

Fig. I. One of the earliest examples of Wetherhill's handicraft, and not so well designed nor so cleverly executed as his later work

A MASTER BUILDER OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

By Marc W. Cole

CYRUS WETHERHILL, a slight wisp of an Englishman, a carpenter, a stone mason, and a builder, came into Orleans County, New York, about 1814. He lived and labored near the village of Gaines, and the results of his work stand to-day, a monument to his genius and technique. The log cabin was then prosperity's home, the ox cart was the common vehicle, and the celebrated Ridge Road was not yet entirely surveyed.

Once this Ridge Road was an Indian trail from the Genesee to the Niagara River, and it soon became the main highway for pioneers of northwestern New York. The settlement of Gaines began about 1809, and about 1816, when the stage coach line from Canandaigua to Buffalo was established *via* the Ridge, it became a thriving village. Wetherhill no doubt helped to build many of the

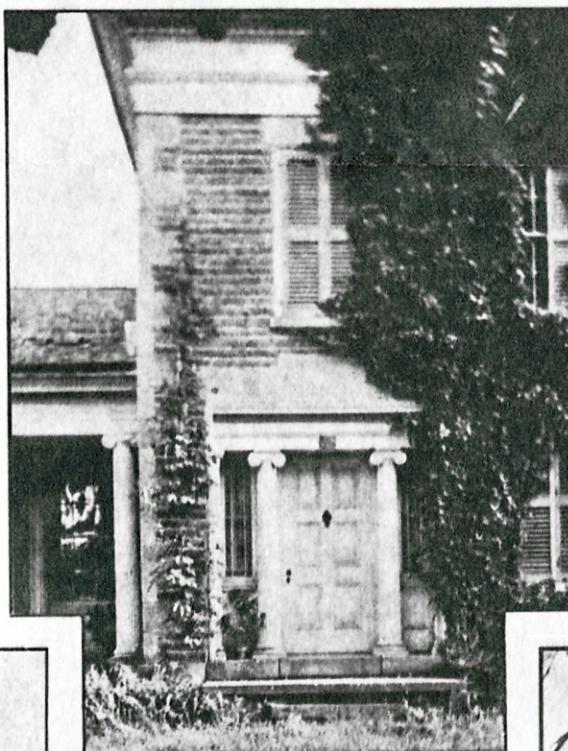


Fig. II shows a marked improvement over Fig. I, both in treatment and in design

pioneer log cabins, but as soon as this settlement was sufficiently prosperous, his building was confined almost entirely to stone, and later to brick. Taking the material at hand, the water-worn lake stones that lay in beds along this road, he wrought all the pleasing effects shown in the illustrations with the single exception of the doorway in Fig. VII, which was built many years later by home labor, but clearly shows the influence of his style in the neighborhood. All the houses in which these doorways stand are within a three-mile radius of Gaines, and were probably built between 1820 and 1835. The lumber which this builder with ideas used was taken



Fig. III. Built a year later than Fig. II, but under unpleasant circumstances, which are reflected in the whole atmosphere of the house

from the standing pine woods, and it was chosen with so keen an eye that flaws or checks are not to be found even after nearly a hundred years of service.

Fig. I is one of the earliest examples of Wetherhill's work. The woodwork of the doorway is very simple and the stone work is not as regular nor as cleverly done as is his later work; it seems to show a lack of confidence and freedom. In Fig. II both the doorway and the house itself show a marked improvement both in treatment and design. Perhaps his environment was more congenial, at any rate he was working for a Free Thinker, a Free Mason, and a social nabob of the pioneer days. The stones used in the main part of the house are perfectly matched and blended in color. Through the dark green of the ivy they look like the soft red and brown colorings of a Persian rug. There is almost no variation in the size of the flat stones used in the herring-bone pat-

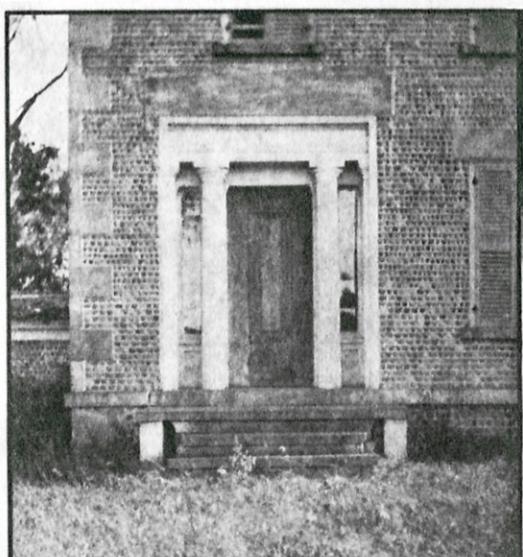


Fig. IV. Doorway of Fig. III, almost sinister in its plainness. Although following the same general design and dimensions, note how much less pleasing it is than the one in Fig. II

