Irwin, Harriet Morrison

Harriet Morrison Irwin

The House That Harriet Built

by Kathy Neill Herran

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Harriet Abigail Morrison was born in Charlotte in 1828 to Dr. Robert Hall Morrison—a Presbyterian minister and later founder and first president of Davidson College—and Mary Graham Morrison. The couple’s third child, Harriet was one of ten children who survived into adulthood. Two of her sisters died of diphtheria at early ages. Harriet would always remember the losses of these sisters and the impact of illness and death on families.

At the time of this article’s publication, Kathy Neill Herran, of Charlotte, was the author of women, not just in the field of architecture, but as an encouragement that they, too, could aspire to higher education and professional jobs once held only by men.

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The wife of Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, Harriet Morrison Irwin, with no formal training in architecture, received a U.S. Patent 94,116 for a design for hexagonal, or six-sided, houses. The patent emphasized more-efficient lighting, better movement of air, and better use of space. Even the rooms in Irwin’s house were six-sided, shaped like a bean or a lozenge. She believed that her house’s best feature was the careful placement of windows and doors that allowed easy passage to the outside. These doors and windows provided comfortable air flow in the warmer months but could be efficiently closed during colder weather. Irwin believed that the rooms would be easier to clean than square ones, which attracted more dust and dirt in their sharper corners. There were no hallways in the hexagonal house and one central fireplace, with flues, or passageways, leading to the other rooms. Numerous fireplaces, she believed, led to drier air and required more cleaning.

At age forty-one, Irwin became the first woman in the United States to receive an architectural patent. She herself lived in one of her hexagonal homes.

After her recognition as a self-taught architect, she achieved another goal. The author of several newspaper articles, in addition to her magazine work, Irwin published a novel, The Hermit of Petraea, in 1871 to promote her patent. The book was about a sickly youth who is banished to Arabia Petraea—a name once used for the northwest part of the Arabian peninsula—to find better health and living conditions in a six-sided house. That same year, she and her husband, along with their brother-in-law, Harvey Hill, organized the Hill and Irwin Land Agency, which specialized in the building of hexagonal homes. At least two or three houses were built in Charlotte based on Irwin’s patent, although, sadly, none stand today.

Irwin died in Charlotte in 1897 and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery there. No plaque or mention of her famous patent or accomplishments appears on her tombstone, which is not hexagonal, as has sometimes been written. (It is rectangular and, unfortunately, in disrepair.) But, as North Carolinians, we should remember this frail and courageous woman’s achievements. Irwin lived in a century when girls seldom received more than a sixth-grade education, yet she taught herself skills in engineering and architecture that no college or university would teach her. She helped open doors for women, not just in the field of architecture, but as an encouragement that they, too, could aspire to higher education and professional jobs once held only by men.

“*At the time of this article’s publication, Kathy Neill Herran, of Charlotte, was the author of They Married Confederate Officers, the story of the six Morrison sisters including Harriet, as well as Anna, the wife of Confederate Lieutenant Governor Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. The book received the 1996 Willie Parker Peace History Book Award from the North Carolina Society of Historians.

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