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72nd Tour of Tours

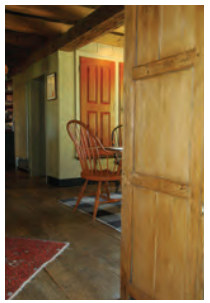
Story and photos by **Matt Freeman**

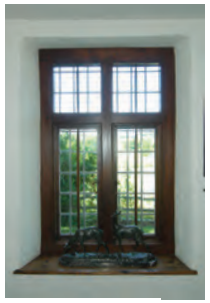
Photos of the Abiah Taylor House, first four pages, by Don Pearse Photographers

You never know what's going to make you stop and take a long, fascinated look. You might linger over a museum-worthy painting in one house on the tour, a soaring arch in the two-story foyer of another. It might be patterned brickwork from 17th-century England or a pair of swans, gliding over a tree-shaded pond.

But while you never know exactly what features will create those moments, people who enjoy visiting historic and otherwise significant homes can reasonably expect to have plenty of them on the first Saturday in October during Chester County Day, an annual house tour that offers an invitation inside scores of impressive private homes. This year, the 72nd anniversary, focuses on Chester County's southwestern quadrant.

We hope you enjoy our annual preview. For tour information, see the Events Section in this issue or visit *ChesterCountyHospital.org.*





Milners' Abiah Taylor House

There's evidence of a Lenni-Lenape village on Taylor's Run, so it's hard to say how many millennia the environs had been occupied when Abiah Taylor arrived in 1698 at what is now the intersection of North Creek Road and Route 162. Taylor built a cabin first, then a stone house, and finally, in 1724, a four-room brick house as an addition to the stone building. Taylor, a miller who was by then becoming a prominent person in Chester County, put in leaded windows and, on the south and west sides where it could be admired by passersby, he put patterned brickwork typical of Berkshire, the English county from which he had emigrated.

Abiah Taylor died in 1740 and at some point his son Samuel built a barn across the road, thought today to be the oldest extant stone barn in the state. The surrounding area has changed little since then, and the house still sits by the country road, a field away from Brandywine Creek.

And appropriately enough, it's home to John and Wynne Milner. A prominent architect who specializes in historic restoration and new traditional design, John had been through the house in the mid-1970s, and when it became available the Milners bought it.

In 1994, after two years of work, they moved in. They put a four-room addition on the east side, and renovated the historic structure. The Milners had to do some sleuthing to undo a modernization done in 1910. They found pieces of the original leaded-glass windows on site that they could reproduce. And with the help of the Chester County Historical Society's photo archives, they found images from before 1910 that enabled them to reproduce the original front doorway and, in general, peel away the centuries.

It may be 2012 by the calendar, but by the north end of Creek Road it's still mostly 1724.

Pennock House

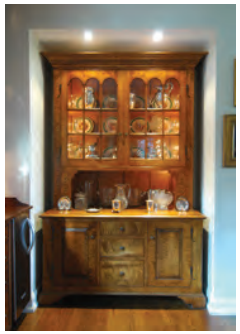
Anna Myers' maiden name is Walton, a name well known in the West Marlborough Township village of London Grove. As a child, Anna had played in a tenant house that the Walton family owned in the village, but until Anna and Mark Myers started restoring it in 1989, the house had stood empty for three decades. They have appalling pictures of the derelict, crumbling house, its windows gone, the building prey to the elements.

But the house, built by Joseph Pennock in 1790 and expanded in 1810, was basically sound. "The slate roof, which we kept, saved the house," Anna says. In addition to restoration, the house needed modern amenities—it had never had indoor bathrooms or central heat.

When the house was empty, part of its hardware and woodwork were stolen; the Myers recovered some and recreated other pieces from photos. The original separate kitchen, now part of the house, features a beehive oven, spinning wheel, and other 18th-century details. Two parlors flank a hall, as well as a dining room and a new kitchen with a period fireplace and wooden cabinets.

On the surrounding 164 acres visitors will find a barn, carriage house/garage, hay fields and belted Galloways. And they'll see, from the Newark Road side, a pristine example of a late 18th-, early 19th-century Georgian brick and stone home.

The Walton Myers Farm unsurprisingly won the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Great American Home Award Grand Prize in 1996, and has been much written about. It may be surprising that the sadly crumbling skeleton in the photos could be so perfectly restored, but Chester County Day is a concentrated burst of exploration and discovery, and pleasant surprises like that simply come with the territory.



Rolling Plains Farm

Rolling Plains Farm on Wollaston Road in East Marlborough Township has been home to Cuyler Walker and his wife and children just since 2008. But for Walker himself the move was a homecoming—he grew up there.

