

HISTORIC HOUSES AND BUILDINGS OF DELAWARE

by

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Published with private funds by

PUBLIC ARCHIVES COMMISSION

Dover, Delaware, 1962

After serving a diversity of purposes in more than two hundred years, the Old Academy no longer figures in any public capacity. For a long time past its function has been purely residential.

Substantially built of brick to begin with, the Old Academy is now a stuccoed structure, painted a light yellow. On a high base, it is of two-storey-and-attic height, but has no dormers. It is two full rooms deep. The front, which has a plain box cornice, has four full-sized windows on the upper floor; on the lower floor there are two somewhat smaller windows at the north and south end of the front and, between them, two separate narrow doors close together.

This arrangement suggests alterations that must have been made in all the years of varied occupancies. The varied uses and occupancies, with successive alterations and adaptations, render it pointless to discuss what may have been the original plan.

The building is devoid of distinguishing architectural characteristics that would invite attention or merit praise. Yet it has a reassuring air of unassuming, comfortable, kindly dignity, like a genial, somewhat stout, and elderly dowager.

RIDGELY HOUSE

The Green, north side, east of State Street, Dover

The Ridgely house, facing The Green in Dover, was built in 1728. It is a two-storey-and-attic brick structure, originally of four-bay width. An addition in 1767 at the west end made a frontage six bays wide. The rear wing was added in 1764. The brickwork of the south front, facing The Green, is laid in Flemish-bond with black headers. The west and east walls are stuccoed over the brick.

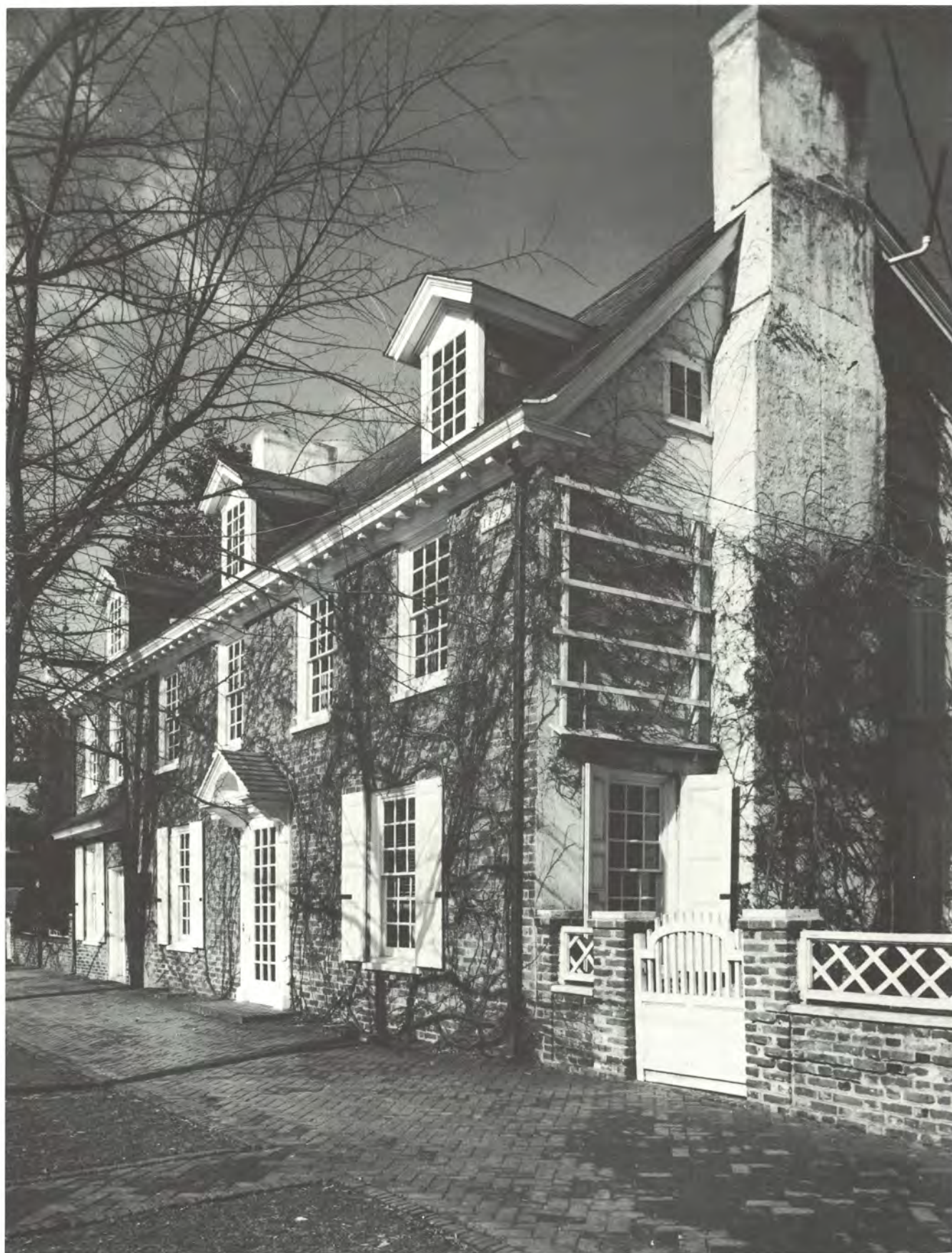
The plan of the house, as first built, is the pre-Georgian plan that came into southern Delaware from Virginia and Maryland. It corresponds exactly with the plan of an early house at St. Mary's City, a natural precedent for the Southern builder to follow. The plan also coincides in fundamental features with the plan of Resurrection Manor, in St. Mary's County, Maryland, and likewise with the plan of the original part of White Meadow Farm, in Sussex County. The said fundamental features being one large oblong room with a fireplace, besides which a winding stair (usually closed off by a door above the lower steps) ascended to the several bedrooms above. Additions to this plan might consist of one or, oftentimes, two adjacent rooms opening off from the one original oblong room. In the original structure, the rooms have admirable panelling and other woodwork characteristic of the period.

