A Case for Preserving Adrian's Octagon Cottage

The J. H. Champion House, 1856,
Orson Fowler's *Home for All*, and the *Adrian Daily Watchtower*

By Peter Barr, Ph.D.

Is Adrian's octagon cottage at 523 South Winter Street worth preserving? Should this private residence that was built for J. H. Champion in 1856 be granted historic preservation status? On more than one occasion, friends have confided in me that they would like to see this neglected old building torn down and replaced with something fresh. Truth be told, most residents of Adrian are probably unaware that the city has a vintage octagonal building. It is a relatively unassuming structure that doesn't match up well with current taste in historic houses, especially when it is compared with the imposing Italianate and fanciful Queen Anne mansions that have been lovingly preserved nearby.

And sadly, the house doesn't look as good as it once did. An 1868 black-and-white photograph of the home at the Lenawee County Historical Museum labeled "Mrs. Champenois' School for Girls" indicates that it was originally designed in an unpretentious, yet handsome Italianate style. Key elements of the style, which are visible in this photograph, include brackets in the eaves and tall, thin windows with door-like proportions on the first floor. The windows of the home are unusually modest for the Italianate style, lacking fancy crowns; and the entrance is made through a simple rectangular opening instead of the more usual Italianate arch. The brackets, too, are

relatively slender for the style, cut with a scroll saw into ogee curves that resemble swans' necks. The photograph also reveals that the entrance was originally accessed through a *veranda* or open front porch that was supported by triplets of posts. The posts were constructed of crisscrossing lumber and adorned above with cut-out, bracket-like capitals, and below with rectilinear, crisscrossing bases. It also indicates that the exterior walls were originally a natural red-brick color, while the window frames, cupola and porch posts were painted white; the eaves and window shutters were painted a contrasting dark color, perhaps a red-brown or a deep green.

Mrs. Champenois School for Girls, 1868
(Formerly J. H. Champion House)
Photograph probably by Adrian photographer Fred J. Meyerhuber, Sr.
Courtesy: Lenawee County Historical Museum

A photograph of the home published a generation later in *Art Work of Lenawee and Monroe Counties* (1894), indicates that the house was well preserved and maintained through the end of the century, when it was owned by the widow of house painter Joseph A. Merrett. By then, the shutters had been removed, and the veranda had been rebuilt in

a style similar to the original—except for its new posts, which were evenly spaced and somewhat less-decorative. Not surprisingly, the entire home had been repainted—a sandstone-like color for the walls, eaves, and cupola; and a dark color for the porch posts and window trim.[1]

Residence of Mrs. J. A. Merrett, 1894
(Formerly J. H. Champion House)
Courtesy: Lenawee County Historical Museum

The Champion House continued to be well maintained through about 1960, but did not fair so well during the second half of the twentieth century. A color photograph by Adrian dentist Richard Youngs from about 1960 demonstrates that at mid-century the

[1] Previous known owners, before the Merretts but after Mrs. Champenois, included W. H. Payne, Superintendent of Adrian Schools, who lived here from 1869 to 1879. Until 1953, the home remained in the possession of the Merrett's descendents, first their daughter Harriet (Merrett) Barnum and then later their granddaughter Catherine (Barnum) Mobus. Harriet Barnum and her husband were photographers who acquired the 1868 photograph of their home along with other 19th-century photographs of Adrian. In 1952, Catherine gave the Barnum's collection to the *Adrian Daily Telegram*, which used them to run a series of articles titled "Reminiscing." The collection was later donated to the Lenawee County Historical Museum. See Hoig L. Gay, "Reminiscing in Adrian: Old photographs to be used in historical series," *Adrian Daily Telegram*, Thursday, July 17, 1952, p. 11. The article traces the ownership of the home from Superintendent Payne to 1952. According to 1867 City Directory at the Lenawee County Historical Museum, before Mrs. Champenois operated her school in the Octagon House, ownership of the house had passed briefly from J. H. Champion to Henry Knapp, a physician, general insurance agent and co-owner of the Knapp and Perkins Dry Goods Store in Adrian.

house had been painted medium gray with white trim. The veranda had been rebuilt yet again, this time with fewer and simpler porch posts. Railings were added between the posts, and a hedge appeared along its periphery. The entire home was neatly landscaped with a well kept lawn and large shade trees that, in this photograph, obscure the cornice and eaves.

