

THE OLD HOMESTEAD

Almost everyone has a place or two that we affectionately call "Home"... places filled with memories, mostly good... places to which we will always "Belong". We share these places with our siblings, spouse and children and in some cases with other individuals and other families. Many of our friends and neighbors are fortunate to be able to think of their special place as "The Old Homestead" especially if it included a farm with fields or woodlands and a stream. A homestead, never just a house, included the entire environment and everything within it. Homesteads are things of the past, they are "Old" and deserve the respect and admiration due to the elders of all our families.

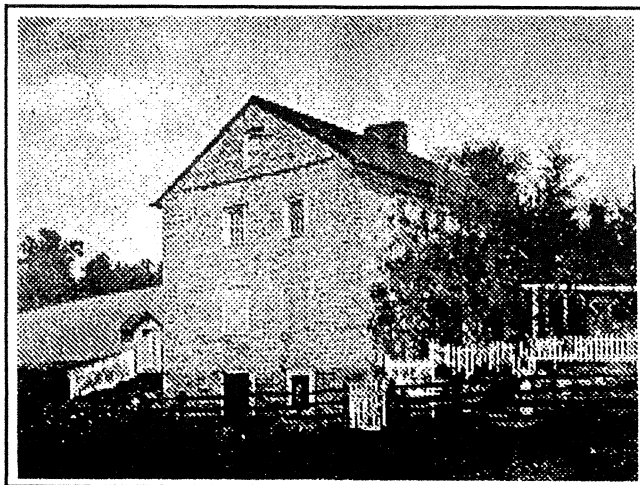
The farm, built by Conrad Kershner along the road to Hain's Church at the East end of town, was indeed a very special place and was referred to as "The Old Homestead" by the Hehn, Kershner, Werner and Kintzer families that lived there. That title was written, in pencil, on the reverse side of the old photographs shown in this newsletter. The farm is also special since portions of the house and adjacent bake/smoke house were removed and are now on permanent display in the PA German portion of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum by Wilmington, Delaware. The house is described in the 1916 *History of St. John's (Hain's) Reformed Church*: "Of all the interesting old homesteads

whose history is a part of the story of the life of the Hain's Church, the house on the farm now occupied by Michael Kintzer deserves especial mention. This was the early home of Captain Conrad Kerschner. It is the oldest building of which we know in the neighborhood. It was erected in 1754, and shows a style of mason work and general plan, both interior and exterior, different from all other old houses in the vicinity. Heavy walls, with arched windows and deep window seats, a large fireplace, well proportioned rooms, the ceilings still showing a type of panel ornamentation in plaster, of which modern metal ceilings are but poor imitations. The house, after continuous use for 162 years, is still in good condition and bids fair to be the sheltering roof tree for several generations to come. This house was the early home of the ancestor of the present pastor of the Hain's Church congregation. It was the meeting place of the early organizers of the church, and one can well believe that if its walls could speak, they could tell an interesting story of the trials, sacrifices and devoted energy of the early members. This historic house was built by two German workmen, a mason and a carpenter, "redemptioners"- immigrants whose passage across the ocean was paid to the captain of the vessel for them by Conrad Kershner. These men were then indentured or bound in

writing to their employer for a stipulated time to work out the passage money. In this instance the employer agreed that they should be free as soon as they had completed a dwelling house for him.

The story of the Kershner House is also told in the Fall 1995 edition of *Voice*, the newsletter of the *Phoebe Berks Village* Retirement Community in Wernersville: "Back in 1754 one of the most interesting old homesteads in this vicinity was built right here on the 66-acres that now belong to *Phoebe Berks Village*... There were two barns on the farm; one is still standing (Removed in 1996) behind the *Phoebe Berks Complex*. The original barn was located in the vicinity of the *Village Green* in the courtyard area of the *Community Center*. Early records show that *Conrad Kershner* lived there from 1772 - 1803. *Reverend William J. Kershner*, pastor at *Hain's Church* from 1883 - 1916, also resided there.

