CHAPTER 2

THE JACKSON HOUSE:
SHARING WITH THE CAPTAIN

"Is Nemacolin Castle the oldest house in the Brownsville area?"

This question is often asked of me. Sometimes it takes on a slightly different form.

"Is Nemacolin Castle the oldest house in this area that was continually occupied by one family?"

The answer to both questions is no.

Jacob Bowman began building Nemacolin Castle in 1789, expanding the original stone trading post several times over the next sixty years. Since 1789 it was always owned and occupied by Bowmans until the 1959 death of Leila Jacobs Bowman, the last family member to live there. Soon after her death it was donated to Fayette County and is now used as a museum.

There is a home about a mile from Nemacolin Castle which is still occupied by the family of the man who built it in 1785, four years before Bowman began building the castle. You have seen the home if you have traveled on Albany Road near Albany tunnel.

It is a white two-story stucco house located near the entrance to Assad Iron and Metals Inc. It is shaped like an L, with the foot of the L running parallel to the driveway entering Assad's and the stem of the L pointing back toward Albany hill. Its most notable feature is a beautiful two-story porch on the front of the house. The home's original main entrance is on the porch's first floor, and on the porch's second level is a door leading into the upstairs of the house.

This house is 216 years old and is known as the Jackson House. It is the residence of its current owner, Audrey Lee Forsyth, and two of her daughters, Mary and Rebecca Forsyth.

First we will look at the origin of the house and learn the story of its builder, Samuel Jackson, who was one of the Brownsville area's first business leaders. Then the Forsyth family and I will discuss the practical challenges of living in a house that is more than two centuries

old. Finally our conversation will take an eerie turn when I am "introduced" to another occasional occupant of this ancient house – an occupant whose unexpected visits can best be described as "other-worldly."

The Jackson House, built by Samuel Jackson in 1785, stands near Albany Tunnel, about one mile north of Brownsville.

I visited the Jackson house on a spring evening not long ago and had a lively conversation with three generations of Forsyth family women. I was invited to visit by Mary Forsyth. Mary and I were joined at the house's dining room table by the matriarch of the family, Audrey Lee Forsyth, her daughter Jennie Forsyth Abbadini and Jennie's daughter, Gianna Abbadini.

When I arrived at the house, I was escorted to the dining room. Already spread out on the table were numerous old ledgers and books, their pages yellowed with age. Audrey immediately offered me a pair of latex gloves.

"These books are pretty dusty," she laughed.

I put the gloves on and said to Audrey, "I understand that you have been living in this house since 1947. Is your family descended from Samuel Jackson, the man who built this house?"

Audrey replied, "Samuel Jackson's daughter Rebecca inherited this property in 1820 and married Joseph Baily in 1823. My late husband, Joseph Baily Forsyth, was a descendant of Joseph Baily. The house

remained in the family through many generations, and in 1941 my husband inherited it. I married my husband in 1947, and when he died in 1985, I became owner of the house."

"What can you tell me about Samuel Jackson?"

"Jackson was one of this area's earliest businessmen and leaders. He lived in this house from the time he built it in 1785 until his death in 1818."

According to Franklin Ellis's *History of Fayette County, Pennsylvania*, Samuel Jackson was a Quaker who came to this area from Chester County, Pennsylvania. This "sturdily built man" arrived in early 1777 and immediately paid two hundred pounds for three hundred acres that he bought from a fellow named Jesse Martin.

Included in his purchase was the land where Redstone Creek enters the Monongahela River. Adjacent to Jackson's new property were the extensive lands of Thomas Brown and Andrew Linn. Jackson initially built a log cabin on his land, and by 1785 he had constructed his stone mansion.

Audrey Forsyth described the evolution of the house.

"He built the long part of this house first," she explained. "It is the side that faces the river, with the two-level porch on it. The rest of the house, including the room in which we are sitting, was added later."

This rare photograph, possibly taken in the 1920s, shows Albany Road as it exits the tunnel (left), passes the Jackson House, bends sharply to the left, and continues up Albany hill. Many of the buildings in the picture are no longer in existence.

"Samuel Jackson must have come here with a plan in mind," I said to Audrey. "He purchased all of this land, and then he built this large

house. What did he do to make money?"

"He ran several businesses at once," she said. "He ran a grist mill, which stood just to the left of the present-day Albany tunnel as you approach the tunnel from Albany hill. The mill race ran behind a barn that stood near the creek. You can still see an indentation over there in the ground, and my late husband said that the grist mill was at the end of that indentation, by the creek."

"Did that grist mill have a name?"

