Save that old building? Why?

The Thornbury Historical Society held their fall program at Ivy Mills in Concord Township on November 18, 2010. Hosted by Mark Willcox, from this his ancestral home, Mark read the following John Ruskin statement.

“Old buildings are not ours. They belong, partly to those who built them and partly to the generations on mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right to them: That which they labored for...we have no right to obliterate. What we ourselves have built, we are at liberty to throw down. But what other men gave their strength and wealth and life to accomplish, their right over it does not pass away with their death”.

Ivy Mills’ survival and ongoing restoration progress is due to the efforts of the Willcox family, with the help of many lovers of history.

On October 21, 2010 Madeleine Sheerer, with passenger John McIlhenny, stopped the car to read the blue informational sign at the entrance of Thornbury Chester County’s Squire Cheyney Farmstead. The information on the sign indicated the property to be the birthplace of Squire Cheyney.

Side note: Squire Thomas Cheyney, on 11 September 1777 at the Battle of Brandywine, warned General Washington of British General Howe’s tactical attack change. Washington’s belief of Cheyney is one of the main reasons the revolutionary war survived that day and allowed our troops to eventually gain our independence.

Both knew the sign verbiage had a “slight problem”. Squire Cheyney in fact, was born in our township’s Historical Resource Property (HRP) # 053. Madeleine and John, both well credentialed architectural historians, knew this from their prior research on Squire Cheyney and because John (past 20 year chief historian for the over 8000 acre Fairmount Park), owns HRP #053, aka John Cheyney House aka Star Tavern.

The “slight problem” discovery lead to our contact and to over 500 hours of pro bono work performed by these two dedicated and history passionate TTDC citizens, culminating in their copyrighted reports of well over two hundred pages. Their work has been instrumental in clarifying the exploratory collaboration between our Historic Commission and Thornbury Chester County’s Historic Preservation Commission, to protect, stabilize, preserve, rehabilitate and restore the Cheyney/Dallett buildings.

The cover of one of the reports contains a poignant quote from William Morris “…..these old buildings do not belong to us only; that they have belonged to our forefathers, and they will belong to our descendents unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those that come after us.”
Friday 28 January 2011 I received an email from a Maryland resident who had been researching a property one of her great great grandfathers had owned in our township circa 1866-1873. Her research had narrowed down, but not definitively, the possible property locations.

Using old maps and township HRP files, we were able to confirm that her great great grandfather’s property was one of our HRPs. To take it one step further Madeleine provided some research on the family.

The result is best described by the last sentence of our email to the Maryland resident and her subsequent answer. Our sentence, “Hopefully you got a tingle up your spine when you read this”. Her answer: “Oh my!!! I am overcome- to think he lived there and may have built the house!”

What’s the commonality here? Everyday ordinary citizens with a passion to learn about and preserve our past, whether closely linked to them or not... Thornbury Historical Society, Ivy Mills, Squire Cheyney, an out of state resident wanting to know her roots........

Our Historic Commission goal is to preserve that past for our future. Ruskin and Morris, say, in brief, what we attempt on a daily basis...

Our Historic Preservation Ordinance helps us to attain our goal. This is a team effort strengthened by our Supervisors, our township staff, township boards and commissions and our Historical Society. We continually investigate ways to educate our residents and to prevent destruction of our heritage, our structures, view sheds, old growth trees, etc. This township has 203 documented historical properties, 489 documented historical resources and two historic districts. As funding allows we will add to this inventory.

Historical assets, be they Concord’s, Chester County Thornbury’s, ours or whomever’s, have formed us and helped to form this nation. By default, we all are their guardians........

“When the well is dry, we know the worth of water” – Ben Franklin