

"Vernon"
Vernon Park, Germantown
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

HABS No. 7-2
HABS
PA
51-GERM,
38-

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District No. 7
Eastern Pennsylvania

Historic American Buildings Survey
E. Perot Bissell, District Officer
1901 Architects Building,
Philadelphia, Penna.

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HABS
PA.
51. GERMAN

33.

VERNON
Vernon Park, Germantown
Philadelphia
Pennsylvania

Owner: City of Philadelphia

Date of Erection: Before 1741 (?).

Architect and Builder: No record.

Present Condition: Good.

Number of Stories: Two, and basement.

Materials of Construction: Stone and stucco.

Other Existing Records: See text.¹

Additional Data: See following pages.

¹ Eberlein, H.D., and Lippincott, H.M., The Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and Its Neighborhood, 224.

"VERNON", VERNON PARK, GERMANTOWN
PHILADELPHIA, PENNA.

"Vernon" is the product of two periods, the informal farmhouse Colonial architecture of the 18th Century and the more formal architecture which came into vogue in the early years of the 19th Century.

Tracing down the ownership of the property from the first owner, Peter Shoemaker, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1685 on the ship "Francis and Dorothy", no reference is made to any buildings on or near the site of "Vernon" until 1741, when a stone house is mentioned in a Deed of Partition between Isaac and John Shoemaker, grandsons of Peter. Very likely this building now forms the kitchen wing of "Vernon", and it may originally have been the barn mentioned in an inventory of the property of Melchior Meng in 1778, Meng having acquired the property by purchase from John Shoemaker in 1757. We know that Meng's house bordered directly on the Main Street, now Germantown Avenue, as was the invariable custom, the barns stables, etc. being placed in the rear of the property. If our surmises are correct then the older portion of "Vernon", must have been built before 1741.

Meng sold the property to James Matthews in 1804, and it was he who built the later portion of "Vernon" in 1805, which date appears on one of the rain conductor heads. Matthews conveyed the house to John Wister shortly after it was finished. John was a grandson of the John Wister who built "Wister's Big House".

This later section which became the main part of the house contained a central hall with stair at the southwest end and rooms to the right and left, the first and second floor plans being identical, the older portion then forming the kitchen and servants' quarters.

In 1895, the house and property were acquired by the City of Philadelphia, and the house was altered in 1898 for the use of the Germantown Branch of the Philadelphia Free Library. The stairway and partitions in the first and second floor were removed and a gallery formed at the second floor level. In 1907, the library moved into its new building. The old house is now vacant.

There are two stories of how the name "Vernon" originated, one is that John Wister named it in honor of Washington's House at Mt. Vernon, and the other mentioned by Jones Wister, his grandson, in his book of Reminiscences is that it commemorates the name of Diana Vernon, heroine of Sir Walter Scott's "Rob Roy".

The lightness and delicacy of the beautifully proportioned facade, and the sturdy simplicity of the earlier section form a very interesting combination, but, as so often happens, the original wood finish of the older portion has given place to modern work and the interior has lost much of its charm. The interior of the later portion, however, is in keeping with the exterior and is enriched with four very ornate fireplace mantels, and the stairway which has disappeared, had all the refinement of detail characteristic of the architecture of the period.

The information pertaining to the earlier portion was obtained from Mr. Curtis Seibert, 5846 Stockton Road, Germantown, who has examined the old deeds referring to the property. Mr. Jones Wister's "Book of Reminiscences" has also been referred to.

E. Prot Brant

District Officer.

Addendum to
Vernon
Germantown Avenue, Vernon Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240