

KNAPP FARM  
417 DeKalb Pike  
Montgomeryville  
Montgomery County  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6064

HABS  
PA  
46-MONVI,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

KNAPP FARM

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1-

Location: 417 DeKalb Pike, Montgomeryville, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The Knapp Farmhouse illustrates how German and English vernacular styles were combined in the construction of homes during the colonial period of American architecture. The property was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

Description: The eighty-two-acre Knapp Farm extends north from the corner of DeKalb Pike and Knapp Road in central Montgomery County. Surrounding the farm are housing subdivisions and shopping areas, most of which have been built in the past ten years. A creek, dry for most of the year, wanders through the western section of this gently rolling property.

An asphalt driveway runs northwest from DeKalb Pike along the south side of the house, then bends northeast to run towards the barn. The two-and-one-half story, four-bay-by-two-bay farmhouse faces southwest towards the driveway and the creek. Built from fieldstone covered with heavy layers of stucco, the house features a wood-shingled gable roof with three gable dormers on each side. Extending along the northwest facade is a one-story stucco-covered masonry kitchen with a shed roof. The main facade faces southwest and features glass and wood doors in the two center bays. The windows on the first floor are two six-over-nine-light sash with recessed wood surrounds, while the windows on the second floor are six-over-six-light sash (with a one-light casement placed in the interior stairway). The three dormer windows are also six-over-six-light sash, as are the rest of the windows on the main block. In addition to the two front entries, there are three other doorways: one on the rear of the main block, and one on either end of the kitchen addition. Along the main elevation is a full-length porch with chamfered posts which extends to cover the southwest kitchen door. On the northwest end is a stone interior chimney; an exterior chimney on the opposite end was removed during the 20th century.

The interior indicates that the house was built in two stages. The western and apparently earlier section is now one large parlor; an exposed beam, with one beaded edge, and a seam in the floor planking indicate that this space used to contain two rooms. A large fireplace runs along the northwestern wall; it was closed and covered with wainscotting when the kitchen addition was built. Adjacent to its northern end is another, smaller fireplace set a 45-degree angle. Next to this fireplace is a door to the kitchen; an earlier exterior door along the northeastern wall has been converted to a window. The enclosed

oak stairwell begins to the right of the entrance; its placement suggests the door which was removed was the original front door. The walls and ceiling are covered with plaster painted white, though the eastern wall also includes dark wainscoting. In the middle of the floor is a metal grate, used in an earlier radiant heating system.

The eastern section of the house seems to have been built about ten years after the western. Situated higher than the other section, it contains two parlors. The larger, southern room has a fireplace along its eastern wall and a door to the stairwell. The northern room has a franklin stove fireplace set at a 45-degree angle so as to share the chimney with the adjoining room. This room includes an exterior door and a bathroom added in the 20th century. A small batten door connects the two rooms.

The winding staircase leads to four bedrooms on the second floor. Arranged asymmetrically, each has its original hardwood floor. Except for the room in the western corner, each has its own fireplace. The third floor has been divided into several spaces, though the rooms are generally unfinished.

Immediately to the right of the western entry is a door leading down to the low-ceiling basement. It extends under the entire eastern half, but only a small part of the western section has been excavated. It now contains a oil-burning furnace, but a coal pile indicates an earlier method of heating. At the eastern end is a massive masonry relieving arch supporting the fireplaces along that wall. At the southeast corner is a stairway leading to the outside.

Throughout the house are surviving handcrafted details and structural elements. Many of the best examples appear on the batten doors, several of which are less than six feet tall, suggesting they date from the Colonial period. Many H-and-L hinges and wood latches with string pulls have also survived. Rafters are pinned, and joists are hand-hewn.

There are several other buildings on the property. A slate walkway leading north from the kitchen door passes an old smokehouse with a shed roof and vertical siding. Farther north is a large wood-frame barn. Rectangular with an eastern addition, the two-story structure is a replacement for one which burned in 1894. Just across the driveway from the west corner of the house is a one-story vehicle shed built during the 1930s. The final structure is an abandoned spring house alongside the creek. This one-story gable front stone structure has a corrugated metal roof and faces north.

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History: The Knapp farm occupies property which Welsh immigrants originally settled just after 1700. Though a 1712 will refers to a house on what has become the Knapp Farm, it is unclear what connection, if any, that structure has to the present house. Previous attempts to date the building suggest the western section was erected around 1760, with the eastern half following approximately ten years later.<sup>1</sup>

During the 18th century the property changed hands a number of times. In 1770 Dr. Charles Moore purchased the property, now a total of 170 acres. Though he transferred title to his brother Mordecai in 1774, Dr. Moore lived in the house for four additional years. In 1776 he carved his name and the date into the western front door, providing some evidence of the building's history. Local legend claims George Washington stayed at the house during 1777-78. Although no conclusive evidence has been found, Moore had attended school in Virginia with Washington.<sup>2</sup>

The family who gave the Knapp Farm its current name bought the property in 1835. Abiram Knapp had married Mary Worrell, the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant in 1815; in 1835 her father purchased the farm and 102 acres as a gift for his daughter and son-in-law. The property has varied between 80 and 115 acres since the Knapps began living there.

Knapp family ownership was interrupted in 1969. That year the North Penn School District seized the property through eminent domain in order to build a new high school. The family fought this attempt, in part by having the property added to the National Register. The school district then decided not to build a school, instead attempting to sell the property to developers. Finally in 1981 they returned title to the family in the form of a trusteeship; the Knapps are presently to reclaim full ownership.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Williams, *An Erudite Little Township: A History of Montgomery Township to 1900* (n.p., 1979), 45; Madeline Cohen, "Knapp Farm," National Register of Historic Places Inventory--Nomination Form, July 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 48; Interview with Ruth K. Oberholtzer, August, 1994.

Sources:

Cohen, Madeline, "Knapp Farm," National Register of Historic Places Inventory--Nomination Form, July 1976.

Oberholtzer, Ruth K. Interview by author, August 1994.

Williams, Joseph A. An Erudite Little Township: A History of Montgomery Township to 1900 (n.p., 1979), p. 45.

Historian: William Wright, Summer 1994