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# OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL

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Peeling Ceilings

Framing Walls

Prairie Plaster

Composition Ornament

# INTERIORS



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#3233  
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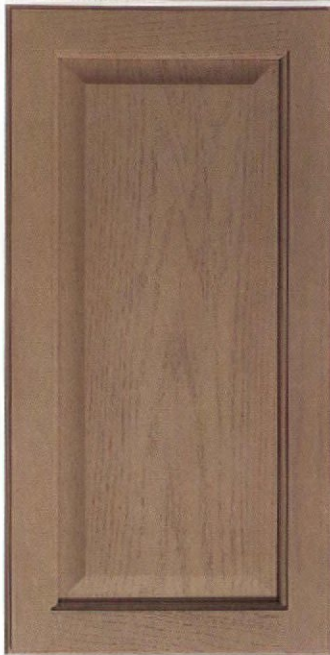


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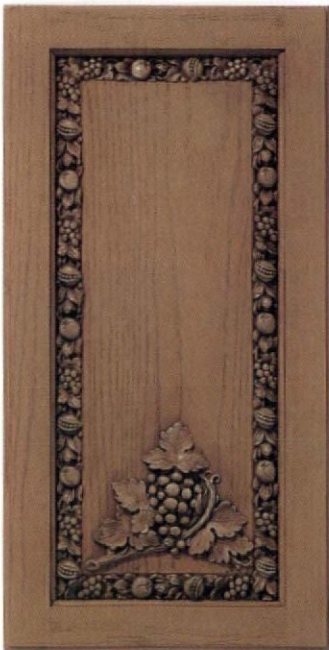
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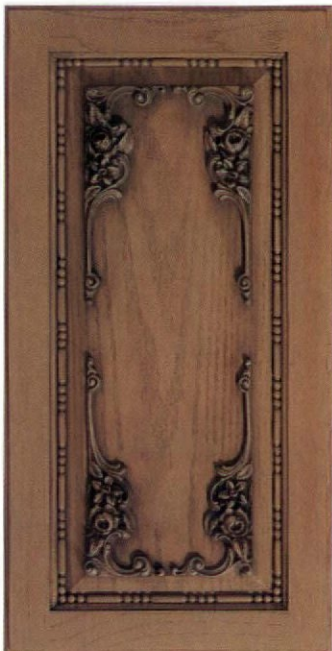
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Typical door BEFORE



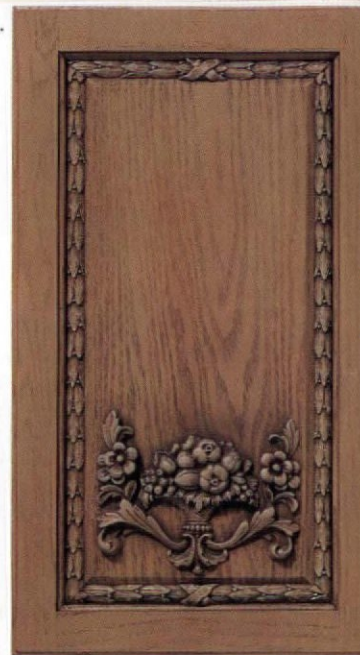
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# OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL

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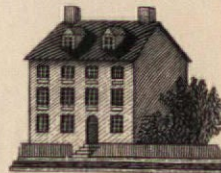
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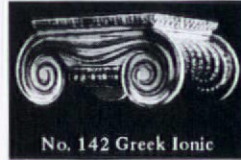
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# EDITOR'S PAGE

## A Few Important Details



EVERY SO OFTEN SOMEONE WRITES us a letter that, in the course of describing their old house, uses phrases like "it's pretty plain," or "there's no fancy gingerbread or architect's designs," or "ours is just an old house." As the letter goes on it's clear the writer is totally involved in their old house, but there's an inkling they feel it can't be compared with the grand or one-of-a-kind buildings one sees in house tours or coffee table albums. Well, in my book every old house is special.

At one time I had a Plain Jane complex about my old house. It's an unspectacular, late 1800s farm-cum-boarding house, yet over the years I've learned to appreciate its many small details and construction idiosyncrasies. The sash windows are factory made, but pinned mortise-and-tenon joints were still used at the time they were built. The building is wood-frame (with not a lick of plaster) but the lumber is nearly all pine and probably cut within a mile of the house. The hardware and fittings are stock mail-order stuff, but I get a kick out of the fact they're exactly what should be found in a no-frills rural house. Details like these don't bowl you over as marble columns or gold-plated plumbing might. Never-

theless, the simpler and less obvious they are the more I cherish them.

Uncomplicated plans or minimal appointments do not necessarily represent a lack of design — very often the contrary is true. It's difficult to be simple, and this can be part of the beauty of an old house. The strictly functional economy or austere charm

some time, features that turn out to be impractical or unnecessary are usually changed or abandoned, while what "works" remains for a good reason.

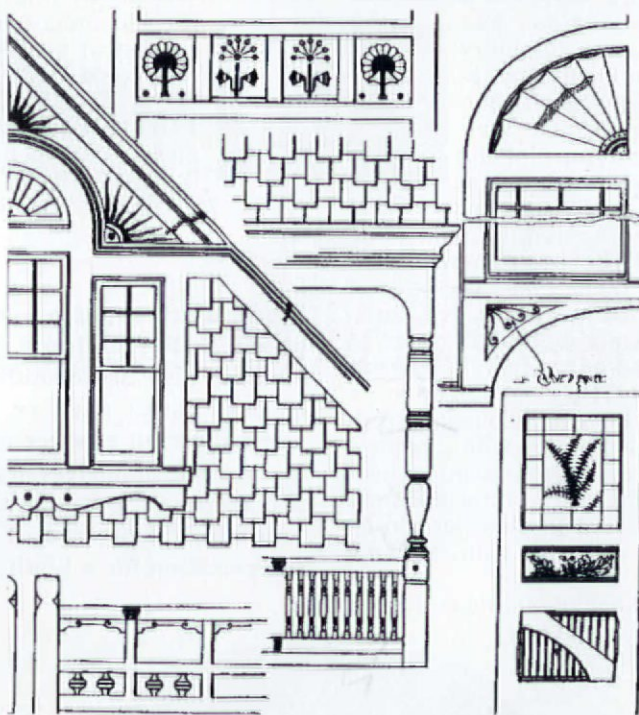
Beyond the tangible details of construction or architecture, each old house has its own background that is a product of time. It is this individual history that makes it unique and gives

it character. Even houses built from the same plan or as exact duplicates can't share the same site or experiences. Furthermore, they are shaped not only by the major forces of alteration or wear, but by the generations of people who live in the house. The subtle impact of human lives accumulates on its surfaces like the many polished layers of deep Chinese lacquer.

I was invited to a housewarming a few weeks ago by some very pleasant people who were friends of friends. They had moved to a lovely neighborhood and their pride was evident as they showed us around their attractive, impeccable

home. I had a wonderful time and the house was very nice. Still, it was just a new house.

*Golden Book*



*Exterior details, such as these from Palliser's New Cottage Homes (1887), are only part of the appeal of old houses.*

of many old or unsophisticated houses has long been admired by professional designers. They frequently take a cue from layouts that were the product of a practical need or decorative elements carefully evolved over generations. In a house that has stood for

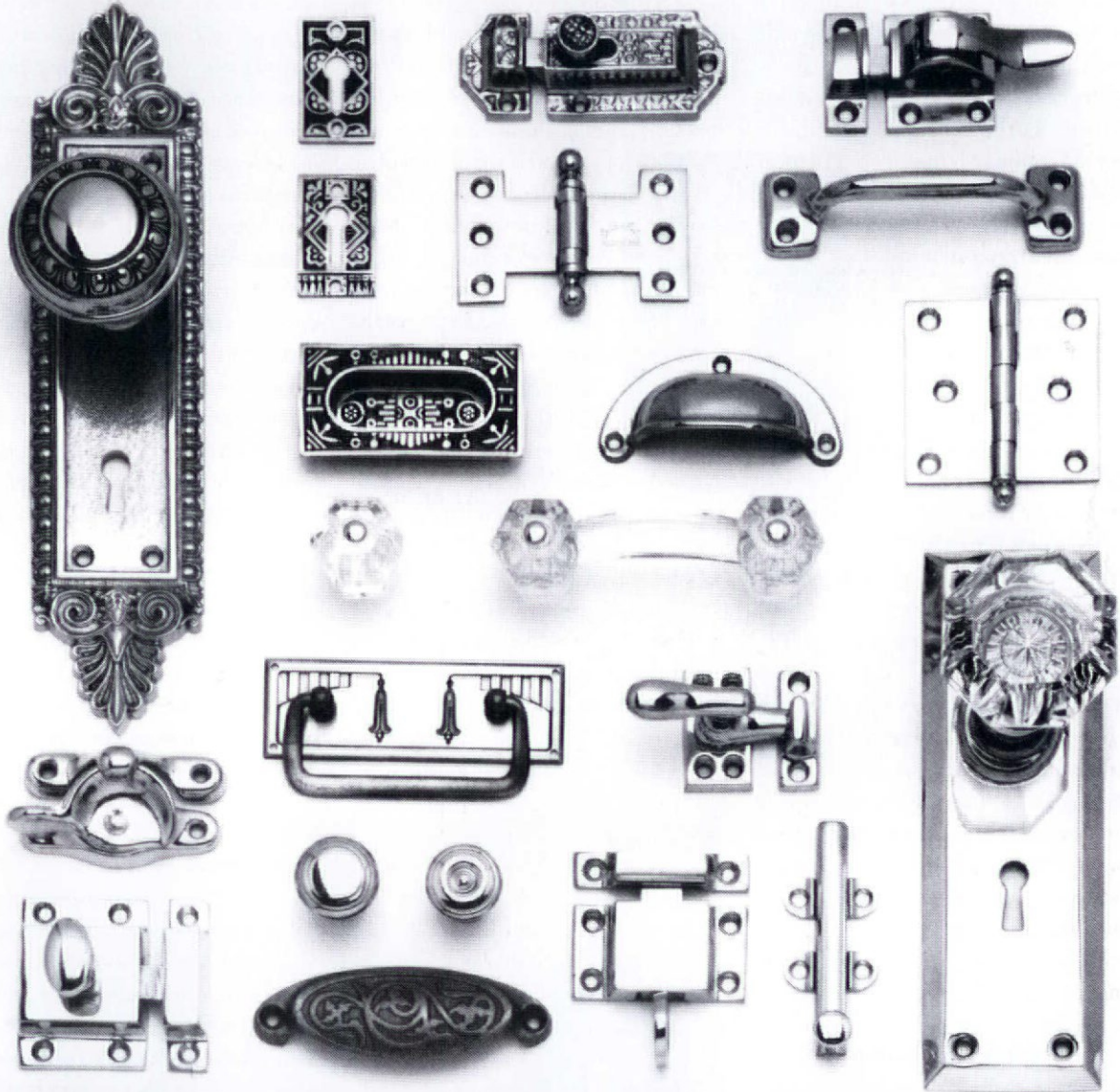


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# LETTERS

## Remuddling Rivalry

Dear OHJ,

ARCHRIVALS SEPARATED BY LESS THAN 30 miles, Seattle considers itself superior to Tacoma in all things, including old-house restoration. Therefore, it was with great glee that I realized the monstrosity in the November/December issue of *Old-House Journal* was located within the environs of Tacoma's snooty northern neighbor!

In my north Tacoma neighborhood, old houses, whether modest bungalows or grand Queen Annes, tend to be remuddled as often as not.

Many's the time I've been tempted to submit photos to your "Remuddling" page — only the thought that people who live in old houses with dry-rotted, falling gutters (and unconverted husbands who favor vinyl or aluminum) should not point fingers restrained me.

Now, however, my restraint is vindicated by more than guilt or shame! *Nothing* I've seen in my beloved North End could equal that Seattle nightmare! Thanks for sending a ray of sunshine into my typical wet and gray Western Washington day.

— PAM PETERS  
Tacoma, Wash.

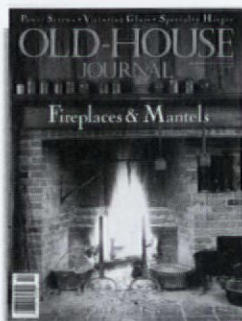
## Adobe Dilemma

AS A SELF-APPOINTED EXPERT ON THE Monterey Colonial style in California, I cannot ignore some of the misstatements made by Mr. Brack in your September/October issue.

First, the only concession to the Spanish Colonial building tradition made by the Monterey style was the use of adobe. Also, there are certainly more than 30 adobes in this style still standing. Sonoma County has 15;

Monterey County has 36; Santa Barbara has 26, and there are at least that many in the counties to the south.

I wrote *Sonoma Valley Legacy* in 1986 (sold by the Sonoma Valley Historical Society and the Sonoma State Historic Park), and one of the salient points in



this book was that the Monterey Colonial style clearly indicated the "Americanization" of the California during the Mexican era and the first years of statehood. In the Southwest, this same American-style adobe is called the "Territorial Style" and bears strong similarities to the Monterey-style houses

here. Californians might have used the same name except for the fact that we were never a territory.

However, permit me to commend Mr. Brack for calling attention to a charming style, which, alas, is so greatly misinterpreted by so many.

— JAMES B. ALEXANDER  
Sonoma, Calif.

*The author responds:*

Mr. Alexander's letter certainly confirms the point I made in my article that "Most historians have attributed the creation of the Monterey adobe house to [American] immigrants." Unfortunately, those writers who have promoted this interpretation have never really examined the vernacular building traditions of Latin America or Spain. For my recent article "Domestic Architecture in Hispanic California: The Monterey Style Reconsidered" (in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV*; University of Missouri Press, 1991), I conducted extensive field and archival research in California and Mexico. This research led me to conclude that in form, materials, detail, and spatial organization, these buildings were clearly indebted to Hispanic vernacular traditions. I must also note that Dr. David Gebhard has published two articles that have questioned the supposed American origins of the Monterey style.

As for Mr. Alexander's claim regarding the number of surviving "Monterey-style" houses in California, I have visited nearly all the extant buildings of this type, and I stand by my original figure. I suspect his definition of the Monterey style is quite different than mine and that he may be including one-storey adobe houses with porches.

## Historic Interiors Expo

I WANT TO INVITE YOUR READERS, BOTH PROFESSIONALS AND HOMEOWNERS, TO attend the Interiors Conference and Exposition for Historic Buildings II, February 17-19, 1993, in Washington DC., sponsored by the the National Park Service and other leading preservation organizations. There will be more than 80 leading experts as speakers, a comprehensive handbook for registrants, field inspections, and a trade show with over 50 select companies participating as well as educational displays and demonstrations throughout the show.



This is an excellent opportunity for people involved in all aspects of historic buildings to gather, learn and share information. Contact: Interiors Conference and Exposition II, P.O. Box 77160, Washington, DC 20013, or call (202) 343-9578.

— CHUCK FISHER  
Washington, D.C.



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## LETTERS

Many issues are involved in this topic. I would suggest that interested readers review Mr. Alexander's publication and my own so they might decide for themselves.

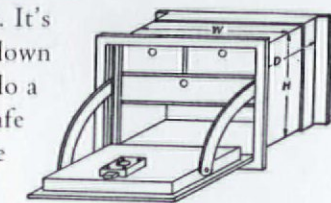
— MARK L. BRACK  
Berkeley, Calif

### Unlocking The Past

REGARDING THE ASK OHJ "SAFE ASSUMPTIONS" [November/December 1992], although not a locksmith, many years ago I read an article concerning safe combinations. Usually combinations are arranged in a A-B-A-L or A-B-A-B-L orientation. That is, if the dial reads 1-100 and it is a three-combination pattern, split the dial in half. And like ordering from a Chinese

restaurant, pick a number from 1-49 for A and one from 50-100 for B. Then [pick another from] 1-49 for A and turn to "Lock".

I've had great luck with this over the years. It's necessary to write down each try and only do a few a day. (That safe isn't going anywhere on its own.) Each time you try, take it slow and listen for the clicks inside the lock — they let you know you're succeeding.



(above) A 1925 fireproof wall safe.

— BRIAN FAHEY  
Buffalo, N.Y.

### Hooray for Hoosiers

WHEN I RECEIVED MY SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1992 issue of your magazine, I saw on the front cover Hoosier Cabinets and could hardly wait to read your article.

Having been raised by my grandparents, the cabinet in the pantry was always the home of my grandmother's goodies. Five years ago, I inherited the house as well as the Hoosier cabinets. I wish I had your article when my husband and I started to refinish the cabinets. We spent

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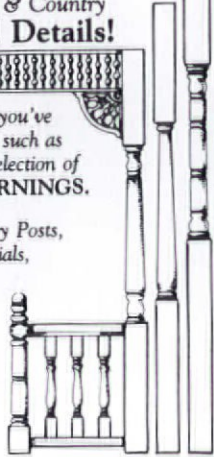
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## LETTERS

six weeks that summer in our spare time stripping tons of paint. It is nice to know that in our ignorance we took the cabinet apart just as you said and didn't mess with the flour bin or sifter. Now, it is the holder of goodies we try to hide from our grandchildren.

— SHARON CLAUTIS  
Virginia, Minn.

I WANTED YOU TO KNOW HOW MUCH I enjoyed the article on Hoosier Kitchen Cabinets in your September/October issue. Three weeks before my issue arrived, I purchased a Hoosier cabinet. It was interesting to find out my cabinet is one of the ear-

ly types made by the Hoosier Manufacturing Company of New Castle, Indiana in 1923. I feel so lucky to have this beautiful piece in my home.

— KIMBERLY A. FUGLEBERG  
Hinesville, Geor.

### Top Option

AS DIRECTOR OF MARKET DEVELOPMENT for U.S. producers of stainless steel, I particularly enjoyed your article in the September/October edition on "old-fashioned" stainless steel and how it remains a good option today for kitchen countertops.

In addition to the attributes you listed — nearly indestructible, impervious to water and food stains — you

should know stainless steel tested best in cleanability by a British research organization that compared [it] with three other sink-making materials. The test showed that stainless steel surfaces produce clean scratches that release bacteria with relative ease.

— BRIAN R. LESLIE  
Specialty Steel Industry  
of the United States  
Washington, D.C.

CORRECTION: In the article "Brilliant-Cut Glass" [November/December 1992], Thomas Tisch's phone number was misprinted and should be (607) 387-5473.



