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Asher Benjamin in East Lexington, Massachusetts

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The pattern books of Asher Benjamin, written to meet the special needs of the country carpenter who had to work without the assistance of an architect, had a marked effect on the New England village of the early nineteenth century. Throughout New England one sees the imprint of the Benjamin pattern books, in the elaborate "Frontispiece" of Greek temple-form house with assertive pediment and columns or in the doorframe of a simple farmhouse.

Although perhaps best known for disseminating the Federal style of architecture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly as developed by Charles Bulfinch, in his later works Benjamin also instructed his readers in the Greek Revival style. Of the seven books written by Benjamin between 1797 and 1843 the most popular was *The Practical House Carpenter* of 1830.[1] In both its Preface and concluding chapter Benjamin explicitly defines his allegiance to the Grecian style already popular in sophisticated urban design. He assumes that the "ingenious builder" living at some distance from the city may not know "with what a rapid progress the Grecian system has advanced beyond the Roman within the last fifteen or twenty years . . ."[2] Benjamin undertakes in this and in his next book, *The Practice of Architecture* (1833), to instruct the country carpenter both in the advantages of Greek design over Roman, and in the methods by which the new design detail could be executed.

Benjamin's books made Greek design appealing to the builder in several ways, quite apart from the ideological association of ancient Greece and democratic government. Grecian motifs were larger in scale, more generously and broadly conceived than the outmoded Roman. They were, therefore, both less expensive and easier to execute. Benjamin's plates and text are quite explicit in the ways by which his designs could be translated into wood, the basic material of country con-

FIG. 1. THE STONE BUILDING, 715 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington, which now houses the East Lexington Branch Library. Originally designed as a lecture hall by Isaac Melvin, 1833. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

struction. Finally, Benjamin is not concerned so much with "correctness," a matter which could trouble a rural craftsman, as he is with proportion, a seemly matching of ornament and building. Any skilled carpenter, using one of Benjamin's pattern books, could easily adapt the new style to his own needs with assurance.

The evidence of the New England village street makes it obvious that many chose to attempt the Grecian mode. A particularly well preserved example of the impact of Benjamin on those who made this choice in one town may be seen in East Lexington, the "other" village center of Lexington, Massachusetts. East Lexington is located about a mile and a half east on Massachusetts Avenue from Lexington's famous Green. Unlike the houses around the Green, the most notable of which were restored in the early twentieth century to conform to popular notions of colonial style, many of the houses of East Lexington retain their authentic early nineteenth century look. The Grecian mode is everywhere, even in the square doorframe and wide cornerboards of an updated pre-Revolutionary tavern. One has the feeling that this part of Lexington cared nothing for Revolutionary heroics. Rather, the east village wanted the latest and best, as befitted a prosperous and

progressive community of successful small businesses.

East Lexington emerged as a separate entity shortly after the Revolution. Entrepreneurs Stephen Robbins, Jr. (1758-1847) and his son, Eli (1786-1856), made major contributions to the growth and prosperity of the village. As traders, land dealers, inn keepers, mill owners and especially as fur processors the Robbins men gave employment to over a hundred of their townspeople.[3] The economic vitality of the area attracted newcomers to the east village rather than to the Center and fostered the growth of support industries such as blacksmithing and tanning.

The prosperity of East Lexington led to the construction or renovation of numerous houses still standing along the main street, now Massachusetts Avenue. The basic form of these houses is the same, a product of the knowledge and skill of traditionally trained housewrights. Almost all of the nearly thirty existing pre-1840 houses in East Lexington's old village center are five bays wide with a center entrance. Whatever distinguishing characteristics each has is found in the details of the enrichment around the door. This varying ornamentation clearly demonstrates a familiarity with the books of Asher Benjamin on the part of the builders of several houses constructed between 1833 and 1840. Also apparent are the several different ways in which Benjamin's books could be used.

East Lexington's first exposure to Asher Benjamin seems to have occurred in 1833 when Eli Robbins hired Isaac Melvin of Concord, an architect and master builder, to design a meeting hall for the village.[4] The need for such a building had emerged directly from the village's prosperity. By the early 1830's East Lexington had grown enough to feel itself quite separate from the village at the Green. Compelled to remain under the Center's political and, more irritatingly, religious dominance, the people of the east village had begun to resent their enforced ties, particularly the necessity of worshipping in the First Parish Church on the Green, rather than in a building closer to home. Some conservatism in the congregation of the First Parish in that time of growing agitation for reform must also have rankled. Robbins' plan for a new meeting hall would answer the needs of the east village by providing "a public building where lectures, preaching, and other meetings could be held, and where freedom of speech could be allowed."[5]