Jennie Abbadini moved around the table to show me a small ledger from 1845 in which were recorded transactions involving flour and corn meal.

"We are guessing that this ledger is for that mill," she said. "In the ledger it is called the Redstone Point Mill."

"Is there any clue when that mill ceased to exist?"

"No, but it apparently burned down."

The 1845 ledger was one of many that were on the table. There were books of many different sizes, most with dusty black covers, all looking very old and fragile.

"I believe I heard you say that you found these ledgers somewhere," I said to Audrey. "Where did you find them?"

"There was a long white outbuilding on this property near the house. In 1985 when we tore that building down, we discovered these ledgers and books in it."

The grist mill was just one of Samuel Jackson's enterprises.

"In addition to the grist mill," Audrey said, "Jackson entered into a partnership with a man named Sharpless, and they built the first paper mill west of the Alleghenies. The paper was made from cloth rags. The mill was further up Redstone Creek, and the ledger for that mill, which we also have here, dates to 1785. It lists the employees and the hours they worked.

"In addition to the grist mill and the paper mill, there is also mention in Ellis's history of a saw mill and an oil mill Jackson owned."

"He must have been one of the area's wealthiest men," I said.

"Yes, I would say that he was. He also made money building flatboats, which were in great demand by the many travelers who went through Brownsville."

Brownsville was a magnet for westbound Americans. Easterners who were on their way to Ohio, Kentucky, or destinations along the Mississippi River often traveled by stagecoach or by wagon to Brownsville. There the most frequently used roads to the west intersected the Monongahela River.

At Brownsville many of these westbound travelers left their wagons

or stagecoaches and boarded flatboats or steamboats to continue their journey, floating downstream (north) to Pittsburgh, then continuing westward on the Ohio River toward their destination. Samuel Jackson was only too happy to provide many of them with flatboats and overnight accommodations at his mansion.

"The Jackson house was both a residence and an inn during the late 1700s and early 1800s," Audrey Forsyth observed. "According to Ellis, Samuel Jackson built flatboats that were large enough to carry a family and its possessions. While his customers waited for the construction of a vessel, Jackson would furnish them with entertainment at his house for a week or so."

The four mills and the boatyard were just part of Jackson's growing commercial empire. He and Chadds Chalfant purchased (from Thomas Brown) the area north of Market Street on Brownsville's present-day North Side. It was a large plot of land which later included Spring Street and Church Street.

In 1796 Jackson sold some of that real estate to three men who then donated it to the Episcopal congregation. Christ Episcopal Church now stands on that property.

Jackson also owned a store in Brownsville, had an iron manufacturing business outside of the county, and in 1817, just a year before his death, founded the Albany Glass Works. It stood at the present site of Assad Iron and Metals, but Jackson died before it got underway. Glass was produced there until 1865. In 1881 the site was purchased by George E. Hogg with the intention of mining the coal deposits there.

Samuel Jackson, builder of the Jackson House, was a remarkably talented and busy man. Upon his death in 1818, he bequeathed his house to his wife Rebecca, and upon her death in 1820, it was inherited by her daughter, also named Rebecca. Mary Forsyth showed me a copy of Samuel Jackson's handwritten will.

"Where is Samuel Jackson buried?" I asked as I examined the will.

"We are not sure," replied Mary. "Some have said that he is in one of the cemeteries on Church Street, while others have said that he is buried at the cemetery along Route 40 in Searights."

The house that he built is still remarkably sound despite its age. Next, the Forsyth women share stories of the unique daily challenges that come with living in a house first occupied four years before George Washington became the President of the United States.

MAINTAINING A CENTURIES-OLD HOME PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Springtime at my house means working my way through a head-spinning list of home maintenance chores. Repainting the front porch railing, repairing the uneven brick sidewalk, taming the lawn and overgrown shrubs . . . the list is long, and despite my diligent labors, keeps getting longer!

I can only imagine what the maintenance list would look like for a house that is in its third century of existence. I visited just such a house recently and learned that the challenges of living in such a residence are, shall we say, "unique."

Audrey Forsyth lives with her daughters Mary and Rebecca in the 216-year-old Jackson House. The L-shaped house is two stories high, made of stone covered with stucco, and stands just east of the Albany tunnel near Brownsville. It was built in 1785 by an early settler of the area, Samuel Jackson, and has been handed down through the family to the present day.

Unique challenges? How about maintaining a furnace that is located in a hole in the ground outside the house? Or huge wooden beams that are so hard that utility workers can't drive a staple into them? Or wall cupboards with unusual hinges that a Smithsonian expert says were made in 1776? Try finding a replacement for one of those at your local home center.

