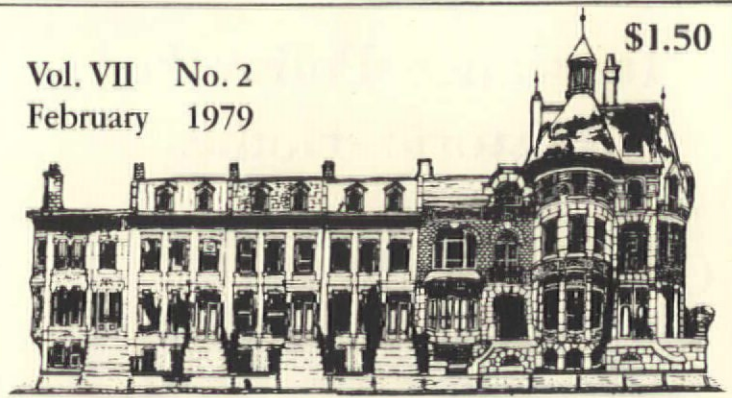


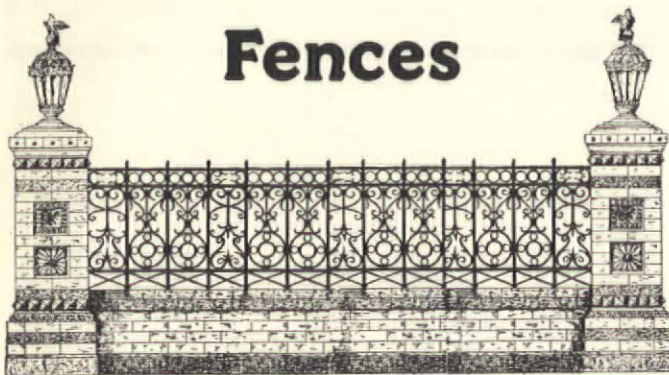
THE OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL

Vol. VII No. 2
February 1979

\$1.50



Restoration And Maintenance Techniques For The Antique House



Fences

By Frederick Herman, AIA

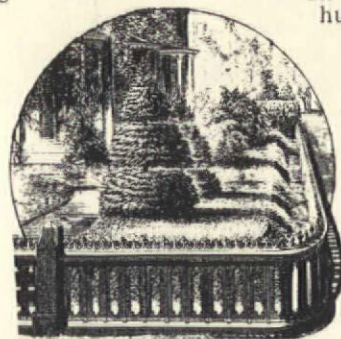
MAN TENDS TO TAKE a view of fences that is varied and, all too often, opinionated, yet fences have been and are still very much with us. As the world gets more crowded we seem to be becoming more and more conscious of them both from an aesthetic point of view and as a means of defining and securing our own personal bit of the landscape. One sometimes wonders if we are not heading back to the medieval world with its enclosed and very private castle garden.

MOST OF US, however, are more interested in the immediate problem of what kind of fence is appropriate for our purpose, and how do we get it put up, rather than in the philosophical speculation of man's relationship to his garden.

A Dividing Frame

FENCES ORIGINALLY WERE visualized as purely utilitarian structures serving to keep animals and men in or out of certain areas, to set off areas for specific uses, and to somehow or other act as "a dividing frame."

IN THAT BROAD TERM "fences" include: Divides built of any



In This Issue

Restoring Damaged Plaster.....	21
Tenement To Townhouse.....	15
Insurance Policy For Historic Houses....	14
Handbook for Victorian Houses.....	24
Wooden Scrollwork.....	24

Coming Next Month

INSTALLING TIN CEILINGS

number of materials including brick, stone, earth, concrete, assorted plants, metal, wood, and today one would have to add plastic to the list or combinations of two or more of these materials. In appearance, they have ranged from the very utilitarian barbed wire (a fairly recent invention) and Virginia Rail Fence (a favorite of the early settlers) to highly ornamental and vastly expensive wrought iron fencing, the purpose of which was to display power and wealth as much as to be a barrier.

THE VARIETY OF FENCES is bewildering. Their designs not only change with periods of history but also from region to region, from urban areas to rural areas, with changes in land usage (i.e., farming vs. animal husbandry), availability and cost of materials, new technology and changes in aesthetics.

ONE CAN RAISE the question as to whether there really exists such a thing as a "typical fence." The problem is further compounded by the fact that most fences, and especially wooden fences, are ephemeral.

"WOOD, EVEN GOOD CHESTNUT, oak,

(Continued on page 18)

Insurance Policy For Historic Homes

GETTING INSURANCE on old houses has been a vexing problem. (See OHJ, Dec. 1977.) Now, on the insurance front, there's some good news...and some bad news. First, the good news:

THE ST. PAUL INSURANCE CO. has introduced a "historic home policy" designed to provide reasonable fire insurance coverage for privately owned homes that are architecturally and historically significant to the area in which they are located.

NOW, THE BAD NEWS: The policy will not be available to every old-house owner in the United States. There are two basic limitations: (1) The home must either have been nominated or be listed in the federal government's Register of Historic Places, or be in a historic area designated by federal, state or local government. There are roughly 250,000 houses in the United States that fall into this category.

THE SECOND LIMITATION is that the policy—at least according to current plans—will only be available in 23 states. Insurance Departments in 19 of those states have already given their administrative approval; responses are pending in the remaining four states.

AS OF FEBRUARY, The St. Paul has introduced the policy and is now ready to accept business from independent agents in the states of Alabama and Mississippi.

BY THE END OF MARCH, insurance agents in the following states will be offering the historic home policy:

Arkansas	North Dakota	Colorado
Georgia	Oregon	Delaware
Indiana	South Dakota	Idaho
Maryland	Tennessee	Pennsylvania
Montana	Utah	Vermont
Nevada	Wyoming	

THE ST. PAUL CO. is awaiting Insurance Dept. response to the new policy in the following states: Kentucky, Nebraska, Ohio and Illinois.

OLD-HOUSE PEOPLE have experienced two basic problems in getting adequate insurance coverage for homes they are restoring. The first problem is one of geography: Many old houses are located in neighborhoods that insurance companies often consider high risk areas. These areas become "redlined": The insurance companies decline to insure any property within the area, no matter what the condition of the property or the financial integrity of the owner.

THE ST. PAUL CO. earlier this year issued a company policy statement against redlining—and said that the company's anti-redlining stand would apply to the historic home policy as well.

