

BACK IN TIME

Eulogy for a very old house

By **DICK SHEARER**

For many years it stood as one of Lansdale's unheralded historic treasures.

The Old Server Place as it was known to earlier generations was a simple stone farmhouse situated on an odd angle next to Matterno's scrap yard at Seventh St. and Kenilworth Ave. Hundreds of motorists passed by it each day paying scant attention until a cold January day when it was consumed by fire.

By the time the flames were extinguished not much remained, only a stone shell and piles of charred timber. It was only then – as a result of the ensuing media coverage – that many people became aware that the Old Server Place was probably the oldest existing house in Lansdale.

This surprised many folks who assumed that the Jenkins Homestead, headquarters for the Lansdale Historical Society, held that honor. Sometimes the truth is in the wording – and have to read carefully to arrive at the correct conclusion.

Over the years, the society has referred to the Jenkins Homestead as the oldest house in the *original* borough of Lansdale. The operative word is *original*.

At the time of Lansdale's incorporation in 1872, the borough's northern boundary was what is now Fifth Street, the eastern bound-

ary Line Street, with Mt. Vernon Street to the south and what is now Cannon Avenue to the west. The homestead fell within those boundaries, but the Old Server Place did not; it remained a part of Hatfield Township until a later annexation.

We are relatively certain, based on early records, that construction of the Jenkins Homestead began in 1770 and was completed after the Revolutionary War. But the Server house probably predated it by at least seven years.

The best clue we have comes from Edward Matthews' *History of Montgomery County*, published in the 1890s.

In his history, Matthews wrote: "The former Server place was an old homestead situ-

ated immediately north of Lansdale and fast being encompassed by the growing town. Here is a two-story stone dwelling and an annex at the east end of one story. The spring which attracted the first settler is near at hand. About the dwelling stand old pear trees and remnants of an old orchard."

That was in 1896. Stepping back, Matthews stated with certainty that the property was bought in 1763 by Jacob Server and at the time of the purchase the stone house with "very thick walls" was already there,

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Server Place likely predates 1763

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most likely built by the original settler, Edward Lewis. Lewis bought the land – as much as 400 acres – in 1727, but there is no record when he actually settled there or built the house.

Sometime after Server moved into the house, but before he died in 1813 at age 88, it burned down to the stone shell, however because the walls remained solid and intact, he rebuilt from within. Over the years, the interior of the Old Server Place was extensively remodeled numerous times including shortly before the January fire.

So, based on just the houses, we must assume

the Old Server Place predated the Jenkins Homestead by a number of years.

But let's complicate matter just a bit. We are relatively certain John Jenkins settled on the land given to him by his father, Jenkin Jenkins, in or around 1746. He built a substantial log house next to a spring house fed by the headwaters of the Towamencin Creek.

When the log house became too small for the growing Jenkins family, construction on the first part of the present homestead – the side closest to Hector Alley – was begun in 1770. Initially, it was attached to the log house through an entranceway that still exists.



We believe the original plan was to move the family into the new wing soon after it was completed, but the Revolutionary War delayed the second step which involved tearing down the log house and building the larger wing that now faces Jenkins Avenue. That was completed by 1785.

Add this to the mix: many of the interior elements of the Jenkins Homestead are original to the pre-1800 period, including windows, doors, staircases, fireplaces, floors and trim. The Old Server was rebuilt except for the exterior walls.

According to Mike Hart of Hartland Demolition and Restoration, the second fire – 200 years or more after the first – was

more than the Server House's walls could withstand. Aging and heat had taken their toll and what was left had to come down.

Hart, who will receive the society's Edwin G. Holl Historic Achievement Award on April 19, slowly dismantled the remains to trace the house's roots and recover what can be salvaged for use in other restoration projects. Historians would consider this making the best of a bad situation.

It's just too bad those walls couldn't talk as they came down. What tales they could have told.

Dick Shearer is president of the Lansdale Historical Society.