

"No invention can be of greater practical utility to man than one which shall CHEAPEN AND IMPROVE OUR HOUSES, and especially which shall bring comfortable dwellings within the reach of the poorer classes," he wrote.

Some of Fowler's ideas are best expressed in his own words, which may be smiled at indulgently before reflecting on the possibilities of a few "home truths."

"Given sized windows will light a room more than those a fifth larger in the octagon than in the square — first, because the latter has deep, dark CORNERS, which will be dark in a cloudy day however large your windows, which is not the case with the octagon; and also because the octagon makes the same gain in the DEPTH of the rooms that it does in the length of the walls, that is the room is more COMPACT."

Fowler appealed to housewives for confirmation of his step-saving theories:

"It is now submitted whether you cannot go from room to room, and story to story about this house, with less than half the steps requisite to get from room to room, and story to story, in other houses as usually arranged. Observe, here are a great many rooms, and all handy to each other. In short, is not this centrality of the stairway incomparably superior to ordinary entries?"

Whatever Fowler's fancies, the realities of everyday chores, whether in octagonal or "ordinary" houses, were well described by Hattie Brown, writing to her sister Laura in a 14-page letter which began on July 28, 1889. The occasion of the three-part letter appears to have been something of a "walk-out" by their mother, Emaline, who went to visit her sister Addie in Nunda (now Crystal Lake), and who apparently meant to give Hattie "a dose of it."

Left my bed at the sleepy hour of six. Made the beds about the first thing while the water heated; put things in their places, such as Pa's newspaper, my writing desk, etc. swept with sweeper; got a potato and egg breakfast; put in clothes



and took them out of washer—pa turned it nearly all the time—; did dishes; washed stove top; (it rained this morning so left clothes in tub) mopped kitchen floor, back room floor, east piazza and steps, three sides of the long piazza, the pantry floor (I slop things terribly cooking); mopped thresholds; made custard pie, built fire and got dinner, set emptins (spelled correctly?); pa and I rinsed and blued clothes (he turned the ringer and put the pins on the clothes for me); made starch—a new undertaking; ate dinner when I wasn't looking at my pie for fear it would burn; did dishes and emptied wash water. I can see many things to do yet, but thought I'd rest a bit"

To the Joseph Brown's, the encircling porches were "piazzas", the scrubbing and painting of which seems to have been a matter of frequent frustration, but to Orson Fowler, "Verandas are delightful places on which to spend twilight and moonlight evenings in either promenading or conversation." And 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."

There were some other architectural personalities with octagonal interests during the mid-19th century. In contrast to Fowler, one of them, Samuel Sloan, a well known Philadelphia architect, saw the octagon as only suitable for a man of affluence, who was able to build on the grand scale. His actions fulfilled his opinions, and his legacy is the magnificent Longwood, at Natchez, Miss. It was built for Dr. Haller Nutt, probably beginning around 1860, and in fact became known as Nutt's Folly, for it was never completed.

At the beginning of the Civil War, the workmen, many of whom were brought by Sloan from Philadelphia, went off to join their respective armies, leaving a half-finished, exotic, oriental revival residence, displaying all the graces, excesses and signs of prosperity of which the mid-Victorians were capable. Nutt's descendants continued to live at Longwood, unfinished as it was, until 1968,

when the property was sold. Through local preservationist efforts, including the Pilgrimage Garden Club of Natchez, Longwood was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. It is maintained by the Garden Clubs of Natchez and is open regularly to the public.

Magnificence was not the need behind the construction of Barrington's octagonal house. On the petition for consideration to list it on the Illinois Register of Historic Places, it is described as "the least altered, octagonal-shaped, clapboard-sided, Gothic revival cottage in Illinois."

Its unpretentiousness is matched by few other octagonal houses, except for one in San Francisco, built in 1861. The cottage designation has two derivations:

