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American Classic

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American Classic

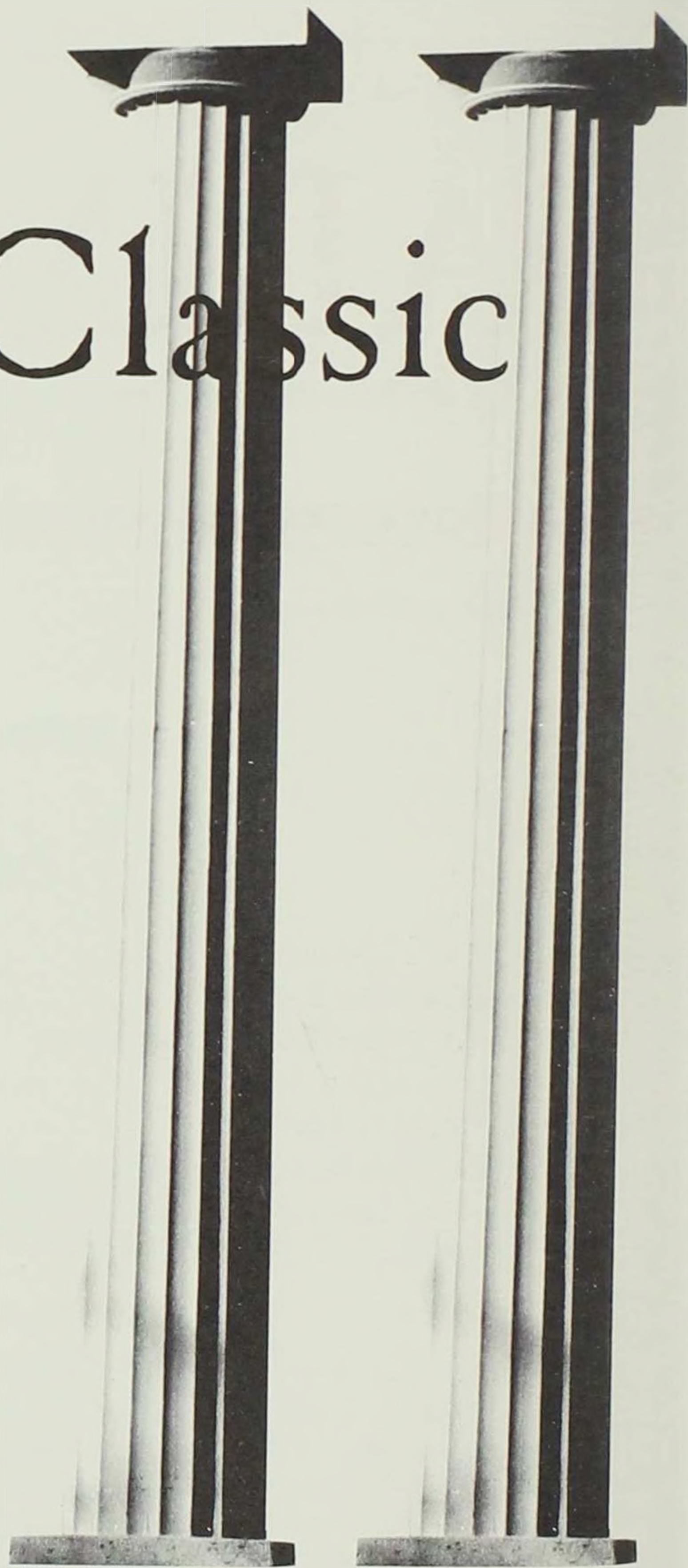
by

Laurence Lafore

Iowa City is a classic American town. It lies a few hundred miles from the midway point between the coasts, and it was founded almost midway in time between the beginnings of national awareness in the settlements along the Atlantic and the present day. It is in a state whose population, area, and wealth are near the median of the states. Its history is the history of the founding of American towns and of the American nation.

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We are setting out now on a tour, a tour through time and space. Any town — and any street or building, for the matter of that — is a marvelously complicated thing made up of hidden pasts, of long forgotten causes and effects. Buildings tell stories to those who can read them, and some of the stories are very long indeed. Architecture makes lasting monuments. It is the most durable of the arts, and it is also the most inclusive. A single dwelling may instruct us in the history of mankind: in the glories and sometimes the



depravities of past generations; in discoveries of engineers and chemists; in sociology and economics and taste; in the genius and folly of nations and individuals. For a building not only shelters people, it also embodies their needs and their ideas. Notions of virtue and beauty are recorded in timber, steel, and brick, and they can tell us what people have thought and done and what gods they have worshiped.

