It's Hard to Despise Victorian Houses Anymore

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT MAY come as a surprise to the split-level dweller in Peapack and elsewhere that the single-family American house is considered by experts to be one of the most noteworthy contibutions to architectural history. Well, maybe not exactly today's split-level. According to the historian Vincent Scully and other authorities the great age of American home building came to an end about the time of World War I.

But the 19th and early 20th centuries produced a domestic American genre that reached high points in what Professor Scully has named and documented as the "Stick" and "Shingle" styles, and in the internationally famous houses of H. H. Richardson, McKim, Mead and White, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

This distinctively American development in domestic building — freely innovative and esthetically rich—is on view now as part of an exhibition, "The Rise of an American Architecture," that opened yesterday at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of its centennial celebration.

Houses in the United States from about 1815 to 1915 form one of the three sections of the show, which has been directed by Edgar Kaufmann Jr., and is co-sponsored by the museum and the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The two other sections deal with equally outstanding contributions to American architecture and urbanism, the commercial building, and the design of parks and open spaces.

It's hard to hate a Victorian house anymore. Take, for example, the ones on this page, from the show. Built in 1852 as part of a cooperative development called Evergreen Hamlet, near Pittsburgh, they qualify as specimens of long-detested Victoriana, along with later, heavier gingerbread pastries of multiple turrets, oriels and verandas. But these are confections, and they are alive and well, in Millvale, Pa.

Evergreen Hamlet was founded in 1851 by William M. Shinn, a lawyer and promoter, as an 85-acre cooperative for "comfortable" families. Commuting to Pittsburgh was possible by community carriage and rail. Each family owned one acre of land and a house designed to its taste. A farm, school and roads were joint property.

By 1852, four houses were built and the hamlet was in operation. The cooperative association was dissolved after Mr. Shinn's death, in 1886. Those first four, homogeneous houses, for Mr. Shinn, William A. Hill, Wade Hampton and Robert Emory Sellers, still stand, with later structures around them. They are prized by their present owners. Most houses of this kind, which represent one of the best periods of American home building, have suffered wholesale, wanton destruction.

If it is hard not to like these houses now, it is also hard not to be nostalgic about them. Their plans show clearly how the art and standard of living have de-

