

V. Historic Overview

The Hunsicker House was constructed in several building campaigns beginning around 1770 and ending with the small frame section in the early twentieth century. The following history provides an overview of the major building campaigns with diagrams illustrating the floorplan of the house at the different stages. Portions of these diagrams are speculative, especially when locating elements which were later removed. All diagrams are shown at the same scale.

Much of the history of the Hunsicker House is associated with the Hunsicker family, which owned the property from the mid-eighteenth century until 1926. Valentine Hunsicker (1700—1771), an immigrant weaver, moved to the Pennsylvania colony in 1717 to help construct the Mennonite Meeting House in Skippack Township. Hunsicker settled near the meeting house around 1720 and was active in the Mennonite community. Naturalized in 1731, Hunsicker purchased several parcels of land in Skippack Township and constructed a house. He and his descendants became leaders of the Mennonite community.³

The first Hunsicker House was constructed by Isaac Hunsicker the Elder, son of Valentine Hunsicker. Isaac Hunsicker (1738—1828) purchased three parcels of land from Valentine Hunsicker in 1768; the deed does not mention a message. When he sold the farm to his son Isaac Hunsicker the Younger in 1809, the deed does mention a message (see the appendix for the chain of title). The location of this house is not definitely known. It is likely that Isaac Hunsicker the Elder constructed the south section, which may be either his house or a freestanding summer kitchen or tenant house. Isaac and

his wife Barbara had eleven children, which would have made the south section quite crowded if it were the family's residence. In any case, the south section was certainly standing on the property by the time of the construction of the c. 1834 section. The south section was a 1½ story stone building measuring just 15x16 feet. The stone wall in the basement and the ash cleanout nearby suggest that a substantial kitchen hearth support was located in the southeastern corner. All traces of the fireplace, including the chimney, have been removed on the upper two levels. Most other original details of the section have been replaced in the succeeding centuries, such as the stairs in the northeast corner and original flooring. The many changes to the section make an analysis of its history difficult.

The house was significantly enlarged when the center section was constructed c. 1834. By this time, Isaac Hunsicker the Younger had a growing family and may have enlarged the house to provide additional bedrooms for his children. Interestingly, the 32'x28' addition touched but did



Figure 7.
Original
appearance of
the south
section.

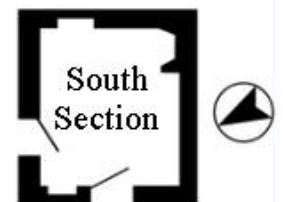


Figure 8.
Floorplan of
house c. 1770.

³ Theodore W. Bean, *History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1884), pp. 135, 1021.

not connect with the northwestern corner of the south section. This follows a similar building practice found in several houses in northern Chester and Montgomery Counties. The date 1834 is found inscribed in the stucco in the basement of the addition. Architectural evidence, including the hearth support in the basement, the cut nails in the flooring, the door and architrave molding profiles, the muntin profile in the transoms, and the ridge system all point to a date of construction of c. 1820 to 1840. Given the kitchen fireplace, it is unlikely that this section was constructed much later than 1835. (After 1840, stoves largely replaced kitchen fireplaces in this region of the country.) Therefore, the inscription and the architectural



Figure 9. Elevation of house following construction of center section, c. 1834.

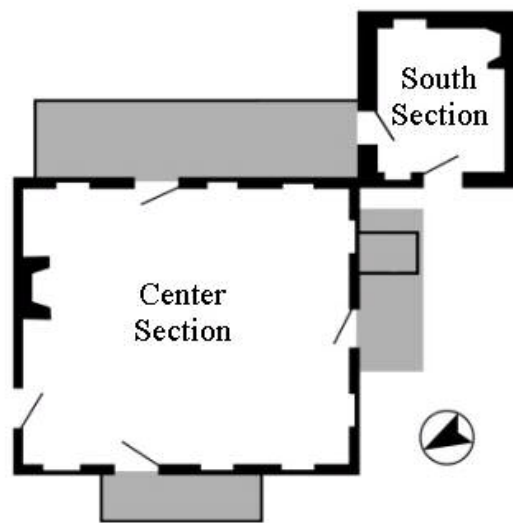


Figure 10. Floorplan of Hunsicker House c. 1834, following the construction of the center section.

evidence are consistent. Although the nature of the original porches is not known for certain, it is likely that the addition had porches to protect the entrances. It is possible that another porch protected the door on the north wall as well. The center section has been altered, with two bay windows added in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, the northern chimney was partially demolished and a new brick flue added in its place.

