By the middle 1700s, handsome villas had begun to appear along the banks of the Schuylkill. Besides affording their owners the pleasures of country living, they served as showcases of fashionable taste — evidence that one had “arrived.” As the century progressed, the houses reflected a range of architectural styles, from the bold symmetry of Palladian to the smooth lightness of Federal, a neo-classicism that continued into the 19th century.

Meanwhile, the city fathers realized that, in order to preserve the quality of the river, development of the land above the waterworks had to be curtailed, and they began buying up the estates along the Schuylkill to create a large public park. Thus, in 1855, Fairmount Park was born.

A series of events unfolded, beginning in the 1790s, that would change the fortunes of these country villas, but would eventually lead to their preservation. Several serious epidemics of yellow fever, the worst in 1793, forced the city fathers to try to find a way to prevent the disease. Falsely assuming that the cause was contaminated water, they built public waterworks. The first of these, designed by architect Benjamin Latrobe and completed in 1801, was a steam-powered pumping station at Center Square, presently the site of City Hall. Soon proven inadequate for the growing city, it was replaced by a larger and more efficient one, also steam-powered, designed by Latrobe’s pupil, Frederick Graff. This waterworks opened in 1815, at the foot of the hill called Fairmount, now the site of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Later, a dam, completed in 1822, created a cheaper and more efficient system, harnessing the river to power huge waterwheels that pumped the water to the top of Fairmount, to flow by gravity to the city.

The waterworks was praised for its efficiency, and for the beauty of its neo-classical buildings, but the dam caused problems for some of the river villas above it. Swamp conditions and the flooding of meadowlands began to make country living seem less desirable, and some of the residents began to contract “river fever” from mosquitoes breeding in stagnant water.

A revealing look into the history of extraordinary 18th century treasures in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park

“...It is one of those odd accidents of history that the best illustration of villa life as it was understood in England and developed along the banks of the Thames in the 18th century should exist in Pennsylvania along the banks of the Schuylkill River a few miles from the centre of Philadelphia.”

— John Cornforth (1)
The oldest of the eight is Cedar Grove, owned by five generations of the Paschall/Morris family. In 1746, a Quaker widow, Elizabeth Coates Paschall, bought land in the Frankford area, about four miles northeast of the old city of Philadelphia in a section called Harrowgate, known for its mineral springs. She had a house built there in 1748-50 as a summer residence for herself and her three children. Her house, the northern half of the present Cedar Grove, was of native gray stone, with two stories and a garret under a gable roof.

Life had not always been easy for Elizabeth Paschall. Her husband, Joseph, had died in 1742 at age forty-one, and she had taken over his dry goods business. Of the nine children born to them, only three had survived. Perhaps understandably, she was interested in the medical practices of the day, and she recorded many recipes for cures, using the herbs from her extensive garden.

After Elizabeth’s death in 1768, her unmarried daughter, Beulah, inherited Cedar Grove, and raised her two nieces, orphaned daughters of her deceased brother, Isaac. One niece, Sarah, inherited the house in 1795, the same year that she married Isaac Wistar Morris, a brewer at the time of the marriage. Together they more than doubled the size of the house c.1799, creating a much larger parlor and kitchen, and two large bedrooms above. They had the roof raised to a double pitch, or gambrel, to accommodate four more bedrooms on the third floor for what became a family of nine children. In enlarging the house, they matched the earlier portion with ashlar stone in regular courses on the front façade, and used undressed rubblestone on the sides.

Their son, Isaac Paschall Morris, became the next owner of Cedar Grove. Involved in the iron industry, manufacturing parts for ships, he was purported to be one of the twenty richest men in Philadelphia. It was probably he who added the porch, or “piazza,” by 1848.

The last generation to live at Cedar Grove was Isaac’s children, Miss Lydia Thompson Morris and her brother, John. They enjoyed this summer home until 1888, when increased industrialization and the intrusion of the railroad made it no longer a peaceful country retreat. They bought land in Chestnut Hill, built a large new country house there called Compton, and developed its gardens into what is today the Morris Arboretum. After the death of John, Miss Lydia had Cedar Grove dismantled and moved, stone by stone (1926-28) to West Fairmount Park, where it became the property of the City of Philadelphia under the Park Commission. She also generously gave much of the family furniture that had been in the house to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, to be placed in the house under the jurisdiction of the Museum, at the time directed by Fiske Kimball.

