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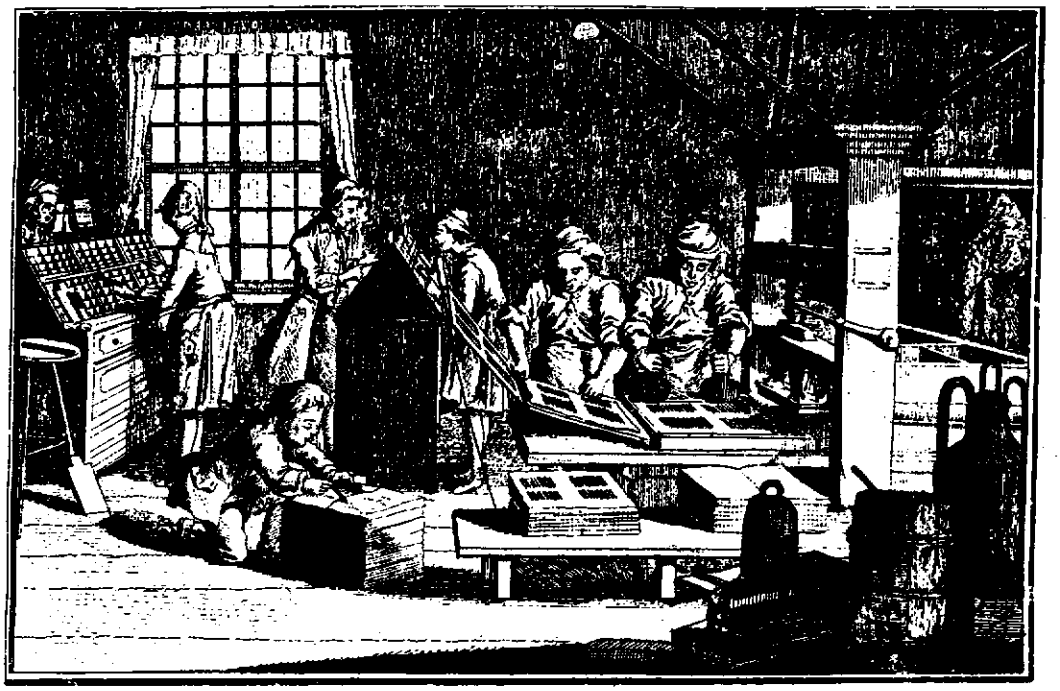

WINTERTHUR

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Mail-Order House Plans and American Victorian Architecture

James L. Garvin

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY American suburbs often display an amazing inventiveness in their house designs rather than the monotony and repetition that one finds in most areas developed within a limited span of time. Moreover, Victorian suburban houses frequently incorporated the aesthetic innovations of leading architects only a few years after these new ideas were introduced. The Queen Anne style, the enlarged stair hall with its elaborated balustrade and inglenook, and the shingle style all appeared in the more pretentious suburbs shortly after they were first seen in major commissions of fashionable architects.

How were new ideas and good designs spread on such a scale? Although the architectural profession grew rapidly between 1865 and 1900, it is virtually impossible that the thousands of houses constructed during this period were all designed and constructed under the personal supervision of architects. By its very nature, the traditional architect-client relationship was too intimate to serve the needs of a nation of burgeoning suburbs. If America's suburbs were to benefit from the aesthetic insight, the planning talent, and the practical skill of the architect, a method had to be found to multiply the effectiveness of a limited number of architects and to enable these planners to meet the unlimited needs of the growing towns and cities.

One important method by which the result was achieved was through the sale of mail-order house plans. Such plans permitted the homeowner to benefit from many of the special services of the architect without actually employing an architect and without paying the customary architect's fee. In the same way, such plans, if purchased in sufficient numbers and variety, enabled the contractor or housing speculator to construct a suburban development of quality and impressive variety while dispensing with the expensive daily services of the architect. Mail-order plans were an important but hidden factor in suburban growth during the decades before 1900.

House plans were advertised through a type of book that was superficially similar to the architectural pattern books that had inspired housebuilders since the appearance of Andrew Jackson Downing's *Cottage Residences* in 1842. Downing's volumes and other early architectural pattern books had often implied that the reader would do well to consult the book's author for architectural services, but these books were not primarily intended to sell plans. Rather, they were meant to influence taste and to satisfy the reader's desire to ponder a variety of possible house types. The authors may have gained incidental commissions from the publicity generated by these books, but they probably expected to make their primary profit from royalties on book sales.

Plan books, on the other hand, were nothing more than catalogues of house plans that were available for purchase. Any description of individual designs was necessarily limited to the amenities of the buildings themselves. Never, of course, could reference be made to a particular site for which a building was intended, since the same plan might be used in Maine and in California. House-plan books were inexpensive, because the potential profit to the architect lay not in the books but in the sets of plans that were purchased through the books. Most plan books sold for fifty cents or a

James L. Garvin is curator of the New Hampshire Historical Society.

The author would like to thank Margaret Supplee Smith of Wake Forest University, who, during her professorship at Boston University, introduced me to the nineteenth-century architectural sourcebook in 1975.

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dollar, and many were printed on inferior stock. Because these books were not an end in themselves, they were not treated with the care accorded the more expensive architectural pattern books. Most were read, used, and discarded. Perhaps for this reason, plan books and the large-scale architectural business that they generated have been generally overlooked.

Plan books did not appear immediately after the Civil War. In the decade following the war, authors sought to meet the needs of the growing nation in other ways. First, they updated the type of builder's guidebook that had been introduced by Asher Benjamin, Owen Biddle, and Minard Lafever and adapted it to the needs of the mechanic in the woodworking mill. These guidebooks illustrated elements and details of woodwork that could be turned out by steam-powered planers, shapers, lathes, and fretsaws or band saws. One of the first volumes was *Architecture: Designs for Street Fronts, Suburban Houses, and Cottages* (1865) by Marcus Fayette Cummings and Charles Crosby Miller. Despite the promise of its title, this book consists almost entirely of detail plates (fig. 1). In the introduction, Cummings and Miller referred to the many architectural pattern books, like those of Downing and Vaux, that had preceded the publication of *Architecture;* they pointed out that the illustrations in the older volumes are limited to floor plans and perspective views and "are almost invariably drawn to so small a scale as to render comprehending their details impossible to any one except experienced architects." They then proclaimed the special virtue of *Architecture:* "This work . . . contains designs for all the various features which enter into the composition of buildings, both for the city and country, and these features are again given in detail, and drawn to so large a scale that anyone familiar with the construction of work cannot fail to comprehend their forms and their construction."[1]

Cummings and Miller's *Architecture* is typical of a number of architectural detail books of the post–Civil War era. Similar volumes—some as specialized as C. C. Buch's *Album of Mantels* (1883), M. J. Morton's *Mantel Designs* (undated) and *Mantels and Side Walls* (undated) by Eugene Prignot et al.—continued to be published until the end of the century. The classic work was published by the versatile Palliser, Palliser, and Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut. *Palliser's Useful Details* (1881), a large folio volume specifically addressed to workmen, was actually a bound set of architectural drawings showing details at full size or large scale. The intent was to enable "builders and mechanics . . . to obtain good practical details of construction, giving them insight into the general detail of the prevailing styles of modern work."[2]

The process of educating the mechanic through such volumes was an important step toward assuring the general success of the mail-order house plan. Once woodworkers throughout the country were familiar with the various vocabularies of late-century architectural styles, mail-order plans could be successfully utilized wherever they were sent.

The second means by which architectural writers addressed the postbellum public was through a continuation of the pattern book as it had been perfected before the war by Downing, Vaux, Gervase Wheeler, and Samuel Sloan. Sloan's format was particularly attractive to later writers. It included floor plans, elevations, many details and cross-sections of millwork and ornament, an essay on the particular virtues of each design, and technical specifications intended to protect the layman housebuilder from shoddy workmanship. The purpose was to render the reader capable of serving as his own general contractor.

One of the most prolific writers to continue the pattern-book tradition after the war was New York architect George E. Woodward, who published *Woodward's Country Homes* (1865), *Woodward's Architecture* (1867), *Woodward's Cottages and Farm Houses* (1867), and *Woodward's National Architect* (1868), as well as the quarterly *Woodward's Architecture with Hints and Notes on Building* (January 1870–?). *Woodward's National Architect* in particular followed the older Sloan format both in high price ($12) and in complete presentation of details, sections, and specifications for carpentry, masonry, and plumbing.

Builders and potential homeowners began to demand completeness in pattern books. Cummings and Miller, whose *Architecture* (1865) had been confined to details, stated in 1868 that their patrons had informed them "that their wants are still pressing in regard to many subjects not treated of in the work 'Architecture'; and there seems to be a great desire to have a work containing not only full detail-drawings, but complete plans and elevations of buildings of various kinds, mainly dwelling

[1] Marcus Fayette Cummings and Charles Crosby Miller, *Architecture: Designs for Street Fronts, Suburban Houses, and Cottages* (Troy, N.Y.: Young & Benson, 1865), introduction.

[2] Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's Useful Details* (Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1881), introduction.

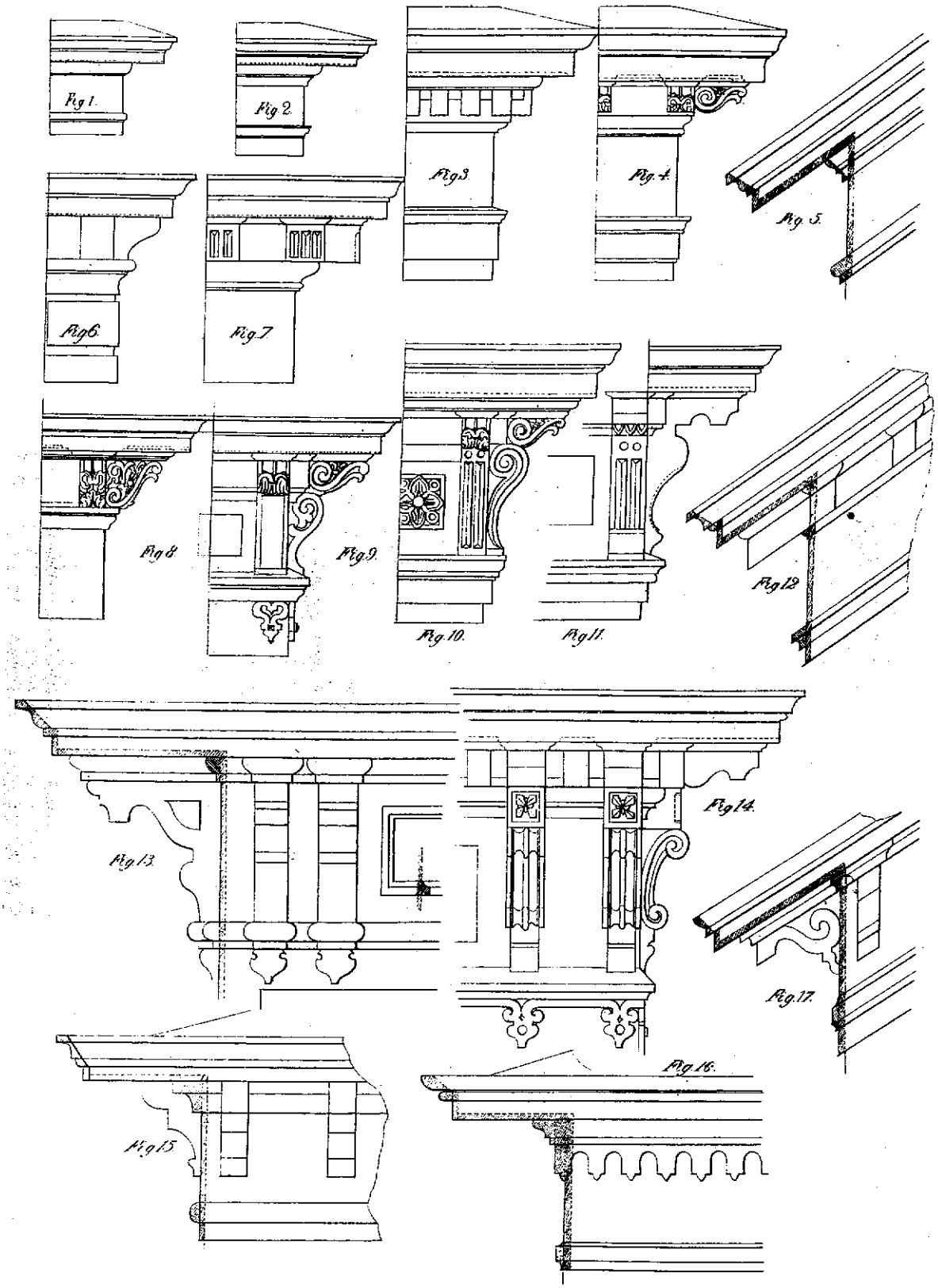


Fig. 1. Plate 26 from Marcus Fayette Cummings and Charles Crosby Miller, *Architecture: Designs for Street Fronts, Suburban Houses, and Cottages* (Troy, N.Y.: Young & Benson, 1865). (Boston Public Library.)

houses."[3] The two authors responded by publishing *Modern American Architecture* (1868), which contained plans and elevations at a scale of ⅛ inch to the foot and details at ¾ inch to the foot.