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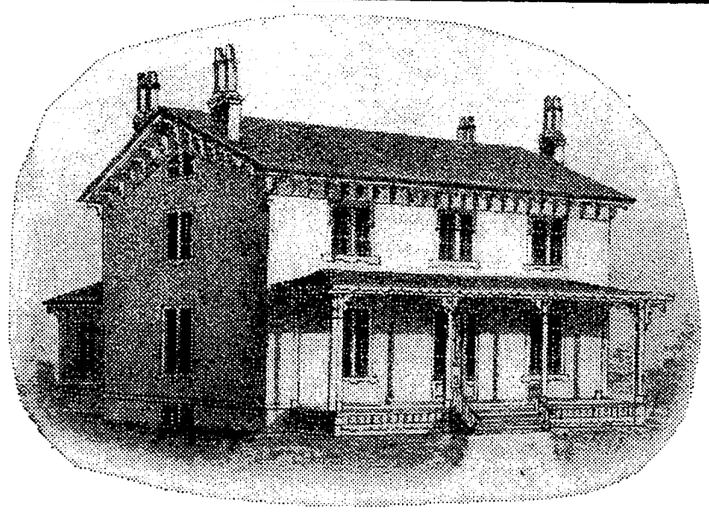
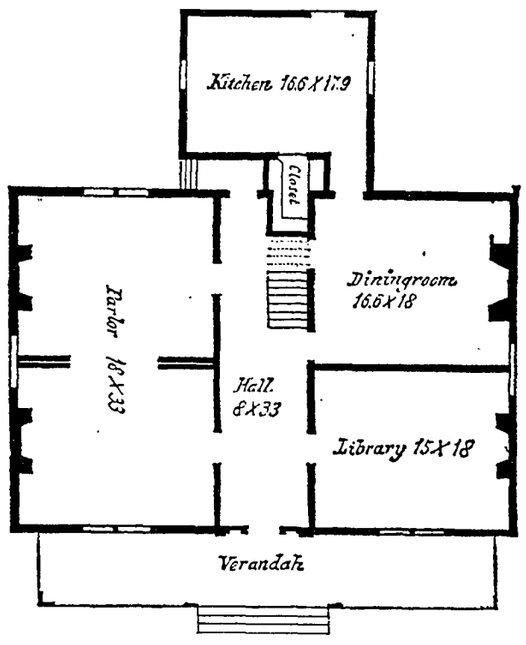
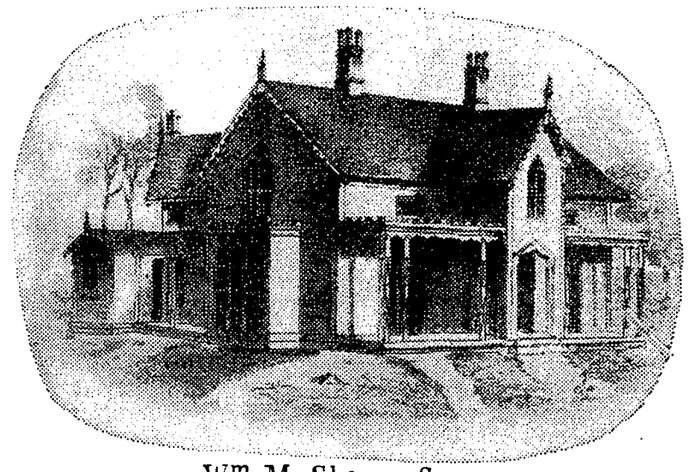
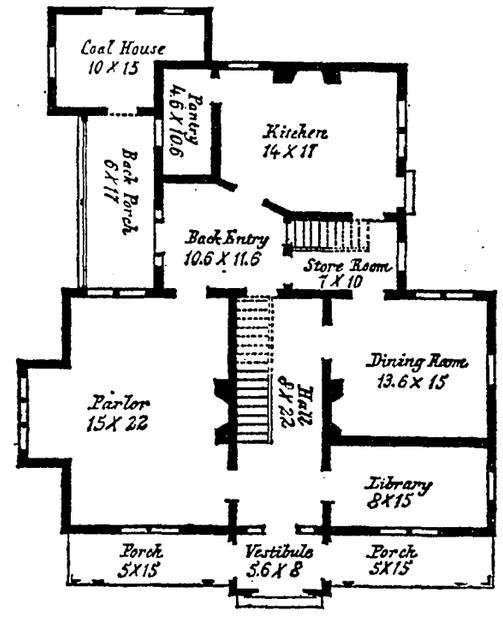


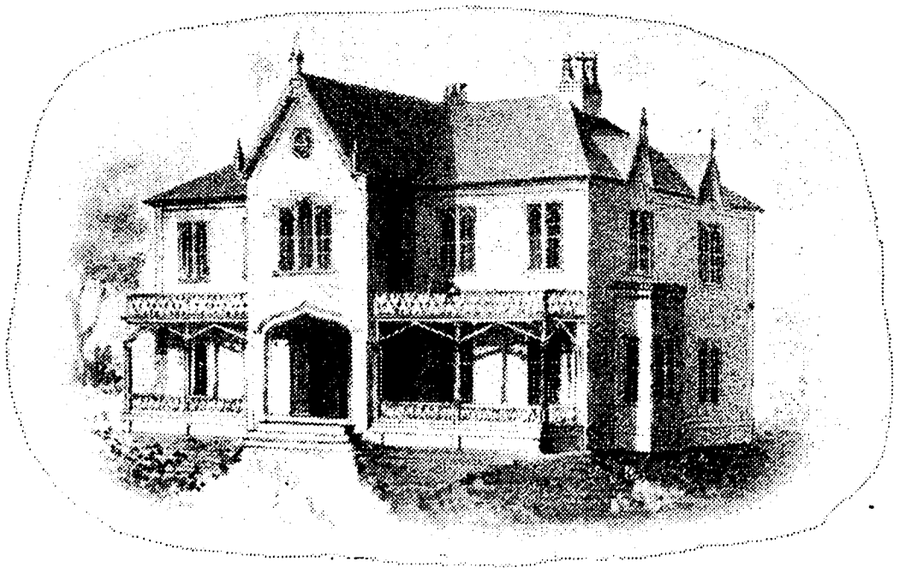
Wade Hamptons Dwelling.



