

## Crows' Nests or Eagles' Aeries? The Octagon Houses of E. A. Brackett and H. P. Wakefield

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**T**hat a house should reflect the life and character of its inhabitants is an idea often expressed in the architectural planbooks of the nineteenth century. Therefore, when one finds a house of that time much out of the ordinary, one is apt to suppose that its builder was in some way an extraordinary person. At the same time, one cannot help but suspect that the structure and appearance of such buildings owe some debt to the planbooks then available. Such is the case with the E. A. Brackett house in Winchester, Massachusetts and with the H. P. Wakefield house in nearby Reading. They are eccentric houses built for men of strong individuality, and are based primarily on one of the most eccentric planbooks of the time, Orson S. Fowler's *A Home for All*.

When Edward Augustus Brackett arrived in Boston in the summer of 1841 at the age of twenty-three, he was full of confidence in his future as a sculptor, certain that here he would find the patronage which had eluded him in New York.<sup>1</sup> He had come a long way from the Vassalboro, Maine farm of his father, who had been a clockmaker and nurseryman. He began to teach himself sculpture after his family had moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, working first in clay and later in marble in the neo-classical style of his idol Horatio Greenough. In 1839 he decided that he must move to a city which offered an artist more than Cincinnati did, and so he went to New York. There he met with little success, due to the competition of more formally trained sculptors. So with letters

of introduction from his friend William Cullen Bryant to Richard Henry Dana, Washington Allston, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he left for Boston.

Although the success he sought as a sculptor was never to be his, its lack of immediacy did not prevent him from marrying eighteen months after his arrival. He established a studio and residence in Boston, but moved his residence to Woburn in 1843 to save money. Commissions for sculpture were few, and Brackett was forced to try his hand at crayon portraits to support his young family. He had to rely on his brother Walter and Richard Henry Dana for support in completing his *Shipwrecked Mother and Child* and publishing a volume of poems in 1851.<sup>2</sup> Earlier an attempt had been made to raise money for Brackett by publishing folios of engravings of his work, but as only one volume of what was to have been a series seems to have been published, the project was apparently a failure.<sup>3</sup>

In 1848 Brackett and his wife began to assemble a lot of land in the village of South Woburn, which became the town of Winchester in 1850. In this they received some assistance. Their first parcel of four acres, in a remote wooded spot on the ridge above the village, was sold to them for one dollar.<sup>4</sup> Even as late as 1855 Mrs. Brackett enlarged their house lot by purchasing adjoining acreage for fifty dollars with the attached stipulation that it was to be "... for her sole and separate use, and free from the interference or control of her said Husband in any



FIG. 1. EDWARD A. BRACKETT HOUSE, c. 1852, Winchester, Massachusetts. (Photo by author.)

manner.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly some felt more sympathetic to the wife of the artist than to the artist himself. The lot which the Bracketts acquired must have appealed to Edward’s love of nature and the outdoors which had been formed during his boyhood days in Maine. Even today, though the town has grown up all around, the hillside with its hemlocks and oaks remains relatively unspoilt (Figure 1).

Like many poor men before and since, Brackett’s problem was how to build an adequate house which he could also afford. He found his solution in a book which offered to teach a man living in such straitened circumstances to build his own cheap housing, provided he was open-minded enough not to simply reject the book outright. In 1848 Orson Squire Fowler, phrenologist and reformer,<sup>6</sup> had published a large paper-bound pamphlet, *A Home for All; or a New Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building*, with a price — fifty cents — that reflected its title.<sup>7</sup> The book must have appealed to Brackett in several ways. The low cost of Fowler’s

designs, based on their construction methods, materials, cheapness of labor, and lack of waste, must have been the primary attraction. But to Brackett, a man remembered for “. . . his love of a life near nature . . .”<sup>8</sup> Fowler’s description of his ideas — “In short it is NATURE’S style of architecture”<sup>9</sup> — must have had a strong appeal.

It is tantalizing to think that as Brackett shared many of Fowler’s interests, including abolitionism, natural history, and spiritualism, they may have met. Brackett’s mentor Bryant had been associated with Fowler in New York,<sup>10</sup> and perhaps Brackett had met him there. Certainly a young sculptor could not have lived long in New York in the 1840’s without hearing of Orson Fowler and going to see the collection of sculpted heads in the Phrenological Cabinet. Whether Brackett made heads for Fowler’s museum or not, an interest in phrenology, the belief that character could be read in the configuration of a person’s skull, would have come naturally

to a young artist whose career would doubtless be spent primarily on portraits. As Fowler himself noted, "The importance of combining a knowledge of phrenology with the arts . . . is very great, and too apparent to require comment. In a few years every artist must be a phrenologist, or out of employ."<sup>11</sup> Later, after Fowler and his partner Wells opened their Boston office in 1851, such contacts might have been renewed.<sup>12</sup>

In any case, Fowler's small book of 1849, which Brackett used, is based on two ideas. The first, that of building homes in the form of an octagon, Fowler claims is his own.<sup>13</sup> Of the second, Fowler states: "While looking about, in my professional tours, for some pattern of a house after which to build, I saw, in Central New York, houses constructed WHOLLY OF BOARDS and WITHOUT FRAMES, though only one story."<sup>14</sup> This construction method, in which planks are laid up horizontally, forming either a solid wall or an interlocking crib, made the octagon plan possible.