Many similar books followed in quick succession: *Bicknell's Village Builder* (1870), with plans, elevations, specifications, and a model contract; *Supplement to Bicknell's Village Builder* (1871); Bicknell's *Detail, Cottage and Constructive Architecture* (1873); *Woodward's Suburban and Country Houses* (1873), with model specifications; Bicknell's *Wooden and Brick Buildings with Details* (1875), with specifications, the "New York Form" of contract, and a schedule of charges endorsed by the American Institute of Architects; *Atwood's Modern American Homesteads* (1876); and numerous others down to the end of the century.

The general purpose of all the volumes was to present a number of house plans and to augment each plan with as many details, specifications, and descriptive paragraphs as possible. They made as complete a presentation of each design as was feasible within the limitations imposed by the size of the book and by the necessity to avoid giving undue emphasis to any single design. These books were clearly attempting to fill a need, but this need could be fully satisfied only by complete working drawings and full specifications for each house design. The provision of such material, by mail, became the architectural innovation of the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

There had been hints at mail-order architectural services even before the Civil War. The nineteenth-century architect was not prohibited from advertising or using competitive tactics within the profession. Vaux inserted a statement of his charges at the back of *Villas and Cottages.* Sloan built a large practice through his many books and through the designs he published in *Godey's Lady's Book.* And the essence of the mail-order-plan business was clearly anticipated in 1865 by Cummings and Miller, who advertised in their book that they were prepared to "furnish designs, detail drawings, and specifications of buildings of all kinds, for any part of the country, and will superintend the erection of buildings, when desired. Drawings, in detail, of any of the designs in this work furnished on Application."[4]

But the seed that was to grow into the first large mail-order-plan business was planted in 1876. In that year, George Palliser, an English-born immigrant architect, published a little book entitled *Palliser's Model Homes for the People.* Only 5,000 copies were printed and, as the author later admitted, "the designs were very poorly given, on account of their being wood-cuts."[5] The book contains a series of illustrations showing floor plans and elevations of houses of generally modest design, accompanied by brief and matter-of-fact descriptions of the virtues of each design. The cost of construction is given for each house. Most important, plans and specifications, ranging in price from $3.50 to $80.00, could be purchased from the author.

The history of *Model Homes* is outlined in the preface of the enlarged and revised second edition, published in 1878 after George Palliser had taken his younger brother, Charles, as a partner: "In consequence of our increasing business, supplying parties in all parts with Designs, etc., we found it necessary to adopt a system for conducting this class of business, and with which to supply a want long felt, especially in the country where Architects had done but little business, and the people had been obliged to plan their own houses or copy from their neighbors. This led us to issue the first edition (5,000) of Model Homes. These have nearly all been disposed of, having been sent into every State and Territory in the Union, and many to the provinces." The second edition began with a seven-page essay on the follies of relying on one's own taste or that of a local builder. To reemphasize the point, the book ended with an advertisement stating, "We shall be pleased to furnish Plans, Detail Drawings and Specifications for any Design in this book [fig. 2], with any alterations that may be required. . . . Without working drawings it is impossible for any one to carry out the spirit of a Design as intended by the Designer."[6]

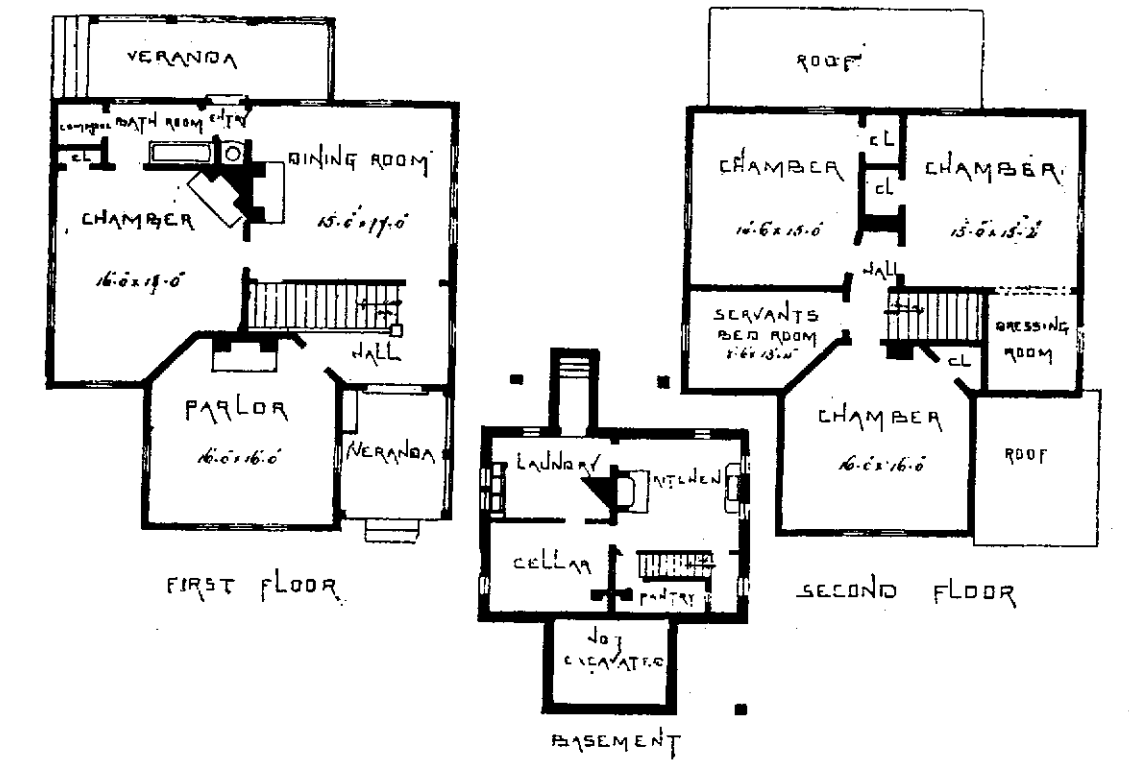
Even as the first edition of *Model Homes* was being exhausted, the author clearly sensed that he had found the key to an immense building practice. In 1878, the Palliser brothers, now in partnership, published *Palliser's American Cottage Homes.* Advertisements for the new volume, which had a far more impressive format than either edition of

[3] Marcus Fayette Cummings and Charles Crosby Miller, *Modern American Architecture* (Troy, N.Y.: By the authors, 1868), introduction.

[4] Cummings and Miller, *Architecture,* advertisement at back of volume.

[5] Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's Model Homes* (2d ed., Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1878), preface, [p. 4]. For a biographical study of George and Charles Palliser, see Michael A. Tomlan, "The Palliser Brothers and Their Publications," in *The Palliser's Late Victorian Architecture* (Watkins Glen, N.Y.: American Life Foundation & Study Institute, 1978), introduction.

[6] *Palliser's Model Homes,* preface, [p. 4], advertisement, [p. 87].



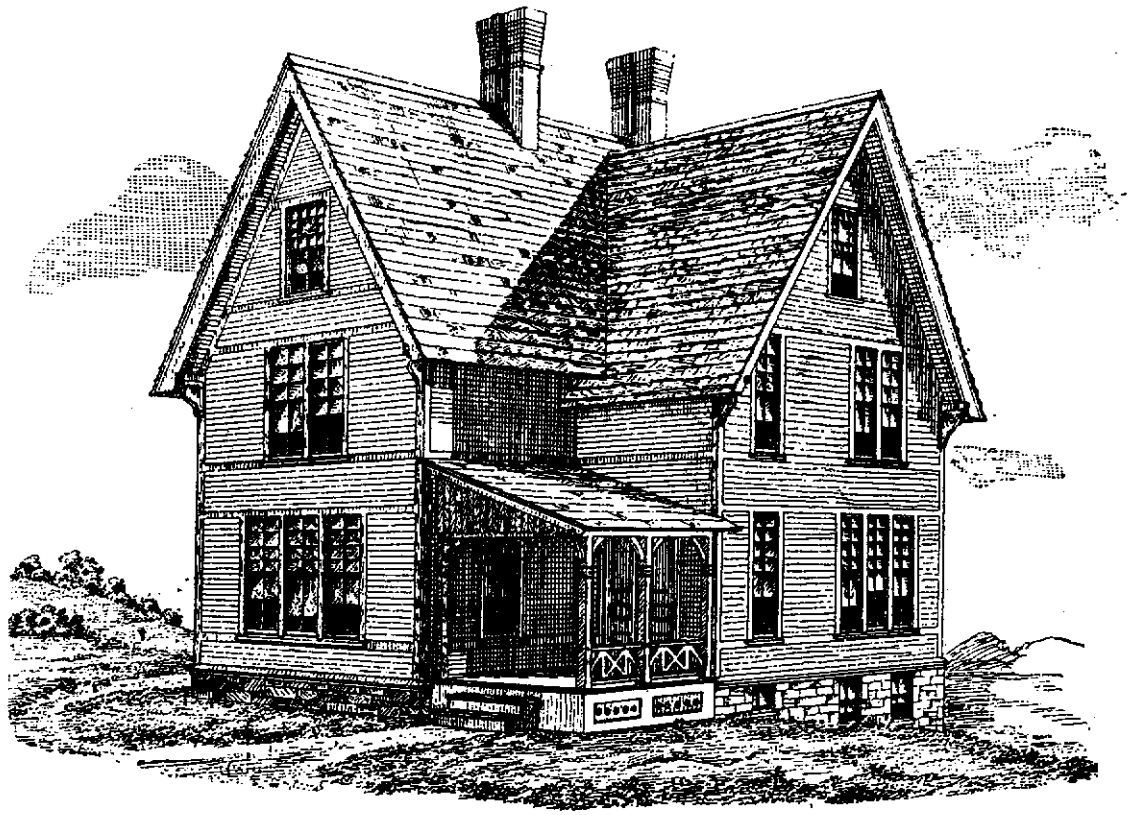


Fig. 2. Plate 5 from Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's Model Homes* (2d ed., Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1878). (Boston Public Library.)

Model Homes, emphasized that this was "a book for the people, and no one can afford to neglect it." It was "the best, cheapest, and most popular work ever issued on Architecture—two hundred and sixty drawings—a $10 book in size and style for $5 which is much too low, yet we have determined to make it meet the popular demand, to suit the times, so that it can be easily reached by all." *Cottage Homes* contained forty 9-by-12-inch photolithographed plates that faithfully reproduced the delicate original ink drawings. These plates illustrated a total of "50 designs of Modern Low Priced Cottages and Workingmen's Homes," mostly in the stick style (fig. 3). The Pallisers restated their readiness to provide readers in any part of the country with full working drawings for any design in the book, although they did not indicate the price of such drawings.[7]

Thus, between 1876 and 1878, Palliser, Palliser, and Company had produced two books, one of which had passed through two editions. In 1878, they also issued *Specifications for Frame Houses* as a general aid to housebuilders.[8] They recognized that they had found a lucrative method of retailing their services to the common man. In the competitive world of nineteenth-century business, that success could not remain unchallenged.

A rival soon appeared in the person of Robert W. Shoppell of New York, who published *Artistic Modern Houses of Low Cost* in 1881. Shoppell's books and methods perfected the techniques introduced by the Pallisers and quickly established mail-order house plans as a major business. Shoppell's first innovation was to assemble a staff of architects (eventually about fifty) who anonymously produced plans under the name of the Cooperative Building Plan Association. Second, Shoppell dispensed with any coyness regarding the sale of his plans; each plate in the book stated the price at which the house could be built and the price for a complete set of working drawings for its construction. Third, Shoppell clearly made the sale of plans his primary goal and priced his books at a level that left no doubt of their function as merely catalogues. Whereas the Pallisers' *Cottage Homes* sold for $5, Shoppell's *Artistic Modern Houses* sold for 25¢. Finally, Shoppell established a standardized format for sets of drawings. Each set included floor plans and elevations, framing plans, details and sections, specifications, bills of quantities of materials, and, eventually, chromolithographed color sheets to guide the final painting of the building. Moreover, as Shoppell later pointed out, the complete sets of documents cost "about *one-fifth* the price usually charged by architects."[9]

In his second book, *How to Build, Furnish, and Decorate* (1883), Shoppell related the history of the Cooperative Building Plan Association:

> Some three years ago a gentleman [perhaps Shoppell] called at the office of a prominent architect in New York, and, showing rough sketches of three cottages, said that these represented just such houses as he wished to build . . . [and that] he desired working plans drawn from the sketches he held in his hand, and made out so plainly, with complete directions, details, specifications, and estimates of quantities, that he could order everything necessary to build the cottages, and proceed with the work by the aid of local workmen. . . . These were prepared accordingly, and the cottages were built as proposed, without hitch or difficulty. The success of this experiment led to the erection of several other houses of different design, by the same person, and following the same system of operation . . . . The results of these transactions having proved so satisfactory in every respect, THE CO-OPERATIVE BUILDING PLAN ASSOCIATION was formed, for the purpose of applying the principle which had worked so prosperously, on an extensive scale. Its first step was to publish, as widely as possible, copies of elevations and plans representing structures [for] which it was prepared to furnish working plans, with complete directions, details, specifications, and estimates of quantities, at a fractional part of the charges made by architects.[10]

Realizing that the success of his method depended upon the growth of new construction, Shoppell was venturing into territory unfamiliar to the traditional architect. The purchaser of *How to Build, Furnish, and Decorate* was requested to send his name and his book's serial number to the Cooperative Building Plan Association. Upon receipt of this information, the association would endeavor to assist each prospective builder in securing a construction loan.

Shoppell displayed a similar concern for finance in his next collection, *Shoppell's Building*

[7] *Palliser's Model Homes,* advertisement for *Palliser's American Cottage Homes;* Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's American Cottage Homes* (2d ed., Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1878), advertisement at back of volume.

