, resulting in most of the extant commercial district in Central City being constructed of brick or stone. Construction continued throughout the 1880s, and resulted in the architecture that defines Central City today.

The 1880s was the high point of economic prosperity in the three communities of the mining district. Gilpin County led the state in gold production until 1893, and building during this period reflected the continued optimism of economic prosperity, primarily in residential construction. While there were few new commercial structures built after the late 1880s, new residential structures blossomed into the early 1890s. These newer structures were larger than their predecessors, with more architectural details than in previous decades, and with residences more frequently being constructed out of brick or stone. Greek Revival and Gothic Revival were the most popular styles, although a host of architectural styles were employed, including Italianate, Romanesque Revival and Second Empire.

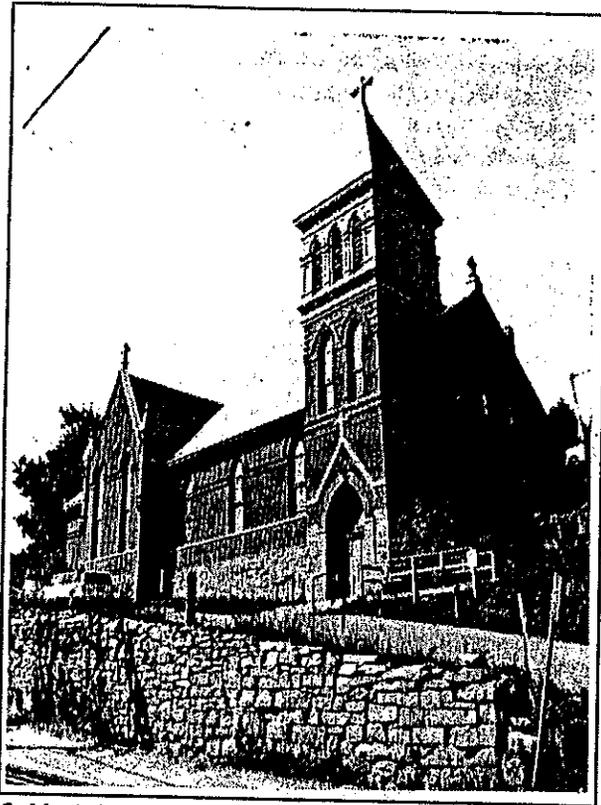
The myriad of building styles evident in Central City was short-lived. The sharp decline in gold mining in Central City brought residential construction to a near halt after 1890, then mining yields increased between 1897 and 1899, which led to a slight resurgence in home construction during this period. The population of the mining district, having dropped to 4,000 in the early 1880s, remained at that level until 1910. Around this time, and closer to the eve of World War I, mining activities decreased, and the economic base to attract and maintain a healthy population in the district vanished. By 1925, Black Hawk had a population of 200, Central City had a population of 400 and Nevadaville had 10. People continued to move away, resulting in the slow decay and loss of historic structures. There was little new construction in commercial or domestic architecture until recently.

### Period of Historic Significance

The National Park Service has defined the period of historic significance for the city as 1859 to 1918. This encompasses the first gold claim through the years of peak activity and ends with the First World War. Buildings and features from this period that retain their structural and architectural integrity are generally considered to be "contributing" to the historic character of the district. Within this period, the city also recognizes a more narrow time period, from 1874 to 1903, as the historic context for the commercial core because this represents the major building period following the fire that destroyed a significant portion of downtown.



This photo, ca. 1890-1899, looks to the south with the old depot in the center foreground. Nevada Street curves from the depot to the upper right. To the far right stands St. Mary's Catholic church on Pine Street.



St. Mary's Catholic Church, built in 1892, displays Gothic Revival details in its pointed arches and steeply-pitched roofs.

### Present Day (1992) Central City

The current character of the Central City Historic District is defined by the sum of all its "neighborhoods." It is specifically defined by the remains of its historic character, in terms of surviving buildings, and by the changes that have occurred and are occurring in the District today. One of the greatest departures from the historic character is the loss of building fabric in many of the neighborhoods, resulting in large tracts of vacant land. The casual observer may not realize these blank areas were once inhabited. Therefore, the present day context tells only a portion of the history of Central City.

