
Burrell Homestead Study

A Comprehensive Study of the Burrell Homestead

Col. Matthew W. Nahorn - 2017



A unique, artistic look at the Burrell Homestead. The title of this photograph is "Lonely," as after over 180 years of continuous habitation by members of the Burrell Family, today the house is quiet.

Introduction

A rare opportunity is presented when one enters a house that has experienced little change in nearly two centuries and is steeped in rich, local history. It is not only a privilege to do so, but it is an honor to be inside the walls of such a building. Numerous houses in the area are approaching or are around a century old; however, they have been altered to an extent that they only continue to reveal certain aspects of their original period feel and architectural features. And of course these houses are generally equipped with present-day amenities and fixtures, such as forced air HVAC systems, electrical appliances, and the like, which create and provide a certain atmosphere that one would not have experienced years prior, when the early structures were erected. A few of these “normal”-day sounds of which we are accustomed may be encountered in the Burrell House, such as the forced air furnace clicking on from time to time, and an electrical switch here or there, but for the most part, this house maintains a certain silence only found in early period houses that have undergone little alteration — a silence or quietness that is maintained by having few present-day features that new houses boast. The Burrell’s is reminiscent of a certain time capsule, that upon entering, allows one to almost immediately appreciate the sounds, simplicity, and pioneer life that was lived two hundred years ago. In order to completely appreciate and understand the importance behind this house and why it is so very unique, it is imperative to study the history that once occurred here and look closely at the structure of the building itself. Upon doing so, this study naturally reveals aspects of necessary preservation to properly maintain and retain the rare historical character of this significant dwelling. The astonishingly well-preserved late Federal style Burrell House presents a cross-section of American pioneer life during a unique transition period to early village lifestyles in the Western Reserve of Connecticut here in Ohio.

History

The history behind the Burrell Homestead is involved, rich, and varied. It is also well-documented and fascinating — providing a glimpse of national history through the perspective of a local family. Various sources and numerous references were used in order to prepare this section, including an important audio recording of Ms. Eleanor Burrell, recorded by Ms. Diane Wargo-Medina in 1992.

The Burrell House is located at 2792 East River Road in Sheffield Village, Ohio at the end of a rather long stone road, not far from the confluence of the French Creek at the Black

River and Sugar Creek at French Creek. The French Creek is the largest tributary of the River. Before European settlement, this immediate area, because of its topography and availability of natural resources, was an important spot for Native American Indians. Several prehistoric Native American Indian sites have been recorded here, and archaeological excavations, via accredited organizations, are ongoing. This report, however, will focus on the house itself and refrain from delving into the prehistoric aspects of this property, which are numerous. The house and its construction will be studied closely in the Structure section of this report.

In 1815 Capt. Jabez Burrell (1767-1833) came to this area from the East, being the Berkshire Mountains of Sheffield, Massachusetts, to select a few hundred acres of land he wished to purchase, along with Capt. James Day. (The original Burrell Family Homestead still exists, albeit in rough repair, in Massachusetts, as seen below.) In 1816, the Burrell and



Day pioneer families returned to this area to settle. Henry Root and his wife Mary Day Root were the first family to arrive in the spring of 1816 and permanently settle in Sheffield Village, Ohio (Township 7 in the 17th Range). The Burrells traveled largely by water, and the Roots came over land. A double log house was constructed as a temporary residence for the Burrell and Day families, located somewhere between the current brick Burrell House and



East River Road. This log structure was used until the present brick house could be constructed, a few years later. Col. Nahorn aided in a rather brief attempt to unsuccessfully locate the original log house site in the front yard of the property, during an archaeological exploration in 2012. We were unable to find evidence of a foundation there; however, tradition is that it was located there out front.

The Days built a wood frame house up the Road. The Burrells, as did the Native Americans who inhabited this area hundreds (or more) of years prior, saw this to be a perfect spot to live — a superb vantage point high atop the area near the confluence of the Sugar Creek at

the French Creek, within the Black River Watershed. (This is also an important late-Archaic archaeological site — a temporary, seasonal village site has been found on the rear of the property (essentially opposite the Burrell Fort Site) — both very important sites, archaeologically speaking as well).

Anyway, the Burrells fired their own bricks on-site, and they gathered the clay from across the Road. This is the oldest brick house in Lorain County and likely the first one constructed in the County, finished circa 1820.

