

THE ARMOUR-STINER (OCTAGON) HOUSE

IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK

An arrested carousel
— A viewer

INTRODUCTION

The story of a house is the story of life. Just as the history of a country is written down in architecture, so is the history of individuals to be traced by the houses in which they have lived. There it all is -- their beginning, their growth, their development or deterioration, the realization or the destruction of their dreams, the very pattern of their destiny as it was etched line by line.

— Elise de Wolfe

The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House is one of the most visually unique houses in the world. It is the only known residence constructed in the domed colonnaded octagonal form of an ancient classical temple. The exterior decoration of the Octagon House is as distinct as its shape and adds to the unique-to-the-world appearance of this melodic structure. The exterior embellishments are decidedly festive with floral details in the cast iron cresting and railings and extensively carved wood scrollwork and capitals - all polychromatically painted in shades of rose, blue, violet, gray, tan and red. The interiors are equally embellished with stenciled and decoratively painted ceilings, gold, silver and bronze leaf trim, specially carved eight-sided motifs in the woodwork, magnificent etched glass and highly detailed brass hardware. The exterior and interior of the house, its decorations and its 1870s furnishings all reflect the late 19th century interest in exotic decoration. Here, in a colorful display, is one of the very few American examples of Pavilion Architecture — buildings created in a distinct form or coloring with the purpose of amusing viewers.

The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) was the first house to be bought by the National Trust and resold to a private citizen. Since 1978, I have undertaken a complete conservation of the interior and exterior of the house and the grounds, furnished the house with original and contemporaneous furniture and corrected extensive structural problems, including separation of the dome.

My goal was not to remove all traces of age, but to hold together the fragile exotic beauty of this lyrical home.



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House Author's Collection



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon House), c. 1882

IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON

A noble river, running majestically along, always imparts life and spirit to the scenery of its banks.

— Richard Brown

In the third quarter of the 17th century, Frederick Philipse began purchasing large tracts of this land. Philipse had been born in 1626 in the Netherlands and had emigrated to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (later New York) in the mid-1650's. He prospered through successful business activities and a marriage to a wealthy woman. Philipse bought the land from the Indians and patroons, early Dutch entrepreneurs, who had been granted land by the Dutch.



Tappan Zee - John Williamson 1875 Octagon House Collection

The patroons, and now Philipse, leased portions of the large tracts to Dutch settlers who cleared the forests and established small farms. In 1693, the British, who had taken over the colony, confirmed the Philipse holdings.

Through continuing acquisitions, the Philipse family became lords of a vast manor of 90,000 acres. When the Revolutionary War began, the Philipses chose loyalty to the British Crown, a decision that resulted in forfeiture of the manor, after America's success. At a public auction of 1785, the tenant-farmers were able to buy their farms.

In 1849 a railroad was placed on the east bank of the river, which allowed

passengers traveling from the City to reach the area in less than one hour. With the tracks, being on the edge of the river, travellers enjoyed delightful, direct river views. The surrounding old Dutch farmland began to be purchased by prominent New Yorkers who erected country seats and summer residences overlooking the picturesque Hudson and the Tappan Zee.

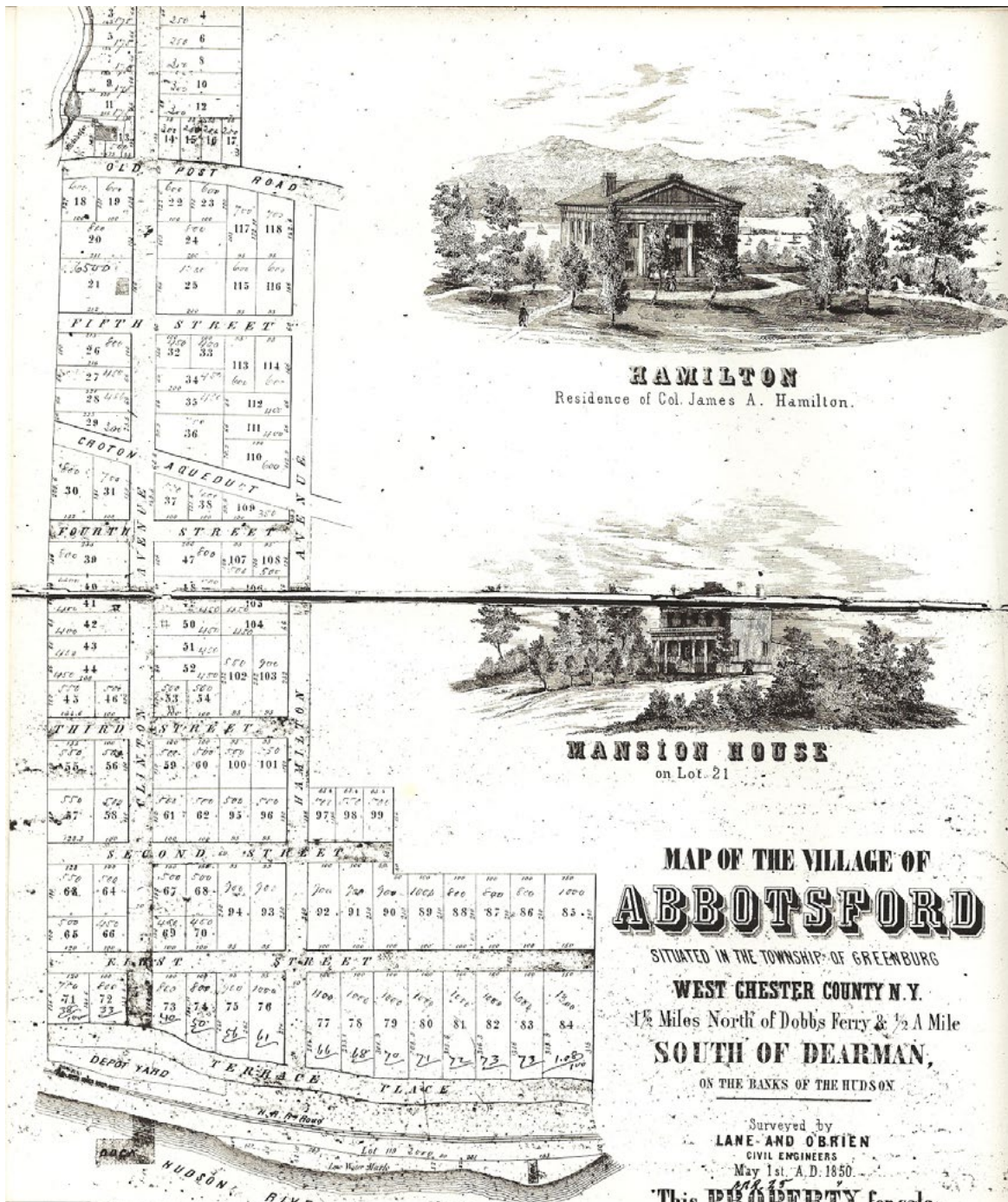
Twenty miles north of New York City, in 1850, the small village of Irvington-on-Hudson was created from one of the farms. Its main street became lined with small shops and large trees which formed a long tunnel stretching up from the glimmering river. The area eventually became home to numerous noted residents, including Cyrus W. Field, John Jacob Astor III, Charles L. Tiffany and, its most celebrated resident and namesake, Washington Irving.

In the 1850's, entrepreneurs bought a tract of farmland one mile to the south of Irvington-on-Hudson. They planned another small community to be called Abbotsford. The sale of building plots resulted in several houses built with the notion that Abbotsford would be a separate village with its own main street, but with only a few plots sold, the idea of a separate village was eventually abandoned and the area became the outskirts of the present-day village of Irvington-on-Hudson.



Pallisades. W.G.Wall, No.19 of the Hudson River Portfolio 1826

Octagon House Collection



The proposed village of Abbotsford

THE OCTAGON HOUSE 1858-1975

Orson Squire Fowler

Man's greatest knowledge is HIMSELF to know

— O.S. Fowler

The octagon house fad in 19th century America was inspired by the publication of an 1848 book, *The Octagon House, a Home for All* by Orson Squire Fowler, a phrenologist, sexologist and amateur architect. Orson Squire Fowler was as extraordinary as his book. Patriarchal in appearance thanks to his luxuriant beard, high forehead and piercing eyes, he was by nature the epitome of the nineteenth century individualist. Born in 1809 on a farm in upstate New York, he began his studies for the ministry at Amherst College, but he soon found himself captivated by the phrenological doctrine recently introduced to the United States by Johann Kaspar Spurzheim, a Viennese doctor who held that character could be analyzed by examination of the cranium. This nineteenth-century vision of psychiatry so appealed to Orson Fowler that, with his brother Lorenzo and sister Charlotte, he established himself as a practicing phrenologist. In 1835, Orson Fowler described his profession:

Phrenology teaches that the mind, instead of employing the WHOLE brain for EACH mental function, uses one particular part of it for one class of mental functions, and another for another, just as it does the eye for seeing, the ear for hearing, etc.; that it uses that part under 12 for an affection of fear, that under 13 for kindness, etc. Now the exercise of any corporeal organ increases its size as well as strength. If then one part of the brain is used more often than another, it will grow more, and of course elevate that portion of the skull above it; so that if a person exercises the feeling of benevolence more often than he does that of apprehension, the portion of the brain under 13 will be larger and more elevated than that under 12, as much more so as he is more benevolent than apprehensive. So of all the other organs, if we can tell what portion of the brain the mind uses for each mental function, and how much larger one portion is than another, we can tell just how much the person exercises certain classes of mental functions more than he does others. This has been done by practical observation.

Phrenologists believed that, like muscles, there was a correlation between the exercise of a mental functions and elevated and depressed areas of the cranium. They would examine the contours of a head comparing them with elaborate diagrams and three-dimensional models of the human head, to determine which areas of the brain were being used more often than others. The bumps and crannies, they assumed, manifested peculiarities of behavior. The phrenologist would then recommend cultivation or restraint of a particular behavior. Subsequent observations for changes in elevations would determine if the recommendations were being followed.

Although Phrenology was enormously popular in the mid-nineteenth century, it was not absent of critics. The New York Times in August 2, 1878, comments on the science.

In fact, but one fault can be found with phrenology, and that is that it is not true, and there is not the trace of a shadow of a ghost of a reason for believing it to be true.



Orson Squire Fowler Engraving
by Max Bachert



Phrenological Chart

And the Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle reports on February 6, 1874, on the departure of Professor Franklin after a phrenological lecture in Fishkill, New York:

He departed from the village by the milk train on Sunday evening, and as he left he was presented with a few eggs, and in order that he might not have the trouble of breaking them, they were hurled at his noble cranium.

Often overlooked, the practice of Phrenology prescribed ways in which to improve behavior. This was accomplished by recommendations as to how to restrain or cultivate a problematic behavior. For example, Fowler's recommendation for the cultivation of individuality was to "notice whatever comes within range of your vision." To restrain individuality, his recommendation was to "look and stare less, and think more."

Besides examining the heads of the nation's philanthropists, criminals, artists, statesmen and writers, Orson Fowler published the American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany, which survived well into the twentieth century and issued, over his imprint, a stream of phrenological, health and sex manuals. As author, marriage consultant and sex scientist, Orson Fowler may be said to have foreshadowed Sigmund Freud by looking for answers

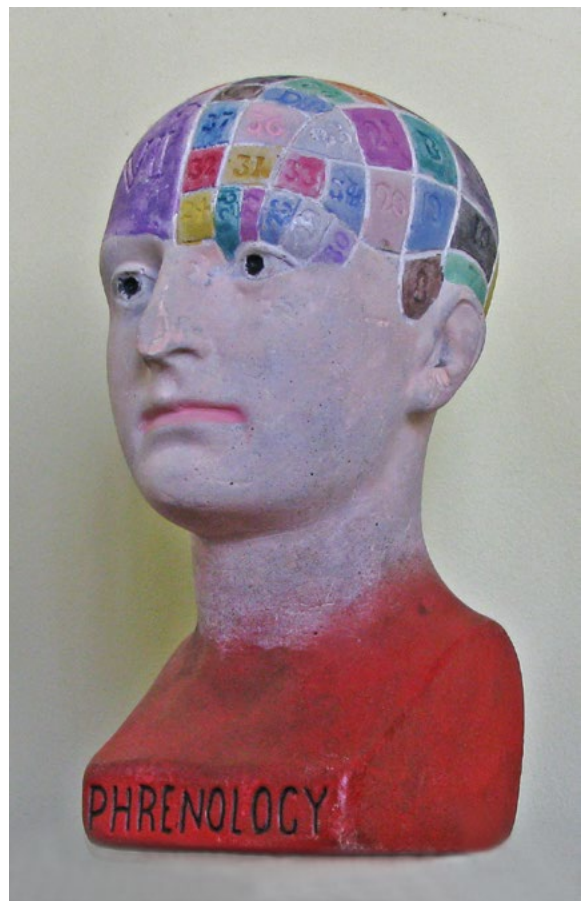
to the question of why we are what we are. In time, Orson Fowler advocated most of the reforms of his century and advised on a wide range of subjects such as woman's suffrage and wages ("equality with men"), cohabiting ("enjoyment is the test of nature") and enemas ("decidedly agreeable").