... I said, "Why not build HOUSES in a spherical, instead of a square form?" "Because they cannot be FRAMED without costing more extra than is gained," was the practical answer. "But the BOARD wall can be constructed at any other angle as well as a right angle," thought I. "Then why not have our houses six, eight, twelve, or twenty-sided? Why not build after some mathematical figure?" I inquired. I had it.<sup>15</sup>

It is also this "board wall" construction which makes the first edition, which Brackett used, so different from the better known second edition, published in 1853. The revised title of this larger volume — *A Home for All; or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior, and Adapted to Rich and Poor*<sup>16</sup> — reflects the major changes Fowler had made in the work. The second

edition relegates "board wall" construction to a small section at the end,<sup>17</sup> and emphasizes the use of concrete, which Fowler had first seen in Wisconsin in 1850.<sup>18</sup> It also places much more emphasis on homes for the rich, even though the purpose of both editions is to "CHEAPEN AND IMPROVE OUR HOUSES, and especially . . . [to] bring comfortable dwellings within the reach of the poorer classes."<sup>19</sup>

The first edition is clearly not as well conceived and unified as is the second one. Fowler was obviously writing quickly, stretching to make a book of any size out of his two ideas, the octagon form and the "board wall." A great deal of space in the first edition is given over to phrenology, the benefits of exercise, and public ownership of land, among other topics in which Fowler was interested. Many discussions, especially proofs of the efficiency and cheapness of the octagon plan, are repeated frequently and needlessly. Plans and other features are offered as suggestions to be developed and improved upon, and Fowler encourages the builder to develop his own plan.

The author is far from claiming perfection for this plan of building. No one mind can perfect anything; nor has the author been able to devote much time to the composition of the work. Doubtless every reader could suggest some improvements either in location, or form, or arrangement of some of the rooms, or closets, or house appurtenances; but he does claim that this kind of wall, and the general form of house and arrangement of rooms, are every way superior to those now in use, and strike out a plan which can be varied by each builder to suit his taste and means, besides being susceptible to improvement almost indefinitely.<sup>20</sup>

The disappearance of this flexibility from the second edition was undoubtedly the result of Fowler's building his own oc-

tagon house and his interest in concrete. What is rather surprising is that few people ever really deviated greatly from the standard octagon plans which Fowler offered, especially considering the tentative quality of the first edition and what one assumes to be a large bump of independence on the heads of the builders of octagon houses of any sort.

The house Edward Brackett built at some time between 1850 and 1854<sup>21</sup> (Figure 2) is clearly based on the first edition of Fowler's *A Home for All*. It is octagonal in plan, and employs the "lattice" form of "board wall" construction which Fowler describes.

Let every second board be of equal width and straight-edged, and the intermediate ones can be these scantling slabs [smaller boards]. This will leave openings enough to hold the mortar, which will fill up all irregularities. I saw houses built on this plan like lattice-

work, that is with every second board omitted, with a row of blocks wherever they were nailed, leaving the plaster to fill the interstices. But in this case girths should be laid on for the floor timbers to rest upon, because the boards would spring, except on these blocks. Yet with such girths this plan is probably as good as the other, and save half the boards, yet of course, takes the more mortar.<sup>22</sup>

This "lattice" form of the "board wall" was later described by a newspaper as having "no single upright post, being built on the plan of an old snake fence."<sup>23</sup> In the Brackett house, following a suggestion Fowler credits to his wife,<sup>24</sup> both the interior and exterior walls are built up out of rough sawn fir boards, one by three inches. These boards are laid horizontally in interlocking octagonal cribs, and are supported along their seven foot lengths by blocks spaced between eighteen and twenty-two inches apart. At these points, and at the corners, the boards are fastened

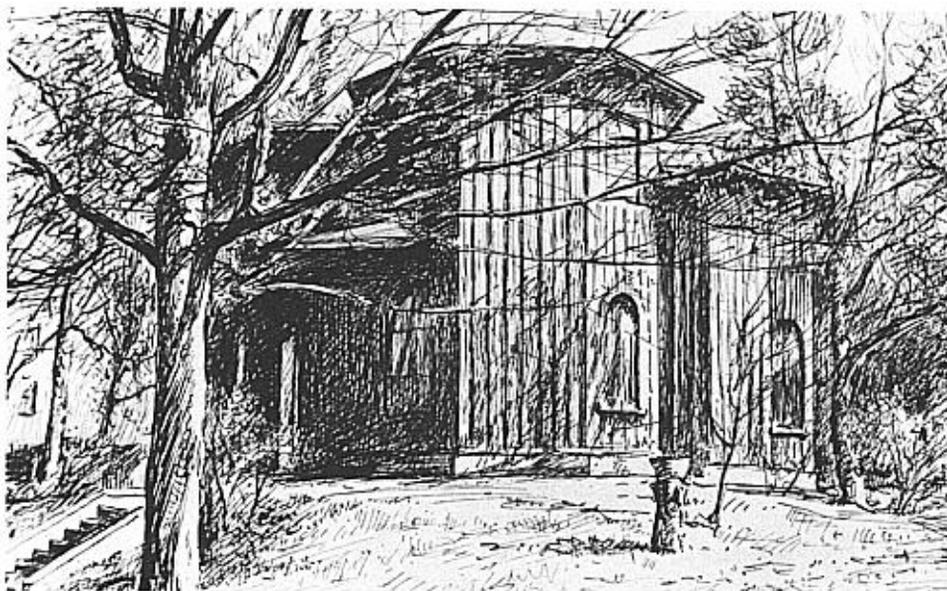


FIG. 2. E. A. BRACKETT HOUSE, as drawn by W. H.W. Bicknell for Henry S. Chapman's *History of Winchester, Massachusetts*, 1936. (Courtesy of the Winchester Archival Center.)

together (Figures 3 and 11). Sills are built into the cribs to carry the floor joists and the frame of the roofs. The plaster is laid directly on the cribs, which as Fowler suggests saves the expense of lath<sup>25</sup> and fills in all the spaces, and producing a very strong, tight structure.<sup>26</sup>

