

HISTORY OF THE PRIESTLEY HOUSE AND THE MOVE- MENT FOR ITS PRESERVATION*

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About the first of August, 1794, Dr. Joseph Priestley, after a long and tiresome journey from England, arrived in Northumberland. His fame as a clergyman and a scientist had preceded him to America and he was royally entertained in both New York and Philadelphia as he passed through those cities. But he longed for the quiet and rest of the country and so pushed on to Northumberland with the purpose of visiting his son who had settled there a year or so before. He was, however, so pleased with the town and its surroundings that he quickly decided to make Northumberland his home and wrote to a friend in England under date of August 27th, "I have just now fixed upon a spot on which to build a home." He states in another letter that, "Nothing can be more delightful nor more healthy than this place," and in the diary of William Davy, then living in Sunbury, we read, "Dr. Priestley visited us at Sunbury. He is in the whole so well pleased that he is preparing to build a very good brick house, the foundation of which, and a well, he has already dug." This was on October 3rd, indicating that the good Doctor lost little time in making up his mind where and how he was to live.

Northumberland is one hundred thirty miles from Philadelphia and, in 1794, four days were required to make the journey up the valley of the Schuylkill, over the divide, and down to the Susquehanna. It is rather remarkable that Priestley should have selected a home so far away from Philadelphia, the great center of commercial, social, and political activity. George Washington was President of the United States and, with Congress, was living there. Dr. Priestley writes of having taken tea with President Washington and that: "He (Washington) invited me to come at any time without ceremony."

Having once chosen his home he seems never to have contemplated a change. On account of his remoteness from a large center he encountered difficulties in obtaining carpenters. On April 5, 1795, he writes to England, "Nothing is yet done towards building my house. It is next to impossible to get workmen and the price of everything is advanced one-third since we have come hither." In May of the same year he writes, "I cannot make many experiments to much advantage till I get into the house I am about to build. At present I have both my library and apparatus in one room in my son's house."

Apparently nothing of moment was done during this entire summer,

* Read at the meeting on the lawn of Joseph Priestley's house, Northumberland, Pa., September 5, 1926, as a part of the exercises connected with the pilgrimage made by chemists during the golden jubilee of the American Chemical Society.

for on September 14, 1795, one year after he planned to build, he writes, "We have had an uncommonly wet and unhealthy summer all over the continent.....On this account we have not been able to make bricks to build my house." Evidently he now changed his plans and determined to build a frame house. He had only freshly sawed lumber but this he prepared as follows:

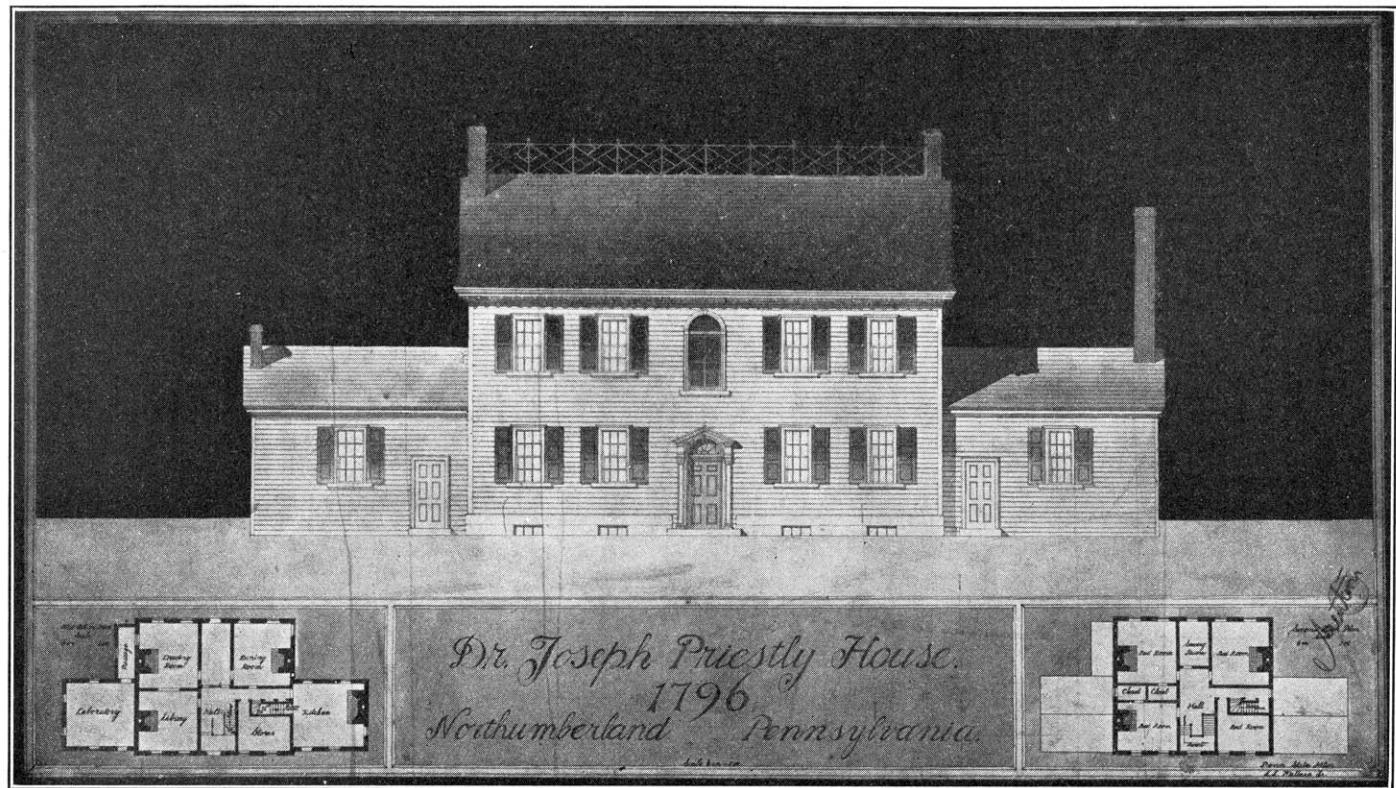
To kiln dry boards we dig a trench about 2 feet deep, the length of the boards and what breadth you please. We then support the boards with the edges downwards and so that when the fire is made under them, the smoke and heat may have access to every part of them. Two or three stages are placed one over another and on the outside, boards to keep off the rain. In ten days they will be as much dried as by exposure to the air in two years. We commonly kiln dry ten thousand feet at a time. The fire wood must be such as is not apt to flame, lest the boards should take fire, which sometimes happens. The expense cannot be much. A house constructed with such boards I prefer to one of brick or stone.

He looked forward anxiously to the completion of his house for in October, 1795, he writes, "I promise myself, when my house and laboratory shall be erected, to devote as much time to philosophical pursuits as ever I have done. Hitherto it has not been in my power to do much, as I have only one room in my son's house for my library and apparatus too." And again in December, "I have much more to do in my laboratory, but I am under the necessity of shutting up for the winter, as the frost will make it impossible to keep my water fit for use, without such provision as I cannot make till I get my own laboratory prepared on purpose, when I hope to be able to work alike, winter and summer."

However, the building must have progressed very slowly, for on July 28, 1796, two years after reaching Northumberland, he writes, "My house will not be finished until next Mid-summer: but I hope to get the laboratory finished soon." In September of this year Mrs. Priestley died. He writes on September 19, 1796, "This day I bury my wife. She died on Saturday, after an illness of a fortnight.....She had taken much thought in planning the new house and now that it is far advanced and promises to be everything she wished, she is removed to another."