[8] Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Specifications for Frame Houses Costing from Five Hundred to Fifteen Hundred Dollars . . .* (Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1878).

[9] "Getting Ready to Build: Helpful and Practical Hints," in *Shoppell's Building Plans for Modern Low-Cost Houses,* ed. Robert W. Shoppell (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1884).

[10] Cooperative Building Plan Association, *How to Build, Furnish, and Decorate* (New York: Robert W. Shoppell, 1883), preface.

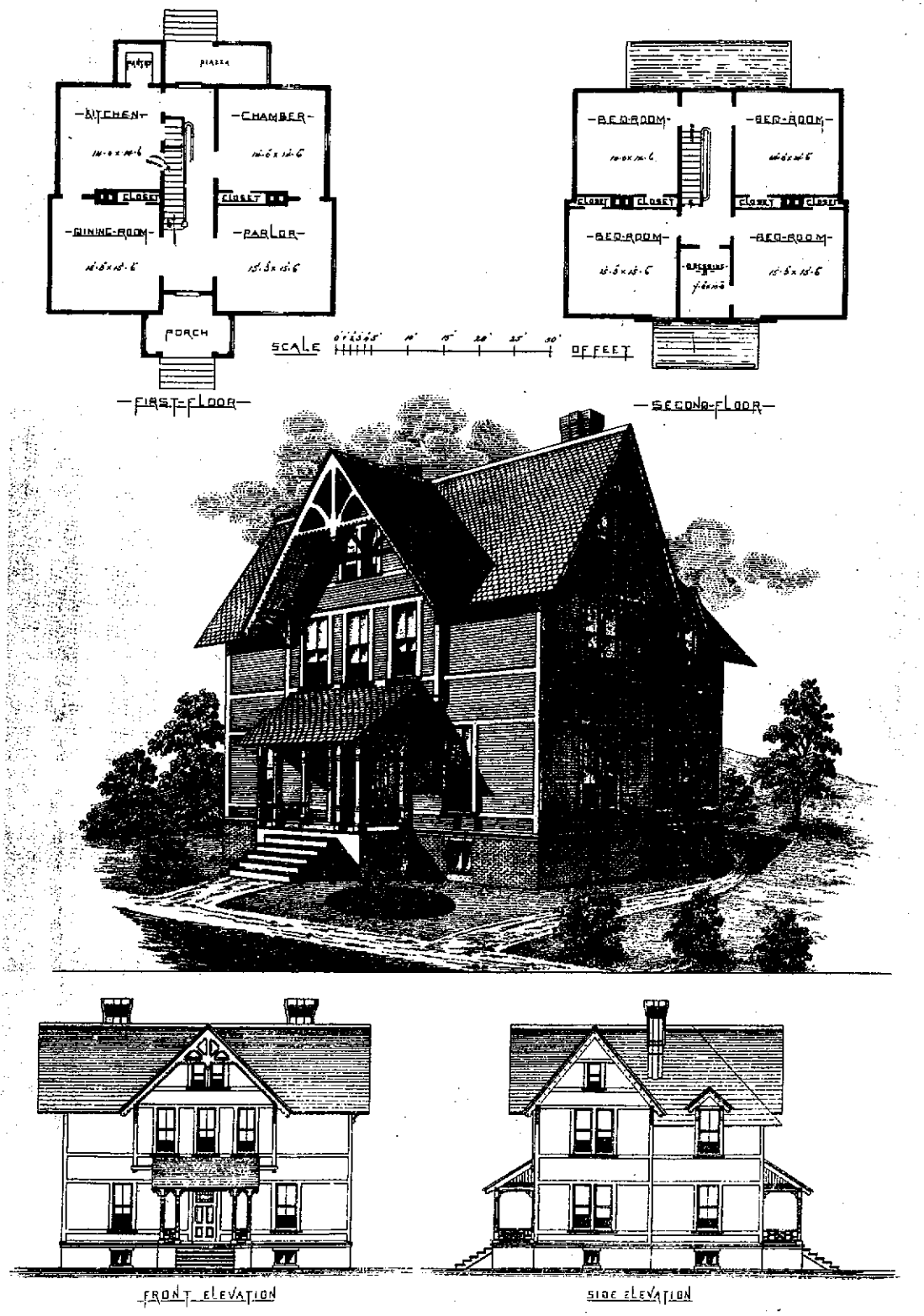


Fig. 3. Plate 23, design 33, from Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's American Cottage Homes* (2d ed., Bridgeport, Conn.: By the company, 1878). This design is described as "a Southern Cottage of eight rooms, which, with some slight changes, is suitable for erection in almost any part of the country. . . . Cost, $1,500." (Boston Public Library.)

Plans for Modern Low-Cost Houses (1884), which sold for fifty cents. Here, the author addressed himself to the capitalist who had land that he wished to improve: "If a capitalists will show his homeless friends the plans in this book . . . and say to them that he will sell them lots and build them any of the houses just as they are shown, or altered to suit, all on favorable terms, he will find no difficulty in starting improvements. . . . The erection of one of our handsome cottages . . . becomes the talk of the neighborhood, and the likelihood is that the 'building fever' will spread and become epidemic. Thus a demand for lots is created, and as a consequence they increase in value."[11] Shoppell outlined a plan by which even a man with no money might be able to arrange loans for the construction of a house.

The aesthetic quality of designs by the Cooperative Building Plan Association was generally high, and the plans appear original (although in one exceptional instance the firm plagiarized, line for line, a design from Downing).[12] As early as 1884, the association recommended a feature that had recently become a favored design element used by major architects (fig. 4): "The large hall, with open staircase, fireplace and a hardwood floor is an interior feature after the style of old English houses—a feature well worthy of reviving and of general adoption. A first floor hall should not be a narrow, uncomfortable passage; it should be of good size, well lighted and heated, with comfortable seats, and some good pictures on the walls."[13]

Having published several highly successful plan books within the space of a few years, Shoppell next turned to periodical publications, a medium that allowed him to market still more designs at an even cheaper rate. In January 1886 he issued *Shoppell's Modern Houses,* "an illustrated architectural quarterly." *Modern Houses* was deliberately kept as inexpensive as possible; it initially sold for $1 an issue or $3 a year but after one season dropped to 25¢ an issue. The periodical proved to be especially well adapted to Shoppell's method and volume of business because it permitted an increasing number of new plans to be disseminated almost as soon as they left the drawing board. With a relish characteristic of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur, Shoppell explained his business system in the first issue:

> Four years ago, Mr. Shoppell issued the initial number of a series of pamphlets, giving plans, perspectives, views and descriptions of a large number of modern houses, mostly of low cost, offering to supply architectural services for any of the designs or modifications of the same at a low price (a much lower price than they were actually worth), believing that the duplication of the services . . . would bring him a proper remuneration. He was surprised at the result. Thousands of his pamphlets were sold, and hundreds of houses were built from his Working Plans and Specifications. . . . The movement attracted the attention of other architects who united their interests, their skill and special knowledge with Mr. Shoppell's, making this one of the largest and best-equipped architectural offices in the United States. . . . We have associates who are pre-eminent in designing, others in constructing, others in making details, others in writing specifications, and all freely consult with each other to perfect every design.[14]

Shoppell went on to note that his business met a real need, since the public had hitherto been reluctant to pay architects' fees for private homes. Perhaps realizing that this statement would raise the ire of other architects, he attempted to show that he was not actually undercutting bona fide competitors. He pointed out that his clients were "those who would not employ architects, except at low charges, and the extent of our business cultivates the public taste, and must result in the more frequent employment of architects. [Moreover,] the same plan of doing business is open to all architects who may think we are getting more than our share."[15]

Shoppell had found a market that, except for the Palliser publications, had never been tapped. His assertion that hundreds of houses had been built from the already published designs of the Cooperative Building Plan Association was probably an understatement (figs. 5–13). In *Modern Houses,* he regularly published excerpts from testimonial letters that were sent from nearly every state in the union ("I have finished my cottage, and will say that it is a perfect little gem") and listed the names of literally hundreds of builders across the country—no less than fifty-eight from Massachusetts, sixty-six from New York, forty-nine from Pennsylvania, twenty-four from Illinois, and eight from Colorado—who were willing to recommend Shoppell plans. The editor boasted "cer-

[11] "Getting Ready to Build."

[12] Design no. 67, "A Rural Gothic Cottage," in the Cooperative's *How to Build, Furnish, and Decorate* is identical to design no. 2 in A. J. Downing, *Cottage Residences* (New York and London: Wiley & Putnam, 1842).

[13] Design no. 157, "A Picturesque Cottage, costing $3300," in *Shoppell's Building Plans.*

[14] "Miscellaneous Notes," *Shoppell's Modern Houses* 1, no. 1 (January 1886): 1.

[15] "Miscellaneous Notes," p. 1.

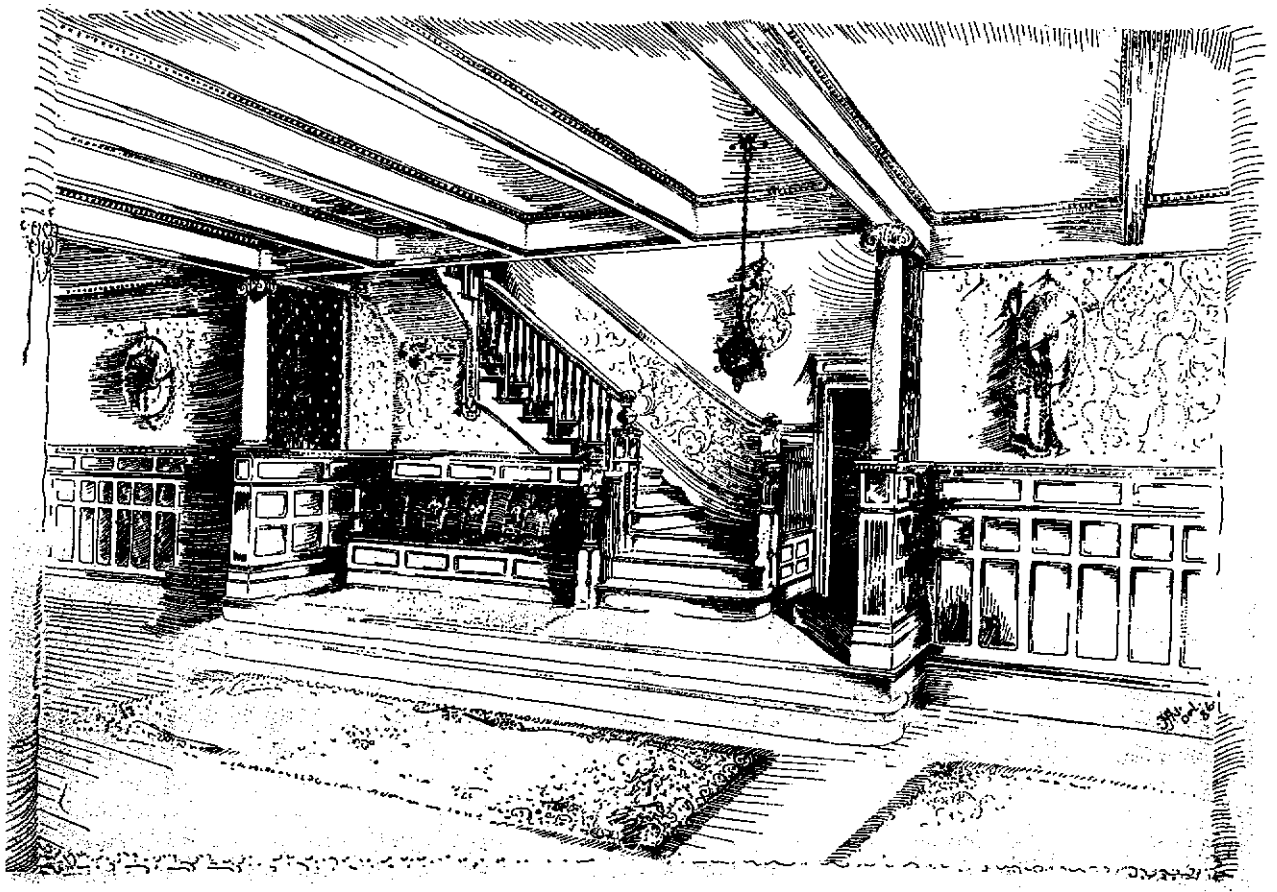


Fig. 4. Plate 193 from *The Builders' Portfolio,* sec. 2 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1887). (Boston Public Library.)

tainly no other architectural office, and but few great enterprises in any line, can equal the showing on this page. These are men who *know* what they are talking about."[16]

