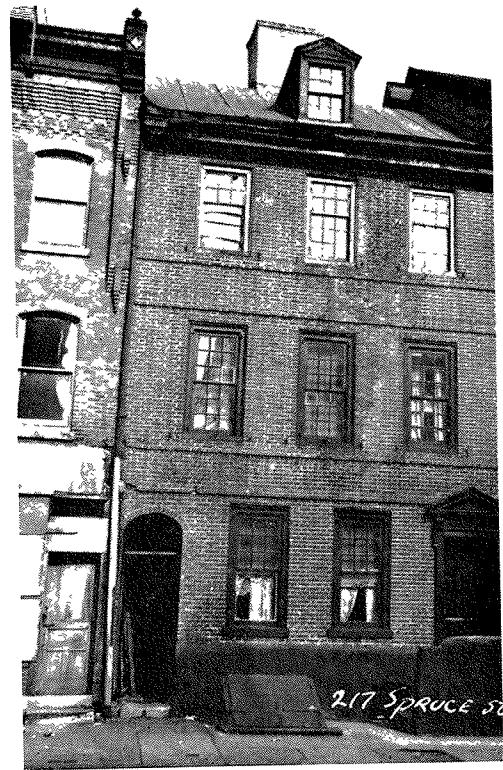


# A Society Hill Restoration

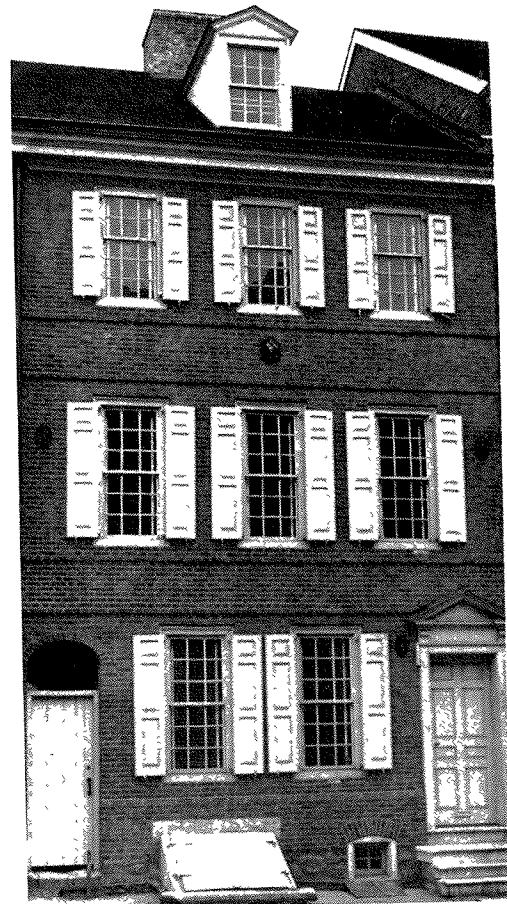
Agnes Clement Ingersoll '23

Jared and I have been Philadelphia winter dwellers for many years in a house which after the marriage and departure of our five daughters was much too large for us. We began to think of finding something smaller, perhaps in Society Hill, the development of which we were very much interested in and anxious to help along. My husband had been a member of the Philadelphia Planning Commission when the idea of restoration of this area was being initiated.

Strolling about Society Hill one day in the fall of 1959 to look at the restoration in progress, we came upon a startlingly dilapidated, and yet, to our eyes, very charming old house. It was obviously of an earlier period than most of the houses on the street—also more bruised and battered and forlorn looking. We stood and looked at it a while, thinking aloud. "What a shambles. . . . Of course the rotted piece of cornice up there could be repaired and if the grimy red paint were scrubbed off the old bricks. . . . Yes, and if that gloomy brown paint that's peeling off the trim were a lighter color. . . . Oh look at that beautiful little pedimented frontispiece. . . . And the well-proportioned windows with nine-over-nine panes. . . . We'd have to replace the shutters, but, see, the turnbuckles and hinges are still there. . . . One, two, three, four stories, counting the one with the dormer. . . . What a quaint chunky chimney in the middle of the roof. . . . Probably lots of fireplaces inside." Just then the alley gate, hanging on one broken hinge, swung out, revealing through the arched brick tunnel a trash-littered muddy yard from which two ailanthus trees had risen above the grim surroundings. "And we'll lay a path of old brick in herringbone pattern back there with a bed on one side filled



"Situate on the North Side of Spruce St.  
between the Third and Second Streets  
from Delaware"



with. . . . Not so fast, it isn't ours yet. . . . Let's jot down the address—217 Spruce Street—and we'll make inquiries." As we walked on, the old house seemed to be pleading like an abandoned child for help, and we both felt a strong urge to respond.