In the following year the house and laboratory were finished. Dr. Priestley's son writes in completing his father's memoirs,

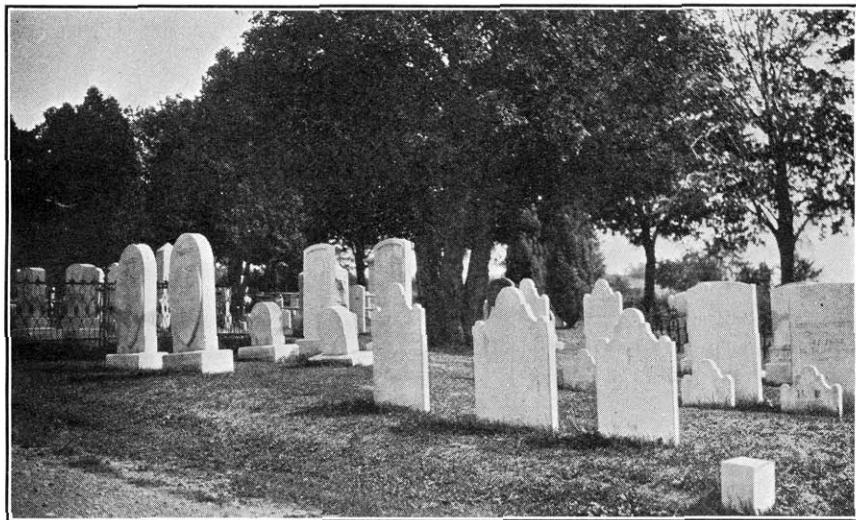
Towards the end of 1797, and not before, his LABORATORY and LIBRARY were finished. None but men devoted to literature can imagine the pleasure he derived from being able to renew his experiments with every possible convenience and from having his books once more arranged. His house was situated in a garden, commanding a prospect equal, if not superior, to any on the river Susquehanna, so justly celebrated for the picturesque views its banks afford. It was a singular fortunate circumstance that he found at Northumberland several excellent workmen in metals who could repair his instruments, make all the new articles he wanted in the course of his experimenting, as well as, if not in some respects better than he could have got them done in Birmingham.



ARCHITECT'S DRAWING OF THE PRIESTLEY HOUSE

By A. L. Kocher in the *Architectural Journal*

Priestley thoroughly enjoyed his house, his laboratory, and his garden. Concerning the latter he wrote, "Plants, as well as other objects, engage more of my attention than they ever did before.....I wish I knew a little more botany; but old as I am, I learn something new continually." One can readily imagine the dear old man—for such he surely was—stepping from his study or his laboratory after a morning of earnest work to labor among his flowers; or possibly, to wander under the trees which bordered the river; or perhaps, to sit a while on the bank and watch the then limpid waters of the Susquehanna flow onward to the sea. Here



THE PRIESTLEY BURIAL LOT, NORTHUMBERLAND, PA.
Photograph, 1921, by Dr. Louise McDanell Browne. Joseph Priestley's headstone is the central one of the three aligned in the foreground.

he lived and worked until February 6, 1804, when he peacefully passed away. From this house he was borne to the grave we have just visited, where of himself his epitaph says, "Return unto thy rest, O My Soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee."

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Fifty miles across the mountains to the west of Northumberland lies the Pennsylvania State College. Here dwelt for many years Doctor George Gilbert Pond, professor of chemistry and dean of the School of Natural Sciences. A profound admirer of Doctor Priestley and always greatly interested in the history of chemistry and physics, Doctor Pond, early in his life at State College, sought out Northumberland and this venerable home of Priestley.

Dr. Pond frequently spoke of the lamentable condition into which the Priestley house and grounds had fallen, and noted with deep regret the slow but sure disintegration of the old place, hallowed as it is by the memories of an illustrious past. At several times he formulated plans for the purchase and restoration of the property, but there were never sufficient funds in sight to make such a move possible.

