THE "HALFWAY HOUSE": A QUERY AND A PLEA

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Standing on Route 22 east in a fine state of preservation is an early nineteenth century log house that is unfamiliar both to the public and, presumably, the historian. Known cryptically as the "Half-way House," its photograph is in Charles Stotz' definitive volume on early western Pennsylvania architecture\(^1\) and in Solon and Elizabeth Buck's *The Planting of Civilisation in Western Pennsylvania*,\(^2\) but no expanded history seems to exist. By interviewing the present owner, Mrs. George Vogle, and a descendant of former owners, Mr. Forrest H. Alter, I have managed to piece together the following information.

The house was built during the 1830's\(^3\) on the Northern Turnpike (now Route 22) about five miles west of New Alexandria overlooking Spruce Run. The first known tenant was Jacob Alter of Berlin, Pennsylvania. His grandfather together with two brothers arrived in America aboard the good ship *Beulah* on September 10, 1753.\(^4\) Formerly a saddler located in the first two storey building in Berlin (built in 1785 and owned by G. W. Brollier), Jacob was operating the "Half-way House" as a tavern in the 1840's and 1850's. His son, also Jacob, occupied the inn as a house during the 1890's, and for obvious reasons it became known about this time as "Alter's Voting Precinct."\(^5\) About 1900 the William Kinnan family bought it, and the George Vogle family purchased it from them in 1942.\(^6\)

Two photographs of the house are extant, each quite different from the other. Forrest Alter has what appears to be the older of the two.\(^7\) It shows the main house with two successively smaller additions.

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3 At my request Mr. James D. Van Trump, the leading contemporary historian of Pennsylvania architecture, examined the house first-hand. He verified this approximate date that genealogy records of the Alter family now in the possession of Mr. Forrest Alter imply.


5 The preceding information derives from Mr. Forrest Alter's records.

6 According to Mrs. George Vogle.

7 The later photograph shows electric wires strung to the house, while the older displays a much larger verandah, more suitable to the earlier use of the edifice as an inn.
to the west. The photo in Charles Stotz' book, however, displays one addition to the west and a frame addition in the back. Mrs. Vogle draws a verbal picture that is even yet different. When she and her husband bought the house, she says that they dismantled an addition on the eastern side and used the logs to enclose an open stairwell in the back. She seems not to know of the second smaller western annex, while none of the photos shows the one she mentions to the east. Also, the verandah roof varies, although more explicity. In the older photo it is simply a steep extension of the main roof out beyond the front portion of the main house; in the later one it is a small roof one storey high beginning at the westerly edge of the larger western addition (that is, the one contiguous to the main house) and running only to the center of the main house. At present no verandah roof exists at all. All these changes are logically explained as simply economical renovations, but no actual evidence exists. Strange to say, in the older photo the section of the roof covering the main house is in very bad condition while the section over the verandah looks fine.

One last confusing note to this Babelistic history is that the scholars who do allude to the House always place its name within quotation marks — an unusual and curious practice since it suggests a nickname.8

At this moment the exterior of the house is in splendid condition. Mrs. Vogle has kept it painted, and its lawns are green and trim. The inside, however, has been plastered, and the great fireplace and chimney to the west have been boxed in. (The eastern chimney has disappeared.) But without great expenditure the original interior could easily be restored.

Thus my query is this: can any one provide information about the building of the house or straighten out these rather disarranged facts about the series of remodellings done to it? In fact, does any one know anything else about its history? And my plea must now be obvious: can we save the house from destruction? Because she is paying taxes on a "useless" piece of property, the present owner is contemplating demolishing it. The house is valuable historically and as an architectural remnant, but is already fading into the shadows; can we permit it to suffer final oblivion?

8 During the time that the House functioned as an inn, it stood halfway in travel-time between Johnstown and Pittsburgh. Perhaps that explains the nickname.