

**A HOUSE OF A CITY BUILDER,
11 & 13 MARKET STREET
NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE**

by

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Introduction

In his 1795 *Travels through the United States of North America*, the Duke de Liancourt noted that the town of New Castle is composed of “seventy houses, some of which are brick, and are built adjacent to each other.”¹ Only twelve years later in 1807, Joseph Scott wrote in his *Geographical Description of the States of Maryland and Delaware* that, “Newcastle, a post town...contains about one hundred and sixty houses, and one thousand two hundred inhabitants.”² These two early observations establish that during the initial years of the nineteenth century, New Castle’s population increased rapidly and that physically, New Castle grew in tandem with this rising population. The opportunities that attracted many to settle in New Castle created additional opportunities for entrepreneurs and investors to build in anticipation of the profits they could reap from New Castle’s new growth. These entrepreneurs turned city builders added to New Castle’s urban fabric as their opportunities allowed. Some managed to construct whole rows of houses, while others added only a single house or store. This paper will focus on the life and house of one of New Castle’s early nineteenth century city builders, namely Adam Barr, whose only unique contribution to New Castle’s urban fabric was one rather

¹Duke de la Rochefoucault Liancourt, *Travels through the United States of North America*,...in the years 1795, 1796, and 1797, 4 vols. (London, 1800), 3: 536; quoted in Constance J. Cooper ed., *350 Years of New Castle Delaware*, (Wilmington: Cedar Tree Books, 2001), 69.

² Joseph Scott, *A Geographical Description of the States of Maryland and Delaware* (Philadelphia, 1807), 176; quoted in Constance J. Cooper ed., *350 Years of New Castle Delaware*, (Wilmington: Cedar Tree Books, 2001), 71.

typical townhouse (Fig. 1, 2). Nevertheless, Barr's townhouse, positioned prominently on New Castle's Market Square, was an important component of New Castle's municipal façade and reveals many of the values of its builder and the values of the town in which it stands. By first studying the development of New Castle's Market Street and then examining the development of Barr's house itself, it is possible to see how this house responded to its immediate surroundings and also reflected the larger values and aspirations that helped to shape early nineteenth century New Castle. A study of Barr's house also reveals much about the profits and the pitfalls of urban development, and demonstrates how the process of city building could make and or break even its most eager participants.

Early Development of Market Street and the Barr House

Adam Barr's house dates to the first decades of the nineteenth century, but much of its significance stems from the lives and efforts of those who began to develop Market Street a century before. This is especially the case with the houses located at present 15 and 17 Market Street, to which Barr's house was closely allied during much of its early history. In 1721 a New Castle resident, George Hogg II, inherited a large lot fronting Market Street from his father.³ At some point in the mid-eighteenth century, Hogg built a substantial brick house on this lot, which was referred to as a "mansion" in Hogg's 1748 will (Fig. 3).⁴ As one of the first buildings on Market Street, both the size and position of Hogg's house would have made it a landmark in this part of the city and an integral part of the marketplace itself. Countless dealings transacted in the market during much of the

³ Carol Garrett. *New Castle County Delaware Land Records 1764-1769*, (Westminster, Md.: Willow Bend Books, 1999), 152-3.



Figure 1, David Amott photographer, (a) approximate appearance of Adam Barr's house in the early 19th century and (b) Adam Barr's house as it appears today.

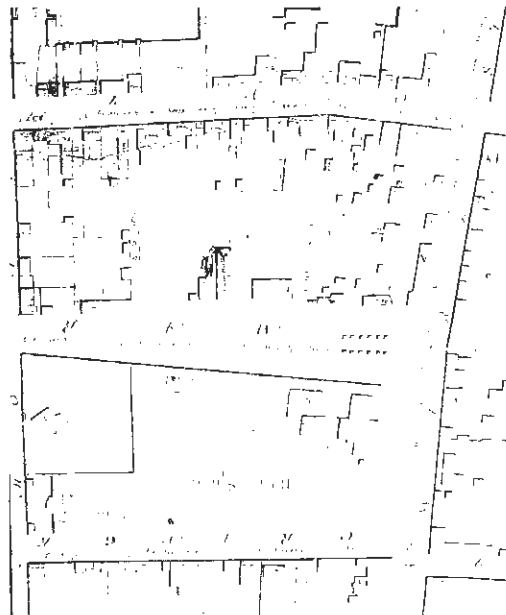


Figure 2, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *Map of New Castle, Delaware*, 1804, ink on parchment.



