

First impressions. You can make them only once. An accurate observation, but hardly new. Victorian Americans were acutely aware of the power of first impressions. They knew that what people saw first had a disproportionate impact on the formation of opinions and judgments. It was because they understood so well the importance of first impressions that the Victorians created distinctive forms of material culture to mold and manipulate them.

The modern term for this behavior is *impression management*.¹ When we hear people speak of impression management today, it is usually in the context of the corporate world. The ability to manage people's perceptions can put someone on the road to success in human relations generally and in business in particular. The Victorians had a somewhat different orientation, for while they shared today's commercial values, the current high status accorded to corporate life was only beginning to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century.² In Victorian America the domestic realm was still the major arena for acting out social strategies. The furnishings people put in the hallways of their houses, the first interior spaces visitors saw, played important roles in shaping first impressions and in framing and manipulating Victorians' perceptions of themselves and their relationships to others (1.1). Hall furnishings were widespread and prominent components of the Victorian system of impression management.

It may seem a bit peculiar to speak of hallways and first impressions. Obviously, before visitors even entered a house, they acquired data they could evaluate from the city, the neighborhood, and the exterior of that house. All this information, however, was external to the house and was understood to be superficial, potentially misleading, even suspect. The interiors of people's houses provided more accurate, more authentic information about them. Moving inside a house brought someone into a more intimate association with its inhabitants. Knowing the inner house was something like knowing the inner person. Exteriors of houses and houses unfurnished spoke of architects and builders. But the insides of houses and houses furnished spoke of the life that went on within and the character of those who lived it.

1.1 *The hall as transitional and connecting space. In this stereotyping image, the hall is the middle territory where two spheres intersect and two worlds meet. Males leaving the outer "masculine" world join women and children in the "feminine" sanctuary of the home. The hallstand on the right defines the space as an appropriately genteel hall and serves as mute witness to this family encounter.*

*The Four Seasons of Life: Middle Age
Lithograph published by Currier & Ives
New York, 1868
Prints and Photographs Department,
Library of Congress*



This chapter is about hall furnishings, the first clues of that inner domestic life in Victorian America. My argument is that these objects, little appreciated today, were once significant parts of a deliberate and pervasive strategy to ceremonialize and ritualize the commonplace activities of everyday life. They played important roles in a style of life that was highly self-conscious and tightly scripted. They were critical components of an elaborate artifactual system that was central to the Victorians' understanding of themselves and their place in the world. They were tools for managing not only impressions but comprehensions, cosmologies.

To understand hall furnishings we need to know something about halls, for these spaces and their relationship to other spaces in houses had some influence on the objects placed within them. I say "some" because I do not want to suggest that architectural or spatial determinism was at work here. Architecture and space enabled a certain mode of furnishing but did not dictate it. Cultural factors were far more important. This becomes clear when we recognize that halls in many nineteenth-