Taken together, the structures of a town reveal its personality, as a face does an individual's. Both buildings and faces are inherited, and American towns are all family albums of America's past — and of a past much older than America's. The houses and streets have family resemblances that show their descent and identify their forebears. Iowa City is a classic example of such family traits. Its history repeats, with odd precision, the history of Philadelphia, the model and archetype of American towns. Its site and name were decided in Burlington by men who had never seen the place where it would be built, as Philadelphia had been planned and "named before it was born" by William Penn in London, in 1681. By the terms of Penn's land grant from King Charles II, "a quantity of land or ground plat should be laid out for a large town or city in the most convenient place upon the river for health and navigation." The same words might well have been used by the men at Burlington, the Legislators and the Governor of the Territory who was, by appropriate coincidence, a descendant of William Penn.

Iowa City, like its ancestor, was intended to be the capital of a new province, and its plan followed with great fidelity the model that Penn had decreed for the "greene countrie town." The network of straight streets enclosing squares, some of them left open for markets or places of wholesome recreation, reflected Penn's notions of what a healthful and convenient city should be, open and log-

ical, in contrast to the jumbled cities of England or the older American places like Boston — whose street map, it has been said, looks like a plate of spaghetti. His notion proved popular as well as logical. It determined how American townspeople would live thereafter, from Philadelphia to San Francisco.

Many other places in North America were planned as capitals of new provinces on new frontiers. For most of them their makers conceived grand projects for public buildings and broad avenues. Sometimes enthusiasm and funds ran out, as they did in Iowa City, and sometimes the seat of government was moved, as Iowa's was when the westering flow of settlers led Iowans to choose a more central capital, as it had led Pennsylvanians to do long before.

The genesis of the American towns, however, was far older than William Penn, and its antiquity justifies the word classic in another sense. The men who designed the early America were scholars. The plan of Penn's town had itself had models consciously imitated — a long line of ancestors, Spanish-American towns, medieval garrisons, and the camps and colonies of ancient Rome. Rome's settlements, like those of North America, were built on wild and rapidly moving frontiers, and some of them, too, were the provincial capitals of empire. The Romans were imitating a still older tradition of city-making, and it befits a tradition that goes back to Periclean Athens and beyond that the Capitol of the Territory of Iowa should have been provided with Doric columns that are nearly replicas of those of the Parthenon. The Americans practiced a rigorous adherence to classical architectural rules, and their public buildings, from Boston to Sacramento, recall the hope of reproducing the civic perfections of Athens in their wilderness. Iowa City is not the less American that its model was Roman and its inspiration Greek. So were the nation's.



Most of the earliest houses were log cabins or shed-like frame structures with rough shingle siding. But stone, the local yellow sandstone (which was judged more durable than the white limestone of the Old Capitol), was also used. The little house at 614 North Johnson Street (above) shows what many of the early stone houses must have looked like. In

1846, it was owned by Almon Barnes and was probably built by him then or a little earlier. It is a rectangle of the simplest sort, and it looks much like farmhouses in older parts of the country, wherever there was native building stone to be found. The transom-light was a feature of old Colonial houses, but the very low-pitched roof is novel; in the East





the early houses generally had steep roofs with gables that formed right triangles, permitting the use of the top story for bedrooms or attic space. The low-pitched roofs in Iowa, which sacrifice space that could have been added at little extra cost or labor, may reflect the hazards of high winds.

Plum Grove (left), the beautiful house of Robert Lucas, Iowa's first Territorial Governor, was built in 1844. Along with its pleasant grounds it was restored in 1946. The exterior is very plain, almost bare, but the proportions are admirable. It represents, better than anything else in Iowa City, a great American tradition inherited from England, whither, in turn, it had come originally from the ancient world via Renaissance Italy and seventeenth-century Holland. Red brick, light-colored wood, multi-paned windows, forthright moldings and eaves, and simple dignity were the hallmarks of great houses in Philadelphia, Williamsburg, and

Boston. Plum Grove, which is open to the public, is at the end of Carroll Street, a dead end off Kirkwood Avenue.

