Victorian Bungalows

The Birth of an American Housing Style

BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER

In the middle of the 1880s, America was feeling self-congratulatory. Having survived the Civil War only 20 years earlier, the country had expanded rapidly during the rebuilding process. New industries and strong commerce replaced a colonial economy and marketplace. American textiles and steel were the best in the world. Yankee shipping carried products from Europe to the Far East in record time. At home, the railroad had reached nearly every town and hamlet, linking the nation as no other on the planet. Goods, services, and ideas made their way from New York to San Francisco easily. Although there were some minor economic downturns, living standards rose steadily. More and more families desired and acquired a home of their own.

Around the edges of larger cities, suburban areas began to take hold. They provided a setting for family life that offered access to the jobs and culture of the city along with the quiet and space of the country. Leisure time increased as more "white collar" jobs became available in the growing service industries. Fashion reflected this growth with fanciful dresses and casual suits. Domestic architecture also echoed the change, with homes suited to entertaining and the suburban lifestyle. Houses reflected this "Gilded Age" in their detailing: vargeboard, gingerbread, fancy shingles, long wide verandahs, and irregular, ornate plans. The contemporary Queen Anne, Stick, Shingle, and Colonial Revival styles were described by some as robust, happy, and cheerful, by others as overdone, gaudy, and wasteful.

While today we think of the Bungalow (used here with a capital "B" to denote the architectural style) as a 20th-century housing type, its roots began in the Gilded Age of the 1880s. For even in that age of opulence there were already calls for restraint. The impact of *change* was already being felt at almost every level of society. The pace of change alarmed many. Streets, for example were being paved at a rapid rate. They were as quickly torn up to install gas lines, and strung with poles and wires for electric service. Trains raced in and out of town at a frantic pace. Industrial expansion clogged the inner cities and waterfronts. Housing growth was swallowing up the countryside. Church attendance was declining as people began to take up other Sunday amusements such as baseball and bicycling. Many people moved from farms to factory-type jobs in the city that offered little satisfaction beyond a steady income. There was a growing concern that life was too lavish, and moving along too quickly.

SLOW THE PACE OF CHANGE

The "industrial society" pressures felt in America had been experienced for some time in Europe and particularly in England. As early as the late 18th century and more prominently in the 1830s, calls to slow the pace of change were heard. Riots over the mechanization of agriculture and the

