

## **History of the Cottage**

Mount Gretna Area Historical Society  
206 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Mount Gretna, PA

By March 1892, after leasing ground from Robert Habersham Coleman for the purpose of establishing the Pennsylvania Chautauqua, the area was buzzing with men clearing trees, making site preparations and building the required structures for classes, dormitories, dining hall, and numerous two and four room rental cottages. All this work was completed by the first Chautauqua session in July.

The Historical Society Cottage is believed to be one of those first four room rental cottages built as indicated on the early Chautauqua maps. Each cottage had a living room and a dining room on the first floor. There were no kitchens in the cottages. Meals were taken in the Chautauqua dining room or prepared on open community charcoal grills placed throughout the grounds. The second floor contained two bedrooms, a storage room with closets and a large open hall outside of the bedrooms. There were no bathrooms in the cottages. Renters would wash by bathing from a washstand with a bowl and pitcher. Water had to be carried into the cottage from local springs or wells. The toilet was usually made up of a potty chair with a removal chamber bucket that needed to be carried & emptied in the community bathrooms (out houses). In 1897, with Coleman living in New York State, he and his sister sold the leased land to the Chautauqua and the individual cottage owners.

In later years, as the Chautauqua divested itself of rental properties, the cottages were purchased by individual families. Water lines were installed and an adequate sewer system had been constructed in 1898. Now bathrooms were being installed and kitchens were being added to the cottages. In this cottage, an area was walled off from the large up stairs hallway. A claw foot bath tub, a toilet with a water tank hung on the wall above the toilet and a wash bowl were installed. On the first floor, a section of the back porch was enclosed to create a kitchen. The only heat in the cottage was from a pot belly stove on the first floor. Holes cut into the first floor ceiling permitted heat to rise and enter the bedrooms.

This cottage has been owned by several families over the years and at times was rented to tenants for several weeks during the summer. The last owner was Caroline Erisman from Lancaster. She & her husband Paul E. Erisman purchased the property on 8/12/1961 from Myra F. Frey & Cora L. Heisey.

## History of the Cottage

As early as 2005, a committee was formed to select a location for the society headquarters and a museum. The former Kauffman Park, owned by Joan Gible was considered as a possibility. Mrs. Gible offered the property to the Society at a price of \$500,000.00 for the 57 acres including a brick dwelling. There were some negatives to be considered such as ease of access by the general public. After discovering a "residential only" deed restriction placed on the property by a previous owner, we abandoned further consideration of the offer. Someone suggested that we consider our present location at 206 Pennsylvania Avenue. Neighbors indicated that there was little use of the property by the owner. I instructed Jack Bitner to keep an eye on the property and if he saw activity to inquire when the owner usually visited. Jack spoke to the owner, Mrs. Erisman, who said she was always there during the art show.

During the 2005 Art Show, I visited Mrs. Erisman on her cottage front porch and asked if she would consider selling the cottage to me for use as a museum. She indicated that she would consider it since her family was purchasing a property in Lititz where they would reside together. We discussed a price of \$175,000. She said a decision & price would be made by the spring of 2006. In the spring of 2006, a "for sale" sign was placed on the property by a Lancaster realtor and soon after, it was marked sold. Needless to say, I was very upset. However, the prospective buyer from Maryland or DC needed a mortgage for the sale price of \$224,900. The lender required an inspection. The inspection stated that there was no heating system in the building and that the house sat on sandstone rocks and cement blocks rather than on a proper foundation. The lender declined the mortgage application. Now the realtor contacted me. I expressed my displeasure at not being contacted first and indicated that the price was entirely too high. My offer was \$195,000, all cash, no inspection and no negotiating with an answer required in three days. The realtor came back with a counter offer that I turned down. A few days later, I offered \$175,000 with the same terms and the owners accepted. We settled for the property on March 10, 2006 with Ruth I. Buch listed as the new owner.

At this point in time, the historical society did not know that Ruth & I had purchased the property. At the next board meeting, I offered to sell the property to the society at the same price that we paid and that I would serve as the contractor to restore the cottage and prepare it for museum use. Additionally, we offered to hold the mortgage since the society had little credit. The board agreed to our proposal.

## History of the Cottage

During the summer of 2007, Wolfe House & Building Movers of Bernville were contracted to lift the cottage into the air about 10 feet so that excavators could dig a basement for an office, furnace room, boardroom and vault. The cottage was set back down on the new foundation that was about two feet higher than the original so that the rear door was on grade to provide a handicap entrance. Drain tile were placed around the footer at the base of the foundation terminating in the basement sump pump for drainage. A steel beam was added in the basement to support the first floor and all floor joists of the first floor and porch were doubled for further support. New steps and step railings were added at the front of the cottage to make up for the higher elevation. A new all electric heat pump along with humidification and dehumidification were installed. All the electrical wiring and new electrical service were installed as well as new plumbing. The second floor was kept in the original condition with new electrical and security systems added.

Roland Nissley, architect, provided architectural and design services for the project at no charge to the Society. Willard Hacker, my cousin, of Ephrata was the carpenter. W.E. Peters & Son of Ephrata was the electrician. Vernon Schmuck & Son of Ephrata was the plumber. County Line Mechanical of Reinholds provided the HVAC systems. John Smith of Mount Gretna volunteered to help paint. Fred Buch served as contractor and volunteered with painting & carpenter work.

Renovations were completed by early 2008. Six display cases were purchased from the Heritage Center in Lancaster. By March, we started moving Jack Bitner's collection into the museum, shortly before Jack's death. He was a happy man knowing that a museum was in the making. In July 2008, we held a ribbon cutting ceremony and officially opened the museum and library/research center.

On September 30, 2008, settlement was held transferring the property from Ruth I. Buch to the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society. Two mortgages were issued to Ruth Buch in payment for the property. One was for \$100,000.00 and the second was for \$200,000.00. Cash in the amount of \$23,094.46 was paid to Ruth Buch in exchange for additional costs of personal property.

In September 2017, a mortgage burning ceremony was held with contributors to the project invited as special guests.

Fred N. Buch  
Additions, corrections and revisions  
February 1, 2018