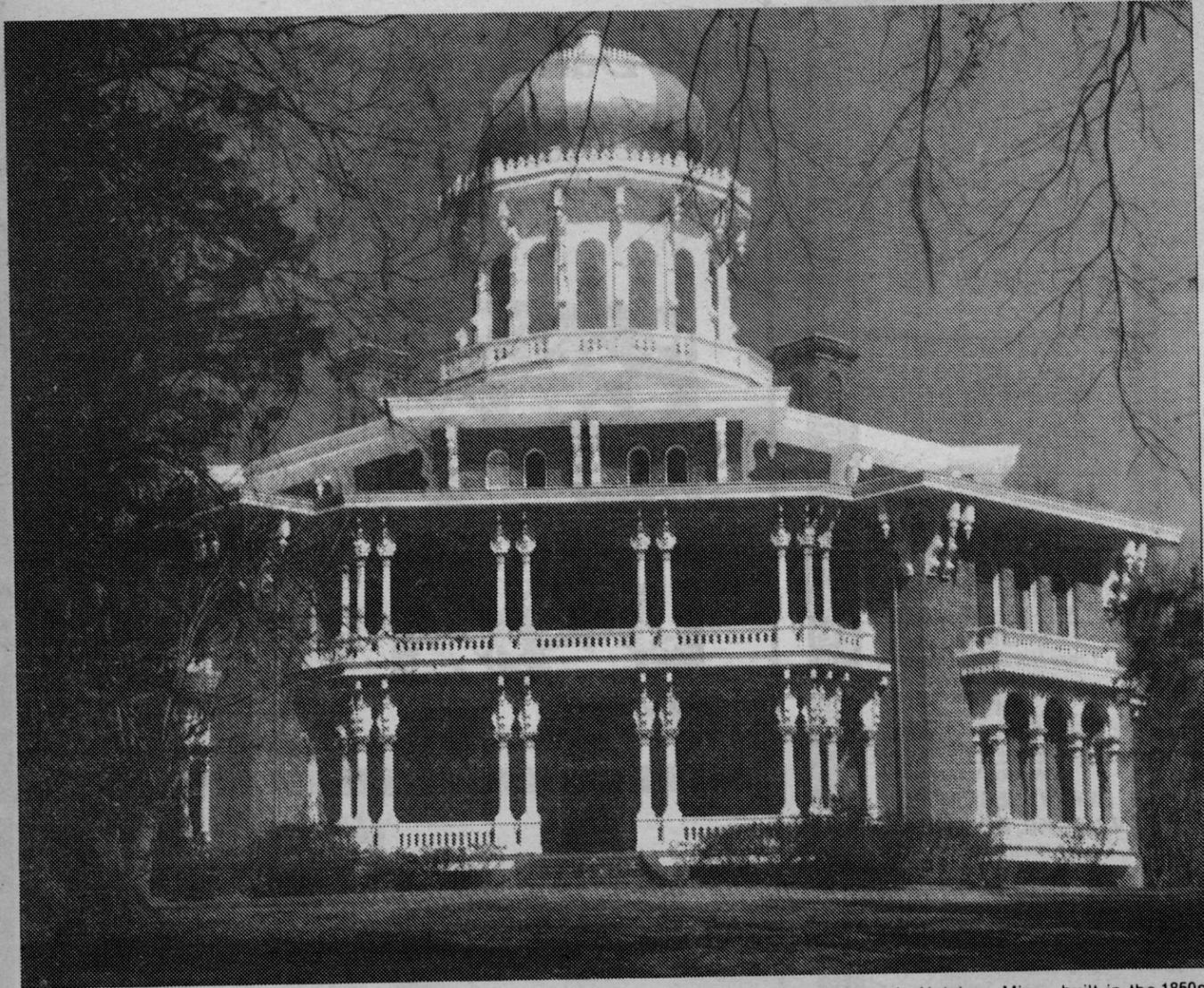
1) that the house is clearly built as a single family house, without provision for servants quarters, and

2) from Andrew Jackson Downing's "The Architecture of Country Houses," published in 1850, in which the renowned landscape architect included plans for a Gothic-derived octagonal country cottage.

Downing lived across the Hudson River at Newburgh, N.Y. from where he could undoubtedly see "Fowler's Folly" dominating the horizon at Fishkill. Downing and Fowler disagreed philosophically. Downing was rooted in classical traditions of architecture and design as embodied in European heritage. Fowler was nonconforming, innovative, and completely convinced about any idea he espoused, although in his claims to originality of design, he may have been stretching the facts slightly.

Certainly he popularized octagons for a fleeting period of time as residential structures, but the octagon as a building has been noted as early as 300 B.C. In Europe, octagonal churches were often built in Holland, and that heritage conveyed to the Hudson River Valley, where nearly 20 small, octagonal Dutch Reformed Churches were built between

(Continued on page 68)



Probably the most elaborate octagon-shaped house still standing is one in Natchez, Miss., built in the 1850s.

## Coming up: rails arrive

In the next article, we'll explore Joseph Brown's ledger, the Hawleys, and the E.J. & E. Railroad.

Emaline Brown covered every available margin of her letters with postscripts. On July 3, 1889, she wrote, "It makes quite lively times here having a new railroad. There are lots of tents pitched here and there. One gang are at work back of Mr. Wolf's pasture, they will soon get to the County Line Road. The new railroad starts from a place in Indiana on the lake shore, then crosses into Illinois goes to Joliet then up near Elgin, then Barrington Center, up here through Tom Freeman's crosses the track (C&NW) then goes up through Kempert's and Pomeroy's on up to Lake Zurich, on up to Waukegan to the lake again, I mean Lake Michigan..."

In future letters Emaline describes the actual building process. The introduction of the railroad signalled the beginnings of increasing development for the area west of Hough Street.

Arnett C. Lines has written, "In 1888, when the community was but 34 years old, let us recall its appearance. In wet weather, it was a floating sea of mud, mud, mud... In dry weather, the dust which was copiously perfumed with manure from the streets, blew through the village in clouds."

But behind a white picket fence, surrounded by a garden filled with pansies and tulips, peonies, dahlias, rose and fruit bushes, stood the octagonal dream of Orson Fowler and Joseph Brown.