In many instances, as at the Ridgely house the rooms adjoining the oblong nucleus were built at the outset. The library or sitting-room at the Ridgely house represents the oblong nucleus; the present parlour and the dining-room open from it respectively at the east end and the west side.

Thomas Parke, who built the house, was apparently of the Parke and Custis Virginia connection. He was High Sheriff of Kent County from 1758 to 1760. His son, Colonel John Parke, of Revolutionary repute, was educated at Oxford and wrote a volume of verse entitled *The Lyric Works of Horace translated into English to which are added a Number of Original Poems. By a Native of America*. The book is now a rare item sought by collectors.

The Ridgelys of Delaware descend from Nicholas Greenberry Ridgely, born at Annapolis in 1694. He was the grandson of Colonel Henry Ridgely, who came from England in 1659 and founded the Ridgely family in Maryland. Nicholas Greenberry Ridgely was the son of Henry Ridgely and Katherine Greenberry, daughter of Governour Nicholas Greenberry. In 1711 when he was but seventeen, Nicholas married Sarah Worthington, a daughter of Colonel John Worthington. Ten years later he was a widower. Under the weight of his bereavements and the changed atmosphere of his paternal home, he left Maryland and came into Delaware.

In 1723 he was living near New Castle, where he married Ann French, who lived only a few years and left him with several motherless daughters. About 1735 he was living at Salem, New Jersey. There, in 1736, he married a widow with two small children; Mary, the widow of Captain Benjamin Vining and daughter



Ridgely House facing on Dover Green.

of Judge Hugh Middleton. Not long afterwards, with his new family, including his own infant son, Charles Greenberry, Nicholas settled in Dover.

Thence onward Nicholas took an active part in politics. Soon after his arrival in Dover he became a Justice of the Supreme Court of the Three Lower Counties and continued in that office until his death in 1755. In 1745, Caesar Rodney, still a minor, chose Nicholas Ridgely to be his guardian.

Having bought land west of Dover, in 1749 Nicholas Ridgely built and moved into the brick plantation house thereon. This was Eden Hill, the plantation Charles Greenberry Ridgely inherited from his father.

The foregoing explanatory interlude has been necessary because the stories of the House on The Green and of Eden Hill are so inseparably associated and because the people who have lived in them have been so identified with the public life of Delaware through a long period of years. Also, houses cannot be dissociated from the people who lived in them.

Charles Greenberry Ridgely studied medicine in Philadelphia under Dr. Phineas Bond. In 1758 he returned to Dover to practice. He married Mary Wynkoop, of Philadelphia, in June, 1761. At the death of his mother in December of the same year, he came into possession of Eden Hill.

Finding it inconvenient to practise from Eden Hill, in 1767 Dr. Ridgely moved into the old Parke dwelling on The Green and shortly afterwards bought it from Thomas Parke's estate. It was at this time that the western addition was made, affording the Doctor suitable office rooms, on the ground floor, away from the rest of the house.

Dr. Ridgely was active in political life. In 1765, before he moved into the house on The Green, he had been elected to the General Assembly and continued to serve in most sessions to the end of his life. In 1767, he urged the passage of a bill "to prohibit the importation of slaves into this government." From 1769 to 1779 he was the Treasurer of Kent County. Just before the Revolution he was Chairman of the Kent County Committee of Correspondence. And he was a member of the Constitutional Convention that framed the Delaware Constitution of 1776.

In 1772, his wife, Mary Wynkoop, died, leaving him to cope with the rearing of five young children. Of this perplexity he was relieved in 1774, when he married Ann Moore, the daughter of Judge William Moore and the Lady Williamina, of Moore Hall in the Welsh Barony of Pennsylvania. Ann was the younger sister-in-law of his old preceptor, Dr. Phineas Bond.

