The Hunsicker House: Preliminary Structure Report (2/23/04)

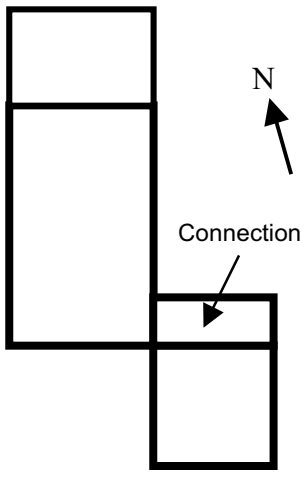
Robert Wise and Seth Hinshaw, Preservation Planners with Wise Preservation Planning, examined the Hunsicker House on February 18, 2004 with members of the Skippack Historical Society. The goals of the visit were to:

1. Become familiar with the property;
2. Provide a more accurate age of the property;
3. Develop a chronological sequence of building campaigns;
4. Assess the property's condition for adaptive reuse purposes.

The following is a brief description of our main findings, recommendations for the adaptive reuse of the Hunsicker House, and the next steps we recommend pursuing. In summary, the house is generally in good condition and should be restored or rehabilitated. Given its interior alterations, we think that restoring or rehabilitating the house for residential or commercial use is a better use than preserving it as a house museum, particularly since the Historical Society has what appears to be a far more historic, extensive, and intact farm property in Evansburg State Park. Each of the Hunsicker House's three primary sections tells a different story of its use and evolution and should remain. To guide the adaptive reuse process, we recommend first obtaining additional information about the history of the property and, hopefully, discovering precisely when the house was built.

Chronology

The brick section appears to be the oldest intact section of the house. 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 1830. The section has been altered, with two bay windows added in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Central heating, added in the early 20th century, required the partial demolition of the basement hearth support and, no doubt, the removal of the fireplace and stove heating elements and southern chimney.



Sections of the house.

The north section was added onto the brick section, probably within 10 to 20 years after the brick section was constructed. In

the attic of this section, the former exterior wall of the brick section is visible, featuring exterior pointing, the datestone area, and a tie rod; all these elements point to the wall predating the north section. At the foundation level, the north section's stonework firmly butts up against the existing quoined corner wall of the brick section. There is other evidence that the north section was added, including the exterior roof molding pattern, the center wall construction of the basement, and the molding patterns in the living space. The existence of the kitchen hearth in the north section's basement indicates that the section predates 1840.

The south section is not clearly defined in terms of age and appearance. Elements of it may be the oldest part of the house. It was highly altered in the twentieth century, which covered or eliminated many of the details that would normally convey its history. It has undergone many other changes prior to that time, as well. The presence of the hearth support in the southeastern corner may point to a date of construction in the eighteenth century. The joists in the basement do not appear to be two centuries old and may have been replaced when the north foundation wall was rebuilt. The fact that windows are found on the walls in the chimney location and that all windows are slightly cheeked like those in the north section suggests that the hearth was removed or reduced near the time the north section was constructed.

The connection on the north side of the south section was constructed to allow access from the south section into the brick section. Its construction resulted in the partial rebuilding of the south section, since its north wall was removed; the foundation wall was rebuilt to serve as a retaining wall for the unexcavated basement under the south section. This may explain why the north foundation wall differs from the west, south, and east foundation walls. The connection includes a second floor that may have been included when constructed, or added at a later date. Nonetheless, it greatly altered the undoubtedly symmetrical front gable appearance of the south addition into its present shape.

Condition Analysis

As a vacant property, the Hunsicker House is in good condition. The basement is generally in good shape, although water (now frozen) is entering a window on the south end (and possibly through other areas) of the brick section. Other than the broken windows in the main floors of the house, and one area where the plaster ceiling is failing in the south section, the interior is in near livable condition (acknowledging that livable is a relative term). The roof is in fair condition, with no signs of failure other than flashing around the north section chimney, which is common. The east side porch, however, is in poor condition: its northern wall underpinning is failing.

Adaptive Reuse

The generally good condition of the house indicates that it is an ideal candidate for rehabilitation. Ample integrity exists (primarily on the exterior) for a careful restoration. Because of the proximity of both road and new development, it may best be suited for commercial development, such as a professional office. That said its size and perpendicular setting to the road present an opportunity for residential use. The rooms are plentiful with plenty of ceiling height and natural light. We would strongly recommend preserving the house in its entirety; each section is a major historic component of the house and quite usable.

Next Steps

1. Stabilize the structure to prevent further water, animal and vermin infiltration, and secure it from unwanted human ingress.
2. Conduct additional research to try to ascertain the age of the building sections. We recommend examining tax records, road dockets, newspaper clippings, wills, and other primary documentation. Some of this information may have already been obtained and much of what you have already obtained will be helpful in working with tax records. In any event, we recommend working closely with your historians to minimize costs, beginning with the tax records.
3. Assuming additional information on the property is found in the tax records etc. search, we recommend reexamining property based on new findings to provide a closer evaluation of age and building campaigns.
4. Should you wish to evaluate rehabilitation or restoration, we recommend retaining a historic architect, contractor, and structural engineer to evaluate the true structural condition, restoration/rehabilitation potential, and cost estimates. (Note: Wise Preservation Planning does not provide engineering, architectural, or contracting services.)
5. We recommend working closely with THP to make it aware of the potential asset that the restored building would be to the development.
6. We recommend keeping the township aware of the progress and discuss possible relaxations of area and bulk requirement that may be necessary for successful adaptive reuse.
7. The Historical Society should be in charge of adaptive reuse to ensure it is properly carried out. Such building parameters should be developed prior to beginning reconstruction.
8. A conservation easement should be donated to the H.S. or regular conservation organization to ensure exterior of house will be maintained indefinitely.
9. Work with the township to develop historic resource protection ordinance language.