A Brief Study of the McWilliam House, (Number 8, The Strand, New Castle) During the Eighteenth Century

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Constance Anderton Vernacular Architecture 12/8/92 Dr. Bernard Herman The McWilliam house, also known as the McIntire house, located at Number Eight the Strand in New Castle is a fine example of an early Georgian urban town house. The house is now owned by Richard and Martha Day, who have recently removed the nineteenth-century stucco to reveal the original eighteenth century brickwork. The dating of the house has been the subject of some controversy. An early HABS report, based possibly on some observations by Jeannette Eckman, dates the house at 1690.¹ A later report, nomination for the National Register for Historic Places, written in 1978/1979 dates the house at about 1700-1710 yet refers to it as Georgian.² Documentary sources have failed to suggest a specific date, so the determination rests on construction and style. This paper will offer some reasons in favor of a 1730-1750's building date. Also, relying on Richard McWilliam Junior's will and inventory this paper will explore how the house was lived during the 1780's. Since the focus of this paper is on the eighteenth century, the twentieth century addition is not the subject of discussion, photographs or detailed floor plans.

History of the Property to 1740

A deed search of the property shows that lots of Number 6 and Number 8 were owned together. The deeds describe the property -- its size, position, and the names of its neighbors but do not describe the building on it. This vagueness only adds to the confusion about the dates. In 1708, the lots were purchased by Thomas Tresse, a merchant, sold by his heirs to Samuel Monkton, a physician, then sold by Monkton's heirs in 1723 to John Vangezell, a saddler and merchant. Vangezell, in turn, sold the Number 8 lot to Henry Gonne, a shopkeeper.³ This kind of activity suggest that there was building on the site that was both commercial and residential. Robert Brown, in his study of Front Street, (an earlier name for The Stand) states

that it was an important commercial center and that most buildings had such a dual function.⁴

Sometime between 1733 and 1740, Henry Gonne died, leaving a widow and three young sons. The deed record stops at this point. Although Gonne's estate went through Orphans Court, the appraisal and disposition of the property have been lost. All attempts to trace sale of the property through the widow, sons, or administrators have so far proved fruitless. Richard McWilliam Senior acquired the property at some point between 1740 and 1781 (the house is mentioned in the settlement of his estate in that year) but a direct deed has not been found.⁵

The missing deeds probably would not solve the question of when the house was built because so little description is provided. However, in view of McWilliam's successful career as an attorney and judge, it is quite probable that he built or bought the elegant early Georgian brick structure known as the McWilliam house.

This supposition is contrary to previous ideas about the house. Jeannette Eckman believed that the house was built in 1690 and that John Vangezell lived in it until he built the "Gunning Bedford" house at Number 8.⁶ This supposition would date the Gunning Bedford house between 1723 and 1733, making it one of the first Georgian houses in Delaware. Teresa Lucas, in her seminar paper on the Gunning Bedford house demonstrates that the house is clearly late Georgian and stylistically belongs in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁸

Description of the House

The 1992 removal of the nineteenth century stucco has revealed two things about the McWilliam house. First, is its glazed-header Flemish brick bond reminiscent of the John Dickinson plantation, built in 1744, and Quaker houses in New Jersey, also built in the 1740's (see appendix). The only other house in New Castle with this kind of brick bond is the VanLeuvenigh house, also on the Strand,

dated at about 1760. The second surprise was traces of a pent eave, a trait common only in the Middle Atlantic states. Two surviving houses in Philadelphia and in New Jersey of were both built in the mid-eighteenth century (see appendix).

The three cellar window arches include glazed headers and appear to be original to the structure. The window nearest the door has been filled in, probably when the street was graded lower and additional steps to the door had to be put in.

The cellar is brick-lined with three windows facing the street. Inside the cellar, the bricks under the largest window have been replaced, showing an area large enough for a three-quarter length cellar door. This area has since been walled up again with pieces of stone, sand and broken brick. The replacement is not visible from the outside. The enlargement probably took place after the nineteenth century grading of Front Street, which lowered the street level several feet.⁸

In the cellar under the hall, the original unfinished beams seem to be still in place. The hearth support is corbelled brick. Wooden supports or dividers have been added creating three bays in the front half of the cellar. The posts have wrought nails in them suggesting that they were put in in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The homeowners, Richard and Martha Day, noting out the remains of a door jam, feel that the area may once have served as a place for locked storage of barrels brought in through the enlarged window opening.⁹ The view of the house in the Latrobe Survey of New Castle, 1804-1805, shows slanted cellar doors, supporting the Days' theory.¹⁰

An odd feature of the cellar floor is the triangular pattern of the bricks in the corner opposite the corbelling (see appendix). This is under the front door and there is no evidence of a fireplace nor any reason why there should have been. No reason for this arrangement has been suggested.

