

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED JUN 14 1979

DATE ENTERED AUG 17 1979

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

AND/OR COMMON

The Octagon House and Addition

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

120 Strawberry Hill Avenue

--- NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Stamford

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

4th-Stewart B. McKinney

--- VICINITY OF

STATE

Connecticut

CODE

COUNTY

Fairfield

CODE

001

3 CLASSIFICATION**CATEGORY**

DISTRICT
 BUILDING(S)
 STRUCTURE
 SITE
 OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

PUBLIC
 PRIVATE
 BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

IN PROCESS
 BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

OCCUPIED
 UNOCCUPIED
 WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

YES: RESTRICTED
 YES: UNRESTRICTED
 NO

PRESENT USE

AGRICULTURE
 COMMERCIAL
 EDUCATIONAL
 ENTERTAINMENT
 GOVERNMENT
 INDUSTRIAL
 MILITARY

MUSEUM
 PARK
 PRIVATE RESIDENCE
 RELIGIOUS
 SCIENTIFIC
 TRANSPORTATION
 OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

High Clear Associates

STREET & NUMBER

72 Little Hill Drive

CITY, TOWN

Stamford

--- VICINITY OF

Connecticut

STATE

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Old Town Hall

STREET & NUMBER

175 Atlantic Street

CITY, TOWN

Stamford,

Connecticut

STATE

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

State Register of Historic Places

DATE

1979

--- FEDERAL STATE --- COUNTY --- LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Connecticut Historical Commission

CITY, TOWN

Hartford

STATE

Connecticut

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		unknown

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Octagon house (see Photo #1) is located in a secluded pine grove approximately 800 feet back from Strawberry Hill Avenue. Strawberry Hill is one of several hills which encircle Stamford's central business district. The house and its neighboring structures are not visible from the main road, and access to them is through a long, winding driveway. The Octagon House is bordered to the north by a road leading to St. Joseph's Hospital, to the east by a hospital parking lot, and to the south and west by pine trees and wooded land. Situated within this enclave are two other structures: a turn-of-the century half-timbered, wood shingled dwelling, formerly a carriage house, and another, smaller converted carriage house with Neo-Colonial features. There is also a recently constructed low-rise apartment building to the southwest which does not interfere with the serene and secluded nature of the site.

The eight sides of the structure are each approximately 15 feet long. The house is two and one half stories tall, and constructed of poured masonry. Attached to its west elevation is an addition: a one and one half story shingled structure, rectangular in plan (24'x30') with a mansard roof (see Photo #2). The main body of the house has a smooth stucco covering scored to simulate ashlar (see Photo #3). The "cast" nature of the structure is evident in both the molded water table and the cast window frames (see Photo #4). The below-grade portion of the foundation is fieldstone, with poured concrete above grade. The rectangular shaped basement windows have been filled in.

The entrance elevation (south) has a one story porch resting on two chamfered posts. Small curvilinear brackets appear under the porch cornice. Marks remaining on the **concrete** indicate that the original porch was hip roofed, and extended around three of the sides (see Plate #1). The front entrance has French doors which may or may not be original. Markings on the jambs indicate the presence of another set of doors, possibly storm or screen.

The fenestration pattern of the structure varies from elevation to elevation, a not uncommon arrangement for octagonal houses. The double-hung sash windows are of the variety suggested by Orson Squire Fowler in his book entitled A Home For All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building. The overall fenestration pattern can be best described as follows: (assuming the entrance elevation to be #1) The odd numbered elevations consist of paired windows separated by engaged wooden columns, or mullions. The even numbered elevations show two individually placed windows, either double-hung or casement. The first story casement windows, in what was formerly the front parlor have lightly tinted, leaded glass.

The roof of the Octagon House is a truncated, eight-sided hip crowned by a skylight which provides light for the central interior stairwell. The slightly projecting eaves are carried on evenly spaced wooden brackets simulating rafter ends. Gabled, wood shingled dormers appear on all eight sides, and may be later additions. The roof is covered with rapidly deteriorating roll asphalt revealing successive layers of asphalt and wood shingles underneath. Although the skylight is probably original; Fowler endorsed glass as a roofing material, the possibility exists that it was placed there following the removal of an eight-sided cupola. The roofline also features two "in-line" corbelled brick chimneys.