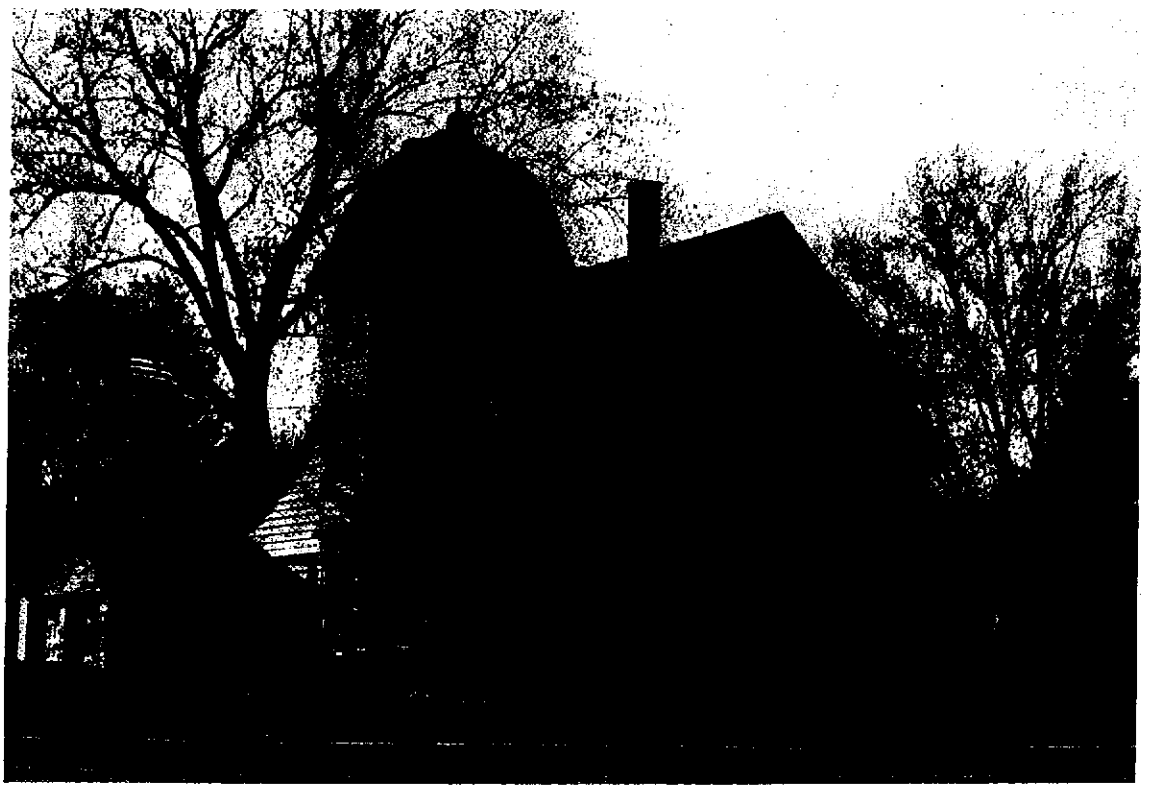
Nor was *Modern Houses* the limit of Shoppell's ingenuity. Although he claimed that the construction costs of designs in the magazine were "the *actual cost* of structures, not the cost and a contractor's profit added," Shoppell was perfectly willing to assist a builder in making whatever profit he deemed feasible. This Shoppell accomplished through yet another publication of the Cooperative Building Plan Association: the *Builders' Portfolio* (issued in three "Sections," 1886–88). Each of these portfolios, available only to contractors, consisted of 100 finely delineated house plans and views accurately reproduced by photolithography on unbound bristol. The construction prices were omitted on these drawings (whereas they were always included in the Shoppell publications intended for the layman); however, they were supplied in a confidential handbook, along with the precise data on which these prices were calculated. Thus, a contractor could ascertain whether local costs would vary in any particular and could adjust his base price accordingly. Also, he could add to the base price whatever percentage of profit he chose and quote the customer a final figure that included a hidden profit margin. "At this point," Shoppell assured the builders,

> you are prepared for preliminary interviews with prospective customers. Do not delay. Take your Portfolio under your arm and call upon the men who are going to build. Such a man will give you a cordial reception. There is nothing that interests him more than to look at a lot of Views and Plans of Buildings, especially when they are shown to him by a Builder who he knows can give him a reliable figure also. . . . When you get your contract, write or telegraph us for full Drawings and Specifications. (The prices for which, to you, are given in the Hand-Book). Then get to work. During the progress

[16] "The Testimony of Practical Men," *Shoppell's Modern Houses* 3, no. 2 (January 1889): 48.

Fig. 5. Detail of design 562 from *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890), p. 242. (New Hampshire Historical Society.)

Fig. 6. W. S. Clark house, Greenfield, Massachusetts. (Photo, James L. Garvin.) Built in 1889 from the design in figure 5, this house was described by its owner as "a beautiful combination of the Colonial with the Queen Anne, that delights the eye of all who see it."



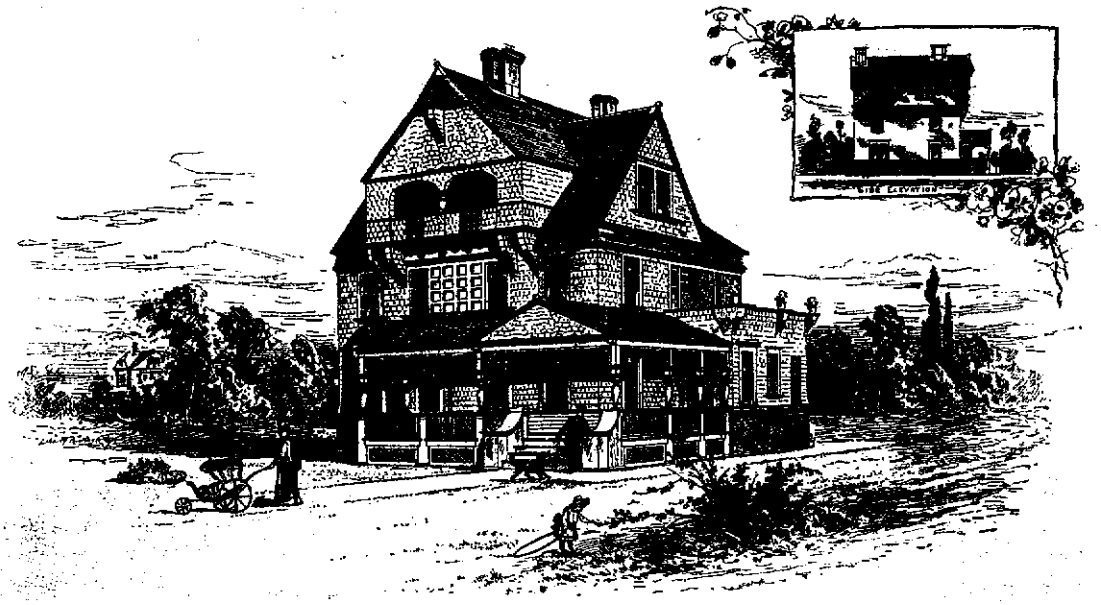


Fig. 7. Detail of design 455 from *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890), p. 198. (New Hampshire Historical Society.)

Fig. 8. Arthur O. Fuller house, Exeter, New Hampshire. (Photo, James L. Garvin.) This house, built in 1888 from the design in figure 7, was reversed during construction, a process easily and frequently done. The entry and pantry wing to the left, shown covered by an open balcony in the original design, has been raised to two full stories.

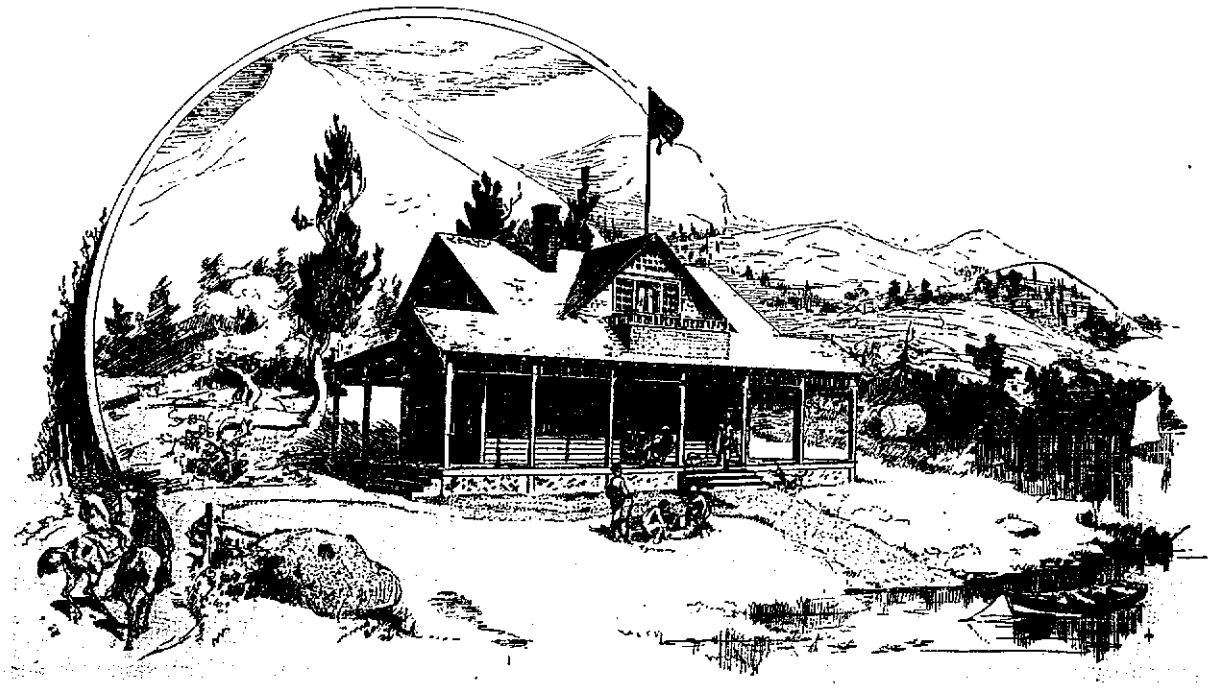
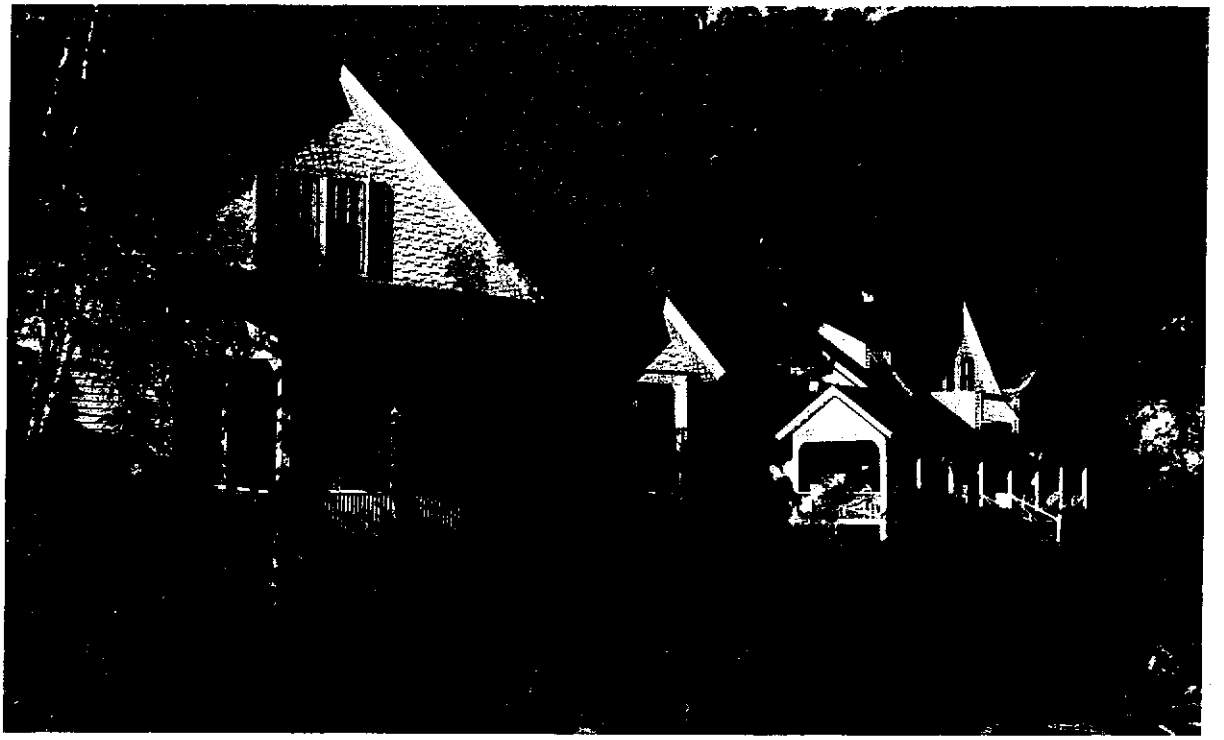


Fig. 9. Detail of design 371 from *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890), p. 64. (New Hampshire Historical Society.)

Fig. 10. Harmon House cottages, York Harbor, Maine. The design in figure 9 was clearly intended for a summer cottage, and owner J. H. Varrell built such a structure near his seaside hotel, Harmon House. Varrell wrote in 1889: "I was so well pleased with the plans of the cottage you furnished me that I am now erecting another after the same plans." The two, shown here, are oriented at right angles to one another.



of the work you are at liberty to consult us by interview or correspondence at any time, without charge.[17]

Designs included in the *Builders' Portfolio,* like those in Shoppell's other publications, ranged widely in price but were of uniformly good quality (figs. 14–17). They are generally characterized by imaginative exterior composition and by spacious and convenient plans that often include the popular grand hallway, elaborated staircase, and chimney nook.