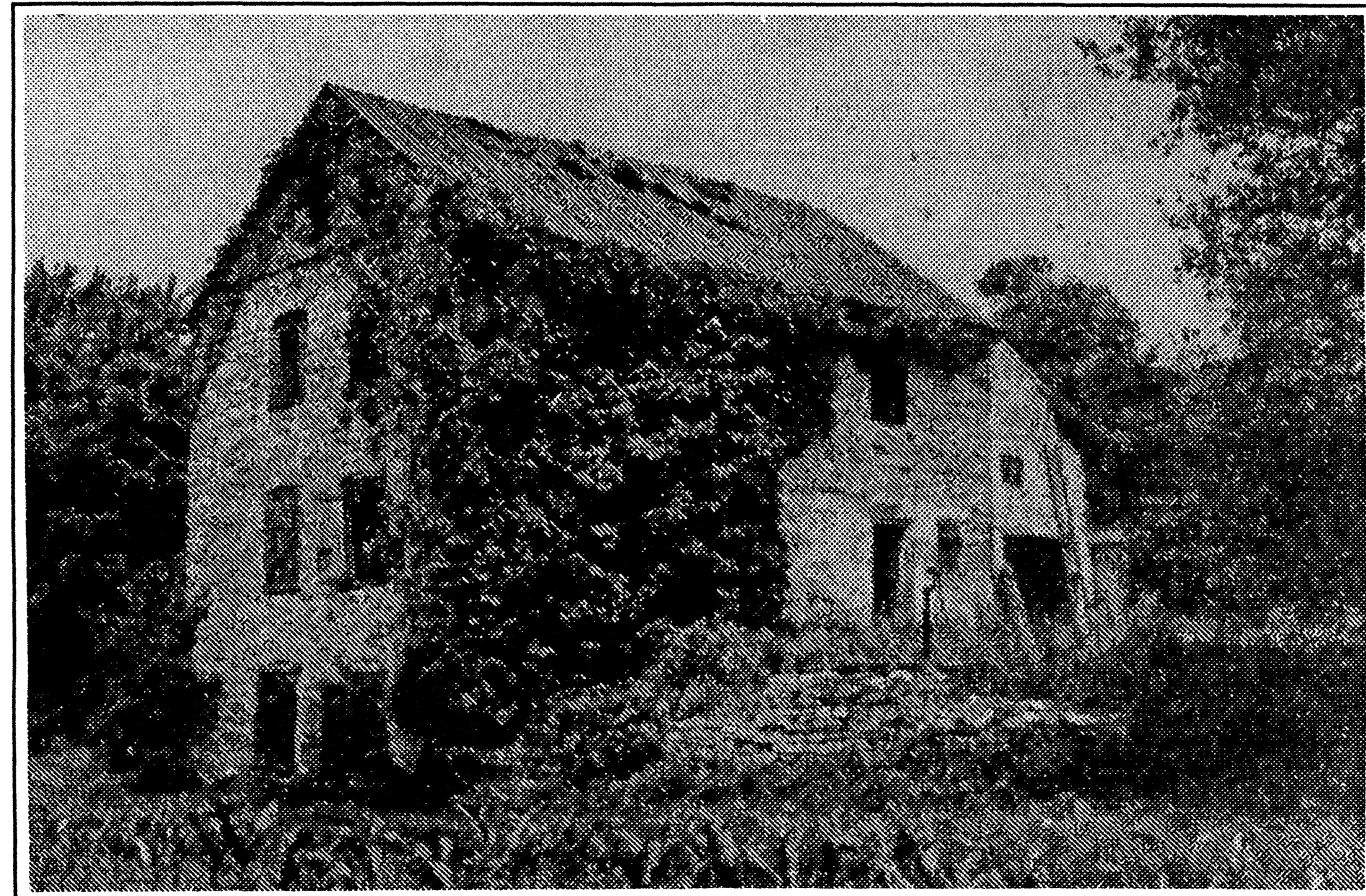
William Werner purchased the 66-acre farm and with his brother, *Henry*, lived in the house until 1844. *William's* son, *Henry*, inherited his father's farm in April 1848. He lived there and farmed the land until 1867.