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The interior plan is essentially the one Fowler termed "The Best Plan Yet" (see Plate #2) and features a winding central staircase. In converting it to a multi-family dwelling, interior walls were added and removed, and it is now difficult to determine the exact original configuration. The staircase however, appears to have retained its newel posts and balustrade. Of note, though possibly of a later origin, are several translucent leaded glass windows used to light the interior hall.

A narrow, two story passageway connects the Octagon House to its mansard roofed addition. This shingled structure rests on a masonry foundation scored to simulate ashlar. Flat fascia boards and sills emphasize the horizontal structural elements. The connecting passageway contains a hooded entryway with a small balcony above it. The "Dutch" door is muntined above, panelled below and surmounted by a large wooden canopy carried on curvilinear brackets. The outside stairs appear to have retained their original iron posts and rails. The iron balcony above the entrance is treated in a similar manner, but is supported by curvilinear iron brackets.

Shallow shed dormers with small casement windows are built into all four sides of the mansard roof, lighting a second story apartment. The dormer rooflines are distinguished by strong, raking cornices which can best be seen in profile view. The dormer on the east elevation is penetrated by the upper story of the connecting passageway. The first floor apartment is a large studio room with an adjacent kitchen and bath. A brick fireplace with a wooden mantle dominates the western end of the room. The southern elevation contains triple French doors which open on a narrow deck, while a high row of casement windows light the northern wall inside.

Condition

Though exhibiting considerable surface deterioration, the Octagon House and Addition appear to be structurally sound. The roof however, seems to be in need of immediate attention.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

Construction Technology

SPECIFIC DATES unknown BUILDER/ARCHITECT unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Octagon House is one of the few remaining structures of its kind in the United States. Hidden from view in its secluded enclave, it has gone unnoticed for nearly one hundred years. It represents a fad or architectural anomaly which swept the nation in the period preceding the Civil War, and was inspired by the writings of Orson Squire Fowler in his popular book, A Home For All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building. This small volume had at least seven printings between 1848 and 1857 and was the main vehicle of propagation for octagonal house plans throughout the country. The Stamford Octagon House bears additional importance in its use of poured concrete, an innovative building technique endorsed by Fowler.

The idea of an eight sided building was not new and may be traced as far back as the Tower of the Winds constructed by the ancient Greeks in the First Century, B.C. The Roman Emperor, Hadrian, was known to have experimented with a domed octagon at his villa in Tivoli. Octagonal structures continued to be constructed throughout Medieval and Renaissance times including such exceptional buildings as San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Small octagonal churches in opposition to traditional Catholic forms were the fashion in Calvinist Holland, and therefore were popular among the 17th century Dutch settlers of the Hudson River Valley. Jefferson too was an enthusiastic advocate of polygonal buildings and rooms. The octagonal shape was also common in school and barn construction. It was not until the 1850's, however, that the idea became popular for residential uses. This popularity is generally attributed to the endorsements of Orson Squire Fowler, a highly successful phrenologist, lecturer and publisher. He enthusiastically incorporated the ideas of Joseph Goodrich of Milton, Wisconsin, who had built a house using a poured concrete technique. Fowler referred to it as "gravel wall" or "grout" construction. Later additions to his book was subtitled, "The Gravel Wall and Octagonal Mode of Building...New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor." Like his contemporary, A.J. Downing, he saw moral implications in architecture and waxed eloquent about his desire to bring "comfortable dwellings within the reach of the poorer classes". A gravel wall octagon, he reasoned, was not only beautiful, but functional, healthy, and economical.

Since a circle encloses more space for its surface than any other form, of course, the nearer spherical our houses, the more inside room for the outside wall, beside being more comfortable.

Large population increases in the United States had prompted the search for faster and cheaper building techniques. The balloon frame provided one solution, the gravel wall another. Fowler observed that his walls were four times cheaper than wood

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Creese, W. Fowler and the Domestic Octagon, Art Bulletin, XXVIII, June 1946, pp. 89-102.
- Fowler, Orson Squire. A Home For All or The Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building. New York: Fowler and Wells, 1854.
- Schmidt, Carl F. The Octagon Fad. Scottsville, N.Y.: Carl F. Schmidt, 1958.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1/2 acre

QUADRANGLE NAME Stamford

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24,000

UTM REFERENCES 060 680

A

1	8	6	2	3	6	9	5	4	5	4	6	0	6	0
ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