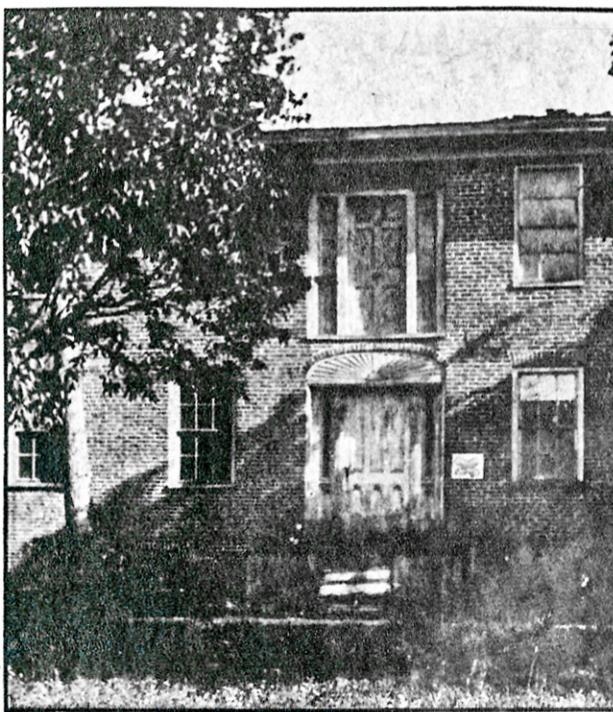


Fig. V. An old brick hotel by Wetherhill. It once had a balcony upon which the upper door opened

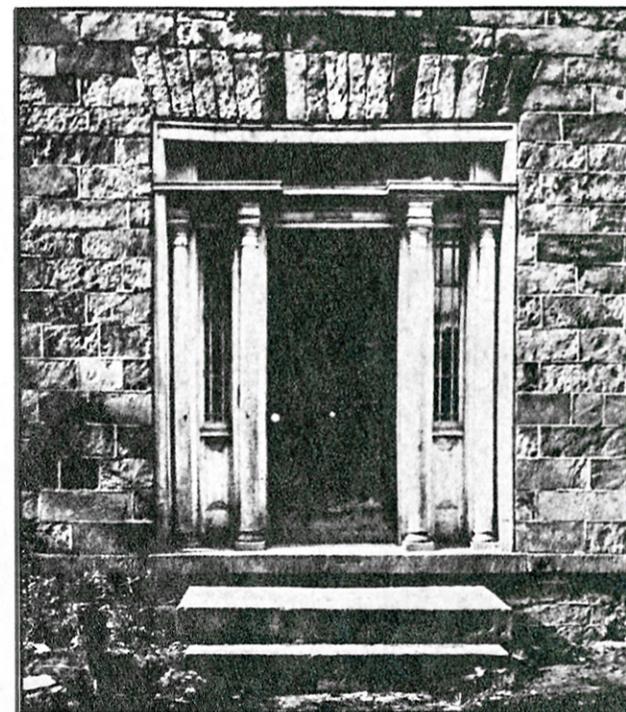


Fig. VI. Sandstone was the material used here, but the masonry is not so well preserved as is the wonderfully constructed woodwork. This house has recently been torn down and the doorway now graces a new home in a neighboring city

tern, and the mortar ridges between the courses are as regular as if cast in a form. The capitals to the columns at the doorway and on the left wing are hand carved; the columns are solid and were worked out and fluted by hand, showing to-day the tool marks even under many coats of paint.

Wetherhill must have been gifted with a lot of that doubtful blessing, artistic temperament; he was greatly influenced by his environment, and unless this suited, his work reflected his discomfort. This can easily be seen in the general effect of the house and doorway to it shown in Figs. III and IV. This was built only a year after the vine covered home in Fig. II, but it stares blankly into the north and the doorway is almost sinister in its plainness. The cold air of the house is relieved only by the warm colors of the stones and the darker reds of the facings to the windows, door, and corners; these could not be hidden. But on this job Cyrus was working long hours for a strict Calvinist—a crusty, penurious landowner who kept bearing down on all the building expenses, who wanted no frills; and his architect and builder wrote large over all the house of the cheerless atmosphere in which he worked. There is the same material, the same general plan followed, almost the same dimensions used as in Fig. II, yet the contrast is remarkable.

