THE ROMANCE OF THE PENNSBURY
MANOR RESTORATION

By FRANK W. MELVIN
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

HOW has Pennsbury Manor House again come into existence? Always remembered by a few, never wholly forgotten, it was from time to time—for over two hundred years—hazily recalled as the “Lost Capital” of Pennsylvania. Recently, requests for a brief report on the Pennsbury Manor restoration have been made by serious minded citizens, and with some hesitancy, it here follows.

Previous to 1882 considerable patriotic agitation arose to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Founding of Philadelphia by William Penn. Inspired by the success of this celebration, and with an awakened consciousness of similar patriotic values, a demand thereafter arose to commemorate, in September, 1887, the 100th anniversary of the establishment in Philadelphia of the Constitution of the United States.

This resurgence of interest in all that Philadelphia had meant to the state and nation, revitalized concern in William Penn and concentrated attention upon his home, just over the Philadelphia border, in Bucks county, and upon the events there planned and executed. Revenants, with but slightly familiar faces, and echoes of voices long stilled, reappeared from Time’s shadows and curiosity as to its historical past became an insistent urge.

Prior to 1889 the general site of the Manor house was known in Bucks county as the “William Penn Farm.” In that year state Senator George Ross, of Bucks county, introduced into the Senate at Harrisburg a bill to authorize the purchase of the farm and to appropriate $27,200.00 for that purpose. After the purchase, the State Board of Agriculture was to be given control and was to farm the land, profits to be paid into the general fund of the Commonwealth. This bill passed the Senate by a vote of 27 to 10, but was defeated in the House by lack of a constitutional
majority, although those favoring numbered 81, and those opposed 78.

This effort, though it failed, appears to have been educational. Certainly it created much public controversy. The bill was denounced in the Legislature as a "steal" and a "job." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said of the bill: "The House sat upon it real hard and crushed the scheme into a shapeless mass." Nevertheless legislators from Philadelphia and Bucks counties gave it support with unanimous loyalty. The public of that generation became aware of the "William Penn Farm."

In 1913, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission was created. As the Commission developed, it formulated plans to establish historical markers throughout the State, and the idea of placing one on the "William Penn Farm" naturally arose. The secretary of the Commission, Dr. Albert Cook Myers, the well-known Penn historian, pursuant to the marker program, successfully approached organizations of the Religious Society of Friends; the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies; the Welcome Society; the Bucks County Historical Society, and individuals. During the intervening years the "William Penn Farm" which, in 1889, had consisted of 136 acres, had changed in acreage as it changed ownership. Moreover, it had undergone development by several sand and gravel companies, and their successor, the Warner Company. Indeed, it would seem warranted to say that, between 1889 and 1927, all plans to acquire the Pennsbury site appear to have been forgotten. Then the marker idea arose, but that seemed inadequate. A definite "concern" was felt by many.

In 1929, largely through the good offices of United States Senator Joseph R. Grundy, a member of both the Bucks County Historical and Welcome Societies, the Warner Company was induced to consider presentation to the Commonwealth of the immediate site of the Manor House, consisting of 9.8 acres. This gracious offer was accepted by the State through enabling acts of the Legislature in 1929 and 1931. By that legislation the Commonwealth obligated itself, "to preserve and maintain the Pennsbury Memorial as an historical place." It was further provided that: "The Pennsylvania Historical Commission shall have full control and adequate supervision thereof, and shall have power to adopt and carry into effect plans for its restoration, improvement and
The act of 1931 appears to have been enacted to insure that, if the State should fail to handle this property as obligated, “the land so acquired shall revert.” Thus the Pennsylvania Historical Commission assumed the responsibility for that which then became known as “The Pennsbury Memorial.” The word “manor” was not used since no one had yet envisioned a manor house on the site.

With a view to ascertaining if traces of the original buildings had survived, the private owner permitted preliminary archeological testing of the area by the archeologist for the Commission, Mr. Donald A. Cadzow. Results proved most promising and on October 23, 1932, Mr. Charles Warner, president of the Warner Company, at a formal public ceremony, presented to the then Chairman of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission the deed of gift to the Commonwealth. Representatives of the Bucks County Historical Society, the Welcome Society, the Religious Society of Friends, etc., were in attendance. The outstanding feature of the occasion was the historical address delivered by Dr. Benjamin Franklin Fackenthal, Jr., president of the Bucks County Historical Society.

Up to that time, no original building restoration had been contemplated. True, the act of the General Assembly had authorized “restoration and improvement.” But the restoration then envisioned was of the Crozier house which covered the site, and of the grounds and gardens. No responsible source had suggested a restoration of the original manor house and other buildings, nor was there sufficient factual knowledge concerning those structures to warrant a proposal of such restoration.

