

75th Tour of Tours

Story and photos by
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When Chester County Day opens the
doors to magnificent area homes.

HELP CELEBRATE THE 75th ANNIVERSARY of Chester County Day, the longest-running house tour in the country. In this anniversary year, the event appropriately focuses on the West Chester area and the southeastern quadrant of the County, location of the original 1936 tour.

With a few years' hiatus for two World Wars and other inconveniences, Chester County Day has proceeded ever since, allowing thousands of visitors, including those from other states and countries, to appreciate the historic appeal, interest and charm of our region's architecture and its surroundings.

The tour, organized from the beginning by the Women's Auxiliary to the Chester County Hospital, directly benefits the Hospital. This year tour tickets and VIP passes—available at CCHosp.com—help support its award-winning Cardiac Program.

Perhaps less directly but still meaningful is the way the tour helps people appreciate the region and its historic resources. This article visits five distinctive properties on the tour, all lovingly preserved and added to over the years by a series of caring owners.

The tour itself allows visitors close-up looks at these and other homes. If anyone wonders why the tour has lasted so long, or why people care so much about Chester County's charms, the following pages may hold an answer.



The Dower House

The Dower House on Goshen Road is considered the oldest inhabited structure in West Chester (the original log house was built in 1712), but it's also part of a very new real-estate trend—its current owners bought it before they ever saw it in person.

Work changes two years ago meant Tait and Lisa Norden had to move from Maine to the West Chester area. They looked at 50 prospects as time pressure mounted. Then one day they peered at a computer screen in Maine as the agent walked through a house in West Chester, pointing her phone excitedly at the different features. Tait says the visual appeal of the home and the agent's palpable excitement led them to make an offer.

The real-life house did not disappoint. Built circa 1767, the house was later owned by the novelist Joseph Hergesheimer, who had it renovated in the early 1920s by the famous restoration architect R. Brognard Okie. The renovation recreated the extensive and charming original woodwork, using the best wood available, and accented with authentic period ironwork. They also milled lumber from 18th-century barns. This millwork has Okie's signature elements and design.

Later owners maintained the home's stylistic consistency and comfortable charm, and the grounds were spared intensive development anywhere within view. Tait says today he and Lisa feel they are "stewards of a very special place."



IF YOU GO ON THE TOUR:

On October 3, the **Women's Auxiliary to Chester County Hospital** hosts the 75th gala year of the longest running house tour in the country.

Start the "Day" at the fox hunt where riders and hounds take off at 9 a.m. from the beautiful Radnor Hunt grounds. Coffee and baked goods will be available.

Then on to the tour! This year's focus is on the Borough of West Chester, where the tour began in 1936, and on the southeastern quadrant of the county. Tickets are \$40 and may be purchased by mail, online or in person starting Sept. 1st at satellite locations and at the Chester County Hospital. Tour hours are 10 to 5.

Do the "Day" in style with a VIP ticket, which gives you exclusive benefits including a VIP Reception and Preview Party at Vickers Restaurant on

Sept. 27th, a visit to Broadlawns in West Chester for a private tour and a gourmet boxed lunch from White Horse Tavern, plus a chance to tour in a BMW provided by Otto's BMW. VIP tickets are \$100 and 100 percent of your contribution benefits The Chester County Hospital.

There are many public preview lectures at sites around the county, running from Sept. 15 through Oct. 2. You can purchase tickets for the tour at these lecture locations. Check the website for a complete list.

Tour-goers can reserve a picnic lunch from Arrianna's Gourmet Café (for \$10), or bring your own picnic lunch to enjoy along the route. The Brandywine Table column in this issue has ideas for delicious treats that travel well.

For more information, phone 610-431-5301 or visit ChesterCountyHospital.org/ChesterCountyDay.



Thomas Mill Farm

East of West Chester, The Thomas Mill Farm is situated along Crum Creek. The driveway is just across Goshen Road from Bartram's Covered Bridge, and going up the lane you pass a grist mill that may have helped feed the Continental troops at Valley Forge. "We just love the feel of the history," says Diane Roskamp.

Roskamp and her husband Robert discovered Chester County some 20 years ago while developing a new retirement community here. They fell in love with the area and began to look for a home. Once they came up the lane off Goshen Road and experienced the bucolic peace of the 20-acre property, the search was over.

