



# The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

BY JOSEPH PELL LOMBARDI

## The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

Through a collection of images and an extensively researched history, Joseph Pell Lombardi provides a first-time comprehensive narrative into the lyrical Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House and its significance. Being a unique-to-the world home, it is not only physically extraordinary, its history is a compelling story.

The story of a highly skilled professional conservation of an important monument, this beautiful book will appeal to all including architectural historians, preservationists and those interested in remarkable homes.





# The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

BY JOSEPH PELL LOMBARDI

*“An arrested carousel”*  
A visitor

George W. Dibble  
Shortly after his acquisition of the Octagon House from Joseph Stiner  
Circa 1882





Aerial view overlooking the Hudson River



From the northeast - 20th century



Aerial view from the east



South stair to the verandah



The verandah



Early fall at Octagon House



Inside the Foxglove Garden



Lord & Burnham greenhouse with the shed and the artist studio



Carriage house and shed



Foxglove Garden



Eastern elk weather vane, evening silhouette



North stair gas lamp



The Octagon House birdhouse and lion at south flanking stair



Entry hall



Solarium



Stair from entry



Salon



Library



Dining room



Egyptian revival music room



Master bedroom



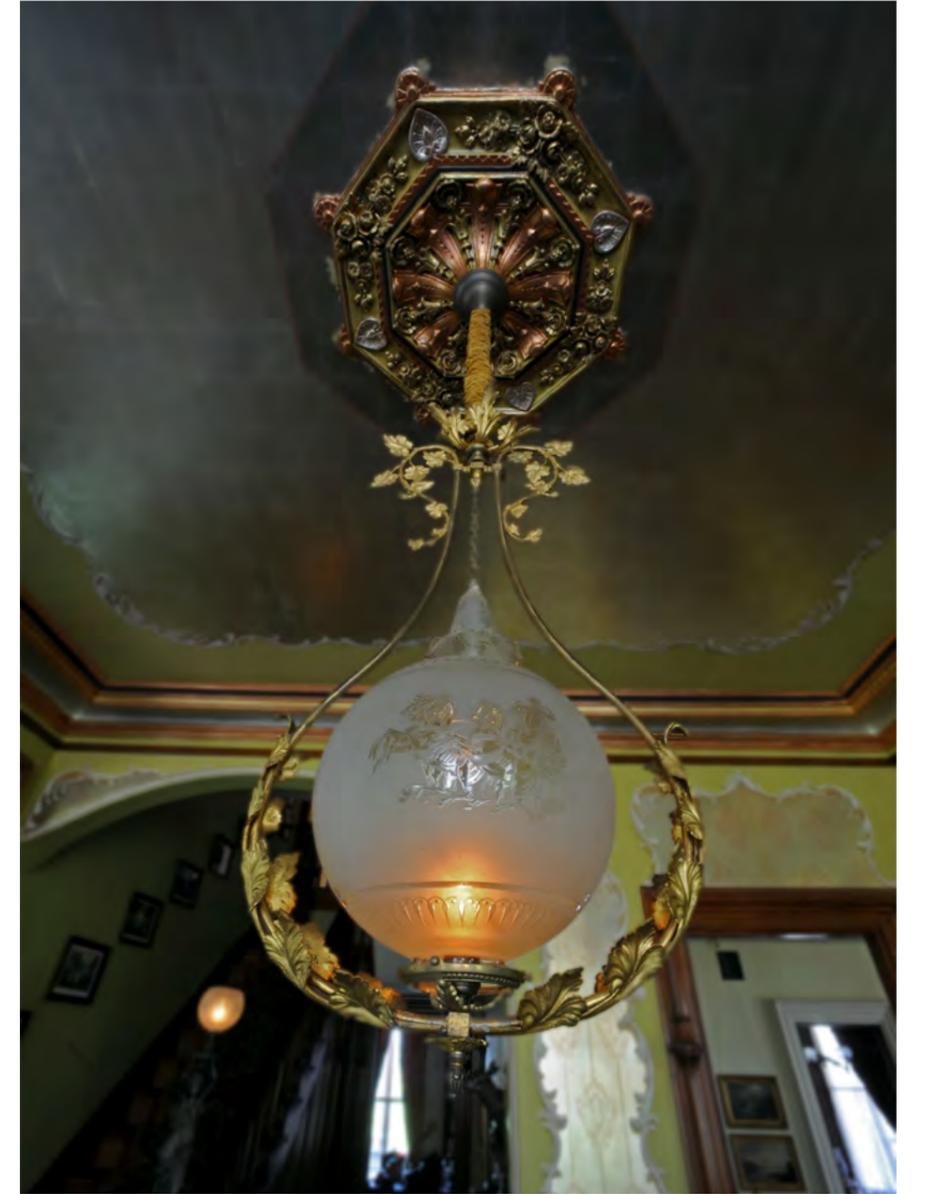
Kitchen



Second floor stair hall



Second floor bathroom



Entry chandelier and medallion



Dance room window



Dining room door, etched glass



The observatory



Dance room

# The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House

IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK

## Introduction

*“The story of a house is the story of life. Just as the history of a country is written down in architecture, so is the history of individuals to be traced by the houses in which they have lived. There it all is -- their beginning, their growth, their development or deterioration, the realization or the destruction of their dreams, the very pattern of their destiny as it was etched line by line.”*

Elise de Wolfe

The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House is one of the most visually unique homes in the world. Referencing Donato Bramante’s 1502 Tempietto in Rome, it is the only known residence constructed in the domed colonnaded octagonal form of an ancient classical temple. The exterior decoration is as distinct as its shape and adds to the unique-to-the-world appearance of this melodic structure. The exterior embellishments are decidedly festive with floral details in the cast iron cresting and railings and extensively carved wood scrollwork and capitals - all polychromatically painted in shades of rose, blue, violet, gray, tan and red.

The interiors and furnishings are as they were in 1872. Painted ceilings in floral patterns, stenciling, gilding, gas fixtures with a play on neo-Roman decoration and singular 8-sided motifs in the plasterwork, woodwork and etched glass continue the specialness of this remarkable house. Throughout the house are fine examples of American Renaissance Revival and Egyptian Revival style furnishings. The exterior and interior of the house, its decorations and its 1870s furnishings all reflect the late 19th century interest in exotic decoration. Like the 18th century French pavilions on the outskirts of Paris, the colorful Octagon House is meant to entertain and amuse its viewers; a rarity in somber post-Civil War America.

The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) was the first house to be bought by the National Trust and resold to a private citizen. Since 1978, I have undertaken a complete conservation of the interior and exterior of the house and the grounds, furnished the house with original and contemporary furniture and corrected extensive structural problems, including separation of the dome.

My goal was not to remove all traces of age, but to hold together the fragile exotic beauty of this lyrical home.



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House 2011



The Tempietto 1502

## Irvington-On-Hudson

*“A noble river, running majestically along, always imparts life and spirit to the scenery of its banks.”*

Richard Brown

To the north of the island of Manhattan, the east bank of the Hudson slopes up gradually from the river to low hills. The outlook from the hills very beautifully encompasses the ever changing river, the steep palisades of the opposite shore and, twenty five miles above the city, a great widening of the river which the early Dutch settlers called the Tappan Zee (Sea).

In the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Frederick Philipse began purchasing large tracts of land on the east bank of the Hudson River. Born in 1626 in the Netherlands, Philipse emigrated to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (later New York City) in the mid-1650’s. He prospered through successful business activities and a marriage to a wealthy woman. Philipse bought land from Indians and patroons (early Dutch entrepreneurs) who had been granted land by the Dutch. Philipse leased portions of his land to Dutch settlers who cleared the for-



The Palisades, W. G. Wall



The Tappan Zee, John Williamson 1875

ests and established small farms. In 1693, the British, who had taken over the colony, confirmed the Philipse holdings. Through continuing acquisitions, the Philipse family became lords of a vast manor of 90,000 acres. When the Revolutionary War began, the Philipses chose loyalty to the British Crown - a decision, after America’s success, which resulted in forfeiture of their manor. At a public auction of 1785, the tenant-farmers were able to buy the farms they had leased.

In 1849 a railroad was placed on the east bank of the river enabling passengers traveling from New York City to reach the area which would become Irvington in less than one hour. With the tracks being on the edge of the river, travelers enjoyed delightful, direct river views. The surrounding old Dutch farmland began to be purchased by prominent New Yorkers who erected country seats and summer residences overlooking the picturesque Hudson and the Tappan Zee.

Twenty miles north of the City, in 1848, the small village of Dearman, later Irvington, was created from one of the farms. Its main street became lined with small shops and large trees which formed a long tunnel stretching down to the glimmering river. The area eventually became home to numerous noted residents, including Cyrus W. Field, John Jacob Astor III, Charles L. Tiffany and, its most celebrated resident and namesake, Washington Irving.

In the 1850’s, entrepreneurs bought a tract of farmland one mile to the south of Dearman to create another small village with a Main Street perpendicular to the River. It was to be called Abbotsford. The sale of building plots resulted in several houses built as village houses fronting on the “Main Street”, but with only a few plots sold, the idea of a separate village was eventually abandoned and the area became the outskirts of the present-day village of Irvington.



The proposed village of Abbotsford

## THE OCTAGON HOUSE 1858-1975

### Orson Squire Fowler

*“Man’s greatest knowledge is HIMSELF to know.”*

O.S. Fowler

The octagon house fad in 19th century America was inspired by the publication of an 1848 book, *The Octagon House, a Home for All*, by Orson Squire Fowler, a phrenologist, sexologist and amateur architect. Orson Squire Fowler was as extraordinary as his book. Patriarchal in appearance thanks to his luxuriant beard, high forehead and piercing eyes, he was by nature the epitome of the nineteenth century individualist.



Orson Squire Fowler

Born in 1809 on a farm in upstate New York, Fowler began his studies for the ministry at Amherst College, but he soon found himself captivated by the phrenological doctrine recently introduced to the United States by Johann Kaspar Spurzheim, a Viennese doctor who held that character could be analyzed by examination of the cranium. This nineteenth-century vision of psychiatry so appealed to Orson Fowler that, with his brother Lorenzo and sister Charlotte, he established himself as a practicing phrenologist. In 1835, Orson Fowler described his profession:

*“Phrenology teaches that the mind, instead of employing the WHOLE brain for EACH mental function, uses one particular part of it for one class of mental functions, and another for another, just as it does the eye for seeing, the ear for hearing, etc.; that it uses that part under 12 [numbered parts assumed to be associated with particular functions] for an affection of fear, that under 13 for kindness, etc. Now the exercise of any corporeal organ increases its size as well as strength. If then one part of the brain is used more often than another, it will grow more, and of course elevate that portion of the skull above it; so that if a person exercises the feeling of benevolence more often than he does that of apprehension, the portion of the brain under 13 will be larger and more elevated than that under 12, as much more so as he is more benevolent than apprehensive. So of all the other organs, if we can tell what portion of the brain the mind uses for each mental function, and how much larger one portion is than another, we can tell just how much the person exercises certain classes of mental functions more than he does others. This has been done by practical observation.”*

Phrenologists believed that, like a muscle, there was a correlation between the exercise of mental functions and elevated and depressed areas of the cranium. They would examine the contours of a head comparing them with diagrams and three-dimensional models of the human head containing numbered areas, to determine which parts of the brain were being used more often than others. The bumps and crannies, they assumed, manifested peculiarities of behavior. The phrenologist would then recommend cultivation or restraint of a particular behavior. Subsequent observations for changes in elevations would determine if the recommendations were being followed.

Although Phrenology was enormously popular in the mid-nineteenth century, it was not absent of critics. The New York Times in August 2, 1878, comments on the science:

*“In fact, but one fault can be found with phrenology, and that is that it is not true, and there is not the trace of a shadow of a ghost of a reason for believing it to be true.”*

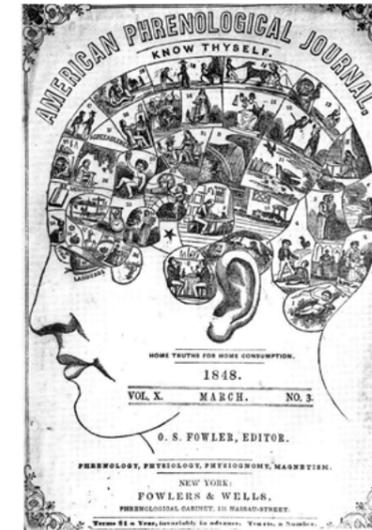
And the Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle reports on February 6, 1874, on the departure of Professor Franklin after a phrenological lecture in Fishkill, New York:

*“He departed from the village by the milk train on Sunday evening, and as he left he was presented with a few eggs, and in order that he might not have the trouble of breaking them, they were hurled at his noble cranium.”*

Often overlooked, the practice of Phrenology prescribed ways in which to improve behavior. This was accomplished by recommendations as to how to restrain or cultivate a problematic behavior. For example, Fowler’s recommendation for the cultivation of individuality was to “notice whatever comes within range of your vision.” To restrain individuality, his recommendation was to “look and stare less, and think more.”

Besides examining the heads of the nation’s philanthropists, criminals, artists, statesmen and writers, Orson Fowler published the American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany, which survived well into the twentieth century and issued, over his imprint, a stream of phrenological, health and sex manuals. As author, marriage consultant and sex scientist, Orson Fowler may be said to have foreshadowed Sigmund Freud by looking for answers to the question of why we are what we are. In time, Orson Fowler advocated most of the reforms of his century and advised on a wide range of subjects including woman’s suffrage and wages (“equality with men”), children’s rights (“every child is entitled”) and cohabiting (“enjoyment is the test of nature”).

In 1848, Orson Fowler published



Phrenological chart

*The Octagon House, A Home for All or a New, Cheap, Convenient and Superior Mode of Building.* In his book, Fowler advocated the use of the octagonal plan for houses on the suppositions that it:

- encloses one-fifth more space than a square plan (although an octagonal shape is difficult to build);
- creates rooms more accessible to each other (certainly true);
- is more beautiful because it approaches the shape of a circle (another truth);
- receives twice as much sunlight by having eight sides instead of four (a delightful truth);
- allows viewing into the grounds from all directions (a fine attribute); and
- gives square rooms with triangular closets between them just where they are wanted (true, but triangular rooms are awkward).

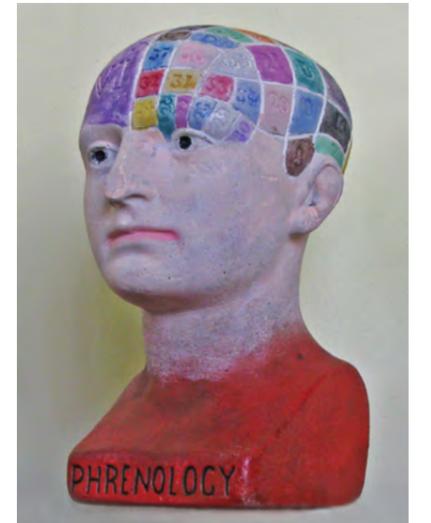
Not mentioned by Fowler is the amusing sense of motion which is caused by the lose of orientation in a house with eight directions.

The book went on to make numerous further recommendations regarding ventilation, water filtration, central heating, construction detailing and planting. Fowler’s ideas on domestic architecture caught the imagination of the country.

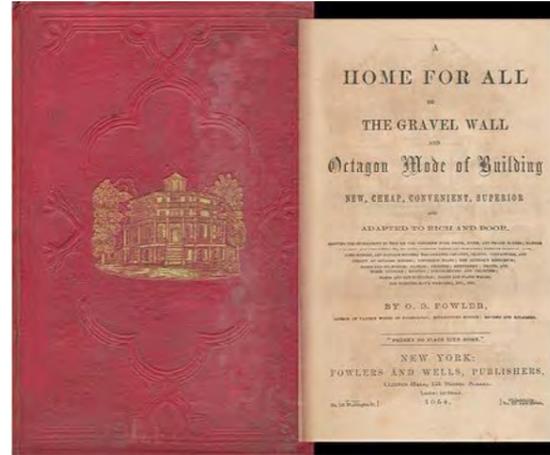
An interesting parallel to the advocating of the octagon enclosing more space is Orson Fowler’s comments on head shape:

*“There is much more brain in a round head of a given size than in a long and narrow one of the same size.”*

During the 1850’s, Fowler began work on his own octagon house



Phrenological head



Home for All, Octagon House collection

near Fishkill, New York. His extraordinary house, perched upon a knoll overlooking the banks of the Hudson River with the Catskill Mountains beyond, was three stories high and contained sixty rooms. The main floor boasted four large rectangular rooms: parlor, sitting room, dining room and amusement room, along with four triangular side rooms, all

connected by doors. Each of the upper floors contained twenty rooms, among them a playroom, a dancing room, a gymnastic room for unlaced female dress reformers, a dressing room for every bedroom, a library, a room for minerals, shells and portraits, an author's study and a prophets chamber. Verandahs at three levels surrounded the house and the house was topped by a glass roofed octagonal cupola.

Fowler received many prominent visitors including the journalists Horace Greeley and Charles A. Dana and the women's liberators Amelia Bloomer and Lucretia Mott. None gave a more vivid description of the monumental octagon than a reporter for Godey's Lady's Book, who wrote:

*"The appearance is noble, massive, grand and imposing, especially as seen from a distance. It has piazzas all around at each story, which makes delightful promenades. Its main, or through entry, is in the ground or first story, devoted to work and storage; and its stairway is in the center, which greatly facilitates ready access from each room to all the others, and saves steps and which is lighted from the cupola, in the center of which is a glass dome, which also lights its stair and the center rooms."*

In his octagonal dwelling Fowler lectured on phrenology, entertained his bemused visitors, dined at his vegetarian table and wrote articles for his Phrenological Journal. The waning of the phrenological fad and the "Panic" of 1857, with its mounting unemployment and bank failures, brought an end to Orson Fowler's resources.

In September of that year Fowler rented his octagon house along with its 130 acres to a New York real estate operator. The house survived only four more decades, passing through a series of ill-starred owners. By 1880, the house stood empty with broken windows, decayed roof and rotted verandahs. It was condemned as "a public hazard" and, in August of 1897, Fowler's octagon house was razed by dynamite.

The builder of the octagon was spared the sight of its final destruction. Orson Fowler, the celebrated phrenologist, sex educator and amateur architect had died in 1887, ten years before the demise of his ambitious house.



Octagonal Home of Orson Fowler, Fishkill, New York (*A Home for All*, 1854 edition)



Two story 1850 octagon house - Montvale, NJ

## Paul J. Armour

*"Near some fair town I'd have a private seat, built uniform, not little nor too great; Better if on rising ground it stood, On this side fields, on that neighboring wood."*

Promfret's Choice

In 1858, Paul J. Armour, a Manhattan banker, purchased four plots along West Clinton Avenue, the then proposed "Main Street" of Abbotsford. Since it had been last used as fields for farming, the site was free of structures and vegetation. The open fields permitted sweeping views of the Hudson River valley.

Armour carefully selected the site on which he would build his new house. The site, if Abbotsford had been fully developed, would have been a double corner with a neighbor on only one side. The north boundary was the existing West Clinton Avenue; the south boundary, a proposed new street and the eastern boundary, the Croton Aqueduct. The Aqueduct is an 1830s subterranean water tunnel connecting upstate reservoirs to New York City. Atop the Aqueduct is a foot and bicycle pathway connecting the Hudson Valley villages.

Armour constructed a flat roofed two story house with an octagonal floor plan, a porch and a main entrance facing the proposed "Main Street" of Abbotsford. Based up probes and the roof which still remains between the 2nd floor ceiling and the 3rd floor of the current house, Armour's octagon house was probably very similar to a 2 story octagon house in Montvale, NJ.