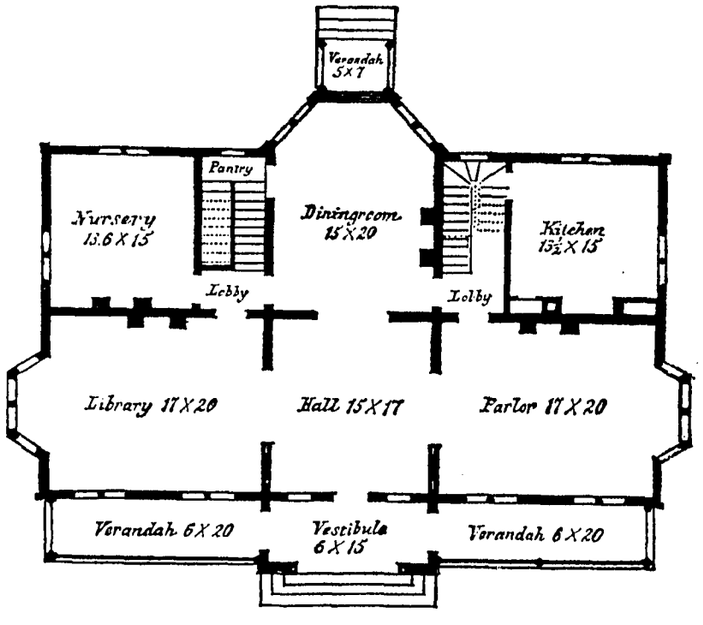


Wm. M. Shinn's Cottage
at Evergreen Hamlet.





Residence of Wm A Hill,
at Evergreen Hamlet



Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harvard College

Victorian House Lauded

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clined as mechanical conveniences have multiplied.

The generosity of the room sizes, parlors commonly supplemented by libraries, fireplaces, marble mantels, handsome stairs, bay windows, large halls, are gone with the 19th century and the high cost of construction. When the Hampton house was sold in 1867 to J. J. Gillespie, an art dealer, he added huge, French gilt mirrors to its elegant rooms.

The rooms in most of the houses were freely arranged in a spacious asymmetry, breaking open the conventional pattern of house design. They were no longer placed rigidly, four-square, off a central hall. This feature, characteristic of the time, was a significant breakthrough in domestic planning. Behind the Victorian facades was the beginning of the modern house; free plans led to open plans, and to the prairie houses of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Victoriana covered a galaxy of styles in American houses, with evocative names that tell us a lot about 19th-century tastes: Italian and Tuscan Villa, Swiss Chalet, the Castellated Mode, Queen Anne, and that omnibus category, the Cottage Style. The Evergreen houses are "cottages" in the "picturesque" manner, another omnibus word of the time. Mr. Shinn's house was designed in the "Gothic" taste; Mr. Hill's had "Tudor Gothic" touches. The others were in a simpler, "Bracketed" style.

A "cottage" usually had one or two parlors and a study, dining room, kitchen and assorted pantries and porches downstairs, and under the projecting, bracketed eaves, enough bedrooms for a proper Victorian family. A "cottage" required two in permanent help; a "villa" required more.

Like most of the houses of the time, the Evergreen group was strongly influenced by the work and teaching of Andrew Jackson Downing, a landscape architect and one of the great tastemakers of history, who preached a new doctrine of the natural and the picturesque.

