

Jean Zipser

“Shall We Dance?”

Partnering with the National Park Service

For 27 years, I’ve been a tenant of the National Park Service in Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area (NRA), in a house my family once owned. A difficult dance, indeed! We began as forced partners, the National Park Service and I; and only time has mellowed the relationship.

As I write this, The Pahaquarry Foundation, Inc., an organization I helped create, is on the verge of joining the National Park Service in a new dance — partners in the rehabilitation of a 190-year-old house my grandmother bought early in the last century and from which her descendants were evicted by that same National Park Service in 1991. The B. B. Van Campen House, built around 1810, is about a quarter of a mile from the Abram Van Campen farm, where I live. My grandmother, Julia Orthwine, purchased the property in 1926. It was then a rural retreat called “Honeysuckle Lodge.” She turned it into a home — not only in the physical sense, but her heart’s home, for she felt most at ease when she was there.

Her marriage to Rudolf Orthwine, the publisher of “Dance Magazine,” derailed; and Julia put her energies into the property — remodeling, landscaping, and farming. She also pursued other

interests — including drawing, painting, sculpture, and the study of religion. The Pahaquarry Foundation, with 200 members, feels that its plan to create an art and study center there, with art education programs for teens and residency programs for adults, serves Julia’s memory and will create a valuable regional resource. This will be a different kind of dance.

While preservation of the mid-Delaware River Valley as a national park and the Delaware River as part of the Wild and Scenic River System is laudable, I abhor what has happened to my community, Pahaquarry Township, which was forced out of existence. I have struggled to turn my bitterness and anger into something positive. Preserving the wonderful, historic houses is a way for me to assuage my grief. It combines my deep feelings for family heritage and regional history with my civic mindedness. I was my township’s last mayor, and I am now the president of the board of The Pahaquarry Foundation. This allows me to take a more active part in historic preservation and rehabilitation.

I have some experience in preservation, as a private National Park Service tenant in a house that is almost 300 years old. The house was built by an original Dutch settler, Abram Van Campen; and was my parents’ home. It is located north of the Delaware Water Gap, along Old Mine Road, in Warren County, NJ.

The National Park Service now considers me a beneficial tenant; I pay rent and keep a historic building in good condition — difficult because the lease absolves the National Park Service from a landlord’s traditional responsibilities. The foundation was incorporated on July 21, 1997, 19 days after the Township of Pahaquarry was forced to merge with Hardwick Township, a neighboring municipality. Pahaquarry lacked enough people to operate a municipal government. The township’s demise was the result of the federal policies, including National Park Service policies, in place for the Tocks Island Dam project, a 1960s program to dam the Delaware River.

B. B. Van Campen House, built c. 1810, shown after completion of exterior rehabilitation. Work performed included the replacement of foundation sill beams, general carpentry repairs, and exterior painting. NPS photo.





Park construction crew led by preservation carpenter Doug Townsend rehabilitates the covered porch. A new flat seam metal roof was installed with assistance from the NPS Historic Preservation Training Center in Frederick, MD. NPS photo.

After the first environmental legislation was signed into law (The Clean Water Act), construction of the dam was delayed. Congress stopped funding the project; and it was finally deauthorized in July 1992, almost 30 years after its inception. My own grief at the death of my township spurred me to create the foundation as a way to keep the “idea” of Pahaquarry alive. The name “Pahaquarry” has a specific meaning. It is an Anglicized version of Lenni Lenape word Paoqualin, meaning “the place between the mountains beside the waters.” It refers to the glacially formed Delaware Valley, including the striking Delaware Water Gap. The area remains remarkably unspoiled. Many artists and photographers, including Eladio Lopez, Penny Ross, Patricia Ann Griffin, Sandy Taylor, Miharu Lane, Owen Kanzler, and Dominick Martino have drawn inspiration from that beauty. Thus, the foundation wanted to stay in Pahaquarry, if possible.

My grandmother’s house had been empty since 1991. Richard Ring, then park superintendent, had hopes that Van Campen family descendants would use the property. That plan fell through. The house, which had been re-roofed in expectation of its new tenants, and outbuildings were left empty.

By 1996, the park’s administration began to seek tenants who would refurbish and use the historic buildings. My grandmother’s house was put on a list of available properties. It was on a park-sponsored tour in June 1996 that I entered my grandmother’s house for the first time since the National Park Service evicted my cousins from it. I was shocked and angered by the damage. The house is on the National Register of

Historic Places as part of the Old Mine Road Historic District. While the National Park Service has a mandate to preserve these buildings, financing this is another matter. What is remarkable is that there was a reprieve. In December 1998, Robert Kirby, then assistant superintendent of Delaware Water Gap NRA, asked me if the foundation might be interested in the property and, if so, would it come up with a draft use plan. The foundation’s board of directors asked me to draft it. On December 9, 1998, the foundation submitted its plan.

The National Park Service responded by sending a memorandum of agreement. The document was impossible. The foundation balked. It would be responsible for the property’s rehabilitation, and it simply did not have the money to do the work. The foundation’s representatives toured the property on a rainy spring day in 1999. The wooden floors were rippled from moisture; moisture had severely damaged structural beams in the cellar; the kitchen porch was partially collapsed and the other porches needed repair. The house had no running water, and the septic system no longer met building codes. Despite this, the foundation reaffirmed its interest and explained the reasons behind its reluctance to take over the property.

That summer, the National Park Service committed funds and manpower to repairs. Work began. Beams were replaced, and the porches repaired. Early in 2000, the foundation’s buildings expert, Robert McCabe of Belvidere, toured the property and declared the project “manageable.” The foundation started investigating grants to finance the work. I am really not sure why Bob Kirby had faith in The Pahaquarry Foundation. We are a homespun group, with a small budget. We try not to waste resources. Kirby created a bridge of trust. He extended his hand and asked The Pahaquarry Foundation to dance, and we said we’d be delighted. All the bitterness of the past receded. This does not mean that everything goes smoothly. However, the foundation and the National Park Service have discovered that we can be willing partners in this dance. We can save Julia’s home (the B.B. Van Campen farm) and give this extended community a valuable resource.

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