Shoppell's growing success stimulated his ambitions. In 1885 the Cooperative Building Plan Association purchased thirty acres of undeveloped land at East Rockaway, Long Island. On this site, Shoppell proposed "to erect many of the most popular houses of our designing, in order to demonstrate by *our own* construction the best methods of doing the work, the best materials, the utility of all the latest appliances and improvements and, by keeping a strict account of all materials and labor, to show the actual costs to a penny. . . . There are a good many of us in this association, and we propose to live in some of the houses and rent others."[18]

Meanwhile, suburban development was also taking place along the Hudson River and in formerly rural areas of New Jersey. Railroad corporations were quick to see that the people who read *Modern Houses* might be induced to build "cottages" in communities along the railroad rights-of-way and thereby increase commuter traffic on the lines. It is therefore not surprising that the Baltimore and Ohio, the Central Vermont, the Fitchburg, and the Erie railroads paid for lavish advertisements in *Modern Houses* (fig. 18). Shoppell's new enterprise matured at the perfect time to serve the needs of a vast suburban expansion, and railroad companies were eager to encourage this expansion in regions that previously would have been inaccessible to the middle-class businessman who subscribed to *Modern Houses.*

Shoppell succeeded in many areas. He was the first to standardize the mail-order-plan business, openly stating the price of his plans and the completion price of his designs. He increased his business by offering to help secure financing for potential builders and by providing special portfolios and price arrangements for contractors. He assembled a group of "fifty architects, draughtsmen, and correspondents" who issued "a larger number of drawings and specifications than any other office." He saturated the marketplace with low-priced books and magazines for the sole purpose of selling plans. He made three publications a potent economic force that attracted advertising not only by railroad corporations but also by manufacturers of mantels, grates, furnaces, water closets, sinks, roofing materials, paints and stains, hardware, and millwork.

Such unparalleled success was certain to stir envy, especially on the part of a competitor who had clearly been outclassed. In 1887, Palliser, Palliser, and Company issued *Palliser's New Cottage Homes and Details* and prefaced the volume with a lengthy and indignant commentary on the state of the architectural profession. The Pallisers commenced by denying that they had ever had any intention of selling "ready-made plans" (an argument weakened by their advertisement in the same volume for a modern eight-room cottage with tower which claimed that over 75,000 copies of the plans had already been sold [figs. 19, 20]. Instead, the Pallisers emphasized that they specialized in providing *custom* designs by mail. "[We] may be said to have been the first to organize a system by correspondence for furnishing people everywhere about to build with working plans, specifications, &c, &c, to meet all their requirements, and more especially people in the Country where Architects had done but little business and the people had been obliged to plan their own houses, or copy from their neighbors, . . . and we must treat each individual case separately, as Architects should."[19]

Having established their credentials as architects rather than mere purveyors of plans, the Pallisers issued an almost incoherent castigation of the Shoppell enterprise, although they refrained from naming him.

> [As] we anticipated, there has sprung up during the past five or six years in many directions several persons and firms imitating that part of our business referred to above. Most of them, however, put out designs that are

[17] "How to Use the Builders' Portfolios and Hand-Books," in *The Builders' Portfolio,* sec. 1 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1886).

[18] "Miscellaneous Notes," p. 1. Shoppell's plans to develop this tract displayed a keen sensitivity to the new interest in colonial architecture. In order to house the visitors who would flock to see his model development, Shoppell proposed to build "a pretty inn," that would represent a "correct example of the colonial style of architecture." Shoppell speculated that it was "entirely practicable to work into this structure *real* doors, windows, mantels, iron and brass work, staircases (possibly) wainscoting, etc., that were made in colonial times, often beautifully carved and worked, and having historical value. Many old houses are disappearing, and there must be plenty of this material available."

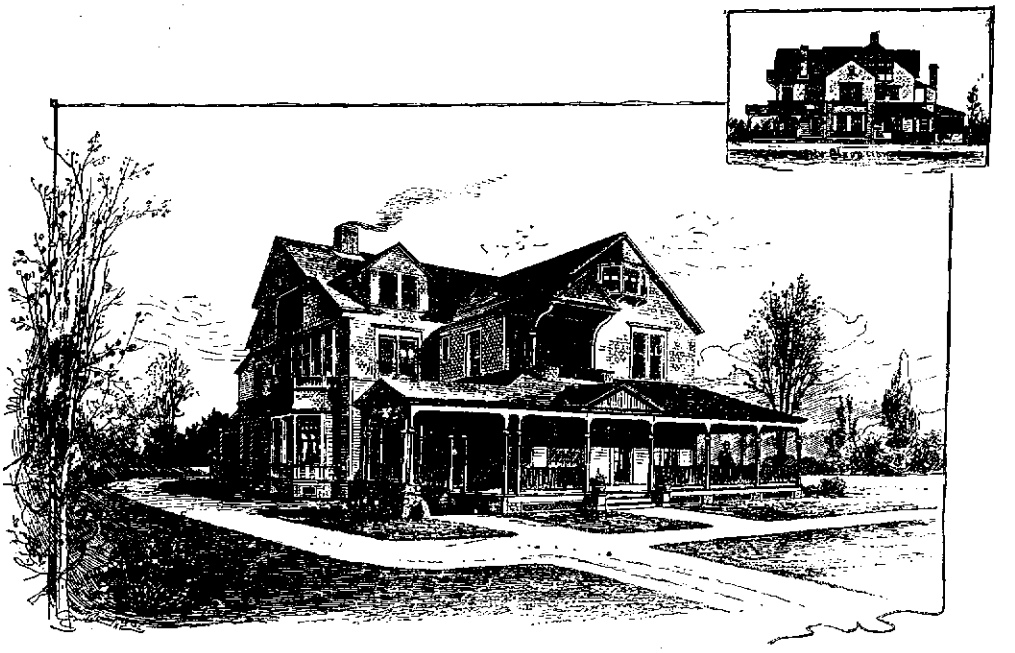
[19] Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's New Cottage Homes and Details* (New York: By the company, 1887), introduction. The advertisement is near the end of the volume.

Fig. 11. Detail of design 416 from *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890), p. 258. (New Hampshire Historical Society.)

Fig. 12. B. B. Noyes house, Greenfield, Massachusetts. (Photo, James L. Garvin.) Built about 1889, this dwelling was transformed from the stone construction shown in figure 11 to brick, and its third-floor porch was enclosed.

Fig. 13. Joseph W. Creasey house, Amesbury, Massachusetts. (Photo, James L. Garvin.) The builder, a druggist, testified that "every one who has examined my new house admires the arrangement and expresses amazement at the amount of room. One gentleman from Washington, D.C., examined my plans and since then has purchased one of your designs."

Fig. 14. Plate 171 from *The Builders' Portfolio*, sec. 2 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1887). (Boston Public Library.)



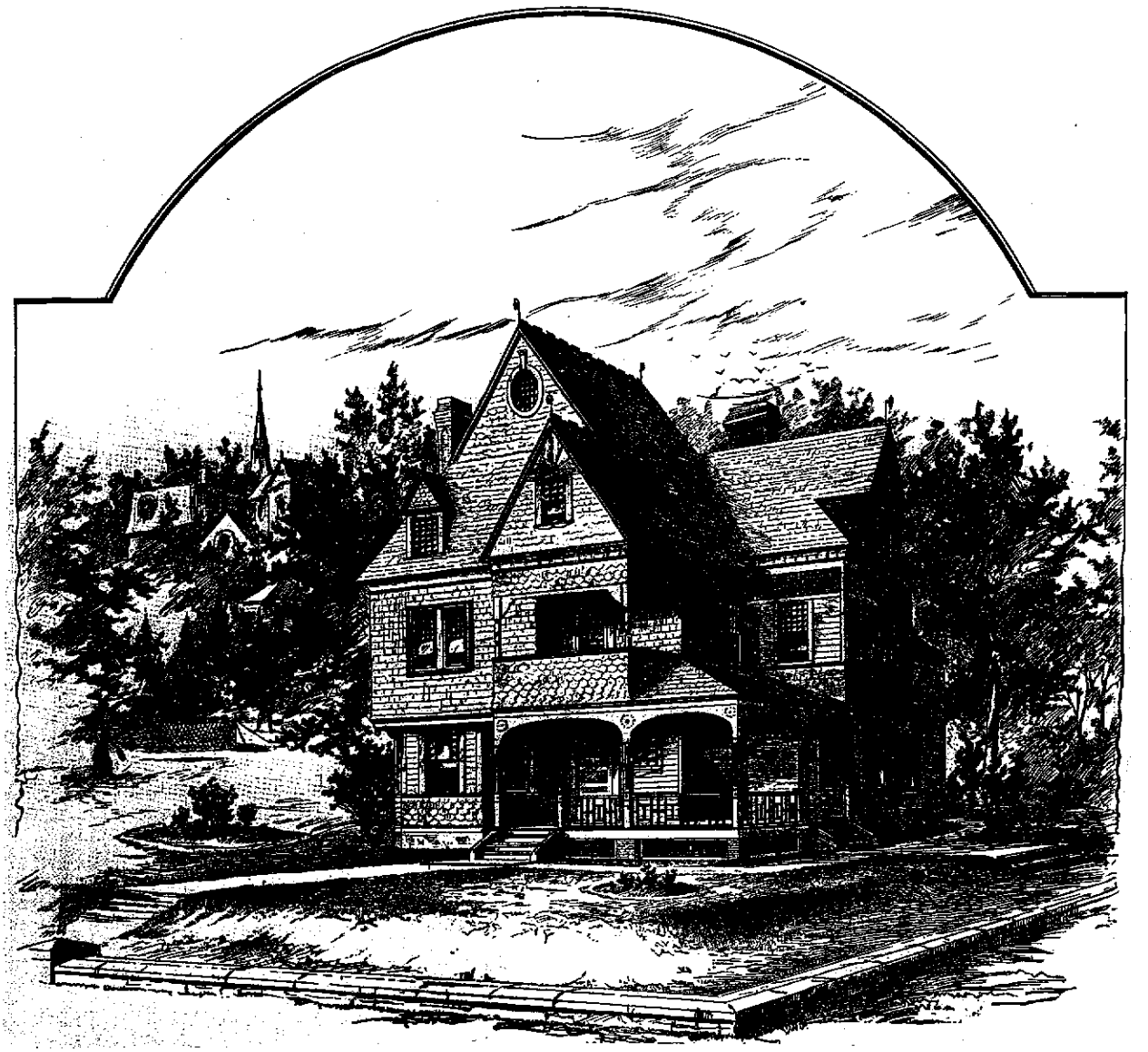


Fig. 15. Plate 79 from *The Builders' Portfolio,* sec. 1 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1886). (Boston Public Library.)

very crude, and offer services that would apparently be of a very inferior order and clap-trap generally. Their methods are of the worst order of quackery, making deliberate calculations to mislead the public by issuing pictures, sketches of the imagination, never built, and with impossible costs of construction, given to catch the ignorant, only to prove disappointing to them when tried. Rumor has it that one of these quacks has been scheming to close up all the Architects' offices in the country so as to have a monopoly of the plan business himself, though he is not an Architect, but claims to know more than them all.[20]

The Pallisers expressed a special scorn for Shoppell's *Builders' Portfolio.* "We also desire to state here that we do not publish these designs in any other form, giving costs of constructing each on an increased scale, or separate from the designs for the use of builders only . . . so that if it were possible he might monopolize his customer and get an exorbitant price. We beg to say most emphatically that we resort to no such means to try and serve our customers."[21]

The lines of dispute were clearly drawn, with the Pallisers claiming to scorn Shoppell's techniques and to offer custom architectural services. Nonetheless, the plates in *New Cottage Homes* were

[20] *Palliser's New Cottage Homes,* introduction.

[21] *Palliser's New Cottage Homes,* preface.

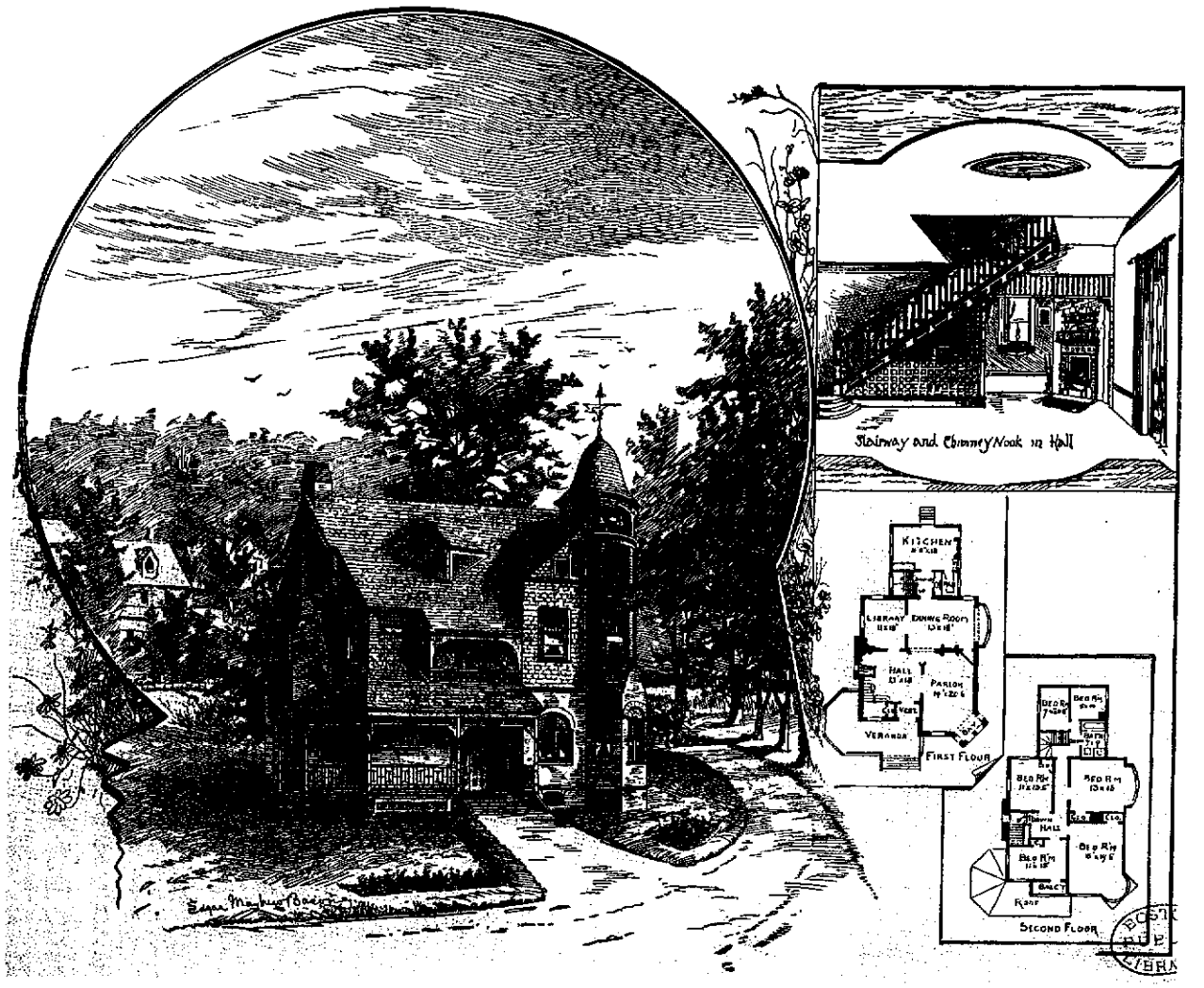


Fig. 16. Plate 85 from *The Builders' Portfolio,* sec. 1 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1886). (Boston Public Library.)

obviously intended to induce customers to send for large-scale drawings. While the Pallisers' plates showed more plans and elevations than did Shoppell's (fig. 21), the plates were insufficiently detailed to allow a house to be constructed by their aid alone.

