

Mail-order Houses: A Popular 20th-Century Option

One option to building a new home at the beginning of the 1900s was to order a kit from a mail order catalog. It came complete with everything you would need to construct a house from nails to shingles, to pre-cut numbered boards, paint and detailed construction manuals. The kits would arrive by box car and families could then hire local carpenters to put the kits together or build them themselves following the detailed instructions.

Popular mail order companies included Sears Roebuck, Montgomery Ward, Harris Brothers and Aladdin. Kit houses were sold from 1908, when Sears published its first "Book of Modern Homes" with 22 styles to choose. At the height of popularity in the 1920s to 30s, there were over 400 different kits to choose from. Most companies had stopped producing mail order kit homes by 1940.

Mail order kit houses were a popular alternative for a number of reasons. Prior to World War II, home/portable power tools were not available, which meant pre-cut

boards were a labor-saving, therefore cost-saving measure. Second, many companies such as Sears offered direct financing, therefore families did not need to go to banks to

finance a mortgage for their home. Kit homes were a preferred alternative for builders before the advent of tract housing construction techniques and prefab housing after World War II.

The American Foursquare was a popular mail-order style. It was a 2 ½ story house with four rooms on the first and second floors. The

Foursquare has a low hipped or pyramidal shaped roof with a dormer window and front porch. Franklin Township has an example of a mail-order American Foursquare house on New London Road.

The Craftsman or American Bungalow style was also popular as a starter home for new families. It is typically one story with a low sloping roof and wide porches. One such house was built in Franklin Township.



American Foursquare kit house on New London Road.