

# Description of the Allee House

Origins of the Allee House remain clouded. The first real documentation of the house was in the 1790 inventory of Jonathan Allee's estate, ordered by the Orphans Court following his death in 1775. Abraham Allee, who died in 1770, bequeathed a house to his son, Jonathan, but Abraham's will identified the house only as "the one where I live." There were no other clues in Abraham's will to establish that this was, in fact, the house in question. It was known that Abraham built at least one other house, one he built in 1740, but the 1790 inventory of Jonathan's estate gave a detailed description of this Allee House, giving dimensions for the main house and the kitchen wing, and eliminating all doubt – this was the Allee House in which "Abraham lived" and that he bequeathed to his son.

## When was the House Built?

According to local tradition and general consensus the Allee House was built in 1753 by Abraham Allee; however, there is no documentation to support the claim other than that it has been so widely repeated.

There is no record to explain why the date 1765 is incised on a brick on the south elevation or why the initial of the first names of the wife and children of Abraham's son, Jonathan, are incised on another brick near the one with the 1765 date. Jonathan inherited the house from his father, and the initials are S (for Sarah his wife) and five children: M (Mary), E (Elizabeth), A (Ann), S (Sarah), and A (Abraham). Jonathan's son, Abraham, was not born until 1772, so the initials of his wife and children were incised after that date. Since the scratchings on both bricks are similar, the date, 1765, may have been incised at the same time. These free-hand scratchings are not the kind of date mark expected on a house of the quality and elegance of the Allee House, and in fact there is a niche on the west chimney of the kind used for the builders name and date – but unfortunately it is empty. So the date, 1765, remains a mystery.

The best guess, therefore, is that Abraham Allee built this house in 1753, and that the 1765 date has another, unknown meaning.

## The Site.

The Allee House is located on Dutch Neck on a tract that was known as *Islington Plantation*. Islington Plantation was bordered on the south by Dawson's Branch, on the north by Irons' Branch (also known as Hixon's Branch), and on the east by Dutch Creek. The peninsula on which this tract is located is only ten feet above sea level, is a half mile wide, and extends from upland fields and forests eastward into the tidal salt marsh.

Islington Plantation was purchased by John Allee, Abraham's father, in 1711. At the time of its purchase it was described as three hundred and sixty acres, but later when it was surveyed, it was found to be six hundred acres. On John Allee's death in 1718, Abraham's brother, Peter, inherited an adjacent property, *Woodstock Bower*, while Abraham acquired Islington Plantation with its mix of upland fields, woodlots, and marsh.

Islington Plantation, Woodstock Bower, and other tracts owned by John Allee were tobacco plantations. When Abraham inherited Islington Plantation, he changed the crops to corn, wheat, and other grains.

The Allee House is located in the middle of the half-mile wide peninsula and orientated on a north-south axis. The front or south elevation faces what probably even in 1753 were cultivated fields; the north elevation faces what then was a small stream, navigable by flat-bottomed boats, that led to Duck Creek and thence to the Delaware River and Bay.

## The Architecture.

The architecture of the original house is known as Early Georgian or Queen Anne style. Additionally it has been called a *Penn Manor House*, a design styled after William Penn's home in Fairmont Park, Philadelphia – and a design that apparently was copied frequently in the middle colonies.

The Allee House differs, however, from the typical Georgian style. Although the bays on either side of the central hallway are of nearly equal size, on the left there are two windows on each floor, while on the right side there is only one window on each floor. The south and north elevations are identical in this regard.

The original house is a two-story rectangle, forty-two by twenty-two feet, laid in Flemish bond with a grapevine joint. Flemish bond is a bricklaying style favored in the eighteenth century that alternates stretchers (i.e., bricks placed lengthwise) and headers (i.e., bricks placed on end). Grapevine joints are made by drawing a single line with a small stick through the mortar joints between the bricks (it has the visual effect of softening the appearance of a brick wall).

The architecture style of the front or south elevation differs from that of the north or back elevation, the south using later design elements than those found on the north. For example, the south and west elevations have a molded brick water table that is not found on the north and east; Flemish bond headers on the south are unglazed, while those on the north have a blue salt glaze, an older style; windows on the front have plastered lintels, while those on the back have segmented brick window heads, again an older style; the front elevation has a plaster and lath cove cornice, while the back has a wooden box cornice.

A two-brick wide belt course between the first and second floors is found on the south, west, and north elevations, but not on the east. The east elevation is stuccoed, probably an original feature that was used for weatherproofing on the east elevation, known as the “weather” end.

Windows are nine over nine pane sash. The rear door with an Indian Bar is original, while the front door has been replaced. The front steps also have been replaced (they block the brick-lined gutter that was intended to drain rainwater away from the building).

A one-story kitchen wing was added before 1790, probably around 1775. It was built around the original exterior entrance to the basement of the house. There is a sleeping loft above the kitchen. Kitchen brickwork is American bond.