A brick supporting wall which goes up through at least the first floor and possibly up through the second, leads to the other section of the cellar, under the

parlor. I have not been able to find evidence of a cellar fireplace but the possibility remains. Sometime in the nineteenth century, the parlor and parlor chamber fireplaces were removed and piping was fitted for stove heating. This change is reflected in the cellar where the hearth support has been replaced and a reused support beam runs across the cellar room. The center of this cellar room has a rectangular pit in which now sits the water heater. It is not clear when this pit was made. Gabrielle Lanier, in her book on Delaware architecture states that root pits were usually dug in front of the kitchen hearth in eighteenth century homes.¹¹ If the pit was dug as a root cellar then that would support the existence of a cellar kitchen. The back wall of the cellar has been rebricked in several places, possibly obscuring the remains of a kitchen fireplace (see appendix).

Up on the first floor, the front door opens onto what was once a stair passage. The dividing wall between the passage and the hall has been removed but traces of it are still visible on the ceiling and in the change in floorboards. The hall has a corner fireplace which has been bricked-in to form a smaller fireplace. On either side of the mantel are triangular shaped cupboards which are slightly off center. The seventeenth-century type hinges are later replacements. Although the style of the overmantel is correct for the period, it is not clear whether it is original. The molding next to the ceiling and around the windows may be original. The room contains no other molding or chair rails but also does not have evidence of previous chair rails.

A doorway gives access to the parlor from the hall. The corner fireplace of both the parlor and parlor chamber have been removed making a comparison of finish between hall and parlor impossible. A later chair railing has been added but it is not clear that there was an eighteenth-century chair rail. There is a change in the wall texture where the wall was plastered after the removal of the fireplace. It is believed that a nineteenth-century coal stove flue replaced the fireplace.

The parlor is roughly the same size as the hall. A side door now leads to a porch, but outside brick detailing suggests that it was originally a window. The one remaining window in the parlor is probably an addition because the Latrobe survey indicates an extension of the back of the parlor where the window is now.¹² This was probably a kitchen wing and it may have been original to the house. The survey does not show whether the extension was one or two stories, and due to the twentieth-century addition, I was unable to determine it from the parlor chamber.

The parlor has two other doors which may be original, one door to the stair passage, behind the stairs and one door to the twentieth-century addition. The latter door may have an original outside access but in view of the Georgian plan, this seems unlikely. I suspect that the door from the back of the stair passage was the original outside back entrance.

The house has several very old raised panel doors which may be eighteenth century. These are the door between hall and parlor, the cellar door which is under the back of the stairs, and the door from the parlor chamber to the hall chamber. The front door is very old and has handmade through-construction but is probably early nineteenth century.

The stair steps give a half turn but the stairs go straight up to the second floor. The newel post, banister and ballusters are simple square cut, not turned. For a Georgian house, the stairs are fairly modest, indicating early Georgian styling.

On the second floor, the hall chamber is the largest room in the house, extending the full width of the front of the building. This may have been the best chamber. The fireplace, overmantel, triangular side-cupboards, and wide floorboards match the hall downstairs. Additional ceiling molding may be colonial revival to match the twentieth-century built-in bookshelves.

The parlor chamber, like the parlor below, has been greatly altered. A closet has been built in the corner where the corner fireplace was, and colonial revival

windows fill the side wall. The back wall of the chamber divides the old house from the addition and it is not possible to trace whether there were any windows there before the addition was built.

The attic has one room and a crawl space. The room has sloping walls and a dormer window which was added sometime after the Latrobe survey in 1804-1805. This unheated space, with side windows, may have been a sleeping area for family members, servants or slaves. A three-quarter door leads from the attic room into the crawl space which reveals the roof construction.

Style

The floor plan, construction, and detailing all suggest an early Georgian house. In *A Field Guide to Delaware Architecture*, Gabrielle Lanier defines Georgian house plans as "closed plans that lack direct access into the heated living spaces of the dwelling...[with] a stair passage connecting all of the rooms in the main block of the dwelling." Earlier house forms in Delaware had direct outside access to heated spaces. Closed plans did not appear in Delaware until the 1730's and widespread use of this form did not occur until the 1760's.¹³

Another way to distinguish Georgian houses from earlier structures is the concealment of structural members such as joists, wall plates, corner posts and tie beams. This did not become a common practice until after 1740.¹⁴ The McWilliam house seems to have been built without exposed structural members.

Glazed headers in Flemish brick bond was popular in the 1740s and can be seen in examples such as the 1744 John Dickinson plantation¹⁵ or the Zaccheus Dunn house, a 1743 Quaker house in New Jersey which bears a striking resemblance to the McWilliam house in its use of a pent eave as well as in its brickwork.¹⁶ Although the Dunn house is a center passage plan, preferred in a rural setting, side passage plans were common on small urban lots.

