

The Huey House

The Dwelling of an Early Westtown Settler

By Ray Sarnacki, Historical Commission member

Farming dominated Westtown's early economic history. For centuries, Native Americans had grown nutritious gardens of corn, squash, beans, and other vegetables. When Europeans migrated to southeastern Pennsylvania, they found that the climatic and soil conditions were similar enough to be very hospitable for most Old World grains, fruits, and livestock. Traveling through the area today, historic farms and agricultural structures, constructed mainly of serpentine limestone and fieldstone, still dot Westtown's landscape. However, not all of these historic farmhouses remain intact.

Driving down the west side of South New Street, where it intersects with General Howe Drive, you can see the ruins of a stone building, believed to have been built around 1730. The ruins sit on a ½-acre parcel now owned by Westtown Township, but it was once part of a 125-acre farm owned by William and Gemet (a.k.a. Jane) Huey, who purchased the land from Mordecai Maddock, according to a deed dated April 22, 1730. William, believed to be a native of Ireland, and his wife, Gemet from Wales, arrived in this country sometime in the early 18th century and settled in Westtown. Together, they had two children, Mary born in 1733 and James in 1737.

We do not know definitively from which country the Hueys emigrated. An account in Gilbert Cope's *History of Chester and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania* states, "...the Huey Family, the name of which was originally spelled Huet, claim for their pioneer ancestor in this country William Huey, a native of Ireland, a Protestant in religion, and a farmer by occupation, following that line of work in Westtown township, Pennsylvania. His wife, Jane Huey, a native of Wales..." Another account says they may have been French Huguenots and may have emigrated directly from France, but more likely, their parents first immigrated to northern Ireland after France revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Then in the early 1700s, the family would have emigrated again, this time to the colonies.

William was a yeoman. In colonial Pennsylvania, yeomen formed a rural majority. Common practice dictates that we refer to anyone who cultivates the soil as a "farmer" regardless of the means of production. However, the term "yeoman" describes those who operated their own land and followed a risk-adverse strategy. They also stressed continued ownership of the "family land" above profitability to preserve agriculture as a way of life. This differentiated them from "farmers," who primarily follow a market based-strategy for growing their crops. From the Chester County Archives' index of Wills and Administrations between 1713 and 1870, we know that yeomen were populous throughout the first half of the 18th century, grew in the 1760s and 1770s, but dropped away in the 1780s.

William died in 1754 and the inventory of his estate indicates that he employed a mixed-farming strategy that would help his family sustain themselves through various market cycles. Included in the inventory were eight milk cows and several head of cattle, along with 35 sheep, 19 lambs, and 1 breeding sow. As for crops, he had 23 acres of wheat, six acres of poor rye and one acre of barley oats & flax in ground at the time of his death. It also listed three cheese tubs, indicating that the family likely produced cheese from their dairy operation, as liquid milk would not have survived transport to markets such as Philadelphia or Wilmington without spoiling. Excluding the value of the 125 acres, his estate was valued at 217 pounds 6 shillings and 9 pence as appraised for probate by his neighbors, Samuel Osborne and George Entrikin. Gemet inherited the farm until her son, James, reached the age of 21.

The Huey property encompassed parts of several of today's neighborhoods in the northwest corner of Westtown, including the Snow Drop Hill development (Spring Line Drive, South Deerwood Road, and North Deerwood Road) and parts of Radley Run development on General Howe Drive (see Figure 1). The ruins of what we

believe to be the original farmhouse are all that remain (see Figure 2). Constructed of fieldstone and wood, it looks to have been two stories high. The cellar contains a spring, likely used for cold storage of milk and dairy products produced on the farm. Historic maps show that another farm building of framed construction stood on this property, perhaps a barn.

When Gemet died on October 1, 1767, her son, James had already taken title to the plantation (the term used by yeoman for the land they cultivated). As a result, Gemet had only her personal property to bequeath. In her will, on which she made her mark, she gave clothing and household items to each of her granddaughters. To her son and grandson, she left her riding horse and 50 English pounds, respectively. To her daughter, Mary, who had married Samuel Entriken, she left clothing:

“I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Mary Enterken [sic] two gowns, the one black & the other striped, and also one part of a piece of camblet [cambric - a lightweight, closely woven white linen or cotton fabric] sufficient to make her one long cloak & the remainder or residue of my wearing apparel.”

Making a financial success of the farm proved difficult for James and his wife, Mary (nee Miller). He ran into financial difficulty and after mortgaging his property twice in the late 1760s, placed his property in trust to pay off his creditors. Later, the trustees sold 12.5 acres off the eastern end of the tract to Joseph Curtain. That must have satisfied his creditors because James retained the remaining piece of the tract until his death in 1822. James died intestate, and his heirs sold the land at public auction to his neighbor Richard Strode, for “the sum of five thousand three hundred thirty-four dollars and two and one half cents lawful money of the state”.

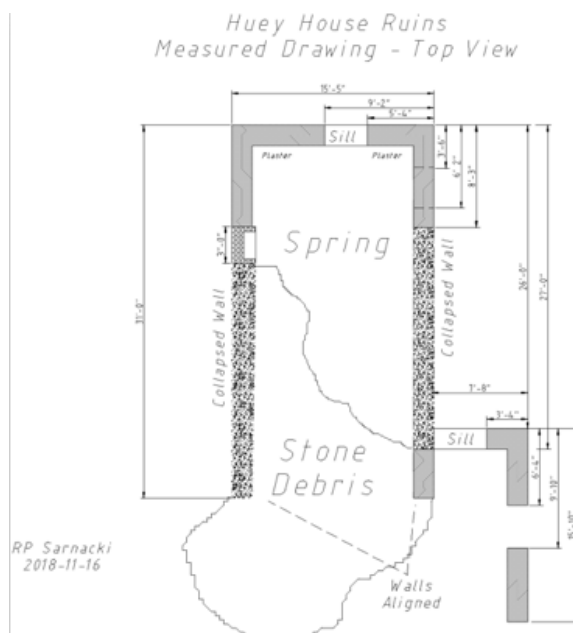
Why did this house not survive, while others did? We can only speculate, as an extensive search of the records is required to provide more insight. Perhaps with the sale of James’ land to Richard Strode, the farmhouse

became redundant, as the new owner already had a house and other farm buildings on his adjacent property. Likely, changes in farming production methods and capital markets at the time resulted in abandonment of the house.



Ruins of the Huey House, as they exist today at 950 South New Street.

Through further historical research and an archaeological survey of the site, conducted by Dr. Heather Wholey and students at West Chester University, the Westtown Township Historical Commission hopes to gain more insight about the property and the lives of the Huey family, one of the earliest settlers in the township. A future article will provide information on the findings from this work.



References

Gilbert Cope, *Historic Homes and Institutions and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs of Chester and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania*, 1904, New York, New York, (Lewis Publishing Co.), page 164.

Pennsylvania Agricultural History Project, *Agricultural Resources of Pennsylvania, c. 1700-1960 Southeastern Pennsylvania Historic Agricultural Region, c. 1750-1960*. (n.d.) Retrieved October 29, 2018, from <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us>

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Agriculture and Rural Life*. (2011). Retrieved October 29, 2018, from <http://explorepahistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-4&chapter=0>

Simler, L. (1986). *Tenancy in Colonial Pennsylvania: The Case of Chester County*. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 43(4), 542-569. doi: 10.2307/1923682

Scholl, David Michael. Scholl, Michael David. *The American Yeoman: An Historical Ecology of Production in Colonial Pennsylvania*. University of North Carolina, 2008. Retrieved from Carolina Digital Repository as PDF