Adrian's Octagon House, 523 South Winter Street
Photograph by Richard Youngs, c. 1960

Just a few years after Dr. Youngs took this photograph, the Champion House took on its current appearance. Snapshots in the collection of Ellen Puerzer (published at http://www.octagon.bobanna.com/images/adrian_mi_3.jpg; 4/12/2005) indicates that by the late 1970s the front porch had been enclosed, the Italianate brackets had been replaced by triangular knee braces, and both the house and trim had been painted a monochromatic white. A large stain on the frieze board suggests incipient problems with the roof or gutter system. Then, in 1981, when Adrian College professors and students inventoried Adrian's architecture, surveyors of the Octagon House noted that its enclosed front porch, its horizontal bands of aluminum porch windows, and its large, one-story addition in the back were "inappropriate and recent changes to the building."

These "inappropriate and recent changes" were probably made in 1968, when Marvel and Claude Feltman converted the house into an adult foster care home.[2] Today, in the early twenty-first century, the house is no longer owner occupied and functions as a multi-unit apartment building with cars parked in the muddy back yard. The eaves have started to decay and one of the knee braces under the roof recently fell off and disappeared.

Photograph by author: November 2004

Still, I would like to answer in the affirmative that this building is worth preserving and worthy of public attention—even if the Champion House was never luxurious and is now in disrepair. It is arguably a national and local treasure, both rare and significant to the history of American architecture and noteworthy to the pre-Civil War history of the City of Adrian. From a national perspective, octagonal houses are among the most unusual and fascinating forms of architecture in the nineteenth-century, rare despite having been effectively promoted at mid-century by a popular book:

[2] Before the Feltmans took possession in 1963, the home was owned by Walter and Mary Fowler (1955 to 1961; insurance), Roger and Margaret Ebbitt (1961 to 1963; manager of Dooly Manufacturing), and Marvel and Bradford Meyers (1963 to 1967; driver Stubnitz-Greene). See *Polk's Adrian City Directories* at the Adrian Public Library, Heritage Room.

Orson Fowler's *A Home for All*…. Moreover, Adrian's octagon cottage, as it was originally designed, closely resembles a house illustrated in that book. In this sense, it is of considerable importance to the story of American architecture. From a local perspective, this building offers an important link back in time. When it was built, Adrian enjoyed remarkable economic prosperity and yet was politically divided over heated national social and political issues that would culminate in the American Civil War. Moreover, the home was built by a significant (though now largely forgotten) local political figure, J. H. Champion. As editor and later owner of the Democratic *Adrian Daily Watchtower*, Champion and his colleagues chronicled the era from a partisan political perspective in their newspaper, and thereby left us with an incomparably rich resource for investigating his home's original social context.

First and foremost, Adrian's nineteenth-century eight-sided house is worth preserving because of its importance to the history of American architecture. It is a rare surviving example of a house form that first appeared in communities across the United States in the late 1840s. Indeed, the building of octagonal homes can be described as a peculiar trend of the pre-Civil War era that resulted from the publication of a curious book in 1848. The book was written by one of the century's most eccentric and original thinkers, Orson Squire Fowler (1809-1889), and titled *A Home for All, or a New, Cheap, Convenient, and Superior Mode of Building*. It proved to be so popular that Fowler reprinted it in 1849, 1850, and 1851 then revised it in 1853 with the new title, *A Home for All or the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building, New, Cheap, Convenient,*

Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor, and reprinted again in 1854 and 1856 (the year the Champion House was built).[3]

The success of Fowler's book was due in large part to his ability to tap into the era's fascination with efficiency, new technologies, and health. He was also able to appeal to potential home owners' frugality, intelligence, independence, moderation, maturity and good taste. Fowler was a successful New York City publisher as well as a trendy and persuasive writer and speaker, and able to blend the era's most divergent tendencies. On the one hand his lectures and publications appealed to the period's interest in efficiency, progress and technology and on the other hand, a sense of loss that these things were undermining America's social stability. He traveled the country lecturing on topics such as phrenology (a pseudo-science that claimed to be able to read a person's personality in the bumps on his head), affordable housing, sex education, health, and social reform. Near the end of his life, he platted a community that bears his name near Pueblo, Colorado, and called for the construction not only of eight-sided houses there, but the opening of a cooperative store and the communal planting of berry bushes and fruit trees so that every resident could work together to raise and preserve healthy foods.[4]

