

INTERPRETING THE GEMBERLING-REX  
HOUSE  
BRADLEY K. SMITH  
HARRISBURG AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

*Bradley Smith*  
*Harrisburg Area Community College*

The Gemberling-Rex house, built circa 1750, is an architectural treasure and the former residence of Schaefferstown's most prominent citizen, Samuel Rex.<sup>1</sup> The structure's marvelous architecture is noteworthy because it blends German and English architectural elements, declaring a bold statement regarding its owners' uniquely American experiences.

The Gemberling-Rex House was originally a modest, purely Germanic structure of a flurkuchen house design with an off-center chimney, but by 1798 it had been radically altered.<sup>2</sup> Its owners introduced refinements more typical of the Anglo-American elite: fireplaces abutting the exterior walls, an elaborate array of dental moldings, and an elegant, free-hanging banister. The owners also covered its exterior, once coated in plaster scored and painted to resemble brick, with a more subtle—and more English styled—clapboard siding.

In 1798, Samuel Rex and his wife purchased the property, at the time a prominent area tavern, in 1798, and they made it

their residence by at least 1807. Samuel Rex's lifestyle embodied elements of both his German ethnicity and the surrounding English culture, as evidenced by the presence of both English and German language books in his 1835 estate inventory. He established a store in the Germanic hinterlands of Pennsylvania, but offered a surprising array of goods which he acquired from prominent merchants in the "English" cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore.<sup>3</sup> Through his activities as a merchant, and later as a Justice of the Peace, Rex served as a liaison between his small Pennsylvania German community, Schaefferstown, and the outside world.

Given his many connections with the English world, one is tempted to attribute the English inspired renovations to Rex, but, with the exception of the exterior clapboards, the renovations pre-date his ownership. While Rex was not responsible for the interior changes, he certainly embodied the spirit behind them, and the remodeled dwelling was befitting of someone who so skillfully maneuvered in both the English and German worlds. While Rex was childless, descendants of his brother, Abraham, inherited and remained in the house into the 1970s, and in so doing they preserved much of the property's original features along with numerous family heirlooms, documents and artifacts. Many of these descendants, like their uncle, lived an English-German duality that mirrored the house in which they lived. Today the building is a historic house museum, operated by Historic Schaefferstown, Inc.

Interpreting a site like the Gemberling-Rex house for the public is a somewhat daunting proposition. Is it possible to present information pertaining to architectural details in a meaningful way to a broad spectrum of visitors? Furthermore, how does one interpret a site that radically changed both in form and function, having evolved from a modest tavern to an elegant home?

The American Association of Museums in 1939 commissioned Laurence Vail Coleman to survey the effectiveness of museums. Nearly forgotten today, the three volume study offers substantial and significant insights that are still germane to museums such as the Gemberling-Rex house. Coleman argued that museums should be regarded as community enterprises, similar to libraries. He criticized museums of his day for being "a group of air-tight compartments" in which the "instructors ... are buffers between the public and the curatorial group that wants to be left alone."<sup>4</sup>

Research indicates that the majority of the population either visit museums with trepidation, or they avoid them entirely. Many view museums as

formal, inaccessible places with too much “museum code”—the erudite terminology so often prevalent in exhibit labels and interpretive tour scripts. For most people, museum code is not conducive to building connections, new understanding, and learning.

The cleavage between museums and the public is exacerbated by what one museum professional describes as the prevailing attitude amongst curators that “the collecting, research, and interpretation efforts of museums are intrinsic social goods and that members of the public who choose not to attend museum exhibitions and participate in museum programs do so because they are not quite up to the intellectual or aesthetic challenge.”<sup>5</sup>

Studies find that the public falls into three general categories: museum “buffs” who will visit any historic site (10–15%), those who visit a museum once a year (35–40%), and those that typically do not visit museums at all (45–50%).<sup>6</sup> The latter group finds traditional museums to be elitist, demeaning and patronizing. Thus if museums want to reach beyond the buffs and connect with broader audiences, they must minimize the museum code and present information to the largest spectrum of visitors in meaningful ways, but without reducing the content to its lowest common denominator.

Many curators begin the interpretive planning process by selecting one of three angles: documentary—emphasis on a specific individual, group or event; representative—focus on a general time period or concept; or aesthetic—focus on artistic qualities of the site or its artifacts. The Gemberling-Rex House is unique in that any of these approaches would be valid: the house is representative of a typical colonial tavern, Samuel Rex’s prominence merits a museum documenting his life, and the architecture warrants interpretation from an aesthetic perspective.

