



*Photograph from Library Germantown Historical Society*

# The Laurens

By EDWIN IWANICKI

ON JANUARY 7, 1964, the Germantown Historical Society acquired one of the most unusual buildings in Germantown—a house distinctive in design and rich in reminiscence. Located at the southeast corner of Germantown Avenue and Walnut Lane, the property, known today as The Laurens, or No. 6043 Germantown Avenue, has, at various times, been used as a residence, a hospital, a school, a hotel, a boardinghouse, and an apartment house. It has been occupied by a diverse succession of individuals, ranging from the simple artisan to the sophisticated physician, clergyman, or educator. Its list of owners has been even more variegated, with names ranging from the locally obscure to the internationally prominent.

The building itself exhibits a certain variety, representing, as it does, the result of a number of additions and alterations. The main portion of the structure, fronting on Germantown Avenue, rises three-and-a-half stories above a full cellar. It is, according to tradition, the earliest house in Germantown to rise above the height of two-and-a-half stories, which was the architectural vernacular in this suburb of colonial Philadelphia. The walls are of stone, stuccoed, the ex-

terior dimensions being forty-one feet eight inches in width and thirty-six feet in depth. The shop windows in front, of course, were not part of the structure originally, and the small-paned sash first used throughout the building have been largely replaced with sash of more modern design. Another alteration of the original facade is represented by the frontispiece, which consists of engaged columns surmounted by a section of entablature, ornamenting the doorway. This embellishment formerly adorned a house built about 1795 for Dr. George Bensell at the southwest corner of Germantown Avenue and School House Lane. When that structure was demolished in 1880, the frontispiece was salvaged by Dr. William R. Dunton and imposed on the doorway of The Laurens.<sup>1</sup>

This doorway opens into a vestibule, beyond which lies a center hall, six feet seven inches wide, extending the entire depth of the three-and-a-half-story portion of the building. Originally there were two rooms on either side of this center hall, each of the rooms being nearly square. The two rooms on the south side have, however, been made into one by the removal of a partition wall. The arrangements of rooms in the upper stories differ somewhat from the layout

of the first story. Fireplaces throughout the house have been sealed. Most of the interior doors in the building seem to be original.

Flanking the rear of this main section of the structure is a two-story stone wing of more modest proportions, covering an area less than half that occupied by the above-described section and having lower ceilings and smaller window openings. The wall between the two-story section and the three-and-a-half-story section of the structure is a stone wall, and therefore it presumably was built as an exterior wall, which would mean that these two portions of the structure were erected at different times. The two-story wing contains a stairway leading from the cellar to the first floor and one leading from the first floor to the second floor, the latter stairway having a handrail that appears to be original. Since the three-and-a-half-story portion of the building has no stairway leading either down or up from the first floor, it obviously is dependent upon the smaller wing of the building for access to its cellar and upper stories. On the basis of this evidence it can be concluded that construction of the larger section, which now fronts on Germantown Avenue, could not possibly have preceded the erection of the two-story wing, and that in all probability the smaller wing is of earlier construction. There are two other wings of the structure; these, being constructed of brick and extending further to the rear, are clearly later additions.<sup>2</sup>

The lot upon which The Laurens stands was part of the 5700 acres of land, comprising the German Township, which William Markham and John Goodson, representatives of William Penn, granted to Francis Daniel Pastorius for himself and for the German and Dutch purchasers whom he represented.<sup>3</sup> This transfer of title was executed in 1689, although German settlers had occupied the land as early as 1683. When the township was divided into smaller tracts to be allotted to individual purchasers, the site of the present No. 6043 Germantown Avenue fell within a thirty-nine-acre lot having a frontage of 239 feet on the present Germantown Avenue and extending eastward a very considerable depth to the township line. This tract, which is referred to as Lot No. 18 of the town lots towards Bristol, was allotted to Andreas (or Andries) Souplis.<sup>4</sup> Little seems to be known of this early settler except that he is mentioned as a resident of Germantown in 1689 and as sheriff of Germantown in 1691.<sup>5</sup>