In *A Home for All*, Fowler pointed out that an octagonal house, when compared to a rectangular one, was more economical because it offered "one-fifth more room for its Wall." He also pointed out that by providing more window surfaces (including glass roofs!), and by providing an eight-sided cupola above, a home owner could increase and

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[3] For background on the book, see Madeleine B. Stern's introduction to the 1973 Dover reprint of the 1853 edition of Fowler's book.

[4] See: http://www.geocities.com/reknight2002/ and http://www.geocities.com/reknight2002/OrsonSquireFowler.html.

control the amount of health-giving natural light and ventilation to the home's interior. For larger octagonal houses, he also described how rooms could be set aside for dancing and other healthful physical activities. All of these things, he wrote, would reflect on the homeowner's superior character, practicality, and intelligence:

> Those who let the mechanic play with their purse, by first playing on their fancy, and persuading them to built after this or that gaudy or antiquated fashion, lack independence and judgment, while those of immature tastes will attempt some try-to-be-extra-exquisite monument of gewgaw crudeness, but those of well-balanced minds and sound practical sense, will plan and execute a comfortable, good-looking, well-arranged residence, which they will finish off in a style corresponding with their own order of taste. Indeed, other things being equal, the better a man's mentality, the better mansion will he construct, and the characteristics of the house will be as those of its builder or occupant…. As a general rule, a fancy man will build a fancy cottage; a practical man, a convenient home; a substantial man, a solid edifice; a weak man, an illy-arranged house; an aspiring man, a high house; and a superior man, a superb villa.[5]

Entertaining and full of prudent advice, Fowler's book encouraged builders to adopt the latest technologies and conveniences, including flushing indoor toilets (which he admitted might offend "squeamish maidens and fastidious beaux,") central heating, gas lights, dumbwaiters, speaking tubes and hot and cold running water (heated by the kitchen range). His book also called on builders to adopt innovative labor-saving techniques, such as the use of concrete walls, which he called "gravel walls," that were to replace "expensive" brick and "objectionable" wood. Following his own advice, in 1853 Fowler built a three-story octagonal home for himself in Fishkill, New York, that had all of these features—plus a roof designed to collect rain water, which was then filtered and sent around the house to the washstands and water closets.

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[5] pp 11-12.

The octagon house in Adrian, when first built, closely resembled the John J. Brown home, which was the only house described in *A Home for All* for which Fowler also provided plans, an elevation, and building specifications. Fowler clearly intended for the Brown house to appeal to homeowners with practical sensibilities, describing it as "an octagonal cottage, [originally] designed by Messrs. Morgan and Brothers, architects, Williamsburg, New York for Mr. Howland (our engraver), and which has been much admired by builders for its neatness, simplicity, convenient arrangement, and cheapness." Although he provided detailed mason's and carpenter's specification that indicated, for example, that the home should be built with a projecting roof "supported by brackets, as shown on elevation," he allowed for the owner to select the size of windows and the color of paint. He concluded that "the whole cost of such a house, as is here specified, will not exceed *eleven hundred dollars.*"[6]

The Champion House, as it was constructed in 1856, was designed as a mirror-image of the Brown house in Fowler's book—with the front door placed off center to the left instead of to the right. Both two-story buildings had nearly identical cornices, roofs, brackets and cupolas; and both had remarkably similar porch posts, although the veranda on the Champion House was built with ten posts instead of four (a prudent structural improvement).

There were only a few minor differences between the Brown House and the Champion House, and one major difference. Of the minor differences, the most striking are the placement of the chimneys and the proportion and placement of the windows. While the chimney on the Brown Residence emerged (awkwardly) from the cupola, the chimney on the Champion House was placed to one side. And while the paired windows

[6] pp. 108-115.

on the Brown house create square apertures on the first floor and rectangular ones on the second floor, the Champion house windows are taller, thinner and unpaired. Yet, this variation in the windows is not surprising considering that Fowler "left optional with the owner," the "size of glass."

