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Final Paper - ARTH 667-011
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December 10, 2004

Separated Spaces, Multiple Uses:
Exploring Family Living and Tenancy in the Hugh Mercer House, 1803-1830

126 Harmony Street
New Castle, Delaware

When New Castle, Delaware blacksmith Hugh Mercer and his wife Elizabeth broke ground on what must have been their dream house in 1803, they probably never imagined that they had less than seven years to enjoy their new residence. In truth, Elizabeth may not have even lived to see the house completed, as she appears to have died sometime during 1803. The joy Hugh Mercer felt upon seeing his grand house completed must have been tainted with the sadness of his wife's passing. Nevertheless, Mercer certainly celebrated his new brick home—for few men of his status and occupation enjoyed such accomplishment in federal America. According to historian Donna Rilling, the median artisanal household in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia occupied a frame or brick home with a total area of less than 648 square feet.[1] In his New Castle, Delaware town house, Mercer had more than two thirds that amount of space *per floor*.[2]

Mercer's two-and-a-half-story, three-bay brick dwelling sat on a prime corner lot at the intersection of Second and Harmony streets. Though it lacked the exquisite composition and punch and gouge ornament of the significantly-larger houses built by New Castilians George Read II and Nicholas van Dyke Jr. only a few years before, 126 Harmony Street was well built

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[1] Donna Rilling, *Making Houses: Crafting Capitalism: Builders in Philadelphia 1790-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001): 13.

[2] The interior space of Mercer's home is 18.5 ft. by 24 ft. or 444 sq. ft. per floor.

and nicely detailed. Walls of flemish brick bond faced both streets, and tall, nine-over-nine-pane double hung windows on the first floor let copious amounts of sunlight into the house [Fig. 1]. Behind the plentiful glazing, the house boasted unadorned but elegantly crafted mantels and woodwork throughout its two main floors. A sturdy center stack chimney allowed for a full cellar kitchen and fireplaces in five of the six rooms on the first, second and garret levels. For an artisan of modest means, the house was a beautiful accomplishment and must have announced to the town that Hugh Mercer, blacksmith, had arrived.

His stylish aspirations in brick, windows and woodwork were tempered by a conservative floor plan. Mercer chose room arrangements that gave him maximum flexibility in an era of financial instability. The house's straightforward plan was nearly identical on all four levels; dedicated passages lined the left side of the house and two rooms arranged one behind the other filled out the rest of the plan [Fig. 3-6].

The side passage plan was quite common. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries both rich and poor citizens resided in various adaptations of the form that suited their particular housing needs. The basic plan can be traced back to J. Moxon's drawings from the first decade of the eighteenth century. In his plan, a long side passage granted access to a front and back room, which were separated by an enclosed stair in the center of the house [Fig. 2]. For the upper classes, dedicated passages allowed for the staging of formal rituals of entrance and separated family rooms from undesirable visitors and the comings and goings of servants. For the "lower sorts" dedicated passages offered greater privacy to residents of houses in which a different family occupied each room.

To both wealthy and poor persons, the dedicated passage offered the same ability to navigate a house without entering its main rooms. To rich individuals like Charles Carroll, whose

elegant villa, Homewood, sat outside Baltimore, such passages represented luxury and refinement and allowed residents to ignore the movements of those they did not wish to see. For the poor, however, who often had smaller and fewer rooms, dedicated passages could mean the difference between having some privacy or none at all. In order to maintain larger amounts of private space, many homeowners chose to create doorways to directly link the front and rear rooms. The arrangement of these double parlors facilitated easy sociability, and many fashionable town homes had adjacent rooms that could be united by the opening of large doors to create a continuous entertaining space.

The stylish detailing of Mercer's woodwork, the elegant proportions of his home, and the well-laid flemish bond suggests that he sought to build a polite house. However, his decision to leave each room a separate entity—accessible only from the hall—suggests that he was not overly concerned with sociability or entertaining. Mercer must have valued each room in his house as an elegantly decorated, stand-alone space because he invested in stylish woodwork, but he apparently placed little value on the intimate communication between adjacent rooms. On all four levels of Mercer's house, one may pass from a hall into either room, but not from one room to the other. This arrangement facilitates private and separate use of each room and restricts sociability, suggesting that Mercer likely valued the first criterion over the second. Unless actively overcome by the inhabitants, who made a conscious effort to socialize, the Mercer house would tend to compartmentalize residents and inhibit interaction rather than encourage it [Fig. 7].[3]

This paper will explore the lives of those who inhabited the Mercer house and show how the separated spaces enabled multiple family groups to share the dwelling with ease. We will

[3] See Julienne Hanson, *Decoding Homes and Houses* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Hanson and other architectural historians speak about houses in terms of access—the potential movement and communication between the rooms and passages of a building.

conduct this inquiry in two parts, focusing first on the period from 1803 until Mercer's death in 1809 and secondly on the period from 1809 to 1830 when his widowed second wife Rachel, his daughter Elizabeth, and numerous tenants occupied the house.

The Home of Hugh Mercer 1803-1809

The land at the southern corner Harmony and Second Streets passed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries largely undeveloped, containing only stables and outbuildings. In 1796, William Armstrong purchased a lot fronting 94 feet on Harmony and 77 feet on Second Street from Israel Israel of Philadelphia, and in 1801, he began to break up the land for sale. Hugh Mercer bought his corner parcel (measuring 20 feet on Harmony and 60 feet on Second) from Armstrong in December 1802 for $230.[4] Corner lots were desirable because they were naturally set apart from the rest of the block and because they allowed residents to have more windows on the house. In an article about early nineteenth-century Wilmington, Delaware, Bernard Herman notes that "affluent residents often occupied corner lots while the less prominent inhabited midblock."[5] Residents of the town of New Castle might not have initially identified the blacksmith Mercer as "affluent", but his choice of a corner lot demonstrates a desire on his part to fashion such an identity.

Armstrong apparently speculated on the lots neighboring Mercer's, building a less refined set of town houses at 122 and 124 Harmony Street. In 1804 he sold the conjoined dwellings for $100 each to cordwainer / hatter Thomas Turner (#122) and butcher William Nagle (#124).[6] Based on their professions Mercer and his new neighbors would have been near equals socially.

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[4] Recorder of Deeds, New Castle County, Wilmington, Delaware, W-2-19 (1796), Israel to Armstrong. Jeannette Eckman, "Harmony and Second Streets North of Read's Alley: #126" Harmony Street," Study, 1930.

[5] Bernard Herman, "Multiple Materials, Multiple Meanings: The Fortunes of Thomas Mendenhall," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (Spring 1984), 73.

[6] Jeannette Eckman, "Harmony and Second Streets North of Read's Alley: #124 Harmony Street," Study, 1930.

However, Mercer's place on the corner lot and his significantly larger windows would have set him apart from his neighbors.

No documentation survives for the building of 126 Harmony Street, but we can infer that it must have been built during 1803. The December 1802 deed between Armstrong and Mercer contains no mention of a house, and Mercer's dwelling is clearly rendered in its present form on the 1804 Benjamin Henry Latrobe survey. The map also shows a small frame building (approximately 14 feet square) at the back of the lot fronting Second Street, which served as Mercer's blacksmith shop [Fig. 8].[7]

Little record remains of Mercer's financial state, but we can glean information from probate records. In the late 1790s, John Vining, Hugh Mercer's father-in-law passed away and left $238.83 ½ to his daughter Elizabeth Vining Mercer.[8] Vining's estate took many years to settle, and Elizabeth died before receiving her inheritance. However, ongoing estate records for John Vining from 1803 promise the $238.83 ½ to Hugh Mercer "in right of his late wife, Elizabeth."[9] Regardless of when the Mercers actually received this money, they probably knew of the bequest shortly after John Vining's death in the 1790s. Perhaps they had the inheritance in mind in 1802 when Hugh purchased the land for their new house for $230.

Buying the land was only the beginning of the costs; he still had a house to build. In the 1816 tax assessment Mercer's land and house were valued at $625. In order to have been solvent enough to build a two-and-a-half-story brick house, he must have operated a fairly successful blacksmithing shop.[10] When Mercer died in 1809, his executor George Peirce transcribed the

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[7] New Castle Country Orphan's Court Records, I-1-667 (1810)

[8] It is of interest to note that Mercer's first wife was a Vining. There is a break in the deed after Mercer's until the 1860s when the house was owned by a John B. Vining. With this family connection in the late eighteenth century, it is likely that the house just stayed in the extended family until the 1860s.

[9] New Castle County Probate Records, Probate of John Vining.

[10] Mercer seems to have cleared any debt from his house by the time he died. None of the disbursements paid by his estate appear to have been related to the house, suggesting that it was free and clear when Mercer died.

debts owed to the blacksmith from his account books. The list of nearly 250 customers included the exact amount that each person or business owed and totaled more than $3400.

From the appearance of many familiar names on his books, it is clear that a large percentage of Mercer's work came from local clients. Of the fourteen individuals who owed Mercer more than $50 almost all were town residents. Although he certainly created architectural work in iron, as evidenced by account entries for the Nicholas van Dyke mansion and the New Castle Academy, Mercer most likely prospered as a result of the town's place in the Atlantic shipping industry. "New Castle's primary function in the web of commerce was not buying and selling goods but servicing ships. As the last safe harbor before putting out to sea and the northernmost port on the Delaware River to stay relatively free of ice in the winter, New Castle was a refuge."[11] When ships stopped in the New Castle harbor Mercer would have been have been close to the action. His house fronted bustling Harmony Street where residents and visitors alike trekked up from the public pier at the end of the block toward the public green that began just past Mercer's house. As foot traffic rounded Second Street and walked along the gable end of Mercer's house toward the market square, they would have soon encountered his blacksmithing shop. If Mercer knew how to market himself, he could have capitalized on his location to offer services to ships in need of repair. Indeed, his account books list work for several clients with the title "Cap'n."

We may never know exactly how Mercer financed his house, but the extant building is a testament to his taste and aspirations. The house completely fills the twenty-foot width of its lot and extends 26 feet from front to back. Originally the Mercers could have accessed their cellar kitchen not only from the staircase inside, but also from an excavated "area' in front of the house

[11] Constance Cooper, "A Town Among Cities: New Castle, 1780-1840," Cooper, Constance J, ed., *350 Years of New Castle, Delaware: Chapters in a Town's History* (New Castle: New Castle Historical Society, 2001): 76.

and beneath the front door [Fig. 9]. Such areas, as they were called, were common in English houses but made fewer appearances in American buildings. The Mercer's area has been mostly filled in, but the original standard height door is still in the basement complete with iron hinges that Mercer himself may have wrought [Fig. 10].

The front basement room had a large cooking hearth and a built-in dresser and shelving, some of which is extant [Figs. 11 & 12]. A single bake oven was accessible from both the front and rear basement rooms. Although the original partitions have been removed, markings on the floor and ceiling demonstrate that the basement was once divided into two rooms. The clearest evidence is in the ceiling where the white wash that once covered the front room abruptly stops. Unmistakable vertical plaster lines along both sides of the central chimney stack also give witness to former walls.

Guests entering the main floor of Mercer's home meet a long, broad entry hall nearly six feet wide, twenty-four feet long that is graciously lit by both the transom window above the front door and the window on the landing of the staircase at the opposite end of the hall [Fig. 4 & 13]. Two doors into each of the main rooms once stood on the right side of the hall, but only the second door remains today. The front room is brightly lit due to the three, nine-over-nine windows on the front and side wall. It has no chair rail, but the mantelpiece is the most elegant in the house [Fig. 14]. In addition to the fine mantel, the sides of the fireplace are fully paneled.

The back room, which now serves as a dining room, has a less refined mantel, but its chair rail wraps elegantly around the window sill [Fig. 15]. The fireplace is also flanked with built-in cabinets [Fig. 16]. The one to the right of the mantel retains its original beaded shelves (which actually match those in the basement seen in Fig. 11). However, the cupboard to the left is completely new fabric. A previous occupant punched a doorway through into the front parlor

and removed the original cabinet. Also missing from this room is the window that once occupied the rear wall. It has been replaced by a doorway into the modern kitchen, but the original window fabric now sits in the modern kitchen wing in the wall facing Second Street.

