

Historical Society News

HIGHTSTOWN-EAST WINDSOR
NEW JERSEY



FALL/WINTER 2014-2015

The Sloan House at 238 South Main— *Lifting the Lid on an Architectural Mystery*

By Robert W. Craig

The house at 238 South Main Street, the northwest corner of South Main and South streets, was built for local merchant Samuel Sloan in 1856-57, and then repaired and refinished for Dr. Joseph McChesney in 1858-59. This house is today the home of the Peddie School headmaster. In a 1996 article, I explored the circumstances under which this house was built, and came to one unintended conclusion: that there was no evidence that then-famous Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan designed the house. That conclusion contradicted the view held by the antiquarian Josephine



Dawes, who owned the house through most of the 20th century. During my research, the name of the builder was discovered: David B. Dey, Jr., one of Hightstown's most talented building contractors. It was Dey whom local merchant Sloan hired to construct the house.

The question has remained ever since: where then did the design come from? Did Dey cook it up, himself? Ambitious builders

would sometimes buy a design from an architect to construct for a client. Builders would also often fashion a design themselves, working with pattern books of house designs. Some builders, in fact, became architects as their careers progressed and as architecture professionalized. Historians call such men "builder-architects," who both created new designs and built them from their own drawings and specifications.

The Sloan house is distinctive, with a design that has not been seen elsewhere. Searching for a source in pattern books has not yet yielded anything approaching a match to the house as constructed, and no architect has been identified who designed it. It seems more likely that Dey and the local merchant Sloan would have searched through available architectural design sources to come up with something satisfying.

One designer whose work was very well known through his pattern books was Andrew Jackson Downing, of New York. Downing published two highly influential books in the years before the Sloan house went up: *The Architecture of Country Houses* in 1850, and *Cottage Residences* in 1853. In the former, Downing championed the Gothic Revival style of architecture, and when he finally reached out to the Italianate style in the second half of the

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Society Hosts Hight Descendants

On October 10th, Dale Grubb and Bob Craig of the Society played host at Ely House to Judy Grabowski and Mary-Therese Grabowski from Virginia, mother and daughter respectively, who are descendants of the Hight family through Judy's mother's line. Genealogical records they have found show that they descend from a Nicholas Hight (1727-1805), who lived in the western part of Windsor Township (West Windsor Township today).

Judy and Mary-Therese have posed an interesting question: could this Nicholas have been a son of John and Mary Hight of Hightstown? It has long been understood that the names of some of the Hight children are not known. Daughters' names, especially, have been hard to discover, but not even all of their sons' names may be known. Three sons' names are known, but one of them was only discovered in 1984. Nicholas's date of birth places him a few years older than the Hight's known sons, but not so early that he couldn't have possibly been an eldest child.

More likely, however, may be that this Nicholas was a son of the Nicholas Hight that was an older brother of John Hight and who lived in or near the Penns Neck neighborhood of West Windsor, perhaps just north of the Millstone River. The presence of this other,

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HIGHTSTOWN EAST WINDSOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hightstown, New Jersey
Founded 1971

**To educate, while preserving for
future generations, our people
and our community's history.**

Robert Craig, Editor



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Clark J. Hutchinson

This year the Society lost one of its longest-serving members, Clark Jordan Hutchinson (1953-2014), who joined back in the early 1970s only months after the Society was organized. He helped create the Society's library in 1976 and served as Library committee chairman for several years. In 1985 Clark was elected vice-president of the Society, and then elected president, serving from 1986 to 1989.

In Hightstown High School in the late 1960s, Clark had been a member of Eleanor Shuman's Exploring New Jersey Club, and in 1973 he helped conduct the 18th-century land-title research of the Hightstown East Windsor area that had the unexpected result of establishing once-and-for-all that John and Mary Hight never owned a 3,000-acre tract of land. Clark led a project to recover artifacts from Peddie Lake in 1983, and helped save a stretch of the original Camden & Amboy Railroad right-of-way in downtown Hightstown in 1984, in the process getting the Smithsonian's curators of transportation history involved. That year Clark was appointed the Borough's official (but unpaid) historian, under a state law that allows municipalities to provide office space and administrative assistance to local historians. He would end up serving in that post for more than two decades, in the process, also serving on the Borough's historic preservation advisory committee.