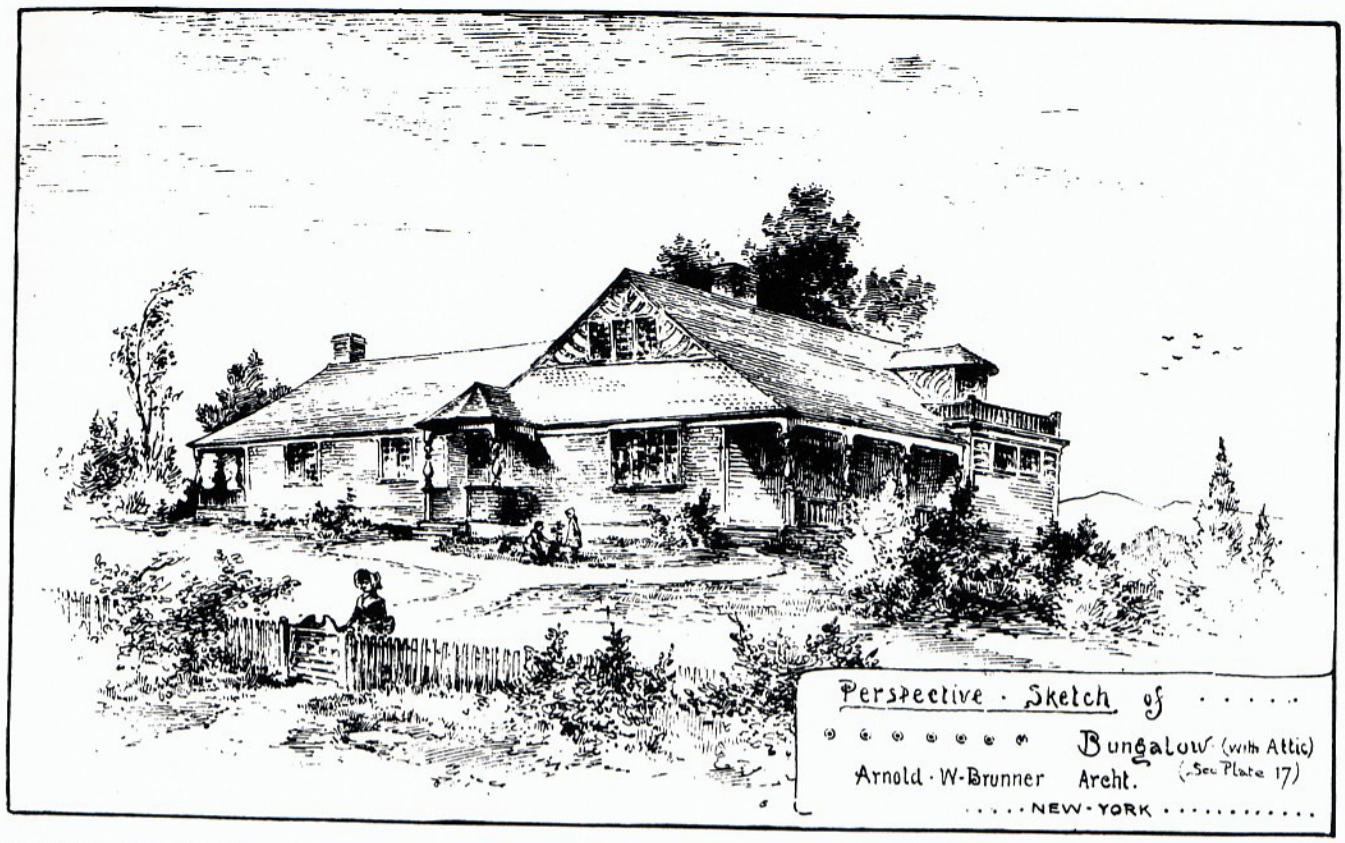


FIGURE 1—One of the first illustrations of a Bungalow was from the book* Cottages or Hints on Economical Building *(published in 1884 by William Comstock). Arnold W. Brunner of New York was the architect. The first bungalows were vacation homes and lakeside cottages, but they soon became standard housing types.

industrial revolution in general shook Britain in the 1830s.

To counter these changes, and to try to bring some peace and calm to society, some people began to look back at the European Middle Ages as a "golden era." Back then, they thought, life was more simple and work more meaningful. The traditional virtues of craft and guild production were thought to bring dignity to the worker and quality to the goods. There was a general trend to simplify life. Work should be noble, leisure should contain reading and discussion, and buildings should be more functional and less gaudy.

Many of those Arts & Crafts principles, as they are now known, were exported to this country by writers such as William Morse. They were quickly picked up and spread to all parts of the nation. People began to question the very goals and mechanisms that had brought on the splendor and grandeur of the late Victorian period. By the end of the century calls were heard to *simplify* in popular magazines and the press. Architects also picked up the cause. Writing in 1884, William Comstock noted "It will be noticed in all these designs that whatever grace or charm they may have is the result of the simplest treatment. A building should be logically designed, and the exterior should be the natural expression of the plan. This is what is meant by Truth in Architecture. ...A proper regard for our architectural morals does not require us to exhibit to the passer-by every detail of construction and arrangement."

RESTRAINT IN DESIGN

What Comstock was calling for was not the streamline moderne of the 1930s nor the glass box of the 1960s. He wanted to see some restraint in design, some simple good taste in decoration. He called for the same principals that made the Bungalow such a popular-style home in the early decades of the 20th century.