In 1848, Orson Fowler published *The Octagon House, A Home for All or a New, Cheap, Convenient and Superior Mode of Building*. In his book, Fowler advocated the use of the octagonal plan for houses on the suppositions that it encloses one-fifth more space than the square plan, creates rooms more accessible to each other, is more beautiful because it approaches the shape of a circle, receives twice as much sunlight by having eight sides instead of four and gives square rooms with triangular closets between them just where they are wanted. The book went on to make numerous further recommendations regarding ventilation, water filtration, central heating, construction detailing and planting. Fowler's ideas on domestic architecture caught the imagination of the country.

An interesting parallel to the advocating of the octagon enclosing more space is Orson Fowler's comments on head shape:

There is much more brain in a round head of a given size than in long and narrow one of the same size.

During the 1850's, Fowler began work on his own octagon house near Fishkill, New York. His extraordinary house, perched upon a knoll overlooking the banks of the Hudson River with the Catskill Mountains beyond, was three stories high and contained sixty rooms. The main floor boasted four large rectangular rooms — parlor, sitting room, dining room and amusement room — along with four triangular side rooms, all connected by doors. Each of the upper floors contained twenty rooms, among them a playroom, a dancing room, a gymnastic room for unlaced female dress reformers, a dressing room for every bedroom, a library, a room for minerals, shells and portraits, an author's study and a



Phrenological Head Octagon House Collection



Octagonal Home of Orson Fowler, Fishkill, New York (A Home for All, 1854 edition)

prophets chamber. Verandahs at three levels surrounded the house and the house was topped by a glass roofed octagonal cupola.

Fowler received many prominent visitors including the journalists Horace Greeley and Charles A. Dana and the women's liberators Amelia Bloomer and Lucretia Mott. None gave a more vivid description of the monumental octagon than a reporter for Godey's Lady's Book, who wrote:

The appearance is noble, massive, grand and imposing, especially as seen from a distance. It has piazzas all around at each story, which makes delightful promenades. Its main, or through entry, is in the ground or first story, devoted to work and storage; and its stairway is in the center, which greatly facilitates ready access from each room to all the others, and saves steps and which is lighted from the cupola, in the center of which is a glass dome, which also lights its stair and the center rooms.

In his octagonal dwelling he lectured on phrenology, entertained his bemused visitors, dined at his vegetarian table and wrote articles for his Phrenological Journal. The waning of the phrenological fad and the "Panic" of 1857, with its mounting unemployment and bank failures, brought an end to Orson Fowler's resources. In September of that year Fowler rented his octagon house, with its 130 acres, to a New York real estate operator. The house survived only four more decades, passing through a series of ill-starred owners. By 1880, the house stood empty with broken windows, decayed roof and rotted verandas. It was condemned as "a public hazard" and, in August of 1897, Fowler's octagon house was razed by dynamite.

The builder of the octagon was spared the sight of its final destruction. Orson Fowler, the celebrated phrenologist, sex educator and amateur architect had died in 1887, ten years before the demise of his ambitious house.

Paul J. Armour

*Near some fair town I'd have a private seat, built uniform,
not little nor too great; Better if on rising ground it stood,
On this side fields, on that neighboring wood.*

— Promfret's Choice

In 1858, Paul J. Armour, a Manhattan banker, purchased four plots along West Clinton Avenue, the then proposed “Main Street” of Abbotsford. Since it had been last used as fields for farming, the site was free of structures and vegetation. The open fields permitted sweeping views of the Hudson River valley.

Armour carefully selected the site on which he would build his new house. The site, if Abbotsford was fully developed, would have a double corner with a neighbor on only one side. The north boundary was the existing West Clinton Avenue; the south boundary, a proposed new street and the eastern boundary, the Croton Aqueduct. This 1830's, subterranean water tunnel connected upstate reservoirs to New York City. Atop the Aqueduct was an inland foot and bicycle pathway connecting the Hudson Valley villages.

Armour constructed a flat roofed two story house with an octagonal floor plan, a porch and a main entrance facing the proposed “Main Street” of Abbotsford. Based up probes and the roof which still remains between the 2nd floor ceiling and the 3rd floor of the current house, Armour's octagon house was probably very similar to a 2 story octagon house in Montvale, NJ. In 1860, 56

year old Armour moved into the house with Rebecca, his 38 year old second wife, five of his ten children and two Irish servant girls. Paul J. Armour died in 1866 and, in 1872, Rebecca sold the property to Joseph H. Steiner for \$27,000.

Armour's choice of an octagonal shape for a house was most assuredly based on an 1848 book, *The Octagon House, A Home for All*, by Orson Squire Fowler.



Plot Plan, Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

The Paul J. Armour Octagon House (1858-1872)

Why continue to build in the same SQUARE form of all past ages.

— Orson Squire Fowler

The several hundred octagon houses that rose in America during the mid-nineteenth century can be attributed directly to Orson Fowler's inspiration. The octagon house which Paul J. Armour had built in 1858-60 consisted of two stories and a raised basement. No views have ever been found of this early house, but it may be supposed that its appearance would have been very similar, although on a larger scale, to an engraving of an octagon house which appeared in a pattern book of the time.

Implicit in Armour's Octagon House are Fowler's tenants of “convenience and delight” derived from the “compactness



Two story 1850 octagon house Montvale, NJ
(Author's collection)

within and generous light from without” of the octagonal form. Extending five feet above ground level, the basement had numerous windows affording indirect light and ventilation. The basement also received the delivery of staples to the house, which were processed and then supplied to upper floors by a mechanical lift. A central, vertical stairway spine served a dual purpose as circulation core and ventilation shaft, permitting hot air to rise and disperse in the summer and to heat upper floors in the winter. Windows on eight sides provided continuous daylight and views in all directions. The color scheme of the original house consisted of tan siding, dark tan trim and deep green window sashes.

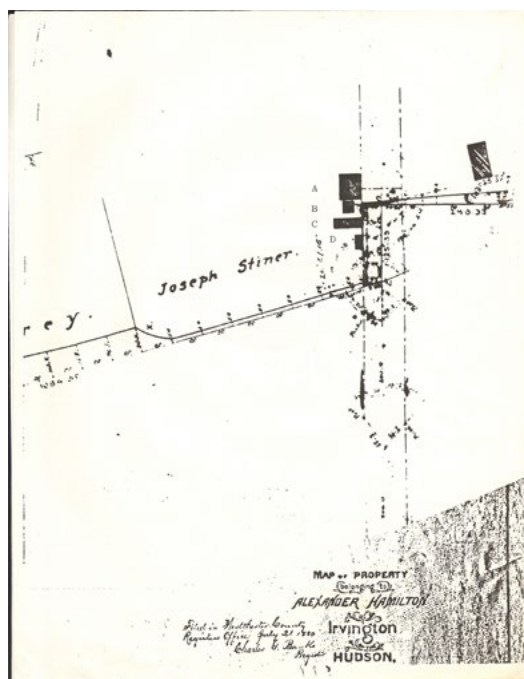
Due to the expansion of the property by Stiner in 1872 and the reorientation of the entrance to the house, the landscaping of the Armour period is obscure and no outbuildings remain from that period.

Joseph H. Stiner

We boys at times wondered if Mr. Stiner came over to buy goods or tell stories.

— Abraham Wakeman in *History and Reminiscences in Lower Wall Street*

In 1872 the Armour house was purchased for \$27,000 by Joseph H. Stiner, a prominent New York City tea merchant. Stiner, acting with great confidence, immediately extended and improved the property by acquiring land to the south from James Alexander Hamilton (son of President Alexander Hamilton), substantially reconstructing the interiors and adding the elaborate dome and verandah to create an elaborately detailed, classical Roman Temple.



The increased height made it possible take fuller advantage of the pastoral site with its extensive prospect over the Hudson Valley. Stiner, his first wife Hannah, and their six children used the house as a summer and weekend retreat. The ornate details added at this time gave the house a festive summery nature.

Stiner had been born in Hungary in 1827. After college, he served in the Austrian Army in the War of 1848 with France and Italy. He later emigrated to the United States in 1852. On his way to the United States, he visited Jamaica, W.I. where he met for the first time his stepbrother's daughter and future wife, Hannah, whom he would marry in 1856. Born in Jamaica in 1836, Hannah's mother was Esther Henriques, a member of an aristocratic West Indian family.

Stiner began a small chain of tea and spice shops in New York City in 1853 with his stepbrother and future father-in-law, Jacob Stiner, who had been in the trade in the West Indies. The business partnership ended in litigation in

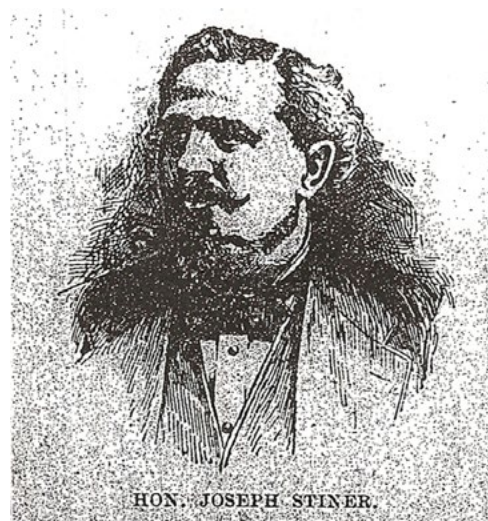
1867. Joseph Stiner retained over a dozen stores upon settlement and continued to market spices, condensed milk, cocoa, flavoring extracts as well as tea and coffee. In 1871, he attempted unsuccessfully to establish a wholesale tea enterprise and suffered heavy losses.

This financial failure did not prevent Stiner's purchase of the Armour property in 1872, its spectacular rebuilding and enlargement and the acquisition of an additional one-and-a-half acre parcel from the Hamilton estate to the south for \$16,700.

Stiner traveled extensively throughout the world, and was noted as a connoisseur and collector of art. A breeder of horses and dogs, he had the head of "Prince", his prize winning White English Terrier, cast in iron in the center medallion of each bay of the cast iron railing of the new verandah.

In 1878 Joseph Stiner was a member of a real estate pool losing \$135,000 by speculation and, in 1881, Hannah Stiner died. Amidst these unhappy circumstances, Stiner sold the Octagon House on January 3, 1882, for \$22,250 an amount that was less than what he had paid ten years earlier for the unembellished property without the additional land. The family moved to neighboring Dobbs Ferry, where he died of cancer of the larynx in 1897. His obituary in the New York Times described him as:

"at one time the largest retail dealer in teas in the world, his firm owning seventy-six large stores in the City and Brooklyn. He owned and occupied a beautiful villa at Irvington-on-Hudson, but more recently removed to Dobbs Ferry, where he had a handsome place."



Joseph Stiner, Dobbs Ferry Register, July 9, 1987

The Joseph H. Stiner Octagon House (1872-1882)

...seek for a design at once original, striking, appropriate and picturesque
— Samuel Sloan

Of the hundreds of octagon houses constructed in nineteenth-century America, none were more distinctive than the Irvington-on-Hudson structure after its 1870's rebuilding by its new owner, Joseph H. Stiner. Except for the foundation, portions of the exterior walls and some of the interior partitions, his campaign resulted in a completely rebuilt structure.

Stiner's most visually striking contribution was the addition of a two-story dome surmounted by an Observatory and a colonnaded verandah reached by paired sweeping stairs flanked by cast stone lions. The verandah has fifty-six columns with capitals carved in the shape of flowers local to the grounds and an ornate cast iron railing.