The most significant difference between the Brown House and the Champion House is the exterior wall treatment. While the specifications for the Brown house called for wood construction, the Champion House was constructed of brick. Clearly, such a choice required a significant economic investment.[7] Considering the associations that Fowler's book suggests between a man's home and his character, Champion's choice of a "solid" material such as brick for this house plan, reflects perhaps the self-image of a man who was neat, simple, practical, yet "substantial." It might also reflect Champion's desire to create a fire-proof structure since the city did not yet have an adequate supply of water for putting out fires; and a fire two years earlier had nearly destroyed half of the city's downtown.[8]

Despite the sensation that Fowler's book created, nineteenth-century octagon houses were then and are now quite rare. An inventory of older octagonal buildings at the website, http://www.octagon.bobanna.com/main_page.html (4/11/2005), indicates that only about two thousand octagonal houses were built in the nineteenth century,

[7] Lenawee County tax records in 1856, preserved at the Lenawee County Historical Museum, indicate that Champion's house, with an assessed value of $1000.00, was neither lavishly expensive nor cheap for its time; most other houses in Adrian at that time ranged in value from $200.00 to $2,000.00. The house appears as: "Champion, J. House & Lot 4 Block 9 Berry's Addition $1000 total value." That year he paid $30.20 in state, county and township tax and $20.00 in school tax.

[8] The *Watchtower* reported that "at least half of the business portion of the city" would have been destroyed "but for the gallant Fire, and Hook & Ladder Companies" that were "on hand… to save the city." Thursday, April 13, 1854. Subsequent articles in the Watchtower called for improved sources of water for battling fires.

typically just one for each moderately sized town of the time.[9] This was most likely true because homeowners found it difficult to imagine how they could gain maximal use of the structure's odd shape. After all, fitting rectangular rooms—and traditional, rectangular furniture—into the eight-sided form resulted in left-over triangular spaces that seemed to be well suited only to closets. Moreover, Fowler's claims of greater wall-to-floor efficiency were almost always offset by the added costs of construction since most builders were unaccustomed to the structure's strange 135-degree angles. In addition, the octagon fad lasted for only a decade; following the economic panic of 1857 and the onset of the American Civil War, the form fell from favor. Today, fewer than 500 octagonal houses from the nineteenth-century are still standing, mostly in the Hudson Valley of New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Fewer than 50 survive in Michigan, just two in Lenawee County: this one in Adrian and the Heman Goodrich House (1862), at 428 South Church Street, in Hudson. For this reason alone, the Champion House in Adrian seems worthy of preservation.

Yet, if the Champion House is worthy of preservation because it is a rare example of an octagon house, it is also worthy of preservation because it stands as a cultural symbol of Adrian shortly after the city incorporated, when it was growing rapidly and was considered by many to be one of the outstanding cities in the State. For example, in 1854, just two years before the construction of the Champion House, the *Michigan Expositor* (published weekly at that time in Adrian) noted that "more than one hundred

[9] While most towns have just one octagon house, Robert Kline, who masters the www.octagon.bobanna.com website, has noted (in correspondence with the author, 5/3/2005) that at one time there were five octagon houses in the small town of Albion, Michigan (Calhoun County), and four in Grand Rapids (Kent County). He also pointed out that there are many instances of two on the same block, and that in a couple of cases the same family would build two. Kline estimates the number of surviving Octagon Houses from the Fowler period is about 800, but adds "one could probably make an argument for some thousands" having been built before the fad took its course around 1870; after that "relatively few octagon houses were built again for perhaps 80 or 90 years."

new and substantial buildings have been erected during the last year, one of which cost some $10,000. There is also to be a large amount of building the coming year, including some fine business blocks, in the heart of our town." Just a few months later, the *Adrian Daily Watchtower* quoted the *Michigan Farmer*, which offered this flattering description of the prospering young city:

> Who that has visited Adrian has not admired its pleasant location, its well laid out streets, large blocks of stores, and elegant private residences? It is the second city in the State for wealth, enterprise and business. Its population is about six thousand. The surrounding farming lands are extremely rich, productive and well improved… The city is well supplied with churches, foundries, tanneries, saw and flouring mills, machine shops and sash factories… They also have an extensive hardware store. Adrian supports two weekly papers and one daily; the advertising patronage they receive is an unmistakable evidence of the enterprise and thrift of the town. [10]