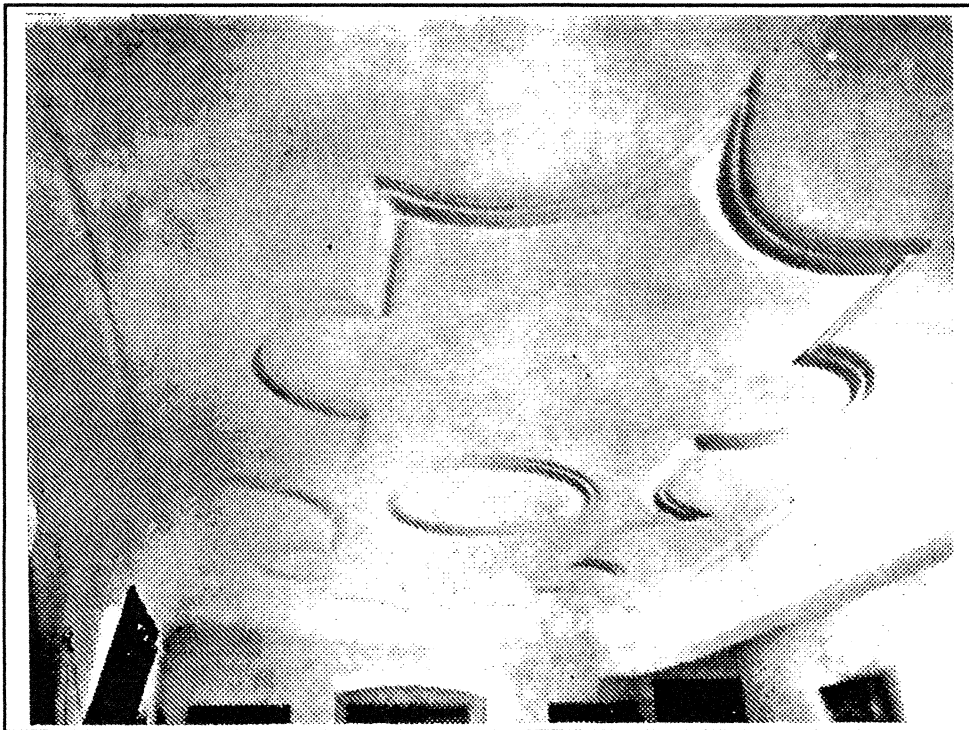
THE CONRAD KERSHNER HOUSE

Three generations of *Kintzers* farmed the land from 1890, when it was purchased by *George*. In 1937 the *Kintzer* family left the homestead and moved north to a smaller farm of 13 acres located behind *Hain's Church*. *Michael Kintzer* lived to be 99 years of age.

The *Kershner* house remained empty for many years. It was never updated and was in much



The KERSHNER HOUSE in the Summer of 1957



Baroque Plaster Ceiling in the Kershner House

need of repair. The farm was next purchased by James F. Weber, President of the Muhlenberg Dairy. Twenty years later, several young priests from the nearby Jesuit Novitiate, while walking on the land, became curious and decided to explore the old house. One of the Brothers shared the story with his family who were friends of the du Ponts and involved with the Winterthur Museum. Mr. Weber was approached about the items remaining in the old farmhouse and a deal was made.

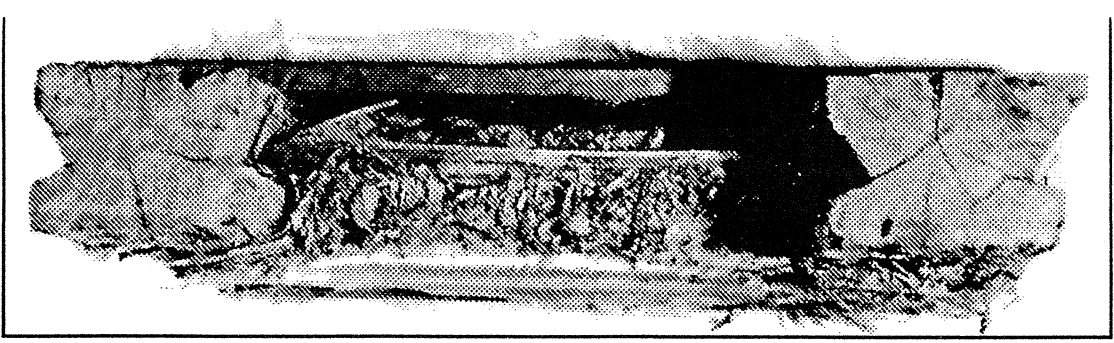
Additional specifics were published in an essay by Dr. Scott T. Swank entitled *Henry Francis du Pont & Pennsylvania German Folk Art*. He reports that Mr. du Pont was always interested in architectural discoveries that might build upon the strengths of his collection.