THE OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL®

Published Monthly For People Who Love Old Houses

Editor	R.A. Clem Labine
Decorative Arts Editor	Carolyn Flaherty
Circulation Director	Paul T. McLoughlin
Circulation Assistants	Joan O'Reilly
	James Graham
	Shirley Zucker
	Michael Carew
Midwest Editor	Tom H. Gerhardt
Contributing Editors	Claire Wood Labine
	R.A. Labine, Sr.
	H. Weber Wilson
	Barbara Schiller

Published by The Old-House Journal Corporation, 69A Seventh Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217. Tel. (212) 636-4514. Subscriptions \$12/yr. in U.S., \$14/yr. in Canada; \$20/yr. elsewhere. Printed at Royal Offset Co., 34 W. 15th St., NYC 10011. Contents of the Old-House Journal® are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without specific permission in writing from The Editor.

THE SECOND PROBLEM old-house people have encountered is the "co-insurance clause." (This was explained in detail in the Dec. 1977 article). Basically, if a home is not insured for at least 80% of its REPLACEMENT COST, on the regular homeowner's policy the property is not fully covered in case a loss occurs. With old houses, of course, there is great difficulty in computing replacement cost: How do you replace a carved walnut staircase, an elaborately decorated ceiling, or an elegant marble mantel?

THE NEW HISTORIC HOME POLICY provides a modified replacement cost clause. It provides the flexibility of choice of an amount of coverage ranging from 100% to 40% of replacement cost—subject to a \$30,000 minimum. A company official declares: "The conventional homeowners' replacement cost provision was never intended to cope with the high cost of replacing damaged fine arts features of a historic home with the same materials and high level of craftsmanship.

"IN SOME CASES, a dwelling's entire significance may rest on such outstanding features—features that would be prohibitively expensive to repair or replace. In such cases, for an agreed amount, the St. Paul will provide a valued endorsement to specifically insure important features for an agreed-on amount."

THE CRITERION for this program that the house be either on the National Register or in a historic district is another argument for the homeowners' stake in historic district legislation. The St. Paul Co.'s insurance program is probably not the last private industry or government program that will be built around historic districts. So if your house is not now on your state or National Register, nor part of a historic district, you (and your neighbors) will probably benefit in the future by seeing what can be done to obtain historic designation. ■ ■

From Tenement To Town House

By Nancy Kullman

MY HUSBAND AND I have been laboring for the past five years to make livable and attractive our 12 room Second Empire house in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

WITH THE EXCEPTION of the roof, floor sanding, reconstruction of one fireplace and some final-coat ceiling plastering, we have done all the work ourselves. This includes wall-papering and the other work involved in decorating those rooms that we've finished.

I DO NOT APPLY the term "restore" to our work, because scholarly, historical accuracy has not characterized our efforts. Rather, we have both in our basic work and in planning decor, tried to be true to the house and restore or maintain the feel of a mid-1870's house.

OUR INTEREST in an antique house was pre-dated by an interest in antique furniture, and it was to find a suitable environment for our antiques as well as ourselves, that motivated our purchase in June 1973 of a big old wreck of a house.

THE HOUSE and its five neighbors had all been held by a single owner whose intention was to get as much rental income as possible until the time was ripe to sell the land for a high-rise apartment. However, the community organized to "downzone" the area and upon their success, all six houses were put on the market. All were purchased by owner-occupiers who have since restored and renovated their properties. Now, with a little imagination, when you look down our street you can really look back in time to when the area was a fine, middle class academic neighborhood.

WE PURCHASED OUR PARTICULAR HOUSE because the least structural changes had occurred. But it had been a student tenement for 20 years and the transient tenants had left their mark. When we moved in there was no room that did not require a thorough overhaul--floor sanding and decorating, at the least.

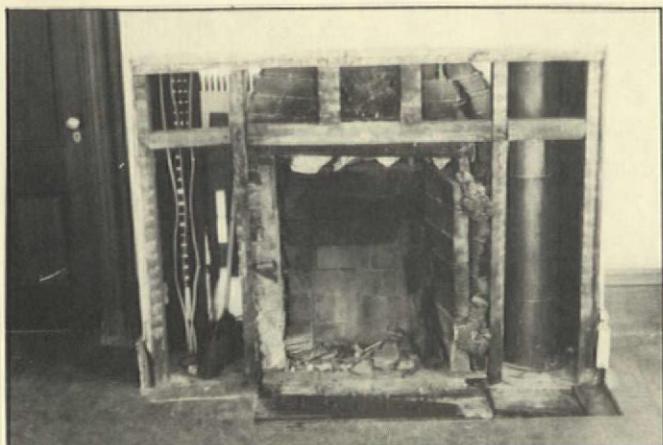
BRIAN IS A TRANSPORTATION CONSULTANT and I worked full time for the first two and a half years of ownership, so most of what we have done was accomplished nights and weekends. Brian's father is an inveterate do-it-your-



selfer who has spent years improving and adding on to the family home. Thus Brian was well exposed to the labor and art of things like plastering and plumbing, and was armed with the first requirements for our own effort--knowledge and confidence that it could be done. We needed both, since lack of front-end funds necessitated that we move right in and do the work in a piecemeal fashion. Fortunately, we had no big disasters--just ongoing chaos!



A complete rebuilding of the metal roofs on the eight dormers and repair and replacement of the rotted and missing architectural trim was done over a whole summer's weekends.



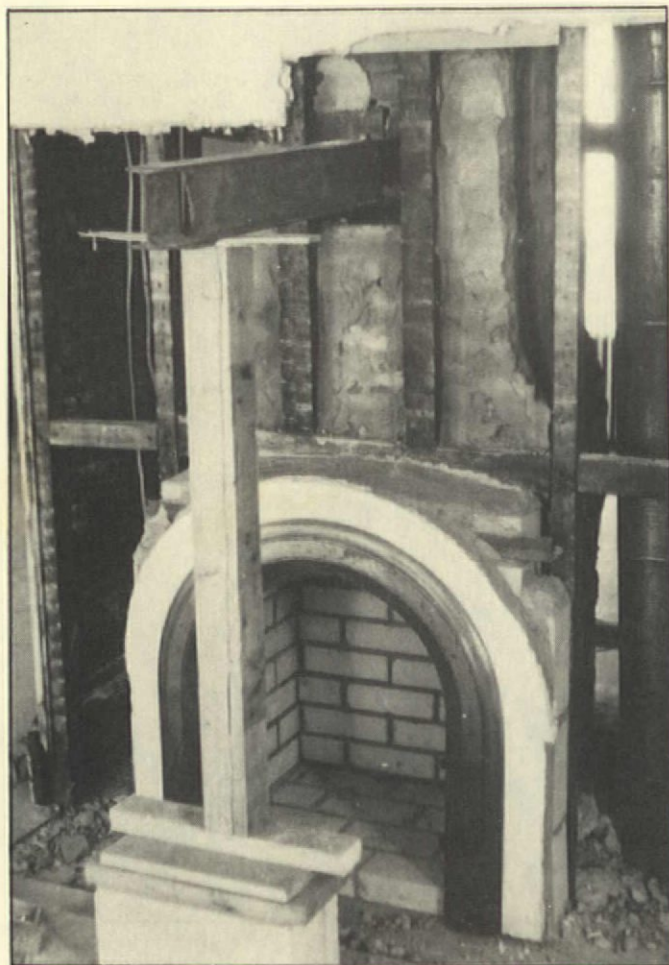
This is the back parlor fireplace opening prior to being rebuilt. Note old ducts used for plumbing and wiring to left and right of firebox and the crumbling brick on right side of firebox.