The tract was purchased from Andreas Souplis by Christian Warmer, the elder, a "taylor," who also acquired the contiguous lot on the south side by purchase from John Doeden.<sup>6</sup> This Christian Warmer is known to have been in Germantown as early as 1694.<sup>7</sup> He apparently was acquainted with Johannes Kelpius (1673-1708), "the Hermit of the Wissahickon,"<sup>8</sup> as the latter mentions writing a hymn on the subject of peacefulness as he lay in "Christian Warmer's house very weak, in a small bed, not unlike a coffin, in May, 1706."<sup>9</sup> One wonders whether the house thus re-

ferred to is the present two-story stone wing of The Laurens, but this, of course, is a moot question. It is a fact, however, that Christian Warmer, the elder, made a will in 1728, wherein he devised as follows: ". . . And as Concerning all that my other Messuage or Tenem.<sup>t</sup> & fifty Acres of land thereunto belonging in Germantown af.<sup>d</sup> [aforesaid] w.<sup>ch</sup> I purchased of Andreas Souplis [*sic*], & all the land thereunto next Adjacent which I purchased of John Doeden, being twenty two acres, with the Appurtenances whereon I now live, I Give & Devise the same unto my Son Christian . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Christian Warmer, the younger, who thus came into possession of the property upon the decease of his father in 1731,<sup>11</sup> was, by trade, a blacksmith. While he cannot be considered a man of great distinction in his own right, he was the close friend of one of the most renowned inhabitants of early Germantown, Christopher Witt (1675-1765). Dr. Witt, Germantown's first "Practitioner of Phisyick" (by which phrase he identifies himself in his will), was born in Wiltshire, England. Upon his arrival at Philadelphia in 1704 he joined the community of German Pietists, or mystics, which had been established ten years earlier on the west bank of Wissahickon Creek. Becoming intimate with Johannes Kelpius, the leader of the group, he remained with the Pietists perhaps two years or more before removing to Germantown. His experience with the mystics seems to have impressed him deeply, as he was well-known for casting horoscopes—an activity which, at that time, was apparently considered not incompatible with the practice of medicine.

Dr. Witt had one of the earliest botanical gardens in America, and he was acquainted with John Bartram, the renowned botanist, who considered him "very pleasant, facetious and pliant."<sup>12</sup> The following items, mentioned in the inventory of the Doctor's personal effects taken after his death, further suggest the versatility of the man: "Telliscope," "An Organ," "Virginals" (a musical instrument), "Mathematical Instraments, Library and prospect glases," "Drugs Medicines and other Utentials belonging to the Apothecarys and Docters Way," and "Clock makers Toolles."<sup>13</sup>

Christopher Witt was a friend of the elder Christian Warmer and a tenant on one of the properties owned by the latter.<sup>14</sup> He also became intimate with the younger Christian Warmer, in whose home he lived during the latter part of his life. The Doctor's esteem for his friend is evidenced by the following passage from his will, dated 1761: ". . . as touching the residue of all my Estate both real and personal, (not otherwise herein before disposed of) it is my will, and I do hereby Give, devise, and bequeath the same unto my well beloved friend Christian Warner [*sic*] of German Town, in the County of Philadelphia, with whom I now live . . ."<sup>15</sup>

The mutuality of this esteem is bespoken in a provision contained in the will of Christian Warmer, the



Doorway to The Laurens, removed from the home of Dr. George Bensell when it was demolished in 1880.

younger, which reads as follows: "I do hereby give and bequeath unto my affectionate and loving friend Christopher Witt the full & free Use liberty and Priviledge of any fruits or Garden Erbs Growing or belonging to any part of my s.<sup>d</sup> Lots Lands Tenements afores.<sup>d</sup> As also of Sowing planting such Trees Quick Sets & Erbs as he shall think proper and shall have Occasion of on the same with all the Necessary Use of y<sup>e</sup> South East end of my Mansion house, diet firewood, attendance and finally all that he may or shall reasonably require or have occasion of during his Natural Life . . . ."<sup>16</sup>

The use of the expression "Mansion house" in this will, which is dated 1749, may well be taken as an indication that the large front portion of The Laurens had been built by this time. This thesis is advanced by Edward W. Hocker, who mentions that Dr. Witt, after the death of his companion, Daniel Geissler, which occurred in 1745, "removed into what was described as 'a large mansion' which the second Christian Warmer built at the southeast corner of Germantown avenue and Walnut lane."<sup>17</sup>