The Burrell House was used as the area's first church for many years, until about 1850. A log schoolhouse was erected where church was held in the warmer months, but they still needed the Burrell House during wintertime. Mary Burrell started the church in their house. The Burrell House has several fireplaces, which provided much needed heat in the wintertime for church services. It was an ideal location, with spacious rooms and fireplaces providing plenty of heat during colder months. The first area post office was operated out of this house as well, and the original post office desk, with its numerous divided sections where residents could collect their folded mail, still resides in the house.

A portion of the house acted as an early branch campus for Oberlin College (at the time Oberlin Collegiate Institute), known as the Sheffield Manual Labor Institute. Robbins Burrell





opened the Institute in 1836, just a few years after his father, Jabez Burrell, passed away. It was a racially integrated organization, and this is one of the main reasons it ceased operations in the following year, as the Ohio Legislature refused to grant its charter unless the proprietors stopped admitting black students. This was against the Burrell's convictions, and the Institute remained closed.

As an overview, upon entering the building, there is a central hallway — to the left (south) is the formal parlor, and to the right (north) is the informal sitting room (this is further designated by the different style moldings employed in both rooms: the parlor having the more ornate moldings; the sitting room having simpler, drabber moldings.) The informal room was used as a classroom for the aforementioned Institute, and it is believed the first African American students from Oberlin were educated here and not necessarily on the Oberlin Campus, proper. The slogan for Oberlin College is “learning and labor” (still today), and so this ‘labor’ portion of the slogan was largely carried out here on the Burrell property.

One major “labor” project undertaken there was the propagation of silk via silkworms. They initially planted some 17,500 mulberry trees in an attempt to raise silkworms and eventually harvest the silk, but with Ohio’s harsh winters and a drought that occurred, this venture soon failed, which partially aided in the eventual ceased operations of the Institute. Furthermore, and as it was described above, it was a racially integrated organization, and so it ceased operations in the following year as the Ohio Legislature refused to grant its charter unless it would stop admitting black students.

The Burrell Homestead was a major stop on the Underground Railroad as well. Capt. Jabez Burrell's son, Robbins, aided in hiding runaway slaves on the property — not in the house but rather in the grain barn (now gone) out back. It was much easier to explain to the slave catchers, if questioned and found, the runaways being hidden in the barn rather than being found directly in the house. Then the Burrells worked with Capt. Aaron Root, who lived not far away, in ferrying the slaves over to Canada. Root was a captain on Lake Erie and aided in this manner, taking the runways down the French Creek, on to the Black River, and over to Canada, via Lake Erie.



The house is essentially all-original, the only parts being “replaced” or repaired are those during a devastating fire that occurred there in the early 1840s. This fire, often referred to as the “great fire,” is believed to have ignited from a spark that exited from the north chimney, igniting the wooden shake shingle roof on December 2, 1842. It lasted about three

days, largely because the structural wood that was affected is oak and black walnut, lending the fire to burn slower and smolder longer. Much of the interior wood work especially, was gutted and quickly rebuilt, however. The extreme front portion of the structure is believed to have suffered the heaviest damage. Most doors are original and were saved from the fire, but the front door was required to be replaced at the time, and the large front sandstone step block exhibits a major crack where it broke in two pieces as a result of the heat from the devastating fire. The ornately hand-carved Federal Style fireplace mantels, in each front room, (formal parlor and sitting room — much more ornate mantelpiece in the parlor) were literally torn from the walls and saved from the fire which burned for days in the thick tri-layer brick walls. Some Greek Revival flares are encountered on the exterior roof architecture, especially that of the returns and entablature, likely as a result of the necessary repairs from the fire. The entablature, including frieze and cornice members, is not ornate and actually is quite plain.



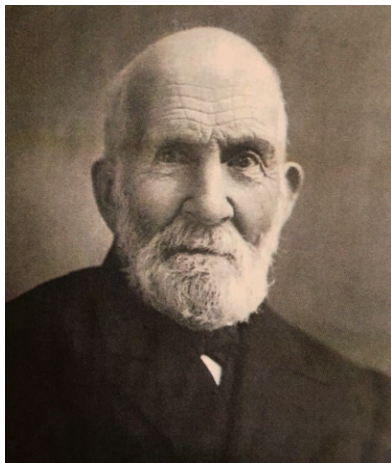
There were several barns and outbuildings on the grounds, only one of which survives. Two outbuildings were located on the property into the early 2000s, but the large wood frame barn had since fallen into disrepair, which forced its demolition, circa 2002. The only remaining outbuilding is the Cheese House built circa 1869–70, constructed by Edward

Burrell (Robbins' son). Field-stone foundations of a granary and two barns are extant west of the house. There were two cisterns by the house and about five wells total. The land was home to many livestock over the years, requiring the large number of wells. At least two wells still exist. These were used well into the 20th century by the Burrell family.