Everything about Cedar Grove suggests informal country living. There is no central hall, and the downstairs rooms all have access to the piazza. An indoor bake oven, a large brass and copper wash boiler, and a wall of built-in closets are unusual features. The architecture reflects a practical simplicity from the long line of Quakers who lived there; but their furniture has a simple elegance that is anything but plain. Every period is included, from the Early Baroque (William and Mary) through the Rococo (Chippendale) to a Federal suite that was Lydia Poultney Thompson’s wedding dowry in 1809. A rare triple chest of c.1750 is said to have belonged to Elizabeth Paschall, and Beulah’s dressing table, a gift from her brother Joseph, made by David Evans, graces the master bedroom.

Cedar Grove is open to the public under the auspices of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is on Lansdowne Drive, in West Fairmount Park.
On the east side of the Schuylkill, near the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, stands Woodford, the 18th century home of both Patriots and Tories. In 1756, Judge William Coleman purchased twelve acres of land carved out of an original Penn grant. On this he built a one-and-a-half story symmetrical brick Georgian house as his summer residence. It had a parlor, center hallway, two bedrooms, and a basement kitchen. Symmetrically placed a short distance behind the house are two stone buildings of equal size that served as a cottage for servants and a stable or "chair-house." Coleman’s best legacy to Woodford was the beautiful parlor with its coved ceiling and exquisite carved wooden chimneypiece.

William Coleman was a successful merchant, a devoted public servant, and, eventually, a justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He was also a patriot and a close friend of Benjamin Franklin, and involved in many of the latter’s civic projects. He and his wife Hannah (Fitzwater) were childless, but they took in their seven-year-old orphaned nephew, George Clymer, and brought him up as their own. Clymer would later make his mark as a signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Upon Coleman’s death in 1769, the house was sold to a Quaker, Alexander Barclay, His Majesty’s Customs Comptroller for the port of Philadelphia, whose position would initiate the tenancy of Loyalists (Tories) at Woodford. Barclay’s tenancy was brief, and upon his death in 1771, the house was bought by his brother-in-law, David Franks. It was Franks who enlarged Woodford to almost its present size, adding a second floor with a Palladian window, a stairwell, and a kitchen wing with a paneled room above, which may have been a ballroom. A recent paint study has revealed that most of the woodwork was finished in stylish painted graining during the Franks family’s ownership.

David Franks had strong family ties to London. He had served for years as the Crown Agent for the British Army in North America, a position that continued with the onset of the Revolutionary War. Yet, in 1765, he had joined the local merchants in signing the Non-Importation Agreement, which led to the repeal of the Stamp Act. His attempt at a neutral position was undoubtedly undermined by his beautiful, witty, and irrepressible nineteen-year-old daughter, Rebecca. She wrote poetry satirizing the Revolutionary leaders, was the toast of the British officers during their 1778 occupation of Philadelphia, and was the belle of the Mischianza ball, given for the departing Lord Howe.

Eventually, in 1778, David Franks was arrested for sending letters considered inimical to the American cause; ordered to leave, he took his family to New York, and transferred Woodford to Thomas Paschall to settle a debt. Paschall probably never lived at his newly acquired country house, and rented it out. He sold Woodford to Isaac Wharton in 1793.
Isaac was married to Margaret Rawle Wharton, who had grown up summering “next door” in the house called Laurel Hill. The Whartons evidently made substantial interior changes to Woodford, turning the two small first floor bedrooms into one large dining room, reflecting a newer trend, and creating one room from the two above the parlor. Having five young children, they used all the upstairs space for bedrooms. Woodford was still used only as a summer retreat. Upon Isaac’s death in 1808, he left his villa to his oldest child, Francis Rawle Wharton, who continued to summer there.

In 1869 the city bought Woodford from the Wharton heirs to add to Fairmount Park. The villa served as the home of the Chief Engineer and Supervisor of the Park, and later, in 1912, as the Park Guard headquarters and traffic court. “Scorchers,” driving motorcars over the speed limit (and frightening the horses), were apprehended by the Park Police on bicycles, and paid their fines in Woodford’s parlor.