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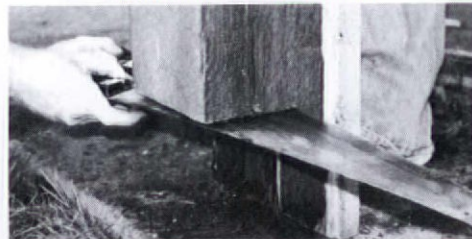
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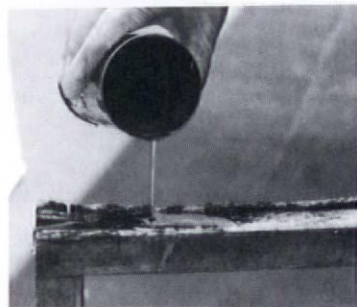
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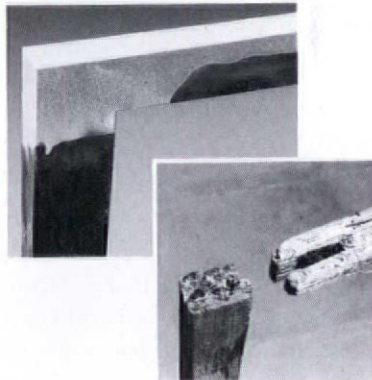
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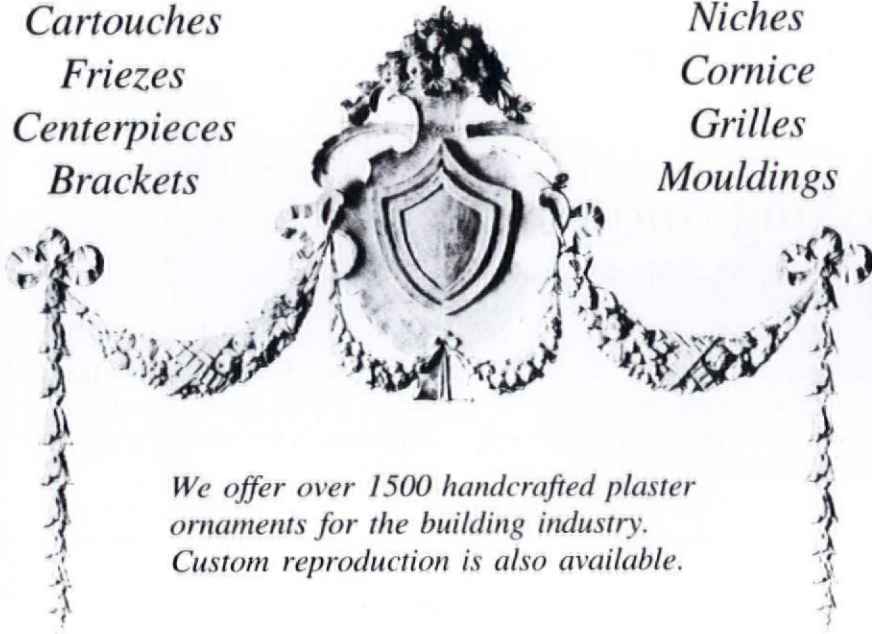






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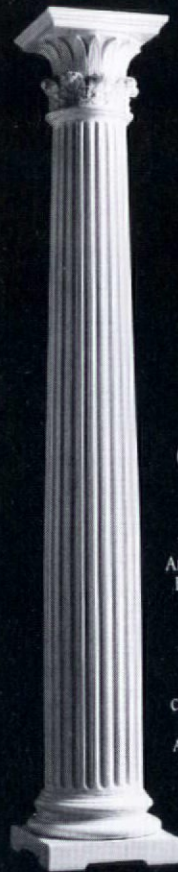


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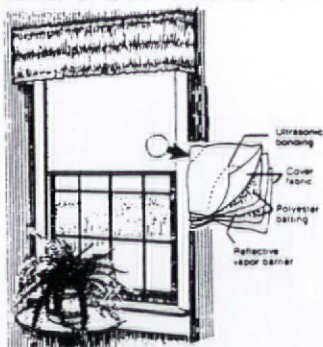
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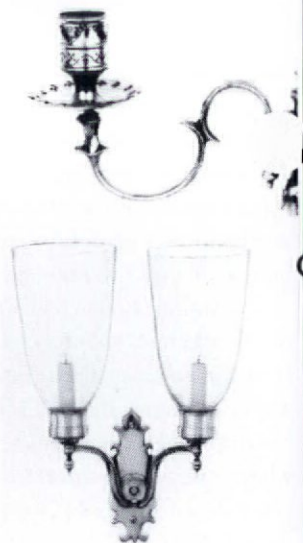
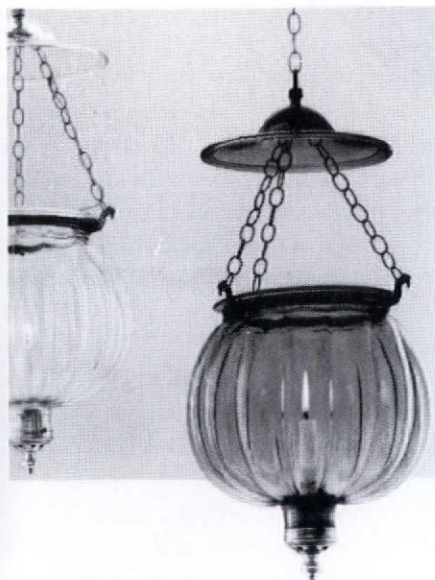


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# GOOD BOOKS

## Collecting Antique Books

by Neal A. Vogel

**F**RUSTRATED BY TODAY'S PUBLICATIONS (present company excluded, of course) and their irrelevant home improvement advice? Baffled by the construction of missing balustrades, windows, or dormers? Curious about who manufactured your millwork? Answers can be found among the golden pages of antique building catalogs, architectural journals, trade manuals, and home improvement books. Whether described as "rare," "antique," "out-of-print," or simply "used," yesteryear's books provide first-hand descriptions of the artistic and technological developments which influ-

enced the design, materials and construction of your old house. With them you can explore what designers and builders were writing when it was built and "Learn to fill bigger shoes."

Antique books regularly have a depth, context, richness of illustration, and nostalgic flavor that is missing in modern references, and they can be inexpensive to collect. Decide what topics you're interested in, how you will use the books (for reference, casual interest, or decoration), and determine your budget. The most pertinent books will be period with your house. Hunting for such specific rare books is challenging, but by

honing your browsing instincts you can become a discriminating collector. As an antiquarian pup, I purchased anything and everything related to restoration I could get my teeth on; as a maturing book hound, I am more selective about what I flush out.

### FINDING ANTIQUE HOUSE BOOKS

OCCASIONALLY, OLD-house books can be found at auctions, antique shops, and library sales, but antiquarian or used book shops are where elusive editions dwell. Dealers occasionally cull their stock for book fairs (streamlining shopping for those with little time) but beware, such events

can raise prices 20% or more. If you see a book you want but cannot afford, return as the fair closes. If it's still there, the dealer often prefers to unload it rather than load it, and may negotiate.

Mail order catalogs are another convenient way to save time. Since these books are purchased sight unseen, you should be familiar with the type of book you're ordering to avoid disappointment and return postage (most dealers offer fair return policies). Again, convenience raises the price 25% to 40%. Watch out for "search services" that

charge as your fee may be returned only after an extensive wait. Many dealers will search for free if you're genuinely interested.

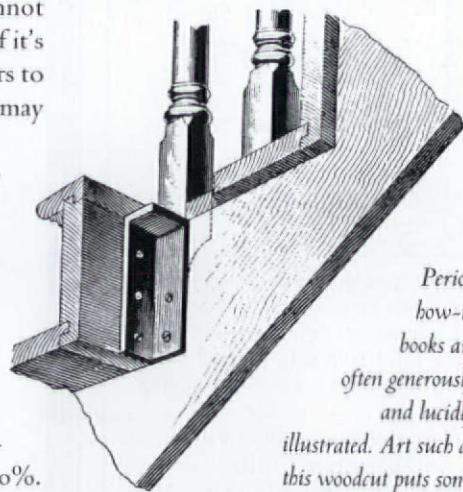
Myself, I relish the hunt and have stalked books from the back roads of Iowa to the streets of New York City. Dealers can be found everywhere. It's simply a matter of locating the first one in the yellow pages, through an antique shop, or by chance. Directories typically list the dealer's location, hours, inventory size, and primary stock (most states and major cities have them). Many dealers operate as a struggling small business so phone first or be prepared to find locked doors due to auctions, days off, and closures. Rare book shops are much easier to find than rare books.

Dealers with vast collections of literature and Americana are a dime a dozen, but those whose primary stock is germane to old houses are few and

[Continued on p. 18]



Early correspondence school sets are a treasure trove of information.



Period how-to books are often generously and lucidly illustrated. Art such as this woodcut puts some modern volumes to shame.

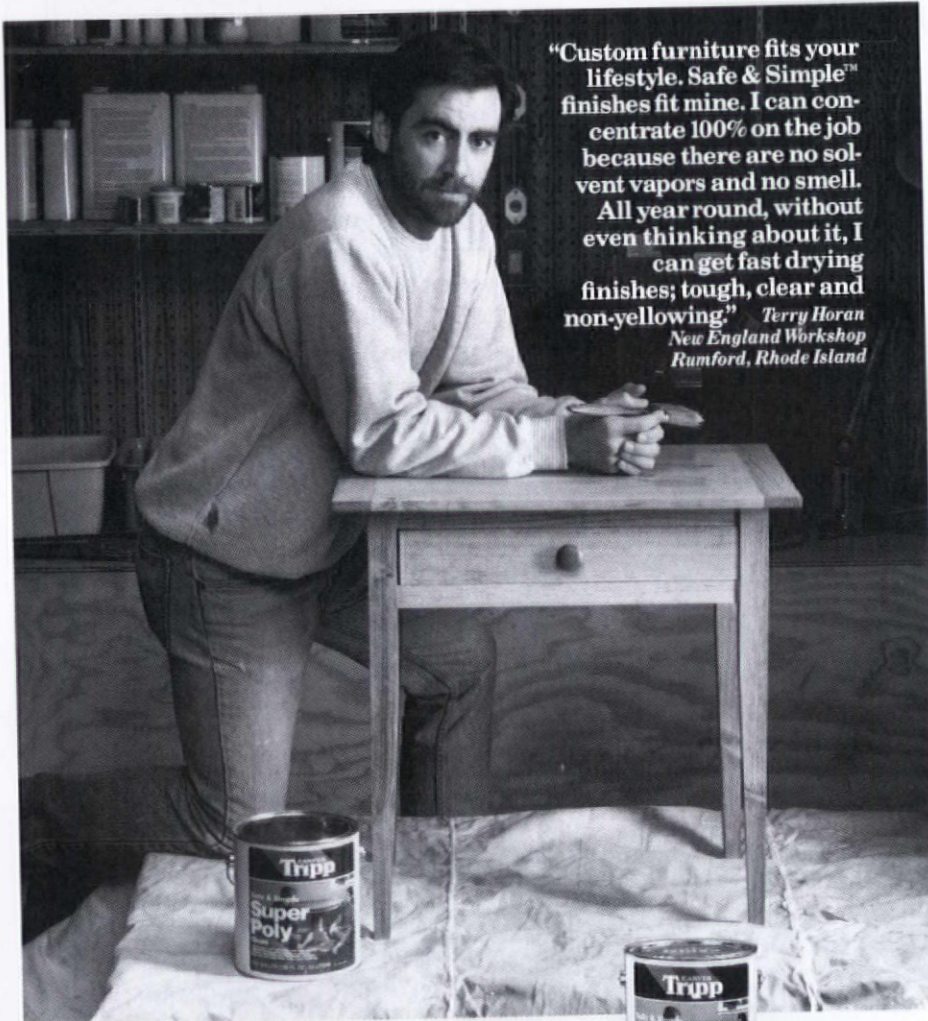


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far between. More often, such books are sparsely scattered among a few shelves — but this is where the bargains can hide. Be sure to check the sections labeled architecture, arts, crafts, decorating, how-to, home improvement, trade catalogs, and technical. I have also found great books on masonry under geology and wood under forestry. Don't forget to check the oversized sections, a common spot for design books. If the shop is large or the clerk unfamiliar with the stock, still take the time to browse; many owners can't keep track of their entire collection. For instance, last month I spotted a 1906 first edition of *Sweet's Architectural Catalog* — 760 pages chock full of turn-of-the-century architectural information — on a "general interest" shelf. This discovery was made on my way out the door after I was informed there were no other architectural books in stock. It had never been opened, except to pencil \$24.95 inside. ssssssSOLD!

### LET'S MAKE A DEAL

ANTIQUARIAN BOOKS ARE PRICED ACCORDING to their condition, age, quality, rarity and how much the dealer has invested. Price catalogs are available, but they're expensive and unnecessary for anyone but dealers. The bottom line is, what can the dealer get for the book, and what are you willing to pay? Regional demand also makes a big price difference. Not surprisingly, books on glass don't come cheap in Corning, New York (home of the

Corning Glass Museum). In places known for preservation such as Boston, New Orleans, or San Francisco, prices tend to reflect an abundance of buyers. While traveling, look for books relevant to your region, especially architectural guides and pictorial surveys, that may be worth more at home.



Assess old books carefully, inspecting the binding and looking for loose or missing pages. Pre-1870 books were frequently made with durable linen and cotton fibers. Unfortunately, paper quality was much lower from 1880 to 1920, which correlates with the biggest housing booms in America (and the greatest abundance of old house books). Nevertheless, don't judge a book by its cover. Most impor-

tant is the quality of the illustrations and text because some books just ain't worth the paper they were printed on.

I have browsed neat boutiques with plastic covers on every volume, and leaning barns crammed with book stacks that defy gravity like a scene from Dr. Seuss. As a rule, the more challenging the hunt, the better the buy. Horse trading is an acquired talent, but I find most dealers will drop the marked price 5% to 15%. Fortunately, a few publishers have reprinted some of the classic architectural and building trades books in recent years, but the originals are often cheaper. Collecting antique books is a rewarding, never-ending hobby. Many of these books can be found at great libraries, but it's more fun building your own.

*Neal A. Vogel manages a technical services program for Inspired Partnerships in Chicago.*

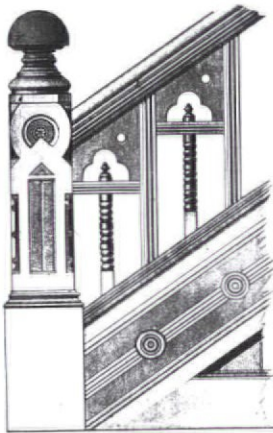
### WHAT TO LOOK FOR

I HAVE CROSSED EARLY- AND MID-19TH CENTURY EDITIONS BY ASHER BENJAMIN, Andrew Jackson Downing, and others, but they're rare to find. However, the late- and post-Victorian housing boom generated countless mail-order catalogs and manuals relevant to old houses. Sash & Blind company catalogs are fairly common and have nice illustrations of moulding profiles and period decorating. In the 1890s, the International Correspondence School (ICS) was formed in Scranton, Pennsylvania that produced incredibly in-depth and profusely illustrated books on the American building trades. Undoubtedly, the most common how-to series of the early 20th century were *Andel's Carpenter and Builders Guides* (1923), and *Andel's Masons and Builders Guides* (1924), both brimming with practical illustrations. A number of great sources were also produced by manufacturers, such as *The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs* (1915-1924). By the way, don't overlook journals. *Building Age* (1898-1928), *House Beautiful* (since 1896), and *Scientific American* (since 1845) are just a few which contain a wealth of old-house information. Always, check the origin of publications for clues on their content. For example, a good series entitled *Cyclopedia of Architecture, Carpentry and Building* produced in Chicago by the American Technical Society emphasizes Midwest construction. Beware of British publications, which often have great information but are inconsistent with American construction terminology and practice.





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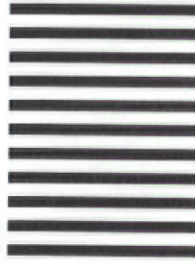
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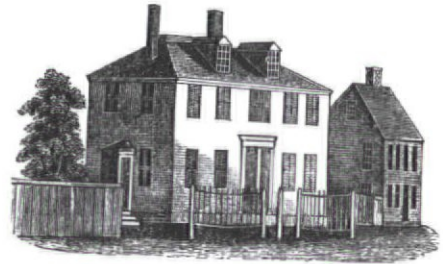
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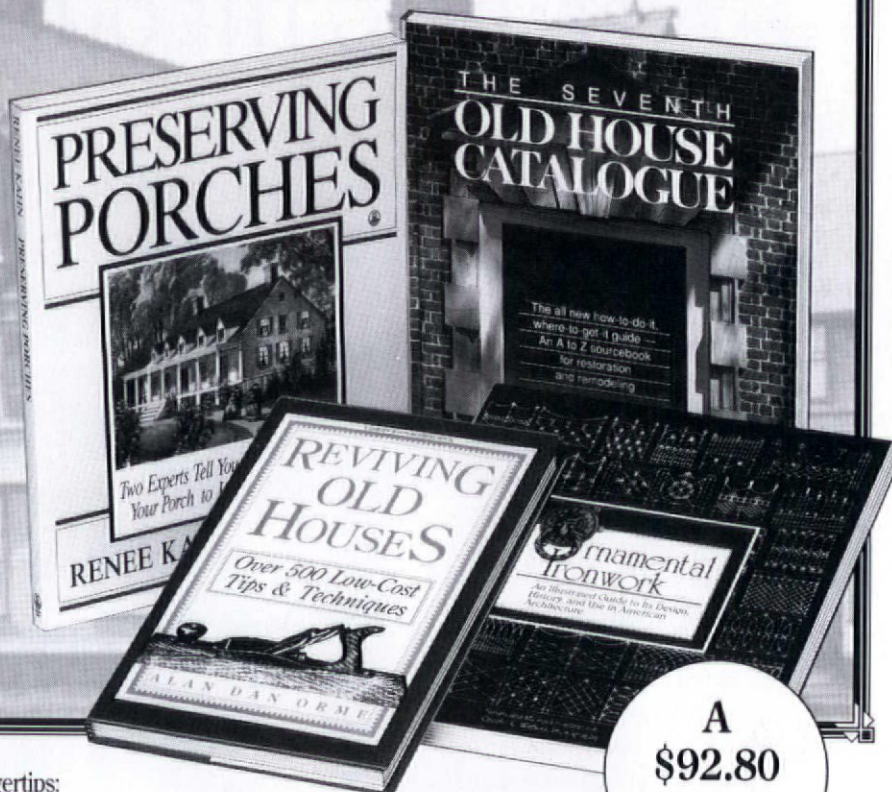
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Old House Journal 1/93



# READING THE OLD HOUSE

## The Ubiquitous Queen Anne

by James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell

**C**ONSTANTLY ENCOUNTERED, yet hard to define — that's the American Queen Anne house. It pops up everywhere in late 19th and early 20th century neighborhoods. Such houses may look like the Queen's poor relations, but they have an unmistakable air about them, a fundamental Queen Anne-ness, if you will. We've picked four recent reader houses from a variety of geographical regions to illustrate some clues to this widely popular style.

The least ambiguous examples are also the earliest ones. Oakwood farm (*below*), constructed in 1895 in Calhoun Bluffs, Topeka, Kansas, was correctly tagged by its owners as a Queen Anne. In fact, it is a nearly prototypical example in wood, with complex massing and roof, wraparound porch, and a second-floor porch that appears to have been enclosed. The curiously crafted towerlike observation porch reminds us of mail-order house designs from the same period by Barber, Shoppell, Palliser, and others. Although the exterior color



scheme is plain vanilla now, a bit of paint scraping might reveal a livelier, more colorful past. Two books by Roger Moss, *A Century of Color* and *Victorian Exterior Decoration*, could provide inspiration. The Decatur, Alabama, home (*above*) is also a solid Queen Anne, built in 1896. Its hipped and gabled roofs, two-storey bay, and

quaintly bulbous porch supports are all stylistic giveaways.

