**Echoes Through Time: The Living Legacy of the Newell A. Whiting House in Onawa, Iowa**

**Architecture, Memory, and Preservation in a Midwestern Landmark**

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On a quiet corner of Iowa Avenue in Onawa stands a grand brick house that has witnessed nearly a century and a half of local history. This is the Newell A. Whiting House, more commonly known as the Murphy House, a proud Italianate Victorian home built in the 1880s by one of the town's earliest entrepreneurs, which today also happens to be my grandmother's cherished residence. Growing into the person I am today, I knew it as "Grandma's house," where we gathered as a family. It always smelled like something baking, and the stairs creaked in all the right places. However, as I got older and asked more questions, I realized this was not just any old house. It had a story, and a long one at that. The home I visited in my early teen years is more than a residence. It is a piece of living history. My grandmother Cheryl and her husband Mark purchased the Whiting House nine years ago, not out of necessity, but out of love. In a stage of life when most people think about downsizing, they did the opposite. They sized up. Moreover, in doing so, they brought new life to a historic space that had long deserved careful stewardship. For them, it was not just about square footage or antique charm but about honoring the past while making it their own.

This paper explores the story of the Whiting House, blending professional historical research with a deep personal connection. In the pages that follow, I trace the origin of the house as the vision of a 19th-century pioneer, following its architectural character and evolving design, its recognition as a preserved local landmark, and ultimately the living legacy it continues to hold not just for the town of Onawa, but for my own family. Drawing on 19th-century Iowa newspapers, modern oral interviews, secondary histories, and architectural analyses, this paper explores how one Midwestern home can connect past and present, memory and identity, heritage and home. While this research offers a meaningful start, there remain areas particularly regarding interior restorations and early ownership records, that invite further exploration in the future.

The Newell A. Whiting House is inseparable from the story of its original owner, Newell Artemis Whiting. Whiting was a hardware merchant and entrepreneur who played a formative role in Onawa's early development. A native of New York born in 1823, he spent his youth learning the carriage-making trade and even ventured south, working in Ohio and Alabama in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1857, as the American frontier pressed westward, Whiting came to the young settlement of Onawa, Iowa, just as the town was being platted and organized. By the following year, 1858, he had established Onawa's first general hardware store, supplying tools and goods to a growing community of pioneers.[1] Success in commerce soon made Whiting one of Onawa's leading citizens as 1890 county history described him "the leading hardware dealer of Onawa" and "one of its most prominent and wealthy citizens," noting that he was among the early pioneers who arrived in the 1850s. In addition to his hardware business, Whiting also operated a sawmill, capitalizing on the local demand for building materials in the developing town. By the late 19th century, Newell A. Whiting had a substantial income and influence in Monona County's seat.

Both tragedy and renewal marked Whiting's personal life. He married his first wife, Louisa "Eliza" Criner, in 1851, and together they had several children during the 1850s. Lousia died in 1863, leaving Newell a widower with young children. Years later, Whiting found companionship again. He married Julia P. Fellows (herself born in 1831) as his second wife, and it was for Julia that Whiting constructed an impressive new family home in his later years. By 1880, Newell A. Whiting was in his late fifties and eager to build a residence benefiting his stature in the community. The result would be one of the grandest houses in Onawa, an enduring symbol of his legacy.

Planning and construction of the Newell A. Whiting House began around 1880 when Onawa was thriving and establishing its identity. The site was a large corner lot along Iowa Avenue, the town's main road. This location was prominent: Iowa Avenue is famously wide (claimed to be the widest main street in America at 150 feet across), providing a generous stage for the new house's imposing façade. Construction commenced in mid-1880 and quickly drew public interest. The local *Onawa Gazette* reported on the house's progress frequently over the next two years.[2] Contemporary newspaper accounts detail how the foundation was laid in 1880 and how the structure steadily rose, capturing the community's imagination. By May 1882, the house was essentially complete and ready to be occupied by Newell Whiting and his family.

