

THE GEMBERLING-REX HOUSE:
FROM EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TAVERN TO
NINETEENTH-CENTURY HOME
TO TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MUSEUM,
A PUBLIC HISTORY ROUNDTABLE

PERSONAL HISTORY FOR THE VISITING
PUBLIC

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In recent years, groups concerned with the interpretation and preservation of historic buildings, including the American Association for State and Local History, the American Association of Museums, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, have begun reevaluating the role of the historic house. In *History News*, Carol Stapp and Ken Turino blatantly ask, "Does America Need Another House Museum?" Focusing on alternatives to preserving a property by turning it into a museum, including private ownership with strict preservation restrictions, the authors suggest that local history groups consider several questions before creating yet another museum in a historic structure. Can the building tell a compelling story? Is the structure intact or has the historic fabric been compromised? Are financial resources in place to care for the building? Are there already other historical resources in the area that would compete for both visitors and dollars?¹

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In this and the subsequent three articles, which grew from sessions at the annual meetings of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and the Vernacular Architecture Forum, Charles Bergengren, Diane Wenger, Brad Smith, and I focus largely on Stapp and Turino's first question as it relates to the Gemberling-Rex house in Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania (Figure 1). We address the relationships between the building and the people who have come in contact with it and how these interactions illuminate historical issues through personal stories. To a lesser extent, we address the historical integrity of the structure, the financial resources available for its care, and the proximity of other cultural attractions. Our purpose in this case is not to demonstrate that the Gemberling-Rex house should be turned into a museum, since it has already functioned as such in some capacity since 1987, but rather to demonstrate how one building can be used to give the visiting public a personal connection with history.



Figure 1: Gemberling-Rex House, Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania, c.1758. Photo, Diane Wenger, 2007.

At the close of the eighteenth century, Samuel Rex purchased property on the village square where Market and Main Streets meet in Schaefferstown, in present-day Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. The primary structure on the parcel was a tavern, which was likely four decades old at the time of the sale. It had undergone extensive renovations, perhaps at the hand of a previous owner and tavern keeper, Paul Gemberling, in a desire to better serve diverse

tavern customers. However, in 1799, at the time of Rex's purchase, the building, at least from the exterior, was hardly stylish: the tax assessor described it as "Tavern—but indifferent order." Other buildings on the property included a series of frame sheds to house travelers' animals and a log barn "in bad order."²

After renting the tavern to another tavern keeper for a few years, Samuel Rex and his wife Mary decided to change the use of the building from business venue to home. Moving in sometime before 1807, Samuel and Mary started a chain of Rex family ownership and occupancy that would last into the late twentieth century. Without children of their own, Samuel and Mary's property was inherited by Samuel's brother Abraham, who sold it for a token payment to his daughter Maria Zimmerman (Figure 2) some years later. These transactions started a long chain of ownership that would favor daughters, nieces, and siblings, including the Zimmerman's spinster daughter Tillie, Tillie's niece Anna Illig, Anna's sister Minnie Lewis and niece Rachael Lewis, Minnie's brother John Lewis, and John's brother Leon Lewis. The Gemberling-Rex house was finally sold out of the Rex-Zimmerman-Illig-Lewis family in 1974.³



Figure 2: Maria Rex Zimmerman by Jacob Maentel (1778-?), Schaefferstown, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania; c. 1828. Watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 17 x 10 1/2" sight. Collection of American Folk Art Museum, New York, promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, PI.2001.014B. Photo ©2000 John Bigelow Taylor, New York. In 1859, Maria Zimmerman, the niece of Samuel and Mary Rex, bought the Gemberling-Rex house for one dollar from her parents, who had inherited the property in 1835.

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Since 1987, the tavern-turned-house has been owned by Historic Schaefferstown, Inc., a non-profit organization founded in 1966 and dedicated to “the culture and unique history of Schaefferstown and [the] southeastern region of Lebanon County.”⁴ Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. opens the Gemberling-Rex house and two other historic properties, the Alexander Schaeffer Farm and the Thomas R. Brendle Museum, to the visiting public on a regular basis in order to further its mission. The organization has also used the Gemberling-Rex house as a source of income, not only charging admission to museum visitors but also renting it to long-term, live-in tenants. Monies raised from such activities help offset expenditures for maintenance and utilities, as well as preservation and restoration projects at the Gemberling-Rex house and other Historic Schaefferstown sites.