Master builder Isaac Melvin must have come to East Lexington with copies of Asher Benjamin in his valise. He designed a center entrance, temple-form building for Robbins, the first floor of which could be used as living quarters, the second as lecture hall (Figure 1). Four Doric columns support a broad pediment inset with quarter circle windows which flank a smaller lunette in the peak of the gable. The soffit or underside of the cornice is adorned with mutules, flat projecting blocks, in spite of Benjamin's injunction that in the Doric order "the Grecians never employed either mutules, dentils or modillions in the cornices of the sloping sides of their pediments."[6]

Despite this disregard for one of Benjamin's rules of "correct" decoration, to frame the door of his temple Melvin chose to copy, almost line for line, Plate XXVIII in Benjamin's newest pattern book, *The Practice of Architecture* of 1833 (Figure 2). Like the plate, the actual doorframe (Figure 3) shows a paneled door flanked by two-thirds length sidelights, defined by narrow, fluted moldings. In both, a shallow fanlight extends across sidelights and doors, and the compositions of door and lights are framed by broad

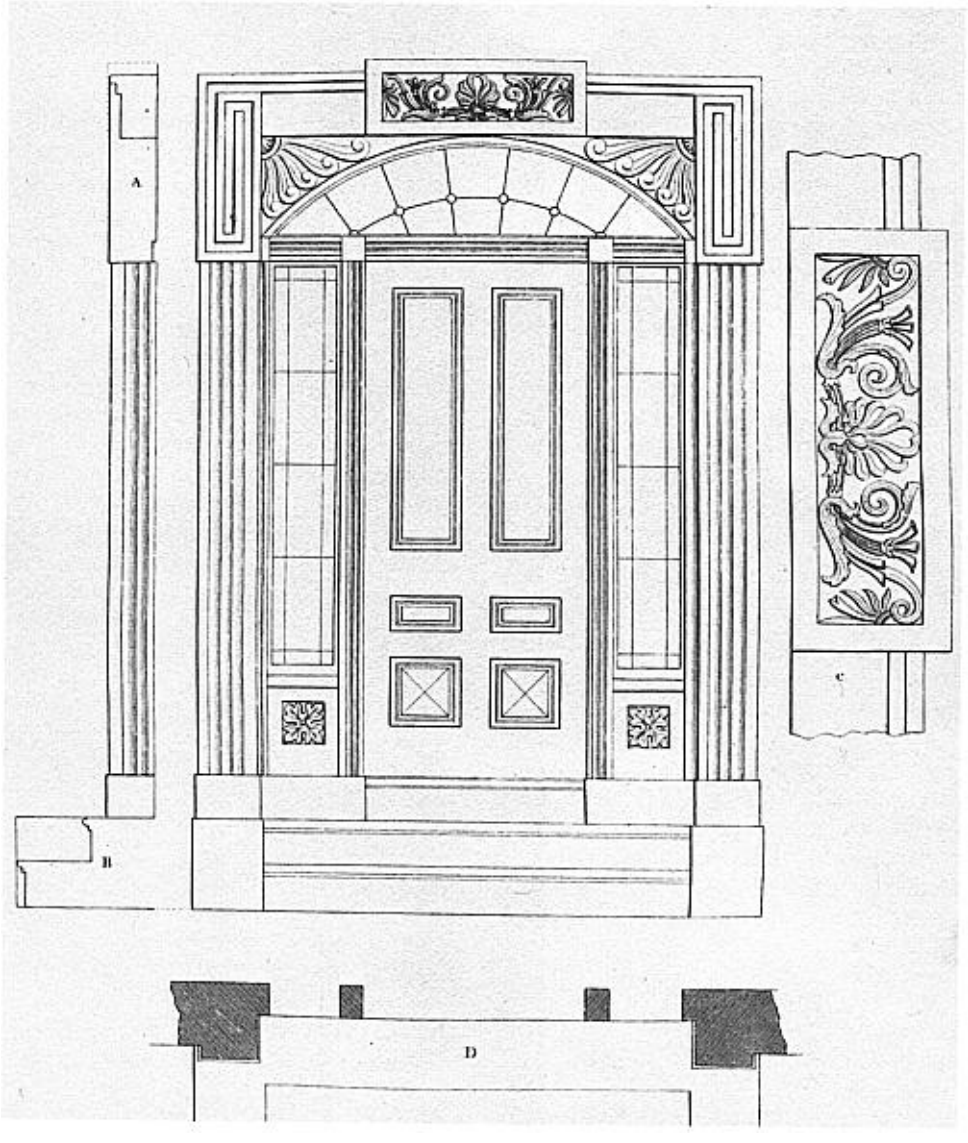

FIG. 2. PLATE XXVIII, from *The Practice of Architecture*, 1833, by Asher Benjamin. (Courtesy of the Boston Atheneum.)