Under the terms of the will of Christian Warmer, the younger, this property became vested in his widow, Lydia Warmer, in 1768, upon the decease of the testator, who further devised the property to his son, Christopher Warmer, upon the termination of Lydia Warmer's life estate.<sup>18</sup> This son, Christopher Warmer (1743-1783), was a physician, probably having studied under Dr. Witt, after whom he may, indeed, have been named.<sup>19</sup> Since Dr. Warmer predeceased his mother, he never came into possession of the premises, although he no doubt lived there for a considerable number of years.

At the time of the battle of Germantown, October 4, 1777, a skirmish is said to have been fought in the house, which was then used as a hospital after the battle. A lady who was familiar with the house in

later years wrote of it as follows: "The room I slept in had the mark of bullets in the wall, and the print of a man's foot in blood on the floor."<sup>20</sup> The building seems to have been badly battered in the battle, for in 1785 it underwent extensive repairs. The magnitude of the work done at that time is suggested by the quantities of materials purchased, which are listed in a bill as follows: 3575 shingles, 137 feet of cedar boards, 419 feet of pine boards, 946 feet of lath, 83 feet of white oak scantling, and 113 pounds of nails.<sup>21</sup>

The house was thus repaired in order that it might be an acceptable dwelling for its new owner, William Shippen, the elder, a distinguished "Doctor of Physick," of Philadelphia. Lydia Warmer and the executors of the Estate of Christopher Warmer had sold the property at a public sale on February 28, 1785. The above-mentioned bill for repairs was dated March 18, 1785, and the sale to Dr. Shippen was completed with the execution of a deed on April 1, 1785. This deed conveyed to the physician for £1411, gold or silver coin, a "messuage and plantation or tract of land," containing 57 acres, more or less.<sup>22</sup>

William Shippen, the elder (1712-1801), was for twenty-five years the first physician of the Pennsylvania Hospital, having "a large and lucrative practice, which he maintained through a long and respected life." He had been elected in 1778 and 1779 to the Continental Congress, where he served honorably. He took part in The Junto and in the American Philosophical Society, of which he was vice-president. "His mode of living was simple and unostentatious. His temper was so serene and forbearing that tradition says it was never ruffled. His benevolence was without stint."<sup>23</sup>

Dr. Shippen, in a codicil to his will dated 1794, devised the property to his daughter, Susanna Blair, describing it as "my dwelling House in Germantown & Land thereunto belonging containing fifty seven Acres with the Appurtenances thereunto belonging."<sup>24</sup> S. F. Hotchkin notes that Dr. Shippen was buried from this house, and he remarks, in a burst of antiquarian zeal, "There was a famous funeral."<sup>25</sup>

Susanna, who then inherited the property, was the wife of the Rev. Dr. Samuel Blair (1741-1818), "an exceedingly talented and learned man, and a fine Greek and Latin scholar."<sup>26</sup> Dr. Blair aided in the founding of the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown, the services being held for a time in this house, where he lived.<sup>27</sup> When the estate of Susanna Blair was settled in 1823, the house, "Commonly called the mansion house," was allotted to Francis [sic] V. Peirce, daughter of the decedent,<sup>28</sup> who is said subsequently to have occupied the premises.<sup>29</sup>

In 1827 Mrs. Peirce and her husband, Charles Peirce, sold the property to Samuel Bucknal, of Germantown, a lapidary. The deed mentions the premises as a "messuage plantation or tract or piece of land" having an area of 42½ acres 17 perches.<sup>30</sup>

From this time on, the property will be noticed to change hands a considerable number of times, many of the owners, to judge from the evidence provided by deeds and city directories, leasing the premises to tenants. In each deed until 1852 the description of the property is the same as that last mentioned above.

