

William Penn Tavern (Gruber House)
SE corner Gruber Road and State Route 183
Mount Pleasant vicinity
Penn Township
Berks County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-263

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. PA-263

WILLIAM PENN TAVERN (Gruber House)

Location: Southeast corner of intersection of Gruber Road (LR06038) and State Route 183, approximately .4 mile southeast of Mount Pleasant, Penn Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Bernville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.410180.4472690

Present Owner: United States Government.

Present Use: Demolished in 1976 for Blue Marsh Lake project, sponsored by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Significance: This handsome three-and-a-half-story stone building was occupied by the Gruber family from 1882 to 1935 and as such was integrally involved with the evolution of the entire Gruber Wagon Works complex. The house dates from circa 1830 and is reputed to have been a tavern, a possibility heightened by its proximity to the Union Canal.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: Circa 1830. The house shares many characteristics with the Reber House (HABS No. PA-256), known to have been built in 1834. In addition, the opening of the nearby Union Canal in 1828 would have spurred building in the immediate area.
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the building stands. Chain of title information for Berks County before 1875 is often vague and incomplete, and for this property it was impossible to find Rothermel's acquisition. Reference is to the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Berks County.

1842 Orphans' court, Vol. 13, page 496
Paul Rothermel died intestate with twelve children. Son Peter accepted buildings and cash as his part of the estate.

- 1882 Orphans' Court, Vol. 28, page 162
Peter Rothermel died intestate. Administrators of
estate were wife Sara Rothermel and Adam Lash;
letters of administration found in Will Book 30, page
119. Isaac H. Gruber (brother of Franklin) was
guardian for minor children of Rothermel.
- 1882 April 2
Sneiff sale
to
Franklin H. Gruber Price \$920.50
- 1905 April 13. Book 330, page 87
Jacob H. Gruber, administrator of estate of
Franklin H. Gruber
to
John W. Gruber
- 1935 October 19. Book 779, page 250
John W. Gruber
to
William E. Gruber and Salome M. Gruber
- 1935 October 19. Book 778, page 57
William E. Gruber
to
Arthur Kreitler and Edna A. his wife (Franklin
Gruber's sister)
- 1947 June 2. Book 963, page 109
Arthur Kreitler
to
William A. Kreitler.
4. Alterations and additons: While the basic fabric of the
building seems unaltered since its circa 1830 construction,
there have been considerable alterations to the front porch.
In the 1880s it was a full double porch with simple detailing.
At the turn of the century, a subsequent alteration resulted
in the removal of the roof over the upper deck and the
installation of the present "Carpenter Gothic" hoods over the
door to the second story as well as an elaborate Queen Anne
balustrade with turned balusters and porch posts decorated
with scrolls and lattice work. The most recent and
considerably simplified one-story partial wrap-around porch
with balustraded deck topping dates from the 1960s.

According to John Gruber, prior to Franklin Gruber's initial purchase of the house in 1882, it had served as a tavern and country inn. An interior staircase had extended from the ground floor straight up to the attic, providing access to the former hotel rooms above. The foundations of earlier structures on the site were noted in an area adjacent to and west of the house and in the orchard above and behind it. The original tavern known as the William Penn contained a bar in the downstairs public room on the northwest side of the building, entered from the street through a pair of double doors. This bar was removed only when the Grubers took possession, but it and the old tavern sign were retained for many years on the third floor of the wagon works. The bar has disappeared in the interval, but the sign was sold to the Landis Valley Farm Museum, where it is still on display, although no documentation as to the details of the acquisition can be found.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the structure:

The building's first use was apparently as a tavern. According to Gruber family legend, the Rothermel family had acquired the house at some time prior to the 1850s, supposedly for the salvation of a son who was spending far too much time at the bar in the then tavern. Rothermel bought the house and closed the tavern, although the bar itself, removed by the Grubers in 1882, was stored in the Wagon Works for many years thereafter.

Franklin H. Gruber purchased the house from the estate of Peter Rothermel at public sale "at the Public House of Phillip Obold in the valley of Mt. Pleasant on the 18th of November 1882, for the sum of \$920.50."

The founder of the Gruber Wagon Works across the street (See HAER No. PA-14), Franklin Henry Gruber (1835-1898) trained as a wheelwright in his brother Isaac's shop in Mount Pleasant. In 1870, Franklin returned briefly to farming but was forced by popular demand to continue wagon-making. In 1882 he bought this house, and in the following year he built the first structure of the Wagon Works directly across the street. Of the five sons of Franklin Gruber that grew to maturity, four were actively involved in the Wagon Works. After Franklin's death in 1898 and one son's death in 1903, the remaining sons expanded the business, introducing technological innovations. The Wagon Works flourished until the 1920s.

Franklin H. Gruber occupied the house with his sons. When John W. Gruber, the business manager, married, he occupied one half of the house with his bride, the brothers taking the other half. As the other brothers married, they moved out. Jacob Gruber, the master wheelwright, moved to a nearby house that was built for him in 1895 (see Jacob Gruber House, HABS No. PA-262). The house remained in John's family and was sold in 1935 to his daughter Edna's husband, Arthur Krietler. The Krietler family lived there until the Corps of Engineers purchased the property in the 1970s.

This building is commonly confused with the Oolds-Billman Hotel, which stood nearby but was demolished many years ago. The confusion arises from old maps and the proximity of the two structures.

C. Sources of Information

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Historic American Engineering Record's file on Gruber Wagon Works, HAER NO. PA-14.

Interview with Mr. and Mrs. John Gruber; Mr. Gruber is the nephew of Frank P. Gruber, and both Mr. and Mrs. Gruber are intensely interested in family and local history.

Interview with George Meiser IX, local historian.