The house was enlarged around 1845, when two new sections were constructed. It is possible that these additions were built by Isaac C. Hunsicker (1819—1895), who purchased the farm from his father Isaac Hunsicker the Younger in 1849. It appears clear that these sections followed soon after the construction of the center section, although their specific dates are not known for certain. A brick addition on the north end of the center section extended it by seventeen feet, and a stone section provided a connection between the center section and the south section. The two following paragraphs describe these two sections.

The north section was added onto the center section. The two-story, two-bay section has a Penn Plan-like appearance. Although its Penn Plan appearance suggests this section is older than the brick section, the architectural evidence is consistent that this section is an addition.

The basement walls and framing and the existence of exterior features on the brick wall in the attic (datestone, pointing, and tie rod) all point to the north section being an addition. The existence of the kitchen hearth in the basement indicates that the section predates 1850, so the section was constructed soon after the center section. Other important evidence includes the door latches in the section (the Blake latch, introduced in 1840) and a mid-nineteenth century type of paneling on the doors and architraves.

The “connection” on the north side of the south section was constructed to provide access from the south section into the center section as well as enlarge the south section. Its construction resulted in the demolition of the north wall of the south section; the foundation wall was rebuilt to serve as a retaining wall for the unexcavated basement under the south section, and a second stone wall was built to serve as the foundation wall of the connection. The roofline of the south section was altered by the construction of the connection, as the northern rafters were removed and re-installed at a lower slope. The resulting saltbox-like roof system retains the original ridge of the south section. An important element of the enlarged southern wing is the window surrounds, as the windows in the connection have identical cheeking to those in the north section, pointing to a similar date of construction.

Isaac Hunsicker’s family left the Mennonite faith in the mid-nineteenth century. In the mid 1840s, some Mennonite congregations in Montgomery County divided over the issue of sending children to public schools. Henry A. Hunsicker, a distant relative, started a boarding school in 1848 named the Freeland Seminary. Three years later, the more progressive Mennonite group divided again when a bishop named Abraham Hunsicker advocated a more liberal position on church polity. Abraham Hunsicker and his supporters constructed a new meeting house in 1855 near the school. Called the “Christian Society of Freeland,” this group was more evangelical than the older two Mennonite communities and was more involved in the wider culture (including politics). Among the adherents of this “Reformed Mennonite” group

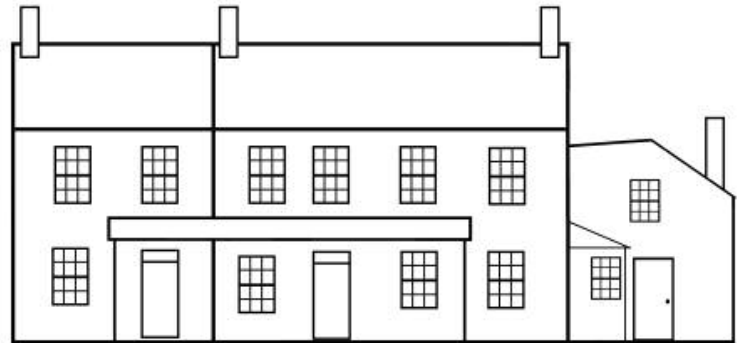


Figure 11. Elevation of house as it appeared following the additions of c. 1845.