When the Gemberling-Rex house was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, while it was still in private ownership, the “statement of significance” focused almost exclusively on the architecture itself. Other important resources, according to the nominator, included the garden landscaping, particularly the English boxwood estimated to be more than two hundred years old, and the archeological resources, yet to be investigated, on the property. However, the house itself, rather than the broader landscape or its inhabitants, was what was given the most attention. The nomination notes that the building was constructed as a half-timbered structure with plastered infill to simulate brick (Figure 3), and that it had unusual and fine hardware (Figure 4), woodwork (Figure 5), and painted and stenciled decoration (Figure 6).⁵



Figure 3: Former exterior wall, Gemberling-Rex House. This wall, now accessible in the uppermost portion of an eighteenth-century addition to the building, shows the early exterior finish of the structure. The timber framing was filled, and the infill was plastered, scored, and painted to resemble brickwork. Photo, Diane Wenger, 2007.

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Figure 4: Stair, Gemberling-Rex House. Photo, Cynthia Falk, 2000.



Figure 5: Hardware on front door, Gemberling-Rex House. Photo, Diane Wenger, 2007.

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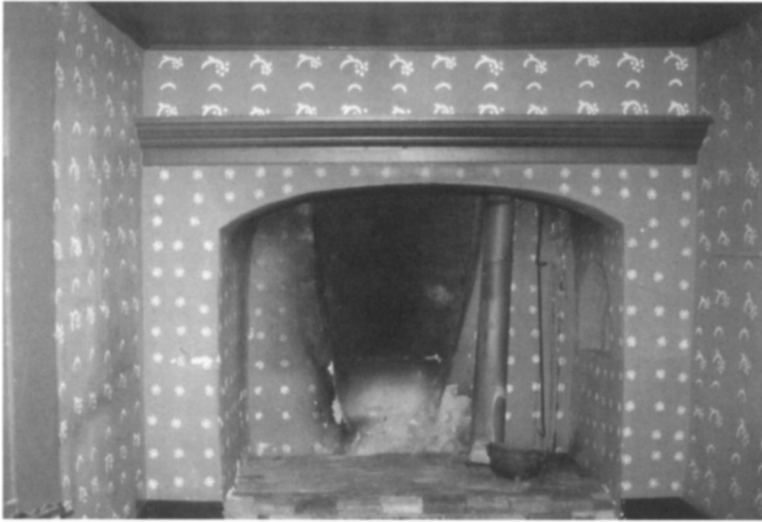


Figure 6: Kitchen, Gemberling-Rex House. The painted and stenciled decoration in the kitchen was recreated by former house owners. When the building was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, the owner reported, "Under the paneling in the kitchen walls, were found at least four layers of red paint with hand painted designs and stencils. Most of the designs and stencils appear to have been white but some seem to be yellow and others black. Each layer of red had different designs from the other layers." Photo, Cynthia Falk, 2000.

There is no doubt about it. The Gemberling-Rex house as a physical object has a fascinating history. Yet this is also a history that is difficult for both the general public and academics to decipher. Charles Bergengren, through a careful study of existing physical evidence as well as documentary sources and oral histories with people who interacted with the building in recent years, has been able to piece together the physical transformation of the structure.⁶ Fundamentally, the Gemberling-Rex house is a complex building that went through a major eighteenth-century remodeling, and subsequent minor alterations throughout its history. While a select group of people would find a story based on this physical history gripping, most would be more confused by or indifferent to this type of specialized interpretation.

What complements the history of the structure itself, and provides for a more personal story related to the building, are the numerous family and business documents, including tavern account books, store day books, diaries, letters, and auction sale bills, that bring the people who have interacted with the Gemberling-Rex house to life.⁷ Sources like these allow for an interpretation that focuses on more than just the elite, often male, building owners that

more impersonal legal documents generally uncover. We can learn about tenants, tavern customers, dutiful daughters, early preservationists, and descendants perhaps desperate for cash who sold artifacts that no longer proved important to keep. From a museum perspective, two things are important about the abundant paper trail associated with the building. First, the range of people who are included is broad. There are still missing links to be sure. The tavern account books, for example, favor the inclusion of men to whom credit could be reasonably extended: women and strangers who could not be trusted to repay a debt are largely excluded.⁸ Yet, most museum visitors could realistically identify with someone about whom something concrete is known. This is not the case at all historic sites.