During the three and a half years between the autumn of 1932 and the spring of 1936, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission engaged in two forms of activity: First, Mr. Cadzow, was asked to make complete archeological investigations. Works Progress Administration funds were secured for further exploration of the tract and for building an entrance road more than a mile long. Second, the Commission endeavored to consult the Penn manuscripts and other material available in this country, and to some extent in England, to ascertain what descriptions remained of the original manor buildings.

As the underground exploration progressed the original garden wall was discovered. The foundations of the bake and brew house,
with sections of the ovens and other architectural features, were brought to light. Further digging disclosed a portion of the old foundation of the manor. The Crozier house, erected in 1803, was found to stand on a part of the site and to prevent complete investigation. The materials dug out, constituted definite evidence, both provable and provocative, as to the original construction and all exhibits were carefully tabulated and preserved. By April, 1936, the surroundings of the Crozier house had been filled in, regraded, seeded and planted. A few minor house improvements had been made, but the only restoration was the lawn.

A Works Progress Administration project soon matured for signature to restore and to repair the Crozier house, which had suffered sadly from years of neglect. Since this farmhouse concealed much of the Manor house site, nothing more of value could be determined until it was removed, but there was no money to remove, nor to improve, and the reproduction or restoration of the original buildings had not yet been dreamed of. Dr. Fackenthal, ripe scholar and fervent apostle of factual preservation, in his address at the presentation of the land in 1932, voiced his hope that "this sacred and historic spot may be restored, as nearly as can be, to its former condition," of which, at that time, but little precise evidence could have been produced. In other words, the garden and orchards were to be restored.

True, three members of the Welcome Society, United States Senator Joseph R. Grundy, Mrs. Bertram Lippincott and Mr. Henry Paul Busch, had already created a fund for historical research which was privately administered.

When the present Historical Commission assumed jurisdiction in April, 1936, the Act of June 28, 1935 (P. L. 452), known as the General State Authority Act, had recently (January 6, 1936) been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Its object was to enable the Commonwealth to finance the improvement or construction of "State institutions of every kind and character (heretofore or hereafter constructed), public buildings for the use of the Commonwealth," etc. Antedating that time the provisions of the State Authority Act were not conceived to be sufficiently broad to include the restoration of an historic building. Moreover the manor was not a building. It was hardly a ruin or, if so, then a ruin partially buried under a farm house. Certain it is that, from
no quarter, had any suggestion been forthcoming that the Pennsylvania Historical Commission could be interested in the success or failure of the State Authority legislation. Even so, that act, by a four to three vote, had been declared unconstitutional.

In the summer of 1936, hope for the General State Authority Act was again revived. A new legal approach was found. The benefits to be derived to the Commonwealth by securing large Federal funds were concededly overwhelming. A petition for review and reconsideration by the Supreme Court was prepared, allowed and argued. On February 4, 1937, the Supreme Court, by unanimous vote, declared the General State Authority Act constitutional.

It is accurate to say that no practical plan to recreate Pennsbury Manor had been proposed or considered in any responsible quarter prior to the summer of 1936, when the first serious conception arose in the Commission's plan to present a bill to the next session of the General Assembly. In the autumn of that year its Chairman was authorized to draft such bill and to press for its passage. It was drafted to carry an appropriation of $250,000.00.

The Chairman was told summarily by the Governor, and by the leaders of a Republican Senate and a Democratic House, that such bill would not be passed and approved; that no money could be made available.

In the autumn of 1936 the Chairman carefully considered the possibility of accomplishing a restoration through the General State Authority Act, if, as and when, the Supreme Court should reverse itself and declare the act to be constitutional. Such hope seemed slim. Only by a series of miracles could such a dream grow into reality.

Even should the Supreme Court act favorably, a further almost insurmountable obstacle would have to be overcome. A Pennsbury Manor restoration program had not been included in the General State Authority programs which had fallen with the adverse Supreme Court decision. Should the Supreme Court reverse itself, those programs, all prepared, were waiting to be put into operation. Hence, with respect to a Pennsbury house restoration, nothing was even conceivable unless some way could be found to bring such restoration within the provisions of the act, and unless inclusion could be secured on the very end of the already adopted, overextended and much crowded building programs.
The Chairman of the Commission discussed this matter many times with the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Attorney General and the Director of the General State Authority. The initial discouragement from all quarters was devastating. None the less the Chairman briefed the legal question of what constitutes “a State institution.” Under the legislation in question the institution had to be “heretofore or hereinafter constructed.” Would the remains of the Pennsbury mansion constitute “a State institution heretofore constructed?” The foundation and other ruins were five or more feet underground, where they had so been for over a century and a half.