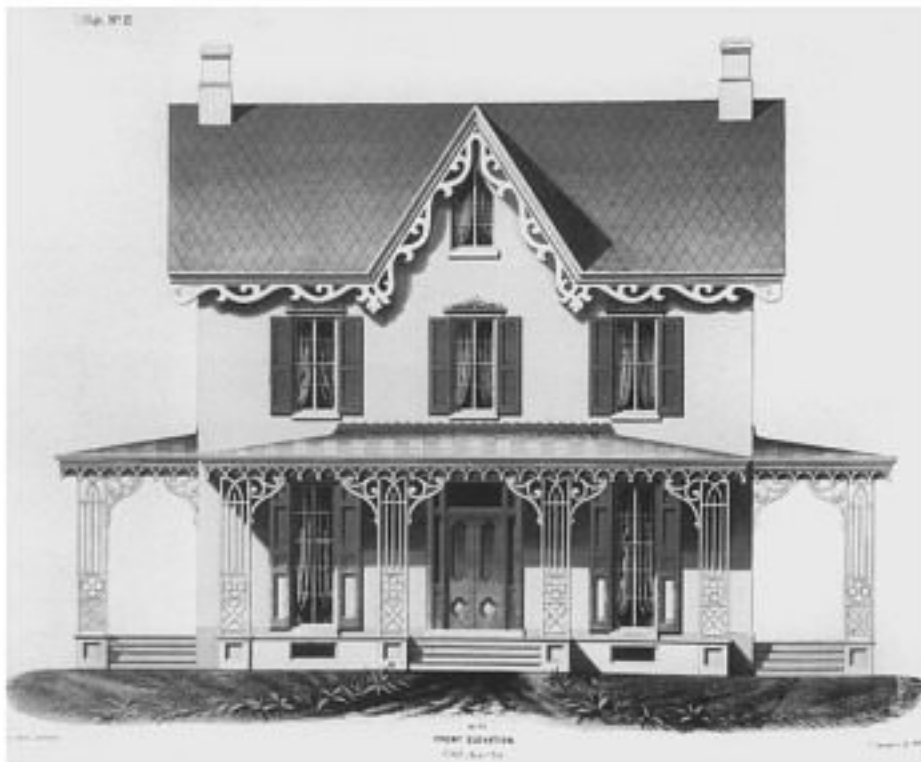
century houses were often nearly identical in plan, proportion, and scale to those in eighteenth-century houses. What differentiated the later buildings from the earlier were cultural conventions of use and meaning—and thus of furnishing. One of these was the premise of specialization, a cornerstone of capitalism and a pervasive characteristic of Victorian material culture.³ In Victorian America, each room of a house was understood to perform a distinctive set of functions. These functions were revealed, served, and advanced by an equally distinctive set of artifacts. Specialization was more frequently demonstrated through furnishings than through any intrinsic properties of the rooms themselves. In other words, unfurnished, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century halls looked pretty much the same; furnished, they looked dramatically different. The movable material culture—that is, culture in visible, tangible, and portable form—made all the difference.⁴

As these comments may suggest, middle- and upper-middle-class domestic building in America has been more notable for continuity than lack of it. A few basic ideas, altered occasionally by ideological, economic, or other factors, underlie the spatial organization of most single-family, free-standing houses.⁵ It is possible to assign most middle- and upper-middle-class houses of the nineteenth century to one of two classes on the basis of hall type. The first type of hall, popular into the fourth quarter of the century, was a relatively narrow passage that connected the outside of the house to its interior spaces. This type was based on late Renaissance ideas introduced to this country in the eighteenth century with the Georgian style (1.2). Although frequently obscured by an overlay of complicated ornament or lively asymmetry (1.3), Georgian concepts of spatial organization were perpetuated in Victorian houses; many nineteenth-century plans closely resemble eighteenth-century examples. A characteristic feature of these houses of the Georgian–Victorian continuum was the conceptualization of the hall as a passage. Until about 1880, this was the dominant mode.⁶

In the second and later type of hall, the passage was expanded into a large living space. Derived from medieval great halls and the multifunction rooms of pre-Georgian dwellings in colonial America and associated with the English reform

