

History of the Eugene W. Crane House
By Gerald J. Forthun, August 21, 1981

The Eugene W. Crane house stands at 322 E. Front Street, Adrian, Michigan. The house is situated on a parcel of land 115 feet square at the southwest corner of Front and Locust Streets. Information from the property abstract indicates that the lot on which the house is located was originally considerably larger, 220 x 135 feet, and that the southern portion of the lot was sold in 1893. This piece of property contained a large carriage house, which was thereafter converted to a residence, now identified as 229 North Locust.

According to the property abstract, this parcel of land was part of an 80 acre piece of land deeded by the U.S. government to Addison J. Comstock, Lenawee County pioneer, on May 10, 1826. Mr. Comstock deeded approximately one acre of this land to Lenawee County in 1837, with the stipulation that the land be used for the construction of county public buildings. This piece of land, approximately 220 feet square, comprised one half of the block bounded by Front, Locust, Toledo and Clinton Streets. A courthouse was constructed on the southeast corner of Front and Clinton Streets, and a jail was built to the south of the courthouse. The courthouse lasted only a short span of years, burning to the ground in 1852. Some years later the jail was removed. Subsequently, the county sold the one acre parcel of land to Ezra T. Gilliland, on August 25, 1884. Robert Gilliland built a large house on the southeast corner of Front and Clinton Streets in 1885, and a short time later, on October 15, 1886, sold approximately 1/2 of the parcel of land to his son-in-law and daughter, Eugene and Agnes Crane. The Crane house was thereafter constructed in the period 1886-87.

The Crane house was constructed with a floor plan similar to that described in Appendix A, although the floor plan was reversed, presumably because of the position of the house on the block, so that the veranda and staircase were on the east side of the house. The outside dimension of the Crane house are also considerably larger, measuring approximately 38 feet across the front, including the veranda, and approximately 59 feet from front to rear. The interior room dimensions are also somewhat larger than those in Appendix A, and the ceilings on the first story are 10 1/2 feet high, while those on the second story are 9 1/2 feet high. A variety of hardwood paneling and molding was used throughout the house, with walnut being found in the parlor and oak, maple, sycamore and pine being used in various other rooms of the house. The front staircase is constructed of oak and the balustrade is similar to that one seen in

Appendix B. A sturdily constructed oak wainscoting similar to that seen in Appendix B is found in the dining room. A large stained glass window (48 inches square) is located on the landing of the front stairway, and has an eastern exposure. There is also a smaller stained glass window over the main parlor window, facing the front of the house and another smaller stained glass window in the dining room, facing west. The house has three large chimneys, with three fireplaces on the first story and two on the second story. The mantle in the parlor is marble, while the others are constructed with ceramic tile fronts and oak mantles.

While restoration work was recently being completed in the dining room of the house, a pencil signature was uncovered near the door casing of the main entrance. The signature "C. Matthes" strongly suggests that the Crane house was constructed by Christian Frederick Matthes, an important architect and builder in the Adrian area from approximately 1880 to 1910. C. F. Matthes moved to Adrian with his family when he was 11 years old, completed grammar school, and then began the carpentry trade with his father, when he was 13. After working in the trade for several years, and being naturally adept in the field, he decided to study the higher branches. He went to Detroit and worked under the noted architects Carl Schmidt and Julius Hess, later returning to Adrian and working in a partnership with his father, John L. Matthes, and later with his son, Arthur Matthes. C. F. Matthes is credited with the design and construction of several important buildings in the Adrian area, including the Andrew Carnegie Library, completed and dedicated in 1909, which now houses the Lenawee County Historical Society Museum. Matthes died in 1910, at the age of 56.