Furthermore, before 1929, the ruins could scarcely have been considered “a State institution” as they never had been owned by the Colony or Province of Pennsylvania, or by the Commonwealth. Further, neither the fact that the site had been owned by the Proprietary, nor the additional fact that the Proprietor, in his official capacity, had performed public acts at Pennsbury Manor, could, per se, constitute the site as either a state institution or a state ruin. After 1929, did the ruin constitute “a State institution?”

What is an “institution?” What is a “building?” Does an institution or a building cease to become such, in the eyes of the law, for purposes of reconstruction, after having been burned to the ground, or destroyed? How much of a ruin must remain in order to “reconstruct?”

Evident it is that the obstacles presented were overwhelming and the outlook unpromising. Hence the problem, at this stage, became a one-man job to find a theory for action, a method by which to progress and, then, to devise a strategy for its fulfillment. So the Chairman, holding a mandate from the Commission, undertook the task. The legal definitions or meanings of the words involved were duly investigated and their application in insurance law, and in other legal fields, critically weighed. The resultant legal findings were argued at length before the Attorney General. That official, after due consideration, finally announced that he would not oppose a Pennsbury Manor restoration project.

 Barely getting over that almost insurmountable hurdle was not enough. Both primary and secondary State Authority programs, as noted, had been adopted before the General State Authority
Act had been killed by the Supreme Court. When, in February, 1937, the Supreme Court reversed its decision, an attempt was made to include a tertiary program. Another campaign became obligatory. Assisted principally by the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Commission at last was able to secure inclusion of Pennsbury Manor on this third program. And then, only by watchful, zealous and understanding cooperation, both by the officials of the Department of Public Instruction and of the Director of the General State Authority, did it become possible for the Commission to secure the adoption of this particular portion of the third program.

Finally, the General State Authority allocated $237,000.00 for the much desired purpose, and the re-creation of Pennsbury Manor became possible. Its restoration has not been due to an appropriation by the General Assembly, except in so far as the General Assembly had created the General State Authority, whose building program was financed, in major part, by Federal funds. Nor was restoration made possible through pressure exerted by interested friends of the Historical Commission or the memorial itself, willing as they would have been to help. Nothing was known of what had been attempted until the public announcement by the General State Authority of the adoption of a part of its third program; nor of the involved processes which led to that announcement. The next steps were to secure the right architect and to remove the Crozier farm house from the manor site.

As to the first, the Commission was definitely determined that all partisan political considerations should be eliminated if the special type of work, and the peculiar nature of the problem were to be given just consideration. The Commission had previously turned to the State Art Commission and to the Welcome Society for suggestions as to an architect. Advices from those quarters was such that a Committee of members of the Philadelphia Chapter, American Institute of Architects, was selected to nominate an architect. Messrs. Paul A. Davis and John P. B. Sinkler, former presidents of the Philadelphia Chapter, and Dr. Warren P. Laird, former dean of the School of Fine Arts of the University of Pennsylvania, chairman, constituted the Committee. It reported that Mr. R. Brognard Okie is, perhaps, the outstanding expert on Colonial architecture.
It is of interest to recall that when, in 1936, Mr. Okie was first approached the question was: "How can the Crozier house be repaired to resemble a seventeenth century residence?"

In August of that year, the Chairman refused to sign for himself and Commission the Works Progress Administration agreement, elsewhere mentioned, to provide funds to remodel this house in accordance with plans then under consideration by Mr. Okie. At this time Mr. Okie had been merely recommended, not engaged. The Chairman based his refusal on the grounds that the Commission should first exhaustively examine possibilities, probabilities and certainties, under which the mansion house, itself, might be rebuilt. To do so, the Crozier house had first to be removed from above the ruins and located elsewhere, that the earth beneath might give up its secrets, as it had at Jamestown and St. Mary's, the buried cities of Virginia and Maryland. Then and then only, could such restoration be considered or justified.

Hence when, in the spring of 1937, the financing of Pennsbury became assured, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, charged with the duty of proposing the architect, requested Mr. Okie's appointment. Despite the fact that he was of a different political party, he received administration approval and appointment. Then to reinsure against error, Mr. Okie asked, and received, the supervisory assistance of Dr. Warren P. Laird, Emeritus Professor of Architecture, of the University of Pennsylvania, as consulting architect.

By the use of Works Progress Administration funds, the Crozier house was removed, and the entire manor foundation, together with those of the brew house and other buildings, was revealed, in excellent condition! Hundreds of relics had been, and now were, brought to light. Definitely the Commission had ascertained the dimensions of the original buildings, and the materials of which they were composed. Careful archival research, principally by Mr. Charles B. Montgomery, added its quota of definitive knowledge, and the blended result was great expectations realized. Much of the research material was published in the July, 1939, issue of The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle of the University of Pennsylvania. Materials found in the ruins will be displayed at the Manor.