A happier phase was initiated when The Naomi Wood Trust came into being. Miss Wood had been a collector of 18th century furniture and household gear, and along with her executor and fellow collector Daniel T.V. Huntoon, had set up a trust by which her collection would be displayed in an appropriate house for the enjoyment of the public. Following her death in 1926, Huntoon found that Woodford was available to be leased from the Park. The $50,000 that Miss Wood had earmarked for the purchase of a house was put toward the restoration of Woodford, and thus began the happy marriage of a handsome villa and an outstanding collection of antiques. Woodford opened as a house museum in 1930, with Daniel Huntoon as the first individual Trustee, along with the Girard Bank as Corporate Trustee. (Much of the furniture in the house is from Huntoon’s own collection.) The next two Trustees were John P. B. Sinkler and Martin Snyder. The present Trustee, since 1986, is Lawrence A. Berger.

A near disaster happened to Woodford on July 11, 2003. A painter using a heat gun touched off a fire under the eaves of the roof. Fortunately it was quickly discovered; and thanks to the prompt action of the caretaker, Ed Doyle, the firefighters, the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust, and the Museum of Art’s conservation staff, the house and its contents were saved. Due to smoke and water damage, and the hole in the roof, it was almost two years before the house could reopen. Ironically, one of the few pieces to be smashed to smithereens was a Delft “Tory” bowl, inscribed “Success to British Arms by Sea and Land.” It is being repaired.

Opposite page. Woodford parlor chimneypiece. Landscape painting in the center is English, school of Richard Wilson, 1750. Garniture, Chinese export, famille rose pattern, 1780.
A successful Scottish privateer, Captain John MacPherson, bought about one hundred and fifty acres of land on the east side of the Schuylkill, and erected a splendid villa between 1762 and 1765. In its classical symmetry and two flanking pavilions, Mount Pleasant reflects English design books and the influence of the Italian Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio. Its creamy scored stucco façade, boldly trimmed with a red brick belt course and quoining, strongly resembles Scottish prototypes, such as Glendoick, in Perthshire, near the area from which MacPherson had come. His master builder, Thomas Nevell, working with skilled craftsmen, created in Mount Pleasant what John Adams, visiting in 1775, proclaimed “the most elegant seat in Pennsylvania.” The rich carving, both classic Greek and rococo, that embellishes the interior, particularly the principal chamber on the second floor, more than qualifies for such an accolade.

MacPherson married twice, and fathered ten children. He developed his estate with fields for sheep and cows, orchards, and a large, Scottish-style walled garden in which he grew such luxuries as asparagus, strawberries, and artichokes. Eccentric and ingenious, he invented a vermin-proof bed, and a mechanical device for moving brick or stone houses from one place to another, operated from within the house. He also published the first city directory. Evidently he over-extended himself in financial deals, for he died impoverished in 1792.

Money problems had forced the Captain to rent out Mount Pleasant in the late 1770s to the Spanish Minister to Philadelphia, Don Juan de Mirailles. General Benedict Arnold bought the property in 1779, in trust for his bride-to-be, Peggy Shippen. In the fall of 1780, before the Mirailles lease was up, Arnold’s intended betrayal of the military fortifications at West Point was discovered, and the traitor left Philadelphia. His wife and baby son were banished as well. Mount Pleasant changed hands several times in the 1780s; Peggy’s father, Edward Shippen, acquired it in 1784 and sold it in 1792 to Colonel Jonathan Williams, a great-nephew of Benjamin Franklin.

Williams, like his great-uncle, had a strong scientific bent. His knowledge of fortifications led to his appointment to supervise the defenses at West Point. In 1802, President Jefferson appointed him as the first superintendent of the new military academy there. He directed the fortification of New York Harbor, and, during the War of 1812, he attended to the defenses of the Delaware in Philadelphia. At this time he was commissioned a Brigadier-General of New York militia. In his absence, his wife, Mariamne, was left in charge of Mount Pleasant and its operating farm.
At last, in 1926, Mount Pleasant was rescued by the Park Commission’s decision to restore it, with the help and encouragement of Fiske Kimball, newly appointed Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a knowledgeable architectural historian. A generous donation from Charles H. Ludington helped fund restoration of the house and grounds, and Mount Pleasant opened as a house museum, which it is today, administered by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. During 2005-2006 an extensive restoration of the house has again taken place, including major structural repair, under the able supervision of David deMuzio, the Elaine S. Harrington Senior Conservator of Furniture and Woodwork at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

General Williams died in 1815, followed by his wife in the following year. Mount Pleasant and its grounds, by then reduced to thirty-eight acres, were inherited by their son, Henry J. Williams and his sister, Christine Biddle. By the 1840s, Henry had begun to sell portions of the land to new industries in the area. The Knickerbocker Ice Company of Philadelphia, harvesting ice from the Schuylkill, bought or leased various parcels of Mount Pleasant’s land along the river, as did some brewers of German lager beer. In 1854, Henry Williams sold thirty acres, including the house, to a group of investors who, in turn, sold to the Granite Land Company. During this time, many of Philadelphia’s German population used Mount Pleasant as a center for recreation known as “Washington’s Retreat.”