This marriage greatly increased an already wide family connection and also kept the family at Dover in closer touch with Philadelphia. The house on The Green became more and more a cherished destination for the many Ridgely relatives and their friends. The hospitality there dispensed extended to the numerous men in public life with whom Dr. Ridgely came into almost daily contact.

Dr. Ridgely died in November, 1785. He had not spared himself in his practice. It involved riding on indifferent roads in all weathers and at all hours and, in addition, he had given much of his energy to the service of his Country and State. His arduous life ended when he was only forty-seven.

After the Doctor's death, Mrs. Ridgely moved to Eden Hill, which had been left to her for life. She had always loved the country and was fully capable of managing the plantation. It pleased her to be able to direct farm operations on the spot.

From 1767, when Dr. Ridgely had moved into the house on The Green, Eden Hill had been in the care of a tenant-farmer. The immediate family contacts with the place had been in the frequent visits they made from town, Eden Hill was only about a mile from The Green. When Mrs. Ridgely moved to Eden Hill, the house on The Green was rented. It was not again occupied by any of the family until Dr. Abraham Ridgely rented it from 1794 to 1799.

The next member of the family to live there was Henry Moore Ridgely, the son of Dr. Charles Ridgely and Ann Moore. In 1803, as a rising young lawyer of twenty-four, he married Sarah Banning and brought his bride to live in the house where he was born.



Ridgely House, Dover. A view in the Library, the original "great room" of the house, with fireplace and winding stair beside it.



Ridgely House, Dover. Parlour, the "added" room adjoining the Library.

When only twenty-eight, he was elected President of the newly-founded Farmers' Bank of the State of Delaware and continued to hold that office until his death, forty years later. His abilities as a lawyer were highly esteemed and he stood at the top of the legal profession.

His services in public life were many. He was repeatedly elected to the State Legislature. As a leading Federalist, he was elected to the United States Congress in 1811 and 1813, but declined nomination in 1815. He was thrice Secretary of State in Delaware. In this capacity he set the files of that office in order and arranged the scattered records of the State. He asked to be made a Levy Court Commissioner in order to put the County papers in shape. This same service he also performed in his trusteeship for the County Almshouse.

In 1827 Henry Moore Ridgely was elected to the United States Senate to fill the unexpired term of Senator Nicholas Van Dyke, who had died in March, 1826.

In 1830, Chancellor Nicholas Ridgely died and Eden Hill went to the heir, Henry Moore Ridgely's thirteen-year-old son Henry. After that, Henry Moore Ridgely gave much of his time and attention to farming.

In 1841 the house on The Green was the scene of an unusual incident. It cannot be better told than in Mrs. Henry Ridgely's words:

"During this winter a speaker came to Dover, Lucretia Mott, who arrived from the north via Smyrna with a small party of Quakers. She had spoken there on Abolition. The hearers were infuriated and the men of her party were tarred and feathered. This news reached Dover Green before the lady herself arrived; Senator Ridgely heard of the outrage and decided that Dover should not be disgraced by similar behavior. When the Abolitionists reached Dover, he met them and with his sons escorted them to his house on The Green. Ann Ridgely was the hostess. Lucretia Mott was to speak from the steps of the Court House directly opposite the Ridgely house. When it was time for the speech, Mr. Ridgely and several other gentlemen escorted the party to the Court House steps. It is said they carried guns. When the meeting was over they retraced their way through a mob collected on The Green. They entered the house with its low doorstep and went into the parlor, where a window gave onto the street without.

As the crowd had gathered around the window and there were murmurs from outside, one of the guests suggested that the shutters should be closed. Henry Ridgely forbade this. He said that no one was afraid. A fire burned brightly on the hearth in the little parlor and Lucretia Mott was asked to sit near it while the family, Ann and two of her suitors included, gathered near to listen to the fascinating talker's anecdotes. Miss Mott was an animated speaker. At one point in her tale she arose from her chair to make an emphatic gesture and stepped forward, without realizing she had done so. Then, intending to resume her chair, to her surprise and to the dismay of her hearers she sat instead upon the floor.

Charles duPont ran and tenderly picked her up. Another young man in the party burst into a rude laugh and hid his face in his handkerchief. Both these men had asked Ann's hand in marriage, but up to this moment she had been unable to make up her mind. After the episode she knew that Charles duPont was her choice, and soon thereafter they became engaged."*

The house on The Green eventually descended to Henry Ridgely, the grandson of Henry Moore Ridgely.

**The Ridgelys of Delaware & Their Circle. What Them Befell in Colonial & Federal Times: Letters 1751-1890*, by Mabel Lloyd Ridgely, beginning with the birth of Nicholas Greenberry Ridgely in 1694, gives not only an intimate picture of family life at the House on The Green and at Eden Hill, and their occupants' relations with the public life of Delaware, but also much valuable information about other houses and the general history of the State. Its many engaging sidelights reveal the cultural life of Delaware with Province and State.