Samuel Bucknal transferred title in 1829 to The Manual Labor Academy Association of Pennsylvania.<sup>31</sup> Thus the house came to be occupied by the Manual Labor Academy, a Presbyterian institution which prepared young men for the ministry. The educational program combined manual with mental labor to promote health and economy. The Academy had a number of frame buildings, as well as a farm, located upon the tract, and the institution is said to have accommodated as many as one hundred and fifty students at one time. When the Rev. Dr. George Junkin, who was in charge of the school, became president of Lafayette College in 1832, the professors and most of the students of the Manual Labor Academy went with him, and the latter institution went out of existence.<sup>32</sup>

James Ogilbe, a house carpenter, of Germantown, who purchased the property from the Academy in 1832,<sup>33</sup> died later that year, leaving a will, wherein he directed his executors to ". . . dispose of the property late the Pennsylvania Manuel Labour Academy but now intended for a public house to be called the Congress Hall Hotel . . ." <sup>34</sup> Samuel Bucknall (as the name is now spelled) now purchased the property a second time and resold it before the end of 1832, the purchasers being William E. Wells and Zenas Wells, "Inn Keepers," of Philadelphia.<sup>35</sup> These latter owners transferred title to the property in 1835 to William W. Thackara, a Philadelphia conveyancer, who sold the premises the following year to Daniel Vail, a hatter, of the same city.<sup>36</sup>

The latter, by another deed dated 1836, conveyed the property to Charles Alexander, a Philadelphia printer,<sup>37</sup> who is listed in *McElroy's Philadelphia Directory* of 1842 as printer, editor, and proprietor of the *Daily Chronicle* and of the *Weekly Messenger*. Hotchkin states that the Germantown property was kept by one Col. Alexander as a branch of his city hotel, for summer use, and that it was called "Our House."<sup>38</sup> In 1850 the property was seized from Charles Alexander and sold by the sheriff to Charles Harlan, of Philadelphia, a conveyancer.<sup>39</sup>

The next owner, unlike the usual purchaser or seller of real estate, who would be identified in a deed as resident of a particular township, borough, or municipality, is styled, somewhat grandiloquently, as it seems, "Charlotte Cushman of the United States of America." Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1816-1876), an actress lauded for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, toured the United States from 1849 to 1852, being acclaimed as the leading actress of the American stage. Indeed, her fame spread to Europe, where she gave performances in some of the large

cities. The actress purchased this Germantown property in 1851 and subdivided the premises, the following year selling the "Messuage or Tenement" with thirteen acres of land to Charles H. Shoemaker, gentleman, of Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County.<sup>40</sup>

In 1853 Shoemaker conveyed part of the thirteen-acre property, including the house, to a prominent Philadelphian, whose occupation is stated rather modestly in the deed as that of a druggist.<sup>41</sup> George W. Carpenter (1802-1860), a student of natural history and particularly of mineralogy, had been led by his penchant for scientific matters to contribute papers on medical subjects to the *American Journal of Science*. He was, too, the author of a recognized textbook. Establishing his own drug business in 1828, he was extraordinarily successful, later becoming the hospitable owner of a magnificent suburban estate, which he called Phil-Ellena, at Mount Airy. His real-estate holdings in the Germantown vicinity were extensive.<sup>42</sup>

George W. Carpenter's heirs retained the house for many years after his decease. During most of this period the premises were occupied by members of the Burkhart family, beginning, probably, about 1864, in which year Isaac Burkhart, gentleman, is listed in the city directory as residing at Main (that is, Germantown Avenue) and Walnut Lane, Germantown. In the following two years Charles F. Burkhart, clerk, is listed at the same location, and in 1867 there is reference to a boardinghouse kept by E. Burkhart at No. 5083 Germantown Avenue, which seems to have been the address of the property at that time. From then until 1889 the premises are listed variously, from year to year, as being in the tenure of Elizabeth Burkhart, Mary A. T. Burkhart, Ann Burkhart, or S. Burkhart, with intermittent references to a boardinghouse being kept there.<sup>43</sup>