B

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

C

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

D

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

E

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

F

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

G

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

H

ZONE			EASTING				NORTHING							

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Bordered 25 feet to the north by a road leading to St. Joseph's Hospital, 25 feet to the east by a hospital parking lot, 25 feet to the south and west by pine trees and wooded land. See map marked Site: Location, Book #1127 Pg. 208 Stamford Land Records

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE Renee Kahn
Steven H. Hirschberg

ORGANIZATION STAMFORD ARCHITECTURE CONSERVANCY DATE 24 November 1978

STREET & NUMBER 713 Bedford Street TELEPHONE (203) 329-1975


CITY OR TOWN Stamford STATE Connecticut

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL STATE x LOCAL x

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE 

TITLE Director, Connecticut Historical Commission DATE June 5, 1979

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Carol Shull DATE 8-17-79
 KEEPERS OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST: Marie Mar Doyle DATE 8/17/79
 CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

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construction, and six times cheaper than brick. They had numerous other advantages as well. Concrete walls kept heat in and vermin out. They were strong, durable and easy to construct from simple, abundant materials.

The plan itself had much to recommend it, especially in the way of increased light and ease of communication between rooms. Fowler spoke of the many steps the housewife would save in using his plan. The sharp and awkward angles presented the greatest problem, but these could be utilized for storage purposes.

While Fowler was the prime advocate of the octagonal plan, others endorsed it too. Numerous versions appeared in builders' handbooks of the 1850's including one designed by Samuel Sloan, similar to "Longwood", the Oriental fantasy he created in Natchez, Mississippi for Dr. Haller Nutt. The enthusiasm for constructing octagons, however, diminished even before the halt in construction brought about by the Civil War.

Carl F. Schmidt, in his book, The Octagon Fad, published in 1958, lists approximately 300 known octagons in the United States, many of which are no longer extant. Over 100 of these are in New York State. The Connecticut section notes only ten surviving structures, and does not include the Stamford Octagon House. Of the ten listed, only one other is of gravel wall construction, although several are brick or stone with a smooth covering of plaster. Stamford's Octagon House contains many of Fowler's original concepts: its aggregate walls, scored to simulate ashlar and the central stairway plan. The once three sided porch faces south into a fragrant pine grove, and the hilltop view may have originally extended to Long Island Sound. While mysterious in history and origin, it stands out as a rare survivor of a distinctive building style.

History of Structure

The Octagon House, despite its distinctive architectural character, remains a mystery. No mention of it appears in Picturesque Stamford: A Souvenir (1892) or in the Tercentary Edition of the Stamford Advocate (1641-9141), both of which gave extensive coverage to local landmarks. In addition, the Stamford Historical Society has no records of the house. A search of Stamford land records sheds little further light. A house does not seem to appear on the property until sometime between July 27, 1891 and March 28, 1896. During that time title was held by Dudley S. Trowbridge, a businessman who manufactured a "never fail" elixir known as Dandelion Pills. When he purchased the property from Charles E. Hill in 1891, no buildings were listed. Even allowing for a degree of retardataire, this date is still considerably later than the style of building would indicate. The questions posed by this obvious conflict are: Was it

PLEASE SEE CONTINUATION SHEET - #2

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an earlier structure moved to the site, or was it an anachronism? The difficulty of moving a masonry structure of such size and weight makes us reluctant to accept the idea that it was moved, although the possibility can not be ruled out. A third possibility exists: that it was originally an unrecorded outbuilding, but this does not seem consistent with the careful recording of property transfers characteristic of that period. Until further information appears, we are inclined to accept it as an anachronistic structure built in the 1890's.

Equally puzzling is the mansard roofed addition. While not so noticeably out of period; mansard roofed structures were built in Stamford through the 1880's, it does seem rather late for the style. A long-time resident of the building reported that it had been moved to the site to provide studio space for a former owner's sons, but this story cannot be further substantiated.

The residents of Stamford are fortunate to possess a noteworthy example of a rare and distinctive architectural style. Fowler's octagons represented the creative and technical ingenuity characteristic of 19th century American society. The octagon was not only a harbinger of innovative construction techniques, but represented a conscious effort to create a structure which was practical and functional rather than decorative. In this sense it forecast concepts which were not to become widespread in America until the turn-of-the century.