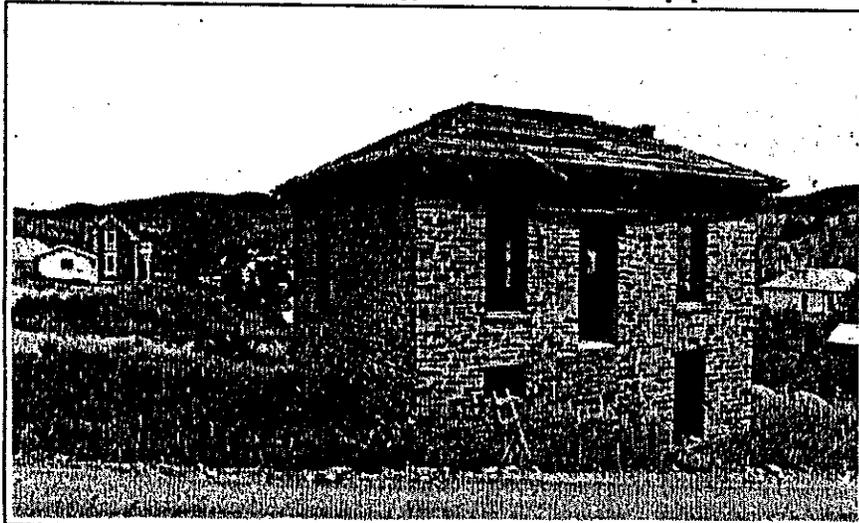
Another major departure from the historic character is the opposite of building loss. New buildings have emerged, many of which are out of step in mass, scale, and character with the historic buildings that once occupied the various neighborhoods. Mining facilitated the establishment of Central City and led to its rapid growth and fame at the end of the 19th Century. Today, new development is again causing rapid growth in Central City. According to the National Park Service Inventory of the Central City Historic District of 1986, there are 311 contributing buildings and mine-related sites in the District, comprising approximately 89% of the structures in the Historic District. To maintain a high proportion of contributing structures for future generations, current historic buildings in danger of ruin or destruction must be preserved, and new construction must be sensitive and adaptive to its neighborhood. This will preserve the integrity and coherence of the Historic District.

### The Future of Central City

The Central City Historic District, which encompasses nearly the entire city, is unique among other Colorado mining communities, both in the "organic" quality of the streets as they wind up and down the hills and gulches, and in the extent to which historic structures have been preserved. These buildings demand preservation to maintain Historic District status and the architectural integrity of Central City, even while new activities appear. Therefore, a balance must be struck between new development and the preservation and maintenance of the historic architectural qualities evident in the Historic District. In order to find this balance, it is necessary to define which elements contribute to the historic architectural character of the City. The Design Guidelines of Central City



Attached columns that frame the outside edges of narrow clapboard siding and triangular pediments over windows are Greek Revival details that appear on this vernacular, L-shape plan house.



A hipped roof caps this simple vernacular stone structure, located off Hooper Street. The upper door suggests that a porch was once a part of the design.

identify these elements and provide specific guidelines for new construction, additions and the continued preservation of historic structures. The application of the design guidelines will ensure the visual continuity of the streetscape is maintained throughout the City, and the integrity of the district will be preserved for future generations

### Architectural Styles of Central City

Residential and commercial styles of Central City include vernacular log cabins covered with clapboards and more refined interpretations of Greek Revival, Carpenter Gothic, French Mansard, Italianate, Queen Anne, and Romanesque designs. However, Liston E. Leyendecker and Edward D. White, Jr. make this cautionary comment on architectural style in *Central City, The Little Kingdom Master Plan II*:

“It is a serious mistake to over stress the importance of style, however, as is sometimes done to the point of distortion in modern preservation guide books. Style identification centers on shapes and ornaments fashionable in the period, but only slightly reminiscent of their alleged European inspiration. The fundamental fact about the buildings of this period is that they are more alike than different; that while their detail is eclectic and varied, their construction is similar and a direct expression of the contemporary American technology. The fact that the Lace House is of light wood frame construction is at least as significant as its gingerbread barge boards. This is a vernacular architecture, a harmonious expression of a particular historic time. It is not a collection of architectural styles, but a synthesis of the themes of the Victorian West.”

With this in mind, a description of the architectural styles represented in Central City follows.

