

Bethinking of Old Orleans

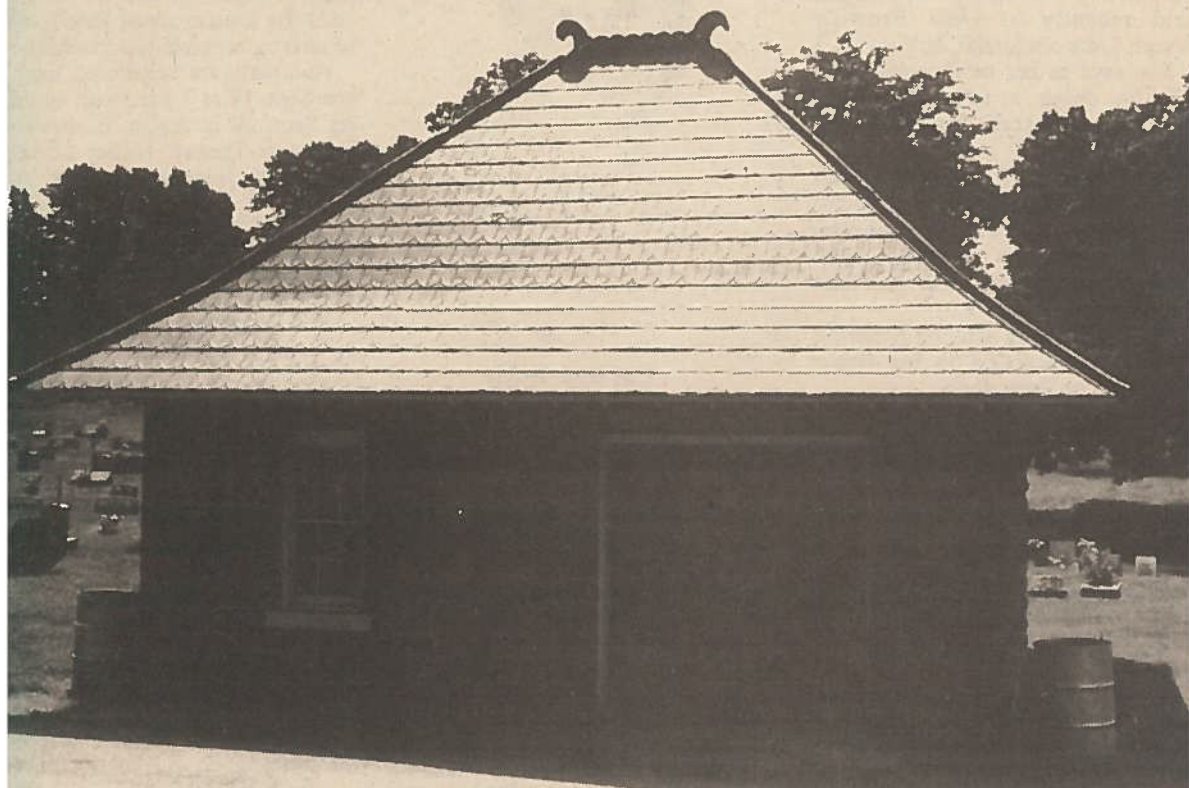
C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XIV

8-24-92

No. 33

ONE BEAUTIFUL ROOF



In the July/August issue of Old House Journal there appeared an article entitled: Making Sense of Metal Roofs by Gordon Bock. Here is what he states about Metal Shingles:

"Some early examples of Metal Shingles were manufactured by cutting sheet metal by hand. One notable example is the tin-coated iron shingles that Thomas Jefferson imported from Wales for installation on Monticello's grand dome around 1800. However, the product did not really take off until after the mid 1870's when machine-pressed shingles made from black (uncoated) sheet iron were first manufactured. They were followed on the market by galvanized iron, copper, bronze, and zinc shingles in the 1880's and continued to be produced on a large scale until the metal-manufacturing demands of World War II reempted the necessary machinery and raw materials.

Decorative metal shingles were made possible by the improved mass production techniques available in the mid-19th century. Almost all were shaped and embossed, often mimicking wood, slate, or terra cotta at costs the average person could afford. Strictly decorative patterns — of which there were many — satisfied the late-19th century taste for elaborate and eye-catching surfaces on houses. Different designs often took their names from the outline, such as Gothic, diamond, and hexagonal. Most had edges connived to interlock and prevent windlift and raised designs helped maintain rigidity in the shingle. Metal shingles were laid up much like traditional shingles, either individually or in sheets of four, and did not require a skilled craftsman to be installed, which added to their popularity."

As I read this with interest and looked at various pictured examples, I thought to myself, nothing shown in Old House Journal exceeds the extraordinary roof on the building shown here. Indeed, right in our midst is a most unusual and fabulous example of metal shingle work. It is the roof on the

pump house at Mt. Albion Cemetery. The roof is made up of individual pressed metal shingles in the "Queen Anne" pattern. The roof type is of hip construction, sloping up from four sides and capped on the ridge with a decorative metal cresting. To my knowledge there is nothing like this anywhere else in Orleans County. The roof appears to be in excellent condition as it has always been well cared for by having been painted periodically. It is appropriately painted a pretty shade of dark green. Wide over-hanging eaves expose decorative rafters.

The pump house was built in 1906 and is a 20 x 24 foot storage shed. Its original purpose was to house a gasoline engine used to pump water to a cistern or reservoir up near the tower which fed by gravity to individual water spigots in the cemetery. Prior to the pump house a windmill was used for this purpose.

Although I wish to emphasize the decorative quality of the roof here, I'd also point out that the building is constructed of concrete blocks which emulate stone ashlers. The 1905 Souvenir Book of Albion advertises a local cement products company known as Bowles and Crowther which was located at the corner of McKinstry and Fruit Streets (now Crimson Heights). Here, with perhaps six employees, John Bowles and Henry Crowther produced building blocks, horse blocks, sidewalks, hitching posts, fence posts and steps, all in concrete. I would be almost certain that the concrete blocks used in the pump house were cast at this establishment.

Indeed, the pump house at Mt. Albion Cemetery is an example of architecture utilizing the early techniques of mechanization and industrialization of man made building materials. It is an early technological and highly refined example of building which foretold the way of the future. Its crowning glory, the pressed metal shingle roof remains a beautiful example of its kind, shedding the elements and gleaming for all to behold.