The grain barn that was located to the side of the Cheese House is believed to be where Robbins Burrell hid runaway slaves. A portion of its foundation remains today. The runaway slaves stayed there until Capt. Aaron Root could take them down the Black River and across Lake Erie to Canada. A possible tunnel led from the basement of the house to this particular barn. Archaeological explorations are ongoing in order to determine the validity or status of the tunnel's existence. A very unique sandstone carriage step remains out by the driveway. It is a rather narrow stone with four steps cut into it. The Pioneer Cemetery is south of the House on E. River Road.



Remarkably, descendants of the Burrells are the only people to have owned and occupied the house in its approximately two hundred years of history as a residence. Of the



last family to live in the house, there were six children total: three boys and three girls. These included: Edward, Dwight, Kenneth, Doris, Virginia, and Eleanor. Their parents were Harry Clifton Burrell and Tempe Garfield. Doris and Eleanor Burrell were the last of the Burrells to live in the house; Doris passed away in 1997, and Eleanor passed away in 2001. This ended over one hundred eighty years of continuous occupation by the Burrell family in the house. Today it is operated by the Lorain County MetroParks system as a museum and park center, open to the public on various occasions. The last of the Burrell family sold the house and property to the Lorain

County Metropolitan Park District in 1969 in the form of a life estate gift, and it is now operated as a museum, being open periodically. They exercised the option to reside in the house for as long as they wished.

In August 2016, Col. Nahorn had the unique opportunity to meet with David Burrell (below), of Oregon, a direct relation of Jabez Burrell. It was very interesting to speak with

him and tour the house *with* a direct Burrell descendant. Thomas Hoerrle, an expert on the Burrell Homestead history and a frequent visitor with the late Burrell sisters, provided the detailed tour of the Homestead for David Burrell. This was an honor. His resemblance to direct relation Jabez Lyman Burrell (above), the founder of the Sheffield Manual Labor Institute operated on the farm, is remarkable.



Structure

One of the main facets of this report is to study, reveal, and document aspects of the structure that comprise the Burrell House. As noted in the previous section, a double log house was hurriedly constructed initially before the brick house could be erected. Jabez had located a substantial clay deposit near a small tributary of the French Creek, being Sugar Creek, and he soon commenced establishing brick kilns in order to fire enough handmade bricks for a large homestead. It is difficult to imagine today the efforts of planning, designing, and executing the construction of such a structure without detailed plans and the aid of an educated architect and then finishing this task within just a few years, as we have estimated. This all had to be done while completing necessary tasks of literally staying alive in a wilderness. Not only was the house built to look bold and imposing yet fit seamlessly with the agricultural nature of the early farmstead landscape, it was constructed to last — and it definitely has fulfilled all requirements set forth by Mr. Jabez Burrell. And finally, all of

this precision and exactness with only a difference of two inches in width comparing the north and south upper floor bedrooms.

The Burrell House was constructed circa 1820 and is believed to be the first brick house in Lorain County, Ohio, certainly being the oldest of its kind still standing in the County. Its style, being late Federal with Greek Revival accents, and its place in history do lend itself to this nomination. It was likely started circa 1818, via our estimates and appreciating that Jabez and the family had to maintain an emerging early Western Reserve farm operation all while preparing and commencing the brick homestead. County tax records reveal that it was taxed, for example, in 1828, at \$850.



Having about 14 or 15 rooms (and rooms, including closets, being taxed at that time), combined with the structure's material, provide reasons for this higher value. As a comparison, at the same time a more modest wood frame, 1 1/2 story house in Amherst was taxed at \$250. Typical, modest-sized frontier houses in the area were taxed at figures from \$200-400, during this era.