In 1860, 56 year old Armour moved into the house with Rebecca, his 38 year old second wife, five of his ten children and two Irish servant girls. Paul J. Armour died in 1866 and, in 1872, Rebecca sold the property to Joseph H. Stiner for \$27,000.

Armour's choice of an octagonal shape for a house was most assuredly based on Orson Squire Fowler's 1848 book, *The Octagon House, A Home for All*.

## THE PAUL J. ARMOUR OCTAGON HOUSE (1858-1872)

*“Why continue to build in the same SQUARE form of all past ages.”*

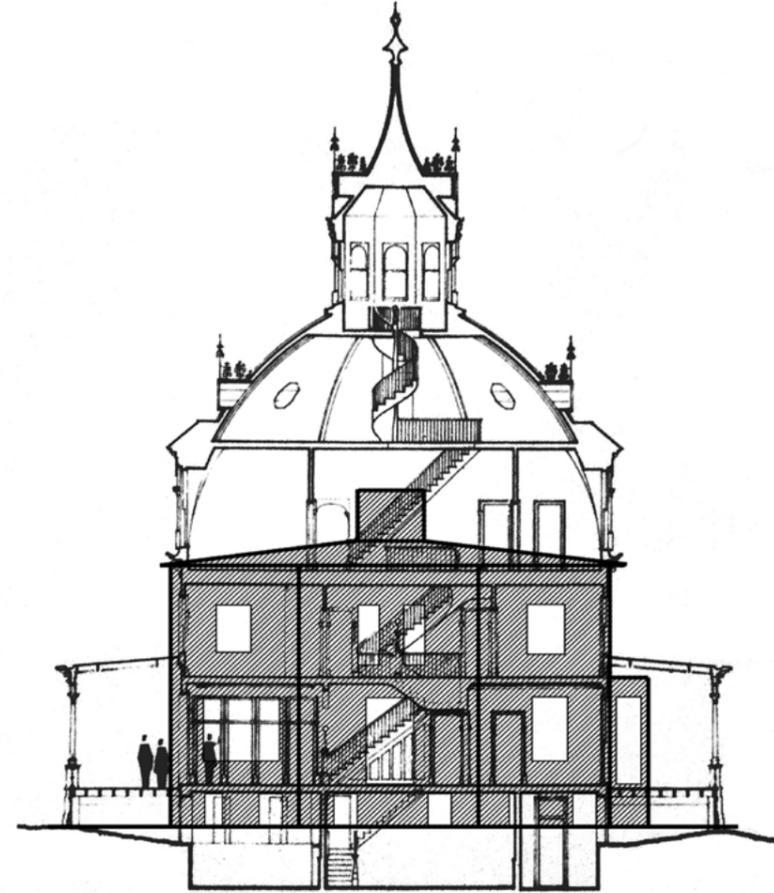
Orson Squire Fowler

The thousand or more octagon houses that rose in America during the mid-nineteenth century can be attributed directly to Orson Fowler’s inspiration. The octagon house which Paul J. Armour built in 1858-60 consisted of two stories and a raised basement. No views have ever been found of this early house, but it is supposed that its appearance would have been very comparable to a similar size octagon house in Montvale, NJ .

Implicit in Armour’s Octagon House are Fowler’s tenets of “convenience and delight” derived from the “compactness within and generous light from without” of the octagonal form. Extending five feet above ground level, the basement had numerous windows affording indirect light and ventilation. The basement also received the delivery of staples to the house, which were processed and then supplied to upper floors by a dumbwaiter. A central, vertical stairway spine served a dual purpose as circulation core and ventilation shaft, permitting hot air to rise and disperse in the summer and to heat upper floors in the winter. Windows on

eight sides provided continuous daylight and views in all directions. The color scheme of the original house consisted of tan siding, dark tan trim and deep green window sashes.

Stiner’s 1872 expansion of the property and the reorientation of the entrance to the house obscures the landscaping of the Armour period and no outbuildings remain from that period.



The Paul J. Armour Octagon House superimposed on the Joseph Stiner Octagon House

## Joseph H. Stiner

*“We boys at times wondered if Mr. Stiner came over to buy goods or tell stories.”*

Abraham Wakeman



Dobbs Ferry Register, July 9, 1897

In 1872 the Armour house was purchased for \$27,000 by Joseph H. Stiner, a prominent New York City tea merchant. Stiner immediately extended and improved the property by acquiring land to the south from James Alexander Hamilton (son of President Alexander Hamilton), substantially reconstructing the interiors and adding the elaborate dome and verandah.

The increased height made it possible to take greater advantage of its extensive prospect over the Hudson Valley. Stiner, his first wife Hannah, and their six children used the house as a summer and weekend retreat. The ornate details added at this time gave the house a wonderful festive appearance.

Stiner had been born in Hungary in 1827. After college, he served in the Austrian Army in the War of 1848 with France and Italy and emigrated to the United States in 1852. Prior to the United States, he visited Jamaica in the West Indies where he met his stepbrother’s daughter and future wife, Hannah, whom he would marry in 1856. Born in Jamaica in 1836, Hannah’s mother was Esther Henriques, a member of an aristocratic West Indian family.

Stiner began a small chain of tea and spice shops in New York City in 1853 with his stepbrother and future father-in-law, Jacob Stiner, who had been in the trade in the West Indies. The business partnership ended in litigation in 1867. Joseph Stiner retained over a dozen stores upon

settlement and continued to market spices, condensed milk, cocoa, flavoring extracts as well as tea and coffee. In 1871, he unsuccessfully attempted to establish a wholesale tea enterprise and suffered heavy losses.

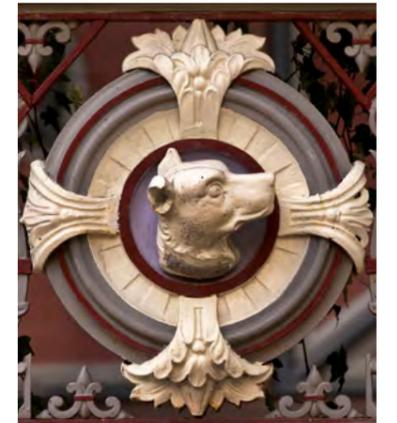
This financial failure did not prevent Stiner’s purchase of the Armour property in 1872, its spectacular rebuilding and enlargement and the acquisition of an additional one-and-a-half acre parcel from the Hamilton estate to the south for \$16,700.

Stiner traveled extensively throughout the world, and was noted as a connoisseur and collector of art. A breeder of horses and dogs, he had the head of his show dog “Prince,” his prize winning White English Terrier, a breed now extinct, cast in iron in the center medallion of each bay of the cast iron railing of the new verandah.

In 1878 Joseph Stiner was a member of a real estate pool losing



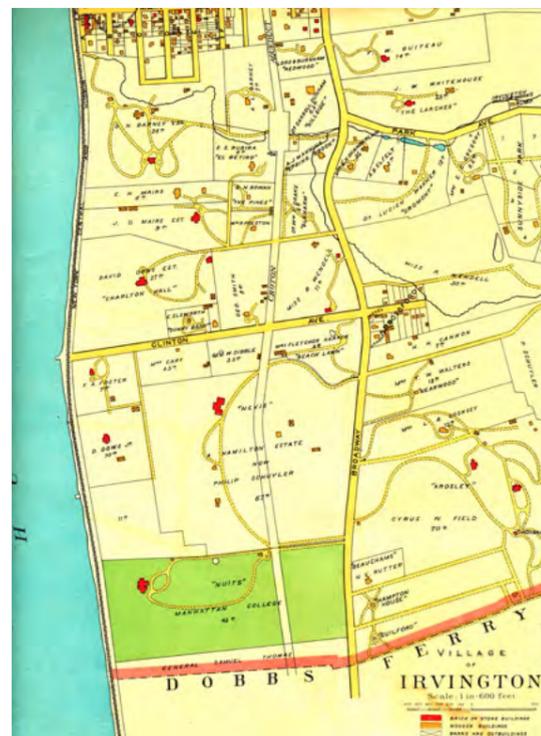
George Earl, White English Terrier, “Prince” c. 1856



“Prince,” cast-iron railing

\$135,000 by speculation and, in 1881, Hannah Stiner died. Amidst these unhappy circumstances, Stiner sold the Octagon House on January 3, 1882 for \$22,250 an amount that was less than what he had paid ten years earlier for the unembellished property without the additional land. The family moved to neighboring Dobbs Ferry, where he died of cancer of the larynx in 1897. His obituary in the New York Times described him as:

*“at one time the largest retail dealer in teas in the world, his firm owning seventy-six large stores in the City and Brooklyn. He owned and occupied a beautiful villa at Irvington-on-Hudson, but more recently removed to Dobbs Ferry, where he had a handsome place.”*



1870 Map -- Village of Irvington

## THE JOSEPH H. STINER OCTAGON HOUSE (1872-1882)

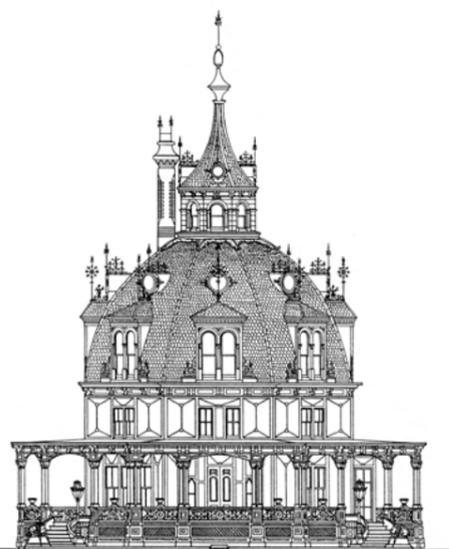
*“... seek for a design at once original, striking, appropriate and picturesque”*

Samuel Sloan

Of the hundreds of octagon houses constructed in nineteenth-century America, none were more distinctive than Stiner’s home after his 1870’s rebuilding. Except for the foundation, portions of the exterior walls and some of the interior partitions, Stiner’s campaign resulted in a completely rebuilt structure.

Stiner’s most visually striking contribution was the addition of a two-story dome surmounted by an Observatory and a colonnaded verandah reached by paired sweeping stairs flanked by cast stone lions. The verandah has fifty-six columns with capitals carved in the shape of flowers local to the grounds and an ornate cast iron railing. As Doell & Doell, Garden Historians said in their 1985 *Site Visit Report for the Armour-Stiner House*: “The verandah brilliantly integrates structure and setting, residence and grounds. From it, the viewer may witness the entire landscape which surrounds the residence. Consequently, the verandah transcends its function as an architectural appendage. Interior and exterior interpenetrate as never before, and the landscape becomes their medium of exchange.”

Here, in nineteenth century America, Stiner created in wood,



**The Octagon House**

slate and cast iron the ultimate American exotic villa, a summer retreat whimsically built to entertain and amuse its viewers - built at a time when whimsical houses were not being built in America. While there are French “Pavillions” and English Royal retreats in England built to amuse, the Octagon House is the only American example. One viewer aptly called it an “arrested carousel.”

The concept of a villa goes back thousands of years to the Romans who built countryside pleasure houses in a classical form for occasional use. Gerase Wheeler, a nineteenth century American architect, defines villas in his 1867 book, *Homes for the People*:

*“The word originated with the Italians, who applied it to those pleasure houses built in the vicinity of their larger towns, by men of wealth and leisure. They were not houses of constant residence...the villa should resemble the early buildings which gave it birth...”*

The notion of houses that “were not houses of constant residence” has 18<sup>th</sup> century precedence in the German *lustschloss*, the English country house and the French *maison de plaisance*. Jerome Zerbe in his book *Les Pavillons* of the Eighteenth Century described a *maison de plaisance* as the pavilion that provided an escape from the trying duties of Court life and *pavillons de rendezvous* or *folies d’amour* as the pavilions which sprang up all over Paris for the installation of a mistress.

*“We take our title from these garden-houses, if big enough to be lived in, that have a particular garden quality and were constructed out of a desire to get away.”*

Les Pavillons

Both *Folie* in French and *folly* in English, suggest a building which is either bizarre or extravagant.

The Octagon House is not only an exotic villa and a retreat built to amuse, it is also the only known residence constructed in the fully domed colonnaded form of an ancient classical temple. Complimenting Amer-

ica’s third quarter of the 19th century fascination with classical forms Stiner’s villa references Donato Bramante’s elegantly proportioned 1502 *Tempietto* in Rome. An Octagon shape, topped with a dome and surrounded with a colonnade has been used as a building form for thousands of years.

The configuration of an octagonal structure surmounted by a dome and surrounded by a colonnade has ancient origins as in Greece in the *Phillipeion* at Olympia and the *Tholos* at Epidaurus both from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Vitruvius describes in his first century B.C. book, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, an eight-sided structure known as the *Tower of Wind* which was built in Athens at that time. Octagonal and circular forms, crowned with hemispherical domes and surrounded with a colonnade were actively used for early Roman temples of which several examples of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries remain. The octagonal shape has symbolism rooted in Medieval churches. Saint Ambrose explained that the 4th century octagonal baptistery at Milan symbolized salvation and new life. The number eight standing for the eight day (the day of Christ’s resurrection), the eight day of the world (that of eternity, after the traditional seven ages) and the eight day of human life (that of eternal life). The inscription on the wall, credited to Saint Ambrose reads:

*“Eight-niched soars this temple for sacred rites,  
Eight corners has its font,  
Right it is to build this baptismal hall about the sacred number eight,  
For here the people are reborn.”*



The Tempietto by Donato Bramante - 1510

During the Renaissance, it was rediscovered and used mainly as an ecclesiastical design and in eighteenth century England, the form was popular for garden pavilions in Country House landscapes. The Stiner Octagon House is the rebirth of an ancient classical form uniquely adopted for domestic use.

The popularity of classical forms in the third quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century America was based upon redecoration by Empress Eugenie, wife of Napoleon III, who ruled France from 1852 to 1870. In the redecoration of her palaces, the Empress used a Louis XVI revival style which was widely publicized by the growing number of design books and magazines of the time. The original 18<sup>th</sup> century Louis XVI style had been a revival of interest in the classical arts of ancient Greece and Rome inspired by the Pompeian and Herculean discoveries of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

The classical form of Stiner's house was given a romantic quality by coloring. A half dozen shades are employed to highlight the various applied moldings, decorative scrollwork, capitals and consoles. The main siding is light rose, the window sashes are deep red and the surfaces within the circular moldings are crimson. The stacked moldings and fasciae framing windows and walls are cocoa-tan and two shades of gray. The finer details of the capitals, railings and porch ceiling are picked out in red, white, violet, light blue and several shades of gray. The dome is festooned in patterned red, green and black slate accented with gold painted cast iron cresting and elaborately carved, painted wood scrollwork.

While the primary inspiration for both Armour's and Stiner's campaigns was Orson Fowler's renowned publication, his ideas had been ex-



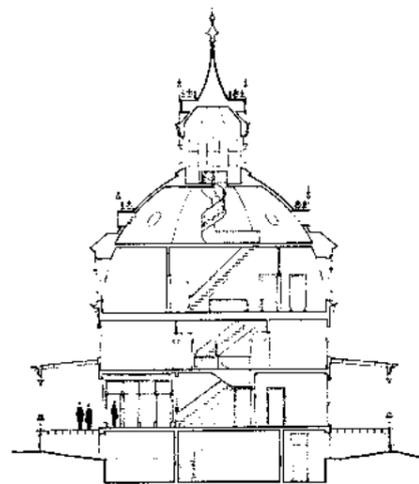
United States Capital 1855-63

panded upon by the 1872 building campaign which uniquely weaves Orson Fowler's form and function philosophies with an ancient classical form.

Stiner's Octagon House consists of a full basement, four stories and an Observatory. As in Armour's time, the basement is seven feet below ground level, but with a ceiling height of ten and one-half feet, the high windows on all eight sides bring indirect light and ventilation. Access to the raised first floor verandah and main entrance was now by means of the pair of magnificent curving stairs. A service stairway on the south facade gives access to the basement.

A central, vertical stairway spine continued to serve the dual purpose of a circulation core and a ventilation shaft and it is topped by an observatory with eight windows. When two of the windows are opened in the direction of the prevailing breeze a negative pressure is created within the house. In the summer this causes the hot air to rise and disperse out of the observatory which induces the cool air in from the basement. Victorians were greatly concerned with the relationship between health and architectural design. Like his contemporaries, "ventilation was", according to Fowler, "as important in a house as breath to human life and strength." The verandah encircled the entire first floor of Stiner's residence. As Fowler noted, "the advantages of having them all around the house is considerable, allowing you to choose sun or shade, breeze or shelter from it, as comfort dictates."

The basement contains the billiard room, wine storeroom, service kitchen, larder, laundry room and furnace room. The first floor, raised above ground level in the tradition of a *piano nobile*, contains rooms for



Section

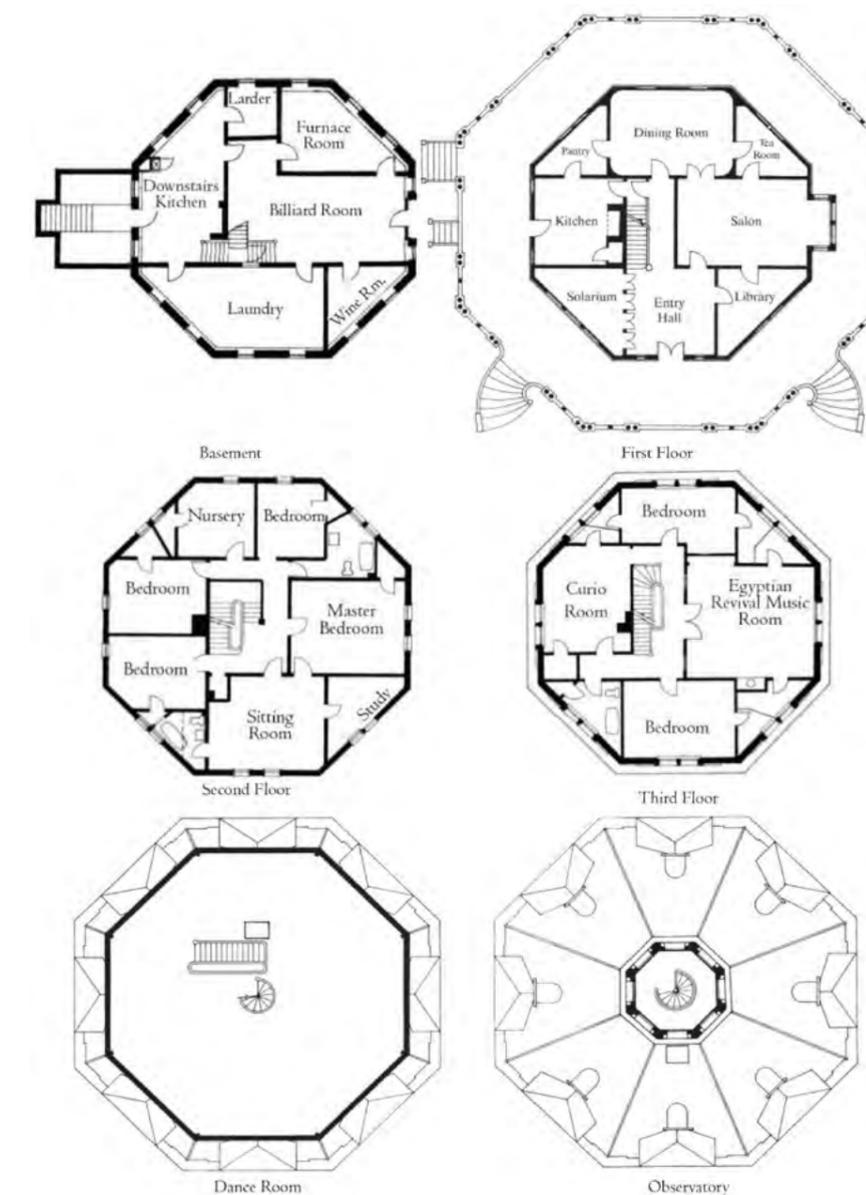
formal and social functions. These consist of a main salon, dining room, tea room, solarium and library. A pantry, adjacent to the dining room, is linked to the downstairs kitchen by means of a dumbwaiter. Flanking the pantry is the upstairs kitchen with detailing and finishing that clearly indicate that, unlike the downstairs service kitchen, it was used by the family. The upstairs kitchen is indicative of the emerging women's role in family work in the middle and upper classes. As Harriet Beecher Stowe stated in her 1869 book, *The American Woman's Home*:

*"To the minds of most children and servants, 'to be a lady', is almost synonymous with 'to be waited on and do no work'. It is the earnest desire of the author of this volume to make plain the falsity of this growing popular feeling, and to show how much happier and more efficient family life will become when it is strengthened, sustained and adorned by family work."*

All "the rough and bad smelling work of the family" was conducted in the downstairs service kitchen.