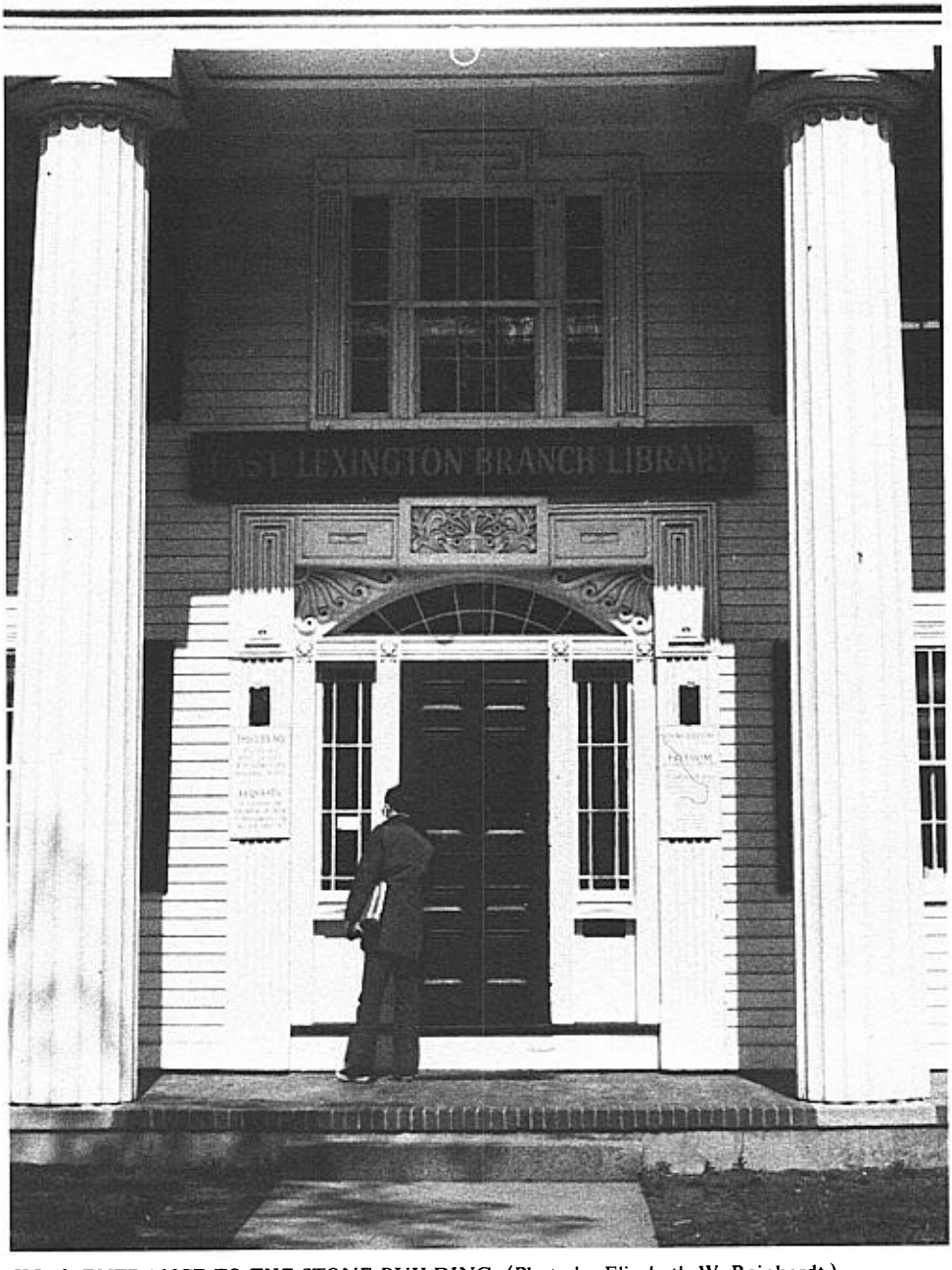

FIG. 3. ENTRANCE TO THE STONE BUILDING. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

fluted pilasters ornamented at the top with a variation of the rectilinear Greek fret. Rather than a full entablature, the pilasters support a cap ornamented on a central panel with the anthemion motif in bold relief. In the Benjamin plate, this motif also appears at the corners of the cap, but the doorframe as completed omits this feature.

As shown on the plate and executed in the doorframe, stylized honeysuckle vines curl in the spandrels framed by the curve of the fanlight. The heaviness of the honeysuckle vines on the finished doorframe clearly demonstrates Benjamin's assumptions about their appropriateness for country design. They have, he says, "dimensions which in practice will be so large that they may be wrought by a carpenter when a carver is not at hand."[7]

Over the door of the house at the second-floor level is a triple window, Palladian in balance if not in design. Melvin did not derive the window directly from the Benjamin plate, but did utilize some of the motifs from that source. The window is framed at the sides with panels ornamented with the Greek fret, and bears a cap which repeats in simpler terms the rhythm of corner ornaments and central panel found over the door.