In the course of time, many complications arose, too numerous to recount here. Contract specifications appeared most peculiar,
judged by modern building standards. The special character of the restoration required most thoughtful consideration at every point that the direction and execution of the work might be performed in the same loyal and almost prayerful spirit with which the Commission, and its architects, approached the task. Under ordinary circumstances buildings are erected of the cheapest durable and suitable materials, purchased from the lowest competitive bidders. But Pennsbury Manor could not be restored if a too rigid application were to be made of customary methods. For example, the hardware required for Pennsbury could not be bought in open market. Some hardware found in the ruins had to be duplicated. Some, merely of the period, must be made to order. Some had to be bought at auction sales of old houses.

So necessary was it to insist upon this procedure that, in May, 1937, the General State Authority advised the Chairman of the Commission that his insistence had "completely upset all arrangements and plans that had been made. . . . You apparently have made the restoration of Pennsbury seem such a difficult task that the Authority has decided that it is too complicated a task to touch."

On May 26, the Chairman of the Commission received a round robin letter from three employees of the Commission imploring him to ease his demands else "there is no hope for the restoration of Pennsbury."

The Chairman did not ease his demands. Even if willing to yield, the situation, itself, would permit no yielding. Mr. Okie had found that he could not "continue to act as architect unless the special nature and difficulty of the problem could be recognized." Under date of May 28, 1937, the Chairman replied to the protesting assistants that "an ordinary job, performed by the usual profit-making contractors and cheap production material men, would butcher the Pennsbury . . . project. The State Authority must realize this is a special problem, requiring special treatment. . . . I would prefer that this project be dropped than to have it bungled by an inferior architect," etc. Finally, this insistence prevailed.

By January, 1938, the results of the studies of materials found in the ruins, of contemporaneous structures, and of descriptions left by Penn and others, were combined into an architectural plan, of which a pen sketch was made. Then, for the first time, it be-
came possible to see illustrated the Pennsbury Manor of 250 years ago, the Commission’s vision of the Pennsbury Manor of today and of the future, the Manor, like the brew house, foursquare on the original foundation.¹

The resultant building specifications were necessarily intricate and peculiar. They were drawn to require heavy, seasoned timber, similar to that cut from the virgin forest. That timber was to be joined, or pegged, not nailed. Bricks, in texture and size, duplicated those found in the ruins. As elsewhere stated, hardware, window panes, and an infinite variety of component materials, had to be created to match original objects found in the rubble. Such details as the finish of the plaster and color of the paints were subjects of careful study. It can be said with truth that nothing used in the Pennsbury Manor of today is there by accident. Every item and detail represents a reason.

Planning was done without haste, carefully, and with the devout hope that the spirit would lend all engaged to conclusions of fidelity. This definite concern that all partaking in the important task should be guided into the paths of truth, so that a restoration of quality and character, worthy of the original structure and of the great Proprietor, himself, might be wrought, was shared by the Historical Commission; architects, contractors and laborers under them; the Society of Friends, and others, heretofore named and unnamed. So deep, for example, was this feeling that both architect and contractors deliberately sacrificed profit and lost money on their contracts.

On February 23, 1938, the contract for restoration was awarded to Sessinghaus and Ostergaard, of Erie, Pennsylvania. On April 21, 1938, work was inaugurated in the presence of century-old religious, historical and patriotic organizations. A member of the Religious Society of Friends was moved to invoke the divine blessing. The Governor of the Commonwealth, titular successor of William Penn, delivered an address. Foundation bricks were relaid by men and women representing organizations from historical societies to labor unions.

In the fall of 1939, Pennsbury, including adjacent buildings, was completed. Except for furnishing the interior, grading and

¹ Provision was made to leave uncovered in the cellar a portion of the original foundation. There, merely reinforced, it can be seen and compared with the surrounding similar foundations.
planting the exterior, and providing an automobile parking lot, the work was accomplished.

Truly Pennsbury Manor, recreated, represents a labor of devotion. It is an offering from the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, and those interested, to the Commonwealth and to the nation. Without fear of intelligent contradiction, the Commission assures the public that in Pennsbury Manor, as restored, the great Proprietor's dream-home again stands!

This, then, is the warp and woof of the tapestry which became Pennsbury, under the guidance of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission.²

²The Commission consisted of Frank W. Melvin, Chairman; Bruce A. Hunt; Henry W. Shoemaker; Miss M. Atherton Leach; Ross Pier Wright; Lester K. Ade, ex-officio (Chairman, June, 1935 to April, 1936); Francis B. Haas, ex-officio (September 1, 1939 to January 1, 1940). The term of this Commission expired on January 1, 1940.