The source of the wood for this poor man's house was probably one of the mills along the Aberjona River in the center of Winchester.<sup>27</sup> Here the seven foot lengths of fir could have been obtained easily and cheaply. Fowler actually suggests this, pointing out that "... knotty hemlock or whitewood — anything which will hold a nail or pin — will answer the purpose . . . and can generally be procured just for the drawing of the logs and sawing. . . ."<sup>28</sup> Not only did Brackett save money on materials, but on labor as well, by building the house himself. Fowler tells how he built a "board wall" building at Fishkill, New York, with the aid of his father, brother, and one carpenter.<sup>29</sup> Brackett, having grown up on a Maine farm, was doubtlessly roughly familiar with building techniques, and as a sculptor was certainly adept. Various accounts of Brackett's life say that he built the house, and it seems reasonable to suppose in this instance that that is exactly what happened.<sup>30</sup> As Fowler says, "He is rather soft, though no carpenter, who cannot put one board above another. . . ."<sup>31</sup>

The plan of Brackett's house (Figures 4 and 5), "a combination of . . . octagons and segments of octagons," was his own.<sup>32</sup> It is related to a plan in *A Home for All* (Figure 6), of which Fowler wrote: "Now by making a closet of the same size in the other corner of each room, you perceive each of these four rooms to be an octagon — in beautiful keeping with the house."<sup>33</sup> However, Brackett followed Fowler's suggestion that every builder devise his own

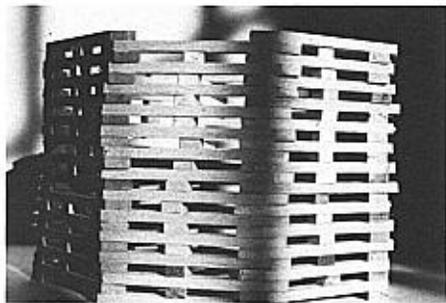


FIG. 3. MODEL SHOWING THE CRIB OF PLANKS USED IN THE "LATTICE" FORM OF "BOARD WALL" CONSTRUCTION, as employed in the E. A. Brackett and H. P. Wakefield Houses. (Model and photo by author.)

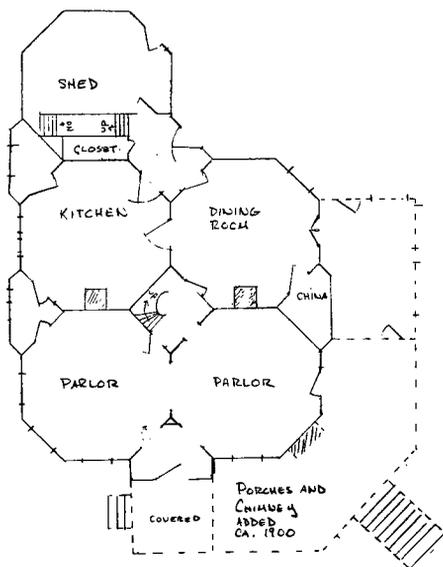


FIG. 4. PLAN OF THE FIRST FLOOR OF THE E. A. BRACKETT HOUSE. (Drawn by author.)

plan, taking advantage of the flexibility of the wall system to combine four regular octagons, each with seven foot sides, into a larger octagonal form. (The fifth octagonal unit, the shed on the northeast side, was added later.) As Fowler said:

Now these boards can be laid up at any angle you please, so as to render your base triangular, or square, or octagonal, or whatever shape you like, and thus of the inside as well as the outside walls. The opportunity thus afforded for diversifying the shape is surely a very great recommendation alike serviceable to both fancy and utility. See how many shapes it allows you to give your house and your rooms, and each room a different form, if you like, without any perceptible increase in cost.<sup>34</sup>

In treating the exterior, Brackett used boards and battens, which can still be seen where the later shed was attached. Fowler thought a plaster exterior to be the superior external finish, but pointed out that "... this plan allows a covering of

clapboards, or sheeting, equally with a frame house."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Fowler's arguments about the permanence of such a plaster exterior failed to convince Brackett, but the present white stucco exterior is in happy keeping with Fowler's ideas.

The Italianate overhang, brackets, and windows of the exterior are stylistically somewhat at odds with the board and batten finish, which one usually associates with the Gothic style. However, provoked by some desire for a more picturesque home than the usual octagon plan provided, Brackett chose to give each of the various units of his house even greater external expression with a multitude of differing roof levels, the result being somewhat like a towered castle.

The low roofs may have been influenced by Fowler's recommendation of a new type of asphalt roof.<sup>36</sup> However, as the only elevation provided in the first edition of *A Home for All* is phrenological and not architectural, the picturesque qualities of this octagonal house may have

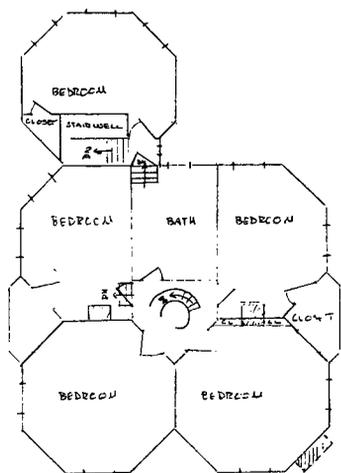


FIG. 5. PLAN OF THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE E. A. BRACKETT HOUSE. (Drawn by author.)