Even the financial "Panic" of 1857, the year after the Champion House was built, had little impact on the city's booming economy. In 1858, the *Watchtower* quoted the *Firemen's Journal*, which noted that despite the general economic depression nationwide, "talk of hard or dull times, they don't know anything about any such thing over there [in Adrian]."[11]

More than just a symbol of a prosperous, young, frontier city, the Champion House can also be seen to reflect the temperate social, and complicated political values of its first owner, J. H. Champion, or rather—because little is known about Champion directly—of the *Adrian Daily Watchtower*, where he was employed in the late 1850s as

[10] May 13, 1854.
[11] April 2, 1858.

Editor.[12] While not every issue of the *Watchtower* has been preserved, and sadly none from the year that the Octagon House was built, enough issues have been preserved from the mid-1850s at the Adrian Public Library to paint a picture of Champion's political and social values.

Champion's tenure at the *Watchtower* started out well enough for him to afford a sturdy home, but ended in disaster—the result of national political turbulence. This was the era of the partisan penny post, when the public expected its newspapers to earn most of their income from advertisements and to advocate on behalf of one of the nation's political parties. The *Watchtower* at ten cents per week gave over more than half of its paper to advertisements (including the entire front and back pages!), and was an organ of the local Democratic Party—much as the *Expositor* would become the voice of the Republican Party as that party rose to prominence in the second half of the 1850s. Editorials in both papers almost always agreed with their respective party's national platform and took entertaining pot-shots at each other about the logic (or lack thereof) of the other's positions. In the late 1850s, this meant Champion argued vigorously in favor of "States' Rights," which would allow the residents of territories (especially Nebraska and Kansas) joining the Union to decide for themselves about the issue of slavery.

The *Watchtower* and the Democratic Party took a subtle and complicated position on the issue of slavery. They described slavery as objectionable. Yet, at the same time, they argued against proposed federal bans on slavery in the territories, describing such bans as unconstitutional limitations on the rights of individual states. To reconcile these two positions, the *Watchtower* chose to forecast a time when new technologies and labor-

[12] The earliest record of Champion in the city appears in the Lenawee County Tax Rolls of 1856. His name also appeared on an 1857 map that has been preserved at the archives of the Lenawee County Historical Museum, where his name is inscribed beside an octagonal symbol for his house.

saving inventions would make slavery obsolete… when, to use their words, "the Inventive Genius of the world will, ere long, free it of physical bondage and break up the relations, which now exist between the Master and Servant."[13]

Subtle and complicated political positions rarely turn out well and this was a subtle and complicated position that would result in the undoing of both the Democratic Party in Michigan and the end of the *Watchtower*. As the 1850s moved forward, the Democratic Party lost more and more of its base in Lenawee County until the Republican Party, which called unequivocally for the abolition of slavery, developed into the dominant party. The pivotal moment came on November 8, 1856, just months after the Champion House was built, when the *Evening Michigan Expositor* recorded the results of the previous day's elections:

> **The Election—Adrian all Right! Lenawee County overwhelmingly Republican. Michigan Erect—The "Greasy Mechanics and small fisted farmers about!"**
> Our election passed off yesterday in a spirited manner, and the result has been glorious for the Republicans. Adrian city gives over 200 Rep[ublican] majority! And old Lenawee over 1,700 Rep[ublican] majority! Every town has done nobly…

This represented a stunning and swift change in the local political scene. Just three and a half years earlier, the *Watchtower* had bragged—and not without some justification—that "the Democratic Party is the only real political party in the country."[14]

Even though the Democratic Party in Adrian would rebound in April 1858 with the election to city Mayor of the popular, former Michigan Governor William L. Greenly (with a slim majority of just 631 out of 1182 votes), its days of political dominance in the

[13] *Watchtower*, June 17, 1853.
[14] Tuesday, June 21, 1853.