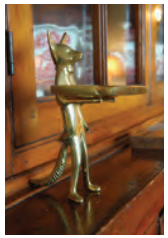
The house was built for a dairy farmer named Rakestraw in the 1850s. Walker's grandparents bought the house and the 250 acres that surround it, and his parents lived there since the late 1940s, building an addition in the 1950s.

The foyer has a towering wooden arch, and similar woodwork is used for the distinctive fireplace surrounds. The woodwork is made of pine, because it was originally meant to be painted. But Walker's parents had the paint removed, and today it's a handsome reddish-brown, an unusual and eye-catching color.

The living room and rest of the house feature numerous family and equestrian-themed paintings. The equestrian theme continues in a parlor off the foyer and in another room where the walls are covered with framed photos of family members over the decades.

The exterior of the main house is covered with smaller pieces of fieldstone than you typically see in a Chester County home. The original builders stuccoed it over, but the Walkers removed that layer in the 1950s. Now, as a result of the stucco removal, the exterior walls have the color and variety of fieldstone but with a softer texture and more of a horizontal flow than most fieldstone farmhouses. Walker says people often mention the woodwork and the exterior walls, and he finds it interesting that these two features, originally meant to be hidden, are among the things that set the house apart and make it distinctive.

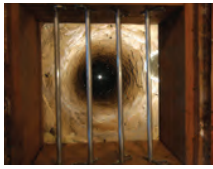
Another thing people mention are the vistas. And what may be among the most impressive feature of the house itself is the dining room's window, which frames a panoramic view of fields that sweep away to the southeast—a classic example of Chester County's natural beauty.



Spring Brook Farm

It's hardly surprising that there's a barn near Mary Beth Drobish's circa-1780 stone farmhouse on Locust Grove Road in Pocopson Township. The surprising and inspiring part is why the barn was built, and what it's used for today.

Drobish had always been interested in history and wanted to live on a farm, and despite her husband's reluctance, the couple looked for two years and finally bought Spring Brook Farm in 1995. There was a mood, an atmosphere to the property that Drobish liked. "I felt that really nice people had lived here," she says.



With the help of Berwyn architect Peter Zimmerman, the Drobishes renovated the home, adding a bathroom and a kitchen. In the process they discovered an old well that can now be seen by pulling up a trap door between a kitchen island and a work area (see photo at right).

The house has a striking foyer with a large fireplace, and a charming dining area in the kitchen that overlooks a pond where swans are often found gliding about. The grounds had to be renovated, like the house; Drobish says you couldn't see the pond from the house when she first arrived.

Some ten years after buying the farm, Drobish was widowed. As she wondered what to do next, inspiration struck: build a barn. She imagined giving children with disabilities a chance to have positive, growth-inspiring experiences with animals and nature. She sketched a barn on a paper towel the first day, had West Chester architect Richard Buchanan on site within a week, and in 2005 the barn was built by Hugh Lofting Timber Framing, a local specialist in barns.

Although Drobish had meant for the program to be part-time, the phone started ringing, and today The Barn at Spring Brook Farm is a full-fledged nonprofit organization. "It has just been an incredible journey," Drobish says.

Highland Farm

One of the homes in this year's area is Highland Farm, the childhood home of Chester County historian Gilbert Cope, on Highland Farm Road just west of West Chester. In 1997, Seth and Kate Whitelaw decided to move into the area and made what Kate calls a "strafing run," looking at 32 houses in 48 hours. Highland Farm was the 31st, and when they pulled into the driveway, "I heard," Kate says, "the intake of breath."

Seth had fallen in love with the house at first sight, and saw the potential it had to regain its former glory. Kate saw the amount of work involved—"It was not in fabulous shape," she says—and twice tried to talk him out of it. But eventually they bought the house and moved in on Friday, August 13, 1997.

The first morning, Seth walked into the butler's pantry and fell through the floor, fortunately coming to rest on a former brick patio just four inches down. The house had been generally neglected and decorated in a way that could charitably be described as quirky, plus the grounds were completely overgrown.

Today, after 15 years of hard work, the impressive stucco-over-stone mansion presides over acres of charming gardens visitors call a "mini-Longwood." Those grounds are easily visible from the mahogany wraparound porch the Whitelaws fully restored.

The interior is filled with antique furniture and art the Whitelaws have collected, and the fireplace surrounds rescued from an 18th-century house in Philadelphia lend a Colonial touch to the house, which was built in 1850.

One surprise is the interior floor plan—when Philadelphia financier Herman Hoopes bought the house as a gentleman's country estate in 1896, he opened up the ground floor rooms with wide, high arches that go shooting off in all directions and allow you to see into multiple rooms wherever you stand. ♦