Here, in nineteenth century America, Stiner created in wood, slate and cast iron the ultimate American exotic villa. The concept of a villa goes back thousands of years to the Romans who built countryside pleasure houses in a classical form for occasional use. Gerasse Wheeler, a nineteenth century American architect, defines villas in his 1867 book, *Homes for the People*:

The word originated with the Italians, who applied it to those pleasure houses built in the vicinity of their larger towns, by men of wealth and leisure. They were not houses of constant residence. . .the villa should resemble the early buildings which gave it birth. . .

The notion of houses that "were not houses of constant residence" has 18th century precedence in the German lustschloss, the English country house and the French maison de plaisance. Jerome Zerbe in his book *Les Pavillons of the Eighteenth Century* described a maison de plaisance as the pavilion that provided an escape from the trying duties of Court life and pavilions de rendezvous or folies d'armour as the pavilions which sprang up all over Paris for the installation of a mistress.

We take our title from these garden-houses, if big enough to be lived in, that have a particular garden quality and were constructed out of a desire to get away.
— *Les Pavillons*



George Earl. White English Terrier, "Prince" (c. 1856).



"Prince," cast-iron railing



Lion at the south stair

Folie in French and folly in English, suggest a building which is either bizarre or extravagant.

The most interesting of this type of eighteenth-century building is the Desert de Retz which took the form of an oversized ruined column and base. It was built in 1771 by the rich dilettante, Chevalier Francois Racine de Monville, who was both owner and architect. Like the Octagon House one hundred years later, it was a marvelous merger of classical architecture in a romantic context.

The classical form of Stiner's house was given its romantic quality by coloring. A half dozen shades are employed to highlight the various applied moldings, decorative scrollwork, capitals and consoles. The main siding is light



Lion at the north stair

rose, the window sashes are deep red and the surfaces within the circular moldings are crimson. The stacked moldings and fasciae framing windows and walls are cocoa-tan and two shades of gray. The finer details of the capitals, railings and porch ceiling are picked out in red, white, violet, light blue and several shades of gray. The dome is festooned in patterned red, green and black slate accented with gold painted cast iron cresting and elaborately carved, painted wood scrollwork.

The configuration of an octagonal structure surmounted by a dome and surrounded by a colonnade has ancient origins as in Greece in the Phyllipeion at Olympia and the Tholos at Epidauros both from the 4th century B.C. Vitruvius describes in his first century B.C. book, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, an eight-sided structure known as the Tower of Wind which was built in Athens at that time. Octagonal and circular forms, crowned with hemispherical domes and surrounded with a colonnade were actively used for early Roman temples of which several examples of the 1st and 2nd centuries remain. The octagonal shape has symbolism rooted in Medieval churches. Saint Ambrose explained that the 4th century octagonal baptistery at Milan symbolized salvation and new life. The number eight standing for the eighth day (the day of Christ's resurrection), the eighth day of the world (that of eternity, after the traditional seven ages) and the eighth day of human life (that of eternal life). The inscription on the wall, credited to Saint Ambrose reads:

*Eight-niched soars this temple for sacred rites
Eight corners has its font
Right it is to build this baptismal hall about the sacred number eight
For here the people are reborn.*

During the Renaissance, it was rediscovered and used mainly as an ecclesiastical design. In eighteenth century England, the form was popular for garden pavilions in Country House landscapes. The Stiner Octagon House is the rebirth of an ancient classical form uniquely adopted for domestic use.

The popularity of classical forms in the third quarter of 19th century America was based upon redecorating by Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, who ruled France from 1852 to 1870. In the redecoration of her palaces, the Empress used a Louis XVI revival style which was widely publicized by the growing number of design books and magazines of the time. The original 18th century Louis XVI style had been a revival of interest in



Désert de Retz — *The Broken Column*, Michael Kenna 1988

the classical arts of ancient Greece and Rome inspired by the Pompeian and Herculean discoveries of the mid-18th century.

While the primary inspiration for both Armour's and Stiner's campaigns was Orson Fowler's renowned publication, his ideas had been expanded upon by architects of the time. The Philadelphia architect, Samuel Sloan, inserted an octagonal design for an "Oriental Villa" in his 1852 book, *The Model Architect*.

The illustrated design consisted of a two-story octagonal structure with a raised basement and an observatory crowned by a decorative bulbous cupola. In 1859, Dr. Haller Nutt of Natchez, Mississippi, engaged Sloan to employ an enlarged version of this design for his home which was to be called Longwood.

The final design consisted of two floors with piazzas on every other side of the octagon with rooms in between. Like the villa in *The Model Architect*, the core of the house was to be a great rotunda.

In 1861, Samuel Sloan described this revised "Oriental Villa":

The choice of style in this example was less a matter of caprice than the natural growth of the ground plan adopted. The Moorish arch employed in the balconies and the foliated drapery of the verandahs will fully sustain us in the application of the term "Oriental", despite the Italian details of cornice and window.

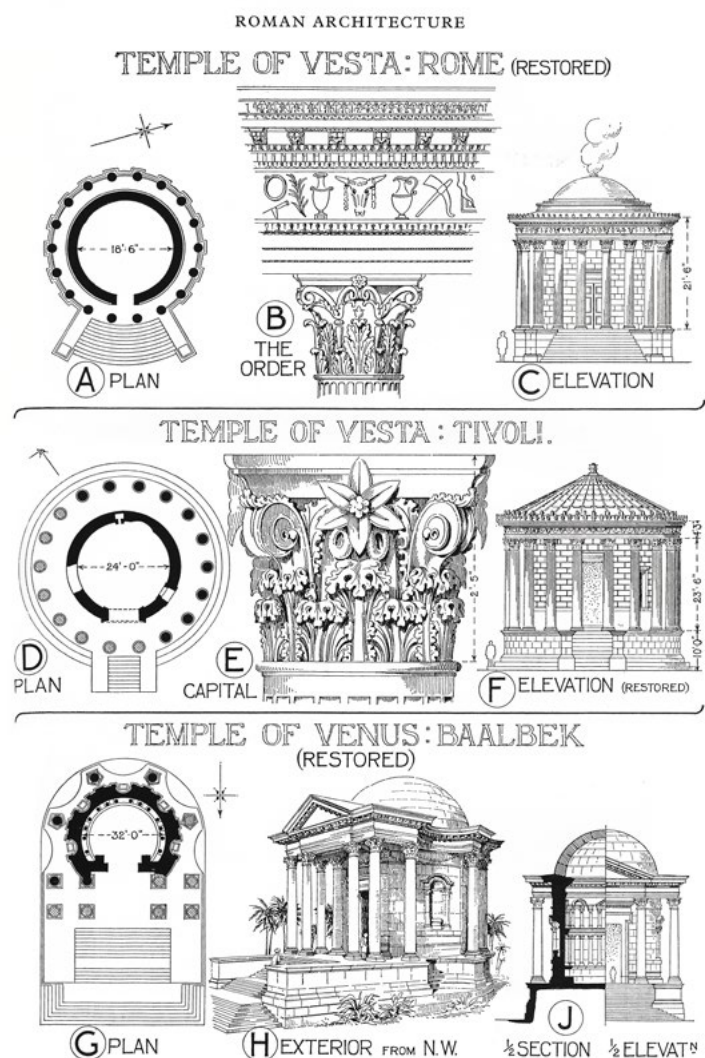
Unfortunately, the war between the States began in 1861, and the men working on the unfinished villa exchanged their construction tools for instruments of destruction, and never returned to the task of completing Longwood. Many of the orders for furnishings were canceled, and only the basement was made livable.

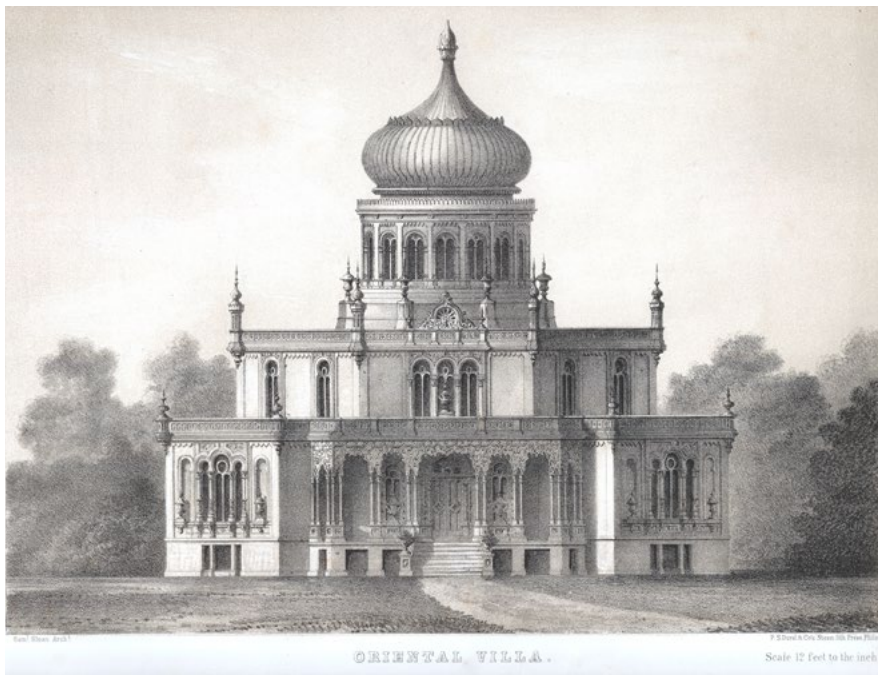
Stiner's 1872 building campaign uniquely weaves Orson Fowler's form and function philosophies with the exotic design recommendations of architects like Samuel Sloan.

Stiner's Octagon House consists of a full basement, four stories and an Observatory. As in Armour's time, the basement is seven feet below ground level, but with a ceiling height of ten and one-half feet, there are high windows on all eight sides bringing indirect light and ventilation. Access to the raised first floor verandah and main entrance was now by means of the pair of magnificent curving stairs. A service stairway on the south facade gives access to the basement.

A central, vertical stairway spine continued to serve the dual purpose of a circulation core and a ventilation shaft and it is topped by an observatory with eight windows. When two of the windows are opened in the direction of the prevailing breeze a negative pressure is created within the house. In the summer this causes the hot air to rise and disperse out of the observatory which induces the cool air in from the basement. Victorians in general were deeply concerned with the relationship between health and architectural design. Like his contemporaries, "ventilation was", according to Fowler, "as important in a house as breath to human life and strength." The verandah encircled the entire first floor of Stiner's residence. As Fowler noted, 'the advantages of having them all around the house is considerable, allowing you to choose sun or shade, breeze or shelter from it, as comfort dictates.'

The basement contains the billiard room, wine storeroom, service kitchen, larder, laundry





“Oriental Villa”, Samuel Sloan, Architect, c. 1852

room and furnace room. The first floor, raised above ground level in the tradition of a piano nobile, contains rooms for formal and social functions. These consist of a main salon, dining room, tea room, solarium and library. A pantry, adjacent to the dining room, is linked to the downstairs kitchen by means of a dumbwaiter. Flanking the pantry is the upstairs kitchen with detailing and finishing that clearly indicate that, unlike the downstairs service kitchen, it was used by the family. This kitchen is indicative of the emerging women’s role in family work in the middle and upper classes.