The Crane family owned the house and property from 1886 until 1950. The original owner of the house, Eugene Wilmot Crane, was born in the State of New York in 1847, and as a youth moved with his family to Hillsdale County, Michigan where his father purchased and operated a 160 acre farm. As a young man he worked for several years as a store clerk, later attending Hillsdale College for two years. He then worked a few more years as a clerk in Hudson, Michigan, store before moving to Adrian in 1881. Upon arriving in Adrian he entered into the partnership of Moreland Brother and Crane. An advertisement in the Adrian city directory of 1894 announces that Moreland Brothers and Crane are "Jobbers of Oils, Tobaccos, Cigars, Lampshades and Confectionery." Interestingly, the Moreland Brothers and Crane store was located for many years in the first floor of the Clark Memorial Hall, erected in 1887 to house the

offices of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. This building, an excellent example of commercial architecture of the 1880's, still stand intact and relatively unchanged at the corner of South Winter and Pearl Streets in Adrian. Eugene Crane remained with Moreland Brother and Crane until the time of his death in 1912. The fact that his death was announced in full column article, with his photograph, on the day of his death, in the *Adrian Daily Times* would suggest that he was considered a very prominent citizen. He was described as a person who was personally known to hundreds of people, not only in the Southern Michigan area, but also in the Northern Ohio and Indiana areas.

Eugene Crane's wife, Agnes O. Gilliland Crane, was the daughter of Robert Gilliland, a very successful Adrian businessman during a 20 year period just prior to the turn-of-the-century. The history of the Gilliland family is very interesting, in part, because of their association with Thomas Edison, who evidently lived in Adrian for about 6 months, when he was 17 years old. At that time he went by the name Alva Edison. Robert Gilliland was born in Seneca, New York, in 1822 and moved to the Southern Michigan area in 1863. He established a small electrical components factory in Hudson, Michigan, in 1871. Business prospered and he later moved to Adrian and established a factory in 1882. At that time he was manufacturing telegraph insulator pins and brackets. For several years the entire production of the factory was sold on contract to the Western Union Telegraph Company.

It is interesting to note that Robert Gilliland was a cousin to William Martin, who for a period of time was president of Western Union. Mr. Gilliland invented and perfected many of the machines used in his factory. He and his son, James F. Gilliland, were both talented mechanics and inventors, and through the years invented and developed a variety of electrical products. Robert Gilliland's son, Ezra T. Gilliland, was also an inventor, and was considered by many to be an "electrical genius." Although he was Vice President of the Gilliland Electric Company of Adrian for many years, he lived in New York City during that time, inventing and developing various electrical devices. According to a newspaper article in the *Adrian Daily Times* an Expositor of January 23, 1891, Ezra Gilliland joined Thomas Edison in New York in 1884 "to collaborate with him on matters of invention." Prior to that time Ezra Gilliland was superintendent of the mechanical department of the American Bell Telephone Company in Boston. Edison and Gilliland apparently worked together for the next several years, and their two most profitable inventions were the railway telegraph and the phonograph. Their business association came to a stormy

conclusion, however, when in May, 1889, Thomas Edison brought a suit against Ezra Gilliland and Edison's former attorney, John T. Tomlinson. Edison alleged that Gilliland and Tomlinson "practically swindled" the sum of \$250,000, resulting from the sale of \$500,000 worth of stock in the Edison Phonography Company. Judge Wallace of the U.S. Circuit Court in New York ruled in Gilliland's favor, and Ezra Gilliland produced several other electrical inventions, including a nickel-in-the slot phonograph, which could be considered a forerunner of the modern jukebox. Also designed by Gilliland brothers and manufactured by the Gilliland Electric Company were mimeograph machines, electric motors and dynamos, telephone equipment, generators, and various other components for use in the telegraph and telephone industries. The factory continued its manufacturing operations in Adrian until the fall of 1903, when the company moved to Lancaster, Ohio, reportedly because of a scarcity of timber in the Adrian area. The father, Robert Carson Gilliland died in 1897, and Ezra Gilliland died in 1903, at the age of 56.

After Eugene Crane's death in 1912, the Crane house continued to be occupied by his widow, Agnes O. Gilliland Crane, until her death in 1921. Ownership of the house then passed to the only child, Harold G. Crane, and his wife Emily Boice Crane. Harold G. Crane was born in Hudson, Michigan in 1878 and moved to Adrian with his parents in 1881. He graduated from high school in 1898 and then went East to attend college. He graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston in 1906, subsequently accepting a position as a professor of Electrical Engineering at M.I.T. and Harvard for several years. He entered into a machinery manufacturing company in Boston, and after a few years decided to establish such a factory in his home city of Adrian, which he did in 1920. Following his mother's death in 1921 he occupied the family house as 322 Front Street in Adrian. Mr. Crane operated a small factory which manufactured machinery and tools, at 251 W. Church Streets in Adrian, until shortly before his death in 1937. His widow Emily Boice Crane, remained in the house until 1950, at which time she sold the property. Mrs. Crane died in 1961, and was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Adrian, with the rest of the Cranes and Gilliland's.