One such discovery was made in 1957 by Frank H. Sommer, at the time a novitiate at a Jesuit seminary near Wernersville, Pennsylvania. While on a stroll near the seminary, Sommer, a student of classical art and architecture, wandered into an abandoned stone farmhouse and discovered remarkable European baroque plaster ceilings. Sommer, a former faculty member at the University of Delaware reported his find to his friend Montgomery. (Charles F. Montgomery, Museum Director, had provided and designed earlier displays for Winterthur.) Montgomery and du Pont visited the site and quickly began to determine where the

interiors could be placed in the nearly full museum and to negotiate the purchase of the rooms in the abandoned farmhouse.

Finding a location at Winterthur proved to be relatively easy. Montgomery and du Pont were somewhat dissatisfied with the Pine Kitchen, an early Winterthur assemblage of "Early American" antiques, which was already badly dated by its installation and had an amalgamated architectural setting that did not merit retention. Measurements of the space and the first floor of the Wernersville house revealed comparable dimensions. Since the house was uninhabited and in poor condition and had been relegated to the subservient status of a farm storage shed, negotiations for purchase proceeded quickly and smoothly. The interiors of the house and the nearby bakehouse were purchased for \$1,800 in 1957.

Dr. Swank speculates "the house was probably built by George Hehn Jr., a Pennsylvania German whose ancestors had originally settled in New York's Schoharie Valley in the early eighteenth century. Many of this group of Palatines had followed Conrad Weiser to Pennsylvania, settling along Tulpehocken Creek, a tributary of the Susquehanna. Most of the settlement was along the Tulpehocken Path, historically the major route from Reading to Sunbury on the Susquehanna. The tract of 122 acres, which George Hehn Sr. bought



KNOTCHED JOISTS support the floor above, straw & plaster ceiling below.

in 1735 from the Penn proprietors and upon which his son George built the stone house in 1755, lay just off this path.

It does seem more likely that the house was built by George Hain Jr. rather than Conrad Kerschner because of the earlier ownership of the land by George Hehn Sr. and the reported residence by Conrad Kerschner no earlier than 1772. This would suggest that the passage of the "redemptioners" must have been paid by George Hehn or by some form of purchase following their arrival. The name of "Kershner House" may simply have been given with respect to its later inhabitants. Dr. Swank uses the names *Hehn house* and also *Hehn-Kershner house*. He further states: "*The date 1755 is scratched in the attic of the house, and the architectural fabric of the house supports this construction date. Tradition has it that the house, built of local limestone, was erected by two German redemptioners, a mason and a carpenter. The house may have been built by two redemptioners, but not without abundant help, for the Hehn house was no simple farmhouse. In 1755 it was a lord-of-the-manor house of significant proportions and grand pretension. The dressed limestone of the façade and the elaborate plaster ceiling mouldings with ornamental medallions are evidence of expensive and fashionable craftsmanship. Dressed limestone requires a skilled stonecutter, not just a mason, and presuming the date of 1755 is accurate, the house constitutes one of the earliest and largest examples of such masonry in Berks County.*

The scale of the house announces its pretensions. The Hehn house was built against a hill. It had a full basement, two floors, and an attic. In addition, the house was accompanied by en suite outbuildings, including a dressed limestone, two-story bakehouse and smokehouse, a storage cellar built into the adjacent hillside, and a stable or barn. En suite construction was rare in 1755, and it is likely some of those buildings were erected at a

later date. (Note: En suite refers to a set or succession of buildings of matching construction, some of which might be attached.)

The basement of the house, which was traversed by a spring, was opened to ground level on the West Side. An original sash window at this level provided documentation and a model for replicating other windows, all of which had been destroyed by 1957. The basement ceiling retained its original mud-and-straw plaster between the joists.

The first floor consisted of three rooms in 1957 because a nineteenth century partition divided the parlor from the rear chamber. The kitchen had a massive stone fireplace on the interior wall and a closed staircase of nineteenth-century vintage. The entrance to the kitchen, and principal entrance to the house, opened from the south and faced the bakehouse situated 25 to 30 feet away. The first floor had suffered considerable damage by 1957 but no significant modernization. The five-plate stove had been removed, the doors and windows were gone, and much of the first-floor ceiling had been removed or had deteriorated beyond the possibility of restoration.

