

Emilie J. Eliason

AN  
Architectural Monograph

THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE  
AT NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

By Herbert C. Wise

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DETAIL OF FRONT—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



# THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE at New Castle, Delaware

By HERBERT C. WISE

**W**HEN the Swedish ships under the command of Peter Minit anchored in the Delaware in 1638 their company of families bought from the Indian stracts which included the present sites of Wilmington and New Castle, and New Sweden was founded. The soil was fertile, game was abundant, and the settlement prospered. Even the arrival of Peter Stuyvesant in 1651 to claim the territory for the Dutch,—erecting Fort Casimir by way of emphasis,—and his naming the village New Amstel failed to shake the fortunes of the Swedes, for their individual holdings of land were not disturbed and they were allowed to continue their peaceful pursuits.

New Amstel was described as “a goodly town of about one hundred houses and containing a magazine, a guard house, a bake house and forge and residences for the clergymen and other officers.” The settlement again fell into the hands of the Swedes and was again recovered by the Dutch; but upon Penn’s arrival in 1682, he claimed the territory as a part of his Pennsylvania grant from the Duke of York, and thus terminated for all time the Swedish and Dutch authority upon the Delaware shores.

The town hall, the remains of the public market and, of course, the church and the court house can still be seen, as well as a number of delightful old residences. Of these may be mentioned the “Amstel” House, the Kensey Johns House, the Van Dyke House, the Church (or Thomas) House, but the largest and finest residence of the town is the Read House, pictures of which are to be found on these pages.

The house was commenced by George Read, II, in 1791 and completed in 1801. The mansion of his father, the first George Read, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, stood to the south (or left) of the present Read House in what is now the garden, and fronted on “The Strand,” as the street nearest the River is called. This house was destroyed by what the townfolk call “The Great Fire” that swept New Castle in 1824 and destroyed some of the finest buildings.

The present mansion, erected by the son, occupies the northeast corner of a plot of ground having a

frontage of about 180 feet on The Strand. The depth of the property is about 312 feet and extends to The Green. The walls are of brick, and it would be natural to suppose these were made at the southern end of the town long known as “Brickmaker’s Point,”—where roofing tiles were also made,—if indeed the family records did not prove that they had been bought of Jeremiah Hornkett, brickmaker of Philadelphia, and transported down the river by shallop at the rate of one dollar per thousand. The bricks are of a uniform rich dark red like the traditional Philadelphia “stretchers.” They measure  $8\frac{1}{2} \times 2 \times 4\frac{1}{4}$  inches which approaches the standard brick of this country rather than the shorter and higher bricks imported from England. Thomas Spikeman of Wilmington laid the bricks. James Traquair of Philadelphia was the stonemason. The lumber was also bought in Philadelphia, and Peter Crowding of that city was the contractor for the carpenter work.

A plot of well kept lawn stretches before the house and gives a broad outlook on the River. This space also gives a satisfactory view of the stately facade, distinguished as it is by the simplicity of parts characteristic of the English Georgian style, the finely wrought wood detail of the entrance, the Palladian window and the main cornice, the dormers of a form that rings traditionally true, and above all the balustrade enclosing a “Captain’s Walk.” Examining the facade in detail, it is found to be 49 feet 2 inches in width. Granite steps and platform lead to the front entrance with its doorway 4 feet 5 inches wide. Together with side lights and fluted pilasters of wood, the entrance measures 9 feet wide over all. An unusual device is to be seen in the divisions between the door and the side-lights. These are brought out to the face of the wall, thus recessing the door, as well as the side-lights, within deep panelled jambs and head of wood. The first story windows are 4 feet 3 inches wide; and as the bricks are so laid that five courses occupy  $12\frac{3}{4}$  inches in height, the number of courses forming the jambs of the windows can be counted and the height of 8 feet  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches ascertained. The marble window heads are really lintels with joint lines incised upon them to give the semblance of vous-

soirs. The ironwork appears to be of later date than that of the house itself.

The depth of the main or front body of the house is 46 feet 8 inches. A hallway 8 or 9 feet wide traverses the center of the house from the front entrance to the rear doorway opening upon the garden. The parlour and library divide equally the space upon the left of the hall. That upon the right is occupied by a square stair hall at the center, in front of which is the dining room and behind is the breakfast room. Beyond the last named and extending 50 feet or so further to the rear is the kitchen and service wing.

The interior doorways are provided with pilasters and entablatures in carved wood. With apologies to the editor of a journal once devoted to white pine, we remark that the doors themselves are of mahogany. Their surrounding detail is of pine, however, and bears many coats of white paint. The design is derived from classic forms but here used with a freedom leading to an effect a modern architect might yearn in vain to realize, daring not to depart from his books. Should he do so his innovations would be adjudged unpardonable. Yet similar crudities are present here and criticism is stilled. The reason? Time has consecrated them. Then, too, the touch of the hand everywhere noticeable on these mouldings of long ago has laid upon them a pliancy and softness which dwell not in the products of modern planing mills and machinery.

In the frieze and centerpiece of a mantel "French putty" ornaments are found depicting a gentleman-at-arms being driven in a lion chariot, preceded by a flying messenger and followed by his armed retainers. Architraves, skirting and chair rails have generous proportions and heavy projections. The ornament and decoration of the woodwork continue through the first floor. In the library it is as elaborate as in the parlour. The dining room is simpler, with a mantel from which all the moulding decoration is omitted; but the stairway

and the second story hall are similar in treatment to the elaborate rooms of the first floor, yet they are quite distinct in detail. On the second floor, too, is the drawing room which is quite the most elaborate room of all and again displays distinct differences of detail. A fine ornamental frieze in moulded plaster is an added touch of decoration which distinguishes this room.