Lanier notes that early Georgian doors tend to have very simple surrounds and that elaborate door surrounds did not become common until the 1760's.¹⁷ The McWilliam door is very simple, having only four small panes of glass set above the door. The house currently has a pediment over the door but the Latrobe survey reveals that as late as 1804 such ornamentation graced the door of Number 6 and not Number 8. Such a pediment would have been redundant with the pent eave, which is also apparent in the Survey. The shape of the eave cannot be determined in the drawing but there is no second brick course that would have created the line visible over the front door and windows.¹⁸ Further, the exposed ends of projecting beams were meant to be covered by an eave.

Finally, Lanier gives a description of Georgian side passage houses which is completely consonant with the McWilliam house. "The first-floor front room in town settings served either as a commercial room or downstairs parlor, while the back room almost always seems to have been set aside as a dining room connected to a kitchen located either in the cellar or a rear wing. The second-floor front room served either as the best chamber or upstairs parlor, while the room behind almost always seems to have been a sleeping chamber. The third floor and attic stories were relegated to the purpose of sleeping chambers." ¹⁹

The McWilliams and Their Household

The house is known after Richard McWilliam but in fact there were two Richard McWilliams, father and son, who occupied the house. Richard McWilliam Senior served as a justice of the peace, recorder of deeds, was given jurisdiction for trying negroes (slaves, most likely) for their crimes,²⁰ and later became Chief Justice.²¹ He was married twice, first to Mary Curtis, in 1748, and then to Margaret Shaw in 1753.²² He had two sons, Richard and Stephen. Over a period of years Richard senior bought several plantations and farmlands in New Castle County and

Kent County. He died intestate in 1781 and although there is no surviving probate of his estate, settlement is described in the deed books.²³

In 1783, it was formally settled that Richard Junior, being the eldest son, should have two thirds share of the estate, including the house on Front Street, and that his brother would take his one third share in plantations and farm lands.²⁴ Margaret relinquished any interest in the administration of the estate. Some private agreement or one that has not survived must have provided for her welfare and decided where she was to continue to live. Richard Junior lived in the house with his wife Rebecca, and his five daughters.²⁵

Soon after his father's estate was settled, it appears that Richard Junior realized his own death was imminent and he began to prepare for it. First, he wrote his will, in December of 1785, with specific instructions on what parcels of land were to be sold to pay off debts and what was to be divided among his daughters. He gave his wife an annual income of one hundred and thirty pounds rather than property and appointed her, along with his two friends James Booth and Isaac Grantham, guardian of his daughters, all of whom were unmarried at the time, and at least some of whom were still minors. In addition, he left instructions that his slave Caesar would be not only manumitted but provided with an annual income of six pounds. Two of his other slaves, Cuff and Cotto were to be set free if his wife no longer wanted their service, they were not to be sold. One other slave, Liz, was to be sold on his death. One wonders whether there was some personality conflict between Rebecca and Liz that could only be handled by Richard. In addition, Richard made specific bequests of personal property to each family member, ordered a mourning ring for his friend James Booth and directed that his law library be sold intact, with Booth having the first option to buy it.²⁶

In March, when Richard added a codicil to his will, he had already begun selling off property to pay for his debts, had sold his law library, (possibly to Booth)

and gave his wife the use, but not the property of the plate. Interestingly, he revokes Ceasar's annual income but not his manumission. Had some kind of falling out taken place between Caesar and Richard or was he realizing that his estate was going to be in a precarious position until his debts could be settled? One would like to know what kind of opportunities free slaves in New Castle County had, especially since Caesar, "in consideration of a long and faithful Service in our Family," may well have been elderly at his release. ²⁷

It appears both from his instructions in his will and the accounting of his estate, that Richard lent money at interest. During the fifteen years before his estate was settled, in 1801, it was still receiving payments.²⁸ Richard may have realized that his estate was not liquid enough to provide income for his family while his debts were being called in. The year 1801 may signify his youngest daughter, Hester's, twentyfirst birthday. Since he left minor children, his estate went through orphans court, and his will specified that certain property was not to be distributed until each daughter was either twenty-one or married and Hester did not marry until 1806.²⁹

The executors of Richard's will did sell the pieces of property that Richard had accumulated. They even considered selling the house. However, in a report to the orphans court, it was shown that the debts could be settled without selling the house, so as of 1801 it was being lived in by Rebecca and Hester.³⁰ After 1801, the record is obscure. The house belonged to Louisa and Hester. In the 1790's, Louisa married Thomas Clark, a farmer, they farmed part of the land left to her by her father. Clark and Louisa married Benjamin Marley and continued to farm her inherited land, adding to it by buying parts of Hester's share. Hester married Bankson Taylor and went to live in Philadelphia.³¹ It is possible that she and her husband or she and Louisa rented the house to Rebecca until her death in 1822.³²

