

P.O. BOX 102, LAUREL, DE 19956



LAURELDEHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG

# Fall 2025

## NEWSLETTER

### President's Note | *George Denney*

The 2025 museum openings have been a tremendous success this year! We've received many comments about the Hitchens Homestead and the outbuildings which are full of various farm implements that were used in Laurel over the past century. Of particular interest to our many guests was the Marvil basket display and the wall of baskets. In addition to the outbuildings were the Mill-hand House and the Gothic cottage which were the highlight of the tour. Each home is furnished with period furnishings and decorative arts of the period. You should definitely make plans for a visit to Hitchens.

Also on the tour is Rosemont, which has gone through a reinterpretation of many rooms. The Ralph corner cupboard makes quite a statement in Rosemont. Please schedule your next tour on the first Sunday of the month through November.

We are pleased to announce our next dinner will be held at Abbott's on Broad Creek on Saturday, October 18, 2025, with cocktails at 5:30 p.m. followed by dinner at 6:00 p.m. Our guest speaker will be Brian Shannon, Executive Director of the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation. His topic will be redevelopment initiatives in Laurel past and future. Please plan on attending this important event. Mail in your check or go online to purchase your tickets. See pages 2–3 for more details.

November 1, 2025, is the beginning of our Annual Appeal. Please consider all the various projects your historical society has undertaken to preserve Laurel's storied past when making a contribution this year. The newsletter costs alone are substantial.

Please remember, it costs money to preserve the past. Enjoy your newsletter! 🌸

**IN THIS ISSUE:** News, Cook House, Remembering Rural Church Dinners, Fall Dinner on Saturday 10/18, Finding Hidden Historic Treasures, and more! →



## LRC Executive Director Brian Shannon to Speak at Fall Dinner

The Laurel Historical Society's annual fall fundraising dinner will feature a familiar face: Brian Shannon, former society board member and current Executive Director of the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC).

Brian started his business career in Laurel in 1992 as a Realtor with Laurel Realty which became Southern Delaware Realty; today he is licensed with the Real Estate Market. In 1999, he was asked to serve on the board of the LRC, and was hired as property manager, a position which quickly became more involved. Several years later he was named Executive Director.

Since coming on board, Brian has led the charge in Laurel on behalf of the LRC with various projects including:

- The Promenade on Broad Creek, a 28-unit town-house project located on West Front Street and the creek.
- Remodeling Abbott's twice, and leasing to four different operators.
- Construction of the Pierce Ellis Medical Building.
- Construction of four new homes on South Central Avenue on the former site of Christ United Methodist Church.

- Acquisition of historic Rosemont and the Phillips House; also assisted the society with the acquisition of the Hitchens Homestead.
- Venables Park, dedicated to Senator Robert Venables, and Tidewater Park.
- Reconstruction of 201 North Central Avenue, or "Central Station," soon to open as Davelli's Bagel Café.
- Community events such as the Paint Laurel Plein Air, Watercolors (watermelon bus painting event), and 4th of July festival.

When Brian isn't working to Reimagine Laurel, he enjoys owning, restoring, buying, and selling classic vehicles, and has an extensive collection of O-Gauge trains, some of which date to the 1930s. He lives outside of Bridgeville with his wife, Patricia, to whom he has been married for 32 years.

This year's dinner will be held at Abbott's on Broad Creek on Saturday, October 18th. The event will begin with cocktails at 5:30 p.m. with dinner to follow at 6:00. Please see the event flyer and registration form on page 3. 🍷

## The Vernacular Architecture Forum Visits Laurel



*Attendees of the renowned Vernacular Architecture Forum, including many of the leading names in historic preservation and architecture, visited three sites in Laurel during a downstate bus trip in May: The Fowler House (pictured)), the Hitchens Homestead, and Old Christ Church. They also enjoyed lunch at Abbott's on Broad Creek. Society board member Emily Whaley Spicer was instrumental in bringing the tour to Laurel and documenting each of the structures, and many society members volunteered as docents at the three locations. Attendees raved about each of the Laurel stops. Thank you to all who played a part in making this once-in-a-lifetime event a success. Photo courtesy of Paula Shannon.*



# FALL DINNER & FUNDRAISER

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18<sup>TH</sup>

ABBOTT'S  
**ON BROAD CREEK**

COCKTAILS 5:30 P.M.

DINNER 6:00 P.M.

