

## Saving "The Nucleus" of our Local History



Members of the White Clay Creek Preserve are partnering with other local groups in the formation of a commission to preserve and protect the historic John Evans House in Landenberg. Pictured from left to right are Scotty Crowder, David Hawk, Jim Martin, Susan Moon, Martin Wells, and John Starzmann.

By Richard L. Gaw  
Staff Writer

“The people have a right to clean air, pure water and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment. Pennsylvania’s public natural resources are the common property of all of the people, including generations yet to come. As trustee of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all of the people.” - The Pennsylvania Constitution, Article I, Section 27

In the fashion of the many who now surround it with empathy, care and vision for its survival, the story of the John Evans House in the White Clay Creek Preserve deserves an introduction, a proper embrace, so this article begins in the early 1700s, when a Welsh Baptist named John Evans sought a new life in the New World that would soon be called America, in order to escape religious persecution.

With his brother beside him, Welsh sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, ventured to the Colony of Pennsylvania, and bought 400 acres of land owned by William Penn, who had originally purchased the land from Lenni Lenapes in 1683.

After a brief return to Wales, the Evans brothers returned to America on a ship filled with their families and essential supplies, and in 1715, they arrived at the point of their purchase: a quiet valley met by the confluence of the east and Middle branches of the White Clay Creek. It was there that Evans constructed a simple, two-story home in the style of Georgian architecture, and slowly, both his home and the beginnings of a young republic grew up around him.

Later in the 18th century, the house added a center section dining room and fireplace made of granite fieldstone, three additional bedrooms upstairs, and a story-and-a-half kitchen that had its own fireplace.

The Evans' family mark on the history of Landenberg was apparent from the time the family first settled there. John Evans was instrumental in the construction of the nearby London Tract Meeting House (c. 1729) and he also owned and operated a mill in the area. Evans' grandson, also named John, served on the Pa. State Supreme Court during the Revolutionary War. When the younger Evans died, he left the property to his brother Evan, who served as a county militia commander during the 1777 Battle of the Brandywine.

Over the course of the next two centuries, the Evans House served as the home to a succession of owners, and survived not only harsh winters but efforts then made by the DuPont Company to dam the White Clay and flood the entire valley – including historical structures like the Evans House – in order to service water from a massive reservoir to a textile plant the chemical giant wanted to build nearby. Vehement opposition to the proposed dam was led by a cavalry of environmentalists and historians, and in 1982, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter and then Delaware Senator Joe Biden sponsored legislation that led to the formation of the White Clay Creek Preserve, legislation that protected 1,255 acres in Pennsylvania and another 3,300 acres in Delaware.

While the Evans House survived the proposed onslaught of a corporate giant, it could not survive the slow decay of neglect, nor the act of arson. Purchased by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), the home was severely damaged by a fire on Sept. 20, 2017 that gutted its interior and burned most of its exterior fully to the ground.

For the past two years, a structure that is reportedly the oldest house in the area now sits forlornly on Sharpless Road along the White Clay Creek Preserve trail route, a red brick-and-mortar shell of its former self. The remnants of the fire form piles of ashen neglect at its foundation, and fertile and green growth sprout from its foundation.

In May of this year, the DCNR sent word that it was in the beginning stages of plans that would eventually demolish the structure, and permanently wipe it off the face of local history. As fortune would have it, however, these plans have run head-long into the efforts of several guardians of local history, who are engaging in an all-in campaign to preserve this crumbling edifice and add new chapters to its 300-year-old life.

“The house figures prominently in the migration patterns of the area, specifically the Welsh Baptist community that migrated here prior to 1700,” said Susan Moon of LTHC. “John

Evans was one of the first people to acquire land in this area -- an important piece of the London Tract, which is at the confluence of both branches of the White Clay Creek, at a bend in the creek which was advantageous for mill development.

“We believe that there is a position of strength here that the Evans family helped create. They helped build a lot of lasting structures that we still see today. As more experts come in, we will be able to add to the story.”

The origins that initiated efforts to save the historic home date back to 2009, when DCNR first announced that they had placed the John Evans House on its demolition list. Soon after the start of the Friends of the White Clay Creek in 2012, several of its members conducted a tour of the house with DCNR representatives, appealing to the DCNR to support the group’s initiative to save it.

The DCNR did not budge. It’s a matter of financial priorities on behalf of the Commonwealth, said LTHC member Jim Martin.

“The standard response in the letters we have received from the DCNR was that they have thousands of buildings across the tens of thousands of acres that they have in our parks, and that they can’t take the time to maintain them,” he said. “Dinniman’s office has informed us that in the past ten years, there has been severe realignment in the Pennsylvania budget, and a lot of what has been dedicated to pay for that realignment came out of DCNR’s funds, and has yet to be replaced.”

This May, local resident John Starzmann invited Karen Marshall, the Heritage Preservation Coordinator of the Chester County Planning Commission, to meet with the group to discuss ways to keep the John Evans House from meeting the wrecker’s ball, and potentially combine forces with other environmental and historical agencies.

“Karen suggested that we form a committee, and Friends of the White Clay Creek Preserve London Tract Historical Committee [LTHC] was formed right then and there,” Moon said. “Since then, she has been providing technical assistance, and it’s been amazing to have her with us. She has been very positive and keeps us on track.”

Soon, a local Who’s Who of environmental and historical agencies joined with the LTHC: the New Garden Township Historical Commission, the White Clay Watershed Association, the White Clay Creek Wild and Scenic River Program, London Britain Township and Chester County Planning Commission.