The second important point is that more is known about both the building and its varied inhabitants not at the period of initial construction, but in the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. It is no surprise that the Gemberling-Rex house has been described as being built in the seventeenth century, in 1729, as well as sometime in the 1750s, which currently seems most likely.⁹ Neither the physical evidence, nor the documentary sources, shed much light on its construction, early owners, or early use. After 1799, when Samuel Rex bought the property, however, the amount of information about the structure and its human occupants changes. In the first decade of the nineteenth century we know that Samuel Rex and his wife Mary moved into the house, and their extended family continued to live there for generations. With this in mind, it is a credit to Historic Schaefferstown that the physical structure of the building has not been substantially altered to try to display some earlier period in time. In fact, the exterior of the building currently best represents what the house looked like around the time of the Civil War when the clapboard received its first coat of paint, a bright yellow ochre.¹⁰

A continued emphasis on the Rex-Zimmerman-Illeg-Lewis family and the later, largely post-tavern history of the building seems to be the most supported by both documents and the physical evidence of the structure itself. To answer Stapp and Turino's question about whether the fabric of the building is intact requires a decision about what period of history it is used to interpret. The building has been fundamentally changed since Paul Gemberling first ran it as a tavern, and as a result it does not retain a high level of integrity to that period or use. Yet as the Rex-Zimmerman-Illeg-Lewis family home, the building represents almost 175 years of both continuity and change. Rex family occupants retained certain elements deemed important, such as elaborate eighteenth-century hardware and a tavern bar cage that

had outlived its original function; added or adapted other conveniences, like closets and a combination bake oven/smokehouse in the yard; and removed features thought impractical or undesirable, such as the log barn and pipe stoves for heating. In essence, the building represents one family's long history of preserving its own physical heritage, while continuing to live in a modern world.

In interpreting the structure, bridging the past and present is just one of the ways that the Rex family and the Gemberling-Rex house represent a coming together of potentially divergent traits. All three of the following articles indicate that the house, and/or the extended Rex family members who lived in it, straddled two worlds defined not by time period but by ethnicity. Brad Smith speaks of assimilation and likens the Rex house and by implication Germans in Pennsylvania to a Buddha adorned with rosary beads which was owned by Sam Wah, a Chinese laundry man in St. Louis. Charles Bergengren stresses more active selection but still sees the Rex house largely as a statement concerning ethnic identity. He concludes, "the Rexes both learned to actively adopt progressive cultural signifiers of the dominant group (perhaps more so on the exterior) and yearned to preserve heritage and comforting community solidarity in their inner cores and emotional hearths."

There is no doubt that one of the stories that can be told at the Gemberling-Rex house involves the history of immigration, ethnicity, and particularly the blending of German and English cultural traditions. From Samuel Rex's 1835 probate inventory, which includes both a large German Bible and a two-volume English Bible and testament, both valued at \$4, it seems that Rex was familiar in both languages, literally. In terms of more sensory language, Rex also seems to have adopted components of both cultures. The same inventory includes two stoves with pipes, heating sources often associated in early Pennsylvania with people of German descent, as well as two pair of andirons for use in fireplaces, the type of heating more often associated with the English.¹¹

However, to stop at an interpretation that focuses on ethnic background as the predominant factor in the lives of both the Rex family and its house seems shortsighted. In 1799, when Samuel Rex bought the building, Schaefferstown's population was dominated by people with German surnames. The town's founder and namesake, Alexander Schaeffer, was a German immigrant, and religious institutions in the community included Lutheran and German Reformed churches. It would be inaccurate to call Pennsylvania Germans a minority in this place at this time. As evidence from

Tillie Zimmerman's diary suggests, even at the close of the nineteenth century, Schaefferstown residents cooked distinct foods and used different language than Anglo-Americans in other locales.¹²

Bergengren speaks of the English as being politically, if not culturally, dominant in Pennsylvania. However, it is interesting to note that under the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1790, which remained in effect until 1838, five of the eight governors of the commonwealth had surnames common among Pennsylvania Germans.¹³ Many local officials in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Justice of the Peace Samuel Rex and Schaefferstown's 1798 tax assessors Henry Weiss and Mathias Dittman,¹⁴ were the descendants of continental German immigrants. While London may have been the seat of power in colonial America, after the Revolution, at least in Pennsylvania, political offices were not solely the privilege of the English.

Rather than discussing assimilation, or even political hegemony, in regard to the Rex family and the Gemberling-Rex house, Diane Wenger utilizes the term "hybrid." The words "hybrid" and hybridization, like creole and creolization, have recently proved popular in the study of decorative arts and historic architecture. According to Philip Zea, hybridization occurred when consumers sought to use objects "to associate with people of power, wealth, or intelligence."¹⁵ In some cases this led furniture makers in rural areas to adapt urban styles to suit local needs. In others, it involved the reinvention of fashionable styles at lower price levels. Zea's comments are germane to this discussion because they introduce interpretive themes in addition to ethnicity to help explain the Gemberling-Rex house and its inhabitants.

