

Alfred Allen's Creations

by Doris Sherrow

The two similar houses at 315 and 332 Main Street are called Second Empire style. They were both built in the early 1870s, by the same man, **Alfred Hurlburt Allen**. He built 332 for his wife and children, and 315 for his mother-in-law, **Emily Churchill**.

Allen had married **Jerusha Churchill** in 1846. She was the daughter of **Henry and Emily (Hall) Churchill**, and had grown up in their graceful Federal style house where the Getty station now stands. (The Seth Johnson house at 14 Commerce Street is a well-preserved Federal style--the front door to one side under a cove-ceiling porch.) Both the Churchills and the Halls were influential and wealthy families downtown, and Emily (Hall) Churchill was a beautiful young woman!

I would not know this except that I was awakened one morning about six years ago by a call from a California woman staying at the "Bed and Breakfast at the Croft" on Penny Corner Road. She wanted to know about the Halls, the Churchills, the Browns, and several other old families, because she was descended from them! I couldn't tell her very much at the time, but when she got home, she sent me photocopies of paintings and photographs of several of her ancestors, and old news clippings about them.

One of the pictures showed a Federal style house that I assumed was 14 Commerce Street, until I compared the two. The door and porch were on the wrong side of the façade! Neither was it 246 or 251 Main, and there weren't too many other Federal houses left in Portland! So I put it aside.

A few months later, I got the privilege of sorting the historical files at the Portland Library, and I came across the Colonial Dames and the WPA write-ups on old houses, done in the 1940s. Lo and behold, there was a picture of the same house as the one in my photocopy! It had been located on the southwest corner of Main and Silver streets, where the Getty station now stands. "H. Churchill" owned it on the 1859 map. It was probably built for Henry Churchill around 1817, when he married Emily Hall.

In my letter from the California woman, there was a photocopy of a photograph of a painting of Emily (Hall) Churchill in her twenties. She was positively glamorous! Her hair was dark and curling, her eyes were very large and a bit slanted, her nose was slightly arched, and her eyebrows were almost certainly tweezed! Who knew they tweezed eyebrows in 1820-something?! She looked vaguely Italian or Armenian, although the genealogy my correspondent had sent me traced her back to the earliest New England Puritan families. Emily and Henry Churchill had had nine children, and Jerusha, named for her mother's mother, was one of them.

Jerusha Churchill married a good-natured, well-liked builder named **Alfred H. Allen**. Alfred's picture was also in the material mailed to me. His hair was longish and light colored, though not blond. He was smiling slightly in amusement, and if Robin Williams had not been around to be cast as Popeye in the movie a decade or so ago, Alfred Allen would have been excellent for the part, had he been able to get to late 20th century California. His picture shows a similar-shaped face and twinkling eyes.

In 1870 and 1871, when Alfred built these two houses, they would have been spectacular on Main Street! The only more elegant style would be the large, asymmetrical Queen Anne, such as 422 and 430 Main Street, which would not come about for another twenty years. Next to the Puritan-plain colonials, the delicately-trimmed Federals, and the only slightly more decorated Greek Revival and Italianate buildings, the Second Empire style would have been pure fantasy come to life!

The Second Empire style had originated in France in the 1850s, taking its name from Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852-1870). The exhibitions of Paris in 1855 and 1867 had popularized the style in England, from which it spread easily to the United States.

Second Empire houses are easy to spot: they have a distinctive "mansard" roof--a roof whose sides are nearly vertical, either straight or slightly concave, and topped by a flat section. Dormers usually pierce the vertical sides of the roof, rendering the "attic" well-lit and usable. Often the vertical section of the roof is covered in slate shingles. The Churchill and Allen Second Empires would have been decided attention-getters on Main Street in the 1870s.

Emily Churchill only survived three years at 315 Main Street. She died in 1874. The house was then bought by **Edwin Irving Bell**, who established the **Connecticut Steam Brownstone Company**, a plant for cutting and finishing the rough brownstone that was quarried near the river. His carved brownstone lions and railing still grace the house today.

Alfred and Jerusha Allen lasted into the 1890s. A clipping from the October 30, 1896 Penny Press tells of their Golden Wedding Anniversary celebration:

"On Tuesday, the 27th inst., Mr. and Mrs. Alfred H. Allen celebrated the 50th anniversary of their wedding day, and held a reception at their home on Main street [332], during which time quite a large number of their old friends and neighbors called to pay their respects and congratulations to this aged couple who have passed along life's road together so many more years than most of us are ever spared to realize or permitted to enjoy in each other's company.

..."[A]s these ... aged people stood there together with the glow of the setting sun shining in the window at the close of day, it was a reminder of the long ago, when they were all young and life for two had just begun on that wedding day. What memories of the past these fifty years must bring up, the friends of youth nearly all sleeping in the quiet church yard just beyond...

"The bright day, Mr. Allen says was a contrast to that of fifty years ago, when it rained very heavily so that the wedding journey was delayed one day...and on the following morning the stage coach was taken to Meriden then the railroad to New Haven then the boat to New York, being at that time a long journey."