Finally, in 1869, the entire Mount Pleasant property was sold to the City of Philadelphia, and became part of Fairmount Park. In the years that followed, the house endured a checkered career. Used for a time as Park offices, it became a dairy in 1878, producing and selling fresh milk on the premises until around 1900. In 1906, it became the headquarters of a ladies’ automobile club.

Jonathan Williams (1750-1815), painted in 1815 by Thomas Sully (1783-1872). In the background, New York Harbor with Castle Williams, a fort designed by the general, on Governor’s Island. Below, upstairs great chamber of Mount Pleasant; carved decoration attrib. Martin Jugiez (d.1815). Portrait over fireplace is of Mary Keen (1738-1820), mother of the first wife of William MacPherson (1755-1813), the captain’s second son. Artist unknown. Daybed, Philadelphia, c.1745-1755.
Major Parr in 1784. She had more difficulty with his tenant, the French Minister, the Chevalier de la Luzerne, who had been summering there, and who insisted on being repaid for the remainder of his lease, at one hundred pounds a year. Rebecca, in order to raise the money, arranged with Peter Price, her tenant farmer, to “go halves” on the produce raised at Laurel Hill. Strawberries turned out to be Laurel Hill’s most successful cash crop; cabbages and other vegetables were raised as well.

Finally, Samuel and Edward returned from England to rejoin Rebecca, and by 1791 they were again spending summers at Laurel Hill. In 1800, Samuel Shoemaker died. By this time Edward and his growing family of nine children were summering at Laurel Hill, and it may have been for them that the small, one-story wing was added to the south end of the house.

Edward was a successful hardware merchant, but his prosperity was short-lived. The Embargo Act, passed by Congress in 1807, cut off international trade, costing Edward major financial losses, and for years his mother and brother William borrowed money to keep him “outside of a jail.” Several of these loans were from Dr. Philip Syng Physick, “the father of American surgery.” In 1813, Edward moved to a farm in Bucks County, and Dr. Physick and his family leased Laurel Hill and summered there.

Rebecca died in 1819 and left Laurel Hill to her son, William Rawle, who continued to summer there with his family. He engaged in truck farming with the help of a tenant farmer.

William visited Laurel Hill only sporadically after the death of his wife in 1824, and he sold the house to Dr. Physick in 1828. The doctor eventually left Laurel Hill to his daughter, Sally, who was married to a surgeon named Jacob Randolph. The question remains as to when the large, handsome octagonal wing was added to the north end of the house.
Laurel Hill’s present situation is a happy one. In 1976, a group called Women for the Bicentennial adopted the house. Now known as Women for Greater Philadelphia, these ladies have dedicated their efforts to preserving, promoting and enhancing the house, opening it for tours, musicales, and other special events.


Stylistically, with its large-paneled, narrow-muntined windows, it could have been added at any time after 1800. It was definitely in place by the time the city purchased Laurel Hill, then known as the Randolph estate, in March, 1869.

Laurel Hill probably housed temporary tenants for the next thirty years. In 1900, the Colonial Dames of America Chapter II were granted use of the house by the Park Commission. By 1901, the “Randolph Mansion” was restored and re-opened for use by the Dames, who met there and presented papers about the other historic structures in the Park, thereby kindling an interest that would lead to a major “colonial revival.”
A separate kitchen building was forty-five feet due west of the front door. It was one-and-a-half stories high, over a full cellar connected to the front hall of the main house by a tunnel. Food was prepared there, and ferried through the tunnel to the dining area in the west hall of the main house, or into the parlor, or out onto the portico.

Upstairs, the sense of privacy continues to prevail. In Penn's bedroom, the bed was set in a curtained alcove. Evidently, the room was hung with a copper-plated fabric depicting "William Penn's Treaty with the Indians," a remnant of which still exists. The library, with its handsome Sheraton bookcases, held a large assortment of books, said to be fifteen hundred volumes. It was a collection typical of a cultured and learned gentleman, including the great names of literature: Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and many others, as well as books by two English architects, Robert Morris and Abraham Swan, which may have been useful to Penn when designing The Solitude.

