

The House of Many Stairs

Old house you are really very small.
Just big enough for love, that's all.

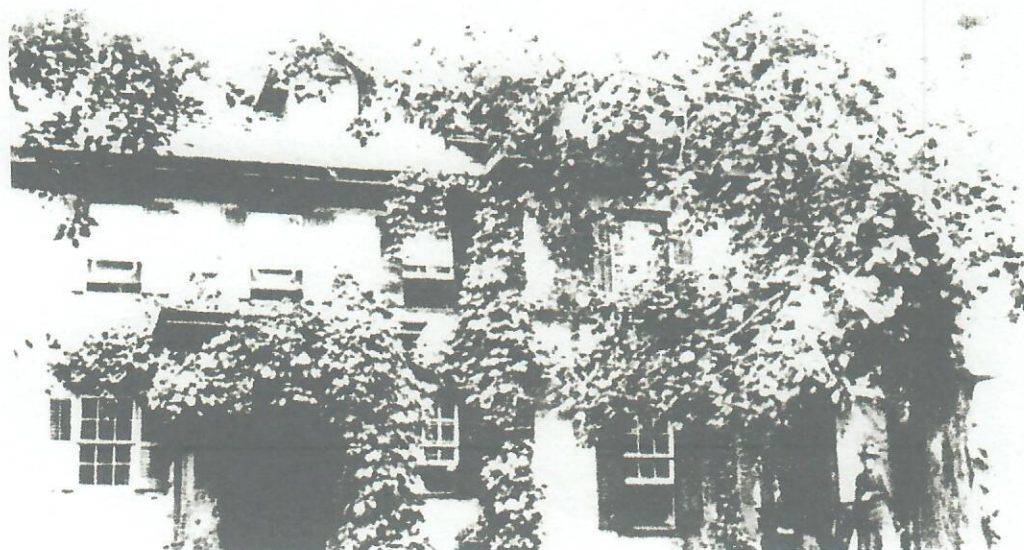
BETWEEN 1784 AND 1790 in Pennsdale, a little house hewn of logs "began to burrow its way into the hillside." Its builder did not concern himself with making the terrain conform to his notions of construction. Instead, he apparently admitted the superiority of nature's handiwork in the creation of the hill and did his best to adjust his own building to the contours of the land. The consequence is a delightfully meandering plan.

We might say that the House of Many Stairs was the first split level because no two rooms lie in the same plane. A floor plan reveals that at least four or five steps lead into and out from every room, and all seven stairways are visibly worn from use.

The original structure was built of lime—and fossilstone with pieces of shell still to be found in portions of the walls. The snows of many winters and suns of returning summers have mellowed the stone so that it has taken on a rose-colored tone.

At the present time, the house has a red tin roof which covers the old wooden one; the shutters are the original ones, as are most of the glass-paned windows. The middle window in the center of the upper story was once a doorway, but its intended use is now a mystery. Our only clue to its use may lie in the fact that the room behind it is lined with cupboards to hold muskets and in time of emergency, the room could be reached quickly via a ladder or outside stairs.

The oldest part of the house had two stories and an attic with the ground floor serving as a combination living room-kitchen. This room still contains the huge, almost square, fireplace including the large crane and kettle in which the cooking was done.

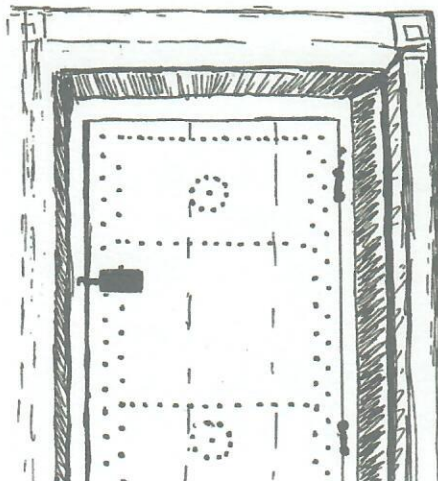


On the fireplace floor are handmade bricks which have begun to crumble from the heat of the many fires which have been kindled over it. Over the mantlepice hangs a Civil War bayonet from Harper's Ferry which the home's present owners found buried in the lawn of the house.

In the 1780's, the little building served both as a home and as a means of protection from the Indians, but, in 1790, it changed roles to become the "Bull's Head Tavern." The tavern was a way station for weary travelers on the stagecoach line and offered overnight accommodations. Then the old house fell on evil days; it became a hideout for horse thieves and highwaymen. Its jumble of stairways proved to be useful in order to baffle pursuing lawmen as the rogues sought escape. A keystone with the carved initials "JS" and "ES" (for John and Eva Stryker) and the date 1807 over the door signify the end of the home's days of infamy and its restoration as a private dwelling. In more recent years, the house was once again turned into an inn and then a tearoom.

The House of Many Stairs contains a secret place where escaping slaves traveling the Underground Railroad in the mid-nineteenth century could be hidden until it was safe to smuggle them on into Canada. Passage to the hideaway is through a small attic door at the top of a stairway. There is also a window there which could serve admirably as a lookout. Several years ago, thick pine floorboards were removed from this passage-way in the attic, were refinished and placed in the upstairs hall. Throughout the house, the ceilings are seven feet high and the rooms small. An intricate design in nailheads may be found on the inside of the doors because Quakers believed these kept out evil spirits.

When purchased in 1936 by the Brant family from the Edward Morrises, the building was finally returned to its original use as a home. The old building is fortunate in its present owners, for nothing has been changed architecturally. It has been preserved in its marvelous simplicity. In itself it is a living entity which has grown to meet expanding needs while it has continuously adapted to its environment. Though the house may lack the convenience of one with a formal design or the elegance of one with grander rooms, it nevertheless more than makes up for these things by its cozy intimacy and in the aura of the many aspects of its history.



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The fireplace which served the original kitchen-living room is complemented with all manner of cooking utensils used in Colonial days.



Reminiscent of the days when this room was part of Bull's Head Tavern is the bar with its collection of antique bottles. Note the three feet wide pine floorboards and the stairs leading into the second level as well as the enclosed section of another set of stairs.



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