

UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

The Locusts – Irvine House

Rising like sculptures outlined against the sky, the curving limbs of a grove of black locust trees enhance the beauty of the stately Irvine house in Warren County. The trees were planted in the 1830s by the home's builder, Guy Carrolton Irvine (1792-1868), and enclosed by an ornamental fence, which defines the formal area at the front of the house.¹

Irvine had quite a colorful life; one memoir claimed he walked more than 200 miles to Pittsburgh from Northumberland County, then walked back to his home to borrow money and then north to Warren, Pennsylvania (more than 130 miles) to buy lumber land, and finally returned on foot to his home in 1817.² This kind of energy and business acumen held him in good stead throughout his life. He was in partnership with his brother-in-law (his wife Polly's sister's husband), Rufus Weatherby, when Weatherby died in 1833. Irvine was in the process of building this house and so built it for two families, his and his now-widowed sister-in-law's. Floating lumber down the Allegheny and returning from his destination on foot or horseback was so time-consuming that Irvine left his wife and children for many months at a time, so it seemed better to have the two

sisters close to each other for company. The large and well-proportioned house contained two kitchens, living rooms, and dining rooms arranged off of an elegant central hallway with a simple, graceful stairway to the second story.

Irvine was the most successful lumberman along the Allegheny River in the first half of the 19th century. He not only cut trees, but milled them on a scale that reached legendary proportions; at one time he owned 20 sawmills. He introduced the gang saw to the Pennsylvania lumber business. He was known as the "Napoleon of the lumber business" with an empire stretching from southern New York to New Orleans.³ The chiseled stone advertising his 1838 mill one-half mile to the northeast is now incorporated into a barbeque on the rear patio of the house. The remains of the four-mile-long, narrow gauge railroad used to supply the mills terminate the formal garden at the rear.

Irvine's passion for the lumber business is evident in the wide-planked, chestnut floors, still lying as flat and true as when they were laid. Neither the stairway nor the upstairs floorboards creak; but the true glory of the early builder's skill is in the attic, where a mortise and tenoned truss system, pegged like a barn, supports the roof. No sagging or structural cracks exist in the attic timbers or even the

Leader (downspout) head.

Photo by Clinton Piper.

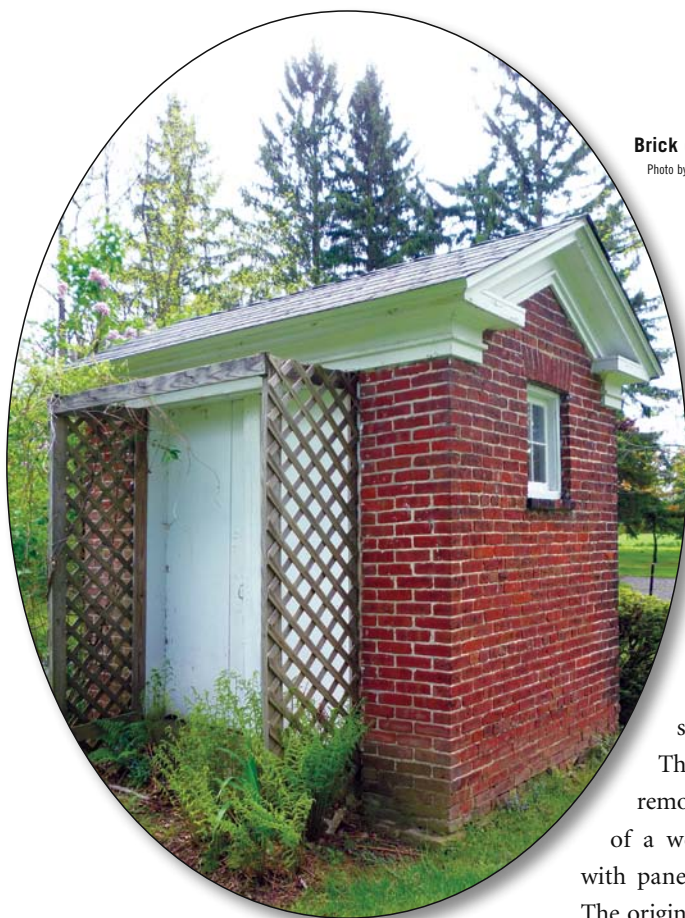


joists in the basement. The fine craftsmanship of Irvine's chosen carpenters, William and John Thompson and John Voverse, is reflected in the interior's crown moldings, baseboards, and wide window surrounds typical of the Greek Revival style. Each door and window in the public rooms on the first floor has corner blocks and unique central blocks at the midpoint of the top of the window frame. One of the two kitchens, now used as a den, retains its original built-ins.

The house was purchased in 1940 by Will A. ("Bill") and Nell Walker who named it "The Locusts" and used it as their summer escape from the town of Warren five miles south. The Walkers' daughter and her husband, Jane and Robert Kopf, restored the house and winterized it sensitively so that it could be used permanently as a home for their three boys. Jane chose appropriate wallpapers and sculpted the eight acres immediately surrounding the house into a garden at the rear with locust



Façade of The Locusts. Photo by Lu Donnelly.



Brick double privy, now garden shed.

Photo by Clinton Piper.


groves on either side. The house and grounds were dilapidated by the late 1930s and the only salvageable outbuilding was the brick double privy, now reconfigured as a garden shed.

The Locusts' façade is familiar to those who live in Western Pennsylvania. A five-bay, red brick, two-story house is nothing unusual here, but the large bridged chimneys on each side of the house set off by fanlights in the attic are an unusual luxury in rural construction. One-story dependencies on

either side elongate the façade and add to its elegance. The Locusts has a one-bay porch sheltering the central entry with Ionic columns and pilasters, as well as leaded sidelights and transom. Charles Stotz' 1936 book, *The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania*, has several pages of drawings showing even the tiny details in the sidelight windows flanking the door in the shape of small florets and fleur de lis.

The only change to the exterior was the removal, before the Walkers' ownership, of a wooden cornice plate ornamented with panels similar to those on the eaves.⁴ The original shutters and windows are set off by stone lintels and sills that were dressed by masons with the scabbled and drafted work (pocking in the center by a chisel point with scoring around the edges of each stone).

The Walker and Kopf families understood the architectural importance of this house and as early as 1980 drew up an easement with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy that legally binds them to maintain the exterior as closely as possible to its original appearance. This contract is embedded in the title to the house so that future owners must respect their

wishes and maintain the house and grounds. What a gift to those of us who cherish the architectural heritage of this region. 

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010), a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art. She is now project manager for the Pittsburgh Architects and Buildings Project, an on-line database in collaboration with the Athenæum of Philadelphia.

¹ The fence was recreated in the 1940s using the Stotz drawings. New black locust trees replace the originals as needed.

² George W. Brown, ed. *Old Times in Oildom* (Oil City: Derrick Publishing Company, 1911), pp. 213-214; William Adams, ed. *Historical Gazetteer and Biographical Memorial of Cattaraugus County, New York* (Syracuse: Lyman, Horton and Co., 1893), pp. 475-476.

³ Philip Tome. *Pioneer Life or Thirty Years a Hunter* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2006), pp. 119-121. This is a reprint of Tome's 1854 memoir.

⁴ Charles Morse Stotz. *The Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), pp. 136-139. A re-issuing of Stotz' original 1936 book.