

# UP FRONT



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Angelique Bamberg

### Two Centuries and Beyond at the Century Inn

The road trip, that modern American icon of carefree adventure, was a far more arduous matter 200 years ago. Then, people traveled under their own power, or that of horses, averaging fewer than 15 miles per day over uneven, unpaved paths. Taverns and inns were located at frequent intervals along these routes to offer rest and refreshment to weary travelers.

The oldest and finest of these wayside

lodges in Western Pennsylvania — the Century Inn — stands in Scenery Hill, Washington County. The hamlet, part of North Bethlehem Township, was once called “Hillsborough” after a family of early settlers named Hill. George Hill began construction on a two-story inn, then known as Hill’s Tavern, using stone quarried from the surrounding area in 1788. George’s son, Stephen, completed the one-story stone addition in 1794.

Like other inns of its time, the Century Inn’s form and scale are essentially those of a large house. The original building had eight rooms: seven for guests plus an eighth doing double duty as both tavern and innkeeper’s quarters. The addition accommodated a dining room and kitchen with a massive stone hearth. The original architectural style is Georgian: its formality, symmetry, and ornament derived from ancient Greek and Roman prototypes. Though a vernacular example by an unknown architect, the Century Inn’s refinement is evident in the precise squaring and careful

coursing of the facade stone and in the splayed lintels and keystones above its windows and front door. The paperwork placing it in the National Register of Historic Places extolls the Century Inn as the “pride of Washington County and one of the most important buildings in Western Pennsylvania.”

Thirty years after it served its first traveler, Hill’s Tavern had the good fortune of seeing the National Road laid just steps from its front door. Conceived by George Washington and authorized by Thomas Jefferson, the National Road was the first major federally funded highway. It extended over 600 miles from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois, connecting the Potomac and Ohio Rivers and facilitating the delivery of mail and merchandise. Ninety miles of the road crossed southwestern Pennsylvania, positioning the region as a center of commerce and communication between the eastern U.S. and the western territories during the first half of the 19th century.

The restored Century Inn just before  
its reopening in February 2018.

Photo by Margittai Architects.







The original stone hearth in the restored 1794 kitchen, or "Keeping Room."

Photo by Margittai Architects.



The Century Inn's historic tavern in 2016, a year after the fire that gutted the property.

Photo by Angelique Bamberg.

The Century Inn reflects the prosperity the road brought to Washington County. Guests have included Andrew Jackson and the Marquis de Lafayette. Abraham Lincoln is also reported to have breakfasted there, lured by the reputation of the food. Successive generations added to the original architecture: a Greek Revival veranda, an Italianate cornice with brackets, and frame additions atop the 1794 stone ell (a wing of a building that lies perpendicular to the length of the main portion) in the rear. In 1960, the innkeepers added three dormers to the roof of the original building, their simplicity and symmetry sensitively keeping with its Georgian design.

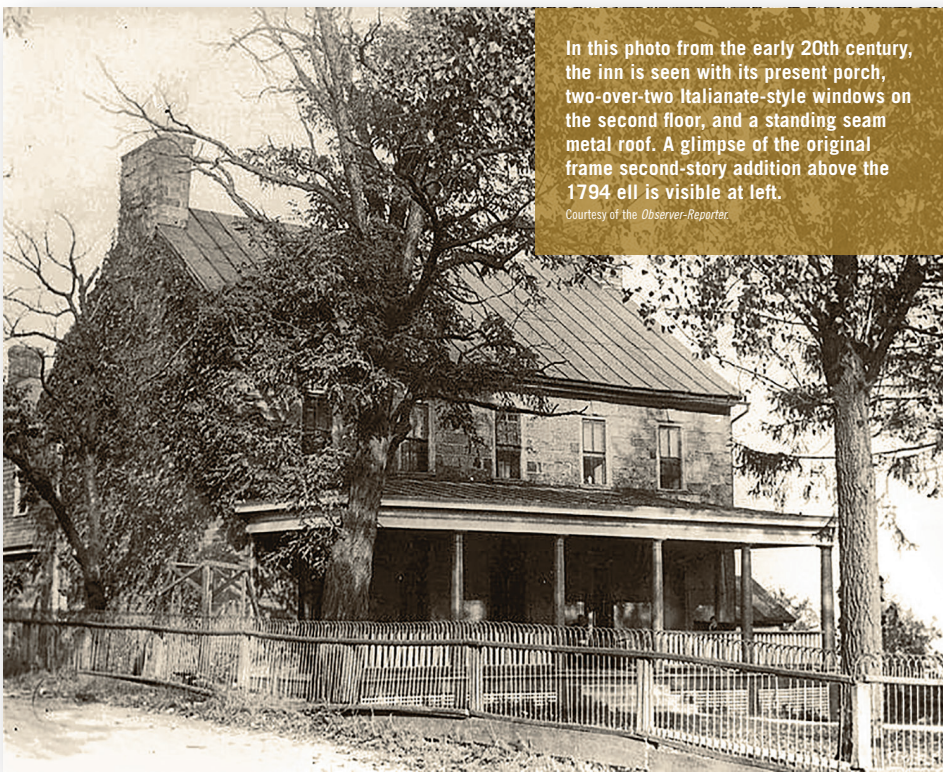
The inn operated continuously from 1788 to 2015. Then, disaster: a fire ignited in the rear addition and swept forward, devastating everything except the inn's 18th-century stone

walls and façade. Along with the building itself, the fire consumed the invaluable collection of antique Western Pennsylvania furnishings and artworks inside.

The Harrington family, who have owned and operated the inn since the 1940s, determined to rebuild. Assisted by Margittai Architects and myself as historic preservation consultant, they restored what could be salvaged and replicated what could not, using the building's charred remains as a guide. The fallen chimneys were rebuilt using the original stone, as was a stone wall that

collapsed during construction. The burned staircase could not be safely restored, so it was thoroughly documented before being removed, and carpenters copied every element to build a replacement. Sections of baseboard and chair rail found on original walls were used as models for milling new trims. The new walls are gypsum board instead of plaster, but finished in period paint colors and papers. The appearance of the original front door is not known, so contractors replicated the one that was on the inn at the time of the fire. Meanwhile, owner Megin Harrington combed antique markets for new furnishings, paintings, and other decor to recreate historically correct, yet comfortable interiors. Only the inn's frame additions were designed anew in the absence of enough evidence to faithfully reconstruct the old.

The Century Inn reopened early this year, an enduring testament to 200 years of Western Pennsylvania architecture, craftsmanship, and decorative arts. 🌟



In this photo from the early 20th century, the inn is seen with its present porch, two-over-two Italianate-style windows on the second floor, and a standing seam metal roof. A glimpse of the original frame second-story addition above the 1794 ell is visible at left.

Courtesy of the Observer-Reporter.

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