As Harriet Beecher Stowe stated in her 1869 book, *The American Woman’s Home*:

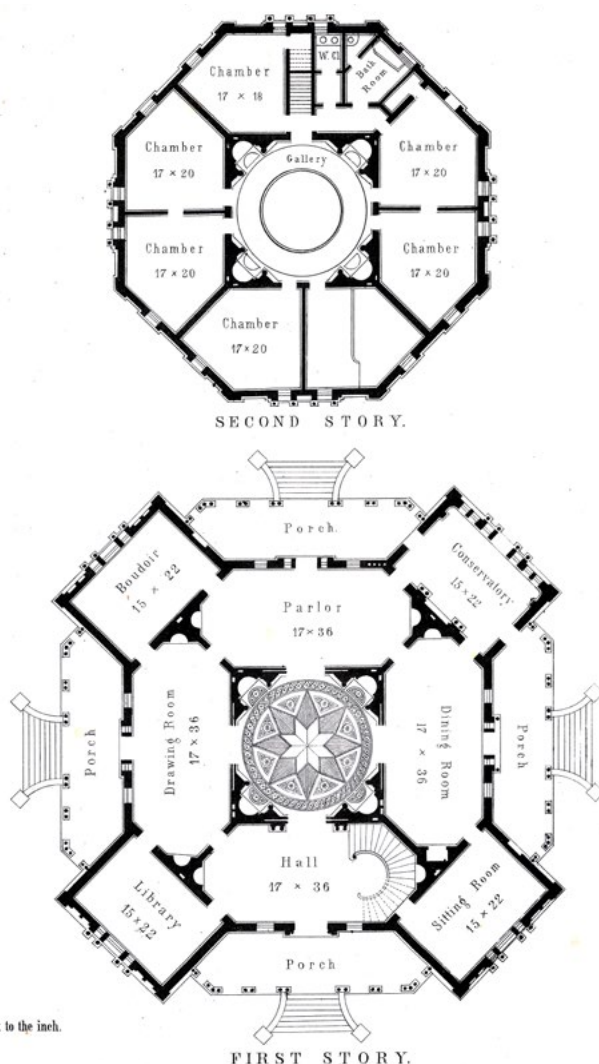
To the minds of most children and servants, ‘to be a lady’, is almost synonymous with ‘to be waited on and do no work’. It is the earnest desire of the author of this volume to make plain the falsity of this growing popular feeling, and to show how much happier and more efficient family life will become when it is strengthened, sustained and adorned by family work.

All “the rough and bad smelling work of the family” was conducted in the downstairs service kitchen.

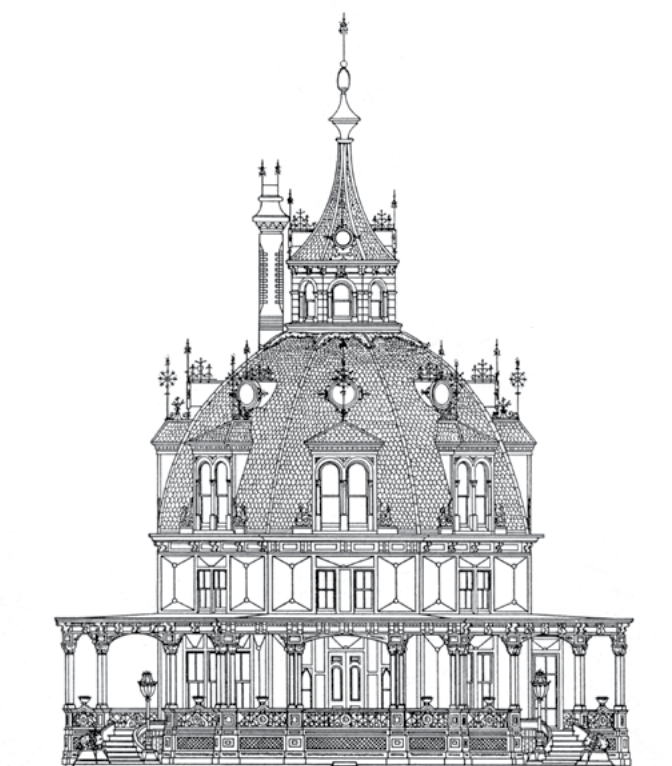
The second floor contains a three-room master bedroom suite with a sitting room, master bedroom and dressing room along with a master bathroom. In addition there are four more bedrooms, a full bathroom and a toilet room. On the third floor is the high ceilinged Egyptian Revival women’s gymnasium/music room, a bedroom with a bathroom, an additional bedroom, a room for the exhibit of collections and a full bathroom accessed by the hall. The fourth floor consists of the unpartitioned dance room with eight windows and a spiral staircase up to the fifth level observatory. The floor plans displayed, as Fowler stated:

...all the peculiarities and the advantages of our octagon style, namely, compactness and contiguity of rooms, central stairway, closets, and small bedrooms.

Interior rooms of the Stiner residence are appointed in a hierarchical order befitting their stature. Door and window surrounds of the formal



“Oriental Villa” Plans, Samuel Sloan, Architect, c. 1852



The Octagon House

rooms are elaborately endowed with now extinct long-leaf yellow pine octagonal moldings and bases with florid Gothic Revival acanthus leaf capitals. Windows and doors of the upper floors maintain the same vocabulary, but with simpler detailing. The less formal chambers, closets and the basement rooms are lined with beaded-board wainscoting. In the bathrooms and basement the wainscoting has alternating long-leaf yellow pine and walnut slats. Similarly, the floors in the women's gymnasium/music room are alternating long-leaf yellow pine and walnut strips. The first floor rooms and the hallways throughout the house are long-leaf yellow pine strips. The bedrooms have sub-floors for wall to wall carpeting.

The town of Irvington had no central water system until 1883. Rainwater cisterns provided the then-considered-healthier rainwater to the kitchen and bathrooms. A cistern below the verandah dating to Armour's time continued to provide a reservoir of water for the kitchen and cisterns on the third and fourth floors served the bathrooms. This system is as Fowler had recommended:

I should want these cisterns, because double-filtered rainwater is preferable to all other water for drinking and culinary purposes. And how much more handy to turn a faucet and draw water direct into a pail, than to raise it from the well, or from a cistern underground or below where you require it for use.

In order to provide hot water, a water line was run into the kitchen wood stove and then to an adjacent tank. A pipe led from the tank to the bathrooms upstairs, with the upstairs cisterns providing the water pressure to drive it back up.

Gas lighting, fed by the village system, was an original component of the house when it was built. In the 1870s, gas illuminated the house from cellar to cupola, including two exterior lanterns. Central heating was also an integral feature of this summer house. To take the chill off Spring and Fall evenings, a coal-fired cast iron furnace in the cellar distributed rising hot air through tin ducts to the upper floor rooms. A system of speaking tubes connected the principal rooms with the service kitchen in the basement.

Several outbuildings existed on the grounds in Stiner's time including a greenhouse and a surviving Oriental style octagonal well house. A 2½ story Carriage House/Barn with servant's quarters above and a shed, both in the polychromatic colors of the house, were destroyed by fire in the 1940s and are now rebuilt.

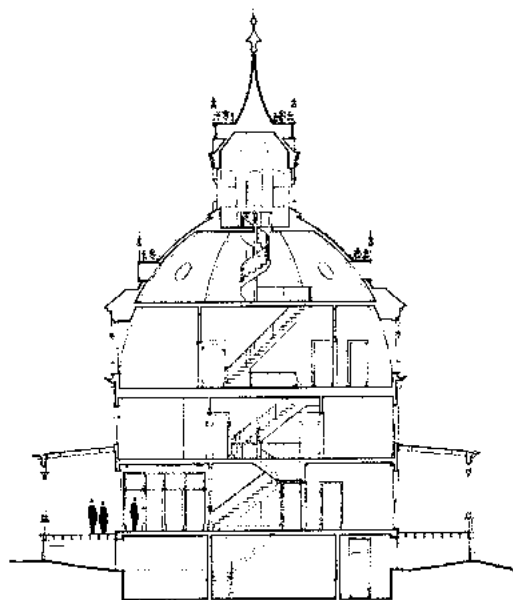
In the tradition of the time, the entire grounds were carefully planted in a picturesque natural form with exotic specimens. A Chinese Cherry Tree (*Cornus Mas*) defines the edge of the southeast lawn, pruned Norway Spruces line the driveway, West Clinton Avenue is lined with maples, a pair of Kentucky Coffee Trees flank the stairways and the west side of the verandah looks into, the now huge, Magnolias.



1870 Map -- Village of Irvington

George W. Dibble Family

George W. Dibble's family owned a substantial estate named "Nearwood" on South Broadway just a few minutes walk from the Octagon House. Born in 1848, George Dibble married Susie Hayt Parish in 1877. One year later their only child, Mable Elsworth Dibble, was born. The 1880 census shows George, Susie and Mable living in Irvington-on-Hudson, possibly at "Nearwood". George Dibble's business is listed as "no business". In 1882, Susie H. Dibble bought the Octagon House from Joseph H. Stiner. Under its new ownership, the house apparently reverted once again to being a year-round residence.



Section

In 1897, Susie Dibble died at the age of 43 of tuberculosis at Saranac Lake where she was probably being treated for the ailment. In 1899, George Dibble married his second wife, Susie's younger sister, Annie Falls Hayt of Mt. Vernon, New York. George died in 1917 in Mt. Vernon, where he had lived since his second marriage.

Prior to George Dibble's death, ownership of the Octagon House property had gone to his first daughter, Mabel, who had married Floyd Blackwell Taylor and was living in Mt. Vernon. On May 28, 1902, she transferred ownership to Delia Stone Clarke and in November of the same year, at the age of 24, Mabel died of heart failure, just six weeks after giving birth to her second daughter.

Stone Family

In 1902, Delia Stone Clarke was a widow. She had been previously married to Charles S. Clarke. There had been no children. But from a previous marriage, Charles had a legally declared insane daughter, Jessie Clarke, who had been born in 1855. When Delia Stone Clarke died in 1909, the provisions of her will bequeathed the Octagon Houses to her executors and trustees for use by her insane stepdaughter, Jessie Clark, who used the house for 24 years until her death in 1933. The property then reverted to Delia's nieces who immediately after their inheritance sold it to Dr. Erwin Brand for \$15,000.

Dr. Erwin Brand

One of American's most colorful and creative personalities in the field of biochemistry.

— 1953 obituary

In 1933, 42 year old Dr. Erwin Brand was an associate professor of biochemistry at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons where he was an authority on amino acids. Brand had been born in Berlin in 1891, studied in Germany and was credited with performing brilliant initial studies on oxazolidines at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute in Dresden. Brand immigrated to the United States in 1922, working first at Montefiore Hospital, followed by the New York State Psychiatric Institute and, from 1931 onward, at Columbia University where he continued his research on metabolism and amino acids.

When World War II broke out, under a contract with Columbia University and the Office of Scientific Research and Development, a federal agency created to coordinate scientific research for military purposes during World War II, Erwin Brand performed the first complete analysis of a protein in terms of its amino acid content. In the early 1940s, he began to devoted extensive energies to chemical societies. In 1952, he was invited to the India Science Congress in Calcutta. In the last ten years of his life, with the financial assistance of the Office of Naval Research and of the National Institutes of Health, he threw all his energies into turning his laboratory into a small polypeptide factory

demonstrating the additive function of the asymmetric carbon atoms of the constituent amino acid residues.

Brand's 1953 obituary stated "to many he appeared to be cantankerous, blunt, and forbidding. That despite these impressions he should have accomplished so much of value is a tribute to the very patent sincerity and unselfishness with which he fought for his causes. He was a creative and constructive force, and such people are usually angular and driven by a remorseless energy". He and his wife Florence, also a biochemist, (they had no children) were known for their entertaining at the house.

Curiously, 13 years before Brand's death, the contents of the Octagon House were auctioned off and, on January 17, 1940, title to the property had been transferred from Erwin Brand to the New York Lien Corporation as part of a foreclosure of a tax lien.



From the east - 1940s

John P. Cunningham

First living person to be elected to the Advertising Hall of Fame.

In 1941, John P. Cunningham purchased the Octagon House from the New York Lien Corporation. Cunningham had started in advertising in 1919 as a artist and copywriter. In 1950 he was cofounder of Cunningham and Walsh, which became one of the largest advertising agencies in the world; he retired in 1961.

In the 1970s, Cunningham and his wife Patricia were living in Riverdale, New York. His house contained a bedroom suite and chairs from the Octagon House which, because of the large size of the pieces, had found no buyers at the furnishings auction at the time of the Brand. Being from the 1870s, and containing octagonal detailing, they were most likely Stiner furniture. Knowing that I coveted the furniture, when the Cunninghams died, they kindly willed the furniture back to the Octagon House with a codicil requiring that it remain forever in the house.

During the Cunningham ownership, the house was rented from September, 1945 to July, 1946 to Aleko E.

Lilius, (1890-1977), a Russian-Finnish writer, photographer and explorer, who wrote of his experiences with Lai Choi San, a female Chinese pirate chief who, with several thousand buccaneers under her command, had looted ships off the coast of China in the 1920's.

In 1946, Cunningham sold the Octagon House to the noted author, poet and historian Carl Carmer for \$8,500.