The second floor contains a three-room master bedroom suite with a sitting room, master bedroom and dressing room along with a master bathroom. In addition there are four more bedrooms, a full bathroom and a toilet room. On the third floor is the high ceilinged Egyptian Revival women's gymnasium/music room (Fowler recommended a high-ceilinged room with large windows facing north for the lady of the house to practice dance and water colors), a bedroom with a bathroom, an additional bedroom, a room for the exhibit of collections and a full bathroom accessed by the hall. The fourth floor consists of the unpartitioned dance room with eight windows and a spiral staircase up to the fifth level observatory. The floor plans displayed, as Fowler stated:

*"...all the peculiarities and the advantages of our octagon style, namely, compactness and contiguity of rooms, central stairway, closets, and small bedrooms."*



Interior rooms of the residence are appointed in a hierarchical order befitting their stature. Door and window surrounds of the formal rooms are elaborately endowed with now extinct long-leaf yellow pine octagonal moldings and bases with florid Gothic Revival acanthus leaf capitals. Windows and doors of the upper floors maintain the same vocabulary, but with simpler detailing. The less formal chambers, closets and the basement rooms are lined with beaded-board wainscoting. In the bathrooms and basement the wainscoting has alternating long-leaf yellow pine and walnut slats. Similarly, the floors in the women's gymnasium/music room are alternating long-leaf yellow pine and walnut strips. The first floor rooms and the hallways throughout the house are long-leaf yellow pine strips. The bedrooms have sub-floors for wall to wall carpeting.

The town of Irvington had no central water system until 1883. Rainwater cisterns provided the then-considered-healthier rainwater to the kitchen and bathrooms. A cistern below the verandah dating to Armour's time continued to provide a reservoir of water for the kitchen and cisterns on the third and fourth floors served the bathrooms. This system is as Fowler had recommended:

*"I should want these cisterns, because double-filtered rainwater is preferable to all other water for drinking and culinary purposes. And how much more handy to turn a faucet and draw water direct into a pail, than to raise it from the well, or from a cistern underground or below where you require it for use."*

In order to provide hot water, a water line was run into the kitchen wood stove and then to an adjacent tank. A pipe led from the tank to the bathrooms upstairs, with the upstairs cisterns providing the water pressure to drive it back up.

Gas lighting, fed by the village system, was an original component of the house when it was built. In the 1870s, gas illuminated the house from cellar to cupola, including two exterior lanterns. Central heating was also an integral feature of this summer house. To take the chill off spring and fall evenings, a coal-fired cast iron furnace in the cellar distrib-

uted rising hot air through tin ducts to the upper floor rooms. A system of speaking tubes connected the principal rooms with the service kitchen in the basement.

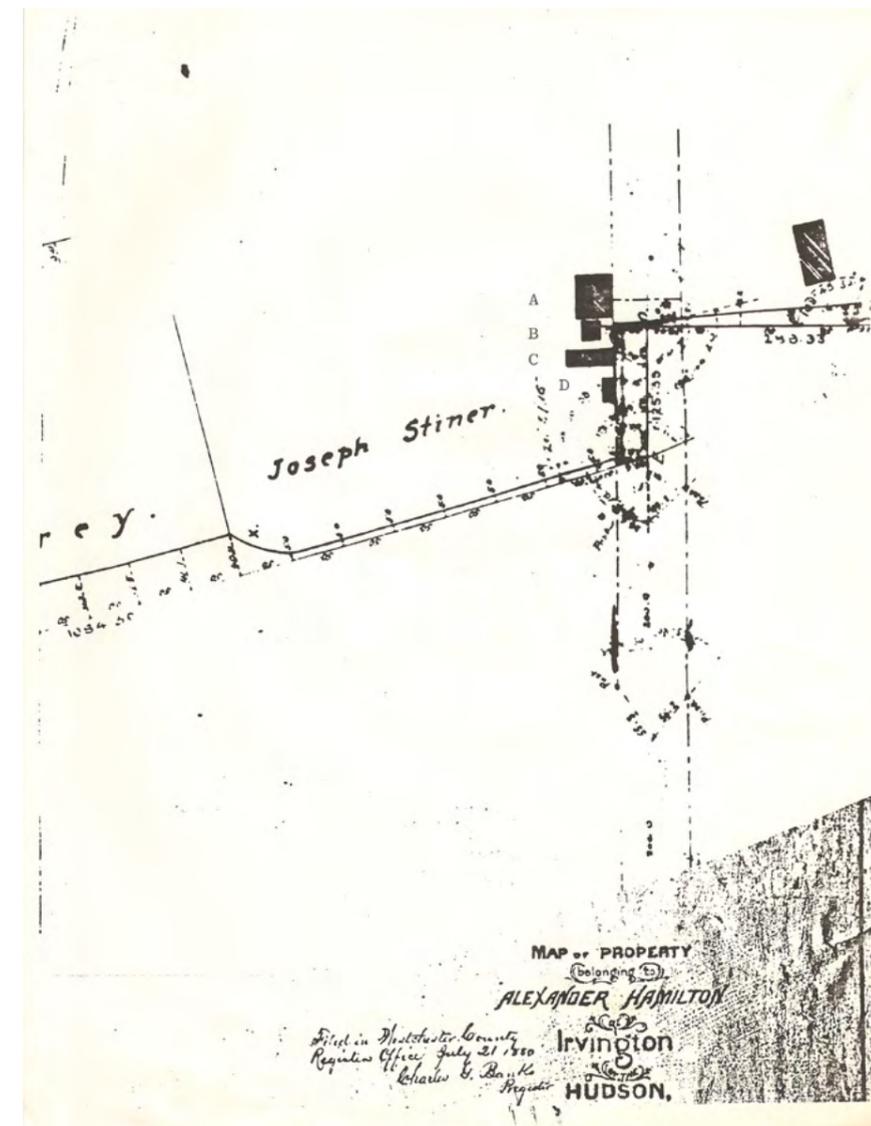
Several outbuildings existed in the grounds in Stiner's time including a greenhouse and a surviving Oriental style octagonal well house. A 2½ story Carriage House/Barn with servant's quarters above and a shed, both in the polychromatic colors of the house, were destroyed by fire in the 1940s and are now rebuilt.

In the tradition of the time, the entire grounds were carefully planted in a picturesque natural form with exotic specimens. A Chinese Cherry Tree (*Cornus Mas*) defined the edge of the southeast lawn, pruned Norway Spruces lined the driveway, West Clinton Avenue was lined with maples and a pair of Kentucky Coffee Trees flanked the stairways. The west side of the house was planted with Magnolia trees so that the verandah looked onto to them.



Sitting room gas chandelier

On the south side, mirroring the size and shape of the house, a formal garden was laid out with planting beds, statues, urns, benches and a fountain.



1880 survey showing the land and outbuildings added by Stiner

## George W. Dibble Family

George W. Dibble's family owned a substantial estate named "Nearwood" on South Broadway just a few minutes walk from the Octagon House. Born in 1848, George Dibble married Susie Hayt Parish in 1877. One year later their only child, Mable Elsworth Dibble, was born. The 1880 census shows George, Susie and Mable living in Irvington-on-Hudson, possibly at "Nearwood". George Dibble's business is listed as "no business". In 1882, Susie H. Dibble bought the Octagon House from Joseph H. Stiner. Under its new ownership, the house reverted once again to being a year-round residence. Dibble was the first of the subsequent owners who covered the outside with somber colors and covered the decorative painting on the inside, as if they were ashamed of the frivolousness of the house.

In 1897, Susie Dibble died at the age of 43 of tuberculosis at Saranac Lake where she was probably being treated for the ailment. In 1899, George Dibble married his second wife, Susie's younger sister, Annie Falls Hayt of Mt. Vernon, New York. George died in 1917 in Mt. Vernon, where he had lived since his second marriage.

Prior to George Dibble's death, ownership of the Octagon House property had gone to his first daughter, Mabel, who had married Floyd Blackwell Taylor and was living in Mt. Vernon. On May 28, 1902, she transferred ownership to Delia Stone Clarke and in November of the same year, at the age of 24, Mabel died of heart failure, just six weeks after giving birth to her second daughter.

## Stone Family

In 1902, Delia Stone Clarke was a widow. She had been previously married to Charles S. Clarke. There had been no children. But from a previous marriage, Charles had a legally declared insane daughter, Jessie Clarke, who had been born in 1855. When Delia Stone Clarke died in 1909, the provisions of her will bequeathed the Octagon Houses to her

executors and trustees for use by her insane stepdaughter, Jessie Clark, who used the house for 24 years until her death in 1933. The property then reverted to Delia's nieces who immediately after their inheritance sold it to Dr. Erwin Brand for \$15,000.

### Dr. Erwin Brand

*"One of American's most colorful and creative personalities in the field of biochemistry."*

1953 Obituary

In 1933, 42 year old Dr. Erwin Brand was an associate professor of biochemistry at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons where he was an authority on amino acids. Born in Berlin in 1891, Brand studied in Germany and was credited with performing brilliant initial studies on ox-



Caretaker's daughters 1930s - 1940s

azolines at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute in Dresden. Immigrating to the United States in 1922, he worked first at Montefiore Hospital, followed by the New York State Psychiatric Institute and, from 1931 onward, at Columbia University where he continued his research on metabolism and amino acids.

When World War II broke out, under a contract with Columbia University and the Office of Scientific Research and Development, a federal agency created to coordinate scientific research for military purposes during World War II, Erwin Brand performed the first complete analysis of a protein in terms of its amino acid content. In the last ten years of his life, with the financial assistance of the Office of Naval Research and of the National Institutes of Health, he turned his laboratory into a small polypeptide factory demonstrating the additive function of the asymmetric carbon atoms of the constituent amino acid residues.

Brand's 1953 obituary stated "to many he appeared to be cantankerous, blunt, and forbidding. That despite these impressions he should have accomplished so much of value is a tribute to the very patent sincerity and unselfishness with which he fought for his causes. He was a creative and constructive force, and such people are usually angular and driven by a remorseless energy". He and his wife Florence, also a biochemist, (they had no children) were known for their entertaining at the house.

Curiously, 13 years before Brand's death, the contents of the Octagon House were auctioned off and, on January 17, 1940, title to the property had been transferred from Erwin Brand to the New York Lien Corporation as part of a foreclosure of a tax lien.



From the east - 1940s

### John P. Cunningham

*First living person to be elected to the Advertising Hall of Fame*

In 1941, John P. Cunningham purchased the Octagon House from the New York Lien Corporation. Cunningham had started in advertising in 1919 as a artist and copywriter. In 1950 he was co-founder of Cunningham and Walsh, which became one of the largest advertising agencies in the world; he retired in 1961.



Aleko E. Lilius, winter 1945-6

In the 1970s, Cunningham and his wife Patricia were living in Riverdale, New York. His house contained furniture from the Octagon House which, because of the large size of the pieces, had found no buyers at the time of the Brand auction. Being from the 1870s, and containing octagonal detailing, they were most likely Stiner furniture. Knowing that I coveted the furniture, when the Cunninghams died, they kindly

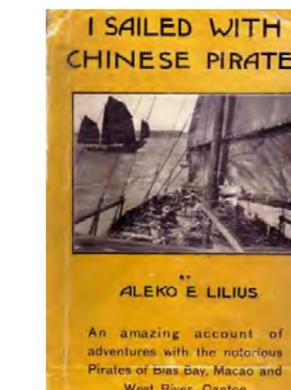
willed the furniture back to the Octagon House with a codicil requiring that it remain forever in the house.

During the Cunningham ownership, the house was rented from September, 1945 to July, 1946 to Aleko E. Lilius, (1890-1977), a Russian-Finnish writer, photographer and explorer, who wrote of his affair with Lai Choi San, a female Chinese pirate chief who, with several thousand buccaneers under her command, had looted ships off the coast of China in the 1920's.

In 1946, Cunningham sold the Octagon House to the noted author, poet and historian Carl Carmer for \$8,500.



Lai Choi San (far right) with her two amahs



### Carl Carmer

*"For people who choose to live in octagon houses are mad and therefore unpredictable, and therefore sometimes worthy of psychic research."*

Carl Carmer

One of the most celebrated occupants of Octagon House was Carl Carmer (1893-1976), the author, poet and historian. In 1946, Carl Carmer bought the Octagon House. His wife, Betty, later described the day:

*"One day, when we were living in a brownstone in New York City, Carl saw the house in the want ads. He got up, went to the car, drove to Irvington and bought it, all in the same afternoon. It was in terrible condition. He came back and told me 'it's so ugly, it's beautiful!' He bought it without my even seeing it."*

Carmer resided in the house from 1946 to the time of his death in 1978. His legacy includes tales of a resident ghost. During Carmer's ownership the house was documented in magazine and newspaper articles, books and architectural treatises.

Carmer made few changes at a time when Victorian houses fared badly. He told me that “anything which feel off the house was tossed under the porch” – which became our treasure trove during the conservation. Carmer wrote delightful stories about the house and its mystical occupants saying once, “that people who choose to live in octagon houses are mad and unpredictable and worthy of psychic research”.

Carl Carmer was born in upstate New York in 1894 to an old Dutch farming family. He graduated from Hamilton College in 1914 and, after earning a Master of Arts degree at Harvard University, taught English at Syracuse University and the University of Rochester. He served as a First Lieutenant in World War I. After the war, he obtained an appointment as Assistant Professor of English at the University of Alabama where he remained for six years. During that time he explored the Alabama backwoods areas, listening to native tales and lore and noting the peculiarities and characteristics of the region.

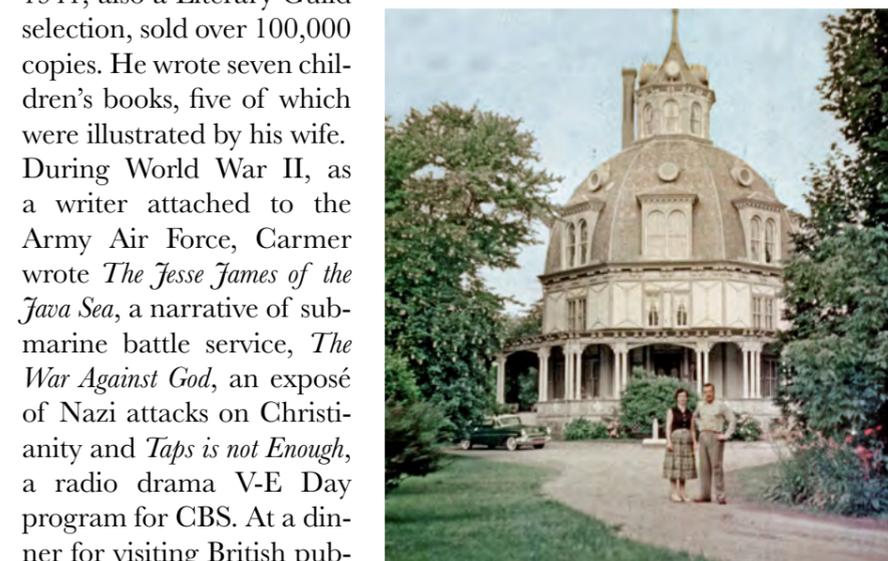
After a year as columnist of the New Orleans Morning Tribune, he became Assistant Editor of Vanity Fair in New York and later Associate Editor of Theater Arts Monthly.

He married his second wife, Elizabeth Black of New Orleans, on Christmas Day 1928. Beginning his writing career as a poet with two volumes published in 1934; *French Town* and *Deep South*, he wove his experiences in Alabama into his first nationally noted book, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, a Literary Guild selection published in 1934. From that time forward, Carmer devoted most of his time to writing. He was the editor of the Rivers of America Series writing *The Hudson* in 1939 and editing a book of river songs entitled *Songs of the*



Carl Carmer, the owner, looking at ironwork that surrounds the porch. There are forty-two dog heads used in the railing. The New York Times (by Fred J. Saxe)

*Rivers of America*. His lifelong interest in, and affection for, upper New York State are apparent in his books about the area including the 1936, *Listen for a Lonesome Drummer: A York State Chronicle* and the 1949, *Dark Trees to the Wind - A Cycle of York State Years*. His one novel, *Genesee River*, published in 1941, also a Literary Guild selection, sold over 100,000 copies. He wrote seven children’s books, five of which were illustrated by his wife. During World War II, as a writer attached to the Army Air Force, Carmer wrote *The Jesse James of the Java Sea*, a narrative of submarine battle service, *The War Against God*, an exposé of Nazi attacks on Christianity and *Taps is not Enough*, a radio drama V-E Day program for CBS. At a dinner for visiting British publishers he was introduced as “the completely American” writer. His own radio show dealt with national folk heroes and folk myths. He assembled four volumes of recordings of regional American Songs for Decca and worked with Walt Disney on a series of folklore shorts.



Carl and Betty Carmer, 1950s

Carmer devoted much time to civic activities including serving as president of the Author’s Guild, president of the Poetry Society of America, director of the American Civil Liberties Union and head of the American Center of P.E.N. Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference (later Scenic Hudson, Inc.) was founded in the living room of the Octagon House in 1963 to oppose the Consolidated Edison Company’s proposed pumped storage facility at Storm King Mountain, near Cornwall, New York. He headed Boscobel Restoration which saved and restored an

important 1806 neoclassical house which now overlooks the Hudson in Garrison, New York.

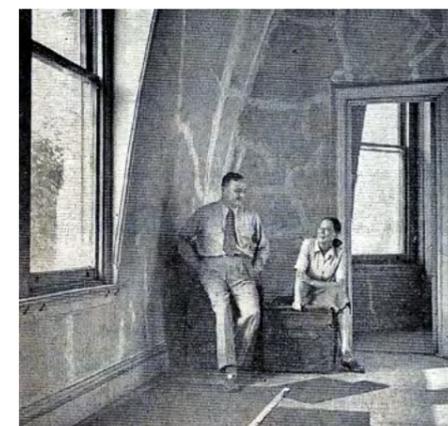


Carmer’s 1947 lawn party



Croquet on the lawn 1947

Robert Boyle, author the ecological study of the river of *The Hudson River*, said that “without Carl Carmer there would be no living river. He was the first to take an intelligent interest in it.”



Carl and Betty Carmer - music room

The Carmers lived full time in Irvington, with lengthy winter vacations in Florida when drafts made the house too uncomfortable. Every September, Carl’s birthday was celebrated with a large house party attended by an array of New York City actors

and fellow writers and broadcasters. A popular gift for the Carmers was a curiosity from the Victorian Era. The Carmers had no children, but the house, jammed packed with their esoteric collections, always bustled with friends and neighbors. When the Carmers had their great parties, Betty Carmer would usually dance on the top of the kitchen table which had a top that was a horizontal slice from a great Redwood Tree.