The completed house was (and still is) a 2/1/2 story structure constructed of locally produced brick. The bricks were sourced from the Turin brickyard just a few miles away, a pinkish-toned pressed brick that gives the exterior its warm, rosy hue.[3][4] Architecturally, Italianate houses typically emphasized height, ornate detail, and a sense of picturesque elegance meant to evoke Tuscan villas. The Whiting House manifests these characteristics in a relatively pure form: a rectangular brick structure with a low-pitched hip roof and a prominent center gable on the front face. Under the eaves runs a decorative cornice supported by elaborate brackets (crafted from metal but painted to resemble carved stone), all hallmarks of Italianate design. At the very ape of the roof sits a square cupola, clad in metal and echoing the shape of the house itself, a charming flourish that provided both ventilation and a 360-degree view of the prairie town below.

The home's symmetrical front façade faces south onto Iowa Avenue and is organized around a central entrance. Twin bay windows protrude on either side of the front doors, creating a balanced, formal appearance. Each bay is filled with tall, narrow, two-paned windows topped by ornate metal hood moldings and an Italianate signature that adds visual interest above the glass. The double front doors are of solid walnut, accented with etched and treasured glass panels, and capped by a pane light, a grand entryway inviting visitors into the home's refined interior. Photographs and descriptions from the period indicate that early, all of these elements were handcrafted or sourced with quality in mind. Whiting's success in the hardware and lumber business meant he spared little expense' the woodwork and fine brass hardware throughout the home were said to reflect "the best that was obtainable" in that era and region. Indeed, many of these original materials remain in place today, from the intricate walnut staircase inside to the heavy exterior doors, offering a rare degree of authenticity to the 19th-century design.

Beyond its front elevation, the Whiting House features additional Italianate elements on its sides and rear. A long one-story porch runs along the east side of the house, supported by cast-metal Corinthian columns, and provides a shaded outdoor space facing Eleventh Street. This porch not only balanced the appearance of the building on its corner lot (since the east side also faces a street) but also gave the Whiting’s an easy method to observe pedestrians on Onawa's bustling main street. Decorative hood molds and brackets continue around the side elevations through the arrangement of windows on the non-street side, which is more informal, indicating that the architect (or builder) considered the corner orientation in the design. An ell extends to the rear (north) of the house, containing service areas like the kitchen. Initially, a frame summer kitchen was attached further north of the brick ell, and a separate carriage house sat back near the alley. Sanborn fire insurance maps from the late 1880s show these outbuildings, though they have since disappeared; the main house itself, however, endured with only minor exterior alterations.[5] As one local historian later noted, the Whiting house was a "textbook example" of the center-gable Italianate subtype, a style uncommon in rural Iowa, making it more of a landmark in Onawa.

Finishing touches were added to the property in the years after 1882, further elevating its stature. In 1884, an ornate wrought iron fence was installed along the south and east sides of the lot, enclosing the yard in an elegant Victorian fashion. With its cast iron finals and panels, this fence was significant enough to be mentioned in the newspaper; a July 1884 article praised the "elaborate wrought iron fence," adoring Mr. Whiting's proper, a feature that still contributes to the home's curb appeal today.[6] A few years later, in 1889, the interior received a fashionable upgrade. Skilled artisans applied new plaster relief work in the parlors and added decorative stencil painting to the ceilings. That summer, the *Gazette* described the interior of the Whiting residence as "a model of modern taste," noting details like molded plaster cornices and ceiling medallions that gave the rooms an extra touch of luxury.[7] By the end of the 1880s, it is no surprise that the Whiting House was seen as one of the nicest homes in town.[8]  It showed who Newell Whiting was and the people's pride in building something lasting when the town grew.

