

## The "First Family" of Phrenology

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The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of “do-it-yourself medicine.” With human science still in its infancy and with bleeding and blistering the mildest “remedies” available to physicians, it took little to persuade the public that, with a little common sense, they could do as least as well on their own.

Alternative therapies, largely based on wishful thinking and an unclear grasp of physiology, became enormously popular. Most of these alternative medicines died a natural death as genuine medical advances caught up with the expectations of the public. The free-for-all that was America in the 1800s, however, led to some remarkably creative “medical” theories. Among them was phrenology.

## What is phrenology?

Phrenology, in its simplest form, is a study of the brain, based on the belief that

- The mind is composed of distinct character traits, each centered in a physical area of the brain;
- The power of character traits physically shapes the brain;
- The brain shapes the skull;

Therefore, the skull can be “read” as an accurate gauge of character.



FIG. 106.—THREE REGIONS.

**A very simple phrenology head shows the supposed Spiritual, Intellect and Propensity regions. “Propensities” are those traits that attach people to their country and home, and secure the preservation of life and accumulation of property. Intellectual traits convey knowledge, originate ideas, and impart memory and the ability to communicate. Spiritual traits give a moral sense as well as including such traits as self-esteem and an appreciation for beauty.**

**From: *A new illustrated hand-book of phrenology and physiognomy, for students and examiners.* New York: Fowler & Wells, 1894.**

In its later manifestations, phrenology degenerated into silly parlor games and outright quackery as traveling “head readers” duped the gullible to turn a quick profit. The early proponents of phrenology, which began in Europe in the early 1800s, regarded their field as a new area of legitimate scientific inquiry. Responsible Victorian phrenologists were careful to point out that although the particular shape of any individual’s skull indicated a propensity for certain traits, it did not predestine character. Phrenologists were very concerned with moral improvement and the proper education of children.



FIG. 88.—THE GOOD BOY.



FIG. 89.—THE BAD BOY.

**Two boys: the good boy on the left and the bad boy on the right, based on the development of their “organ” of conscientiousness, defined as “imparting a perception and love of right, an innate sense of accountability, and a disposition to fulfill promises, speak the truth, and strive for purity and moral excellence.”**

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# Meet the Fowlers

The foremost American popularizers of phrenology were the Fowlers: brothers Orson and Lorenzo and sister Charlotte, all born in Steuben County, New York in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Orson Squire Fowler, born in 1809, attended Amherst College where he and his best friend, Henry Ward Beecher, became interested in phrenology as an instrument of individual and social reform. After their graduation in 1834, Beecher went into the ministry. Fowler, however, continued with phrenology and began traveling through New York and New England, lecturing and “reading” heads.

Younger brother Lorenzo Niles Fowler, born in 1811, studied at Amherst Academy but by-passed a college education and joined Orson as an itinerant phrenologist.

By 1835, younger sister Charlotte (born in 1814 and academy-educated) was also promoting phrenology on the lecture circuit.

As this new “science” of the mind grew in popularity, the Fowler family enterprise grew in profitability. The expanded family business established an office and “Phrenological Cabinet” in New York City, where the Fowlers conducted “readings” as well as displaying skulls, and casts and busts of the heads of the famous and infamous for the education and edification of the populace. Charlotte joined her brothers, Orson and Lorenzo, in their New York enterprise in 1837.

The year 1844 saw two important additions to the Fowler enterprise. Sister Charlotte married medical student Samuel R. Wells. A kindred reforming spirit, Wells was not only interested in phrenology, but was also one of the first advocates of an exclusively vegetable diet. The newly expanded family immediately formed the publishing house of Fowler & Wells.

Orson and Lorenzo’s first book, ***Phrenology proved, illustrated and applied***, had been published in 1835. Fowler & Wells rapidly expanded the scope of the family’s phrenological publishing and soon became an empire, churning out quantities of phrenological periodicals, pamphlets and books.

***Phrenology proved, illustrated and applied*** continued to be published in many revised editions throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ***American Phrenological Journal***, begun by Orson Fowler in 1838 (Orson was not only the editor but also the main contributor), expanded its circulation under the wing of Fowler & Wells. At the height of its popularity in the 1840s, it was being read by more than 20,000 families each month.