The second floor front room, which runs across the entire three-bay width of the house, is arguably the best room in the dwelling. Although its mantel is not quite as fine as the one in the first floor parlor, the sheer size and lightness of the second-floor room renders it superior. Although the room has been reconfigured to make space for a modern bathroom, clues in the floor boards and wall reveal the original layout [Fig. 5]. The fireplace retains an iron arm on which to hang a kettle, and built-in cupboards flank the hearth [Fig. 17]. This room also has a crown molding along the fireplace wall, which the downstairs front parlor does not. The rear chamber on the second floor has the simplest woodwork in the house—a very low mantel that only protrudes about two inches from the wall. The third floor garret space retains no original woodwork, and the original partitions have been removed. At one point however, the garret was divided into two rooms, the rear one heated, the front one not.

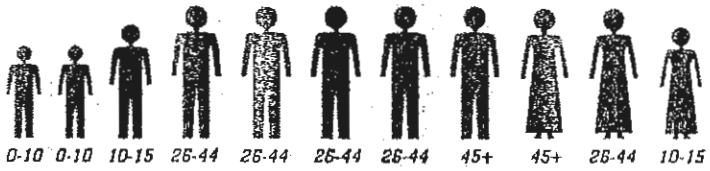
As we have seen in this brief survey, Mercer requested excellent woodwork for the main rooms of his house. In fact, Mercer's woodwork matched pieces in one of the finest homes in town. Curiously, there are striking similarities between the woodwork in 126 Harmony Street and that of the Nicholas van Dyke house at 400 Delaware street (built in 1799, only four years before). The two homes have nearly identical details in their staircases: in the panel construction below the stair, in the profile of the newels, and in the moldings and pilasters along the walls [Fig. 18-21]. The attached figures show a Historic American Buildings Survey drawing from the 1930s that details the staircase of the van Dyke house. Compare the profile of the newel in the illustration to that of the Mercer newel in Fig. 19; they are completely identical. The

unmistakable shape of the Mercer chair molding, which sweeps up the wall and connects a series of tapered pilasters, also matches the illustration from the van Dyke House. The similarities between the woodwork of these two staircases suggest that the same craftsman might have worked in both houses. Furthermore, the relationship between the details also affirms Mercer's aspirations to polite society. The home of a blacksmith, whose property value in 1816 was $625, spoke some of the same architectural language as the home of a senator, whose total property value in 1816 was nearly $40,000 (this amount included properties other than his house at 400 Delaware Street, see note).[12]

As we have seen, Mercer created a house full of refined individual spaces but restricted flow between them. Why did he choose the plan that he did? How did his household occupy these spaces? To begin to answer these questions we turn to the 1800 census of the town of New Castle. In 1800, Hugh Mercer and his wife Elizabeth were living in the town, but they had yet to build their new home. There are no deed records for Mercer having ever bought or sold another house in New Castle, so he and his household were probably tenants at the time of the census. Mercer's household consisted of eleven people: seven adults and four children [see illustration below].

[12] Karen Ackerman, *Tax Assessments of New Castle County, Delaware 1816-1817* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Family Line Publications, 1986). "VANDYKE, Nicholas... H/P. 483 ac., the Belview farm (283 impr. w/l lg. brk. Dwel., wd. Barn, stables & outhouses; 200wdd.) 145 ac., the Hermitage farm (132 impr. w/1 brk. & wd. Dwl.; 13 unimpr.) 260 ac. In ten of H. Morton (170 impr. w/fra. Dwel., barn & stables; 60 unimpr.) 1 brk. Dwel in New. C., stables & lot on Delaware St. 1 brk dwel., stables & lot in tn. Of J. Rogers. 1 brk. tavern house, lot @ stables in ten. of Wm. Waugh. 1 fem. Slave aged 27 yrs. To serve 6 yrs.-Julia; 1 male slave aged 18 yrs. To serve 5 years.-John; 1 do. Aged 10 yers. To serve 11 yrs.-Stephen. Lvstk. 173 oz. plt."

Hugh Mercer's Household, 1800



Using the diagram above, we can start to establish the identities of the various persons in Mercer's house. Presumably Hugh Mercer and his wife Elizabeth were the male and female over 45 years of age, and the four adult males aged 26-44 were most likely journeyman. As a skilled blacksmith in the bustling port town of New Castle, Mercer would have needed employees. Traditionally, master artisans provided lodging for journeymen and apprentices (who probably account for the two boys aged 0-10 and the 10-15 male). The 26-44 year-old female could have been the wife of one of the journeymen or a housekeeper or cook. Finally, the 10-15 year old female could have been hired help or the child of one of the journeymen.[13]

Regardless of how many of these residents moved into the new house at 126 Harmony Street in 1804, Mercer would have certainly had this type of household makeup in mind as he planned his house. Balancing his desire to create a refined home with his very real need to house a motley assemblage of unrelated persons, Mercer chose to build a house with dedicated passages and separate, but individually well-appointed, chambers.

The house's individual chambers allowed for many permutations of room assignments, but Mercer left no clues about how he divided the use of space in his home. Bernard Herman suggests that middle and working class households that blended work and living functions often

[13] Although some of the children could have belonged to the Mercers no other evidence corroborates the existence of Mercer children who fit the profiles of any of the individuals in the 1800 census. Other than the young daughter Elizabeth, no children are mentioned in the settling of Hugh Mercer's estate in 1809. Likewise, earlier and later census records provide no clear links to other Mercer children. The one known Mercer child, Elizabeth could not have been the 10-15 year old mentioned in the census because Orphan's Court records reveal that Elizabeth Mercer was a minor until at least 1812. The 10-15 year old female in the 1800 census would have been at least 22 by 1812.

struggled to maintain private living space. He cites James Bickerton, a ship joiner from Philadelphia's Southwark neighborhood, whose family kept a tavern and boarding house that threatened to take over the entire house:

> With its tavern and boarding house functions packed into the first and second story front rooms and the garret and spilling over into the kitchen, the Bickertons' town house left little room for the householder's personal use. Only the second floor back room with its collapsed functions of dining room, sitting room, and chamber remained their exclusive domain.[14]

Perhaps Mercer faced similar problems in his household of eleven people. However, as owner of the house and the master blacksmith, Mercer had authority over the members of his household on at least two accounts. He could have used the architecture to reinforce, modify, or even erode the distinctions between him and the other occupants. Maybe he kept the majority of the house for him and wife and forced the remaining nine people to sleep in the two rooms in the garret. Or perhaps he reserved the best room at the front of the second floor for his family and assigned the second floor back room as well as the garret spaces to his workers. The first floor spaces also present questions; as individually accessible rooms they could have been occupied as sleeping chambers if necessary. Even if they retained the typical public functions of sitting rooms and dining rooms the Mercers still must have decided who had the right to use each space at a given time.

Although such blended households might seem distasteful to the modern reader, early nineteenth-century Americans would have considered such practices normal, especially within the world of artisans. The residents of New Castle, like many of their fellow citizens often

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[14] Bernard Herman, "The Traveler's Portmanteau," in *Town House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Ohmohundron Institute of Early American History and Culture, est. 2005), 282.

blended home life with work. Many gentlemen had offices in the fronts of their homes in which they conducted business, and the middling classes often ran shops or taverns directly out of parts of their homes. Historian Elizabeth Blackmar traces changing perceptions of boarding and working in nineteenth-century New York City. She suggests that early in the century, the mingling of classes in households like Mercer's was considered to be a typical part of male youth culture and training. However, by the 1830s, reformers' attitudes about home as an important social place—a marker of character and a place that was increasingly separated from the world of business and work—caused Americans to assume a more critical stance on boarding.[15]

Death Records Shed Light: Hugh Mercer's Probate Inventory

The Hugh Mercer we have seen thus far strove to establish a polite identity through the creation of a stylish, well-built brick townhouse. When we take a look at the inventory of his house after his death in 1809, we begin to see a very different picture. Mercer's house was elegant, but he apparently put so much of his money into the architecture that he had little left for his furnishings. The overall value of the estate, $263.67, was low for someone living in a house of the caliber of Mercer's, especially given that more than $80 of that encompassed items from outside the house (cow, saddle, carriage, gun, shop tools, raw iron and steel). One might argue that if he had hoped to furnish his house with items as refined as his architecture he should have spent less money up front. His actions however, are understandable placed in the context of turn-of-the-century New Castle.

After 1789, the economic depression that had followed the revolution began to lift. "Wars between France and England from 1793 to 1807 disrupted normal trade and shipping patterns, providing a golden opportunity for the American economy. In New Castle, vigor, growth, and

[15] Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989): 121, 137.

optimism replaced gloom and poverty. The population grew from 823 in 1800 to 1021 in 1810, an increase of 24 percent."[16] Thus Mercer built his house during a period of high expectations when the residents of New Castle believed in an ever-more-prosperous future. Unfortunately, Mercer speculated on a future that was not to come. However, he was not alone in failing to fulfill his aspirations after building his house. Regarding a similar disparity between the caliber of a Wilmington, Delaware house and its contents, Herman notes:

> Whereas houses are built in times of prosperity and are financed in the anticipation of continued and increasing prosperity, therefore reflecting the owner's anticipations, aspirations, and desires, household artifacts are acquired, consumed, and discarded day to day, thus revealing—insofar as they can be scaled in value and place in time—the temporal fate of anticipations, aspirations and desires.[17]

Herman references Wilmington merchant Thomas Mendenhall, whose once successful business faltered after a political misstep. What foiled Mercer's aspirations? Perhaps his business did not prosper as much as he hoped it would after 1804, or maybe he was content to present a refined façade to the outside world and live with his older furnishings inside. Mercer's death in 1809 might have also cut short a trajectory of savings and investment that would have allowed for improved furnishings in the future.

Mercer's inventory lacks a number of items that one would expect in a polite household. According to the inventory he had no silver, china or pewter, and the home had a general dearth of seating furniture. Refined households usually had chairs in matched sets of six or twelve. Mercer's inventory lists groups of two, three and five that seem to have been mainly in the

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[16] Cooper, 75.
[17] Herman, "Multiple Materials, Multiple Meanings," 81.

upstairs chambers. The one set of five could not have been very fashionable; together the chairs and "two old tables" were worth only $1.50. The single carpet in the house was "rag" and worth $1.00. Several "lots of crockery" probably referred to ceramics used for storage and baking, and the only other items on which food could have been served included tin and wooden ware. Although there was a tea table, valued at $2.40 and 6 teaspoons listed for $2.50, there was no mention of a teapot or cups.

Despite several notable absences, the inventory also includes a number of items that would have been used for show. There are at least four mentions of window curtains, suggesting that the Mercers decorated the windows of their most prominent rooms. Additionally, there are four entries for "pictures" (some with glass) and two for looking glasses. One entry for "looking glass & pictures" is valued at $13.00, suggesting that one or more of these items might have been quite worthy of display. Perhaps the Mercer's used these decorative items in the stair hall and best room to create an appearance of refinement. Because access to all other chambers could have been limited by merely shutting a door, the family could have maintained a pretense of respectability by keeping old and mismatched furniture out of sight.

The house also had adequate bedding, which is fitting for a house that consistently sheltered more than ten people. The inventory listed a total of six bedsteads and a cradle; together they comprised just below 30% of the total value of the estate [Fig. 22].[18] If Mercer's widow Rachel retained the use of all of these items, (there is no reason to believe otherwise) she would have been well prepared to run a boarding house. Although Rachel Mercer's circumstances as a widow in 1809 left her without personal property of her own, both the house and its contents were well poised to help her make a living. With six bedsteads and an equal

[18] In an analysis of seven household inventories from Philadelphia's Southward and Northern Liberties districts from the first half of the nineteenth century, I found that on average the households had 30% of their total inventoried wealth (discounting stocks, bonds, mortgages, etc.) in bedsteads and bedding.

number of individually accessible, heated chambers, Mercer could have offered her tenants prime accommodations.