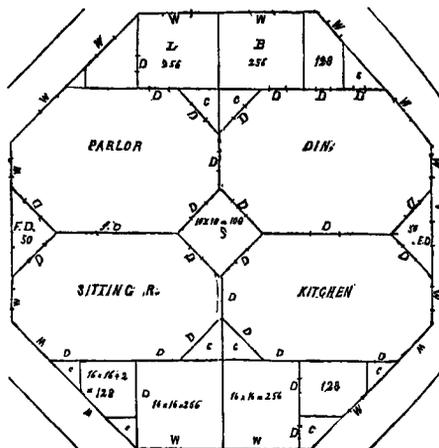


FIG. 6. PLAN OF THE MAIN FLOOR OF A "32-FOOT OCTAGON," from O. S. Fowler's *A Home for All*, 1849. (Courtesy of the Essex Institute Library.)

been inspired either by some building, such as Edwin Forrest's turreted "Font Hill" of 1849,<sup>37</sup> or adapted from some other architectural publication. With his interest in plants and landscaping it is possible that Brackett had seen an octagonal castellated house illustrated in Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* of 1842,<sup>38</sup> but the influence of the books of A. J. Downing, who began as a nurseryman, is more probable. Fowler had read Downing, and had been influenced by him.<sup>39</sup> In the second edition of *A Home for All*, Fowler actually suggests that more detailed plans and specifications ". . . can be learned from scientific works on this subject,"<sup>40</sup> and later Fowler's firm was to advertise and sell many of the architectural publications of the time.<sup>41</sup>

Brackett was very sensitive to nature, and published romantic poetry in the manner of Bryant dealing with natural subjects. Such a common sympathy must have made Downing's works even more attractive to him. The site of Brackett's house is the type which Downing recommended, in which the house sits isolated in the world of nature, commanding distant views.<sup>42</sup> Downing's suggestion that ". . . buildings in an irregular style, highly expressive of irregular symmetry, are much more striking in a picturesque point of view, and are therefore preferred by many artists . . ." <sup>43</sup> would have recommended this style to Brackett. Downing also felt that ". . . as force of expression should rightly spring from force of character, so Picturesque Architecture, where its picturesqueness grows out of strong character in the inhabitant is the more interesting to most minds. . . ." <sup>44</sup>

Some exterior features of Brackett's home derive from Downing. If the appearance of Brackett's house was inspired by some castle, then the lack of battlements may be due to Downing's condem-

nation of them. Downing did admit that there was "something wonderfully captivating in the idea of a battlemented castle," but warned that "*unless there is something of the castle in the man*, it is very likely, if it be a real castle, to dwarf him to the stature of a mouse."<sup>45</sup> Brackett probably chose the original board and batten exterior to emphasize the verticality of the units of the house. It is the treatment Downing recommended, but he did so because it was expressive of the vertical supporting members of the structure, which would have made it inappropriate to a "board wall" structure.<sup>46</sup> The heavy overhang of the roof and the simple supporting brackets can be found in each of Downing's first three cottage designs in his *Architecture of Country Houses*. Only one interior detail of Brackett's house, the alternating dark and light bands of the dining room floor, is specifically recommended by Downing, however.<sup>47</sup>

Such an unusual building naturally provoked comments. It was referred to as a "crow's nest," and townsfolk laughed at Brackett for using a method of construction they were certain would not last.<sup>48</sup> But Downing stated: "The villa — the country house, should, above all things, manifest individuality." It is "men of imagination" who should live in

. . . picturesque villas — country houses with high roofs, steep gables, unsymmetrical and capricious forms. It is for such that the architect may safely introduce the tower and the campanile — and any and every feature that indicates originality, boldness, energy, and variety of character. To find a really original man living in an original and characteristic house, is as satisfactory as to find an eagle's nest built on the top of a mountain crag — while to find a pretentious, shallow man in such a habitation, is no better than to find a jackdaw in the eagle's nest.<sup>49</sup>



FIG. 7. INTERIOR OF THE BRACKETT HOUSE, looking from one first-floor parlor to the other. (Photo by author.)

Similarly, Fowler wrote:

... those who are content to live in old rookeries ... have sordid souls ... while those who are lofty, aspiring, and high in character and aims, will build on eminences, and erect high houses.

Men with the eagle form of nose and physiognomy ... will build on high ground, where they can have a commanding prospect.<sup>50</sup>

Brackett responded to the name-calling with good humor, and referred to his house as "Brackett's Crow's Nest."<sup>51</sup>

The simplicity of the exterior decoration of Brackett's home fits well with its setting, and follows Fowler's recommendation that "Nature furnishes our only pattern of true ornament. All she makes is beautiful, but ... she never puts on anything exclusively for ornament. ..."<sup>52</sup> In a consistent manner the interior rooms are unornamented, with the simplest of door and window enframements, fashioned from plain pine boards without moldings or cornices (Figure 7). The simplicity of these interiors is reflected in the utility of

the centralized plan, which derives from Fowler.<sup>53</sup> The large windows and doors between the first-floor rooms provide for a light, spacious interior. The consistency of the design is no doubt partly a product of Brackett's aesthetic sense, influenced as he was by Greenough, but it is also advocated by Fowler, who said, "... beauty and utility are by no means incompatible with each other. Indeed, they are as closely united in art as in nature; that is, they are INSEPARABLE."<sup>54</sup> The second floor is even simpler, with lower ceilings of heights which vary with the exterior roofs, some of them being pitched parallel to the roofs above.

In this house Edward A. Brackett lived until his death in 1908. Here he wrote his poetry and his book on spiritualism.<sup>55</sup> Here he conceived the plan of making a bust of John Brown, at the same time plotting his escape from prison.<sup>56</sup> Here he conducted experiments with grapes, cucumbers, fish, pheasant, and quail, which led eventually to his second career

as a nurseryman<sup>57</sup> and Chairman of the Massachusetts Department of Inland Fisheries and Game.

Brackett was looked upon by the townspeople as an eccentric artist, but his character played just as important a role in the formation of this view as his vocation and his residence.