We learned that, a few years before, real estate appraisers had written the house off as worthless and had recommended demolition. But now a vigorous interest in old Philadelphia was developing and many of the early houses, although condemned by the Redevelopment Authority, were condemned to restoration, not demolition. We asked the Authority if we might see inside. What we saw was at once horrifying and challenging. All the rooms of the house were still inhabited, despite lack of water, electricity, and heat, all of which had been turned off some months before. The lawful tenants had moved away and the Redevelopment Authority was in process of evacuating the squatters. As soon as one left, two others would appear, to flop in the filthy rooms. We stumbled about with flashlights, picking our way among indescribable rubbish ankle deep, scattering as we walked roaches and mice and, yes, even rats. The rooms contained a few shabby, shaky tables and bureaus and sagging old beds with filthy torn mattresses spilling their vermin infested stuffing, to which our swollen itching ankles soon attested! In one room a coffin-shaped carton half full of ladies' handbags indicated the headquarters of a snatcher. A dead cat lay in the only (and unusable) bath tub. The stench everywhere was suffocating.

Nonetheless, the fine proportions of the rooms, despite temporary partitions subdividing some of them, were obvious and exciting. Dimly we glimpsed early paneling in nearly every room; HL hinges on the doors; fireplaces with breasted closets; chair rails and dados; part of a charming early staircase. We became more and more enthusiastic and longed to get our hands on the place. We were overwhelmed by a sense of urgency: to leave this house to the mercy of its present fate for one more day might be disastrous. But the problem was not that simple. Local, state, and federal red tape tied our hands for many months during which we filled out forms, waited, and filled out more forms, until finally we received permission to restore and eventually to purchase the nightmare of a flop-house that had by now become our "dream house."

While waiting, we paid many visits to "217," measuring, planning, poking about with pleasure, but one day were heartbroken to find that all the old HL hinges had been stolen. Although the house by that time had been padlocked by the Redevelopment Authority, vandals and vagrants broke padlock after padlock drifting in and out at will to steal or sleep. We cannot imagine why the house did not burn to the ground. The occupants used candles for light and alcohol or oil-fueled burners for cooking.

We approached the project of restoration from the point of view of adjusting ourselves to the house, not it to us, deciding to put it back as nearly as possible to its 18th-century condition, adhering to the original partitions, adding nothing but heat, electricity, and a minimum of plumbing as unobtrusively as possible. My husband even suggested restoring the privy instead of putting in bathrooms, but he looked relieved when I said, flatly, "No!" We were eager to learn as much as possible about the early days of the house and began our research by a visit to the City Archivist, who produced the facsimile of a voluminous hand-written document—the will of the builder and first owner, from which I quote as follows:

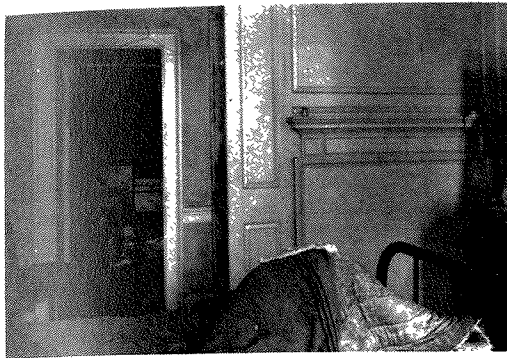
"In the Name of God, Amen. I, James Davis, of the City of Philadelphia, in the Province of Pennsylvania, House Carpenter, being indisposed in Body but Blessed be God of sound and well disposing mind and memory do therefore think fit to make this my last Will and Testament. . . . and I give and devise unto my two eldest sons James Davis and William Davis all that my Messuage or Tenement and Lot or piece of Ground thereunto belonging—situate on the North Side of Spruce St. between the Third and Second Streets from Delaware."

The will was signed in the year of our Lord 1763. From the archivist we also learned that in January 1758 James Davis had, for five pounds yearly ground rent, purchased the lot, 21 by 80 feet, from several persons, one of whom was Sameul Rhoads, architect of The Barclay House (217 Delancey St.) and supervising carpenter of Benjamin Franklin's house and the west wing of The Pennsylvania Hospital. James Davis in his will called himself a "house carpenter"

Society Hill (so named by 1700) is the part of Philadelphia in which William Penn's "Free Society of Traders" originally settled. Rising from the Delaware River, it extends westward four or five blocks and from Independence National Historical Park southward about the same distance. In all it comprises over 100 acres on which remain more 18th and early 19th century houses than remain anywhere else in the United States. Under the regulations of the Redevelopment Authority and the watchful eye of the City's Historical Commission the old houses must be restored privately by the owners wishing to remain and by newcomers buying the houses of those who have moved away. On land made vacant by demolition of houses unsuitable for restoration, new houses, designed to blend with the old, are being built.