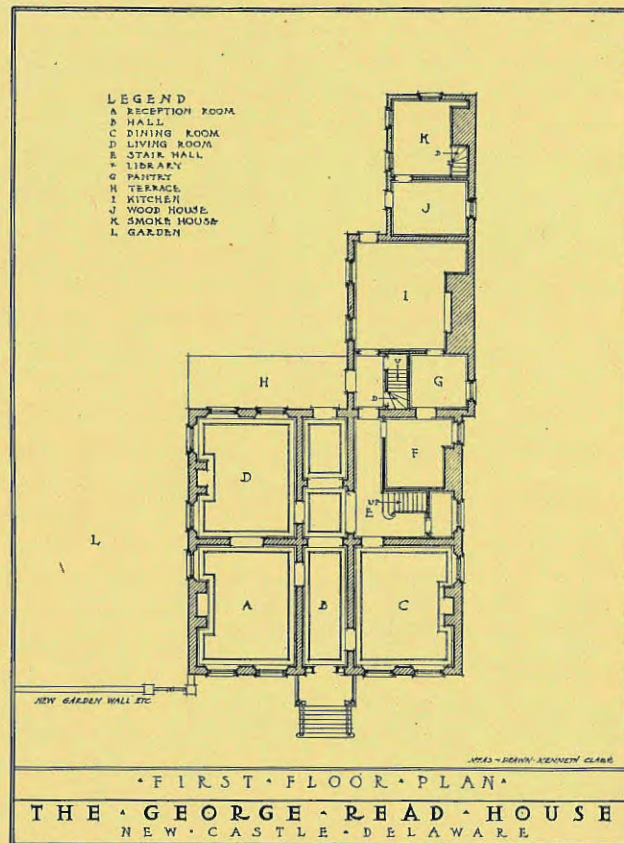
The hardware throughout the main part of the house is quite original, the escutcheons being formed of interlaced silver strands half round in section. In one of the second floor bedrooms there is a quaint arrangement of wires running through pulleys permitting the brass bolt of the door to be opened by a person lying in bed.

Upon entering the house, if the weather be warm, one sees the garden beyond through a doorway elaborated with pilasters and semi-circular transom with fan light, and over all a horizontal cornice. Here is a brick-paved space under a grape arbor, and beyond them are greenhouse, potting house and tool house.

The garden was laid out in 1846 by Robert Buist. Its front portion, extending about 130 feet along The Strand and equaling the depth of the house, is laid out in three geometric parterres. Beyond this is the portion laid out in serpentine paths between cedar trees,

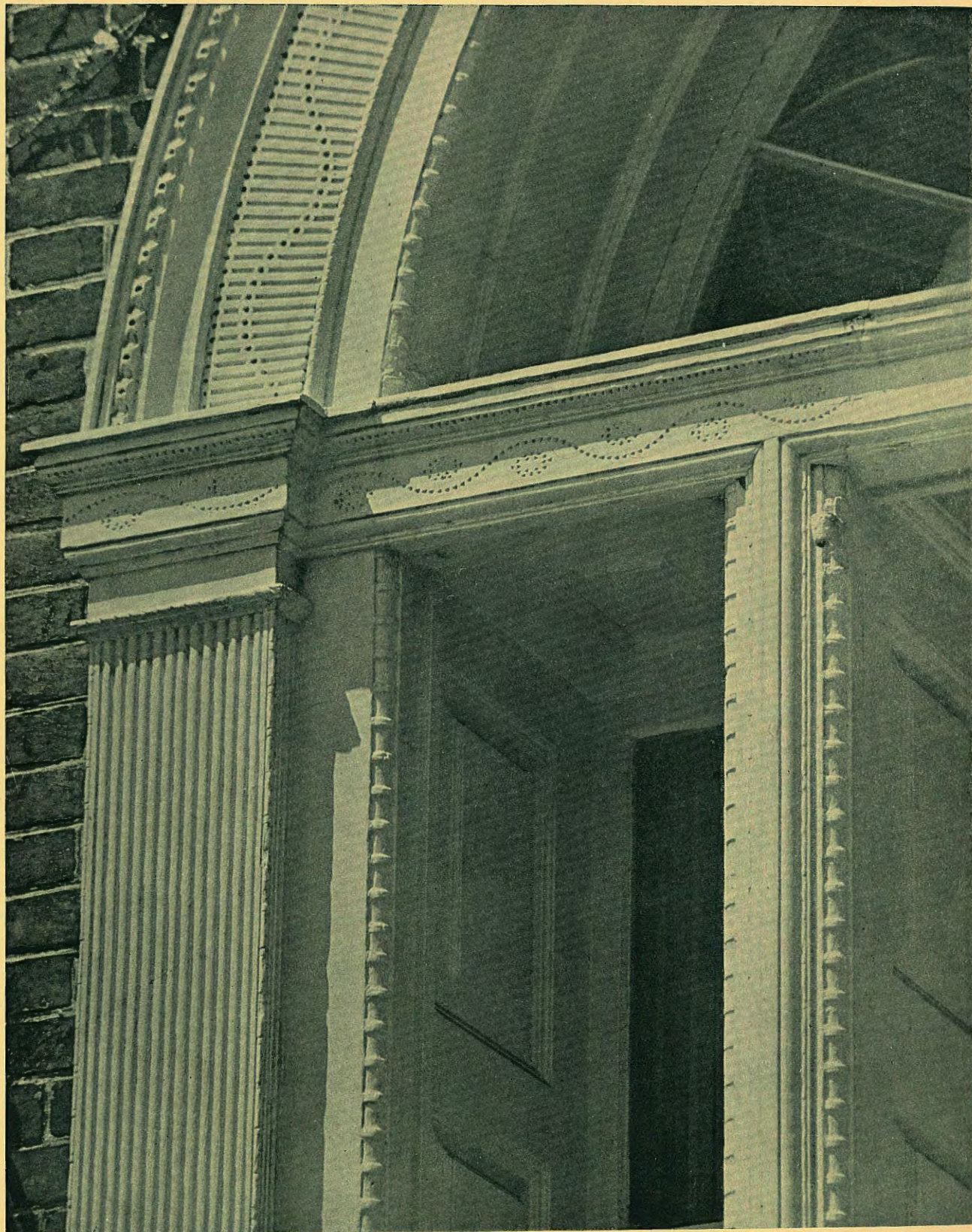
box bushes, balsam firs and a great maple. Further on is the kitchen garden where at two corners stand English walnut trees. An aged Balm of Gilead, a magnolia macrophylla and a crepe myrtle are treasured landmarks.