In 1947, one year after their purchase, the Carmers hosted a party at the Octagon House which was featured in an article in Life Magazine (*Life Goes to a Party in an Octagon House*, Life Magazine November 24, 1947). Evidencing the disdain for Victorian House in the mid-twentieth century, Octagon House is described as “the magnificent monstrosity looming like a pastry chef’s nightmare”.

Carmer enjoyed relating tales about the Octagon House which appeared in his books:

*“High on the east bank of the Hudson River, and only twenty miles from New York City, stands a strange eight-sided house. It seems to have a park of its own, for it is surrounded by a high hedge in which the bushes were so planted that a number of them bloom in each month from March to October. The park has a unique atmosphere, and anyone who enters it through the winding driveway becomes aware that the trees are of unusual varieties and were planted long ago. Here stand tulip trees, magnolias, maples of Norway and Japan, and a tremendous giant called a ‘Kentucky Coffee Tree’ of a sort which was*



William Carlos Williams, Charles Sheeler and Carl Carmer 1961, Cr. Elizabeth Black Carmer

popular among Hudson Valley residents a hundred years ago. Perhaps the strangest of the trees are the Chinese ginkgoes, whose leaves in sunlight throw intricate shadows on the green lawn. Since the largest of these stands near the old well-house, which was made in the shape of Chinese Pagoda, the visitor gets a sense of Chinese influence before he reaches the end of the drive. The house, which is painted in two shades of gray and decorated with white trim, rises five stories high, the last one being a many windowed cupola which is higher than even the tallest trees. It surmounts a slate-roofed two-storied dome which curves upward from the walls of the second floor. The first floor is circled by a wide verandah bordered by an elaborately designed white wrought iron railing from which white pillars in groups of three rise to flowered capitals beneath the eaves.

The prosperous merchant to whom this mansion belonged completed it almost a century ago. He was an importer of Chinese teas, and he had recognized in a number of octagon houses then being built (for the building of eight-sided houses was an architectural fad at the time) a similarity to Oriental "summerhouses" which he had seen in his travels beside the lakes and rivers of China. Consequently, many of the designs of the decorations within the house are of Chinese origin, giving it an atmosphere not to be found in any other American dwelling.

The whole place looks as if it has been the scene of a mysterious story. It has been! And it is this story I am about to tell. When his wife died, the merchant was heartbroken and left the house, which held many happy memories for him. He sold it to a French lady of noble family who, after her husband's death, had brought her only daughter to America. The girl had inherited from her mother great charm and a lively temperament. She was darkly beautiful with black hair and even blacker eyes and her form was slim and exquisitely modeled.

On a great estate near by lived a rich and aristocratic American family whose ancestors of English blood had lived for several generations in feudal splendor among the "Sugar Islands"

off the southern coast of eastern North America. The eldest son of this family has no sooner seen his lovely young neighbor than he fell desperately in love with her. His parents soon discovered that he was making daily visits to the Octagon House whose cupola they could see rising above the hills and trees to the north of their home. Since they had already planned for his marriage to the daughter of another of the great-estate families of the valley, they disapproved of his interest in the French girl and forbade him to see her again.

Though he continued his visits secretly, the girl's mother soon became aware of the situation and, being a person of great family pride herself, ordered her daughter not to see her ardent wooer again. The young couple then took to meeting in a lonely spot on the bank of the river. They soon felt that the restrictions put upon them were intolerable and they planned to run away to New York and be married.

One morning in the spring of the year they met again by the river and hastened to Tarrytown to embark on a steamboat for New York, where they intended to be married. Unhappily for them, a servant of the young man's family saw them hurrying along the riverbank and reported the fact to his employers. At once the father set out in hot pursuit on a spirited horse. In the meantime, his wife ordered her carriage and went to the Octagon House, where she upbraided the girl's mother and accused her of conspiring with the lovers. The pursuing horseman galloped onto the Tarrytown dock just after the gangplank of the steamboat had been drawn aboard.

The steamboat, it developed, was racing against a competitor owned by a rival line. As it entered the shadow of the Palisades, the boiler, which had been subjected to terrific pressure, burst, killing the young man instantly. The steamboat caught fire, and the remaining passengers were soon confronted with the choice of burning to death or attempting to swim from midstream to the shore. That evening when the bodies of the drowned lay upon the river's bank, the corpse of the girl was among them.

The next day a farmer's wagon approached the Octagon

House bearing a pine box. To the consternation of the driver, however, he was met by an angry woman who bitterly refused to accept his cargo. Eventually the girl was buried in a potter's field near the river. This should end the story of the fated lovers.

Nevertheless, a happenstance — possibly an unrelated coincidence — could be considered by the romantic-minded as having a late bearing upon it.

My wife and I now live in the old Octagon House. Twice in recent successive springs my wife has wakened at the end of a strange dream. In it she stands on the moonlit verandah and sees a young girl walking up the drive. She seems to be surrounded by mellow golden light. Suddenly from the shadows of the verandah darts an older woman, who bars the path of the girl and by stern gestures bids her be gone. The girl wrings her hands and weeps, but her companion is obdurate. At last the girl turns about and, still weeping, walks back whence she came. As she reaches the pagoda-like well-house, she turns about for one last look. As she goes so, the other woman beckons to her and opens her arms. The girl begins to run toward her — and the dream ends!

It seems to the present occupants of the house that the two have been reconciled, because whenever we have a visitor who claims to have psychic powers and to understand ghosts, we hear that Octagon House has a special feeling about it — a kind of aura from the past which bears with it a sense of happiness."

With Carl in his 80's and Betty in her 70's and the house badly in need of work, the Carmers offered the house for sale in 1975. On September 10, 1976, the National Trust for Historic Preservation took title to the Octagon House; the next day Carl Carmer died. He left knowing that his beloved house was in good hands. Shortly afterwards it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as one of only twelve hundred National Historic Landmarks - places designated by the Secretary of the Interior as being of national historic significance.

THE DIBBLE (1882-1902)  
STONE (1902-1933), BRAND (1933-1940)  
CUNNINGHAM (1940-1946)  
CARMER (1946-1976) OCTAGON HOUSE

While it is possible to attribute particular aspects of the Octagon House to Armour and to Stiner, it is less possible to differentiate the efforts and changes of the next five owners, Dibble, Stone, Brand, Cunningham and Carmer.

Under the Dibble family ownership (1882-1902), the house received a repainting. A black and white photograph of George W. Dibble in the New York Historical Society shows a dark and light contrasting paint scheme. Paint analysis determined that these circa 1882 colors were



Carriage house/barn February 3, 1944

light tan contrasted with dark gray-green and dark red. On the interior, a redecoration of the Tearoom can almost certainly be attributed to Dibble consisting of wallpaper with a flower and bird design surmounted by a gold leaf picture molding.

During the Stone, Brand, Cunningham, and Carmer ownership (1902-1976) most of the cresting and scrollwork, the chimney cap, the southern lamppost, the verandah urns and the first and second floor shutters were lost. The flanking curved front stairs had a simpler replacement and a section of the south side cast iron railing was removed and a straight stair installed. The exterior was been repainted several times.

In 1959 the Carmers painted the house a gray and white scheme. On the interior all of the originally varnished wood trim had been painted white, all carpets removed and, except for the Tearoom, all walls and ceilings had been over-painted with a white paint. All furnishings and decorations of the Stiner era had been removed. Electricity had been installed and the Carmers had converted the Tearoom to a lavatory. The heating system, still the original cast iron furnace in a brick chamber, had been converted from coal burning to oil.

In 1945, a fire had swept through the two and one half story carriage house/barn/shed complex. Whatever remainders of the missing elements that were stored in the complex were lost at that time.

By 1976, the grounds were substantially different from the Stiner era. The few remaining original specimens were now mature and subsequent owners had made numerous additions. The flanking Kentucky coffee trees on each side of the house were gone. Only one Norway spruce, of the original twelve which had lined the driveway, remained and, contrary to its original sheared condition, it had grown enormous. Originally mock orange, viburnum and lilac hedges defined the street and aqueduct boundaries, later generations remained. Over time, hemlocks and white pine had been planted to screen the property line, these had matured to full size. The Norway maple trees which had originally been planted along the street had, for the most part, disappeared.

## THE OCTAGON HOUSE 1975-1978

### The Octagon House in 1975

*Sad are the ruthless ravages of time!  
The bulwark'd turret frowning, once sublime.  
Now totters to its basis, and displays  
A venerable wreck of other days!*

Sir Walter Scott, *The Bridal of Triermain*  
Images of Cumbria Penrith

One hundred and sixteen years after the original construction of the Octagon House, seven family owners, tenants, a foreclosure, an auction of the contents, a Panic, a Depression and time had all taken their toll on the magnificent Octagon House. Its deteriorating condition with gray and white flaking paint, the curious shape, its missing elements with somewhat awkward replacements all coupled with unusual tales contributed to a less than happy image. The overgrown grounds with specimens choked by bittersweet vines did not help the setting. But the truly serious problem was a structural issue.



Octagon House, 1976

When Stiner had added the dome in 1872, his builder had failed to install a tension ring, a continuous band at the base of a dome which stops the downward force from moving laterally. This was not due to lack of knowledge; construction methodology books of the time clearly recommend this required element. Unless there is a tension ring or very rigid joints, a dome will fail. This was exactly what was occurring in the Octagon House dome.

The problem was an old one with the failure probably beginning within a few years of the initial dome addition. Over the years, the only reaction to the problem had been the sealing of the cracks with plaster and roofing with sheetmetal and tar. Stiner's builders had further compounded the problem by placing the dome on the unstable parapet walls of the original Armour house. The now structurally unsound dome was resting on an unstable support. In addition, Stiner's builders, when they had rebuilt the interior, had positioned the new partitions without regard to the



Tearoom ceiling, 1975

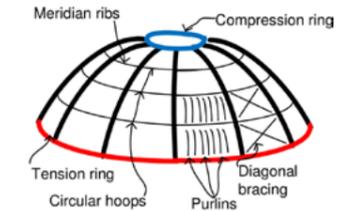
floor beams. This was resulting in substantial deflection of undersized beams, which was apparent in the sloping floors and out of plumb doorways. Finally, the shifting dome had caused numerous openings in the exterior resulting in substantial water damage which was largely concealed in



1975



Observatory - 1970s



pants. In the interior of the house, there were essentially no changes to the 1872 layout. But the heating system, which was producing dangerous fumes, only served the first two floors and one room on the third. The electrical system was insufficient and, in some areas, improperly installed. The hundred years old plumbing system had



North stair, 1970s

additions with plumbing lines installed outside the walls and ceilings. The loss of the original exterior cast iron cresting and vulnerable wood scrollwork had most visibly affected the appearance of the house.

The 1885 photograph of George Dibble, shows areas of physical de-

the exterior walls and behind the terne and slate roofs.

While the structural problems were unique, the house had all of the expected problems of a building of this age and condition except awkward additions. Fortunately, the symmetrical self-contained form of the Octagon House did not lend itself to additions and its size exceeded the requirements of most twentieth-century occu-



Dance room, 1970s

terioration in the form of missing slate and dormer scrollwork only one decade after their installation. In 1976, most scrollwork on the third, fourth or fifth floors no longer survived — in fact early 1940’s photographs showed that much of it had not existed for many decades. Wooden dormer supports on the cupola were replaced in this century, possibly in 1959 when the

Carmers undertook a modest restoration. All of the third floor cast-iron cresting had been removed, no doubt as a safety precaution since these perilously tall and heavy poles were poorly fastened to the house. Cresting from the chimney cap and cupola finial had completely disappeared, as had the chimney cap itself. Asphalt shingles, in lieu of slate, had been applied onto several third floor dormer roofs and the original terne sheathing of the porch roof had received many coatings of tar.

At some point in the early twentieth century, the exterior staircases had been completely rebuilt. While the new stairs somewhat maintained the shape and plan of the original Stiner work, the stairway skirting had been rebuilt with beaded boards, and the trim was simply applied omitting the elaborate and difficult to reproduce kerf of its predecessor.

The entire property needed conservation efforts including every part of the utility and mechanical systems, the entire fabric of the house, the complete surface decoration and the grounds in their totality. While the house generally looked only very run down, the structural problems were in fact unique and extremely serious.



Music room, 1976

## The Acquisition 1975-1978

“...the law’s delay!”

Shakespeare, Hamlet III i 56

In the winter of 1975, there appeared to be insurmountable problems associated with the acquisition, stabilization and restoration of the Octagon House.

First, it seemed that the best price for the property would be from a developer wanting to demolish the Octagon House and subdivide the over three acres of land into ½ acre plots. The plots, in a superb area, on a beautiful road, would have been quite valuable. (One developer was prepared to call the subdivision “Octagon Park” if a zoning variance was granted to permit eight houses). The Carmers were absolutely opposed to a sale to a developer, but the land was establishing the value.

Second, even if a sympathetic purchaser could be found, the physical condition of the house made it unlikely that any bank would be willing to hold a mortgage.

Third, and most significant, the unstable condition of the dome had brought the house to the verge of a complete structural failure. Yet, disassembly and reconstruction of the upper floors was prohibitively expensive.

In order to protect the Octagon House from any possible demolition or compromise by future unsympathetic owners, the property was acquired by the National Trust for Historic Preservation on September 10, 1976, as part of its Limited Endangered Building Fund. This revolving fund had been formulated especially for this purpose and the Octagon House was to be its first application.

On October 2, 1976, the contents of the house were auctioned off. The furnishings were not original to the house, being a combination of Carmer family items and pieces collected by them over the years.

On October 24, 1976, The New York Times reported:

*“The new owner is the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which stepped in when it looked as if a potential buyer of the house and its three-acre site had a tear-it-down-for-development gleam in his eye. The National Trust paid about \$100,000 for the property, the first outright purchase of a building under its Limited Endangered Building Fund. It now plans to resell the house to a buyer who will preserve it and hopefully, restore it as well. It needs work. For one thing, from the top floor daylight can be seen through parts of the roof. ‘We’ll have to figure out some way to make sure we can draw the eight sides of the roof back together,’ said Fletcher Cox of the National Trust. ‘It’s going to be an interesting feat’. What will the National Trust ask for ‘Octagon House’? ‘Whatever we can get for it’, Mr. Cox replied, laughing. ‘The house is not in very good condition structurally and whoever buys it is going to have a tough time and a lot of expense putting it back into really good condition.’”*

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was deeply concerned about the structural problems and the conservation of the property. They requested proposals for its sale with their decision being based upon structural repair methodology, price and willingness to accept a preservation easement. In November, the National Trust invited proposals to purchase the property and provided an Invitation for Proposals which outlined the conditions. The outlined conditions in summary consisted of:

### I. GENERAL AND SPECIAL CONDITIONS OF SALE:

- A. The property shall be subject to covenants in perpetuity including:
1. The exterior appearance shall be maintained and preserved
  2. No buildings shall be built on the property except the present residence and outbuildings appropriate to it.
  3. The property shall not be subdivided.

B. The offeror shall provide proof that the offeror has the capability to:

1. Repair the Property:
  - (a) Stabilize the Dome including making it weather tight
  - (b) Stabilize the Entrance Hall Floor
  - (c) Upgrade the Mechanical System
  - (d) Stabilize the Porch
  - (e) Repair Exterior Woodwork
  - (f) Rebuild and Repaint the Chimney
  - (g) Repaint the Exterior
2. Obtain approval of local officials at the National Trust
3. Maintain the following schedule:
  - (a) Submit to National Trust
    - 1) 60 days from closing of title a proposed program and specification for dome stabilization.
    - 2) 90 days from closing of title a proposed program for stabilization of entrance hall floor.
    - 3) 180 days from closing of title a proposed program for items B. 1, c, d, e, f & g.
  4. Complete dome stabilization and make watertight 180 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.
  5. Complete stabilization of entrance hall floor within 365 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.
  6. Complete items B, 1, c, d, f & g within 730 days from approval by National Trust of proposed program.

C. The purchaser shall accept normal title requirements.

D. The purchase price shall not be less than \$75,000.

E. The terms shall be 10% deposit with 25% at purchase and the balance over a term of 20 years at 8% interest.

### II. INSPECTION

The property can be inspected by appointment

### III. SUBMISSION

All proposals must be received by January 3, 1977 and be in effect for 30 days.

#### IV. EVALUATION

A. The National Trust may accept any proposal which assures a maximum sales return to the National Trust but which at the same time, will assure repair of the property and perpetual preservation in a manner acceptable to the National Trust.

B. Offerer will be required to submit evidence of financial ability and technical competence.

My proposal to bring the dome back into position consisted of high tension steel cables with turnbuckles wrapped around the dome on the outside and running from one corner to the other on the inside. I proposed to pay the same price the National Trust had paid the Carmers. I fully embraced a preservation easement which would restrict exterior charges to the house and the land. There was no required public access.

On December 22, 1976, I submitted a proposal to purchase the Octagon House for \$75,000. I requested a limit on the expense of the dome but agreed to accept all the other conditions and to broaden them to include design control by the Trust of future outbuildings. I stated in my proposal that my intentions are to preserve within and without. I would restore and maintain all that is of the period that remains in the house to as close to their original state as possible. The preservation and restoration of this building should be to a prospective buyer a lifelong labor of love. On February 18<sup>th</sup>, I met with a National Trust representative in Washington, D.C., and discussed purchase price and terms and restoration and stabilization techniques. My proposal was essentially acceptable to the Trust except for the limitation on the expense of the dome repair.

During this time, I was busy researching octagon houses and wood domes and consulting with engineers. I had devised a scheme for stabilization of the dome whereby I would attempt to bring it back into alignment by encircling it in two locations with high-tension steel cables and turnbuckles. Over a period of time, the turnbuckles would be tightened thus pulling the dome, against itself, back into position. The great size and enormous weight of the dome with its slate roof topped by an observatory made ulti-

mate success questionable. The fact that such a technique had never been used before added to the uncertainty of the undertaking.

On April 14, 1977, after much consideration, I advised the Trust that I was dropping my condition that there be a limit on the expense of the dome stabilization. This would fully expose me to whatever financial requirements were necessary for the stabilization. Since I had only a finite amount of funds, I was gambling fully that my untried ideas would actually work. Numerous proposals had been made, but in 1976 the National Trust decided in favor of my proposal.

After a number of months of clarification of legal issues by the various attorneys involved, on February 24, 1978, my wife, Nan, and I signed the Contract to purchase the Octagon House and sent them, on February 27<sup>th</sup>, to Washington for signature by the Trust. My notes for March 8, 1978, state: “Coughlin calls - we got it”.

Two years and three months after we had first visited the Carmers, an agreement was signed which would enable us to purchase the property - an event which would not happen for another 10½ more months. It was the first house to have been bought by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and resold to a private citizen.

On Sunday, March 12, 1978, friends and I drove up to the Octagon House to examine again the project on which I was staking my financial resources and my reputation as an architect and a preservationist on the success of a structural repair concept which had never been tried.



March 12, 1978

## THE OCTAGON HOUSE 1978-2018

*“Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!”*

Edna St. Vincent Millary,  
Second Fig, A Few Figs from Thistles

From 1979 to 2012, I undertook a complete conservation of the interior and exterior of the house and the grounds, furnished the house with original and contemporaneous furniture and corrected the structural problems.