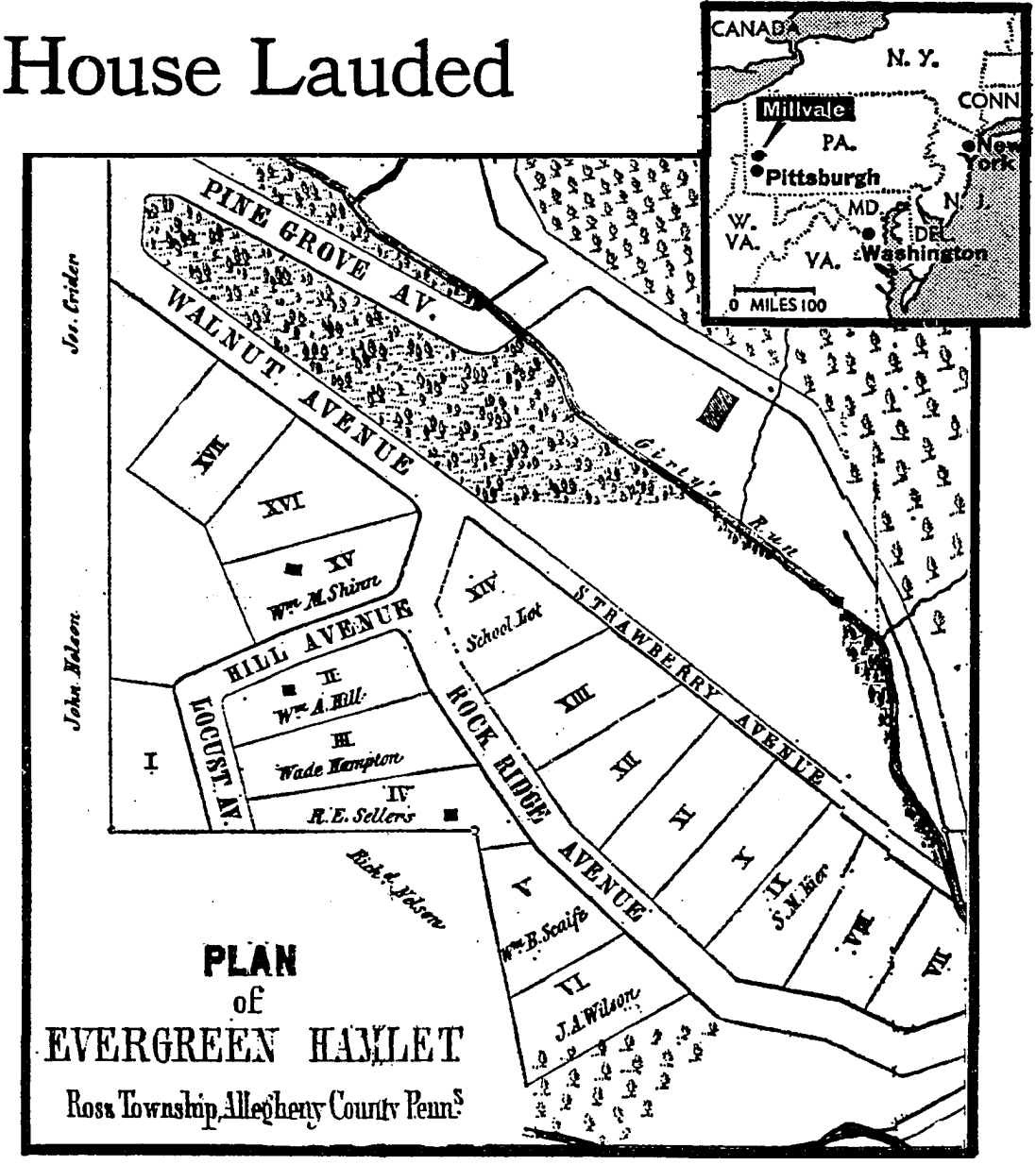
Downing virtually molded the 19th-century American scene. His "Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Architecture," published in 1841, had 12 printings by 1860. Its chapter on building houses was followed and expanded by "Cottage Residences" in 1842. His "Architecture of Country Houses" appeared in 1850. He died at the age of 37 in 1852, the year Evergreen Hamlet was built, in the burning of the Hudson steamer, Henry Clay.

But no Downing houses remain. There are a few done by his known collaborators, Alexander Jackson Davis, or Calvert Vaux (who later worked with Frederick Law Olmsted on the design of Central Park, a showcase of Downing principles), and there are still enough by anonymous designers to show us what the best of mid-19th century America was like. The Evergreen Hamlet is a unique survival of this sort.

The historian James Early, in "Romanticism and American Architecture," calls the style "a revolution in rural building" and the period one that brought about "a radical change in house shapes and plans." The new fashion called for irregular silhouettes and room layouts, and such special features as towers, bays, eaves and porches, to create an interesting variety of detail and a play of light and shade.

Vertical board and batten siding replaced traditional horizontal clapboards. Paint, according to Downing, was "to avoid all colors nature avoids. Copy those that she offers chiefly to the eye—soil, woods, bark."

Evergreen Hamlet is a handsome testament to a remarkable period in American art, taste and history that strongly influenced how people lived. The phenomenon of the rise of a great school of landscape painting, the Hudson River School, was paralleled by the allied development of a great school of landscape architecture, and the creation of a domestic architecture to go with it. The 19th century had a reverence for the natural scene that the 20th century has brutalized.



The New York Times May 3, 1970

Plan of Evergreen Hamlet, a development built in 1852 in Ross Township, Pa., near Pittsburgh, inset map. Each single-family dwelling was erected on a one-acre site.