A slightly later Queen Anne is the one from Lewiston, Illinois (*next page, top*), built about 1900. The cross-gable roof with pedimented front and the projecting porch with a circular corner are typical (if somewhat watered-down) Queen Anne features. This is a good, conservative example of vernacular Queen Anne styling with Colonial Revival overtones. The large-paned one-over-one or two-over-two window sash would almost certainly have been replaced in a Colonial Revival design by small glass panes in a six-over-six configuration.

The Virginia house (*next page, bottom*) was built in 1910 — really after the Queen Anne era. By this time the simpler lines of bungalows, Four-squares, and all-out Colonial Revival

[Continued on p. 22]





# DOVER BOOKS

## for Old-House Restorers

Reprints of rare period books and catalogs essential for restorers, preservationists

**VICTORIAN DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURAL PLANS AND DETAILS**, William T. Comstock. 1881 edition with 734 scale drawings of doorways, windows, staircases, moldings, cornices, other elements for homes in Queen Anne, Eastlake, other styles. Primary source on authentic Victorian style. 96pp. 9% x 12%.



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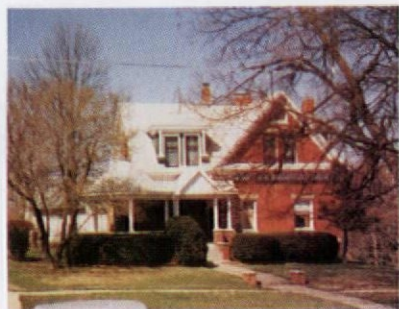
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## READING THE OLD HOUSE



houses had almost entirely displaced the complicated Victorian styles. The Queen Anne characteristics on this Chase City sister include sweeping, wrap-around porches or verandas, a pedimented front gable with bullseye ornament, flat-arch keystones above the windows, and iron cresting on the roof. A pedimented gable projects over a two-storey bay win-

dow seen on the right. The shutters appear to be less than half the window width and look new. Furthermore, the photograph doesn't show any sign of hinge pintles so the house may originally have been shutterless.

The traditional canvas awnings are a handsome and functional feature too seldom seen nowadays. The double front door with transom and sidelights is fitting for Queen Anne rather than Colonial Revival design.

While each of these houses lack the picturesque, asym-

metrical massing, exuberant detail, and rich mix of brick, stone, wood, slate, and other materials that characterized high-style Queen Anne buildings, they are all definitely in the royal family.



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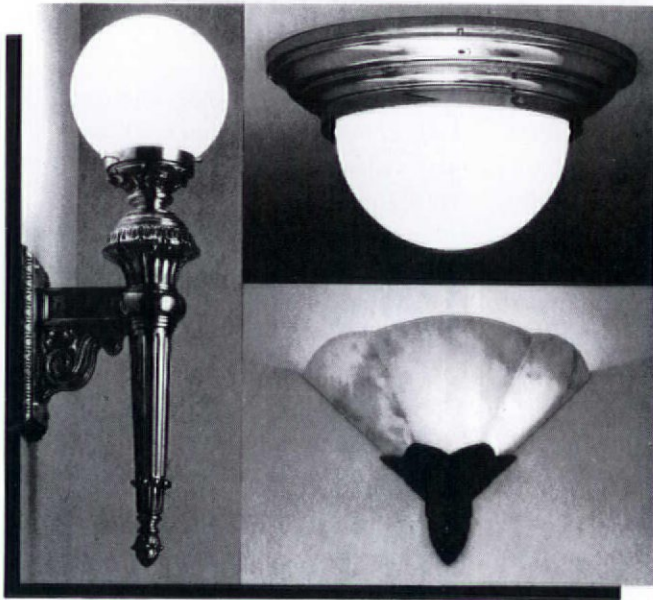
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*Photos courtesy of J. Jean Scott (top) and Kay Smith (bottom)*



# New Lights



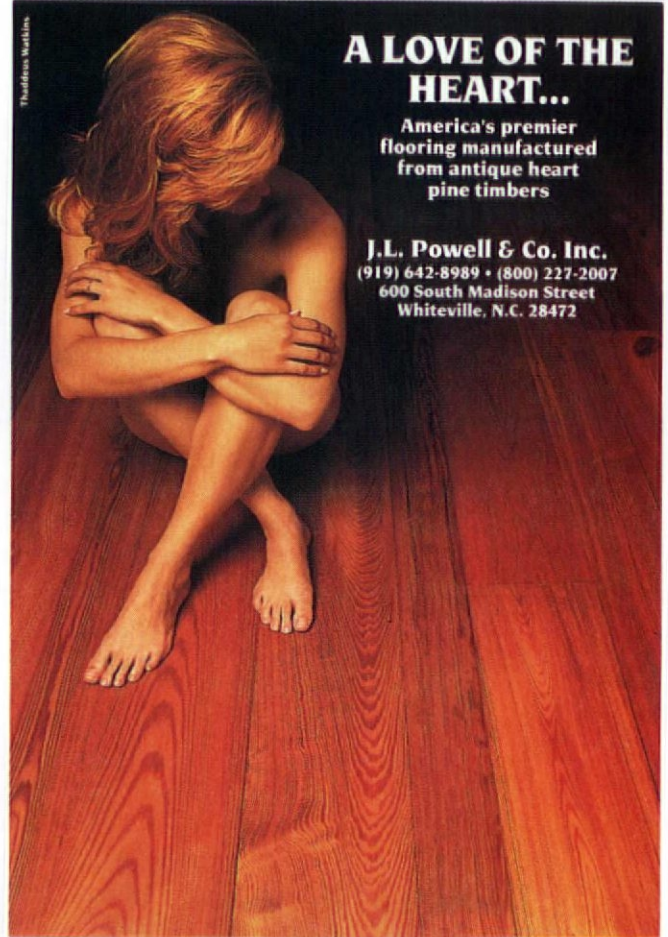
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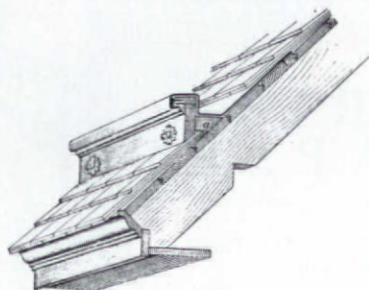
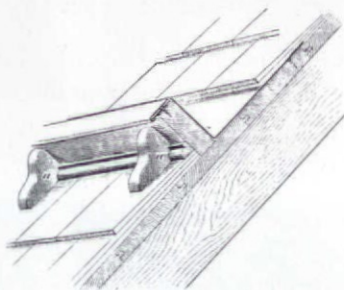


# ASK OHJ

## SHEET METAL MYSTERIES

**Q** AT ONE TIME OUR TURN-OF-THE-century home had on-roof gutters, but they've since been replaced with modern ones. I've removed these, but I don't know how to tackle the job of installing terne metal gutters like the originals. At the same time, my standing-seam porch roof has deteriorated from years of neglect and must be relaid. I haven't the faintest idea how to flash this roof to the wood clapboards. Can you help?

— ALAN W. GLADISH  
Huntington Valley, Penn.



Simple roof gutters (top) are merely an inclined plank supported by brackets. More sophisticated versions (above) incorporate a pitched bottom board.

**A** ROOF GUTTERS GO BY A VARIETY of names — Yankee gutter, Philadelphia gutter, flush gutter — and can be constructed in at least two ways. In the simplest type, a board is nailed perpendicular to the

roof deck and supported by brackets. The gutter is then lined with sheet metal that continues up under the roofing for at least 18" and is doubled over on the front in a blind edge. To shed water, these gutters must cross the roof at an incline. On houses where this is objectionable the gutter is built with a continuous vertical board or moulding parallel to the eave. A gradually tapered board, usually 2" thick, then forms the bottom with the proper pitch, and the gutter is similarly lined with sheet metal.

There is more than one way to flash a standing-seam roof, too. A common and straightforward method is to just roll the seam over as it approaches the wall, and then run the now-flat roofing up under the siding several inches. In quality work this joint is also counterflashed with sheet metal that laps over the roof and continues further up under the siding.

## AROMA AROUSER

**Q** I AM IN THE MIDST OF CLEANING out an old house. The closets have been lined with cedar wood, but some have not been used for years and need to be freshened up. What can I use that won't harm the wood?

— JEAN C. HIGGINS  
Saddle Brook, N. J.

**A** TO REJUVENATE THE AROMA OF old cedar, try using oil of cedar wood. First, lightly sand the surface with fine-grade sandpaper. Then, apply a thin coating of the oil with a clean cotton cloth. Don't heavily coat the cedar; use only as much as it will absorb. Remember, as with any oil product, the wood will slightly darken after an application. Also, two conditions that will diminish old — or new — cedar's aroma are direct light and constantly circulating air, so

cover or seal any windows or louver doors in the closets. If you can't find oil of cedar wood in a local hardware store, a mail-order source is Albert Constantine & Son, Inc., 2050 Eastchester Rd., Dept. OHJ, Bronx, N.Y. 10461; (800) 223-8087.

## MOSSED OUT

**Q** WE RECENTLY PURCHASED A 1925 bungalow that still has its original concrete tile roof — with four or five types of moss thriving all over it. We spent hours scraping 1/2" to 2" thick layers of flora off the tiles followed by a commercial moss-killing product containing copper and zinc, all to no avail. We also tried straight bleach. This didn't work either, though the neighborhood did wonder who bought a swimming pool. We want to have the roof's condition checked out (it has leaked in the past) but, understandably, no one will go near it until the moss is gone. Are there ways to completely get rid of the moss, or at least keep it to a minimum?

— DEBORAH ARING  
Lakewood, Ohio

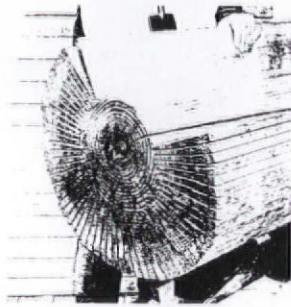
**A** SINCE THE USUAL STRATEGIES haven't mastered your moss, you may have to switch ammunition. Ammonium sulfamate (available at garden supply stores under brand names) is recommended to kill moss on concrete. It leaves a white powder, but this is easily washed off. Potassium salts of fatty acids (also at garden stores or Safer Chemical Company, Newton, MA; 617-964-2990) is an environmentally safe alternative that works by attacking the cell walls. Handle all moss-killing chemicals carefully and avoid contact with other plants. Try a power washer for cleaning the roof, and trim trees to limit shade and improve drying so the moss stays away.





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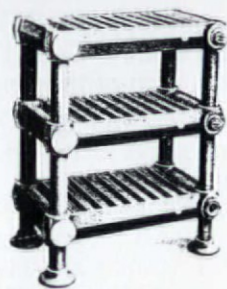
## ASK OHJ

### MOTHER'S LITTLE HEATER

**Q** WE RECENTLY PURCHASED A 1906 Neo-Colonial home in Clarinda, Iowa, and found an unusual heating device in the kitchen. Could you tell us more about its history?

— BYRON AND GAIL BARR  
Clarinda, Iowa

**A** SPECIAL-PURPOSE radiators, like the one in your kitchen, were popular during the early part of this century. In 1925, the American Radiator Company in New York offered a similar Peerless pantry radiator that was designed as a combination radiator and plate warmer. Since it was put together by joining wall radiators horizontally with pipes, its



Similar to the 1925 Peerless pantry radiator (below left), this four-level version (right) was a handy way to keep food warm.

height and number of levels was optional. Although your four-tiered pantry radiator was meant for residential use, larger versions were also adapted for restaurant and hotel kitchens to keep prepared dishes ready for serving. A number of other special-purpose radiators were made, including circular types for around columns, angled ones to fit into corners, and "muffin warmers," which had a small, cupboardlike enclosure in the middle to hold food.



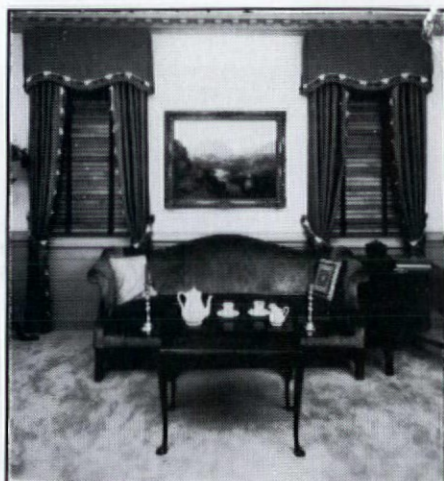
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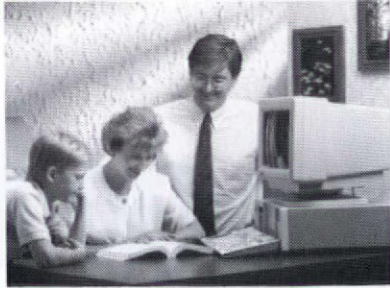
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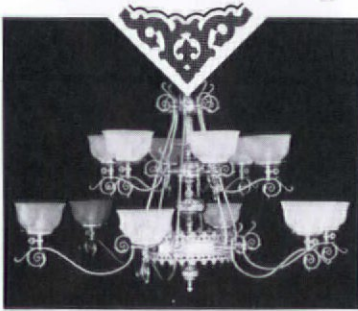
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# Composition

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Compo, as it is often called, is a mixture that can be pressed into molds when plastic, applied as ornament when hardened, and then painted or easily disguised to imitate wood or even costly marble. Today, countless owners of old homes may have (without even knowing it) mantelpieces, columns, crown moulding, chair rails, or ceiling medallions ornamented with what looks like carved wood or stone, but is actually molded compo. When it comes time to restore these surfaces, it is important to know the difference.

### Concocting Compo

AS FAR BACK AS THE 17TH CENTURY, COMPO WAS USED BY THE Italians, who know it as *compositone*. Thereafter, it found favor with both the French and English (the renowned Adam brothers among them), and was often employed for embellish-

ments on furniture and picture or mirror frames. By the 1890s compo started to see extensive use in America. In one instance, European craftsmen brought over to produce ornament for Chicago's monumental 1893 Columbian Exhibition stayed on to work at one of the country's fledgling manufacturers of this material, The Decorators Supply Corporation. Other firms (including the J.P. Weaver Company founded in 1914) followed on both coasts.

Much of the compo industry's output was ordered for the interior decoration of commercial and public buildings such as movie palaces and hotels, but the residential market was strong as well. Even the builders of average, contractor-designed houses could afford to jazz up mantelpieces and millwork with inexpensive ornament in styles ranging from French rococo to Art Deco, and from English Tudor to



# Ornament



*Oak colonnettes  
embellished with stained  
composition ornament  
on a 1903 mantel.*



## Colonial Revival.

The basic method for producing compo ornament has changed little over the years. Though formulas vary, it usually consists of whiting (limestone powder) blended with a binder of animal glue, rosin, and natural oils such as fish oil that have been mixed and heated. Sometimes molasses is added to the mix. This doughy substance is then extruded from a blending machine and cut into breadlike loaves. When these loaves are steamed, the compo softens to a window-putty consistency that can be hand pressed into molds. After about an hour of cooling and hardening, the perfectly formed compo ornament is removed from the mold and the rough edges finished by hand, if necessary.

The ornament molds are maple blocks with an asphaltum core, each created by skilled artisans. Over the years, the few compo makers that remain in business have accumulated thousands of intricate mold patterns, the result of decades of both custom work and standardized designs. Many still use molds made a half century earlier.

Two problems are associated with the molding process. First, compo shrinks as it dries — about one-half inch per foot — so the mold patterns must be slightly oversize to produce a specific finished dimension. Second, if stored for too long, com-



*Left: Compo manufacture begins by extruding the raw mixture from a blending machine. Right: Molds are carved from maple blocks with black asphaltum cores and might be used for decades.*

po ornament can warp. Because of this relatively short shelf life, most manufacturers only produce individual items as they are ordered.

Technically, compo ornament could be shipped and applied at the building site to millwork and other interior architectural elements. In practice, though, much of it was applied right at the factory. Millworks would send their products — columns, mantels, frames, cornices, brack-

ets, consoles — to the compo maker where the ornamental embellishments were added. The finished products were then sold through catalogs to builders across the country.

### Applying and Finishing

ONE OF THE GREAT ADVANTAGES OF COMPO IS ITS EASE OF APPLICATION. An ornament is first steamed, typically by placing it on an open-weave material such as burlap that is stretched over a steaming container of water. Shortly thereafter, the compo becomes supple and tacky as the glues in the mixture come to the surface. The glues make the ornament self-adhesive and it is mounted simply by positioning on a wood or plaster surface. If necessary, stronger attachment is provided by small brads or tacks. Another advantage compo has over plaster, gesso, or wood fiber ornament is its pliability when steamed. Compo can be applied to a curved or uneven surface and, as it dries, will conform to the shape of that surface.

Compo is also a chameleonlike substance that can be finished to mimic the materials on which it is applied. It can be stained or grained like wood, painted, antiqued, or faux finished by most methods. Often, intricate interior architectural elements (a mantelpiece or pilaster, for example) were composed of a wood framework over which ornamental cast plaster and compo was applied. These dissimilar materials were tied together into a unified whole by the finish. Painting was the simplest and most widespread finish, but almost as common were marbleizing, glazing, gilding, wood graining — in short, any technique popular in the late- and post-Victorian eras.



*At the shop, a worker fixes compo mouldings to a wood mantel cornice.*



## Compo Care and Repair

BECAUSE IT IS A FAIRLY STABLE MATERIAL, UNDER NORMAL CONDITIONS compo ornament is carefree. However, it can be damaged by heat, severe moisture problems, or harsh chemicals. Sometimes old compo can crack or delaminate. Fortunately repairs are relatively simple.

Before taking action, you have to know if the swag or scallop shell you're dealing with is truly compo and not an alternative material. Since virtually all ornament will have a finish, you will need to find a place where it has worn or chipped off. Barring this, remove the finish down to the base material in an inconspicuous place by scraping with an Exacto blade or similar tool. If the underlying material is white, the ornament is most likely cast plaster. If it splinters or has a grain, it is wood. If it has a woodlike appearance and texture — but without a grain — it is probably compressed wood-fiber ornament. However, if the material has a brownish color or with a uniform, featureless texture throughout, the ornament is likely to be compo.

Inspecting old compo ornament may reveal small cracks or delamination (separation) from the applied surface. If the ornament is not loose or the cracks are not serious, it's probably best to just live with these small imperfections. Cracks in compo are often the result of overly dry conditions. Unsightly cracks can be filled with Spackle, joint compound, or other fillers, and finished to blend with the surrounding surfaces. If the compo has a stained or "natural" wood finish, fill cracks with wood putty that is pre-stained or that can be stained to match. Slightly delaminated sections can be treated like cracks.