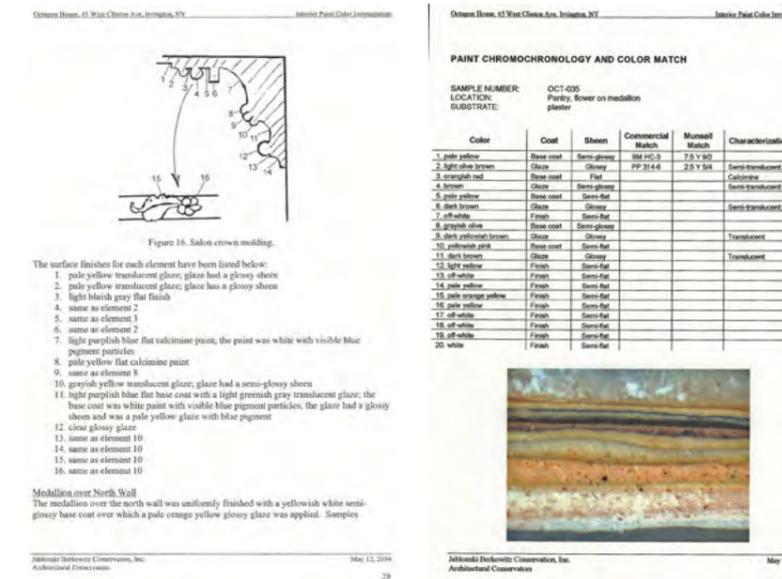
### Research

*“Understanding a thing clearly is half doing it.”*

Lord Chesterfield



Verandah, 1978



Paint analysis charts

As a first step, a very extensive research campaign was embarked upon. Every aspect of ownership was delved into. Photographs, images, accounts, and articles were sought out. Interviews of neighbors and prior owners and their descendants were conducted.

The existing physical aspects of the property were examined, measured and recorded photographically.

Through microscopic examination and chemical paint analysis, the original 1872 extraordinary inte-



Cresting and trim, 1882

rior and exterior colors were determined. Based upon the 1882 photograph, drawings of missing wood and cast iron elements were made to enable replicas to be carved, cast and reinstalled. Original slate quarries were located to replace missing pieces of the slate roof of the dome, the observatory and the dormers. The grounds were subjected to an archaeological investigation including an analysis of roots located by depressions in the land to determine the placement of the original specimen trees and formal gardens.



Twisted dance room structural member

Clearly work on the dome needed to be the first effort. I had been permitted to install devices to determine the movement of the dome. These devices, known as tell-tales, told an alarming story. Not only was the dome continuing to move, the movement was accelerating!



Interior tension cable, meeting place from opposite corners

Immediately after purchase, I commenced a program to stop the movement and to bring the dome back into its original position. As outlined in my program to the National Trust, I had temporary high tension steel cables placed at the base and at the midpoint of the exterior of the dome.



Installation of permanent tension ring

Both cables had a turnbuckle on each of the eight sides. Like a girdle, the dome was compressed on the exterior as the turnbuckles were tightened. To pull the dome together while it was being compressed from the exterior, interior cables with turnbuckles were inserted from one corner to the other. The outside cables would be ultimately removed, the interior cables were left concealed above the ceiling of the third floor.

As the dome had spread, it had also twisted and sunk approximately twelve inches. To raise the dome as it was compressed, jacks were placed in

the top floor dance room. It was also necessary to brace the dance room floor with temporary posts placed under the floor. All of the elements had been sized by Eugene Avallone, an engineer who became devoted to the project.

Once all of the components were in place, we began to slowly tighten the sixteen exterior turnbuckles and the eight interior turnbuckles and raise the top floor jacks. But would the scheme work? There was no shortage of skeptics. One engineer predicted that if a cable snapped it would create an explosive effect that would result in the total collapse of the dome. There were many sleepless nights. My reputation, my career and my assets were all at risk with an untried technique.

Over a three year period, the cables were slowly tightened. As the turnbuckles were tightened, they would develop resistance requiring too much pressure. After a few days the dome would adjust and the turnbuckles could be further tightened. The process was slow, suspenseful and worrisome, buffered with hopeful expectations of success. Midway through the process, the inevitable occurred. As one of the turnbuckles was being tightened, a connection failed and the cable, released from its high tension whip lashed like an angry snake. Fortunately nobody was injured. I yelled to the men who had been tightening the turnbuckle to immediately get down from the scaffolding. A silence fell on the site - this was the occurrence that was our most fearful concern. Fortunately the dome stayed put.

Those were tense times intensified by doubting observers, but finally it came back into position. After much celebration, a steel band was installed behind the 2nd floor gutter, permanently stabilized the dome.

### The Restoration

*"Restoration is happiness."*

An Octagon House saying

Woodwork, stairs, scrollwork. slate work. cresting. Railings, gas lights, urns, paint, structural work, electric, plumbing, heating, plaster work, finishing, paint.



1882



Restored cresting

Current



1882

Restored gas lamp

Current



### Stabilization of the Dome

*"A little stronger than strong enough."*

Old Builder



Installation of exterior tension cable and turnbuckles

After the stabilization of the dome, the missing carved elements, cresting, window embellishments and dormer trim were installed. The slate roof was reinstalled in its original pattern. The finishes and surfaces inside and out were painted their original 1872 colors leaving portions with the original paint layers intact. The interiors are essentially as they were in 1872. Nothing is conjectural, except the pattern of the area rugs and carpets. We could determine the size and shape of the area rugs by the discoloration on the floor and we selected designs with octagonal motifs available in America in the 19th century and had them woven in the colors of the room (which had been determined by paint analysis) The original plaster, woodwork, wallpaper and gilded and painted surfaces were all conserved.

The conservation process was a slow but exciting undertaking. Over the years we spent endless time tracing back the original families to find descriptions, views and memorabilia. We continue to make discoveries and find artifacts that tell us more about this lyrical structure.

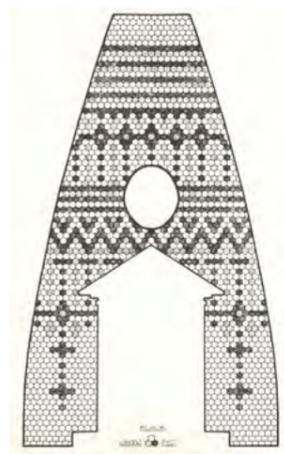
Our task was not to remove all traces of age, but to hold together the fragile beauty of the Octagon House so as to keep our peace with the original builder.

### The Interiors

*“Architectural follies, like Chinese eggs, take on more savour with the passage of time.”*

Clay Lancaster  
Architectural Follies in America

Like the exterior, the Octagon House interiors are also meant to entertain with specially carved eight-sided detailing, elaborate furniture and gas



Roof slate pattern

fixtures with a play on neo-Roman eight-sided decoration. Corresponding to its Roman temple exterior form, the interiors of the Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House are the best example of neo-Roman interiors in the country. Thanks to the Cunninghams, the 1940-1946 owners, the furnishings are substantially original. The Cunninghams had removed the original furniture when they sold the house to the Carmers in 1946 and, upon their death, they very kindly willed the original furniture back to the house.

The neo-Roman theme is carried through in the doorknobs with their cast brass soldier heads, the gas light fixtures with their charioteers and toga clad figures and the furniture with its classic inspired details.

The one exception to the neo-Roman decorated rooms is the music room which has the only surviving American residential Egyptian Revival decoration in the country. It contains Joseph Stiner’s original late 1870s furnishings.

#### Entry Hall:

Putting ones best foot forward, the most beautiful decoration is in the entry hall. The walls are decorated with silver leaf with stenciled decorations in trompe l’oeil neo-Baroque frames. A classical exterior with Baroque wall treatments on the interior was probably inspired by late 17th & 18th century villas in Italy.

The ceiling moldings have applied silver and bronze leaf with the



Octagon House  
doorknobs



Entry hall

neo-Baroque decoration. The furniture is Neo-classical 19th century with a table in an octagonal shape. The rug is a traditionally woven wool Wilton rug in a pattern available in the third quarter of the 19th century in colors to match the paint analysis of the ceiling medallion. There is a Neo-Roman light fixture with a shade etched with charioteers.

Scratched in the floor is an early example of an alarm system which was concealed under the wall-to-wall carpeting installed by Dibble in 1882.

#### The Salon Paintings and the John Jelliff Suite:

The salon paintings are all nineteenth century Hudson River School with an emphasis on the Hudson local to Irvington with images of the Tappan Zee and the Palisades. Artists include Henry Boese (1824-1865), Victor



View of the Hudson River from Tarrytown with the Old Dutch Church and Philipse Manor House, circa 1866, Robert Havell, Jr. (1793-1878)



John Jelliff salon suite

de Grailly (1804-1889) and William Richardson Tyler (1825-1896).

One of the more specific local views is *View of the Hudson River from Tarrytown*, an oil painting on canvass by Robert Havell, Jr., (1793-1878). It is an 1866 view showing the Old Dutch Church and a very rare view of Beekman Manor House (the 1693 Philipsburg Manor House when it was privately owned by the Beekman family - the Beekmans added a wing which was removed in the 1950s). Havell engraved Audubon’s Birds of America & Hudson River landscapes.

In early September of 1985 I spotted an ad for a twelve piece parlor suite to be actioned at Phillips. The suite was by the famed 19th century furniture maker John Jelliff, a master in the second half of the nineteenth century. Jelliff’s furniture graced the prominent 19th century rooms of America - the Metropolitan Museum’s Renaissance Room contains a suite.

I had never seen such an extensive set and an inspection confirmed that the set was of the highest level with hand painted porcelain center medallions and highly articulated carving. Containing two sofas, an arm chair and an armless (for



John Rogers, Courtship in Sleepy Hollow

skirts) large side chair both covered in gold leaf and eight side chairs, measurements of the salon determined that the suite exactly fit into the Octagon House salon.

On the day of the auction, even though I thought I had allowed ample to arrive in time for bidding, I walked into the auction hall to hear the smacking gavel marking my tardiness.

I approached the winning bidder and advised them that if they ever wanted to re-sell I was a buyer and over the years sent them a reminder.

In 1993 the owners wrote that they were planning to move from their New Jersey home and were considering selling. I repeated my time worn desire to buy, but at the last moment they changed their mind. In 2013 I received a phone call from a relative of the suite owner telling me that the owner had died and that the suite was coming up for auction in Aberdeen, Mississippi. Without hesitation, I arranged to bid by phone and in December of 2013, twenty-eight years after I had first seen the suite, it arrived at the Octagon House.



Salon bay window

The salon also contains a bronze sculpture of Rip van Winkle by Richard Masloski and John Rogers Groups with themes of the region – including “Courtship in Sleepy Hollow” & views of Rip van Winkle.

#### The Tea Room:

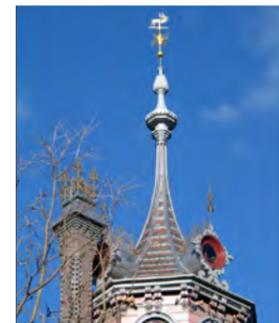
The tea room walls are unusually painted to resemble striped wallpaper. The walls have Hudson River School watercolors. The furniture is 19th century Neo-classical along with a 19th century neo-Elizabethan tea table containing a tea set with a Roman medallion decoration. The rug is a traditionally woven wool Wilton rug in a pattern available in the third quarter of the 19th century in colors to match the painted walls.

#### The Dining Room Renaissance Revival Table & Chairs:

A Renaissance Revival walnut dining room table had been part of the contents when I had acquired Haldane House in the 1970s. It was a perfect size and had semi-circular ends relating to the curved corners of the room, but the table lacked a set of chairs. Dining room chair sets are difficult to find intact because they are often broken up as side chairs as they descend through a family. After many years of looking, a set came up with the original leather upholstery. Lacking only one of the arm chairs, a careful copy of the remaining arm chair completed the set.

Produced by Reed & Barton, the original silverware is “Roman Medallion” which is decorated with a helmeted Roman soldiers head.

The dining room sideboard has a carved wood head of an Eastern Elk. Larger than a deer and smaller than a Western Elk, the Eastern Elk was a revered animal which became extinct by the end of the 19th century due to over-hunting and the loss of their dense woodland habitat. Its symbolic importance is also portrayed in the house on the weather vane, the lamp shades and sconces in the master bedroom, the wall pocket in the entry hallway and the towel rack in the master bath,



Elk weather vane and cresting



Original Reed & Barton “Roman Medallion” 1868 silverware

#### Pantry:

The pantry sink is copper for softness for fine glassware & china, the cabinetry is original and there’s a dumbwaiter to convey heavy cooking from the more substantial lower kitchen.

#### Ladies Kitchen:

Influenced by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811 – 1896) who advocated that the lady of the house be more involved in preparations for the family, the ladies kitchen is detailed to a high level demonstrating its use by a family member. The cast iron wood stove and hood are original to the house. There is a fold down writing desk for menu preparation and a functioning icebox.

The Octagon House water system is as advocated by Orson Squire Fowler consisting of reservoirs on the upper floors feed by the rainwater down spouts. Water in pipes goes into the wood stove, is heated and then stored in the a water tank. The force of the water from the cisterns drives the hot water back up to the bathrooms.

#### The Master Bedroom Suite:

The master bedroom suite consists of a sitting room, a master bedroom, a dressing room/study and a bathroom. The carpets in the sitting room, master bedroom and dressing room/study run wall-to-wall and are Wilton wool woven to match the paint analysis of the room. Following the theme seen throughout the house, the master bedroom lamp shades and sconces use the motif of the Eastern Elk.

#### Hart, Ware and Co. Bedroom Set:

In the mid-19th century an inexpensive furniture style became popular in America. Known as Cottage Furniture, it consisted of simple flat pieces of pine with few moldings and decorated with faux graining and painted designs.

Hart, Ware and Co., a 19th century Philadelphia cabinet maker, took cottage furniture to a more elaborate level by applying beautiful elabo-



Eastern elk sconce



Master bedroom suite

rate painted surfaces. The firm exhibited at the 1853 New York Crystal Palace Exhibition and examples occur in most of the decorative art museums. In the 1980s, I had seen an ad for a sale in Columbia County for an eight piece bedroom suite with elaborate floral decorations and river scenes, but alas the sale had already occurred. In November, 2007, the suite came up again as separate lots at Doyle Auctions, but the prices were probative and none of the lots sold. The seller shipped the suite to New Orleans where it was auctioned as a complete suite by the Neal Auction house in May, 2008. My winning bid finally brought the suite, consisting of an armoire, bed frame, table, dresser, washstand, bed table and two chairs to the Octagon House master bedroom.

#### Bathrooms:

The bathrooms on the second and third floors are original to the house. They contain 19th century toilets, bath tubs, lavatories and faucets.

#### The Nursery:

The Octagon House nursery contains a folding child’s bed, an early example of a bed which could be folded up to permit the room to be more fully used when the child was awake.



Child’s fold-up bed



Stiner's Pottier & Stymus Egyptian revival frames



Egyptian revival piano

the nineteenth century in America. It was influenced by increased availability of prints of the monuments of ancient Egypt, discoveries which led to a major exhibition in New York in 1852, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Verdi's 1872 "Aida" and obelisks, "Cleopatra's Needles" being erected in London, Paris & Central Park in New York City. These events resulted in a revival of interest in Egyptian decoration in America in the 3rd quarter of the 19th century. Pieces displayed sphinxes, gilded bronze heads, carved animal paws, birdlike wings, geometric motifs, and lotus designs. This ornamentation was superimposed upon an otherwise Renaissance Revival form, yet it remained distinctly Egyptian Revival.



The southeast lawn

### The Egyptian Revival Woman's Gymnasium:

In June, 2008, the Butterscotch Auction Gallery auctioned a three piece Egyptian Revival parlour suite with Joseph Stiner's name painted on the frame. The acquisition of the suite put into motion the transformation of the Woman's Gymnasium into its late 1870s appearance.

A comparison of the Egyptian Revival frame with pieces in the Metropolitan Museum and the Brooklyn Museum determined that they had been made by the New York City firm of Pottier and Stymus, one of the premier furniture makers of the late nineteenth century in the United States. The original paint analysis of the woman's gymnasium had focused on the first coat of paint, overlooking the subsequent richly decorative second scheme. An analysis of the second coat showed that Stiner had re-decorated the room several years after the 1872 decoration.



Needlework



The woman's gymnasium

A renewed interest in Egyptian decoration had occurred in the second half of

The room is decorated with friezes representing workers preparing boats to travel to the afterlife, showing the journey to the afterlife and the afterlife itself. The dark blue ceiling with gold stars is the classical motif used in Egyptian tombs and temples to depict the heavens. There are 1840s prints of the ancient monuments by David Roberts, an extraordinary upright 1870s Egyptian Revival piano, models of London's Cleopatra's needle converted in the 19th century into gas lamps and an Egyptian Revival style clock with classical style elements by Seth Thomas & Sons, NY.



North side statue - early image

### The Grounds

*"From the grounds, the Octagon House looms large - the ultimate in garden architecture, belying its primary function as a residence."*

Doell & Doell, Garden Historians



The Foxglove Garden

The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House is not only a unique-to-the world home, its setting is a marvelously intact, 19th century landscape. All of the original property remains with the house and the same landscape which existed in the mid-nineteenth century is much the same today. The vocabulary of the landscape is lawns, ornamental trees and shrubs, vines, garden architecture, statuary and ornament. The grounds are enhanced by the beauty of mature Tulip (Liriodendron) and Cucumber Magnolia (M. Acuminata) trees and probably the largest Asian Cornelian Cherry tree (Cornus Mas) in the county - all native species which were popular ornamentals during the second half of the nineteenth century.

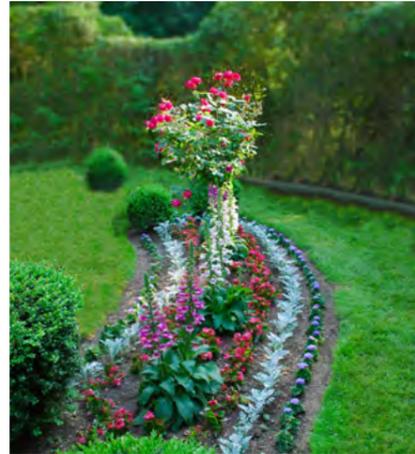


The Foxglove Garden



The Foxglove Garden gate

Based upon photographic evidence and root analysis, trees and shrubs original to the property have been replanted. The trees include the two Kentucky Coffee trees (*Gymnocladus dioica*) flanking the entrance stairs, the two Japanese Maple trees (*Acer palmatum*) at the beginning of the entrance circle, the Norway Spruce trees (*Picea abies*) lining the driveway, the Japanese Pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica*) shading the southwest side of the verandah, a rare Weeping Ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba pendula*) obscuring the carriage house and a Fringe Tree (*Chiisanthus virginicus*) at the end of the row of Norway Spruces. Flowering



Foxglove Garden annual bedding



19th century tree wisteria

shrubs define the borders including Mockorange (*Philadelphus x virbinalis*), Weigela (*Florida japonese*), Viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum*) and Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) shrubs.

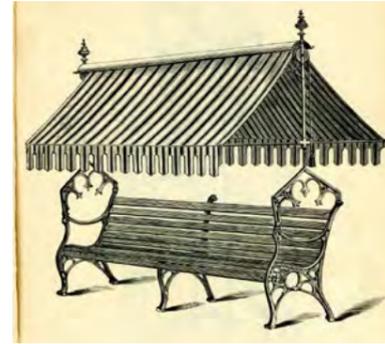
The exotic eight-sided Foxglove Garden has been re-established based upon landscape archaeology and root analysis. The garden maintains its original footprint which is the exact size & shape of the house. As it was in the 1870s, it is planted with foxglove perennials (*Digitalis*), rose standards, privet shrubs (*Ligustrum vulgare*) and four sheared junipers (*Juniperus virginiana*). From spring to autumn, blooming foxglove cultivars are rotated from the greenhouse to the garden to maintain a continuous bloom,

Surrounding the rose standards and foxglove cultivars is bedding in the colors of the house - pink begonias (*Begoniaceae*), blue ageratums (*Asteraceae*) and silvery gray dusty millers (*Senecio cineraria*). Announcing the Foxglove Garden, the metalwork on the gate features the profile of a fox with a glove in its mouth. At the four corners of the house are tree wisterias, the northwest one being the original 19th century vine.