Figure 3, “The Mansion House of Hogg.” The house, originally one large house, was divided in two by Adam Barr in the early 19th century and received later additions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The house’s original eighteenth century roofline appears behind the two additions.

eighteenth century would have been made against the backdrop of Hogg's "mansion," and the size and presence of this house would have testified of both Hogg's personal success in addition to New Castle's own growing prosperity.

In 1768 John Passmore, a New Castle merchant and investor, purchased Hogg's Market Street "mansion" together with an adjoining lot located immediately to the left of Hogg's house.⁵ Upon Passmore's death, his son William inherited this house with its attached lot and lived there during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. As president of the town's five governing commissioners, the location of William's house close to the market would have been convenient for him since his position made him responsible for renting New Castle's market stalls.⁶ The close proximity of his house to the stalls would have made these responsibilities easier for William by providing him with both convenient physical and visual access to the market. The fact that the market's overseer lived on the market itself would have increasingly associated this house with New Castle's market square in the minds of the town's residents. It would also have assured that William Passmore's influence permeated the market even when he was not personally on site to monitor its activities.

At the end of the eighteenth century, William Passmore's daughter Elizabeth began a courtship with a young cobbler named Adam Barr whom she eventually

⁴ New Castle County Probate and Inventory Records. Probate Records for George Hogg, 1742.

⁵ Garrett, 152-3.

⁶ On August 16, 1798 William Passmore, Thomas Janvier, and John Darragh fixed a rent on the stalls in the Market House and made a report on the same. The stalls were to be rented for 3 shillings 9 pence each. On September 11, 1799, William Passmore was appointed again to establish the stall rates. These rates were set at \$4 a year, \$0.40 a month, \$0.012 ½ a week, and \$0.02 a day. For more information see *Minutes Book*, New Castle Town Hall, 8/16/1798 and 9/11/1799 respectively.

married.⁷ In 1800, William Passmore leased the empty lot next door to his own house to his new son-in-law for two Spanish milled dollars per year.⁸ The small amount at which Barr rented this valuable lot from his father-in-law suggests that this exchange was part of Elizabeth's dowry or another similar arrangement. Access to this land was undoubtedly important for Adam Barr in that it gave him the opportunity to build a townhouse for himself in an important and highly visible section of New Castle. For a young merchant and entrepreneur like Barr, whose business was founded in "the noisesome commerce of the city,"⁹ the chance to build a house in New Castle's market square would have provided Barr with the ability to connect himself with many of the town's commercial opportunities by associating himself with the activities of its commercial center.¹⁰

⁷ While no record of the marriage exists, the union is mentioned in the 1804 will of Elizabeth's mother, Sarah Passmore. For more information see New Castle County Probate and Inventory Records. Probate Records for Sarah Passmore, 1804.

⁸ The appearance of glazed headers on the side of William Passmore's eighteenth century house which faced the empty lot suggests that this side of the house was open, visible, and viewed as a display area. As such, the lot itself might have been used as an ornamental garden.

⁹ Bernard L. Herman, "Multiple Materials, Multiple Meanings: The Fortunes of Thomas Mendenhall." Winterthur Portfolio, 19, No. 1 (Spring 1984), 73.

