



THIS OLD HOUSE



PHOTOS BY PETER VOGT

Chris Geiselmann points to where he first found stenciling while doing restoration work earlier this year at the former Hartman Tavern next to the primary school on Route 63. At top, other examples of stenciling found in the building.

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By AMY R. JONES
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DANSVILLE—Many artistic wonders are created using paint as the medium of choice. When we think of masterpieces, works on canvas such as the “Mona Lisa” by da Vinci and “Water Lilies” by Monet come to mind, but the showpieces of artisans of old which graced the everyday lives of those living in the homes of the Genesee Valley region’s original settlers are much closer than most believe.

Unfortunately, primitive examples of the craft of stenciling are becoming fewer and far between, as old homes are either scooped up and renovated with little attention being paid to what is under years of wallpaper and paint or left to crumble in disrepair. The former Hartman Tavern, located on north Main Street in Dansville adjacent to Dansville Primary School, once a stop on a stage coach route of olde, has such treasures.

According to Janet Waring, author of *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture*, “The earliest date which I have found for the use of stenciling as a wall decoration is 1778.” A consensus among experts including Waring deduce the craft evolved after the movement of settlers from the rough hewn log cabin into more spacious structures that afforded them the luxury of



PHOTO FROM BUNNELL'S DANSVILLE, 1789-1902
19th-century photo of the Hartman house as a tavern.

Wall art rises from the ashes

The so-called Hartman Tavern, built as a house in the early 1800s by Harmon Hartman and converted to a tavern by his son John Hartman, has not been a tavern for many decades. Currently owned by the Mark family, it was used as a two-apartment house for many years until August 2004 when it was ravaged by fire.

Subsequent restoration/remodeling work begun in July of this year by Chris Geiselmann of Dansville for the Marks resulted in the discovery of the stenciling. Hidden under layers of wallpaper, the stenciling was first uncovered along the main staircase but has been located in other areas of the house. It is particularly sharp and detailed in the southwest corner room of the house.

smooth plaster covered walls. Waring affirms, “There was a need for ornament and color to satisfy the feelings of achievement which had come with material progress, and a wish to carry on the traditions of distant homelands, a desire to keep the culture that linked this new world

with the old.”

Stenciling was born to satisfy the need to decorate the home, yet not cause settlers to part with hard earned currency, as was the case if one purchased the manu-

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factured wallpaper of the day. The stencil work on the walls of the former Hartman Tavern were completed in colors and patterns specific to the folk genre of New York State, using primarily bold colors of red and green stenciling upon white or light gray walls.

Other colors, such as yellow, blue and off-black, were introduced later as the popularity of the craft spread and an increase in variety of designs was demanded by patrons.

Although his primary interest in the building is its structural integrity, of the stencil patterns within the former tavern retired engineer and author Philip Parr of Caledonia offered, "Stencil patterns vary between New England and New York State," despite many being created and completed during the same time period across the Northeast. Parr explained, "The patterns of New York State are bolder, larger and are spaced farther apart. New England patterns are smaller, fussier and look more like wallpaper."

He went on to explain, "Taverns were stenciled more often than private homes." The work was often completed by itinerant artists, offering their painting prowess in reparation for room and board as they made their way across the state.

Although there is noted similarity in stencil patterns, it is often very difficult to attribute artists of the era with specific works as the work was often left unsigned. In the case of the former Hartman Tavern, it is believed to be the handiwork of Naples na-

tive Stephen Clark (1810-1900).

In writings referred to in *American Wall Stenciling (1790-1840)*, by Ann Eckert Brown and taken from his diary, Clark noted, "I returned home [from neighboring Franklin Academy] and engaged in the business of decorating walls of rooms. I made this a profitable business for the summer of 1828, making from 2 to 5 dollars a day."

Clark has also been credited with the designs adorning the walls of the Ephraim Cleveland House in Naples and the Elijah Northrup house in Stafford, as well as other homes in the area. The stencils used in the Hartman Tavern are quite similar to those in the Naples home, and it is believed by Parr and others that two theories as to the artist of the stenciling in the former prevail. Either it was indeed the handiwork of Stephen Clark, or possibly another artist who may have borrowed his designs to decorate the tavern.

Nonetheless, the art work left on the walls of the tavern stands as a testament to the artist. More than 170 years after the fact, the stencil work serves to remind us of our historic past, and allows us to speculate and discuss what message its creator was trying to convey by putting his paint brush to plaster.