One is qualified to express themselves in detail about the house and its features after having visited the property numerous times over a number of years. A few aspects of the house have already been noted, but it is necessary to go into greater depth in order to present a complete report: as is well-noted, the house is nearly completely of brick, made and fired on-site by the early Burrells. It is the oldest brick house in Lorain County, finished circa 1820, and includes a wood frame of both sawn and hand-hewn locally harvested hardwood lumber, largely being various oak species (*Quercus* spp.) and black walnut (*Juglans nigra*). The floor joists and other major supporting beams are mostly halves or large portions of trees, flattened on the top and bottom with an axe so as to properly receive the wide-board hardwood flooring. The flooring in the main portion of the house measures an average width compared to other houses of its age and style. In the rear portion, newer, more standard-width oak flooring has been installed. Properly sized trees and other wood needed to be selected, hewn, and notched together in order to create the timber wood frame of the structure that largely is hidden behind the brick walls. This wood would not have been

allowed to “season” for very long, as somewhat “green” wood was preferred in construction. This allowed for mortis and tenon joints, wooden pins, and other such pieces to adhere themselves together in a sturdier fashion, creating a house of wooden members that work seamlessly in tandem with each other in this long-term teamwork effort. The foundation is of hand-cut sandstone blocks from local outcroppings, likely coming from a site near State Routes 254 and 57. Local cobblestones, river rock, and brick also comprise portions of the foundation. The house was built before large-scale quarrying operations were in business.

The main section of the house, a grand but simple two-story late Federal style structure, faces the road, connected with a rear section, also of brick with an open-screened-in porch to the west and a wooden framed-in porch to the north. The front-facing exterior design, as noted, is simple but well-ordered and symmetrical. Balance is maintained with the main doorway and its toplight of four glass panes. Windows are generally six-over-six double hung sash — more than twenty are included in the house. Exterior lintels and windowsills, both of sandstone, exist over each window in the front and sides of the house. Artistically-designed brick lintels are curved around the rear windows, resembling a variation of Victorian architecture, having a broad arched structure above. This rear section, with different window treatment aspects, is believed to have been the work of a later Burrell, Edward, as the result of a repair of a structural issue. This would account for the difference in window opening styles. This rear section boasts an unusually wide peak and lower pitch to the roof that is broad and long.

Interior window moldings are composed of several wooden members, comprising a single molding and are reminiscent of other local Greek Revival style houses (again, these Greek Revival accents and other updates would be due to the fact that the house had to be repaired and was slightly “remodeled” or updated after the great fire in 1842). These match the door moldings. Painted wooden doors close off nearly every doorway and hallway in the house. They are all solid wood and mostly of tuliptree or also known as yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) wood. They retain porcelain handles, as is customary with the style. Closets are found, especially in the second story bedrooms, which is unusual in this early style of house.

In studying the brick construction, the house today remains quite square and straight after its two centuries of existence. Patterns in the brick walls may be encountered when closely dissecting these walls. These patterns lend to the sturdy construction and thus resulting overall longevity of the house. The main exterior walls are some three-brick courses thick, and after every four or so layers of brick, within that next layer, every so often a brick is



turned inward in order to tie it in or “key it in” to the next, thus adjoining the wall structures.

The main section of the house is built around a central hallway with rooms to either side (north and south), including a main staircase that greets the entrant on the right, boasting an original simply carved banister and spindles of cherry wood.

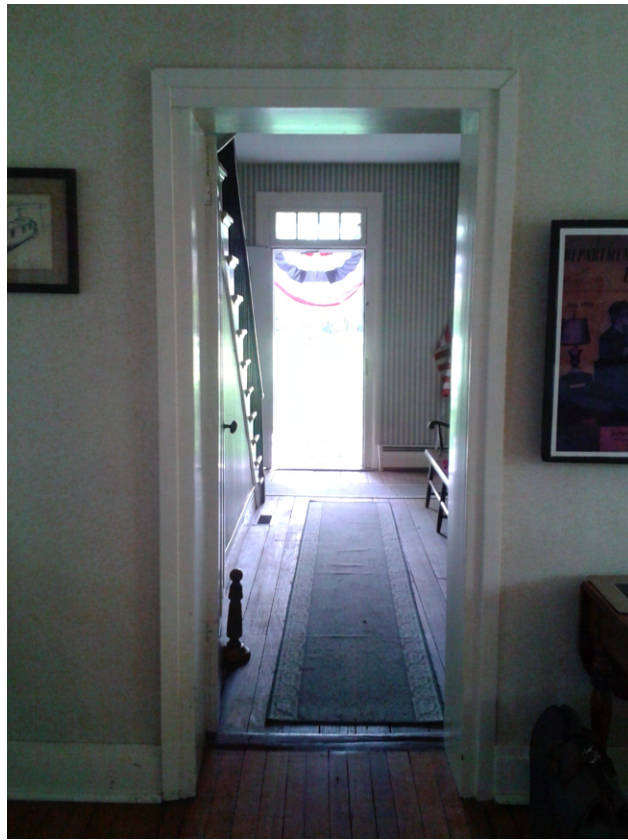
This is a main feature of the

entranceway, providing subtle but rich country charm to the house. The banister and spindles especially retain an original finish that is well-patinated. A parlor and sitting room are offered to the entrant — to the left (south) is the formal parlor, and to the right (north) is the informal sitting room. Each room boasts its own fireplace.