Extant features have been preserved, the overall form and detail have been restored and incompatible or conflicting uses or features were



The Fiske bench



eliminated. The setting visually reflects the time, place and personality of Joseph Stiner, who created this architectural and landscape marvel.

The Octagon House picturesque landscape is as advocated by Hudson River valley resident Andrew J. Downing in his 1841 book, *A*



The carriage house & shed

*Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America and further publications.* As such, shrubs and trees were planted by Stiner in natural-looking ways and as undulating groups on the margins of the lawns. The margins themselves were densely planted so that the grounds appears to be on the edge of the wilderness.

In their 1985 *Site Visit Report for the Armour-Stiner House*, Garden Historians Doell & Doell make the correlation between Joseph Stiner's landscape and "the Victorian frame-of-mind...treating the establishment of the entire home ground in its larger context".

The lawn was an important feature of the Victorian landscape and the Octagon House follows this premise with long views across the open lawn to the southeast.

The relationship of the house to the grounds is evident in the use of floral motifs embellishing the architecture of the house. Roses, lilies and spider-lilies ornament the capitals of the verandah colonnade and stylized ivy leaves can be seen in the garden stair railing, the cast-iron verandah railing and roof cresting. The well pavilion has been conserved and the carriage house and tool shed, destroyed by a fire in the 1940's, were reconstructed in their original location in the 1990s. The finalization of the conservation of the historic landscape required the reconstruction of the original Lord



Porch column capitals



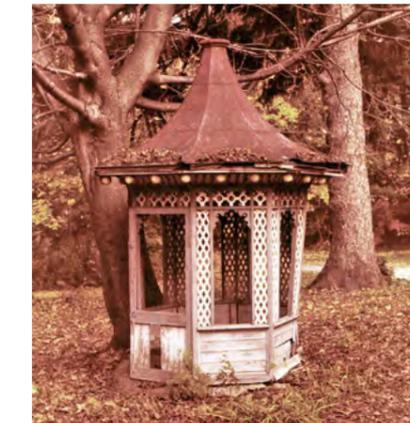
Verandah garden stair railing



Lord & Burnham greenhouse and the artist studio

& Burnham Greenhouse and a studio for an artist to be located in their 1872 location. Lord & Burnham, the premier maker of greenhouses in the 19th century, was based in Irvington, NY.

An entire ensemble, including the iron frame, glass, mechanisms and plant tables, of an early Lord & Burnham greenhouse was acquired from an estate near Philadelphia. Through slight adjustments to the pur-



The well house



1882



Recovered shards



Restored urns

ing. The size and number of windows facing into the grounds is based upon the original nineteenth century artist's studio at the Thomas Cole Studio at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Cedar Grove.

The urns, located between the columns, were recast from the pieced together shards of 4 urns discovered in an archaeological dig where the original barn had stood.

The grounds of the Octagon House were originally carefully contrived and continue to be maintained in a setting which appears as if it was created by nature. The plantings frame the house with great care and cause it to appear as a garden ornament in its landscape.

## THE OCTAGON HOUSE 2018-PRESENT

*"Preservation is a family ailment."*

Octagon House visitor

October 25, 2019, National Trust Tour



Michael Lombardi helping his father, 1979

chased greenhouse, the area and layout of the building footprint was made the same as that of the original Octagon House greenhouse.

The configuration of a greenhouse, with a potting shed in the rear, was a standard configuration used for Lord & Burnham greenhouses and identical to a 19th century greenhouse which existed 1,500 feet to the south at the adjacent Alexander Hamilton property. The cresting for the greenhouse is in a size and rhythm of other Lord & Burnham 19th century cresting and the cresting design follows the cresting on the main house.

The design of the studio for an artist is in a style similar to the already reconstructed carriage house and tool shed employing the same color scheme, exterior board & batten cladding and roof-



The Foxglove Garden looking towards the house

For four decades as owner and restoration architect I advanced the conservation of the marvelously intact Octagon House exterior, interiors, grounds and outbuilding to their 1872 appearance. During this time, the house has been the subject of numerous articles and awards.

My son, Michael Hall Lombardi, is the next generation to continue the Octagon House efforts. Michael has masterfully researched, managed and executed conservation work throughout the house. In the 20th century he conserved the lady's kitchen and pantry and performed extensive work on the grounds. In 2011-2012, Michael oversaw an enormously complicated task - the research and reinstatement of the only domestic Egyptian Revival room still in existence with its original 19th century furnishings and decoration. In 2016, Michael directed the re-installation of the 19th century Lord & Burnham Greenhouse on its original footprint using a salvaged greenhouse with its original cast iron gears, glass and framing and the reconstruction of the artist studio and in 2018 the conservation of the Basement including the Service Kitchen, Pantry, Laundry Room and Staff Room.

In response to numerous requests and with the skilled guidance of Michael and his wife, Jessica Lombardi, in the spring of 2019 the Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House opened as a museum Fridays to Mondays, April 1st to December 30th. Jess has completed numerous important tasks including the research and design of the needlepoint upholstery for Stiner's Egyptian Revival suite, graphics for the brochure and the museum activities.

The maxim of the restoration continues to be to not remove all traces of age, but to hold together the fragile exotic beauty of this lyrical structure.



1990 World Monuments Fund Gingerbread House Competition



Jessica & Michael Lombardi, June 21, 2014



Weeping Higan cherry trees, Jessica Lombardi, photographer



Octagon House, 2010



Winter scene, Michael Lombardi, photographer



Joseph Pell Lombardi, by Mark Seliger

With degrees in both Architecture (B. Arch.) and Historic Preservation (M.Sc.), Joseph Pell Lombardi established his firm in 1969 as one of the first to specialize in restoration, preservation, adaptive re-use and contextual new buildings. With offices in New York, France and Hungary, the Office of Joseph Pell Lombardi has served as architect for over 1,000 projects worldwide.

Lombard's efforts range from preservation projects, as in the conservation of a 10th century château to large-scale adaptive re-use projects such as Liberty Tower, an early 20th century 33-story Gothic skyscraper in New York City's Financial District converted to residential use. As both architect and principal, Mr. Lombardi's 1978 conversion of Liberty Tower introduced residential use to lower Manhattan.

Lombardi has conserved and converted to residential use over 300 commercial buildings in Manhattan and has conserved and restored over 200 houses throughout the world. Current projects include conversion to residen-

tial use of a Midtown Manhattan tower, nine commercial buildings in SoHo and NoHo, Manhattan being converted to residential use and the creation of a new contextual residential tower on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Mr. Lombardi owns many of the projects in which he is involved. He is the owner of the National Historic Landmark, Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, the only Roman temple form, domed octagonal house in the world and the first property to have been sold into private ownership by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Lombardi also owns and continues to conserve several other major historic homes including Château du Sailhant, an early medieval château-fort in the Auvergne region of central France, Alfheim Lodge, a rustic, storybook lodge in the mountains north of New York City and the Parsonage in Peru, an 1850 Greek Revival home in Peru, Vermont.

Joseph Pell Lombardi served on the Venice Committee of the World Monuments Fund and was Chairman of the World Monuments Fund Founders Society. He has served on many boards including the New York City Historic House Trust, the New York City Historic Districts Council, the National Trust for Historic Preservation – Lyndhurst Advisory Council and the Zoning and Historic Preservation Committee for the Alliance for Downtown Manhattan. He is a member of the Society of Architectural Historians.

Joseph Pell Lombardi has received many awards including:

- 1990 Victorian Society in America Preservation Award;
- 1991 Preservation League of New York State Achievement Award;
- 1993 New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Certificate of Merit;
- 1993 City of New York, Department of General Services Professional Service Award;
- 1995 Municipal Art Society of New York Preservation Award.
- 2017 La Médaille Paul Harris Fellow, Rotary club de Saint-Flour, France;
- 2019 La Médaille, d'argent du Tourism, Française Ministère De L'europe et des Affaires Étrangères

Numerous articles have been published about his work and for many years he has given an annual lecture at Yale University's School of Architecture.

## JOSEPH PELL LOMBARDI

### Biography

*“Like an architectural Sherlock Holmes, Mr. Lombardi patiently unravels houses’ secrets, then fervidly restores them. To say that the 49-year-old New York architect and developer has a commitment to historic preservation is an understatement. The man is obsessed.”*

The New York Times, July 5, 1990

I have always been obsessed by houses - old houses. I think about houses most waking hours and they occupy my dreams. My earliest memories are houses and I cannot remember when I wanted to do anything other than nurture them.

I am a restoration architect and owner of five homes. For over 50 years I have specialized in the conservation of historic houses, converting commercial buildings to residential lofts and the creation of contextual residential buildings. Weekdays are spent on my architectural practice and real estate investments. Early mornings, evenings and weekends are devoted to my homes.

My libraries are filled with books about houses; I visit endless old houses and serve on numerous historic house boards. Each day alerts from upcoming auctions in the US and Europe bring possible furnishing additions for my homes and few things make me happier than locating a missing feature or finding appropriate furnishings for them.

My propensity for homes began with a great affection for a childhood summer home which evolved into a lifetime focused on the conservation, restoration and creation of residences.

At times my passion has meant uncertainties, including financial and physical risks. On September 11, 2001, I would walk back into hell in order to guard one of my homes.

*“When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, most people nearby fled down stairs and uptown, but Joe Lombardi did the opposite: despite injuring his leg in the tumult, he headed to Liberty Tower, one block from ground zero, and took an elevator to his penthouse apartment on the 29th floor.”*

The New York Times, October 18, 2001

My architectural practice and the five homes presently in my stewardship have become a lifetime passion.

For further information: [www.JosephPellLombardi.com](http://www.JosephPellLombardi.com)

### Background

*“Some people collect salt and pepper shakers. Joseph Pell Lombardi collects houses.”*

The New York Times, July 5, 1990

As a child in the 1940s and 1950s, I wandered the streets of my New York City Harlem neighborhood discovering Romanesque, Italianate, Moorish and Renaissance Revival houses and comparing them to original examples in my Sir Banister Fletcher’s *A History of Architecture*.

I was consumed by my family’s Rustic Storybook Style summer lodge at Valhalla Highlands, in the mountains north of New York City. The lodge was my first love affair with a house; they became my childhood friends, foreshadowing the way I would live my life. I spent my childhood exploring abandoned houses, excavating ruins and reading everything I could about them.



8 Sniffen Court, Manhattan

### Acknowledgments

The history the Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House relies substantially on decades of research by Lombardi family members and architectural historians at the Office of Joseph Pell Lombardi, Architect. Michael Hall Lombardi coordinated the photography and Jessica Hale Lombardi provided the graphics. A special thank you to Nan Hall Lombardi who produced the layout and Mary DaRos, Doina Stefanovici & Jessica Lombardi who finalized the production.

Joseph Pell Lombardi, Winter, 2020

As an architectural student, I did what I could to advance my studies in the history of houses. The early 1960s was the heyday of modernism; my professors and fellow students couldn't imagine a career restoring old buildings instead of creating new structures. I was considered a heretic for my consuming interest in historic buildings instead of the new forms of Modern Architecture. In that era, historic preservation in America was more a passion than a profession.



Haldane House, Cold Spring, NY



Parsonage in Peru, Vermont

When the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture began a program in Historic Preservation, I enrolled and obtained a Master's degree under the great preservationist James Marston Fitch.

After graduation, I established my architectural firm specializing in conservation and restoration of New York City's deteriorating townhouses. For my family's use and following my firm's mission, I bought and restored 8 Sniffen Court, a 19th century Romanesque Style carriage

house on a mews in Manhattan and Haldane House, an 1870s Second Empire Style house in rural Cold Spring.

In the 1970s, I switched from Haldane House to an intact, but in need of help, 1850s Greek Revival parsonage in Peru, Vermont, as a ski home for my family and a weekend conservation project for me.

During the 1970s Recession I bought Liberty Tower, a 33-story 1909 Gothic style skyscraper located in the Financial District of Manhattan – it's conversion from offices introduced residential use to lower Manhattan. On the 29th floor, I transformed the former board rooms of Sinclair Oil into a quintessential New York apartment for my family.



Château du Sailhant, Andelat, France



Armour-Stiner House, Irvington, New York



Erdödy-Choron Castle, Jánosháza, Hungary

Beginning in the 1970s my efforts shifted to the conversion of the neglected, magnificent commercial buildings of Lower Manhattan into residential lofts and, after the 1989 fall of the Communist Regime, my efforts were also spent on the faded, majestic buildings of Hungary.



Alheim Lodge, Cold Spring, New York

In the late 1970s, I purchased the extraordinary and challenging Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House in Irvington-on-Hudson, 25 miles north of New York City. In the 1990s, I added Erdödy-Choron Kastély, a moated Renaissance castle in Central Europe and then exchanged it for Château du Sailhant, a powerful and romantic thousand year old château in the isolated volcanic mountains of central France.

In the 21st century, I returned to Valhalla Highlands, the location of my first love affair with a house, by reconstructing Alheim Lodge, a summer lodge which had not been completed in its intended Rustic Storybook Style because of the interruption of World War II.

The Octagon House, the Parsonage, the apartment at Liberty Tower, Château du Sailhant and Alheim Lodge continue their place in my lifelong passion.

## New York City Townhouses

*"You had these gorgeous one-family brownstones that had been turned into rooming houses, but the additions were easily reversible, and it didn't take too much work to restore their grandeur."*

Inside the Home of Joseph Pell Lombardi,  
The Real Deal November, 2008

In 1969, I established my architectural firm in New York City. Professionally pursuing my passion for old houses, my new firm specialized in conservation and restoration services, focusing on New York townhouse renovations. In order to develop business, I located townhouses needing restoration and proposed them to potential clients. The former one

family townhouses had been converted to rooming houses during the Great Depression and the housing shortages of the World War II. Each room in a rooming house was inexpensively rented to separate tenants sharing a hall bathroom. The low rents resulted in lack of maintenance and deterioration.

New York still had many of these former gracious townhouses which had been converted to rooming houses with limited changes. The rooming houses had a run-



68 State Street, Brooklyn



45 E. 74th St., New York



Liberty Tower, Lower Manhattan

down appearance, yet discernibly hidden behind shabbiness, their former grandeur was evident in the remaining original fireplaces, ornate plasterwork, hardware, wood doors, trim and early bathrooms. Because rooming houses were deteriorated, numerous and had a stigma, prices were remarkably low.

I began to acquire rooming houses,

converting them back to one and two family houses, eventually acquiring groups of houses so that their restoration impacted entire blocks. Over the next few years, my acquisition, restoration and sale of townhouses increased dramatically and my architectural practice expanded rapidly.



12 East 65th St., New York



129 East 17th Street  
New York



West 78th St., New York

Practicing architecture by being an owner was very much against the norm. In the 1960s, architects were not developers, yet since antiquity architects had also been builders. The difference between my type of practice and my peers was also mirrored in philosophy. The modernist would tear down a 19th century townhouse or put in modern interiors. Architects in the 1960s and 1970s strongly felt the need to leave their fingerprint on their work; I felt that the more successful project was when intervention was indiscernible. I embraced the historic buildings inside and out. By the turn of the 20th century these delightful townhouse and home commissions numbered well over one hundred.

Beginning in the 1970s the focus of my work would change, but I continue to serve as architect for several private homes each year. These commissions remain as one of the particularly enjoying aspects of my practice.



The Colonnade, New York



12-16 East 62nd St., New York

## New York City Lofts

*“What looks like a junk heap to most developers is priceless history to architect Joe Lombardi”*

Rubble with a Cause,  
New York Daily News Magazine, January 17, 1988

At the beginning of the 1970s, as I began to discover the fading magnificent commercial buildings of lower Manhattan, my architectural practice shifted to converting warehouse and commercial buildings to residential use.

In the heart of the greatest city in the world, stood substantially empty



644 Broadway, NoHo, New York



889 Broadway, Ladies Mile, New York

districts containing some of the most architecturally distinguished 19th and early 20th century buildings in the world. Although physically and economically distressed, confined Manhattan is too valuable to have for too long waning districts with fine under-used buildings with prices equal to a fraction of their replace-

ment cost.

Like the townhouses of the 1960s, exploring lower Manhattan was the discovery of treasures. Behind the beautiful, but poorly maintained facades of lower Manhattan were magnificent lobbies, high ceilinged spaces with large windows, top floors with multiple skylights and beautifully detailed interiors -- it was a preservation architect's dream.

At first there was little competition in the residential conversion field from other architects because it was an off-beat specialty consisting less of conventional ar-



1970s - 102 Prince/114 & 116-118 Greene St.  
SoHo, New York



140 Fifth Avenue, Ladies Mile, New York

chitecture and more about preservation, retrofitting, zoning obstacles and building code issues. It was also a waiting opportunity - I was in the right place at the right time. As a New York architect and a preservationist already focused on creating residences from historic townhouses, I had the ability to see opportunity for these architecturally rich, neglected commercial buildings and help pioneer the development of what

came to be known as loft living.

As the loft phenomena grew, my architectural practice mushroomed and, like the townhouse work, I was often both architect and owner. The obstacle to all early residential conversions began with municipal approvals. Since loft buildings were almost always in an area which did not permit residential use, an important step in advancing the loft movement was having the ability to navigate through the approvals required to change commercial use to residential use. With input from my father, an architect specializing in zoning and code issues, I studied the zoning and building regulations and developed skills as to how they could be applied to loft conversions.

Most loft buildings were in historic districts protected by the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission. Since I was both an architect and a preservationist and had often presented to the Landmark Commission during my 1960s townhouse stage, the required Landmarks Preservation Commis-



Juilliard Building, 18 Leonard St., TriBeCa, New York



The Ice House, TriBeCa, New York

sion procedures were a routine for me, not a new obstacle.

Finally, because loft buildings were often financially failed buildings, they involved complex real estate issues. For these, I had developed expertise as a real estate owner and through courses taken at Columbia University and the New York University Real Estate Institute.

With these skills, I had the tools to play a significant role in loft conversions. The idea of living and working in the same neighborhood, much less in the same physical space as in a loft was, at first, unfamiliar. But the buildings prevailed because, though failed, empty and inconveniently located, they were beautiful, solidly built and they contained extraordinary interior spaces readily adaptable to residential use.



Atalanta Building  
25 North Moore St., New York



United States Sugar Building  
TriBeCa, New York

With high ceilings, an elevator that opened directly into the unit and with only one unit per floor, there were no shared hallways and they had double-exposures with windows facing onto both the street and the back yard. These characteristics define the quintessential “loft.” The early lofts were rented by artists to satisfy artists’ needs for studios for the creation of art. With the few add-

ed amenities of a hot plate, refrigerator and a bathtub or shower, the high-ceilinged, large-windowed, inexpensive, unheated spaces became living spaces as well. The antiestablishment combination of living in a work space with functions overlapping in one large open space created a particular style of living, with early loft occupants typically designing their own layouts and making improvements at their own expense.

Like my townhouse activities in the 1960s, in exchange for discovering projects, providing the architectural services and obtaining the necessary approvals I found investors for developing loft projects. My skills benefited both



Riveted Steel Building  
107-11 Greene St., SoHo, New York



The Grabler Building, 44 Laight Street  
TriBeCa, New York

my development partners as well as my clients.

The underground off-beat nature of the downtown art scene was stylish, with artists attracting art patrons and dealers and celebrities. The quiet nighttime streets of downtown would have the seemingly incongruous uptown limousines in front of rundown, semi-occupied beautiful old buildings. A late

night, crowded party in a vast, high ceilinged loft accessed via an oversized manual freight elevator was the place to be and to be seen. Black clothing was de rigueur, loud music, a strobe lit dance floor and a wandering video cameraman rounded things off.

