

To:

Thomas Munsen, Archives Manager
Sioux City Public Museum
607 4th St. Sioux City, IA

Saturday, December 16, 2023 REV 3.28.24

Dear Tom,

Thanks for your interest in the buildings of F.M. Sterling in Sioux City. The following is a draft of notes about him and his work.

Best Regards,

Bill Sterling

Fred Miller Sterling bio

I am an architect from Massachusetts. In August of 2004, I decided to fly out to Sioux City to see what kind of an architect Fred Sterling had been. I had a few snap shots and a few addresses to guide me. I felt at times I was having a personal conversation with a man who had died 4 years before I was born. Walking into one of the houses he had designed and built, I had an uncanny feeling of design kinship with him.

The earliest story I remember about F.M. Sterling is that he had trained each of his boys to do a different trade in construction so that he would have a complete crew from masonry foundations, wood framing and finish carpentry, plumbing and heating, to painting. Only one son was to do God's work, a minister. My grandfather was the painter. Uncle Ralph was the math whiz who could keep all the framing and cutting numbers in his head. He was born in the West 16th Street house.

Ralph would shout dimensions out to the rest of the framers and according to my dad, the pieces would fit together like a Rolex watch. That was no small task on the complex geometric forms that F.M. designed for many of the Victorian Style homes like 1603 Ross St., its multi- gabled roof intersections being a normal framer's nightmare. It's hard to get a builder today to frame a house with so many bump outs, intersecting porches and so much decorative trim. The labor cost pushes such elaborate house costs to over a million dollars. That is about what the replacement value would be if you tried to build one of these Architectural jewels today.



1603 Ross St.

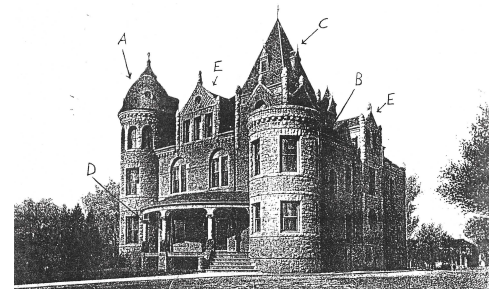
That is why it was reassuring to see the house at 1719 George St. was being so well maintained. The current owners, in 2004, Scott and Julie Jeffords, realized the value of their home and they were protecting their investment with a fresh coat of paint and a water tight roof. Inside the home was no disappointment either. The original fireplace surround has been preserved with its ornate Victorian Style eclectic assembly of wood columns, decorative trim and glazed tiles. A built-in china cabinet as well as decorative leaded glass windows still remained intact. The Jeffords had incorporated period antiques and their own personal taste in color and window dressing to update this fine structure.

1719 George St.



Besides this house, I was able to get inside the Smith School and the Mount Zion Mission Baptist Church, both also designed and built by F.M. Sterling. One interesting feature of these three buildings by F.M. was that all the door and window trim in all three of these buildings were exactly the same detail of decorative profile. The cap molding is a particularly delicate molding that projects about 2 inches wider than the face of the jamb (photo attached). It is a unique molding, not available in any catalogs I have seen today.

F.M. Sterling was listed in the Sioux City Directory as a builder in 1907 and listed as architect in 1909 and continued designing buildings even for his sons to build well into his eighties. He died in 1939 at 90 years old. Until 2004, the only original drawings of designs by F.M. Sterling in the Sioux City Public Museum Research Center were of the house at 1703 Rebecca St. (now possibly 1705 ?.) In 2004 I helped Craig Olsen add four drawings of the conversion of the Smith residence into a school, thanks to the careful record keeping of the Sioux City School System. I suggest you frame and display these original drawings by F.M, as they contribute to our understanding of the sophistication of design work of the era. I suggest the Museum encourage anyone who has such drawings or early photos tucked away in his or her attic to bring them in so you can make copies for your records.



