

Have You Ever Been In an Eight-Sided House?

By ARCH MERRILL

STILL dotting the York State countryside are a few eight-sided houses, reminders of an architectural fad of our grandfathers' time. One day they may be as scarce as covered bridges.

Widely scattered over the Rochester area, about a dozen of the octagonal structures are still standing. All but one of them goes back nearly 100 years.

For it was the 1850s that saw the zenith of their short-lived vogue. Father of the fad in America was the eccentric Orson Squire Fowler, the Cohocton farmhand who reaped fame and fortune as the high priest of phrenology, the once popular "science" of reading character by the bumps on the human cranium.

Impressed by an octagonal house he saw in Wisconsin, Fowler published in the year 1849 a volume titled "a Home for All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building."

This book cited the practical advantages of the eight-sided type of dwelling—more sunlight during the daylight hours, conservation of heat and saving "weak women many steps."

The distinctiveness of the design appealed to many. After Fowler's book came out, at a time when the phrenology craze was sweeping the country, eight-sided houses, barns, smoke houses, chicken houses, even blacksmith shops, began to rise in America.

FOWLER BUILT the most pretentious of the octagonal residences, on a knoll near Fishkill in the Hudson Valley. It was four stories high, with a basement and a glass-roofed cupola that towered 80 feet above the ground. It contained 100 rooms and for a time it was the showplace of the region.

Seepage from a cesspool carried typhoid germs through the grout or gravel walls which were part of Fowler's architectural pattern. After that the place was seldom inhabited and it became known as "Fowler's Folly." It was razed in 1897 because it was considered unsafe for the sightseers who flocked through it.

There is no record that any of the hundreds of other octagonal houses suffered the fate of "Fowler's Folly." Perhaps few copied the gravel wall idea.

Carl Carmer, the author and folklore specialist, has dug into the history of octagonal architecture. He has a personal interest because he lives in a big, porch-encircled, 93-year-old, domed, eight-sided house on Irvington-on-Hudson. His research revealed that there were octagonal public buildings in Italy in the Middle Ages, as shown by old paintings.

But it was Orson Fowler, a native of Cohocton and one of the most fantastic figures of his time, who stimulated the building of so many octagonal structures in the America of a century ago.

NEW YORK HISTORY, the organ of the State Historical Association, in 1952 listed the remaining eight-sided buildings in the Empire State. They were 120 on the list.

So, armed with this list, the Merrills on week-end trips to the hinterlands, have made a special project of looking over the "eight-siders" that remain in our region.

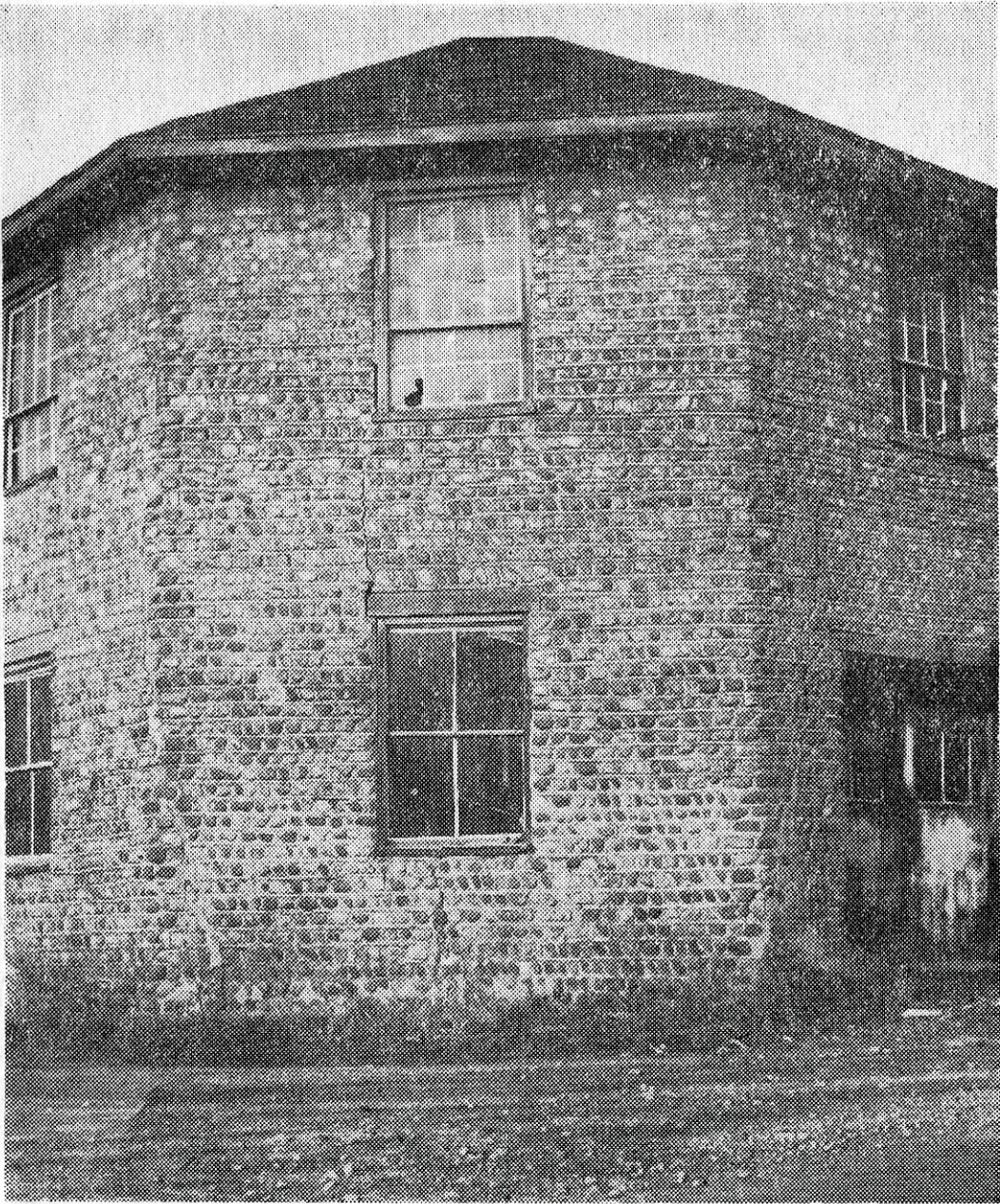
We were shown through one of them, the sturdy, century-old home with the green blinds and the inevitable cupola on the Ridge Road, about one mile west of Williamson. Now occupied by Lynn Falkey, it is known as the Howard Sperry place in the fruit belt village.

