



Fall 2024

NEWSLETTER

P. O. Box 102
Laurel, DE 19956

laureldehistoricalsociety.org

We're Moving!

Society Acquires George B. Phillips House

After almost 25 years at the Cook House, the Laurel Historical Society will soon be moving to larger quarters. This process will take quite some time, as moving our collections is no small task nor is the fact that our new location will need a lot of work before it can be usable.

Our new property is the George B. Phillips House at 504 South Central Avenue, immediately north of the new homes being built by the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation on the former site of Christ Methodist Church at 6th and Central. Built in 1879, the Gothic Revival structure is one of Laurel's biggest and most noteworthy residences and stands right smack dab in the middle of town on our main thoroughfare. Originally constructed for merchant George Phillips, it later was the home of druggist and postmaster George Smith and his wife, Loletie, and then used as a funeral home by Barney Riffin and Douglas Cooper before becoming an antiques shop under the ownership of Doug and Tamsey Ward. The structure has been unoccupied for years and looks every bit of it. We coordinated a work day there last fall, with 27 volunteers filling 2 ½ dumpsters in just one day.



A number of factors have led us to this point. Most importantly, we are desperate for more room. Our collections have simply outgrown our present facilities. We also need space for exhibits, research, and events. As much as anything, it's an opportunity for us to step forward and save one of Laurel's most visible landmarks before it falls to the wrecking ball. *(continued on page 2)*

IN THIS ISSUE: Phillips House Acquisition, Lecture on the Lawn: 9/15, Rosemont & Hitchens Homestead Updates, Fall Dinner: 10/5, & more! →

Is this the cheapest, most practical, and easiest solution to our needs? Definitely not, but it's the right thing to do. The Phillips House has stood sentinel over Central Avenue for 144 years: it has witnessed decades of funeral processions and parades, buses carrying our children to school, and truckloads of watermelons on the way to the Block. In the final analysis, we had two choices: 1) stand by, do nothing, and watch the place be torn down; or 2) crawl out on a limb, fulfill the society's true mission, and do something about it. We chose the latter.

A project of this undertaking never would have been thought of without the support of our growing membership. Your contributions to our annual appeal over these past few years and your faith in us have given the society the encouragement and the "war chest" necessary to think we could pull this off. We are also deeply indebted to Rep. Tim Dukes and Senator Bryant Richardson for their hand in securing a \$300,000 grant for us from the Delaware Community Reinvestment Fund.

Our members will have a chance to see the "before" at an informal wine and cheese gathering there on Friday, September 13, from 4 to 6 p.m. We warn you: don't get too dressed up! 🌸 — Ned Fowler

President's Corner

George Denney

We have been very busy here at the Laurel Historical Society during the past few months as outlined in our Fall newsletter. First, let me thank the members who rushed to Rosemont after the torrential rainstorm and helped secure our collection. Next, let me thank the docents who have given so freely of their valuable time. If you are willing to help us at one of the museums, please contact me.

Please note: Rosemont will be closed the remainder the season as a result of major construction. However, with the cooperation of the Odd Fellows, we have reopened the train station for the remainder of the season. This is a favorite display of Odd Fellows ceremonial costumes and related objects. Don't miss this historic exhibit.

We have numerous events scheduled for this Fall! Top of the list is the donor reception on October 13, 2024. Ned and Norma Jean Fowler have graciously agreed to open their home for a house tour. On display will be an extensive collection of 18th and 19th century decorative arts. We will have drinks and desserts available after the tour, so please RSVP so we can plan.

September will be a very busy month with the George B. Phillips house on Central Avenue open to members only on September 13. You'll get to tour the new home of the Laurel Historical Society before construction begins on the property. Then, on September 15, 2024, please join us in Bethel at one of the two famed Bethel Ships Carpenters' houses for our popular "Lecture on the Lawn" series, featuring board member Emily Whaley Spicer. You'll find more information about upcoming events throughout this newsletter.