*Original paneling, hearth and  
Pennsylvania blue marble facing*

*Mantel shelf does not appear on right because  
it belonged originally in another room where  
it is now in place*



which in those days often meant a master builder with considerable architectural skill. Mr. Davis was at one time an officer in the Carpenters' Company that built Carpenters' Hall.

Our next research effort resulted in two insurance surveys of the property from The Philadelphia Contributionship Insurance Co., one dated 1781, the other 1785. With these documents and the will we were able to establish the date of the original building as 1759. The first survey gave this description of the house as James Davis had built it 22 years before.

"The house 21.2 feet front including the alley. 30 feet deep 9 inch party walls—plastered partitions—dog legg stairs with half paces—both storys painted—shingling about 22 years old—the kitchen 12 by 16 feet 2 storys high 9 inch walls. On house three hundred pounds—kitchen one hundred pounds."

In those days the kitchen was sometimes a separate building, even though attached to the house, hence the allocation of insurance in the survey. James Davis died in 1774 and the property passed to his sons, who sold it in 1779 to Major David Lenox and Tacy, his wife. In 1784 Major Lenox added a third floor and garret. The old kitchen building now became the "piazza," meaning not a porch, as it would today, but a link between house and kitchen, containing a staircase. "Piazza" used in this sense, as far as The Philadelphia Historical Commission had been able to discover, is a "Philadelphianism." Lenox then built on a new kitchen building described in the survey of 1785 which I quote (including the spelling!):

"20 ft. 9 inches by 13 ft. 6 inches, 2 storys high, 9 inch walls—kitchen chamber finished with chimney Brest mantles with frett Bed-mold dintal cornice over Brest and single

cornise round, surbass and scertings, the whole painted outside and in and new posts and rails on roof."

In this building we found plaster at both top and bottom of the beams between the two stories, probably for protection against fire and to insulate the chamber in summer from kitchen heat. The "kitchen chamber," when we found it, was still exactly as described above, though evidencing "indignities to the person" over the years as the house went from good to bad to worse. It is still the handsomest room in the house and once again the master bedroom, as we believe the Major built it to be. By the time he bought the house he had married the noted beauty, Tacy Lukens, "under the ring" in the parlor at Grumblethorpe, Germantown, where he had been courting her while serving in the army under General Washington at Valley Forge. David Lenox was the 44th member of the Light Horse of the City of Philadelphia (First City Troop). He was later Marshal of The United States Admiralty Court, a director of Stephen Girard's Bank, director and successor to Thomas Willing as president of the Bank of the United States and finally Representative (Ambassador) of The United States to the Court of St. James. It is said that he brought back much handsome furniture from London. How we wish it were still in the house! Such is some of the early history connected with 217 Spruce Street which we were able to ferret out with the aid of books from The Athenaeum and The Historical Society.

Although nineteen previous owners of various tastes and circumstances had adapted the house to their own needs, fortunately it had never been burned or fundamentally altered. Age, neglect, and abuse had of course taken their toll, but the facade

still bore the original window frames, the sloping cellar door with marble cheeks, and the white marble steps which we found buried under concrete. The old bricks came up beautifully with cleaning and repointing. One day beneath a mass of debris in the cellar we found some of the original shutters and the old iron footscrapper set in a block of marble. Inside, of seven original fireplaces, six remained in their entirety: paneled chimney breasts, mantels, and to our amazement and great joy, when we tore off the boards over the openings, the iron firebacks, marble facings, and hearths. We had to rebuild the chimneys from cellar to roof for safety but now all the fireplaces are in working order. We were equally surprised and thrilled to find that under layers of grubby torn linoleum lay the original random-width Pennsylvania yellow pine floors. Some needed patching, to be sure, and a few had to be replaced, but we found equally old boards for the purpose when the chicken markets on Front St. were torn down. For the most part, however, the floors we walk on are those that were walked on more than 200 years ago and are, perhaps, even more lovingly cared for. Throughout the house we were very fortunate, after clearing away extraneous partitions and all that did not belong to the house in the 18th century, to find the rooms architecturally about as the Davises and Lenoxes had left them. And the same number too—eight in the main building (counting those in the garret), two to a floor; two in the kitchen building, one above the other. We put three bathrooms in the piazza, one on the first floor and two on the second.