Although Melvin generally followed the details of the Benjamin design, he achieved a rather different effect. As executed, the linear delicacy of Benjamin's illustration has been lost. The carved ornament of the door frontispiece is massively and elaborately three dimensional. The total composition of the central salient is almost more than the building can encompass.

The magnificence of the new addition to what had been a simple village street combined with the presence in town of an architect-housewright familiar with Benjamin's pattern books could not but have an effect on the design of houses built or remodeled within the next few years. Several houses within a few blocks of the Stone Building, as the meeting hall is now called, show in the design of their doorframes that they have been influenced by both the new lecture hall and by Benjamin's pattern books.

At 870 Massachusetts Avenue is the Ammi Hall house, also built in 1833. Although the house itself is a modest five bay wide, one bay deep farmhouse, it has as splendid a doorframe as could be imagined for such a simple structure (Figure 4). Two Doric columns support a portico which, although not pedimented in full, suggests the angle of a pediment in its shape. A full entablature extends from the building's facade to the columns but does not continue across the front. To complete the entablature would have created an entrance too massive to be pleasing and too low for comfort. Pilasters with Benjamin's Greek fret on both the facing and lateral sides of the portico support the entablature and frame the two-thirds length sidelights which flank the door. Over the door is a shallow wooden fan with central sunburst and an ornamental keystone in its defining arch. Columns, fret and fan proclaim the kinship with the Stone Building. This doorway's relationship to Benjamin's books is indirect, as its builder apparently looked not to a book plate, but to the Stone Building as the source for the elements of his design.

The Peletiah P. Pierce house at 1106 Massachusetts Avenue, remodeled in 1834 when Pierce married, has a doorframe that is similar to one illustrated in Plate XXIX of *The Practice of Architecture* of 1833 (Figure 5). The resemblance of this plate to Plate XXVIII, on which the Stone Building doorway is based, may have led to its choice by the builder. Benjamin himself comments on the similarity of this plate to the preceding one

