

18th-century Bridge Keeper's House undergoing restoration

227-year-old Bridge Keeper's House, near the Schuylkill, sustained flooding damage over centuries

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The Bridge Keeper's House in Morlatton Village, built at the birth of America, is undergoing a major restoration that will put it on a rock solid foundation for generations to come.

Workmen from Ghyll Beck Construction Co., Downingtown, have rebuilt the 227-year-old house's stone base and are reconstructing the entire south wall.

Decades of flooding in a marshy flatland near Douglassville eroded the mortar that binds the stones together, weakening the historical structure that once housed the toll taker for a covered bridge across the Schuylkill River.

The Historic Preservation Trust of Berks County, which owns the building, is investing \$75,000 in the project.

"This building is a monument to the strife and determination of our Colonial ancestors," declared Scott Stepp, 49, a historical preservationist and chairman of the trust's property committee. "It's a memorial to our Berks County origins."

Michael Fulp, a yeoman farmer, built the fieldstone house around 1783 along the main thoroughfare coming from Philadelphia. It overlooks a shallow portion of the Schuylkill, where early settlers pushing into Berks County could ford the river in covered wagons.

"Fulp, a combat soldier in the Revolutionary War, built a modest but substantial stone house when others were still building log cabins," said Laurence Ward of West Reading, volunteer project coordinator. "It's an example of the hard work and self-sufficiency of the region's early settlers."

The house is particularly significant, Ward contends, because Fulp was a commoner.

Unlike other early Berks settlers, some of whom received land grants of hundreds of acres from the Penn family, Fulp farmed a mere 40 acres along the Schuylkill.

Ward, 69, a retired lawyer, recently uncovered documents in the Berks County recorder of deeds office that shed light on the life of Fulp, who died in 1808. They were listed mistakenly under the name Folb, he said.

In 1832, when a covered bridge was built across the Schuylkill, Fulp's house was occupied by the bridge keeper - thus, its name. The keeper's responsibility was to collect tolls, light lanterns at night and, ironically, shovel snow onto the bridge so travelers could cross it in their horse-drawn sleighs.

Judged a safety hazard, the rare two-lane covered bridge was dismantled in 1951.

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Joe Forrest of Port Royal, Juniata County, works on restoring the stonework in the Bridge Keeper's House at Morlatton Village, near Douglassville.

Fulp's house, which partially collapsed in 1967, was worked on in the 1970s.

Several years ago, however, authorities became concerned about deteriorating stonework.

After an evaluation by consultant Richard Ortega of Malvern, the trust undertook perhaps the most intensive restoration in the building's history.

Ghyll Beck was selected from pre-qualified construction firms, who submitted bids based on National Park Service standards for historic structures.

Joe Forrest, 75, a master mason with 60 years experience, heads the restoration crew.

"When we're finished, this building will stand for generations to come," said Forrest, who was laying stone on the house's south wall.

The restoration is expected to be completed next month.

Adjacent to the 1716 Mouns Jones House, the oldest stone structure in Berks County, the Bridge Keeper's House is part of historic Morlatton Village. Included in the village is the White Horse Inn, which was run by George Douglass, for whom Douglassville is named.

Jon Hartman, the Trust's archivist, stressed the importance of the project to the region's identity.

"We need to keep our architectural history alive," he said.

Contact **Ron Devlin**: 610-371-5030 or rdevlin@readingeagle.com.