His character is unique and slightly eccentric. By those who knew him as an artist his peculiarities were spoken of as the eccentricities of genius. Though kind, generous and genial he has an indomitable will which cannot be changed if once set. Brought up in strict Quaker faith, the habit of independent thought has made the dogmas of religion especially distasteful to him. The following story shows a line of reasoning of his. A good orthodox deacon passed his house daily in taking a cow to pasture, and many were the arguments they had on religion. One Sunday morning the deacon found him working in his garden and remonstrated. A few weeks later the deacon worked on Sunday to save his hay from spoiling. "Why, deacon," said Mr. Brackett, "are you working on Sunday?" The deacon answered, "Yes. You see that thunderstorm coming. I shall lose my hay if I do not." Mr. Brackett asked, "How much is your hay worth?" "Five dollars," answered the deacon. "Well, deacon," said Mr. Brackett, "I do not see much difference between us in our working on Sunday other than that I work on that day for my pleasure and you work for five dollars." In matters social and religious, and also in matters of dress he is a law unto himself.<sup>58</sup>

In the introduction to his book *The World We Live In*, Brackett's independence of mind and its price are reflected:

If you have swamped your individuality in the habits and customs of a sectarian life, you will probably find yourself dominated by inherited ideas — vagabonds that have come down from a barbarous age. They have taken possession of your intellect, blinding your intuitions. Whether you like them or not

you cannot annihilate them. You may try to kick them out and think for a time that you are rid of them, but, like Rip Van Winkle, they return, not, however, in rags, but dressed in new garments labeled "Higher Criticism."

If by any circumstance, you are so fortunate as to escape this bondage, in the opinion of the majority you are nothing but a crank, subject to the despotism of public opinion against which so few have the backbone to stand up and be counted.<sup>59</sup>

In 1844, the year after Edward Brackett moved to Woburn, a young physician of equally independent mind returned to his home town of Reading, just six miles away. Horace Poole Wakefield had been a student at Amherst at the same time as Orson Fowler. In 1833, the year after his graduation, he attended the first national Anti-Slavery convention in Philadelphia, and founded a local branch in Reading.<sup>60</sup> He was also an advocate of women's rights, and clearly outspoken. In a posthumous biography — presumably underwritten by his widow — it was said of him,

The public claim on Dr. Wakefield was founded on rare ability to serve the public, for he had marked elements of character. He was active and energetic. This was his nature. He was a man of untiring activity, and with so much of positive and progressive energy, that his presence was always recognized. His mental as well as his physical framework showed great natural strength. He had rare wisdom and foresight in planning work and remarkable persistency and zeal in carrying out any project which he undertook. His positiveness of character, by which he lived up to his convictions, was more conductive to his usefulness, than to his popularity. His plainness of speech was due rather to clear convictions, than to adverse feelings, for beneath a sometimes rough exterior, he carried a warm and generous heart. He never withheld his aid from any social, moral or religious cause affecting the common welfare.<sup>61</sup>

This was a man who described himself as a “pill-pusher,” and who could say shortly after the death of his wife and two children, “‘Past and present prosperity’ has been, and is, all I am entitled to, or might reasonably expect. . . .”<sup>62</sup> Like Brackett, he was also interested in agriculture, and served on the State Board of Agriculture from 1873 to 1882. Like Brackett he was respected, perhaps in spite of his strong personality and open mind, and he was constantly elected to various offices in local and state government as well as in other organizations. But unlike Brackett he was financially successful through interests in banks, lumbering, insurance, and gas companies, as well as medicine, politics, and agriculture.

On May 12, 1860 the *Middlesex Journal* reported:

Dr. H. P. Wakefield has removed his house to John Street and intends to go right about erecting another one on the old spot more to his liking — an elegant

one. Hope he will meet with good success, and if he should succeed in completing one anywhere near as odd as himself, he may expect a greater crowd to visit him, than ever before he administered pills to.

On July 14, 1860 the *Journal* again reported:

The new house of Dr. Wakefield, Elmore Johnson builder, is going ahead finely, and attracts multitudes to see it, as it is something new and fully as odd as its owner. I believe it has some fourteen different roofs, and should the Doctor’s family ever consist of that number, each one could have a shelter from the pelting storms.

The odd house that Dr. Wakefield did complete stands today on Pleasant Street in Reading (Figure 8). It is, in fact, a more elaborate and complex variation of Edward Brackett’s home in Winchester, a slightly less original home for a man just a bit more conventional. The Wakefield house has the same basic floor plan

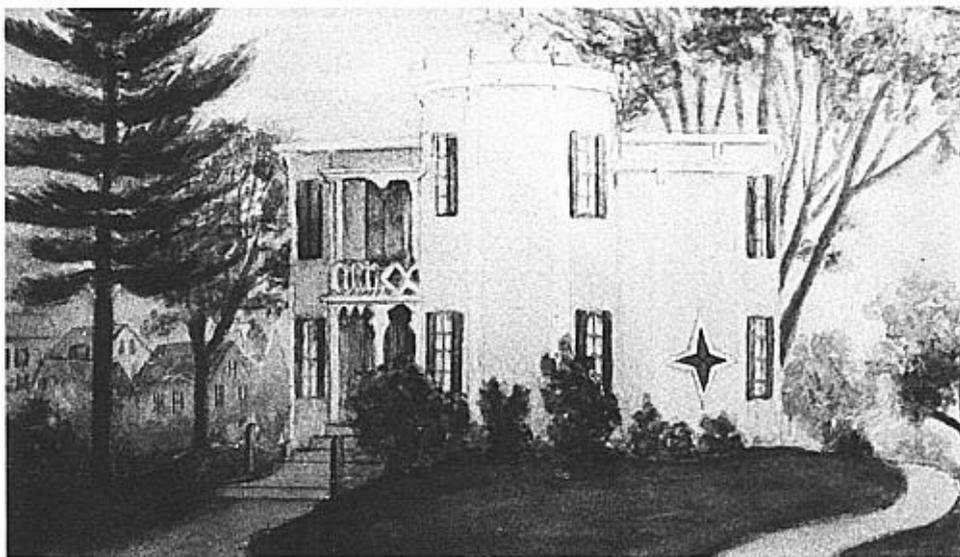


FIG. 8. HORACE P. WAKEFIELD HOUSE, 1860, Reading, Massachusetts. From a watercolor by Edna C. Bishop, c. 1900, which still hangs in the house. (Photo by author.)