Penn's landscape was equally in the British taste, as popularized in 18th century England by "Capability" Brown. All the ingredients of an Englishman's country estate were there: a stable and coach house; a kitchen garden; a "wilderness" and a bowling green; a long, winding path to the Schuylkill, beside a ha-ha (a deep ditch and steep bank to confine animals); a footbridge over a small stream; and a flower garden. Careful plantings afforded controlled vistas toward, and away from, the house.

John Penn's tenancy of his house was short-lived. In 1789, after only four years, he became disenchanted with America, and chose to return to England. Evidently the Pennsylvania legislature's settlement of his proprietary claims was not to his satisfaction. The contents of The Solitude were removed and sold at public auction.

On his return to England, Penn entered into public affairs, eventually being appointed...
some restoration issues made it too much of a financial burden for the Museum, and it reverted to the Zoo, which uses it as the Administration office. Fortunately, most of its architectural details have been preserved, and its present landscape, though altered, retains a vestige of its rural surroundings.

The Solitude, Governor of Portland in Dorset. Although he remained a bachelor, he organized, in 1817, the Outinian Society, a sort of "lonely hearts club," to encourage single young people into wedlock.

Following Penn’s departure in 1789, The Solitude was evidently leased sporadically to tenants. After his death in 1834, at age 74, the villa was inherited by his brother, Granville Penn, and later his nephew, Granville John Penn, the last private owner. The latter visited Philadelphia in 1851, and was showered with hospitality. In return, he gave a "fête champêtre," a feast for the local aristocracy, at The Solitude.

In 1867, The Solitude was acquired by Fairmount Park, and, in 1874, it became part of the Philadelphia Zoo, which used it to house the reptile collection. The kitchen building was torn down, its site presently occupied by the small mammal house, but the forty-five foot tunnel remains. The house has had various functions over the years. From 1976 to 1985, it enjoyed visitation as a tour house, installed in accordance with Penn inventories by Beatrice Garvan, Associate Curator of American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and administered by the Museum. The Solitude’s upkeep and

The Solitude, east façade, showing separate kitchen building to the rear. Oil painting on wood 1796-1808, by William Russell Birch (1755-1834). Courtesy Winterthur.

The Solitude, John Penn’s bedroom with alcove bed. Photograph of portrait of John Penn by Robert Edge Pine (c.1730-1788).
On the west bank of the Schuylkill, not far upriver from The Solitude, stands Sweetbriar, home for almost forty years to Samuel Breck and his family. Breck himself described it as “a fine stone house, rough cast, fifty-three feet long, thirty-eight broad, and three stories high, having outbuildings of every kind suitable for elegance and comfort.” He mentioned the prospect of the river with its great traffic of horse-drawn boats of thirty tons, plus “a beautiful sloping lawn...wide screen woods...gardens, greenhouse, etc.” With its smooth stucco façade, floor-to-ceiling windows in its twin parlors, and delicate interior details, Samuel Breck’s villa embodies the best of Federal architecture.

Breck was born in Boston in 1771, the son of Samuel Breck, Sr., fiscal agent for the French forces stationed in Boston Harbor during the Revolutionary War. At age eleven, Samuel was sent to school in France, and he traveled abroad as a young man.

In 1792, the Breck family moved to Philadelphia, lured by the milder climate and lower taxes in the fashionable port city, then the seat of the Federal government. Young Samuel Breck set up as a merchant on the Walnut Street wharf. Soon he met a local young woman named Jean Ross, and they were married on Christmas Eve, 1795.

The Rosses were a wealthy family. Jean’s father, John, had made a fortune in the East India trade. In 1796, John Ross and his wife gave a twenty-four-acre parcel of land to the newly wed Samuel and Jean Breck for the sum of ten shillings. On this land, Sweetbriar was built in 1797, to be a year-round residence.

There was a good reason to move permanently to the country in the 1790s. A series of yellow fever epidemics in Philadelphia, the worst in 1793, caused ten thousand deaths by 1800, and many fled the city. Samuel Breck, perhaps due to his secure financial situation following his marriage, retired from his merchant career when he built Sweetbriar, and devoted the rest of his life to public service. A year-round house in the country suited him well.

