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AND CHARLES BELFOURE

*Niernsee
and Neilson,
Architects of
Baltimore*

TWO CAREERS
ON THE EDGE OF
THE FUTURE



The First Partnership and Town Houses in Mount Vernon

By the mid 1840s, the land around the Washington Monument was being transformed into Baltimore's most prestigious residential district, Mount Vernon Place. The new neighborhood would be built on land at the south end of Belvidere, the estate of the Revolutionary War hero John Eager Howard, who in 1815 had donated a small parcel for the erection of the monument. After his death in 1827, his heirs laid out the land around the monument into building lots facing four parks surrounding the monument.

Baltimore's housing patterns, which dated from its founding in 1729, were slowly changing. Men of wealth no longer wanted to live cheek by jowl with the working classes near the harbor. They now desired to live away from the city's commercial center in more spacious quarters befitting their status. The nature of the business class was undergoing a change as well. Instead of traditional merchants actively involved in the day-to-day running of shipping concerns and small businesses in the city, "men of capital," who made their money from investments came to dominate Baltimore's business community, becoming the city's wealthiest citizens. These were the men who came to live in Mount Vernon.

The streets defining Mount Vernon had been laid out when John Niernsee visited the monument in 1839, but the blocks were mostly vacant. The lots would soon be filled with grand town houses, designed in the latest architectural fashion—the Greek Revival. And Benjamin H. Latrobe Jr. desired to live in such a house in Mount Vernon. Latrobe had prospered with the B&O, becoming the chief engineer in 1842. He had risen in Baltimore society by proving

to the wealthy directors of the B&O what an exceptionally talented man he was. The driving force behind the construction of the line to Cumberland and to Wheeling, Latrobe kept a firm hand on all aspects of the project, including construction, surveying, cost estimates and economic forecasts, which convinced stockholders that all this work would prove profitable. Many men, as well as the City of Baltimore and the State of Maryland, had invested heavily in the B&O. They realized that Latrobe was the one indispensable man who could bring the great enterprise to completion and thus financial success. The entire cost of the expansion to Wheeling would be \$22 million, only 6 percent over Latrobe's original estimate—an extraordinary feat given that he was building a railroad for the first time and over mountainous terrain.¹

Latrobe would build two houses, at 606 and 608 South Washington Place, one for himself and the other to sell. The architectural profession was slowly gaining a foothold in Baltimore, and there were a few men who had made the transition from carpenter-builder or gentleman-architect to true practitioner of architecture. Latrobe could have chosen a local architect like Robert Cary Long Jr. to design his houses, but instead he gave the opportunity to his former B&O engineer. The choice was probably based in part on his admiration of Niernsee's ability and the lower fee the young architect probably charged to get his start in the profession. Niernsee had been waiting for this opportunity since his days surveying in the South. He could not have wished for a better first client to begin his career. To garner important

NIERNSEE
AND NEILSON

commissions, an architect needs clients with connections and influence, and Latrobe, with his ties to the Baltimore business community and society gave Niernsee an excellent entry to this very privileged world. Niernsee's career would be a textbook case of how the right architectural patronage could pave the way for a very successful practice.

Latrobe's houses were prominent enough to be described in the *Baltimore Sun* in 1846. The *Sun*, which had begun regularly reporting on the building activities around Mount Vernon about this time, commented, "Taking it throughout, Baltimore can boast few finer buildings than this."³ The buildings were quite large, with twenty-eight-foot fronts, three stories, and an attic; with back buildings, the total depth was ninety-seven feet. The interiors were trimmed in marble and heated by hot air furnaces. The façades of the houses, which were not identical, were done in the Greek Revival style; marble steps led to a columned Greek Doric portico beyond which lay the vestibule, opening to a double parlor and elegant staircase. There were two large bedrooms in the second story and three in the third. The attic story held servant's quarters and storage rooms. The fireplaces throughout the house were done in marble, and a boiler in the basement kitchen sent hot water to the "bath house" in the third story of the back building.⁴

Niernsee needed design guidance as to what was "au courant" and may have turned to builders' guides for inspiration (there were no architectural publications at this time). In 1840, one year after Niernsee had settled in Baltimore, John Hall, a builder-architect and furniture designer published *A Series of Select and Original Modern Designs for Dwelling Houses*, providing designs and floor plans for fashionable Greek Revival style houses. He also published a book detailing compatible interior decorating schemes, including suitable furniture and the production of appropriate moldings. A third book was a guide for carpenters on developing elaborate curving staircases and their geometry.

Most row housing in the city was "designed" by carpenter-builders, who depended heavily on such guides. Niernsee likely took his design cues from earlier high-style Greek Revival houses in the neighborhood. John Eager Howard's sons, William and Charles, had erected Greek Revival row houses in the early 1830s, which set the architectural standard for much of the future residential development. Both boasted Ionic porticos

with low-pitched roofs and attic windows. The Morton House at 107 West Monument Street was another important Greek Revival composition of the late 1830s—five bays wide with an attic story and a free-standing portico and tiny attic windows. In 1842, William Tiffany commissioned an unknown architect to design a five-bay-wide house at 8 West Mount Vernon Place that had a tall English basement and a bold four-columned Doric entrance portico.⁵

The influence of these buildings is apparent in Niernsee's early residential designs and would set a precedent for his design approach for the rest of his career. Niernsee was never to be a highly innovative architect, but one who was very adept at manipulating current and past styles into dynamic compositions. One of Latrobe's houses eventually became an annex to the original Walters Art Gallery, and both were later torn down to provide the site for the present 1909 museum building at the northwest corner of Charles and Centre Streets. Aside from the description of the Latrobe House, the *Sun* article contained two very important sentences—"This splendid mansion has been erected for B. H. Latrobe, Esq. It was constructed under the superintendence of Mr. John R. Niernsee, architect."⁶ It was the very first mention of Niernsee's work in the press. Many more complimentary articles would appear in Baltimore newspapers over Niernsee's career, making his talent and ability known to the public and playing a major role in garnering him new commissions.

With the Latrobe House, Niernsee established a precedent that architects follow to this day—he supervised the actual construction of the project to make sure his design was executed properly. Latrobe paid him \$1,800 for the supervision alone. In that era, there were usually no general contractors who handled entire projects; instead, Niernsee would hire the subcontractors and act as superintendent, a practice that no architect would follow today.

Without Latrobe's commission, Niernsee probably would have left Baltimore in search of an engineer's position after he was let go by the B&O. Instead, with this first job from an influential member of Baltimore society, he was able to put up his shingle and advertise that he would do architectural and engineering work (including steam engineering, a discipline that was never taken up).

