

The Wright Mansion

By FRANCIS X. REUSS

The following article, written by Mr. Reuss in 1903, shows clearly that the old stone house was dear to the heart of, at least, one Columbian. He would be delighted, could he know how the old house is restored and preserved by the Rasbridge family, and how it is marked and honored by the Lancaster County Historical Society, in the very year of its two hundredth birthday.—Ed.

“Old homes, old homes, you are passing away
Like the leaves the trees have shed,
And the faces that watched at each window
Are asleep in some grass-grown bed.
And the trees are the only watch and ward
O'er the relics of ancient dead.”

The old stone house, the last one of our old landmarks, which are the only links that connect us with the early history of the land, was the pride and boast of our childhood. In these days, when patriotic societies of all kinds are working toward the preservation of the old homesteads that had any connection with our colonial days; when we rebuild Penn's cottage, taken from a hidden city street, and place it in the park; when Washington's headquarters in any field is placed in preserving hands; it is perhaps eminently fitting that these interesting and most impressive examples of colonial ancestral homes should be preserved. Few persons in these old towns are impressed sufficiently with a patriotic zeal to constrain them to aid in this preservation, and, one by one, these old landmarks are passing away.

These old ideal manor houses, scattered here and there throughout the towns in the state, are beginning to have interest taken in them, and as Columbia has yet but one, it is to be hoped that it may be preserved, even if the borough itself must needs be the eventual purchaser.

Such old homesteads as Kenmore, the home of Washington's sister; of Harewood, Claymount and Andley, all in Virginia; Bartrams, Chews, Betsy Ross, in Philadelphia; all are objects of historic association with the period that tried men's souls; and yet few of them were built earlier than 1748. The old stone fort—Wright's house—was built probably in 1739, not later, however, than 1743.

It was substantially built of stone, with narrow windows, of the period when each stone—and perhaps even log—house was expected to be used as a fort or refuge of defense against the savages. It was not built in a year. The stone was brought from the quarries down below the little stone mill, which James Wright, the builder of the stone house, built on the Shawnee Run, down on what is now called Front Street below Mill Street.

The house was built on Susannah Wright's purchase, by her brother James, but as she was left an interest in the Blunston-Bethel house, Second and Walnut Streets, she moved into that house; Hannah Pearson [a sister of Samuel Blunston], who also had an interest in that Blunston-Bethel house, sold her interest to Susannah's brother, James, who also lived in it in 1760, and Samuel Bethel II moved into the stone house about 1750 or a little earlier, where he remained for a few years.

During the time of James Wright's occupancy of the house, and during the period of the French and Indian War, 1755-1764, there was an uprising of the Indians all along the Juniata and Susquehanna rivers, and the settlers fleeing came to Wright's Ferry, bearing tidings that the savages were coming to attack the place; so armed men and soldiers placed the stone house in a condition of defense, and it was generally considered a refuge in all alarms for many years after.

James Wright was born at Chester, Pa., in 1714, and must have built the house for Susannah, as she left it by will to her nephew, Samuel Wright, who occupied it, and laid out the town of Columbia in 1788 and Columbia Extended in 1795. Jonathan Mifflin married Susannah Wright, daughter of James II in 1800, and went to live at "Woodbine," General Ewing's country seat in York County, but they came home to the old stone house, so that her son might be born in the homestead, and so it came to pass that Samuel W. Mifflin was born in this old house. [General James Ewing was married to Patience Wright, daughter of John Wright, Jr.] From Samuel Wright, the house came into the hands of John L. Wright, whose family yet reside there [1903].

The old sweet bean locust tree has been clubbed and stoned by boys, who became octogenarians and died years ago, and by the boys of my day, and of those of late years, for its sweet morsels, until the tree is but a trunk; how we recall it in its majestic greatness, when it soared aloft, and its widespread branches shaded half the street it overhung.

How long the Wright lots opposite these old houses lay idle in the vain hope that they might be used as a site for the state buildings, when the contest for placing the national, and later state, capital at Wright's Ferry was waging; just when and how they were sold has been related in other stories; how many lots were sold, how many were given away for public uses, for churches, cemeteries, for even Tow Hill, are remembered; and our dearest wish is that Columbia may preserve the old stone house long after even the last Wright has passed away. What a glorious place for a new Society of Ancients to gather the history of it and of the old borough!