Following the sale of the Crane house in 1950, the house was converted into an apartment building which contained six apartment units. The house thereafter changed ownership five times from 1954 and 1978. Mr. and Mrs. Gerald and Sara Forthun, who have a very strong interest in historic homes, particularly in Queen Anne style of architecture, purchased the property in November 1978 and began to

restore it. At present time [1981] the house is being converted back to a single family dwelling, and considerable amount of restoration work has been completed.

Postscript: in February 2007, Jerry Forthun writes:

We both loved the Crane House, and we put in hundreds, if not thousands of hours trying to restore it to its original grandeur. In the fourteen years we were there we worked many evenings, weekend and vacations tearing out old walls, taking out the plumbing from the four or five extra bathrooms that had been installed for the apartments, and generally working our butts off painting, wall-papering, stripping wall paper and stripping painted woodwork, replacing window sash cords, polishing brass, and adding a lot of antique lamps and other furnishings. Our work was not professional, and it was hard work, but it was a labor of love for both of us. After fourteen years of that we were ready to move on—and we also didn't need all that space, since our two kids were on the verge of going out on their own. Each of the two subsequent owners has made even more improvements in the house.

While living in the house, Sara Forthun took a class in architectural restoration from Professor Rob Schweitzer at Eastern Michigan University. Schweitzer suggested the idea for the five-color paint scheme used in 1991.

Sources of Information:

Abstract to the property at 322 E. Front St., Adrian, MI, 49221

Adrian City Directories, 1881 to the present, Heritage Room, Adrian Public Library, Adrian MI

Unpublished Research completed by Ms. Lynne Utley, Research Aide at the Adrian Public Library, regarding the Gilliland Family, 1976-77. Materials are on file at the Adrian Public Library.

Microfilm Collection of the Adrian newspapers, Heritage Room, Adrian Public Library, 1880 to the present.

County Clerk's Office (Vital Statistics), Lenawee County Courthouse, Adrian MI

Oakwood Cemetery, Adrian, MI

Shoppell's Modern Houses

"Death of Mr. Crane" *Adrian Times*, Friday Evening, January 12, 1912, 1+.

"Eugene Crane Highly Respected by Employees," *Adrian Daily Telegram*, January 13, 1912.

"C. F. Matthes Died Suddenly at his Home this Morning," *Adrian Times*, December 12, 1910, 1+.

"Death of Robert Gilliland," *Adrian Daily Times*, April 1, 1897, 3 (col. 3).

APPENDIX A



DESIGN No. 459 PERSPECTIVE VIEW

DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN NUMBER 459

SIZE OF STRUCTURE: Front, including veranda, 33 ft., 8 in. Side, 48 ft.
SIZE OF ROOMS: See floor plans.
HEIGHT OF STORIES: Cellar, 7 ft.; First Story, 9 ft., 6 in.; Second Story, 9 ft.; Attic Story 8 ft.

MATERIALS: Foundation, stone; First Story, clap boards; Second Story, shingles; Roof, shingles.

COST: \$4,500, complete, except mantels, range and heater.

NOTES

The cost is figured from prices of material and labor in the neighborhood of New York City, December, 1906. In other localities and at different dates the cost will be somewhat modified. The publishers will

be glad to acquaint the intending builder with this modified cost in any locality. Details of the Cornices, Windows, Doors, Balcony, Trim, Mantels, etc., in this case, inside Panels, Columns, etc., these constitute the principal decorative and distinguishing beauty of modern houses, are fully shown in our Working Drawings, and careful directions for their execution are given in our Specifications.