Neither Hers nor Theirs: The Widow Rachel Mercer and her Tenants

By the time of Hugh Mercer died 1809 the population of the house ceased to resemble that of the 1800 census. Figure 23 illustrates the changes in household makeup, showing that the eleven members of the 1800 household have been replaced by Mercer's second wife (now widow) Rachel Mercer and the minor orphan child Elizabeth Mercer. Presumably any journeymen and apprentices who had lived in the house sought new employment after Hugh's death. A female cook or servant might have remained, but the widow might also have assumed these duties herself.

Hugh Mercer left no will to provide for his widow and child, so the case found its way to the New Castle County orphans court in 1810 where town residents Samuel Barr, James Riddle and James McCallmont assessed the Mercer's petition on behalf of Delaware Supreme Court chief justice Kensey Johns. The men deemed the property in "good repair" with the exception of the "Porch and Outside facings of the Front door...which for the benefit of the property... [they believed] ought to be repaired," and after "mature deliberation", they concluded that the "aforesaid Buildings and Lot [were] of the Annual value of Eighty Dollars."[19] Such annual income (mostly liked to be collected by taking in boarders) was to support the orphan child Elizabeth. The court also granted the widow her "undivided third" of the property "as valued during her natural life"[20] and left the guardian Samuel Love in charge of the other two thirds.

[19] New Castle County Orphan's Court Records, I-1-667 (1810).
[20] Ibid.

Despite being granted a small yearly income from the property, the widow Rachel Mercer was expected to pay rent for the right to live in the house.

Both for the maintenance of the child and of her own needs, Rachel Mercer had little choice but to take in boarders. Similar plights faced many widowed women in federal America. Women occasionally took over their husbands' businesses, ran a shop, or took on other employment, but "operating a boarding house remained one of the more lucrative enterprises open to single women, especially widows carving out a measure of economic independence."[21] Herman's research demonstrates that women ran the majority of boarding houses in most of America's cities around 1800. "In Boston in 1800 slightly over half the boarding houses listed in the city directory were run by women. In the Southwark District of late eighteenth-century Philadelphia women oversaw the handful of boarding houses; in Charleston women ran two thirds of the city's listed boarding houses in 1803."[22] Although not explicitly stated here, Herman argues that many of the women running such houses were indeed widows. Thus Rachel Mercer took up a common practice when she began to let rooms.

Mercer and her boarders had a peculiar bond; none of them owned the space in which they lived. Herman argues that both long and short term renters in the Atlantic world immediately began to shape their identities within their temporary dwellings. "In their ephemeral accommodations they faced the challenge of somehow defining architectural space as their own."[23] Mercer and her tenants alike "held no stake in their rented accommodations, but in a society where outward show counted for much, the need to craft and furnish a personal domain, no matter how fleeting, was instrumental to the expression and presentation of self in foreign

[21] Herman, "The Traveler's Portmanteau," 278.
[22] Ibid, 279.
[23] Ibid, 266.

circumstance."[24] Mercer and her tenants both faced "foreign circumstances" as they formed a diverse new household. One would expect new tenants to experience such dislocation, but the widow Mercer faced her own unsettling circumstances.

Beginning in 1809, Mercer was *on* her own in a space that was literally not hers *to* own. Living in a house built by her late husband and his first wife and sheltering a young Mercer daughter who may or may not have been her own, Rachel Mercer must have felt dislocated.[25] While she welcomed boarders into the house, who undoubtedly began to construct their own identities within their rented space, Rachel dealt with her own tenuous place in the house. Together these various individuals formed an ephemeral household in an architectural space of which none of them had full ownership.

Like her husband before her, Rachel Mercer faced the challenge of establishing patterns of use within the given architecture space. As Herman notes in his work on boarding houses, "the key element in the organization of the building lay in how the proprietors claimed their own space."[26] Room arrangements had multiple ramifications for the widow and her tenants. Retaining the best room(s) for her and her daughter would have established a hierarchy with the widow at the top. Conversely, allowing the best rooms to go to boarders would have placed the widow in a position of subservience. Mercer must have considered finances as well; certainly the best second floor front room would have commanded a higher price than a room in the garret or the cellar.

The exact makeup of Mercer's household is difficult to assess, but her husband's probate records and town tax assessments provide useful clues. One of the most helpful records is the list

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[24] Ibid, 264.

[25] Elizabeth Mercer could have been the biological child of either the first or second wife. The elder Elizabeth Mercer could have died in childbirth in 1803, but the child just as well could have been born Rachel Mercer sometime between 1804 and 1809.

[26] Herman, "The Traveler's Portmanteau," 269.

of payments to the late Hugh Mercer's estate, which names individuals paying rent from 1809 to 1815 (when the estate was finally settled). The list below shows the names of all individuals listed as paying rent in a given year as well as the total amount they paid during that time.

1809	Rachel Mercer	$50.00
1810	Rachel Mercer	$50.00
1811	Samuel Love	$57.34
1812	Rachel Mercer	$30.00
	Samuel Love	$45.00
1813	Rachel Mercer	$60.00
	Preston Moore	$5.00
	Thomas McIntire	$15.00
1814	Rachel Mercer	$28.11
	Thomas McIntire	$15.00
	Charles Yard	$20.00
1815	Charles Yard	$55.00
	[estate settled, no more rent records]	

As we can see in the above list, Mercer maintained a fairly active household with several long term boarders. The list should not be taken as entirely complete however, since Mercer herself is not listed as paying any rent in 1811. However, these records demonstrate that a number of Mercer's boarders were long term. Samuel Love, the guardian of the minor Elizabeth Mercer lived in the house for at least two years, as did Thomas McIntire and Charles Yard. With the exception of the entry for Preston Moore, a free African American who rented the back room of the cellar, the lists do not tell us how the widow divided the space in the house.[27] For a visual representation of the various boarders in Mercer's house, please see Fig. 24.

Several renters in the house may have stayed well beyond the two years recorded in Mercer's estate records. For instance, Thomas McIntire appears to have been in the house until

[27] Moore was a long term New Castle resident. The 1816 tax assessment listed him in tenure of a house in town belonging to Samuel Barn. Moore's life also illuminates racial tensions In New Castle. The Delaware Governor's Register recorded the following incident in 1818. "May 30—The Governor on the 27th day of this Month (May) remitted, to James Welsh, James Lackey and Joseph Jaquitt, who were convicted, on the 25th day of this month before the Court of Quarter Sessions in New Castle county, of an assault and battery on Preston Moore with intent to kidnap, that part of the sentence and judgment of the Court, which directed that the same James Welsh, James Lackey and Joseph Jacquitt should severally stand in the pillory of New Castle County for the space of half an hour." Source: Delaware Governor's Register 1674-1851, Vol. I, John Clark, Esquire, Governor 1817-1820, p. 154

the mid 1820s. Although the estate records stop at 1815, the 1816-1817 tax assessment places McIntire and a man named Silas Parvin in the house at 126 Harmony Street. "MERCER, Hugh...Estate. 1 house & lot in New C. in ten. of S. Parvin & Thos. McIntire. / MCINTIRE, Thomas...H/P [his person] 1 cow. / PARVIN, Silas...H/P."[28] Each adult male was taxed $150 as a person tax (hence the abbreviation "H/P" for "his person"). Renters were not taxed for the property in which they lived, although as we can see from the record, McIntire was assessed a tax for his cow.

Both McIntire and Parvin are listed in the 1820 census for the town of New Castle, and since neither of them ever purchased a building in town, they probably still lived in Mercer's house at the time along with their families.[29] According to the census both men were married and had children; McIntire's family consisted of seven people and Parvin's was five. Herman suggests that in London, women running boarding houses gave strong preference to single men over families "to the point of lowering rents."[30] The widow Mercer seems to have preferred the opposite, welcoming both the McIntire and Parvin families into her home. Perhaps in her widowed state, Mercer tried to recreate a family herself and for the young Elizabeth. In effect, Mercer might have reversed the standard roles for renter and landlord. Typically, town houses like Mercer's offered boarders "the possibility of a surrogate family of sorts."[31] In this case, Mercer seems to have invited the surrogate family into her potentially lonely home.

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[28] Ackerman 10-11.

[29] Silas Parvin is listed in New Castle in the 1830 census, suggesting that he may have remained in Mercer's house for another 10 years. Beniah Parvin, born Sep. 5, 1814 was baptized at Immanuel Church on Mar. 2, 1833, and Mary Parvin was buried there in 1836. See *The Vital Records Taken from the Parish Registers of Immanuel Church, New Castle, Delaware*, ed. Christopher Agnew (New Castle: the Rector Wardens and Vestrymen of Immanuel Church, 1986.) The McIntires appear to have left town in the mid 1820s when Thomas inherited land from a relative in Cecil county Maryland.

[30] Herman, "The Traveler's Portmanteau," 278.

[31] Ibid, 270.

If the relationship between Mercer and her tenants were indeed amiable, then perhaps she relinquished her larger rooms to them. The McIntire family certainly had more need for the large room at the front of the second floor than the widow and her lone daughter. One option not open to Mercer was that of splitting her house into flats as some landlords did. Because of the lack of access from one room to another, a family could not inhabit two rooms with complete privacy—they would always have to enter the hall in order to pass to the other room on the floor. Although such access might have been desirable for family like the McIntires, in the long run Mercer's plan offered the most flexibility. Excluding the kitchen and a room for herself, she had six completely separate rooms to rent.

Mercer must also have established rules for the use of the downstairs rooms. Many tenant relationships were determined by contracts outlining when the tenant or landlord was allowed to occupy each of the public spaces. It was not usual for residents to create time shares that allotted each a particular time for entertaining visitors or using the dining room. Herman alludes to such a contractual relationship between Benjamin Franklin and his London landlord who had rights to alternating floors of the house. "Franklin, who possessed no share in the kitchen, apparently contracted for meals with his landlady (a common practice in cities) or dined out."[32]

Whatever Mercer's preferences were, it is clear that she had plenty of options. The sizable, well built and decorated house built by her late husband would have certainly helped her supplement her income. Depending on how she managed her household, she could have crafted a number of different identities. "Owned or rented, town house spaces intrinsically exerted proprietary airs for those who 'possessed' them."[33] If she so desired, Mercer could have maintained sole use of the front door or the best rooms in the house to secure her place as the

[32] Ibid, 269.
[33] Ibid, 264.

"proprietress." However, the plan of the Mercer's town house, with its side passage and individual access to each room, was also inherently democratic. Whoever opened the door into the main hall at a given time could be the owner. By leading a guest directly to a sitting room or parlor during his or her allotted "time" any resident could appear to be the master of the house.