Besides his support of local institutions—a church, a school for the blind, bridge and canal building, learned societies—Breck enjoyed a brief political career. He served twice in the Pennsylvania Legislature, and in his second term (1833-35), introduced the bill that would create the public school system in the state. He also served one term in the United States Congress (1823-25).

One of Samuel Breck’s passions was horticulture. He maintained a greenhouse, as well as flower and vegetable gardens, and kept a careful record in his diary of such events as the appearance of the first asparagus and the blooming of the peaches and pears. In growing vegetables for the table and exotic tender plants in a greenhouse, he was in step with several of his villa neighbors.

Samuel and Jean Breck had only one child, a daughter named Lucy. Born in 1807, she was the apple of her father’s eye; he spent a great deal of time driving her to music lessons and parties. In December, 1826, the Brecks gave a ball for her at Sweetbriar, a party of eighty people. There was dancing in the hall and north parlor, and presumably the musicians played from the small balcony above the stairs.

Lucy’s life was cut short, at age twenty-one. Following the building of the Fairmount Dam in 1822, the river above it flooded low-lying areas, creating swamp conditions. Samuel Breck lost over sixteen acres of meadowland, and worried about the effects of the stagnant water...
on the spread of disease. His worries were evidently well founded, for in July of 1828, Lucy contracted what may have been typhus, and died in a few days.

In the years following Lucy’s death, the Brecks became increasingly disenchanted with life in the country and, in 1835, they moved into town, renting until 1839, when a new house was ready for them. They sold Sweetbriar to William S. Torr in 1838. Samuel Breck died at age ninety-one in 1862, in full possession of all his faculties.130

It is uncertain how Torr used the property, but an 1859 survey indicates that he may have used it as a tavern.131 In 1867, Sweetbriar was sold to the City, and became part of Fairmount Park. It was used as a restaurant, and Victorian porches were added. Finally, in 1927, the Junior League of Philadelphia restored the house, under the direction of Erling Pederson, architect, removing some late 19th century additions, including the porches, and putting in modern conveniences for their use. In 1939, the Modern Club of Philadelphia, a women’s organization long associated with social service, assumed the care and maintenance of Sweetbriar, which they continue to this day. Some Breck family heirlooms are on display in the house, as well as furnishings from the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
On the east side of the Schuylkill, close to Woodford, stands a house long known as Strawberry Mansion. The thirteen acre parcel of land on which it was built was bought by William Lewis in 1783. It contained a "messuage," or dwelling.

William Lewis was a Quaker, born in Edgmont, Chester (now Delaware) County in 1751. He became a brilliant lawyer, and was known for his defense of pacifist Quakers accused of treason for refusing to bear arms in the Revolutionary War. A dedicated abolitionist, Lewis was allegedly the principal draftsman of the “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” passed by the Legislature on March 1, 1780, which made Pennsylvania the first state in the Union to pass an anti-slavery law.

On July 14, 1791, Lewis was appointed Judge of the United States District Court of Pennsylvania. He resigned in less than a year, returning to his more lucrative private practice. A staunch Federalist, he was a good friend of Alexander Hamilton, who consulted him about the constitutionality of the Bank of the United States. He disapproved of the mobs and violence of the French Revolution, and defiantly continued to wear knee britches and his hair powdered in a queue long after these were out of style, rather than follow French fashions.

It was probably in 1789 that William Lewis built the central section of the present house, which he called Summerville, allegedly on the foundations of the earlier "messuage." The house embodies the delicate neo-classicism of the Federal taste, including arched niches, fanlight transoms over doors, and a plaster ceiling medallion in the hall, and two mantelpieces adorned with the plasterwork in the Adam style associated with Philadelphia's Robert Wellford. The exterior construction is roughcast stucco over stone.

Judge Lewis died in 1819, in debt. In 1821 the property was sold at a Sheriff’s sale, including the main house, tenant house, barn and stables, coach house and ice house; Joseph Hemphill was the purchaser.

Born in 1770 in Chester County, Hemphill enjoyed an active political career. Genial and urbane, he was elected to three separate terms in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. He served five terms in the United States Congress as a Federalist, and one as a Jacksonian Democrat; he was strongly anti-slavery. In between his political careers, he served as the first President Judge of the District Court of Philadelphia. He married Margaret Coleman, the daughter of a wealthy iron industrialist.