It is a well-kept and comfortable domicile. We were told that Fowler was right about the sunlight and heat and step-saving features. In octagonal houses, all the rooms have unusual angles, providing space for many strange-shaped closets and nooks. Three rooms must be a paper-hanger's nightmare.

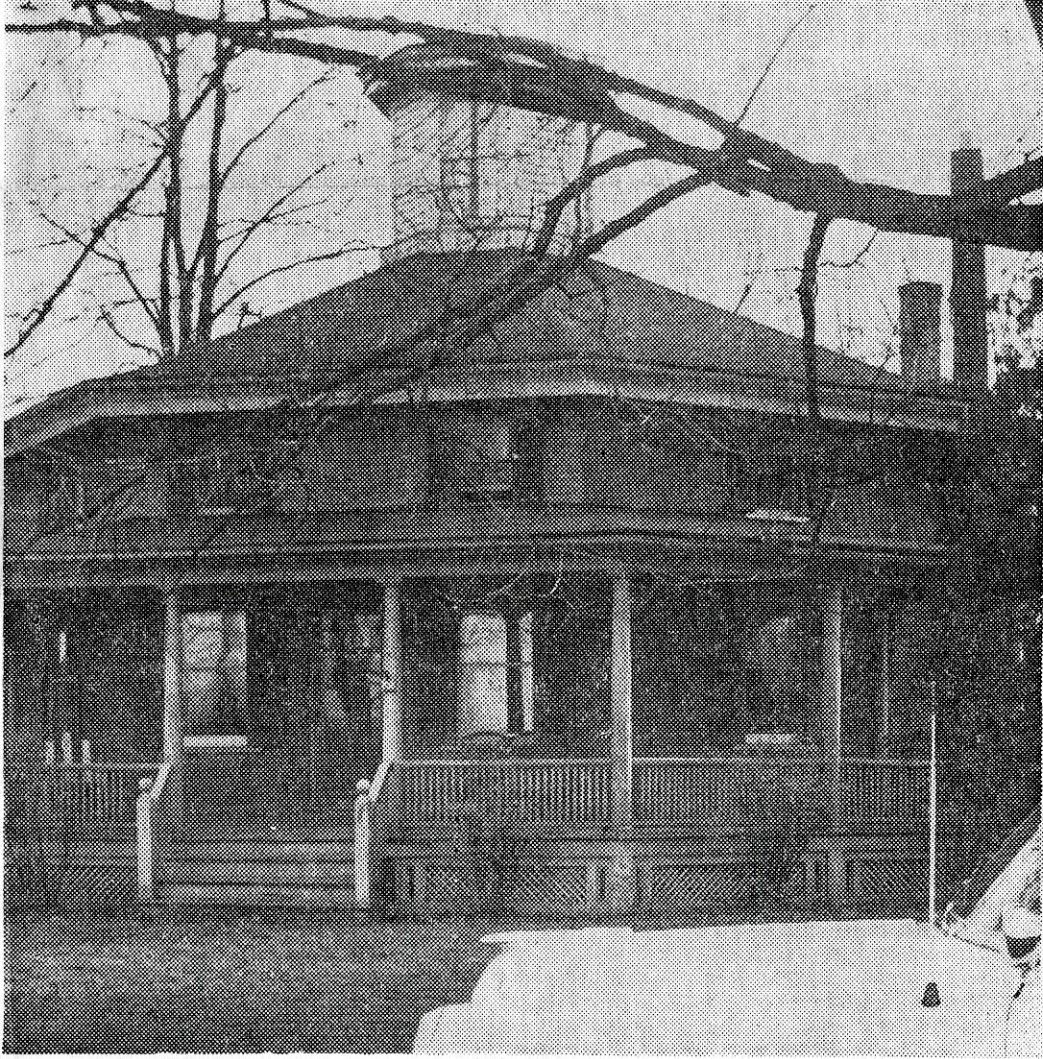
Our visit was crowned with a trip up the winding stairway to the cupola atop the house which commands a fine "4 D" view of the pleasant orchard country.