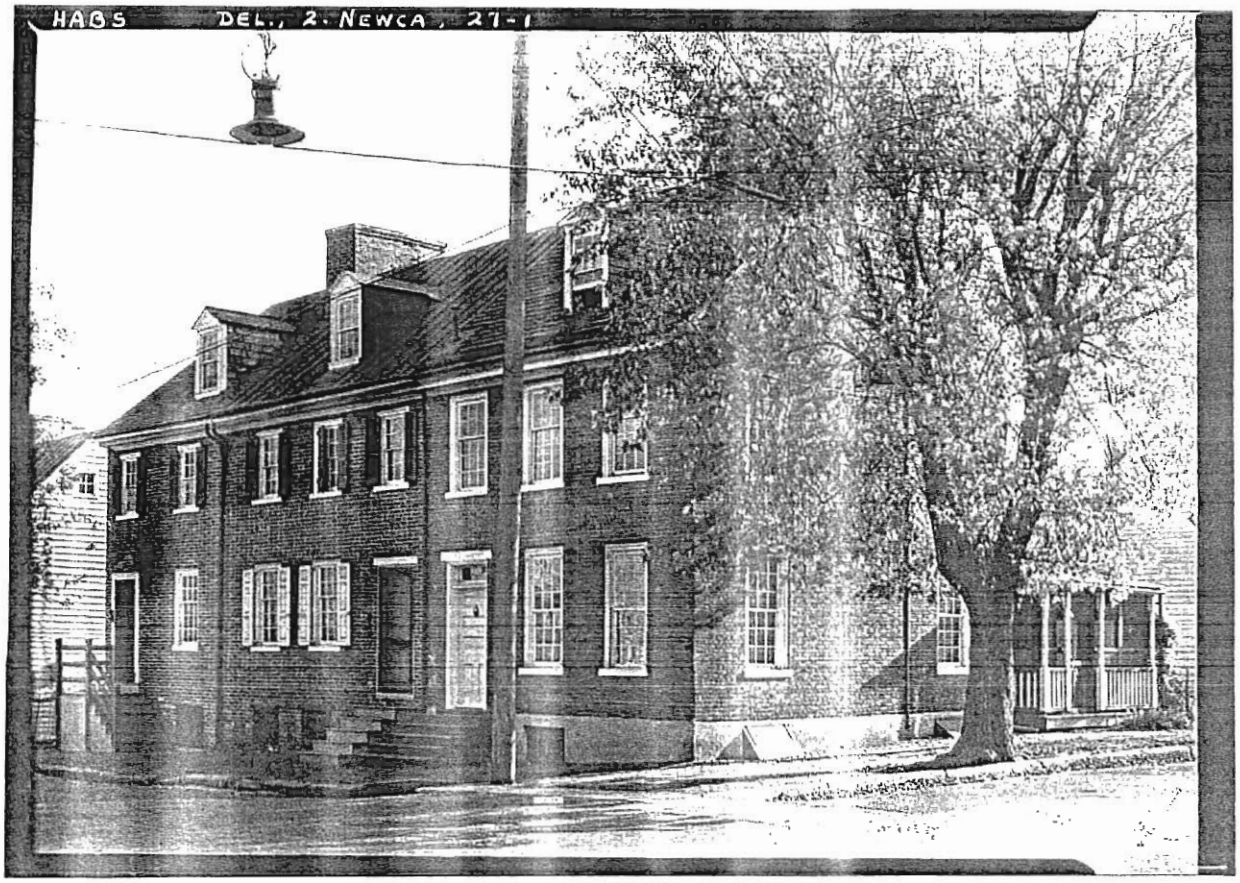


Fig. 1.
"View From North"
126 Harmony Street, New Castle, DE
W. S. Stewart, Photographer Oct. 23, 1936
Historic American Buildings Survey
HABS, DEL, 2-NEWCA, 27-1

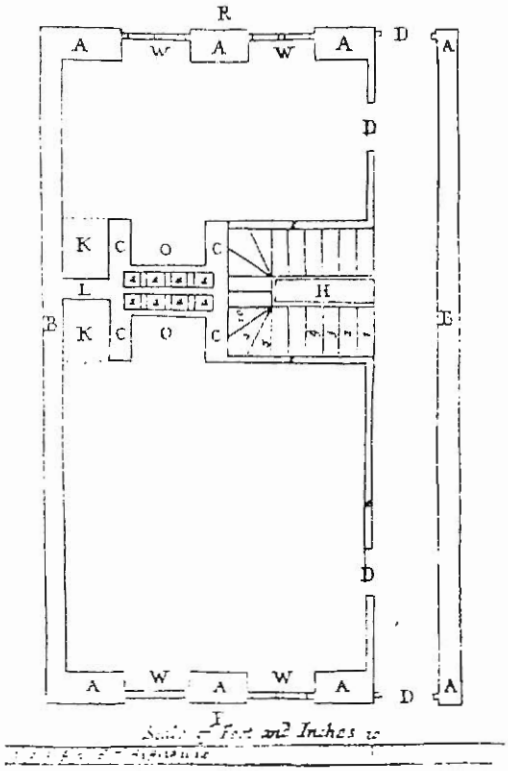


Fig. 2
House plan from James Moxon's Mechanical Exercised or, The Doctrine of Handy-Works Applied to the Art of Bricklayers-Works (London, 1700).

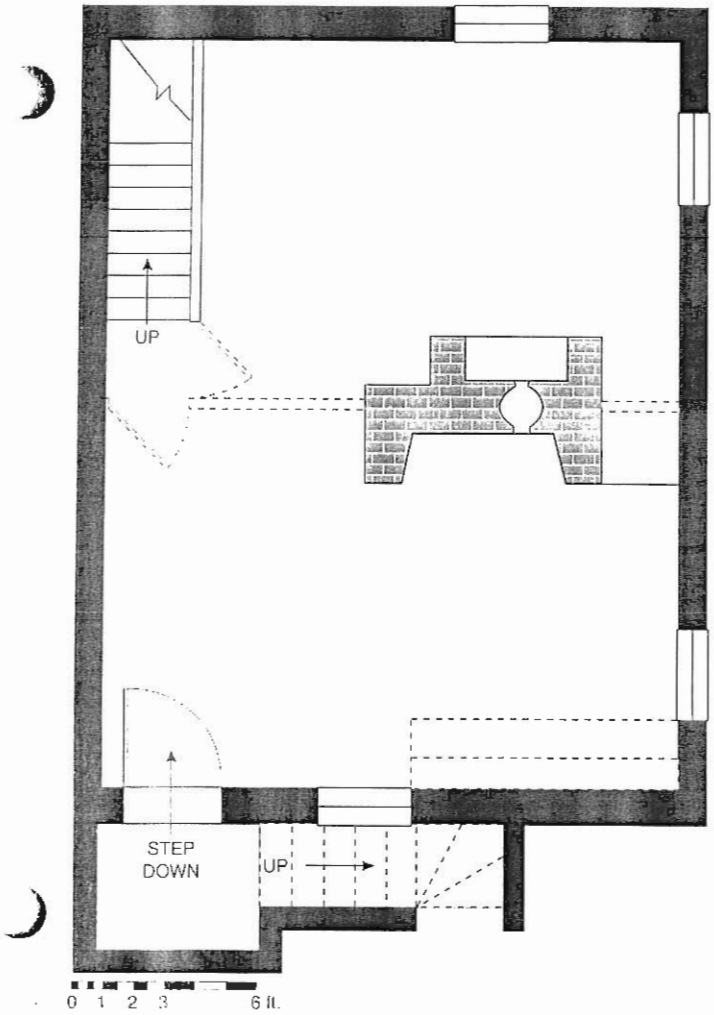


Fig. 3
Basement Floor Plan
126 Harmony Street, New Castle, DE
Illustration by Rachel Delphia

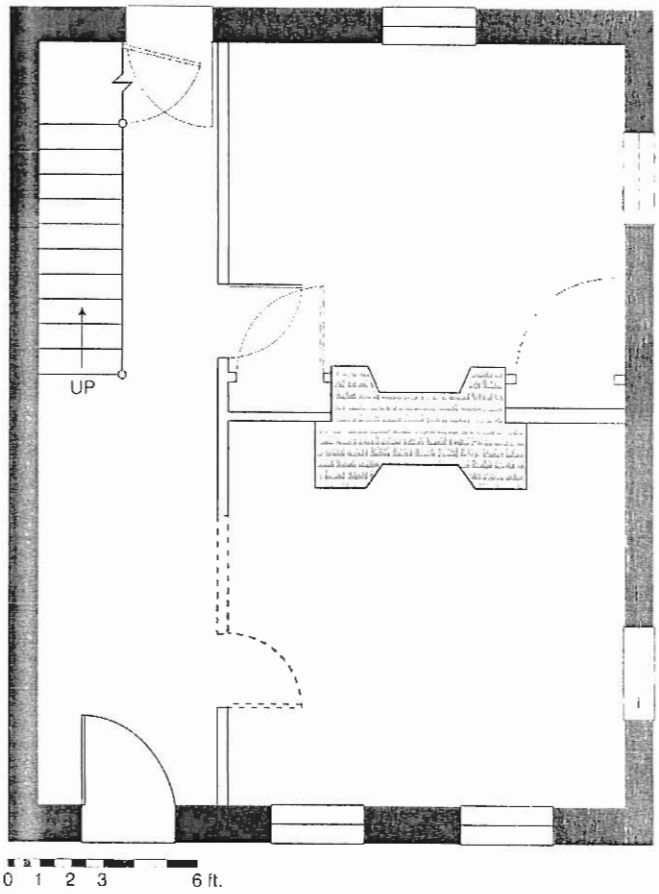


Fig. 4
First Floor Plan
126 Harmony Street, New Castle, DE
Illustration by Rachel Delphia

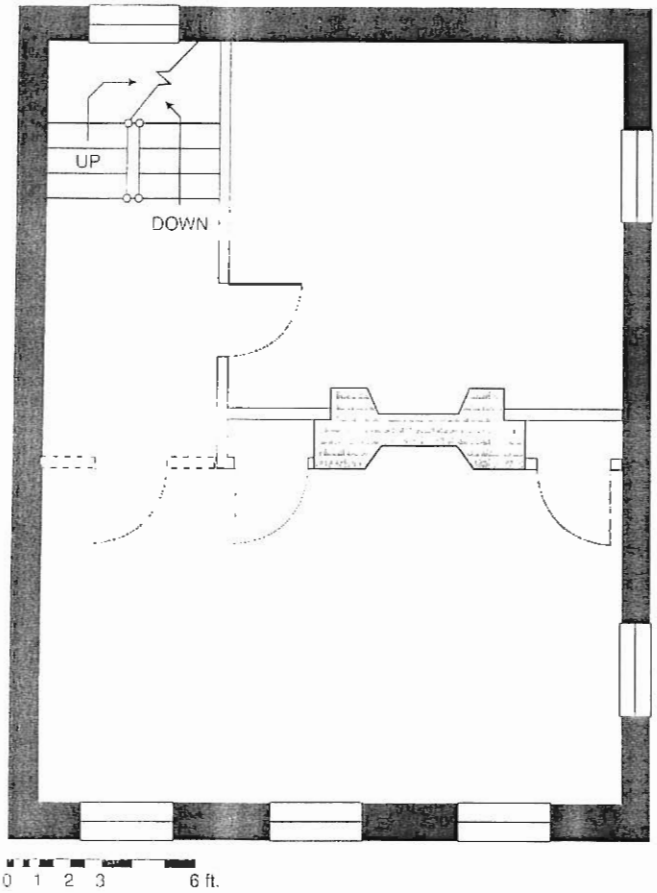


Fig. 5
Second Floor Plan
126 Harmony Street, New Castle, DE
Illustration by Rachel Delphia

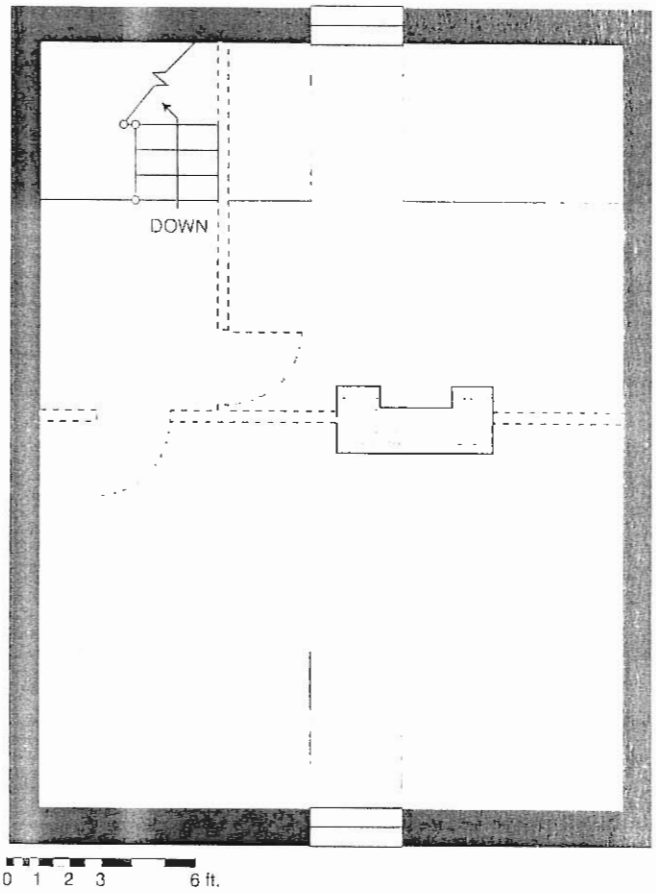


Fig. 6
Garret Floor Plan
126 Harmony Street, New Castle, DE
Illustration by Rachel Delphia