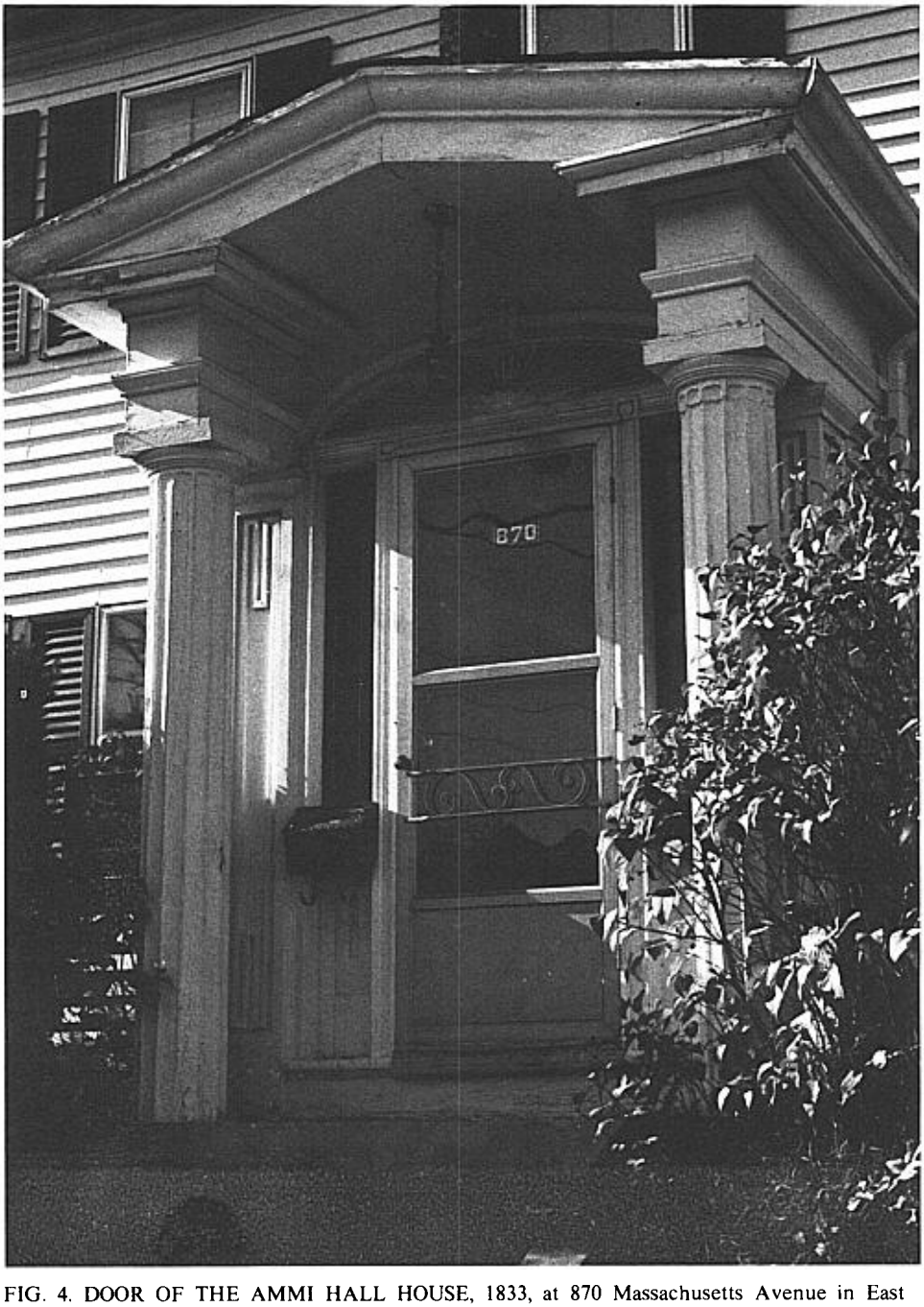

FIG. 4. DOOR OF THE AMMI HALL HOUSE, 1833, at 870 Massachusetts Avenue in East Lexington. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

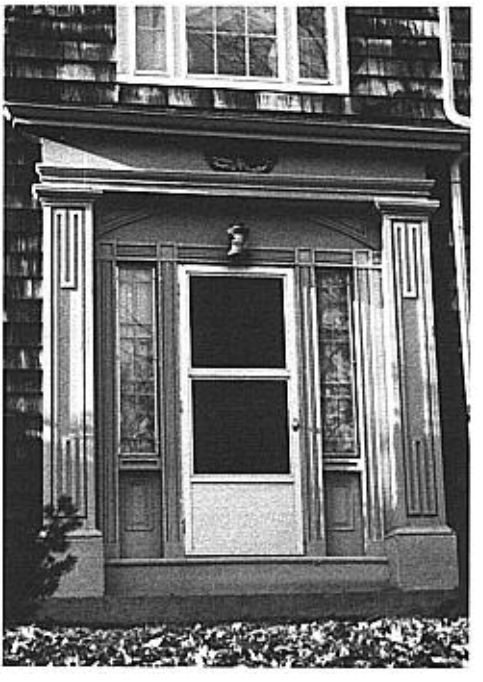

FIG. 6. DOOR OF THE PELETIAH P. PIERCE HOUSE, renovated c. 1834, at 1106 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

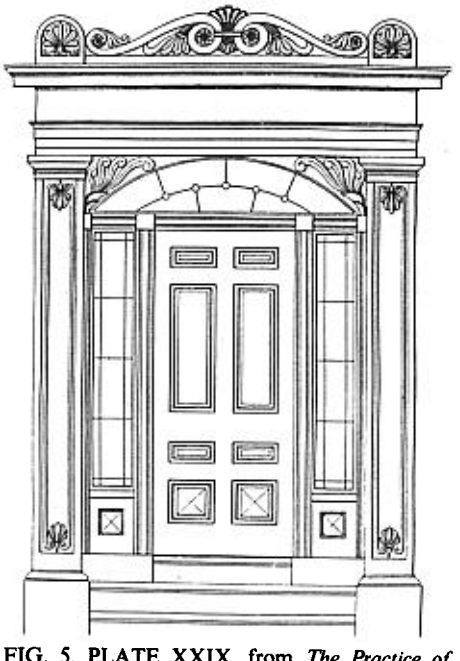

FIG. 5. PLATE XXIX, from *The Practice of Architecture,* 1833, by Asher Benjamin. (Courtesy of the Boston Atheneum.)

"in its door, side and fanlight" although, he notes, it "differs very widely from that in its other decorations."[8] The principal difference of the frontispiece illustrated in Plate XXIX from that in Plate XXVIII is that the composition is framed by ornamented pilasters supporting a full entablature surmounted by an elaborate ornamental device rather than a cap with decorative panels. The Pierce house doorframe (Figure 6) simplifies the total composition by eliminating the ornament over the entablature, narrowing the architrave from three faces to one, and substituting the fret for the inverted anthemion of the illustration. The fanlight has been alluded to by simple arched moldings and the honeysuckle in the spandrels has been reduced to angular shapes which define rather than ornament the space.

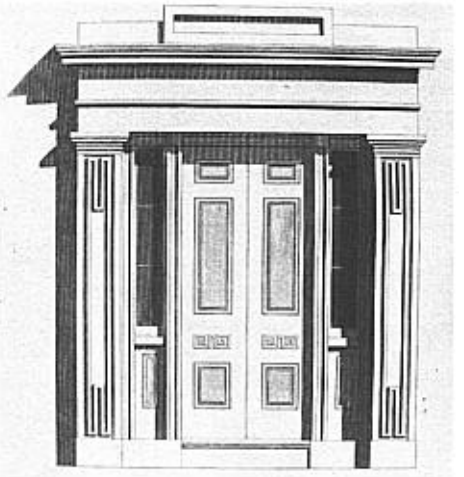

FIG. 7. PLATE XXVIII, from *The Practical House Carpenter,* 1830, by Asher Benjamin. (Courtesy of the Boston Atheneum.)