Caretaker's daughters 1930s? - 1940s



Aleko E. Lilius Winter 1945-6 (Compliments of Marit Lindqvist, Aleko E. Lilius Biographer)



Lai Choi San (far right) with her two amahs

Carl Carmer

*For people who choose to live in octagon houses are mad and therefore unpredictable,
and therefore sometimes worthy of psychic research.*

— Carl Carmer

One of the most celebrated occupants of Octagon House was Carl Carmer (1893-1976), the author, poet and historian. In 1946, Carl Carmer bought the Octagon House. His wife, Betty, later described the day:

One day, when we were living in a brownstone in New York City, Carl saw the house in the want ads. He got up, went to the car, drove to Irvington and bought it, all in the same afternoon. It was in terrible condition. He came back and told me 'it's so ugly, it's beautiful!' He bought it without my even seeing it. . .

Carmer resided in the house from 1946 to the time of his death in 1978. His legacy includes tales of a resident ghost. During Carmer's ownership the house was documented in magazine and newspaper articles, books and architectural treatises.

Carl Carmer had been born in upstate New York in 1894 to an old Dutch farming family. He graduated from Hamilton College in 1914 and, after earning a Master of Arts degree at Harvard University, taught English at Syracuse University and the University of Rochester. He served as a First Lieutenant in World War I. After the war, he obtained an appointment as Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alabama where he remained for six years. During that time he explored the Alabama backwoods areas, listening to native tales and lore and noting the peculiarities and characteristics of the region.

After a year as columnist of the New Orleans Morning Tribune, he became Assistant Editor of Vanity Fair in New York and later Associate Editor of Theater Arts Monthly. He married his second wife, Elizabeth Black of New Orleans, on Christmas Day 1928. Beginning his writing career as a poet with two volumes published in 1934; *French Town* and *Deep South*, he wove his

experiences in Alabama

into his first nationally noted book, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, a Literary Guild selection published in 1934. From that time forward, Carmer devoted most of his time to writing. He was the editor of the *Rivers of America* Series writing *The Hudson* in 1939 and editing a book of river songs entitled *Songs of the Rivers of America*. His lifelong interest in, and affection for, upper New York State are apparent in his books about the area including the 1936, *Listen for a Lonesome Drummer: A York State Chronicle* and the 1949, *Dark Trees to the Wind - A Cycle of York State Years*. His one novel, *Genesee River*, published in 1941, also a Literary Guild selection, sold over 100,000 copies. He wrote seven children's books, five of which were illustrated by his wife.

During World War II, as a writer attached to the Army Air Force,



The Carmer's 1947 Lawn Party for Life Magazine



Croquet on the lawn 1947 for Life Magazine

Carmer wrote *The Jesse James of the Java Sea*, a narrative of submarine battle service, *The War Against God*, an exposé of Nazi attacks on Christianity and *Taps* is not Enough, a radio drama V-E Day program for CBS. At a dinner for visiting British publishers he was introduced as “the completely American” writer. His own radio show dealt with national folk heroes and folk myths. He assembled four volumes of recordings of regional American Songs for Decca and worked with Walt Disney on a series of folklore shorts.

Carmer devoted much time to civic activities including serving as president of the Author’s Guild, president of the Poetry Society of America, director of the American Civil Liberties Union and head of the American Center of P.E.N. Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference (later Scenic Hudson, Inc.) was founded in the living room of the Octagon House in 1963 to oppose the Consolidated Edison Company’s proposed pumped storage facility at Storm King Mountain, near Cornwall, New York. He headed Boscobel Restoration which saved and restored an important 1806 neoclassical house which now overlooks the Hudson in Garrison, New York.

Robert Boyle, author the ecological study of the river of *The Hudson River*, , said that “without Carl Carmer there would be no living river. He was the first to take an intelligent interest in it.”

The Carmers lived full time in Irvington, with lengthy winter vacations in Florida when drafts made the house too uncomfortable. Every September, Carl’s birthday was celebrated with a large house party attended by an array of New York City actors and fellow writers and broadcasters. A popular gift for the Carmers was a curiosity from the Victorian Era. The Carmers had no children, but the house, jammed packed with their esoteric collections, always bustled with friends and neighbors. When the Carmers had their great parties, Betty Carmer would usually dance on the top of the kitchen table which had a top that was a horizontal slice from a great Redwood Tree.



Carl & Betty Carmer, 1950s

In 1947, one year after their purchase, the Carmers hosted a party at the Octagon House which was featured in an article in *Life Magazine* *Life Goes to a Party in an Octagon House*, *Life Magazine* November 24, 1947). Evidencing the disdain for Victorian House in the mid-twentieth century, Octagon House is described as “the magnificent monstrosity looming like a pastry chef’s nightmare”.

Carmer enjoyed relating tales about the Octagon House which appeared in his books:

High on the east bank of the Hudson River, and only twenty miles from New York City, stands a strange eight-sided house. It seems to have a park of its own, for it is surrounded by a high hedge in which the bushes were so planted that a number of them bloom in each month from March to October. The park has a unique atmosphere, and anyone who enters it through the winding driveway becomes aware that the trees are of unusual varieties and were planted long ago. Here stand tulip trees, magnolias, maples of Norway and Japan, and a tremendous giant called a



William Carlos Williams, Charles Sheeler & Carl Carmer 1961
Elizabeth Black Carmer, Photographer - Smithsonian Institute

'Kentucky Coffee Tree' of a sort which was popular among Hudson Valley residents a hundred years ago. Perhaps the strangest of the trees are the Chinese ginkgoes, whose leaves in sunlight throw intricate shadows on the green lawn. Since the largest of these stands near the old well-house, which was made in the shape of Chinese Pagoda, the visitor gets a sense of Chinese influence before he reaches the end of the drive. The house, which is painted in two shades of gray and decorated with white trim, rises five stories high, the last one being a many windowed cupola which is higher than even the tallest trees. It surmounts a slate-roofed two-storied dome which curves upward from the walls of the second floor. The first floor is circled by a wide verandah bordered by an elaborately designed white wrought iron railing from which white pillars in groups of three rise to flowered capitals beneath the eaves.

The prosperous merchant to whom this mansion belonged completed it almost a century ago. He was an importer of Chinese teas, and he had recognized in a number of octagon houses then being built (for the building of eight-sided houses was an architectural fad at the time) a similarity to Oriental "summerhouses" which he had seen in his travels beside the lakes and rivers of China. Consequently, many of the designs of the decorations within the house are of Chinese origin, giving it an atmosphere not to be found in any other American dwelling.

The whole place looks as if it has been the scene of a mysterious story. It has been! And it is this story I am about to tell.

When his wife died, the merchant was heartbroken and left the house, which held many happy memories for him. He sold it to a French lady of noble family who, after her husband's death, had brought her only daughter to America. The girl had inherited from her mother great charm and a lively temperament. She was darkly beautiful with black hair and even blacker eyes and her form was slim and exquisitely modeled.

On a great estate near by lived a rich and aristocratic American family whose ancestors of English blood had lived for several generations in feudal splendor among the "Sugar Islands" off the southern coast of eastern North America. The eldest son of this family has no sooner seen his lovely young neighbor than he fell desperately in love with her. His parents soon discovered that he was making daily visits to the Octagon House whose cupola they could see rising above the hills and trees to the north of their home. Since they had already planned for his marriage to the daughter of another of the great-estate families of the valley, they disapproved of his interest in the French girl and forbade him to see her again.

Though he continued his visits secretly, the girl's mother soon became aware of the situation and, being a person of great family pride herself, ordered her daughter not to see her ardent wooer again. The young couple then took to meeting in a lonely spot on the bank of the river. They soon felt that the restrictions put upon them were intolerable and they planned to run away to New York and be married.

One morning in the spring of the year they met again by the river and hastened to Tarrytown to embark on a steamboat for New York, where they intended to be married. Unhappily for them, a servant of the young man's family saw them hurrying along the riverbank and reported the fact to his employers. At once the father set out in hot pursuit on a spirited horse. In the meantime, his wife ordered her carriage and went to the Octagon House, where she upbraided the girl's mother and accused her of conspiring with the lovers.

The pursuing horseman galloped onto the Tarrytown dock just after the gangplank of the steamboat had been drawn aboard.

The steamboat, it developed, was racing against a competitor owned by a rival line. As it entered the shadow of the Palisades, the boiler, which had been subjected to terrific pressure, burst, killing the young man instantly. The steamboat caught fire, and the remaining passengers were soon confronted with the choice of burning to death or attempting to swim from midstream to the shore. That evening when the bodies of the drowned lay upon the river's bank, the corpse of the girl was among them.

The next day a farmer's wagon approached the Octagon House bearing a pine box. To the consternation of the driver, however, he was met by an angry woman who bitterly refused to accept his cargo. Eventually the girl was buried in a potter's field near the river.

This should end the story of the fated lovers.

Nevertheless, a happenstance — possibly an unrelated coincidence — could be considered by the romantic-minded as having a late bearing upon it.

My wife and I now live in the old Octagon House. Twice in recent successive springs my wife has wakened at the end of a strange dream. In it she stands on the moonlit verandah and sees a young girl walking up the drive. She seems to be surrounded by mellow golden light. Suddenly from the shadows of the verandah darts an older woman, who bars the path of the girl and by stern gestures bids her be gone. The girl wrings her hands and weeps, but her companion is obdurate. At last the girl turns about and, still weeping, walks back whence she came. As she reaches the pagoda-like well-house, she turns about for one last look. As she goes so, the other woman beckons to her and opens her arms. The girl begins to run toward her — and the dream ends!

It seems to the present occupants of the house that the two have been reconciled, because whenever we have a visitor who claims to have psychic powers and to understand ghosts, we hear that Octagon House has a special feeling about it — a kind of aura from the past which bears with it a sense of happiness."

With Carl in his 80's and Betty in her 70's and the house badly in need of work, the Carmers offered the house for sale in 1975. On September 10, 1976, the National Trust for Historic Preservation took title to the Octagon House; the next day Carl Carmer died. He left knowing that his beloved house was in good hands.

Shortly afterwards it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places - one of only twelve hundred National Historic Landmarks - nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior.

The Dibble (1882-1902), Stone (1902-1933),
Brand (1933-1940), Cunningham (1940-1946),
Carmer (1946-1976) Octagon House



Carl & Betty Carmer - Music Room

While it is possible to attribute particular aspects of the Octagon House to Armour and to Stiner, it is less possible to differentiate the efforts and changes of the next five owners, Dibble, Stone, Brand, Cunningham and Carmer.

Under the Dibble family ownership (1882-1902), the house received a repainting. A black and white photograph of George W. Dibble in the New York Historical Society shows a dark and light contrasting paint scheme. Paint analysis determined that these ca. 1885 colors were light tan contrasted with dark grey-green and dark red. On the interior, a redecoration of the Tearoom can almost certainly be attributed to Dibble consisting of wallpaper with a flower and bird design surmounted by a gold leaf picture molding.

During the Stone, Brand, Cunningham, and Carmer ownership (1902-1976) most of the cresting and scrollwork, the chimney cap, the southern lamppost, the verandah urns and the first and second floor shutters were lost. The flanking curved front stairs had a simpler replacement and a section of the south side cast iron railing was removed and a straight stair installed. The exterior was been repainted several times. In 1976 the house had a gray and white scheme, painted by Carmer in 1959. On the interior all of the originally varnished wood trim had been painted white, all carpets removed and, except for the Tearoom, all walls and ceilings had been over-painted with a white paint. All furnishings and decorations of the Stiner era had been removed. Electricity had been installed and the Carmers had converted the Tearoom to a lavatory. The heating system, still the original cast iron furnace in a brick chamber, had been converted from coal burning to oil.

In 1945, a fire had swept through the two and one half story carriage house/barn/shed complex. Whatever remainders of the missing elements that were stored in the complex were lost at that time.

By 1976, the grounds were substantially different from the Stiner era. The few remaining original specimens were now mature and subsequent owners had made numerous additions. The flanking Kentucky coffee trees on each side of the house were gone. Only one Norway spruce, of the original twelve which had lined the driveway, remained and, contrary to its original



Carriage House/Barn February 3, 1944

sheared condition, it had grown enormous. Originally mock orange, viburnum and lilac hedges defined the street and aqueduct boundaries, later generations remained. Over time, hemlocks and white pine had been planted to screen the property line, these had matured to full size. The Norway maple trees which had originally been planted along the street had, for the most part, disappeared.