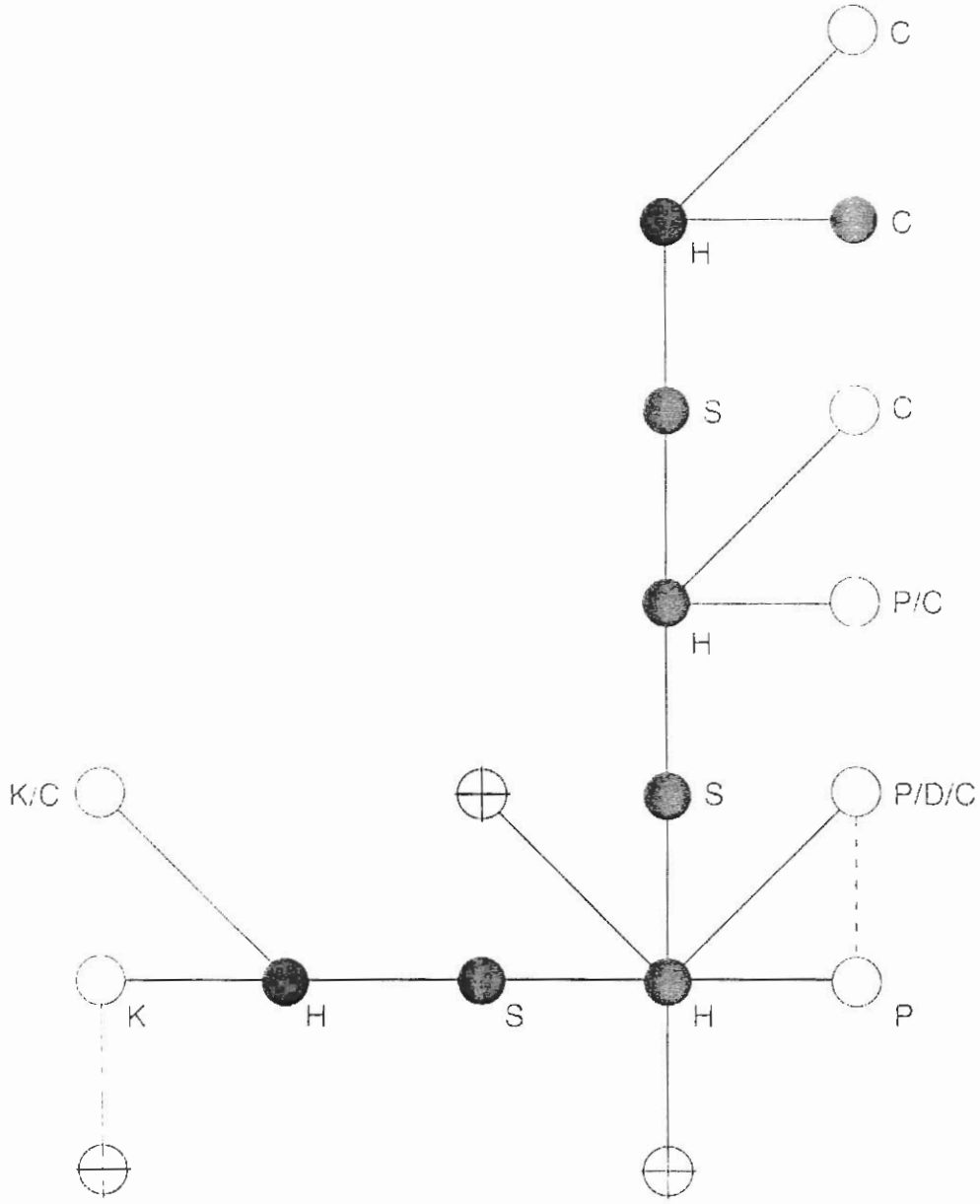


Fig. 7
Access Diagram in the style of Julienne Hanson

This diagram shows the possible ways of moving through the Mercer household. Circles with a cross through them identify and exterior entry/exit. Black circles identify a heated interior space. Open circles identify an unheated interior space. A line between circles means that one can pass from this space to the next. A dotted line means that there was access at one time, but it was not original to the house.
K = Kitchen
H = Hall
S = Stair
P = Parlor
C = Chamber

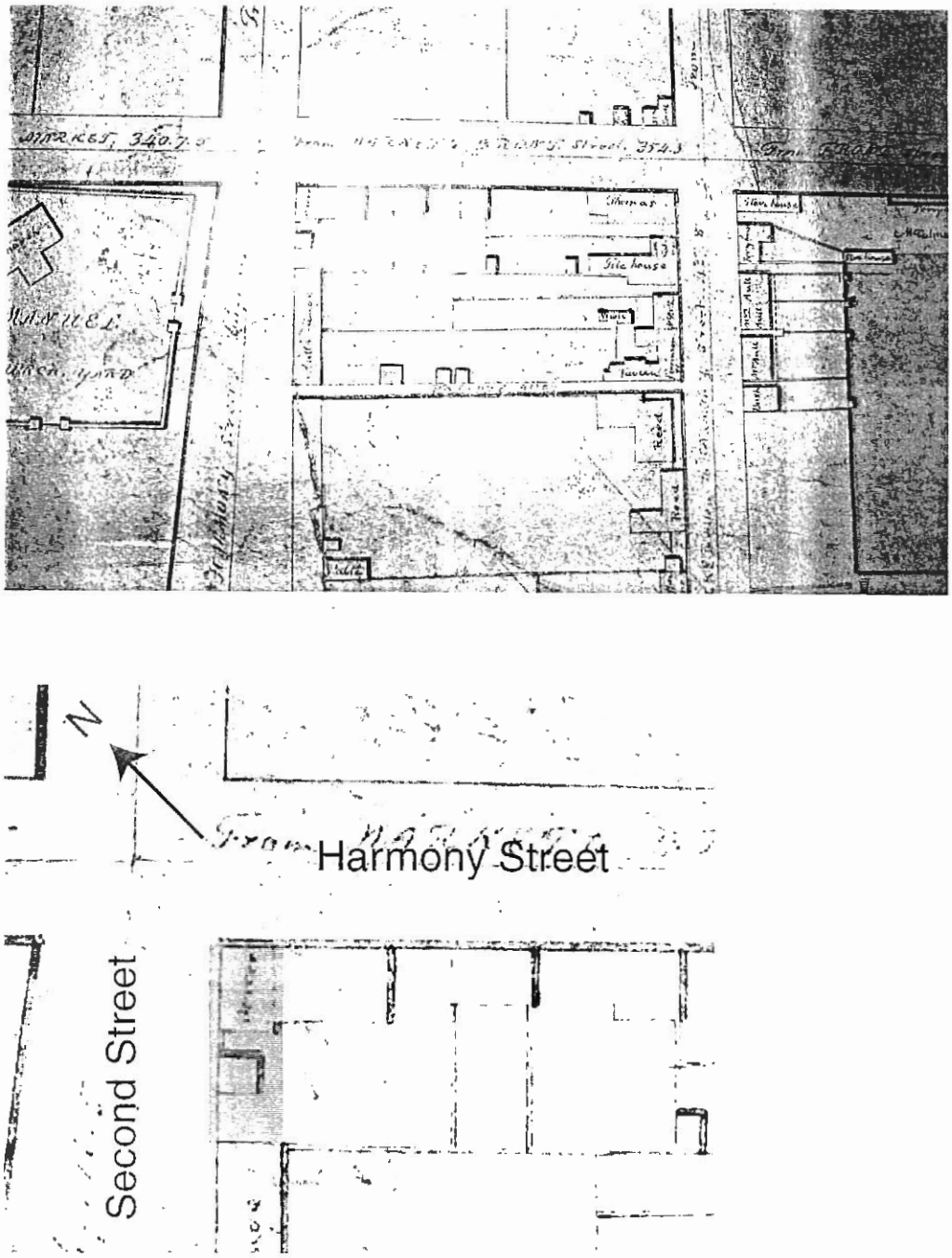


Fig. 8
Survey of the Town of New Castle Delaware, 1804
By Benjamin Henry Latrobe
New Castle Historical Society

The illustration at the top shows Harmony Street running horizontally down to the Delaware River at the far right. The area highlighted in yellow is blown up in the bottom illustration. In the detail illustration Mercer's house and shop are highlighted in pink.

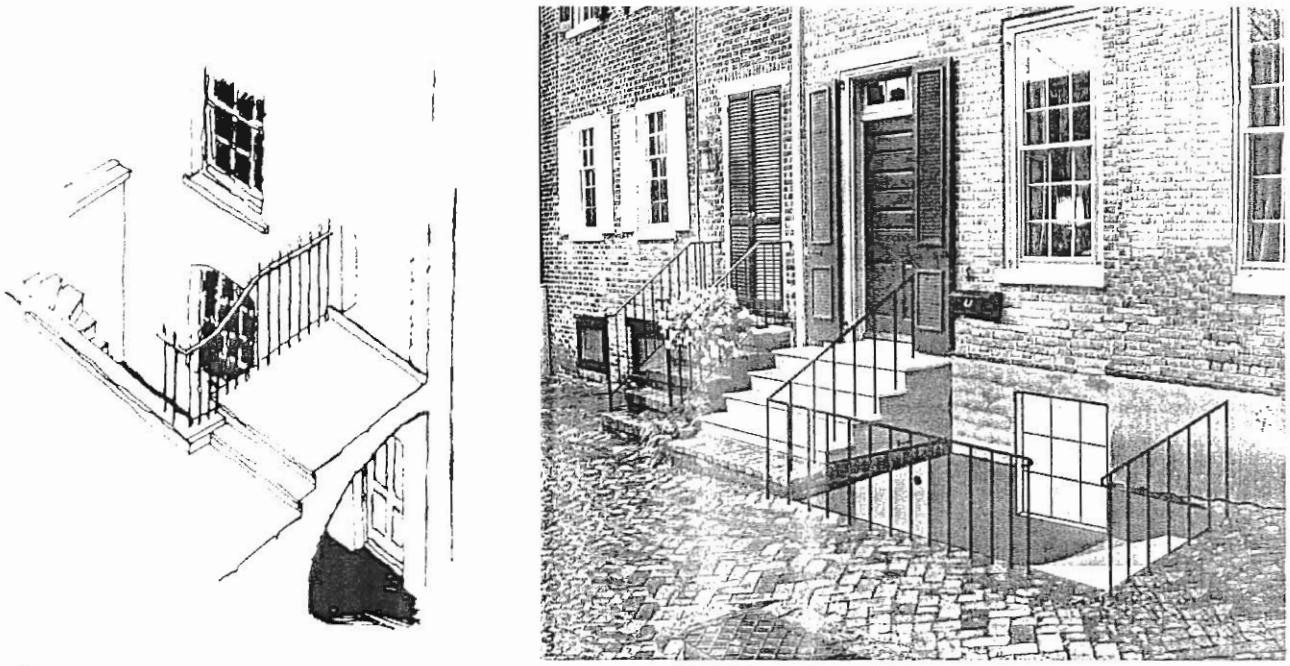


Fig. 9
Left: an "area" in front of a British townhouse c. 1774-1810. Richard Russell Lawrence, p. 20.
Right: author's illustration depicting how the Mercer's "area" might have appeared when it was built.