In 1845 the property was bought by the Couper Family, of which a descendent, Miss Hettie Smith, was long the owner and occupant. Fortunately, the present owner, Mr. Philip Laird, is not only sensible of the architectural treasure in his keeping, but delights in its possession. Upon acquiring it he had it restored as far as possible to its original condition. This work was done under the intelligent and sympathetic direction of Brown and Whiteside, Architects of Wilmington, who also added the brick wall surrounding the garden and the gateway.





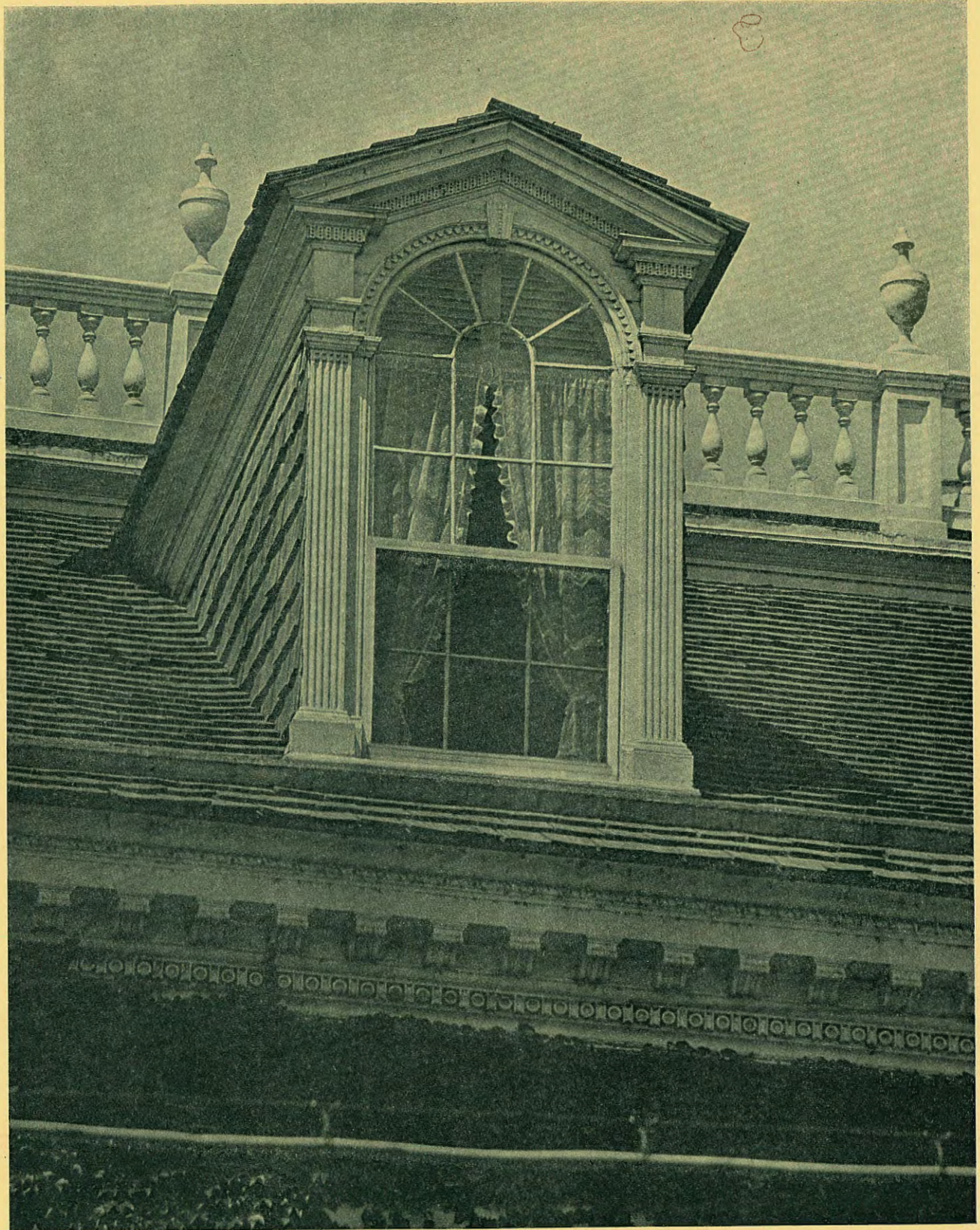
THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