If sections of compo are badly delaminated, damaged,



*At Decorators Supply Corp, compo edge mouldings complete a wood-frame Louis XV mantelpiece (above), while compo acanthus leaves adorn wood brackets (below).*





or missing altogether, you may want to replace them with new compo. Dealing with manufacturers that use decades-old molds (such as those listed on page 33) means there is a good chance one of them will still have ornament that, if not identical in design, is very similar to the missing or damaged item. Peruse the catalogs or send the firms samples or photos of the pieces to be replaced. Compo manufacturers can also cast reproductions by using sections of the original ornament as the model for a new mold. However, there is a hefty surcharge for this service (\$100 to \$150 per mold, for example).



*In-fill repair would restore this wardrobe ornament.*

Sections of damaged compo can be removed by the judicious use of a heat gun. When applied carefully, the heat breaks the bond between the compo and the surface underneath. When using this technique, don't remove any more of the damaged ornament than necessary. If you're restoring some existing ornament, first cut out the section of the new replacement compo that matches the missing (or removed) area and position it over the "ghost line" of the original piece. Minor imperfections or mismatches can be alleviated by sanding or

carving. Then, apply the replacement ornament (or sections thereof) by carefully following the directions. In most cases, you will need to steam the compo to make it pliable and self-adhesive. Afterwards, abut the new compo to the old section. When the new sections have hardened, joints between old and new can be filled with wood putty or Spackle.

### Stripping Finishes from Old Compo

REFINISHING INTERIOR DETAILS IS A COMMON OLD-HOUSE PROJECT, so what about removing old, built-up paint from applied compo ornament? Prolonged exposure to water and heat may dissolve old compo, so water-based chemical strippers and heat tools should be used with great care. Although open flames and chemical immersion "dip stripping" are effective for removing old paint, these methods should never be used where applied ornament is present. (Be aware that since the 1890s compo was often used on furniture and frames so dip-stripping can damage these pieces as well.)

Even so, compo can tolerate the effects of many chemical strippers if they are carefully applied. Always begin with a small test patch on an out-of-the-way section. Carefully follow the manufacturer's directions for the stripper, and inspect the test patch only after it has thoroughly dried. During stripping, a dental tool or toothbrush used with care will help remove stubborn paint from the nooks and crannies of the ornament.

Once the old finish has been removed, the compo ornament can be refinished in any number of ways. However, you might discover that the compo "takes" the finish in a slightly dif-

## Molded and Cast Ornament Glossary

### Traditional Materials:

**Gesso** — A mixture of gypsum plaster, glue, and whiting. It was commonly used for applied ornament on picture and mirror frames.

**Plaster** — Composed of lime and water, plaster sets to form a hard surface and has been used since ancient times for the most intricate of cast ornament.

**Rosin** — A resin obtained from the viscous organic substance exuded by pine trees.

**Whiting** — Powdered limestone or chalk.

**Wood Fiber Ornament** — Refined or partly refined wood fibers in suspension and compressed under high pressure into ornament molds.

### Alternative Modern Materials Used for Ornament:

**Fiberglass** — Fine-spun filaments of glass that, with various resins, can be molded into complex shapes.

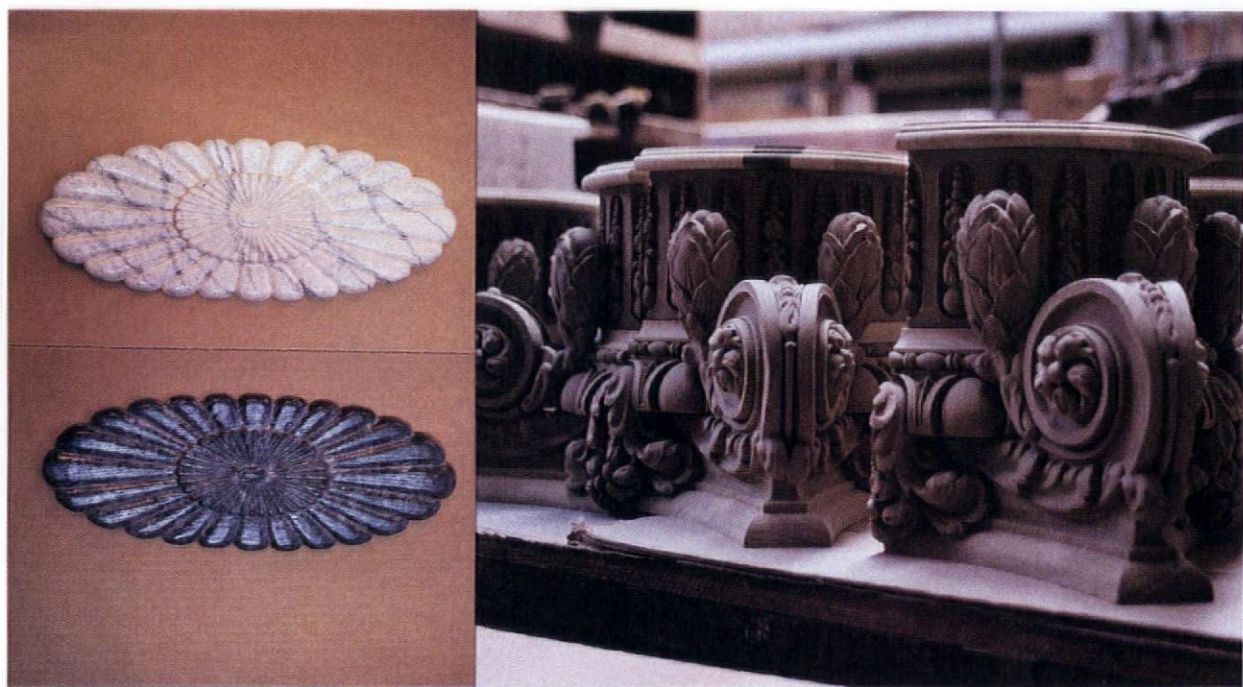
**Polyester** — A synthetic polymeric (giant molecules formed from smaller molecules of the same substance) resin.

**Polyurethane** — A compound made of synthetic rubber polymers.



*A sample board of ornament designs.*






*Left: Convincingly marbledized compo rosettes. Right: Whole column capitals — wood cores with compo ornament — waiting for shipment.*

ferent manner than the base surface. For example, because compo and wood have different densities, a coat of stain applied to compo may come out darker or lighter than the same stain applied to the wood. Perfecting the finish on trial patches before proceeding with the whole project will help produce uniform results.

The great versatility and affordability of compo — still available in thousands of patterns — makes it, perhaps, too easy for old-house owners to “dress up” interior surfaces that never had ornament. If you’re concerned about the historical authenticity of your house, resist the temptation to “gild the lily” in this way. Original, unornamented interior surfaces are usually the result of vernacular traditions or intentional design decisions that should be respected. However, introducing compo ornament might be appropriate for new interior elements. Some examples would be the mantelpiece in a room addition, or on new crown molding added to an original room that had been previously gutted. In these situations choose new ornament patterns that are compatible with the style and level of elaboration found elsewhere in the house.

Compo's heyday was the exuberant late 19th century. Yet after decades of the modernist movement and being eschewed as frivolous, there is a rekindled love of architectural ornamentation. Compo, still produced in the old tradition, continues on as a practical material worth trying for both new and restoration projects. 

*Special thanks to Steve Grage of The Decorators Supply Corporation for helping with this article.*

## **Suppliers of Traditional Compo Ornament**

**Adornments For Architecture**  
309 Hollow Road, Dept. OHJ  
Staatsburg, NY 12580  
(914) 889-8390

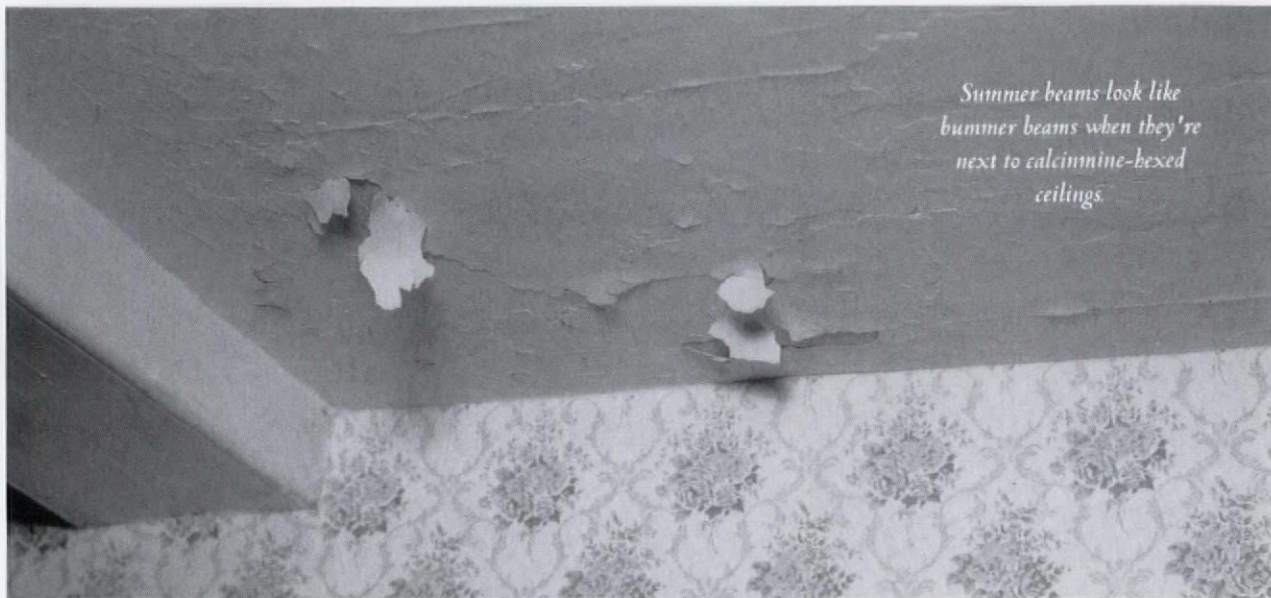
**American Wood Column Corporation**  
913 Grand Street, Dept. OHJ  
Brooklyn, NY 11211  
(718) 782-3163

**The Decorators Supply Company**  
3610-12 S. Morgan St., Dept. OHJ  
Chicago, IL 60609  
(312) 847-6300

**MJM Studios**  
100 Central Av., Bldg. 89, Dept. OHJ  
South Kearney, NJ 07032  
(201) 465-5220

**J. P. Weaver Company**  
2301 W. Victory Boulevard, Dept. OHJ  
Burbank, CA 91506  
(818) 841-5700





*Summer beams look like  
bummer beams when they're  
next to calcimine-bexed  
ceilings.*

WHAT TO DO ABOUT

# PEELING CEILINGS

*By Gordon Bock*

**G**RAVITY IS A HANDY FORCE TO HAVE around — except, perhaps, for inverted surfaces like ceilings. While gravity keeps dust and dirt from collecting in large piles, it also tries to pull down the materials that make up a ceiling — plaster, usually, or wood or metal — and the finishes that cover them. In neglected buildings it often succeeds, and even if the base holds the paint gives out and you get peeling ceilings, the eczema of almost every old house,

THAT OL' CALCIMINE

CEILINGS CAN PEEL IN A NEW HOUSE, TOO, AND FOR LOTS REASONS. Water in the form of leaks or moisture in the air doesn't help, and neither does poor preparation work or low-quality materials in the original job. However, when ceiling paint is failing in an old house, suspect a familiar gremlin: calcimine.

Also known as kalsomine or distemper, calcimine is a simple water-based paint that employs whiting (ground chalk) or dry zinc as the primary pigment. When the powder is mixed with a glue binder and water, it can be spread with large brush much like whitewash. Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century calcimine was used to whiten ceilings in all levels of housing. It was inexpensive, easy to apply, and it had an absolutely flat, soft pastel look that was unobtainable with the linseed oil paints of the era. Calcimine could also be tinted with red, green, or yellow pigments and was popular in colors for walls.

It is the simple nature of calcimine that causes problems. As paint it is not very durable and in the past it was customary to recoat the surface every two years or so. Since a second coat of calcimine tends to dissolve the glue and lift the first coat, ceilings and walls were normally washed clean before applying the new job. Water and elbow grease were the main solvents, but adding a little washing soda or vinegar to the bucket helped. Once calcimine fell out of fashion, however, many a painter "got away" with overcoating an old ceiling with oil-base paint. This hid any evidence that the original surface was water soluble, so later painters often did the same. All this paint usually stays put until something — a coat of water-base latex paint, high moisture levels, or just plain gravity — forces the tender calcimine to let go. When it does, BINGO! — you have a peeling ceiling.



## CEILINGS WITH THE FRINGE ON TOP

THERE ARE NO SECRETS OR SHORT CUTS FOR DEALING WITH A peeling ceiling. Removal requires plenty of dropcloths and overhead handwork, usually from a ladder or scaffold. If you have a ceiling that is peeling actively down to a stable material, there is little to be gained by removing only the loose material. The bond of paint that does stay put will eventually fail over coming weeks or months and the new paint job will be wasted. Better to get it all off now or, if time is not a concern, let the bulk of the paint peel and finish the job later. Some shared wisdom helps:

- Test for calcimine by trying to wash material exposed near the ceiling base. If an early paint coat softens with water, you've got calcimine.
- Exposed calcimine can be scraped off, but washing is usually most effective. Besides vinegar and water, try using a solution of TSP (trisodium phosphate) or wallpaper paste remover, mixing fresh batches as the water get dirty. Adding a dash of photographer's wetting agent ("Photo-Flo") to a couple of gallons of warm water breaks the surface tension and should improve saturation. A spray bottle is ideal for wetting the surface and a stiff brush will be needed to clean calcimine on rough plaster surfaces.
- Though calcimine was never designed to take overcoating, it is possible if properly done. Skilled painters could lightly "top over" a first coat with more calcimine if necessary, and specialty products such as Calci-Coater (see Restoration Products, page 60) or Keim paint (for fresco work) are made for covering water-based surfaces.

- Mechanical removal methods always come into play, especially for the "scabs" that lift off easily. A sharp, broad putty knife or wallboard knife is the main tool, but scrapers, spatulas, and wire brushes are also handy. On metal ceilings, drill-driven wire brushes or flapsanders can help (always wear eye protection and gloves with these devices). Sandblasting, while advocated by some,


is rarely kind to thin metal and creates a mess. Self-adhesive Contact-type paper, though, has been used by applying large sheets, then ripping it off like a bandage (buy the stickiest kind you can find).

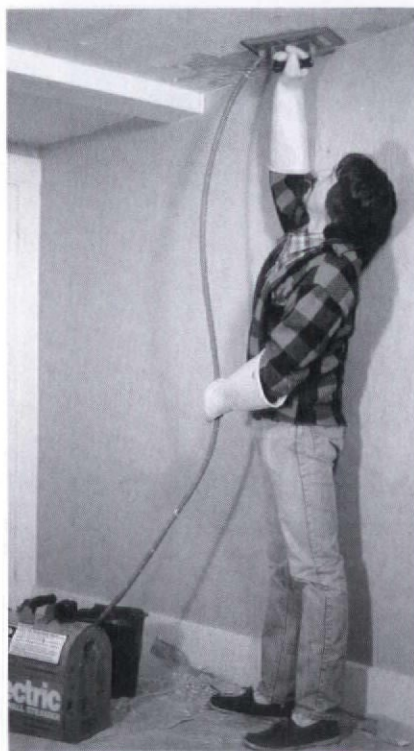
- Heat tools are of marginal value on plaster ceilings (the plaster draws much of the heat) and should never be used on metal or thin ceilings where they might ignite materials on the hidden side.

- Chemical strippers are effective on ceilings, just hard to work with. Using paste-type products helps to keep them in place; most types can be thickened further by mixing in cornstarch or sawdust.

- Steam works for loosening calcimine-and-paint, though usually no faster than for removing wallpaper. There's still a lot of overhead scraping and the mess of condensing steam. An unbroken paint coat can be penetrated but if you saturate the edge of the paint at some exposed plaster the steam will soften the inbetween calcimine and wick its way along the ceiling, speeding the removal process. The steam can be applied with the wallpaper removal tool or right from the hose, if used with caution.

- Wallpaper paste is one of the niftiest tricks we've heard about. Mix up a batch of wheat paste and brush it liberally over the covered calcimine ceiling and allow to dry. After approximately 24 hours the tightening paste will start to stress the old paint film and cause it to blister and peel off the substrate. Success varies but the results can be miraculous. When used recently on an 18th century ceiling, the old paint actually crackled and popped like breakfast cereal as it shed from the plaster. After 48 hours there were

clear areas the size of a playing card — with no scraping or gouges — and the paste was still going strong. Best of all, there's no nasty chemicals to deal with or equipment to rent. Some paint remains to be coaxed off by hand, of course, and leftover paste needs a wash-up with soap and water, but compared to chipping away at an entire ceiling, this work is gravy. 



Top: The effects of wallpaper paste after two days on a paint-over-calcimine ceiling.

Above: Steam generated by a rented wallpaper rig may also help loosen calcimine.



# PRAIRIE PLASTER

Polychrome Walls for Post-Victorian Houses



PLASTER WALL SURFACES — stucco exteriors and rough plaster interiors — are a hallmark of Prairie-style houses built during the first two decades of this century. The stucco is typically a mixture of portland cement and quartz sand that is uniform in color and granular in texture, at times containing tiny pebbles. Indoors, the walls have a similar looking sand finish, produced by working the brown coat surface with a wood float, yet they are alive with a subtle variety of colors mixed into and applied on the plaster.

A few of these rough plaster walls survive intact, but many have been painted over because cracks developed due to settling or untested

*Autumn hues on a ceiling strip of original Prairie Plaster.* structural methods. It was easier to patch and

BY MAYA MORAN



paint these cracks than to track down a skilled and talented artisan who could duplicate the exact colorings in the plaster. The trouble is in most cases entire walls were recoated, not just the damaged areas. Many owners of Prairie-style and other Post-Victorian houses have discovered this stunning finish under flocked wallpaper or a smooth overcoating of plaster. The question is how to resurrect these luminous, colorful, hidden surfaces. Some answers lie in research, color tests, and a careful approach.

### PRAIRIE PLASTER ORIGINS

THOUGH THE INFLUENCE OF THE PRAIRIE style extended as far as Europe, the main examples are where there once was prairie — the American Midwest. There, a large group of architects built in this trend with the result that one may find Prairie Plaster not only in homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, but also by John van Bergen, William Drummond, Tallmadge and Watson, Purcell & Elmslie, and lesser-known architects. All

of these designers regularly employed skilled tradesmen to execute the rich diversity of wall decoration techniques used at the turn of the century. Rough plaster was once a very popular treatment and it was commonly finished with stain coats, glazing, stippling, or scumbling — finishes that are close being to lost arts today. Research is an important first step to understanding Prairie Plaster. Visit other Prairie houses and read — not only Wright (who though a prolific writer and lecturer, did not always explain his techniques or materials) but others such as Robert C. Spencer, a regular contributor to *House Beautiful*.

For example, in an essay Wright collaborator Walter Burley Griffin mentions omitting the third, finish plaster coat and taking advantage of the interesting texture of the second, brown coat. In a later letter to

William Grey Purcell, he wrote about the mixture of transparent stains he was experimenting with to produce different effects. This second “finish” coat of interior plaster might also

be treated with linseed oil, turpentine, oil-ground pigments, and melted beeswax, creating a rich, lustrous non-homogenous effect that is hard to duplicate. Not only is he quite specific about the colors not appropriate for interiors, but he explains the rationale for using two or three colors.