North stair - 1970s



Music Room - 1970s

THE OCTAGON HOUSE, 1975–1978

The Octagon House in 1975

*Sad are the ruthless ravages of time! The bulwark'd turret frowning, once sublime.
Now totters to its basis, and displays. A venerable wreck of other days!*

— Sir Walter Scott, *The Bridal of Triermain*, *Images of Cumbria* Penrith

One hundred and sixteen years after the original construction of the Octagon House, seven family owners, tenants, a foreclosure, an auction of the contents, a Panic, a Depression and time had all taken their toll on this magnificent structure. Its deteriorating condition with gray and white flaking paint, the curious shape, its missing elements with somewhat awkward replacements all coupled with unusual tales contributed to a less than happy image. The overgrown grounds with specimens choked by bittersweet vines did not help the setting. But the truly serious problem was a structural issue.

When Stiner had added the dome in 1872, his builder had failed to install a tension ring, a continuous band at the base of a dome which stops the downward force from moving laterally. This was not due to lack of knowledge; construction methodology books of the time clearly recommend this required element. Unless there is a tension ring or very rigid joints, a dome will fail. This was exactly what was occurring in the Octagon House dome.

The problem was an old one with the failure probably beginning within a few years of the initial dome addition. Over the years, the only reaction to the problem had been the sealing of the cracks with plaster. Stiner's builders had further compounded the problem by placing the dome on the unstable parapet walls of the original Armour house. The now structurally unsound dome was resting on an unstable support. In addition, Stiner's builders, when they had rebuilt the interior, had positioned the new partitions without regard to the floor beams. This was resulting in substantial deflection of undersized beams, which was apparent in the sloping floors and out of plumb doorways. Finally, the shifting dome had caused numerous openings in the exterior resulting in substantial water damage which was largely concealed in the exterior walls and behind the terne and slate roofs.

While the structural problems were unique, the house had all of the expected problems of a building of this age and condition except layout changes. Fortunately, the symmetrical self-contained form of the Octagon House did not lend itself to additions and its size exceeded the requirements of most twentieth-century occupants. In the interior of the house, there were essentially no changes to the 1872 layout. But the heating system, which was producing dangerous

fumes, only served the first two floors and one room on the third. The electrical system was insufficient and, in some areas, improperly installed. The 100 years old plumbing system had additions that had been installed outside the walls and ceilings.

The loss of the original exterior cast iron cresting and vulnerable wood scrollwork had most visibly affected the appearance of the house.

The 1885 photograph of George Dibble, shows areas of physical deterioration in the form of missing slate and dormer scrollwork only one decade after their installation. In 1976, no original scrollwork survived on the third, fourth or fifth floors — in fact early 1940's photographs showed that it had not existed for many decades. Wooden dormer supports on the cupola were replaced in this century, possibly in 1959 when the Carmers undertook a modest restoration. All of

the third floor cast-iron cresting had been removed, no doubt as a safety precaution since these perilously tall and heavy poles were poorly fastened to the house. Cresting from the chimney cap and cupola finial had completely disappeared, as had the chimney cap itself. Asphalt shingles, in lieu of slate, had been applied onto several third floor dormer roofs and the original terne sheathing of the porch

roof had received many coatings of tar. At some point in the early twentieth century, the exterior staircases had been completely rebuilt. While the new stairs somewhat maintained the shape and plan of the original Stiner effort, the stairway skirting had been rebuilt with beaded boards, and the trim was simply applied omitting the elaborate and difficult to reproduce kerf of its predecessor.

The entire property needed conservation efforts including every part of the utility and mechanical systems, the entire fabric of the house, the complete surface decoration and the grounds in their totality. While the house generally looked only very run down, the structural problems were in fact unique and extremely serious.



Dance Room - 1970s



Opening in dome - Music Room, 1976



Opening in dome - Music Room, 1978

"I believe in my heart of hearts that it is better to have your ship sunk at sea than have it rot in the harbor."

— Cory Booker, mayor of Newark, New Jersey

Commencement address, Bard College May 26, 2012

The Acquisition 1975-1978

“...the law’s delay!”

— Shakespeare, Hamlet III i 56

In the winter of 1975, there appeared to be insurmountable problems associated with the acquisition, stabilization and restoration of the Octagon House. First, it seemed that the best price for the property would be from a developer wanting to demolish the Octagon House and subdivide the almost four acres of land into ½ acre plots. The plots, in a superb area, on a beautiful road, would have been quite valuable. (The developer was prepared to call the subdivision “Octagon Park” if a zoning variance was granted to permit eight houses).

The Carmers were absolutely opposed to a sale to a developer, but the land was establishing the value. Second, even if a sympathetic purchaser could be found, the physical condition of the house made it unlikely that any bank would be willing to hold a mortgage. Third, and most significant, the unstable condition of the dome was on the verge of a complete structural failure. But it was prohibitively expensive to secure the dome by complete removal and rebuilding.

In order to protect the Octagon House from any possible demolition or compromise by future unsympathetic owners, the property was acquired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation on September 10, 1976, as part of its Limited Endangered Building Fund. This revolving fund had been formulated especially for this purpose and the Octagon House was to be its first application.

On October 2, 1976, the contents of the house were auctioned off. The furnishings were not original to the house, being a combination of Carmer family items and pieces collected by them over the years.

On October 24, 1976, The New York Times reported:

The new owner is the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which stepped in when it looked as if a potential buyer of the house and its three-acre site had a tear-it-down-for-development gleam in his eye. The National Trust paid about \$100,000 for the property, the first outright purchase of a building under its Limited Endangered Building Fund. It now plans to resell the house to a buyer who will preserve it and hopefully, restore it as well. It needs work. For one thing, from the top floor daylight can be seen through parts of the roof. ‘We’ll have to figure out some way to make sure we can draw the eight sides of the roof back together,’ said Fletcher Cox of the National Trust. ‘It’s going to be an interesting feat’. What will the National Trust ask for ‘Octagon House’? ‘Whatever we can get for it’, Mr. Cox replied, laughing. ‘The house is not in very good condition structurally and whoever buys it is going to have a tough time and a lot of expense putting it back into really good condition.’

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was deeply concerned about the structural problems and the conservation of the property. They requested proposals for its sale with their decision being based upon structural repair methodology, price and willingness to accept a preservation easement. In November, the National Trust invited proposals to purchase the property and provided an Invitation for Proposals which outlined the conditions.



Observatory - 1970s

The outlined conditions in summary consisted of:

I. GENERAL AND SPECIAL CONDITIONS OF SALE:

- A. The property shall be subject to covenants in perpetuity including:
 - 1. The exterior appearance shall be maintained and preserved.
 - 2. No buildings shall be built on the property except the present residence and outbuildings appropriate to it.
 - 3. The property shall not be subdivided.
- B. The offeror shall provide proof that the offeror has the capability to:
 - 1. Repair the Property:
 - (a) Stabilize the Dome including making it weather tight
 - (b) Stabilize the Entrance Hall Floor
 - (c) Upgrade the Mechanical System
 - (d) Stabilize the Porch
 - (e) Repair Exterior Woodwork
 - (f) Rebuild and Repaint the Chimney
 - (g) Repaint the Exterior
 - 2. Obtain approval of local officials at the National Trust
 - 3. Maintain the following schedule:
 - (a) Submit to National Trust
 - 1) 60 days from closing of title a proposed program and specification for dome stabilization.
 - 2) 90 days from closing of title a proposed program for stabilization of entrance hall floor.
 - 3) 180 days from closing of title a proposed program for items 1c, d, e, f & g.
 - 4. Complete dome stabilization and make watertight 180 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.
 - 5. Complete stabilization of entrance hall floor within 365 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.
 - 6. Complete items 1c, d, f & g within 730 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.
- C. The purchaser shall accept normal title requirements.
- D. The purchase price shall not be less than \$75,000.
- E. The terms shall be 10% deposit with 25% at purchase and the balance over a term of 20 years at 8% interest.

II. INSPECTION

The property can be inspected by appointment

III. SUBMISSION

All proposals must be received by January 3, 1977 and be in effect for 30 days.

IV. EVALUATION

- A. The National Trust may accept any proposal which assures a maximum sales return to the National Trust but which at the same time, will assure repair of the property and perpetual preservation in a manner acceptable to the National Trust.
- B. Offerer will be required to submit evidence of financial ability and technical competence.

My proposal to bring the dome back into position consisted of high tension steel cables with turnbuckles wrapped around the dome on the outside and running from one corner to the other on the inside. I proposed to pay the same price the National Trust had paid the Carmers. I fully embraced a preservation easement which would restrict exterior charges to the house and the land. There was no public access.

On December 22, 1976, I submitted a proposal to purchase the Octagon House for \$75,000. I requested a limit on the expense of the dome but agreed to accept all the other conditions and to broaden them to include design control by the Trust of future outbuildings. I stated in my proposal that my intentions are to preserve within and without. I would restore and maintain all that is of the period that remains in the house to as close to their original state as possible. The preservation and restoration of this building should be to a prospective buyer a lifelong labor of love. On February 18th, I met with a National Trust representative in Washington, D.C., and discussed purchase price and terms and restoration and stabilization techniques. My proposal was essentially acceptable to the Trust except for the limitation on the expense of the dome repair.



Verandah - 1978

During this time, I was busy researching octagon houses and wood domes and consulting with engineers. I had devised a scheme for stabilization of the dome whereby I would attempt to bring it back into alignment by encircling it in two locations with high-tension steel cables and turnbuckles. Over a period of time, the turnbuckles would be tightened thus pulling the dome, against itself, back into position. The great size and enormous weight of the dome with its slate roof topped by an observatory made ultimate success questionable. The fact that such a technique had never been used before added to the uncertainty of the undertaking.

On April 14, 1977, after much consideration, I advised the Trust that I was dropping my condition that there be a limit on the expense of the dome stabilization. This would fully expose me to whatever financial requirements were necessary for the stabilization. Since I had only a finite amount of funds, I was gambling fully that my untried ideas would actually work. Numerous proposals were made, but in 1976 the National Trust decided in favor of my proposal.

After a number of months of clarification of legal issues by the various attorneys involved, on February 24, 1978, my wife, Nan, and I signed the Contract to purchase the Octagon House and sent them, on February 27th, to Washington for signature by the Trust. My notes for March 8, 1978, state: "Coughlin calls - we got it".

Two years and three months after we had first visited the Carmers, an agreement was signed which would enable us to purchase the property - an event which would not happen for another 10½ more months. It was the first house to have been bought by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and resold to a private citizen.

On Sunday, March 12, 1978, friends and I drove up to the Octagon House to examine again the project on which I was staking my financial resources and my reputation as an architect and a preservationist on the success of my structural repair concepts which had never been tried.

THE OCTAGON HOUSE 1978-2012

Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

— Edna St. Vincent Millay, Second Fig, A Few Figs from Thistles

From 1979 to 2012, I undertook a complete conservation of the interior and exterior of the house and the grounds, furnished the house with original and contemporaneous furniture and corrected the structural problems.

Octagon House, 41 West Clinton Ave., Iriquo, NY Interior Paint Color Investigation

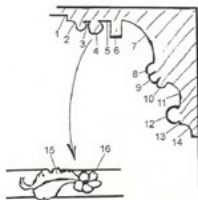


Figure 16. Salon crown molding.

The surface finishes for each element have been listed below:

1. pale yellow translucent glaze; glaze had a glossy sheen
2. pale yellow translucent glaze; glaze has a glossy sheen
3. light bluish gray flat finish
4. same as element 3
5. same as element 3
6. same as element 2
7. light purplish blue flat calcimine paint; the paint was white with visible blue pigment particles
8. pale yellow flat calcimine paint
9. same as element 8
10. grayish yellow translucent glaze; glaze had a semi-glossy sheen
11. light purplish blue flat base coat with a light greenish gray translucent glaze; the base coat was white paint with visible blue pigment particles; the glaze had a glossy sheen and was a pale yellow glaze with blue pigment
12. clear glossy glaze
13. same as element 10
14. same as element 10
15. same as element 10
16. same as element 10

Medallion over North Wall

The medallion over the north wall was uniformly finished with a yellowish white semi-glossy base coat over which a pale orange yellow glossy glaze was applied. Samples

Jahloncki Berkowitz Conservation, Inc.
Architectural Conservators

May 12, 2004

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Octagon House, 41 West Clinton Ave., Iriquo, NY Interior Paint Color Investigation

PAINT CHROMOCHRONOLOGY AND COLOR MATCH

SAMPLE NUMBER: OCT-005
LOCATION: Pantry, tower on medallion
SUBSTRATE: plaster

Color	Coat	Sheen	Commercial Match	Munsell Match	Characterization
1. pale yellow	Base coat	Semi-glossy	PP-314-6	7.5 Y 8.2	Semi-translucent
2. light olive brown	Glaze	Glossy		2.5 Y 5.4	Semi-translucent
3. orangish red	Base coat	Flat			Calcimine
4. brown	Glaze	Semi-glossy			Semi-translucent
5. pale yellow	Base coat	Semi-flat			Semi-translucent
6. dark brown	Glaze	Glossy			Semi-translucent
7. off-white	Finish	Semi-flat			
8. grayish blue	Base coat	Semi-glossy			
9. dark yellowish brown	Glaze	Glossy			Translucent
10. yellowish pink	Base coat	Semi-flat			
11. dark brown	Glaze	Glossy			Translucent
12. light yellow	Finish	Semi-flat			
13. off-white	Finish	Semi-flat			
14. pale yellow	Finish	Semi-flat			
15. pale orange yellow	Finish	Semi-flat			
16. pale yellow	Finish	Semi-flat			
17. off-white	Finish	Semi-flat			
18. off-white	Finish	Semi-flat			
19. off-white	Finish	Semi-flat			
20. white	Finish	Semi-flat			



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Research

Understanding a thing clearly is half doing it.