Undaunted by the Pallisers' indignation, Shoppell quickly added new refinements to his business. In 1889, *Modern Homes* advertised *Shoppell's Classified Building Designs*—portfolios of offprints from Shoppell's earlier designs, sold in collections that were classified according to construction costs. The most popular designs fell into the $3,000 to $4,000 range. In 1890, Shoppell offered *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost.* This volume was the first Shoppell book to substitute some halftone photographs of houses for the earlier pen-and-ink renderings, thus refuting the Pallisers' charge that Shoppell's designs were only "sketches of the imagination, never built" (fig. 22). *Selected Designs* likewise guaranteed that Shoppell's construction estimates were not, as the Pallisers had charged, "impossible costs of construction, given to catch the ignorant." Shoppell stated that his "estimates result from careful and laborious calculation of every item of material and every hour of labor required for each design. We exhibit our own confidence in them by guaranteeing their correctness, under penalty of charging nothing for our services if they are found to be incorrect."[22]

[22]*Palliser's New Cottage Homes,* introduction; "Selecting the Design," in *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890).

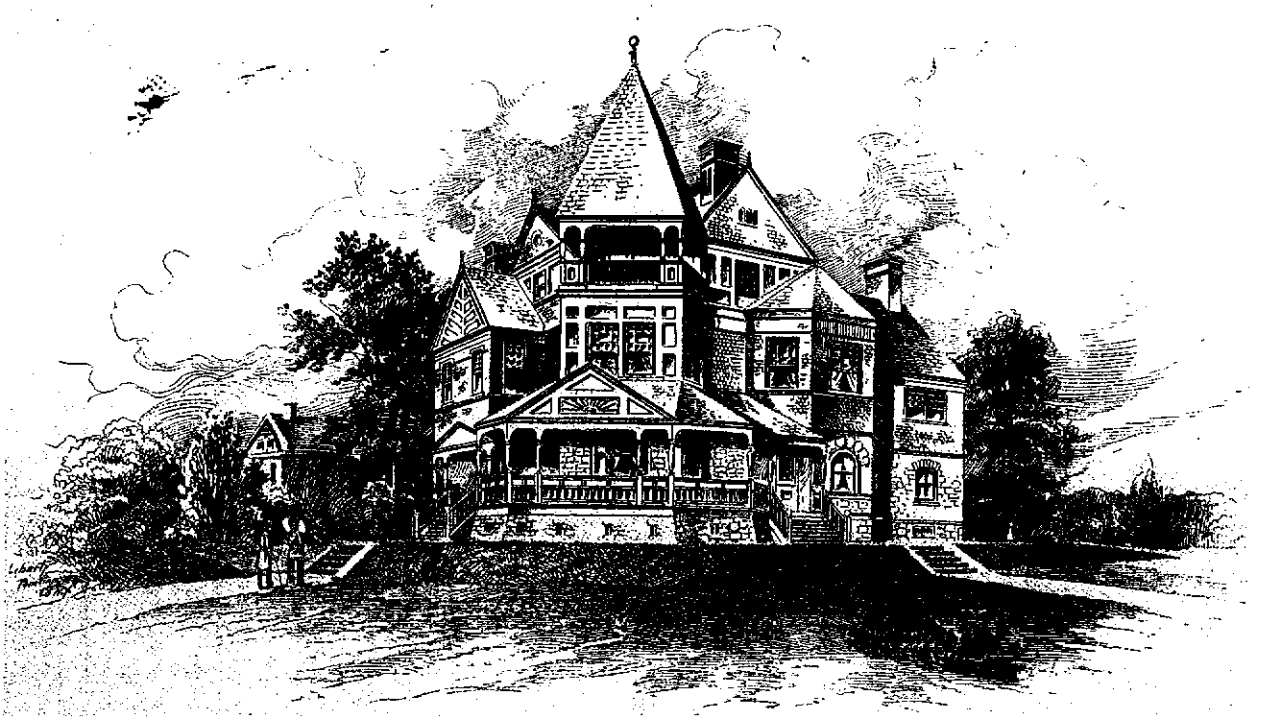


Fig. 17. Plate 275 from *The Builders' Portfolio,* sec. 3 (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1887). (Boston Public Library.)

By 1890 Shoppell's standard full set of plans included working drawings, detail sheets, specifications and agreements or contracts, a "COLOR SHEET, giving examples of elevations properly colored, with directions for mixing and applying the paints," and supplementary sheets showing fence designs, cisterns, earth closets, and privies. Further, because "it often happens that when an owner has completed a handsome and convenient house, it is taken as a pattern, and similar houses spring up all over the neighborhood," all of Shoppell's designs were patented and only actual purchasers were issued licenses to use the plans.[23]

By the 1880s, the Pallisers and Shoppell had perfected their respective business techniques, and each had attempted to prove their superiority in certain areas of the mail-order-plan business. But they were no longer alone. The magnitude of these two businesses could not satisfy the needs of a rapidly growing nation, and other entrepreneurs were ready to heed Shoppell's invitation that "the same plan of doing business is open to all architects."

One of the most enterprising designers to enter the field was Frank L. Smith of Boston, author of *A Cosy Home: How It was Built* (1887). In January 1888, Smith began publishing his own quarterly periodical, *Homes of To-Day,* which sold for 25¢ an issue. It was much like Shoppell's *Modern Houses* in format; it contained a series of house designs, some quite simple (fig. 23) and others more elaborate (fig. 24). All were well drawn and well conceived. At the front of each issue of *Homes of To-Day* was a table listing the cost of constructing each dwelling and the price for a set of plans—four elevations, floor plans, complete framing plans, and detail sheets. Each issue included "forty-eight or more pages . . . illustrating the most desirable designs from . . . [Smith's] practice for the preceding three months." His practice was impressively large: he had commissions in twenty-four states, in Jamaica, and in Nova Scotia. In Massachusetts alone he had designed buildings in forty-six cities and towns, in some of which his buildings numbered in the hundreds.[24] The periodical also contained articles on such subjects as drainage, heating, painting (including paint color samples), plumbing, wooden

[23] "Our Designs Patented," in *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses,* p. 42.

[24] Frank L. Smith, "Announcement," *Homes of To-Day* 1, no. 1 (January 1888): [2].

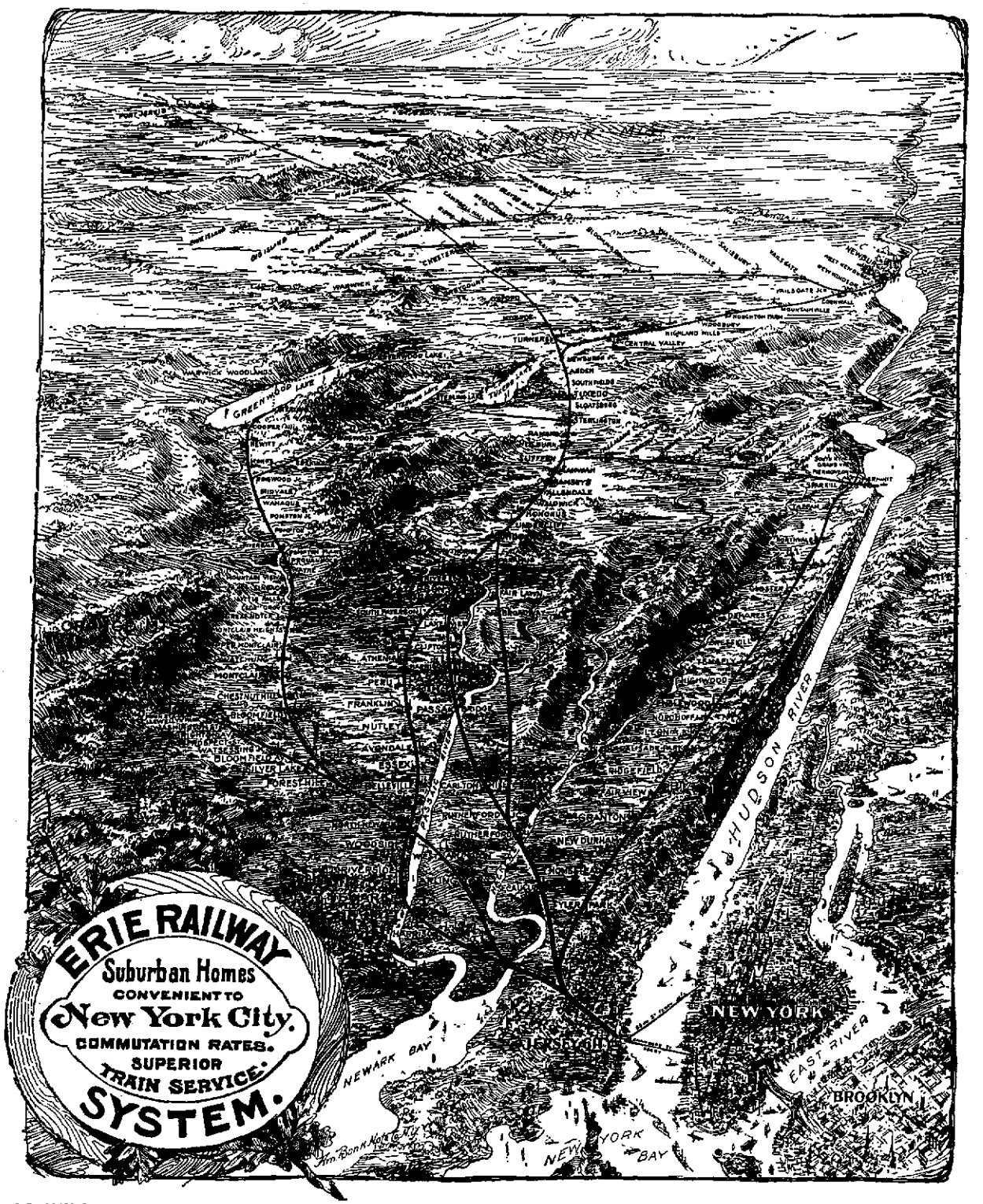


Fig. 18. Advertisement from *Shoppell's Modern Houses,* no. 15 (January-March 1890), p. viii. (Boston Public Library.)

Fig. 19. Advertisement from Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's New Cottage Homes and Details* (New York: By the company, 1887). (Boston Public Library.) The Pallisers had published a similar design as plate 6 of *Palliser's Model Homes* (2d ed., Bridgeport, Conn., 1878).

