

George Stoudt House (Octagon House)
North side Eight Cornered House Road,
.1 mi. NW of Penn Bern Road
Mount Pleasant vicinity
Penn Township
Berks County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-267

HABS
PA,
6-MTPLES.V,
12-

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-267

GEORGE STOUT HOUSE (Octagon House)

Location:

On north side of Eight-Cornered House Road (T579), about .1 mile northwest of its intersection with Penn Bern Road (T554), about 1.2 miles southeast of Mount Pleasant, Penn Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Bernville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.411520.4472180.

Present Owner:

Pennsylvania State Game Commission.

Present Use:

Demolished in 1971.

Significance:

This structure is an excellent example of the octagon craze which swept American building in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is particularly notable for being in the midst of a Pennsylvania German community, a group noted for its conservative attitudes. Despite its innovative design, this structure conformed to other Pennsylvania German building traditions: the structural system was traditional half-timber framing with wattle and daub nogging, while the original first floor plan retained the conventional layout (i.e., kitchen, double parlor, and bedroom), including a winding, Schnecke stairway connecting the first and second floors.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of Erection: The original, octagonal part of the house was built between 1865 and 1870. The conventionally planned wing was added about 1880. The barn and major outbuildings were of mid nineteenth-century vintage.
2. Architect: None known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the house stands. Reference is to the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Berks County, except where noted.

GEORGE STOUTT HOUSE (Octagon House)
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- 1860 Deed dated April 2, 1860 recorded April 3, 1860
in Book 69 page 436
Lydia Dondor, Executrix of the will of Gabriel Dondor
to
William A. Dondor (her son)
- 1865 Deed dated March 31, 1865 recorded April 14, 1919
in Book 479 page 87
William A. Dondor and Anna Rosina, his wife
to
George Stoutt (Staudt)
- 1889 Deed dated August 19, 1889 recorded April 14, 1919
in Book 479 page 89
George Staudt
to
Adam S. Stoutt (his son)
- 1920 Deed dated January 7, 1920 recorded February 3, 1920
in Book 497 page 625
Adam S. Stoutt
to
Martin C. Troutman
- 1925 Deed dated April 8, 1925 recorded April 8, 1925
in Book 613 page 12
Martin C. Troutman
to
Rosie M. Troutman, his wife
- 1925 Deed dated October 5, 1925 recorded October 5, 1925
in Book 625 page 28
Rosie M. Troutman and Martin C. Troutman, her husband
to
Samuel Reifsnyder

4. Original plan and construction: Octagon houses became a craze in American building in the mid-nineteenth century. The use of the octagon plan was a native American attempt to enhance the functional performance of traditional buildings, especially dwelling houses. The basic underlying concept was to maximize floor area, while minimizing outside wall area. The increased number of exposures also promised better ventilation, natural light, and view. Ideally, octagon builders preferred round buildings to accomplish these goals, but accepted eight-sided plans as a pragmatic approximation.

Needless to say, this approach to dwelling house architecture is extremely rare in Pennsylvania German areas due to the basic conservatism of the community and the strength of their own building traditions. The octagon concept was well known

in rural areas, however, having been published extensively in agricultural periodicals, country newspapers, and builders' manuals. The Stoudt House's traditional structural system and conventional first-floor plan, moreover, indicate a vernacular adaptation on the part of the builders.

The decision to build octagonally was made by either George Stoudt or his son, Adam Stoudt. Both men were part-time cabinetmakers and could easily have heard of the octagon concept through their work or associations. The design choice may have also been related to a decision to rent some of their land at this time. Although the Stoudts undoubtedly understood and appreciated the functional gains to be had in an octagonal house, a strong motivation for constructing an octagonal plan may have been so that they could supervise the tenants and hired hands from within the house. Later residents testify that the eight different exposures of the house provided a clear view of all the surrounding lands. Other possible sources for the octagonal plan may have been an eight-sided school house located in nearby Sinking Springs, Pa. This building was well-known locally, though it was only one story in height and not a home.