— Lord Chesterfield

A thorough research campaign was embarked upon. Every aspect of ownership was delved into. Photographs, images, accounts, and articles were sought out. Interviews of neighbors and prior owners and their descendents were conducted. The existing physical aspects of the property were examined and recorded photographically. Through microscopic examination and chemical paint analysis, the original 1872 extraordinary interior and exterior colors were determined. Based upon the 1882 photograph, drawings of missing wood and cast iron elements were made to enable replicas to be carved, cast and reinstalled. Original slate quarries were located to replace missing pieces of the slate roof of the dome, the observatory and the dormers. The grounds were subjected to an archaeological investigation including analysis of old roots to determine the location of the original specimen trees and formal gardens.



Installation of exterior tension cable & turnbuckles

Stabilization of the Dome

A little stronger than strong enough.

— Old Builder

Obviously the dome needed to be the first work. I had been permitted to install devices to determine the movement of the dome. These devices, known as tell-tales, told an alarming story. Not only was the dome continuing to move, the movement was accelerating!

Immediately after purchase, I commenced a program to stop the movement and to bring the dome back into its original position. As outlined in my program to the National Trust, I had temporary high tension steel cables placed at the base and at the midpoint of the exterior of the dome. Both cables had a turnbuckle on each of the eight sides. Like a girdle, the dome was be compressed on the exterior as the turnbuckles were tightened. To pull the dome together while it was being compressed from the exterior, interior cables with turnbuckles were inserted from one corner to the other. The outside cables would be ultimately removed, the interior cables were left concealed above the ceiling line of the third floor.

As the dome had spread, it had also sunk approximately twelve inches. To raise the dome as it was compressed, jacks were placed in the top floor dance room. It was also necessary to brace the dance room floor with temporary posts



Interior tension cable -- meeting place from opposite corners

placed under the floor. All of the elements had been sized by Eugene Avallone, an engineer who became devoted to the project.

Once all of the components were in place, we began to slowly tighten the sixteen exterior turnbuckles and the eight interior turnbuckles and raise the top floor jacks. But would the scheme work? There was no shortage of skeptics. One engineer predicted that if a cable snapped it would create an explosive effect that would result in the total collapse of the dome. There were many sleepless nights. My reputation, my career and my assets were all at risk with an untried technique.



Aerial View -- Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

Over a three year period, the cables were slowly tightened. As the turnbuckles were tightened, they would develop resistance requiring too much pressure. After a few days the dome would adjust and the turnbuckles could be further tightened. The process was slow, suspenseful and worrisome, buffered with hopeful expectations of success. Midway through the process, the inevitable occurred. As one of the turnbuckles was being tightened, a connection failed and the cable, released from its high tension whip lashed like an angry snake. Fortunately nobody was injured. I yelled to the men who had been tightening the turnbuckle to immediately get down from the scaffolding. A silence fell on the site - this was the occurrence that was our most fearful concern. Fortunately the dome stayed put.

Those were tense times intensified by doubting observers, but finally it came back into position. After much celebration, a steel band was installed behind the 2nd floor gutter, permanently stabilized the dome.

The Restoration

Restoration is happiness

Woodwork, Stairs, Scrollwork. Slate work. Cresting. Railings, Urns, Paint, Structural Work, Electric, Plumbing, Heating, Plaster work, Finishing, Paint

The Grounds

Landscape gardening, which is an artistic combination of the beautiful in nature and art!

— A. J. Downing

The Interiors

Architectural follies, like Chinese eggs, take on more savour with the passage of time.

— Clay Lancaster, Architectural Follies in America



Entry Hall



Salon



Dining Room



Library



Solarium



Master Bedroom



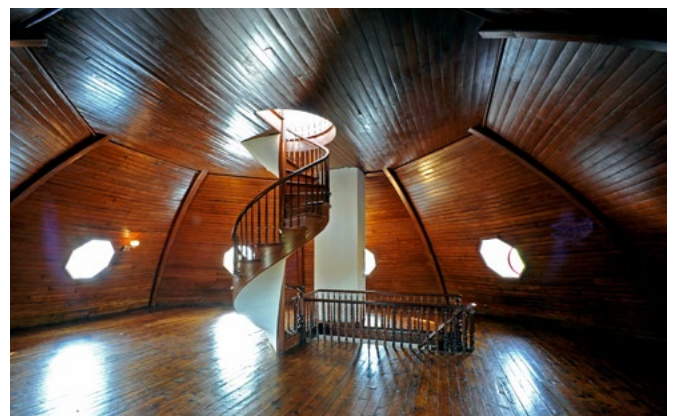
Egyptian Revival Music Room



Kitchen



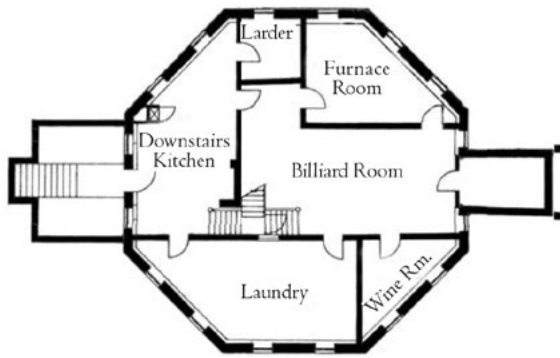
Dance Room - Photo by Nisha Sondhe



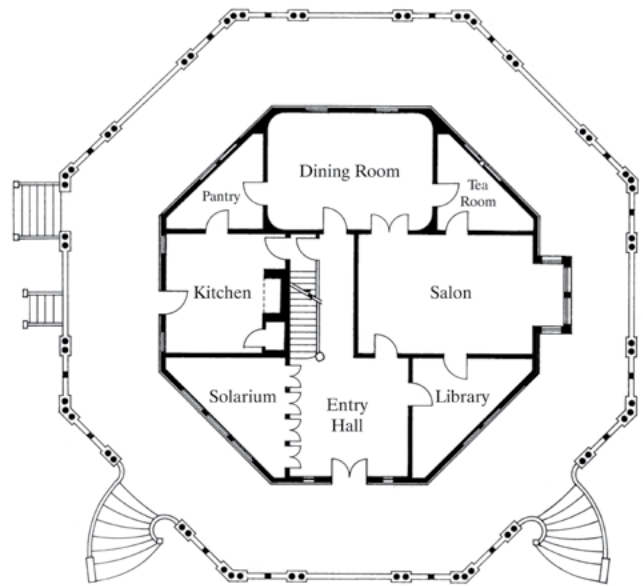
Dance Room



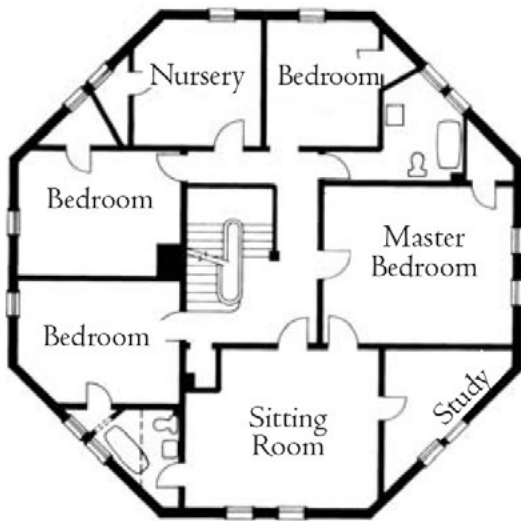
Observatory



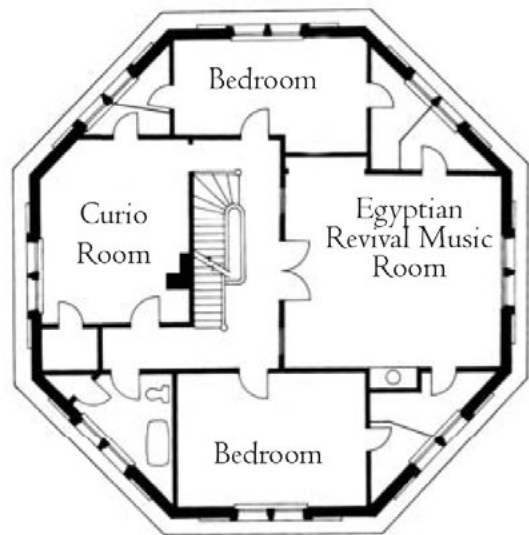
Basement



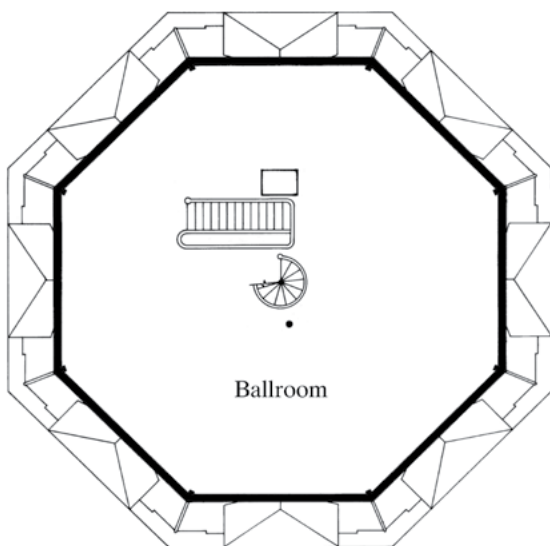
First Floor



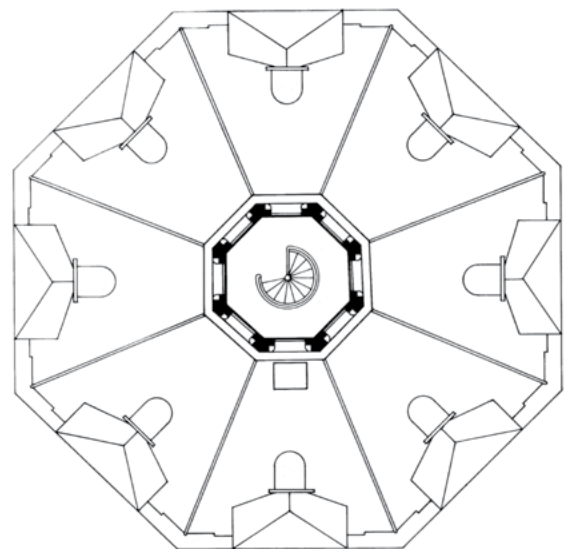
Second Floor



Third Floor



Dance Room



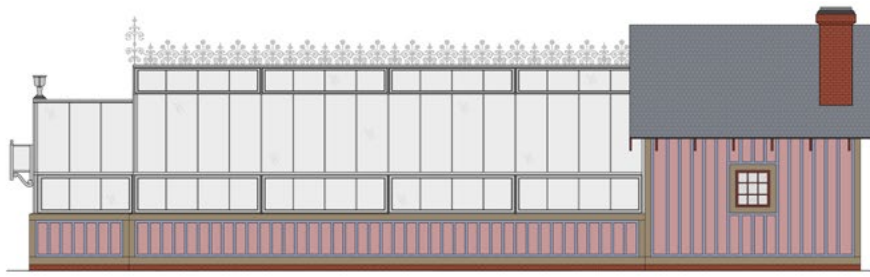
Observatory



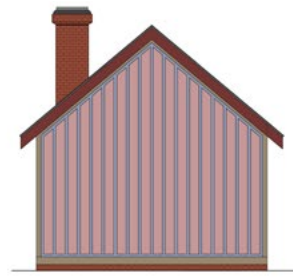
Carriage House & Shed



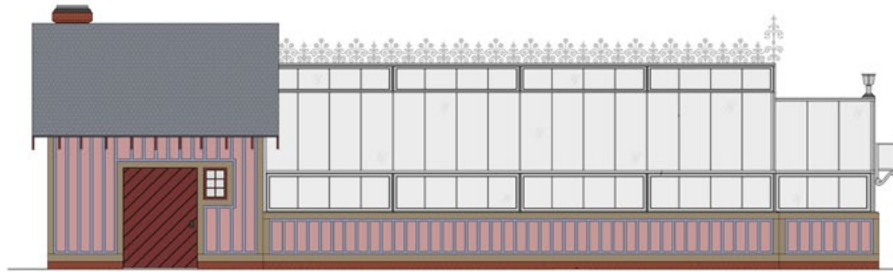
Garden Stairs



1 NORTH ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8" = 1'-0"



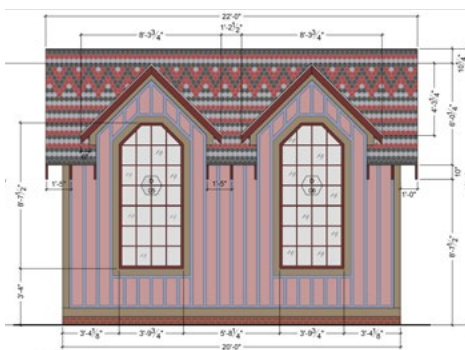
2 EAST ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8" = 1'-0"