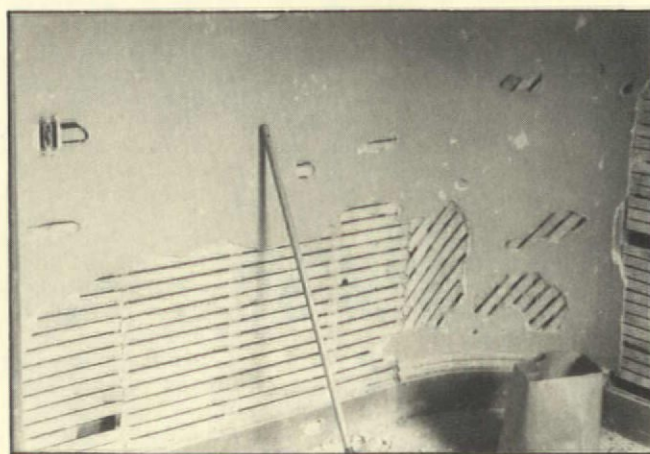
The back parlor fireplace just after reconstruction and replacement of marble mantle. The floors haven't been sanded nor the walls papered.

MUCH OF OUR WORK was the sort that required time, patience, and attention to detail. Large sections of plaster walls had to come down. Hence, many hours were spent in installing anchors and patch plastering. All the woodwork on the first floor is walnut, and in the main rooms it had been painted white. The second floor woodwork is pine and even with 10 to 12 coats of old paint, the job seemed less taxing because I did not need to be so meticulous.

WE HAVE YET TO SEE any mention of our particular technique for refinishing walnut woodwork. First, we applied linseed oil to the wood and filled holes and cracks with wax stick, wiping off the excess with a linseed oil-dampened cloth. We waited several weeks to let the oil dry and applied one coat of Sears semi-gloss polyurethane varnish. The result is a lustrous "hand-rubbed" finish with none of the plastic look of polyurethane.



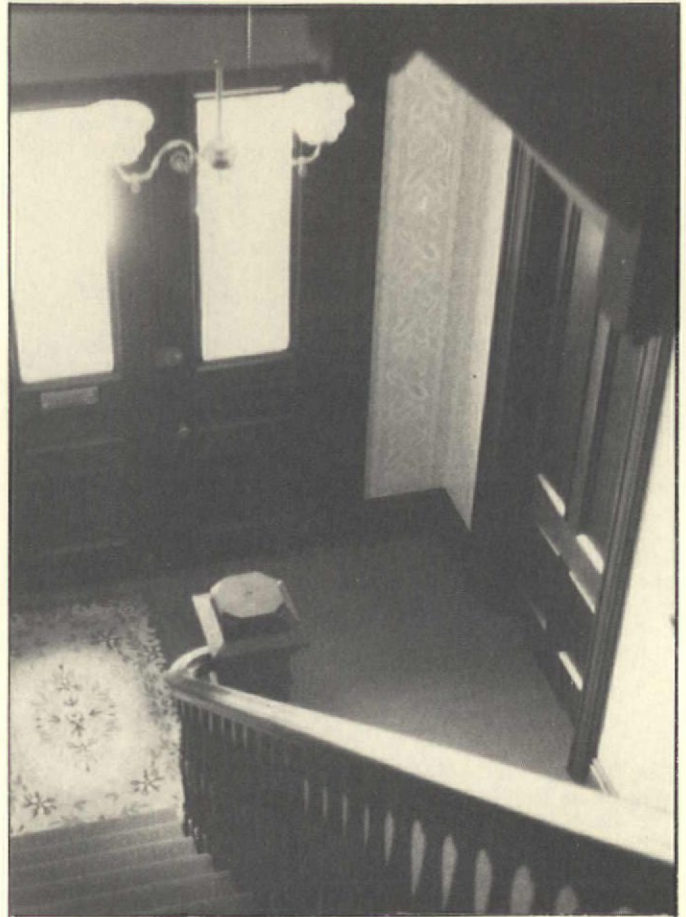
The firebox and bottom of the chimney have been rebuilt and connected up with the old chimney above the I beam.



A typical area in need of patch plastering found in almost every room. This wall is in the nursery.



The center window of the front parlor bay had been replaced in the past with ill-fitting and incompatible materials. The Kullmans reconstructed the original. In order not to hide the woodwork, shirred curtains have been set into the windows.



The major job in the front hall was to strip paint off all the walnut woodwork. For the hall and the other generously scaled main rooms, the Kullmans chose large patterned wallpaper to give richness and a Victorian feel.

FINALLY, THE OLD WINDOW SASH from 10 windows was taken out and stripped professionally, the old putty removed, the wood repaired, the windows reglazed and with new cord, reset.

BRIAN REPLACED FIVE CEILINGS, and in the course of doing this repaired a sag in the dining room ceiling caused by a twisted and cracked beam most of the length of the room. A piece of 100 in. long angle steel was applied to the exposed beam as a brace and bolted in, using lally columns in the basement and above in the dining room to hold the steel in place during the operation. The sag has been eliminated to some extent, and we hope further sag has been arrested.

THE MASTER BEDROOM had been an "efficiency" apartment with kitchen facilities and had to be completely torn up. The kitchen, the floor beneath it, and fifty years' accretion of plumbing was removed and the ceiling replaced. Our ceiling work turned into a renovation job since we decided to raise the ceiling and put in a skylight.

TOWARDS THE END OF OUR WORK on the bedroom, we also started work on what is now a nursery. My doctor assured me that the baby wouldn't arrive before the room was ready. He was wrong. Brian, almost literally, rushed from the delivery room and spent the next three days madly painting and moving furniture. Now we are fixing up a second nursery. But this time we are not relying on the doctor's predictions.

OF ALL THE EXTERIOR WORK that we have done, the simplest made the most impact. When we trimmed the hedge from eight to five ft., several elderly ladies thanked us because now they could pass along one side of the property without having to sidestep into the street. Removing six or seven layers of old paint to reveal the beautiful walnut of our front doors was the other major source of delight to our neighbors. And to ourselves. For in spite of the chaotic conditions, we thoroughly enjoyed our restoration undertaking and we are proud of what we've done.

cedar or juniper rails or original growth heart pines, will last from fifty to a hundred years, so that material once in hand served one or two generations." This observation, written in 1887, points to one of the problems, i.e., the limited life span of wood.