The conventional frame addition was added about 1880 by George Stoudt in order to give himself a dwelling house close to his relatives since he was by then too old to care for himself in Mt. Pleasant. Additions of this type were common in the area and were known as "in-law houses." In order to ensure privacy, the addition was actually built physically separate from the main house. The house and the addition were joined by a common veranda which went across two sides of the octagon house and across the front of the addition.

The original farmhouse on the property (which was located about 500' away) became a tenant house upon the death of Lydia Dundor.

5. Alterations and additions: The fabric of this building was basically unaltered at the time of demolition. Since modern plumbing and central heating were never installed, what modifications that did take place were centered on adjustments to the plan produced by the addition and removal of partitions. The entire weight of the house bore on the outside walls and a central, masonry pier; this permitted partitioning of the plan almost at will.

The approach road originally looped around the barn, with the house overlooking the road and the barn. In about 1930, the road was re-routed to a position directly behind the house, resulting in the original back of the house becoming the front. The new front entry then led into the parlor, rather than into the kitchen; the small rear porch became the front porch, and the large front porch became a private rear porch.

Later owners also removed the partition between the kitchen and the first-floor bedroom (this latter room had also been used as a dining room), and constructed a small storage room at the end of the then enlarged kitchen. The partition between the front parlor and the rear sitting room was removed, making one large parlor instead. Several partitions on the second floor were added, increasing the number of bedrooms from three to five.

The conventionally planned frame addition was added in about 1880 as a residence for George Stoudt in his old age. It was later converted to a summer house, and then a garage.

B. Historic Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

This octagonal house was a local landmark and conversation piece from the day construction was completed. Local residents still marvel at this radically different way of planning a farmhouse. The original owners of the house--George and Adam Stoudt--were known to be the type of strong-minded individuals that would be willing to make a sharp break with long-standing local building traditions. "The eight sided home," writes John Maass in The Victorian Home in America, "defiant among its foursquare neighbors, was always the choice of an individualist" (p. 101).

The circumstances surrounding the construction of the house are also noteworthy. Under the terms which George Stoudt purchased the property in 1865, he was obligated to pay Lydia Dunder \$50 per year and allow her use of the original farmhouse (an interesting log and stone building which was constructed in 1812, and enlarged in 1848) until her death. This was a Pennsylvania German custom known as a widow's dowry. George Stoudt thus had to construct a new house for his family on the property; this house became the octagon house. George soon retired to nearby Mt. Pleasant (his lot is clearly marked in the 1876 Berks County atlas), leaving the farm to his son Adam (1835-1923).

C. Sources of Information

1. Photographs: Mr. and Mrs. William Reifsnyder of Mt. Pleasant, Pa., have in their possession a set of photographs which document the George Stoutt House, the tenant house, and the barn about 1930.

2. Interviews:

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Auchenbach, and their son Thomas, Pleasant Valley, Pa., former residents of the tenant house; August, 1976.

Elsie Gruber, Reading, Pa., a Stoutt family member; August 30, 1976.

Mr. and Mrs. William Reifsnyder, Mt. Pleasant, Pa.; Mr. Reifsnyder's mother was the last private owner of the George Stoutt House, and he and his wife lived in the tenant house for almost thirty years; August, 1976.

Hiester Stoutt, West Reading, Pa.; Mr. Stoutt is the great grandson of George Stoutt and lived on the farm for more than ten years; August 24, 1976.

3. Maps:

Davis, F. A. Illustrated Historical Atlas of Berks County. Reading, Pa.: Reading Publishing House, 1876.

Township Map of Berks County Pennsylvania "from actual Surveys by L. Fagan." Philadelphia, Pa.: H.F. Bridgens, 1862.

4. Secondary Sources:

Arthur, Eric, and Dudley Whitney. The Barn, A Vanishing Landmark in North America. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972, esp. pp 84-113.

Dornbusch, Charles H. and John K. Heyl. Pennsylvania German Barns. Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, Vol. 21, 1958.