Tragically, Newell A. Whiting did not enjoy his showpiece home for very long. In September 1891, just about a decade after the house was completed, Whiting passed away at 68. His obituary in the *Onawa Gazette* lauded his many contributions to the community over 35 years and noted that he was one of the last of Onawa's first generation of settlers. The grand home on Iowa Avenue, built as a late-in-life gift to his second wife Julia and a residence for their family, suddenly became a widow's household. Julia Whiting continued to live in the house for a couple of years after Newell's death, reportedly maintaining it much as it was during her husband's lifetime. However, changes were soon afoot, bringing a new family and chapter into the house's story.

In 1894, the Whiting House found a new owner and steward. John R. Murphy, a local banker and civic leader, purchased the property from the Whiting estate in March of that year. Murphy was an early Monona County settler (He had come to the area in the 1850s, around the same time as Newell Whiting) and a veteran of the Civil War. By the 1890s, he was a respected figure in Onawa, even serving in public office and business leadership; one account called him "one of Onawa's most beloved citizens" at his death. With the purchase of the Whiting residence, John R. Murphy and his family took on an impressive home and took responsibility for preserving its character for future generations.

For many decades, and even present, the house was commonly known in town as the Murphy House. John R. Murphy raised his family there, and the home remained in the Murphy lineage through multiple generations. Keeping the house in the family for so long helped save it. While other 1800s homes were being gutted or torn down, this one held onto its history, piece by piece. While modernizing certain aspects of the home, the Murphys showed respect for its original design. In 1934, after John R. Murphy passed away in 1931, his descendants undertook a sensitive remodeling to adapt the Victorian home to contemporary tastes and needs. This 1934 renovation was spearheaded by John's son, Charles Murphy, and Charle's wife, Esther, who consulted with an interior designer of the period to update the house without losing its historical charm.

Several changes from 1934 are still evident (and documented in family letters and recollections). The front porch's two decorative metal columns, which had flanked the entry, were removed to open up the façade. The porch floor and steps were rebuilt in brick, replacing the old wooden platform. Inside, two front parlors were joined into one large living room by removing a dividing wall, a common modification in older homes to relate to a more spacious main room for modern living. A new brick fireplace with a "heatilator" insert was added to the living room, providing comfort and a focal point. A white-painted wooden mantel with colorful Italian tiles became part of the living room's look. Upstairs, the layout was also adjusted: two smaller bedrooms on the east side of the second floor were combined into a single main bedroom, with the closest added - a reflection of changing expectations for closet space by the 1930s. Importantly, throughout these updates, the Murphy's retained key architectural elements. They kept the original walnut woodwork, the ornate staircase with its carvel newel post and banister, and most of the original windows and doors. A letter from the interior designer who worked with Ester Murphy in 1934 later attested that the family was careful to "retain the house's character" even as they introduced conveniences like an upstairs bathroom and a modernized kitchen (relocated into one of the rear rooms).[9] Thanks to this mindful approach, the Whiting/Murphy House emerged from its mid-century transition, still recognizably the same 1880s structure, only gently adapted for 20th-century life.

Throughout the Murphy era, the house remained a private family residence but also a fixture in the collective memory of Onawa. Longtime neighbors recall annual social gatherings hosted on the lawn and porch, and the local Sioux City Journal in 1969 even ran a feature on the extended Murphy family and their historic home, including a photograph of the Whiting House in its mid-century splendor. By the late 1970s, John R. Murphy's grandson, John E. Murphy, and his wife, Carol, cared for the house.[10] Although John E. Murphy had moved to the West Coast for work, he retained ownership of the ancestral home, and the family ensured it was maintained. In the 1980s, they hired local caretakers (The Petersens) to look after the property when they were away, and they undertook further restoration work around 1983, uncovering some original features that had been hidden and reinforcing the structure where needed. For example, an old brick cistern and underground walkways that once connected the house to the long-gone carriage house were discovered in the yard, hinting at the property's 19th-century domestic infrastructure. These discoveries deepened the appreciation for just how advanced and self-sustainable the home was for its time.[11]