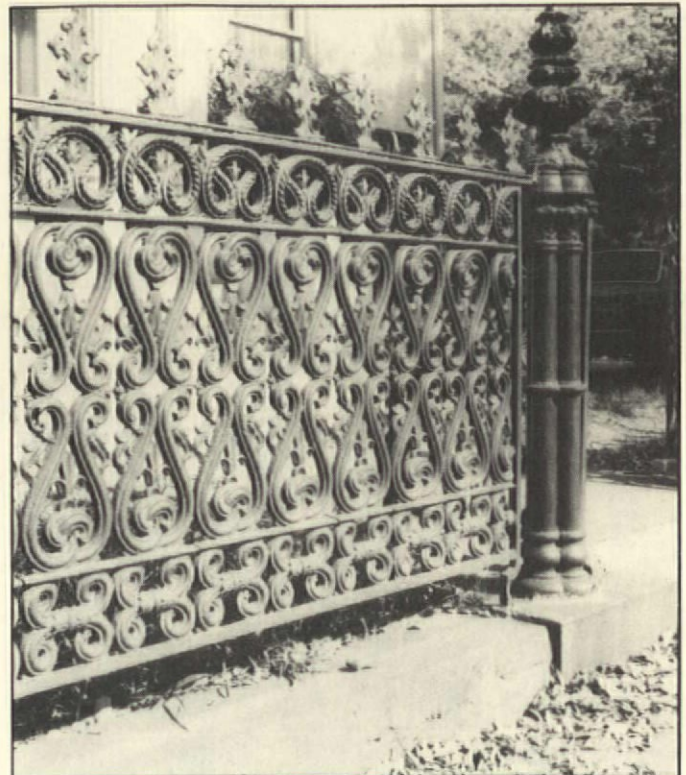
THE SECOND PROBLEM is that during the years with the sale and resale of land, fences which marked boundaries were no longer in the right place and were removed. Last, peoples' tastes changed. Fences which were popular at the beginning of the 19th century were no longer favorably regarded by the mid and third quarter of the century when Downing's influence became prevalent in landscape architecture. Another factor today is cost: Anything except the simplest of fences is becoming increasingly expensive.

STONE, BRICK, AND METAL FENCES and walls have had a somewhat better rate of survival than those made of wood. I will deal with these in this article. Wood fences which were much more common will be dealt with in a separate article.

Stone Fences

STONE GARDEN WALLS are relatively rare, and when we exempt walls consisting of piled up stones separating fields, of relatively recent date. They are found around the larger estates built in the late 19th and early twentieth century. Earlier stone walls occur with some frequency in Western Pennsylvania where sandstone and limestone was readily available, easy to work with, and cheap.

THE USE OF STONE AS A WALL for a garden should be governed by the character of the building with which it is used in conjunction. The use of no other material requires such close coordination of structure, garden, and garden enclosure as does stone. If you feel that you have to have a stone enclosure around your house, first check to see if there ever was one.



This very heavy cast iron fence (circa 1890) in Norfolk, Virginia rests on a low stone base.

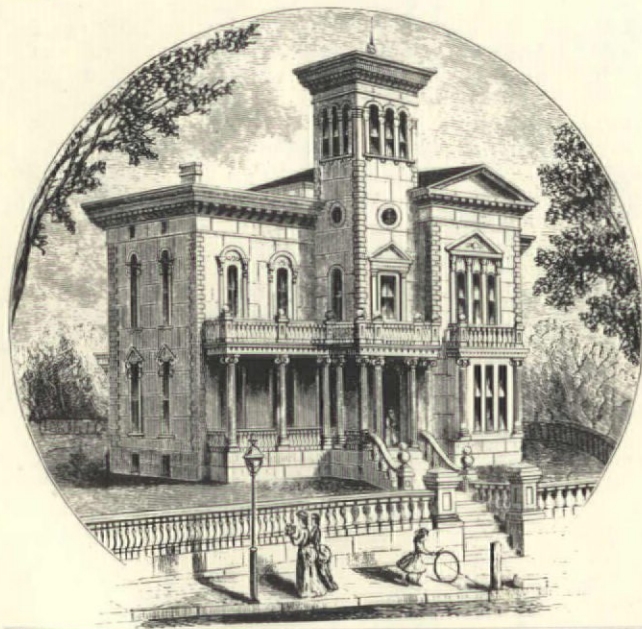
STONE DOES NOT DISAPPEAR and there are sure to be visible remains of any walls that may have existed. If you can't find any evidence, a bit of research in the local library and a check with the local historical society may turn up some evidence. If this also yields a blank, check the neighborhood and see if you can find any examples of stone walls.

IN VERY GENERAL TERMS, any stone enclosure should directly relate to the house as regards the type of stone, the manner in which it is laid and the scale of the wall itself. A very good basic rule is not to use the stone if the house itself is not at least partially built of stone.

YOU MAY ALSO WISH TO CONSIDER THE possibility of an enclosure consisting of a low stone wall surmounted by an iron or wood railing with possibly stone columns at fixed intervals and stone columns at the location of gates. There also exist various attractive yard enclosures consisting of a low stone wall surmounted by a pierced brick wall having a flat stone cap which relates wall to buildings partly built of stone and partly of brick.

Brick Fences

BRICK GARDEN WALLS are more common than stone, but are almost as expensive to build today. Stylistically, they range from the well known serpentine walls at the University of Virginia designed by Thomas Jefferson to simple straight walls with or without some sort of cap which



can either be a simple projecting brick or made of special shaped brick, which can be bought at brick yards, or even fancy stone caps.

THE REAL TRICK is to select a wall which is compatible with the house and garden it is to surround. Here scale and style is of paramount importance. For example, a high brick wall would generally be inappropriate around a small house or a highly ornamental wall next to a plain dwelling. The design of the wall should, if at all possible, try to pick up an element contained in the brickwork of the house such as the watertable or a detail from the brick cornice if the house has these features. It should also use similar brick, mortar, joining and coursing.

AS IN THE CASE OF STONE WALLS, if you have an old house, some evidence will probably remain as to any brick walls which might have existed, and a little research may turn up additional information.

DESPITE THE COST, there are some valid reasons for using stone or brick and that is to use them as part of a retaining wall. In cities it is often undesirable to have your lawn or flower beds level with the street. In this case a masonry wall is ideal as it retains the earth on your side as well as defining your limits. In Victorian times, low walls serving this purpose were often surmounted by iron railings of various designs.