¹⁰ Since New Castle's Dutch founding in the mid seventeenth century, Market Street was the center of much of New Castle's activity and a focal point of the town. In the late seventeenth century the Dutch had established the town green and soon after constructed the first New Castle Court House (1689). Between that time and the opening decades of the nineteenth century many of New Castle's most prominent buildings were constructed along Market Street. The town Jail and debtor's prison (ca.1690), Presbyterian and Emmanuel churches (1707 and 1791 respectively), as well as the Arsenal (1809) were all located on Market Street by the onset of the nineteenth century. While the street served as an important administrative and cultural center for New Castle, it also served as one of the town's principal commercial centers. Biweekly markets were held in the wooden frame market stalls which had stood on the street since the early eighteenth century. From 1729 a town decree made Wednesday's and Saturday's market days in New Castle, and no provisions were to be brought or sold except in the Market House. For more information see Constance J. Cooper, "A Town Among Cities: New Castle Delaware: 1780-1840," Ph.D. dissertation, 1983, 184-228 and Scott Erbes "Elite Power / Elite Control," (unpublished seminar paper, University of Delaware, 1989), 25-30.

Barr's House In Relation to its Market Environment

While the market side location of Barr's property offered definite advantages, it also presented many disadvantages as well. Today, New Castle's Market Street is attractive and even bucolic, but in the early nineteenth century the street was far from calm or picturesque. An 1820 Delaware Gazette article written by "a traveler passing through the village of New-Castle" noted that while New Castle *could* be a place where "love might revel upon gales, wafting at once both fragrance and harmony," the reality of the town was far different. The traveler records that during his stay in New Castle, he was confronted with a "mauvais odeur" and found that the "cows, horses, pigs and poultry, kept and pampered on the public highway" created in New Castle's public areas the "effluvia of a pig pen, mixed with the rising odors of a contiguous stable."¹¹ In addition to the odor that likely permeated the Market Square, large and noisy crowds would have regularly assembled in the square to buy and sell, or participate in other activities such as the public whippings or hangings at the jail opposite the market. Aside from its noisy commotion, New Castle's nineteenth century market place would have also been dirty, absorbing the bi weekly refuse left by the Market's shoppers and pocked with muddy holes and ruts created by the constant pounding of human feet, wagon wheels, and horses' hooves on the unpaved street.¹²

¹¹ *Delaware Gazette*, Vol. L, NEW SERIES: No. 68, (Tuesday, October 17, 1820), p 3, columns 2 and 3.

¹² The New Castle commissioner's minutes of Oct. 16, 1809 show that house owners on Market Street between Harmony and Chestnut streets were required to pave the street in front of their property. It was not until Aug. 16, 1826, seventeen years later, that the commissioner minutes show that the main section of Market Street between Delaware and Harmony streets was paved. Thus, during the years that Adam Barr spent in the Market Street house the section of Market Street that fronted his house would have been unpaved. For more information see: Robert Frank Brown, "Front Street, New Castle Delaware: Architecture and Building Practices: 1687-1859." MA. Thesis. University of Delaware. 1961.

Despite the smell, dirt, noise, and commotion that came with living near the market, the previously mentioned opportunities for exposure combined with the convenience of living in New Castle's center made Barr's lot valuable and therefore difficult to ignore. At some point during the first or second decade of the nineteenth century, Adam Barr constructed his large two and a half-story townhouse on the market adjacent to the earlier house of his father-in-law William Passmore. In as much as Barr's house had such a prominent position in the town, Barr likely felt a certain level of pressure to build his house up to a certain standard. During much of the first half of the nineteenth century, New Castle's governors were increasingly interested in regulating both the market's appearance and its activity. By passing ordinances to improve civic housekeeping, slowly paving the city's streets, establishing market laws, and eventually adding a new town hall and market building to the street, the town's administrators gradually shaped Market Street and New Castle's other key public areas to match their vision of what the town should be. Barr's house would have played a role in the town fathers' vision of Market Street, and would therefore need to respond not only to Barr's personal expectations and aspirations, but those of the town's governing elite as well.