The house, by the time of Samuel and Mary Rex's occupancy in the early nineteenth century, was a hybrid in more than one way. Perhaps most notably, the building, which had been a tavern, had been transformed into a private dwelling. Even as late as Samuel Rex's death in 1835, the house was full of presumably tavern furniture, including ten dining tables, thirty-seven chairs, six bedsteads, and five bureaus.¹⁶ Rex had taken a building that was intended to be public and turned it into his family's domicile. While the Rexes probably did not desire the level of privacy we have become accustomed to in the early twenty-first century, they were changing the function of a building that for years had served locals and outsiders as a meeting place. If, as Bergengren demonstrates, it is difficult to ascertain how the floor plan, including two back-to-back first-floor parlors, was used when the building functioned as a tavern, its usage when the building was transformed to a residence seems equally puzzling.

Diane Wenger notes that Samuel Rex “was equally at home among German farmers in Schaefferstown and in the largely Anglo Philadelphia business community.” On a most basic level, Wenger suggests a polarity between English and German culture in Pennsylvania, as do Bergengren and Smith. Yet she simultaneously recognizes that Rex crossed boundaries related not only to ethnicity, but also place—specifically rural verses urban environments—and occupation. In these ways, too, Rex and his house were hybrids. Looking again at Rex’s 1835 probate inventory, it is clear that he and Mary had a worldview that extended beyond the bounds of Schaefferstown. They hung maps on their walls and owned numerous items to facilitate transportation including a saddle and saddlebags, a wagon, and a sleigh. Yet at the same time, they were tied to their local community and economy. Although Rex had retired from the profession of storekeeping, he still owned steelyards for weighing goods to be bought and sold locally. Furthermore, objects such as the two wool wheels and butter churn indicate the family was involved in the transformation of rural raw materials into commodities that could be exchanged for more refined imported wares. In many ways, Rex linked the small community of Schaefferstown with other places, specifically Philadelphia, about 75 miles away.¹⁷

In his own life he also bridged not only rural and urban locations, but also cultural standards related to occupation and style of life. Arriving in the English colony of Pennsylvania with a German surname, Rex family members changed their name to one that all educated Europeans and Euro-Americans would understand, the Latin word for king.¹⁸ Later in life, Samuel Rex was able to add to his moniker the designation of esquire, due to his position as Justice of the Peace.¹⁹ Yet it seems, like so many people in rural areas, Rex was unable to completely escape manual labor, despite his titles, both appropriated and earned. His inventory included not only silver teaspoons and china teaware for entertaining, but also pitch and manure forks, hoes and shovels, and a flax break for work. Later generations of his family may have operated in similarly complex hybridized fashion. Rex’s great niece Tillie Zimmerman, for example, who as a girl reluctantly left Schaefferstown for school in Lititz (not more cosmopolitan Philadelphia), spent many of her days cooking and cleaning her family home, and still found time to exhibit family china in the state capital of Harrisburg.²⁰

So now the final question: can this building, the Gemberling-Rex house, tell a compelling story that will attract visitors? As a museum, the house has its problems. Most Rex family objects were sold, and furnishing the building

presents some problems, not the least of which is what particular period in time should be represented since Rex family members lived there for almost 175 years. Furthermore, the Rex house is located in a community with less than a thousand residents, located about a half an hour from either I-78 or the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Recent attendance figures indicate that in a given year less than five thousand people visit all Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. properties combined. This compares with approximately twenty-five to sixty-five thousand visitors at the nearby Ephrata Cloister, Landis Valley Museum, and Conrad Weiser Homestead, all Pennsylvania German sites operated by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.²¹

In a region saturated with museums, historic houses, and other cultural attractions, Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. has opted to keep its focus local, generating the most visibility and visitation during annual Cherry, Harvest, and Christmas festivals. In fact, in 2004, net income from special events such as these was more than nine times greater than income earned from standard admission fees. In strictly financial terms, the organization's greatest assets are by far the buildings and real estate it owns.²² With a budget of approximately \$70,000, Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. must stretch its resources to simply maintain its properties, including the Gemberling-Rex house.²³

Yet even with the problems wrought by its location and limited resources, the Rex family house does not lack for good stories. And it is perhaps these that have attracted a membership of about 600 and an active board of directors from throughout the region.²⁴ Topics that continue to be of interest today—immigration and ethnicity, the uniqueness of urban and rural culture, and the relationship among work, class, and lifestyle—are readily told within this eighteenth-century tavern turned nineteenth-century home turned present-day museum. While Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. may have as its goal the celebration of one locale's unique history and culture, it is these personal, but universal, topics that will continue to engage the visiting public.