Since we do know that Richard and his family were living in the house in the 1780's, that is perhaps the best time to focus on it and try to reconstruct what was

going on in the house at the time. The house had four rooms, a cellar, and an attic. It is not clear whether the kitchen was in the cellar or in the kitchen wing shown in the Latrobe survey of 1804-1805.³³ The wing has since been removed and it is not certain when it was added. The lot was thirty-five feet wide and one hundred and fifty feet deep.³⁴ Although the Latrobe survey does not show any other outbuildings there may have been some during the eighteenth century.³⁵

Within this house lived Richard, Rebecca, and their five daughters. Richard's mother Margaret was living in the house in 1781 and may have continued living there after her husband's death. Her wedding ring is part of Richard's will so it is likely that she died sometime between 1781 and 1785.³⁶ Perhaps she was an invalid in the house. How did all these people live in the house?

A brief look at some of the items in the house will give an idea of how crowded it must have been in the 1780's. (Note the floorplan for size of the rooms.) There were eleven tables, three of which were dining tables. Fortunately, this was the age of the folding table. There were thirty-seven chairs, six beds, three of which were complete with bolster, counterpanes, bed and window curtains. There was one chest of drawers and four chests and trunks. In addition, the walls were not bare, having thirty-two pictures and six looking glasses. Although only two fireplaces survive, the McWilliams had five pairs of tongs and three pairs of andirons, two of which were brass.³⁷ With five unmarried daughters to provide for, the McWilliams would be likely to hang onto all the furniture, even though the house may have been crowded at the time. Since walnut was the most popular wood for fine furniture in the first half of the eighteenth century perhaps the walnut pieces had belonged to Richard Senior and Margaret.

The McWilliams had the necessary props for sociability. Rebecca had her choice of two tea boards, plus the use of the "plate", at sixty-four pounds, the single most expensive set in the inventory. Brass andirons, candlesticks, looking glasses

indicate a use of the status items of the day. Richard McWilliam, while not a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, was a landowner and lawyer and probably enjoyed a high status in the town. His wife and daughters were left with many of the items necessary for entertaining in their own households. Rebecca even received her husband's riding chair and horse so that she could move about in some comfort and style.³⁸

Unfortunately, the inventory takers seemed to have grouped all like items together thus making it almost impossible to reconstruct a room by room plan of the furnishings. We must enter into the realm of conjecture with all its risks. Starting with what we do know, which is that the hall was directly accessible from the stair passage, while the parlor was accessible through the hall or from behind the staircase. The hall was the most public room in the house, although possibly not the most formal.

Working with the assumption that the hall was Richard's office, and his father's before him, one would expect to find his law library and perhaps the other books. Although the house was filled with mahogany furniture, the only desk listed was a pine writing desk and no bookcase was mentioned. This is surprising because, aside from the law books there were fifty-eight books inventoried by name and sundry other books.³⁹ Where were they kept? Where did Richard keep his papers? Why would a well-to-do lawyer have only a pine desk? The hall chamber contains built-in bookshelves. Although they are clearly a much later addition, perhaps there was some sort of shelving to hold all of Richard's books. Also, the pine desk may have been used by his wife or daughters. Richard himself may have had some other arrangement that served as a desk.

The parlor may have contained a bed, particularly if, as I have conjectured, Margaret was an invalid in the house. The parlor may have served as dining room, sitting room, and even bedroom.

The hall chamber is the largest chamber and looks out over the street. This was probably the best chamber. Richard and Rebecca probably slept there and possibly entertained there as well. Since there was an unusually large number of beds, (five) for the family, the daughters may not have all shared one room.⁴⁰ The younger daughters may have shared the best chamber with their parents or may have slept in the attic. Another possibility is that some of the less valuable beds were stored, to be divided among the older daughters as they married, and that the McWilliam girls did all share the parlor chamber.

The attic was probably used for storage and possibly as sleeping space for the slaves. I have been unable to determine exactly where the slaves slept. There are several possibilities: the attic, the cellar (unlikely because of dampness) the kitchen (which may have been a one or two-story wing or a separate outbuilding), or another outbuilding on the property. Although the inventory lists beds and bedding for the slaves, it does not refer to bedsteds, which in eighteenth century parlance may mean simply mattresses of some sort and blankets. However, the slaves' total beds and bedding are appraised at three pounds, more than the mahogany dining table.⁴¹ Other questions comes to mind, were there sleeping accomodations for Liz separate from the male slaves? Was she married to any of the slaves in the household? How much privacy did the slaves have?