“In fact,” writes Griffin, “a color scheme can hardly be called a scheme unless it contains



*Individual panels of Prairie Plaster (above) might be finished in different color tones or combinations. With its long cantilever roof and stucco cladding, the Tomek House (below) in Riverside, Illinois, is a typical Wright Prairie building and a prototype for the famous Robie house.*





three tones just as three tones are required to form a chord in music." Different tones or colors might be used in separate framed wall panels. The colors of the autumnal prairie palette were preferred and could range from a deep sumac red to a russet, gold, and olive mixture.

## PLASTER PRESERVATION

GRIFFIN HELD THAT IN BUILDING HOUSES "practical considerations should govern" and that rough plaster is not only natural but easy to keep up. After living for nearly two decades in Wright's Tomek House of 1905-6, I agree that nothing is more practical and pleasing than a textured wall with natural coloring. At Tomek House much of the wall surface is original, some is restored, some is being uncovered, and some remains for the next owners to uncover. Here, then, are some first-hand thoughts about how to proceed for the inquisitive owner of a Prairie house who starts to probe behind old paint or delaminated plaster.

**Make Color Tests First.** This critical step will tell you 1) whether or not you have Prairie Plaster under later surfaces, and 2) the nature of the finish. The analysis of a skilled historic paint specialist who can interpret the various finish layers is very valuable here. Such a consultant will put sample chips of paint and plaster under a microscope to determine their composition. To get a rough idea of what finishes lie hidden under later surfaces, you can use a straight scalpel to loosen a chip and some cel-

lophane tape to prevent it from falling. Part of the original plaster layer will cling to the chip and part remains on the wall, exposing the layers for study. Don't limit your tests to one area. The wall or ceiling may not be uniform — in fact, it's likely to vary a great deal — and different panels may be different colors. When we investigated the reception room of the Tomek House we discovered the ceiling was an even, greyish sand-beige, one stretch of wall was dark-chocolate brown, another panel a variegated milk-chocolate brown, and a third area contained many shades ranging from dark purple and mauve to pink, salmon, orange and rust, or raw sienna.

**Keep Repairs Compatible.** In houses where the walls were overcoated because repairs were needed, more

repairs may be in order to fill cracks and holes or to fix bulging areas. The same construction methods used originally will work again. On the wood or wire lath, lay down a foundation scratch coat, scarifying it with a nail or tool to improve the bond of the next coat. When the scratch coat is dry, mix the second, "brown" coat. Experimenting with mixed-in pigments (paints, stains, or whatever materials your research suggests) may help blend in repairs. Sponge the brown coat to obtain a rough texture. For small repairs, Durabond 90 (a



*Right: Early efforts at removing paint from the dining room wall included sponge washing and delicate wire brushing.*

*Top, far right: Painstaking paint removal with a scalpel in the reception room — a labor of love. Bottom, far right: Exposing "islands" first helps to separate paint from plaster, especially in winter.*



*The dining room wall, now clean of a later skim coat and decorative wallpaper, shows the shimmering effect produced by multicolored dyes and surface finishes.*

quick-setting joint compound) works. For large repairs performed by a plasterer application of the top coat is important. This should be floated on, then patted with sponge to obtain a nubby, coarse texture with no streaks or swirls.

It is sometimes possible to paint over a repaired plaster surface in imitation of the original. Try a torn-apart natural sponge or a foam pad paintbrush (the kind covered with nylon bristles) in order to penetrate the valleys of the surface. If necessary, follow up with a large brush loaded with only a little paint for a dry-brush effect. However, not every Prairie wall has all the color mutations that enliven the surface; some are one plain color, evenly applied. Adding sand not only changes the texture of the wall but dulls the paint and catches light. You'll need several batches of paint to overlap and blend colors.

**Consider Removal.** If the original wall is in good shape, you may prefer to remove paint or later coatings. This is far from easy, but for the purist the rewards include a surface that shimmers with color. At the Tomek House, we've tried many paint removal products over the years and rejected most because they softened and removed too much of the plaster topcoat. Even though some surface is lost with any removal method, we decided the best technique was to manually chip the paint off, slow and simple.

The tools I use are basic: a surgical scalpel, a paring knife, a metal Exacto knife, and goggles or glasses for eye protection. My technique is to lay the knife flat on the surface and with the sharp point gently push against the paint. This sets up a ten-



sion that causes the paint to break off in a chip. Poking at and under the paint is quicker, but often creates gouges down to the scratch coat level. These gouges appear as grey or white spots that clash with the original effect and have to be touched up later.


I discovered that where the paint was latex it had developed cracks and was easier to remove in cold weather. It also helped to first scrape away paths, creating patterns that look like a geographic map, then drop the project for some time. Later, the exposed edges of the "islands" seemed to lift easier. Alternating projects was also helpful (at times, scraping just one wall seemed an unending, Sisyphean task).

Other wall surfaces responded differently. On the breakfast area and main bedroom ceilings a wide-blade scraper and putty knife were quite successful. On the dining room wall, which was stripped of fancy bird-covered wallpaper and a plaster skim coat, we used a large wire brush to get out most of the white plaster flecks that gathered in the valleys (more pressing projects prevented us from carefully removing these "at knife point.")

With these methods it takes about an hour to clear the area of a postcard. Besides time, it requires the skills of a dental hygienist, the



*Original Prairie Plaster ceiling strips connect the living room with the dining room.*

patience of a good mother, a love of detail — and a bit of lunacy. However, one of the delights is watching the colors slowly emerge as the original surface is uncovered. Now that the splendid persimmon, rusty-orange tones are in view, I tend to forget all the work and delight in the end result every day. Like raising a family, bringing up Prairie Plaster is worth the effort. 



# THE GREAT FRAME-UP

*Using Stencils and Mouldings to  
Divide and Conquer Early 20th Century Walls*

BY JOHN CROSBY FREEMAN

**S**URFACE FRAMES MADE WITH STENCILS OR WOOD MOULDINGS were a popular decorative device for walls during the early 20th century. If your old house is some variety of Colonial (Georgian, New England, Southern, Dutch, Cape Cod), or variety of Gothic (Tudor, Modern English, French Cottage), or Mediterranean influenced (Spanish, Italian), or one of the Progressive types (Western Bungalow, Craftsman, Prairie School), it was — and still is — a candidate for this technique. Adding frames is an economical, practical, and handsome way to answer the old question “What shall we do with our walls?”

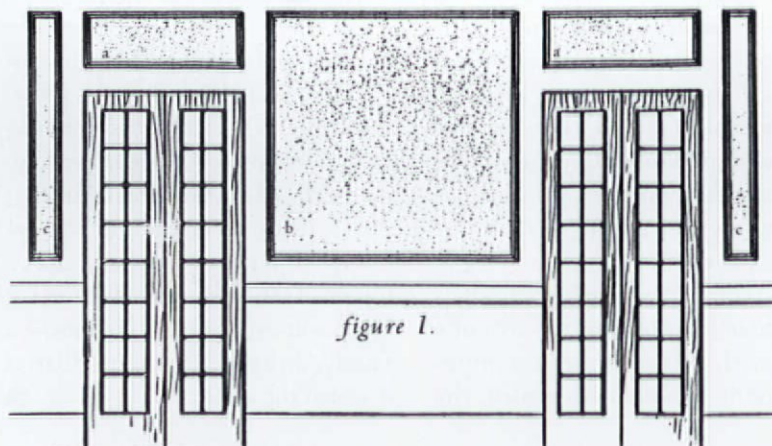
The problem with interior walls is that they are often punctured by architectural necessities such as windows, doors, and recesses. These elements disintegrate the horizontal unity of the room by introducing vertical lines of uneven heights, widths, and locations, thereby creating odd-shaped wall areas around them. The solution is to organize those areas with frames made from stencils or wood mouldings. Frames are a simple and elegant way to integrate windows, doors, and recesses by creating walls that appear to embrace them. Writing in *Interior Wall Dec-*

*oration*, a standard source for this method from 1920s on, F.N. Vanderwalker commented that, “Any room of suitable size may be panelled effectively, but those most commonly decorated in this manner are dining rooms, living rooms, halls, bedrooms and libraries.”

## FRAMES AT WORK

ONE EXAMPLE OF THE PROBLEMS FRAMING CAN SOLVE OCCURS at the side wall of a living room or dining room. Here a pair of French doors crowded on the wall pierce a dado and chair rail (figure 1). Adding frames fills the areas above the doors with horizontal rectangles *A* that resemble blind (windowless) transoms. By carrying the vertical energy of the doors upwards as apparent ceiling supports, they add a new dimension of structural logic to the doors. The blind transoms, in concert with the other frames, create an upper wall that seems to embrace the doors.

A large and nearly-square frame *B* between the doors dominates the wall and appears to impose the order of its perfect shape on an assortment of horizontal and vertical rectangles. However, a subtler source of order are the frames *C* flanking the doors. It is their narrow width that is the basic unit or “module” that is multiplied to determine the width of the other frames. The transoms shown here are actually five times as wide as this module; the square seven times as wide. If you have a room with a similar set of doors, find your module by dividing a door width by various odd numbers (Vanderwalker advocates these over even-numbered multiples) until you find a measurement that handsomely fits the narrowest vertical area of your wall.





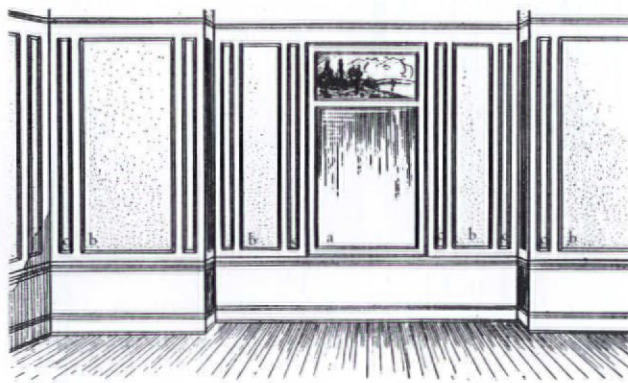


*Decorative frames coordinate the door and windows in this formal Colonial Revival dining room from 1928.*

Frames can also integrate a recessed window into the main wall of the living room. In this case, the solution is to extend the height of the window *A* with artwork framed and placed like a transom (figure 2). (You might achieve the same effect in a bungalow, Craftsman, or Prairie School room by a back-lit, stained glass window.) The width of the window is echoed on the walls with the large frames *B* and flanked by the module-wide frames *C*. This arrangement sets up a rhythm of 1-13-1 that resonates with the 1-5-1 rhythm of the frames flanking the window.

In a more conventional use of frames, single panels are fitted into the areas available between architectural features (figure 3). They rise above the baseboard and run continuously to below the crown moulding or wall top where they are linked by horizontal frames above the windows, doors, and mantel. Use of two concentric frames creates the effect of a matted picture. A bolder use of frames (figure 4) literally embraces doors *A*, windows *B*. This method works for walls that can be evenly divided into areas that allow the door or window to appear centered, or necessities that share the same width as the frame (as with a sideboard). However, under no circumstances should one or more frames be intersected by doors, windows, or major furniture.

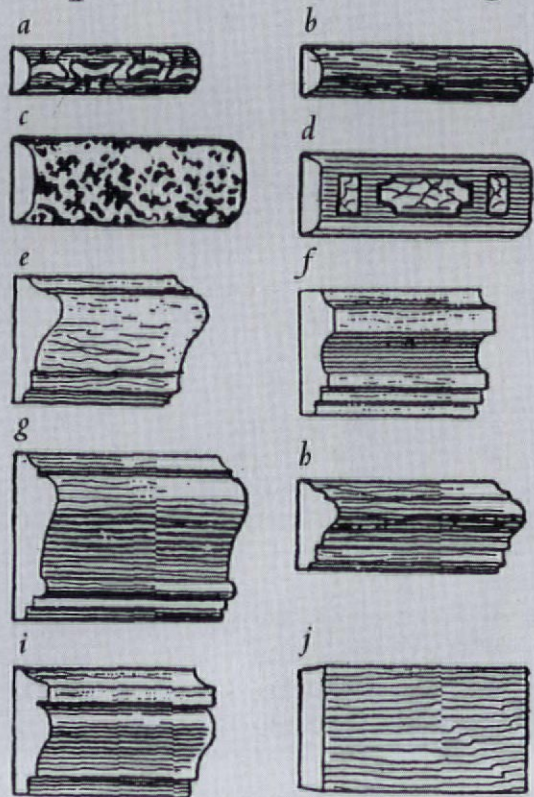
Framing is also practical for organizing interior walls into areas for wallpaper and lighting devices (figure 5). Using this method reduces the expense and bother of hanging wallpaper by framing it as artwork rather than covering the entire wall. As for lighting fixtures, the order of frames provides the regular rhythm and a logical, symmetrical place to arrange wall sconces, especially if they appear to be adrift in an open wall.



*figure 2.*



## Types of Mouldings



### MAKING FRAMES

YOU MIGHT DISCOVER THE GHOST LINES OF ORIGINAL WALL frames under layers of wallpaper and paint. If these frames were made with wood mouldings, it is a simple matter to restore them using stock decorative mouldings of equal width (see box above). If your walls originally had mat-telike concentric frames, choose mouldings similar to a



figure 3.

through d for the smaller, inner frame. These would be good candidates for gilding or multiple colors in sponged, wiped, or glazing techniques. Mouldings e through j would be appropriate for single frames or the outer frame of a matted effect. If you plan to use a dark accent color, choose mouldings with sharp outer edges such as numbers f and i. The plain rectangular batten j would be used in the aggressively simple, unadorned walls of the Craftsman, Mission, Bungalow, or Prairie School style.

If you have interiors in the Colonial or Mediterranean styles, you might give them some Baroque elegance and energy by making frames with decorative corners. Those with straight wood mouldings can be made with modest miter-box skills but curves require careful measuring and cutting. Decorative corners are much easier to make with stencils (see box page 43). If the corner will be the chief decorative feature of the frame, the pattern of the stencil should be dense — the more nondescript the better. The easiest would be a no-stencil border such as b made with low-tack masking tape and a sponged or stippled effect in two colors.

All of the stencils shown (with the exception of the solid leaf pattern) would be delineated on the wall by a background color in addition to one or more colors in the pattern. A special corner is used for a, but the other corners would be simply mitered. The neo-classical designs of a through g, and j would make them appropriate for Colonial interiors. The ones to use for the inner frame of a matted effect are b, e, and j. The heraldic shield of k would suit a Gothic interior, and stencils i, and l to n, would

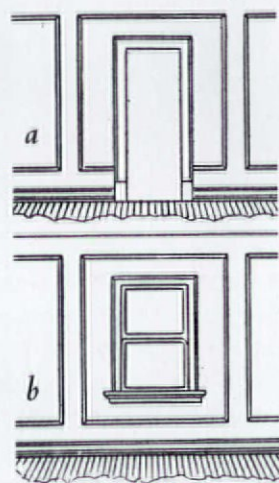
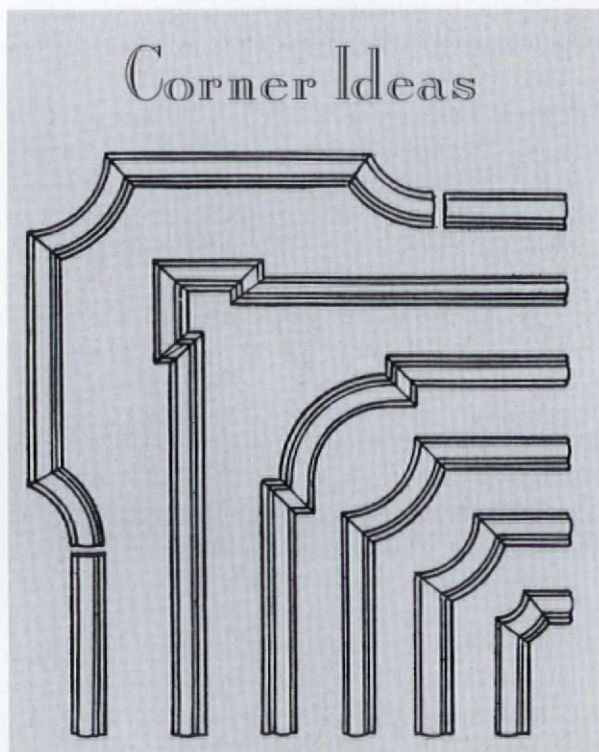


figure 4.

## Corner Ideas





suit Progressive interiors.

One important note on color. White areas are a major shortcoming in many color schemes because they create a visual "hole" in the wall. Never put a framed-up color scheme on top of a white wall, and never put white in the matted area between two frames. Carrying this idea one step further, never use white-matted pictures, and avoid white lace curtains.

## FUNCTIONAL FRAMES

IF YOUR EARLY 20TH CENTURY OLD HOUSE HAS FRAMED-UP walls, or bears the ghost images of their stencils or mouldings, they probably appear on top of lath-and-plaster walls. Less likely — but also possible — is finding frames over the joints in early wallboard installations, using gypsum-and-paper sheets or even wood-fiber products such as Homosote and Beaverboard. Though wallboard is the most popular method for sheathing interior walls today, decades ago

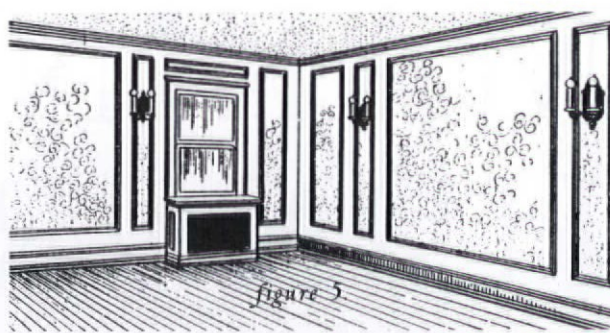


figure 5

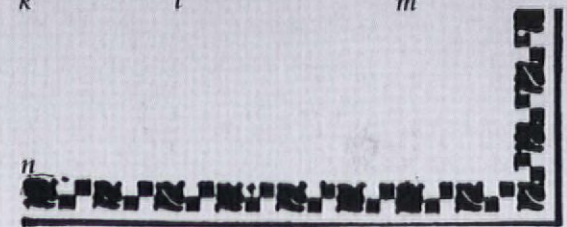
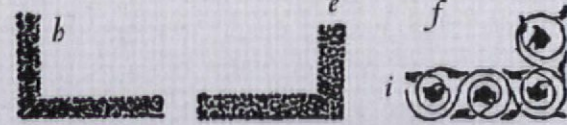
these materials were often used for economy or light duty construction (in summer houses, for example).

During this period, the wallboard industry strove to improve its image and the approach of at least one manufacturer was to offer room designs in Georgian, Colonial, and Adam styles employing stock wallboard sizes. Simple frames made of stock wood mouldings were used for decorative purposes as well as to cover the joints between panels. Because joints were hidden, neither the painter nor the paperhanger had to be precise in finishing the edges between paint and paper.

