

Radford Homes

House Plans through the Mail

BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER

A large number of homes were constructed in the latter part of the 19th and first part of the 20th century. The Industrial Revolution provided vast numbers of middle management, well paying, white collar jobs. Transportation improvements opened up new areas outside towns and cities for building. Reasonable material costs for lumber, and its widespread availability made home ownership possible for more people than ever before. The existing housing stock was insufficient, so many families built new residences. They usually followed the path of purchasing the land, then contacting an architect to draw up plans. These plans, along with the accompanying specifications for the general contractor, cost between fifty and seventy-five dollars.

Beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, architects and service bureaus began to publish books of house plans. These books were advertised in the popular magazines of the day and were also available from local lumber yards and building contractors. Their price ranged from a quarter to a few dollars, depending on the number of plans they contained and how they were bound (like a book or like a magazine).

One very successful plans book publisher was William Radford of Chicago. Beginning in the 1890s and continuing into the 1930s, Radford offered to sell customers a complete set of building plans through the mail for a fraction of the cost of architect-drawn plans. Radford's books appeared under various titles such as *Ideal Homes*, *Modern American Homes* and *Artistic Homes*. In the 1920s he even published a magazine of plans in vivid color. His publications included perspective views of homes with accompanying floor plans. Radford noted that the plans were for



Figure 1. A "Victorian Trade card" (5"x3") from the William Radford Company. It featured a colorful home on the cover and a blue-print on the back. Inside was an advertisement for the company's books.

medium-priced residences. The company advertised that it had sold plans all over the world, even in Africa and Australia. And, that a Radford house had been built in every country in the world where frame houses are constructed. The plans were advertised to be modern, original, practical, attractive, and especially designed to be economically constructed. Radford would provide the customer with a complete set of house plans and specifications for any model shown in the book for prices that ranged from five to fifteen dollars.

A guarantee of complete satisfaction was offered. If the purchasers did not find the plans and specifications accurate in every respect, or as well prepared as those furnished by any architect in the United States, they could return the materials and receive a full refund. Another Radford feature was its "Fire Replacement" guarantee. If a Radford-designed house was destroyed or burnt partially by fire, the company would supply a free replacement set of plans

for insurance adjustment. This speeded up settlement and the rebuilding process. Additional services included the reversal of plans, and a Special department for drafting custom plans and changes to stock plans.

Radford was so confident of his service that he told prospective customers to have no fear of ordering plans through the mail and from a great distance. (The mail-order business was pioneered by Sears Roebuck and operating in full force at this time.) But in case they needed a reference they should contact their local lumber dealer or bank, as Radford was so widely known and respected that local building organizations would know of the company first hand.

The books themselves contained large numbers of plans, one per page with a floor plan. These were not highly detailed illustrations, nor were the Radford plans highly ornate in themselves. The market segment Radford aimed at was more middle class and conservative

in taste. While you didn't see highly ornate homes in Radford books, you saw numerous choices of well styled, tasteful plans that would fit nicely into almost any neighborhood. From the advertising claims made in the books, the plans were well received and sold all over the world.

Research has shown that the early Sears Houses by Mail (1908 to 1916) were likely a combination of Radford plans and Sears lumber. (It is important to note that Sears did not start selling ready-cut house kits until 1916. Prior to that Sears sold customers just the plans and raw, not cut to length, lumber and millwork). Another Chicago mail order giant, Montgomery Ward, also used Radford plans in its early offerings of houses sold through the mail.

Each plan had an estimated cost



Figure 2. Radford Design 530 was a simple one story, two bedroom, 1,100 square foot plan that costs approximately \$1,000 to construct.

range attached to it. This range of dollar amounts was presented to assist customers in planning the total cost to build their home. Small one-story plans were presented, such as the Design 530. It was a two bedroom, 1,100 square foot plan that costs approximately \$1,000 to (see Figure 2) construct. The house contained a front and rear porch, a pantry, and a layout without any hallway space. Petite two-story plans with simple decoration were also shown. Larger, more ornate, stylish plans in recognizable styles like Queen Anne, English Tudor, and American Colonial Revival dominated the Radford books. Radford Design 513 is a Queen Anne style house with a wrapping verandah, tower, and side bay window, with an estimated cost of \$2,300 (See Figure 3). An English Tudor Revival plan labeled No. 543 is

highly stylized, with upright crossing gables filled with half-timbering. The upper windows are diamond paned in the Old-English fashion. The completed house was said to cost about \$4,000 (see Figure 4). The Design 118, with an estimated cost of \$3,000, contained many



Figure 3. Design 513 is a towered Queen Anne style house with a wrapping verandah, tower, and side bay window, with an estimated cost of \$2,300. It contained three large bedrooms with many closets.

Colonial Revival touches, such as Palladian windows and classic columns on the porch (see Figure 5). Radford never talked up the stylistic features of these plans assuming that the public knew the differences between styles. The ads concentrated on the space utilization and described the excellent blue prints and specifications the customer received.

The Radford Architectural Company offered other publications besides house



Figure 4. English Tudor Revival Radford plan No. 543. The second story front gable held the master suite. The upper windows are diamond paned and the gables are half-timbered in the Old-English fashion. The completed house was said to cost about \$4,000.

plan books. A five volume set on Carpentry, Building and Architecture with

over 1,500 pages and 2,000 illustrations was offered. Other books such as *How to Frame a House* and *Roof Framing Made Easy* gave customers additional information on house design and construction. Mr. Radford also advertised himself as "Editor-in-Chief" of Radford's *Cyclopedia of Construction*, *American Carpenter*, and *Builder and Cement World*.

There are doubtless many homes across America that were built from



Figure 5. Design 118 is Colonial Revival with an estimated cost of \$3,000. It contained a large reception hall with grand staircase, a parlor, and a sitting room in the Victorian fashion. There were four bedrooms on the second level as well as servants' quarters.

Radford Plans. Yet these remain anonymous, lost in memory and in the destroyed building records of our cities and towns.

These homes are just as important a part of our architectural heritage as other more prominent structures built by noted architects, for they represent the true fabric of our streetscape. They are the homes of the majority of American families that made up the vast inventory of our historic architecture.

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