

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

History gives Pottstown meaning, substance

Pottstown is more than a collection of older buildings, most of them housing people of modest means. Our history and architecture give us our unique sense of place and identity.

Every building has a story. Consider my home at 222 Chestnut Street. Although the house is about 140 years old, my wife and I are only the third family to live in it.

The house was built about 1870 by Nathaniel Duncan, who worked as a machinist for the P&R Railroad and later as a janitor at Pottstown High School. He died in 1896.

The house was bequeathed to his daughter, Elizabeth, who grew up in the house and became a teacher in the Pottstown School District. In 1903, she married Irwin Warner in Transfiguration Lutheran Church (now Invictus Church) just a block away from the house. Irwin was a bookkeeper for the P&R (later Reading) Railroad and served on the Pottstown School Board. He died in 1933.

The Warners had a son, John, whose young family joined Elizabeth in the house during the Great Depression when he couldn't find full-time work. Elizabeth lived to 83, dying in 1955. She and her husband are buried in Edgewood Cemetery.

When Elizabeth died, her son sold the house to Dr. Robert Gray, an osteopath who remodeled the front parlor into a waiting room and a tiny examining room. He died in 1969. His widow, Esther, was the social editor of *The Mercury* when I joined the paper in 1971. I can still see her at the far end of the newsroom, a petite woman with bobbed black hair, her head barely rising above her typewriter.

Esther died in 1972, and we bought the house from her children, including her son-in-law, John Durkin, who is now retiring after a notable career as a Pottstown policeman and district justice.

My wife Frances completed the circle, teaching for 35 years in Pottstown's elementary schools, just as Elizabeth did, retiring last June. Now I hope to serve on the Pottstown School Board, as Irwin did.

Recently, Frances and I had the pleasure of hosting Elizabeth Warner's grandson, Glenn, who grew up in our house during the Depression. We were amazed as he

described with precision how his grandmother had arranged the furniture in every room. His childhood bedroom is now our bedroom, facing the Potts Family Burial Ground where John Potts, the founder of Pottstown, is buried.

Glenn is 79 now. He earned a Ph.D in chemistry and retired as a professor at the University of Charleston in West Virginia, where he still lives with his wife. They will also be buried in Edgewood Cemetery, where they've already placed their headstones next to his parents and grandparents.

In our highly mobile society, we too often make light of roots and connectedness. But here in Pottstown, our beautiful historic buildings

bind us together.

That's just one reason most of us oppose plans by our school administrators, who all live in the suburbs, to replace our neighborhood elementary schools with something big, new, and expensive.

Our schools link generations of Pottstonians who either attended them or lived and worked near them. They help stabilize our neighborhoods. We will be better off — spiritually, financially and educationally — to renovate and preserve them.

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Commentary by
Thomas Hylton



222 Chestnut Street in Pottstown, next to the Potts Family Burial Ground, has housed just three families over 140 years.