## Historic Overview

### Residential Styles

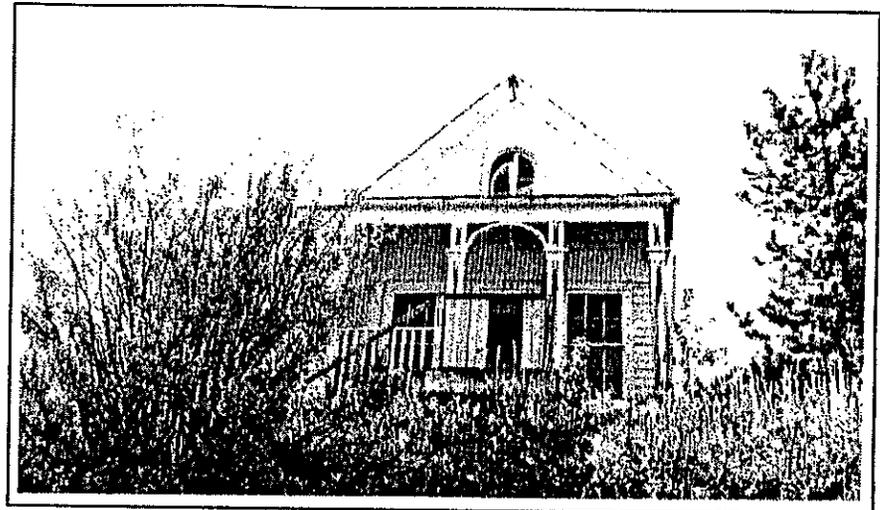
**Greek Revival** - One of the earliest styles used in residences was Greek Revival. In its most complete form, it consisted of a symmetrical, straight-edged design, painted white with Greek detailing in varying degrees of accuracy for the facade. The overall effect was horizontal, with a low pitched roof line and a facade wider than high. Although there are no true examples of Greek Revival residences, the addition of triangular pediments over windows and doors is one of the most common stylistic additions to log or otherwise plain frame structures. In a further refinement, a broken pediment gable end is used with engaged columns at each corner. In a further refinement, a broken pediment gable end is used with engaged columns at each corner.

**Gothic Revival** - The Gothic Revival stone house was translated into western terms by using wood in place of stone. This gave rise to the term "Carpenter Gothic." This adaptation consists of narrow lap siding or board-and-batten siding. The stone tracery became narrow-arched windows and intricately carved barge boards. The overall effect of this style is vertical. The roof is steeply pitched, the openings narrow and pointed, and the structure seems taller than it is wide.

**Italianate** - Colorado was less influenced by the residential Italianate style than other areas of the country. Masonry construction was adapted to wood frame construction in an elongated cube with an almost flat roof and heavy bracketed corners. In Central City residential architecture, the basic structure is similar to other residential types with the addition of Italianate details.

**French Mansard** - This style is not common in mining town architecture and there are only a few examples in Central City. The adaptation usually consists of the addition of a mansard roof and dormer windows to an otherwise box form. The effect is horizontal and rectangular. While the materials of the building may be the same as used in other architectural styles, the roof line and horizontal orientation of the structure make it stand out noticeably.

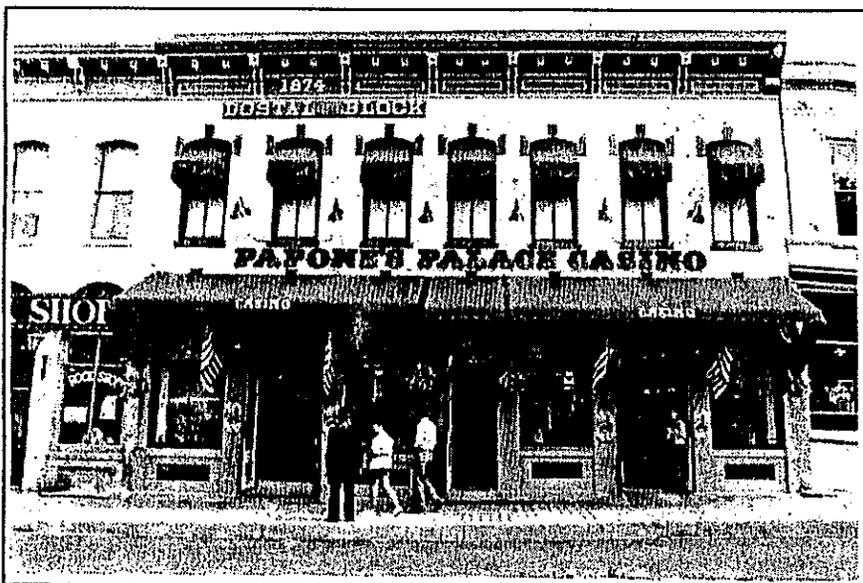
**Queen Anne** - As in the case of the other represented styles, Central City has no true examples of Queen Anne style residences. The adaptations consist of the additions of porches, overhangs, oriel and bay windows, stained and leaded glass, balconies, dormers, turrets, towers, and the use of several different materials for a single building exterior including clapboards, shingles, and bricks. Whatever combination of Queen Anne details are used, the effect is massive and complex.