For any necessary reproduction there was always enough of the old to guide us. For instance, the shutters and “new posts and rails on roof” (as noted above in the survey of 1785). The latter had baffled

us at first but now like a jig-saw puzzle piece it fell into place. In the third-floor back bedroom we had found two steps leading up to a small door which led into space. A historian with the National Park Service explained to us that originally there must have been a “flat,” on to which the door opened, built on the sloping roof of the two-story kitchen building. There would have been “posts and rails” on it, he said, the posts high enough for attaching clothes line. This is where, in those days, the clothes were hung to dry, having been washed in the kitchen and carried up. He showed us pictures of the details. The “posts and rails” have been reproduced, though I must admit they are not used for their original purpose. We also found a few wooden clothes pegs in a third-floor cupboard and these we had reproduced for use in other cupboards.

We were greatly blessed by the enthusiastic help of Miss Penelope Hartshorne, an architect with the National Park Service, who, as she had done for Independence Hall, undertook in every room to scrape off the paint with a surgeon’s scalpel under a microscope, layer by layer, until at last she came up with the original color. In some rooms there were 18 coats of paint. Thus we have been able to paint our woodwork as it was when the house was built, and fortunately the colors are very pleasing. To the horror of the painter we insisted on rubber-base paint for both walls and woodwork because of its flat finish, similar to that of the 18th century; because it would be scrubbable (so important in city house-keeping); and because it could be touched up or recoated. It has been a great success and we heartily recommend it to other restorers.

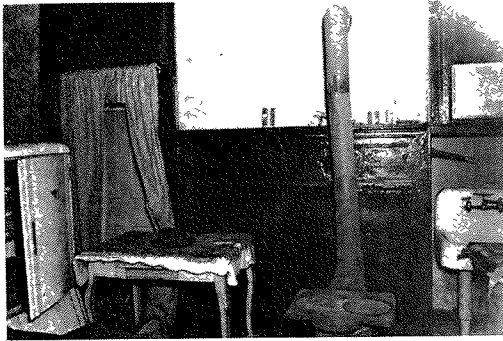
The restoration of the house took eight months. In

*Original door on right was found and replaced*

*Kitchen chamber. Door on left was replaced with a reproduction of original*

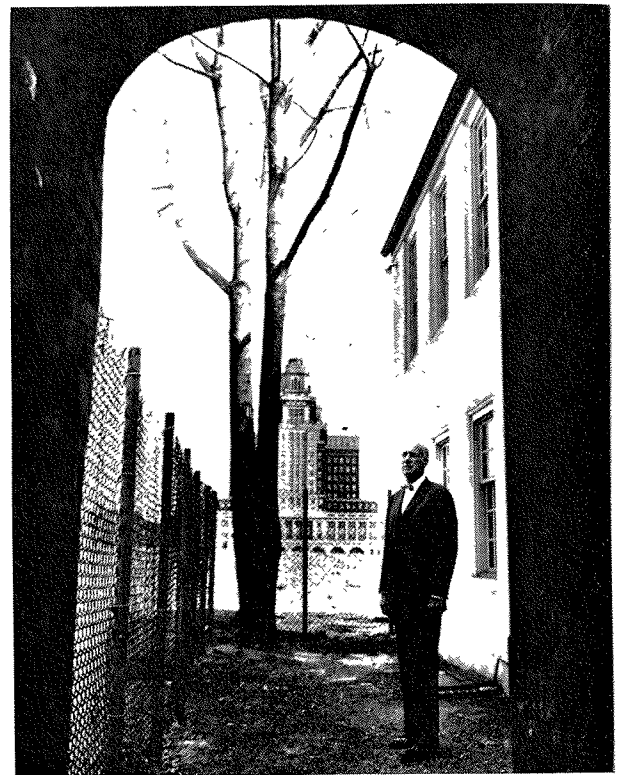


*Originally, front parlor;  
recently one room flat*



some ways we wish we could have worked more slowly, prolonging the pleasure of the project by pondering in more leisurely fashion the discoveries and problems that were presented to us almost every day, but we had to work feverishly. At that time (though no longer) vandals were rampant in the neighborhood and a house under renovation is not tight. There were so many ways intruders could enter. Over one weekend all the paneling from a third-floor bedroom was stolen, but happily we recovered it unharmed and it is back in place.

With the last coat of paint barely dry, and the floor polisher still at work, we moved in during one of the several blizzards of January 1961, and then after a very happy year settling in we turned to making a garden. We built six-foot brick walls enclosing the yard on the side and back, pruned and fed the brave ailanthus trees and then, as we had planned over two years before, where there used to be "a trash-littered muddy yard" we have laid "a path of old brick in herringbone pattern with a bed on one side filled with" . . . box and holly, ground covers and hundreds of early spring flowering bulbs.



*Jared Ingersoll contemplates completion of the garden*

This article was originally written for the catalogue of the 1962 Antiques Show for the benefit of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, and was revised by Mrs. Ingersoll for the ALUMNAE BULLETIN. The 1963 Show will open with the Preview Reception on April 22nd and will stay open to the public through April 27th.