Veritical files of Berks County Historical Society.

2. Photographs:

Photocopies of old photographs in possession of Franklin P. Gruber are included with the Historic American Engineering Record's report on the Gruber Wagon Works (HAER No. PA-14). Photo PA-14-4 dates from circa 1960 and shows the house with its previous porch. Photo PA-14-7 dates from circa 1910 and shows the same porch.

3. Maps:

Pagin, L. Berks County, Pennsylvania Atlas 1861.

Henry, M.L. and M.L. Boyer Township atlas of Berks County Pennsylvania 1854.

4. Secondary sources:

"Gruber: The Name is Synonymous with Wagons." Reading Eagle,
November 23, 1941.

"History of an Important Industry in Berks County" Reading Eagle,
March 27, 1910.

Prepared by Brian H. Guss
Philadelphia District Historian
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
September, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This two-and-a-half-story stone house with basement is a multi-level bank structure featuring a porch across the front.
2. Condition of fabric: Demolished in 1976.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The house measures 38'-9" across its five-bay front by 32'-1' deep. Sited on a slope, the house is two-and-a-half stories on a basement exposed in the front.
2. Foundations: coursed random rubble limestone.
3. Wall construction finish, color: Coursed random rubble limestone.
4. Structural system: wooden joists bearing on exterior masonry walls, and wood stud bearing partitions.
5. Porches: The one-story porch on the west (front) facade of the building has a balustrade and seven box columns at the ground floor, topped by a balustraded deck which wraps partway around the house on the south end at the first floor. Thus both the ground floor and the first floor are accessible from the exterior. The first-floor doorways on the west and south facades have gabled hoods supported on scroll brackets with pendants, decorated with elaborate scroll work.

The shed-roofed rear porch also has balustrading of a simplified style using posts and boards. The fact that brick is utilized beneath this porch roof, rather than the limestone masonry found elsewhere, indicates that a rear porch was part of the original building.

6. Chimneys: There are two interior brick chimneys running from the basement to the roof, one at either end of the residence. These two lead from the two original ground floor kitchens of a building which once served as a double house.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Doorways were deeply recessed into masonry walls with jambs and heads of recessed panels. The doors themselves were also paneled in the lower half and fitted with panes of glass in the upper half, except for one door to the rear porch, which was completely wood panel construction.
 - b. Windows and shutters: windows have double-hung sash with large two-over-two-lights, except at the ground floor where they are six-over-six. Most windows are equipped with solid paneled shutters, hung with strap hinges which are screwed to simple plank front window frames as are the shutter dogs. The shutters are secured when closed with heavy nineteenth century sliding bolts.
8. Roof: The roof is gabled and has been covered with a standing seam tin roof. The simple box cornice returns on the gable ends.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The house is built on a modified central-hall plan with four front rooms per floor. The modification relates to the ground floor which, instead of a central hall, has a small interior central foyer which provides access to the former bar (with fireplace) and kitchen on lower level, as well as stairs to second floor. Store rooms are also on the ground level.
2. Stairways: Stairs between the ground floor and the second floor consist of a single flight enclosed between walls. Stairs above the second floor are open-well construction with two flights of open-string stairs decorated with ornamental brackets and balusters of fairly simple design, together with a simple continuous chair rail on the wall side.

3. Flooring: A mixture of hardwood tongue and groove flooring in some rooms and wide random-width softwood flooring in others. A difference in both type and direction of flooring is also noted in the second floor, giving rise to a suspicion that a partition or doorway may have interrupted the central hall at this point, and that the central hallway on the third floor may likewise not have extended through to the front of the house.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The smooth finish three-coat plaster on hand-split wooden lath appears to be typical of original walls. One room on the second floor contains vertical board wainscoting which seems typical of the region and houses of this period.
 5. Doorways and doors: Typical interior doors appear to have been four panel (two tiers of molded panels) surrounded with architrave trim.
 6. Hardware: Box locks use "Z" shaped handles instead of knobs.
 7. Mechanical equipment: the current heating is by hot water radiators. The previous heating was by stove, indicated by stove pipe holes and the cast iron stove remaining in the shop out-building. There is electric lighting and modern plumbing.
- D. Site and Surroundings:
1. General setting and orientation: The building is set into a sloping site with its three-and-a-half-story front facing west onto Gruber Road directly opposite the Gruber Wagon Works. On the north side is the track of the old Bernville Road which separated the house from the barn. Just beyond the Wagon Works lies Licking Creek which originally provided power to the Gruber plant and flows into the Tulpehocken. Beyond that is Lock #41 of the Union Canal.
 2. Landscape design: No landscape design is apparent, but the house is sheltered by quite a number of shade trees as well as some evergreens.
 3. Outbuildings:
 - a. Privy: The square frame building features vertical siding, a scalloped cornice, a hipped roof of wood shingles, and a finial that probably serves as a vent.

- b. Wash house and butcher shop: With a standing seam tin gable roof, this structure is built into the hillside covering an older vault which served as a root cellar. The building has brick side walls and a frame front of German siding, six-over-six-light double hung sash windows and a six-panel door.
- c. Smokehouse: Next door is a small brick smokehouse with a concrete gable roof topped by decorative terra cotta vent. Inside is a central pole with radiated spokes.

Prepared by John Ingle
Architect, Philadelphia District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
September, 1976

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Tulpehocken Creek Survey was undertaken in 1976 by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) in cooperation with the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of Blue Marsh Lake. This report was compiled by Brian H. Guss, Philadelphia District Historian (historical research) and by John Ingle, Architect (architectural description), with the assistance of Clifford V. Long (title research) and Anthony Bley, District Photographer (contemporary photographs). The data was edited for transmittal in 1980 by Alison K. Hoagland of the HABS staff.