FIG. 8. DOOR OF THE ELI WHITNEY HOUSE, c. 1834, at 884 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

Although Melvin's design for the Stone Building and the doorframe designs for the Hall and Pierce houses were all drawn from *The Practice of Architecture* of 1833, the evidence of houses along the street strongly suggests a familiarity with Benjamin that also included his previous publications, especially *The Practical House Carpenter* of 1830. The ubiquitous Greek fret, the most frequently repeated of Benjamin's devices, is integrated into a frontispiece design illustrated in Plate XXVIII of *The Practical House Carpenter* (Figure 7). This design appears in a fairly literal interpretation on the Eli Whitney house, 884 Massachusetts Avenue, built sometime between 1833 and 1839 (Figure 8). The capitals of the pilasters are simpler, the architrave is narrower and without the three faces proposed by Benjamin, but essentially it is the same design. A modification appears at 13 Pleasant Street, just off Massachusetts Avenue, in an only slightly less exact translation of the same illustration. The fretwork alone has been used to renovate the David Penney house, c. 1810, 516 Massachusetts Avenue, where it appears on the pilasters supporting an old-fashioned high, narrow entablature without architrave.

Another way of using Benjamin's pattern books is demonstrated by the door of the John Beal house at 782 Massachusetts Avenue (Figure 9). Rather than imitate or adapt one of Benjamin's designs for a complete frontispiece, the carpenter has chosen to assemble details in a charming albeit clumsy collage. The fluted pilasters of the doorframe have simplified Roman