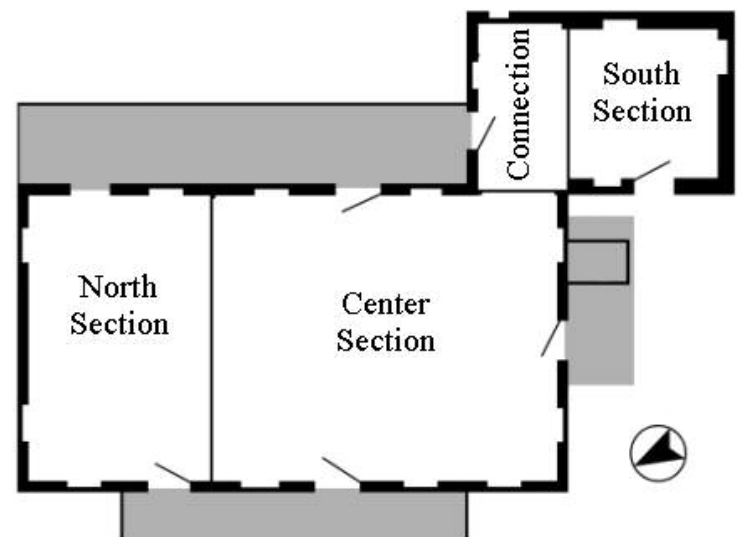


Figure 12. Floorplan of house as it appeared following the additions of c. 1845.

were the two sons of Isaac C. Hunsicker who grew to adulthood: John G. Hunsicker and Henry G. Hunsicker.⁴

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the house was remodeled with several Victorian features. These changes appear to date to the ownership of Henry G. Hunsicker (b. 1855), who purchased the farm from his father Isaac C. Hunsicker in 1879. Henry G. Hunsicker was a member of the Reformed Mennonites, and he appears to have been named for a distant relative Henry G. Hunsicker who was active in the Freeland Seminary. Hunsicker is also reported to have been an active Republican, which would not have been acceptable in the traditional Mennonite community. This fact may explain why he would make a “trendy” alteration to the house, since this type of Victorian alteration would not normally be expected of a Mennonite. The porch on the west elevation was rebuilt with a hipped rather than a shed roof. It was constructed to accommodate a large three-panel bay window unit, just left of the front entrance. Shaped slate shingles replaced the early wooden shingles, necessitating the strengthening of the rafter system. The date of these changes has not been determined, although they may date to the years following the death of his father (1896), when the farm was being rented out.⁵

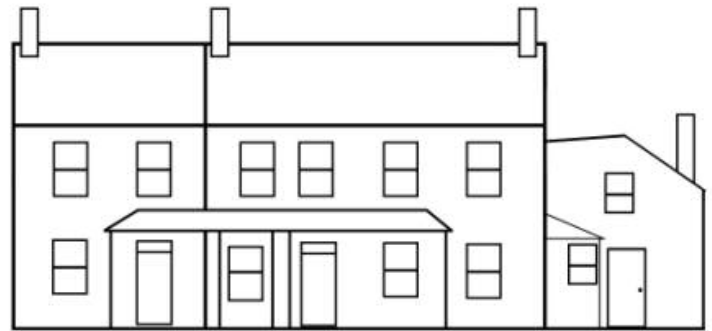


Figure 13. Elevation of house following rebuilding of porch on west elevation and building of octagonal bay.

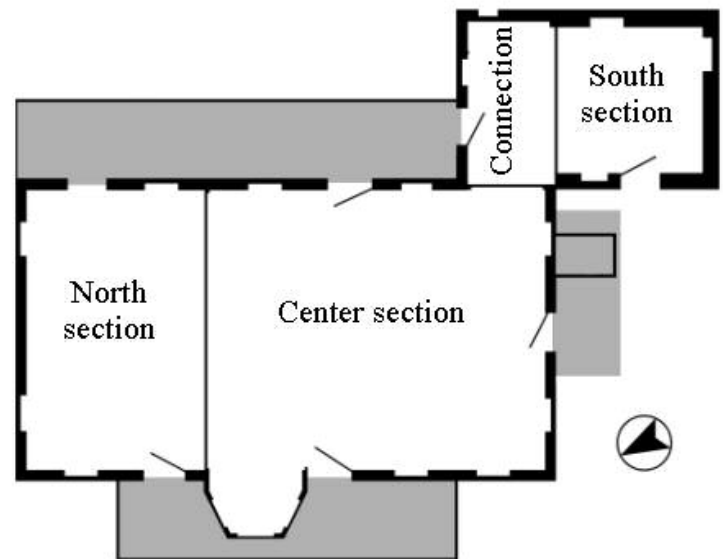


Figure 14. Floorplan of the house as it appeared c. 1880.

