THE JOHN HARRIS MANSION AND THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF DAUPHIN COUNTY

By George B. Bains, 3d

The oldest building in the city of Harrisburg is the John Harris Mansion. It is a stone structure built in 1766 by John Harris, Jr., the founder of the city of Harrisburg, on land acquired by his father, John Harris, Sr., from the sons of William Penn. The property remained in the Harris family until 1835, when it was sold to Thomas Elder, son of the Reverend John Elder, famous fighting parson of Paxton Church. In 1854 the property was purchased by the Reverend Beverly Waugh, who established the Pennsylvania Female College. In 1863 the property was purchased from Beverly Waugh's widow by General Simon Cameron. It remained in the Cameron-Haldeman family until 1941, when the Cameron-Haldeman heirs presented the mansion to The Historical Society of Dauphin County.

John Harris, Sr., as early as 1710 according to some authorities, settled on land between the present mansion and the Susquehanna River. His name appears on the tax list of property owners in Conestoga Township, Chester County, for 1718. Included in his holdings was the site of the mansion. Present-day Lancaster and Dauphin Counties were then part of Chester County. Harris was licensed as an Indian trader by the courts of Chester County. His activities were mostly in the Susquehanna Valley. It is believed that his locating here might have been at the instance of the Penns, the Shippens, and others, who wished to see this im-

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important ford of the Susquehanna in the hands of a trustworthy man. John Harris, Sr., had acquired a reputation for fair dealing with the Indians and as a counselor for the settlers. Upon his death his son and namesake became the director of extensive trading enterprises and successor to his father’s influence.

The trading post under the second John Harris figures largely in the provincial history of the area from 1750 to 1763. During the trying period of the French and Indian War it was a place of refuge for harassed settlers. In 1755 John Harris wrote that he had cut loopholes in the building, thereby establishing the first fortified place on the Susquehanna. It was subsequently known far and wide as Fort Harris.

From the porch of the mansion, John Harris saw the final review of the Harris Ferry Company of Thompson’s Rifle Battalion when this fighting unit marched to join Washington at Cambridge in the summer of 1775. His son and namesake, the third John Harris, was an officer in that company; he was killed in the attack on Quebec. From the porch was read the Declaration of Independence to the people of the Harris Ferry neighborhood a few days after the signing in 1776. Within the house was organized the campaign to help finance the Revolution; in this John Harris took an active part and was the largest contributor in the area. Here were also organized steps to provision and equip various elements of the Pennsylvania Line and other regiments of the War for Independence.

During the lifetime of the second John Harris, meetings of importance in connection with the stabilization of central Pennsylvania life were held in the building, among them first steps to organize land grants to soldiers. Here were laid the plans for the organization of Dauphin County, and here Harris and his son-in-law, William Maclay, made the first draft of lots in the new town of Harrisburg. The County of Dauphin was organized under an act of March 4, 1785, and the first sale of lots in Harrisburg was made April 14th of the same year.

General Simon Cameron, United States Senator, member of Lincoln’s Cabinet, and ambassador to Russia, purchased the property in 1863, residing there until his death in 1889. During his residence, the mansion was visited by many men of national prominence concerned with business, political, and legislative af-
fairs of Pennsylvania and the Nation, and figured as much in the life of that era as it had in the days of its builder.

The mansion was occupied by the Cameron-Haldeman families until shortly before 1941. In 1941 the Cameron-Haldeman heirs presented the building to the Historical Society of Dauphin County as a permanent home for its archives and museum.

The Historical Society of Dauphin County was organized May 10, 1869, and incorporated January, 1870. Meetings were first held in the Court House in a room assigned by the County Commissioners. Here was started the assembling of documents and objects relating to the history of Dauphin County. In 1908 William A. Kelker bequeathed to the Society the Kelker family residence, 9 South Front Street, as a memorial. The Society met regularly there, enlarging its collections and facilities for historical research and preservation of original data and information pertaining to the organization and life of the city of Harrisburg and the boroughs and townships of the county. In 1941 this property was acquired by the County of Dauphin as part of the site of the new Court House. Since 1941 all activities of the Society have centered in the John Harris Mansion.

The Society holds ten meetings a year. In the Spring and Fall pilgrimages are made to places of historic interest within this
county and neighboring counties. Open house is held on Lincoln’s Birthday, for the Society has a Lincoln collection of considerable importance. Regularly, school groups visit the Mansion to see exhibits depicting the early history of Harrisburg and Dauphin County.

Included among the Society’s manuscripts are the grant made by the Penns to John Harris to operate a ferry across the Susquehanna River, Harris’s original lot book for the town of Harrisburg, Harris correspondence, and correspondence of the Reverend John Elder, Edward Shippen, and Colonel James Burd. There is also a file of Harrisburg and Dauphin County newspapers dating from the 1790’s, including the Pennsylvania Gazette of August 10, 1791, recording the death on August 4 of John Harris. Another valuable collection of local historical materials is that of William A. Kelker, donor of the Society’s early meeting place.

A new venture was begun early this year with the publication of the Dauphin County Historical Review, designed to record some of the monthly programs and to acquaint the members with other materials of historical interest and Society plans for the future.