Beginning November 1, you'll be receiving our annual appeal letter. Once again we ask you to be generous, as in past years, to help support the major initiatives we've begun. With all the major construction, Laurel is beginning to enjoy a renaissance. We anticipate a new rebirth of Central Avenue. In conclusion, please respond with a generous annual appeal gift so we may continue to preserve Laurel's storied past.

Enjoy your Fall newsletter! 🌸



**Members Advance Preview
of the**

**Future Home of
The Laurel Historical Society**

**George B. Phillips House (1880)
504 South Central Avenue, Laurel**

Complimentary Wine and Cheese

**Friday, September 13, 2024
4 – 6 p.m.**

A Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On

by Ned Fowler

There's been *a whole lotta shakin' going on* lately at Rosemont. With all the banging of nails, the buzz of saws, the clinking of bricks, and moving of stuff from here to there, Rosemont is beginning to come alive once more. The Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), its owner, applied for and received a state grant of some \$250,000 to begin the process of bringing Laurel's oldest and most prominent house back to life. To date, we have a new wooden shingle roof, new front dormers, two new chimneys, and what-soon-will-be an entirely new 4-columned portico with balcony—just like some of us remember. Much more needs to be done, but let's be patient. We're closed to the public while construction is going on, but we'll have something new to show off when we re-open: a portrait of Theodore Mitchell, the governor's son, who grew up at Rosemont and eventually owned the house, mill, and pond. The society commissioned this reproduction taken from the original owned by Theodore Mitchell's 3rd-great grandson, Graham Robb, of suburban Philadelphia.

Peeling back layers is often the source of new discoveries, and that's exactly what happened in tearing out a second-floor closet to prepare for the installation of the new south chimney stack. Hidden inside the walls is the outline of an earlier and previously unknown addition. The evidence was right before our eyes: the slope of the roofline, the height of the roof peak, and the depth of the addition. The only thing missing is the length, and perhaps the ground below will cough up the evidence. This new finding is further substantiated by an early photo in our collection and, perhaps, is the reason why an 1840 insurance policy listed the place as a "kitchen, sitting room, and dwelling." 🌿



Top: New roof, chimney stacks, dormers, and the beginning stages of a restored portico with balcony at Rosemont.

Left: Reproduction of a portrait of Theodore Mitchell, son of Governor Nathaniel Mitchell.

Lecture on the Lawn

Sunday, September 15th
4:00 p.m.

Ship-Carpenter's House
7729 Main Street
Bethel, Del.



Speaker: Emily Whaley Spicer

Music on the Lawn



Photos courtesy of Crystal Slavens.

Don Ward to speak at society's fall dinner, Oct. 5th

The Laurel Historical Society's upcoming fall dinner, scheduled for **Saturday, October 5th**, will feature a book signing and presentation by author and society member Don Ward.

Don grew up in Sussex County on a small farm near Carey's Church and Camp about five miles west of Millsboro. He is the son, grandson, and great-grandson of sharecropping farmers, all of whom lived within a few miles of his homeplace. After graduating from Millsboro High School and East Carolina College, Don taught physics and chemistry at Millsboro High School. In 1968, he became the last principal of that school. In 1991, he retired as Supervisor of Instruction from the Indian River School District. Upon the retirement of his wife, Anne, in 2000, they embarked on numerous world travel experiences lasting almost a quarter of a century and visiting more than one hundred countries and every continent. In 2019, Don published a history of Carey's Church and Camp entitled *Hope and History*.

Don's most recent publication is his autobiography, entitled *My Journey*, drawn from material collected over the last seven decades. Copies will be available for a \$20 donation to the Laurel Historical Society. Don will share memories of times spent with his grandfather, visits to local country stores, attending school in Millsboro, and traveling around the world. In addition, he will share several antique items of interest from the area, and some of his favorite photos. 🌻



**Saturday, October 5th
6:00 p.m.**

**St. Philip's Church Hall
600 S. Central Avenue
Laurel, Del.**

Please mail this form with \$45 per attendee to the Laurel Historical Society, P. O. Box 102, Laurel, DE, 19956. Questions? Contact George Denney at 302-745-1963.