In the early twentieth century, Henry G. Hunsicker made other alterations to the house. It is thought that he partitioned off an apartment, requiring additional changes in the house. A squared bay window was added on the south end wall of the center section, overlooking a cement porch (also dating to this time). It is likely that the fireplace was removed here, replaced first by a door and later by the current window. The mechanical systems were completely replaced, and a heater was installed on a cement pad in the basement of the center section. The hearth support under the north chimney of the center section was partially

⁴ Bean, pp. 1058—1063.

⁵ Ellwood Roberts, *Biographical Annals of Montgomery County* (New York City: T.S. Benthon & Co., 1904), pp. 434—435.

demolished to provide space for the construction of a new brick flue to vent the furnace. Bathrooms and additional kitchens were added to serve separate apartments.

In the twentieth century, the farm left the ownership of the Hunsicker family and was a rental property. Henry G. Hunsicker sold the property to Abraham S. Heckler in 1926 for \$5,500. In the following decades, the house was renovated again and divided into three apartments. The interior of the south section was gutted and rehabbed, removing many of the period details which would have told the history of the section. The large window on the west elevation of the south section also dates to the early twentieth century. Throughout the twentieth century, the house changed hands several times and is thought to have been a rental property during most of the century. Caesar and Savanne Gorski owned the property from 1963 to 2003, thereby owning the property the longest of the post-Hunsicker owners. In 2003, the Gorskis sold the property to T.H. Properties for development.

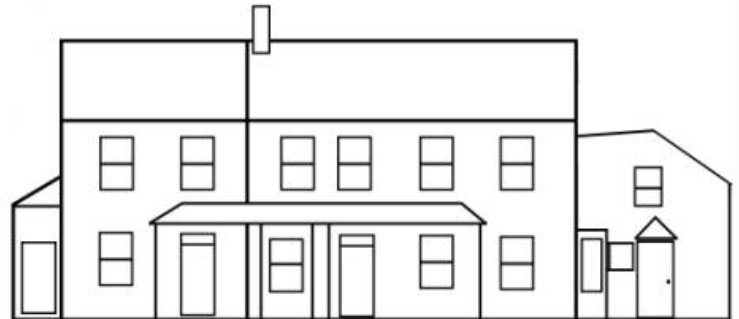


Figure 15. Elevation of the house as it appears today.

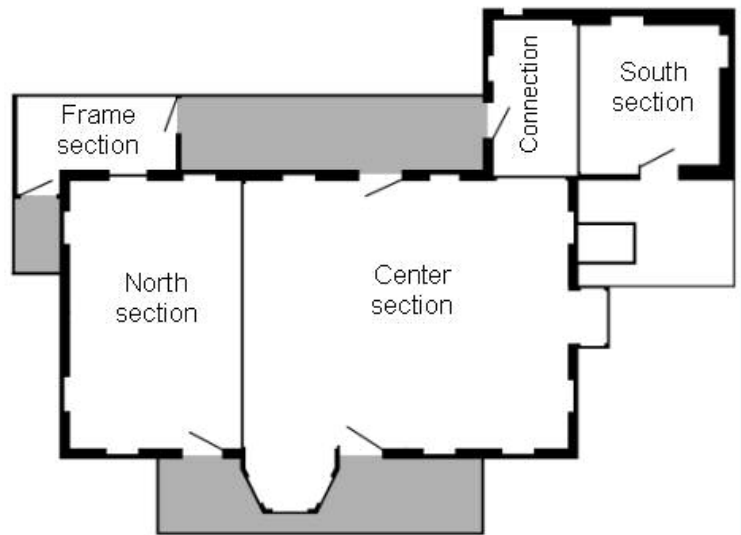


Figure 16. Sections of the house today.

The following house near Kimberton, Chester County, has a summer kitchen section of the house much like that at the Isaac Hunsicker House.



Photos 40a and 40b. Views of a house near Kimberton with a similar summer kitchen section to the Hunsicker House.