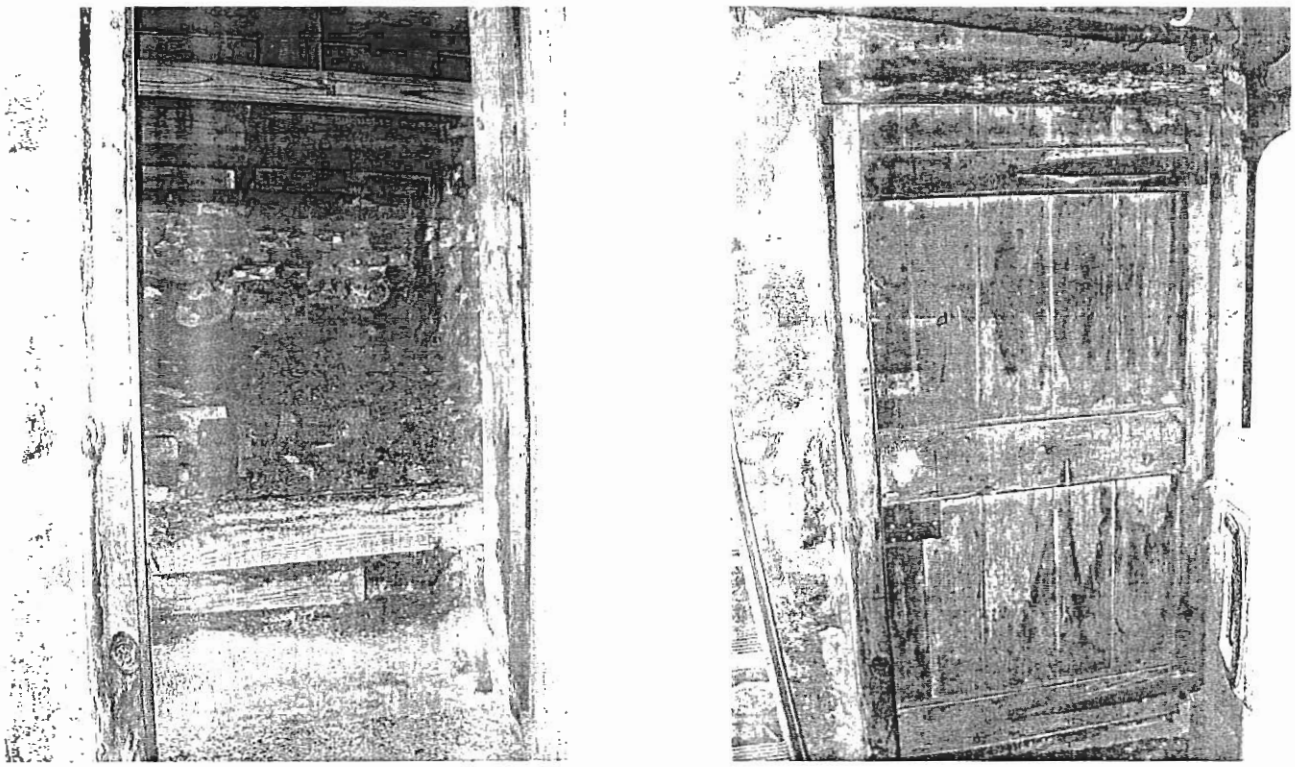


Fig. 10
Left: The remains of the Mercer house's excavated "area" visible from behind the original basement level door. Right: The basement door that once opened into the outdoor area that lead up to the street in front of the house. Note the original iron hinges that may have been made by Mercer himself.

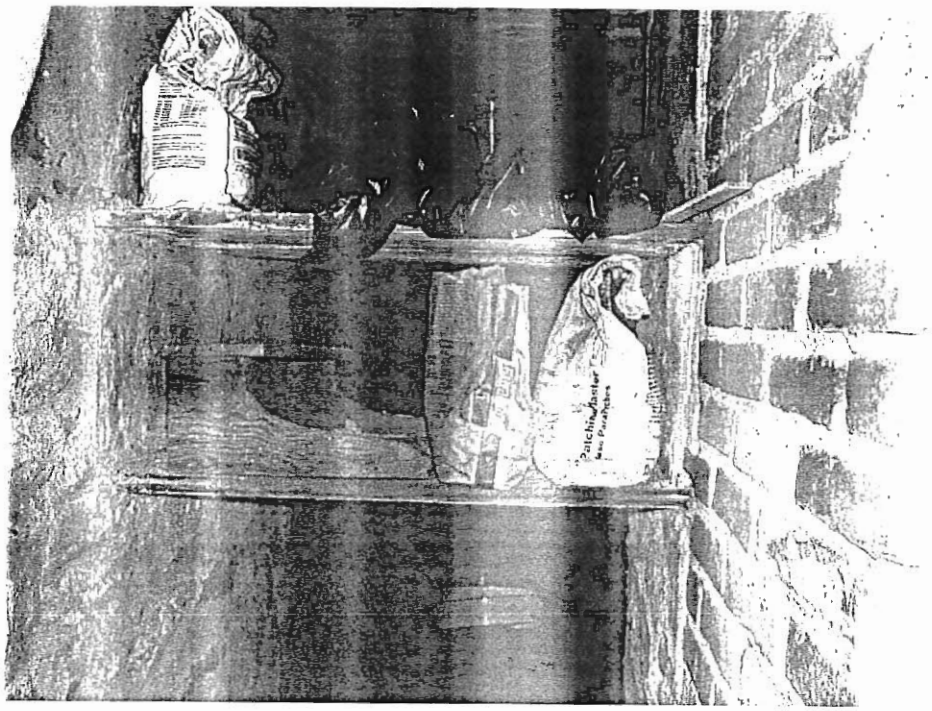


Fig. 11
These original shelves in the basement are wedged into the masonry wall (left) (along Second Street) and into the central chimney stack (right). This view is of the back side of the shelves. A wall/back to the shelves once extended from floor to ceiling in line with the vertical plaster seam seen here just to the right of the shelves.

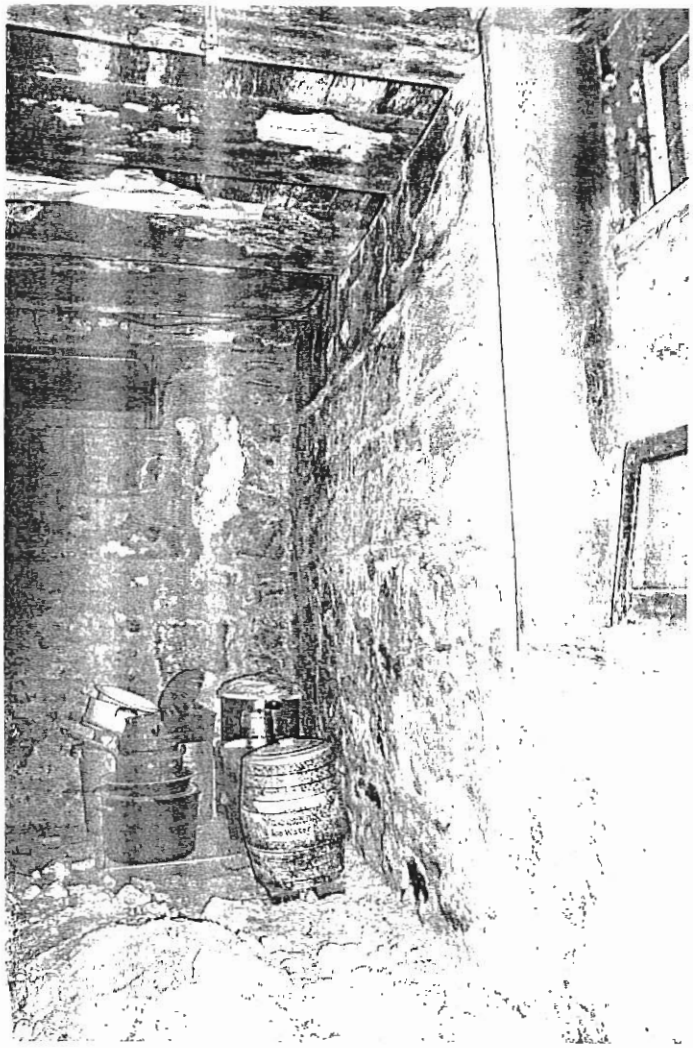


Fig. 12
View of front basement kitchen room. The window in the foreground once faced out onto the steps of the excavated "area" on the front of the house. To the left of the window are ghost marks in the masonry wall where a built-in dresser once stood.

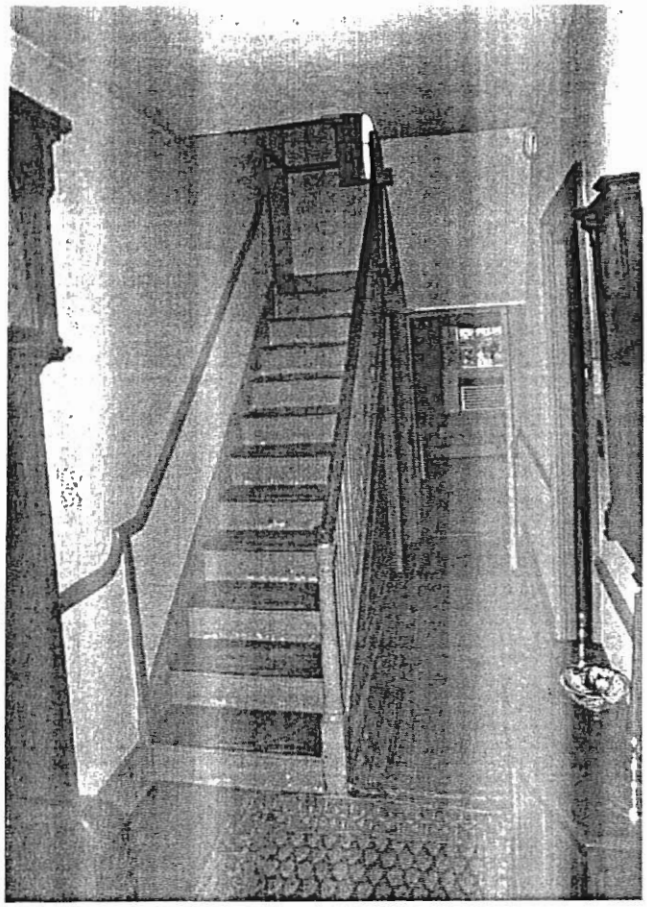


Fig. 13
View of first floor stair hall. Note: the open door at the far end of the hall is the original rear exterior door. It now opens into a modern kitchen addition. An original door below the stair leads to the basement.

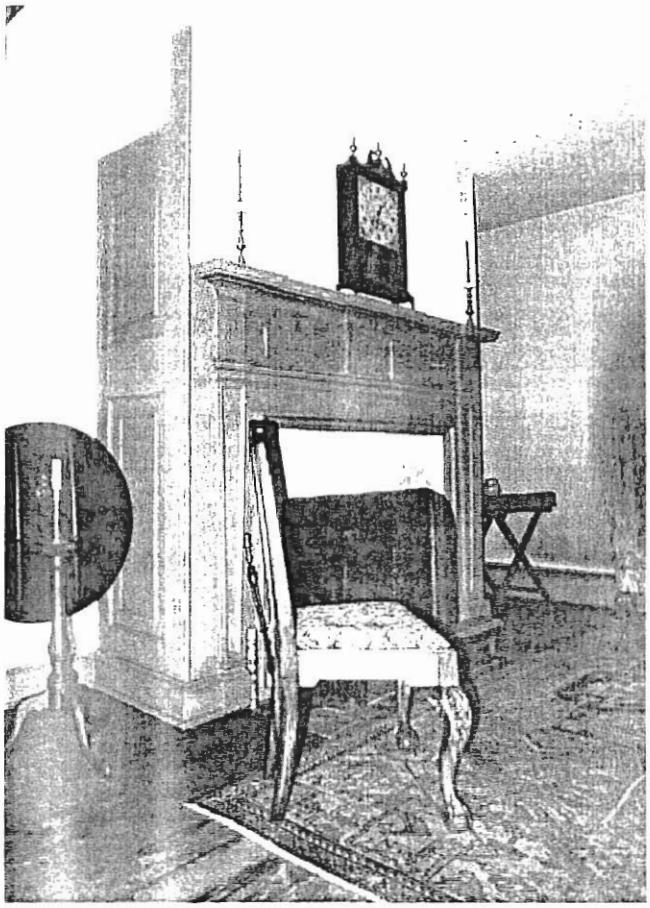


Fig. 14
View of the first floor front room fireplace. Note the coved molding, center tablet and slightly tapered pilasters.