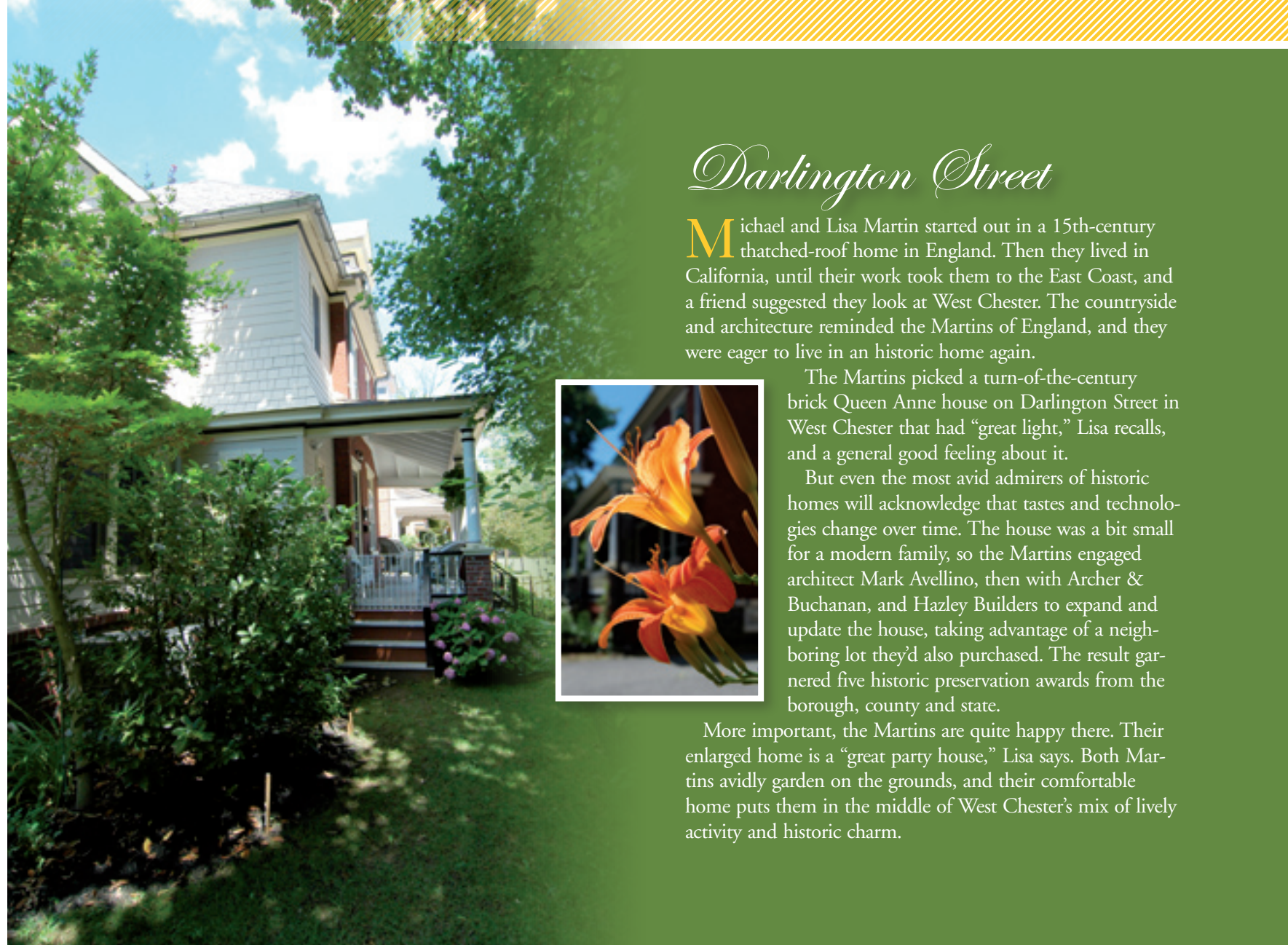
The famous clockmaker, Isaac Thomas, built the small, original 1745 house for his new wife. Needing more room for their own family, the Roskamps hired historic-preservation architect John Milner to add some new wings to the original building.

Art pieces—contemporary and historic, including several tall case clocks made by Thomas himself—lend visual charm to

the interior; outdoor sculptures include one piece by Glenna Goodacre, creator of the Vietnam Women's Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Chester County Day visitors are invited to picnic on the grounds. "Why have all this," Diane asks, "if you don't share it?"





Darlington Street

Michael and Lisa Martin started out in a 15th-century thatched-roof home in England. Then they lived in California, until their work took them to the East Coast, and a friend suggested they look at West Chester. The countryside and architecture reminded the Martins of England, and they were eager to live in an historic home again.

The Martins picked a turn-of-the-century brick Queen Anne house on Darlington Street in West Chester that had “great light,” Lisa recalls, and a general good feeling about it.

But even the most avid admirers of historic homes will acknowledge that tastes and technologies change over time. The house was a bit small for a modern family, so the Martins engaged architect Mark Avellino, then with Archer & Buchanan, and Hazley Builders to expand and update the house, taking advantage of a neighboring lot they’d also purchased. The result garnered five historic preservation awards from the borough, county and state.

More important, the Martins are quite happy there. Their enlarged home is a “great party house,” Lisa says. Both Martins avidly garden on the grounds, and their comfortable home puts them in the middle of West Chester’s mix of lively activity and historic charm.





