

Westtown Township's 19th Century Cottage

William Coburn House: 1142 Wilmington Pike, West Chester, PA 19382

In the rush of today's daily life you may not have seen it staring back at you for all these years. It is only in the subdued moments sitting in rush hour traffic at the intersection of Street Road (Rt. 926) and Wilmington Pike (Rt. 202) that you notice the collection of aging buildings and begin to visualize how this particular crossroads may have been way back in time. Imagine when it was a thriving country village, consisting of a bustling drover's inn, a busy smithy and wheelwright shop, and an enterprising general store/post office dispensing everything from groceries to hardware to clothing to stamps to the weary travelers going south to Wilmington or north to the Chester County seat of West Chester. Imagine, too, a handful of 19th century homes surrounding the crossroads.

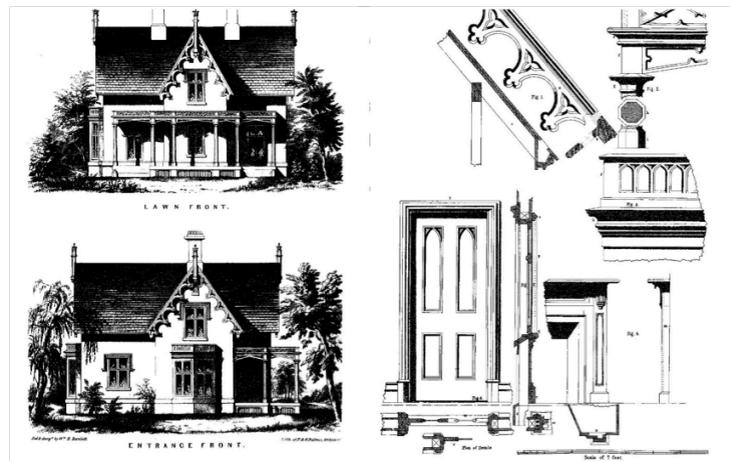


William Coburn House - 1142 Wilmington Pike, Westtown Township

The small village originally went by the name of Thornbury (namesake of today's Thornbury Township), but around 1823, changed to Darlington's Corners after local businessman Benedict Darlington founded his Westtown Factory for the weaving of cotton and wool on the east side of Wilmington Pike — just north of the village. Joseph H. Brinton also opened a general store and a wheelwright shop in the 1830's. Between the late 1860s and the late 1880s marked the village's most prosperous period that included the construction of several more small shops and private houses. Although many of the historic businesses have been lost to time, many of the original houses still stand as a reminder of earlier times.

Peeking thru the overgrowth of vegetation discovers a hidden gem of Westtown Township long overlooked by the thousands of vehicles speeding by. In 1873, stonemason, William Coburn, built a locally quarried green serpentine stone house using early 19th century Victorian pattern books by architects like AJ Downing, Calvert Vaux, Samuel Sloan, and William H. Ranlett at 1142 Wilmington Pike.

Rural homebuilders utilized these published building designs and specifications as a step-by-step construction instruction to create a modern contemporary 19th century home. Downing believed every American deserved a good quality home where its architecture and landscape gardening could positively affect the morals of the owners as well as "better" all those who have contact with the home. In his 1850 publication, *Architecture of Country Houses*, he included Picturesque Gothic and Italianate designs for cottages, farmhouses and villas defining their interiors, furniture and the best methods of warming and ventilating them. Through these publications he was credited with the popularization of the front porch as the link to nature. Building porches had just become easier to construct due to the advance in building methods and resulted in the frequency of front porches being built on new residences at that time. Downing believed interacting with nature had a healing effect on mankind and wanted all people to be able to experience nature thru his architecture.



William Coburn House - Built in what is commonly referred to as the Carpenter Gothic style.

Built in what is commonly referred to as the Carpenter Gothic style, the William Coburn house is dominated by a wide front porch and large double-hung windows that embraced Downing's natural open air philosophy. A separate barn and small carriage house was also constructed on the farmstead in the same Carpenter Gothic style. Although it is unclear how the barn and carriage house were lost to time, the main house still stands much as it did in 1873. The front porch maintains its original chamfered wood post and decorative wood carved fretwork brackets inspired by Downing's pattern book details, while the original windows and shutters still function as well as the day they were installed.



Original 19th century wood bracketed fretwork and chamfered porch posts.

Inside, an original 19th century fireplace mantle, raised panel doors with original Victorian box locks, door casings, deep curved plaster window jambs, random-width yellow pine wood flooring, and winder stairs remain intact.

In 1894 the property was inherited by William's son James T. Coburn where he subsequently added a large kitchen wing on the rear elevation effectively doubling the size of the house. This wood frame stuccoed addition was built with exposed hand hewn wood floor joists and yellow pine flooring. The side elevations of the original serpentine section were stuccoed as well to coordinate with this new 1894 addition. James Coburn spent less than a year in the house before selling it to Harry Jones in 1895. Jones later sold it in 1900 to Nathaniel Leaf who coincidentally served alongside William Coburn in the Spanish American War. Both men were enlisted in the Pennsylvania National Guard in April 1898 and fought together during the 10-week altercation with Spain. Leaf possibly used his mustering out pay to acquire the property.



Original 19th century fireplace mantle and yellow pine flooring; original box locks & mahogany wood knobs.

In 1907, Leaf sold the property to Ruth Roberts, who renamed the farmstead "Bluebird Hill" and operated the farmstead as a plant nursery until 1961, when she sold it to artist Howard Yarnell. Yarnell converted the house to an art studio and renamed it "Painter's Hill." Over the 34 years he resided there he observed the large scale development of Westtown Township and the widening of Route 202 almost to his door step. As Father Time approached, Yarnell finally placed his beloved house up for sale ultimately selling in to John Crowley in early May 1995. Presently the William Coburn house and adjacent Wilmington Pike property are owned by Crebilly Farm Family Associates.

On your travels south on Wilmington Pike take a moment and look left to imagine a time in history (1870) when President Ulysses S. Grant was overseeing the readmission of Virginia, Mississippi and Georgia to the Union of 37 states after the Civil War, and the ratification of the 15th Amendment giving African Americans the right to vote. To a time when Wilmington Pike was a small country road populated with horse drawn carriages and William Coburn was completing construction on his new home in the small southern Chester County village of Thornbury (Darlington Corners). History is told all around us in Westtown Township if one is aware of its background. By reading this article, and understanding the story of this forgotten little 19th century cottage, your morning commute along Route 202 will never be quite the same.

- Westtown Historical Commission