Fowler, Orson Squire. A Home for All, or the Gravel wall and Octagon Mode of Building New, Cheap, Convenient, Superior and Adapted to Rich and Poor. New York: Dover, 1973; original edition published in 1848.

Long, Amos, Jr. The Pennsylvania German Family Farm: A Regional Architectural and Folk Cultural Study of an American Agricultural Community. Breinigsville, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society, Vol. VI, 1972.

Maass, John. The Victorian Home in America. NY: Hawthorn Books. 1972, esp. pp. 98-110.

Meiser, George, "Historical Survey of Blue Marsh Project Area." Historical Review of Berks County XXXVI (Summer, 1971), 98-110; general study with good map of the area and the local landmarks; George Stout House is the cover photograph.

Moser, Nick. "Penn Township." Reading Sunday Eagle Magazine (December 1, 1957), 1-3.

"Octagon House Draws Interest." Reading Eagle April 24, 1970. 21; contains erroneous historical information, but reproduces three excellent photographs showing the house as it existed in 1970.

Prepared by Thomas Kheel
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
September, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The innovative design of an octagonal house is paired here with Pennsylvania German building traditions such as the half-timber framing with wattle and daub nogging and the three-room first floor plan.
2. Condition of fabric: Because demolition occurred before proper recording and documentation could take place, the description that follows has been pieced together from photographs and interviews, rather than compiled from direct observation of the building fabric.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Each of the eight sides of the two-story house measured about 16' long. The front and rear sides had a door and window on the first floor and two windows on the second floor; all the other sides had one window at each level. The frame addition was a conventional two-story rectangle, measuring about 20' by 15'.

2. Foundations: The foundations were randomly laid rough limestone with crude quoins.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The exterior walls of both the house and the addition were covered with clapboard siding. The house and the addition were last painted yellow with light brown trim about 1905.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system of the main house was half timber with nogging of wattle and daub. The floor beams and joists were supported at the center of the house by a large stone pier from which they flared out to the outside walls like the spokes of a wheel. The floor beams and joists were tied into the outside framework by mortise and tenon joints. The addition was framed with heavy timbers and covered with clapboards without any nogging or infill.
5. Porches: The small porch on the front of the house, measuring about 10' by 6', was formed by two, ornamentally turned wood posts, with two built-in seats flanking the doorway.

There was another, larger porch on the rear of the house which served to protect the kitchen door and to join the main house to the addition. This long covered veranda, wrapping around two sides of the octagon, and then continuing on to form a conventional front porch on the addition, measured about 40' long by 6' deep, and was articulated by six posts.

6. Chimneys: There were two brick chimneys in the main house. One was located against an outer wall and vented the large fireplace in the kitchen. The second chimney pierced the roof at the center of the building and was used to vent a metal heating stove in the parlor.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The front and back doors on the main house were wood doors with three panels (one large panel below, with two smaller panels above). The door into the addition was of similar design and construction. The cellar doors to the main house were a set of slanting, wooden batten doors located at the front of the large porch.
 - b. Windows and shutters: All the windows in the main house were six-over-six-light double hung sash. All of the windows in the addition were two-over-two-light double hung sash. Many of the windows on the main house were fitted with wood shutters composed of panels (on the first floor) and louvers (on the second floor).