Other than Latrobe's houses, there is no record of work done by Niernsee on his own

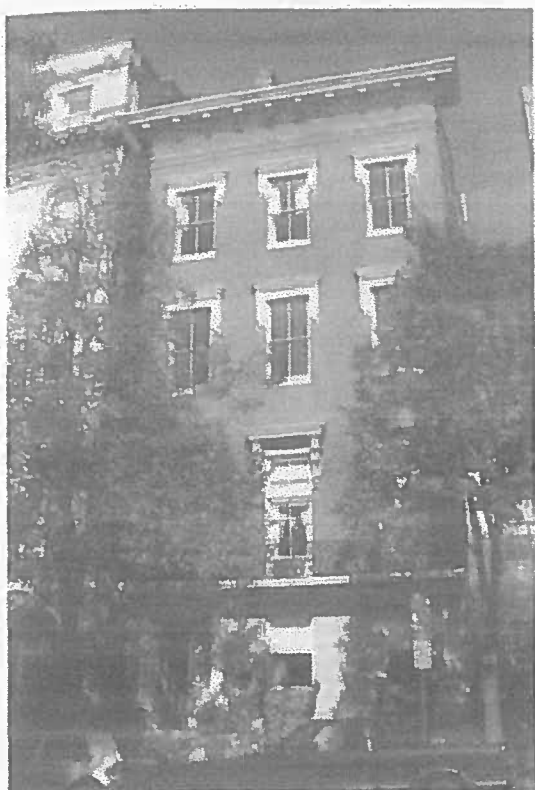


FIG. 3. (left) Tiffany House, Baltimore. Charles Belfoure



FIG. 4. (right) Duvall House, Baltimore. Charles Belfoure

THE FIRST
PARTNERSHIP AND
TOWN HOUSES IN
MOUNT VERNON

account between 1846 and 1848. His work for Latrobe began to pay dividends in 1848, however, when he garnered three important residential commissions in Mount Vernon. Again the *Sun* took note of the new work and in November 1849 commented on "the splendid places of residence recently erected thereon, which, for general beauty of exterior, elegant workmanship, and convenience of interior arrangements would lose nothing in comparison with any similar edifices in the Union."⁶ All three followed the Greek Revival model; the Edmund Didier House at 16 West Mount Vernon Place had a "chaste Greek front and portico of classic taste and beauty." The house was drastically altered in 1888 and 1896 to reflect the current Romanesque revival style. The George Tiffany House at 12 West Mount Vernon Place was also a Greek Revival composition with a lavish interior; the floors were done in marble with the main stair lit by a dome of stained glass (fig. 3). The façade was ornamented by an elaborate balcony of cast iron, a material that was beginning to come into use by the end of the 1840s.

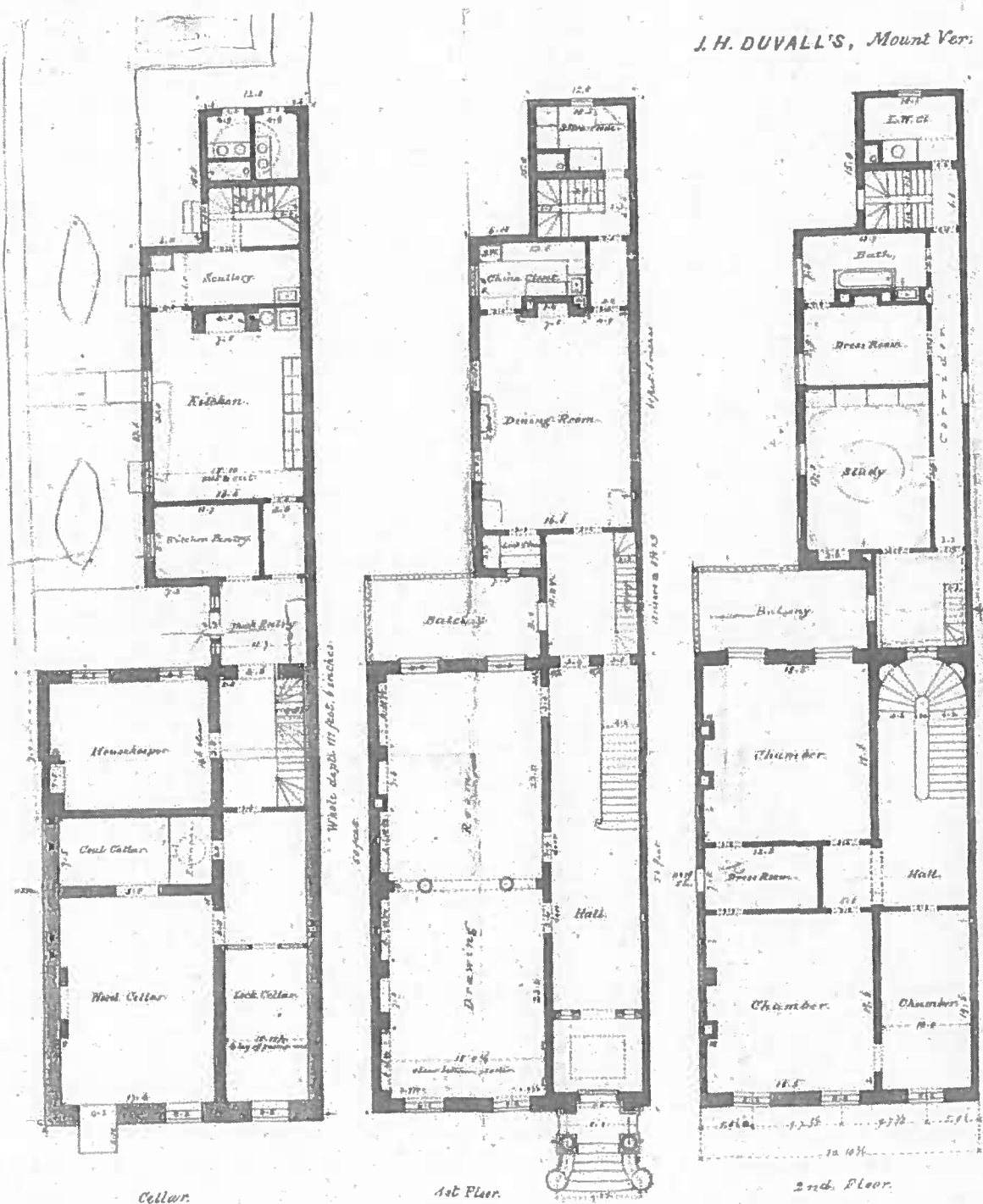
The John H. Duvall House, across the street at 5 West Mount Vernon Place, had a similar Greek Revival exterior (fig. 4). It is one of the very few buildings for which Niernsee's original drawings still exist. Found in the posses-

sion of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the drawings, which were submitted with an application for insurance to the Franklin Fire Insurance Company of Philadelphia in 1848, show the original design including a cross section through the depth of the house (fig. 5).