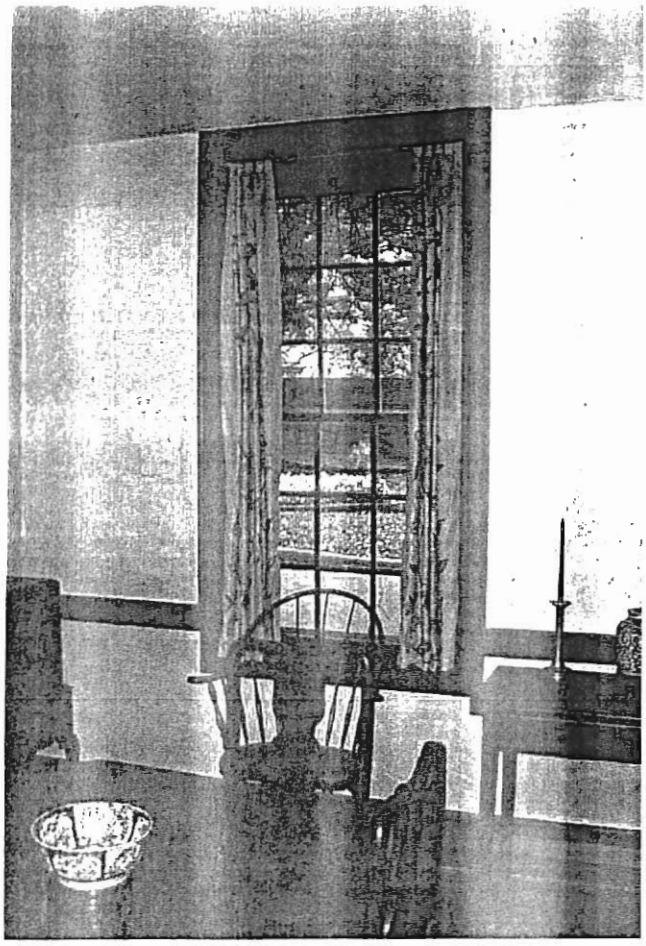


Fig. 15
View of the first floor back room (Dining Room) Note how the chair molding wraps around the bottom of the window sill.

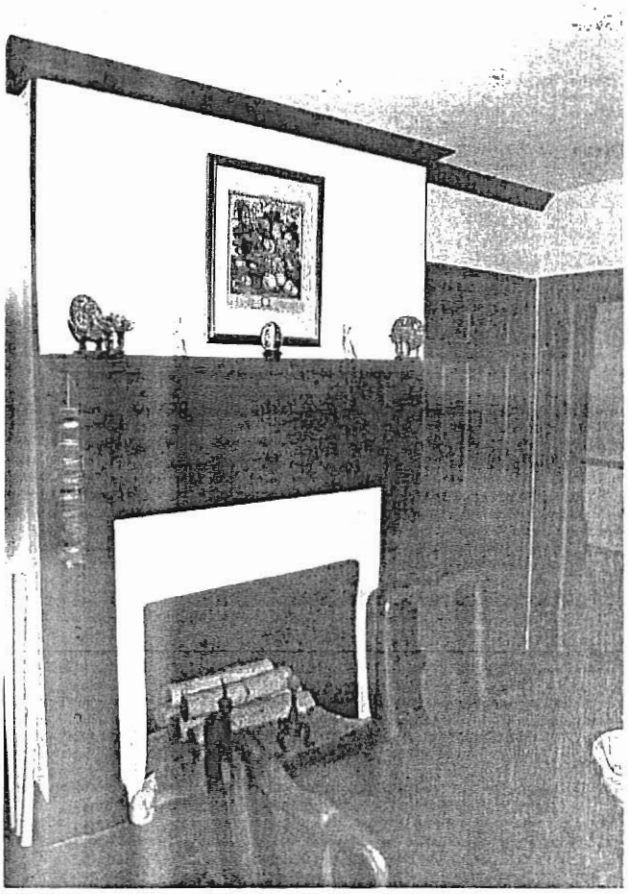


Fig. 16
View of the dining room fireplace. Original built-in cupboard can be seen to the right.

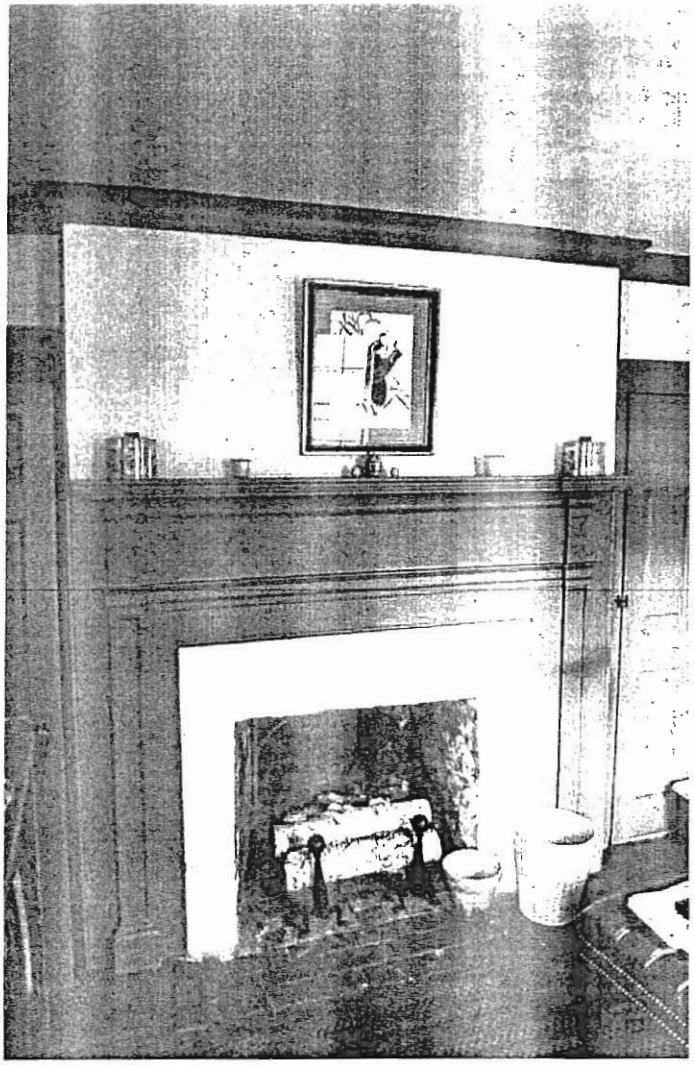


Fig. 17
Second floor front chamber. This room runs the entire width of the house and has three windows along front wall and two along the side. Seen here is the fireplace and surrounding cupboards. The mantle is not as fine as that in the downstairs front room, but this room has a nice crown molding that the downstairs room lacks.

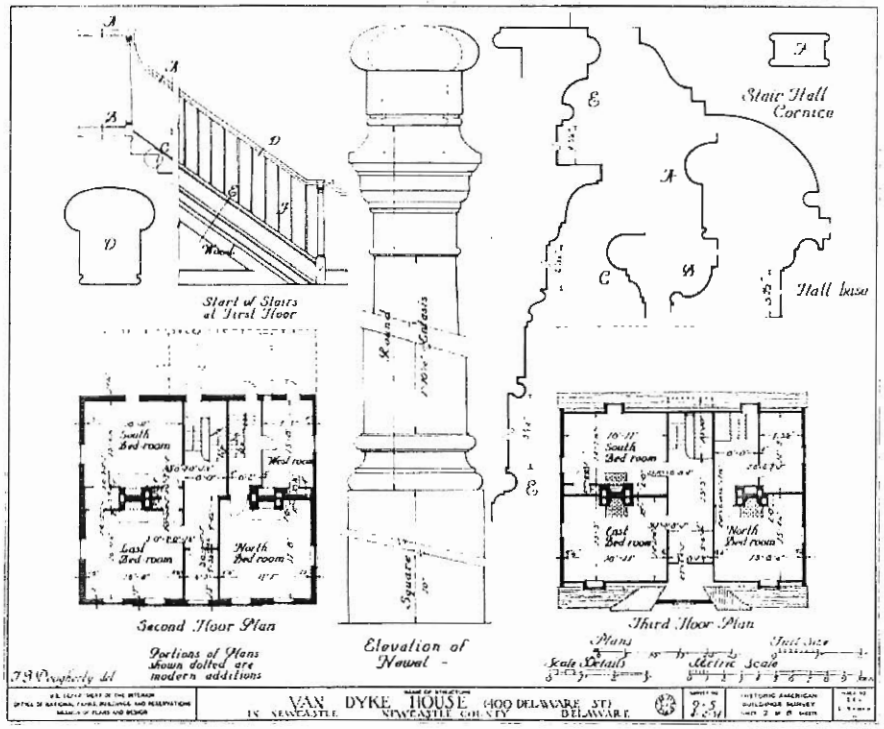
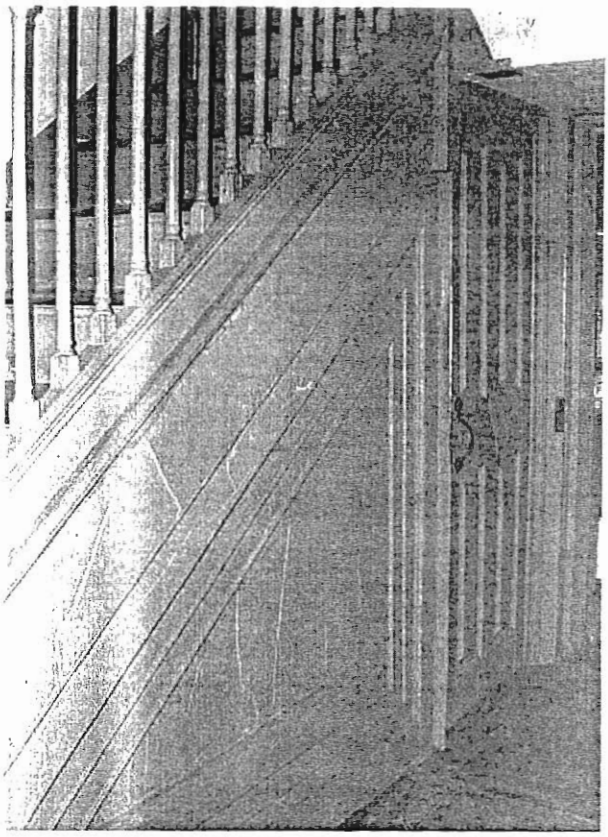


Fig. 18 (left)
HABS illustrations of the staircase in the Nicholas van Dyke Jr. House at 400 Delaware St. in New Castle. HABS, DEL,2-NEWCA,11-1933 HABS DE-9-5

Fig. 19 (below left)
Detail of newel post and chair molding, Mercer house. 126 Harmony Street, New Castle. Note that the newel post and chair molding exactly matches the drawings in Fig. 17.

Fig. 20 (below right)
Detail of triangular paneling below the stair, 126 Harmony Street. Note similarity to drawings in Fig. 17.