Then came the World War, crowding into the background all activities not connected with support of the Government. However, in 1919, two events happened which in Dr. Pond's mind made some action regarding the Priestley Homestead imperative. One was the fact that the house was being used as a boarding house for foreign laborers and



THE PRIESTLEY HOUSE BEFORE ITS RESTORATION
Photograph by Dr. Louise McDanell Browne. The two tall hemlocks are said to have been planted by Dr. Priestley himself.

was, more rapidly than ever before, going to its ruin; and second, a report was circulated that a new railroad location in the valley of the Susquehanna passed through the Priestley property and would necessitate the destruction of the house.

Dr. Pond realizing that something had to be done, moved with his accustomed energy and directness and presented a plan to the Chemical Alumni of the Pennsylvania State College by which the old house could be saved to future generations. The presentation of his plan took the form of a dream in which he saw the house taken down in units and moved and re-erected on the Campus of the Pennsylvania State College. His understanding then was that the Priestley grounds were to be sacrificed

in any case, and that removal to State College was a certain way of insuring the perpetual care of at least the house.

Dr. Pond suggested to "his boys," as he was wont to call the Chemical Alumni, that a fund should be raised for the purpose of purchasing the house, and moving and re-erecting it. The Trustees of the Pennsylvania State College had already expressed a willingness to provide for perpetual care of the house when on the campus, but no funds were available for placing it there.

Notwithstanding the fact that everyone had given of his resources during the War until it had hurt, the response was exceedingly gratifying. However, before the fund was complete, Dr. Pond received a printed notice stating that the house and grounds were to be sold at public auction at a date just ten days later. Through the very prompt and splendidly generous support of Mr. William H. Teas of Marion, Virginia, Dr. Pond was enabled to appear at the auction with funds that assured to him the purchase of the property. Thus was the legal title to the Priestley house and grounds acquired by the Chemical Alumni of the Pennsylvania State College through the prompt and generous action of these two men.

Plans for the restoration of the house and for a fund large enough to carry them out were well formulated when Dr. Pond very suddenly died in May, 1920. When we recovered from the shock of this sad event, we recognized with dismay that the light which had illumined the picture had gone out; and that the driving force to which action in the past had been due, was no longer present. For a time the project stood still.

We then recalled the query from Gray's Elegy, "Can storied urn or animated bust, back to its mansion call this fleeting breath?" No, they cannot, but a storied urn has its function, its purpose, its utility. The Trustees of the Pennsylvania State College promptly honored the memory of Dr. Pond by giving his name to the new Chemical Laboratory, then building. But a more personal testimonial of the loving regard in which Dr. Pond was held by his students, both past and present, seemed desirable; and in the possibility of bringing to completion his cherished plan for the preservation of the Priestley house there was presented the looked-for opportunity.

The work was then taken up where Dr. Pond had laid it down. In the meantime there had developed two facts which made a change in the plan necessary. First, a closer inspection of the house showed that, because of its age, but little of the structure could be moved without almost complete destruction. Second, the project to push an additional railroad through the property had been abandoned. Hence it seemed best to restore the house and the grounds amid all the traditions of their early years, retaining the very trees which had been planted by Dr. Priestley so long ago. Only those who had seen the house and grounds before