ENGINEERING PROBLEMS can arise where a masonry wall serves as a retaining wall. If the difference of grade from one side of the wall to the other is substantial, considerable pressure can be exerted against the wall, especially if there is the possibility of heavy rains which can saturate and make the soil plastic. Tall walls are subject to wind loads and provisions have to be made to compensate for these pressures by the introduction of piers or similar elements in the design. You should consult an architect or engineer on these questions as well as on the requirements for a foundation.

A **MASONRY WALL** represents a considerable investment and is quite permanent. Your best bet is to have it built to an actual set of plans and to ask some reputable masonry contractors for bids. Very few of us have the skill or training to be brickmasons and nothing is more noticeable than sloppy masonry.

Iron Fences And Railings

IRON RAILINGS come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, as well as types of iron. Iron fencing, with the exception of very formal entrance gates to large plantations, are primarily an urban phenomena and even in urban areas, they more often take the form of railings along stairs, balconies or around small front yards than long stretches of fencing enclosing large areas. The exceptions are usually fences around public complexes, such as government buildings, churches, cemeteries and similar areas.

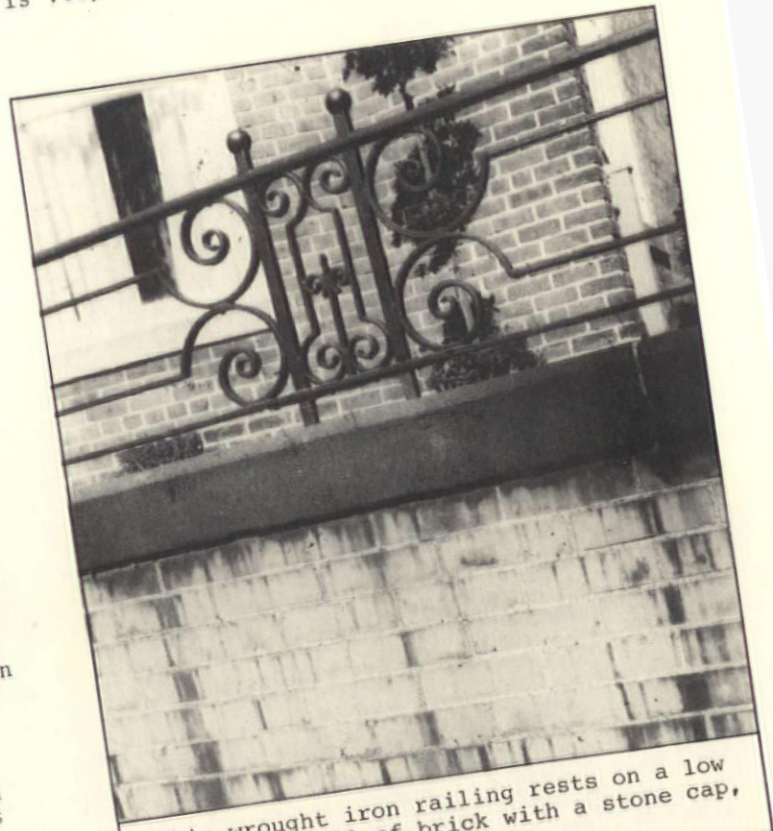
IF YOU ARE CONTEMPLATING the installation of an iron fence, once again there is no specific rule as to what fence to get. In very general

terms, one can say that the earlier the house is, the simpler the fence should be. The other criterion is that stylistically the fence should have some relation to the structure it surrounds.

A HIGHLY ORNAMENTAL CAST IRON treillage which is appropriate on a French Quarter New Orleans house would be an absolute disaster around a New England Salt Box. The best advice is once again to do some local research and to find out what was currently in use at the time your house was built.

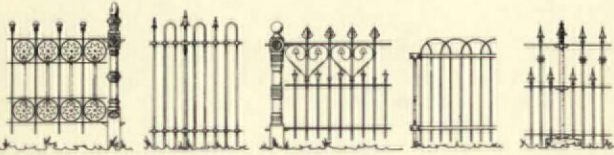
IF YOU LIVE IN AN AREA where there were local iron works, you might be in for some very pleasant surprises. The local factory might have produced various types of cast iron fencing, much of it very elegant, (and sections of which might still be obtainable from such sources as local junkyards and demolition firms), which may be illustrated in the company's sales catalogs. In some instances, you will discover that these firms custom-made a fence specifically for one or two buildings, i.e., a fence in an Egyptian motif to go around an Egyptian revival building.

BUYING OLD OR ANTIQUE iron fencing can be risky. Aesthetically, the fence will have to relate to the character and period of your house. Never buy fencing without keeping the ultimate picture of house, yard, and fence in mind. Examine the fence closely. There may be pieces missing. If it is of cast iron this will mean that you will have to have castings made of the missing elements. This is very costly.

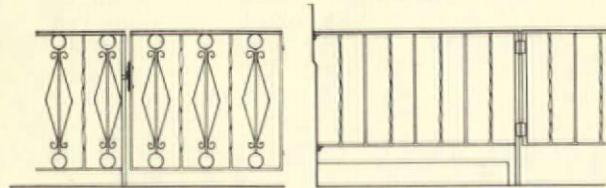


This wrought iron railing rests on a low retaining wall of brick with a stone cap, c. 1905, Norfolk, Virginia.

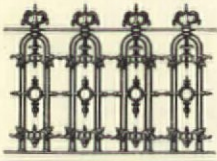
Types Of Iron Fencing



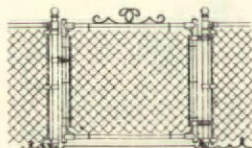
Wrought Iron Typical hairpin fences with interlacing U shapes and arrowheads or spiked spheres are made of wrought iron which has been heated and then beaten into shape, or bent on a slab. Wrought iron, a dense, relatively soft pure iron, resists rust even when unpainted. Today what is called wrought iron is usually mild steel. Wrought iron is harder and lasts longer than mild steel, but is difficult to obtain. Mild steel gives a ringing sound when struck. Wrought iron does not. If it is maintained and painted every 5 years, wrought iron will last at least 100 years.



Mild Steel Mild steel is called wrought iron because it is hand worked. It has a high oxygen and carbon content and rusts very rapidly. Steel fencing should be heavily galvanized. After galvanization, however, the fence will not hold paint. To take paint, the fence must be dipped in hot "red lead" and baked dry. Repainting will be needed every 5 years. With proper maintenance a mild steel fence may last 50 years.



Cast Iron Cast iron fences are usually heavier and more ornate than wrought iron. The mold for casting is made by hand. Cast iron is a brittle metal which does not bend easily. Ornamental cast iron rusts relatively slowly, but should be protected with paint.



Chainlink Chainlink or Cyclone fencing is stylistically the least compatible fencing material. The heavy galvanization looks dull. When painted green and concealed by climbing vines or a hedge, the appearance is improved.

