

## Our Historic Properties

### Intro

Based out of Historic downtown Wilmington, the Delaware Historical Society (DHS) owns and maintains several historic properties on North Market Street and the Read House & Gardens in Old New Castle, 6 miles south of the city. Each embodies a piece of Delaware history. Scroll to explore these properties virtually and visit in-person to see these buildings in their full historic splendor!

### Delaware History Museum

Formerly an F.W. Woolworth 5-and-10 cent store, the building at 504 North Market Street became home to the Delaware History Museum in 1995. *Distinctly Delaware*, a landmark exhibition on 300 years of Delaware history, opened in 1998. The investment allowed for the permanent exhibition of objects from the collections, a temporary exhibition gallery, a museum store, a large lecture hall, several classrooms, and archival storage space. This building holds the largest private collection of objects made or used in Delaware in the world.

On October 1, 2016, the Delaware History Museum re-opened after undergoing significant renovations featuring two new exhibitions: *Delaware: One State, Many Stories* and *Journey to Freedom* and a striking two-story glass corridor connecting to Old Town Hall with the Museum and the Mitchell Center.

### Mitchell Center for African American Heritage

In 2014, DHS launched *The Sesquicentennial Campaign*, a \$6.8 million fundraising initiative to add a center for African American Heritage, renovate the permanent exhibition, and underwrite improvements to Old Town Hall. The Jane and Littleton Mitchell Center for African American Heritage opened in 2016, named in honor of Jane and Littleton Mitchell, who dedicated their lives to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for African Americans and other disenfranchised Delawareans. The purpose of the Mitchell Center for African American Heritage is to collect, preserve, research, and present for public enrichment the history and heritage of Delaware's African Americans. The Mitchell Center is located within the Delaware History Museum building.

### Old Town Hall

Next to the Delaware History Museum is Old Town Hall. Completed in 1798, Old Town Hall functioned as the center of political and social activities during the height of the mercantile-milling economy in Wilmington until 1916 when the city government sold it to the Delaware Historical Society.

The onset of World War I crippled fundraising efforts to pay the remaining debt on Old Town Hall, so it was rented to the American Red Cross from 1917 to 1919, before falling into disrepair in the early 1920s. In what was the Delaware Historical Society's first fundraising campaign, several generous donors paid off the debt, and Old Town Hall was restored and re-opened as the permanent home of DHS in 1928.

Improvements made in 2014-15 provided fully accessible spaces and galleries for changing exhibitions, educational programs, meetings, and events. The bronze bell that originally hung in the cupola of Old Town Hall from 1800 until 1875 is on display across the street between the Research Library and Cook-Simms house.

## Research Library and Archives

Across the street from the Delaware History Museum, at 505 North Market street, is the Research Library. In 1926, the Artisan's Savings Bank of Wilmington purchased the Robert Porter House and the lot adjacent. The Artisan's Savings sold half of the Porter House to the Central National Bank at the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Market and demolished their half for its new building, now the Research Library. In 1971, the Delaware Historical Society purchased the Artisans Savings Bank building for use as a Research Library. The 1930s Art Deco-style building and many of the original features remain intact, including the façade, the interior light fixtures, radiator covers, doors, and the bank vault, which now safeguards precious historical documents.

## Wilmington Square

As part of Wilmington's national Bicentennial Celebration in 1976, the Old Town Square theater next to the Research Library was demolished. In its place, four early 19th-century residential buildings were relocated from around Wilmington to create a beautiful urban courtyard. The square bears the name Willingtown after Thomas Willing, who laid out the streets in a grid pattern like Philadelphia's and after whom the city of Wilmington was originally named. The buildings that constitute the square are the Cook-Simms House, Jacob and Obidiah Dingee Houses, Jacobs-Ferris House, and Coxe Houses.

## Jacob and Obidiah Dingee Houses

Next to the Cook-Simms house are the Dingee houses built by carpenter brothers Jacob and Obidiah Dingee on adjacent lots, 105 and 107 East 7th Street in Wilmington. Jacob constructed his house in 1771 at 107 East 7th Street. His brother Obadiah built the connecting house two years later. Both brothers were carpenters and joiners and may have used the first floor as a workshop with their living quarters upstairs. A bricklayer and ironmonger, then a contractor and builder occupied these houses after the Dingees continuing its occupation by those engaged in the building trades.