This designation of use is clearly delineated by the different style moldings employed in both rooms: the parlor, having the more ornate moldings; the sitting room, having simpler, drabber moldings. For example, a finely carved Federal style fan is found cut into the formal parlor’s fireplace mantel, flanked by two columns on either side boasting elongated dentil features, as compared with the quite modest

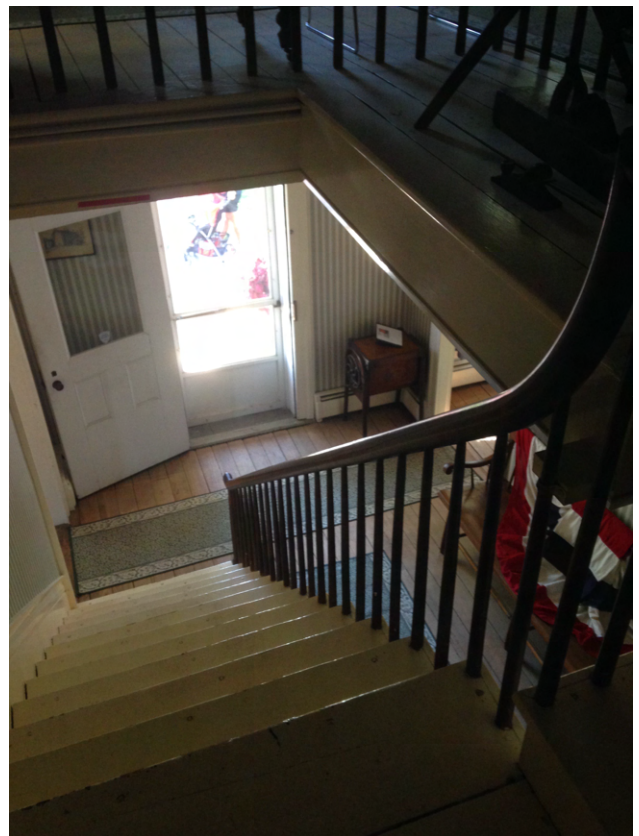


style fireplace mantel to be found in the north’s sitting room. The south parlor, being the



formal room, offers an extra exterior doorway with a multi-paned, slightly wider wooden door, in the rear. This was the “funeral door,” where the casket would have been brought in and out during such events. This doorway is common in early period houses. A useful built-in wooden bookcase or shelving unit is found in this room, to the left of the fireplace, with wooden doors.

After traversing the main hall, one is confronted with a door accessing a large room which generally comprises the rear wing of the house. Prominent wooden thresholds greet the entrant to most rooms. A more informal and likely more often utilized entryway is found on the north end of this room. It is covered by a deep porch, which is a portion of the long roof





structure comprising this rear section. The porch section is flagged with sandstone. Exactly opposite this doorway, on the south wall is located a large multi-paned window that looks to have been designed as inoperable. This was what family members once referred to as the “horse door.” A large sandstone porch, similar in design to the north portion, is seen on the exterior of the southern wall. Tradition is that horses would deliver an extra large log, entering one of these doorways, and since horses often hesitate or are uncomfortable to move in a reverse manner, after having delivered this backlog, it is believed they would continue straight through and exit the room. This log likely would be employed in the summer kitchen portion of the house, located in this rear section. A wood stove was installed in the large main room during colder months, and a hole in the ceiling still exists today, where the chimney would connect to exhaust the stove’s smoke. In the spring, the stove would be removed, and the term “spring cleaning” was much more appropriately used in those days. The house’s overall design also leads to a well-ventilated and cooled house in the summer.

Main features of the house are its numerous fireplaces found in both lower level main rooms and those in the upper level bedrooms as well. In fact, fireplaces are also found in the basement, requiring an enormous attention to planning and constructing the house walls in

proper stages so as to prepare for triple flues (basement, first level, and upper level fireplaces), ensuring that drafts were correctly drawn and exhaust cleared as well. The kitchen, especially in the winter months, was originally located in the basement, using these ovens and fireplaces. An exterior entranceway on the south end of the house (access allowed as a result of the natural topography here) facilitated the kitchen operation in this portion of the basement of the dwelling. The basement floor is mostly brick. Furthermore, having fireplaces in this lower level allowed much-needed heat to rise to the first floor during cold weather. In summer months, the house offered a summer kitchen for use in the later-enclosed wood-frame service porch, on the northwest end section of the house. Here, a well was enclosed in the house, providing early indoor plumbing!