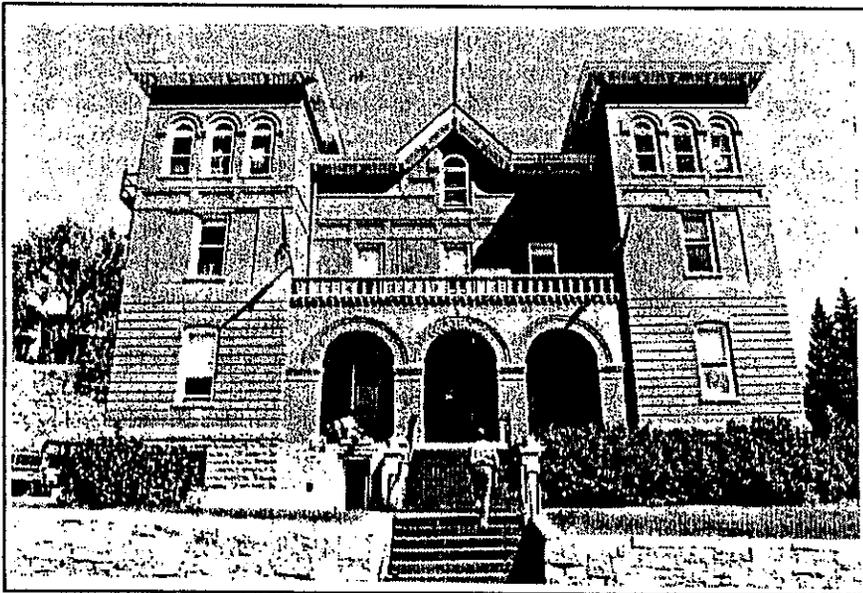
Gothic Revival tracery is seen in the intricately carved barge boards of this gabled-end cottage. The porch posts also convey a Gothic Revival character, while the symmetrical composition with full-front gable suggests Greek Revival influences.



Ornamental window heads and the elaborate brackets over the entry are Italianate details seen on this L-shape plan cottage, located in the High Street residential neighborhood.



Italianate features abound in Central City's commercial structures, as illustrated by this building on Main Street. These include deep, ornate cornices and elaborate window heads.



The Gilpin County Courthouse combines Romanesque arches and loggia with Italianate towers.

### Commercial Styles

The earliest commercial structures in mining boom towns were tents, because merchandise was shipped in before a building was even begun. Simple log cabins, similar to residential log cabins, quickly followed to replace the tent stores. Then, like the residential log cabins, the commercial log buildings were boarded over with siding or replaced with simple frame structures and steeply pitched roofs.

**False Front** - The false front was the next step in the evolution of mining town commercial architecture. Using a false front, a simple, small single-story structure could be made to look as imposing as a two-story building, creating the appearance of a more settled and progressive city. The interior space was deep and narrow with two large display windows on either side of a recessed central entry door. This one-story structure gradually expanded to two-stories, with offices below and living quarters above.

Building materials for early false front structures were usually wood clapboard or board-and-batten. In structures built later, brick, stone, and cast iron were used, although cast iron was rare, and more commonly used in Italianate buildings. The cornice was the only elaborately detailed portion of the false front.

**Italianate** - Italianate design was the first Victorian style to influence commercial architecture. A variety of factors caused this, including increasing prosperity, the popularity of the style in the East, and advances in building techniques and transportation. Wood frame buildings gave way to brick, stone and cast iron. These materials were permanent, fire resistant and more like eastern examples than the wood frame structures. The plan of Italianate structures was very similar to the false front. There were usually two stories, and sometimes three, replacing the empty space behind the false front with offices and apartments. A series of several shops under a common second floor created larger building "blocks." Flat roofs and elaborately detailed cornices and window heads became the identifying features of Italianate architecture. The cast iron front became a popular detail of Italianate commercial buildings since it was durable, fire resistant, structurally very strong, and could be elaborately ornamented. Pressed metal detailing also became a popular way to ornament cornices and windows.