While it was not ostentatious, the house Barr built attempted to both distinguish itself from its Market Street surroundings while simultaneously connecting itself to these surroundings. Confidently anticipating a fortune that had yet to be made, surviving evidence suggests that Barr architecturally harmonized his house with its notable neighbor, the older Hogg / Passmore house, and in the process linked itself with the Hogg / Passmore house's long-standing connection to the Market, New Castle's commercial activity in general, and to the memory and success of the wealthy owners, such as George

Hogg and William Passmore, who had inhabited this older house during much of the previous century.¹³ However, by placing itself directly on the street rather than stepping backward from it, as did the noble Reed house just over a block away, Barr's house became a feature of the street itself, suggesting perhaps that its occupant was an individual who was anxious to involve and connect himself with the community and its day-to-day activities. Constructed of brick instead of wood, Barr's house was also built to last, serving as an enduring statement of not only its builder's aspirations, but also those of the community as well. By constructing his house of expensive and durable materials, Barr complimented New Castle by heavily investing himself in its physical development, suggesting that he believed in the town's long-term future to which he was now an active contributor.

Like the exterior, the interior of Barr's Market Street house both distinguished Barr from, and yet connected him with New Castle's Market. Leaving Market Street and entering the house through its front door, one would have first come into a hallway that provided access to Barr's parlor and dining room—the two most sociable spaces in the house (Fig. 4).¹⁴ While the formality of these spaces would have distinguished them as polite, views of the market place through the parlor's windows together with the market's noise, dirt, and odor would have inadvertently linked these rooms through smell, sight, and sound to the market beyond. Since Barr's house had no formal parlor on the second

¹³ Interior evidence such as seams, cracked plaster, and photographs taken during a recent restoration project indicates that the pitch and height of the roofline on Barr's house exactly matched with that of its neighbor, the Hogg / Passmore house. Thus, originally these two houses likely appeared as a single row and were architecturally similar to each other.

¹⁴ While little of the original finishes on the first floor survive today, neoclassical second floor moldings and mantles suggest that the first floor rooms would have featured similar treatment, albeit more elaborate than those on the second floor.

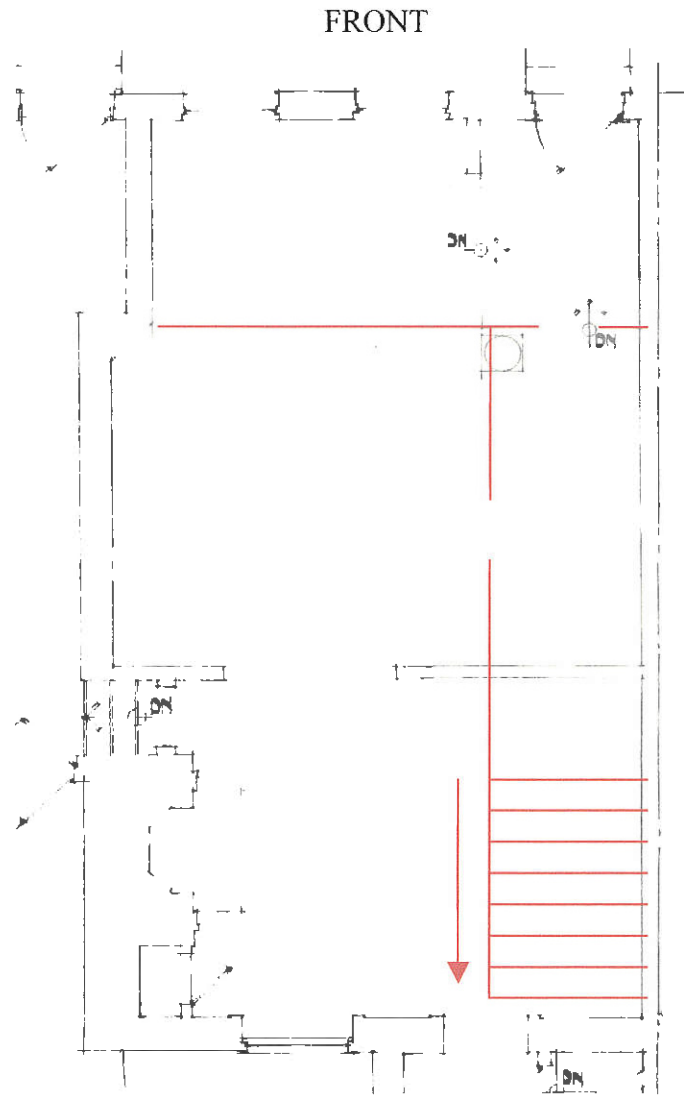


Figure 4, The first floor of the Adam Barr House. The heavy black lines indicate the house's early nineteenth century dimensions and likely floor plan.

floor, Barr would have received and entertained all his guests in these spaces, be they social or business in nature. While the room's relations to the nearby market likely interfered with the sociability of these spaces, it was appropriate that these rooms be connected with the marketplace and its noisy commercial activity in that Barr's first floor rooms themselves were likely doubled as commercial spaces on many occasions.