The design was standard for a high-style row house of the period with a spacious stair hall, a double parlor, forty-six feet in length, and a large dining room in the back building from which a rear stair led to the kitchen and scullery in the basement. Bedrooms and a study were located in the second and third stories. The servant's room at the rear of the third story of the back building was connected to the rest of the levels with a stair, and behind the main stair was another servant's stair to the basement. At the rear of the main block, a balcony on the first and second stories overlooked the garden. The house was well proportioned with a three-bay-wide, thirty-foot frontage and fifteen- and fourteen-foot ceilings on the first and second levels, respectively. Instead of being a cramped space, the basement, housing the kitchen, had a twelve-foot ceiling and its own outside entry located where the back building joined the main block. All of Niernsee's Mount Vernon houses had indoor bathrooms, a luxury only the wealthy could afford at the time. The bathroom would not

FIG. 5. John R. Niernsee, Duvall House, Baltimore, plans. Historical Society of Pennsylvania

NIERNSEE
AND NEILSON



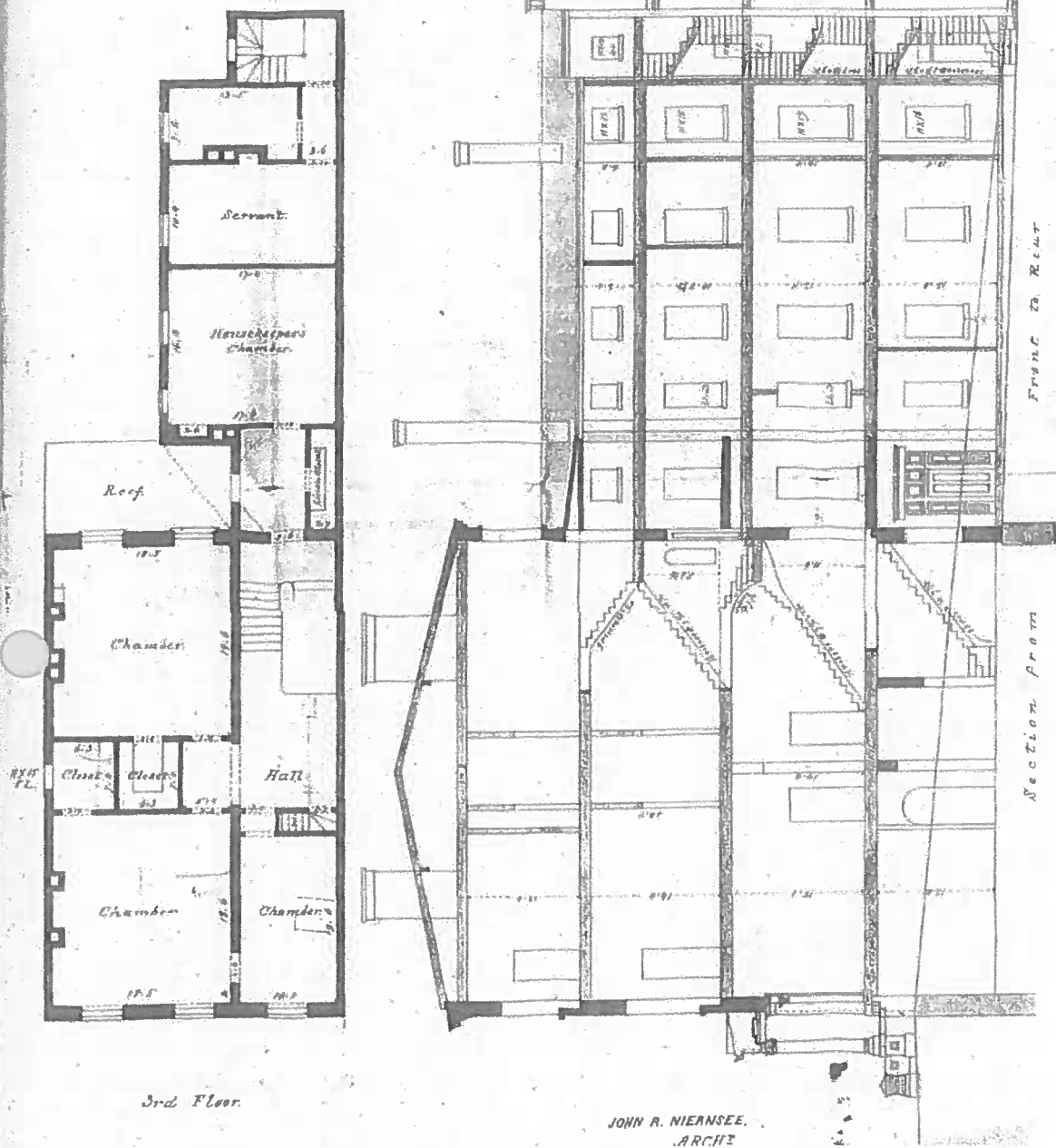
become a middle-class convenience until after the Civil War.⁷

Assuming that Niernsee did the drawings himself (he signed them), they clearly show his fine drafting ability. Many architectural drawings of this period were just crude pencil sketches by carpenters. Any detailing was drawn in chalk at full scale on a floor or wall at the building site. It is readily apparent from Niernsee's drawings that he had been trained in drafts-

manship at the Polytechnic in Prague. Done in ink on linen, as was the practice of the time, the line work is crisp, accurate, and professional. Instead of single lines to delineate the walls, he gave them properly scaled thicknesses as well as "pocheing" them, or coloring the walls with ink. All dimensions are indicated, including those for the doors, windows, and stairs, with the lettering done in an European-influenced cursive manner. The section indicates the design

Square

*Settled 1 April 1848.
Not referred to in application of Insurance to the Franklin
Fire Ins. Co. of Phila. — John M. Duvall*



THE FIRST
PARTNERSHIP AND
TOWN HOUSES IN
MOUNT VERNON

of the entry portico and calls out the three-inch by twelve-inch wood floor joists. Compared to today's construction documents, which spell out the tiniest detail in order to avoid liability problems, nineteenth-century drawings give the bare minimum of information, leaving the construction methods and interior and exterior detailing to the craftsmen.