Clark had a career with land title insurance companies, and he specialized in the longitudinal title searches that were so beneficial to the Society and its house tours that began in 1990 and have been held every two years since. His work with the research committee for the tours helped create the "Hightstown model" for house tour research, which synthesizes the results of architectural history, land title research, genealogy, and newspaper searches to support brief histories of each house on the tour. Thanks to the wonders of e-mail, Clark was able to continue his participation with the house tour committee even after moving from Hightstown to Alabama about eight years ago.

Clark is survived by his mother, Hazel Hutchinson, his wife, the former Suzanne Thomas, and his step-children, Jared and April. ■

Hight Descendants

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closely related, Hight family in the local area during the 18th century has complicated the search for John and Mary's descendants.

In addition to a session in the Ely House library, in which Dale brought out material from the Society's manuscript collections about the Hights, and in which the Grabowskis shared information about their line of descent, the group visited the location along Wyckoffs Mill Road that remains one possible location where John and Mary Hight of Hightstown were buried. (It is also possible

that both were buried in the graveyard of the First Baptist Church of Hightstown, of which they were still members at the time of their deaths).

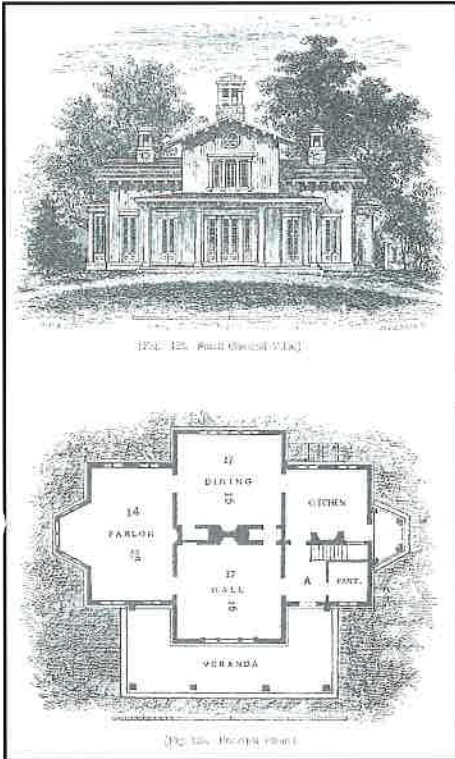
After enjoying a lunch at the Hightstown Diner, Grubb, Craig, and the Grabowskis also drove over to the cemetery in West Windsor in which Nicholas Hight was buried. Graves of several other members of the extended Hight family are also located there, though some of the grave-stones have been damaged by vandalism.

The Grabowskis extended their visit to Saturday to attend the annual Hightstown Fair. ■

Sloan House

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book, it was to promote the asymmetrical villas that drew inspiration from rural villas rather than urban ones that featured symmetrical designs. Downing came closest to the Sloan house in Design 23, "A Small Villa in the Classical Manner," which is a less fully-developed expression of a promi-



nent, central mass linked by a covered porch to flanking wings across a symmetrical facade. The Sloan house possesses all of these features, but there the similarities end. Downing put chimneys in the center of his plan, and the wings dominate the central block. In *Cottage Residences*, Downing didn't even come that close.

The architect Samuel Sloan was a prolific designer, also equally at home in the Gothic Revival and Italianate styles that were both riding high in 1850. Sloan had enjoyed a meteoric rise in favor among wealthy Philadelphia clients beginning in 1848, and in 1851

was approached to publish his designs and design ideas. The result by 1853 was the two-volume *The Model Architect*, a work now available as a single-volume reprint from Dover Publications.

In Sloan's sixth design, "An Italian Villa," he placed the front entrance in a projecting central bay that was flanked on either side by the recessed main block of the house, as if that block were wings, and he united the entire facade with a porch that extended to turn the right-front corner of the house and run the width of the main block on the right side. But the central element was a mere tower, one bay wide, not the three-bay-wide main block of the house in Hightstown. He came closer in his eleventh design, of an "ornamented" villa, three bays wide, with a covered porch in which pairs of fluted colonettes rested on dadoes connected by balustrades. The Sloan house in Hightstown would have these features, except that Dey substituted individual fluted pillars for the paired colonettes, and that the individual balusters on the Hightstown house were much heavier than those shown in the book's

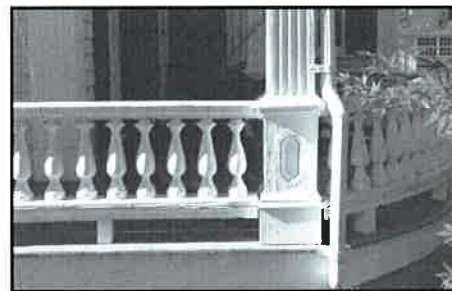


plate. Design 11 also pushed the chimneys from the center to the sides to make room for a lantern arising from the middle of a hipped roof, and provided a frieze band below the cornice ornamented with small windows, one above each of the second floor windows. The eleventh design

comes closer than any other to the main block of the Sloan house in Hightstown, but it lacks the wings



of the Hightstown house, the porch that wraps around to reach those wings, and differs in many details of ornament. In some ways, the Sloan house in Hightstown combines the central features of both the sixth and the eleventh designs.