The house at 829 Kirkwood Avenue (above), illustrates the transition from America's Georgian colonial tradition, so handsomely embodied in Plum Grove, to the Victorian idea of "richness" that supplanted it. It was built in the 1870s, a generation later than Plum Grove. The basic forms are similar, with the red brick and gables, but elaboration and distortion is already well-advanced. The height of ceilings, and accordingly of outside walls, has begun to rise. Heavy lintels have appeared. Bracketing — still quite modest — has appeared on the eaves. A veranda and bay windows have been added. The floorplan has become more complicated. Symmetry has been abandoned. The determinants of the first stage of the Victorian house are all there, although in rudimentary and dignified form.

The Gothic Revival flourished as people tired of classical restraint and formality and became beguiled by what were hazily called the Middle Ages. Gothic houses were romantically nostalgic, but until much later nobody thought to try to imitate literally the very expensive kind of masonry and stone-carving that had been the most conspicuous features of the originals. One Gothic fashion was for steep-roofed rustic "cottages," which were intended to — and indeed did — exude charm, although the Middle Ages were only very faintly perceptible. A brick



dwelling at 704 Reno Street (above), built in 1870 next to the city cemetery (to which its decidedly ecclesiastical design seems suitable) is much simpler, but as well as any house in Iowa

City it shows the attraction that Gothic windows had for people, and that they can give to what is really just an ordinary Basic House a characteristic twist and charm.

