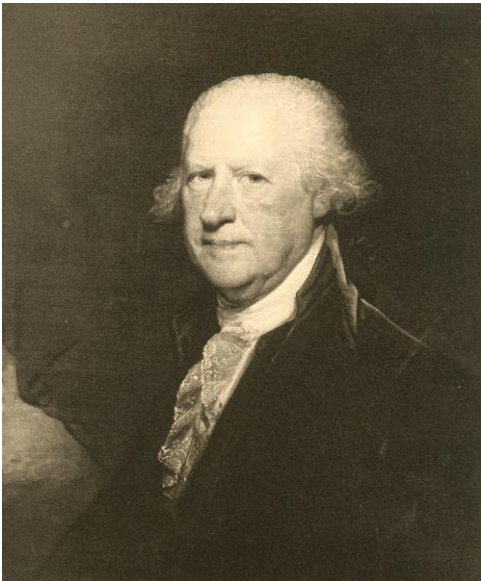


# THE MOUNT AMWELL NEWS

## Shippen House or Not?

By David R. Reading



Edward Shippen

In May of 1776, Edward Shippen, a prominent Philadelphia lawyer, fearing for his family's safety in the face of a possible British capture of the city, decided to retreat north east to the countryside. He chose to purchase a property near Flemington, New Jersey complete with a house built by Gov. John Reading in 1760. Shippen undoubtedly knew of the property from his father, also Edward, a contemporary of Gov. Reading. Both had been founding trustees of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) as well as business associates in the 1750s and 60s. The Shippen family, including Margaret "Peggy" Shippen, resided at the farm until late fall of 1776 when they returned to Philadelphia. "Peggy" Shippen is infamously known as the second wife of the American traitor, Benedict Arnold. Over the years since the late 18th century the original Reading property has been subdivided and sold off in pieces. The house shown in figure 3 stands in close proximity to the Reading house and the grist mill remnants on the south branch of then Raritan River. It is unknown

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when it was built. It is possible the house was built prior to 1776, but there is no evidence that it was built or occupied by the Shippens. It is also possible that the house was built by Shippen to house his supposed new career as a rural shopkeeper but again this writer has seen no evidence to support that theory. Nevertheless, the house has acquired the label as the "Shippen" house.



Peggy Shippen

The Raritan Township Committee adopted Resolution #10-221 authorizing the Mayor and Clerk to sign the Contract authorizing the Purchase of Block 28, Lot 7 - Riccioni (Shippen) on December 21, 2010. The house and land (approximately 4 acres) had been designated in 1979 as a "historically significant" and was identified as "a gap" in the overall greenway planning along the south branch east of Flemington and

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consequently of great interest to the Raritan Township Open Space Committee. There is no doubt that the property is historically significant as it lies adjacent to the stunning Georgian style home of Gov. John Reading (1686-1767). However, its designation as the "Shippen" house is suspect.



Figure 1: "Shippen" house

There is some evidence that the property was included in the original Reading plot owned by Gov. John Reading and transferred by deed to his son George. George Reading was given a mill on 2 acres and 130 perches (0.8 acres)<sup>1</sup> on Dec 31 1755. This is almost certainly the mill on the "Shippen" property. Later, on June 19th 1764 he was granted another 250 acres from his father that would have included the brick house (built in 1760). The deed describing the boundaries of the property is hard to follow today, but the starting point and initial northern most boundary is clear. The deeds describe the beginning at a point southwest of the South Branch of the Raritan and the line proceeds along a westerly line bordering Daniel Reading's property for a distance of forty chains (2,640 feet) which is precisely one-half of a mile.<sup>2</sup> The red line on the Hammond map (Figure 4) indicates roughly a 250 acre area bounded by the Daniel Reading's line and the South Branch. It clearly encompasses the "Shippen" property.

George Reading for unknown reasons decided to sell the property while his father was still alive. He advertised the property containing "a large brick house" in January 1766 and apparently having no takers, again in October. Finally, he advertised a Vendue (public auction) to take place on March 31st, 1767. In the advertisement, he describes the brick house as "good Brick House, genteelly finished" and the land area as "320 acres." There is no mention of a mill house.