The second story, which like the ground floor was two rooms deep, served primarily as the family's private area (Fig. 5). According to an 1810 census, Barr's immediate family consisted of Barr and his wife, and two children.¹⁵ It is likely that most if not all members of Barr's family would have been accommodated in the second story's heated rooms which were probably distinguished from lesser spaces in the house by both their furnishings and architectural features, which include still extant neoclassical moldings and mantles. Walls separating these private chambers from the second floor passage and stairwell allowed the family to retain their privacy by blocking the prying eyes of servants and boarders. While set above the dirt and grime of the market, the second floor was still linked to the market below through sound and sight. This is especially true of the front second floor room where Adam Barr and his wife likely slept. One can imagine the Barrs being aroused on market mornings by the call of merchants selling wares below. One can also imagine Barr perched on the windowsill of this room examining the market beyond his house, hoping to spot a particular individual with whom he wished to do business, or likewise a creditor or financier whom he wished to avoid.

While the house's most sociable spaces were found on its first and second floors, secondary spaces such as the basement and garret were also likely used as living spaces.

¹⁵ New Castle County Census Records for the Town of New Castle, 1810

FRONT

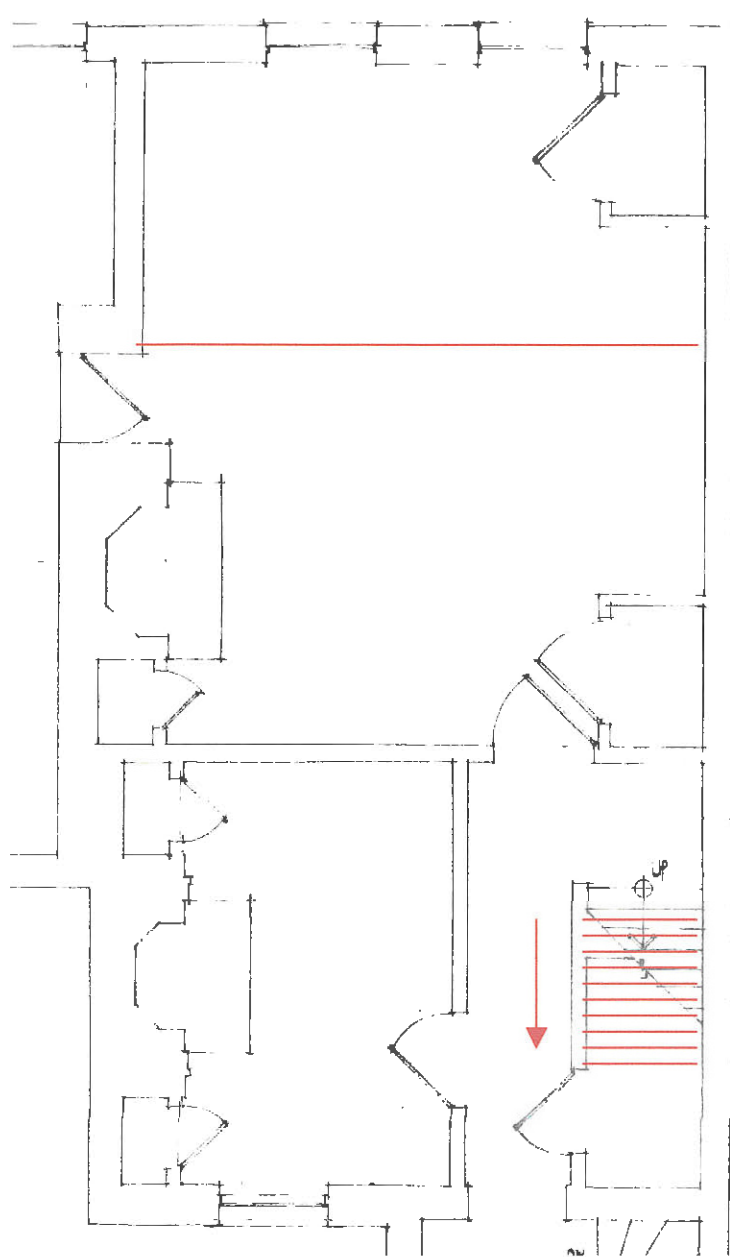


Figure 5, The second floor of the Adam Barr House. The heavy black lines indicate the house's early nineteenth century dimensions and likely floor plan.

According to the 1810 census, the Barrs employed an African American servant and housed a Caucasian boarder. Instead of enjoying the heated and well appointed middle floors, these two individuals would have likely spent most of their time in these peripheral garret and basement areas of the house.¹⁶ While most of the original features of these two spaces no longer survive, their location at the extremities of the house suggests that these areas were built for functionality and not sociability. Likewise, the people who lived and worked in these peripheral spaces were expected to be functional and not sociable, making neoclassical finery in their living areas superfluous and perhaps even dangerously ennobling. These spaces however were not devoid of comfort and benefit for their occupants. Just as the walls on the second floor provided privacy for the Barr family, the marginality of the garret and basement areas of the house also provided privacy for Barr's servant and boarder, freeing them from the constant observations of the Barr family and providing them with a greater ability to do and say what they pleased when in these spaces.