In a 50 year span, I witnessed the loft phenomena broaden from fulfilling the needs of economically-challenged artists to supplying luxuriously finished, multimillion dollar lofts to investment bankers and hedge fund managers. Ultimately, the new names of the lower Manhattan districts, SoHo, TriBeCa, Flatiron and Ladies’ Mile, became household names synonymous with this new and vibrant domestic form.



Fairchild & Foster  
415 Washington St., TriBeCa, New York



Mohawk Atelier  
36 Hudson St., TriBeCa, New York

The popularity of lofts eventually spread throughout the world. In 1970, it was impossible to imagine that 30 years later, in the winter of 2000, lofts had become so popular that I would be asked to collaborate on a new 16-story residential building in São Paulo, Brazil with open loft-like apartments aptly called “Grand Loft”.

SoHo eventually became a famous international shopping center and destination with clogged streets and retail and residential rents equal or greater than the highest in



Glass Atelier 401-3 Greenwich Street  
TriBeCa, New York

Manhattan. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, in addition to a dozen in-fill buildings, my office had converted to residential use over ten million square feet of space in over 300 commercial buildings in lower Manhattan.



660 Madison Ave., Upper East Side, New York

## Southeast Asia, Castles and Central Europe

*“He restores castles in Europe, but Joseph Pell Lombardi lives Downtown.”*

New York City Downtown Express March 28, 2000

For many years I provided pro bono services to the World Monuments Fund, an organization which sponsors the conservation and preservation of architecture and art throughout the world. In the 1980s, I had served on their Venice Committee, provided pro bono services on the adaptation of two Venetian palazzi to a museum and residences for Venetians and assisted in the creation of public access to Comte Hubert de Commarque’s 12th century Château de Commarque in the Périgord region

of France. In the 1990s, I provided input on the conservation of vernacular houses in Siem Reap, Cambodia, the town adjacent to the Ankor Wat temple sites, where the World Monuments Fund was performing archaeological work. In 1992, I worked on the adaptation of Eszterháza Palace in Fertőd, Hungary into a



Palazzo Cappello-Memmo



12th C. vernacular house  
Ankor Wat stone carving



Present vernacular house  
Siem Reap, Cambodia

music academy, museum, hotel and learning facility for the European Mozart Academy. Eszterháza is Hungary’s grandest palace, a beautifully proportioned 18th century Baroque palace 50 kilometers southwest across the border from Vienna.

Called the Versailles of Central Europe, the 1760 Eszterháza Palace consists of a 21-bay façade with horseshoe-shaped wings curving in to create an enormous, fully enclosed entrance court. The interior contains elaborate Rococo style suites. Joseph Hayden was the resident conductor and composer for 29 years. He composed his most important works at Eszterháza.



Eszterháza Palace, garden and south façade



Eszterháza Palace, music room

Family disuse in the 19th century and damage during and after the World War II had somewhat compromised the palace. For three years, the World Monuments Fund, the European Mozart Academy, the Hungarian National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments and my firm labored to advance this worthy project. This involved the preparation of reports, plans, cost estimates and several meetings each month in Budapest, Vienna and at Eszterháza.

In 1993, with the Eszterháza project well advanced, I decided to take on a conservation/

restoration project in Hungary. I was given a list of 12 castles in need of restoration which were owned by the Hungarian government. Many were fascinating obscure properties in remote areas of the country. Touring and discovering these forgotten treasures was an enormous pleasure. After several weeks, I narrowed my choice to two, Prónay Palace in Acsaújlak and Erdödy-Choron Castle in Jánosháza.

Prónay Palace was reconstructed in the 18th century in a Baroque style from the ruins of a medieval castle damaged during the Turkish occupation. It was built by a nobleman to the designs of Giovanni Carlone Battista, a master builder from Italy. With its four turrets and hilltop location, it is a late Renaissance interpretation of a castle. After the World War II, it had been used by the Russians for disabled soldiers. In 1994, the palace was vacant, in need of intervention, but substantially intact with much of its Baroque detailing in place. Changes and insertions were reversible. Being a magnificent building in a handsome, rural location only 26 miles from Budapest, returning Prónay Palace to its former grandeur was a very logical choice. I started research, began planning the conservation and furnishings and submitted tenders for a 99 year lease with a requirement to complete the



Prónay Palace, Acsaújlak, Hungary, south façade, 1998



Aerial view of Prónay Palace from the south

conservation. But the response was a clause that the lease could be terminated upon a 90 day notice without cause and without compensation for my improvements. I turned my attentions to Erdödy-Choron Castle in Jánosháza, which was in the stewardship of the Hungarian National Board for the Protection of Historic Monuments.

The Erdödy-Choron Castle is located in the Transdanubia region of southwestern Hungary near the Austrian border standing on a hill at the edge of a small town overlooking a river. It is one of the very few surviving medieval castles in Eastern Europe. The castle had been encircled by a wet moat and there is a tower surmounted by an onion shaped dome.



Erdödy-Choron Castle, 1998



Erdödy-Choron Castle, 1998

Initially built in the 15th century, it passed through prominent Hungarian families including Pál Kinizsi, the chief commander for King Matthias of Hungary, János Zápolya, who became King of Hungary in 1526, Tamás Bakócz, Archbishop of Ezstergom, Péter Erdödy, who encircled the castle with defensive walls and a moat and Commander András Choron and his son János, who was granted the title of Baron by the Hapsburg King Rudolf. When János Choron died in 1583, the castle passed to Margit Choron, who married Kristóf Nádasdy whose family seat was Sárvár, a nearby late 13th

century castle. In 1721 it was sold to Palatine Miklós Illésházy who, in turn, left it to his daughter Anna Illésházy, who made changes in accordance with the taste of the time including richly decorating the principal rooms with genre wall paintings and applying flowery ornamentation to the wood beams and ceilings. Following the 1765 death of Anna Illésházy Erdödy, the castle passed to Count Kajetán Erdödy whose family continued to own it until World War II. After the War, the Castle, under the Communist Regime, became State owned and was used as a children's school until 1979, followed by research, archaeological investigation and conservation by the Hungarian National Board for Protection of Historic Monuments.

In 1994, I submitted a tender for a 99 lease with an option to purchase the castle from the Hungarian government. After four and one-half years of negotiations the lease was signed in 1998. For ten years I conducted research, including a thorough analysis of its earlier configurations and prepared architec-



Erdödy-Choron Castle, interior, 1997



Onion dome repair, 2000



Onion dome completion, 2000

tural, mechanical and structural drawings and submitted everything to the Hungarian government. After much discussion, approvals were granted. During the process, I stabilized the uninhabited castle by sealing the openings and repairing the copper clad onion dome.

Upon completion of the construction drawings and specifications, I solicited bids from contractors to perform the work. But the prices were astronomical. Finally, in 2008, with great reluctance, I returned the property to the Hungarian government, fully stabilized, extensively researched, with a complete set of restoration/conservation drawings and specifications and all approvals in place.



Erdödy-Choron Castle  
Demonstrating its appearance after completion of the work.

## Liberty Tower New York, NY

*“The ‘World’s Tallest Building on so Small a Plot’...it introduced the Gothic style to skyscrapers and is one of the earliest of the romantic skyscrapers which changed the skyline of Manhattan at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1978, it was restored and converted to residential use by Joseph Pell Lombardi, Architect. It was the world’s first residential conversion of a skyscraper.”*

New York City Landmarks  
Preservation Commission Wall Plaque

On the first day of May, 1978, Dave Waldman, an old friend from Helmsley-Spear, called and said. “Listen Joe, I just got in a troubled piece downtown. When I looked at it and saw the gargoyles, I could see that it had your name written all over it”. My excitement was hard to contain. Liberty Tower, designed by Henry Ives Cobb and built in 1909, had the distinction of being the “World’s Tallest Building on so Small a Plot.” Without setbacks it rises thirty-three stories and is terracotta-clad. Predating the Woolworth Building, it introduced the Gothic style to skyscrapers and is one of the earliest of the romantic skyscrapers that changed the early twentieth century skyline of Manhattan.

A marvelous skyscraper, Liberty Tower has one of the most beautiful facades in the world. But



Liberty Tower, Joseph Pennell (1857-1926)

in 1978 it was an economically failed office building. Substantially vacant, it was in a rundown condition with antiquated mechanical facilities and only one stair (two were required). New York was in the midst of a severe recession and soothsayers were predicting that the Financial District would never recover.

With high ceilings, large windows on all four sides and a small floor plate, I saw Liberty Tower as a perfect candidate for residential conversion.

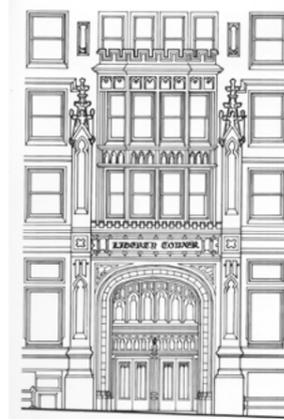
Because payments to the bank were not current Liberty Tower was in a foreclosure action. Within a week a public auction was to be held with the building going to the highest bidder.

Rather than waiting for the auction, I visited both the owner and the bank. I offered the owner \$25,000 for the ownership with my assumption of the mortgage and I told the bank, I would pay the past-due \$50,000 mortgage payments. Both parties agreed to my proposals; the owner because he was on the verge of losing everything and the bank which did not want to own a deteriorated, empty skyscraper in the financially distressed Financial District.

Following the same procedure I had used in the loft districts to the north, I installed the common area improvements and sold units as “raw space” - totally unfinished units without bathrooms, kitchens and



Liberty Tower, 1910



Liberty Tower entrance

partitions. Like a SoHo or TriBeCa loft, this allowed the purchasers to create their own individually designed interiors to meet their design inspirations and their budget. Purchasers also had freedom as to the size of their unit. None of the 89 units were the same. On any floor an apartment door lead to a California modernism, a neo-Gothic or a Oriental style interior -- all in a different size and layout. Even in that deep recession, great excitement was generated by the notion that one could own, create a design and reside in such a venerable structure. Liberty Tower was the first residential conversion of a skyscraper – it initiated residential use in the Financial District. Much to my critic’s surprise, and to my delight, owning an apartment in an historic, beautiful skyscraper was sufficiently appealing to overcome the then strangeness of living in a nonresidential district.

On the 29th floor, Harry Sinclair, head of the Sinclair Oil Company, had created his private offices with a boardroom, dining room and sitting and reception rooms. The floor looks out over Lower Manhattan in four directions and has views of both rivers.

With floor to ceiling walnut paneling, grain painted steel trim, pressed glass doors with gold lettering, hanging globe light fixtures and brass hardware in a neo-Gothic design, it is an early definition of an executive office suite. I adapted it, without changing its character, to be my apartment.

partitions. Like a SoHo or TriBeCa loft, this allowed the purchasers to create their own individually designed interiors to meet their design inspirations and their budget.

Purchasers also had freedom as to the size of their unit. None of the 89 units were the same. On any floor an apartment door lead to a California modernism, a neo-Gothic or a Oriental style interior -- all in a different size and layout.

Even in that deep recession, great excitement was generated by the notion that one could own, create a design and reside in such a venerable structure. Liberty Tower was

the first residential conversion of a skyscraper – it initiated residential use in the Financial District. Much to my critic’s surprise, and to my delight, owning an apartment in an historic, beautiful skyscraper was sufficiently appealing to overcome the then strangeness of living in a nonresidential district.

On the 29th floor, Harry Sinclair, head of the Sinclair Oil Company, had created his private offices with a boardroom, dining room and sitting and reception rooms. The floor looks out over Lower Manhattan in four directions and has views of both rivers.

With floor to ceiling walnut paneling, grain painted steel trim, pressed glass doors with gold lettering, hanging globe light fixtures and brass hardware in a neo-Gothic design, it is an early definition of an executive office suite. I adapted it, without changing its character, to be my apartment.



Liberty Tower, 1976

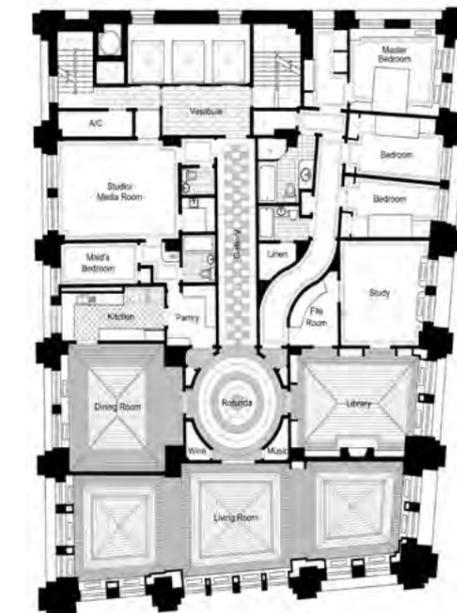
The furnishings are gathered up early twentieth century furniture found throughout the building which would be equally at home in a men’s club of the same time (“it looks like a run-down men’s club” was the best compliment received).

The former kitchen remains where it had been and the vice president’s offices became bedrooms. Originally accessed by a private elevator from the floor below, the principal missing ingredient was a central room to connect the living room (former board room), dining room, library (former sitting room) and entrance gallery. Because of the complexity of the space, a rotunda was the most suitable shape, above which a plaster dome was installed. Green and white terrazzo in a checkerboard pattern was used for flooring and the walls, ceilings and trim were finished in faux stone.

From the late 1970s, the neighborhood that surrounded Liberty Tower changed dramatically. After my conversion of Liberty Tower, a number of smaller and medium sized office buildings were converted to residential use.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the empty land fill created from the World Trade Center excavation became Battery Park City, with 7,500 residents and residential related shops. Enlargement of Battery Park City and conversions continued to occur during the last two decades of the twentieth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Financial District had become a very comfortable place to live.

The tip of Manhattan had been the residential and commercial center of



Liberty Tower floor plan

New York City from its establishment in the mid-seventeenth century to the dramatic northward growth in the mid-nineteenth century. For the next hundred years, it was the center of commerce for the world. The end of the twentieth century saw its aged buildings being reused for residential and cultural uses. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it had come full circle as both a commerce, residential and cultural center.

Liberty Tower is one and one half blocks from the World Trade Center site. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I left my apartment and walked north to a meeting on the roof of a nearby building



Liberty Tower rotunda



Liberty Tower living room

I was working on. The meeting was interrupted by a large jet plane flying over at an impossibly low elevation followed, fifteen minutes later, by the second plane.

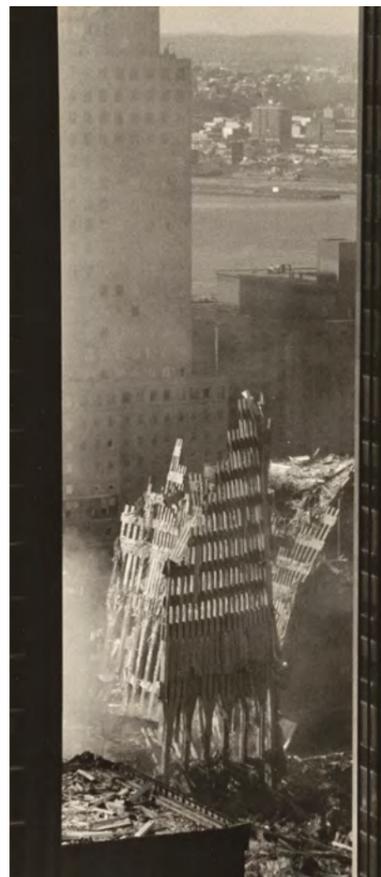
The upper floors of the twin towers were quickly engulfed by an intense fire and the sky filled with a large, black smoke flume. The desperate workers on the window sills of the upper floors are permanently etched in my mind.

I instinctively, but irrationally, returned to my Liberty Tower apartment. This choice was rooted in the pattern of my life — the desire to safeguard a home even if it risked my well-being.

After my return to my apartment, the towers collapsed causing Liberty Tower to shutter and the area to be plunged into total blackness. With the failure of phones and internet, all communication ceased.

For weeks, the sealed off sections of Lower Manhattan remained isolated from the rest of the world. Life was slow to return to any form of normalcy. At Liberty Tower there was no reprieve. For too many months the sound of an ambulance siren meant another victim had been discovered.

In early 2002, my vitality began to slowly return, but the despair remained in the streets.



View from the 29th floor, Liberty Tower  
September 12, 2001

## Château du Sailhant Le Sailhant, France

*“Thanks to the passion of an American architect, Château du Sailhant, in the heart of the Saint-Flour (Cantal) region, escaped a tragic destiny. After fifteen years of work, it reveals a crusty transition modeled on the original version.”*

Massif Central December, 2016

Château du Sailhant is an ancient château-fort located in the Auvergne Region of Central France. It is surrounded by the volcanic Cantal Mountains, the remnants of an enormous ancient stratovolcano — the largest in Europe.

Rising out of dramatic one hundred-foot perpendicular volcanic cliffs on two sides of a triangular shaped promontory, blocked by a deep trench-moat on the wide end and containing a knob with a tower at the point, Sailhant speaks of forbiddance.



Aerial view



Château du Sailhant

With impregnable walls constructed of ancient black lava blocks and roofs of stone slabs, Sailhant overlooks the Cas-

cade du Sailhant, a mystical waterfall that drops sixty feet into a perfectly round crater-lake formed from a prehistoric volcano. Sailhant looms atop the volcanic promontory like a menacing bird looking for prey.

Due to its impregnable topographical characteristics, the small knob at the tip of the spur has been occupied from the remotest times. At the end of the 10th century, the crusader Etienne Saillans, replaced earlier wood shelters on the knob with a traditional Auvergnat multi-storied square stone tower two or three stories taller than its present height. It was separated from the main part of the spur by a deep ravine-dry moat. With a seigneurial room of justice and a prison at its lowest level, for centuries, the Donjon was also used by the occupants as a final refuge during a siege.

The Sailhant territory (domain) encompassed many thousands of acres. By the 13th century, Sailhant was composed of high walls enclosing the inner court, the old multi-storied donjon and a 2½ story seigniorial residence built against the inner side of the north wall.



La roseraie



L'entrée

Of the four great semi-circular towers protruding from the north façade, the most easterly and the one to the west of the entrance are medieval.

The two shooting slits in the tower to the west of the entrance are the shorter type used for a crossbow which is unlike the 13th century and earlier longbow shooting slits which are taller. The non-contextual masonry

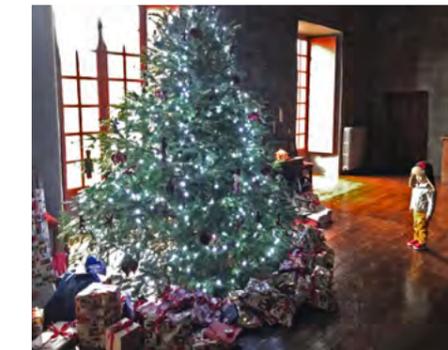
pattern shows that the crossbow shooting slits were added, evidencing that the tower pre-dates the crossbow.

In the 14th century, with the advent of the Hundred Years' War, Sailhant was seized several times by marauders with owning family reclaiming it by buying it back from the marauders.

In 1398, Béraud Dauphin I de Saint-Ilpize, the then lord of Sailhant, took his two sons, Béraud II and Robert, to fight at the battle of Agincourt in 1415. All three Dauphins were killed.

In 1436, Sailhant was again seized, by Rodrigue de Villandrando, a Spanish pillager; payment bought it back in 1438.