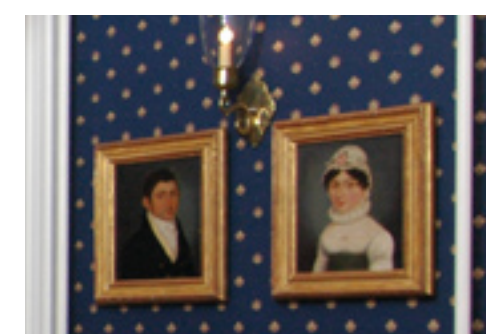
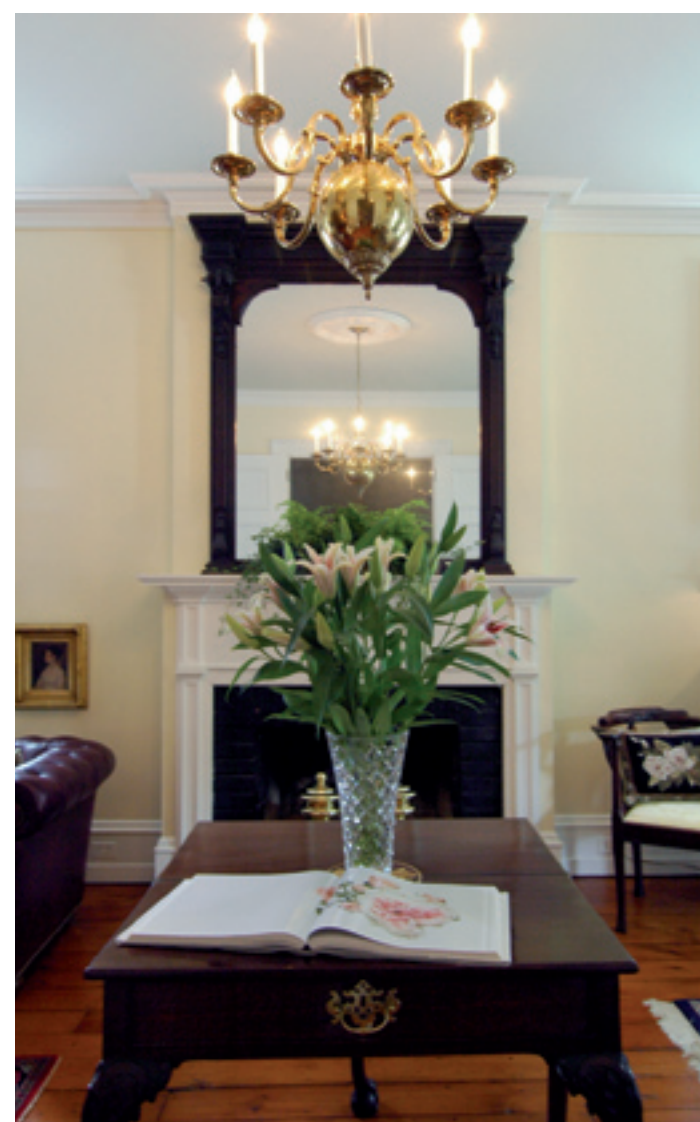
1865 Brick Twin

Allen and Sarah Burke live in a circa-1865 brick twin on Miner Street in West Chester, and Allen thinks there's a simple reason they found it relatively unchanged from its original state. As the manse for the nearby First Presbyterian Church of West Chester, it was home for the ministers there from 1881 through 1967.

So it really had one owner all those years, not a series of new families with their individually varying tastes. The Burkes are pleased to point out the original woodwork, doors and crown moldings, along with the wide-planked floors and the original wrought iron exterior decorations.

The Burkes had been looking for a house in the country, and had looked at about 50 properties, but fell in love with the Miner Street home as soon as they walked in.

In one notable way they've made the home their own, without sullyng any of its original features: portraits. Years ago, these avid antiquers went to a show and were struck by a portrait they saw. Acquiring one led to another ... and then another. Today there are historic portraits aplenty in the living room, hallway, dining room and even kitchen, each with its own story to tell.





1920s Corcoran Home

Bob and Wendy Nelson were renting a modern house in the area when they heard about a home built in 1926 between West Chester's High and Walnut Streets by architect William J. Corcoran for his own family. The Nelsons' goal was to downsize from their home in Westchester County, New York, and Wendy laughed when she saw the Walnut Street house had six bedrooms.

But then they saw it, "and we fell for it," she says. The house has a tile roof and stucco exterior, similar to the Tuscan look of the nearby Chester County Hospital, and it has a quietly regal way of sitting on a hill that overlooks High Street and the grassy expanse of the golf course beyond.

The Nelsons added terraces and a circular herb garden, but what may strike Chester County Day visitors most is how their decor, much of it original art, blends with the clean, expansive lines of the interior to create a timeless visual fascination. "Homes from the 1920s often have a charm of their own that happens to accommodate modern living and design remarkably well," Wendy says. Be sure to check out the clean, modern lines of the centuries-old Khmer pots (see photo facing page, inset). ♦

