

# Memories Amidst The Ruins

## - THE JOSEPH LEWIS HOUSE

by Resident Writer, Doug Humes

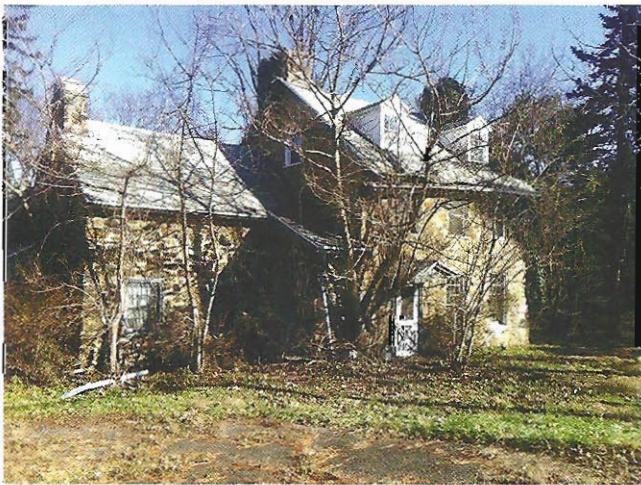
*How many memories are contained within the walls of your home? Births are celebrated; engagements and weddings are feted; holidays fill a house to overflowing – with either joy or dysfunction depending upon the family. We each get up and bathe and dress and eat and say goodbye to our loved ones and go off out that front door in to our daily routines. A mother may stay home with infant children or aged parents. Dogs sleep in front of a fireplace. Cats perch in a window and watch the ebb and flow of the traffic and the light and the seasons. Everyone comes home for dinner together. Perhaps there are special guests that break the routine. On weekends there is work to do – projects inside and outside; perhaps additions and improvements – a new barn, or shed or an addition. The children grow and there is a day when they leave the nest – and the parents say goodbye, and come back inside, surrounded by their memories, and know that their lives have begun a new chapter. When the adult child returns, with their spouse and the next generation of children, they show off the rooms and share their memories of growing up in that space. And they return again, to clean out the house and get it ready to sell, when mother and father are no longer there. And then a new family moves in, new wine in old skins, and begins the process anew.*

So it was with the Joseph Lewis house, sitting at the side of Newtown Road as it veers off from Rt.252 at Wyola and heads towards Berwyn. The house was estimated to have been built around 1730-1780. It was later described as follows:

The first floor consisted of two rooms or two sections of one room, one a “kitchen” with large “cooking fireplace,” a smaller hearth for heating only, jutting into the room to form the other section. Two rooms make up the second floor with an attic above. Pegged rafters, restored six panes over nine windows and an early mantel are 18th-century details. The 20th-century architect, Brognard Okie, added a new section to the house in the 1930s. Two dormer windows facing the road are among the changes as well as an attic addition in the rear which, although useful in affording light and space, are an obvious violation of the original roof lines. A notable feature of the house is the fine stonework of the exposed walls.

Who lived there over the course of 250 years? The families of Joseph Jones, Joseph Lewis, his son Caleb Y. Lewis, Joseph Lewis, Jr., his children, Edwin, Emma, Mary, Hannah, Laura and Susanna. Emma Lewis Baldwin was the sole owner in 1900. Then William and Josephine Morris in 1909; and William L. and Mary Austin in 1917, to Rebecca J. Austin in 1921, Howard Lewis Fussell in 1922, William B. Fussell in 1943, Howard and Katherine Fussell in 1947 and Robert and Eleanor Curtis in 1957. Charles and Helga Bowers, Jr. purchased this property in 1964 and Donald and Martha Baxter became the owners in March, 1968. In 1982, Mrs. Claire Pfister and her daughter bought the property.

The last owner passed away in 2007. And then the property sat vacant, tied up in an estate. The Society made



several inquiries over the years; there were people interested in the property – interested in keeping the house and restoring it. But no one reached back. The roof started leaking and giving way. Water finds its level, and on its way, it rots the wood support beams, and washes out the mortar between the field stones – particularly

the simple mortar original used in farm communities where people built their own houses with the help of their neighbors.

The current owner who bought it in 2014 sealed it up as best he could, and had an engineer out to look at the condition. The news was bad – the front wall was near collapse. Seven years of “demolition by neglect” had done its job. To preserve it would mean to take it down stone by stone and put it back together again. This was cost prohibitive to him – and so on New Year’s Eve 2015, the Joseph Lewis house was reduced to a pile of fieldstones and building debris to be carted away.

“Why didn’t the Township or the Historical Society do something about this?” Truth be told, there are tools available to a local community to deal with the issue. We could adopt a preservation ordinance. It is permitted by state law, and by



doing so, you at least have the tools in the toolbox to be able to use them if the situation arises.

But we have no preservation ordinance in Newtown. The Society had proposed a very good ordinance that would have given the Township the tools to address a situation like this. The ordinance was “tabled” by a 3-2 vote in 2003, and has never seen the light of day since. Until we have an ordinance that contains those powers, we will continue to lose our historic resources, the structures and landscapes of the past, filled with history and memories, that made the Township such an attractive place to live and work. So when you see our community leaders – our Township Manager, our Supervisors, let them know what you think about the continued loss of our historic homes and barns. There will be no preservation in Newtown until there is a preservation ordinance. And there will be no ordinance until there is the political will to do so. And there will be no political will unless we as a community determine that we value preservation and work to create the change that is needed.

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Doug Humes is a board member of the Newtown Square Historical Society. Visit our website at [www.historicnewtown-square.org](http://www.historicnewtown-square.org) for more information.