DETAIL OF FRONT DOORWAY—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

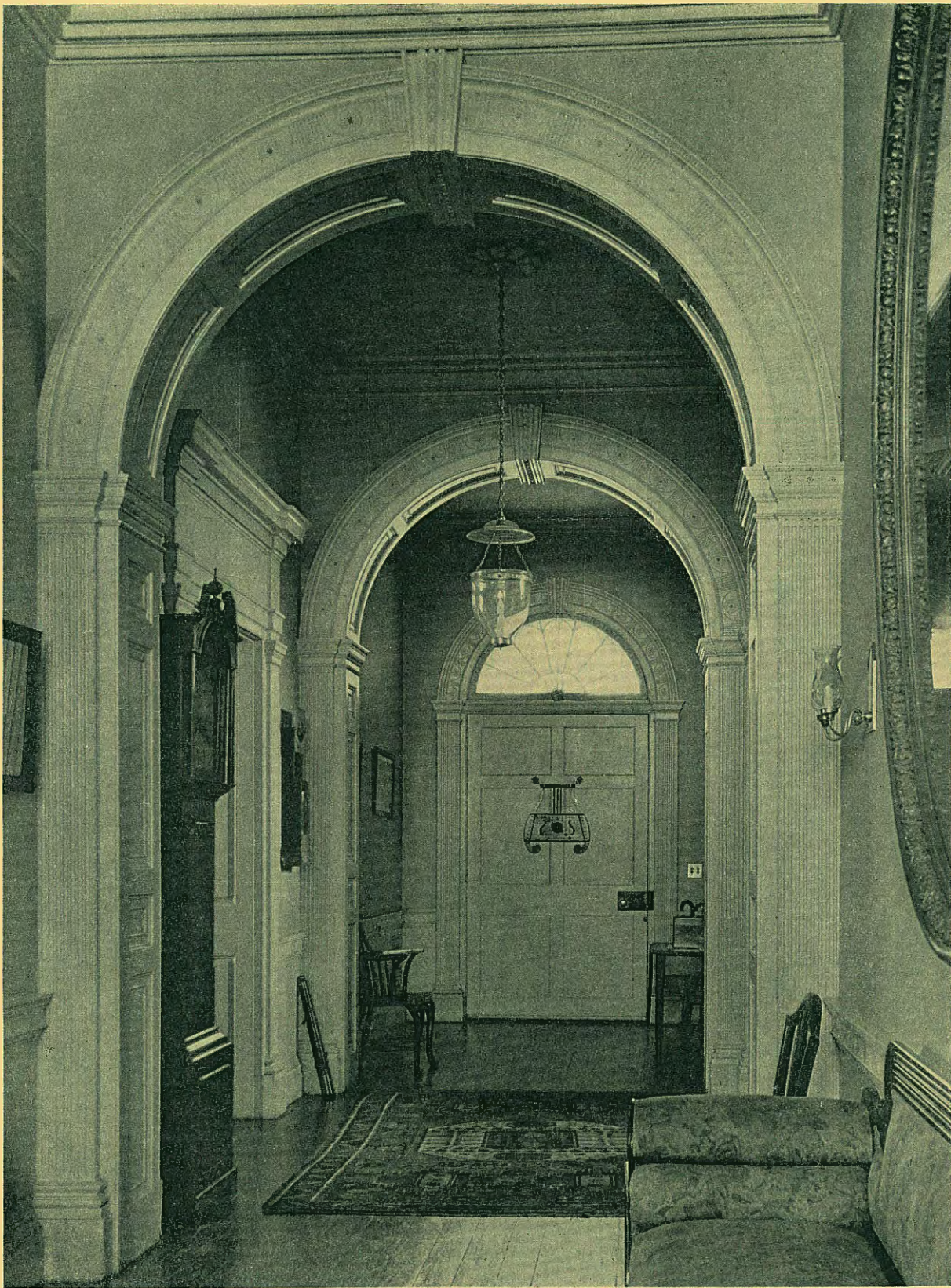


DETAIL OF PALLADIAN WINDOW—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

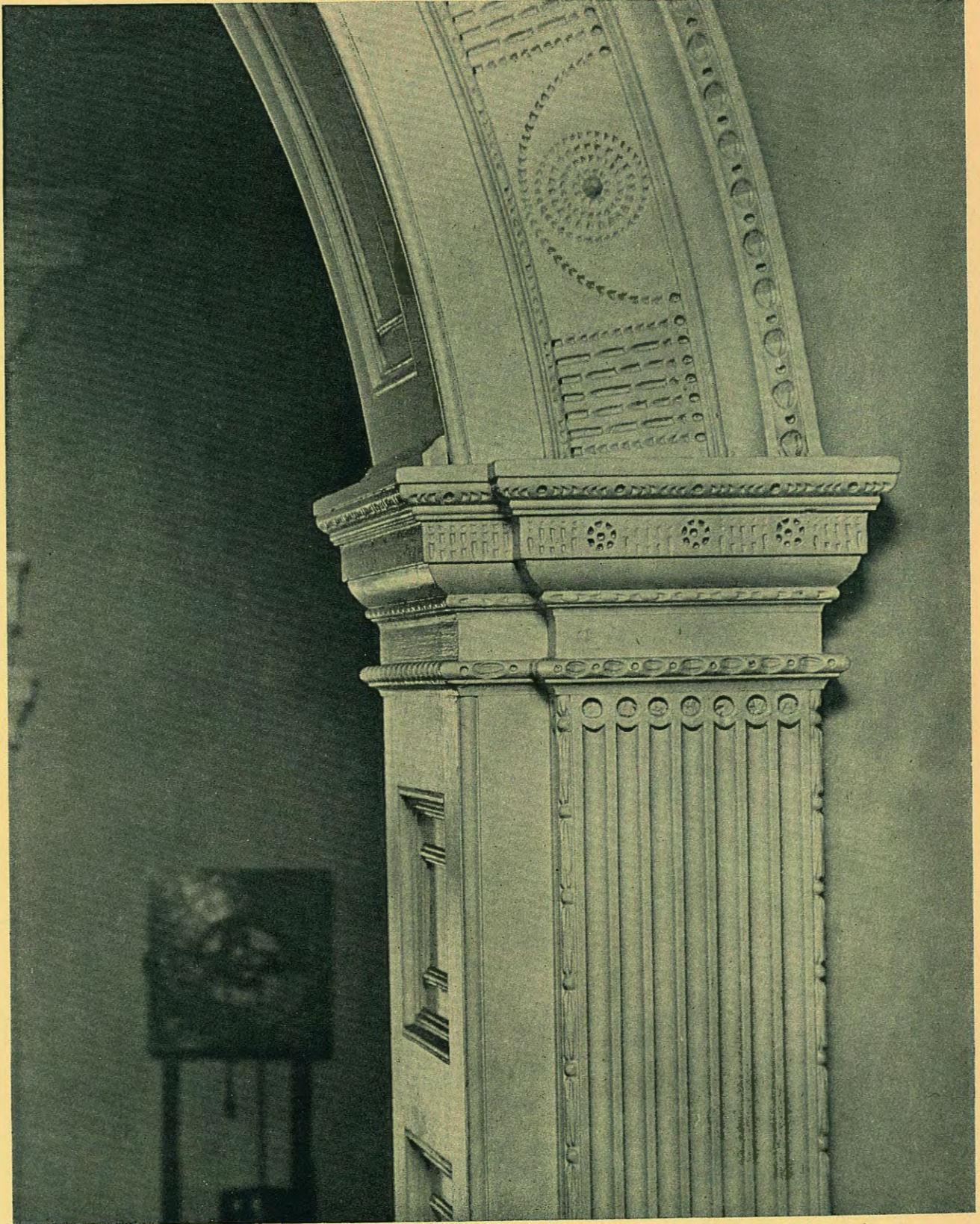


