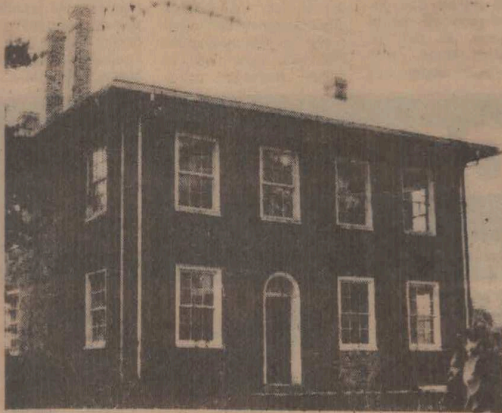


Restoring Old House Fulfills Couple's Dream



Top photo is the Smith-Urban home before the restoration. Bottom photo shows how the home looks today.



Tom and Laura Urban are fulfilling their dream of restoring an old house as they work on a house in the Oak Ridge area.

The Smith-Urban house is located along Redbank Creek near Oak Ridge. It was built circa 1828 for Yost Smith (Josef Schmidt) who settled in the area in 1807. Smith, who had come from eastern Pennsylvania, applied for a patent deed for 465 acres in 1810. He received the patent in 1820.

Smith was in the farming trade and possibly

selling merchandise such as hardware, according to Urban. Smith also operated a ferry across the creek in that location as the first bridge was not built until 1839.

Urban said the house was used as a roadhouse providing food, liquor and lodging for travelers. The original house had 10 rooms with a large public dining room which housed a large cooking fireplace. There was also a bedroom for overnight guests.

The house is constructed with bricks made and fired on the site. It is a post-

colonial type structure with 13 inch walls.

"It is the only surviving brick house of the post-colonial style. There are several brick houses in the county, built in the 1830, but they are modified country Greek revival style," Urban said.

The house has no central hall and the main door is not in the center of the house. It has wooden sills and lintels. The window sashes are six over six, meaning six panes of glass on the top and six on the bottom.

The original roof had wooden shingles and house had louvered shutters. An arched entry with a fan window highlights the front of the house.

The house foundation contains stone that are three feet across.

"The stones came from a local quarry and are dressed. That means they are chipped. It makes them look good," Urban said.

Flooring on the first floor is oak plank, while the

bedroom floors are random width pine.

Yost Smith died in 1841 and in his will left his real estate to his eight children with the stipulation that the land not be sold as long as his wife lived so that she would have a home.

Catherine (his youngest daughter) lived with her mother for some time. She married Andrew Workman in the mid 1840s. Workman was part owner of the Phoenix furnace located in northern Armstrong County.

In 1860, Smith's wife Magdalena, died and the estate was settled. Catherine Workman took the house and 113 acres. A brother and a sister received two other sections of the estate.

The house and 113 acres were sold by Mrs. Workman to a coal company in 1881. The house was used as a home for the superintendent and the company operated mines on the property.

The owners squared the house's original L shape with a plank frame addition that added two more rooms to the house. Some time during that period of ownership, the house was made into a two family structure.

The house was redone in the Italianate style in 1881.

"We believe that it was done in 1881, because we found a May 1881 Kittanning newspaper wedged between some boards in the addition," Urban said.

The house's original roof was taken off and replaced by a hip roof. A belvedere was placed on the top of the house. The belvedere is a room 10 feet square with windows on each side.

"The Italianate style is very ornamental. The style also included brackets up under the roof," Urban said.

There is an old folks' tale that says the belvedere was built so that the superintendent could see the mine operations, according to Urban.

The company went bankrupt in 1914 and as part of the settlement, the superintendent, Henry Williams, bought the house and lived in it until 1923, when it was sold to William Wolfgang. It stayed in the Wolfgang family until 1964. The house was then occupied by renters until 1972. Urban and his wife bought the house in September 1975.

"When we bought it, the house was full of scrap building materials," he said.

The house was then in need of a new roof, according to Urban.

"The roof needed replaced. It was leaking like a sieve. There was a lot of water damage inside. One of our relatives asked me what kind of livestock lived in there," he said.

Urban and his wife purchased the house because they always wanted to restore a house.

"We had even considered building an underground house. We always wanted to buy a brick house. There aren't too many around. We didn't realize this house's age," he said.

There was no plumbing inside the house, only a pitcher pump when the Urbans purchased it. Only sparse wiring existed and the plank frame addition had settled about eight inches in the corner and was pulling the roof down. Urban said a foundation for that section was dug and the section was jacked up and placed on it.

Previous owners had ripped down all the plaster from most of the second floor rooms in preparation for remodeling with panel. Plaster in all the rooms on the first floor was damaged by water.

The Urbans have worked to restore their home on evenings and weekends since the fall of 1975, working without heat for some time. Enough restoration was completed by December 1979 to make the house "livable" and they moved in.

During that period of four years, they had worked to make their home as much like the original house as possible. Utilities have been added to the home with underground cables.

"Cables are all underground and the meters are at the rear of the house. There are no wires attached to the outside. Water comes from a well dug 600 feet from the house. The original spring was destroyed years ago when the limestone was taken out of the area," Urban said.

The house was once again turned into a one family dwelling. The previous owners had removed windows and installed

doors. The Urbans removed the doors and replaced them with windows once again.

Three porches that were added in the late 19th century were all removed.

"We've saved all the gingerbread pieces to use in a gazebo in the yard. We also removed an early 20th century tile summer kitchen that had been added on the back," Urban said.

Two chimneys that ran outside the house and a coal furnace from the cellar were removed. The house is on the Redbank Creek flood plain, so nothing is stored in the basement, according to the owner.

"We get a little anxious when the ice comes," Urban said.

A mason was contracted to do the necessary work

on the chimneys and fireplaces, while a contractor redid the roof.

All five fireplace mantles in the house were stripped and repainted. Woodwork was repainted and the outside doors were replaced.

The walls and ceilings were plastered by a professional plasterer. The Urbans, however, did the necessary preparation for him, including cutting and nailing all of the lath.

The furnace was installed on the first floor in the addition which was rebuilt with all the "modern" necessities such as a laundryroom and bathroom.

"We would rather not make any alterations to any rooms that aren't absolutely necessary. There were never any closets in

the bedrooms and there are still none. We have erected free standing wardrobe closets that look just like furniture," he said.

The original interior doors were grained to look like burl walnut, according to the owner.

"The upstairs' door has the original finish still intact with some slight damage. It (the type of finish) was popular from about 1810 through the mid 1830s," he said.

Urban said the restoration is now 80 per cent complete.

"We've got finishing work to do now. It's a slow process to reproduce things that match the originals," he said.

His current project is making the chair rail that runs through the house.