Dell Upton describes the landscape of the antebellum Virginia as one of hierarchies and barriers. The language of status was conveyed by both visibility and inaccessibility. Visitors to the great house passed through many barriers and each movement through a barrier confirmed the status of the visitor as well as of the planter. However, because slaves did not participate in the formal routes, the message of the landscape was undercut. The planter's power over the life of the slave rendered material displays of status unnecessary as a means of defining the

relationship between master and slave. Thus, Upton points out, slaves experienced the landscape quite differently even from poor whites.⁴²

This notion is useful in an exploration of how the slaves of Richard McWilliam perceived and moved through the house. Probably they entered and exited through a back door. Their first glimpse of the stair passage was a view of the cellar door. We may wonder how they participated in heated spaces. They undoubtedly slept in unheated spaces like the rest of the household, for although there were fireplaces in the second floor chambers, they were probably used only on rare occasions. But their daytime and working evening hours had to have been spent somewhere warm. Perhaps it was the kitchen. The kitchen may have been a space of greater freedom, a place where they could sit down. The other rooms may well have been spaces where they could never rest, never sit. Certainly they experienced the rooms in a different way.

Other questions come to mind. Who answered the door when a visitor knocked? Did the women of the household answer or was it the slaves? Possibly the slave answered and left the visitor in the stair passage while announcing him or her to the family. This would have meant that a servant had to be nearby or easily and discreetly summoned by the household. Where were the slaves when they were working yet in reach of their masters? What were their tasks? We know so little about them.

How did the house affect those who lived in it, free and unfree? How was the house affected by its inhabitants? These questions are far from being answered. The study of the house is ultimately a study of how people acted in and perceived their world. Surely the McWilliam house has more to tell us. We need to make the past speak about Caesar, Cuff, Cotto, and Liz, a living vital part of the household yet so little able to leave their mark on the written record or on the permanent fabric of the house.

This paper has spent a great deal of time calling the McWilliam house "Georgian". This is not merely for the sake of labeling or pigeonholing but because the ideals and material language that is called Georgian conveyed so much meaning to people at the time. It was a way of expressing themselves and ordering their world. It was a newer, more private arrangement of families and the outside world. It was a statement of power and culture that fit in with both McWilliam families' place in society. Identifying the house as an earlier structure does injustice to its message.

Notes to Text

- 1. U.S. Department of the Interior, HABS Survey
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- Public Archives Commission. (Hall of Records, Dover, Delaware.) Deed Book K, Vol 1, 238.
- Brown, Robert Frank. "Front Street New Castle, Delaware Architecture and Building Practices 1687-1859." (Master's Thesis, University of Delaware. 1961) 4.
- 5. Public Archives Commission. Deed Book E, Vol 2, 62.
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- Lucas, Teresa. "Seminar Paper in Vernacular Architecture." (University of Delaware. 1992.)
- 8. Brown, 2.
- 9. Days, Richard and Martha Day. Conversation with author 5 December, 1992.
- Toro, Lucille P. "The Latrobe Survey of New Castle 1804-1805." (Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, 1971.) appendix
- Lanier, Gabriell. "A Field Guide to Delaware Architecture." (Prepared for the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, University of Delaware, 1992.) 79.
- 12. Toro, appendix.
- 13. Ibid. 30-31.
- 14 Ibid. 139-140.
- 15. Ibid. 11.

- Chiarappa, Michael J. "The Social Context of Eighteenth-Century West New Jersey Brick Artisanry" Thomas Carter & Bernard L. Herman, eds. *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV.* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991.) 43.
- 17. Lanier, 140.
- 18. Toro, appendix.
- 19. Lanier, 38.
- 20. Public Archives Commission. Deed Book .
- 21. Eckman,
- Public Archives Commission. (Hall of Records, Dover, DE.) Record of Marriages.
- 23. Deed Book E, Vol 2, 62.
- 24. Ibid.
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- 26. Public Archives Commission, Probate Records, Richard McWilliam.
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- 29. Public Archives Commission. Record of Marriages.
- 30. Probate Records, Richard McWilliam.
- 31. Ibid.
- Public Archives Commission, (Hall of Records, Dover, DE.) Probate Records, Rebecca McWilliam.
- 33. Toro, appendix.
- 34. Public Archives Commission. Deed Book I, Vol 1, 92.
- 35. Toro, appendix.
- 36. Probate Records, Richard McWilliam.

- 37. Ibid.
- 38. Ibid.
- 39. Ibid.
- 40. Ibid.
- 41. Ibid.
- 42. Upton, Dell. "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" Robert Blair St. George ed. *Material Life in America 1600-1860*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988.) 357-369.