Name(s): _____

Number of people: _____ Total: \$ _____

Laurel Needlework Comes Home

by Ned Fowler

Early Delaware needlework is uncommon, and rarer yet are examples from rural downstate. At present, only four pieces are known to have originated in the Laurel area, and they are thought to have been done in private academies under the supervision of a teacher, rather than executed at home. The Laurel Academy was founded in 1817, yet we currently cannot offer any attributions to this school.

One of these pieces, worked by Joanna Windsor, has recently been given to the society. It likely dates around 1850 and has descended through four generations of her family—from Laurel, to Chincoteague, Va., to Raleigh, North Carolina, and finally to Williamsburg, Va. Accompanying the piece are Joanna's memory album and a collection of early Windsor-Hearn family photographs. Joanna's father, Cyrus Windsor (1803-1860) was a local surveyor, and the society owns several of his surveying fieldbooks.

Joanna, born in 1831, married John Bacon, and died in 1864 at the age of 33. They are both buried at Old Methodist Cemetery on West Street in Laurel. The needlework descended to their daughter Sallie (Mrs. Thomas Henry Hearn) of Laurel and then to her daughter Ida Bacon Hearn, who also grew up in Laurel . . . actually just next door to the Cook House. Later Mrs. Walter M. Clark, Ida and her husband operated a funeral home in Chincoteague, Va. Both the Hearn and the Clarks are interred at Laurel Hill Cemetery. The Clarks had no children, so the needlework passed to her nephew, Chase Patterson Hearn, whose widow, Patricia, generously presented the piece to us. ❀



Cynthia Steinhoff, co-author of Delaware Discoveries: Girlhood Embroidery 1750–1850, and Barbara Hutson of Queenstown Sampler Designs admire Joanna Windsor's needlework at the Cook House.

Old News

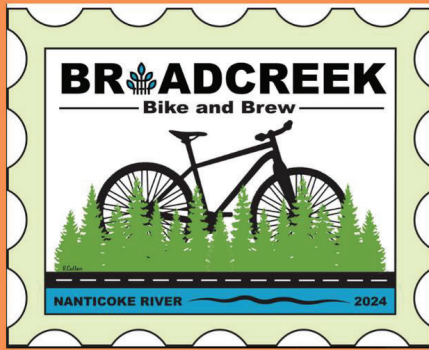
Twins With Twelve Toes Each.

Special to The Washington Post.

Laurel, Del., May 22.—Twins with twelve toes each, six on each foot, were born to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Johnson at their home here Friday morning. They

weigh about 7 pounds each, are in a thriving condition, and with the exception of the extra toes are normal. The mother's condition is causing considerable anxiety. The Johnsons moved here from Seaford a few weeks ago.

The Washington Post
May 23, 1910



12th Annual Broad Creek Bike and Brew

Saturday, September 21, 2024

7 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. onsite registration-Early start for Century and Metric Riders
9:00 a.m. Leisure start for all other riders

Laurel Elementary School
815 S. Central Ave, Laurel DE, 19956

Features:

- All routes begin and end in Laurel and feature designated rest stops with restrooms, snacks and beverages.
- Rides include historic attractions, beautiful waterways, The Woodland Ferry, Trap Pond State Park and More
- Finish Party at Janosik Park on Broad Creek featuring local breweries, live music and Chicken BBQ
- Interactive map with historical stops plus photo app locations throughout the ride
- Charitable giving benefits local non-profit groups
- Event is Rain or Shine. Extreme weather could force cancellation

For more information:

Contact the Western Sussex Chamber of Commerce
Email: admin@westernsussexcoc.com
(302) 629-9690

www.westernsussexcoc.com/broad-creek-bike-brew



Southern Delaware
Beaches are just the beginning.

This event is sponsored by:



2024 Nanticoke River Jamboree at Handsell



Saturday, October 12

10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

4837 Indiantown Road
Vienna, Maryland

Admission \$5 Adult at the entrance
children 12 and under free



Commemorating the 160th year of Emancipation in Maryland

This event is presented by the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance
Info: www.nanticokehistoricaljamboree.com



Down On the Farm

by Ned Fowler

Exterior work on the main house at the Hitchens Homestead is nearly done. Still to be checked off are repairs to the chimneys, outside steps, and a railing of sorts around the piazza. Hopefully, the roof will give us a few more years.

