



## History of Hilltop Farm

Early settlers to the region, many of whom were English, found their way up the Delaware River to acquire land and build log or stone houses. Among those who arrived in this country from England was Richard Hough who had sailed on the *Endeavor* in 1683. He became a provincial representative, prospered, and within a decade built a house along the Delaware using stone from his own quarry. Later he purchased 475 acres in the Buckingham area.

Unfortunately, in 1705, Hough died by accidental drowning on a boat trip to Philadelphia. His will stipulated that his acreage be sold. Maps indicate that the land included the current Hilltop Farm. Joseph Fell–Fell is a well-known Bucks County name–purchased 355 acres and Joseph Linton, 120 acres in 1706. Of Fell’s 355 acres, data suggests that 137 ½ were then sold to Robert Sanders.

The earliest record in the Recital of Deeds regarding the property states that John Bradfield, Sr. purchased the 137 ½ acres from Robert Sanders in 1723. Bradfield’s will, written in 1752, reveals that only a descendant named John could inherit the homestead and land. Initially, his wife Jane was to be given the use of the “new” house and its furnishings. This new house was probably stone, replacing a log cabin. Their son, named John, lived nearby and was to bring his mother firewood, two cows and her riding house. He was also obligated to sell the wheat grown on the plantation and give the money to her.

Unexpectedly, after the death of John Bradfield, Sr., son John brought suit against his mother demanding payment of debts owed him by his father. Jane Bradfield was therefore forced to sell the house and acreage in order to repay her son the amount of the debt.

A sheriff’s sale was held in the fall of 1757. Surprisingly, the highest bidder was none other than John Bradfield, Jr., himself. This is perplexing because, according to his father’s will, John, Jr. had “lifetime rights” to the house and property after his mother. Perhaps he wanted clear title to everything. He did, however, make provisions in the suit for his mother’s maintenance.

After the passage of 30 years, John Bradfield, Jr. sold his property and all of his personal estate to John and Jane Cutler (or Cutter). This may have been “in trust” because only two years later, in 1789, the three principals, Bradfield and the Cutlers, sold the plantation to Meshach Michener, Sr.

Within six years, Michener divided the property, retaining two sections for himself and his wife Mary, and conveying one section each to Meshach, Jr. and another son Isaiah. Since Michener was a mason by trade he, undoubtedly, helped erect stone houses for the brothers whose wives were sisters. Isaiah’s home, built in 1795, is the earliest part of the present Hilltop Farm house which includes the old kitchen and fireplace and two front rooms.

In 1814 George Rapp entered the picture by purchasing all but nine acres of Isaiah Michener’s property, as well as adjoining land that, at the time, was owned by James Dunlap, an innkeeper and hatter. The combined tract of 103 acres cost \$7,528.57. Unfortunately, four short years later, a money-strapped Rapp lost his lands at public sale because he owed \$668.25. John Bradshaw was the next buyer. Three additional buyers purchased abutting property that included a stone tavern which had been built by James Dunlap. The tavern was reopened as the *Broad Axe, Square and Compass*.



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Bradshaw's daughter Phoebe, wife of Hugh Meredith, inherited her father's property in 1821. Meredith was a tall, spare man, highly intelligent and an avid reader who filled his home with books. When Phoebe died, after bearing six children, he sold to two brothers, Jacob and Abraham Geil in 1841. The Geils sold to Hiram Rice, Esq. who, by 1872, increased his holdings to the original northwest boundary, now Smoke Road.

The name Fell reappears when Rice in 1875 sold to Seneca Fell, Jr. who, apparently not an astute businessman sold his property to Alexander Rich for \$11,501.72, nearly \$3000 less than he had paid for it three years earlier.

The sale advertisement had extolled "The Star Farm" as a well-built stone mansion with exceptional features and an array of outbuildings stabling horses and cows, with a pen for hogs and a house for chickens. There were orchards that included 180 Smith cider apple trees, also timberland, well-fenced fields and a "never-failing spring". It was said to be "convenient to schools, church, stores and railroad". Rich planted a plethora of his favorite flowers, bluebells. During the succeeding ownership by his daughter, Margaret Hiller, the blooms were so plentiful that the property was renamed Bluebell Farm.

Jacob and Ida Kresge owned the farm from 1917 to 1923 followed by Albert and Lucinda James from 1923 to 1927.

John H. and Anna Ruckman, a well-known couple, next bought the farm and were responsible for a remarkable accomplishment. Within two years, the Ruckmans managed to acquire all but two small tracts of the original 137 ½ acres. It had been 206 years since the land was under one ownership. In all likelihood, it was also the Ruckmans who enlarged the house and moved an interior staircase. Their initials appear on the west gable. John F. Ruckman inherited the farm from his parents and occupied it from 1960 until his death in 1965. His will bequeathed a "liferight" to Ronald Webster for 30 acres and the former tavern buildings, but only if he lived there and maintained the property. The remainder was passed to Charles V. Swain, executor of the estate. By 1987 the two properties were once again combined when the Webster portion was passed to Swain.

Charles Swain died in 2006 at the age of 92. He was an extraordinary steward of Hilltop Farm. Antiques of museum quality filled his exquisitely appointed home. His pewter collection was especially renowned, some of which had been amassed by John Fell Ruckman, his Doylestown mentor and former owner of Hilltop Farm. Another influential person who contributed to Swain's passion for pewter was his nephew, Donald L. Fennimore. Fennimore, who once lived in Doylestown, is the retired senior curator of metals at Winterthur Museum. Last year Swain's possessions were auctioned at three sessions in New Hampshire.

Over the course of the past twenty years, houses have sprung up, obliterating the rural countryside around Hilltop Farm. The original 137 ½ acres have been reduced to the current 18.32 acres. Towered over by a 175-year-old Austrian spruce, Hilltop Farm still exudes exceptional beauty and may be enjoyed this month, dramatically presented as the 2008 Bucks County Designer House and Gardens.

Based upon research by Wilma Rezer and Jean Dawson