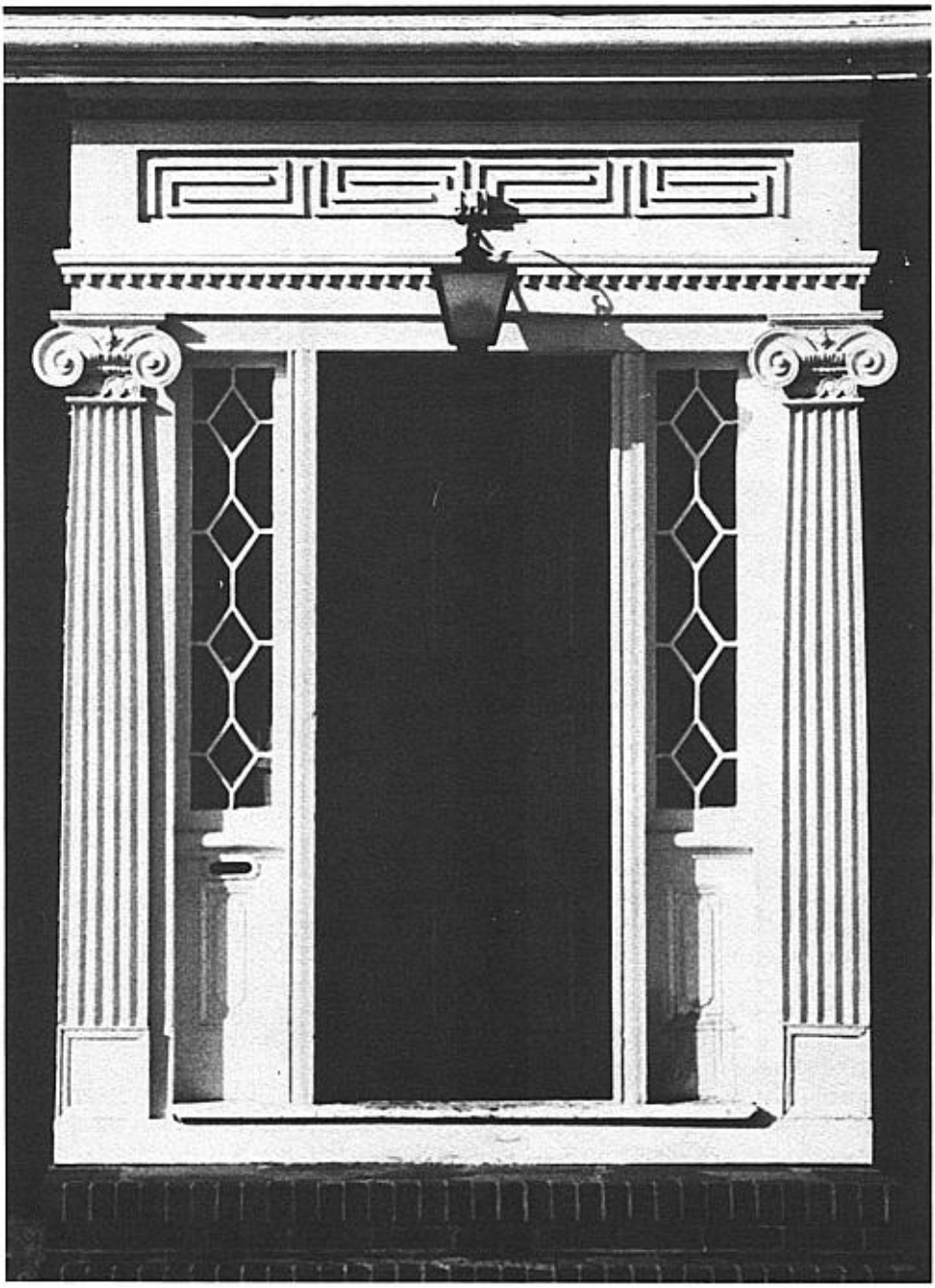

FIG. 9. DOOR OF THE JOHN BEAL HOUSE, c. 1834, at 782 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington. (Photograph by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

Ionic capitals, which have small volutes or scrolls with an ornament tucked between them. In a "correct" Roman Ionic capital, as illustrated by Benjamin in *The Practical House Carpenter,* this ornament would be a carved rose, but the carpenter of the Beal house has inserted instead a diamond shaped decoration, easily executed with strips of molding. Below the volutes an interlocking circular knot design like that shown in fig. D, Plate LII, of *The Practical House Carpenter,* has been used (Figure 10). From the same Plate the carpenter chose the rectangular fret of fig. E to ornament the broad frieze of the entablature. Apparently feeling this to be insufficient he added a decorative band of alternating diamonds and circles outlined with strips of molding at the cornice line. The carpenter of this doorframe relied on Benjamin's designs, but felt free to simplify and combine them to fit both his skills and his own sense of design.[9]

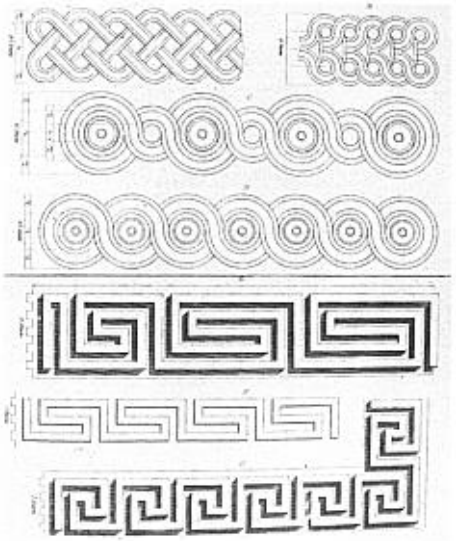

FIG. 10. PLATE LII, from Benjamin's *The Practical House Carpenter,* 1830, illustrating designs for guilloches and frets "intended for friezes, bands, panels and various other decorations." (Courtesy of the Boston Atheneum.)

FIG. 11. AMBROSE MORELL HOUSE, 627 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington, built c. 1800, remodeled 1839. Note the brick side wall at right, with a stringcourse between the first and second stories. (Photo by Elizabeth W. Reinhardt.)

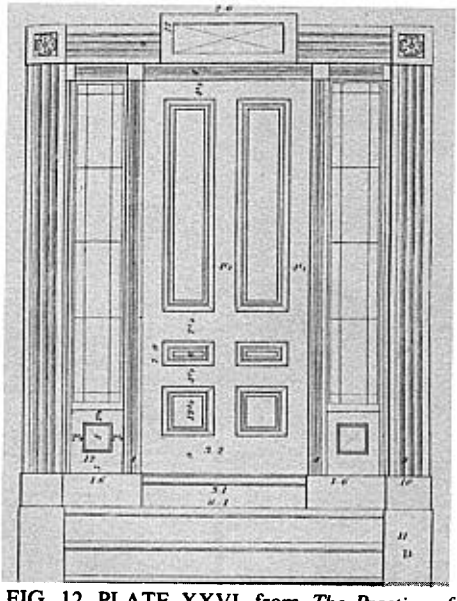

FIG. 12. PLATE XXVI, from *The Practice of Architecture,* 1833, by Asher Benjamin. (Courtesy of the Boston Atheneum.)