Further off the Ridge Road, cobblestones were not easily found, but an outcrop of sandstone served for all the material in the house whose doorway is shown in Fig. VI instead of being used only in ornamentation as in the other buildings. Here Wetherhill did not get the same durable mixture in his mortar or else his material was new and unfamiliar, for the masonry is not so cleverly done nor so well preserved, but in the woodwork he fairly outdid himself. How long the wood for it was seasoned we can only guess, but its present day condition, in spite of a lack of paint and a direct exposure to the sun, tells a tale of sterling quality and masterful joinery. The door and woodwork are all white pine. Wrought iron nails of the finest diameter were used, and the delicate sash mullions and mortices meet without a visible joint. It is almost impossible to find a crack in the deep-set panels below the side-lights, and there has been no paint here to protect the wood for thirty years. The columns are of course solid, and the capitals and the detail below

the top sash are built up from different shapes of molding and half-round stuff, yet they look like carved work even on very close inspection.

A lusty inn-keeper once stood in the doorway in Fig. V and many a fair lady has spread her crinoline upon the balcony on which the upper door once opened. They may have watched the coming of the stage coach, for this was a most important stop and the horses were changed before this door. Our builder used brick for this hotel, as a brickyard had been opened a few rods back from this building and the cobblestones were becoming too expensive a material for the many houses now being built.

Whether Cyrus was the originator of the herring-bone pattern with the flat lake stones, or not, it is almost certain that his designs, so very favorably situated to be seen and admired by travelers, were widely copied. Ten stage coaches of two competing lines passed these doorways each day, carrying the business and social life of western New York, and many houses of the same general style can be found quite frequently along the valley of the Genesee and the Niagara frontier, showing where some passing admirer of Wetherhill's work has attempted to duplicate it. Wetherhill's life was spent almost entirely in Orleans County, all his working years surely, and his style and knowledge of design must have been largely a boyhood memory only of New and Old England.

These almost classic entrances have endured through the stage-coach days, when they looked out on the great social and political artery of early times; through the hard and narrow days which followed, when they served but as exits for some sad funeral train or some merry wedding party; through a time when they were sold for mortgage debt, when their owners struggled fruitlessly against diminishing returns from the land, and the sons of the household heard only the calls of urban life; until to-day, once more the social stream waxes before them. Motors flirt the roadway dust their way, and their owners once more are swinging wide the doors to newer methods and to larger life, for farms are profitable now and the pride and satisfaction of country living have returned.

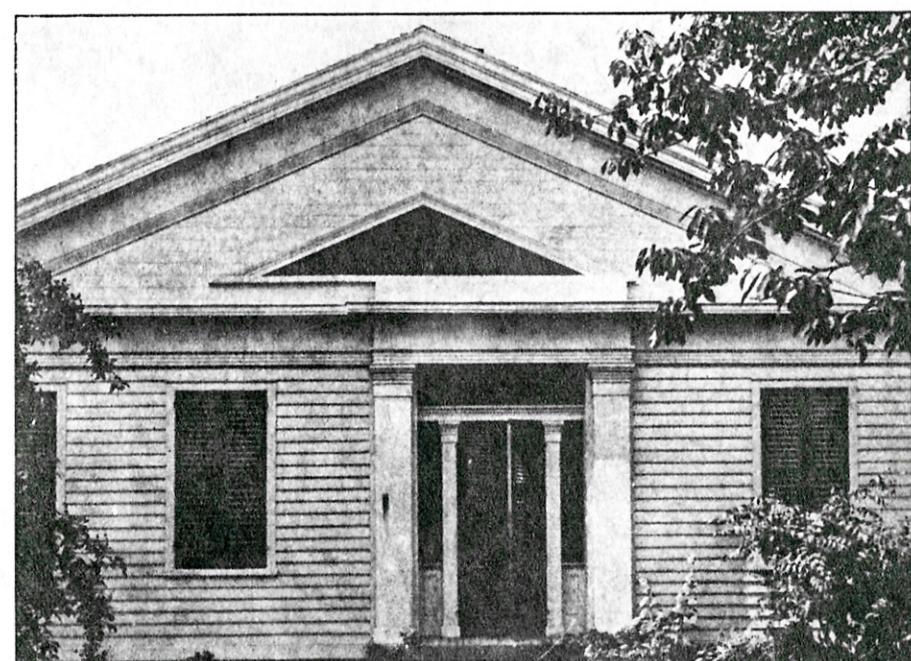


Fig. VII. A house near Gaines not built by Wetherhill or even in his time, but many years later, the doorway showing clearly the influence of his style in the neighborhood