

Octagon House

Folly or fad, visionary's book set 1850s' trend

By BARBARA BENSON

What inspired a New Hampshire-born pioneer to build an octagonal cottage on a muddy wagon track leading westward out of Barrington? The answer likely lies in the "octagon fad" of the mid-19th century.

The popularity of the octagon style as residential structure can probably be best attributed to an eccentric genius by the name of Orson Squire Fowler. Fowler was born in 1809 on a farm, at Cohocton, in Steuben County, N.Y. He went to Amherst College in Massachusetts as a student of theology. One of his classmates was Henry Ward Beecher. They both attended the lectures of an Austrian scientist on the subject of phrenology, the "science" of assessing character by studying the structure of the skull. Orson Fowler became so accomplished in discerning the characteristics of his subjects, that upon graduation in 1834, instead of going into the ministry, he set off on lecture tours, and opened an office in New York, all based on phrenology. His business was so good that he recruited his brother and sister to help him, and in a few years became a very wealthy man.

To phrenology were added lecturing and consulting on morals and marriage. As his fortune grew, so did his interest in building. He began what was to be a 10-year effort to design a home which he considered would be innovative, practical, charming, and seemingly original.

The result, to fulfil his personal dream, was hardly practical. His own octagonal masterpiece at Fishkill, N.Y., was built to four stories, 60 rooms and a height of 70 feet, with a cupola from which the surrounding countryside could be seen for miles. He began the building around 1850, and it took two to three years to complete, accounts of which differ considerably. The building was not only the outcome of Fowler's becoming an architect, but of his dabblings into the actual process of construction and his interest in the "gravel wall." He was to claim credit as the originator of the "Octagon Mode of Building" and for the "discovery" of concrete, a process of wet mixing cement, sand, stones and gravel. He had first seen the process used in the construction of a six-sided house by Joseph Goodrich at Milton, Wis., sometime around 1850. His own house apparently was partly built with concrete. The mansion became known as Fowler's Folly, fell into disrepair, and had to be dynamited in 1897.

But the publication in 1848 of his book "The Octagon House: A Home for All", created such a demand for the style, that the book was reprinted seven times in the first edition. Fowler's octagonal house was planned, unlike the Barrington house (see drawing) around a central hallway and staircase, where the cupola provided both light and better circulation within the core of the house. All rooms opened to this core. Fowler's premise was that the entire plan was a more healthful environment in which to raise a family, that it in fact saved corner spaces that were otherwise wasted, and afforded a flexible combination of rooms for sociable living. But, at the same time, each room could be closed and self-contained for privacy. The traffic flow in an Octagon House could be both through the rooms, and across the hall. Heat and fresh air could flow back and forth. Extra ventilation was provided through the cupola.

While Fowler built himself a magnificent mansion, his purpose in promulgating the octagonal style was expressed in the opening words of "A Home for All" when the first edition was published.

Brass baptism for restoration

On May 15, another chapter was added to the Octagon House story.

As part of "Landmark Living: Barrington Preservation Festival '82, the Barrington Historical Museum had arranged for an open air brass concert to be played from the porch of the Octagon House, with the audience sitting around on the lawn on old quilts. The Aeterna Brass Quintet was featured in a program of turn-of-the century music.

The feeling was real old-time Barrington, when an octagonal bandstand stood close to South Cook and East Station Streets, about where the Town Shoppe is now, and village residents could stroll out and hear a weekend afternoon concert.

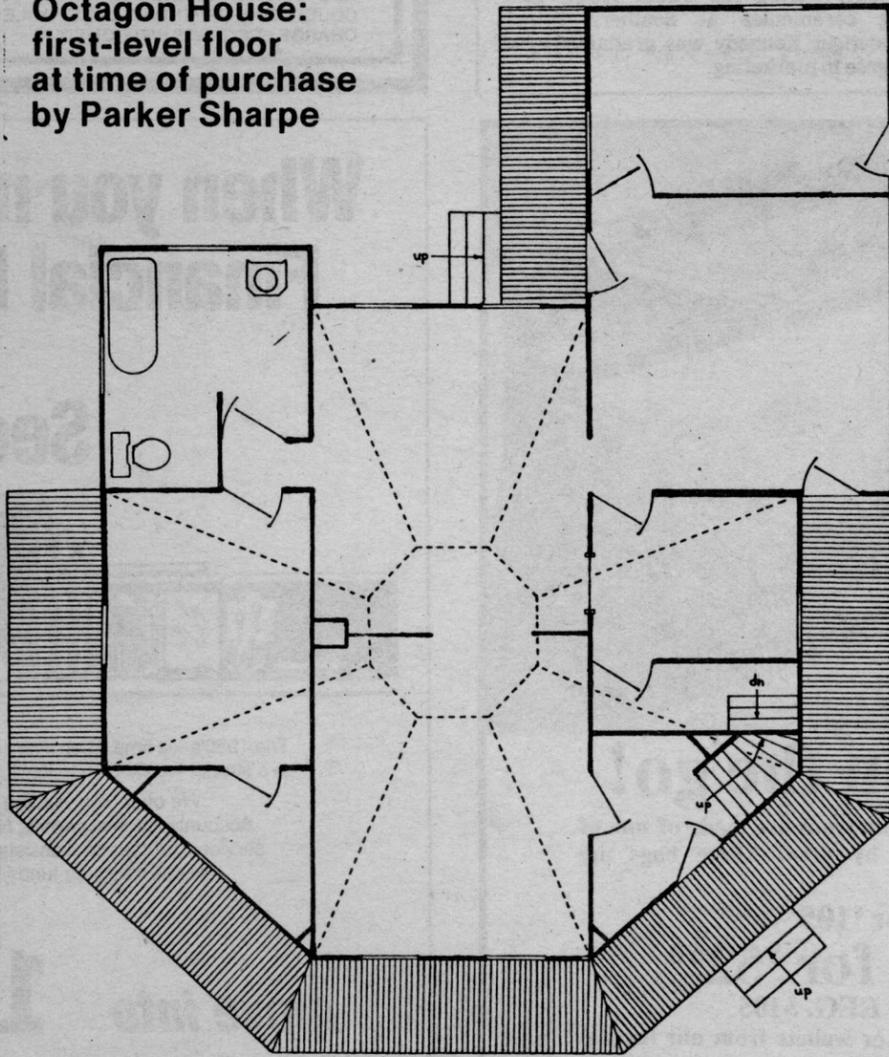
A minute after the brass quintet began to play, the first drops of rain fell. The band collected its instruments and ran inside the Octagon House, which, in the course of its current restoration, was completely torn apart. Pieces of nails and plaster and wood lathing covered the floors. Walls were half open or demolished, and the electricity was turned off.

But the band played on.

They set up in the back parlor. The audience grabbed the quilts and spread them out of the floor in the front parlor covering all the debris. Nobody left. Some sat on the floor, some stood outside on the "piazza", and the band played until the skies darkened so much that they couldn't read their music anymore. They closed the concert with a few rousing bars of Yankee Doodle Dandy.

Current owner Parker Sharpe probably hadn't thought of an open house quite that soon, and Emaline might have paled at that much company when the thresholds weren't mopped, and the parlor wasn't dusted. But, this is a living landmark, and if Joseph Brown was "a bold experimenter," then maybe he would chuckle about the future for his "round house."

Octagon House: first-level floor at time of purchase by Parker Sharpe



West Main Street

Barrington's Octagon House as seen from Main Street several decades ago. Current owner Parker Sharpe is busy remodeling the structure, inside and out, to return it to its original appearance. The house will then be used as an office.