Architects in this era spent much more time at the building site than architects do today,

answering questions and sketching out details on the spot. The *Sun* routinely listed the subcontractors on every job, and it is clear that Niernsee liked to use particular craftsmen again and again, like John E. Davis, a carpenter, Dieter Barger, a bricklayer, and Bell & Packie, marble cutters, probably because he knew they were trustworthy and did high-quality work. The Duvall, Didier, and Tiffany Houses were very expensive for the time—a total cost of



FIG. 6. Thomas House, Baltimore, ca. 1860. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

\$60,000 (\$1.4 million in 2004). The newspaper praised all three houses, but most importantly, it acknowledged the designer, "they were designed and superintended in all their details by John R. Niernsee, Esq. Architect." Positive publicity of this kind gave momentum to Niernsee's practice and very soon his plate was full of commissions—all from affluent influential Baltimoreans, which in turn would lead to even more commissions.

But it would be his next house that would secure his reputation. The Thomas House, later known as the Jencks House and now called the Hackerman House, at 1 West Mount Vernon Place, is considered Niernsee's masterpiece (fig. 6). The house, built for the wealthy physician and banker Dr. John Hansen Thomas, was noteworthy from the beginning for its size and its expense. The building, the *Sun* reported when construction began, "has already attracted considerable attention from both artisans and property holders" (Dec. 14, 1848). The building was, at the time of its construction, extremely

sumptuous in its decoration and fittings, and a landmark of domestic architecture in Baltimore.

The house also marked an important stylistic transition in Baltimore. Instead of strictly adhering to the Greek Revival models of previous years, Niernsee cautiously introduced Italianate features to residential design in the Thomas House. The Italianate had been used in commercial buildings and townhouses in New York since the mid 1840s and by the 1850s supplanted the Greek Revival across the country. The house continued the basic proportions and elements of the old style; five bays wide with attic windows, measuring fifty-nine feet across and sixty-three feet deep with a raised entrance portico of four Corinthian columns, "of the purist white Italian marble," reported the *Sun*. But it was the embellishment of the north and east façades that was novel in its use of a new architectural material. The tall windows are topped with Italianate-style cast-iron architraves molded in a Greek Revival motif.

The most arresting new feature, however, is the deep overhanging Italianate cornice, supported by scroll brackets. In a nod to the old style, the top edge of the cornice is decorated with Greek acanthus leaf ornaments. The original stucco exterior, painted a classical dove gray, was later removed.⁸

The interior, as well, broke away from the Greek Revival and the mold set by John Hall. The focus inside the house is on a magnificent, semicircular oak staircase, which rises out of a large stair hall decorated in the Corinthian style. "Above the staircase," reported the *Sun*, "rises a superb oval dome, supported from the second floor by Corinthian columns of the same style as those below" (Jan. 24, 1851). The public rooms on the main floor are lit by French windows, glazed doors that extend from floor to ceiling and can be opened to allow full ventilation to the room. Each window opens onto a shallow cast-iron balcony, which gives a sense of privacy from the sidewalk only a few feet below. The second floor windows on the north and east façades also have similar cast-iron balconies. The floor plan revolves around the central staircase (fig. 7).

To the right of the stair hall is the usual double parlor, brilliantly decorated in stucco with its sixty-foot length broken up by two pairs of marbleized Corinthian columns. On the left, at the center of the house, was once a breakfast or morning room leading to the library in the front of the house, which was originally decorated in the Gothic Revival manner, with elaborately carved mahogany bookcases and trim, including carved wooden heads of famous authors such as Robert Burns and William Shakespeare, attached to the tops of the pilasters. Insets over the bookcases and doors were painted in trompe l'oeil fashion. The other door from the morning room led to the dining room at the rear, which was also designed in the Gothic Revival style, with plaster walls and ceiling painted in imitation of wood.

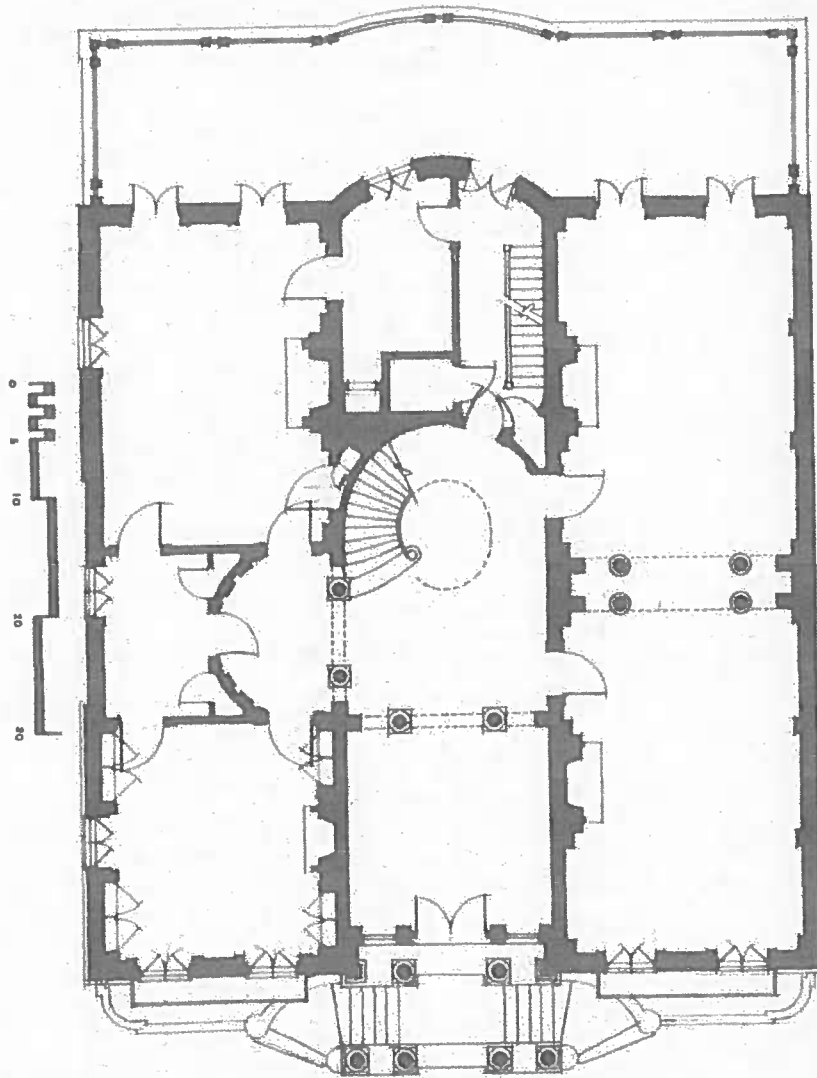
It was the insertion of these airy, central rooms, which focused on drawing room requirements, that was such a departure from the Greek Revival interiors published by John Hall. Entertaining in this period had a strict code of behavior, with women retiring to drawing rooms leaving the men in the dining room with port and cigars. The arrival of guests in the great hall created a sense of drama all its own with the monumental curving stair acting

almost as a stage piece where the hostess stood to welcome her guests.