Notes to Appendix

- 1. Toro, appendix
- 2. Ibid.
- McAlister, Virginia and Lee McAlister. A Field Guide to American Houses. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1990.) 151.
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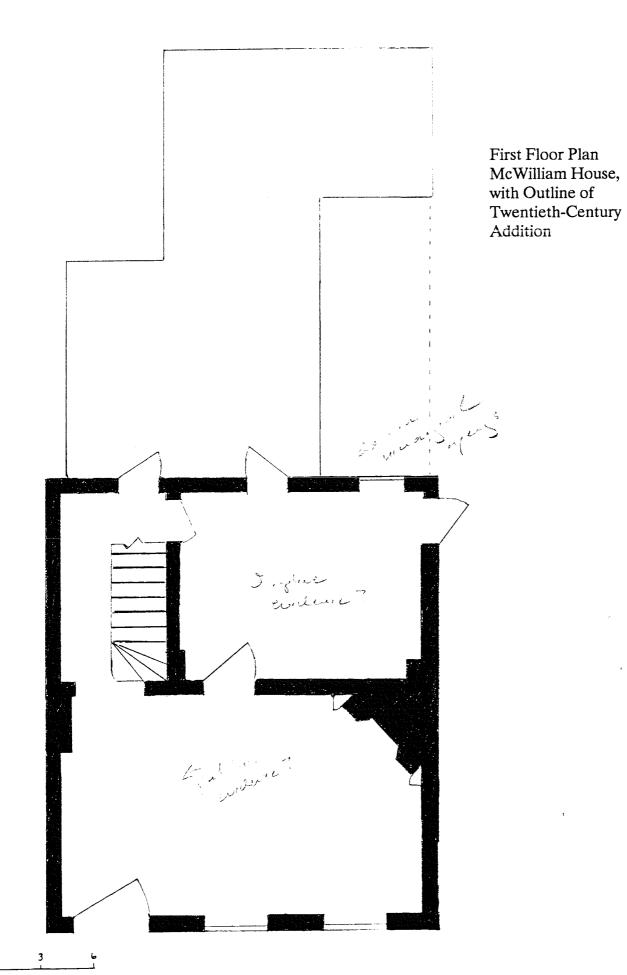
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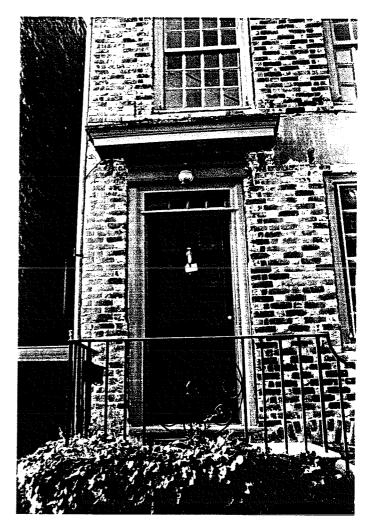
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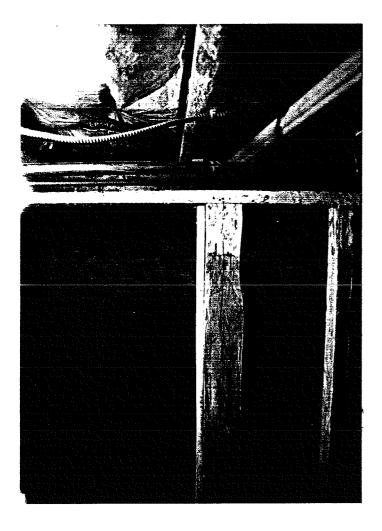