The early Bungalow was a mixture of late 19th-century design, mainly Queen Anne and Colonial Revival, plus the emerging features that were to make the Bungalow so popular later. Those features included:

- a single story or story-and-a-half dwelling
- a small, more compact, more rectangular plan
- entrance directly into the living room
- all or most of the bedrooms on the main floor
- a wide porch across most of the front facade, usually under the main house roof
- reduced use of hallways
- low pitched roof with overhanging eaves
- connected living and dining spaces
- small front facade roof dormers

While the origin of the bungalow is not exactly clear, many researchers believe that it originated in India as a traveler's rest stop. From there the British brought it to England while adapting it to a cooler climate. Bungalows then found an audience in the

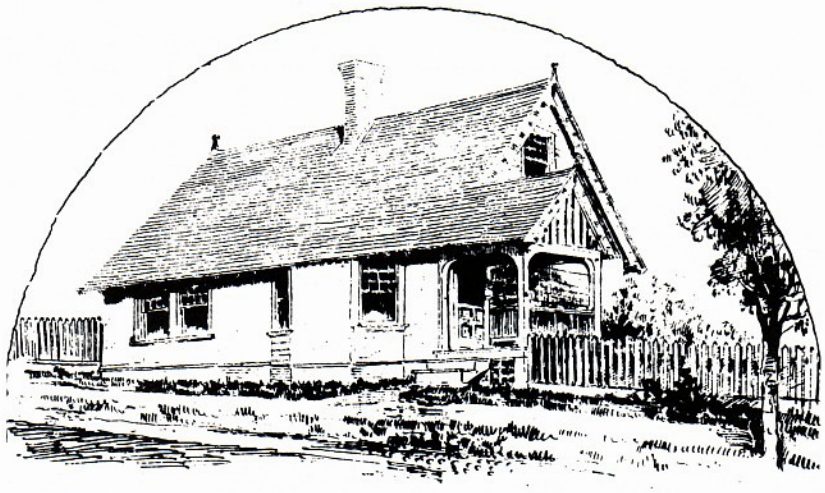


FIGURE 2—In this example from Comstock's 1884 book, this house could well have been built in the 1920s and identified as a "Double-Front-Gable Bungalow." This style house, used as a cottage in the 1880s, was perfectly suited to the narrow lots of cities and suburban areas after the turn of the century.

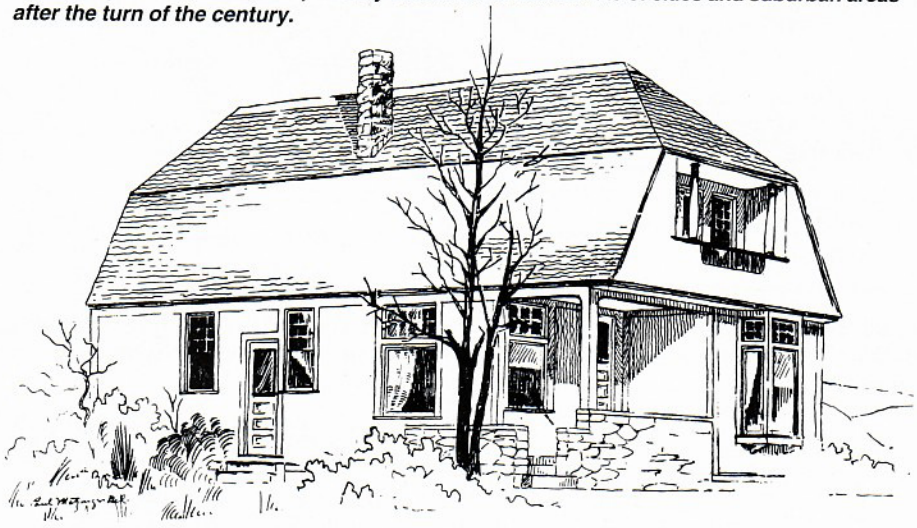
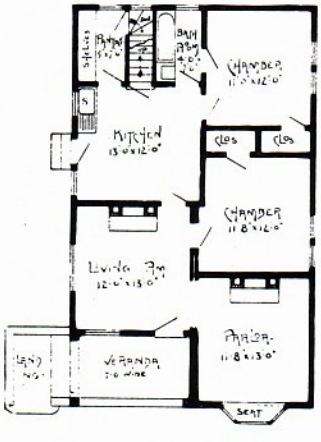


FIGURE 3—In the 1890s an increasing number of Victorian Bungalow plans emerged. A group of architects in Cleveland, Ohio, published a plan book containing 40 new house designs in 1892. Entitled* Modern Homes, Houses and Cottages Costing from $700.00, Upwards, *this book contained Queen Anne, Shingle, and Bungalow designs. Number 115, above, contains a gambrel roof, front facing gable, enclosed porch, and a simplistic look that shows its bungalow nature.