\$45 | PLEASE RSVP BY OCTOBER 10<sup>TH</sup>



GUEST SPEAKER

**Brian Shannon**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
LAUREL REDEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



Please clip and mail this form with \$45 per attendee to the Laurel Historical Society, P. O. Box 102, Laurel, DE, 19956, by October 10th. Questions? Please contact President George Denney at 302-745-1963.



Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Number of people: \_\_\_\_\_ Total: \$ \_\_\_\_\_





## Memories of an Old Lady | Norma Jean Fowler

While the title could refer to the author, what this article will spotlight is our own “old lady,” the Cook House, which has been the home for the Laurel Historical Society for twenty-five years. Newer members of the society may take that for granted but old timers will remember the days before she became our flagship. Her story has evolved over the years and it’s time for those newcomers to hear it told.

As best we know, the house was built around 1860 by George Washington Hearn who operated a blacksmith and carriage factory across the street on Fourth Street. It stayed in that family until 1909 when it was purchased, after Hearn’s death, by the William Cook family. Two generations of the Cook family enjoyed life there until 1999, when Cook’s granddaughter Haroldine Cook Shaner donated her homeplace to the society for use as a headquarters. For the first time we now had a centralized location for our collections and records. Since it had been known as the Cook home for 80+ years, the name became synonymous with the society, and is still in use today. With a well-appointed setting in place, and collections on display, we could now also host educational and social events. One glance at our society’s scrapbooks will testify to our propensity for having a good time!

By 2008, our expanding collections necessitated a need for better inventory control. No longer could we rely on memory for the information and stories each donation brought. Thanks to financial support from the Laurel American Legion and a few generous donors, we

raised enough funds to purchase not only a computer and internet access for it, but also a large printer, scanner, laptop, projector, and digital camera. These became the catalyst for our research center and library, which today number over ten thousand items. As our reputation for excellence in preserving family treasures continues to grow, more and more donations are coming in, so much so that Cook House is officially *out of room!*

Fast forward to today and efforts to restore Rosemont and the Hitchens Homestead are continuing. The exhibit committee has been working to bring to life the stories of the 18th and 19th century people and events that once occurred here. *Finally*, we are able to bring collection items long stored at Cook House out into the open so that visitors can experience the history these items represent. To that end, major pieces have been moved to period appropriate rooms at each site, leaving the rooms at Cook House available for expanded storage, something desperately needed. While the research center remains intact and available for visits by appointments, Cook House will be a closed storage area, and will not be open on our monthly Sunday tours. The grand old lady has taken care of her collections for more than twenty-five years. She can take heart that her “children” have gone on to bigger and better things. And isn’t that what we want? Make sure to visit Rosemont and the Hitchens Homestead this fall to see newly interpreted rooms and displays. You will be pleased to see our old “stuff” made new again. 🌸



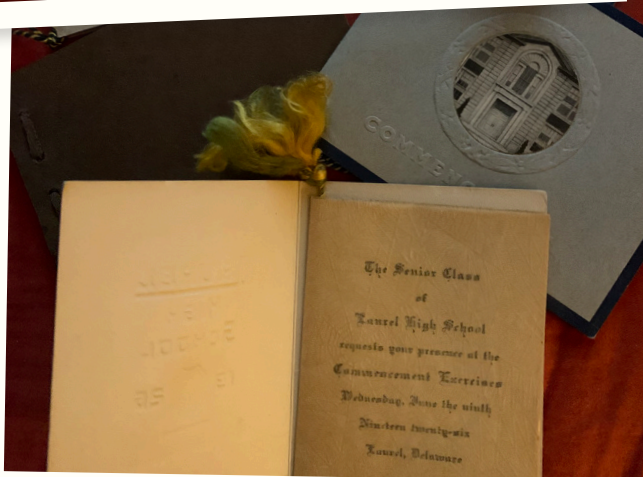
## Hidden Treasures | Brad Spicer

What's in your attic . . . your closet . . . drawers . . . sheds . . . cabinets or barns? What could you find when you're downsizing or closing the estate of a family member? I'll tell what may be lurking waiting to be found . . . "Hidden Treasures!"

Now that we have four sites/museums available to tell the multiple facets that define Laurel's incredible history; we are reaching out to you, our members, to help us uncover those hidden treasures that will give life to the narrative. We are seeking objects and asking you to donate items that will assist us to tell Laurel's complete history. These items can range from the mundane that reflect the lifestyles of our ancestors, to those that exhibit immense importance to Laurel's rich history.