I recently sat in the dining room of the Jackson House with owner Audrey Forsyth, her daughters Mary Forsyth and Jennie Abbadini, and her granddaughter Gianna Abbadini, and we talked about Audrey's historic house.

"You said you have lived here since you married your late husband in 1947," I said to Audrey. "Do you find it comforting or intimidating to live in a place that has such a remarkable past?"

"I'm very proud of this house," Audrey said, "and my late husband was proud of it too. It takes a lot of upkeep, but fortunately my children have taken an interest in the house as well."

"Since it is a stone house, I would imagine it is not very well insulated."

"You are right, although the walls are made of fieldstone and are eighteen to twenty-four inches thick. During the late 1800s or early 1900s, the sand between the stones began to deteriorate, so the outside of the house was stuccoed."

"I see there is an old and very decorative radiator in this room. Hot

water heat?"

"Yes. And until just a few years ago, the furnace was not located inside the house."

"Not inside the house? Where was it?"

"At one time in the house's history, when the heat was provided by fireplaces in every room, there was an accidental fire in the wall above the fireplace that is right behind you."

I turned to look at a large fireplace, no longer used and covered by a decorative plate.

"The house's owner at that time feared another fire might occur, so he had a coal-fired hot water furnace installed, but not inside the house. It was installed in a subterranean chamber in an outbuilding, and underground pipes delivered the hot water to the house."

"Why was the furnace in the ground?"

"It was installed prior to the availability of electricity," Mary explained, "so gravity would take the water back to the furnace below ground level. Then once it got hot, pressure sent it back to the house."

"When repairs had to be made, I imagine that was a nightmare," I said.

"Oh, yes," Mary laughed. "One of the lines started leaking underground a few years ago, and our heating servicemen had to dig up the pipes. It was the line from the furnace house to the kitchen. The lines had never been dug up before."

"What did the furnace man think when he saw that setup?"

"He had seen it before, so he was aware it was not your usual repair job. They had to dig up the pipes, and they made some alterations to make maintenance easier."

"Is that furnace still used?"

"No, we have now installed a furnace down in the basement that provides the house with plenty of hot water heat. But these old radiators are still in use."

Samuel Jackson built his mansion in a picturesque spot. The residents of Jackson House who succeeded him enjoyed a beautiful view of the confluence of Redstone Creek and the Monongahela River. They enjoyed it, that is, until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the railroad arrived and permanently blocked the view.

"I see that Albany tunnel and the high embankment for the railroad tracks obstruct your view of the river now," I said to Audrey. "Aren't those railroad tracks on what was once your family's property?"

"Yes, they are," Audrey replied. "The railroad came through in 1902 and purchased some of the original Jackson plot that paralleled the river. Then they constructed the Albany tunnel, created the raised

embankment that takes the tracks up over the tunnel, and built the railroad bridge over Redstone Creek."

"The railroad got some pretty valuable land from your family."

Audrey agreed. "There were, of course, negotiations prior to the purchase," she said. "Joseph J. Baily, my husband's ancestor, owned the land at the time. The agreement he made stipulated that the train would stop near the tunnel and pick up members of his family any time they wished to ride the train to Pittsburgh. At one time there were some steps over by the Albany tunnel. When they came back from Pittsburgh, the train would stop again to let them off."

"That was convenient," I laughed. Still thinking about the river, I said, "You are only a few hundred yards from the riverbank. Tell me how this house has fared in floods."

"If the flood waters come up to the sidewalk just west of the house, before reaching the house," Audrey said, "you can't see the top of Albany tunnel. It is completely underwater. A flood in the 1880s came all the way up here into the dining room. And of course, in 1985 the water was all the way around the house. . ."

". . . and the river was one inch from coming onto this dining room floor," Mary chimed in. "At that time we were still using the coal furnace outside in the hole in the ground, and we had to put the fire out. That 1985 flood was in November, so although we didn't have to leave the house, it got pretty cold in here. The basement was completely underwater, and we lost everything down there. Would you like to see the basement?"

"Definitely," I replied, and we walked across the dining room to the door to the basement. Ducking our heads, Mary, Jennie, Gianna, and I carefully descended aged wooden steps into an area beneath the earliest part of the house.

"See," said Mary, pointing back up to the top riser of the basement steps that we had just come down. "There's the high water mark."

I nodded, realizing that if it were 1985 we would be descending into the muddy Monongahela. I looked around at the basement's rough stone walls and the once-dirt floor now covered with uneven concrete.

"We are under the original part of the house," said Jennie, "under the 'foot of the L.' The rest of the house has no basement, only a crawl space."