The second addition to the family enterprise in 1844 was Lorenzo’s bride, Lydia Folger Fowler. Born in Nantucket in 1822, Lydia Folger first attended Wheaton Seminary (now Wheaton College) in Norton, Massachusetts, and then taught there. After her marriage to Lorenzo in 1844, Lydia took to the phrenological lecture circuit, as well as writing several books on physiology and phrenology for Fowler & Wells.

Five years after her marriage, Lydia enrolled in Central Medical College of Syracuse and Rochester, New York, receiving her medical degree in 1850. An “Eclectic” and not a mainstream medical school, Central Medical College embraced a wide range of views, emphasizing plant remedies. Lydia Folger Fowler was the second woman, after Elizabeth Blackwell, to receive a medical degree. Appointed to the faculty of the college the following year, she became the first woman professor in an American medical college. After the college closed in 1852, Lydia established a New York medical practice, specializing in the health of women and children, and continued to lecture on phrenology, physiology, hygiene, nutrition, and child rearing.

It is thanks to legendary showman, P.T. Barnum, that we have a description of Lydia on the lecture platform.

P. T. Barnum had opened his "American Museum" in New York City in 1841, offering a mix of education, entertainment and sheer bunkum. In 1855, Barnum began to hold "National Baby Shows." More than 60,000 visitors paid admission to view the judging of over 140 contestants at the first Baby Show. In order to deflect criticism that he was crassly exploiting family and motherhood, Barnum scheduled a lecture by Dr. Lydia Folger Fowler, hoping to confer social respectability and medical legitimacy on the Baby Show.

The *New York Tribune* of June 8, 1855, described the lecture – and Lydia Folger Fowler

*She was dressed in a very broadly striped silk, which was anything but a bloomer. Her hair was done up in a French twist with curls in front. Her face is pleasant, she has sunny blue eyes and a sweet mouth. She waved an elegantly embroidered handkerchief as she read her lecture. Quite a number of the little exhibited [babies] were present and contributed their full share to the festivities, at times almost drowning her voice, which is scarcely strong enough for a lecturer.*

In the 1860s, Lydia and Lorenzo moved to England. Lorenzo manufactured high quality porcelain phrenological busts.



**An elaborate symbolical head, as developed by Orson Squire Fowler and Lorenzo Niles Fowler, shows the location of the various character traits found in individuals. Using this chart – and, if resources allowed, one of the fine porcelain phrenological heads manufactured by Lorenzo Fowler – a phrenologist would analyze approximately 36 faculties and conditions to arrive at a character analysis.**

**From: *A new illustrated hand-book of phrenology and physiognomy, for students and examiners.* New York: Fowler & Wells, 1894.**

Lydia no longer practiced medicine, but she did continue to write and lecture widely – shortly before her death in 1879, she estimated that she had lectured to 200,000 women in America and Europe over a period of more than 30 years.

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# Phrenology ... and more

Phrenology was not the sole interest of the Fowler family. Their crusade to improve society led to an interest in other reform movements of the time. Most of these movements were at least indirectly health and medical related: the Fowlers were firm believers in fresh air, exercise, early rising, and regular bathing, as well as recommending a largely vegetarian diet and temperance (including abstention not only from alcohol, but also from tea, coffee and tobacco).

These interests led Orson Squire Fowler to architecture. He himself explained the path of his enthusiasm in the preface to ***A Home for All*** (first published in 1849)

*Till past forty, his [the author's] profession engrossed too much of his time and means to allow him to procure a comfortable home; yet for ten years he has been making observations, in all his professional peregrinations, and cogitating by months, upon the best mode of building the home of his future years. These have at length brought him to results, now reduced to practice. Let no one suppose that he has forsaken, or even turned aside from, Phrenology – that first and only occupation of his enthusiastic youth, and the idol of his mature and declining years. He has turned aside only to build him a good home, and in doing so, has made and learned improvements to adopt which will greatly increase home comforts...*

Orson noted that, just as (phrenologically speaking) men's skulls correspond with their characters, so "men's habitations correspond with their characteristics... especially will the quantity and quality of man's intellect evince themselves in the houses they build."