There are at least two other octagonal buildings in Wayne County. One is the century-old cobblestone former blacksmith shop beside the Canandaigua Outlet in the village of Alloway, just south of Lyons on the Geneva road. It is owned by Cleve Friend, who for many years plied his smith's trade within its eight-sided walls. Now it is a storehouse.

The other octagonal building in Wayne County is the residence



Eight-sided cobblestone blacksmith shop at Alloway, near Lyons.



Octagonal house near Williamson, at least 100 years old.

in Clyde known as the "Gillete place."

ONLY ONE of the picturesque oldtimers is within the borders of Monroe County and that is of recent vintage. Perhaps it was the last octagonal structure built in the state.

It is the summer home at Lighthouse Beach along Lake Ontario in the Town of Parma, near the tall old lighthouse, and it was built between 1919 and 1927 by Aylesworth B. Haines, an elderly artist. In it he followed his

idea that "all art work to be really art is composed of round radiating and curved lines. "That is why," he told a reporter in 1937, "I chose the octagonal with its curving corners and straight lines."

Everything about this house beside Ontario's sometimes ram-bunctious waves is eight-sided—the chimney, the fireplace, the roof with its eight cornices, each housing a flower box.

Probably the only octagonal house ever erected in Rochester was the one that stood on the

west side of Plymouth Avenue South, south of Columbia Avenue, until it was razed around 1890.

ONE OF THE MOST elegant

and best kept of the "eight-siders" in these parts is the one at the head of Castle street in Geneva. It is said to have been built by a deaf mute couple in 1852. The high steps that lead to the roomy porch are flanked by an iron railing which continues around the porch. A mahogany spiral stairway leads from

the basement through two floors to the cupola.

A brown frame house with eight sides has stood since before the Civil War at 116 Gorham Street, at the corner of Wood Street, in Canandaigua. For many years it housed a distinguished occupant. Senator John Raines and his family lived there from 1872 until 1912.

Also in Ontario County is the batten and board type octagonal house at West and Lyons Streets in Naples, flanked by vineyards and in the shadow of magnificent hills.

LIVINGSTON COUNTY has one of the oldest of the octagonal houses. It is the so-called Hurlburt place, of wood, with stucco sides, on the Cowan Road in the Town of York. It was built in about 1837, which is a dozen years before Orson Fowler wrote "A Home for All."

South of Livonia on the road over the hills to Conesus is another eight-sided home and also south of Livonia on the Coe Road is an octagonal barn.

On the fringes of the Rochester area, there are octagonal houses at Lyndonville, Orleans County; a 101-year-old residence one mile south of Prattsburg on the Bath road and one of stucco at Hammondsport at the head of Keuka Lake. The last named was built by Timothy Younglove in the mid 1850s.

IN THE ARCHITECTURAL "passing show" of the years, many styles have marched. There were the Colonial types built by the pioneers and copied in later years; the Greek Revival, the Georgian, the fussy Victorian, the cobblestone structures that are peculiar to this area; the Tudors, the bungalows and now the ranch houses, in rainbow hues.

Of the lot the "eight siders" were the most original. Better take a look at them while they are still here. Their ranks are thinning. Maybe some of those we visited are gone by this time.