We all looked upward at the thick wooden beams installed in the days of Samuel Jackson. Mary reached up and touched one of them.

"This wood is so tough," she said, "that when we had new phone lines put in, the phone company installer couldn't get his staple gun to penetrate it. He said he had never seen wood so hard in his life. Of

course, all of these beams have been under the river a few times too."

Mary then pointed to the far side of the basement, toward a large brick chimney that extended upward through the house. An old wooden cupboard sat directly in front of the chimney.

"We are told that slaves may have been hidden behind that cupboard," said Mary.

"Behind it?" I said, puzzled. We walked over to examine it more closely.

Instead of the masonry chimney being square or rectangular in its footprint, it was shaped like the letter U. The cupboard, which was facing us, was set into the open end of the U. Not apparent was the fact that the alcove within which the cupboard sat was several feet deeper than the cupboard itself.

"Two or three people could stand behind this cupboard," said Jennie, "and a searcher would not realize that there was a space back there. You wouldn't want to be back there for long, but it could be a temporary hiding place."

I was quiet as we climbed the rough steps taking us back upstairs to the main floor. I was thinking about fugitive slaves hiding in this cellar, petrified by the fear that they would be discovered. About weathered wooden beams, petrified by age and invading river waters. About the many national and local crises that this house has silently witnessed.

"So through the years," I summarized when we reached the dining room, "this house has been a family home, an inn for westward travelers, and perhaps even a sanctuary on the Underground Railroad. Quite a few strangers have visited within these walls over the centuries."

"Yes," said Mary. Then her voice took on a mysterious tone. "And they may not all have left."

I looked at her with a puzzled expression. She glanced toward her sister Jennie, who returned her look, paused, then gave a little laugh.

"Well, go ahead and tell him about the Captain," said Jennie.

I looked back at Mary, seated across the dining room table from me. She hesitated, gathered her thoughts, and then began weaving a tale that sent shivers right down my spine and kept me glancing at the shadows in the room. Next, dear reader, join Mary and me as she describes the continuing visits of . . .

The Captain.

THE CAPTAIN

It was nine in the evening and dark outside the 216-year-old Jackson House near Brownsville.

I was inside the house at the dining room table talking with the house's owner, Audrey Forsyth, her two daughters Mary Forsyth and Jennie Abbadini, and her granddaughter Gianna Abbadini. The five of us had spent two pleasant hours discussing the historic house and touring it. It was as our conversation was wrapping up that Jennie made her mysterious remark.

"Well, go ahead and tell him about the Captain," said Jennie.

"The Captain?" I said.

Jennie said, "We don't know his name. Mary has seen him and so has my brother Lee, who now lives in the state of California. Lee is fifty-nine years old. When he was twelve, he was over there in the living room doing his homework. He looked up and saw somebody standing there on the landing. He didn't know who he was, and he was afraid to tell anybody. So he never mentioned it to anyone."

"Then how . . ." I started to say.

Jennie kept talking. "Mary has seen the Captain several times. Right after the first time she saw him, she phoned Lee. She said to him, 'You'll never believe what just happened. I was upstairs, and a man stepped out of the room at the top of the main stairs, looked at me and headed down the steps. I went after him, but he disappeared.'

"Before Mary could describe the intruder," Jennie continued, "Lee interrupted her.

"'I'll tell you what he looks like,' Lee said, and then described the man to a T. That was the first time Lee had ever told anyone that he had seen him."

Mary spoke up. "Lee is seventeen years older than I am, so he saw the Captain before I was even born."

"And when did you first see him yourself?"

"About eight or nine years ago," said Mary.

"And most recently?"

"About two years ago."

"In the first encounter that you described to Lee, what was the man doing?"

"The first time I saw him, I thought he was an actual person. It was about eight o'clock at night. I had been working some long hours, and I was ready to go upstairs to bed. There are three different stairs that lead to the second floor. The stairs I went up took me through a room at the

opposite end of the hall from my bedroom. I needed to go down the hall and pass the top of the main stairs to get to my bedroom.

"As I stepped into the hall, I saw this person near the top of the stairs. He had come out of the small room opposite the stairs. Our eyes met and he let out a startled groan, then he quickly went down the steps. I thought, 'Oh my God, someone has broken into the house.'

"I hurried down the stairs after him, but he was nowhere to be found. My mom was still awake, sitting in the living room.

"'Mom, did you hear anybody?' I asked her.

"'No, I didn't hear or see anything,' she told me.

"I searched the whole house looking for him, but everything was locked up tight.

Mary stopped talking. Jennie waited for a moment, and then said, "And when you had passed the spot in the upstairs hallway where he had been standing . . ."