FIG. 9. PLAN OF THE FIRST FLOOR OF THE H. P. WAKEFIELD HOUSE. (Drawn by author.)

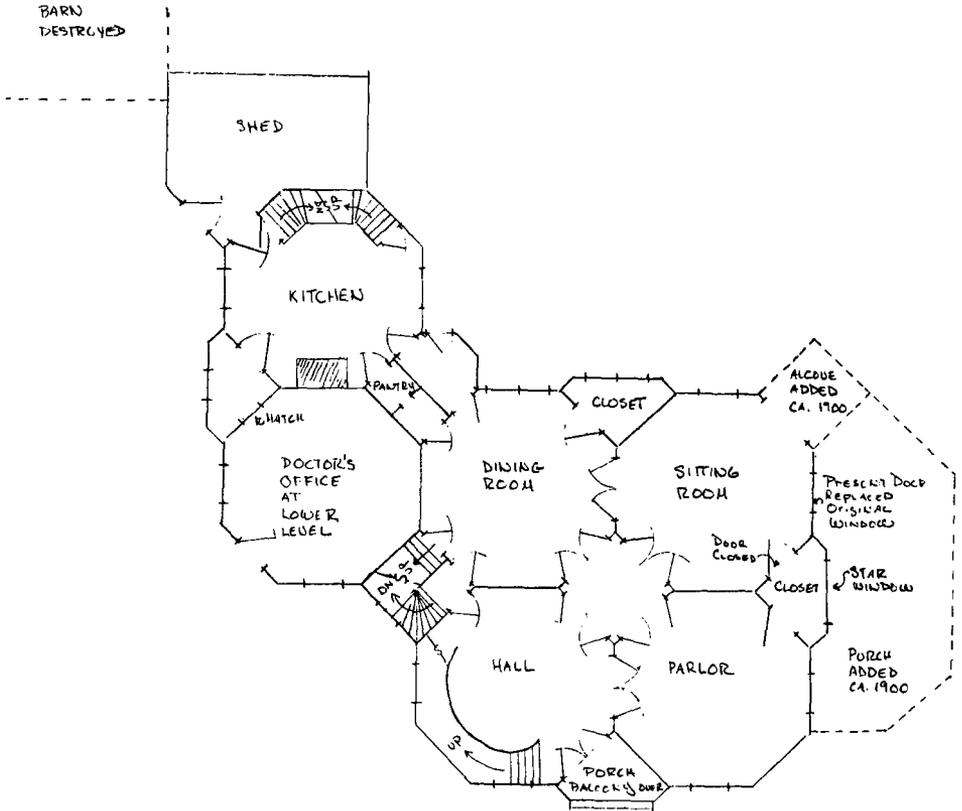
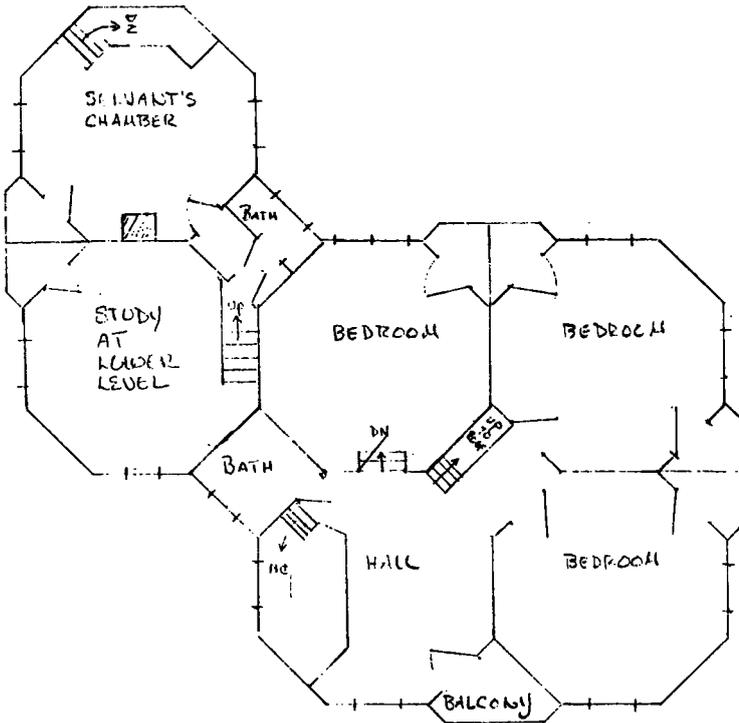


FIG. 10. PLAN OF THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE H. P. WAKEFIELD HOUSE. (Drawn by author.)



(Figures 9 and 10), method of construction (Figure 11), and roofing as the Brackett house. Originally both houses had board and batten exteriors, and though Wakefield's house was never as isolated as its model, it sits on the crest of a small hill, providing views from the flat roofs, to which a small stairway gives direct access.