NOTES

1. Carol B Stapp and Kenneth C. Turino, "Does America Need Another House Museum?," *History News* 59 (Summer 2004): 7–11.
2. Diane Wenger, "Schaefferstown," in *Architecture and Landscape of the Pennsylvania Germans, 1720–1920* (Vernacular Architecture Forum, 2004), Tours section, 35–37; 1798 Federal Direct Tax for Heidelberg Township, Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, Schedule A, entry for Samuel Rex (microfilm, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware).

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3. For deeds of sale following Samuel Rex's death see: Lebanon County Deed Book N:6:349; Deed Book N:6:351; Deed Book N:6:352; Deed Book D:10:339; Deed Book 123:1000; Deed Book 234:4. All deeds are recorded at the Lebanon County Courthouse, Lebanon, Pennsylvania. I wish to thank Diane Wenger for her diligent work in documenting the chain of ownership of the Gemberling-Rex house.
4. Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. brochure, "Experience life from an authentic Pennsylvania German point of view," 2006 (http://www.hsimuseum.org/GeneralBroch2006_FINAL.pdf, accessed 25 April 2007).
5. H. Frank Maldonado, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Rex House," 1979. Bureau for Historic Preservation, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (http://www.arch.state.pa.us/pdfs/H000767_01B.pdf, accessed 25 April 2007).
6. Charles Lang Bergengren, "The Cycle of Transformation in the Houses of Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 139–40, 213–15, 282–85, 304–22; Bergengren, "The Physical Thing Itself: Evolution and Adaptation in the Gemberling Rex House," presentation to the Vernacular Architecture Forum, 15 May 2004, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
7. Leon E. Lewis, Jr. Collection (microfilm) and Rex Family Collection, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Delaware; additional manuscripts are held by Historic Schaefferstown, Inc. and the Hauck Research Archives of the Lebanon County Historical Society, Lebanon, Pennsylvania.
8. Diane E. Wenger, "Creating Networks: The Country Storekeeper and the Mid-Atlantic Economy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2001), 101–4, 194.
9. Maldonado, "National Register," section 8; Bergengren, "Cycle," 139; July 1960 auction bill.
10. Wenger, "Schaefferstown," 35. Mid-nineteenth-century yellow ochre paint was the earliest color revealed in paint analysis conducted for Historic Schaefferstown, Inc.; previous to this time the boards were either unpainted or treated with an impermanent wash.
11. Probate Inventory for Samuel Rex, 22 May 1835, Leon E. Lewis, Jr. Collection, Reel 9, RE5; Benjamin Rush, "An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania," *Columbian Magazine*, January 1789, 23; Gabrielle M. Lanier, *The Delaware Valley in the Early Republic: Architecture, Landscape, and Regional Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 21, 53, 60.
12. A. S. Brendle, *A Brief History of Schaefferstown* (1901; reprint, Schaefferstown, PA: Historic Schaefferstown, Inc., 1979), 14–15, 18–19, 194; Tillie Zimmerman Diary, Leon E. Lewis, Jr. Collection.
13. Between 1790 and 1838, the governors of Pennsylvania were Thomas Mifflin, Thomas McKean, Simon Snyder, William Findlay, Joseph Hiester, John Andrew Shulze, George Wolf, and Joseph Ritner.
14. 1798 Federal Direct Tax for Heidelberg Township, Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, Schedule A.
15. Philip Zea, "Diversity and Regionalism in Rural New England Furniture," in *American Furniture 1995*, edited by Luke Beckerdite and William N. Hosley (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for the Chipstone Foundation, 1995), 71, 73, 83, 106.
16. Probate Inventory for Samuel Rex.
17. Probate Inventory for Samuel Rex; Wenger, "Creating Networks," especially 265–66, 323–31.
18. Bergengren, "Cycles," 140, 241. Bergengren outlines conflicting evidence of the Rex family's former last name.
19. Probate Inventory for Samuel Rex.

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20. Brendle, *A Brief History of Schaefferstown*, 89—90; Tillie Zimmerman diary.
21. American Association of Museums, *The Official Museum Directory*, 2006 (New Providence, NJ: National Register Publishing, 2005), 1222, 1236, 1267, 1278.
22. Historic Schaefferstown, Inc., IRS Form 990 (Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax), 2004 (<http://www.guidestar.org/FinDocuments/2005/236/463/2005-236463356-028e8d88-9.pdf>, accessed 25 April 2007).
23. Budget figure from Alice Oskam, Historic Schaefferstown, Inc, email to author, 7 May 2007.
24. Alice Oskam, email to author, 7 May 2007; Historic Schaefferstown, Inc., IRS Form 990 (Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax), 2004.