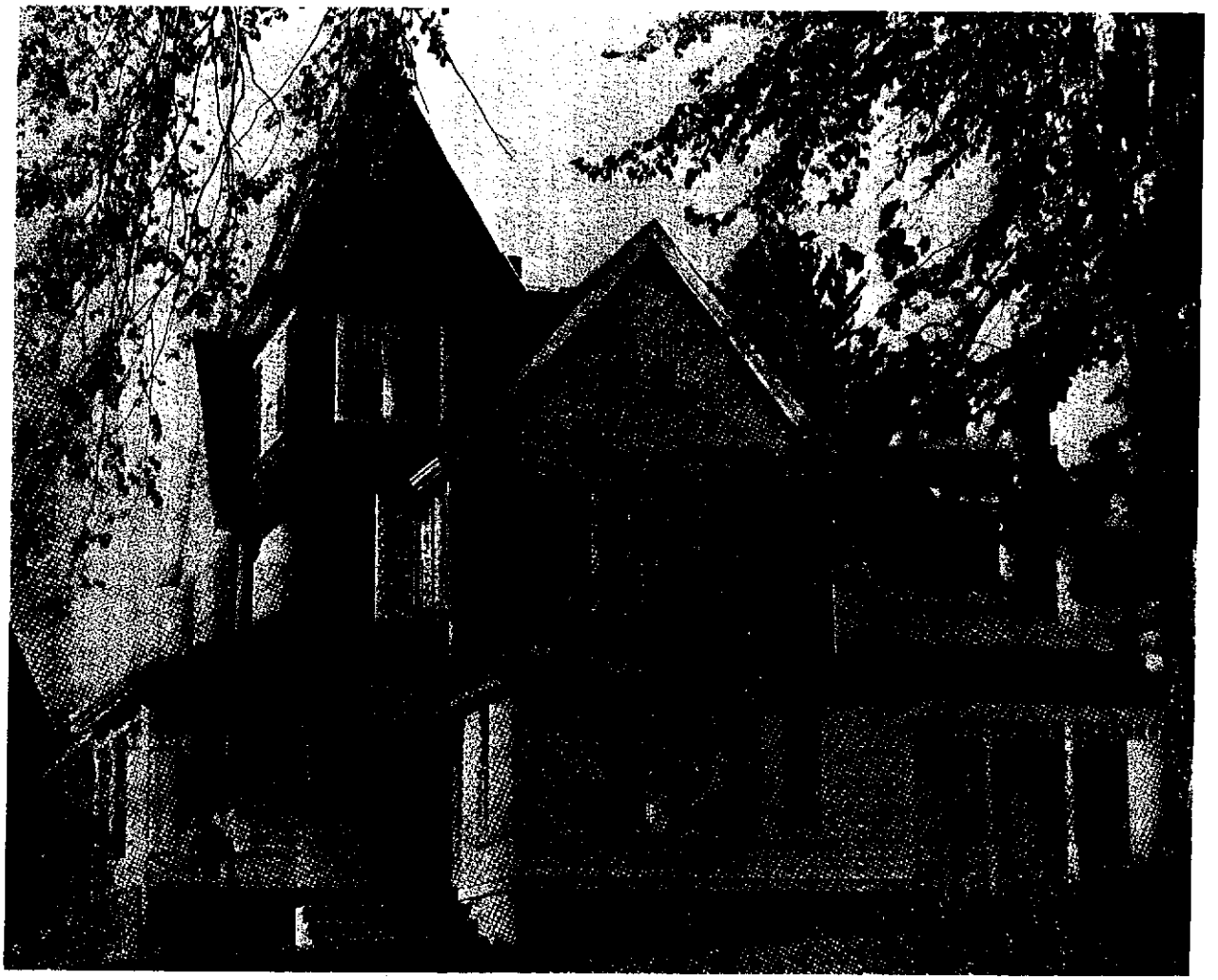


Fig. 20. Irving Dow house, Northwood Narrows, New Hampshire. (Photo, James L. Garvin.) Built about 1890, this is a good rural example of "Palliser's Modern Eight-Room Cottage, with Tower." To the left is the nearly identical James A. Towle house; a third example stands a few miles to the east in the same town.

mantels, wood stains, modern kitchens, and colonial designs.

Grand Rapids, one center of the American furniture industry, was especially well supplied with architects ready to publish plan books. Among these were David S. Hopkins, *Houses and Cottages* (ca. 1889); Frank P. Allen, *Artistic Dwellings* (ca. 1891); and W. K. Johnston, *Modern Homes* (1894?). All of these used the Shoppell format: a series of perspective renderings accompanied by miniature floor plans (figs. 25, 26, 27), an estimate of the cost of construction, and a table of prices for complete sets of working drawings. Like Shoppell and the Pallisers, these architects also offered either to supply original designs, if the needs of a prospective owner were not met by a published plan, or to alter the published designs to suit the customer.[25]

Shoppell's Cooperative Building Plan Association also inspired imitation of which the National Architects' Union of New York and Philadelphia was probably the most prominent atelier. Between about 1885 and about 1894, the union issued eight volumes of designs, ranging in style from distinctly Richardsonian (fig. 28) to colonial revival.

[25] Frank Lloyd Wright, like any other architect of his day, was exposed to the ready-made house plan (and to the practice of altering such a plan to suit a customer) during his brief sojourn in Silsbee's office. Wright recalled the standard method of providing "custom" house plans: "All [the architect] had to do was call, 'Boy, take down No. 37, and put a bay-window on it for the lady'" (*An Autobiography* [New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1943], p. 140).

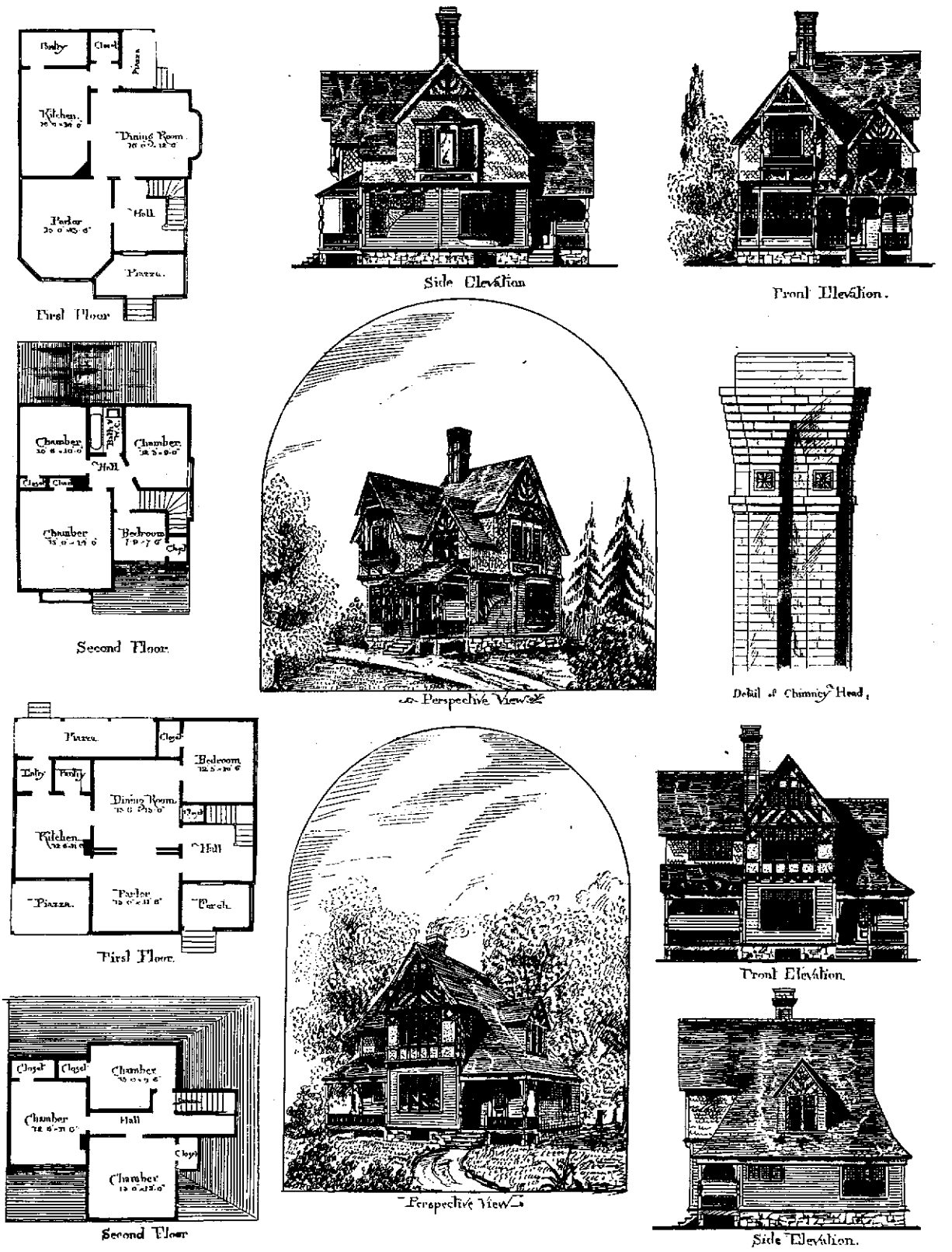
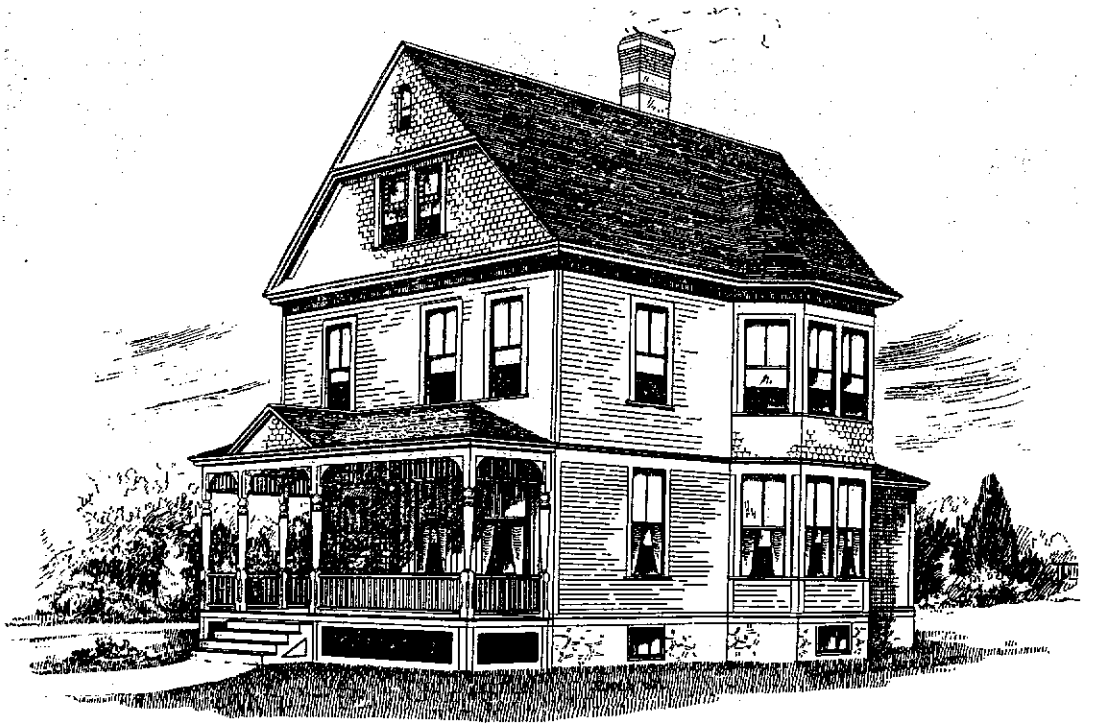


Fig. 21. Plate 36 from Palliser, Palliser, and Company, *Palliser's New Cottage Homes and Details* (New York: By the company, 1887). (Boston Public Library.)

Fig. 22. Detail of design 564 from *Selected Designs from Shoppell's Modern Houses, with Full Descriptions and Estimates of Cost* (New York: Cooperative Building Plan Assn., 1890), p. 243. (Boston Public Library.) The accompanying caption states that this house was built at a cost of $6,500 but does not state its location.

Fig. 23. Design 392 from Frank L. Smith, *Homes of To-Day* 2, no. 3 (July 1889): 172. (Boston Public Library.)