These benefits are as important for the decoration of late 20th century neo-traditional homes as they were in the the early 20th century styles they emulate. Using frames over joints means there is very little joint compound mess and sanding dust during construction, and if cracks appear later due to wall movement, few joints are visible. For anyone planning to build in a Colonial, Gothic, Mediterranean, or Progressive manner, once again this is a practical and beautiful way to divide and conquer walls.

*John Crosby Freeman is a color and design consultant based in Norristown, Pennsylvania (215) 539-3010.*

## Stencil Patterns



## SUPPLIERS

**Aristocast Original, Inc.**  
1119 Cobb Parkway, Dept OHJ  
Marietta, GA 30062  
(404) 427-5544  
FAX: (404) 427-3050  
*Cast decorative panel mouldings, quadrant corners.*

**Bendix Mouldings, Inc.**  
37 Ramland Road South, Dept. OHJ  
Orangeburg, NY 10962  
(800) 526-0240  
*Decorative wood mouldings in many designs.*



# MAKING THE HONOR ROLL

DOES YOUR HOUSE BELONG ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES?

by Shirley Maxwell and James C. Massey

Photography by JAMES C. MASSEY

IT'S A GREAT HOUSE, AS YOU AND ALL WHO KNOW IT AGREE, and it ought to be protected from the destructive forces of change forever. So why not put it on the National Register of Historic Places and ensure, once and for all, that future generations will get a chance to admire it too. Right?

Well, maybe not. National Register listing, by itself, can't guarantee that your house will survive the centuries unscathed, but it is certainly an essential step in the right direction — and it's one that more and more old-house owners are taking.

Unfortunately, the owner (or admiring neighbor) of a distinguished old building often first thinks about listing it on the National Register when some threat to its longevity arises. But National Register listing is not the best weapon to grab in a fast-moving, last-minute defense against "progress." For one thing, it takes too long. For another, listing on the Register does not mean that a listed building cannot be altered, added to, over-

whelmed by unmannerly neighbors, moved, or even demolished. In fact, it does not restrict in any way the rights of private owners to do what they choose with their own property. (And it definitely doesn't tell them what colors to paint the house!) In truth, National Register listing affects only activities that are funded, licensed, owned, or managed by federal agencies — "federal undertakings."

Does that mean National Register listing is a hollow honor? Not by a long shot. Although real protection can only come from local or state laws

and regulations (that's what zoning laws and local historic preservation ordinances are for), listing at the national level does serve as a threshold to a broad range of local, state, and federal protections and rewards. These may include anything from preventing encroachment by HUD-financed housing developments to qualifying for investment tax credits on commercial properties. In some states, it may even provide a property or income tax break for private homeowners (see Reading List).



## GETTING ON "THE REGISTER"

WITH THAT CAVEAT, what's the best and quickest way to go about getting your property on the

National Register? Actually, "best and quickest" may be an oxymoron. You should count on a minimum of three to six months from the research stage through acceptance by the National Register. A carefully documented "vitae" for the candidate property is





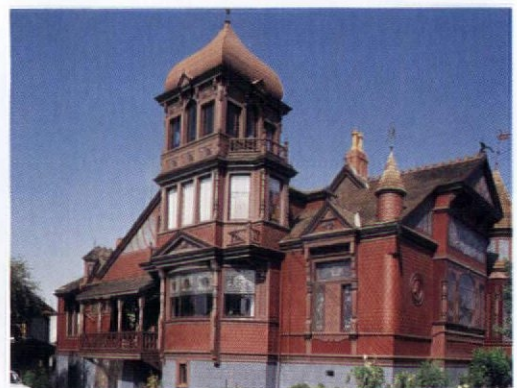
the first requirement, and it has to be as good as you can make it because it will be thoroughly scrutinized by professional historians and architectural historians at both the state and federal levels.

Before you get mired down in the nomination process, it would be wise to have a chat with your State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) or the SHPO's staff because this is the doorway through which all nominations must pass. The SHPO files may contain some useful information on your property or its neighborhood. You may even discover that your house is already listed on the National Register, either individually or as a "contributing" property within a historic district. (A contributing property is one that is compatible in age and/or appearance with the general character of the district and also retains its

integrity — that is, it hasn't been significantly altered, damaged, or compromised by changes to its immediate surroundings.) If your building qualifies for the National Register, it is almost certainly eligible for some sort of state landmark recognition as well. At any rate, the SHPO staff is the best source of guidance on how to go about submitting a nomination in your particular state, since they will review the form before it goes to the National Park Service (NPS). They will help you make a realistic evaluation of your chances of getting your house on the Register, which could save a lot of time and effort if the chances look slim.

Even if your house is already listed, there may be persuasive reasons

*Homes as diverse as this traditional Pennsylvania stone farm house (above) or this complex Queen Anne confection (below), Villa Montezuma in California, are on the National Register.*



for wanting to amend the existing nomination form. The art of preparing National Register nominations has come a long way within the past two decades. Early nomination forms, par-



*When wandering around the King William Street Historic District in San Antonio, Texas, one of the most prominent houses is Villa Finale.*

ticularly those prepared before 1979, tend to be sketchier and sometimes less thoroughly documented than later ones. Very often more accurate information about the property has come to light with the passage of time, and there may be errors that need to be corrected in the original form. If so, it would be praiseworthy, to say the least, to update the nomination form with an amendment.

Or, perhaps your house is on the Register as part of a historic district. District nomination forms typically do not contain much information about individual properties beyond a brief description, a photograph, and a construction date (usually



#### **IS YOUR HOUSE REGISTER-WORTHY?**

OVER SEVERAL DECADES, THE NATIONAL Park Service has hammered out a rationale for evaluating properties nominated to the National Register. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the cornerstone of historic preservation policy in the United States (much amended since its first passage), allows for the recognition of properties that are important on a local, state, or regional level, as

well as those of national significance.

Briefly, a property is eligible for the National Register must be significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture for one of the following reasons: 1) It is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; 2) It is associated with the lives of persons

significant in our past; 3) It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; 4) It represents the work of a master, possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction (e.g., a historic district); 5) It has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history. Ordinarily not eligible for inclusion in the Register are churches and religious properties, cemeteries, buildings or structures that

have been moved from their original locations, birthplaces or graves of historical figures, reconstructed buildings, properties primarily commemorative in nature, and properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years. Of course, there are exceptions to all these exclusions. Confused? *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* explains how the National Park Service applies these criteria in evaluating properties for significance in local, state, and national history (see Reading List).

A property does not have to be nominated to the National Register by its owner (actually, it is the SHPO who nominates it, and anyone can prepare the nomination), but it cannot be listed on the Register without the owner's consent. Sometimes, perhaps because the owner objects to its listing, a building may be certified by the National Park Service as being eligible for listing. The same protections from federal undertakings apply for buildings that are eligible for listing as for those that are formally



*The c.1860 Italianate-style Honolulu House in Marshall, Michigan, is said to recall the owner's residency in Hawaii when he was a U.S. Consul.*

only a close estimate). You may have reason to believe your property is important enough to warrant an individual listing. Although it has very little practical effect, an individual listing might make a difference in the suc-



listed. Beyond that, local and state laws and regulations remain the ruling factor.

### THE REGISTRATION PROCESS

AT THIS POINT, YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING if you can do your own nomination. The answer is: maybe. Theoretically, a literate and conscientious layman should be able to handle the preparation of a National Register nomination. However, like any DIY job, it really depends on how much time, energy, and interest you can bring to the task. You may not want to go the whole route alone anyway. Your SHPO can furnish a list of approved historic preservation consultants convenient to and familiar with your geographic area. The preparation is usually complex, the instructions can be confusing, and the packaging of the nomination takes much more time than the four-page form might suggest. Because research is labor-inten-

*Recognizing the importance of the Old French Quarter, the Vieux Carré National Historic Landmark District, which includes the Gallier House, was established in New Orleans.*

sive (that is, expensive) and also intrinsically enjoyable, you certainly should do as much of the preliminary data-gathering as your time, skills, and interest allow.

The photography calls for a good camera (a perspective-control "shift" lens and a solid tripod are also desirable) in reasonably skilled hands, as well as a knack for straightforward presentation of architectural features. Try to be realistic in assessing your abilities here.

No matter who prepares the nomination form, they will have to follow the gospel according to NPS. The



Register "bible" is a 54-page booklet entitled *National Register Bulletin 16, Guidelines for Completing National Register of Historic Places Forms* (see Reading List). Please believe us when we tell you that reading this article is no substitute for

## PRESERVATION ORGANIZATIONS

➤ **National Register of Historic Places:** The nation's official "honor roll" of buildings, structures, sites, districts, and objects worthy of preservation because they are of historical, architectural, or archeological value at a national, state, or local level. Established under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Register is administered under the U. S. Department of Interior, National Park Service. Nominations to the National Register are made through the appropriate State Historic Preservation Officer (see below).

➤ **National Trust for Historic Preservation:** A private historic preservation organization often confused with the National Register. Although it is chartered by Congress (like the Red Cross) and receives some federal funds, it is not a federal entity and is not connected with the Register. However, it does own a number of historic properties.

➤ **National Historic Landmark:** If earning a place on the National Register is like making the dean's list, a spot on the National Historic Landmarks list is graduating magna cum laude. NHL listing is reserved for properties

that are strongly associated with persons or events of transcendent nationwide significance. Only one NHL per person or event is allowed. Designated by the Secretary of the Interior, NHLs are automatically listed on the National Register, and their selection process begins with preparation of a National Register nomination.

➤ **State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO):** Every state's governor is authorized to appoint a SHPO (pronounced, in casual usage, sh'poe or shippo). It is the SHPO staff, composed of professionally trained historians, architectural historians, architects, and archeologists, who do the day-to-day work of reviewing, evaluating, and advising on National Register nominations—among many other preservation-related tasks. The SHPO is typically found in the state's Department of Historic Resources or Parks and Recreation Department. If you have trouble locating your own SHPO, you can get their address from the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (Hall of States, Suite 342, 444 N. Capitol St., N.W., Washington, DC 20001; (202) 624-5465).



studying that booklet and the other aids that the Park Service and your SHPO have prepared for your edification.

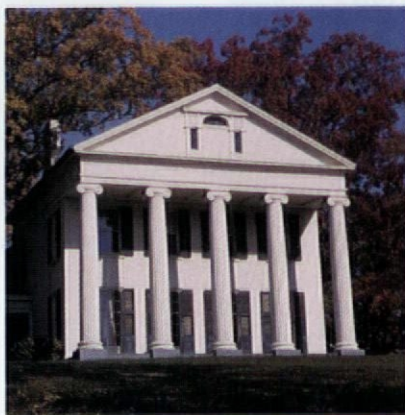
### INDIVIDUAL BUILDING VS. HISTORIC DISTRICT

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ENCOURAGES nominating groups of buildings, either as historic districts or as multiple or thematic resources (geographically separated buildings, structures, sites, etc., that share a thematic connection). Listing by district gets more buildings on the Register faster and more economically than nominating them one by one. It also makes it more likely that the Register will include houses like the ones in which most old-house people live — the cherishable, but unremarkable, buildings that take their importance from the fact that, as a group, they and their neighbors form a recognizable and distinguished whole.

While nominating a district is an excellent way to get more bang for your preservation buck, it is also much more complex than nominating a single building. The nomination must be based on an inventory of all buildings in the district, compiled through a building-by-building survey. And, yes, it has to include the modern, ugly, or otherwise awful — that is to say, “non-contributing” — buildings as well as the clearly “good” ones. Since each owner must eventually be contacted in order to have an opportunity to participate in public hearings, it also requires a good bit of community cooperation.

If you choose to submit a nom-

(below) *The H.C. Brooks House:  
A distinguished hilltop Greek Revival  
in Marshall, Michigan.*



ination for your neighborhood, you will have to determine what it is that makes it a cohesive and significant district, and how much of it is closely enough related to be included. You should consult

with your SHPO to set the physical boundaries of the district and to determine the range of dates for the period of significance. There are usually natural cut-offs for both, and they must be precisely defined. Physical boundaries must be described in writing and on a special USGS map with universal transverse mercator (UTM) coordinates (see Reading List). The physical boundaries might be set by a major traffic artery, a park, a river, or similar features, for instance. A district by definition has to hang together somehow. You are not allowed to jump from building to building or block to block, excluding some things here and others there. However, you may legitimately designate some structures or buildings as “non-contributing”, meaning that they don’t conform to the characteristics that tie the district together. The period of significance generally has chronological “markers” that become apparent as you study the history of the area.

### DESCRIBING THE BUILDING AND DOING THE RESEARCH

THE BACKBONE OF THE NOMINATION form is the description of the building. Writing architectural descriptions is a fairly esoteric skill. Bulletin 16 gives some good clues as to how to go about it, but you will also need to consult an

## READING LIST

For more information about the National Register nomination process, here’s some good National Parks Service publications to consult:

- *The National Register of Historic Places*, a brochure about what the National Register does and doesn’t do.
- *Using the UTM Grid System To Record Historic Sites* by Wilford P. Cole, a booklet that explains how to do UTMs and what special equipment is needed.
- National Register publications are available from your local SHPO or the National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127

Two useful books on tracing house history are:

- *Houses and Homes: Exploring Their History*, by Barbara J. Howe, et al. (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1987)
- *House Histories: A Guide to Tracing the Genealogy of Your Home*, by Sally Light (Spencertown, N.Y.: Golden Hill Press, Inc., 1989).



architectural style guide and possibly an architectural dictionary to make sure you are properly identifying the style (or styles) and building parts. Your SHPO will most likely have printed guides to regional terms and architectural types found in your area. Use the approved vocabulary, and take an organized approach to the descriptive process.

If the physical description of the building gives us the skeleton of the National Register nomination, the historical research provides the flesh. Although you probably have already done some research on your house, be prepared to dig deeper for the kind of information you will need to get on the Register. When was it built and for whom, who designed it, who lived in it, what happened there, what did it all mean? The answers to these and other questions are likely to lie in a dozen or more places in the community and perhaps beyond it.

Get to know your way around the local courthouse or other repository of deeds, wills, tax records, court proceedings, and records of marriages and deaths. Tax records may tell little or nothing about the house itself, since they are primarily concerned with land rather than structures. However, a sudden spurt in the appraised value of one

---

*A National Historic Landmark, this c.1714 mansion in Charlestown, South Carolina, features pavilions at all four corners.*



property while those surrounding it remain stable may suggest that a building has been constructed or enhanced.

Original architects' drawings and contemporary eyewitness accounts (including fire insurance policies), fire insurance atlases, and building permits are among the best records for dating and describing physical aspects of the property — if you can find them. Don't be surprised if much of the material you seek has been tossed out, lost, or destroyed by fire or water, but don't fail to search diligently for it either. More and more often, this kind of material is available only on microfilm or microfiche, so be prepared for eyestrain and neck pains.

Other information may be buried in the memories of long-time residents of the neighborhood or the house itself, so talk to your neighbors. However, remember that oral history is a tricky tool. Even when intentions are impeccable, memories can be faulty and facts may inadvertently be altered, embroidered, or just plain forgotten. Always check information gathered this way against documents and physical evidence if possible.

Historical societies and the local

history section of the library (particularly newspaper clippings from the real estate and obituary sections) and books on local history, memoirs, and genealogies may yield some information. Look for old city directories, where residents are listed by address, and telephone books. Visual records are invaluable. If you are lucky, you



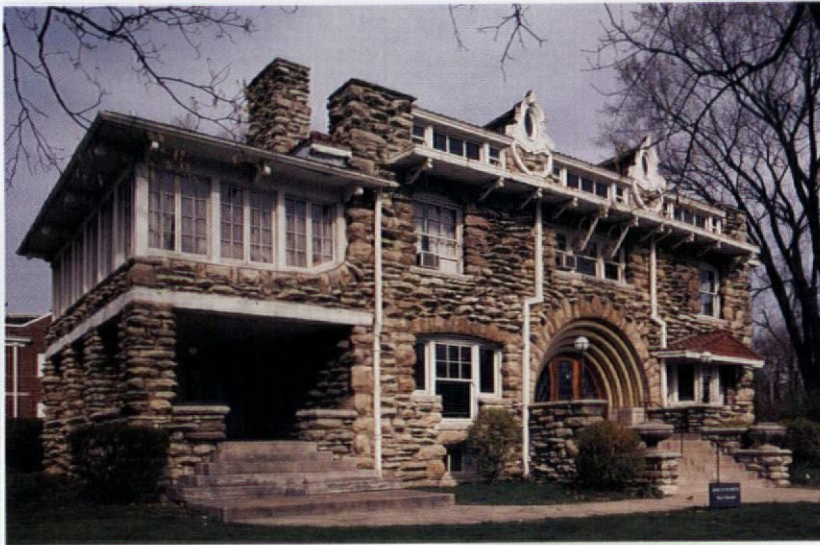
*An early 18th-century mansion in one of the several historic districts that cover much of Salem, Massachusetts.*

may locate old photographs by talking with residents, their families, and neighbors, or by researching newspaper morgues.

In order to establish who owned the house when, you'll need to do a chain of title for the property. (The title search done when you bought the house may not go back far enough for your purposes.) However, a genealogy is not a necessary or even desirable part of the nomination.

The goal of your research is to establish the role that this house and its inhabitants played in the history of their community. Once you have the facts, the story should be told in the most accurate, understandable, and economical way possible consistent with good grammar and good taste. You'll be expected to provide footnotes and a bibliography to back up your information, so be scrupulous about sticking to the facts (for two good resources, see Reading List). It's generally best to leave conjecture and





*Perhaps unique in the United States, this unusual house in Kansas City, Missouri, has strong Art Nouveau overtones, especially in the front door.*

interpretation to your readers. Be prepared for nitpicking by your SHPO and the National Register. It's their job, and there is usually a good reason for it.

#### HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

IF YOU ARE DOING THE NOMINATION yourself, these are some of the costs you will need to budget for: 1) Film, processing, and at least two sets of 5" x 7" or 8" x 10" black-and-white prints from 35-mm or larger negatives, including (as a minimum) views of each side of the main house, the set-

ting, interiors, significant details, and each outbuilding; 2) Copies of documents and newspaper articles; 3) Transportation; 4) Long-distance telephone calls and postage; 5) Books and offprints of articles relating to your property's history. You may also be asked by the SHPO to provide color slides and publicity views to present the nomination to a review board or to present the completed form on computer diskette as well as in hard copy.

If you decide to hire a consultant, the cost will vary depending on how much of the research and/or photography you do yourself, whether you take on any of the packaging tasks (typing the final copy, for instance), and the going rate for historic preservation consultants in your area. Try to get at least two, preferably three, estimates. If you are dealing with a historic district, you may want to explore the idea of using volunteers or graduate students

supervised by a professional to survey, write property descriptions, and photograph the individual buildings. The total outlay for preparing a nomination

for an individual property will likely be several thousand dollars. The nomination for a district would obviously cost considerably more, depending on the geographical area and the number of buildings.