Front views

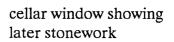


View of cellar window openings





Remains of door jam



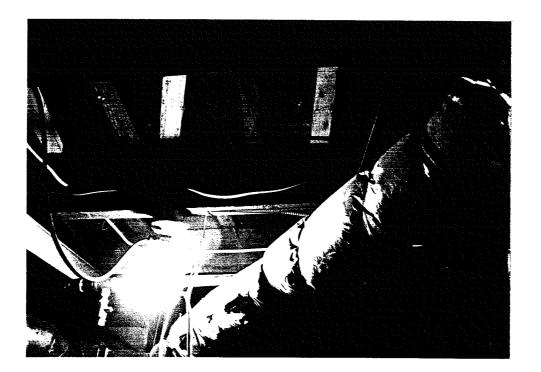


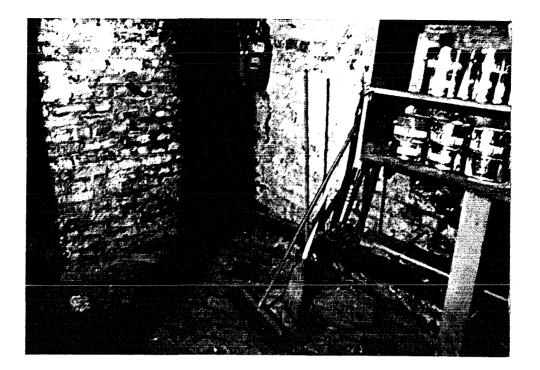
Corbelling for hall hearth support



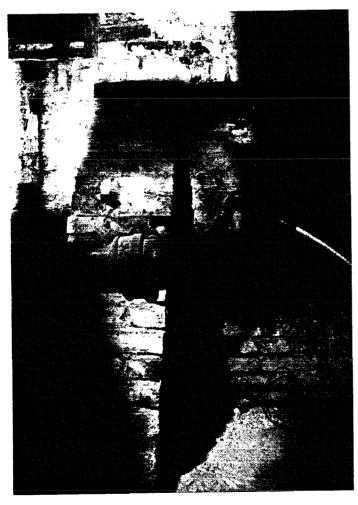
Bulging wall at back of cellar

Circular saw marked joists under parlor





Unexplained triangular pattern brick work



unexplained brickwork

cellar pit



Hall fireplace and windows

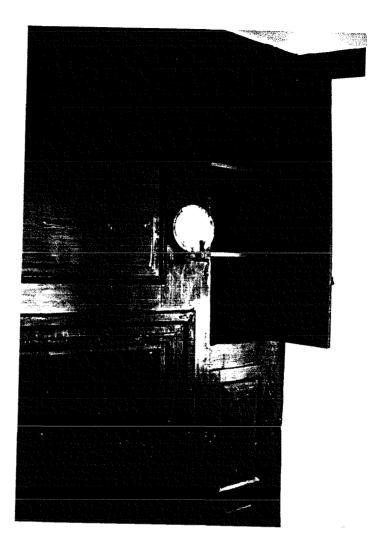




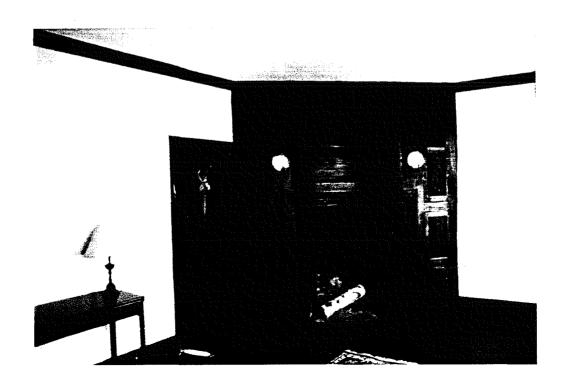