John Gregg probably was the buyer George's Vendue, his deed is dated April 29th 1767. In November 1767, Gov. John Reading died and his will was proved Jan. 27, 1768. The inventory of his estate is made Nov. 20,

1767 by John Gregg and Gershom Lee. (Lib. 13, p. 338). Nine years later on June 1st, 1776, John Gregg sold the property to Edward Shippen of Philadelphia for £3,200. The property is described, in part, as "...stands a water Corn or Grist Mill and a large brick Messuage<sup>3</sup> together with several other buildings and Improvements." Shippen sold the property two years later to Robert Shewell, a Philadelphia merchant, for £9,000 Pennsylvania money.

Did the Shippens occupy the Reading brick house or the "Shippen" house between 1776 and 1778? Stephen H. Case, a MTAP life member, writes in his forthcoming biography of Peggy Shippen, that Edward Shippen described the house as "a fine house" on "a clever tract of land with a good deal of meadows." This is very similar to the language used by George Reading and suggestive that the family occupied the brick house and not the frame house near the mill.

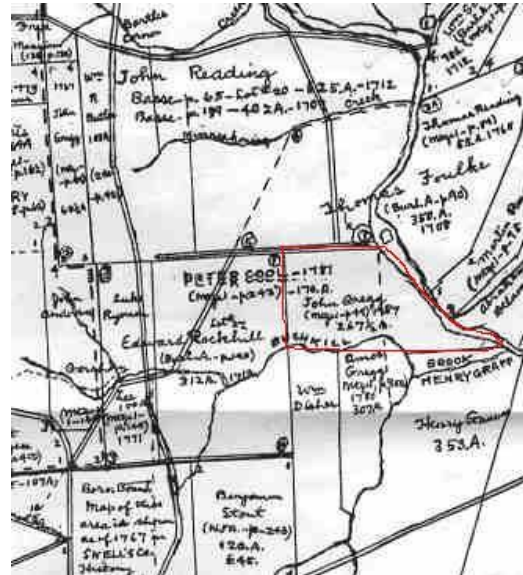


Figure 2: George Reading's Property Boundary

No matter the historical details, the efforts of Raritan Township to acquire the property deserves full support of MTAP members and all others dedicated to historic preservation.

*A special thanks to Steve Case for his permission to use the research results of his deed searches and quotes for his upcoming book Treacherous Beauty, a biography of Peggy Shippen, who was probably more responsible for Arnold's treachery than previously acknowledged by historians. The book will be published next summer.*

<sup>1</sup> The perch as a lineal measure equals of 16.5 feet. As a unit of area, a *square perch* is equal to a square rod, 30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> square yards or 0.00625 acres. An area of 130 perches would equal 0.81 Acres.

<sup>2</sup> Hunterdon County, New Jersey, Deed Book 1:457, John Gregg and wife to Edward Shippen Jr., 22 Sept. 1791; Clerk's Office, Flemington. Hunterdon County, New Jersey, Deed Book 1:461, Deed out of Edward Shippen Jr. and Margaret Shippen his wife to Robert Shewell, 24 Sept 1791; Clerk's Office, Flemington. (used by permission Stephen H. Case)

<sup>3</sup> This word is synonymous with dwelling-house; and a grant of a messuage with the appurtenances, will not only pass a house, but all the buildings attached or belonging to it, as also its curtilage, garden and orchard, together with the close on which the house is built. A Law Dictionary, Adapted to the Constitution and Laws of the United States. By John Bouvier. Published 1856.

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### Wanton Disregard of Our Heritage

*This article by Blake Clark was condensed from The Diplomat and appeared in the Readers Digest, January 1959. I discovered it in my mother's papers and thought it is as appropriate today as in 1959, perhaps more so.* DRR.

An architect visiting West Point a few years ago was admiring Superintendent's residence, the oldest building still being used at the Academy, this one had housed almost every superintendent, and so has historic as well as architectural value.

"We're tearing it down for more barracks rooms", an officer told him matter-of-factly. The architect was horrified. Couldn't it possibly be saved? No, the plans were made.

The visitor hastened to Washington and buttonholed. Congressmen and Senators, but could interest none. Then he had an inspiration: he called on Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia. "Senator", he said, "did you know that Gen. Robert E. Lee's famous home while he was Superintendent of West Point is about to be destroyed?"

The senator was incredulous. "Get me West. Point" he said to his secretary: the destruction plans were cancelled and today this architectural landmark still stands, used and admired.

The patriotic architect is but one of many

Americans who are alarmed at the wanton razing of places precious to our heritage. Allover the country structures that help recreate our past are being sacrificed to make way for shopping centers, superhighways, skyscrapers and. "sub-topias.

