

DAWESFIELD, HOUSE
585 Lewis Lane
Whitpain
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6063-A

HABS
PA
46-WHIT,
IA-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DAWESFIELD

HABS NO. PA-6063 -A

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Location: 585 Lewis Lane, Whitpain, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Dawesfield is an example of the "gentleman's farm" which existed throughout suburban Philadelphia, and its architectural development illustrates the continuing "tasteful improvements" characteristic of this type of property. During part of 1777 it served as Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters, and was the site of General Anthony Wayne's court-martial that October.

Description: Dawesfield consists of a large parcel of land located in a still relatively undeveloped section of central Montgomery County. The most significant area is approximately eleven gracefully landscaped acres which includes oak, beech, and tulip poplar trees, lawns, and other plantings. This section, bordering on Lewis Lane, contains the property's most historic structures. Ten more acres are cornfield; the rest of the property consists of open fields or forests.

The most prominent building on the property is the main house. Sitting close to Lewis Lane, it has undergone five major and several smaller additions and renovations since its erection in 1736. The original building was a two-story (and basement) 36' x 22' rectangular rubble stone farmhouse, facing south. The first addition, built in 1745, expanded the house in two directions: a two-story, 22' extension to the east, and a one-story ell of similar size to the north of the original building. A second story was added to this wing in 1785, and a 1821 two-and-a-half-story addition extending from the west end of the south facade created a T-plan. At this time the main entrance was moved to the western facade, the top of the newly-formed "T". The last major addition was a one-story kitchen built on the eastern end in 1859; in 1870 it was expanded and a second story was added. Other changes to the exterior include the construction of the front veranda in 1867 and a wrought iron second-story porch and flagstone terrace on the western end of the southern facade in 1954.

The interior of the house is basically symmetrical. The entrance hall, the western half of the original building, contains an elevator and stairway on its southern end. The north and south wings each contain a parlor; General Washington is supposed to have used the former as his office. Through the entryway is a dining room, and to the far east is the kitchen. The second floor plan is similar, with three bedrooms along the west facade.

The largest of Dawesfield's other buildings is a 1795 stone barn 250' to the west of the house. Asphalt shingles have replaced the original wood shingles on the gable roof, whose ridge runs north and south. Southeast of the barn 20' is a carriage house; 40' from the barn to the west is a wood-frame corncrib, a stone wagonshed, and a wood-frame wagonshed. Also near the barn, 100' to the southwest, is a two-and-one-half story L-plan stuccoed stone tenant farmer's house. Arranged around the house are a greenhouse (formerly the icehouse), a two-story stone garden house with connecting wall, and a stone springhouse. The final two structures are located approximately 300' north of the main dwelling: a two-and-one-half story frame cottage for the farm manager and a stone and frame toolshed. Most of these buildings were built during the 19th century and have been altered at least once.

History: Abraham Dawes originally moved into the area in 1702. Records of his initial property have been lost, but by 1728 he owned about 600 acres of land which included the present Dawesfield. His son, also named Abraham, built the original house in 1736. His death in 1775 began a tradition which continued until recently: the property passed to the oldest daughter.

Abraham's daughter Elizabeth and her husband James Morris moved into the house as the Revolutionary War began. Though Morris was a Quaker, he was actively involved in the fighting. The property became Washington's headquarters between October 20 and November 2, 1777, as the American Army planned their strategy after a defeat at the Battle of Germantown. The house was also the site of a court-martial requested by General Anthony Wayne after he was accused of incompetence during the battle; he was acquitted.

Upon his death in 1795, James Morris bequeathed the property to his children Joseph and Hannah; Joseph died the next year. In 1802 Hannah married Thomas Chalkey James, a Philadelphia physician whose practice, according to family history, kept him in the city much of the time. The house and one hundred acres of the land passed to the James's daughter Phoebe; the rest of Abraham Dawes's 600 acres going to other heirs. Phoebe married Saunders Lewis, a Philadelphia attorney. The family generally spent their winters in the city and summers at Dawesfield. Between 1843 and 1893 Mr. Lewis made a series of changes to the house and other buildings in order to create the type of gracious country home which had become popular during this period.

The next owner was the Lewis' daughter Bessie, who took possession in 1901. She and her husband George Meade conveyed Dawesfield to their daughter Elizabeth, who was married to James Cheston IV. The Chestons are responsible for much of Dawesfield's present Colonial Revival appearance.

Sources:

Bean, Theodore Weber. History of Montgomery County. Philadelphia, Everts and Peck, 1884, pgs 1162-1164.

Gregory Ramsey, "National Register Form--Dawesfield," January 8, 1991.

Historian: William Wright, Summer 1994