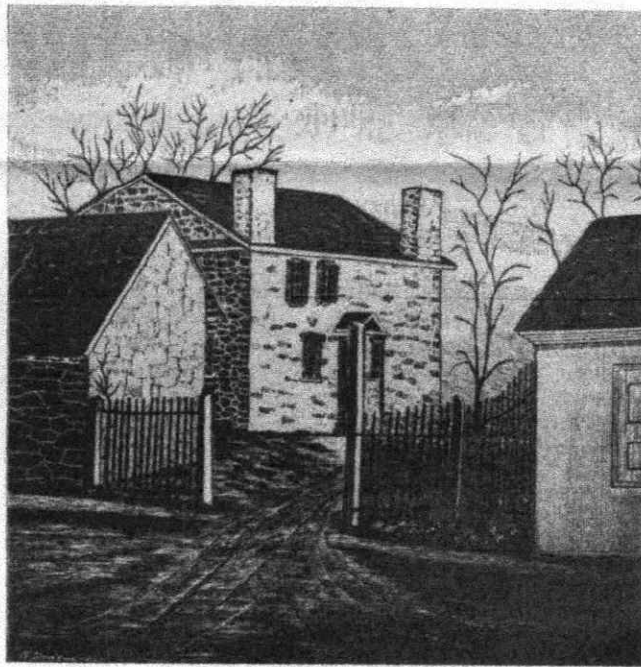


# Evolution of A Concept



Earliest Print of the Uwchlan Meeting House, built in 1756.

By Jane Boggs

Concepts of the highest motives do not just happen. They evolve from a small glimmer and are attained with difficulty. The attitude of the Woman's Community Club of Uwchlan regarding the status of its historic meeting house grew from one of "We bought it; we paid for it; and it's ours," to the wide vista of a landmark "to preserve for and to share with the future."

The story began in 1963 when this half-century-old organization purchased the Uwchlan Meeting House in Lionville, Pa. from the Uwchlan Grange. It was a grand undertaking for so few, and with trepidation they assumed the financial burden. The women went to work with a will, digging, cleaning and removing paint. In the process they fell in love with the fine old building.

The house is made of beautiful gray stone which bears with imperishable dignity the lofty ideals it has always housed. It was built in 1756 on the site of an earlier log house. The women knew

that it had been commandeered as a hospital by Dr. Bodo Otto, George Washington's surgeon general, and that soldiers of the Revolution lay in the adjacent burying grounds. They had heard of the Abolitionist meetings and the underground railway connections. It was again a hospital during the Civil War, and an ancestor of one U.S. President was buried there. It all added lustre and value to THEIR meeting house, and they held it to themselves as they labored to accomplish the needed repairs.

Then came the day when the women had to ask themselves, "How shall we decorate our building?" Visions of homey drapes and pretty lamps danced through their heads. Plans were drawn according to two suggestions: one, to make it as attractive as possible through available means; the other, to restore it as it had been in the past. Ninety women could not be expected to agree, and sides were formed — Decorate vs. Restore. Then came the compromise, and they resolved to investigate further the true meaning of restoration.

In 1971 the club engaged G. Edwin Brumbaugh, known as "the dean of restoration architecture," and through his eyes the ladies began to see the hidden wealth of the old house. The thick oak floors were original, with every other one tapering because of the old-time thrift employed in cutting as far up a tree as possible. The grey patina of the floor came from the polishing feet of two hundred years of worshippers, and all thoughts of wall-to-wall carpeting disappeared forever.

Exploration became discovery. They learned the message of authenticity in the "reed run" in the plaster around the windows. Artifacts came to light, and they learned to date the construction by the type of nails it contained. Old shutters were discovered in the area above the present dropped ceiling and were found to be the same as those shown in the earliest print of the meeting house in "History of Chester County, Pennsylvania" by J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope (p. 237). History was coming alive, and the concept widened.



Richard W. Hurst

**The Uwchlan Meeting House in Lionville, Pa., as it appears today.**

The next step was getting the Uwchlan Meeting House registered. All the right forms were obtained, and the process seemed to require nothing more than a good sharp pencil, until they came to the blank that said "Latitude and longitude of said property."

Many months and much research later, the completed forms were mailed. The master's thesis "Uwchlan Meeting, Library, Schools and Houses" by James Edward Matthews, the son of one of the members, proved an invaluable source of information. In this delving some old legends fell before the truth and others earned recognition, but the concept continued to grow.

The Uwchlan Meeting House was registered in 1972 by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission, and on September 20, 1973 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in Washington, D.C. Just in the niche of time, registered status as a National Historic Site granted a stay of execution for the row of ancient sycamores that stand as sentinels between the building and the

grinding wheels of Route 113 and its proposed widening.

From the research and the visualized plans of the architect, work was begun to replace the west shanty wing, long referred to as "the chicken coop," with a structure more compatible with the dignity and purpose of the house. It was all funded from within the organization despite the spiraling costs. But each succeeding step was steeper, and recent rains dictated the next one, a new roof. To our forebearers the hand-split wooden shingles were an economy, but they aren't anymore.

With the assuming of each new responsibility the concept and the awareness grew more keen. To keep pace with this wider vision, the Uwchlan Conservation Trust Inc. (Lionville, PA 19353) was created to involve a wider segment of interested parties in the funding of this and other conservation projects. The desire to accomplish this restoration as a birthday gift to our nation is very real, and a desire to pass along this sense of living heritage motivates this group.

The current census figure shows a 450 per cent growth from 1960-1970 for the Uwchlan area, making it the fastest growing community in Pennsylvania. This indicates a great influx of people who have never heard the stories from the past in this historically rich area. "We want to make them know of it, but more important, to feel it as we have."

The concept has created acceptance of the objective and motto: "To preserve for and to share with the future," and to this end the ladies of the Uwchlan Meeting House struggle. Realizing now that growth is a continuing dedication, they have only just begun the long, hard climb. They do, however, admit at this moment that "we are a little out of breath and where-with-all."

But the concept keeps on growing, and the Woman's Community Club of Uwchlan continues its work to create a meaningful landmark to honor the past, and to make it live again.