## Historic Overview

---

**Queen Anne** - The Queen Anne style is differentiated from the Italianate by a greater variety in surface detailing. The basic layout of the buildings remained the same, with a series of shops under a common second floor. In many cases, Queen Anne style eliminated cast iron fronts and pressed metal ornamentation, and replaced them with panel brickwork. In Central City, there are a few examples of buildings ornamented only by panel brickwork. A combination of Italianate and Queen Anne elements is much more common. These structures often combine more detailed first floor storefronts and cornices with fairly simple panel brickwork.

**Romanesque Revival** - The Romanesque Revival style was frequently combined with Queen Anne panel brickwork. It featured rusticated masonry walls, towers, and heavy, round-headed arches. Although Central City has few structures that could be described as Romanesque, the best example is the Gilpin County Courthouse which has rusticated brickwork, round-headed arches at the entrance and two towers. However, the towers are Italianate in detail, identified by their square proportion and low pitched roof with brackets.

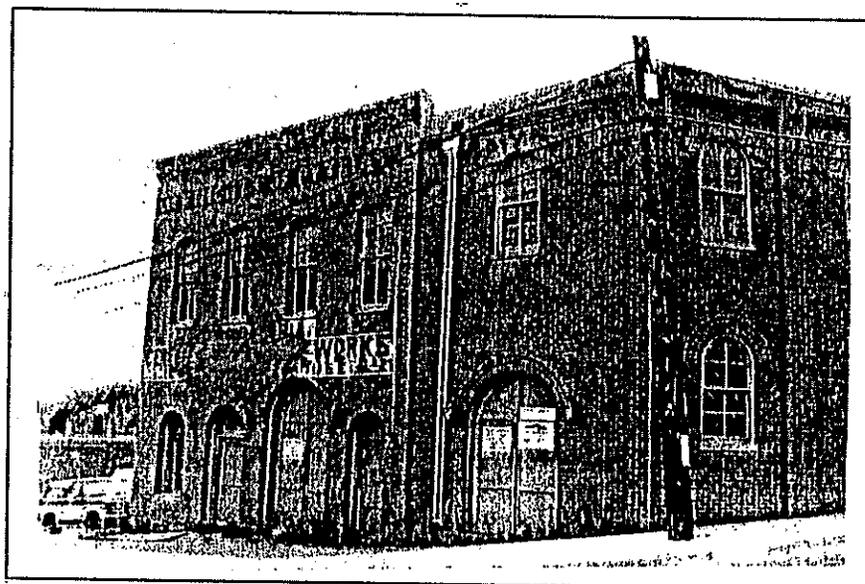
**Colonial Revival** - The Colonial Revival style became popular too late to have any great influence in mining town architecture, and was limited, for the most part, to the addition of classic details such as swags or columns to buildings of previous architectural styles.

In sum, Central City's fortunes were largely founded on mining and its architecture was shaped by this enterprise. When the mines prospered, so did the city and this was reflected in its buildings. When mining declined, the city's architecture declined. However, Central City was much more than a boom town. The richness of its ore, and its accessibility to Denver and the railroads, encouraged large Eastern mining companies to buy up the mines. They capitalized the mining ventures, enabling profitable mining of difficult, less accessible ores. This kept Central City thriving while other camps became ghost towns, and this resulted in greater variety in architectural details.

Tents met the immediate needs miners had for shelter. Log cabins, and then simple wood frame structures, were built as opportunity and prosperity allowed. As the fortunes of the mining camp grew, so did the complexity of structures. The influx of people from the eastern United States who came to work and support the community, brought with them the need for government buildings,

schools, churches, stores and entertainment, as well as the desire to recreate some aspects of the communities from which they had come. The use of elements of various Victorian styles was one way to recreate the civilized and prosperous atmosphere of established eastern communities.

The relatively difficult access to mining camps, however, limited the availability of materials and skilled labor needed to produce full-blown examples of Victorian architecture. Although, many of its citizens had visions of grand houses, great hotels, and churches, a simpler architecture prevailed. While the size, shape and simplicity of Central City's buildings make the greatest visual impact, the creative adaptations of the various Victorian styles are equally important contributions to its mining town architecture.