During The Renaissance, Sailhant was sold for the first time in five hundred years to the Dubourgs. In 1569, during the Wars of Religion, the Catholic leader and governor



Enzo Lombardi - 2017



La grande salle

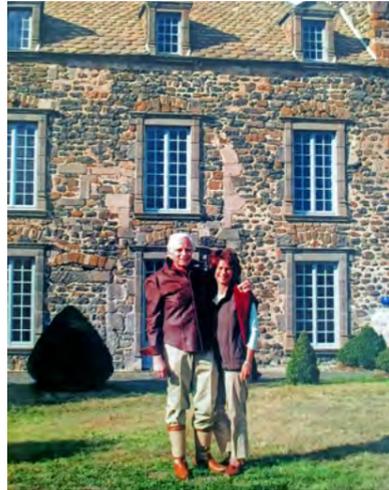
of Auvergne, accompanied by his troops, forced their way into Sailhant, seized Charles-Antoine Dubourg, a protestant, and forced him into the kitchen oven where he died of asphyxiation.

Two monumental fireplaces inside the château date from the time of the Dubourgs. With their flat hoods, and mantels supported by classic columns, these fireplaces are typical of the Renaissance period. Fabricated in the volcanic stone of the Auvergne, they were painted in polychromatic colors.

At the beginning of the 17th century, a Dubourg married Jacques d'Estaing bringing Sailhant back to a descendant of the ancient Sailhans family. In the late 17th and early 18th century, Joachim-Joseph d'Estaing was the bishop of Saint-Flour. The proximity of Sailhant to Saint-Flour led the Bishop to use his brother's château as his country estate. The 1710 date on the blazon above the main entrance to Sailhant memorializes restoration work done for the Bishop.

In the early 17th century, the upper levels of the donjon were removed and it was made into a pavilion. At the same time, the surrounding walls were lowered. The principal transformation during the eighteenth century, was the opening of windows on the court façade.

The d'Estaing succession was crippled by debts with the main creditor being the famous writer, Voltaire. The debts lead to a sale by auction in



Joe and Joy Lombardi



Luca Pell Lombardi and Christopher Pell Lombardi - 2017

1753 to Francois Jean Roger, squire, lord of Colombelle, financial advisor and secretary to the King and notary of Chatelet in Paris.

After the Revolution, the incumbent tenant under the farming lease bought the château and part of the lands. The château was in disrepair, providing only very basic comforts, but it had not suffered any direct destruction. In 1881, the château and the lands were bought by Hippolyte Mary Raynaud.

Born to farmer parents in 1844 at the foot of the château, Raynaud was an adventurer with grandiose ambitions. In the 1870s, he started a bank in Paris named Banque d'Etat, bought a town house on the avenue de Bois de Boulogne and married an actress of the Royal Palace. In 1888, Raynaud began a spectacular restoration, but in 1890, a bankruptcy was disclosed and by 1891, the work on Sailhant was suspended and Sailhant was sold at auction with the winning bidder being Mary Raynaud's wife.

By 1896, Raynaud seemed to have overcome his difficulties. He opened a new bank in Paris named Credite Internationale, but at the beginning of 1904 this bank also bankrupted. Raynaud fled the country, dying in England in the 1920s.

Raynaud's work included adding two towers on the north façade, the one



Jessica, Michael and Enzo Lombardi



La bibliothèque

to the east of the entrance to match the medieval tower to the west of the entrance and another on the far west end. At the same time Raynaud raised the two existing north side medieval towers above the roofline so that all four towers became the same height. Raynaud also added four more bays to the seigniorial residence creating a unified building behind the north wall. On the interior, Raynaud added bathrooms, a kitchen and



La salle à manger



La Chapelle - 12th Century Auvergnat virgin

subdivided the first floor Grande Salle into three bedrooms with lower ceilings. A chapel was installed at the most westerly end of the ground floor.

At a 1904 auction of Château du Sailhant, Doctor Paul Delbet was the successful bidder. Doctor Delbet was a Parisian whose family originated from town nearby to Sailhant. His widow, Antoinette, married Comte Claret de Fleurieu, who died in 1945. Antoinette died in 1961.



La chambre du seigneur



La cuisine with tiles containing early scenes of the Auvergne

Dr. Paul Delbet's only son, Dr. Jean-Paul Delbet, took over the château. He died in 1996. During their 20th century ownership, the Delbets applied finishing touches to the château. Much of the Mary Raynaud interior decoration and some of the furniture of remained.

In 1997, I purchased Sailhant. All available historical material was assembled. My conservation directive was to understand its chronology, conserve and leave intact the existing composition, to remedy structural problems, to install new mechanical systems and to follow the preservationist maxim that "the facsimile is always worse than the ruin."

My efforts were not to remove traces of age, but to hold together Sailhant's fragile unity so as to respect the work of the previous proprietors. The grande salle, the Seigneur's bedroom, the entrance hallway and the Donjon retain their 13th to 17th century detailing and are furnished with medieval furnishings and decorations from local sources.

The kitchen, informal dining room, library, main dining room, salon, chapel, bedrooms and bathrooms retain their 18th & 19th century detailing. The salon contains a collection of late 19th and the early 20th century landscape and genre paintings of Auvergnat locations and the library contains an extensive suite of neo-Gothique pieces matching the existing bookcases and room trim.

Cave à vin



La table d'echecs



Salle de bain



Château du Sailhant library, Joseph Pell Lombardi

Although very much a home, the Château and its gardens, fully conserved and furnished, are open as a museum seven months each year. The 18th & 19th century farmhouses in Le Sailhant, the small village at the base of the Château, can be rented. They provide swimming in the volcanic Château Lake with its 60 foot high cascade, fishing in nearby streams, hiking and skiing on the renowned exotic volcanic mountains, touring of 12th century Romanesque chapels and surrounding châteaux and wild boar hunting in the forest.

The site has been listed Site Remarquable de France since 1945 and Monuments Historiques de France since 2019. With its rugged, mysterious beauty perched on a remote volcanic promontory, Château du Sailhant speaks of ancient times and the unique remote Auvergne region.

For further information please visit:  
www.sailhant.com

## The Old Parsonage Peru, Vermont

*"Finding historically accurate furniture proved thorny because Greek Revival pieces around were 'too citified'. Mr. Lombardi said. He was looking for 'lesser Greek Revival' in a style known locally as high country or country Sheraton'. The sparse interiors are decorated with hooked rugs, scrimshaw, antique Vermont maps, gilded mirrors, paintings and old Vermont legislative directories. In the study, an 1850 parson's desk where weekly sermons were written (it folds flat for travel-ling) now holds Mr. Lombardi's blueprints."*

The New York Times, July 5, 1990

Peru, in southern Vermont, is a quintessential New England village with only ten houses, a general store, a church and a minuscule post office. The early habitants were farmers who deforested the surrounding hills for sheep grazing. Roads, edged with 150-year-old sugar maple trees, lead to the center of the town where there is a triangular commons used, in the 19th century, for grazing of travelers horses and gathering for civic events. The roads leading to the commons are lined with the original 19th century architecture.

The Old Parsonage was built in 1850 for the Peru Congregational Church. Occupied by parsons for over one hundred years, it has remained substantially intact, including some original furnishings and the books originally forming the 19th century town library.

The early American Republic had looked to classical Greece, the highest symbol of democracy and independence, for its architectural inspiration. In the mid-nineteenth century, archaeological discoveries resulted in



Peru, VT, early 20th century postcard

the publication of pattern books depicting the classical orders of architecture and their application to vernacular architecture. The classical architectural details finding their way into American buildings was known as the Greek Revival style; the exterior detailing of the Congregational Church and the Parsonage were designed in this prevalent style of the time.

The roofs are covered in traditional gray-black Vermont slate. The frame of the house is of hand-hewn posts and beams fastened together with wooden pegs. The floors are wide pine boards. The interior was used in a semi-formal manner as befitted a country parson with the detailing of rooms reflecting their hierarchy. There is a careful separation of the service areas from the living areas.

Nineteenth century vernacular New England houses relied upon the newly available paints for their decoration. Paint was applied on all surfaces including the ceilings, walls, woodwork and furniture. To give the furniture the look of the more costly wood, the furnishing were typically grain painted and stencil decorated, giving them greater expression than the costly woods. Likewise, the sim-



"Old Home Day" front lawn of the Old Parsonage, c. 1914



Dining room

ple pine floors and furniture, usually stripped and stained by city escapees (“flatlanders”), were also originally painted and grained.

Until the mid-1950s, the church employed a parson, with the Parsonage’s principal rooms being used for church dinners, bible readings, sewing circles and a small lending library.

Acquired in 1976, a historically accurate restoration and conservation was possible because each parson left the house, with its simple, rural New England decoration, essentially intact.

The conservation steps included paint analysis, wallpaper reproduction, decoration, furnishings and reestablishing the historic gardens. The meadow behind the Parsonage had been used for the grazing of the parson’s horse and cow. At the back of the meadow I dug a small farm pond, a typical method

of supplying water for the animals. In Vermont, with its high water table from the spring run off from the mountains, the pond consisted of simply having a large whole dug with a backhoe. Here it became a picturesque frog pond.

The traditional New England garden is an En-



Chris, Mike, Nan and Joe Lombardi

glish style perennial garden that annually grows better as it becomes more established. The borders were planted with colorful perennials and the beds in the meadow planted with wild flowers. My neighbor, Dr. Roger Fox, set up a bee hive that took advantage of the wild flowers. The simple gardens are one of my great pleasures.

In the center of the area immediately behind the house, I installed a traditional cistern consisting of fieldstone walls capped by a one piece granite circle easily obtainable from the local Vermont quarries.

The Parsonage quickly became a home filled with memories of country weekends, often shared with friends, enjoying winter skiing, spring fly fishing, summer swimming and the colorful autumns.



The Old Parsonage



Parsonage gardens, photo by Hubert Schriebl

### The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House Irvington-on-Hudson, NY

*“This polychromed wonder, now a National Historic Landmark, was literally come apart at the seams when Mr. Lombardi bought it in 1979 from the Endangered Properties Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation... ‘Everyone has their thing’, said Mr. Lombardi, ‘Mine is the mystery of bringing it all back together.’”*

The New York Times, July 5, 1990

By the time I was six years old, I had already decided I wanted to be an architect specializing in the restoration of old houses. As a teenager in Irvington in the 1950s, I was familiar with the Octagon House and had even delivered newspapers to the Carmers several times as a substitute newsboy. Extraordinarily strange and haunting, the Octagon House fascinated me because it was also a candidate for my selected career.

In 1976, I met with the Carmers and had my first tour of the interior. With great pleasure I observed that the house, underneath many layers of paint, was essentially untouched since its creation 104 years earlier.

The extent of the remaining historic fabric was remarkable - no changes had been made to the layout other than those which were easily reversible (a toilet, sink and a hung ceiling had been added to the Tea Room), no additions had been made (a wraparound porch made additions impossible) and the nineteenth century kitchens and bathrooms were substantially intact.

With every surface on the inside, including the woodwork, painted



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House from the east

white and the outside painted gray and white, its appearance belied its extraordinary original polychrome surfaces. Even before the paint analysis commenced, a slight scraping of the surfaces hinted at the delight to come.

After my acquisition in 1978, the house was barely habitable. Nonetheless, Nan and my two sons “camped out” on weekends with a patched together kitchen and minimum heat.

Dome stabilization and paint analysis commenced while at the same time early owners were being tracked down and the history of Joseph Stiner, octagon houses and phrenology were being delved into. The 1882 photograph was enlarged and endlessly studied – other than the house itself, it was the most important source of historic information.

As in all my conservation efforts, the preservationist maxim that “the facsimile is always worse than the ruin” was religiously followed.

At Octagon house, if it wasn’t immediately repairable with an identical vintage item we did without, rather than replace. This applied to door knobs, faucets, hinges, etc. It was a rather imprac-



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon House) c. 1882



Enzo in the Foxglove Garden

tical approach, but it reinforced the desire to locate what was needed as quickly as possible. Prior to the Internet, a herculean effort was required to find obscure, no longer manufactured pieces necessitating endless letters and phone calls too often resulting in wild goose chases.

Everything was carefully recorded by written description and photography. Over and over in the ensuing years these important archives proved invaluable. A house rule was that nothing was ever to be thrown out – one room was set aside for artifacts, small and large.



Luca Lombardi

Slowly, but ever so satisfyingly the hidden wonders of the house emerged. Some of the wonders, like the multi-color vibrant exterior and the decorative wall paintings had been concealed immediately after Stiner's sale to Dibble in 1882 – it seems that owners subsequent to Stiner had a more somber view of how a house should appear.



Entry hall

For us it was just the opposite, the more extraordinary – the more delightful. In every room we worked exactly with the early remaining details and expected the unusual - we were rarely disappointed. It was a preservationist's dream.

Quite remarkably, at times answers occurred just as questions were posed. The 1882 photograph showed all of the original cresting except the top portion of the observatory dormers, which were slightly out of focus. A kind visitor brought us a photo taken in the 1960s showing the missing portion of the cresting which had been haphazardly placed on top of the well house.



Carriage House, greenhouse and writer's studio

Contributions of information continue to flow in to this day –



Joy and Joe Lombardi at the Octagon House

they are always welcome. Old photographs and visitor's recollections have been priceless in answering our questions. Several years ago an elderly woman recalled seeing clouds and birds in the salon ceiling while visiting the house in the 1940s as a child. A repeat of the paint analysis proved



Verandah and grounds



Joy Lombardi in her 1946 MG TC "Emily"

that the ceiling was not uniformly blue, but had, in fact, originally contained the white clouds and doves in the child's memory.

The Egyptian Revival Woman's Gymnasium is as unusual as its name.

Octagon House not only "amuses and entertains its visitors," it provides an endless fascination for its owners through new discoveries and the finding of another missing piece in the 500,000 piece jigsaw puzzle.

Although very much finished and furnished as an 1872 home, the house is open as a museum nine months of the year, please visit:

[www.ArmourStiner.com](http://www.ArmourStiner.com)



Mike and Chris Lombardi at the Octagon House

## Alfheim Lodge Cold Spring, New York

*“In the 21st century, Lombardi returned to the location of his first love affair with houses, his family’s summer lodge at Valhalla Highlands, north of Manhattan”*

Antiques & Fine Art Magazine, Winter 2017

Alfheim Lodge is a reconstruction of, a Rustic Storybook Style lodge in Valhalla Highlands, an isolated, 1930s, stylistically cohesive, lakeside summer community in the mountains near Cold Spring, New York, 55 miles north of New York City.



Valhalla Highlands aerial view

Having summered at Valhalla Highlands as a child, I returned, reconstructed a lodge which had been planned in the 1930s, but interrupted by World War II, and placed the entire district (55 lodges and 10 community buildings set on a lake in an untouched 730 acre forest) on the New York State & National Registers of Historic Places.



1945 Valhalla Highlands, home from the war

Valhalla Highlands is the only known, planned community comprised entirely of “Rustic Storybook” architecture. The Storybook Style was popular in America between

World War I and World War II for retreats in the rural areas of United States. Like the Adirondack Style, Rustic Storybook lodges are distinguished by the use of log construction and fieldstone walls and chimneys, but they differ by having asymmetrical peaked, swooping, multi-color roofs, cantilevered entry canopies, free-standing peeled log arches at the entrances, window awnings, rock gardens with elf figurines and knotty pine interiors with oversize fieldstone fireplaces.

The whimsicalness of Alfheim Lodge and Valhalla Highlands is described in the National Register designation report as: “With creative playfulness, picturesqueness and nostalgia, the Valhalla High-



Storybook style



Alfheim Lodge From the west



Alfheim Lodge overlooking Lake Valhalla

lands interpretation blurs the line of fantasy and reality with an inherent sense of humor and playfulness. From swooping variegated asphalt shingle roofs to rock gardens with elf figurines – the fairy-tale aesthetic of Valhalla Highlands matches the community’s theme as a Nordic paradise”.



Alfheim Lodge great room



Alfheim Lodge library

More than 90 years old and being an entire ensemble, this completely intact lakeside community is a unique and elegant American treasure. Multiple years went into the planning, decorating, furnishings and assembling of the parts for Alfheim Lodge. It is finished and furnished in context with the



Alfheim Lodge dining porch



Alheim Lodge kitchen

Similar restored 1930s Rustic Storybook Style lodges in the community are available for rent. In a remote setting, they provide swimming, boating, fishing, tennis, skating and hiking in the private forest and the surrounding 9,000 acre State Park

Information history of Valhalla Highlands can be seen here:  
[ValhallaHighlands.com](http://ValhallaHighlands.com)  
 User Name: Valhalla (case sensitive)  
 Password:1940

community with its adzed wood beams, neo-Medieval lighting, 1930s Rittenhouse log furniture, Gnomeman furniture (each piece has a small carved gnome - the spirit of the wood), peeled log cabinetry, 1940s kitchen appliances and bathroom fixtures and period paintings of the community.



Alheim Lodge great room

*“One thing hastens into being, another hastens out of it. Even while a thing is in the act of coming into existence, some part of it has already ceased to be. Flux and change are forever renewing the fabric of the universe just as the ceaseless sweep of time is forever renewing the face of eternity. In such a running river, when there is no firm foothold, what is there for a man to value among all the many things that are racing past him?”*

Marcus Aurelius, Mediations (VI, 15)

## Illustration Credits

*All illustrations were furnished by the author except those listed below:*

Arc Light Images for Buffalo Lumber, p. 96  
 Cunningham, Bill, p. 90  
 Fowler, Orson Squire, engraving by Max Bachert, p. 33  
 Dupin, Leslie, p. 66  
 deGoumoëns, Patick, p. 85  
 Globus, Stephen, p. 56  
 Historic American Buildings Survey, p. 52  
 Life Magazine, p. 48  
 Lombardi, Jessica, pp. 12 & 70  
 Lombardi, Michael, pp. 16, 21, 22, 23, 26, 28, 30, 43, 60, 62, 64, 65 & 70  
 Neal Auctions, p. 63  
 New York Historical Society, pp. 6, 57, 59 & 92  
 The Real Deal, p. 70  
 Rhodes, Laurie, p. 94  
 Sagarin, David, p. 84  
 Schriebl, Hubert, p. 90  
 Seliger, Mark, p. 55  
 Smithsonian Institute, p. 48  
 Swann, Fred (Oil Painting), p. 91  
 Toth, Bela (Oil Painting), p. 83  
 The New York Times, p. 85  
 Underhill, p. 84  
 Soissons, Pierre, pp. 88, 89 & 90  
 Werry, John, p. 63

## Bibliography

Carmer, Carl Lamson, “The Screaming Ghost and Other Stories” 1956  
 Corvisier, Christian, “Château du Sailhant, Monographie Historique et Architecturale, Étude Approfondie de Documentation et d’Analyse Historique et Archéologique,” 1999  
 Dietz, Ulysses G., “A Major New Piece in the Jelliff Puzzle,” in The Magazine Antiques, May, 1986  
 Doell & Doell, Garden Historians, “Site Visit Report for the Armour-Stiner House,” 1985  
 Douët, Alfred, “Le Château de Saillans et Ses Seigneurs,” 1925  
 Downing, Andrew J., “A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America and further publications,” 1841  
 Fowler, Orson Squire, “The Octagon House, a Home for All,” 1848  
 Johnson, J. Stewart, “John Jelliff, Cabinetmaker,” in The Magazine Antiques, August, 1972  
 Stowe, Harriet Beecher, “The American Woman’s Home,” 1869  
 Vitruvius, Marcus Pollo, “The Ten Books of Architecture”  
 Wheller, Gerase, Homes for the People,” 1867  
 Zerbe, Jerome, “Les Pavillions of the Eighteenth Century,” 1979



### About the Author

Joseph Pell Lombardi is an international architect and preservationist and the owner of the Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House. During the past 50 years he has conserved over 1,000 historic structures throughout the world.

Mr. Lombardi owns most of the projects in which he is involved, and serves on many boards concerned with the built environment. Recipient of numerous awards and a worldwide lecturer, Mr. Lombardi has had extensive articles written about him and his work.

Back Flap: Photo by Mark Seliger

Back Cover: New York Historical Society



The Armour-Stiner (Octagon) House. Circa 1882