The second floor was more nearly intact. The baroque ceiling mouldings and central medallions of the two upstairs chambers were in excellent condition; therefore, these were the ceilings removed and reinstalled with the first-floor interiors at Winterthur. The large upstairs hall, above the kitchen, had a fireplace which may have been used to feed a stove in an adjoining room. The second floor also had an outside entrance, the third entrance to the house. It opened onto ground level on the East Side of the building.

The three principal architectural mysteries of the Hehn house are its roofing material, the exact disposition of first-floor rooms, and the original position of the staircase. Unfortunately, the dwelling is presently a pile of overgrown

rubble, with only a few partial walls standing, so further investigation will require archaeological excavation. The roofing material of the bakehouse was red-clay tile, and one of these tiles is part of the Winterthur collection.

The staircase could only have been in two positions in such a traditional Germanic house, either to the right of the kitchen fireplace or in the location of the nineteenth-century one along the exterior kitchen wall. The dimensions of the niche to the right of the fireplace are sufficient for a closed winder staircase. In 1957 this area showed evidence of a former opening in the ceiling, which Winterthur curators speculated may have been for an original ladder-type access to the second floor; however, a ladder staircase, even of a permanent kind, would have been inappropriate for as ambitious a dwelling as the Hehn house. It would have been inconsistent with the fine construction detail of the remainder of the building. At the time of discovery, the second-floor chimneystack niche was a closet, closed in with scraps of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paneling. The quality of the eighteenth-century-fielded paneling is evidenced for an original winder staircase in the niche. Such a staircase would have had doors and paneling.

The argument for an earlier staircase on the site of the existing nineteenth-century one (on the exterior wall next to the kitchen entrance), although possible, has problems. The staircase in its nineteenth-century location chops considerable working space from the kitchen. The niche location, on the other hand, occupies a corner that might otherwise have been difficult to use effectively, and thereby maximizes kitchen workspace. Second, since the existing staircase is clearly nineteenth-century in construction, one must ask why a new staircase was built. Staircases do not normally wear out in 75 to 100 years if the house is maintained, as the Hehn-Kershner house was; however, a winder staircase in a niche was clearly outmoded by 1830. An occupant might have decided to sacrifice some workspace in order to gain a more commodious staircase.

Perhaps one of the most significant arguments for the original staircase being located in its later position is the existence of a small window to the left of the kitchen entrance. This window could not only be included in the Winterthur installation due to the necessity of compressing the rooms into existing museum space,

but its purpose was most likely to provide natural light for a stairway to the cellar. The crucial question is whether this window was original to the house or was added when the staircase was moved from the fireplace niche to its present location. In light of the architectural ambiguities, Winterthur's curators decided to accept the existing staircase rather than recreate on the basis of speculation.

The third mystery relates to the spatial organization of the first floor. The most typical Pennsylvania German house of the mid eighteenth century, whether one or two story, consisted of three principal rooms, although two- and four-room variations of the same plan were common. Conceptually, the Hehn house has three spaces on the first floor, for a summer beam divided the large area next to the kitchen (Kuche) into two spaces, each with an ornamental ceiling. In Germanic architecture these spaces were the Stube (parlor) and the Kammer (sleeping chamber). And in fact, upon discovery in 1957, this area was divided into two rooms by nineteenth-century paneling. The evidence suggested that the home originally had two rooms on its first floor, not three, so the installation at Winterthur presents only the Kuche and Stube. The Hehn house may have had either a combination Stube-Kammer or two rooms separated by a board partition that was merely replaced in the nineteenth century.

Naming and furnishing the rooms from this house posed a problem for the curatorial staff. Even at Winterthur there was a general paucity of Pennsylvania German household furnishings made prior to 1770. This meant that the rooms could not be furnished as they had been by George Hehn from 1755 to 1772. The next logical step was to furnish the rooms as they had looked under the second owner, Conrad Kershner, and for this reason the rooms at Winterthur are called the Kershner rooms. Because Kershner's death occurred over a decade after his departure from the house, the museum staff, led by curator John A.H. Sweeney and museum director Charles F. Montgomery, decided not to use the Kershner estate inventory. Instead they sent assistant Charles F. Hummel to comb Berks County inventories filed between 1782 and 1796. Hummel's survey provided the historical foundation for selecting the appropriate furnishings for the Kershner complex, such as large quantities of pewter and linen, and for eliminating inappropriate items such as window

curtains, andirons, silver, candlesticks, and paintings. Some compromises had to be made for the sake of museum exhibition. For example, the parlor includes framed Fraktur and an assemblage of sgraffittoware. Other compromises were necessary because the museum did not own and did not have any prospect of buying appropriate objects, most particularly a bed and bedstead.