When an interpretive guise is not immediately discernable, as is the case with this property, one must next consider the differential: why is this site of interest and what unique perspective on the past does it offer? According to one museum curator, “the significance of artifacts [or, historic homes] and, hence, their ability to stimulate useful and meaningful discussion will be directly proportional to our success in using them to symbolize important and persistent human issues that have endured through time.”<sup>7</sup>

The most potent message of the Gemberling-Rex house—its differential—is the message that the home and its occupants were the products of cultural conflict between the English majority and an ethnic German minority. The story sounds compelling, but is it an accurate assessment of the house and its occupants?

In his study of Pennsylvania German acculturation and assimilation, Max Loudon postulates that the pressure to adapt English cultural traditions caused many Pennsylvania Germans to feel ashamed of their ethnic identity.<sup>8</sup> However, this observation was made in the context of twentieth-century social pressures, many of which were shaped by two world wars in which Germany was the United States' enemy. Did such pressures exist during the era of Samuel Rex?

Historian Charles Glatfelter contends that these pressures did exist early in the nineteenth century and were often linked to economic factors. He argues that Pennsylvania "Germans ... who took part in the country's [antebellum] economic and other growth, especially between 1840 and 1860, gave up some or all of their old distinguishing ways. By 1865, except for their names and perhaps a few other survivals, many of these people had become almost indistinguishable from the majority of Americans around them."<sup>9</sup>

If one assumes that economic factors encouraged assimilation into the English majority, as Glatfelter suggests, then there is validity to the argument that Samuel Rex experienced this pressure since, as was mentioned previously, his economic dealings brought him into frequent contact with prominent English merchants in both Philadelphia and Baltimore.

Visitors to the Gemberling-Rex house will better appreciate details of the home's architecture and history when they are presented within the context of the cultural conflict message. The public at large might be indifferent when told that the clapboard siding was a typical English treatment. However, if one emphasizes that the Gemberling-Rex house was renovated by minority families that were attempting, perhaps imperfectly, to embody the tastes of the majority, the human element brings life to the story and provides a context to explain the house in terms of its uniqueness and evolution.

In a *History News* article discussing the significance of historic artifacts, Robert Archibald, Director of the Missouri Historical Society, shared an intriguing and relevant vignette. The society was fortunate to acquire a personal collection of ephemera that had belonged to Sam Wah, St Louis' last Chinese laundry man. The collection's centerpiece was a statue of the Buddha adorned in rosary beads. It seemed a strange juxtaposition of religious and cultural symbols, one which Archibald described as perhaps indicative of this immigrant's struggle in the United States and "posing the perennial and quintessential question of what it is to be American."<sup>10</sup>

The similarity between the Sam Wah Buddha and the Gemberling-Rex house are quite remarkable for both demonstrate the strong influence a

dominant culture holds over ethnic minorities, and the assimilation that this influence subtly and inevitably engenders as reflected in art, language, religion, cuisine and architecture. They are two very different artifacts from different ethnic minorities living in different centuries, but they share the same message and hold the power to evoke a similar reaction.

The Gemberling-Rex house is a physical artifact erected and modified by immigrants making their way in a new land in which they were an ethnic minority that was slowly being assimilated into the Anglo-American majority. As such, it represents a significant chapter in the story of the American experience—a chapter which the ancestors of all Americans experienced to some extent. This is what gives depth and meaning to the history and features associated with the house. That is what makes it relevant as a museum to more than just architectural historians and locals, but indeed to all Americans.

## NOTES

1. The name "Gemberling-Rex House" derives from the home's first documented owner, Paul Gemberling, and its most famous owner, Samuel Rex.
2. For a detailed analysis of the house's architecture, see Charles Lang Bergengren, "The Cycle of Transformations in the Houses of Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 249–50 and 283–84.
3. Diane Wenger, "Samuel Rex's Country Store; Mercantilism in Schaefferstown," *Historic Schaefferstown Record* 29, no. 3 (November 1996): 8–9. For a more thorough study of Samuel Rex see Diane E. Wenger, "Creating Networks: the Country Storekeeper and the Mid-Atlantic Economy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 2001).
4. Laurence Vail Coleman as quoted in Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the Twentieth Century," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 114.
5. Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums," 116.
6. Marylyn G. Hood, "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums," *Museum News* 61, no. 4 (April 1983): 52.
7. Robert Archibald, "History is Not a Museum," *History News* 49, no. 3 (May-June 1994): 13.
8. Mark Loudon, "Patterns of Sociolinguistic Variation in Pennsylvania German" in *The German Language in America, 1683–1991*, ed. Joseph C. Salmons (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute for German American Studies, 1993), 288.
9. Charles H. Glatfelter, *The Pennsylvania Germans: A Brief Account of their Influence on Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania Historical Association, 1990), 39.
10. Archibald, "History is Not a Museum," 13.