Judge Hemphill built some major additions onto Judge Lewis’s old house, probably in the 1820s. Two large, box-like wings, topped by scrolled Greek Revival parapets, flank the center section. The one to the south contains a ballroom, elaborately decorated, each window topped with a Grecian scrolled pediment and flanked by pilasters. The ceiling is embellished with an intricate Greek-style plaster medallion. Paint analysis has revealed that the exterior was at one time painted a light pink, a color common to the Greek Revival.

From 1831 to 1837, Hemphill was a partner and major investor in William Ellis Tucker’s porcelain company, the

Strawberry Mansion (Summerville) 1789, 1820s. Greenland Drive, off 33rd Street, East Fairmount Park. East façade, original center section and flanking Greek Revival wings with Grecian scrolled pediments.

Portrait of Judge William Lewis (1751-1819), after original by Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828). Detail of portrait.
first successful manufacturer of true porcelain in America, founded in 1826 in Philadelphia. When Hemphill became involved, it was called Tucker and Hemphill. A financial panic in 1833 began the downward trend of Hemphill’s fortunes, and his withdrawal from the Tucker firm in 1837 was soon followed by its closure.

In 1838, Joseph Hemphill took out a $10,000 mortgage on the house from his sister-in-law, Harriet Coleman. Upon his death in 1842, she acquired the property for $5000. Four years later she sold it to George Crock, who kept it as a dairy farm until he sold it to the City in 1871, when it became part of Fairmount Park.

There is no clear record of when the name Summerville was changed to Strawberry Mansion. The house was rented out to a number of restaurateurs and snack shop concessions, and became a popular destination for diners and picnickers. It is said that a Mrs. Grimes, renter, dispensed strawberries and cream to the carriage trade on their Sunday outings. By 1876, the name Strawberry Mansion was well known, and the house considered “one of the most popular resorts” in the Park. In 1906, a new music pavilion added to its popularity, and the adjacent neighborhood adopted its name. Probably the only major change to the house in this period was the addition of a wide veranda at the second floor level on the river facade, approached by a large stairway.

Strawberry Mansion’s final reincarnation came about in 1930. Inspired by the success of their venture in the 1926 Sesquicentennial Fair, in which they had created a miniature “High Street” exhibit of 18th century buildings, a women’s group formed the Committee of 1926, and adopted Strawberry Mansion for transformation into a house museum. With a $36,000 donation from Joseph Horn, founder of the Horn and Hardart restaurant chain, the house was restored under the direction of Fiske Kimball and Erling Pederson. The large veranda was removed from the back, and a porch in front, of uncertain age, was removed and replaced with a Colonial Revival portico. Small rooms in the second floor of the north wing were gutted and replaced with a banquet room. The attic is now used to display an assortment of household gear, and a collection of dolls, one from every state, that was begun for the Sesquicentennial.

One major donation, finalized in 1967, is an important addition to the house: the suite of furniture owned by General George Cadwalader, bought in Paris in 1835. Bequeathed by Miss Sophy Cadwalader to the house, its French Empire chairs, sofas and circular “borne” bring a gilded splendor to the ballroom.

Since 1930, the Committee of 1926 has faithfully cared for Strawberry Mansion, and it is open to the public for tours.
In 1770, Robert Morris, a merchant, banker, and financier, purchased from Tench Francis a fifty-five acre tract of land on the east bank of the Schuylkill. He enlarged his purchase to about three hundred acres, and named it The Hills.

Morris’s meteoric career is legendary. From his birth and humble background in Liverpool, England, he came to America, was educated in Philadelphia, formed a successful business partnership, and became very wealthy in trade and finance. At age thirty-six he had a town house as well as his large country estate, where he raised cattle and hogs, and kept a large garden with fruit trees and an elegant greenhouse.

On the national scene, Morris became a major financier of the Revolution. A signer of both the Declaration of Independence and, later, the Constitution, he helped fund George Washington’s army, and, as superintendent of finance, he was able to juggle the new nation’s foreign debts and keep it solvent. Later, when Philadelphia became the temporary capital of the United States, he made one of his two town houses at Sixth and High (Market) Streets available to Washington as the President’s House.

For a time, Morris succeeded very well financially, with investments all over the middle and southern states and in the China trade. In 1784, he was the largest investor in the first voyage of the “Empress of China” on her round trip out of New York to Canton. But by the 1790s, he was beginning to overextend himself. He had bought too much land in the west, and in the developing Federal City (Washington, D.C.), and he had engaged L’Enfant, the designer of the capital city, to build him an elaborate new town house, which became known as “Morris’s Folly.”