### Outbuildings and Dependencies.

The 1790 inventory listed five outbuildings, none of which remain. The inventory mentioned a granary made of logs and measuring eighteen by sixteen feet; a corn crib measuring eighteen by six feet; two stables described as old and in poor repair; and a log kitchen with an outside brick chimney adjoining the brick kitchen addition.

The three existing outbuildings on the property were constructed after the 1790 inventory. There is no record of the existing barn, but it appears to have been built in the nineteenth century – there is a date, 1850, painted on one of the beams – and it may have been built in two sections, the first half earlier than the second. The two small structures on the north side of the house also were constructed after the 1790 inventory. They may have been built sometime after the property passed from the Allee family to a new owner in 1828.

The ten by twelve foot log building listed in one document as a “smokehouse” was built of both hewn and sawn logs, three inches thick and ten to fourteen inches wide. It has been dated in the second quarter of the nineteenth century because machine headed cut nails were used in its construction – putting its construction sometime after 1825.

The seven by eleven foot brick “dairy” or ice-house, laid in American bond, may have been built at about the same time. It has a lath and plaster barrel vault ceiling. The dairy probably was stocked with ice cut from ponds in the winter to cool dairy products during the warmer months.

The well, just off the kitchen addition, is probably original with the house, although the structure over it is a contemporary interpretation.

### The Kitchen

The original kitchen was in the east end of the basement, under the “dining” room. The large cooking fireplace still can be seen, although it has been blocked up to accommodate the current heating system. This was a “winter” kitchen. In colonial homes it was customary to cook indoors during the winter, but to cook outside in “summer” kitchens during the warmer months.

During the second half of the eighteenth century it became fashionable to move kitchens from basement locations to ground level, and apparently Abraham Allee followed the fashion. Sometime before 1790 and probably about 1775, he built the kitchen addition. This also was a “winter” kitchen, to be used only during the colder months. It too has a large cooking fireplace – the opening was reduced and the face of the fireplace was replaced, probably in the twentieth century.

Little is known about the third kitchen, the “summer” kitchen. The only reference to it is in the 1790 inventory in which it was described as a log structure adjoining the brick kitchen addition and having an outside brick chimney.

### The Center Hall.

The eight foot wide center hall separates the two first floor rooms, and it includes the stairways from the basement to the first floor, from the first to the second floor, and from the second floor to the attic. As they are throughout the house, the paneling, moldings, and hardware are original, and the woodwork has been painted in original colors. The front door is an early replacement, while the rear door, which retains an Indian bar, is original.

Since most travel was by water, in this case the stream on the north side, it is likely that many visitors would have arrived by boat and entered the house from the rear door.

### The Fireplaces.

Each of the four main rooms (parlor, “dining” room, and two bedrooms) has its own fireplace that, along with its chimney stack, projects into the room. The end

walls in the parlor and bedrooms are paneled, creating space for cupboards and closets. The hearths in all fireplaces are laid in sand.

### The Parlor.

The parlor is the most elegant room in the house. The west wall has paneling that surrounds the fireplace and contains two china cupboards that flank the hearth. These have beautifully butterfly shelves. The room has raised paneled wainscoting and crown molding.

This room was used for entertaining guests, meeting with important dignitaries, and other special occasions. It was not in everyday use.

### The “Dining” Room.

This room is called the dining room, and certainly it served this purpose. But it had many other uses as well. It is where the women sewed or spun flax into linen thread, where Abraham may have tallied up his books after a sale of grain, where the children played – where most of the daily activity took place.

This room is plain, with none of the paneling and moldings found in the parlor and center hall. It does have two closets on either side of the fireplace that provided a warm, dry storage space.

### The Bedrooms.

The two bedrooms match in size the rooms below them. The one over the parlor is more elaborate and clearly the master bedroom. Both, however, have paneled walls on the fireplace ends that create large closets. Closets of this kind were virtually unheard of in the mid-eighteenth century, a remarkable feature of this house.

A small room at the head of the stairs is not described in any of the inventories. The walls appear to be original, but its use is unknown, but perhaps it served as a nursery or child’s room.

### The Cellar.

The east end of the basement was the original kitchen, but it has been modified to accommodate the heating system and other utilities. The west end under the parlor remains in its original condition. The floor is loose-laid brick in a herring bone pattern. The structure on the west wall is not a fireplace, but rather the foundation for the two fireplaces on the floors above it. The floor joists show adze marks and careful notching to accept the transverse stringers.

## The Allee House on the Historic Register

In 1962 the federal government finalized the purchase of 341 acres adjacent to what then was the northwestern boundary of Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, the tract that included the Allee House, adding it to the refuge. With assistance from the State of Delaware, the Allee house received minor repairs and restorations that were completed in 1966. The house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971.

Robert W. Mayer