Much of this destruction is the result of callous disregard of cultural values. Residents of Charleston, S.C. used to point with pride to their Orphan House Chapel, designed in 1802 by Gabriel Manigault, one of the finest of early American architects. It was destroyed to enlarge a parking lot!

Boscobel, a classical mansion dating from 1804, was considered one of the most distinguished examples of Hudson River architecture. Despite local efforts to save it, it was sold to a wrecker who tore it down. (Private citizens have since raised money to re-erect Boscobel and today it is a museum of Hudson Valley history and art, a popular tourist attraction).

Why save old places? What can they contribute to living in the world today? A nation with no regard for its past will have little future worth remembering. We need authentic, tangible reminders if our national virtues and heroes to make us feel a part of the best in our heritage.

Historic preservation speaks to the spirit. In 1942 an army private wrote to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., "Of all the sights I have seen and the books I have read, none ever made me sense the greatness of this country with more force and clarity than when I saw Williamsburg."

Many a lesser known locality, taking a fresh perspective of the past, is finding an old courthouse or residence, even a covered bridge or a tavern, that is rich in historical association. How can such sites be preserved?

Historic homes can retain their charm and. still be put to good use. In Washington, D.C., when three handsome Federal style buildings were about to be torn down for a parking lot, a group of neighbors, to prove that preservation will pay brought the buildings and leased them to a restaurateur, a florist and an interior decorator. The 1787 Dr. Estrehan Plantation House in Louisiana remodeled in 1840 in the Greek revival style was taken over by an oil company which used it as its administration offices.

Preservation can be good business. A recent government survey shows that an Average of only 28 tourists a day visiting a town with historic attractions will bring in as much money during a year as a new business with a \$100,000 annual payroll.

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The true preservationist, however, is not motivated by money. His is the spirit of Ann Pamela Cunningham, the South Carolina woman who almost single handedly saved Washington's home Mount Vernon from ruin when she organized the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in 1858 which bought the historic place for \$200,000 and restored it as a national shrine.

Now is the time for every town to take stock and determine what is most worth saving. Many communities may not attempt to save their historic places until it is too late.

If we can save enough of the houses, churches, courthouses and other places where Americans who went before us lived and worked, we can sense their way of life, their ideals and character.

We want our children to sense them, too. Unless we act now, few of these firsthand lessons from the past will remain.

"If America forgets where she came from, if the people lose sight of what brought them along, if she listens to the deniers and mockers, then will begin the rot and dissolution."

-Carl Sanders, *Remembrance Rock*

## Web site Members Access

Reminder - The MTAP web site includes a member's only page. Content includes current newsletters. To access simply click on the members page and enter user: member, password: mtap2008

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### Board of Directors

David R. Reading.....Executive Director  
Jennifer Ellsworth.....Director  
Richard B. Reading.....Director

## Announcements

### Fall Luncheon Meeting

The fall meeting was held at the Tewksbury Inn in Oldwick, NJ on October 22nd. The guest speaker was Art Rittenhouse, VP of the Hendricks and Hendrickson Family Association. Art gave a very compelling and emotional talk on the destruction of the family cemetery in Holmdel, NJ. All members are encouraged to visit their web site at

[www.gjoynson.com/hendrickson.htm](http://www.gjoynson.com/hendrickson.htm) and on facebook at [www.facebook.com/.../Hendricks...Hendrickson-Family-Association](http://www.facebook.com/.../Hendricks...Hendrickson-Family-Association). If you wish to send a donation to organization, you may write directly to the association president:

Andrew A Hendricks, MD  
President,  
Hendricks and Hendrickson Family Association  
103 Rosewood Drive  
Lumberton, NC 28358

## Members

Carl Shuster, Ph.D. - life	John & Marielle Reading
Brian & Cindy Murphy - life	Romy Reading-Leo
Jen Ellsworth- life	Sybil Albrecht Lewis-life
Bill & Marjorie Luken, PhD. - life	Joan Phoenix
Rick Hayes-Roth, Ph.D. - life	John G. & Susan Reading- life
Ruth Meeker - life	Leigh Braun-life
David & Jan Reading - life	Eugenia Klein-life
Chris Solliday - life	Shawn &Theresa Reading
Albert Reading -life	Jerry Rosco
Rick Reading – life	Dr. Ed Tindall
Audrey R. McAbee – life	George Muller
Fred Lathrop-life	Bruce Hotchkiss
Marfy Goodspeed - life	Nancy Herman
Steve Case – life	John Stevenson
Mark Reading- life	Sharon Lake