8. Roof: The roof rose to a low peak in eight equally sized pie-shaped segments. The roof was covered with tin placed over wood shingles, and last painted red. The roofs of the two porches were simple shed roofs covered with tin painted red, while the addition had a gable roof covered with tin also painted red.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Cellar: The cellar was essentially one large space divided only by the stone pier at the center supporting the floor beams and joists. The cellar was used as a work space and had wood bins used for storage of fruits and vegetables.
- b. First floor: The first-floor plan reflected Pennsylvania German farmhouse planning traditions. The original plan was divided into four rooms: the kitchen (die Kiche), the double parlor (die Schtubb), and the parents' or grandparents' bedroom (die Kammer) (this room was also used as a dining room). The door through the smaller porch led directly into the front of the parlor. The small bedroom or dining room originally led directly off the side of the parlor, while the entry to the kitchen was through the rear parlor (the sitting room). The winding stairway was located at one end of the sitting room. The large fireplace was located at the end of the kitchen. The enlarged kitchen as modified by recent owners could be divided temporarily with a wooden, folding door which was located at about the midway point of the length of the kitchen. In recent years, the house was divided into a two-family house: one family lived in the enlarged kitchen, while the other family lived in the enlarged parlor. The parlor was subdivided near the entry door to form a very small bedroom.
- c. Second floor: The stairway to the second floor led directly to a small landing which provided direct access to two bedrooms. Access to the other three bedrooms on the second floor was through these two bedrooms.

- d. The Addition: The first floor was a single undivided space with a fireplace and stairway in the end wall. The second floor was also a single undivided space.
 2. Stairways: The main stairway connecting the first and second floor in the main house was a winding, Schnecke stairway commonly found in Pennsylvania German farmhouses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
 3. Flooring: The flooring in the main house and the addition was made of random-width hardwood boards. The cellar floor was packed earth.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Most of the rooms had paint or decorative wallpaper applied over plaster and lath walls.
 5. Doorways and doors: All the doors were made of wood panels and surrounded by simple wood moldings.
 6. Trim: Most rooms had simple wood baseboards painted various colors. Most of the windows were surrounded by simple wood moldings also painted various colors.
 7. Hardware: Most of the doors were equipped with simple nineteenth-century wrought-iron latches with brown porcelain knobs.
 8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Most of the rooms were fitted with early versions of modern electrical fixtures, usually mounted in the ceiling of each room. Most of the electrical switches were the early push-button type.
 - b. Heating: The house was heated by two iron stoves, one in the kitchen and one in the parlor.
- D. Site:
1. General setting and orientation: The house faced south (toward Eight Cornered House Road) and was built into a shallow embankment. The general site of the house was high land, allowing the house to overlook the surrounding fields. Eight Cornered House Road is a very lightly used road and once functioned as a private approach lane to the farm. This road leads directly into Gruber Road which would have

provided the farm with access to the Union Canal, Pleasant Valley, Mt. Pleasant, and several nearby mills operating next to the Tulpehocken. In the other direction (northeast), Eight Cornered House Road leads to Penn Bern Road which leads to Bern Church, a large local Pennsylvania German Reformed Lutheran Church.

2. Landscape design: As in the case of nearly all Pennsylvania German farmsteads, there was never a professional attempt to design the farm landscape. The farmstead exhibited the typical Pennsylvania German sensitivity to the rolling contour of the land, however, with the buildings placed on the land in convenient and visually satisfying ways that took full advantage of the complexities of the site. The barn, the addition, and the tenant house, for example, were all sited to allow for multi-story entry and exposure, while the placement of the main house allowed for direct access to the outbuildings and the fields, while still ensuring a distinct sense of separateness.
3. Outbuildings: This house was part of a typical ensemble of Pennsylvania German farm buildings, including a large bank barn, a large log and stone tenant house, a pig sty, a stone springhouse and carpenter shop (demolished circa 1930), and all the other smaller buildings traditionally constructed as integral parts of a working farm.

Prepared by Thomas Kheel
Project Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
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. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect, the documentation was prepared on site by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania); student architects Robert E. Clarke (University of Notre Dame), Gregory Lee Miller (University of Illinois), Robert Moje (University of Virginia), Daniel F. Clancy (University of Pennsylvania), and Steven M. Shapiro (University of Maryland); and HABS project historian Thomas H. Kheel (Cornell University) and HAER project historian Stuart Campbell (University of Delaware). The drawings were completed in the HABS office in 1977 and 1978 by Mr. Clarke and HABS architects Susan M. Dornbusch and Bethanie C. Grashof. The HABS data was edited for transmittal in 1980 by Alison K. Hoagland of the HABS staff.