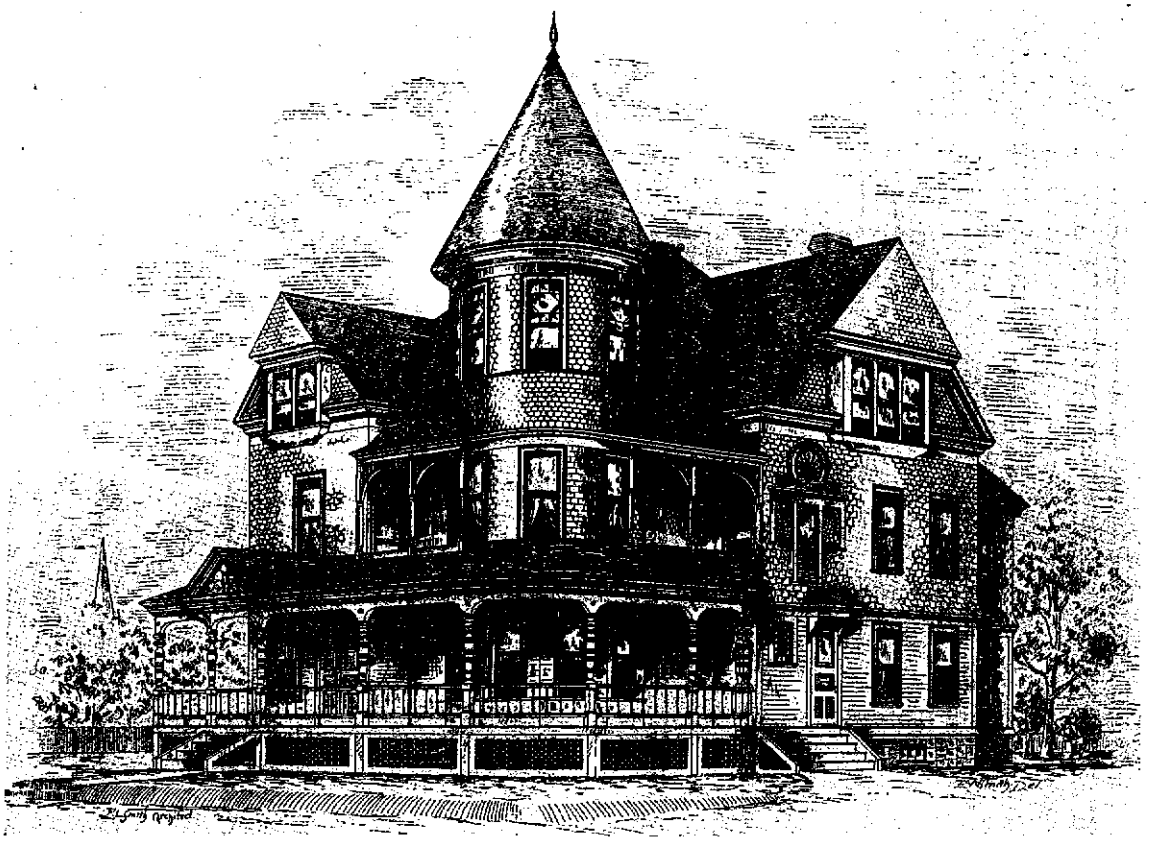
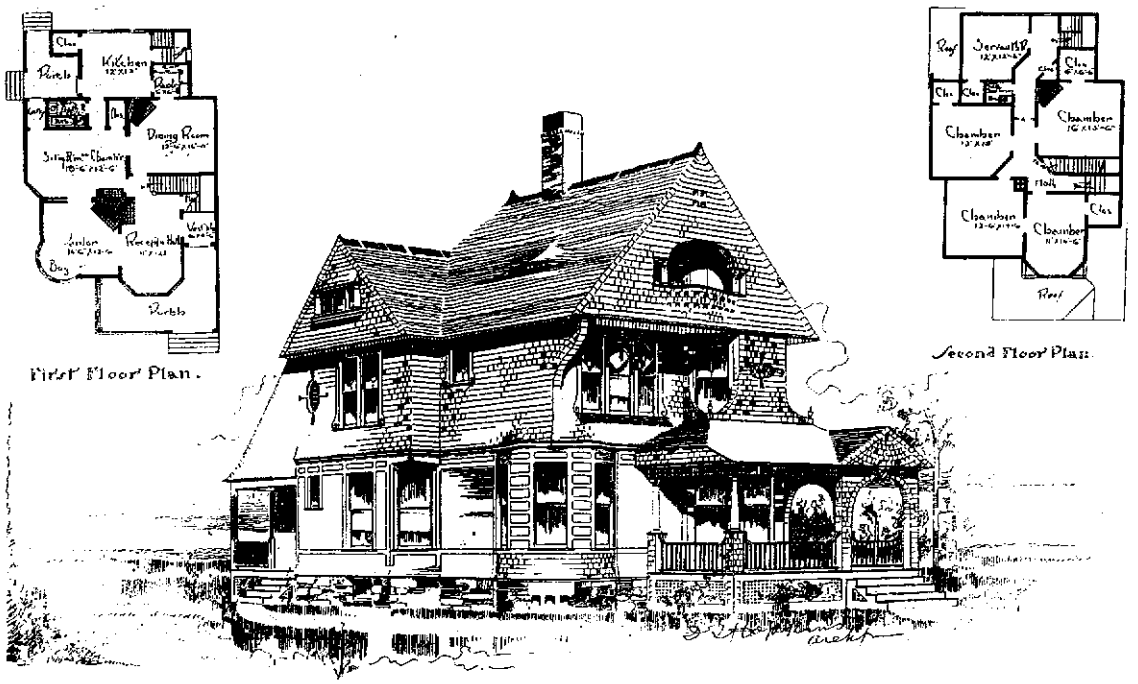


Fig. 24. Design 123 from Frank L. Smith, *Homes of To-Day* 1, no. 1 (January 1888): 36. (Boston Public Library.)

Fig. 25. Design 119 from David S. Hopkins, *Houses and Cottages,* book no. 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: By the author, 1893). (Boston Public Library.)



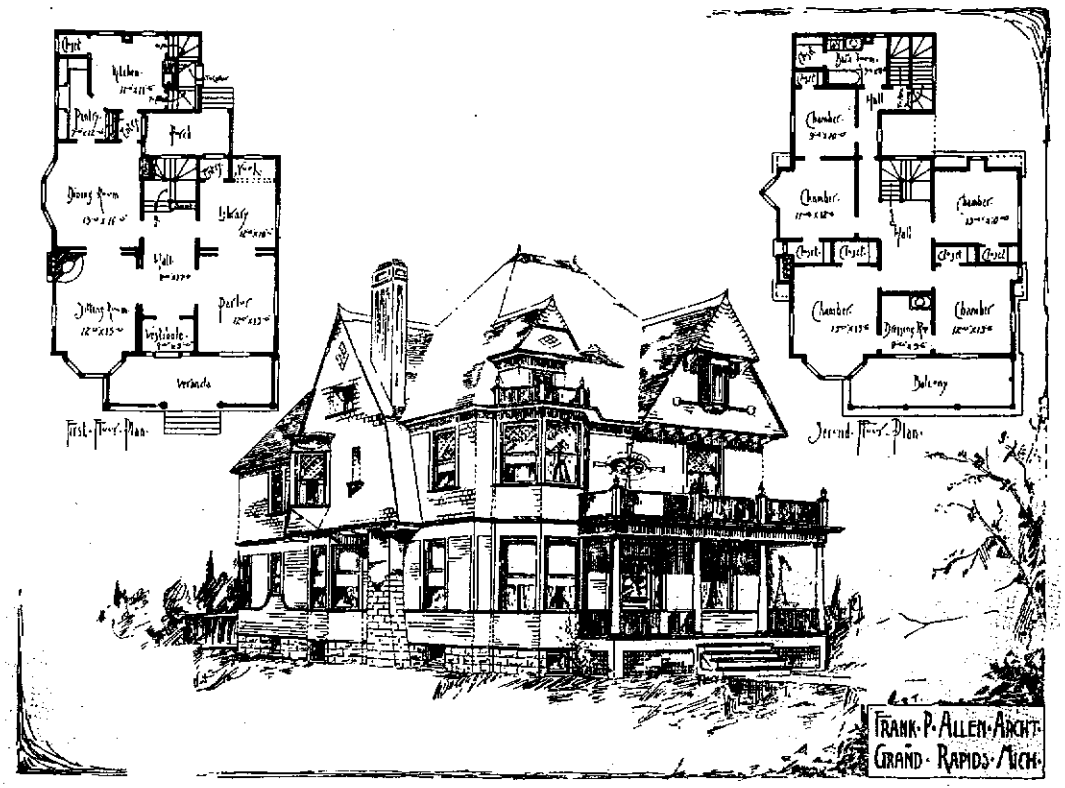
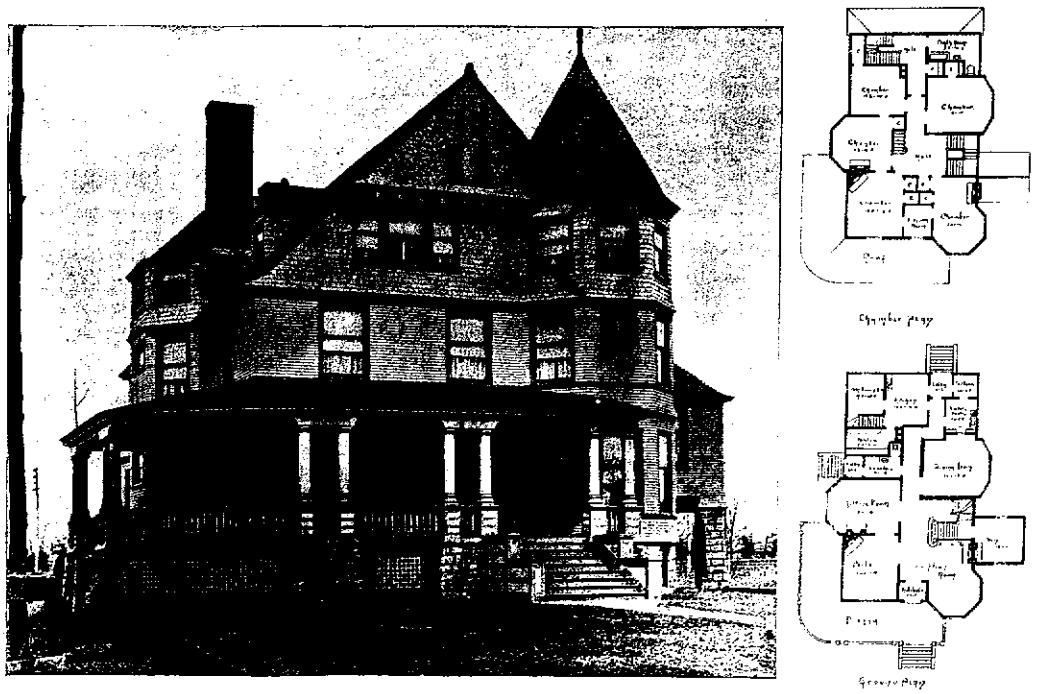


Fig. 26. Design 84 from Frank P. Allen, *Artistic Dwellings* (4th ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: By the author, 1893). (Boston Public Library.)

Fig. 27. Design 2 from William K. Johnston, *Modern Homes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: By the author, [ca. 1894]). (Boston Public Library.) This house was built for A. S. Montgomery in Muskegon, Michigan, at a cost of $9,000.



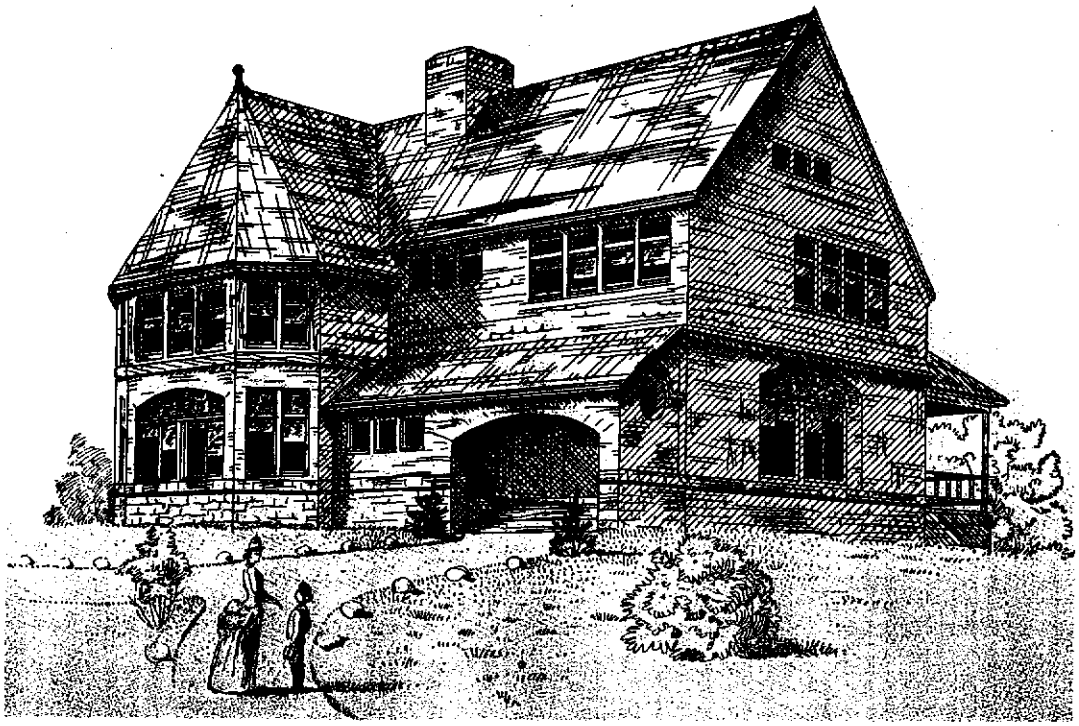


Fig. 28. Design 23 from National Architects' Union, *Sensible Low-Cost Houses,* vol. 2 (New York and Philadelphia: A. C. Child, [ca. 1893]). (Boston Public Library.)

A logical outgrowth of the mail-order-plan business was the provision of building components and, ultimately, entire houses from catalogues. The beginning of this phenomenon is seen in the scores of advertisements for manufactured architectural details that filled the end pages of the Palliser and Shoppell publications from the 1880s on. The same railroad network that permitted the city worker to commute to his mail-order house in the suburbs also offered the potential for transporting architectural elements or prefabricated dwellings to the country.

George F. Barber was a mail-order architect who pioneered in the production of prefabricated houses. Barber moved from DeKalb, Illinois, to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1888 and soon began a successful mail-order-plan business. His catalogue, *Cottage Souvenir,* illustrated plans of houses that could be built for $500 to $10,000. More significant, Barber offered to ship entire dwellings of his design, to be assembled at their destination by local carpenters. At least one of Barber's prefabricated dwellings was built as far away as Jacksonville, Oregon.[26] Such shipment of entire dwellings was eventually perfected by the great mail-order houses. During the 1920s, both Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward offered a line of prefabricated one- and two-story houses at prices ranging from $1,200 to $2,500.[27]

Like inexpensive printing, ready-made merchandise, and cheap transportation, the mail-order house plan transformed the lives of many Americans in the post–Civil War era. From its modest beginning in the 1870s to its maturation as an industry of national scope in the 1890s, the business exerted a powerful and beneficial influence on suburban housing. The mail-order plan brought high standards of design and the latest architectural trends to countless middle-class homeowners and builders. Houses built from such plans reflect not only the aesthetics of their era but also the new technologies that placed in the hands of the middle class those amenities formerly reserved for the wealthy.

[26] Patricia Poore, "Pattern Book Architecture: Is Yours a Mail-Order House?," *Old-House Journal* 8, no. 12 (December 1980): 183–93.

[27] Hal L. Cohen, ed., *1922 Montgomery Ward Catalogue* (New York: HC Publishers, 1969), p. 633; Alan Mirken, ed., *1927 Edition of the Sears, Roebuck Catalogue* (New York: Bounty Books, 1970), pp. 1090–91.