On May 29, Friends of the White Clay Creek Preserve sent a letter to State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, encouraging his office to “use its powers to halt DCNR’s demolition plan,” and allow committee additional time to study the site and secure funding in order to preserve it.

“The Historical Committee envisions the future of the John Evans House as a fully documented and stabilized ruin, with interpretive panels that will allow current and future generations to continue to enjoy and to interpret the significance of this structure and its place in migration patterns and industry of the time,” the letter read. “It is the Historical Committee’s aim to secure the site with fencing and security cameras as soon as possible, and begin the process of serious study of the history, architecture and archaeology” of the house.

On June 10, Sen. Dinniman wrote a letter to The Hon. Cindy Adams Dunn at the DCNR, expressing his concern about the agency's demolition plans, and requesting a site visit meeting with DCNR officials and members of the LTHC and elected officials.

“Since it has become known that the Department has plans to demolish this structure, a significant number of my constituents have contacted me with strong opposition to the proposed removal of this historic resource,” Dinniman's letter read. “Simply put, many in my district are concerned that the demolition of this historic property will forever remove the potential opportunity for future generations to witness a direct link to our nation's founding.”

Soon after it received Dinniman's letter, the DCNR made it known that it had removed the John Evans House from its demolition list, until after it conducts a site visit of the property and working session with Dinniman, members of the LTHC and other concerned groups. The site visit will occur this fall.

“I'm of the opinion that if you have a historic structure and it shows that some people really care about it and are doing all they can to conserve it, then not too many people will bother it,” said Scotty Crowder, chairman of Friends of the White Clay Creek Preserve. “But if you have structure that is being neglected, it's an invitation to throw a rock at it, or steal a piece of wood off of it. We all agreed that we had to do something.”

“We want to ask the DCNR whether or not we can move forward in a new spirit of preservation,” Moon said. “The legislation that created the White Clay Creek Preserve includes statements about historic resources. The official letter from DuPont selling this land mentions historic resources. It is part of the directive of the Preserve's managers to preserve historic resources.”

While the LTHC prepares for the site visit, it has gathered additional community support. On August 5, local residents joined with members of the LTHC, London Britain elected officials and the [www.FriendsofPaWCCP.org](http://www.FriendsofPaWCCP.org).



## Dinniman: 300-Year-Old John Evans House Saved from Demolition

September 18, 2019

LONDON BRITAIN (September 18, 2019) – The John Evans House, a historic structure that was built in 1715, will be saved from demolition thanks to the work of state Senator Andy Dinniman, the Friends of the White Clay Creek, and others.

This week Dinniman brought together officials from the friends organization, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to visit the house, which is purported to be the oldest in the area.

Initially, DCNR planned to demolish the structure, which was severely damaged by fire in 2017. As a result of the meeting, a plan is now in the works for the groups to work together to stabilize and preserve the structure's shell as part of the rich history of the White Clay Creek Preserve and the surrounding region.

“The John Evans House tells the story of our nation – from its founding by colonists to the fight for the freedom and independence in the Revolutionary War to the establishment of the Mason-Dixon line and the abolitionist movement in the antebellum period,” Dinniman said. “It is vital that this structure be preserved for posterity as a testament to our rich history and that of Chester County’s White Clay Creek Preserve.”

According to reports, between 1696 and 1700, the John Evans family, Welsh Baptists, came to Colonial America.

Around 1701, they joined the Welsh Baptists of “First Philadelphia,” then, some of these Baptists split from the Philadelphia group and formed the Welsh Tract Baptist Church in Iron Hill, Newark. Later, part of that congregation left Newark to form a new congregation at the London Tract Meeting House.

In 1714, John Evans bought 600 acres in what is now Chester County, Pennsylvania and New Castle County, Delaware. The Evans House or Evans Mansion, as it is sometimes known, was built nearby the historic London Tract Meeting House, circa 1729. According to historians, new members were likely baptized in the White Clay Creek.

Recently, Dinniman worked with DCNR to complete infrastructure improvements, including a new roof, on the London Tract Meeting House, which today houses the preserve’s Nature Center.

Dinniman also said the group plans to work to have the entire London Tract Meeting House District recognized by the National Register of Historic Places. The tract includes additional historic structures and is also believed to have once been home to a railroad and Native Americans of the Lenape tribe who grew corn, beans, and squash.

Lenape Chief Kekelappen sold the land the White Clay Creek Preserve is located on to William Penn in 1683. According to historians, it is likely that the Native Americans did not fully understand the European concept of land ownership and only thought they were allowing the settlers to use the land.

Historians believe that Chief Kekelappen may have lived in Opasiskunk, a large Native American town that was at the confluence of the east and middle branches of White Clay Creek. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that Native Americans were living in the White Clay Creek Valley from the Archaic Period (8000 to 1000 B.C.) until the early 18th century. They made pottery out of the white clay deposits found along the banks of the stream that give it its name.

In addition, the 2,100-acre White Clay Creek Preserve will soon be significantly expanded, making it part of one of the largest contiguous areas of preserved land between Washington, D.C. and New York City.

Dinniman recently helped secure key state funding to acquire and permanently protect more than 1,700 acres owned by George Strawbridge Jr. in southern Chester County – land that will be added to the White Clay Creek Preserve.

Combined, the Strawbridge property and Maryland's Fairhill Natural Resources Management Area (FNRMA), will result in a contiguous block of open, recreation space in excess of 7,000 acres – one of the largest in the Mid-Atlantic region.