The house, completed in 1851, was remodeled in 1892 by Charles Platt, the architect and brother-in-law of Francis Jencks, the new owner of the house. The east façade was modified by the addition of a bay window to the dining room, as well as several other small changes to the exterior. An open rear porch with cast-iron railings was converted into a conservatory. The interior was changed to the extent that Platt seriously diminished the amount of decoration that was originally part of the architects' plan of 1848. This building has been renovated, including restoring its original color scheme, for use by the Walters Art Gallery, whose Asian art collection it now houses.

Niernsee's inclusion of fashionable Italianate elements in the Thomas House of 1848 shows that he was well up to date on current architectural trends sweeping the nation. Influenced by

FIG. 7. Thomas House, Baltimore, first-floor plans. Peter Pearre



the Renaissance palazzo designs of the English architect Charles Barry, the Scottish born architect John Notman introduced the Italianate style to America as early as 1837 with the Bishop Doane House in Burlington, New Jersey, and the Philadelphia Atheneum of 1846. It is doubtful that Niernsee ever saw these buildings; instead, he relied on architectural books. In an age before architectural periodicals, architects and builders relied on books that illustrated the new styles. One early English work available in Baltimore in 1836 was *Encyclopedia of Cottage Farm and Villa Architecture*, by J. C. Loudon. American architect Alexander Jackson Davis published his designs in *Rural Architecture* in 1837. But the most influential architectural books of the period were Andrew Jackson Downing's *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, published in 1841, and *Cottage Residences*, published in 1842, which introduced romantic styles, including the Italianate, to America. All these books were available to Niernsee, which undoubtedly helped him master the details of the new style, as evidenced by his handling of the Thomas House. At this time, Robert Cary Long Jr. designed an Athenaeum for Baltimore—the first building to bring the palazzo style to the city. Standing at the northwest corner of St. Paul and Saratoga Streets, the gleaming white marble building could not but have influenced Niernsee in his experiments with Italianate design.⁹

As the Thomas House was going up, Niernsee was working on a substantial dwelling for another important Baltimore businessman and banker, John S. Gittings, at the northeast corner of St. Paul and Monument Streets. Three stories in height and trimmed in marble, the forty-nine-foot-wide house had thirty rooms and cost \$23,000. Gittings was so pleased with the results he took the hundred or so men involved in the construction out for a night on the town at John Himesley's Public House, where "everything that the epicurean palate of man could desire was provided in abundance, and the character of the feast was highly creditable to all concerned."¹⁰

Gittings, like Latrobe, also saw profit in building speculatively in Mount Vernon. He had already built rows of working-class houses in Fells Point and Federal Hill and now eyed a wealthier clientele. In 1851, he commissioned Niernsee to design six row houses for him at 104–112 East Madison Street, spacious three-

story, three-bay-wide buildings with Italianate cornices (fig. 8). Originally stuccoed brown and scored in imitation of brownstone, the row still survives with the stucco removed from the brick façades. Though it was a speculative venture, the houses were not inexpensive—\$100,000 in total cost. Beginning in the late 1840s, both the carpenter-builder who built for the working classes and the professional architect, like Niernsee, who designed for the wealthy, now bought a great many prefabricated architectural items, such as Gittings' wood cornices and arched entry surrounds, from established mill-work dealers who mass produced their products with steam-powered machinery rather than by hand.¹¹

The *Sun* article of December 14, 1848, credited both the Thomas and Gittings houses to the firm of Niernsee & Neilson. This was the first mention of the partnership in the press. Niernsee's good fortune in securing commissions meant he had more work than he could handle by himself and needed help, a reliable right-hand man. He knew Neilson's ability from their railroad days together. Neilson had come into Niernsee's office to assist him as early as April 1848 and certainly proved to be an able lieutenant, supervising the work and taking care of the office correspondence. The firm of Niernsee & Neilson legally began when partnership documents were signed in July 1848, and business started up at 16 East Fayette Street.

A successful partnership in any business comes about when each partner has a definite talent that the other does not. Their respective strengths must complement each other. In an architectural firm, these talents usually divide into design, business procurement, and construction administration. The melding of these separate abilities creates an effective working relationship, and this is exactly what happened with Niernsee & Neilson. It is clear that Niernsee presided over all of the design work of the firm until its dissolution in 1855. Neilson had no formal training in architecture, but being of a quick mind and an analytical nature, he may have contributed to the critiques of the works in progress but more likely served as construction supervisor. Meticulous and detail oriented, he was well suited to this role. The engineering experience he gained from the B&O Railroad gave Neilson a complete understanding of the building process. But at the same time, Neilson was actually serving an architectural



FIG. 8. Row Houses,
Madison Street,
Baltimore. Charles
Belfoure

THE FIRST
PARTNERSHIP AND
TOWN HOUSES IN
MOUNT VERNON

apprenticeship and learning the design side of the profession, something that would be quite beneficial to him in the future.

As opposed to being a firm run by a sole practitioner with very little drafting help, as was the norm for early architectural firms in America, Niernsee & Neilson became Baltimore's first full-service firm, with a drafting staff and a business structure that could handle the volume of work that poured in from 1848 to 1855. Processing the enormous amounts of paperwork for the accounting, contracting, and inspecting that all these projects generated could not have been accomplished without the able assistance of a staff. Part of the firm's success was the thoroughness with which it supervised the various contracts for its clients. Though no accounting or project records of the firm remain, there is evidence in the form of records from clients' daybooks that both partners were scrupulous in their control of the work of various contractors. The work was inspected, approved, and the owner billed only when satisfactory completion was achieved. Bills from the alteration of the Thomas Swann House, for example, show where the architects wrote "correct" and signed their name below the bottom line figure of an invoice authorizing payment (fig. 9).¹²

Architectural partnerships were rare in pre-Civil War America. The most prominent one

was that of Ithiel Town and Alexander Jackson Davis, which began in 1829. Town secured business and Davis remained in New York City to design, manage the office, and teach students. The partnership, which briefly had branch offices in Washington and Baltimore between 1832 and 1833, ended in 1835, when Town decided to concentrate on bridge engineering. Niernsee & Neilson were among the very few architectural partnerships in this period to survive and become successful. The practice was run as a business instead of an artistic cottage industry.