Mary said slowly, "That part of the hall was ice cold. And this happened in the summer time."

I felt a chill myself. I shuddered, raised my hand and said half-jokingly, "Stop!"

We all laughed, but mine was a nervous laugh. I said to Mary, "What does he look like?"

"He wears a navy blue seaman's coat and a seaman's hat. He is tall and thin, has gray hair and a long, gray beard. He looks like someone in his late sixties."

"And when was the next time you saw him?"

"The next time he was in the same room with me! It was evening, and I had nodded off. Something awakened me. It was dark, and he was there."

"You could see him in the dark?"

"I could see his silhouette. The dusk-to-dawn light was on outside the window behind him, and there was enough light that I could see the grayness of his hair and the dark blue colors. It was him. My cat was in the room too, and she jumped up and tore out the door. The cat refused to re-enter that room for days."

"Did you feel any coldness at that moment?"

"Yes, oh yes. And I got out of there fast!"

"Did he leave the room before you did?"

"I don't know!" Mary laughed. "I don't know what became of the Captain that night."

"And your most recent encounter?"

"He was halfway up the far set of steps," Mary said. "He was just standing there on the landing. When I walked through the hall and saw

him, he saw me and pretty much disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"When I spotted him, I gasped and looked away for a second. When I looked back, he was gone. Where he went, I don't know."

"You've never seen him disappear in front of your eyes?"

"No, but I've looked, seen him, and looked away for an instant thinking, 'What have I seen?' When I would look back, he'd be gone."

"Over the years, even as far back as when your brother saw him here forty-seven years ago, he has always looked exactly the same?"

"Always the same."

"Does he look like an actual person?"

"He is not defined as you and I are defined, in 3-D. He is defined to the point that I can see his clothes and his features and his hair and his hat. But surrounding him I couldn't see very crisp edges. He appeared a little blurred at the edges."

"Are you aware of any sea captains or river boat captains who died in this house?"

"I'm not aware of any."

"Why do you think he comes here?"

"I'm pretty sure that he probably slept in one of those rooms upstairs at one time. The small bedroom at the top of the main stairs has a door on its opposite end that opens onto the front porch's upper level. I really think that was his room, because he is often coming out of there when I see him. And it is cold in that room when I go in there."

"Do these occasional visits by the Captain bother you?"

"No, not really. It's kind of neat."

I looked over at Audrey, who was listening to her daughter's description of the Captain's visits.

"Audrey, have you ever met the Captain?"

Audrey shook her head. "The closest I've come is hearing footsteps."

"And we occasionally smell the cigar or the pipe," added Jennie, "and the bacon, and the coffee and whiskey."

"And there's no apparent reason for those smells?"

"No."

Audrey added, "He doesn't bother me, because I've never been bothered by him. I hear things, but I've never seen anyone."

Mary pointed to a thick sheaf of papers on the table. It was a photocopy of an old book that had been given to the family.

"We have the original book here in the house somewhere," said Mary, "but we think the Captain has it. He takes things and moves

things."

"But he always brings them back," Jennie laughed.

"Yes, he does," said Mary. "He's taken various things. Little books, not even old books. Flower and bird books disappear from where we keep them. We search everywhere for them, and then a few months later, we open up the desk drawer and they are right there on top. Even some gowns have turned up missing."

"Gowns?" I raised an eyebrow.

Jennie said to Mary, "The gowns have been gone for how long?"

"They've been gone for quite a while now," Mary chuckled. "We wonder if he has a lady friend somewhere!"

I was pondering that possibility as Mary continued, "Our basement has a cement floor. You know the sound that a can makes if it falls off a shelf and rolls across the floor.

"Well, I was working on the computer one night in this dining room, and I heard that distinctive sound from the basement. I thought, 'Oh my, some critter has gotten into the basement.' So I went down into the basement, but there was no critter, and there was absolutely nothing on the floor.

"So I came back up and closed the door, sat back down, and I heard it again. I went back down, but found nothing out of place or on the floor. I came back up, heard it the third time, and I said in a loud voice, 'I am not coming back down those steps! You might as well stop it now.' And it never happened again that night!"

What will the Captain think about these newspaper articles about "his" house? The day after the second article in this series appeared, I received an interesting e-mail from Mary.

"Just thought I'd let you know," Mary wrote. "The Captain must be 'reading' your articles. My mom told me that earlier in the day while she was in the kitchen by herself, she heard a rustling sound like someone with a newspaper. It was at the other end of the kitchen, an area that was clearly visible to her from where she was sitting, but she didn't see anything. She just heard the sound. I hope he likes the articles!"

So do I, Mary.

So do I.