



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

Sturgeon Houses Fairview, Erie County, Pa.

Tourists are drawn to Pennsylvania's small towns to shop along their intact 19th-century main streets and enjoy their period houses. In Fairview, west of Erie, many of this era's buildings are gone or altered, but all

is not lost: only one block south of the intersection of US Route 20 and PA 98 lies a frame saltbox house that acts as a window to the early 19th century. The National Register-listed Robert Sturgeon house (4302 Avonia Road), tended by a stalwart crew of devoted volunteers, is nearly all that remains of a family that once so dominated the region

that the village was called Sturgeonville from the late 1790s to 1868 when it was incorporated as Fairview Borough.¹

Surprisingly, hidden behind modern siding, six remaining Sturgeon-related buildings dating from the 1830s and 1840s lie within blocks of one another. The elegant saltbox roof profile and frame construction

of the Sturgeon house is commonly associated with settlers from the northeast. In this case, the family was Scots-Irish and Presbyterian, descendants of Sturgeons who came to the U.S. c. 1730 from Ulster in northern Ireland and settled near Harrisburg in Dauphin County. Two Sturgeon brothers moved to Erie County in 1797. A third arrived four years later. William (1768-1838), Jeremiah (1770-1818), and Andrew (1779-1857) Sturgeon² spawned 24 children, many of whom settled nearby.

Why Robert's (1810-1883) house constructed by his carpenter brother Samuel (1801-1878) was built in the New England

style, while the other houses he built employed the more typical three- to five-bay, gable-roofed Western Pennsylvania house design is not clear. A recessed entry on the long side of the house set off by fluted square columns is unique to the region. The Sturgeon family retained ownership of the house until the heirs sold it to the Fairview Historical Society in 1979. Samuel Sturgeon also built the Monitor House (tavern) on the southwest corner of the crossroads (demolished 1994) and the Thomas Sturgeon house at the southwest corner of West Ridge Road and Franklin Avenue (demolished 1990).



Samuel Sturgeon's House, 7463 West Ridge Road, Fairview, Pennsylvania, built c. 1832.

Unfortunately, the remaining Sturgeon-related buildings have suffered various indignities ranging from the application of modern siding to complete and utter transformation. Samuel's own farm includes the house built close to the time of his 1833 wedding and the barn just west of it. Both structures give a sense of the scale and impressiveness of the Sturgeon family's holdings. The house, enlarged and altered considerably during its time as a funeral home, has been preserved as the headquarters of the Fairview Evergreen Nurseries, Inc. The large storage barn,



Robert Sturgeon House, 4302 Avonia Road, Fairview, Pennsylvania, constructed c. 1838. All Lu Donnelly.



Samuel Sturgeon's barn behind his 7463 West Ridge Road home.

sheathed in barn-red aluminum siding, retains its original configuration, including the banked entry and stone foundation.

A second house and barn, built in the 1830s for Samuel’s cousin, William R. Sturgeon (1804-1861), remain on West Ridge Road (US Route 20) at the intersection with Maple Drive. These structures are nearly unrecognizable as early 19th-century buildings—their histories remain masked by modern alterations. So too, brother John

Sturgeon’s (1790-1866) house at 5080 Franklin Avenue; while it dates from the 1830s, it fits all too readily into a 20th-century suburban milieu.

The village of Fairview did not lose its distinctiveness only to the “tin men” who committed rampant “alumi-cide” in the area; fire and demolition took two Samuel Sturgeon-built buildings on West Ridge Road, which makes the destiny of the only other remaining pre-Civil War era building

retaining its original wooden siding all the more important. In the 4100 block of Avonia Road (PA 98) a handsome white frame Greek Revival chapel, most recently known as the Believer’s Chapel, has simple, elegant ornamentation. The structure was built in 1842 for a New School Presbyterian denomination. The land under it is proposed as a parking lot. In a village that has lost so much of its original building fabric, with so few remaining early 19th-century resources, it is surprising that this chapel is not assigned the highest priority for preservation. ✪

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States* and published by the University of Virginia Press. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

¹ The village lost its borough status in 1997.

² Andrew settled in Girard, west of Fairview, in 1801. In 1832 Girard Township was formed from Fairview Township.



John Sturgeon's House, 5080 Franklin Avenue, built c. 1830.



Former Presbyterian Church, 4100 block of Avonia Road, constructed c. 1842.