

## Orson Squire Fowler (1809-1887)

From 1834 till his death in 1887 Orson Squire Fowler promoted through writings and lectures the pseudo medicine of phrenology. Phrenology is the study of the shape and size of the human skull as a way to interpret one's characteristics and mental abilities. Along with his brother Lorenzo and his sister-in-law Lydia Folger Fowler they opened a phrenological office in New York City. Fowler along with his brother and his wife are considered mainly responsible for the popularity of phrenology during the mid to late-19th century. In addition to phrenology, Fowler was also a great promoter of social reform, education, and health.

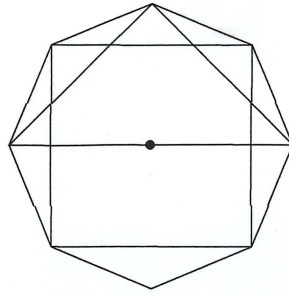
Fowler believed that every man could be an architect without the need of study and apprenticeship as long as he strong phrenological organs of "inhabitiveness" and "constructiveness", the love of home and the ability to build. Fowler possessed such abilities which he presented in his publication *The Octagon House: A Home For All*. In the book he called for and outlined the hows and whys houses should designed and built octagonally. In addition to houses he also provided designs for churches and schools. The octagon as an architectural idea been seen early such as at Jefferson's retreat home of "Poplar Forest" in Virginia and Washington's threshing barn and garden house at "Mount Vernon", and in the construction of the Russian blockhouses in Sitka, Alaska.

He saw that the octagonal house could be either small or large, a basic design to serve both the poor and rich. The house shape was more efficient in many ways. Because of its shape it had more space of a square home and even more over a rectangular home with the same perimeter. By rooms radiating out from a central hallway there were less hallways and thus useful space gained. The central hallway and stair also allowed for the circulation of cool air in the summer and heated air in the winter. With additional wall space comes additional windows for the allowance of not only healthy natural light but the reduction in heating costs during the winter. Fowler presented a design that was not only inexpensive to build but a healthier one to live in.

Fowler himself would build one for his own family in Fishkill, NY overlooking the Hudson River. The four-story house had hundred rooms, sixty of which were main rooms, and a seventy-foot high central staircase which lead to a large glass enclosed octagonal cupola. Every family member had their own room, especially the children which Fowler believed needed their privacy in order to develop their own uninfluenced character. Porches surrounded every floor to protect from rain and sun and still allow fresh air through open windows. The Fowler home also had central heating, piping for hot and cold water, indoor toilets, natural gas lighting, and even a water filtration system. The house was also outlaid with speaking tubes and dumbwaiters. There were storage rooms for wood, milk and other spoilables, and prepared foods. The foundation was a concrete or "gravel wall" construction using timber shuttering, a more efficient and inexpensive then stone. The house took five years to build and was completed in 1853. The family enjoyed the home until 1857 when financial panic forced him to rent out the house.

The popularity of octagonal houses took off during 1850s with hundreds of homes built throughout the northeast and the midwest. By the 1860 octagonal houses could be found in most the United States. Though the house style construction was greatly reduced as a result of the Civil War, octagonal houses were still being built into the 1890s. Today approximately just over 2,000 are still standing mainly in the eastern United States.





Greetings and thank you for visiting from Jesse Bransford and Susan Aberth.

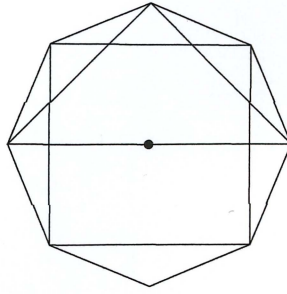
*Please sign the guestbook in the Library.*

The Catskill Octagon (The David Van Gelder House, aka Spring Side) was built in 1860 by David Van Gelder, a farmer and builder known for his covered bridges. In 1870 an extension was added, presumably to bring the kitchen upstairs, which would have originally been in the cellar. Built according to the specifications of Orson Squire Fowler, who popularized the octagon design in his book *A Home For All, or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building*, the style was popular from about 1850 to 1890.

The logic of the design, generally revolving around light exposure and maximization of space, was intended, among other functions, to prevent the formation of miasma, bad and unhealthy air. Miasma was theorized by some at this time to form in right-angled corners and caused illnesses as far flung as cholera and the common cold. Light and good air were considered essential to health in the Victorian period, and Fowler clearly states these goals in his text, but it is known that there were other motives as well.

Fowler was a progressive for the time, a noted suffragist, feminist, abolitionist and proto-modernist. He also popularized the pseudo-science of phrenology, which, like palmistry, seeks to use the shape and grooves in a person's head to intuit behaviors and personality. Much of this thinking was born out of the Spiritualist movement, and their beliefs state that octagonal structures encourage the visitation of 'spirit'. The spiritualist and anthroposophist Rudolph Steiner, who is known in the US for his Waldorf schools, was also a proponent of the miasma theory, and his architectural designs also lack right angles wherever possible. Whether or not Van Gelder was a Spiritualist is not known, but there is a standing octagonal house at the Lily Dale Assembly, in upstate NY, a Spiritualist community that survives today and still uses the building for séances.

Van Gelder adhered to Fowler's design with one conceit: he used brick instead of stone and gravel. In his book Fowler strongly suggests his gravel wall (a predecessor of poured concrete) for its durability and affordability. By using brick, Van Gelder was perhaps noting his elevated status. Many octagonal houses participated in high Victorian ostentation, with detailed woodworking, tiered porches, and extravagant cupolas. Many also were built in wood which at the time was the most affordable material of all. The



Catskill Octagon is one of only a few brick octagons remaining (another survives as the Red Hook Public Library) and one of only a few thousand left in total.

The previous owners of the house beyond Van Gelder include in chronological order Angela Benanti, John and Florence Vaughn, Mark Phillips, and James Burgess and John Schultz. The Vaughns were ministers of the Mount Tabor African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (196 Water St.). Mark Phillips stabilized the house after being abandoned for several years and had the house listed on the National Register in 1997.

The staircase railing is original. Of the four chimneys only one connects to the original fireplaces, in the living room. These would have been coal burning and a relative novelty at the time the house was built. The most recent restoration is the porch, which was rebuilt in 2017. The flowerbeds around the house were installed over the last two years. The yard, which was intended to be able to produce food year round according to Fowler's design, has two apple trees, two cherry trees and a plum tree, as well as several Canadian maple, black walnut and tulip poplar trees. The large tulip poplar towards the end of the drive is at least as old as the house.

The original property was the entire hill, Cherry Hill, and included the brick house across Cherry Street, which was built around the same time as the Octagon for Van Gelder's brother. The original property also included much of the lot that the public school now sits on, but over time parcels were sold off. Among the first was the lot that became the still-standing Cherry Hill House on the corner of Cherry and Division St., built in 1876.

Bransford, an artist, and Aberth, an art historian, have shared passions for symbolist and surrealist art. Aberth has an extensive collection of the material culture of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century fraternal orders. Together they have a shared library devoted to magic and esoteric philosophy. Bransford's studio is a converted garage and is open to view as well.