

From: Selden Deemer libssd@gmail.com
Subject: Re: Hermitage
Date: May 24, 2016 at 3:10 PM
To: James L Meek james.l.meek@gmail.com



Jim, I'm on the road back to Atlanta at the moment, and can answer a few of your questions.

When was the property owned by the Deemers? Who owned it subsequently?

My parents bought the Hermitage around 1949. At the time, it had electricity (naked bulbs hanging from ceiling wires), no central heat, no plumbing. We ran into the yard with a shovel, and used fireplaces for heat the first winter. My parents said that pigs and chickens were living in the first floor of the newest wing when they bought the place.

The NHR nomination says it was built c1800, but that seems appropriate for the right half of the building in this picture, but the brickwork on the small part to the left looks like <1750.

A graduate student at U. Del wrote a history of the architecture of the building about 20 years ago. I'm pretty sure I can find it when we get back to Atlanta. The salt box on the left, with the glassed in porch was the earliest element, probably first half of the 18th century. The wing extending back from it was built next, probably ~1750. The big wing was added by Senator Van Dyke, who (if I remember correctly) acquired the property around 1800, and the construction was finished by 1810. The new section had a curved wall, and the only part of the building rescued from the house was a curved mahogany door, which is currently in the basement of the Terry House.

Anyway, did you grow up in the Hermitage? Did you farm it at all? (I wonder when the invasives started to take over the orchard).

Yes. My family was living at 606 Tremont in the late 1940's, and I have been told (although I have no direct memory) that at one point I rode my tricycle from Tremont Street to the Hermitage. The Delaware Memorial Bridge hadn't been built yet, so ferry traffic was often backed up well to the west of the railroad tracks, and it was probably a safer crossing than today. I think I mentioned during the NCHS talk that coal fired steam engines still used the railroad in the 1950's, and the fields would burn every few years; all that forest between the Hermitage and the railroad tracks used to be open field/grassland, prime hunting area for pheasant and rabbits.

Do you recall the small brick building which is the only thing that survived? Ted Megginson thinks it was an ice house, but it would seem too far from the house.

Soon after my parents acquired the place, they tore off the front porch and the side porch (which was used for milking). Just out of the photo was another porch that connected to a square brick ice house. A well was between the ice house and the main house. Farther west were 3 fieldstone walls of some building (perhaps a stable), and closer to Wm Penn HS was a wooden barn, which unfortunately my parents let fall into disrepair, and was torn down ~40 years ago. Still further west was a brick structure, which we called the carriage house. We used it as a source of bricks for paths around the house. Some of my earliest memories are of knocking mortar off bricks with a hammer, then carrying them (heavy load for a 6-year old) up to the house. I think Jim Trower's book has an aerial photograph of the property.

to the house. I think Jim Travers book has an aerial photograph of the property from the 1930s that shows the various buildings.

The apple orchard was still producing fruit in the 1950's, and roughly on the property line between the house and Wm Penn HS there was a large blackberry bush. We had an International Harvester Farmall Cub tractor, which was used for light farming, mostly corn and sunflowers, but we never grew anything commercially. We also used it to grade the road and a sicklebar to cut back vegetation. The tractor was the first vehicle I ever drove.



Selden Deemer


On Tue, May 24, 2016 at 2:48 PM, James L Meek <james.l.meek@gmail.com> wrote:

During my class at the Arsenal, it was clear that you were very knowledgeable about the Hermitage and I have since found out that your family owned the place.

My interest in the Hermitage stems from the Trustees starting a project to make it a "natural area" for walking, photography and wildlife observation. I've made some progress with the project as you can see on the web page:

<http://trusteesncc.org/hermitage/index.php>





I understand the Megginsons farmed it, and then later (from a c1950 newspaper the Deemers were going to renovate it.

So numerous questions: (and you may not know the answers!)

When was the property owned by the Deemers? Who owned it subsequently?

The NHR nomination says it was built c1800, but that seems appropriate for the right half of the building in this picture, but the brickwork on the small part to the left looks like <1750.

I found a reference that it was originally build in the early 1700s (HABS) but no details. (They mentioned Scharf, but I don't find the Hermitage mentioned therein.

Anyway, did you grow up in the Hermitage? Did you farm it at all? (I wonder when the invasives started to take over the orchard).

Do you recall the small brick building which is the only thing that survived? Ted Megginson thinks it was an ice house, but it would seem to be far from the house.

Regards,

Jim Meek