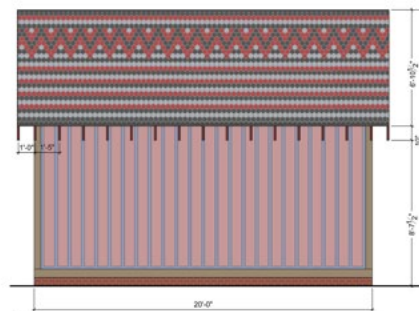
3 SOUTH ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8" = 1'-0"



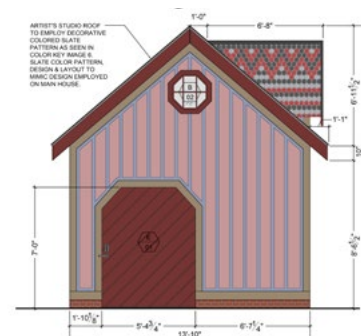
4 WEST ELEVATION
SCALE: 3/8" = 1'-0"



1 WEST ELEVATION
SCALE: 1/2" = 1'-0"



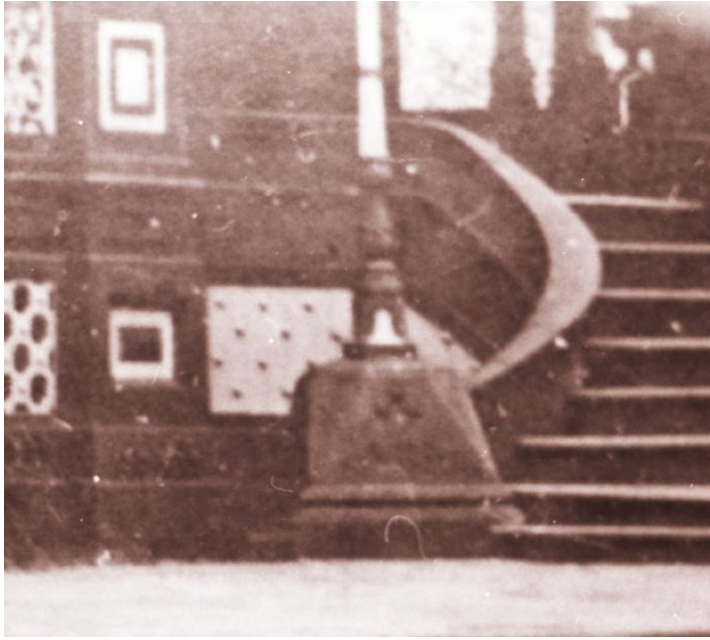
2 EAST ELEVATION
SCALE: 1/2" = 1'-0"



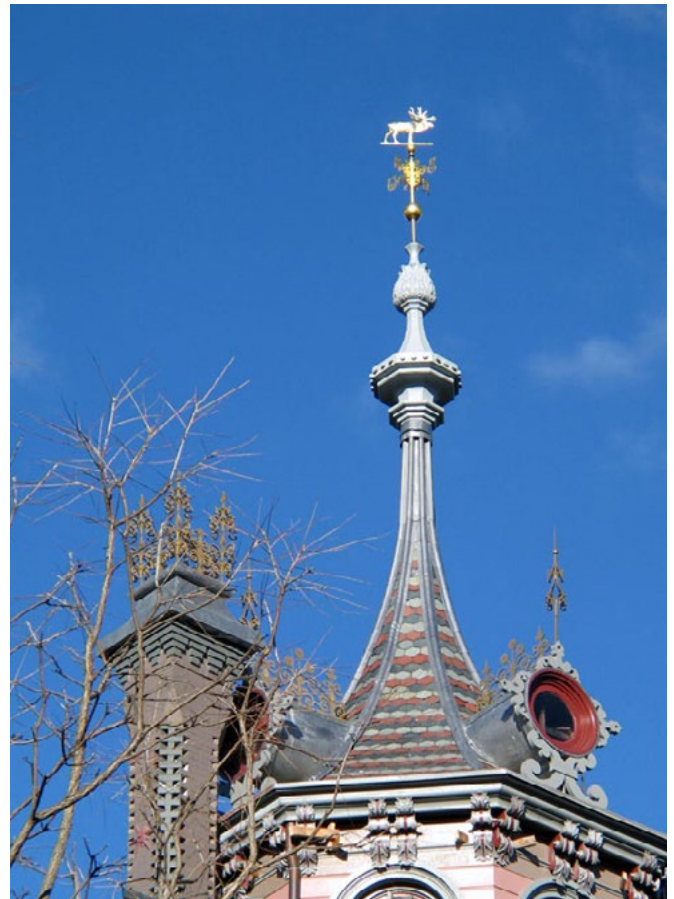
4 NORTH ELEVATION
SCALE: 1/2" = 1'-0"



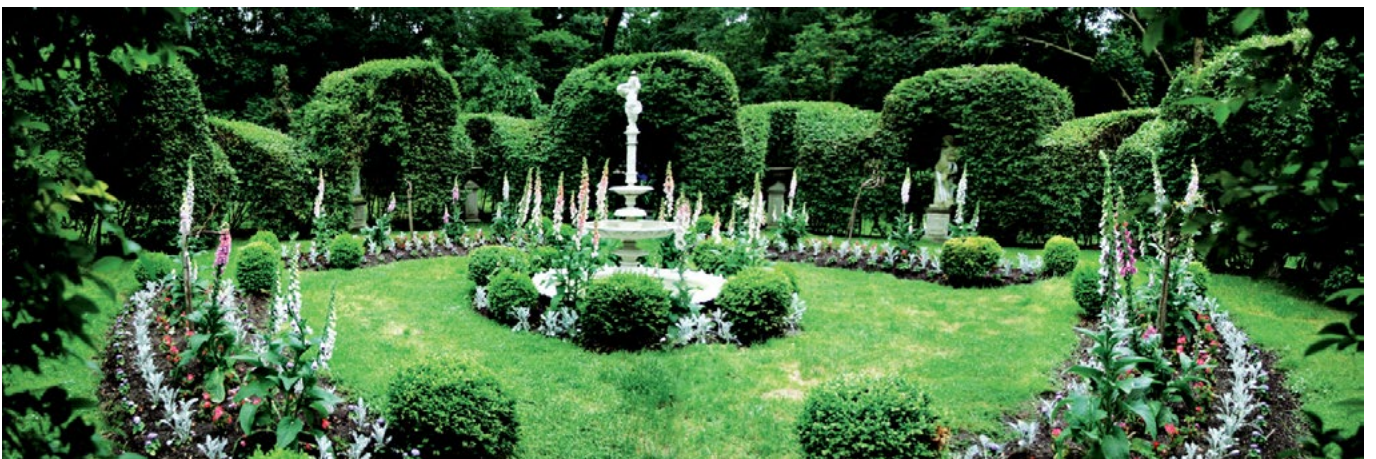
Greenhouse & Artist Studio - Photo by Michael Lombardi



Octagon House -- Restored Gas Lamp



Octagon House — Elk weather vane & Cresting
Michael Lombardi Photographer





Octagon House , 19th Century



Octagon House Gingerbread House
1990 World Monuments Fund
Gingerbread House Competition



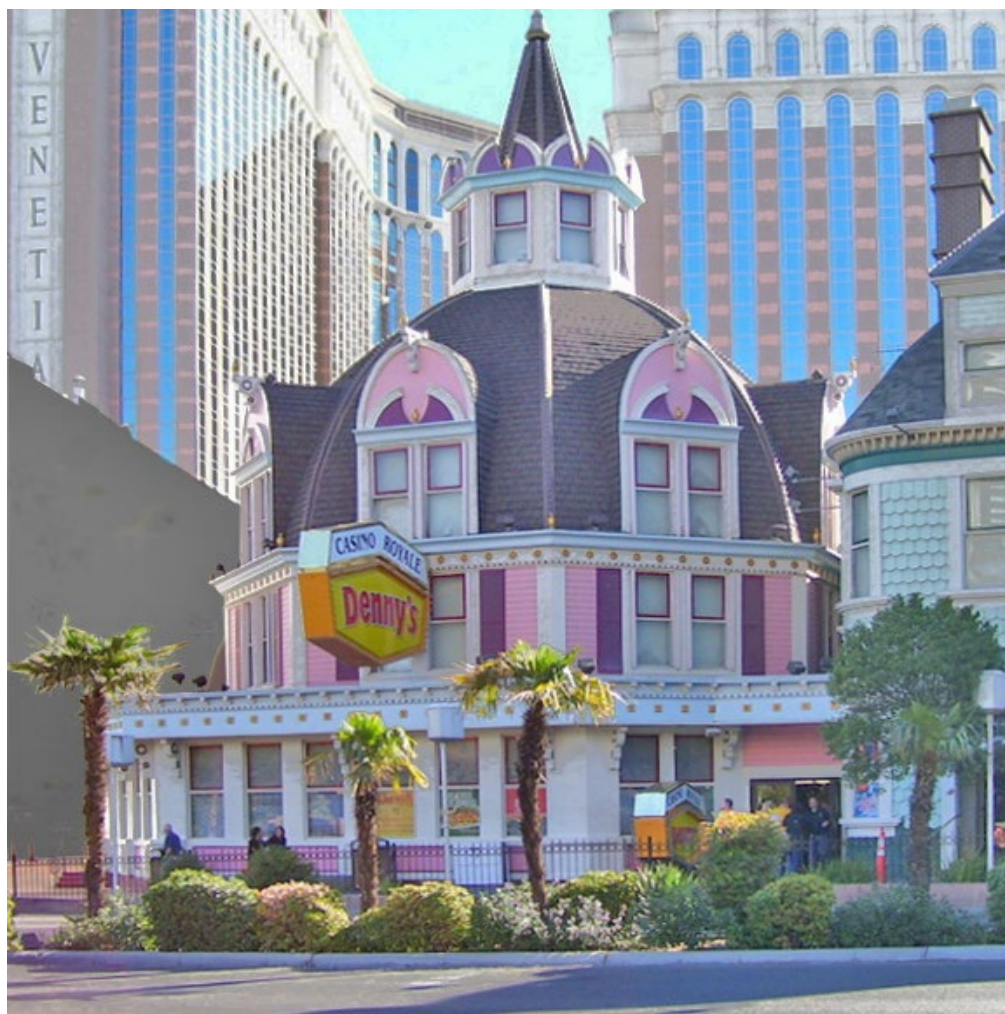
Octagon House -- 2010



Porch Column Capitals



Winter Scene
Michael Lombardi Photogrpher



Denny's at Casino Royale -- Las Vegas