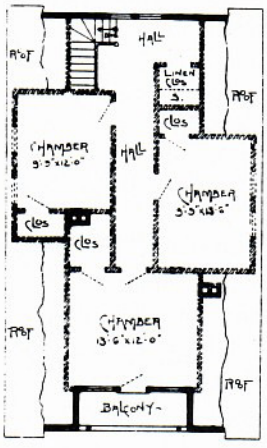


DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN NO. 115

GENERAL DIMENSIONS.—Width over porch, 32 ft.; length over bay, 43 ft. Height of stories: cellar, 6 ft. 6 in.; first story, 9 ft.; second story, 8 ft. 6 in.

EXTERIOR MATERIALS.—Foundation, stone: one course of 12 in. ashlar, above grade; cellar floor cemented; ash pits under fireplaces; whole house sheathed with common 7/8 in. sheathing and covered with 1/2 in. lap siding and dipped shingles.

INTERIOR FINISH.—Two coats of plaster. Pine finish throughout. Finish to suit owner. Doors and windows all of good size.



ACCOMMODATIONS.—Sizes of all rooms, with the location of closets, pantry, with fixture, etc., are shown on plans. This is a plan we recommend to parties who wish a moderate cost home or cottage, the second story being so arranged that at any time it can be finished as shown on plans.

COST.—Contract price for above, without plumbing, furnace or mantels, was $1,120. Price of working plans, details, specifications, etc., all in duplicate and license to build, $20.00.

expanding suburban areas of southern California in the early decades of this century. During the second and third decades of the new century, the Bungalow was considered the height of building fashion. It had many subtypes that included Spanish, English, and even Colonial.

While this all makes perfect sense, there could be another explanation. A look through the house plan/pattern books of the period of 1880 to 1905 reveals some very interesting designs that we could call "Victorian Bungalows." These, perhaps, are the first attempts at simplification, the first attempts to bring stylized housing to the masses. These could in fact be the forerunners of the modern Arts & Crafts homes that dot our countryside. Perhaps the origins do not lie in a far off land but right here in America as part of our own building tradition.

EARLY BUNGALOWS

Some of the earliest uses of the term "bungalow" appear in the 1880s and refer to vacation or cottage buildings. William Comstock's book *Cottages* published in 1884 shows a "Perspective Sketch of [a] Bungalow, [with Attic]" by New York architect Arnold W. Brunner (Figure 1 on previous page). It does, upon study, resemble the more modern version. It contains a small front roof dormer, a porch under the main roof and an overall simple plan. But it also had Tudor Revival exposed timber framing in the gables and a Queen Anne-like porch featuring spindles and turned posts. That Comstock volume also contains several other likely candidates for our Victorian Bungalow home. Plate 1 (Figure 2) could be considered a "Double-Front-Gable" type that was common in the 1920s. It contains a front facing gable on the main roof and a second or double matching gable on the porch roof. This 1884 example even had the side bay window so common in later Bungalows. This plan places it in the living room, while later models had in in the dining room. The ornate chimney and vargeboard, however, tell us that this is a Victorian design.

When we look into the decade of the 1890s, we again find examples of this transitional Victorian Bungalo A plan book published in 1892 by t Saving Sensible Architectural Bureau, entitled *Modern Homes,* contains several prime examples Design No. 115 (Figure 3) is akin t the "Gable Front" Bungalows of th Jazz Age. It even has a clipped fron gable, along with an inset porch ar bay window. The floor plan mo closely resembles the later mode with entry directly into the livi g room—there is no entry hall. Figu 3 sports a sleeping porch on the t floor, a common device in both la Victorian homes and early Bung lows. Its front porch does not have traditional rail and spindles but low wall that is enclosed as it wou be in an Arts & Crafts-style home. does not contain any bands or grou of windows as Bungalows usuall did; moreover, its gambrel roof more of a Colonial Revival detail.