This information on fences was excerpted from *The Cape May Handbook*. This informative book is reviewed in this issue on page 24. --Ed.

REPAIRING WROUGHT IRON requires expensive handwork. Check the overall strength of the fence. Iron does rust! Be sure that you are not buying a shell of rust held together by layers of paint. Installation of old iron fencing may also cause layout problems because the sections may not be readily divisible to fit your lot. Problems of this type are legion, so be cautious. Also, make sure you get enough fencing. You can't just pick up the phone and order another 20 ft. of antique fencing.

INSTALLING AN IRON FENCE is not a do-it-yourself project. First, it should be set on a brick or stone base to give it secure anchorage and a proper visual appearance. An iron fence rising out of grass, even if its parts are firmly anchored in concrete, simply does not look right. Second, an iron fence needs to be properly secured to its base. It should be set in lead or sulphur and both of these substances in their molten state are not to be treated lightly. Needless to say, such fencing will also involve brazing and/or welding.


Good Advice

THE BEST SIMPLE ADVICE one can give anyone contemplating a masonry or iron fence is the following:

- Make sure that this is what you really want and that it is appropriate to your building. Because there are tremendous stylistic variations depending on periods and localities, there is no such thing as "a single type of appropriate fence."
- If you decide that you have to have such a fence or wall, do some research locally to first discover if your house ever had such a feature. To see what was used locally around similar houses, research your local or state library and historical society, as well as a walking tour of your neighborhood. Lastly, do some reading on the topic.
- Get professional help for the design, including help in the field of landscape architecture. Remember that a wall or fence is not an isolated element but is part of a greater image which involves house, plants and the adjacent structures.
- Get a professional to build it.
- If you have any doubts at all, opt for the simplest design and make sure that in scale and proportion it has some relation to the area enclosed, the function to be served, and the house.

Next Month—Part II will detail designs and construction of wooden fences.

Dr. Frederick Herman, AIA, has served as chairman of the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. He is also a partner in the architectural firm of Spigel, Carter, Zinkl, Herman & Chapman—Restoration Architects, 420 West Bute St., Norfolk, VA 23510.



Restoring Damaged Plaster

By David S. Gillespie, Chicago, Ill.

REPAIRING DAMAGED PLASTER is one of the first "cosmetic" tasks that most old-house owners get involved with. Nearly every house has had some settling or other movement that creates long, spidery cracks extending across ceilings and down walls—especially over the doors. Children, reclining rockers and the like will have taken their toll on the walls. Previous owners may have filled in doors and windows leaving visible changes in the wall surface. Or they may have attempted to patch the plaster with a bag of Sakrete and a hand—leaving something that looks like a child's model of the craters of the moon.

MOST HOUSES have experienced some settling—and the cracks caused by this settlement present no special problems. However, other plaster damage is caused by shifting foundations or leaking water. Obviously, these are serious conditions and must be tended to first before attempting to fix the plaster.

ASSUMING YOUR HOUSE is sound and that all the major structural and mechanical work has been done, the first step in a plaster repair program is to get an accurate assessment of the overall condition. This may require that multiple layers of wallpaper be removed from some walls at this point if they are masking the true condition underneath.

Plaster Vs. Drywall

MANY PEOPLE, seeing numerous cracks and holes in their plaster, opt to avoid repair problems by ripping out all the old plaster and installing dry wall (sheetrock) throughout. But no matter how well done, drywall simply does not have the form and texture of a plaster wall. I will go to almost any length to preserve existing plaster.

YOU'LL WANT TO go through your house room by room, examining each wall and ceiling to see which ones can be saved. As a rule of thumb, I try to repair any surface that has 50% or more of its plaster intact.

IF THE SURFACE CANNOT be saved, call in a plasterer for an estimate on replacing with new plaster. The estimate won't cost anything and you may be pleasantly surprised. In many

cases you may be able to replace with genuine plaster at a cost not much higher than a good drywall job.

To Salvage Plaster

TO SALVAGE PLASTER, the first step is to strip off all wallpaper, nails and other odds and ends. To get paper off, I use a garden sprayer and chemical wallpaper remover. Spray the paper in a small (4 ft. x 4 ft.) section, soaking it thoroughly. Let the paper soak for 3-5 min., soak again, and start scraping. (A stiff wallpaper scraper works best.) Old paper generally comes down easily—if it hasn't been painted. If it has, score the paper at frequent intervals, and soak. It will come off—inch by inch! And be careful not to gouge the plaster; you're the one who will have to fix all those nicks later on.

WITH THE WALLS BARE, you have a better idea of the problems. Most houses built before 1914 had hair plaster; i.e., plaster with animal hair mixed in to provide greater strength. The quality of this plaster can vary greatly depending on the care taken by the original plasterer. Usually, old plaster is quite hardy and well worth salvaging.

PLASTER INSTALLED after 1914 may have a fiber bonding agent rather than animal hair...or it may have no bonding agent at all. Some of this old plaster without bonding agents is so weak that it may crumble away as you pull off the wallpaper.

Surface Preparation

REPARATION OF THE SURFACE is the key to good plaster repair. Failure to prepare adequately will simply mean that the plaster will crack and fall out again soon after you are finished. Here are some common problems that require special surface preparation:

WATER STAINS—Brownish rings on the plaster, especially the ceilings, indicate that the plaster has been wet. Water damage is not serious if the water was stopped quickly. The surface can usually be sealed with pigmented shellac to prevent the stain bleeding through new paint or wallpaper. But if the leak was

allowed to continue over long periods, the plaster may have effloresced...leaving a rough, chalking surface to which patching material will not adhere. The solution is to first wire-brush the surface, then seal it with pigmented shellac. After that treatment, the patching material will hold and it can be patched as described later.

OTHER STAINS—An unusual problem occurred in one house I worked in. Acid had been poured into the wall to dislodge a wasp colony. The wasps left—as did the lime in the plaster, causing the finish coat to disappear entirely over a large area of the ceiling below. To repair the mess, all loose and crumbling plaster had to be removed with a scraper and wire brush. The surface was then sealed with three coats of pigmented shellac to prepare the surface for later patching.

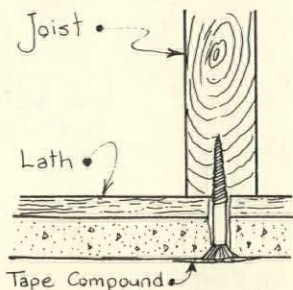
GREASE STAINS may have soaked into the plaster, but they, like most other kinds of stains can be repaired by simply sealing the surface with shellac and painting. Naturally, any globs of grease or other residue must be removed and the surface washed before sealing.