Wakefield's house was not a poor man's home. By 1856 the construction methods Fowler had recommended in his first edition of *A Home for All* had been rejected as being costly.<sup>63</sup> But expense apparently mattered little in this case. The plan of six octagons, one of which is entirely given over to the stair hall, is more expansive than Brackett's. The small square center room and the large doors between hall and parlor, and sitting room and dining room, allow for a more complete openness (Figure 12). The kitchen is removed from the main block

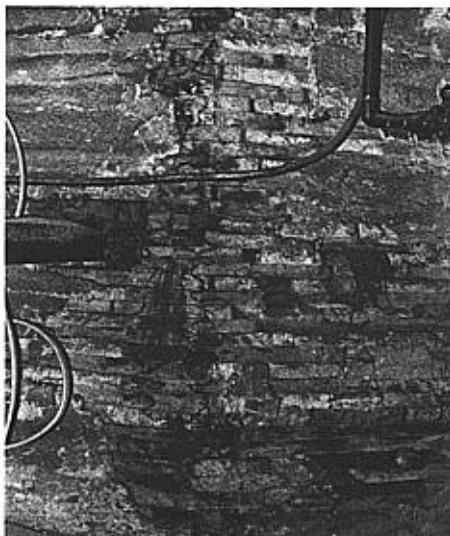


FIG. 11. VIEW OF THE INTERLOCKING HORIZONTAL PLANKS that form the "lattice-type" of "board wall," as exposed in the basement of the H. P. Wakefield House. (Photo by author.)



FIG. 12. INTERIOR OF THE WAKEFIELD HOUSE, looking from the first-floor sitting room into the dining room and central hall. (Photo by author.)

of the house, and contains only a single chimney, the rest of the house having been heated by a furnace rather than the stoves Brackett used.

Taking advantage of the sloping site, the doctor's office is at a lower level than the other first-floor rooms. This allowed patients to exit directly to the street. A small stair leads to this office from the dining room and hall above. Thus the doctor had private access, and the hall could function as a waiting room. This same stairway rises to the second floor to a room thought to have been the doctor's study. The remainder of the second floor is given over to bedrooms of varying height, all with flat ceilings.

The details of the interior and exterior of this house are quite elaborate. The exterior was undoubtedly intended to present a castellated appearance, and to complete this, each of the standard mill-work brackets under the eaves has a small gargoyle-like face applied to it. There are a great number of these, now obscured by layers of paint, but some are of a strongly medieval type (Figure 13). Reading had a long tradition of cabinetmaking and organ building,<sup>64</sup> and these carvings, as well as the decorative elements at the corners of the baseboards of the principal rooms are probably the work of local craftsmen. Likewise the heavily molded plaster cornices and ceiling ornaments, mercury doorknobs, the elaborate mercury glass finial on the roof, a complete set of lightning rods, and two windows in the form of stars set this house off from the earlier, simpler home of Edward Brackett. And while the complexity of Wakefield's house deprives it of the simpler consistency of Brackett's design, it adds a further element of fantasy to the light and open interiors.

These two remarkable homes leave one wondering what other buildings and vari-

ants the first edition of Fowler's *A Home for All* produced. Various authors of plan books offered their improvements on Fowler's ideas.<sup>65</sup> Among such authors was Zephaniah Baker, who published in 1857 a multitude of Fowleresque plans, including one for a round house, and another which resembles the plans of the Brackett and Wakefield houses.<sup>66</sup> Certainly the "board wall" round house of Enoch Robinson, in Somerville, Mass. of 1856, is another variant.<sup>67</sup> Undoubtedly there are others.<sup>68</sup> The strong individuality of the builders of these houses suggest a type of personality — one of conviction and independence — which may be typical of those who chose the octagon mode, and is most certainly typical of those who executed their own variations on it.



FIG. 13. DETAIL OF THE END OF A ROOF BRACKET on the H. P. Wakefield House. (Photo by author.)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Brackett's biography is scattered through many sources. The principal ones are: Herbert I. Brackett, *Brackett Genealogy* (Washington, D.C., 1907), pp. 303-305; Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America* (New York, 1968), pp. 187-189, *et passim*; Hannah F. S. Lee, *Familiar Sketches of Sculpture and Sculptors* (Boston, 1854), Vol. II, pp. 194-202.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward A. Brackett, *Twilight Hours, or Leisure Moments of an Artist* (Boston, 1845). H. I. Brackett, p. 304.
- <sup>3</sup> Edward A. Brackett, *Brackett's Works* (Boston, 1845). The only copy I have found is in the Boston Public Library.
- <sup>4</sup> Middlesex County, Massachusetts, Registry of Deeds: 555-350.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 704-438.
- <sup>6</sup> For a complete account of Fowler's life and work, and of his firm, Fowler and Wells, see Madeliene B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines, the Phenological Fowlers* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1971).
- <sup>7</sup> A copy in the Essex Institute is a large paper-bound pamphlet six by nine inches. The price appears on the spine and in the advertising on the back cover.
- <sup>8</sup> H. I. Brackett., p. 304.
- <sup>9</sup> Orson S. Fowler, *A Home for All* (New York, 1849), p. 51. All references are to the first edition.
- <sup>10</sup> Stern, pp. 21, 60, 162.
- <sup>11</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 17.
- <sup>12</sup> Stern, pp. 124, 189.
- <sup>13</sup> For possible sources and brief accounts of the octagon in architecture see Turpin C. Bannister, "The Architecture of the Octagon in New York State," *New York History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (June, 1945), pp. 43-50; Walter Creese, "Fowler and the Domestic Octagon," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June, 1946), p. 92; Marian Card Donnelly, "Astronomical Observatories in New England," *Old Time New England*, Vol. L, No. 3 (Winter, 1960), pp. 72-79.
- <sup>14</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 1. One wonders what these buildings were. Ruby M. Rounds's list provides some tantalizing possibilities. See Ruby M. Rounds, *Octagon Buildings in New York State* (Cooperstown, New York, 1954).
- <sup>15</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry Russell Hitchcock, *American Architectural Books* (Minneapolis, 1962), pp. 40, 41. Orson S. Fowler, *The Octagon House* (New York, 1973; reprint of 1853 edition), p. viii.
- <sup>17</sup> Fowler, *The Octagon House*, pp. 179-184.
- <sup>18</sup> Creese, p. 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 1; *The Octagon House*, p. 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 96.
- <sup>21</sup> In 1850 Brackett was assessed for land in Winchester, but there were no buildings on his land, and he was listed as being resident in Woburn. *Valuation List and Record of Taxes of the Town of Winchester for the Year 1850* (Woburn, Mass, 1851), p. 20. Hannah Lee, in her *Familiar Sketches* published in 1854, says that "His cottage is built after his own original design," p. 202.
- <sup>22</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 43.
- <sup>23</sup> Winchester, Mass. *Star*, March 20, 1908, p. 1.
- <sup>24</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 42.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 49, 50.
- <sup>27</sup> Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester, Massachusetts* (Winchester, Mass., 1936), p. 132.
- <sup>28</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 46.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, *et passim*.
- <sup>30</sup> Craven, p. 18. Lee, p. 202. Winchester, Mass. *Star*, Oct. 5, 1906; Oct. 4, 1907; March 20, 1908.
- <sup>31</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 47.
- <sup>32</sup> Winchester, Mass. *Star*, Oct. 5, 1906, p. 1; Oct. 4, 1907, p. 1. An earlier source of a plan similar to Brackett's house is Robert Morris, *Select Architecture* (London, 1755), pl. 30. It is most unlikely that Brackett knew of this plan.
- <sup>33</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 84.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 49, 92.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>37</sup> John Maass, *The Victorian Home in America* (New York, 1972), p. 36. Forrest was a friend of Fowler's, and made a modest contribution to *A Home for All*, p. 74. Forrest's house is specifically ridiculed by A. J. Downing in his *Architecture of Country Houses* (New York, 1968; first published 1850), p. 262.