## Jacobs-Ferris House

Situated on the southwest side of Willingtown Square, the Jacobs-Ferris house is the oldest remaining house in Wilmington. Built for Job and Mary Jacobs in 1748 by Griffith Minshall, it originally stood at 414 West Second Street. Mr. Minshall included the Jacobs' initials and the date of construction in the front wall of the house.

Caption: The decorative brickwork shows the date the house was built and the initials of the owners. The date is read in a backwards "X" pattern: 1, 7, 4, 8. The letters "J", "M", and "I" in the inner part of the design stand for Job and Mary Jacobs. In the 1700, "I" and "J" were not considered to be separate letters. The diamond stood for the "&" used today.

## Cook-Simms House

Adjacent to the Research Library, the Cook-Simms house was built in 1778 by William Cook at 101 East Fourth Street in what was then the heart of downtown Wilmington. Dr. John Simms bought the house in 1840 to serve as his shop and residence. He and his son specialized in herbal medicines and were one of only two pharmacy shops in Wilmington at the time. Before it was moved from King Street, it was a restaurant called "The Sanitary Luncheon" from 1919 to 1969. Operated by the Valko family, it was known as the home of "the original Hot Texas Weiner."

## Coxe Houses

Alongside North Shipley Street are the Coxe houses, formerly located at 107-109 East Sixth Street in Wilmington on land granted to the Coxe family by the Duke of York. These houses were built in 1801 by Thomas Coxe for his two daughters. As of 2020, the Delaware Historical Society is working with the Jewish Historical Society (JHSD) and the Jewish Federation of Delaware to preserve and renovate the Coxe House into the headquarters for JHSD and house their archives.

## Tatnall Bell

Between the Research library and the Robert Porter House is this bronze bell, which originally hung in the cupola of Old Town Hall across the street from 1800 until 1875.

The bell, cast in England, was purchased by Joseph Tatnall (1765-1813), a prosperous local miller and merchant who also had bought chased the clock still in the cupola. As one of the tallest buildings in Wilmington for almost a century, the Town Hall and its tower became an important community focal point. The bell worked with the clock to strike on the hour. It could also be rung manually as a fire alarm, to summon the citizenry to meetings, or to mark a period of public celebration or mourning.

The bell was removed when the original cupola was replaced by a larger one in 1875. The bell then passed to the Phoenix Fire Company before being donated to the Delaware Historical Society by the heirs of Joseph Tatnall in 1933.

## Robert Porter House

Now serving as the Library Annex, the Robert Porter House is the flat-roofed, three-story, single-bay brick building sandwiched between the Research Library and Levy's Loan Co. (formerly the Central National Bank) on the corner of Market and 5<sup>th</sup> Streets. Robert Porter, a printer who published one of Wilmington's early newspapers, the *Delaware Journal*, bought the lot and built the house in 1816 and lived there until 1823. The Artisan's Savings Bank purchased the lot along with the adjacent building in 1926. They sold half of it to the Central National Bank and demolished their half for a new building, now the Research Library. The remaining 14-foot-wide building is a testament to early preservation efforts that continue to this day. In the 1970s, with the support of the city of Wilmington and the Delaware Historical Society, the Garden Club of Wilmington purchased and restored the building, returning the first-floor conversion to its original construction. The Wilmington Garden Center (now the Delaware Center for Horticulture) was dedicated in October 1977. DHS later acquired the Porter House. In 2020, construction began on restoring the historic façade. The original 1816 bricks were carefully removed, cleaned, and stored so they can be re-used in the rebuilt façade.

## Read House & Gardens

Located on the Delaware River in Historic New Castle, the 14,000 square foot mansion was completed in 1804 for George Read II. The house is surrounded by 1.5 acres of formal gardens installed in 1848. Bequeathed to the Delaware Historical Society by Lydia Chichester Laird in 1975, the site underwent a state-of-the-art restoration campaign in the 1980s. In 2017 it was designated a National Historic Landmark for its outstanding Federal-style architecture.