New discoveries at the millhand house continue. We have now documented the existence of a working open fireplace in the southernmost room, as well as original floorboards covered by a later layer all over the first floor. Also, a second-floor kneewall has yielded a treasure trove of artifacts from the 1930s: old Delaware license plates, an assortment of Hollybrook Dairy bottles, whiskey jugs and bottles, and enough old shoes to outfit the entire block. We're so fortunate that the millhand house itself was spared in a recent late-night police chase through town in which the instigator's vehicle soared into the air, flew over the berm, and took our Hitchens Homestead sign with it. Luckily enough, the millstone below the sign was unharmed and only pushed across the yard.

On a more positive note, we have recently been given some wonderful things that will further enable us to tell our story at the Homestead. Thanks to Ellis Hammond, we now have an early farm wagon, a milk chest for our



dairy, a pot-bellied stove for the south parlor (as listed in the inventory of original owner Emanuel Twilley's estate), a corn sheller, and a ginormous iron hog killing pot. (See photos below.) We'll soon be busy preparing for a visit to the Homestead by the Vernacular Architecture Forum when it convenes in Delaware next May. 🌻



Plant Corn, Grow Corn, Harvest Corn. Repeat. by Ned Fowler

Here in southwestern Delaware, it's what we've been doing since the mid-1700s—not for feeding poultry all over Delmarva and beyond, like today, but mostly for home consumption or feeding the hogs and barnyard chickens. In 1850, Laurel area farms typically produced between 400 to 500 bushels per year. Our lives rotated around this cycle. Up until the 1880s, corn cultivation was very much localized and buildings specifically built for and dedicated to corn storage dotted the countryside.

In 1986, recognizing the pressure put on the agricultural landscape by normal attrition and increasing development, the University of Delaware's Center for Historic Architecture and Design initiated a survey in Broad Creek and Little Creek Hundreds during which 609 farms and their buildings were documented. Their findings attested to the fact that, despite so much corn production, very few corncribs (especially log corncribs) survived. To be more specific, only four of this latter type were found. And one of these four is now at our Hitchens Homestead, thanks to Danny LeCates for alerting us to it being for sale on Facebook and Bobby

Carey for moving it.

Our example came from the former Discountland Road farm of Joe and Pansy Plummer. It's what is called 9-round, meaning that 9 logs are stacked atop one another to form the walls, which are then V-notched at the corners and set on wooden blocks, stumps, or concrete piers. The structure is unchinked so as to allow ample air circulation for drying corn inside. It dates from the mid to late 19th century.

Not to be confused with a sheaf of corn stalks stacked around a bean pole in the middle of a field, in Sussex County these log buildings were commonly called stacks—possibly suggesting moveability. Indeed, they were moved from farm to farm. It actually hasn't been that long ago that one was advertized in the *Sussex Guide* at an auction around Pittsville with the caveat that the buyer had to move it.

Our new log corncrib is one of very few remaining local examples providing material evidence of an architectural type expressly associated with the prevalent corn culture of the day. 🌽



Local Militia Officers in 1782

by Chris Slavens

On April 15, 1782, Colonel John Jones of the 6th Battalion of the Delaware Militia recorded descriptions of the boundaries of eight subdivisions of the “southern or Lower district” of Sussex County, as well as a list of officers under his command and recommendations for persons to fill vacancies. These obscure documents have resided in the collections of the American Philosophical Society for ages, and, like so many other historically valuable records, only recently became easily accessible to anybody with an Internet connection.

The eight subdivisions, each of which gave its name to a local militia company, were: Broad Creek, Little Creek, Great Neck, Sockham, Head of Indian River, Dagsberry, Baltimore, and Head of the Sound. Detailed descriptions of the boundaries of each subdivision were given, but are omitted here due to limited space.