Loose Plaster

LARGE AREAS where the plaster has fallen out entirely, or is very loose, present a problem that often daunts the do-it-yourselfer. If the plaster has not actually fallen off, but is merely loose, then screw it! That is, get some dry wall screws (not nails) or other large, flat-head screws. Carefully drill holes the size of the screw shank through the loose plaster about 6 in. apart and 1½ in. from the edge of the loose section.

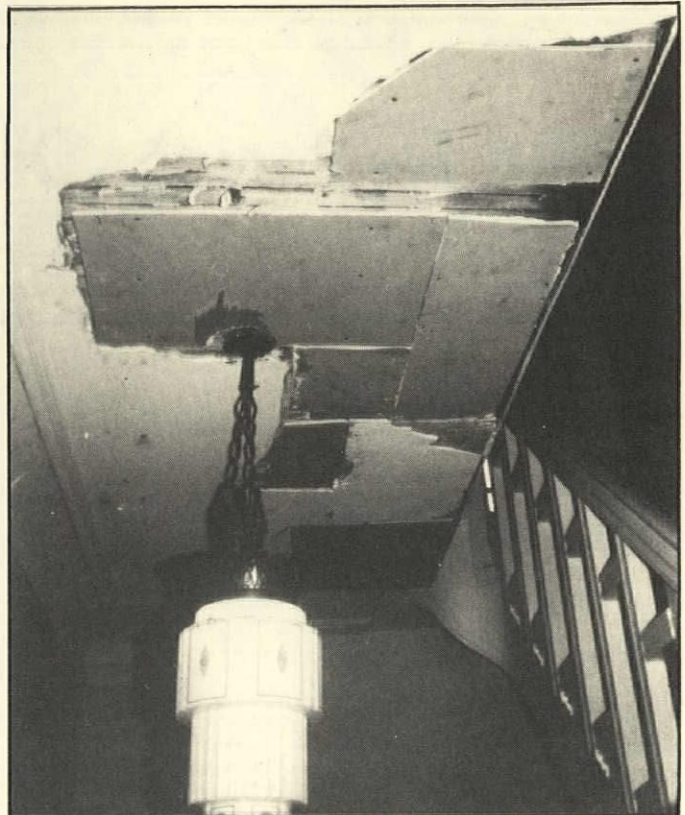
DRILL SMALLER holes in the lath, and then screw the piece of plaster up snug against the lath. Tighten the screws gradually all along the edge to avoid breaking off pieces of the plaster—and make them just tight enough so that the screw head pulls down below the surface.

IT IS ALSO a good idea—whenever possible—to sink longer screws through both plaster and lath up into the joists. This transfers a greater amount of the load directly to the joists...which can be very desirable in situations where drying of the beams has weakened the grip of the lath nails.

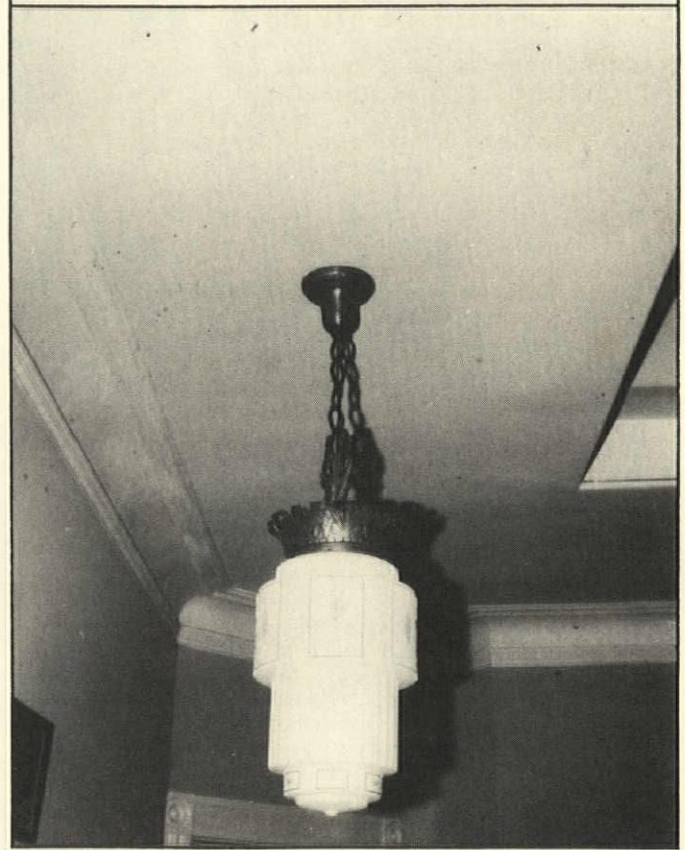


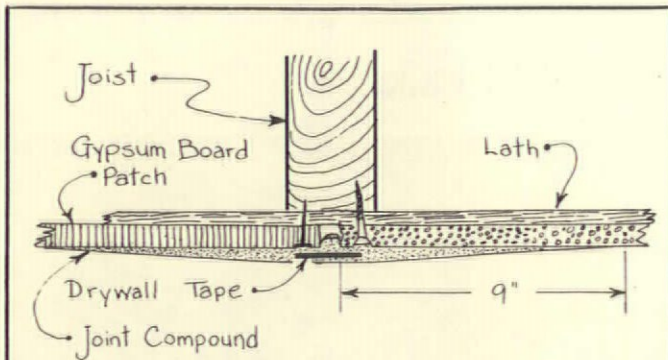
SOMETIMES, loose plaster will give way while you are working on it, and the ceiling will fall. When this occurs, it's time for Plan B.

PLAN B is harder. All loose plaster must be knocked down. It find it easiest to use a hammer and a 5-in. wall scraping knife to pry off all loose sections. The best idea is to locate the wall studs or ceiling joists (the lath nails give you a quick clue) and cut a line down those joists. Make your section as square as possible (to make it easier to cut patches), and as large as necessary.

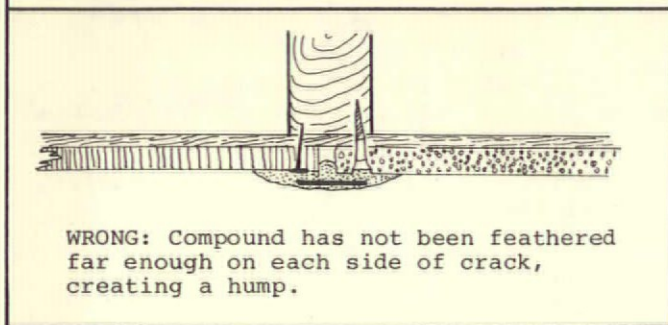


BEFORE AND AFTER: A loose plaster condition, above, required the removal of all loose segments and the cutting of gypsum board patches. After tape and joint compound are applied (below) patched area is as smooth as new plaster.





RIGHT: Joint compound covering taped crack extends 8-9 in. on both sides of the crack.