Baltimore's rapid industrial growth meant it needed to house the workers and immigrants who came to the city to work. Housing construction rose to a peak of about two thousand new houses a year in 1848, then leveled off to about eighteen hundred units built annually until 1851.¹³ Except for the six houses for Gittings, Niernsee & Neilson would design none of this speculative housing.

The design of such houses had traditionally been the province of the building mechanics, the nineteenth-century term for builder—either masons who built houses and incorporated the work of carpenters or carpenters who employed masons and other tradesmen to do the work. The buildings were designed from sets of instructions for building a particular kind of house, exactly what John Hall and other pattern book

FIG. 9. Swann House,
Baltimore, invoice,
1849. Maryland
Historical Society,
Baltimore, Maryland

NIERNSEE
AND NEILSON

Balto Decr. 31 1849

M^r Tho^s Swann To *Bewan* from *D^r*

To Balance due on Account \$2.00

Aug 25	To 2 Marble wills b. 8 at 90cts	6.00
"	" 2 Freestone do b. 8 " 45.	3.00
28	" 2 Marble do b. 8 " 70	6.00
31	" 2 Freestone " b. 8 1/2 " 45	3.00
"	" 1 Marble " 3.4 " 90	3.00
		.50
Sept 14	" Hand 1/4 day at home	1.00
" 18	" Fixing door sill	
		<u>\$24.50</u>

Correct - *Niernsee & Neilson*
Recd Payment

Bewan

M^r James Conley
To Order *M^r Bayley*
For *M^r Swann*

Balto 1849

To *W Reed &*

Sept 21 To 10 Br. Hair 2.50
" 24 " 15 " do 3.75
\$6.25

W Reed Correct *Niernsee & Neilson*
W Reed

authors provided in their ready-made plans. The size of the framing and the thickness of walls were empirical in nature, passed down from one mechanic to another over generations.

As buildings became more complex, especially nonresidential building types, the public slowly turned to the very few professional architects in America like Niernsee, a person who not only possessed artistic talent but also had a scientific knowledge of the strength and qualities of various materials and a well-rounded knowledge of construction. Niernsee & Neil-

son would establish a truly professional level of architectural services, quite different from that of a draftsman working for a builder. They would act as the client's agent, insuring that the building was constructed as designed with a high level of craftsmanship. The firm would guard against shoddy building practices and overcharging by the contractor or subcontractors. The services they offered were contrary to the norm in Baltimore, where architects had had very little influence. Builders possessed all the power over design and construction super-

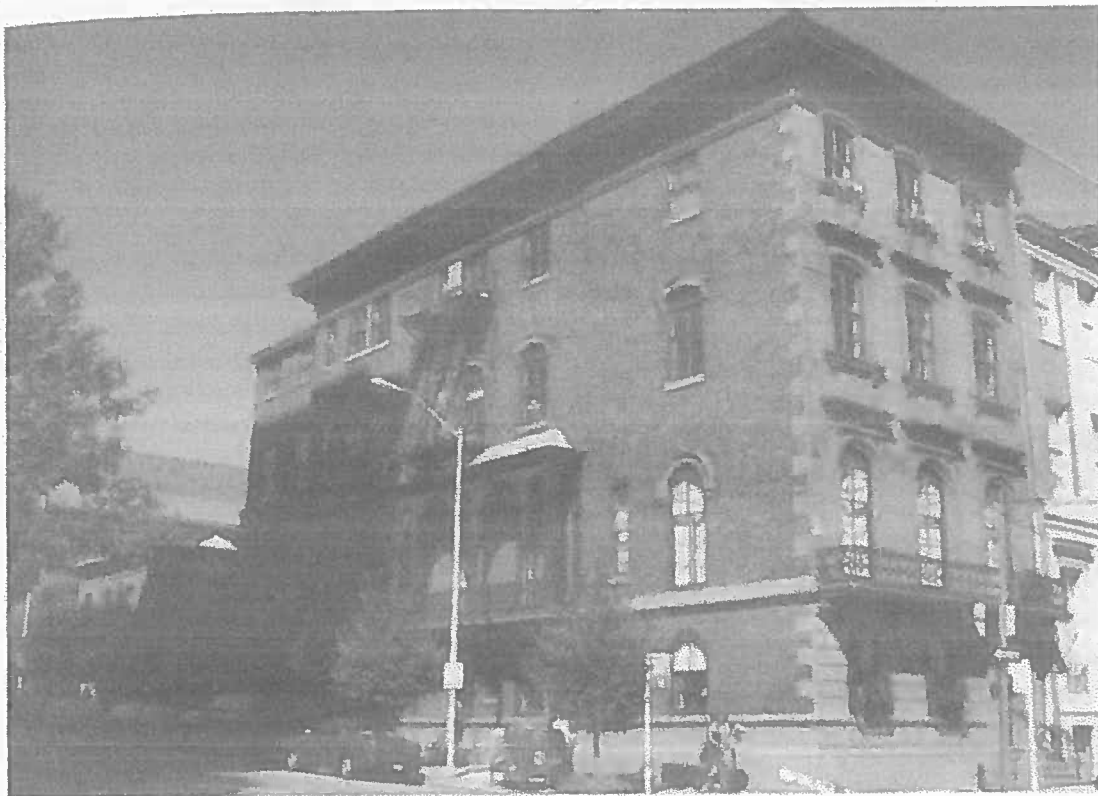
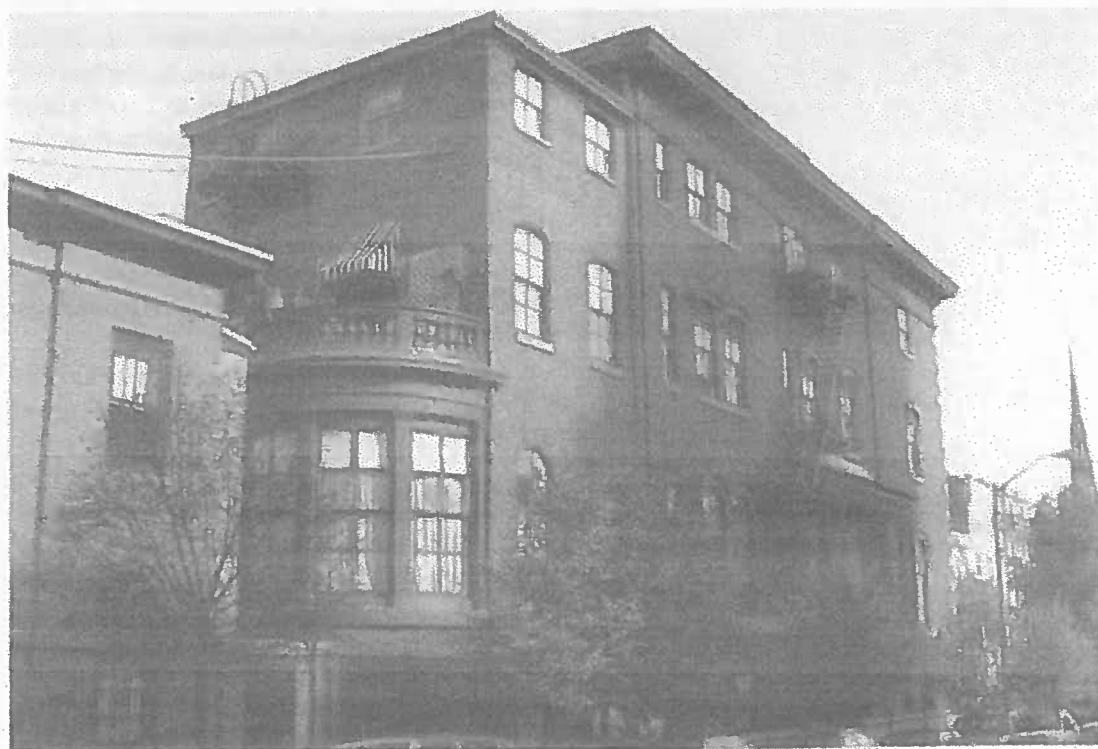


