

"Laurel Hill" (Residence)
East Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-13

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12.

Photograph

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

"LAUREL HILL" (Residence)
East Fairmount Park
Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania

Owner - Commissioners of Fairmount Park, City Hall, Philadelphia.

Date of Erection - 1748

Present Condition - Fair state of preservation. No material departure from original appearance, as regards exterior since the addition of the east wing during Greek Revival period. Interior changes are noted below.

Number of Stories - Two.

Materials of Construction - Foundations, brick, painted; floors, wood; exterior walls, brick, painted; interior walls, brick and frame. The hall running parallel to the front wall did not exist when the house was built, but was formed to give access to the drawing room with octagonal ends which was added during the period of the Greek Revival and the room to the right of the entrance originally extended the full width of the house. There is evidence too that the start of the stairway has been changed and that originally it ran along the end wall from the present second landing in one unbroken flight and the partitions that now enclose the small room behind the stairway are later additions.

Additional Data - Is conspicuous among the houses that line the east bank of the Schuylkill on a high bluff overlooking the river with an unexampled view up and down the stream. Its name is derived from the luxuriant growth of laurel for which the bluffs along the river were once noted.

Joseph Shute, who owned large tracts of land close by, built "Laurel Hill" in 1748. In 1760 Francis Rawle bought the estate for his summer residence. After his death his widow married Samuel Shoemaker in 1767. Samuel Shoemaker was councilman 1755 - 1776, alderman, assemblyman, city treasurer, mayor, judge of the county court and justice of the peace. He was a tory during the Revolution and, notwithstanding it belonged to his wife and not to him, the estate was confiscated. In 1782 state agents sold Samuel Shoemaker's life interest in his wife's estate to Major James Parr, an extensive investor in confiscated lands. Parr leased "Laurel Hill" to the French Minister, the Chevalier de la Luzerne.

After the war, when zeal against Loyalists had in some measure, abated, the estate was restored to its rightful owner. In 1828 William Rawle, trustee under his mother's will, sold "Laurel Hill" to Dr. Philip Syng Physick and from him it passed to the Randolphs, who retained it until the city bought it for a part of Fairmount Park.

References: Eberlein, H.D. and Lippincott, H.M. "Colonial Homes of Philadelphia and its Neighbourhood" 1912, pp.125 - 132. Wise, H.C. and Beidleman, H.F., "Colonial Architecture for Those About to Build" 1913, pp. 62 - 65

S. Prot. Bassall

District Officer

ADDENDUM TO
LAUREL HILL
(Randolph House)
(Randolph Rawle House)
East Edgelev Drive & Kelly Drive
Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LAUREL HILL
(Randolph Mansion)

HABS NO. PA-13
(p. 3)

Addendum To:
two pages previously transmitted to the Library of Congress

Location: Between Kelly Drive and East Edgeley Drive, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Erected about 1765, Laurel Hill represents one of the earliest in a series of villas commissioned by affluent Philadelphians along Edgeley Point Lane and elsewhere in the Northern Liberties until the early nineteenth century. It is a small Georgian house with two major additions and bears formal similarities to other villas along the Lane. During the Revolution, the Pennsylvania legislature confiscated Laurel Hill; it came into the hands of pioneering surgeon Philip Syng Physick in 1828, and three decades later became a source of public rather than private enjoyment when, along with other villa properties, it was purchased by the City of Philadelphia and incorporated into Fairmount Park.

Description: Located about 300' east of the Schuylkill River, Laurel Hill is two-story brick building of highly irregular form. The earliest portion of the house is the hip-roofed central section; rectangular in plan, it consists of Flemish bond brickwork and was originally characterized by rigid Georgian symmetry. This section's north (rear) and south (front) facades protrude at the center, forming entrance pavilions flanked by twelve-over-twelve-light windows on the first floor and eight-over-eight-light windows on the second floor. Pediments adorn the entrance pavilions at the roofline and above the front door. Inside, a number of partitions obscure the original layout: one room on the first floor and two rooms with a stair hall on the second. The east wall supports a chimney. Adjoining the west wall of the central section is a one-story addition that maintains the earlier structure's fenestration and brickwork. It encompasses two rooms and is capped by a gable roof with a chimney at each end. A two-story, octagonal addition rises on the east side of the original structure and represents a Federal Style deviation from the latter. Six-over-six-light windows illuminate a single space on the first floor while three-over-three-light windows illuminate two rooms on the second floor. The octagon's walls are laid in common bond, and its eastern, chimney-bearing wall is blind. Food preparation probably occurred in an outbuilding, since neither the central section nor the additions originally contained a kitchen.

History: In 1760, successful Philadelphia merchant Francis Rawle purchased the 31-acre tract of land upon which Laurel Hill would eventually be built. He died the following year, leaving the newly-acquired property to his wife Rebecca. She remarried in

1767 but in the meantime commissioned the villa at Laurel Hill (Halpern, 8/15/95; Thompson, 12). Rebecca's second husband, Samuel Shoemaker, came from the same social set as Francis. A Quaker merchant residing in Philadelphia, Samuel also owned a secondary house in Germantown, was active in local politics and went on to become Mayor of Philadelphia.

Samuel's Tory sympathies prompted the Pennsylvania legislature to confiscate Laurel Hill during the Revolution, despite Rebecca's insistence that she owned the property and did not share her husband's political views. Real estate investor Major James Parr bought the Shoemakers's rural retreat from the state in 1779 and soon leased it to French Minister Monsieur Chevalier de la Luzerne. Rebecca managed to buy back Laurel Hill in 1784 and Samuel, who had fled to England with their son Edward, joined her there two years later. Over the following decades Edward began spending much time at the family villa, and the first addition seems to have been built sometime before 1813 to accommodate his growing family.

The Shoemakers's increasingly dire financial straits forced them to lease their retreat in 1813. The lessee was Dr. Philip Syng Physick, an important figure in the early history of American surgery. He may never have lived in the house but bought it outright in 1828 and, upon his death ten years later, left it to his daughter Sally. Either Dr. Physick or Sally and her husband Jacob Randolph commissioned the octagonal addition which was built between 1830 and 1846.

Sally Randolph was Laurel Hill's last private owner; the City of Philadelphia acquired the property in 1869 and included it in Fairmount Park. From 1900 until 1915 the Colonial Dames of America occupied and maintained the villa, and are the earliest party known to have painted the exterior walls. The Women for the Bicentennial (later Women for a Greater Philadelphia) restored the house in 1976 and have been responsible for its upkeep since that time.

Sources:

Fairmount Park Files, Historical Commission of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fong, Kecia L. "Laurel Hill Historic House, East Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," a report prepared for University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Fong), annotated chain of title, and 1935 HABS drawings.

LAUREL HILL (Randolph Mansion)
HABS NO. PA-13 (page 5)

Halpern, Martha Crary (Department of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art). Interview regarding recent research on Laurel Hill, 8/15/95.

Laurel Hill Files, Fairmount Park Commission, Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Rawle Papers, Shoemaker Papers and related collections, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Thompson, Maria M. "Evolution of a Country Property: 'Laurel Hill,' East Fairmount Park, Philadelphia." Unpublished manuscript, Fairmount Park Commission.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian, 1995.

ADDENDUM TO:
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Edgeley Point Lane
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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