Plan No. 121 is a good mixture both architectural trends. (Figure on next page) It is Queen Anne in i rounded tower, oriel side windo terra cotta rosettes, and Palladia window in the gable. This plan co tains a front parlor and an attache dining room with a reception hall i the Victorian style. Its Bungalow fe tures are the front gable orientatio , entry vestibule (a late 1920s touc , and porch contained under the ma house roof. The overall feel of t e home is also simple and Craftsma like (no sunbursts or wild shingle) rather than lively and joyful li e most Queen Anne homes.

EARLY 20TH-CENTURY PLANS

As we look at the early years of t e 20th century there are even mo e books and catalogs that offer th s transitional type of Bungalow. O e very popular publication was *Keith Home Magazine,* published in Mi neapolis. This monthly magazine f the year of 1902 offered prospecti e home buyers a wide range of pla s and home views. The Keith compa would sell the plans and vario s booklets dealing with home co struction. For example, in 1902 th

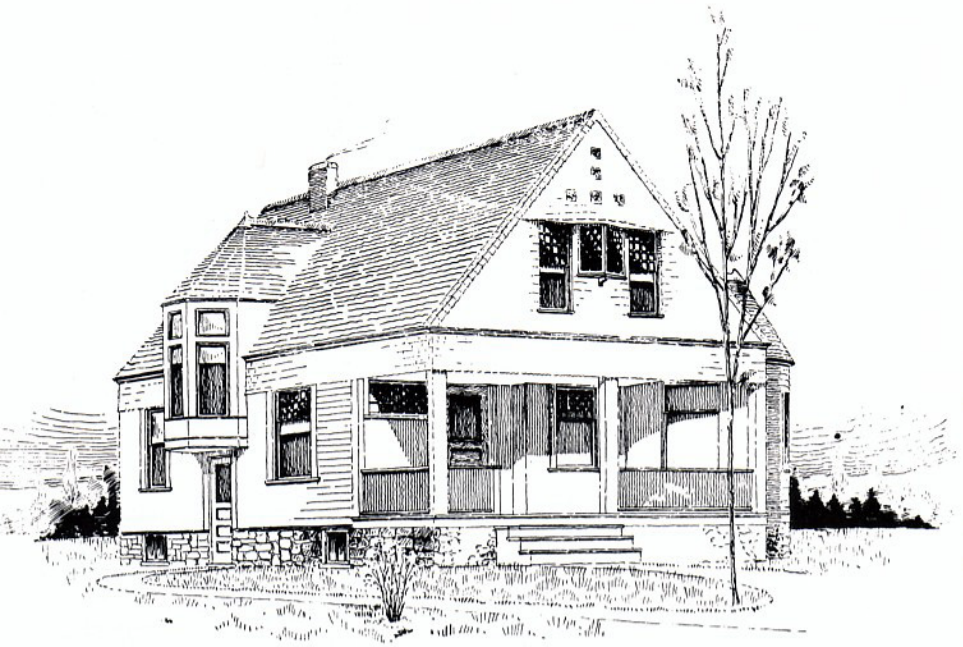
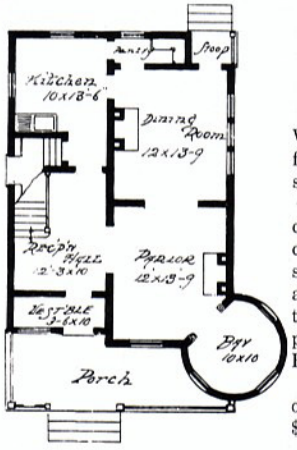


Figure 4 (Design No. 121)—This group of architects named themselves Saving Sensible Architectural Bureau, in keeping with the philosophy of the era. Their plan 121 combines the attributes of several late 19th-century styles: Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Bungalow. Note the tower, and Palladian and oriel windows.

