

# The Farmhouse Renovation— A Survivor's Tale

By John Hanson '78 and Morgan Hanson '03

AFTER



**B**ishop William White founded Episcopal Academy in 1785 at Christ Church in Philadelphia, one of the oldest and most historic structures in all of Philadelphia. So it's a bit of a surprise, after the move to the new campus, to discover a building that actually predates that period by perhaps as much as a hundred years—the white farmhouse near the main entrance on EA's new campus. We were thrilled when our company (Hanson) General Contracting Inc.—John '78, Chris '83, and Morgan '03) was selected to work along with Jim Garrison AIA ('75) and Mark Notaro, Director of Facilities and Operations at the school, to design and implement the renovations to the building, which now serves as the residence for Mark and his family. From the outset, we knew that the building was old, but it was not until we had peeled back a few layers that we began to understand the actual origins of this story, one that began well before the Declaration of Independence, and evolved in a way that only vernacular architecture can. We feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to help write the latest chapter, which paid particular effort to balancing the sometimes divergent interests of historic preservation, sustainability, and family life in the 21st century.

William Penn planned “the first inland town west of Philadelphia” in 1681 and the township of Newtown Square was incorporated in 1684. At that time, the town encompassed about one square mile centered approximately at the intersection of Goshen and Route 252. A farmer's commute to the market in Philadelphia would

make today's horrors of the Schuylkill Expressway pretty tame by comparison: a half day or more on dirt roads through mostly undeveloped land or forest, followed by the prospect of crossing the Schuylkill River, no simple task since there were no significant bridges at that time.

The exact dates of the farmhouse are not well-documented; the builder of the original structure on the land where the farmhouse sits was a man named John Reese who purchased 650 acres of land in 1698. Township tax records indicate that there was a building on the land at least by 1715 and possibly earlier. Descendants of the Reese family owned and operated the farm for the next 150 years until the land was eventually sold to James Calvert in 1866. Calvert, a

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successful farmer and businessman, was able to upgrade into a new Victorian home, which he built up the hill from the farmhouse, now the site of Sherrerd Alumni House. The Calvert family later sold the land to William Liseter Austin, whose daughter married William DuPont, which is how the property became part of the DuPont estate. The DuPonts owned the land for the majority of the 20th century when it became known as Liseter Hall Farm.

Before agreeing to any strategy about the redesign of the farmhouse, our first assignment was to peel off some detritus from previous remodels to see what we had to work with. A first glance at the property from the outside showed a structure built from rubblestones across the front, with wood siding on the rear and one gable end, and a chim-

ney coming through the mid-point of the roof. Inside, the rooms on both the first and second floor were small with two stairways at either end, with different floor heights in the rooms on either side of the chimney. It was obvious that the building had evolved in stages with the chimney at one time being on an outside wall. You could also notice a seam in the stonework and a slight change in the window heights from one side to the other. What we did not know was how bad its condition was, and how truly historic it was.

One early indication of both its age and its condition was the floor framing. Beneath some carpet and late 20th century tongue and groove flooring were a series of floor joists that were literally small tree trunks with a flattened top edge. The bark was still intact on all exposed surfaces. Also mixed into the framing were beams taken from previ-



ous locations with cuts and mortises showing evidence of their former lives. Unfortunately in addition to being really old and interesting, the framing was also completely riddled with termites and had to be removed. So much for historic preservation.

The next and probably most interesting discovery we made was when we tore out the existing stairs at one end of the building. After peeling off the structure of the stairs and the wall finishes, we found another series of wood logs, in this case a whole wall of them stacked on top of each other. Apparently this rubblestone house had been predated by a log structure, and rather than tear it down entirely when it was time to rebuild, the log wall was left in place and added to with the adjacent stone walls. After looking at some of the exposed details with a structural engineer who specializes in historic structures, we determined that this section of the building was probably built before 1700, making it perhaps the

oldest building in the township. In this same space on the opposite wall was a cavernous fireplace. After we tore out the ceiling we also uncovered mortise and tenon joinery, and even small sharp hooks fastened to the sides of the second floor joists, which we assume were used to hang small game waiting to be turned into a meal.

As we turned our attention to the design for the reconstruction it became apparent that it was this oldest part of the structure that should become the focus of our historic preservation efforts. We paid particular attention to restoring the details around the large fireplace, using a traditional limewash for the interior and installing a new flagstone hearth, and left other elements exposed such as the log wall and the ceiling framing. On the second floor we removed the plaster ceiling and left the framing exposed to create some additional volume, also exposing some of the traditional joinery that was used to tie the structure together. The ceiling joists and rafters were tied together with a mortise and tenon and each one was labeled with Roman numerals by the carpenter as he fit them together before they were installed.

A two-story addition at the east end created a garage and additional bedroom space, with a full basement underneath to house mechanical systems. From an energy efficiency standpoint, we all agreed from the outset that we were interested in applying any and all principles of sustainability that we could fit into the scope of work.

Although we were unable to create room in the budget for big ticket items such as solar or geo-thermal energy

collection, we did manage to create a tight envelope for the building by using sprayfoam insulation throughout, by far the most effective method of sealing the envelope and containing a building's energy. We also specified a 90% efficient furnace which recaptures much of the heat wasted in less efficient systems by condensing and gathering heat from escaping water vapor. Variable speed motors for the equipment also help to reduce energy consumption.

In the interest of keeping it local (another key principal of sustainability) we were able to find materials on-site and nearby to fit into the project. Some leftover tile from one of the buildings on campus was used for the vestibule floor, and wood from a tree that was cut down was used for some of the millwork. We also relocated some boulders from the grounds to create a retaining wall at the driveway. It was also nice to be able to take advantage of the Episcopal community in finding local resources. Donatucci Kitchens (Tom Donatucci '83) provided the kitchen cabinets and countertops, and Platttile (Rod Platt '71) provided and installed all the bathroom tile.

This building was on the verge of a fate similar to many buildings like it—demolition by neglect—when Episcopal inherited it. It's a credit to everyone involved that its value was recognized, and that the appropriate resources were found to redefine it and give it new life. Who knows—in another 225 years, after Episcopal has outgrown its campus yet again and moved on, maybe this building will have outlived its surroundings yet again. Survivors have a knack for reinvention. ●●●

## Naming Opportunities Still Available!

The renovation of the existing farmhouse, as well as the construction of the Head of School's House and the Chaplain's House, were part of the overall Ever Episcopal Campaign. The school expects these three "Phase II" projects to conclude this spring.

**Lowry House**, generously funded by Dick '54 and Carol Lowry, will house the Head of School and his family. Ham and Ceci Clark look forward to moving into the home in the coming months and a formal dedication of the house will take place in the fall of 2010.

The **Chaplain's House** and **Farmhouse** are still available as naming opportunities. Please contact Paige Peters LeGrand at 484-424-1773 if you are interested in learning more.