DETAIL OF DORMER—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

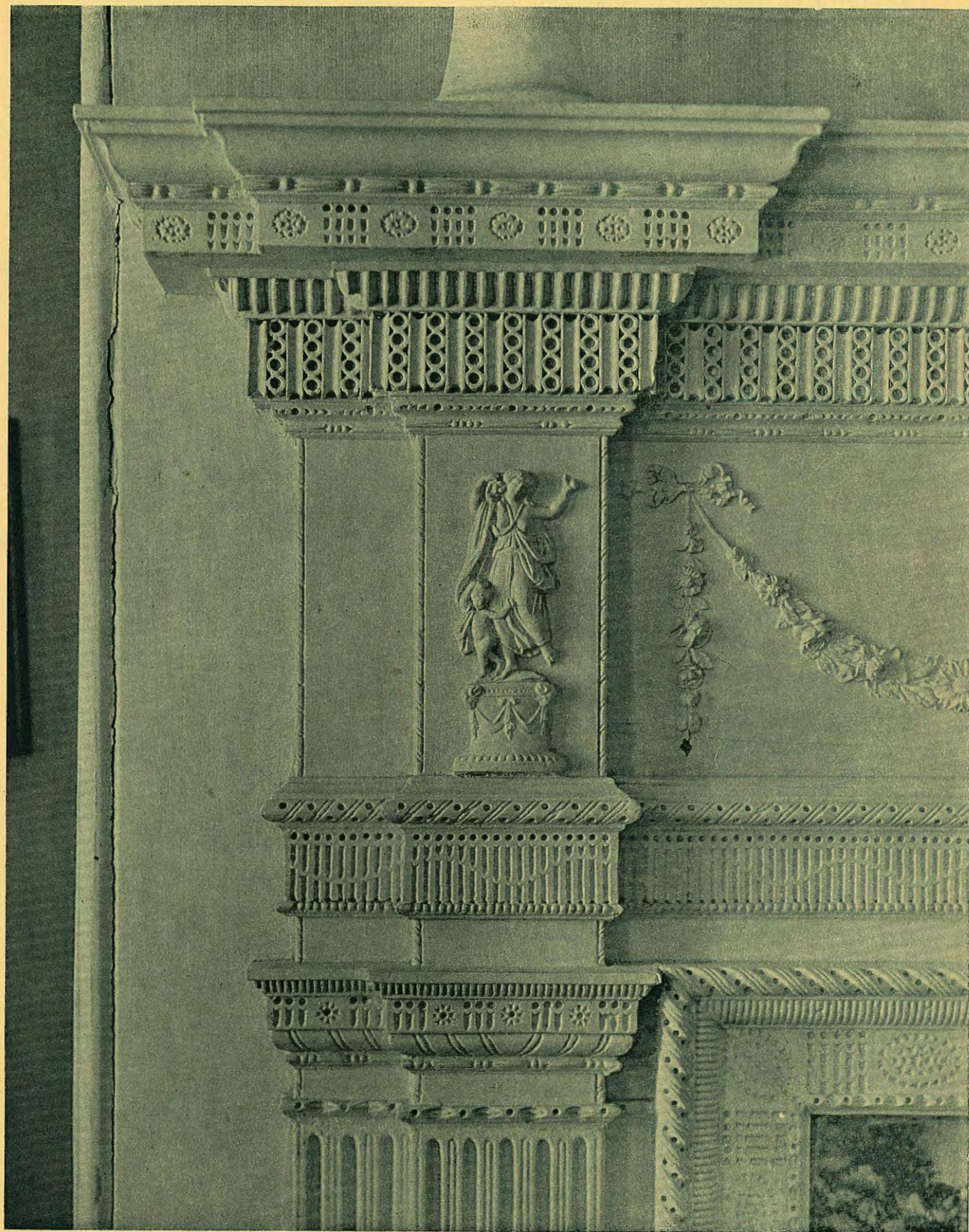




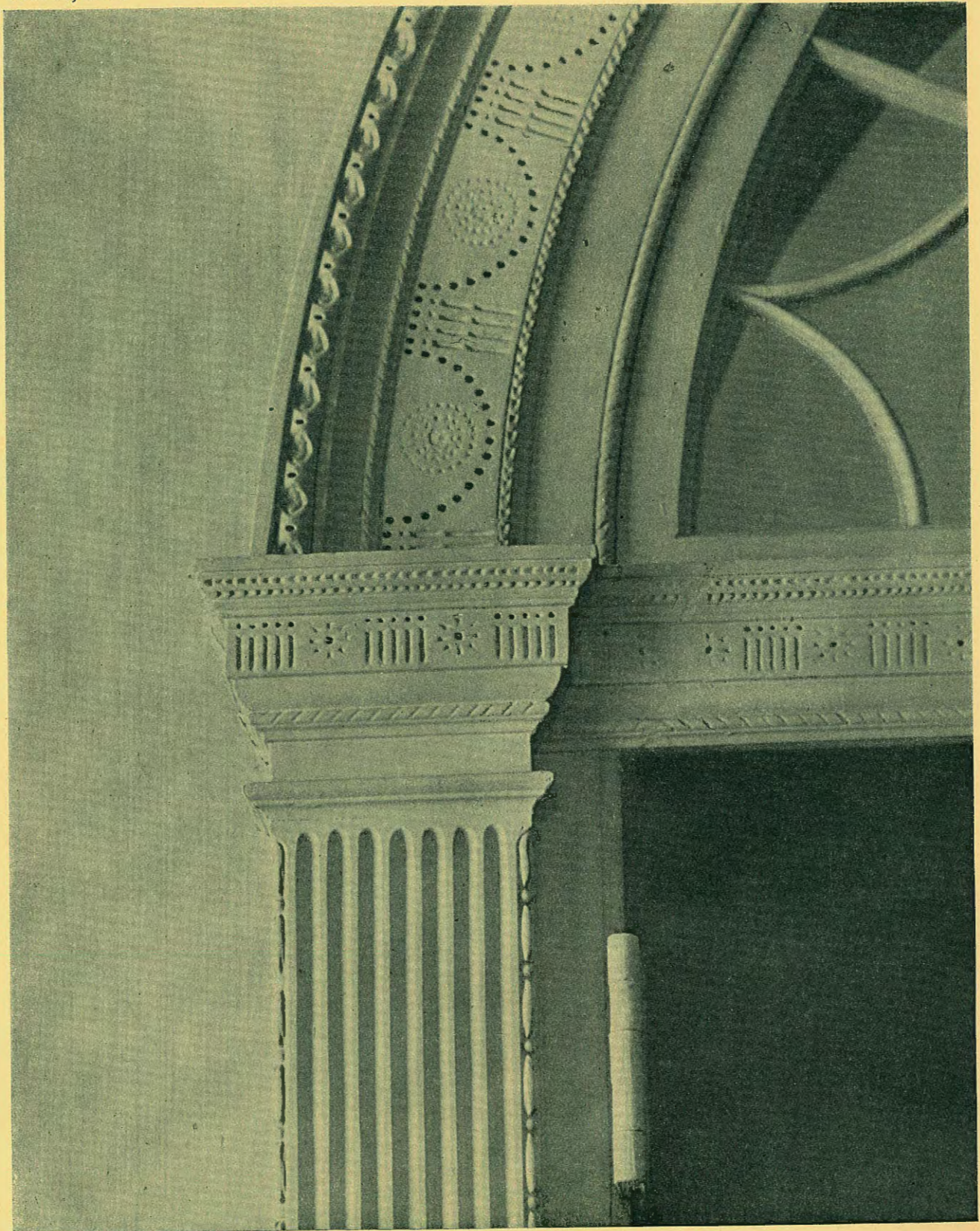
HALL—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