FIG. 10. (*top*) Miller House, Baltimore (front). James D. Dilts

FIG. 11. (*bottom*) Miller House, Baltimore (rear). Charles Belfoure

THE FIRST
PARTNERSHIP AND
TOWN HOUSES IN
MOUNT VERNON



vision, sometimes hiring architects to do the most minimal of drafting for their projects. This led to an almost universal lack of appreciation of the value of an architect's services and skills. Niernsee & Neilson was the first firm to counter this trend.

On his next major commission, Niernsee would completely abandon the Greek Revival style and produce a fully developed Italianate design. In 1851, the Decatur Miller House, which still stands at 700 Cathedral Street at the northwest corner of Monument and Cathe-



FIG. 12. Miller House, Baltimore (interior, second-floor front)

dral Streets, would also provide him his first opportunity to use real brownstone instead of brown painted stucco (figs. 10, 11). Once again, Niernsee was aware of the latest architectural fashion. Brownstone, a member of the sandstone family, became a popular building veneer in the 1840s. There were four main quarries on the eastern seaboard from which to buy the material: Portland, Connecticut; Hummelstown, Pennsylvania; East Meadow, Massachusetts; and the largest in New Jersey, a thirty-two-mile belt along the Delaware River above Trenton from the Palisades on the Hudson River to Suffern, New York. The last provided the stone for Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church on Wall Street, built in 1846. The mania for the material would last until about 1900. It was easily cut to a four-inch thickness and applied as a veneer to a brick back-up wall.

Niernsee gave the Miller House an English basement and a brownstone entrance façade with a rusticated basement, molded window surrounds, and a handsome bracketed cornice. The brownstone was not continued around the Monument Street façade; here the brick was painted in imitation of brownstone. The windows on Monument Street are protected from the sun by an elaborate series of cast-iron balconies, a style that tends to be associated with New Orleans, but was at the time of its construction just as original to Baltimore.¹³

The interior of the Miller House was quite elaborate, and it is fortunate that very little of the original decoration has been altered, including the ceiling and wall decorations of the *piano nobile* in the second story. The three-bay-wide

front allowed the visitor to enter a foyer and then a hall, from which an attractive elliptical stairway rose in a gentle looping fashion in a counter-clockwise direction to the second story, then to the third. A stylish skylight of stained glass made by H. T. Gernhardt of Baltimore lights the stair. The principal room of the ground floor was the office/library/den of the owner Decatur Miller, a well-known merchant and shipper. This room was done in what was referred to then as the Elizabethan manner, with a deeply coffered ceiling, involving not only rectangular but diagonal patterns. A small room to the west still contains the original safe.

Some of the rooms were altered in the process of conversion, making it difficult to fully appreciate the grand parade of rooms on the *piano nobile* that originally existed in 1853. Behind these rooms, there was a small conservatory overlooking the alley behind the lot. The saloon ceiling, which is still extant, is very handsomely laid out in molded panels decorated with paintings and is an excellent example of the sumptuous decoration of this mid-century house (fig. 12).

There was very little description of this house in the local press, but the Decatur Miller House is unusual in that a ledger listing the building firms and costs still survives. The brownstone work cost \$3,792, with the lumber and carpentry amounting to \$10,770. The local firm of Hayward, Bartlett & Company fabricated the iron veranda for \$385. The architects' 5 percent fee on an estimated cost of \$26,314 amounted to \$1,316. The final construction cost was \$32,000.¹⁵ Architects in pre-Civil War America thought 5 percent was a fair fee. Benjamin Henry Latrobe and later Richard Upjohn first promoted the idea of a percentage fee tied to building costs as opposed to the lump sum payment the subcontractors received. The American Institute of Architects finally adopted the 5 percent fee in 1866.

The firm's next commission continued the valuable B&O connection that began with Benjamin H. Latrobe Jr. The 1850 \$3,300 addition and alteration to a house originally designed by Robert Cary Long Jr. for Thomas Swann in the 200 block of West Franklin Street, gave Niernsee another opportunity to design a two-story cast-iron veranda (fig. 13). It cost \$517 and faced the garden.

Swann, a lawyer who became the B&O's president in 1848, played an important role in securing financing for the line's expansion from Cumberland to Wheeling. His success would

open up the world of politics to him; he became mayor of Baltimore in 1854. The Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, sat on Niernsee's balcony during a celebration in his honor when he came to Baltimore in 1860. The list of final costs for the house, which late in the century housed the Maryland Academy of Sciences, show that again, the firm received a healthy 5 percent fee of \$165. As mentioned earlier, the Swann job is notable for the extensive itemized bills now in the Maryland Historical Society, which show the firm's approval process for paying contractors.¹⁶

The Albert H. Schumacher House, at 10 East Mount Vernon Place, now known as Asbury House, is another Italianate design in brownstone, "a grand and costly" residence of the "Roman style," noted the *Sun*.¹⁷ Schumacher, one of the city's first successful German businessmen, was the managing director of the North German Lloyd Line, the main steamship company that brought immigrants to Baltimore. Built in 1855, the three-bay-wide house has a rusticated English basement containing an arched doorway and two arched windows (fig. 14). Its *piano nobile* is treated in an entirely original manner, a very large bay window with a deep brownstone balcony stretches across the entire façade, providing the only fenestration. The bay contains tall narrow arched windows framed by decorative niches. Two-story pilasters run up to the underside of a dramatic overhanging Italianate cornice.

