

Historic Structures Report for 313 Main Street, Oley, Pa.

Prepared by Robert Wood, July 2016

The house of the “Clay On Main” complex was developed in three distinct building phases.

Phase 1: The earliest part that fronts on Main Street is a 2 story structure constructed of randomly coursed, rubble sandstone with large dressed quoins. It is stuccoed in a pebble dash manner with 20th century materials. The house is typical Georgian design with end chimneys. This style persisted throughout the 19th century in this region. Outside dimensions are 40’ wide X 16’ 8” deep. The entry is a half-story above grade and so allows light into the full cellar. Milled shingles of eastern white cedar currently underlay a low pitch metal roof. The shingles are attached with typical, square 19th century nails.

Although much altered over the years, there remain a few original details that date the house to around 1840. First, the original door surround lining the sides and top of the front door frame remains and contains, in the top corners, “bulls-eye blocks” which typically date to 1840. Also, the second floor room, west side, has original wood trim and fireplace mantel which are also characteristic of an 1840 date. There remain several original first floor joists which, too, are consistent with mid-century construction.

A dating anomaly is that the rafters are oak: hewn and planed. (They were hand hacked and smoothed with a hand plane rather than being sawn at any one of a number of local 19th century saw mills). This is an 18th century building method and is unlikely to have been used in 1840. Indications, however, are that the rafters were salvaged from earlier structures since they are not a uniform size and in construction some were notched to accept the shingle laths and some were shimmed to make a level roof.

As previously noted, the house was much altered over the years. Originally, upon entered the front door the visitor would have found partition walls on right and left with stairs straight ahead. The left hand partition is still in place, the right was removed and the stairs relocated to where they now are. Beside the stairs ran a narrow hallway ending with an outside door. The dressed sandstone doorsill of that back doorway is still in place. The photo below is similar (but doubtless more “fancy” than the original 313 Main Street).

The open stairs ran to a landing, turned 180 degrees, and went on to the second floor. The original attic stairs and a section of banister are still in place and mirror what the first floor stairs were.

Each floor had 2 approximately 14’X12’ rooms with a heating fireplace in each.

(In 1840, every house had to have, or have access to, a cooking fireplace commonly called a “walk-in fireplace.” Kitchen stoves were not yet invented, and the small parlor heating stoves called “ten plate” stoves were not cook stoves. Cooking fireplaces were large, often 5 or more feet wide, and usually had a swinging pot holder called a “crane.” It would be safe to assume that the cooking fireplace for this house lay in a detached summer kitchen. By mid century most every farmhouse and many town houses had these auxiliary kitchen used for food preparation, food preservation and general household utility. Usually a single room with a cooking fireplace and bake oven, summer kitchens were opened in the early spring and later closed with the onset of winter cold. The doorway to this summer kitchen at 313 Main Street would have been the doorway leading from the old house to the current kitchen. The photo below shows current restoration work on a typical detached summer kitchen of that era (in New Hanover Township).

There are two large cellar fireplaces in 313 Main Street suggestion a “cellar kitchen” arrangement for the winter months when the detached summer kitchen would have been closed.

Phase 2: Around 1870 a 2 story addition was attached to the house resulting in an “L” shaped house footprint. This addition extended the west side room forming the current kitchen (14 X 16) and two rooms on the second floor. The roof pitch of the addition copies the original and the attic spaces are similar. There is no cellar. This addition probably occupies the site of the original summer kitchen. The structure can be dated by second floor trim and paint patterns. Rafters were sawn with a typical 19th century “up-and-down” sawmill and some structural elements were sawn on a “round” saw. Of interest are the very wide second floor floorboards no doubt salvaged from an earlier structure.

(Interpreting the kitchen suggests that this is a time of transition when old style cooking hearths were giving way to the new kitchen cook stoves. There exists a relatively small cooking hearth with crane. Doubtless by this date the family would have owned a kitchen cook stove where most of the cooking was accomplished, yet the hearth was kept in ready reserve for heating large pots of water, cooking scrapple, apple butter or other large tasks for which the cook stove would have been impractical. Early cook stoves were smaller than those which later developed).

Phase 3: Around 1910 the house was “squared off” to its present shape with a second addition having the same dimensions as the first and providing a rectangular footprint. Elements of trim design and painting practice date this addition to the early 20th century.

Local history has the original house used as a shoemakers shop. This would be consistent with its size and location. The commercial extensions out the back were built in the 1920’s for Heffily’s Bakery which was in operation until 1945. The present owner believes that after that it was used as a factory for military products, later it was a hosiery mill and finally a machine shop. The building was purchased in 1999 and named “Clay on Main.” It has since been used as an art studio, gallery, and classroom specializing in art clay.

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