There has always been some question as to which of the several farm buildings Morris used on his visits to The Hills, but evidence points to the “large and elegant greenhouse” with its fifty-foot hothouse wings, which contained living quarters in a “strong stone building,” as described by Morris. It was in these glass houses that Morris grew the famous lemon trees that were to give the estate its final name. Morris eventually plunged so deeply into debt that, in February, 1798, he was taken to the Prune Street debtors’ jail, where he stayed until 1801. He died in 1806 with his vast fortune gone.

Henry Pratt bought The Hills at sheriff’s sale in 1798. Two sets of tax records in the new owner’s name show that the villa known as Lemon Hill did not exist at the time of purchase, but appeared later, proving that Pratt was its builder.

Henry Pratt was a wealthy merchant in Philadelphia. Born in 1761, the son of Matthew Pratt, the well-known painter, Henry was married three times and fathered fourteen children, seven of whom grew to maturity. He was living with his third wife, Susanna Care Pratt, in his house on North Front Street when he bought the Morris estate, and he started work on building a house there in April, 1800.

Pratt’s account clearly reveals that he was working as his own contractor, hiring the individual craftsmen and laborers, and buying the materials. What is not clear is what inspired his design. Lemon Hill is unique in Philadelphia, and unusual in the rest of the country, in having an elliptical bay containing three stacked oval rooms. James Hoban’s plan for the White House is somewhat similar. Pratt’s floor plan, featuring ovals and squares en suite, is


Lemon Hill, top right, entrance hall with portrait of Henry Pratt (1761-1838) by Henry Inman. Left, oval parlor with “Grecian” sofa. Chandelier, Portugese, c.1790. bottom right, detail of Pratt portrait.
accretions, such as cornice brackets, extra porches, and awnings. Finally, in 1925, Fiske Kimball arrived in Philadelphia as the first Director of the Museum of Art. After trying out Mount Pleasant for a year, he opted to use Lemon Hill as his residence, restored it to its original appearance, and lived there from 1926 until his death in 1955. Shortly thereafter, the Colonial Dames of America, Chapter II, assumed responsibility for the house, and they have been caring for it ever since. It is furnished by the Dames and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and open to the public for tours.

The Schuylkill villas represent the way of life of a class of people whose privilege it was to enjoy their leisure time in rural surroundings. For some, these houses made a statement of financial or political success, and for others, they were an expression of fashion and taste. For all, they provided a place where family and friends could visit and experience the pleasures of the countryside, and contemplate the beauty of the natural world.

Joan Church Roberts

Pratt apparently took great pains to renovate and enhance Morris’s greenhouse, and add to its collection of exotic plants. A visitor in 1819 commented on the fine collection of orange, lemon, lime, tea, and coffee trees, as well as sugar cane, pepper trees and bananas. Also mentioned were the outside features, including “gravel walks, espaliers, plants, shrubs, mounds,” as well as “pretty bowers, grottoes, summer houses and fish ponds.” Pratt opened his garden free to the public.

Pratt paid for a quantity of luxurious mahogany, to be used for the doors of the downstairs oval room, each section of which is cut from the solid wood to match the curve of the walls.

Building and maintaining an estate such as Lemon Hill, as well as a city house, required significant wealth, and Henry Pratt was a very successful businessman. He and his partner, Abraham Kintzing, were engaged in a variety of foreign trade in Germany, the West Indies, and elsewhere, and the period 1798-1800 was particularly profitable.

Henry Pratt sold the property in 1836, two years before his death. For the next eight years, it had a succession of owners before being bought by the city in 1844, the first private property to be acquired to protect the water supply from pollution. In 1855, Fairmount Park was established, for the benefit and enjoyment of the citizens of Philadelphia. Lemon Hill was used as a German beer garden, and was the site in 1857 of a German “Sangerfest,” featuring much singing, dancing, feasting, and merriment.

Lemon Hill was used for various forms of entertainment during the 19th century. There was a bandstand on the grounds for orchestra concerts. The house acquired some Victorian reminiscient of the work of Robert Adam in England and Scotland. Pratt paid for a quantity of luxurious mahogany, to be used for the doors of the downstairs oval room, each section of which is cut from the solid wood to match the curve of the walls.

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Lemon Hill, south façade, showing three-story elliptical bay.