



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

### Abel Colley Tavern and Museum

Driving at highway speed past the Abel Colley Tavern and Museum, one might dismiss it as just another red brick, gable-roofed, five bay, two-story house; the kind seen all over Western Pennsylvania. But this Fayette County house bears closer inspection, not for its age, but for its location, associations, and the dedication of its volunteers. There are older inns along the National Road. In fact, the original owner of this tavern grew up three miles to the west with his 10 siblings in his Irish father's stone inn/house dating from 1796.<sup>1</sup> There was no shortage of inns along this, the main highway to the west from 1818 to 1852. Since most stagecoaches averaged 12 to 14 miles per day, there were more than 70 taverns or inns along the 90 miles of the road in Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> So what sets this inn apart?



**South and east elevations of Abel Colley Tavern and Museum.**

All Photos by Edward J. Donnelly, III.

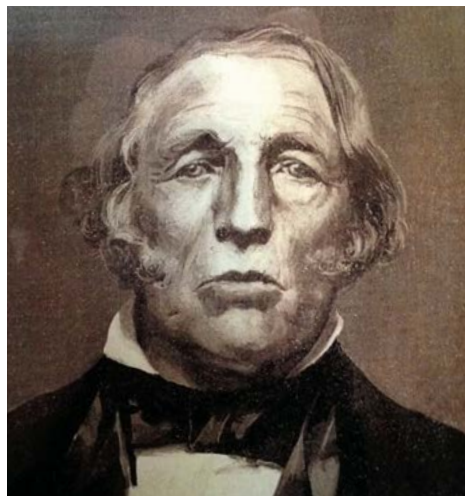
First, as Thomas Searight's 1894 history of the National Road states, "Abel Colley accumulated a considerable fortune at this old tavern (an 1825 tavern on the south side of the road called 'Green Tree'), and when trade and travel ceased built a fine brick residence on the roadside opposite, where he retired with his family to private life and in a few years thereafter died."<sup>3</sup> If this is Abel Colley's retirement house, why have a separate door to a room with the scars of a corner bar on the floor, and folding doors on the second floor that opened two rooms into a large meeting space? The inn

is also unique because one family donated the house to the Fayette County Historical Society, which now cares for the home.<sup>4</sup>

The tavern also fascinates because of the skilled volunteers who spent most of 2010 restoring the house to its full potential. They even enlisted the aid of non-violent prisoners in orange prison suits, who came with their guard from the State Correctional Institution in Greene County, and the group just happened to include a skilled drywaller, a union carpenter, and a plumber. During renovations, it was discovered (after years of

paint were cleaned off the hinges) that the inn's doors were manufactured in Cincinnati by the A. Gardner Company, which was only in business between 1849 and 1851, thus helping determine the age of the house.

The volunteers found and saved the signature of Bess Colley, Abel's granddaughter, etched in the glass of one of the original windows, along with her sketch of a bird. They built a new kitchen floor when the old one turned out to be linoleum and indoor/outdoor carpeting floating above rotted joists. They even built corner cabinets, fireplace



Abel Colley, from a drawing in Thomas Searight's *Old Pike*, p. 250.



Hinge labeled "A. Gardner."



Bess Colley's window etching of a bird.



# UP FRONT

---

mantels, and a ceiling medallion appropriate to the 1850s, and installed donated crown molding and wooden blinds throughout the house. Joe Hardy, founder and CEO of 84 Lumber, donated the climate control system so the historical society could properly store artifacts that capture the history of Fayette County, including the story of Abel Colley and his grand house.

The Abel Colley Tavern and Museum is at 7083 National Pike/US 40, Smock, Pa. Find it on Facebook. 

**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.

<sup>1</sup> The stone Peter Colley tavern of 1796 located less than three miles west along the National Road is in disrepair, but is a very important artifact as it pre-dates the building of the National Road.



West elevation.



Ceiling medallion crafted by Tom Buckelew, c. 2010, from scars on ceiling.

## Learn More Online



Visit the Abel Colley Tavern Museum's Facebook page.

Check out the Fayette County Historical Society's homepage.



**15-inch Rodman Columbiad, Fort Monroe, Virginia, c. 1864.**  
Library of Congress B817- 7419.



## 15-inch Artillery Shell, 330 pounds

The Fort Pitt Foundry in Pittsburgh manufactured the first gun built using Thomas Rodman's innovative hollow casting process in the 1850s. In 1860, the War Department commissioned Rodman to build the world's first 15-inch cannon. Used primarily for seacoast defenses, the 15-inch Rodman Columbiads combined two important artillery

features: the mobility of a field gun with a howitzer or mortar's ability to shoot a shell at a high angle with a steep descent. This combination allowed the Columbiad to send a large shell out to sea and do significant damage to an enemy ship. During the Civil War, the Fort Pitt Foundry produced hundreds of 8-inch, 10-inch, and 15-inch Rodman cannons for the Union war effort. By 1864, Rodman had also supervised the fabrication of a massive 20-inch gun—its shell dwarfs this one, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution and on display at the History Center. A full-scale replica of the famous 20-inch Rodman will soon be installed in the History Center's Great Hall to commemorate the cannon's 150th anniversary.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Behring Center. Photo by HHC.

<sup>2</sup> The National Road extends for 600 miles from Maryland to Illinois, but only 90 miles of it cross the southwest corner of Pennsylvania. Deborah S. Burns and Richard J. Webster, *Pennsylvania Architecture* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2000), 445.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas B. Searight, *Old Pike: a history of the national road, with incidents, accidents, and anecdotes thereon* (Uniontown, Pa.: 1894), 250. The historical society puts Abel Colley's death in 1858.

<sup>4</sup> The house was donated by Virginia and Warren Dick in memory of Susan and Frank Dulik, the last private residents, in July 2009.

<sup>5</sup> All crafted by Tom Buckelew of Uniontown.



**Corner cabinet crafted by Tom Buckelew, c. 2010.**