In 1892 the Carpenters—widow, children, and grandchildren of George W. Carpenter—sold the "stone messuage or tenement and lot or piece of ground" to Conyers Button, of Germantown, manufacturer.<sup>44</sup> This new owner was the owner, also, of the Germantown Hosiery Mills, located on the north side of Walnut Lane in the block east of Germantown Avenue.<sup>45</sup> That establishment had been founded in 1831 by John Button, father of Conyers, and had pioneered in the manufacture of hosiery by machinery, thereby enjoying a monopoly for some years. Conyers Button had become sole proprietor of the firm in 1865.<sup>46</sup> By 1902 he was identified no longer as a manufacturer, but as a gentleman. He sold the house at the southeast corner of Germantown Avenue and Walnut Lane in the latter year, without having resided in it.<sup>47</sup>

The purchaser was Walter J. Crowder, a Germantown coal merchant.<sup>48</sup> In 1903 there appeared a listing in the city directory indicating that apartments were kept at No. 6043 Germantown Avenue, and that Blanche Wunder was proprietress. The directory for



The Shippen-Blair House before renovation. Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

the following year lists beside that lady's name another name, "The Laurens." It appears to be about that time that No. 6043 Germantown Avenue was first known as The Laurens. By 1906 a William Wunder was mentioned as proprietor of the apartments.<sup>49</sup>

Walter J. Crowder died in 1907, and his executor sold the premises two years later to Anton Bieregel,<sup>50</sup> who dealt in varieties at No. 6023 Germantown Avenue. Bieregel's wife, Auguste (or Augusta), became the proprietress of The Laurens, continuing in that capacity until her husband's death in 1917, when she took charge of his business,<sup>51</sup> surviving until 1939. Ten years later the trustee under her will conveyed the property to Michael Diorio, Jr., and Grace M.

Diorio, his wife.<sup>52</sup> The latter, surviving her husband, conveyed the premises to the Germantown Historical Society.<sup>53</sup>

In recent years the building has been occupied as apartments, while the first floor front has served as shops. This arrangement is expected to continue under the Historical Society's ownership. Plans are being made for the restoration of the structure, the exterior work being scheduled for this year. The stucco is to be removed from the walls, and the stone is to be pointed. Thus, regaining much the aspect of its early years, this sturdy stone sentinel will, with renewed distinction, continue its uniquely reminiscent career as witness of the passing centuries.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>C. Henry Kain and Naaman H. Keyser, in Naaman H. Keyser, C. Henry Kain, John Palmer Garber, and Horace F. McCann, *History of Old Germantown* (Philadelphia: Horace F. McCann, 1907), pp. 311-312.

<sup>2</sup>The above paragraphs dealing with architectural features of the building are based on data presented in Harry M. Tinkcom, Margaret B. Tinkcom, and Grant Miles Simon, *Historic Germantown from the Founding to the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Patent Book A, No. 1, p. 245. (This patent, as well as the wills, deeds, and administration hereinafter cited, is recorded at Philadelphia; the page cited in each instance is that upon which the instrument begins.)

<sup>4</sup>John Palmer Garber, in Keyser *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 38 and map following p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Whitaker Pennypacker, *Settlement of Germantown* (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1899), pp. 131, 287.

<sup>6</sup>These transactions are recited in the will of Christian Warmer, the elder, as quoted below. One writer mentions the year of the purchase of Lot No. 18 by Christian Warmer, the elder, as 1696.

(I. Pearson Willits, "The Early Physicians of Germantown" [an address delivered before the Site and Relic Society of Germantown, March 12, 1909], *Historical Addresses* [Germantown: Site and Relic Society of Germantown, 1909], p. 136.)

<sup>7</sup>Pennypacker, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup>Francis Burke Brandt, *The Wissahickon Valley Within the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Corn Exchange National Bank, 1927), p. 86.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Pennypacker, *op. cit.*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>10</sup>Will of Christian Warmer, the elder (1731 Will No. 187), Will Book E, p. 156. The acreage mentioned may be an overstatement; it is not uncommon to find discrepancies in such early measurements of area.

<sup>11</sup>The will of Christian Warmer, the elder, was proved on "May 10th 1731." Presumably the testator died shortly before that date.

<sup>12</sup>John Bartram, in a letter to Peter Collinson, June 11, 1743, quoted in Edward W. Hocker, "A Doctor of Colonial Germantown," *Germantown History*, Vol. II, No. 8 (Philadelphia: Germantown Historical Society, 1948), p. 211.

(Continued on page 91)