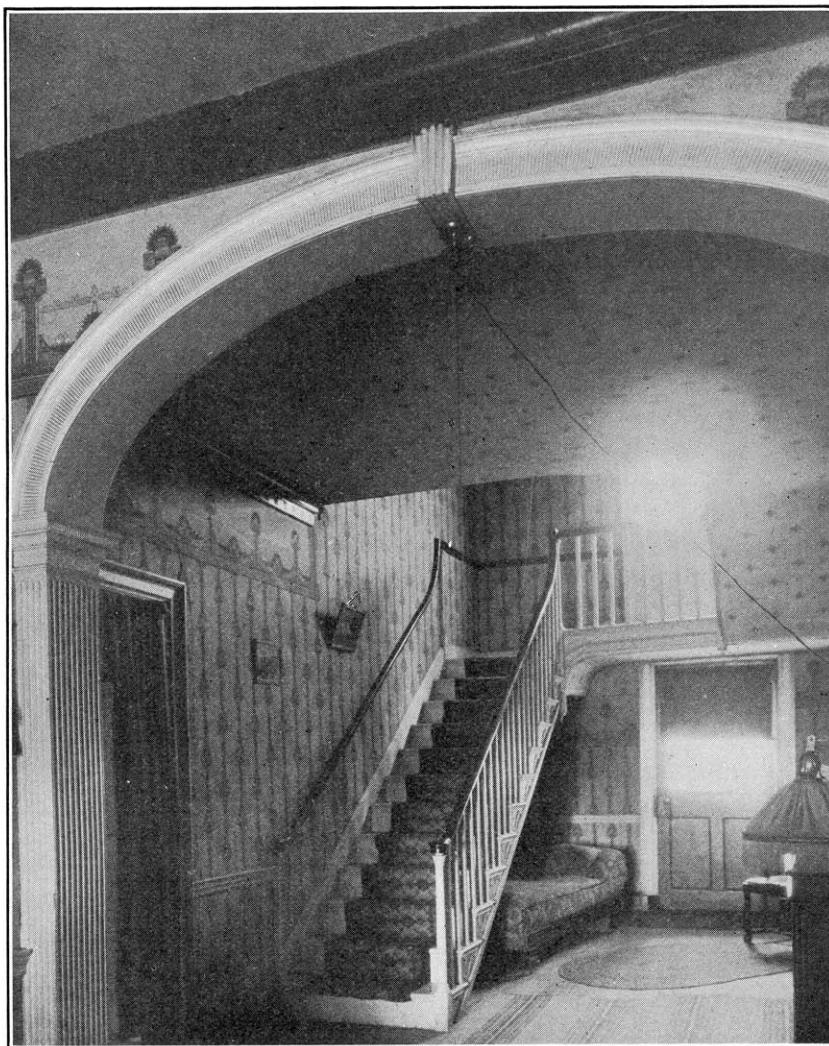
THE PRIESTLEY HOUSE AND MUSEUM FROM THE SOUTHWEST

the foreigners had been ejected can appreciate the change that has taken place; but we can all now see its attractive present and its very promising future.

Dr. Pond's plan included a fireproof room constructed in some part of the house, preferably the laboratory, into which could be gathered the many pieces of apparatus used by Dr. Priestley which are still in existence. These are now more or less scattered; but it was his hope and belief that if a safe and adequate room were provided for holding such precious mementos of the great Priestley, that their present owners would gladly assemble them for the common good. Because of fire-engineering difficulties it was found impossible to construct such a room. But in its place there has been provided near the house and adjoining the laboratory a small museum of the best modern fireproof construction. Concerning the Priestley apparatus which is now there, and that which is to come, Dr. Browne will presently tell us.

It seemed best to the chemical alumni of the Pennsylvania State College that a property so dear to the hearts of the chemists of the country should be held by a more widely representative organization. Hence, the George Gilbert Pond Memorial Association has been created and a charter from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is now issuing which will provide for a Board of Trustees in which will be vested the title to the Priestley property and the fund provided for its maintenance. This Board will be composed of appointees from the Pennsylvania State College, the American Chemical Society, the American Philosophical Society, and the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Because of his generous contribution to this maintenance fund we desire at this time to mention the name of the late Mr. Frederick E. Atteaux, chemical merchant and manufacturer of Boston, Mass.

It is our hope that the time may come when some honored scientist will wish to retire from active life, and come to live in this beautiful old home, and pursue his chemical research in the old Priestley laboratory. The house is full of interesting possibilities, and it requires no imagination to see the laboratory adequately equipped for modern scientific research. Then will Dr. Pond's dream have become a reality and the Priestley home be preserved for all posterity.



MAIN HALLWAY OF PRIESTLEY HOUSE, LOOKING NORTH TOWARD STREET ENTRANCE,
AND SHOWING COLONIAL STAIRCASE