- <sup>38</sup> John C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* (London, 1842), pp. 1089, 1090.
- <sup>39</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 6. For the influence of Downing on Fowler, see Creese, *op. cit.*
- <sup>40</sup> Fowler, *The Octagon House*, p. 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Fowler's former firm advertised and sold the works of Lewis F. Allen, Henry Barnard, John Bullock, A. J. Downing, O. S. Fowler, Daniel H. Jacques, Minard Lafever, Samuel Sloan, A. C. Smeaton, Richard Upjohn, and Gervase Wheeler. *Descriptive Catalogue of Standard Works Published by S. R. Wells & Co., 737 Broadway, N.Y.* bound with *The Illustrated Annual of Phrenology and Health Almanac, 1880*, (New York, 1880).
- <sup>42</sup> Downing, pp. 264, 265, 344.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 262, 263.
- <sup>46</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 51.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.
- <sup>48</sup> Winchester, Mass. *Star*, March 20, 1908, p. 1.
- <sup>49</sup> Downing, p. 263.
- <sup>50</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 12.
- <sup>51</sup> Winchester, Mass. *Star*, March 20, 1908, p. 1.
- <sup>52</sup> Fowler, *A Home for All*, p. 30.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- <sup>55</sup> *Twilight Hours or Leisure Moments of an Artist* (Boston, 1845), *The World We Live In* (Boston, 1903), *My House, Chips the Builder Threw Away* (Boston, 1904), and *Materialized Apparitions* (Boston, 1886).
- <sup>56</sup> Richard O. Bayer, *The Legend of John Brown* (New York, 1973), p. 20. Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown 1800-1859* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965), pp. 546, 547.
- <sup>57</sup> Undated document headed "Pine Hill Nursery — Brackett and Wellington," Winchester Archival Center.
- <sup>58</sup> H. I. Brackett, p. 304.
- <sup>59</sup> E. A. Brackett, *The World We Live In*, pp. 15, 16.
- <sup>60</sup> For information on Dr. Horace Poole Wakefield, see: Will E. Eaton, *Proceedings of the 250th Anniversary of the Ancient Town of Redding, Massachusetts* (1896); and Homer Wakefield, *Wakefield Memorial* (Bloomington, Ill., 1897) pp. 92-94.
- <sup>61</sup> Wakefield, p. 94.
- <sup>62</sup> Z. C. Montague. *The Class of MDCCCXXXII in Amherst College* (Amherst, Mass., 1874), p. 23.
- <sup>63</sup> Charles P. Dwyer, *Economic Cottage Builder* (Buffalo, 1856), p. 34.
- <sup>64</sup> Lilley Eaton, *Genealogical History of the Town of Reading, Mass.* (Boston, 1874).
- <sup>65</sup> Octagon designs after Fowler were published by Zephaniah Baker, John Bullock, C. P. Dwyer, Chester Hills, D. H. Jacques, and Samuel Sloan.
- <sup>66</sup> Zephaniah Baker, *Modern House Builder* (Boston, 1857), pp. 171, 172.
- <sup>67</sup> William Sumner Appleton, "Enoch Robinson Round House, Somerville, Mass., 1854," *Old Time New England*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (April, 1921), pp. 173-175. Walter L. Creese, "Round Houses of New England," *Old Time New England*, Vol. XLIII, No. 4, (April, 1953) pp. 85-90. As Creese notes this house was first published by D. H. Jacques in *The House* (New York, 1859), pp. 92-94. Jacques was an employee of Fowler and Wells. Stern, p. 79.
- <sup>68</sup> An octagonal house in Texarkana, Texas, built in 1884 resembles the Brackett and Wakefield houses in plan. See Clay Lancaster, "Some Octagon Forms of Southern Architecture," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June, 1946), p. 110.