In many ways, the opportunities for varying levels of sociability, observation, access, public display, and privacy created through the division and hierarchy of space in the interior of Barr's house was mirrored by similar opportunities found outside his house in New Castle's market square. For craftsmen and entrepreneurs like Adam Barr, both the market and the home were primarily places where one could see and be seen. They provided a venue for commerce and sociability, as well as a place to connect with others and openly express and build upon shared community values. As previously mentioned, what made Barr's lot on Market Street particularly valuable was the amount of exposure

¹⁶ Ibid.

it allowed its occupant to receive, through direct physical and visible access to the market as well as through associations which linked Barr and his house to the nearby market square.

Conversely, both the market and Barr's home were porous places in many ways providing individuals on society's periphery, such as Barr's boarder and African American servant, a place to escape and find a certain amount of freedom, sociability, and connection. By working together in the service areas of Barr's house, or by going to the market under the pretense of doing their master's bidding, boarders, servants, or journeymen could interact with their associates in a socially acceptable manner, and yet meet their personal needs for interaction, sociability, and freedom in the process. That secondary members of New Castle's society sought out and gathered in porous secondary spaces is underscored by the attempt to pass a law in 1809 that forbade the "Trading, dealing and Bartering with Servants and Slaves without the Consent of the owner thereof within the limits of the town. [Such dealing had lead to]...the great injury of many of the Inhabitants of the Town as well as the Neighborhood.¹⁷" Many of New Castle's citizens were obviously threatened by the opportunities such spaces extended to social ciphers, in this case "Servants" and "Slaves," to openly meet yet cloak many of their words and deeds in privacy.

The Fate of Barr and his House

As a property owner in New Castle, one opportunity Adam Barr could access much easier than his African American servant or young boarder was the opportunity to borrow on credit with the hope of making money. In 1804, Barr received a golden

opportunity to do just that when Barr's wife, Elizabeth, inherited her parent's adjoining house, giving the Barrs control over a large swath of property on Market Street. Seeing the income potential of the large house, Barr divided the large Hogg/Passmore "mansion house" into two halves at some point during the first two decades of the nineteenth century (Fig. 3).¹⁸ Independent of whether or not Barr split the larger Hogg / Passmore house before or after he built his own house, the association between Barr's house and the older Hogg / Passmore house in the minds of New Castle citizens would have remained fixed. Not only was Barr closely related to the house's previous owner, but he now owned this large house himself. Thus Barr became a landlord over a valuable piece of property and gained access to a steady source of income.