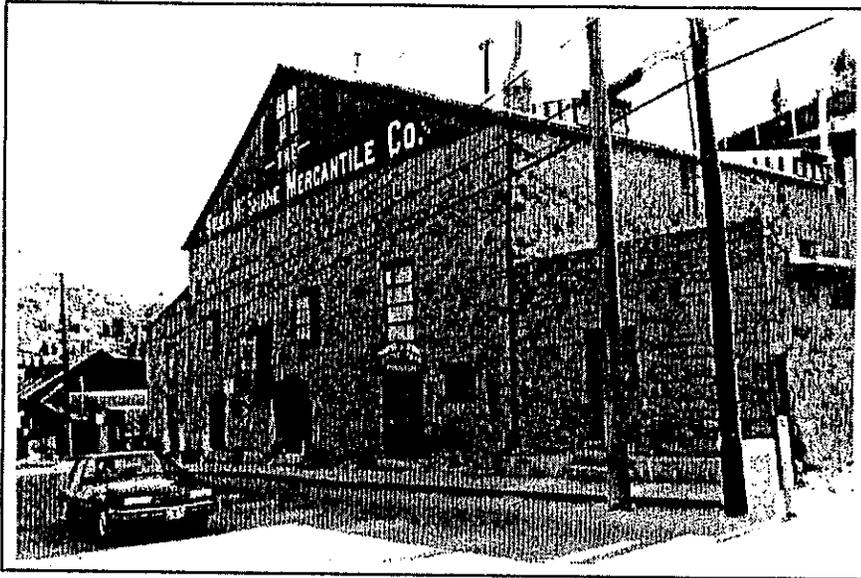
Romanesque arches are also seen on simple masonry warehouse buildings, such as these located at the intersection of Gregory and Spring Streets. Early commercial buildings often had arched openings on the ground floor.

**Endnotes**

Portions of this historic overview include references from:

1. Allyn S. Feinberg, *Standards and Design Guidelines of Central City* (Boulder; The City of Central and Community Services Collaborative, 1981), III.17
2. Hollenbeck, Frank R., *Central City and Black Hawk, Then and Now* (Denver; Sage Books, Alan Swallow, 1961)
3. The National Register survey, prepared by the National Park Service, 1987, revised 1990.

## Historic Overview



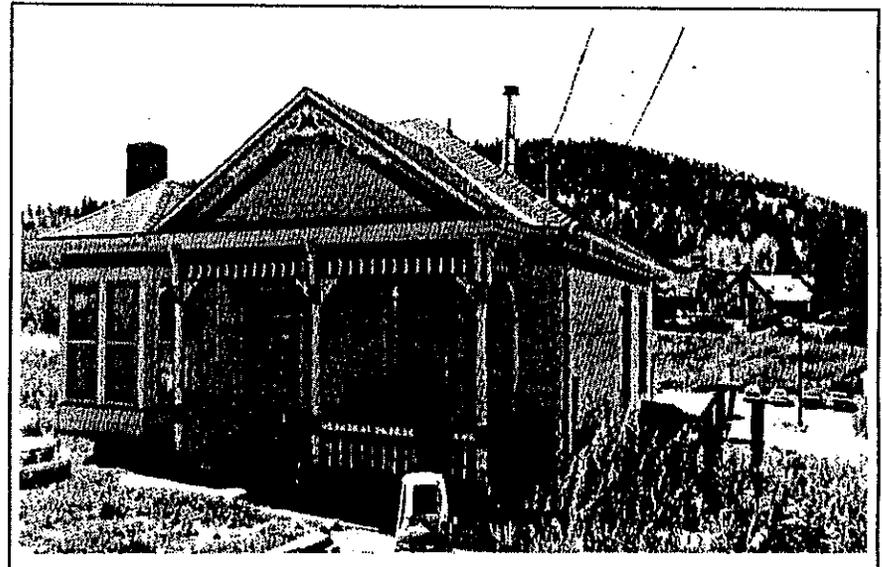
Warehouse-type buildings used simple forms and were frequently capped with gable roofs. Minimal details and ornament were used.



The ruins of the Buell mine and mill are a reminder of other industrial type buildings once found in the city.



Flat stone window arches and corbelled brick cornices are typical vernacular details of commercial buildings in the core area.



Queen Anne details, including turned porch posts, railings and scroll work in gable ends, add stylistic features to this hip-roof cottage.