A couple of rooms immediately west of the area where the horse might enter, add more space. This is immediately south of the enclosed porch space.

One of the most intriguing structural features of this house is a main beam that is pinned in to the brick walls on the north and south ends of the rear section. It is a remarkable structural member of the house that ensures the wide stretch of this portion remains tied together and generally square. A side entrance is located here, on the north side, under an open overhang, where hand hewn wooden beams and wide roof planking are evidenced — all open for viewing.

Indoor plumbing was offered early on in the history of this house, as compared to other local structures. A well was enclosed within the rear section of the house (a service porch), about 1870, by Edward Burrell, who turned it into a kitchen. This feature is still visible today. Furthermore, cisterns and wells were used by the last Burrell inhabitants of the house after their high school years, well into the 20th century.

Upon using the main staircase, the main upper section nearly mirrors the lower main section, having a main hall in the center, adjoining the stairwell and two large bedrooms, one each above the parlor and sitting rooms below. These rooms too have fireplaces. Several more rooms are



located to the rear of this upper section, and another, much smaller service staircase is located here. These could be known as the servants' quarters.

As has been detailed, the structure of the Burrell House is quite expansive for such an early house, built during a time when most area homes were simple and utilitarian, as this was very much a wilderness environment. The Burrells however chose to design and construct a large, lasting homestead that their family can still be proud of to this day, about two centuries later.

Preservation

After having studied and documented the structure of the Burrell House, it has come to our attention that suggestions for preservation and maintenance of the house ought to be presented:

These recommendations are meant to stabilize the house and not necessarily do anything to historically restore areas that have been changed or altered over the years.

1. Repair pediments and entablatures on the exterior. Any repairs should be matched with wood that resembles the historic character of the original being replaced.
2. Install drainage systems ensuring water is shed in underground piping, far from the house.
3. Regular gutter cleaning to maintain maximum gutter efficiency.
4. Restore windows to ensure wood and overall integrity of the window is preserved. Add/repair storm windows when needed. These, however, should allow the original window to be largely unobstructed (same with exterior doors).
5. Remove and document any historically significant items from the basement space so that these may be properly preserved.
6. Paint wood surfaces (especially exterior), regularly, while maintaining brick tuck-points.
7. Keep landscaping a fair distance from the house's foundation so that moisture does not accumulate against the house.
8. Trim trees so that they do not interfere with the house in any way.

Conclusion

Visiting the Burrell Homestead provides the opportunity to literally "step back in time," encountering sights and sounds from the pioneer era and appreciating the designs of such an early structure. The Burrell House is one of the great structures not only of Northern Ohio, but it should be ranked among some of the most unique in the entire State. It is a simple, well-preserved structure from the era of this area's founding history.



What does the future hold for the Burrell House? Overtly, because it is owned by a respected park district, it would seem everything is known and its future can easily be predicted. But to say that would be to overlook current situations and deficiencies that are taking place with the structure's maintenance. Neglect in certain matters with regard to maintenance and preservation must be regarded, and attention must be taken. As a result of the strong and sturdy construction of these early designs, the house can endure some delayed preservation and/or restoration efforts. Simply put, it is strongly advised that suggestions made in the "Preservation" section are heeded, and these issues are attended to as soon as possible. There is no reason that this historic structure, having remained in such an original state for so long, cannot be properly maintained and easily last for an extended amount of time. Visitors may then continue to enjoy and appreciate a time in our history — a period only through which can be experienced by standing within the walls of this exceptional house. As one stands within the entryway hall, with the formal parlor on the left and informal sitting room on the right, the visitor is greeted by the staircase before him — the certain quietness of the house engulfs the visitor and immediately places him in the early nineteenth century.



Col. Matthew W. Nahorn and Dr. Charles E. Herdendorf stand beside Sheffield's bicentennial marker after its dedication ceremony in 2015.

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Special photography that appears in this work is courtesy of Col. M. W. Nahorn and files of the New Indian Ridge Museum. Some maps courtesy New Indian Ridge Museum files and library collections.



For future reference and or information, contact Col. Matthew W. Nahorn of the New Indian Ridge Museum at the 1811 Historic Shupe Homestead Wildlife Preserve in Amherst, Ohio.

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