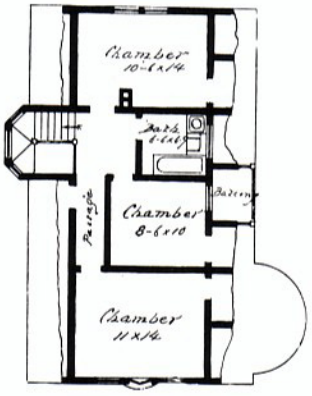


DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN NO. 121

GENERAL DIMENSIONS.—Width over bays, 29 ft.; length, 39 ft. 6 in. Height of stories: first story, 9 ft.; second story, 8 ft.

INTERIOR FINISH.—Two coats of plaster. Oak finish in reception hall and parlor, with open staircase, balance in white pine, and finished to suit owner. Reception hall, vestibule, kitchen and pantry floored with hardwood. Front door of oak.

COST.—Contract price, without plumbing, mantels or furnace, $1,218.



offered a 128-page booklet called *The Building of It,* which told how to supervise the construction of a home. They also sold architectural plan books and leaflets on landscaping.

VICTORIAN INFLUENCED

Keith's design No. 574 presents another remarkable mixture of Victorian and modern Bungalow traits (Figure 5). It is a Bungalow in its small front dormer, porch orientation (under the main roof), and simple exterior decor. There is no entry hall so you step right into the living room. The staircase is small and unobtrusive. On the first floor there is no hallway space but there is a bathroom. The dining and living rooms function as one unit, and the kitchen looks modern with built-in cupboards. The Victorian heritage is evident in its large Queen Anne-style tower, wrap-around verandah, and numerous sleeping chambers. Colonial Revival motifs include the columns on the porch, the sidelight at the entry door, and the jettied third story.

Keith's design No. 134 has the look of a hipped roof Bungalow of the World War I era (Figure 6). It contains a hipped dormer, full facade porch, and only a single bedroom on the second floor. But the design and decor traditions of the 19th cen-

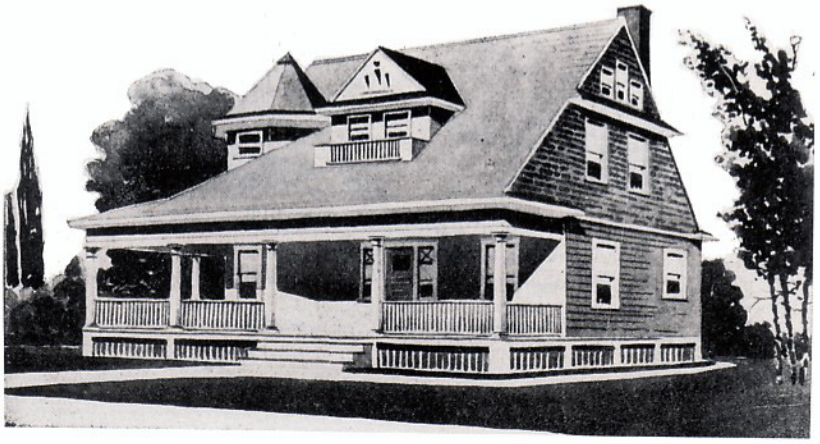


Figure 5 (Design No. 574)—A popular publication out of Minneapolis at the turn of the century was Keith's Magazine on Home Building. *The June 1902 issue carried several Victorian Bungalow plans. Among them was number 574, above, which looks like a Bungalow with a tower added on. You can see the fully developed Bungalow in this plan; if it were a bit more simplified the house would appear to be a suburban home of the 1910s.*

DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN NO. 574

The large porch in this summer cottage affords plenty of room to swing hammocks, and, as the porch extends around the side of the house, assures one of all the breeze there is. The living room, too, is of gererous size, well lighted, and made pleasant by the octagonal tower bay which is fitted up with seats that have hinged lids; also near the staircase is another seat and bookcase.

The fireplace in the dining room has cobblestone facing which extends up to the picture moulding. There is a little china closet in the dining room and the kitchen has two cupboards for dishes and utensils. Beside this there is a little storage room off the kitchen. If desired, the first story toilet could be omitted. and this space and the storage room used as a servant's room and complete bath fixtures installed in the second story rear chamber.

The partitions of the first floor are plastered and the ceiling is ceiled; the partitions of the second story are of one thickness of dressed lumber. The rooms have a ceiling, however, and a scuttle to let the hot air pass up.