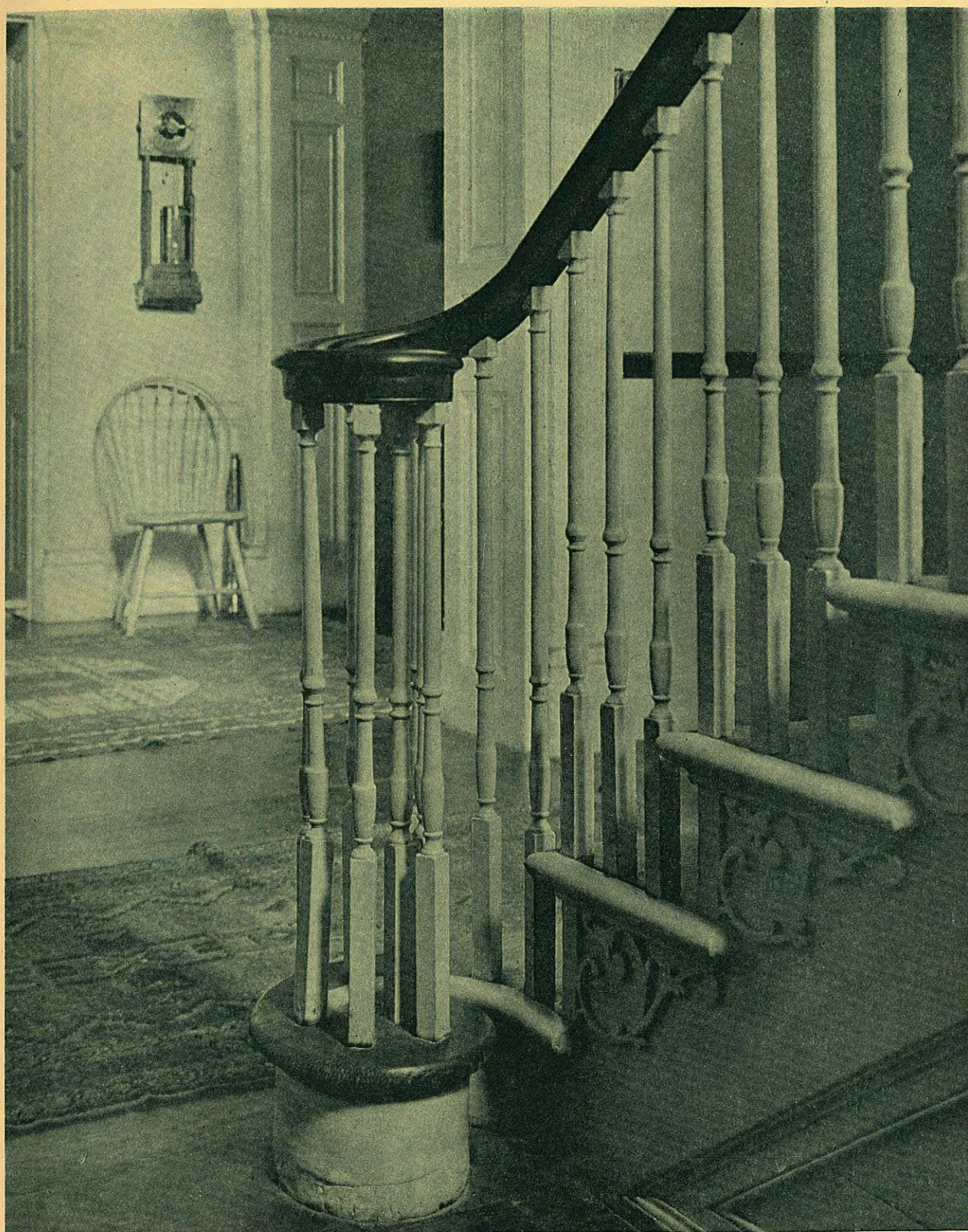
DETAIL, HALL—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