Parlor window and side door

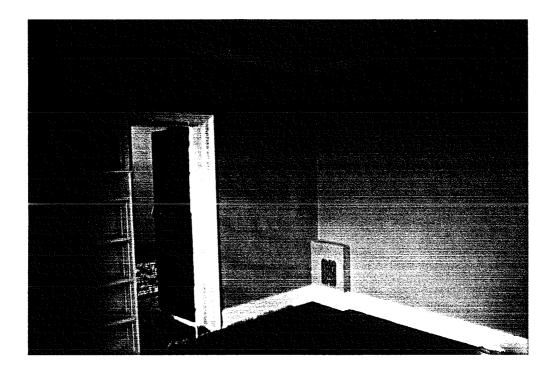


Parlor -door to stair passage on left and door to addition

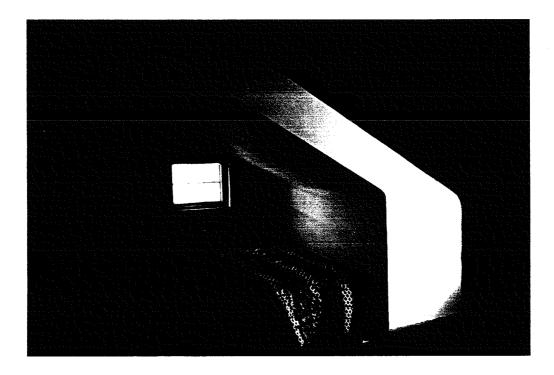


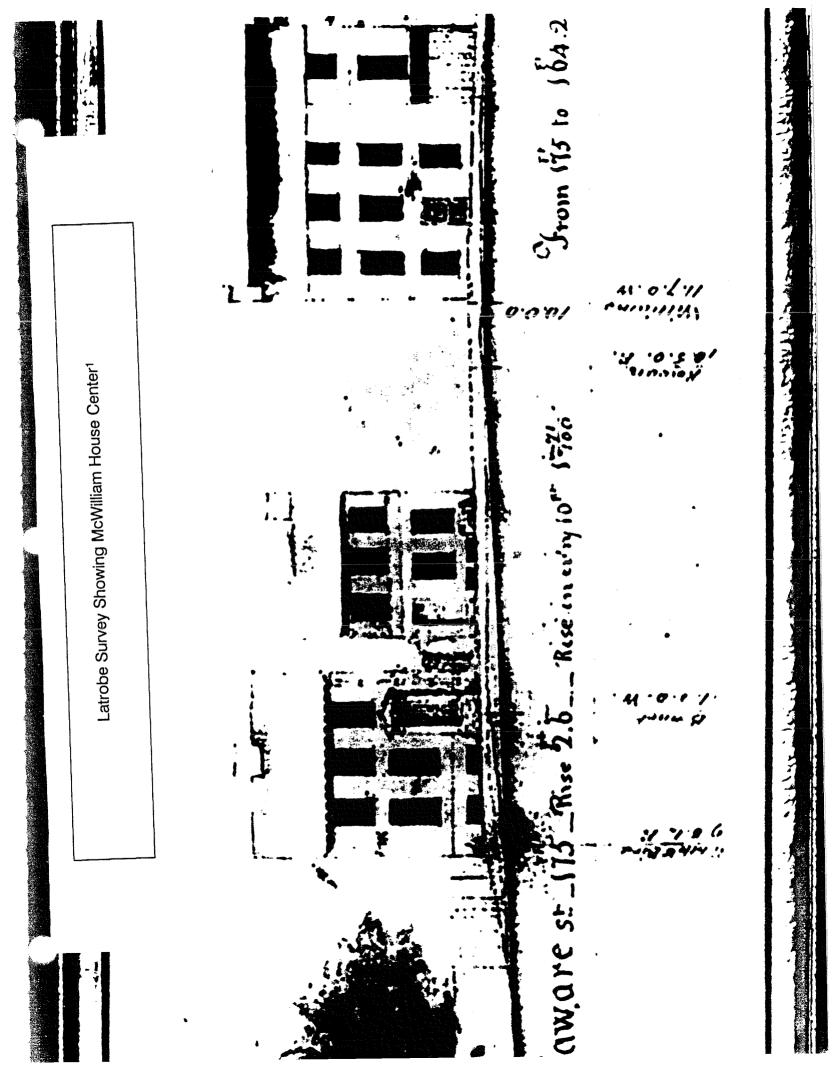
Hall chamber fireplace

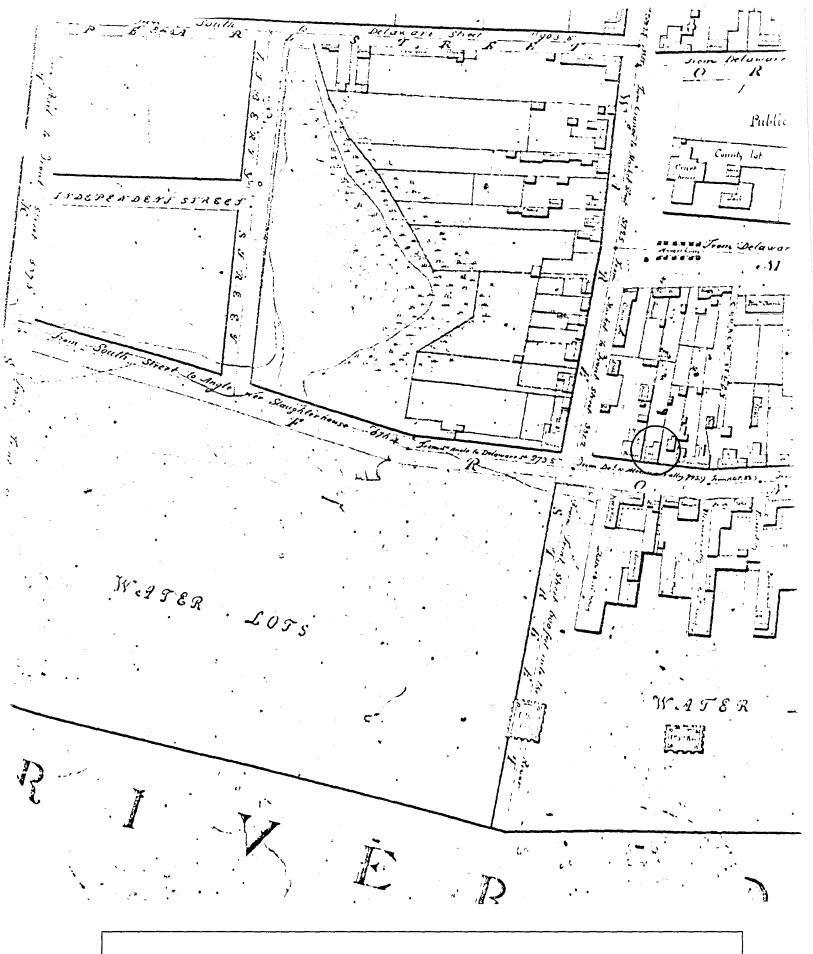




Parlor chamber, above, attic below







Latrobe Survey Showing McWilliam House With Rear Wing²



Mid-eighteenth century Philadelphia house with a pent eave³

V^{COOCLEL}

Zaccheus Dunn house (1743), Salem County New Jersey⁴