Sloan's *The Model Architect* is also sprinkled with the scroll-sawn fretwork that he referred to as "eave and cornice ornament," and which is seen, in modified forms, both in the Sloan house and in several other houses of the period both in Hightstown Borough and in East Windsor Township.

One source that Dey and the merchant Sloan might have consulted is the book *Village and Farm Cottages*, by Henry W. Cleveland and two brothers named Backus, published in New York in 1856, the very year that construction began on Sloan's house. Sloan's pockets were not deep, but he was aiming to have a solid, yet well-decorated, house for his family, one that was substantial and not too inexpensive. He might have seen Design 24 in this book, which even though it was intended to depict a double house rather than a detached, single-family residence, it does illustrate a covered, one-story porch that wraps around the main block to also encompass

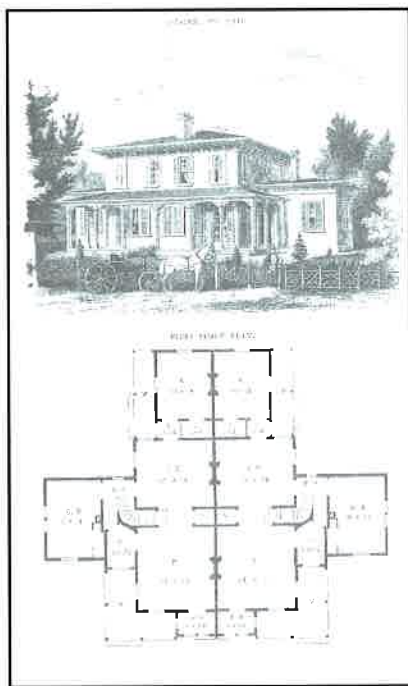
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Sloan House

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the front of matching, recessed wings. It's an unusual arrangement not widely imitated. One can look through hundreds of Victorian house designs without finding another example, and this one was published the very year that work on the Sloan house was begun.

The floor plan that accompanied this design also bears similarities to that of the Sloan house. And the design pictures a shallow hipped roof over the main block not unlike that of 238 South Main. But Cleaveland's design is not a close match to the Sloan house. The main block is four bays wide



rather than three; the design of the porch is much plainer, and there are neither the beautiful lantern that rises from the roof, nor the octagonal attic windows that ornament the wide frieze band below the cornice of the roof.

There remain several other architects' books of house designs to sift through, published during the several years before 1856, and even more of Sloan's published designs. Yet unless or until a clear

match is found, it will not be possible to claim that Samuel Sloan the architect designed a house for Samuel Sloan the Hightstown merchant, or even that the Hightstown house copies a Sloan design (not quite the same thing). It yet remains true, however, that the house embodies a peculiar and charming mix of architectural ideas available from several sources, and that in their composition they are very well thought out. Their selection and arrangement speak highly of whoever the designer was, and its execution is a compliment to the builder. In this case, the designer and builder may have been one and the same. If Dey did compose the design, his work produced a house that was worthy of Sloan.

(The Sloan house is listed in the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places.)

Robert W. Craig, a Life Member of the Society, is a historian and architectural historian who specializes in the history of the American built environment. ■

John Hight of Hightstown: New Evidence

We already know much about John and Mary Hight, the founders of Hightstown, but there are still areas of their lives that remain mysteries, and investigation is still needed whenever new evidence of their lives emerges. References to two documents have recently been found that may shed further light on the Hights in the 1740s, a period of great activity for them but about which many elements are no longer known. John Hight's name appears as a witness to the

will of a William Disbrow in Hopewell in 1743, along with the name Henry Disbrow, a carpenter living in Cranbury at the same time. This corresponds to a period in Hight's life when he was pursuing the trade of a wheelwright, which likely forced him to go to where he could find work. Hight's name also appears on an executor's account for the same estate in 1748. What these documents will actually reveal about the Hights'—more than these bare facts—remains to be seen. ■

Society Welcomes New Members

The Society welcomes the following newest members:

- Gina Barzda—East Windsor
- Kevin and Pat Donahue—East Windsor
- Bob von Reigen and Linda Early—Hightstown
- Reginald Ely—North Carolina
- Sherri Foran—East Windsor
- Gail and David Gerridge—Meadow Lakes
- Barbara Gilbert—East Windsor
- Judy Halstead—East Windsor
- Barbara Harrington—Hightstown
- Karen Hodell—Hightstown
- Patricia Demar Hauver—Carmel, NY
- John and Bernice Mazzeo—Hamilton
- Lorraine McDade—East Windsor
- Mr. and Mrs. Steve Misiuri—Hightstown
- Tom Partyka—New Egypt
- Randy Rauscher—Holmdel
- Laura Lowrie and John Sarappo—East Windsor
- Carolyn and Katherine Umphrey-Boyd—Texas
- Dan and Kathy Yurwit—Hightstown
- Kris and James Zito—Hightstown ■

House Tour Great Success

The HEW Historical Society house tour "Time & Again", held October 26, 2014, drew a large attendance and was a big success. We had great homes on the tour and perfect weather. The Society brought in \$8,300 this year thanks to the many people who volunteered. We thank the homeowners for being so generous in allowing us the opportunity to place their residences on tour. We thank all the committee chairs and tour volunteers for their dedicated service. Rocky Brook Garden Club members made several gorgeous floral designs for each home. The Central Jersey Antique Car Club participated with several of their prized antique cars and trucks. Many thanks to the program book advertisers. Thanks also to the Hightstown Woman's Club art department for their efforts in drawing the houses used both in the program booklet and given as gifts to the homeowners who participated on tour.

The Society gives a special thanks to Pavel and Nichole L'vov for having the post-tour social following the tour. Approximately 85 members and guests attended and enjoyed supper provided by Dick and Cathy Simmons, Cappy and Chris Stults and Jay and Robin Smith. ■

New! Postcard History Book

*Written by Richard Harlan Pratt.
Get your Book today for \$22—a
great Christmas gift!*

Hightstown traces its beginnings to 1747, when John Hight bought an 80-acre parcel alongside

Rocky Brook. He built a gristmill there, abutting the road that became Main Street. The mill attracted other small enterprises, including a dry goods store, two taverns, a blacksmith shop, and sawmill. With the rise of the steam engine, the town grew to become a thriving transportation hub. As this community evolved into a contemporary downtown corridor, the farms and homes spread across what is today both the Borough and East Windsor Township. This book tells a visual story that will hold your interest from cover to cover, including chapters on retail, schools, everyday life, transportation and more!

The Society has 23 books available for sale. Make checks out to HEWHS for \$22 and contact Shirley Olsen at 609-448-8388 for your Postcard History Series. ■

Property Update

A few days ago we noticed water on the hardwood floor in the front foyer of Ely House, on the right side of the front door. The sewer pipe from the second floor bathroom had deteriorated. When the sewer pipe in the basement was checked, that pipe was cracked and was replaced by Plumbing Solutions for \$1,800.

In September the deck was found to be sagging after a group of ARC young adults had just walked on it after touring our facility. The Bryne Brothers Construction Company of Allentown responded and advised that the support beams under the deck had completely disintegrated and needed to be replaced. This work was all done in addition to having handrails repaired for a total of \$3,300.

The Ely House front porch was power washed and shutters repaired. The porch, columns and front door were painted for \$500, by our new Society member, Bob vonReigen. ■

Editor's Column

As we enter the New Year, the future of our Society promises to be bright.

The Society continues to get support from The Hightstown Woman's Club, The Friday Club, and the Rocky Brook Garden Club members. Members were able to spend a Saturday morning cleaning the facility and washing windows so that our property looks presentable.

The Garden club purchased our Christmas wreath, roping, and made the swags.

Lee Brown and Debbie Warfield from the Friday Club have been helping put accessions into the library computer.

Barbara Harrington, a new Society member and member of the Hightstown Woman's Club has been working on the Alphaeus Albert Slide collection. The Slide Collection is a fabulous record of Hightstown's history. The slides include memorabilia, streets, buildings, people, and organizations from the 17th through the 20th centuries. It is a wonderful opportunity to get to know the town and its history. The slides are being scanned, and a digital, categorized, record is being created. These digital images will be available to be used by local groups and educators, as well as by individuals researching their past. Thus far, over 200 slides have been digitally documented, with about 800 to go! Mr. Albert was a prolific camera enthusiast! ■