The caretakers (The Petersen's) and the Murphy family prepared a nomination to list the Newell A. Whiting House on the National Register of Historic Places. Their extensive research and documentation succeeded: the house was officially added to the National Register in August 1990 (NRHO Reference #900001216).[12]  This designation affirmed that the Whiting House, also known locally as the John R. Murphy House, is a significant historic resource. It is notable for its Italianate architecture and its association with persons important in local history. They highlighted its remarkable state of preservation, with original features intact inside and out.[13] They also tied the nomination to the rich narrative of the Whiting and Murphy families, compelling that this building encapsulates a living history of Onawa from the 1880s through the 20th century.[14] The house's listing on the National Register further ensured its future preservation. Understanding its historic character would henceforth guide any changes, and the recognition brought a sense of pride to the community. As one might expect, my grandparents, who acquired the home some years later, were drawn to it for its charm and this legacy of care and continuity.

In 1993, George and Karmen Cormany purchased the historic Murphy House and began restoring it to its original Victorian charm.[15] While they removed the attached garage to build a spacious kitchen converting the old kitchen into a bathroom, Karmen also worked tirelessly to strip the woodwork painted white, a style trend from the 1930s, to reveal the original grain beneath. After Geroge's passing, Karmen felt it was time to downsize and placed the house on the market.

In 2016, my grandparents purchased the Murphy House, becoming the fourth family to own this historic home in over 140 years. My grandmother, Cheryl, did not grow up in Iowa; she spent most of her years in Minnesota. Nevertheless, she decided to build a life here after meeting her husband, Mark, from Iowa. When they stumbled upon the Murphy House, it was not just the architecture that pulled them in; it was a feeling. They both fell in love with it instantly.

My grandmother often says that it’s more than just a house, it is memories, love, families, and, most of all, history.[16] She has lovingly maintained the home's original character. Walking into the front parlor today, one immediately notices the high ceilings with ornate plaster crown moldings, the details that the 19th-century visitors would have seen in 1889. Sunlight still filters through the tall front windows in the afternoon, casting patterned shadows from the iron cresting above the glass onto the hardwood floors. The walnut staircase that Newell Whiting walked down each morning still stands, its banister polished smooth by the hands of generations. Even the original front doors, with their etched wood grain, continue to welcome guests with Victorian elegance. Depending on the season, my grandmother only adds a decorative wreath, as she wants to be careful not to mar the old wood or glass.

Yet the Whiting House is not a museum; it remains a home. Its roots are filled up not just with antique furniture passed down or acquired to suit the 1880s ambiance (some pieces even originally belonged to the Whiting’s and Murphy's and have remained with the house) but also with everyday signs of contemporary life. A television and family photographs quietly coexist in the double parlor alongside the original fireplace. The kitchen, which had been moved and modernized, is where my grandmother loves to bake her cakes, filling the house with delicious aromas that surely rival any scents from Julia Whiting's kitchen 140 years ago.

One of my favorite spots is the screened side porch on warm evenings: I sit on the old porch swing with my grandmother, listening to her reminisce. Sometimes, she retells local history about the house, like the story of the deaths and funerals in the house or how, during Prohibition, the Murphy family might have hidden homemade wine in the root cellar beneath the kitchen (a spot that indeed still exists, accessed by a narrow staircase that was closed off in 1934). Whether fact or folklore, these anecdotes add to the home's mystique. They are part of the "echoes" that seem to reverberate through time in this house, giving each generation a sense of connection to those who walked these floors before.

In many ways, the Newell A. Whiting/Murphy House is more than an architectural landmark; It is a quiet witness to the stories, choices, and values that have shaped a small Iowa town across nearly a century and a half. Its preservation has not happened by accident but through the deliberate care of people who saw its worth, first the Whiting’s, second the Murphys/Petersen, then the Cormany’s, and now my family. As a history student, this house taught me more than any textbook could about the relationship between past and present. Moreover, as a descendant of those who now live within its walls, it taught me what it means to carry a legacy. In its bricks and memories, the Whiting House offers something rare: a living, breathing link between history and home.