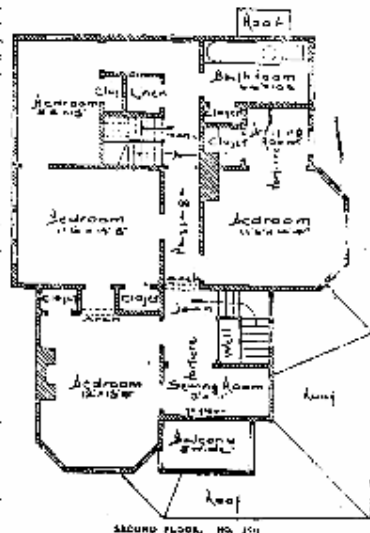
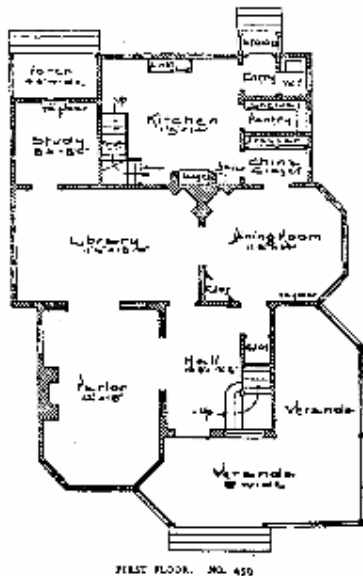
This design can be reversed, enlarged, reduced, or altered to suit special requirements. The specifications can be altered, rooms can be altered, walls, to employ different materials that may be best or cheapest in any locality.

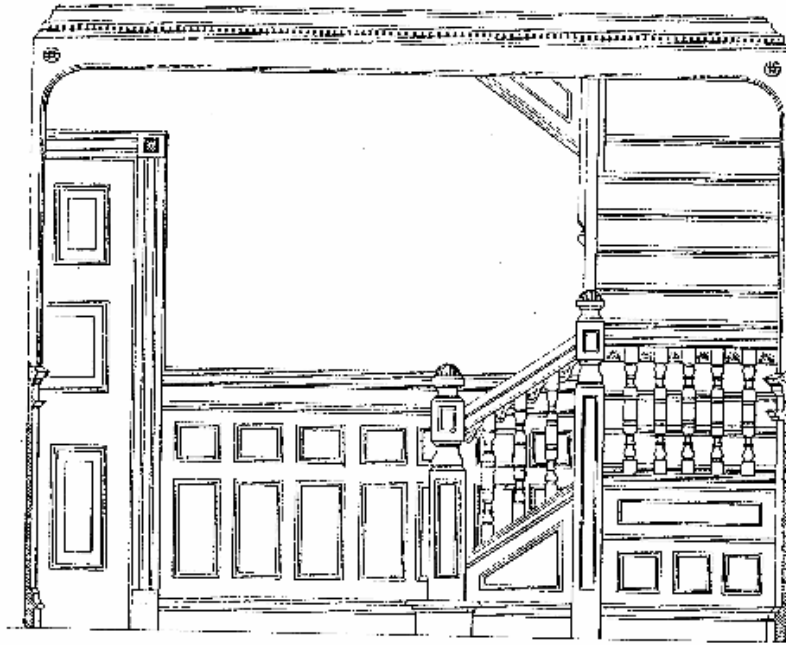
SPECIAL FEATURES.—Sliding doors connect the principal rooms.

Open fire places in the parlor, library, dining-room and front bedroom. Numerous and large closets throughout.

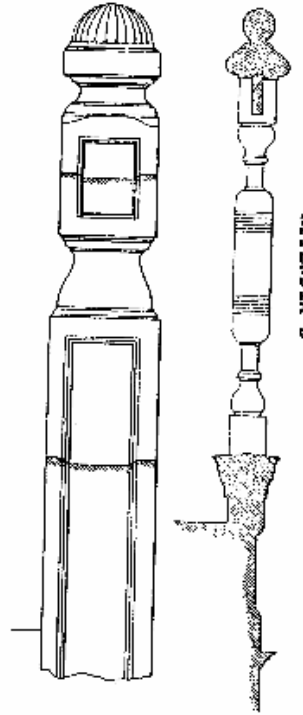
Three bedrooms are finished in the attic.

Cellar under the whole house.





Hall interior, newel, and baluster rail, "House at Short Hills."



APPENDIX B