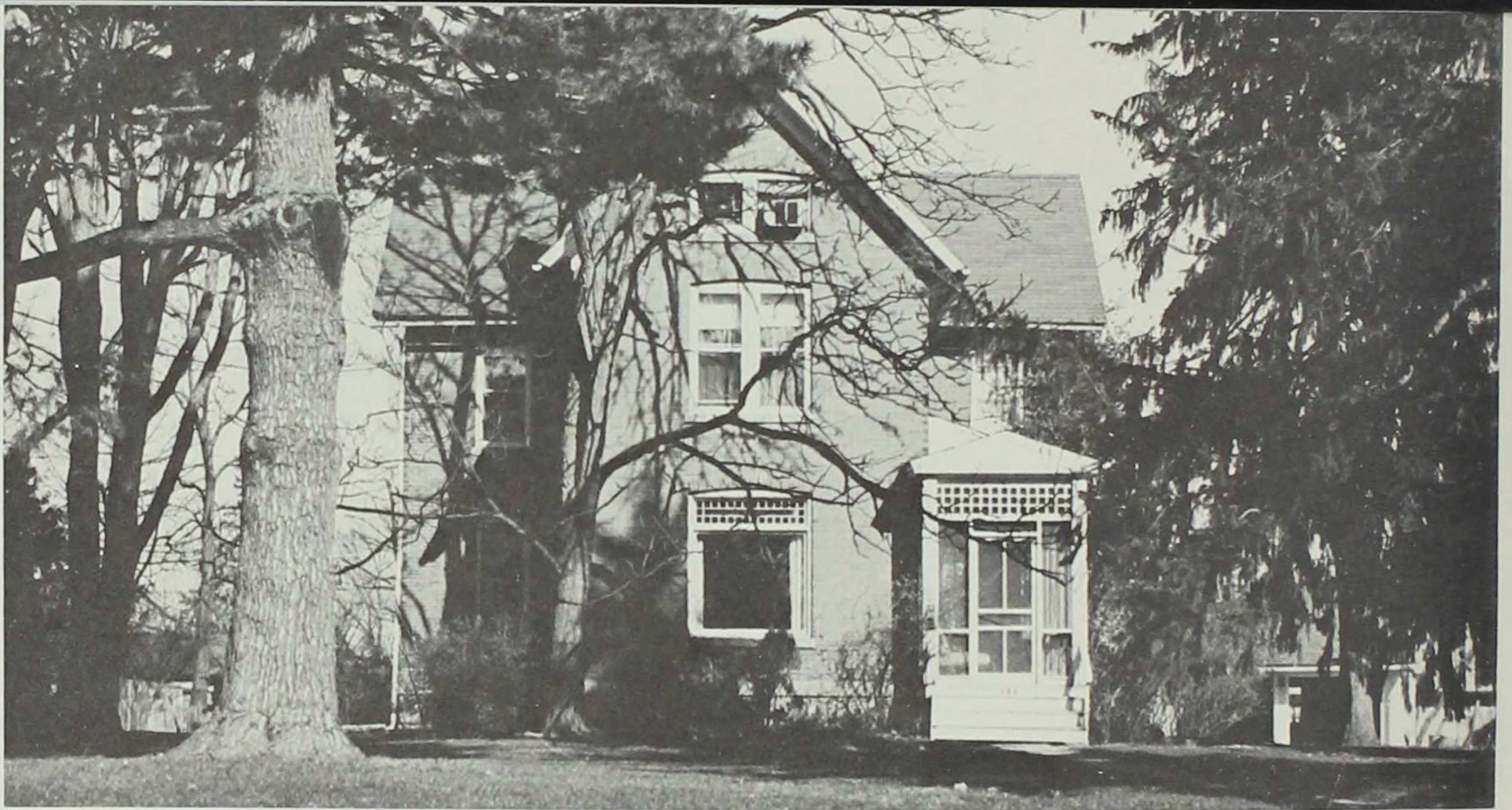


Loggias on the magnificent house at 513 Summit Street (left), built in 1883. Its inspirations are very diverse: classical, Italian, traces of French and Gothic. But their very multiplicity, together with the fact that they are skillfully fitted in to strong, dominant structural patterns, assures the triumph of Shape over Siliness. The details do not intrude. The house has preserved, alone on Summit Street, the iron fence that was so general a feature of more opulent neighborhoods and was important in drawing a line between privacy and the prevailing prospect of a public park.

The house at 935 East College Street (right) was built in 1893 from mail order plans sold at a cost of five dollars. Madly eclectic, combining in random profusion ten or twelve entirely different schools of design, and very badly proportioned, it excites the fascination that often attaches to unselfconscious absurdity.



From borrowings and imitations, from frauds and fads, from miscalculations and mistakes, and from the underlying good sense that dictated uninterrupted adherence to a simple and native-born basic building, there emerged by the end of the nineteenth century a kind of domestic architecture entirely original and entirely Midwestern, a frame house with wide porches and gables, and with only superficial variations of ornament and detail. At 128 Fairchild Street (left), at the corner of Dubuque Street, stands one of the clearest, and handsomest, examples of a paradigm house, born of varied ancestors but admirably adapted to the physical requirements of the Iowa climate and the spiritual and aesthetic requirements of what Meredith Willson called "the Iowa way."



In the 1890s the Classic Revival began. It appeared first in the form of another style adapted from the past, that of the monumental buildings of imperial Rome. In most such Romanoid buildings the varied textures, the elaborate details, and the grandiose shapes of late Victorian design were still very noticeable. But presently the designs would merge with those inspired by the enthusiasm for reborn Georgian. In the house at 624 South Summit Street (above), built in the early '90s, the rebirth of the Georgian tradition is prophesied. The air of massiveness, like the large plate glass windows, is still very nineteenth century, but the siding is red brick — the Georgian trademark — instead of clapboard

and shingles. Ornament is fairly low-keyed, and there is some effort at architectural balance. Symmetry and coherence are about to resume their long ascendancy, and within ten years the houses of the '70s and '80s will be called "hideous" by the younger generation.

The President's House, 102 Church Street (below), has a superb view over the valley of the Iowa, and a regal presence. Its ostentatious neo-Georgian exterior is a trifle awkward, as were many of the early twentieth-century efforts to re-create the great houses of the Colonial era. It seems slightly alien to that most egalitarian of all American institutions, a state university. It was built in 1908.





The University Psychopathic Hospital (left), on Newton Road, built in 1920. It reflects the Tudor (sixteenth-century English) sort of design popular at the time for schools, churches, hospitals, and shops. Casements, bay windows, ornamental sandstone dressings, chimneys, steep-pitched roofs, little dormers, and construction in rose-colored brick, are all sufficiently authentic to mitigate the quite untypical expanse of blank wall and the rather slick, overtidy design.

Saint Thomas More, on North Riverside Drive near Park Street (below). Built in 1962, Saint Thomas is dedicated to the martyr-scholar who was beheaded in 1535 by Henry VIII, after serving as his Lord Chancellor, for refusing to acknowledge under oath that the sovereign was the supreme governor of the Christian Church in England. He was one of the great writers and thinkers of his time, witty, urbane, a leader of the new humanist learning of the Renaissance.

"A man for all seasons," the sponsor and friend of new ideas, he is appropriately commemorated in a building that is one of the most extreme and successful examples of Modern Architecture in the city. It imitates no past and aspires to no "style." Its visual impact is entirely the product of the shapes and textures of reinforced concrete and the clever adjustment of the building to the contour of the land.