Once your house has been listed, consider donating a scenic or historic preservation easement to a non-profit historic preservation organization. An easement is a portion of your property rights, basically the right to the facade of the house and its surroundings. It becomes a permanent part of the deed and guarantees that your house can't legally be changed except in the ways your easement specifies. In return, you're eligible for a federal income tax break on the difference between your property's value before and after the easement.

Preparing a National Register nomination is by turns enlightening, exhilarating, exasperating — and unbelievably tedious. It is also a lesson in civic responsibility. You are compiling both a permanent, official document with potentially long-lasting legal ramifications and a contribution to the recorded history of the United States. Your nomination form may never be amended or added to, or it may serve as the basis of a longer, deeper examination of some aspect of the life of your community at some particular point in its history — or a legal battle. If it is done well, it can be counted on to outlast your lifetime and perhaps the lifetime of your house, and to serve researchers for many generations to come, in ways you might never even imagine.

*Shirley Maxwell and James C. Massey are the principals in a well-known preservation-consulting firm that manages National Register nominations: Massey-Maxwell Associates, PO Box 263, Strasburg, VA 22657; (703) 465-4566.*



*The centerpiece of the Emily Kimbrough Historic District, this modest cottage in Muncie, Indiana, was the home of a prominent American writer.*





# Love is a Two-Way Street

## Old-House Living Too Close to the Road

by Michael Marchant

**W**

HEN I FIRST SAW HER, MY HEART MELTED. SHE SAT by a country road nestled in a valley in North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains. The romantic window architraves, porch balustrade, and gable fretwork set off her

*Although the plants have matured and block most of the noise, the curving, two-lane road will always be uncomfortably close.*

simple beauty. A large pond and whispering stream ran through the property. Even the name of the township in which she resided — Flat Creek — was quaint. It was love at first sight.

She was all alone, abandoned. I was free to come wander and wonder whenever I pleased. I was actively searching for a place to own. Many months passed, but not without her on my mind. Nothing else compared. Finally, I took the big leap and became a homeowner — or to be more accurate, I became married to an obsession. My only second thoughts were that she was too close to the road.



The people who built the house selected a nice spot far enough from the stream to be above potential floods and secure enough behind a hill for protection from northern winds and winter weather. I don't know when the paved road came to be, but it might have started as a one-lane dirt path. The owners of the house, dressed in their Victorian garb, probably spent their leisure time on the front porch and knew all who passed. However, when it came time to build the road, maneuvering around the hill created a tight squeeze. Eventually, the bottom of the hill was shaved to make a wider passageway, and the road was graded higher than the house level. By now, the harsh blacktop and its proximity to the house undermined any images of horse-and-buggy days. I'm just thankful the road planners had enough respect to go around the house and not through it.

### Fighting Road Rattle and Hum

WHEN TWO NEW SCHOOLS WERE BUILT IN THE AREA, MY FEARS of a busy road became reality. Caravans of passing elemen-

tary school buses and cars of speeding teens shook an already unstable structure. There was nothing separating the house from the road except dust. During heavy rains, road drainage—a problem that had been overlooked by the road planners and neglected by the house's previous owners—ran towards the house. I was responsible for the building now and these were challenges to be overcome.

It became apparent that the first thing to do was build a stone retaining wall with plants between the house and the road. This would make a small front yard even smaller, but it would create a barrier greenspace that complimented the house—and tune down the noise. I used North Carolina red clay in place of cement in keeping with the way the house was built, so it was critical for the stone to be flat. (The clay lasts only as long as so many rains.) Every stone, wherever and whenever it could be found, was a treasure cherished as an interlocking piece to a jig-saw puzzle.

For the landscape plantings, I chose hemlocks for their year-round screening ability and boxwoods trans-

planted from other areas of the property where they were growing like weeds in all the wrong places. To assure privacy in the winter, I used only evergreens closest to the road. Various deciduous bushes and trees were placed on the inside to provide seasonal color, forsythia in spring, burning bush in fall. To speed the growth of my natural privacy screen, I helped with a little tender-loving plant care—that is, 20 truck loads of mulch and lots of mowing and weeding.

As the plants grow each spring, my only regret is that I hadn't been able to visualize the final outcome better. For example, the hemlocks and the boxwoods don't seem to blend well, so I should have used just one species. Also, the young trees look awkward next to an old house. In this sea of new plants, there are only a few older trees that dominate the landscape, but someday the younger ones will catch up. For now, the plantings are not as ugly as a modern privacy fence or some other mismatched border. In essence, I am hiding the house, but a few well-chosen spots are left open to provide glimpses to passing motorists.

---

*Now that the two-story porch has been restored and the house freshly painted, I relax outside.*







*Newly-planted hemlock and boxwood trees reduced the size of an already small front yard, but created an effective barrier.*

### From Barrier to Basement

IN MY AMBITION, I WANTED TO SCREEN OFF THE ENTIRE LENGTH of the property, but I was confounded by a sloping stream bank. It was impossible to walk from one end of the property to the other (especially with a non-standing wheelbarrow) due to the lay of the land. I spent days and weeks



leveling off areas, until finally I had walkways. To help close up the front yard even further, I created another road, a circular driveway behind the house. Leveling the driveway by means of shovel power allowed me to leave a center strip of grass. I could have hired a contractor with a bulldozer, but I prefer to think of myself as environmentally sensitive. Or perhaps the truth is I never had the finances.

The house was built on a foundation of flat stone, and over the years it had settled. Since there wasn't a basement or a crawlspace, the termite inspection for the loan application listed the house as "inaccessible." (When that happens, you are required by the bank to obtain a report from a structural engineer, who somehow has X-ray vision. Then, even if you get a clean bill of health, the bank still claims good reason to jack your interest rate up a few points.) I spent eight months using an industrial mop bucket with wheels to haul red clay chiseled out of tunnels and

*After excavating the crawl space under the house, the surplus soil was used to make the property level on the up-hill side.*





*The lazy stream running at the back of the property was part of the idyllic country setting that attracted the original owners to my house's location. By placing the driveway behind the house, the front yard was closed-off from the main road.*

crawl spaces for access to the house skeleton. I used the tailings from the excavation as infill for the roadside greenspace, so the two projects worked well together. Although the job took a long time, it didn't cost a lot of money, except for buying knee pads and fees for my own health — my chiropractor loves me.

### **With Problems Comes Progress**

ONE OF THE SCHOOLS DECIDED TO BUILD A WASTE-WATER treatment plant (a nice way of saying giant septic tank) 100 feet from my front door. The school had 30 acres of land, and this seemed to be the place to put it; there was easy access to the road. No words can describe the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy as your next-door neighbor. They dug up the road to lay pipe and, in a blink, destroyed

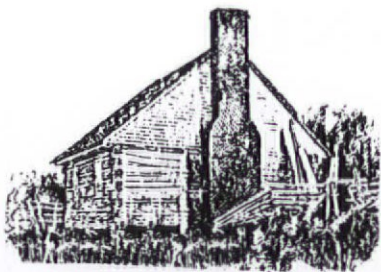


the natural landscape and the hum of the wildlife. It's noisy, it's ugly, and it stinks. The school agencies pass blame to county agencies who pass blame to the state agencies. My property has been devalued by as much as \$20,000 and it cost me \$1,000 to have a legal realtor determine this. The lawyer's fees I've paid to fight the plant could have been well spent on restoring the house. It's been in the judicial system going on two years now. Jasmine is nice incense.

Four years have passed and while I don't know if I have truly finished, I feel I've reached a pause. For every frustration, though, there has always been the satisfaction of completing small projects that slowly return the house to its former beauty. When it came time to refinance, the reward for all the foundation work was a clean bill of health (for the house, not me). The house was no longer considered to be inaccessible and could be properly treated for termites. Old pictures reveal growth in the young trees, so I don't worry anymore about collision insurance (also for the house, not the car). For me, moving the house was never financially feasible, so her integrity remains intact. Over ninety years later, she still stands strong and tall on her original location. The busy world moves around her, but she is settled. After everyone has rushed off to school and the commotion subsides, I'll figure out what to do next. 🏠

*Previous residents told of plum trees that covered the entire length of the property — now only three remain.*





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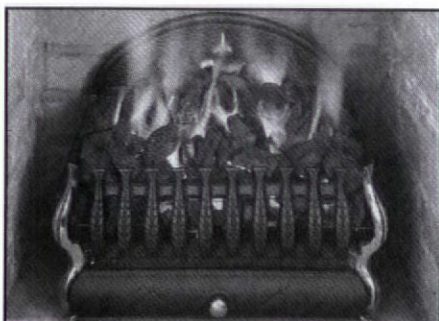
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# OLD-HOUSE MECHANIC

## More on Power Screws

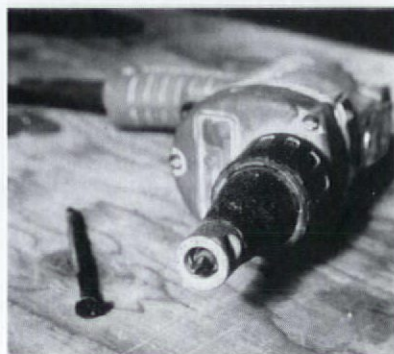
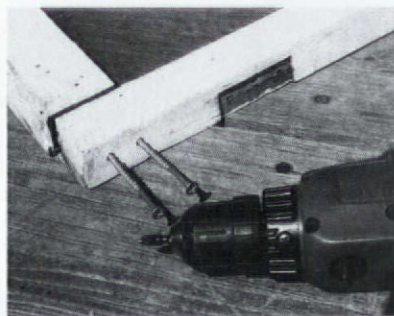
by John Leeke

**W**HILE YOU CAN DRIVE "power screws" by hand, their real advantage lies in using a motorized tool — essential when you have dozens or hundreds of screws to install. I still have vivid memories of one project where I drove 46 screws with a screw driver. The next morning my hand and wrist hurt so much I couldn't work, and they took three months to recover.

**Electric Drills** — For years I drove screws with a Phillips bit chucked in a 3/8" variable speed reversible drill. (A single speed drill doesn't provide enough control and a reversing motor allows you to back a screw out.) This system works but requires a careful touch. You have to apply pressure and keep the drill in line with the screw to avoid twisting out of the socket as driving becomes difficult. As the screw seats I let up on the pressure and reduce the speed. Even then, the bit may keep rotating in the head after the screw is stopped, mangling the cross slot. Using an ordinary drill this way tends to wear out the drive bits, but since bits were cheaper than a screw gun I didn't mind the expense.

**Screw Guns** — A screw gun is similar to an electric drill except that the Jacobs chuck is replaced by a magnetic drive bit that incorporates two special mechanisms: a clutch and a release. A variable clutch has settings that will stop driving the screw when it reaches a specific torque. In use, the electric motor keeps running (avoiding harmful stalls), but the clutch slips and the screw stops turning. Clutch control is most effective

with uniform, manufactured materials such as particle board. A release employs a sleeve that surrounds the bit and head of the screw and meets the work surface as the screw is driven. Rotating the sleeve adjusts the release so that when the screw head reaches a certain depth, the bit is withdrawn. A



*Battery drills (top) are ideal for out-of-the-way driving. A screw gun's automatic tip (above) is designed for production driving.*

release is ideal for natural materials such as wood that vary in density.

The clutch-and-release combination allows you to fine-tune the depth to which the screw is driven, particularly in soft materials (paper-covered dry-wall is a prime example) and where con-

ditions are constant from screw to screw. Their automatic operation frees you to concentrate on other matters such as the fit of the parts and "shooting" screws faster to increase production. When conditions vary, however, it's best not to depend on the automatic settings. If you are, say, screwing delicate second-hand tin ceiling panels into a mix of old hard pine and new soft furring strips, use a slow speed and keep an eye on the work. This would be difficult with the release sleeve in place since it hides the bit and screw head.

**Cordless Driver/Drills** — The new cordless drills have stonger, 12-volt motors and longer-lasting batteries and are very popular for power driving. Features such as multiple speeds, reversing motors, and adjustable torque settings mean the drill can be matched to different screw or material needs for best use of battery power. While some models are equipped with a clutch, most use a standard 3-jaw chuck to hold twist drills, drive bits, and other devices. Of course, not having to stretch an extension cord makes it easy to move around.

**Accessories** — There are a number of accessories that can be chucked into an ordinary power drill to add functions. "Drill-N-Drive" is a device combining a twist drill and countersink that slips over a drive bit already chucked in a drill. After boring a hole, you just slip off the device and then you are ready to drive the screw. "Insti-Bits" are hex-shanked chuck adapters that make possible a quick change between drill and drive bit. Clutch adapters come in more than one make, and automatically

[Continued on p. 58]



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*John Canning Company's recent restoration of decorative painting in the 1812 Valentine-Wickman House Museum (one of the few examples of Neo Classical Decoration from this period)*

*Photo: Karen Bussolini*

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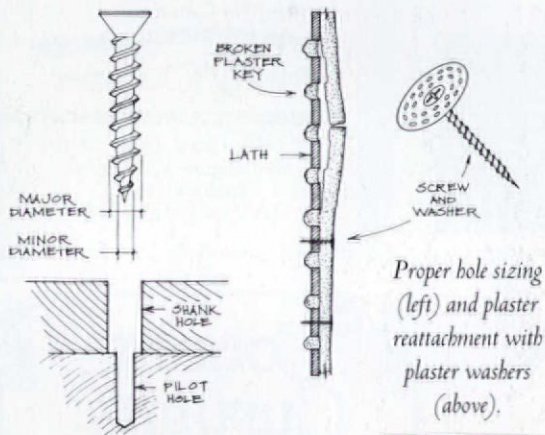
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# OLD-HOUSE MECHANIC

release when the screw is seated to the correct depth.

You'll need a screw gun (typically costing \$150 - \$300) if you will be driving screws day after day, but these tools usually can't be altered to bore holes. A clutch-type drill (\$100 - \$200) is the best value for old-house work since it can be used as a drill and screw driver. If your job is small and budget is limited, just a clutch adapter (\$10 - \$60) may be the most useful investment.



## Working with Power Screws and Drills

WHEN YOU HAVE SCORES OF SCREWS TO drive, you'll find small even small tricks increase performance:

- On a large drywall or plaster ceiling repair the dust created by overhead screwing can foul and abrade the gears, bearings, and brushes in your drill. To prevent permanent damage, clean your drill thoroughly after these jobs. Disassemble the parts and brush out the grit or send the whole tool to a service shop.
- If screws break as you drive, try lubricated screws. Manufacturers coat some screws with an anti-friction material that requires less driving power and makes increased screw sizes possible. Rubbing the threads on a piece

of soap or beeswax before insertion helps uncoated screws drive easier. If this isn't enough, increase the size of the pilot hole, or try a stronger screw.

• Recovering from a mis-driven, broken, or bent screw is more difficult than with nails or ordinary wood screws. Grind off mangled heads by using a small pointed grindstone chucked in your drill. If a screw point penetrates a finish surface and you can't remove the screw, just grind off the point.

• When fastening with power screws, make sure to bore a shank hole the same diameter (or slightly larger) than the major diameter of the screw threads. This way, the screw passes freely through the item being fastened and is drawn tightly to the base material. If a pilot hole is needed, make sure it is the same size (or slightly larger) than the minor diameter of the threads.

• In some projects power screws can substitute for the clamps necessary for gluing. To clamp two pieces of wood with screws, first align the parts and fasten with screws. Next, back out the screws and apply glue. Then, tighten the screws and let the glue set. When the glue is dry, leave the screws in place or remove them and fill the holes.

• Power screws can be used to make adjustable furring for uneven wall studs and ceiling joists. Drill shank holes through the furring strips where they pass each stud or joist and drive in the screws, leaving them loose enough to allow a space. Next slip two mating sawn wood shingles aside each screw shank. Then adjust the shingles and screws until the furring strips are exactly true, tightening and loosening the

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screws as many times as you like to fine-tune the final position of the strips.

• Use common drywall screws to gently draw loose plaster against the lath with plaster washers or injected adhesive bonding (see "Saving Irreplaceable Plaster," Nov-Dec '87 OHJ).

Last, one of the neatest things about power screws is that they're about as easy to take out as put in. This is valuable in old-house work, for example, to cover openings while you're restoring those windows and doors.



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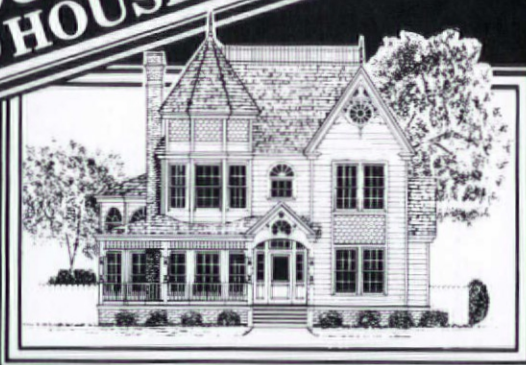
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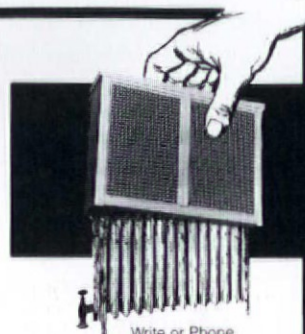
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*The flexible Mastermold 12-3 can reproduce highly-detailed forms.*

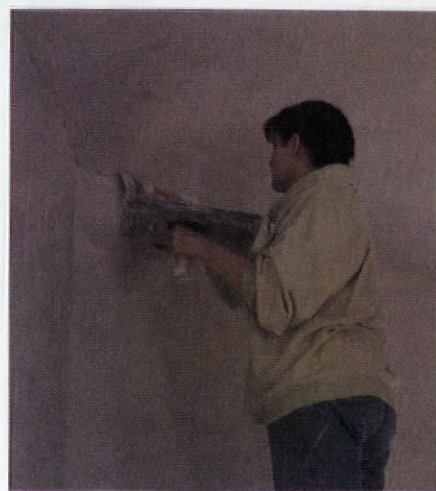
piratory diseases). After mixing, the material has a pot life of 1-1.5 hours and hardens in 6-8 hours. Finished molds have a high tear strength that permits easy release from intricate and undercut shapes, and can be reused many times. Abatron also offers a vast line of compounds and coatings, such as wood consolidants, porcelain refinishing materials, and patching and resurfacing compounds for structural and decorative restoration. Mastermold 12-3 costs \$37.80 for 2 quarts, \$96 for 2 gallons, and \$426 for 10 gallons. For information, contact Abatron, Inc., 33 Center Dr., Dept. OHJ, Gilberts, IL 60136; (708) 426-2200.

### Mastering Plaster

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*The Master of Plaster two-coat system is designed to skim over old plaster.*

can also be used over materials such as plaster, drywall, composition wallboards, and non-bleeding wallpaper. Although it only comes in a true white color, it can be tinted with oil or universal colors. A variety of wallpaper removers, glazing compounds, and paint strippers are also offered from Sterling. Available in one-gallon and five-gallon cans, the Calci-Coater costs \$20 and \$90 respectively. For a list of distributors, contact Sterling-Clark-Lurton Corp., P.O. Box J, Dept. OHJ, 184 Commercial St., Malden, MA 02148; (617) 322-0163.