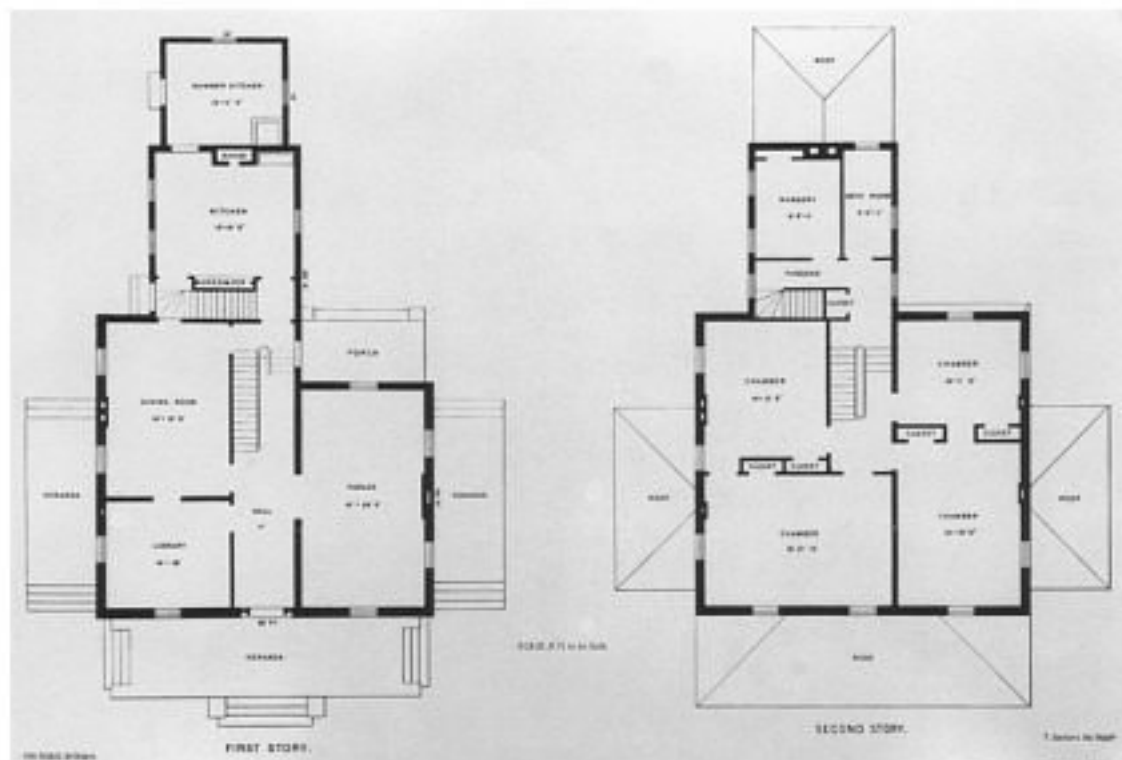
1.2 *Georgian space in Gothic disguise. The elaborate porch and pierced bargeboards put a fashionable, updated exterior on a concept of domestic spatial arrangement that had been in use for over a century when this design was published. Gothic only on the outside, inside this remains a central hall, symmetrical Georgian house.*

*Elevation and plan for Cottage No. 12
John Riddell, Architectural Designs for
Model Country Residences
Philadelphia: John Riddell, J. B.
Lippincott, 1864
The Winterthur Library, Winterthur,
Delaware*



movement, this type was widely published and illustrated in the last quarter of the century and became a prominent feature of many architect-designed houses.⁷

These two hall alternatives can be related to two different conceptual models for domestic structures and domestic life in the nineteenth century. The first was the courtly vision of the house as villa or palace. The second was a more consciously domestic notion of the house as hereditary estate or old homestead.⁸ My emphasis here is on the prereform model of the house as palace and the hall as passage. It was for this physical and cultural setting that Victorian America created its most innovative and distinctive hall furnishings.



A typical upper-middle-class house plan illustrates the characteristics of this concept of hall (1.4). The space was usually 6 to 8 feet wide and 12 to 20 feet long, or considerably longer if it ran all the way from the front of the house to the back, as it does here. Its chief architectural embellishments were the framed doorways to parlor, drawing room, library, dining room, or the outside, and the stair and its ornamented newel post (1.5). Little or no communal activity took place in this form of hall. Its shape, dimensions, and placement emphasized its primary functions as connector and separator of rooms. In most houses of this class, people did not enter directly from the outside into one of the living spaces but rather into the hall (or into

1.3 *The picturesque encounters Georgian. An aggressively picturesque house designed by the English-trained architect Jacob Wrey Mould for an affluent American client. Irregular massing, eccentric roofline, and coyly placed front door are new elements, here made compatible with a conventional Georgian "hallway right through," which serves the usual functions of entrance and passage.*

*Design 20. House erected for Henry E. Owen on the New Jersey shore
Bicknell's Cottage and Villa Architecture
New York: William T. Comstock, 1881
The Winterthur Library*

