

Notes and Documents

AS CHAIRMAN of the Minnesota Historical Society's committee for the preservation of historic buildings, Professor Laurence Schmeckebier of the department of fine arts in the University of Minnesota is conducting a state-wide survey, giving special attention to structures that are in danger of destruction or are actually being demolished. His committee plans to draw up lists of buildings having historic or artistic significance, to collect and preserve records of them in the form of photographs, descriptions, and architects' drawings, and, whenever feasible, to encourage their preservation. Accounts of houses and other structures that fit into the committee's program are being prepared under Dr. Schmeckebier's direction, and, from time to time, they will be published in this magazine. The first article in the series appears herewith. Ed.

A GOTHIC HOUSE AT TAYLORS FALLS

One of the finest examples of Gothic revival architecture in Minnesota was wrecked in the spring of 1946 to provide material for a motion picture theater. Situated on River Street in Taylors Falls, the house was built in 1856 for his bride by Joshua L. Taylor, pioneer lumberman and real-estate dealer of the St. Croix Valley. The little lumbering community, which had been settled for about a decade, boasted at least two excellent examples of the earlier Greek revival style before the Taylor house was erected. As a splendid residence of the Gothic type, the latter gave evidence that the first rough era of the frontier was past, and that the foundations had been laid for a stable community.

Andrew J. Downing, a prominent New York architect who strongly influenced the domestic architecture of the midcentury era, especially by means of his books on the subject, asserted in the preface to his volume on the *Architecture of Country Houses* (New York, 1851) that "So long as men were forced to dwell in log huts . . . we must not

be surprised at lynch law and the use of the bowie knife. But when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country, we know that order and culture are established. And, as the first incentive towards this change is awakened in the minds of most men by the perception of beauty and superiority in external objects, it must follow that the interest manifested in the Rural Architecture of a country like this, has much to do with the progress of its civilization." There is abundant contemporary evidence to indicate that the Taylor house exercised an influence on local culture and progress, for even the ordinary little houses of Taylors Falls are far superior architecturally to those in dozens of other small communities throughout the state.

Joshua Taylor built for his bride, Clarinda Wyman, but he also built for the future, at least in the sense that he built to last, as had his Yankee ancestors in New England before him. The huge white pine timbers which formed the structural framework of his house were again visible, joined by large wooden pegs, when the wreckers had torn away the plaster, and they were as sound and firm as on the day when they were first set in place nearly a hundred years ago. Taylor built to fulfill his obligations as a leader of the community in which he lived. In his home he provided a social center for the town, a place where the local library association and churches could hold "sociables" and fairs, where entertaining and gracious living could flourish alongside the rough and tumble Saturday night carousing that characterized every lumbering town.

The house embodied the very best features of the Gothic revival in American architecture, with its ornamental verge boards, steeply pitched roof, high gables, and pleasant verandas. The interior plan is still admirable, for it includes spacious rooms and large windows, all of which command a magnificent view of the St. Croix, and a spacious center hall with a staircase leading to four large bedrooms on the second story. When last seen, the fireplace mantels reclined, as did most of the interior fittings, on a junk heap on the side lawn. But there still was evidence that the house could easily have withstood the ravages of another hundred years with scarcely a trace of deterioration.

The Taylor house was historically among the most important in the Taylors Falls area. Taylor was one of the community's first settlers.

He was born in New Hampshire, moved west to Illinois, and went from there to Taylors Falls in 1846, buying out the claims of the first settler, Jesse Taylor, for two hundred dollars. He engaged in lumbering until 1849, when he made his way, as did so many of his contemporaries, to California. But in 1851 or 1852, Joshua Taylor returned to Taylors Falls to make it his permanent home, engage in the real-estate business, and flourish as one of the foremost citizens of the St. Croix Valley. Although active in community affairs, the only public office he held was that of warden of the state prison at Stillwater in the 1860's. The couple had no children, and Mrs. Taylor died in 1860. There is evidence that as early as the 1880's the house became a multiple family dwelling. When he left Taylors Falls in 1896, two years before his death, Taylor sold the house to Smith Ellison, who built a large addition at the rear and converted it into a summer hotel. But the tourist trade disappeared from the town about the time of the First World War, as had lumbering earlier, and of recent years the Taylor house has stood unused and forgotten.

In many ways the history of the Taylor house symbolizes that of the town. It was a handsome house, built for comfort by a man of culture and wealth at a time when the town was prosperous, the surrounding area rich in timber, and the village the site of a booming industry. It survived the decline of lumbering and became a summer hotel in a period when the valley turned to its scenic resources for exploitation and attracted summer visitors from the whole state and even from the East and South. The Dalles of the St. Croix and Interstate Park are still there, but for some reason, perhaps as a result of its own lethargy, the town lost the summer trade to other centers, and the house has no economic role to play in today's sleepy rural community. Thus it was doomed to destruction, the natural forces of neglect and decay only being hastened by the wrecker's hammer. With its going, Minnesota has lost a rich bit of its cultural heritage which might easily have been preserved for later generations. As a house, the structure was still both sound and beautiful. As a historic reminder of the wealthy lumbering society which once ruled the St. Croix Valley, it also had a role to play. But no one came forward to save the Taylor house for posterity, at least not until it was too late.



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