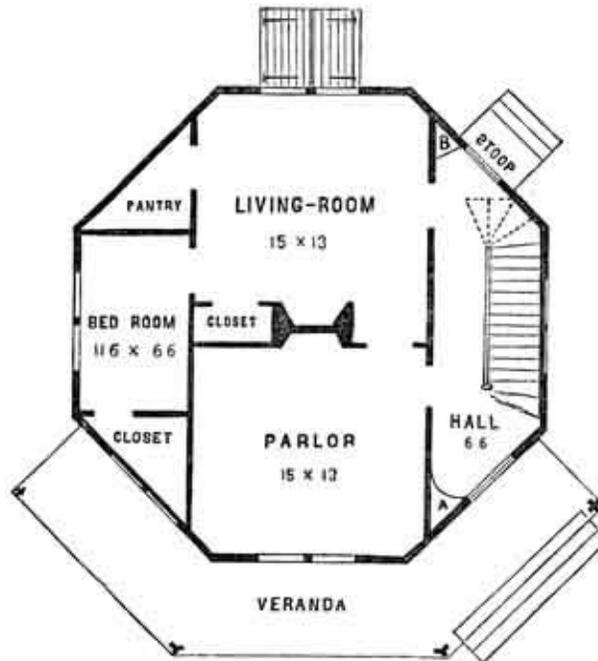
The style that Orson advocated was the octagon house.



**This plan for an "Octagon Cottage," shows a plan that Orson Fowler characterized as notable for its "neatness, simplicity, convenient arrangement, and cheapness." (Cottages were, in Victorian nomenclature, inexpensive rural or suburban homes.) It was claimed that the "octagon house of this size gives 137 more square feet on each floor than a square house of the same outside measurement."**

**From: O.S. Fowler. *A Home for all; or, the gravel wall and octagon mode of building*. New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1853.**

According to Fowler, octagon houses enclosed more floor space per linear square foot than rectangular houses, making them cheaper to build. He also claimed that octagons allowed more sunlight and better ventilation. Designs for the houses show, however, that Americans insisted on retaining traditional rectangular rooms; the “angles” that theoretically could produce extra light and ventilation in an octagon house were usually closed off from the living areas and restricted in use to triangular closets and pantries.



**The floor plan for the octagon cottage, showing a pantry and a closet in two of the octagon’s “angles,” creating largely rectangular rooms. Octagon houses, because of the angles, generally had more closets than the usual mid-19<sup>th</sup> century home. Fowler noted “live, even in a poor house with them [closets], and then in a good one without them... and you will want to move back again.”**

**From: O.S. Fowler. A Home for all; or, the gravel wall and octagon mode of building. New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1853.**

The structural requirements of the octagon house led Orson to a new construction method, which he referred to as “gravel wall.” It was in reality a mix of lime, water, gravel and sand – concrete – one of the earliest modern uses of this material for domestic architecture.

As a result of Orson Fowler’s book, several thousand octagonal houses were erected. Few were built in concrete; most were brick, stone or wood.

Today, octagon houses are rare and exotic. In Plymouth County, examples can be found in Abington (Centre Avenue), Kingston (South Street), North Pembroke (Washington Street) and Plympton (Mayflower Road). Orson Squire Fowler’s own octagon house, a huge four-story 60-room cupola-topped mansion built in Fishkill, New York, in 1850, no longer stands.

**Sources include:**

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**Sources also include the following online resources:**

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the History of Phrenology on the Web at [pages.britishlibrary.net](http://pages.britishlibrary.net), by Dr John van Whye, Department of History & Philosophy of Science, Cambridge University;

The Macleay Museum of the University of Sydney (Australia) at [usyd.edu.au/su/macleay](http://usyd.edu.au/su/macleay),

the Countway Library of Harvard Medical School at [countway.med.harvard.edu](http://countway.med.harvard.edu), Hobart & William Smith Colleges at [campus.hws.edu](http://campus.hws.edu),

George Mason University's Center for History & New Media at [chnm.gmu.edu](http://chnm.gmu.edu), and

the Inventory of Octagon Houses at [octagon.bobanna.com](http://octagon.bobanna.com)