

If Walls Could Talk

By Gail O. Guterl, Westtown Township Historical Commission Member

Four walls punctuated by windows! Every house has them—inanimate, silent! But if walls could speak, especially old walls, they would have fascinating stories to tell. Take for example, the five structures that make up the Bartram's farm enclave at 101-104 Bartrams Lane in Westtown.

The farm has been owned by Bartrams for six generations since 1857. Growing things are in the genes of this family, who are directly descended from naturalist John Bartram of Philadelphia's Bartram's Garden.

Originally a 140-acre farm (now 5 acres), situated east of Westtown School and north of Johnny's Way, it was purchased from the Seals just before the Civil War by John Hibberd Bartram, the fourth recorded owner of the land. (The Hickman family was the first owners of the farm through a Penn land grant. The property went from Hickman father to son to brother, who eventually sold it to the Grays, who then sold the property to the Seals.) Bartram had fruit trees and raised asparagus, which he sold in Philadelphia. He also ran an extensive dairy and livestock operation.

The land and family have witnessed a lot; they farmed through times of national and international conflict, natural events like blights, hurricanes and blizzards, and personal tragedies like the untimely accidental deaths of three of its owners. The family saw the relocation of graves from a cemetery on the property near Manley Road (the last resting plots of the land's first owners, the Hickmans) to East Goshen Baptist Cemetery. And like many large tracts of open land, it eventually saw its boundaries shrink through land sales.

In 1988-89, at the request of a township group gathering the histories of old houses in the municipality, John Hibberd Bartram (1921-1993), named after the great

grandfather who originally purchased the tract, recorded his memories of the farm. Unemotionally and in simple straightforward language, Bartram wrote about the death of his grandfather. "At that time [1924] my grandfather, George Hibberd Bartram, died from a fall from a 20-foot ladder while picking cherries." What John Hibberd does not reveal is that he, a three year old, witnessed the accident, says his daughter Evelyn Bartram Dudas, commenting that her great grandfather, with a broken neck, was transported by buckboard wagon to West Chester Memorial Hospital, where he died several days later.

In his history, John Hibberd does not relate the sad fate of his own father, just 10 days before John Hibberd married Marion Reynolds. In 1943, his father, George Maurice, was crushed by a tractor and died while working on the farm.

A contemporary owner, John Dudas, Evelyn's husband, died July 12, 1982, in a scuba diving accident while exploring the torpedoed wreck of the Sommerstad, 30 nautical miles south east of Fire Island. The ship was sunk in World War I. The Dudas', avid scuba divers, had purchased one of the houses on the property from her father John Hibberd in 1971 and operated Dudas Diving Duds from a barn on the property. Evelyn Dudas made history when in 1967, at age 22, she became the first woman to successfully dive on the Andrea Doria. The 48-year-old diving supply business is still there but will close in August.

"When my great grandfather...purchased this farm," John Hibberd Bartram writes in his 1980s history, "there were three houses, plus the current springhouse, a sheep barn, with unusual square support pillars, and a sheep shed near the tenant house. One house was near what is now Nectar Lane," Bartram wrote. "I believe this was the first house built by the Hickmans. Tradition has it that



Hickmans lived in a cave on this property while building their first house here.” A 1973 township history by Arthur James claims three of the Hickman’s seven children were born in that cave.

The sheep shed is long gone, as are two ponds that were on the property. Dudas says a house on Nectar Lane stands on the spot where one pond used to be. No one knows where the cave is—perhaps under the Nectar Lane cul-de-sac—but the springhouse and the tenant house, which have been enlarged and modernized, still stand. The diving shop occupies the barn that housed animals at one time, then the orchard business. The orchard business was bolstered by sales from two farm stands on two corners of routes 926 and 202 at different times. A large portion of the barn burned down in January 1956. Because it was an unusually cold winter, “we are sure a tramp set the barn on fire accidentally,” John Hibberd wrote. A cottage, built around 1920 and occupied by a Bartram, sits on the north side of the lane and is home to one of Dudas’ four sisters. Dudas remembers growing up with her sisters in the main house, a white stucco-over-stone structure, across the lane from the barn.

In his history of the property, her father relates that this house, with 16-inch deep window frames, built-in drawers under the living room windows, two walk-in fireplaces and unusual square windows, probably dates back to the 1700s “We have no date stone for the house, but...the wood in the windows was hand-hewn and must be from the 1700s. The hardware in this section of the house is also indicative of the 1700s.”

Interestingly, in the 1960s John Hibberd decided he “didn’t like the traffic around here,” compounded by the fact he had had heart valve surgery at age 45 and could no longer farm, Dudas remembers, so he gave up his orchard and cider-making business, “and bought a 300-acre farm in Gettysburg where he grew Christmas trees.” Because his wife did not want to move, he commuted between Westtown and that farm each week until his retirement.

Luckily, the youngest generation of Bartram’s is interested in keeping the property in the family. One of Dudas’ nephews, Tom McEaney, recently purchased the stucco-over-stone house and hopes to renovate it. Another will convert the barn, which houses the diving supply business, into a home. That is only fitting for the oldest settled property in Westtown Township.