More interesting to most readers, probably, are the names of the officers who served in each company. I’ve

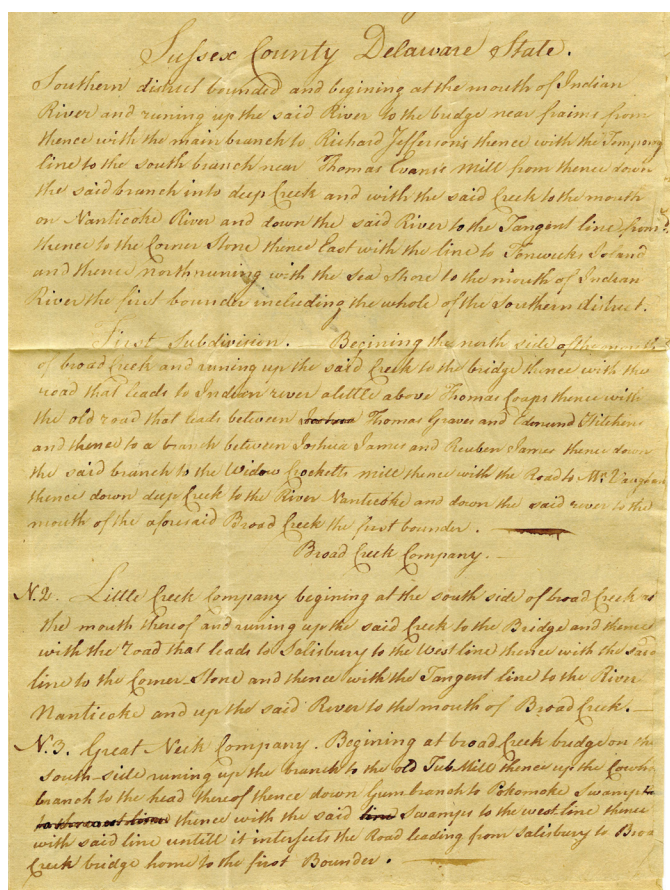
transcribed the lists for the four companies based in what might be considered the greater Laurel area, including neighboring communities such as Delmar and Gumboro.

Many of the names are familiar—John Mitchell, probably the son of the builder of Rosemont; Robert Houston, builder of Old Christ Church; and James Tresham, who gave his name to Trussum Pond. In addition to shedding a little more light on the lives of these early residents of southwestern Sussex, the list is an important resource for individuals interested in joining heritage-based organizations like the Sons of the American Revolution or the Daughters of the American Revolution, or folks who are simply curious about an ancestors’ role in the war. For example, noted Sussex genealogist Mike Adkins says he had been “looking for years” for records of Marshall Smith’s Revolutionary War service, and was excited to learn that he served as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Sockham (Sockum) Company.

Officers’ Names	Rank	Dates of Commission	Names of Companies	Persons recommended
John Jones Simon Kollock	Colo. Lt. Colo.	Sepr. 4th 1778 Sepr. 1778		
John Mitchell Robert Houston James Brauton George Bacon Smith Wingate	Capt. 1. Lieut. 1. 	Sepr. 1st 1778 Augt 31 1778 no Commn no Commn no Commn	B. Creek Company	John Mitchell Major Robert Houston for Capt James Brauton 1 Lieut. George Bacon 2 Lieut. Smith Wingate Ensign
George Smith James Tresham Marshal Smith William Bivans	Capt. Ensign	Sepr. 5th 1778 no Commn no Commn Sepr. 3 1778	Sockham Company	James Tresham 1 Lieut. Marshal Smith 2 Lieut. William Bivans Ensign
William Moore John Bacon William Moore Davis Bacon	2 Lieut. 	 no Commn no Commn no Commn	L. Creek Company	William Moore of Thos. Capt John Bacon 1 Lieut. William Moore 2 Lieut. Davis Bacon Ensign
James Gunby Samuel Scrogin James Edger David Riggan	2 Lieut. Ensign 	Sepr. 6th 1778 Sepr. 4 1778 no Commn no Commn	G. Neck Company	James Gunby for Capt Samuel Scrogin 1 Lieut. Jame Edger 2 Lieut. David Riggan Ensign