DETAIL, A—MANTEL—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



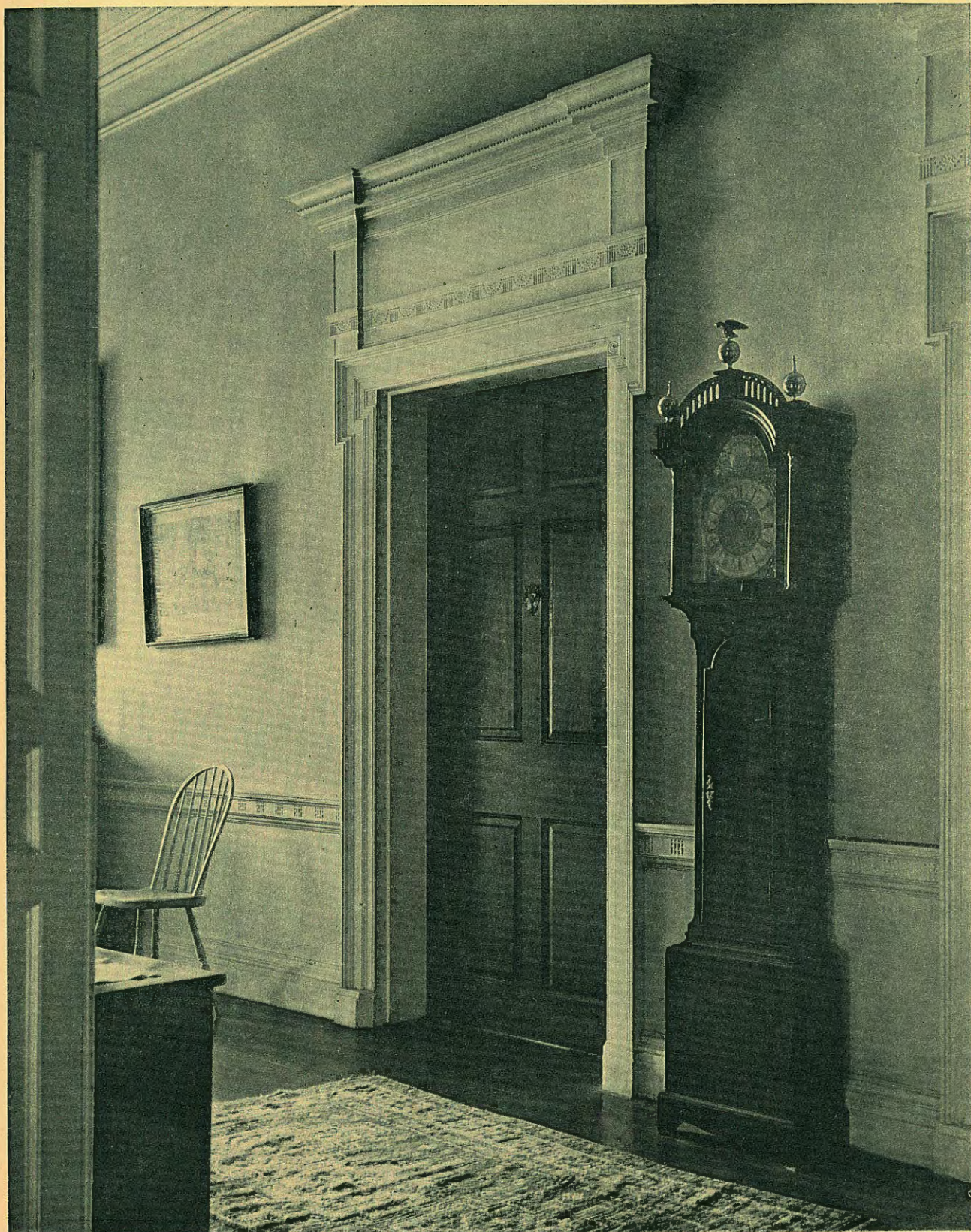
THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE  
*Detail of Doorway between Reception and Living Rooms*



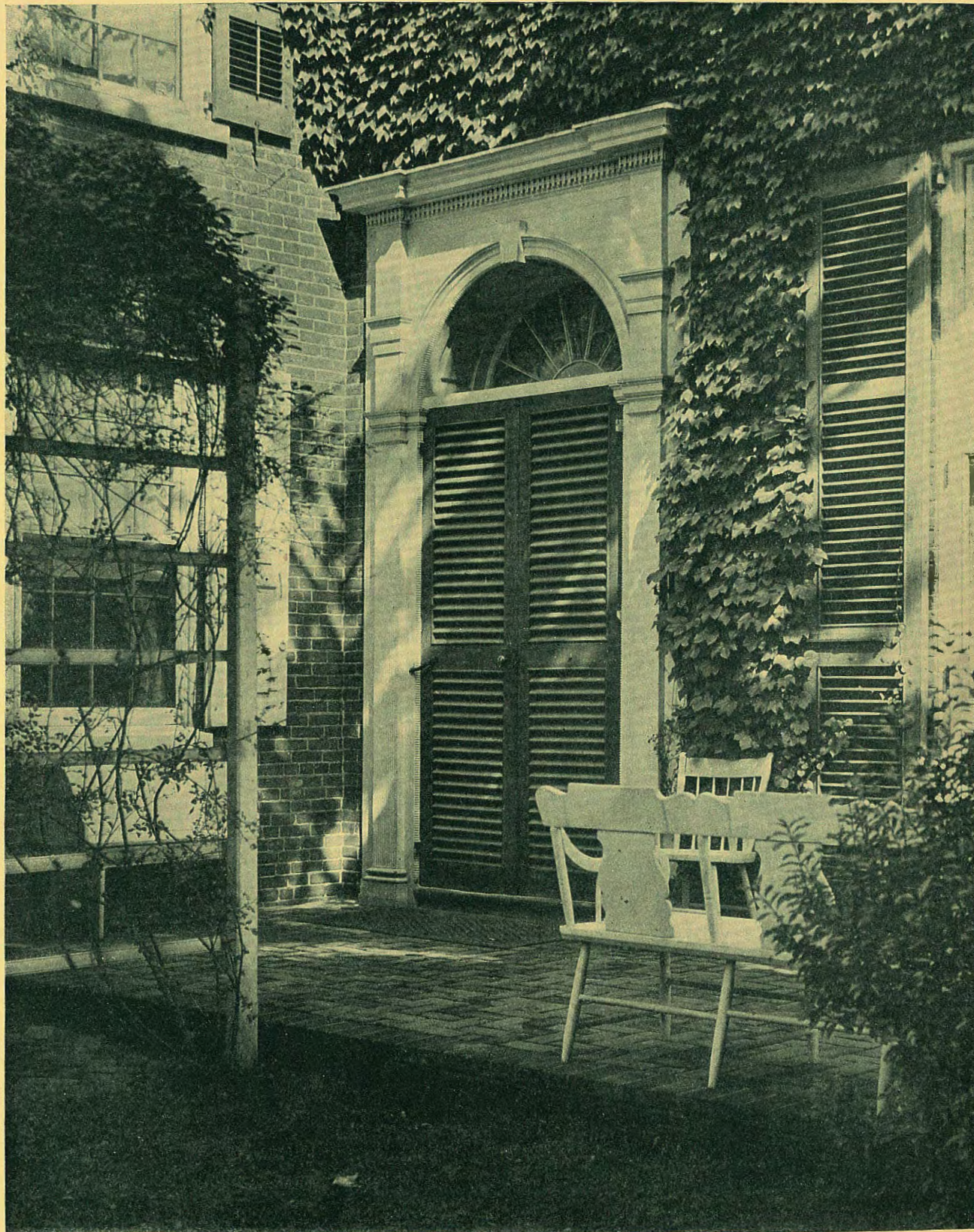
THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE  
*Detail of Stairway at First Floor level*



THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE  
*Detail of "Second Floor Drawing Room"*



THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE  
*Detail of Doorway, Second Story Hall*



GARDEN ENTRANCE DETAIL—THE GEORGE READ, II HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE





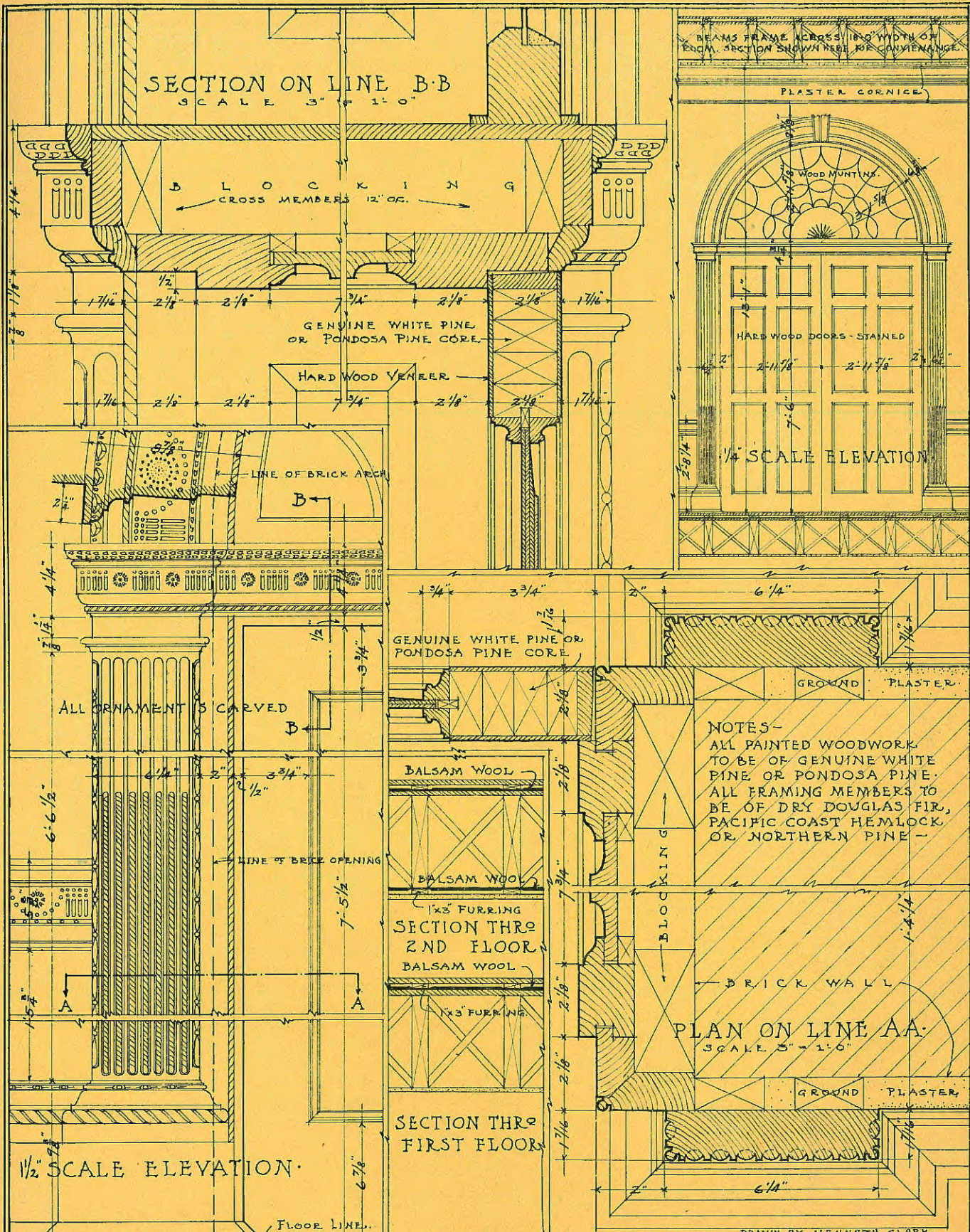
INTERIOR  
WOODWORK



WOOD CONSTRUCTION DETAILS  
Suggested by  
WEYERHAEUSER FOREST PRODUCTS  
SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA



THE  
GEORGE READ HOUSE  
NEW CASTLE - DELEWARE  
BUILT A. D. 1810.



SECTION ON LINE B-B  
SCALE 3" = 1'-0"

B L O C K I N G  
CROSS MEMBERS 12" OC.

GENUINE WHITE PINE  
OR PONDOSA PINE CORE

HARD WOOD VENEER

LINE OF BRICK ARCH

ALL ORNAMENTS CARVED

GENUINE WHITE PINE OR  
PONDOSA PINE CORE

BALSAM WOOL

BALSAM WOOL

SECTION THROUGH  
2ND FLOOR

BALSAM WOOL

SECTION THROUGH  
FIRST FLOOR

NOTES-  
ALL PAINTED WOODWORK  
TO BE OF GENUINE WHITE  
PINE OR PONDOSA PINE.  
ALL FRAMING MEMBERS TO  
BE OF DRY DOUGLAS FIR,  
PACIFIC COAST HEMLOCK  
OR NORTHERN PINE.

PLAN ON LINE AA  
SCALE 3" = 1'-0"

1/2" SCALE ELEVATION

FLOOR LINE

DRAWN BY KENNETH CLARK

INTERIOR  
WOODWORK



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