Toward the end of the decade East Lexington's last major response to the effect of the Stone Building and Asher Benjamin's pattern books was made when Ambrose Morell, business rival of Eli Robbins, remodeled his Federal house in 1839. Originally a brick-ended, center entrance house, built around 1800, with roof-ridge running parallel to the front facade, the house was altered by Morell into a Greek temple-form dwelling, in scale much like the Stone Building (Figure 11). The orientation of the roof's axis was rotated ninety degrees to produce a broad triangular pediment extending the full width of the facade and projecting forward to be supported by four Ionic columns.[10] The doorframe is similar to Plate XXVI in *The Practice of Architecture*

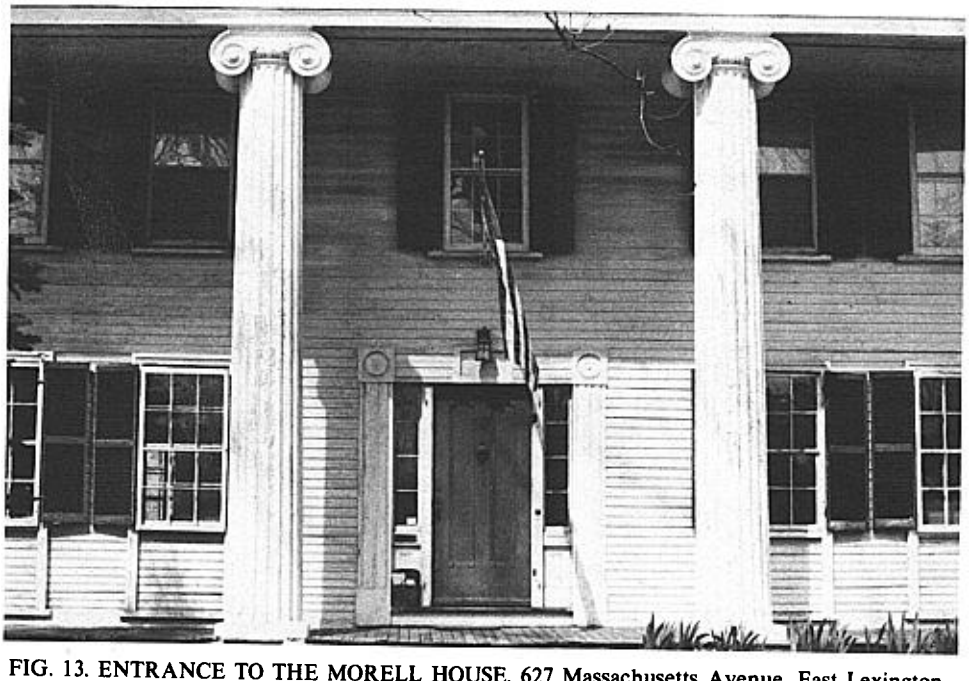

FIG. 13. ENTRANCE TO THE MORELL HOUSE, 627 Massachusetts Avenue, East Lexington. (Photo by Elizabeth Reinhardt.)

(Figure 12). As in the illustration the central panel of the door cap is unornamented; however, the corner squares which mark the intersection of pilaster and cap have simple circles rather than a quatrefoil device (Figure 13). The design is, as Benjamin says, "suitable for a house of moderate size, or where the story is not sufficiently high to admit a fanlight over it or where a fanlight is not desired."[11] The lower first story of the original Federal house may well have precluded the use of a fanlight and more significant ornament over the door. Considering the pretentiousness of columns and pediment it is doubtful if modesty alone restrained Morell.

The bankruptcy of Eli Robbins in the Panic of 1837 slowed the growth of the east village. Economic decline was accelerated when the railroad by-passed East Lexington in 1846. Poverty, the great preserver, protected the village from the effects of growth and prosperity which dramatically altered Lexington Center in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. East Lexington thus retains an extraordinary collection of Asher Benjamin inspired doorways. Taken together they are a remarkable demonstration of the variety of ways in which the country carpenters to whom Benjamin addressed his books could use his designs. The ingenuity, charm and vitality of these doorframes still delight the eye of the passer-by. They serve as an enduring testimony to the value of Benjamin's work and the practicality of his vision.

Notes

This article is dedicated to Lucille K. Fales, who has studied Asher Benjamin for fifty years.

[1] Clay Lancaster, "Builders' Guide and Plan Books and American Architecture from the Revolution to the Civil War." *Magazine of Art*, Vol. 41, No. 1. January, 1948, p. 18.

[2] Asher Benjamin, *The Practical House Carpenter* (Boston: Published by the Author, R. P. and C. Williams and Annin and Smith, 1830), p. 99.

[3] A. Bradford Smith, "History of the Stone Building," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The Lexington Historical Society, Vol. II, 1900), p. 145.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Benjamin, *The Practical House Carpenter, op. cit.*, p. 27.

[7] Asher Benjamin, *The Practice of Architecture* (Boston: Published by the Author and Carter, Hendo and Co., 1833), p. 74.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[9] The doorframe has been so cherished by owners of the house that, when an entrance portico was built sometime after 1920, the whole frontispiece was kept virtually intact and used on the new, extended entrance.

[10] Fred Smith Piper, "Architectural Yesterdays in Lexington," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* (Lexington, Massachusetts: The Lexington Historical Society, Vol. IV, 1912), p. 117. The original brick-ended walls may still be seen from the street.

[11] Benjamin, *The Practice of Architecture, op. cit.*, p. 73.