Smith Home, later School C. 1892
Possible Hoyt Sterling photo



Smith School 2004

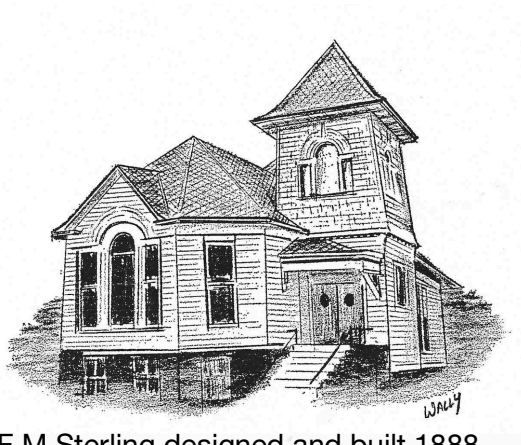
There are many Sterling family members who probably still have the old photos.

I have attached a list of homes my aunts knew were designed by F.M. Sterling. We also have photos taken by family members with a link below that do not all indicate the address. The older ones may very well have been photographed by Hoyt Sterling, F.M.'s brother. The Sioux City Public Museum may solicit historical photos or drawings from current home owners. They can rest assured that they own a building that was crafted carefully by an artist with an excellent eye for elegant proportion.



F.M. Sterling house-1524 Isabella St.
Possibly Hoyt Sterling photo postcard

In 2004, I toured the Mount Zion Mission Baptist Church at 1421 Geneva. While it was a thrilling surprise to find that a church F.M. had designed was still standing, it was sad to hear that it was scheduled for demolition in October. It was designed by F.M. and built by him and his father W.W. in 1888, originally on Villa and Myrtle Streets. It was moved to Geneva St. after the Mayflower Congregational Church moved into its final site in 1924. The 1421 Geneva St. church was a great example of "Craftsman Style" wood frame construction with flared roof eaves and "battered" side wall construction of the bell tower. It had arched "Palladian" windows and decorative wood trim that had been hidden behind aluminum siding.



F.M. Sterling designed and built 1888
Mayflower Congregational Church

I believe it would be possible to obtain early photos of the church before it was covered with aluminum siding, possibly from the records of the Congregational Church. F.M. Sterling, his brother Charles and father, William W. Sterling were all charter members of the Mayflower Congregational Church, as it was known at the time.

I hope this is a helpful addition to your records on F.M. Sterling. There is a history of the Smith School by Jeff Wright printed in 1998 and a biography on F.M. Sterling interview of my great aunt Ruth Sterling in the Siouxland Oral History Program, dated 9.23.1977.



F.M. Sterling early house-1512 W. 16th St.
Possibly Hoyt Sterling photo C.1886

Known addresses:

Besides the original Smith Villa (completed 1892), now drastically altered as the Smith School, F.M. Sterling designed and built several private homes and other buildings. The following is a partial list of known buildings by him in 2004. Note : Attached color photos from around 1970 include some houses by F.M. with no address. For photo link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/plxl7labzay8kk458dc1/F.M.Sterling-houses-1970-73-p.1-5.pdf?rlkey=bmbb9vm9pb1tzusfbx0453gwu&dl=0>

Ross St.

1500 - color photo-former school house (1st & 2nd grades)

1603 - color photo-one of the most ornate and beautiful (pink in 2004)

1615- color photo-Corner of 19th and Ross (W.W. Sterling residence)

1723 - 2 color photos- house still well maintained in 2004

1821- color photo

Also one described at corner of 18th and Ross (1624??)

George St.

1512- color photo

1607- color photo

1611- color photo

1700- color photo

1706 - color photo

1710- color photo

17?? - see photo.

1719 - color photo- Scot and Julie Jeffords

1801- color photo

1812- color photo

???? - see photo.

Also-corner 15th and George, F. M. Sterling's own home.

Rebecca St.

1509 -color photo

1705- color photo -Corner W. 16th and Rebecca St (F.M.Sterling family)

1903- 3 color photos- winter, fall & summer

1524 Isabella St.(another for F.M Sterling's own home.) 2722 Center St.
(for F.M. Sterling family)

A church on Center St. between 6th and 7th Streets was designed and built
by F.M. Sterling.



Another possible photo by Hoyt Sterling of F.M.'s home in 1893:
1624 W. 19th St.