

Octagon House—

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1680 and 1750. More than a score of octagonal school houses were built in four counties of Pennsylvania and Hunterdon County, N.J. between 1815 and 1840. Two octagonal schoolhouses in Southern Illinois are directly traceable to a Pennsylvania heritage.

So Fowler was expanding an idea within an already tried functional form, although the octagonal house has been referred to as the "only purely American form of domestic architecture."

However eccentric he may have been, Fowler received support for his ideas by the inclusion of octagonal designs in many manuals and books devoted to cottage building. Probably the most popular of these publications was "The Cottage Builder's Manual" by Zephaniah Baker of Boston, which was issued in 1856. It included plans for an octagonal residence, a similar layout to the Barrington house, with a side hallway, and sharply curving staircase.

With the publication of builder's pattern books, many similar to Baker's, it became possible for a carpenter with rudimentary skills to follow directions and construct a simple house. An architect was unnecessary, and of course, plumbers and electricians were not yet in the picture. However, some of Fowler's plans included ventilation shafts, and, somewhat like Da Vinci drawing helicopters, Fowler also designed water closets.

Was it in Massachusetts and New York State, there, in the cradle of octagonal houses that Joseph Brown first wrapped up a dream in a pattern book, and carried that dream until he fulfilled it in Barrington, perhaps some 30 years later?

Carl F. Schmidt, who wrote an article entitled "The Octagon Fad," published in

the Empire State Architect in 1958, notes that "the people who built the eight-siders were individualists and did not care if their house was the only one of that type in the community. They would not cling to the traditional ideas or customs, but were bold experimenters."

Bess Hawley, the previous owner of the Octagon House, was told by Joseph Brown's descendants that he remarked rather petulantly that he built a round house because everyone else built a square house. The misnomer occurs even today. One Massachusetts historical society kept persisting that their known octagonal house was a "round house."

One researcher has estimated that over a thousand octagonal houses were built across the United States between 1850 and 1857, both as a result of Orson Fowler's fame, and the distribution of pattern books. Predominantly the smaller homes utilized the side staircase. Also, like the Barrington house, the octagon was broken on two sides for an extension that included a pantry, kitchen and summer kitchen.

Of remaining octagonal houses, most now are lovingly preserved, and some have interesting historical affiliations. Among the several octagons in Northeast Ohio, one at Kinsman was the boyhood home of Clarence Darrow.

There is a brick octagon house at Watertown, Wis. with 57 rooms, planned around a cantilevered spiral staircase with a hand molded rail and hand turned spindles of solid cherry wood. On the grounds of the Watertown house rests the building which houses the first kindergarten in the United States, founded by Mrs. Carl Schurz in 1856.

Predating Fowler, Thomas Jefferson used a pure octagon as the core of his country home at Poplar Forest, Va., built

between 1806-1822. Jefferson experimented extensively with combinations of octagonal and rectangular forms in domestic architecture.

Orson Square Fowler, phrenologist, architect, author, humanist, lecturer and dreamer-died at Sharon Station, Conn. in 1887, and was buried in an unmarked grave at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. He left behind a wealth of dissertations on phrenology, the human condition and philosophies for better living. Above all, he left a fractured trail of octagon houses.

In all subsequent published material, Joseph Brown's octagon house is never mentioned. It's uniqueness isn't even given a second thought as the Brown family write their hearts out to each other in weekly letters.

If "Pa Brown" was a "bold experimenter", by the 1880s he was leading a quiet life of gardening, raising chickens, fishing, and frequent visits to the Barrington Post Office in search of letters from his daughter Laura in Minnesota.