Joy and I decided to take a quick look around our den and were amazed by what we found to donate to this endeavor. We uncovered multiple "hidden treasures" including two Marvil Package Company basket stamps,

my great uncle Leland Spicer's, Peoples National Bank deposit stamp for his Laurel News Agency, two packets of shipping receipts from Capt. Hopkins for the schooner, Vanquish, out of Lewisville (now Bethel) from 1861 & 1862. We also found a Laurel Farmers Auction Market long watermelon cutting knife, an ashtray from the Peoples National Bank of Laurel, Laurel Commencement programs dated 1922, 1924, 1925 and 1926. Not a bad haul of "Hidden Treasures" to donate for a fifteen minute quick search. We are confident that there are so many more items for us to rediscovered as we continue our searches. We are well pleased knowing that we have and will continue to donate artifacts that will help the Laurel Historical Society preserve and showcase our local history. If you possibly have or find items to help with this great work of historical preservation, then please contact Ned Fowler at (302) 381-2714 to make an appointment. Thank you! 🌸





## Let Us Gather for Dinner | *Brad Spicer*

During this time of year, in the 1950s and 1960s, the formidable oppressive heat of summer would begin waning and the welcomed cool breeze of an early autumn afternoon would soon be upon us. This was the time that a special event would be held . . . the rural Sussex county community church dinner.

It was during these late summer and early fall months that I accompanied my Coffin grandparents to numerous rural church dinners on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. When we arrived, they would go to an outdoor table to pay for our numbered tickets. Then, we would take our lawn chairs to an area under the adjacent trees to escape the heat, where friends and family gathered to visit and enjoy one another's company. We might wait for up to a hour until our number was called to be seated; but no one seemed to mind. They were enjoying this social time under the trees. As kids, we were rarely seated, but instead we played various outdoor games such as tag, hide and seek, red rover, red light green light and so many others.

These dinners were often served in the church community halls. It could be exceedingly hot inside during

the late summer months, due to the lack of air conditioning; but quite often huge standing fans would be used to help mitigate the oppressive heat. Once seated, the conversations would continue as if we were seated at a family dinner; and would continue until we began eating. Then, most of the conversations would diminish, replaced with silence as we began the appointed task. Dinners were always served family style with servers placing various large bowls of foods on the tops of the very long connected tables. These combined tables were usually longer than thirty feet, seating 20 to 24 people on each side. The foods included where usually ham, turkey, chicken, beef, oyster fritters, homemade rolls and or cornbread, macaroni & cheese, mashed potatoes & gravy, coleslaw, green beans, pickled beets, pepper relish, corn and assorted pickles. But, the star of the table was always the renowned slippery dumplings. It was a difficult task for the servers to keep those dumpling bowls full. Pitchers of sweet tea were kept filled and coffee was available for the asking. The serving church members always kept the bowls of food replenished and greeted you with smiles and in most cases a hug, if they knew you. There were always an assortment of pies, cakes and hand cranked ice cream on a separate table, and you could order your choice from your chair. You stayed for as long as you wanted, as long as you were eating, and ate to your fill.

After dinner, my grandparents would return to their lawn chairs, to visit with newly arriving friends for several hours, and I would play. We did this weekly, as did so many others. The dinners schedule was a coordinated effort between the many churches, thereby establishing a circuit for attendees to follow. Many friends and families would schedule a time to meet at the dinner, buy their tickets at the same time to ensure that they would be seated together at the table and then sit together under the trees. However, they would also move about the crowd to visit and meet new people. Near nightfall we would pick up the chairs and return to their home, completely satiated by the food and friendly conversations. Quite often I would fall asleep on the sofa, weary from the games we played all afternoon.

I miss these times and the dinners as I knew them; but the memories that I made with my grandparents are priceless and ever present during this time of year. ❀



*Courtesy of the author.*





The Laurel Historical Society held its first Easter egg hunt on April 19th at the Hitchens Homestead. Dozens of families attended the event, which featured the Easter Bunny and more than 1,000 eggs stuffed with a variety of prizes. Several attendees joined the society. Thank you to our sponsor, the Real Estate Market; to all of the volunteers who helped to make the hunt a success; and to Paula Shannon for taking photos. 🐰







P. O. Box 102  
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## Museums Open! First Sundays, May – Nov., 1 – 4 p.m.



*Old Christ Church*  
(Note: Closed after October)



*The Cook House*  
502 E 4th St



*Rosemont*  
121 Delaware Ave



*Laurel Heritage Museum*  
215 Mechanic St



*Bethel Maritime Museum*  
312 First St (Bethel)



*Hitchens Homestead*  
205 Willow St