

The Chambers House

200 Years of History

The Chambers House is an iconic building in the White Clay scenscape. We celebrate 200 years since its erection. The exact year is unknown, but given census records, it is thought to be around 1820. The stone above the gable window would have displayed the date, but it was rebuilt due to a roof fire in later years.

Chambers Family History

Many generations of the Chambers family lived and farmed the lands of northern White Clay. According to John Whiteclay Chambers II, a Rutgers University history professor and descendant, "In 1713, a yeoman farmer in Yorkshire named John Chambers, seeking to escape from religious persecution of Quakers in England, sold his farm and sailed with his family to William Penn's 'Holy Experiment' in Pennsylvania." He and his wife Deborah along with their five children arrived in Philadelphia in 1713. By 1715, John Chambers had settled on a plot of land on the White Clay Creek close to the present-day Pennsylvania state line. In 1720, he purchased from David Lloyd, William Penn's agent, 664 acres along White Clay Creek, originally part of the "Hopyard" tract. He also purchased land on the west side of the creek. Upon John's death, the land was divided among his sons. His eldest son Richard married Elinor Miller of what is now Avondale, and they had at least two sons, John and Benjamin. Over the next two centuries, the descendants of John Chambers operated their farms, known as "Hopyard," "Hillvale," "Pennview," "Hillside," and "Hilltop," located along the White Clay Creek and what is now Chambers Rock Road."



Chambers House: Previous owners, Karen and Tom Church's photo from 1972-1979

Chambers Builds the House

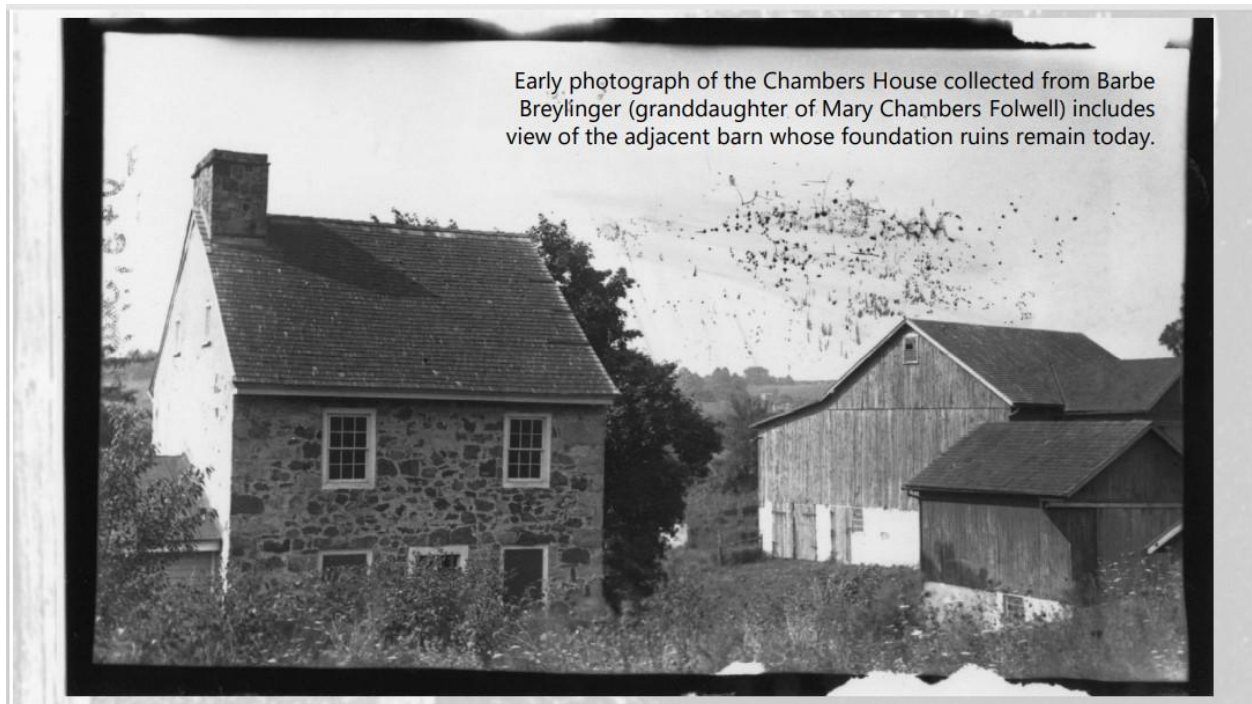
J. Thomas Scharf's History of Delaware (1888) explains how one of John's sons, Benjamin Chambers, purchased 250 acres in 1775 and set up a sawmill on the creek. Following his death in 1819, the land was divided between his two sons Samuel and Joseph. On the 100 acres Joseph was given, he tore down the sawmill and built the original 23' x 28' house out of local field stone.

Layout of the House

According to Nature Center research files, "It is a double cell "Penn's Plan" bank house (sometimes also called a ½ house) constructed of un-coursed fieldstone. In the two-room house, the rooms set are front to back with stairs in the back room and a fireplace in each room with a common chimney and flue system. The double cell plan began to lose popularity by the mid 1700's and the use of the plan after this time is rare. With this house it could be attributed to the traditional values and the avoidance of ostentation of the Quaker influence."

Mary Starts a Dairy Farm

The house left the Chambers in 1841 and passed hands of various owners until Mary Chambers Folwell bought the property in 1927. Mary was a direct descendent of the original John Chambers who immigrated from England. She was working toward reassembling the original Chambers landholdings. By 1938 she owned 508 acres and was running a successful dairy farm of purebred Jersey cows from Hilltop Farm on Chambers Rock Road. It is thought that Mary built the addition on the old stone house to accommodate modern plumbing and electricity.



DuPont Buys Land

The property was bought by the Robinson family in 1954. Shortly after in 1959, the house and land were sold to E.I. DuPont de Nemours and Co. At that time, the Dupont Co. was buying up vast amounts of property in the area. They were planning on building a dam to create a reservoir in the valley in anticipation of potential water shortages. The creation of this would have flooded the house up to the second floor if they were successful. Thankfully, there was public outcry when plans to demolish White Clay Valley was publicized. Conservation groups and citizens in the area were successful in their protests to stop the dam and reservoir from being created. DuPont transferred the property to the States of DE and PA for preservation.



Chambers barn adjacent to house: Previous owners, Karen and Tom Church's photo from 1972-1979

In 1985 this home was renovated and became the site of the park office and nature center. Later in 1995 the park office moved to its current location at the Hillside School.

Sources include articles found in Nature Center Files written by Debbie Paruszewski and Martha, which reference J. Thomas Scharf's *History of Delaware* (1888) and direct quotes from John Whiteclay Chambers II, a Rutgers University history professor and descendant, and photos by Barbe Breylinger and Karen and Tom Church.