The architectural installation in the museum required adjustments, but this 1958 installation was clearly one of the most ambitious efforts toward historical accuracy ever undertaken by du Pont and the museum staff. Today, it remains the most important Pennsylvania German architectural installation in any museum".

At the time Sommer found the Hehn-Kershner house it was owned by James F. Weber of Reading and had probably been last lived in about 1937 when the Kintzer family left the farm. The abandoned building was being partially used as a storage facility for farm equipment but was in disrepair and deteriorating rapidly. On June 19, 1957, Winterthur contracted to buy the interiors of the house and the bakehouse. Further arrangements with Weber allowed Winterthur to take stonework from around the kitchen entrance as long as Winterthur reinforced the doorway. Because the museum removed window frames, it also had to shore up the masonry in these areas, which it did by filling in the windows with cement blocks. Weber's chief concerns were that the structure of the building not be weakened and that the equipment lean-to next to the house not be disturbed.

Two days after Weber signed the agreement, Montgomery wrote to du Pont... Russell Kettell, a noted New England antiquarian, was to arrive to prepare drawings, a photographer had been scheduled, and a master plasterer had been hired to assist in the removal and reinstallation of the ceilings. The key Winterthur personnel were Montgomery, Sweeney and Hummel.

The process of removal was supervised and documented by Sweeney and executed by Howard Lattomus and an expert Winterthur crew. Removal of the Kershner House proceeded smoothly but slowly, as did the installation. The location chosen for the installation was a space 29'6" by 22'3". The Kershner first floor measured 34'8" by 22'3"... The near perfect fit in width was a stroke of luck, but the length match showed a 5' 2"

discrepancy. In an attempt to achieve accuracy, the exterior wall of the museum was pushed out to gain precious inches, but in the end the kitchen and the parlor were shortened. In addition, the ceiling in that space of the museum was only 7'3" and could not be increased to accommodate the rooms' original 8'9" ceilings.

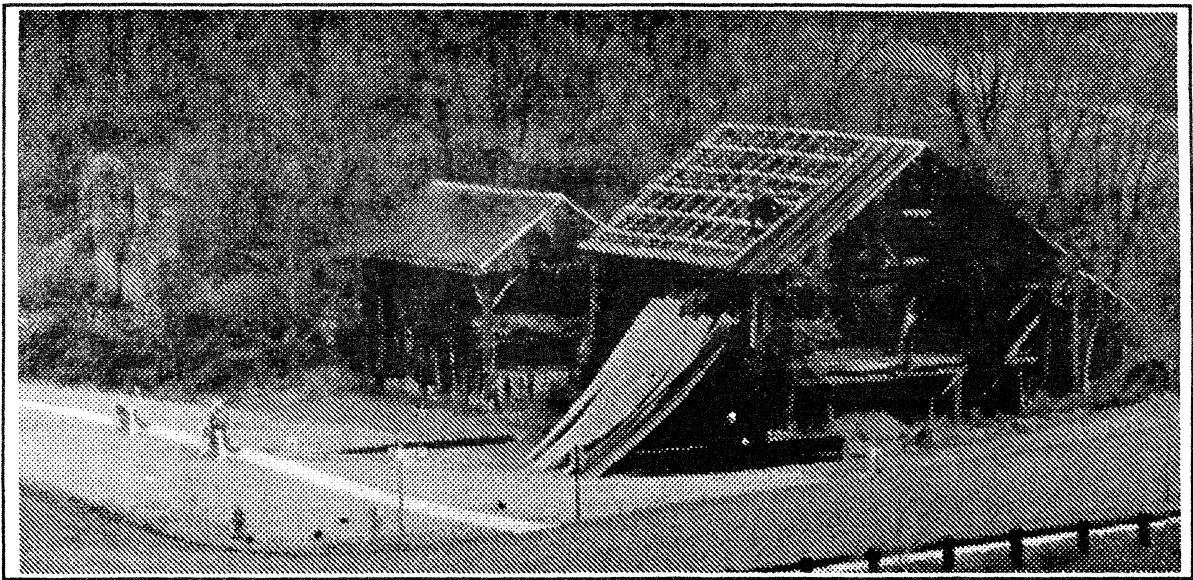
Although the Kershner rooms kept their original relationship to each other, the change in dimension altered the rooms in significant ways. The original dimensions of the parlor were approximately 22'3" by 20'5". This nearly square, traditional German parlor was made more rectangular. It is now 22'3" by 19'... The kitchen lost nearly 3' in width... while the magnificent fireplace hearth always dominated its kitchen, in the museum installation it overpowers the room.

