

# What Do You Call That Thingamabob?

CONTRIBUTED BY DEBRA DAVID RA PC AND THE MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER

**M**ERRIAM WEBSTER defines “thingamabob” as a noun describing something that is hard to classify or whose name is unknown or forgotten.

Architecturally speaking, how many times have you looked up at a building exterior and wondered what that thingamajig is called at the top of that thingamabob roof?

Although there is a plethora of building styles in the township, when Montclair transitioned from a vacation destination and farming community to a place where people wanted to raise their families. This transition was made possible by the railroad connection to New York City. The homes built in Montclair built between 1885 and 1910 were of many different styles not necessarily dependent upon local materials or any stylistic traditions. People who moved to Montclair during that time did not



**This home on Park Street has not only a tower on the left side of the front porch but also a turret on the right corner of the front façade. The turret does not extend below the covered front porch roof. Both the turret and the tower have a conical roof and feature decorative finials. There is also a narrow Porte Cochere at the right end of the front porch.**

necessarily follow any specific style of architecture but seemed to prefer to add details that either they saw in popular magazines or upon the suggestion of their architect.

A popular architectural style during this time was the American form of Queen Anne Style.

Curiously, named after Queen Anne who was the Queen of England from 1702 to 1714, it bears little resemblance to aesthetic preferences popular during her reign. For whatever reason, the highly decorative exterior style caught the fancy of many families who were sometimes constructing their own home for the first time. Many examples of the so-called “Queen Anne” style can be seen in homes throughout Montclair today.

Other styles popular during that time period were Italianate, Second Empire, Gothic, Eastlake or Shingle Style, most with a highly decorative flavor. One might see a combination of any of the styles, the sky seemed to be the limit. While several of these highly decorative residences were demolished 20 or 30 years after construction to be replaced with new residences to reflect the more current wants and needs of the owners, there are still several good examples around the Township.

However, what are the details and features called? Several architectural terms are included below, but there are many more to explore. Here are just a few to expand your vocabulary and hopefully satisfy your curiosity.



**This residence shows a combination of brackets and dentils at the eaves of the main roof. A simpler dentil pattern is used at the porch roof, but the frieze area below it may have been more elaborate when the home was originally constructed. There is also a generous use of the Ionic capital, whether on the top of the porch columns or the pilasters on the window trim at the second floor or supporting the high gable eave on the upper floor.**



**The photos at left show examples of decorative anchor plates. When a tall chimney or masonry wall becomes unstable or begins to buckle, a steel or iron tie rod was inserted through the wall to the interior framing. This rod is threaded through a turnbuckle and then tightened to pull the masonry wall tight to the structural framing. Sometimes a flat metal plate is placed on the exterior as a cap or something more decorative is used. Most anchor plates/tie rods in new construction are purely decorative as masonry construction has evolved.**



**Anchor Plate/Tie Rod/Patress Plate:** The “S” or “star” that you might see on the face of a chimney or randomly placed on a brick wall. Typically seen in older construction, a metal tie rod with an anchor plate used to stabilize or “tie” the brick exterior or tall brick chimney to the inte-

rior structural frame of the building. In the UK, the decorative metal plate mounted at the exterior is called a patress plate.

**Balustrade:** Railing components consisting of top and bottom rails, balusters and posts and/or columns.

**Balusters:** The vertical component of a railing or balustrade is also called a spindle. It can be highly decorative or very plain. Constructed in one piece, can be stone, metal or wood.

**Bargeboard/Vergeboard:** Decorative board detail on the gable end of a roof that not only covers the ends of the roof structure but also could provide additional stability at eave overhangs.

**Bracket:** Element installed as decoration or added structural support at a cornice, eaves or anywhere that would add visual interest to the building. Can be highly ornamental or simplified for a more classic look.

**Camelback/Coping:** A piece of terracotta, masonry, stone covering the point where roof slope changes direction. Not to be confused with “Cricket” or “Valley”. Can also be seen at the top of an exterior masonry parapet wall.

**Dentil:** Square or rectangular blocks evenly space and used as decorative trim. Commonly used under eaves or on a cornice. May be derived from the French “dentille” which translates as “little tooth”.

**Doric Columns:** A Greek classical style, the Doric order is a very simple design with a thick square “abacus” (or flat slab) that lies on top of a round moulding at the top of a column. The column can be smooth-faced or fluted (grooved ridges)

**Dormer:** A small structure built into a sloping roof which includes a window to allow light into the top level or attic. Can be decorative or utilitarian.

**Finial:** An ornamental piece or sculpture

placed at the top of a gabled roof, turret or high point of architectural feature. Can be wood or metal, sometimes covered with gold. Highly decorative or simple design. Not to be confused with weathervane, which could be classified as a type of finial.

**Frieze:** A decorative sculpted or painted strip/band at the top of the wall usually under the eaves or above windows.

**Gable:** The triangular shape at the enclosed end of the gable roof.

**Half-Timber:** At the exterior of frame buildings, the spaces between the structural members are infilled with brick or stucco (over frame). The brick infill is called “nogging”, but when it is

not covered by stucco is called “exposed nogging”.

**Ionic Column:** A Greek classical style, the Ionic order is identified as having characteristic “volutes” which are scroll-like ornamentation on the column head (capital).

**Porte Cochere:** A covered area at one of the building entrances that a horse and carriage could enter from the driveway and park. This structure allows the passengers to exit (or enter) the carriage while being sheltered from the elements. Not to be confused with covered porch, which would not allow for a carriage entrance.

**Tower:** Common in Queen Anne architecture. In our area, they are usually round but can also be square. Topped off with a domed or conical roof when round or a “tent” roof and finial.

**Turret:** When a tower starts at the second floor and is supported by a corbel (bracket). ■



**These photos show two different styles of dormers and camelbacks on the slate roof where the slope changes in direction.**



**This photo shows a finial, bargeboard, and a half-timber gable. The bargeboard/vergeboard is plain on either eave at the sloped portion but is a carved decorative board above the window.**

*Do you have a detail on your house or see something on a building in town that you wonder about? Take a photo of it and email it to me (ddavidarchitect@comcast.net) and if I don't know what that thingamabob is, I'll certainly try to find out!*

*Next time: Will it be windows or bricks or roof types?*

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