Finish—pine, poplar, or cypress. House is set on brick piers; no cellar.

Cost—without plumbing, $1000.00.Height of first story—9 ft. 3 in; height of second story—8 ft. 3 in.

tury—the cresting roof and eyebrow window for example—are not completely gone. The cresting is a holdover from the post Civil War days and the eyebrow window was widely used in Richardson Romanesque buildings of the 1880s. The gable features fancy shingles above a true Palladian window.

Within just a few years from the publication of this Keith's magazine, the housing scene had changed dramatically. Bungalows were the hot fad, and architects, plan books, and ready-cut kits were producing thousands of variations on that simple theme. The homes just examined reveal the origins of that era, a time between 1880 and 1905 when the Bungalow had not quite defined itself. What we have discovered is a new type (style) of American architecture. These houses are part Bungalow but primarily 19th-century Victorian. They represent, perhaps, the true birth of the style that became so overwhelmingly popular in the teens and twenties throughout America. So perhaps it is better to say that the Bungalow developed from late 19th-century houses rather than from Indian traveler's huts.

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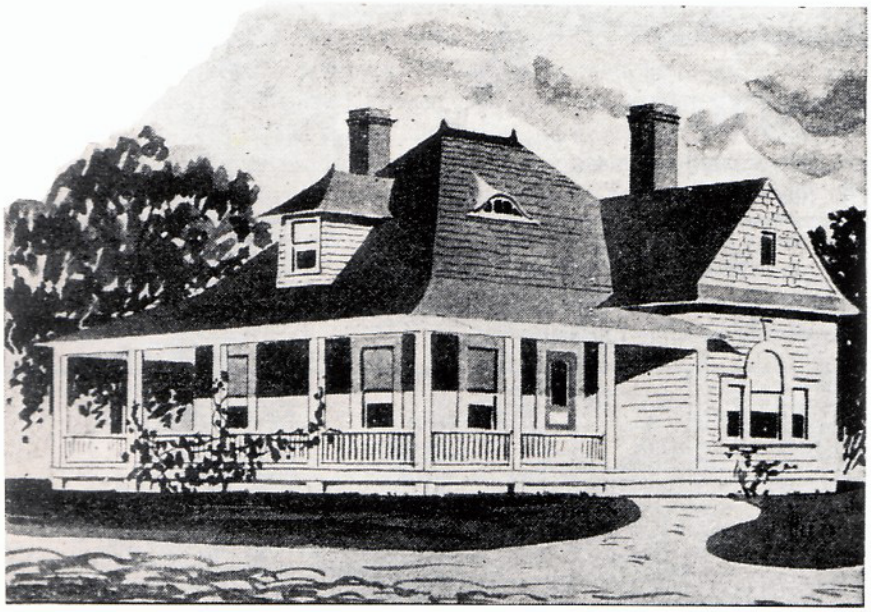

Figure 6 (Design No. 134)—Keith's plan number 134 is an interesting mix of motifs, including an eyebrow roof window, Palladian window, hipped roof dormer, and wrapping verandah. In a few years this type of plan, again stripped down, would be called a "Pyramid-Roofed Bungalow," and would be built all across the nation.

DESCRIPTION OF DESIGN NO. 134

There are two bedrooms of good size on the ground floor with a servant's room and storage space in the attic. By slightly raising the roof or increasing the height of the studding, some additional rooms could be obtained on the second floor without greatly increasing the expense. The fine porch is on three sides of the house. A small cellar is included. The house is plastered and finished in pine, natural finish, or neatly painted. The parlor contains an open fire.

While the rooms in this design may be thought by some to be a little small, it should be remembered that in a cold northern climate this is not always a disadvantage. However, it should not greatly increase the expense to add two or three feet to the width and to the depth of the house, and this would give very fair room all around.

If built on brick piers with no basement, plastering or sheathing, could be built for $500.

Cost—$825. Width—28 ft. 6 in. Depth—36 ft. Height of first story—9 ft. 6 in. Second story—8 ft. Lowest height of second story—5 ft. 6 in.