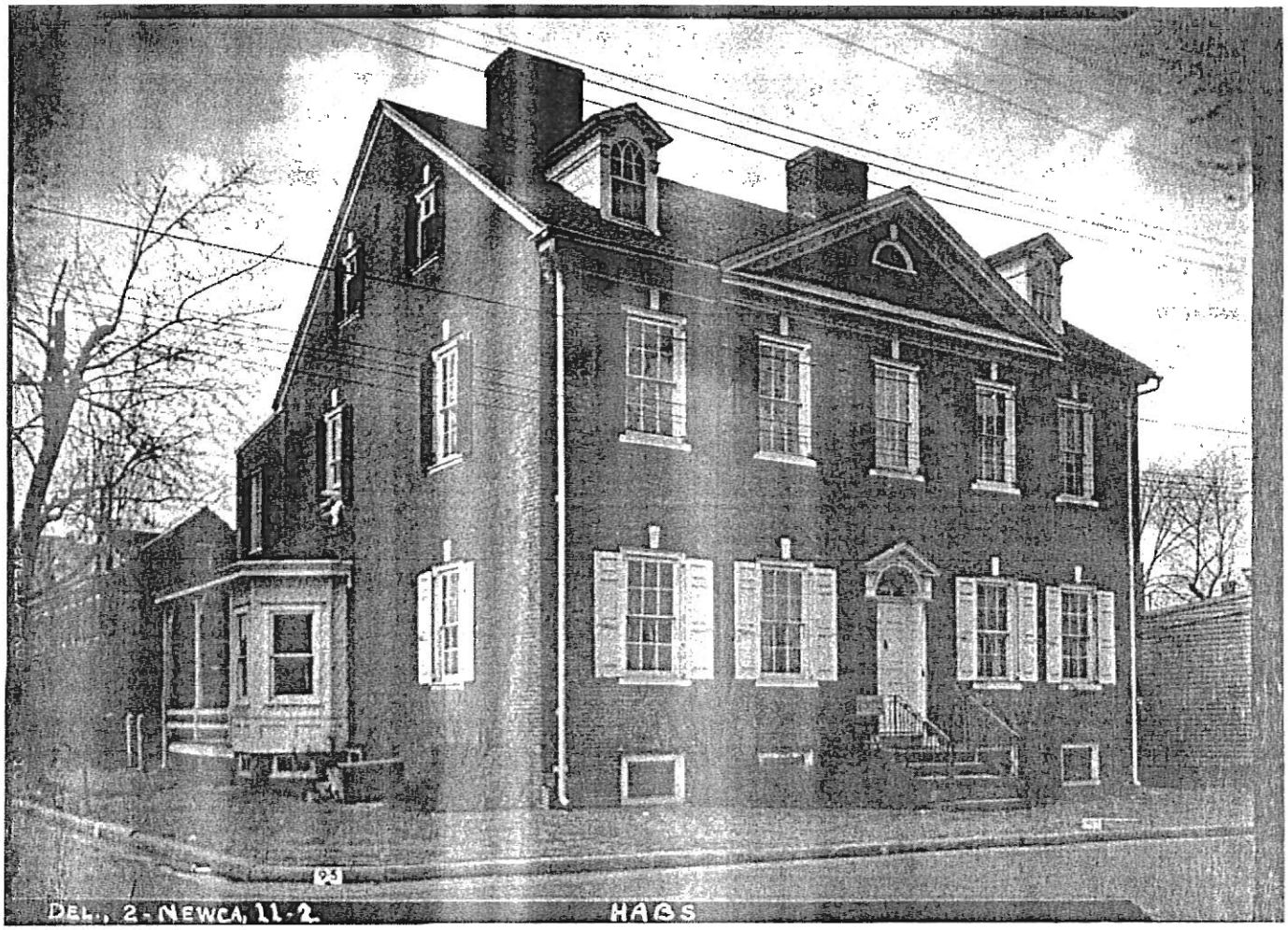


Fig. 21
House of Nicholas van Dyke
Historic American Buildings Survey, 1930s

	Value of Bedsteads, Beds and Bedding	Total Value of Inventory	Percent of Wealth located in Bedding
Agnes Cooker	$15.25	$59.36	25.69%
Margaret Gallaher	$327.75	$1,110.75	29.50%
Jane Howell	$35.75	$100.21	35.60%
Elizabeth Iseminger	$19.50	$49.98	39.01%
Rebecca Mc Donald	$10.00	$28.50	35.08%
Elizabeth Mc Gowen	$23.00	$63.66	36.10%
Sidney Williamson	$36.00	$180.40	19.91%

Fig. 22
Percentage of Overall Wealth in Bedding
Based on the inventories of seven widows in Philadelphia's Southward and Northern Liberties districts, 1825-1850. From Rachel Delphia, "Women and Their Beds: Philadelphia Widows 1825-1850." 2003.
Bedding made up a considerable percentage of the overall wealth of Americans in the early 19th century. The table above shows the percentage of total inventoried wealth (discounting stocks, bonds, mortgages, etc.) tied up in bedsteads and their various accoutrements. Given the wide disparity in overall wealth of the seven widows, the percentage of that wealth held in bedding is surprisingly constant—about thirty percent on average.

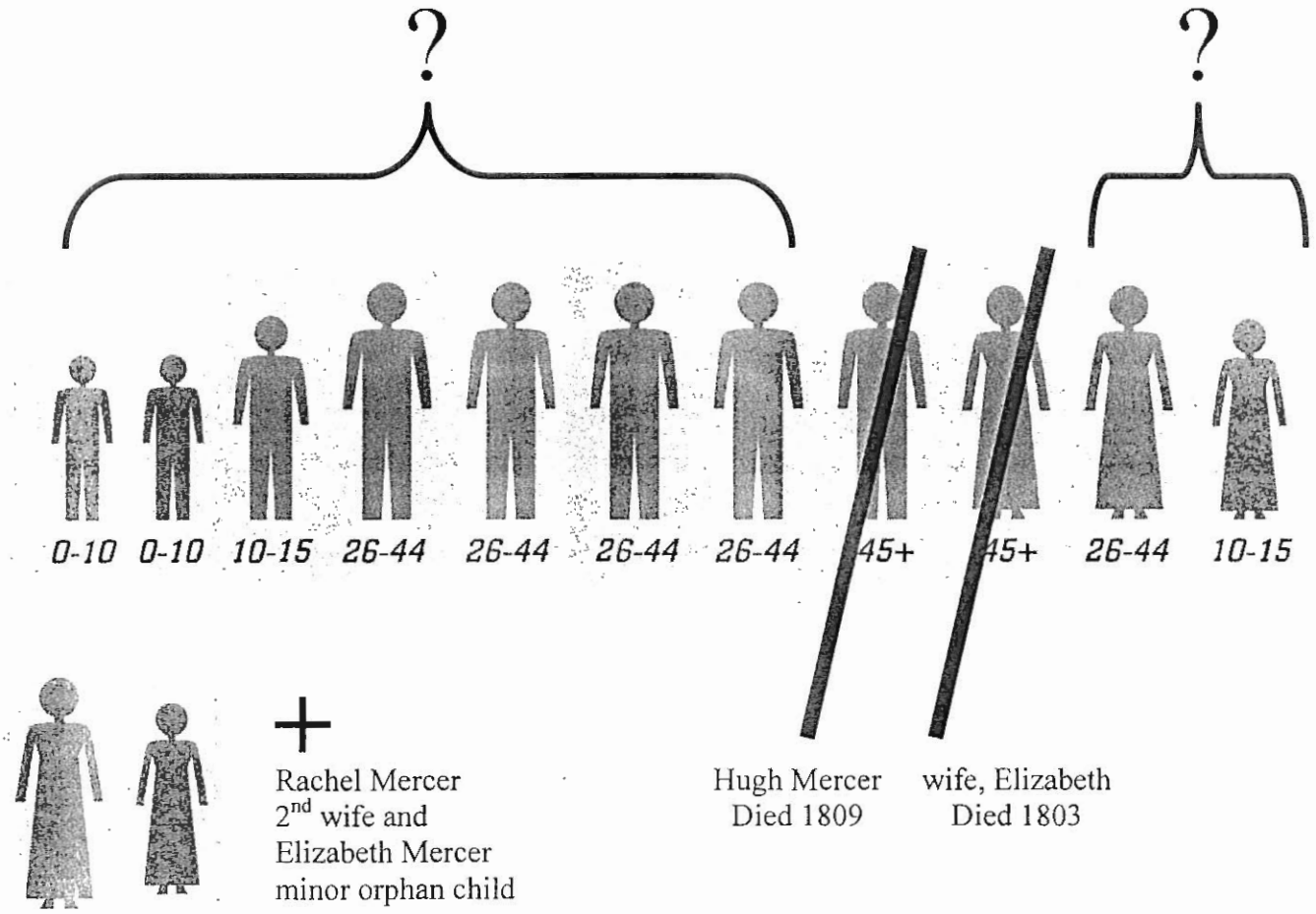


Fig. 23
A Household in Transition 1800-1809
Illustration by Author

The diagram above shows the Mercer household in 1800 and attempts to illustrate the movement of people in and out of that household by 1809.

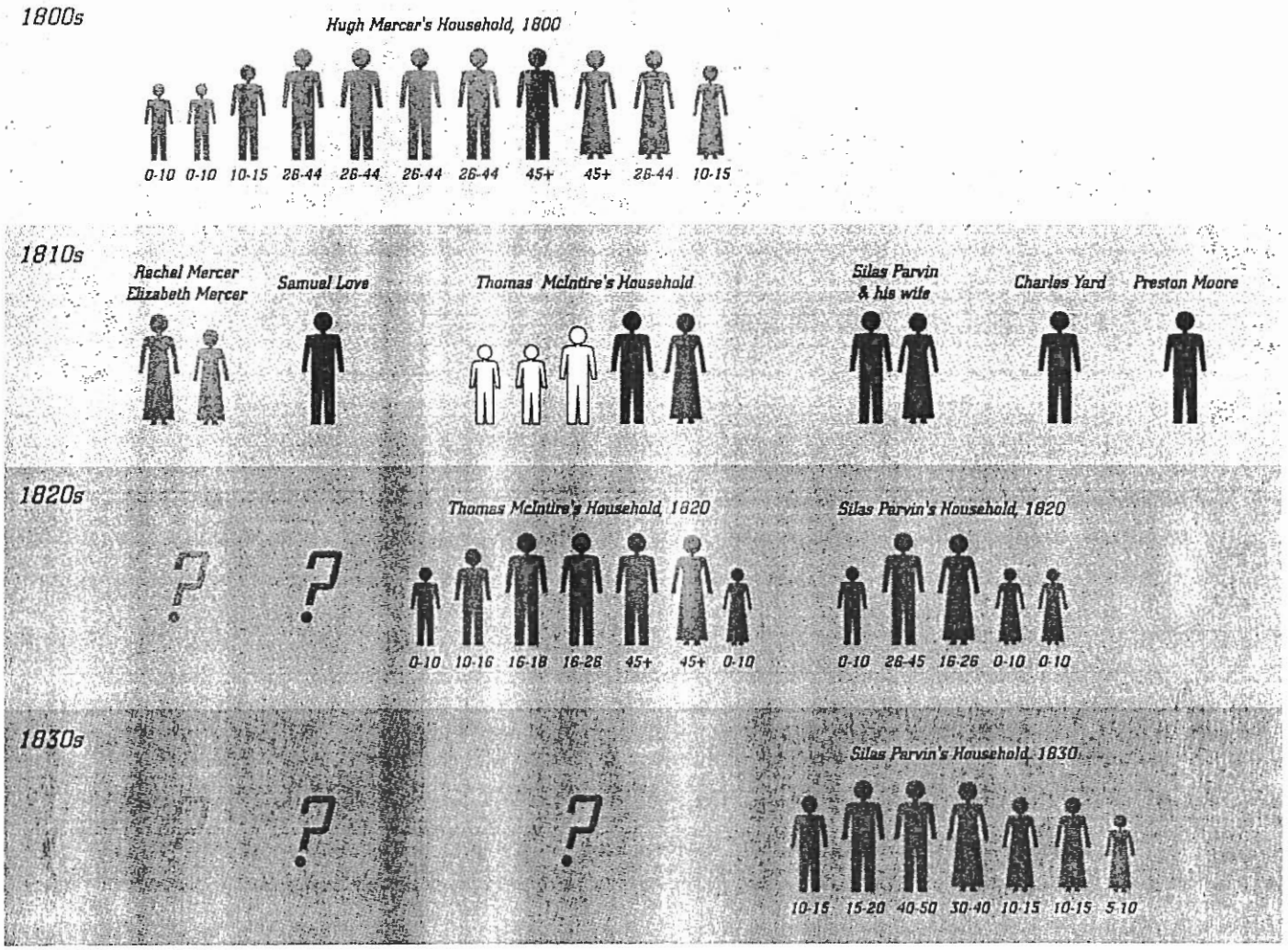


Fig. 24
Population of the Mercer Household, 1804-1830s
Illustration by the author

The diagram above shows the inhabitants of 126 Harmony Street for a period of more than 30 years. Members of the same family are color-coded to show progression through time. Outlined figures are projected backwards in time from later census data. Residence based on census records, rent lists in Mercer's probate records and city tax assessments.

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1810 Census of New Castle County, Delaware.

1820 Census of New Castle County, Delaware.

1830 Census of New Castle County, Delaware.

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W-2-19 (1796)	Israel to Armstrong
F-3-489 (1802)	Armstrong to Mercer
G-4-16 (1827)	Henry Vining to State of Delaware.
I-4-318 (1824)	Thomas McIntire to Andrew McIntire
S-8-310 (1868)	John Vining to Margaret Vining

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