city were numbered. With the start of the Civil War in 1860, the Democrats' control of local politics was lost; and, with a paper shortage in 1862, the *Watchtower*'s economic viability was threatened, too. By 1865, the *Watchtower*'s owner (Ingals and Mills) sold the paper and presses to J. H. Champion and Thomas Applegate. The following year, Champion and Applegate resold their operation to the Expositor, which changed its own newspaper's name to the *Adrian Times and Expositor*. By the end of 1866, Champion's name disappeared completely from the city directories, and the *Adrian Times and Expositor* was firmly in the hands of Applegate, Adam H. Lowrie, and Jerome H. Fee. Applegate, who had switch allegiances to the Republican Party, continued on as Editor of the *Times and Expositor* until his death in 1892.[15]

Of course, the *Watchtower* reported on more than just national politics. From its coverage of local events and its tidbits of humor, one can glean something of the paper's—and perhaps Champion's—social values. In terms of local politics, the *Watchtower* celebrated every new extension of the Michigan Southern Railroad and argued in favor of State policies that would protect Adrian's main source of wealth from competition. Moreover, it repeatedly called for public investment in the city's infrastructure, including the planting of trees,[16] the planking of roads,[17] the creation of public parks[18] and the design and construction of a dependable water supply for use by the fire department.[19]

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[15] See Charles Lindquist, *Adrian: The City that Worked* (Adrian: Lenawee County Historical Society, 2004), 116.
[16] For example, see June 24, 1853; March 30, 1858.
[17] For example, see April 24, 1854; May 13, 1858.
[18] For example, see February 20, 1854; May 8, 1854.
[19] There was a strong connection between the Democratic Party, the *Watchtower*, and the Fire Department. For example, see April 13, 1854.

In terms of social values, the *Watchtower* reported on local social events (especially the Adrian Guard's annual ball, and the meetings of the Adrian Horticultural Society) and echoed the sentiments of writers like Orson Fowler, when it celebrated scientific and technological progress. Among the humorous patents described in the *Watchtower* were a steam-engine ice-making machine and a steam-engine clock with alarm and lamp. The same article then offered an amusing list of new machines that did the work often associated with slavery: "one machine cuts cheese; another scours knives and forks; another blacks boots; another rocks the cradle; and seven or eight take in washing and ironing."[20] Another, more serious, article reprinted from the *Troy (New York) Whig* celebrated a new machine (patented by William Fitzpatrick and Joseph Her) that would help to transform vernacular architecture at mid-century: a nail-making machine that would allow one man and a boy to create 3,000 to 3,500 wire nails per minute.[21]

Offering moral lessons in temperance, frugality, modesty, and health, the paper expressed an ethos that corresponds closely to the one advocated by Fowler in *A Home for All.* For example, on March 10, 1854, at the dedication of the new Watchtower Building in Adrian, the *Watchtower* newspaper underscored the important role that temperance would play its pages, declaring that it would "dish" up "*all* the News" with…

> the choicest variety of miscellaneous literature, science and art, and all the regular developments of the age. The Agriculture and Mechanical branches will occupy a fair proportion of our columns. The spice of wit and humor, the concerts, fanciful notions and the real and ideal romance of the day will be culled and served up for their amusements. Religion, morality, and temperance in *all* things will have advocacy in the *Tower* and every other subject of a nature calculated to make the world wiser, happier and better.

[20] January 5, 1854.
[21] May 20, 1854.

Not surprisingly, the Editor filled left-over space in the paper with amusing (though often misogynistic) warnings against excess: "'Buy Only What You Want,' says an author. We guess if some men (of course, we don't mean women) bought all they wanted, there wouldn't be much left for the balance of mankind." Another filler from later that year observed that if you "reduce a man to one pair of breeches …his view of futurity will be as buoyant as a cork." A week later, it recommended that "every good wife and pretty girl should wear a smiling face, instead of a painted one." It is not surprising, then, that the Editor of this paper would build for himself a relatively modest home.

Though the Champion House is perhaps too modest in scale and decoration to be in sync with current taste in historic buildings, it is arguably a national and local treasure. It is both rare and significant to the history of American architecture and noteworthy to the history of the City of Adrian. It was once, and could be again, an exemplary illustration of Orson Fowler's octagon aesthetic. More, the home was built when the city enjoyed remarkable economic prosperity and yet was politically divided over heated national social and political issues that would culminate in the American Civil War. Having been built by the Editor of a local newspaper, the Champion House is closely associated with a substantial body of regional political and social literature.

Adrian's Octagon House is indeed worthy of preservation.