The interior is a repetition of the sumptuousness of the Thomas and Miller Houses. Instead of opening onto a very narrow stair hall, the ground floor entrance vestibule leads to a beautiful semicircular stair hall, which runs the full width of the house, the stairs rising clockwise to the *piano nobile* (fig. 15). In the vestibule, there is a very exuberant yellow-orange marble dado framed in wood. The marble was probably supplied by Niernsee's lifelong friend Hugh Sisson, the stone dealer, who dealt in exotic marble and stones and contributed greatly to the decorative effect of many of Niernsee's buildings. The ground story office, with its decorative Elizabethan ceiling of geometric moldings and its comfortable Victorian fireplace, is where Schumacher conducted much of his business. The staircase leads to the principal room of the *piano nobile*, an octagonal saloon boasting four niches, filled with built-in furniture and a fireplace. The dining room and a bedroom or sunroom are also done in an octagon shape. The

curved stair continues to the third story, where it is lit by a magnificent and spacious glazed dome supported by Corinthian columns.

The firm's William Mayhew House, located next door at 12 East Mount Vernon Place and built the same year, was also designed in "the Roman style" but without the dramatic bay window. Looking similar to a speculative Manhattan brownstone, the house has plain window trim but an ornate arched entry with double doors set beneath an arched transom. The cornice was removed to install windows in the fourth story. Both houses had four-story back buildings, where the bathrooms, kitchen, and servants' quarters were located.¹⁸ Other brownstones were built in Mount Vernon around the same time. On the same block as the Schumacher and Mayhew houses, Louis Long designed six speculative Italianate brownstone houses for Richard E. France, who sold all of them before they were finished.¹⁹

FIG. 13. Swann House, Baltimore, balcony. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland

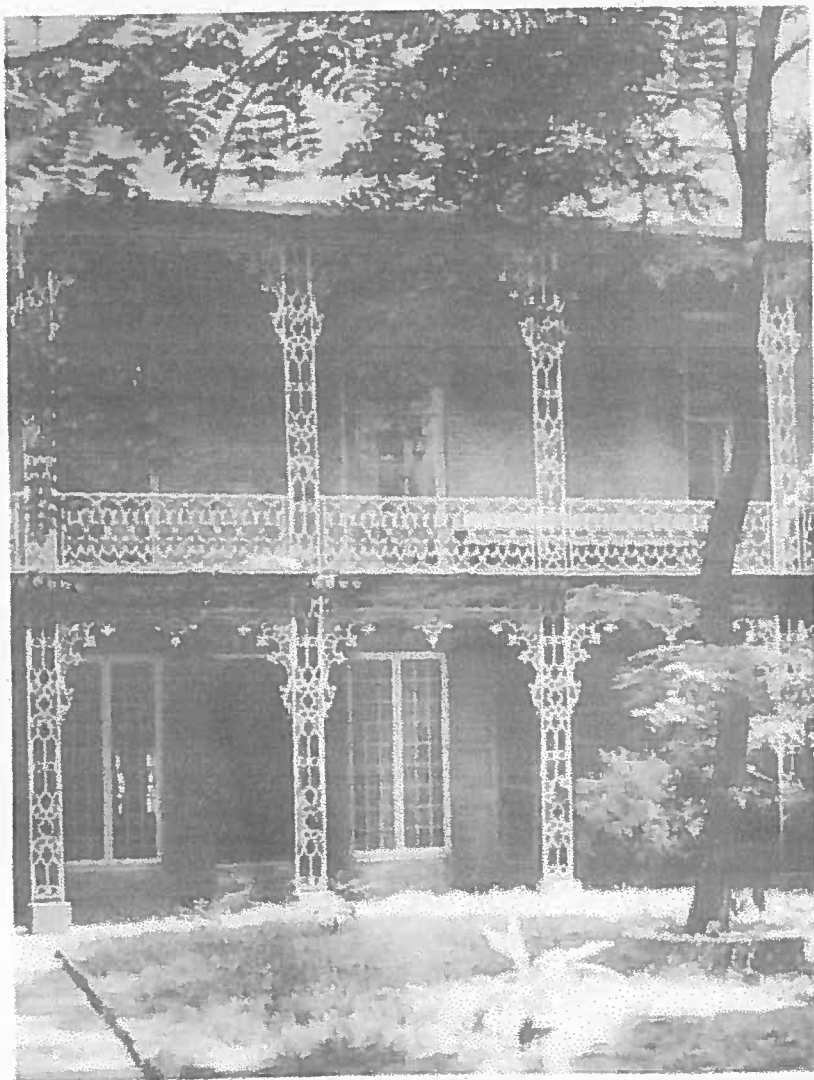




FIG. 14. (above)
Schumacher House,
Baltimore. Charles
Belfoure

FIG. 15. (right)
Schumacher House,
Baltimore. James D.
Dilts

The Latrobe family continued to use Niernsee for their own residences. The firm designed a house in 1851 for John H. B. Latrobe at 901 North Charles Street; it was demolished before World War I and replaced by a tall apartment house named after Latrobe.²⁰ A pair of three-story houses that had imitation brownstone façades was built for James Carroll at the southwest corner of Howard and Monument Streets in 1852. The buildings that now stand at this location, however, bear no resemblance to the early newspaper descriptions.²¹ After 1852–53, commissions for city houses slowed down.

Niernsee, who had mainly lived in boarding houses, now had the financial means and the time to build his own speculative houses. In 1853, he built three houses at 404–408 Courtland Street, and he lived at 406 from 1866 to 1870. All were

demolished in 1914. At the time of their construction Niernsee was living in his own house (not of his own design) at 922 St. Paul Street.

Niernsee and Neilson's Mount Vernon residences became the cornerstone of their practice, establishing their reputation for quality and dependability with Baltimore's elite. The publicity they garnered for these houses solidified their reputation as the architectural firm of choice for the wealthy. An architect could not have dreamed of a more successful start to a new practice. Instead of struggling, as most new architects did (and still do), to get even the most mundane of commissions to launch their careers, Niernsee's first projects were of the highest quality one could have. Beginning with Benjamin H. Latrobe Jr.'s pair of houses, the firm produced one handsome design after another, making a smooth transition from the Greek Revival to the Italianate style. Niernsee's elegant palazzo for Albert Schumacher, in particular, showed what sophisticated design skills he possessed. In addition, the firm did much in this period to further the separation of the professional architect from the builder, particularly with regard to the design and construction administration of a project. In the public's mind, the architectural firm of Niernsee & Neilson, not the carpenters or masons, created the design of the houses. Their practice was set to explode with work.