WRONG: Compound has not been feathered far enough on each side of crack, creating a hump.

the rough plaster. Or you can use drywall compound as described below. Working with plaster—especially overhead on a ceiling—can be tricky and frustrating for the novice. So unless you are willing to spend some time experimenting and learning, you are probably best off sticking to the drywall board and tape patching system.

Dealing With Cracks

CRACKS ARE PROBABLY the most common plaster problem encountered by old-house owners. While not as awesome as large pieces of fallen plaster, cracks must be handled just as carefully if you want to avoid repeating the process next year. The secret to patching cracks, I find, is treating them as you would joints in a gypsum board wall. That is, the cracks are filled with joint compound, covered with tape, and then the tape is covered with more compound. The tape provides a flexible bridge over the crack that prevents the crack from showing up again in 12 months—as it often does when rigid fillers like spackle are used.

I GENERALLY GO OVER the entire plaster surface with a stiff wall scraper to get off any loose or flaking paint, paper, and any knobs of plaster left by previous patchers. Then, using a beer can opener, scrape out the crack in a "V" so that the new patch will hold securely.

BESIDES THE 5-in. wall scraper already mentioned, you will also need the following: A wide 12-in flexible taping knife, a 6-in. flexible taping knife, a 5-gal. pail of all-purpose drywall joint compound, and a roll of drywall tape. My first ceiling was done entirely with a 5-in. knife (somebody said to get a wide knife and that was 5 times as wide as my putty knife!). I still don't know how the job turned out as well as it did. A wide (12 in.) knife will make your job much, much easier and will give you a much flatter looking surface.

I FIND THAT READY-MIXED joint compound is less trouble. And since you can save the left-over for another day (or week, or month), it probably is cheaper in the long run than the powder that you mix yourself—and then throw out the excess at the end of the day.

ONE GALLON WILL NOT go far unless you have only minor cracks and nail holes to fill—so get plenty. Few things are as frustrating as running out of joint compound on Sunday with the job half through and the stores all closed.

NEXT STEP IS to cut a gypsum board drywall patch that will fit the hole you've just created. If you have some large brown wrapping paper around, it can be handy to make a pattern of the hole you've got to fill. Since most plaster is about 3/8 in. thick, 3/8 in. drywall should do the trick. If your plaster is any thicker, the drywall can be brought up to the level of the adjacent plaster with wooden shims attached to the joists.

CUT THE GYPSUM BOARD to the proper size and nail it in place along the joists, using the proper drywall nails with large flat heads. If at all possible, try to use a single piece of gypsum board drywall to fill in the hole. This will minimize the amount of taping to be done and makes it much less likely that your work will come undone in months to come.

EACH JUNCTION LINE where the drywall adjoins the plaster should be covered with drywall tape and drywall joint compound...as explained in the section below

AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD is to purchase some rough fiber plaster and fill in the holes with this material. Mix it to a fairly thick consistency and work it into the lath so that enough gets behind the strips to form "keys" that will hold the plaster in place when dry. Work this plaster smooth approximately 1/8 in. below the finish surface. Buy plenty of plaster because a 50-lb. bag won't go very far.



AS A FINISH COAT for the patch, you can apply the conventional lime-plaster mixture over

NEXT MONTH: Taping And Sanding

David S. Gillespie and his wife, Ruth, are dedicated old-house owners residing in Chicago, Ill. In previous issues (June and October, 1978) they shared their experiences in setting up a kitchen. David is also Executive Director of the Historic Pullman Foundation in Chicago.

Products For The Old House



Decorative Wooden Scrollwork

VINTAGE WOOD WORKS in Quinlan, Texas, is now producing a line of authentic Victorian gingerbread designs for interior and exterior use.

MOST OF THE DESIGNS are fancy brackets--scrolls, parrot's beak, even a Texas Special featuring the Lone Star. There are also two running trims and a screen door corner.

GINGERBREAD IS CUT from clear pine and sent shop-sanded, ready for finishing with paint, stain or sealer.

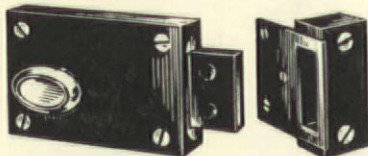
FOR AN ILLUSTRATED four-page brochure, send \$1.00 to: Vintage Wood Works, Dept. OHJ, Rt. 2, Box 68, Quinlan, Tex. 75474. Tel. (214) 356-3667.

Rim Deadbolt Lock

AN INTERESTING COMBINATION of old design and modern technology is the lock made by the Colonial Lock Co. It's an old-fashioned box-type rim lock made to high security standards.

THERE ARE TWO TYPES--the 1776, with knob inside and key outside; and the 1776-1/2, with key inside and outside.

CASE AND KEEPER are cast iron with an antique black finish. The price is \$15.95. For a free flyer with specifications write to: Colonial Lock Co., Dept. OHJ, 172 Main Street, Terryville, Conn. 06786.



Helpful Publications

Handbook For Victorian Houses

THIS HANDBOOK has been compiled for the citizens of Cape May, New Jersey. However, the information that has been gathered will be of great interest to any owner of a Victorian house.

CAPE MAY is the quintessential Victorian sea-side town with over 600 frame buildings from the 19th century, providing an overwhelming variety of house styles and their special restoration problems.

THERE IS A BASIC GUIDE to 19th century architectural styles illustrated with line drawings and photos; A section on maintenance, restoration, doing it yourself and working with contractors.

A USEFUL DISCUSSION of the streetscape--sidewalk paving, fences, gardens, driveways--is featured as well as an extensive review of exterior building features--foundations, siding, windows, shutters and blinds, doors, trim, brackets, dormers, gutters, etc.

OTHER SECTIONS INCLUDE: Tools for preservation (tax incentives, revolving funds); An appendix of Federal legislation; Glossary of Victorian architectural terms; A bibliography of restoration books.

THE CAPE MAY HANDBOOK is an 80-page paperback containing over 100 measured drawings and photos. The cost is \$5.00, plus \$1.00 postage and handling.

TO ORDER, send \$6.00 to: The Athenaeum, 219 S. Sixth Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106.



New and Expanded! 1979 Catalog

- Directory of where to buy 7,282 items and services for the old house;
- 662 Companies listed;
- 203 of these sources are new—they didn't appear in the 1978 Catalog.

Single copies: \$7.95;
\$4.95 to subscribers
(Includes Postage and Handling)

The Old-House Journal
69A Seventh Avenue
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217

Subscriptions: The Old-House Journal

Enclosed is:

- \$12 for one year subscription
 \$15.95 for subscription + Buyers' Guide Catalog

Subscription is: Gift Personal

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Donor's Name _____

Mail to: The Old-House Journal, Dept. 7,
69A Seventh Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217