In the process of installation, Sweeney and Montgomery hit upon the idea of displaying the south façade of the house, On March 18, 1958, Montgomery dashed off a letter to du Pont in Balboa, Panama:

Work on the Kershner Rooms is coming along well, though there have been many problems. Only last night I got agreement from Mr. Weber, the owner of the house, to let us take the stone out of the whole front so that we can line the hallway of the old iron room with it. In other words, as you walk along the hallway, you will see the exterior of that house and then walk in through the front door. I think it will add a terrific note of reality to it and though it will add some \$2,000 to the cost, both John and I are convinced it is worth it. I had to pay \$750 for the stone, and the work of taking it out and putting it in will be \$1200-\$1500 more. I am sure this is going to be one of our great installations. The fireplace is simply overwhelming when you walk into the room and I think the realism of it will be perfect.

The idea was well worth the price, for it added welcome textural relief and a note of authenticity to the museum's rooms.

The Kershner bakehouse was also moved at the same time as the other two rooms. It is the only installation of a functional outbuilding in Winterthur Museum. While the original position vis-a-vis the kitchen entrance was shifted to fit available space, its close proximity makes the central point that bakehouses were adjuncts to



A barn and shed were removed from the "Old Homestead" in November 1996. The East Wall ruins of the Kershner Home can be seen on the left in the photograph.

kitchen work space that were critical to the overall farm operation. In fact, this bakehouse was much larger than in the Winterthur installation; it was a two-story combination bakehouse and smokehouse.

The Kershner installation as a museum merits special attention. It represents the last phase of the development of H.F. du Pont's long career in creating period settings in his museum. The meticulous attention to historical detail, the effort to incorporate an outbuilding and an exterior wall to provide context, and the research behind the project all signal that this period setting was special. It was the product of a highly trained professional staff. In a sense it marked the end of du Pont's very personal approach to his museum. It was the fulfillment of his effort to institutionalize his museum endeavor so that it could continue to realize his dreams by presenting his work to the American public long after his death.

A full-page report of the new Winterthur display was printed in the Reading Eagle newspaper on Sunday, January 25th 1959 under a heading "*Parts Of Berks Farmhouse Find Way Into Famous Museum*" and the byline "*Prize Architectural Features Removed from Wernersville Residence*". The article included photographs of the home and state of disrepair prior to any removal and the newly completed displays as they appear in the museum. The report contained much of the same information as was included in the essay by Dr. Swank. An excerpt does provide some additional detail: "*The dismantling of the house took many months. First it*

was photographed inside and out, and measured drawings were made. Then the ceiling was removed by carefully cutting around the plaster mouldings which were gently packed in straw for their trip to Winterthur... The stones in the fireplace were each numbered to correspond with numbers on a large photograph. When the fireplace was rebuilt in the museum this photograph was used as a guide for placing the stones back in proper order. All woodwork was marked in the same way with its location in the room so that it may be reinstalled exactly as it had been in the original house.

The report also identified Dorothy W. Greer; assistant to the museum director, as an associate of the team that effected the planning and execution of the removal and installation operations. The nature and description of Winterthur was also reported including directions on how to get there, hours of operation and how access to the Kershner Rooms and other displays was limited to small tours that required advanced reservations and special admission charges for interested visitors.

Your editors had the pleasure of visiting Winterthur last August, in preparation for publishing this edition of *The Heidelberg*. We were strongly impressed, not only by the display of the Kershner Rooms, but by the entire museum and especially the knowledge and professionalism of our guide, Pam Smith. We must also note the courteous and cooperative staff of the museum library and archives departments. We found everyone to be as interested in what we were doing as we were in their

accomplishments. We were further honored to help arrange a visit, in September, of the guides of Winterthur's Pennsylvania German displays to Berks County. The group was welcomed and entertained by Chip and Vonnie Henderson at their Charming Forge home and Lester and Barbara Breininger at the Taylor Mansion in Robesonia.

