



# Haverford Township Historical Society



## NITRE HALL'S NEW LEASE ON LIFE

By Richard D. Kerr

Nitre Hall is a truly remarkable historic building. After being erected for powdermaster William Rogers, and lived in by his family and servants in the first half of the 1800s, it then remained inhabited but frozen in time. It stayed largely unaltered, compared with the nearby Grange, which has been enlarged, Victorianized, altered and modernized during its long history as a stately residence.

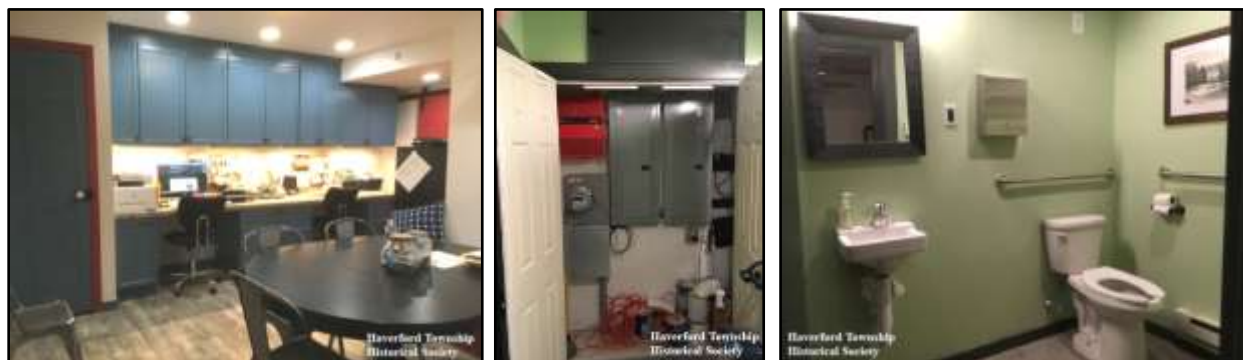
In 1958 the Society for Preservation of Landmarks, Nitre Hall's last private owners, conveyed it with 8 acres of land to Haverford Township as part of the creation of Powder Mill Valley Park along Cobb's Creek. Even then, the house and its occupants had no modern conveniences and no utilities. Amazingly, it was not until the late 1960s that a water line replaced the well, a sewer connection replaced the outhouse, electric and telephone services were installed, and electric heating replaced the iron stoves and fireplaces. While window woodwork and shutters have been repaired and replaced, new stucco and shingles applied, and the entrance stairway, porch and rear footbridge recreated, Nitre Hall has never been enlarged or "reimagined." William Rogers would readily recognize it, two hundred years later.

Oddly, once Haverford Township and the Haverford Township Historical Society repaired and stabilized Nitre Hall, making it an historically furnished treasure, the building essentially froze in time again. Now, after another half-century of suspended animation, it has been getting some much-needed attention. This work deserves description here.

The Historical Society competed for, and won, a Conservation Assessment Program grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to undertake a study of the building and our collection. The 2013 report by professional consultants outlined needs and recommended corrective steps that should be taken to "raise the bar" in our volunteer stewardship efforts. With a grant from the township, we followed up on the CAP study, commissioning historic architect Dan Campbell to do a more thorough analysis of Nitre Hall, including a structural engineering analysis. He developed more detailed, individual, sequential steps to achieve the CAP study recommendations. We, in concert with the township as owner of the building, have been planning and undertaking that work since then. Prudence and public safety, particularly in our annual, large on-site school programs, dictated that we bring things up to current standards.

The first step in the sequential work plan was the renovation of our Society office on the ground floor, where we had been "making do" in a 1960s bedroom. (The red shag carpet and the bathtub just had to go!) As part of this work, some interior walls were reframed and built in slightly moved locations, planning ahead for the next stage. That next stage was the replacement and modernization of the adjacent electrical service closet. The electric service hub was totally replaced with a compact installation against the new office walls. Dan's clever, space-gaining plan then allowed us, in a third stage, to gut and rebuild the small public bathroom, enlarging it to address modern accessibility requirements. In related work, emergency exit signs and emergency lights have been added to the building. An updated fire safety and security system was installed. The guidance of the township

building codes staff included advising on the number and locations of fire extinguishers. We added internet service for the first time. We are no longer working in the 1960's.



We launched a related effort to stop storing a large amount of bulky event supplies and materials in Nitre Hall, especially the lugging of large, heavy things up and down all the twisty, tight-clearance stairs to the attic. Eliminating this constant seasonal wear and tear on an historic building, as well as ourselves, was a top priority. The Society came up with a plan and undertook the long process of locating, designing, receiving approval for, and constructing a new storage shed for these materials. Cooperating and benevolent contractors, working with a team of volunteers, have made the "Rogers Storehouse" a reality. It sits behind the Summer Kitchen and is designed in a matching rustic style.



With room freed up inside Nitre Hall, Society volunteers have been busy in a continuing process to sort, store, and upgrade the archival keeping of our history collections. Flat files and a large industrial shelf unit now make our extensive collection of atlases and maps readily accessible, as well as artwork, deeds and other items in the "Map Room" on the third floor. Our new Haverford newspaper collection rests in sorted and labeled archival boxes on newly-installed shelving in this room. We are presently sorting, listing and upgrading the storage of our photographs and old documents. In this work area of the building, the "Research Room" across the hall houses our vertical files and glass plate negatives, as well

as our newly-sorted, listed and archivally-stored slide collections. A major, multi-year sorting and re-filing effort of many loose historic and society papers is wrapping up. We've made room to work, and we are working.



Meanwhile, the next phase of work on the building is underway. We are addressing Nitre Hall's historic kitchen and the narrow working "galley" kitchen (of "mid-century modern" vintage that we laughingly still called the "modern kitchen"). A new doorway directly into the historic kitchen from the hallway ("Gunpowder Hall") has been added, similar to what once existed. Our docent guides no longer have to lead visitors through the unsightly, wrong-era working kitchen to see the historic one. That working kitchen will no longer be unsightly, because it is receiving a full upgrade. We discovered the elusive water service entry point and replaced the main shutoff valves. Nitre Hall's plumbing is now "up to code."

When the 1960s drywall was removed in the working kitchen, we uncovered a semi-circular bread oven (or warming oven) recessed within the deep thickness of Nitre Hall's exterior stone wall, to the right of the large kitchen fireplace. We consequently modified our plans for a small kitchen closet and a pass-through opening into the historic kitchen, so that this new discovery could be featured and be more visible through the pass-through to visitors. The old brick floor of the historic kitchen has been lifted, leveled and reinstalled.

The kitchen phase will largely complete the work on Nitre Hall's ground floor. We should also note in this summary that all the inside public areas have received their first overall repainting of ceilings, walls and woodwork in a half-century.

All of this overdue and much-needed work, both in materials and labor, has carefully been done in the most cost-conscious and historically appropriate way, compatible with a proper and presentable result. Our goal has been to make this historic building safe, functional, user friendly and memorable for our visitors. This includes the children, so they will want to return, and the Society can continue to tell our story and maintain our Haverford history archives well into the future. Plan on visiting Nitre Hall to see this renaissance firsthand.

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