Documents that survive from the early 1820's suggest that Barr used both his own house on Market Street and that of his father-in-law as collateral to finance his business dealings. Many of these documents also suggest that if wealth was measured by how much debt one could accrue, Adam Barr was one of the wealthiest men in New Castle. On the second of December, 1815 Adam Barr borrowed one thousand eight hundred dollars from Joseph Hamilton promising to pay him back at least nine hundred dollars over the next two years. In order to make this hefty payment, Barr "personally appeared before Judge Kensey Johns" and mortgaged his Market Street houses in December of that same year.¹⁹ When the payment came due, however, Hamilton never received his money

¹⁷ *Minutes Book*, New Castle Town Hall, as quoted in Scott Erbes "Elite Power / Elite Control," (unpublished seminar paper, University of Delaware, 1989), .

¹⁸ Barr likely split the Hogg / Passmore house by removing the house's central chimney stack and placing a passage way in the open cavity, dividing the ground floor in the process. The upper floor of the Hogg/Passmore house was also divided by a central wall. Thus, Barr created two separate houses that could be rented for a profit.

nor did he receive the full amount with interest a year later. In the meantime, Adam Barr was sued for delinquency on another five hundred dollar loan he had arranged with another financier, Lewis Stone. Facing financial ruin, Adam attempted to sell all three of his New Castle houses, but was unsuccessful in doing so. Thus according to the records, “Adam Barr and his family did suddenly depart with his family from the state of Delaware to Philadelphia,”²⁰ where he lived with his family for several years in the city’s North Ward where he reestablished his practice as a cobbler.²¹ After Adam Barr’s sudden departure from New Castle, Barr’s creditors turned to his father Samuel for their payment, creating a situation where Samuel was in peril of losing his own house and property due to his son’s financial delinquencies.²²

In the end, the situation didn’t necessarily turn out poorly for Barr. While Barr’s “three brick messuages” on Market Street were seized and sold by New Castle’s sheriff for five hundred dollars on August 6, 1819, Barr’s father managed to keep his property intact. Furthermore, Adam’s brother Robert purchased Adam’s three houses on Market Street for \$500 and perhaps allowed Adam access to his former homes for a time.²³ Nevertheless, Adam Barr never did fully recover ownership over these properties and it is doubtful that he ever fully recovered financially. While Adam’s will does not survive, Philadelphia city directories suggest that after his death in 1830, his wife opened a school

¹⁹ Chancery Court Records 1820-1824. Barr, John vs. Barr, Adam. New Castle County, Delaware.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robert Desilver, *The Philadelphia Directory and Finders Guide, 1821*, (Philadelphia; Robert Desilver), 9.

²² Chancery Court Records 1820-1824. Barr, John vs. Barr, Adam. New Castle County, Delaware.

in their house to support herself and her family rather than enjoying a salary drawn off her husband's saved income.²⁴

Over the next few decades, both 13 Market Street and 15 and 17 Market Street passed back and forth between the Barr and Passmore families. Eventually, these houses were sold outside these families to investors and new generations of city builders—primarily investors and businessmen who saw potential to gain from these homes and their location in New Castle. The houses were extensively remodeled, and a shop was eventually built alongside number 13 Market Street which further strengthened the links between the house, its location, and New Castle commerce in general.²⁵ Thus, the early history of Barr's house illustrates the associations that related a building with its occupants, and how such relationships provided a variety of people with access to a number of economic and social opportunities and successes, as well as challenges and disappointments. By pursuing these opportunities and success despite the risks, the contributions made by New Castle's individual city builders, such as Adam Barr, both shaped the town of New Castle, and in many ways, the lives of the town's citizens in the process.

²³ New Castle County Deed Records, New Castle Sheriff's Sale Aug. 15, 1819.

²⁴ Robert Desilver, *The Philadelphia Directory and Finders Guide, 1828*, (Philadelphia; Robert Desilver), 10.

²⁵ Barr's house gained a piazza and kitchen "L" in the early 1830's, perhaps the most significant modification took place in the mid 1850s when the house's façade was extended eight feet and the roof was raised to create a full third story.

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