Lunch was enjoyed at the Stouch Tavern in Womelsdorf. A final highlight of the day was a visit, in the rain, to the ruins of the Hehn-Kershner home on the grounds of the Phoebe Berks Village in Wernersville. Joan Avis Jepson, Marketing Coordinator at Phoebe Berks, escorted the group on our visit to the site of "The Old Homestead."

The Kershner Family

The first members of the Kershner family to travel to America came from the village, Langenselbold, near Hanau in Germany. Prof. I. Daniel Rupp reports in his *Collection of Thirty Thousand Names of Immigrants to Pennsylvania: August 27, 1733* – Palatines imported, Ship Elizabeth of London, Edward Lee, Master; from Rotterdam, last from Dover. Johannes Kirshner and wife Gertraud, (nee Faust), are named on the list, along with two children under the age of 16 years (Johan Conrad and Johan George Kirshner). These are the ancestors of the Conrad Kerschner that lived in the Kershner House on "The Old Homestead".

Johannes initially settled his family somewhere near Hain's Church. His name appears on the petition of 1738 requesting the erection of a new County. (Berks County was officially established in 1752 from parts of Lancaster, Philadelphia and Chester Counties.) There are also letters showing that Johannes was involved in the early history of Hain's Reformed Church in Wernersville. Johannes and Gertraud are supposedly buried at Hain's Church, but the exact location of their final earthly resting place remains unmarked and unknown.

Johan Conrad (Conrad I, 1717-1791), the oldest son of Johannes and Gertraud, was married to Catharine Beck. They moved from the Hain's Church area in the mid 1770s and were among the earliest to settle in the part of Windsor Township that is now Perry Township. Conrad I helped to build some of the earliest roads and played a major role in founding Zion's Reformed Church there. He traveled to Philadelphia to obtain 40 acres of land (donated by the Penn Family) where a new log church and school were erected in 1761. Services were held in the Kerschner barn until the log church was completed. Rev. William J. Kershner, pastor of Hain's Church from 1883 to 1926, and Society member, Jean Kershner Grim are descended from Conrad I and Catharine Beck Kerschner. The last record of Conrad I is the Indenture of June 2nd 1792 in which his estate was distributed to his widow, Catharine, and their thirteen children. The Indenture also transferred the farm in Windsor Township to Conrad Kerschner II, the oldest son of Conrad I and grandson of the immigrant.

Conrad Kerschner II, (1744-1813), is the family member that served in the Pennsylvania Militia and along with wife, Catharine Reeser, lived in the Kershner House from 1772 to 1803. (122 acres of land were granted to George Hehn by the Penn Proprietors in 1735. An additional 63 acres were granted to George Hehn Jr. in 1748. Both tracts were sold to Conrad Kerschner II in 1772). A letter dated 1789 which appointed Conrad II as *Captain of the Seventh Company of Foot in the Third Battalion of Militia in Berks County* is shown in the 1916 *History of St. John's (Hain's) Reformed Church*. It would appear, however, that this was not the first appointment of Conrad II since his name is also mentioned in a letter of 1777 and members of his command are listed as having served from April 21, 1778 to October 23, 1788. During this period, the 2nd Zion church, (a stone structure), was used as an arsenal and storehouse and services were again held in the Kerschner barn. Conrad II and his family were also heavily involved in the building of the 3rd Zion church in Windsor Castle in 1805. Services were once more held in the Kerschner barn until the new church was completed. Conrad II died in Windsor Township in 1813.

Conrad Kerschner III, (1770-1850), was the son of Conrad II and Catharine Reeser. Census records show that Conrad III, a farmer and blacksmith, was married to Anna Maria Hix, and lived in Windsor Township in 1800. Conrad III is credited with having manufactured the nails for the building of the 3rd Zion church in Windsor Township. Records of the Zion, Windsor Castle cemetery show that all three Conrad Kerschners and their wives are buried there.

The Kershner Farm, "The Old Homestead" is shown to be in the possession of George Eirich in 1812 although it is not known how or when this may have taken place. The executors of George Eirich sold the land to Jacob Ruth in 1816 and again, at Sheriff's sale, to William Werner in 1827. It is assumed that Jacob Ruth was unable to remain current on his mortgage payments.