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*A variety of the Stencil Collector's designs were used to decorate this floorcloth and screen.*



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*This ceiling detail in the Michigan State Capitol shows the range of decorative painting techniques mastered by John Canning & Co.*



borders, and 28 fabrics, the collection's designs were meticulously copied from original examples taken from old houses across the country, such as the Gallier House in New Orleans. A diverse range of historically-appropriate styles, from Japanesque patterns and chintzes to Patrician stripes and Art Nouveau

motifs, is covered. Each design group authentically represents the colorways of the original document, but updated color combinations are also offered. Prices range from \$20.99 to \$29.99 for wallcoverings and from \$39.99 to \$44.99 for fabrics. Richard E. Thibaut, Inc., 706 South 21st St., Dept. OHJ, Irvington, NJ 07111; (201) 399-7888.





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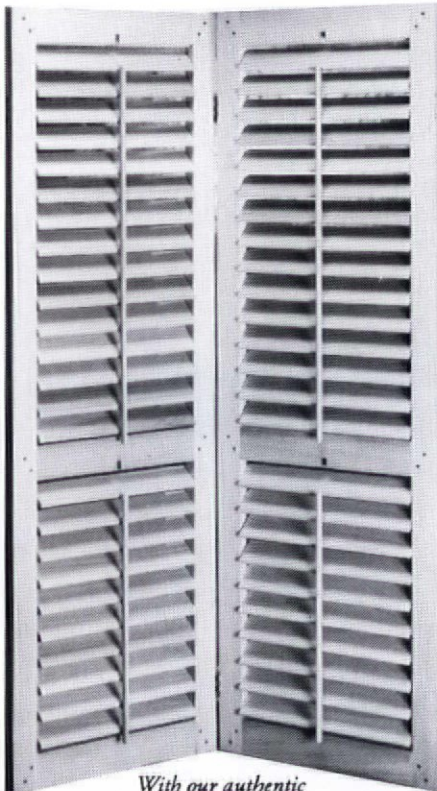
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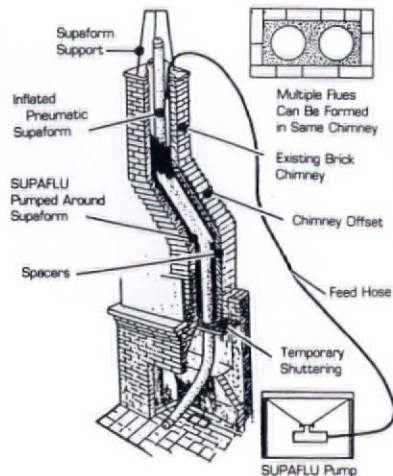
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# Historic House Plans



# M

ail-order plans have a long history in shaping the residential architecture of the country. Of the thousands of house plans available today, few exhibit good design and a grasp of historical proportion and detail. So, in response to requests from OHJ readers, the editors have "done the homework": We've hand-picked plans. In each issue, we offer the most attractive, authentic, and buildable of the historical designs, from all periods of American architectural history. Let us know what plans you're looking for.

You can order actual blueprints for all the houses featured. Plans conform to national building-code standards — however, modifications are usually necessary for your site and local requirements, so you'll probably need the assistance of a professional designer (your builder may qualify) or an architect.

For the houses shown in this issue, blueprints include:

- Foundation plan for basement or crawl space. (Crawl space plans can easily be adapted for full basements by your builder.)
- Detailed floor plans showing all dimensions for framing, plus detailed layout and location of electrical and plumbing components.
- Interior elevations are included in some plans, showing interior views of kitchen, bath, fireplace, built-ins, and cabinet designs.
- Window and door schedule.

- Building cross sections: cornice, fireplace, and cabinet sections when needed to help your builder understand major interior details.
- Framing diagrams that show layouts of framing pieces and their locations for roof, first and second floors.
- Energy-saving specs, including vapor barriers, insulated sheathing, caulking and foam-sealant areas, batt insulation, and attic exhaust ventilators.

Why order multiple sets? If you're serious about

building, you'll need a set each for the general contractor, mortgage lender, electrician, plumber, heating/ventilating contractor, building permit department, other township use or interior designer, and one for yourself. Ordering the 8-set plan saves money and additional shipping charges. Other notes: (1) Plans are copyrighted, and they are printed for you when you order. Therefore, they are not refundable. If you order additional sets of the same plan within 30 days of your

original order, you can purchase them for \$15 each. (2) Mirror-reverse plans are useful when the house would fit the site better "flopped." For this you need one set of mirror-reverse plans for the contractor; but because the reverse plans have backwards lettering and dimensions, all other sets should be ordered right-reading. (3) Heating and air-conditioning layouts are not included. You need a local mechanical contractor to size and locate the proper unit for your specific conditions of climate and site.

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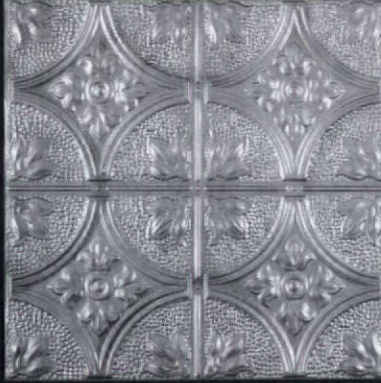
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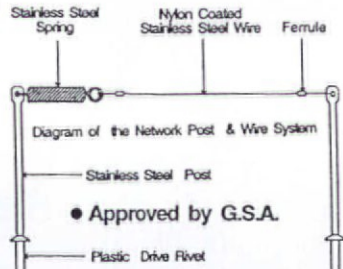
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Plan: BL-01-VI

Costs: \$200; \$280 (set of 5); \$325 (set of 8)

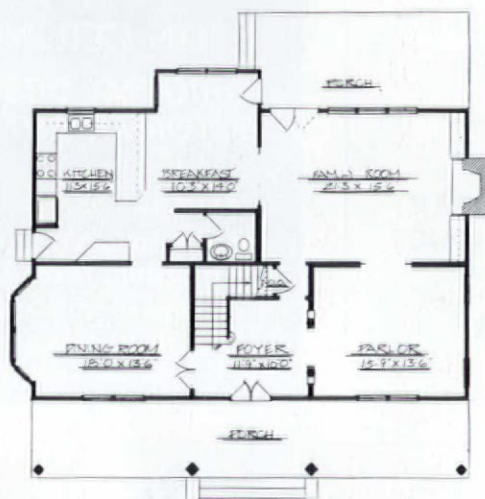
Square Footage: 2,652' (total), 1,412' (first floor),  
1,240' (second floor)

Ceiling Height: 10' (first floor), 9' (second floor)

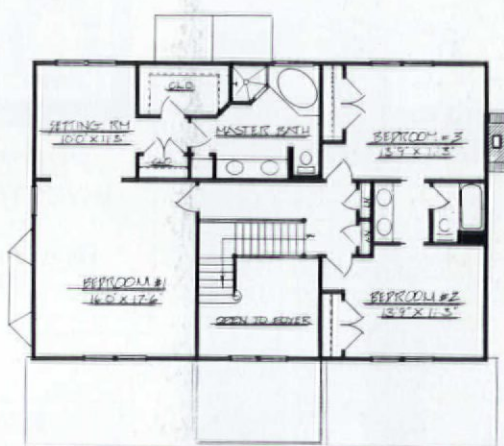
Overall Dimensions:

Width: 49'

Depth: 42'



first floor



second floor





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
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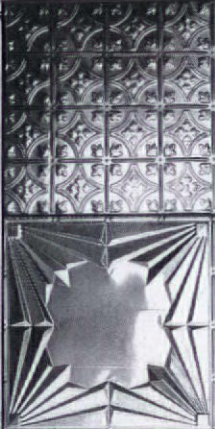


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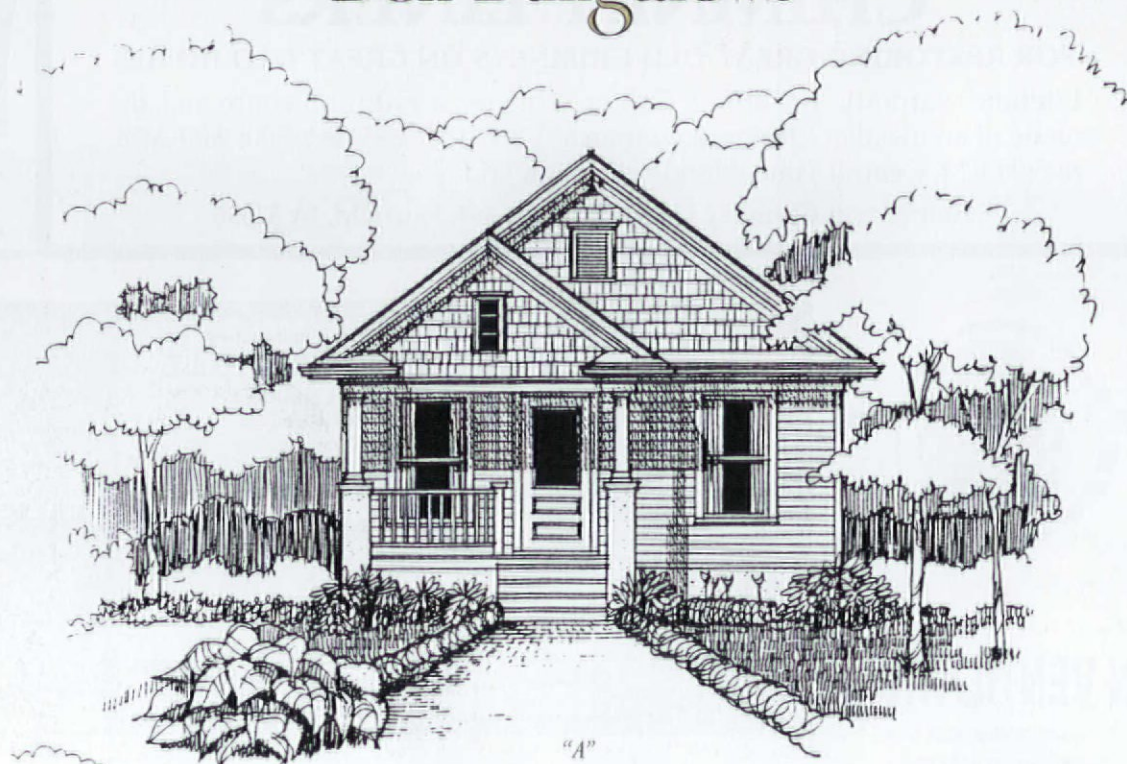
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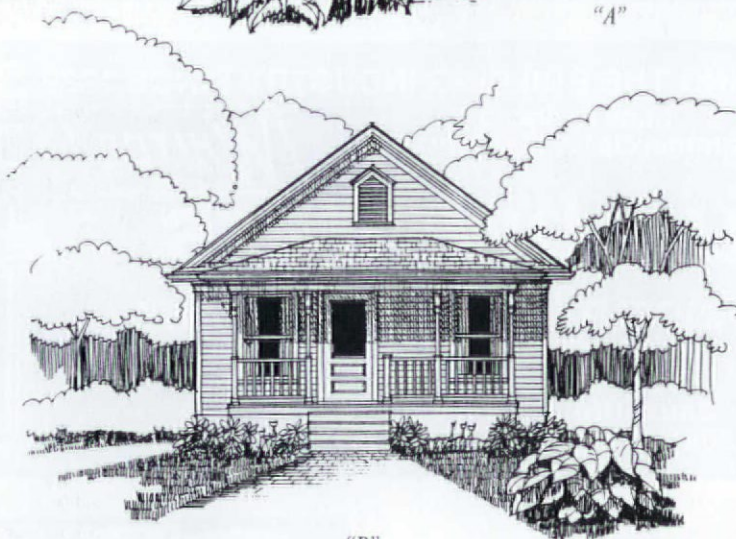
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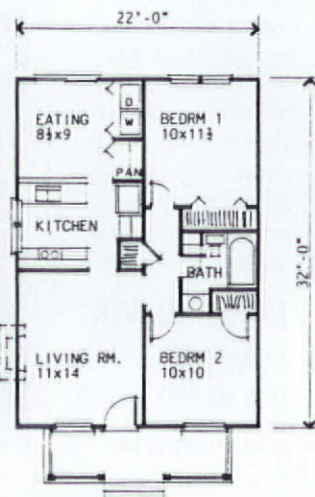
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"A"



"B"



FLOOR PLAN

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Plan: RT-2A-PV

Costs: \$170; \$230 (set of 5); \$290 (set of 8)

Square Footage: 704'

Ceiling Height: 9' (first floor)

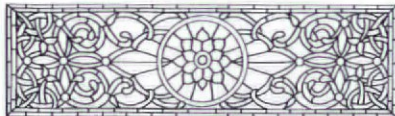
Overall Dimensions:

Width: 22'

Depth: 32'



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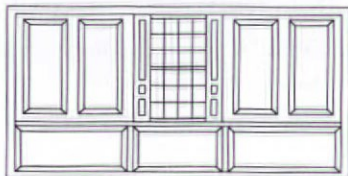


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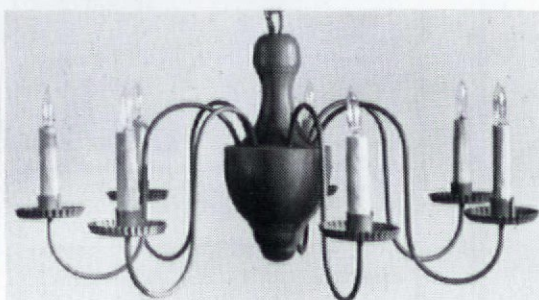
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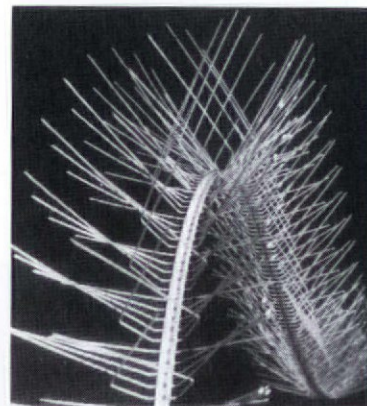
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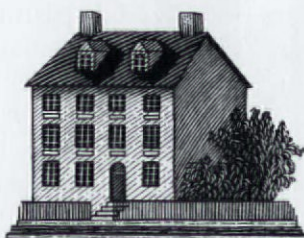
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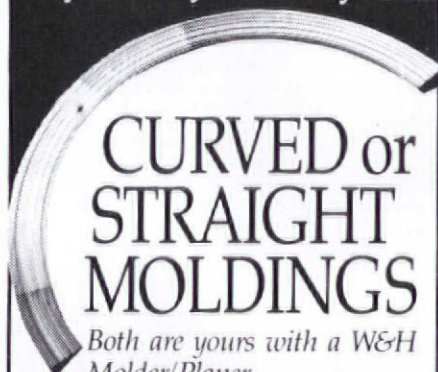
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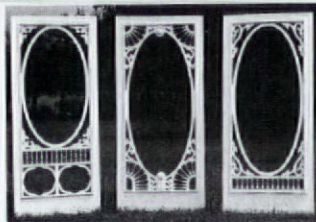
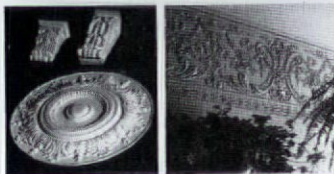


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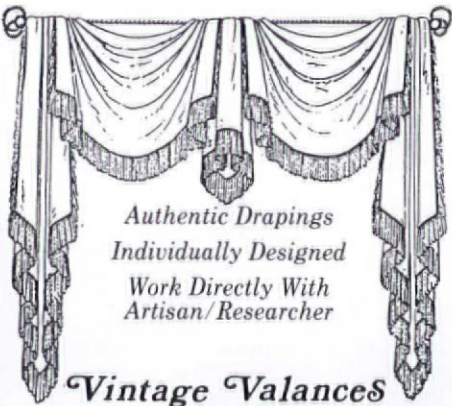
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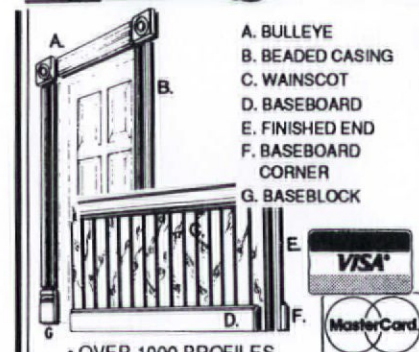
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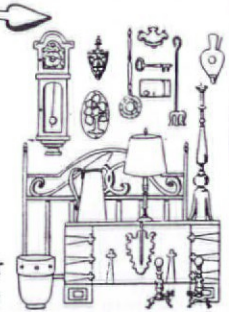


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# REMUDDLING

[opinion]



## DOUBLE TROUBLE

ONCE UPON A TIME, IN THE TOWN OF WASHINGTON, Iowa, two envious sisters lived in identical Neo-classical houses. The first sister built her grand house in the early 1900s, fitting her position as a wealthy socialite. The second sister, who was jealous and not so wealthy, soon built her own house that was a mirror-image copy.

As the years passed, fate was kinder to the jealous sister's house. Although it was moved across town, twice converted into a church, and used as a Farm Bureau building, it is once again a single-family dwelling. Not so with the wealthy sister's house. As Linda L. Bean, who contributed this month's Remuddling, says, "In my opin-

*Walls encased in 60s-style concrete and a glass block column tell this house's tale of Remuddled woe. However, its identical twin (below) is still a grand Neo-Classical building.*



ion, the jealous sister won out. The wealthy sister, so much wanting to make a statement, has [found] her house turned into a concrete-clad apartment building. It is hard to believe that these structures were virtually identical to the eye, but I saw the conversion happen in the early 1960s."

Although the twin houses survived the rivalry between the troublesome twosome, it would seem that one of the identical abodes did not live happily ever after.



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## Vernacular Houses

# Stovewood Houses of Wisconsin



**S**TRETCHING FROM THE DOOR PENINSULA TO THE Lake Superior shore, upper Wisconsin claims one of North America's largest collections of stovewood architecture. This somewhat rare, but practical, 19th-century construction type is linked to northern immigrant populations, particularly the Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, German, and Polish communities.

The heart of stovewood construction is logs, usually white cedar, cut into short uniform sections. To build a wall, individual pieces were stacked perpendicular to the length in a bed of lime mortar. Since the round butts were left exposed, the logs resembled well-organized piles of firewood. Occasionally, these pieces were split lengthwise before being encased in mortar. Solid stovewood walls

commonly measured 16" to 18" in thickness. Corners consisted of hewn or squared timbers piled as stone quoins would be in a masonry building. Variations also employed stovewood as a nogging material.

Stovewood construction provided immigrants with a practical approach to erecting a shelter. Since it didn't require a large quantity of straight timber and could be erected by an individual builder, stovewood was considered by many to be a useful and cost-effective building material.

— MARTIN C. PERKINS  
*Mukwonago, Wisconsin*



*The built-up corners of hewn timber on the c.1884 Kruza House (above) function like stone quoins. (below) Both rounded and split lengths of stovewood are stacked in the open panels of this c.1900 barn.*

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