All of the companies reported not only to Colonel John Jones, but, ultimately, to the legendary Brigadier General John Dagworthy of French and Indian War fame. They had their hands full, as many of their neighbors—even family members—were Tories who actively resisted the patriots' cause. Though not directly related to these militia records, it is interesting to note that many of the officers' commissions date to 1778—the same year in which the Presbyterian church on the north branch of Broad Creek was, according to Scharf, “wantonly or maliciously burned.” For more information about these tumultuous years, see *The History of Nineteenth Century Laurel* (1983), or Charles J. Truitt's excellent *Breadbasket of the Revolution* (1975).

Military matters aside, these records may also be helpful to anybody trying to get a better idea of where one of the listed officers lived. Although the subdivisions were fairly large, they were smaller than the hundreds, and may offer the most specific description of a particular man's neighborhood. For these details, write to me at chrisslavens@gmail.com and I will be happy to send a PDF of the original, hand-written descriptions of all eight subdivisions, as well as the full list of officers. 🌸



Uncovering Laurel History

Recently a random phone call at the Cook House from a Wilmington stranger led to a previously unknown bit of Laurel history. Anyone interested in the beautiful 1921 Laurel School building will appreciate what this phone call triggered. The caller was researching the history of the Washington Memorial Bridge that crosses the Brandywine River and connects Market Street with the Brandywine Village area of Wilmington. He was hopeful of obtaining funding from the “America 250” organization in order to refurbish this early 1920s bridge. It was dedicated to American soldiers from the 1776 Revolution through the 1918 First World War. He had discovered that the original architect for the bridge was none other than Laurel native, and 1906 LHS and Cornell University graduate, Vance W. Torbert. Unfortunately our collection records turned up no information for him on Torbert, but our interest was piqued, and so we turned to newspapers.com to see what we could find.

While scrolling through articles from the Wilmington papers of the day, we were thrilled to discover that Vance Torbert was also selected as architect for the 1921 Laurel

by Norma Jean Fowler

High School building! At that time Mr. Torbert was working for the New York firm, Carrere and Hastings, known nationally for their work on Nemours, the home of Alfred I. DuPont, the New York Public Library, the House and Senate Office Buildings in Washington DC, and the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery to name just a few. Amazing to think that our high school building has a common heritage with all these important early 20th century buildings. In other words it's a big deal!

Further newspaper research revealed that Torbert's building-contractor father, William L. Torbert, also of Laurel, was believed to have held the record for building more houses throughout Delaware than any other single building contractor of his day. Guess you could say that Vance learned a lot from his father. A final tidbit we discovered was that the Torbert family, including young Vance, lived in the large white house still seen today at 142 Delaware Ave. It's truly amazing what one phone call can generate. It just goes to show that history is all around us, and there is always something new to learn. 🌸



P. O. Box 102
Laurel, DE 19956

• UPCOMING EVENTS •

September 1st	•	Museums Open	•	Old Christ Church, Hitchens, Cook House, Train Station	•	1:00 – 4:00 p.m.
September 13th	•	Members Viewing	•	Phillips House 504 S Central Ave, Laurel	•	4:00 – 6:00 p.m.
September 15th	•	Lecture on the Lawn Speaker: Emily Whaley Spicer	•	Ship-Carpenter's House 7729 Main St, Bethel	•	4:00 p.m.
September 21st	•	Bike and Brew	•	Old Christ Church (society station)	•	a.m.
October 5th	•	Fall Dinner Speaker: Don Ward	•	St. Philip's	•	6:00 p.m.
October 6th	•	Museums Open	•	Old Christ Church, Hitchens, Cook House, Train Station	•	1:00 – 4:00 p.m.
October 13th	•	Donor Reception	•	The Fowlers'	•	2:00 p.m.
November 3rd	•	Museums Open	•	Cook House, Train Station	•	1:00 – 4:00 p.m.