

MOUNTAINSIDE
HETFIELD
HOUSE

The Star-Ledger

IN THE TOWNS

SW-1

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24, 1991

This old house is historians' delight

Mountainside
group restores
18th century
structure

By JAMES THOMAS

Restoring an old house is like an unending agenda of unfinished business, according to Fern Carter Hyde, chairwoman of the Mountainside Historic Restoration Committee.

Since 1985, the committee has assumed responsibility for restoring the 18th century Hetfield House, considered the oldest in Mountainside and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

A tour and the history of the house were provided recently for members of the Union County Historical Society.

"Restoration has to be done carefully," Hyde said. "You just can't have some clown come in and hammer a few nails."

Although Hyde noted that about half of the most urgent renovations on the house are complete, there will "always be things to do, ongoing expenses" to meet.

"Of course, it's been on and off," she added. "As we got money, we had something done. And then we waited until we got more money to have something else done."

The house was built in 1755 on the dirt road that is now Route 22, Hyde observed. From its original location, it has been moved twice.

In 1929, the house, located across from Echo Lake Park, was moved about 500 yards to make room for a new highway, then known as Route 29. In 1985, it was lifted onto a flatbed truck and moved a half-mile down the road to its current location on Constitution Plaza, adjacent to the public library.

The house was originally owned by Deacon Andrew Hetfield, whose descendants and relatives lived in it until the 1940s. A Revolutionary War hero, William Clark, married Hetfield's daughter, Sarah, and lived in the house until his death. He was a cousin of Abraham Clark, a New Jersey signer of the Declaration of Independence.

In the mid-1940s, the house was bought by W.B. Rosencrantz, who lived there for more than 40 years and established in it "The Dutch Oven," an antique business. In 1985, the Mountainside Historic Preservation Committee saved the home when the new owners, Walter and Robert Kuczynski, made plans to raze it and erect a new building on the site.

"We went rushing to them and said, 'Hey! We want to buy that house,'" Hyde said. She said the new owners agreed to hold off demolition for six months while the borough tried to raise funds to purchase it.

The house was built in three sections, Hyde explained. The original house consisted of only the kitchen with a fireplace and side flue. Overhead was a sleeping loft.

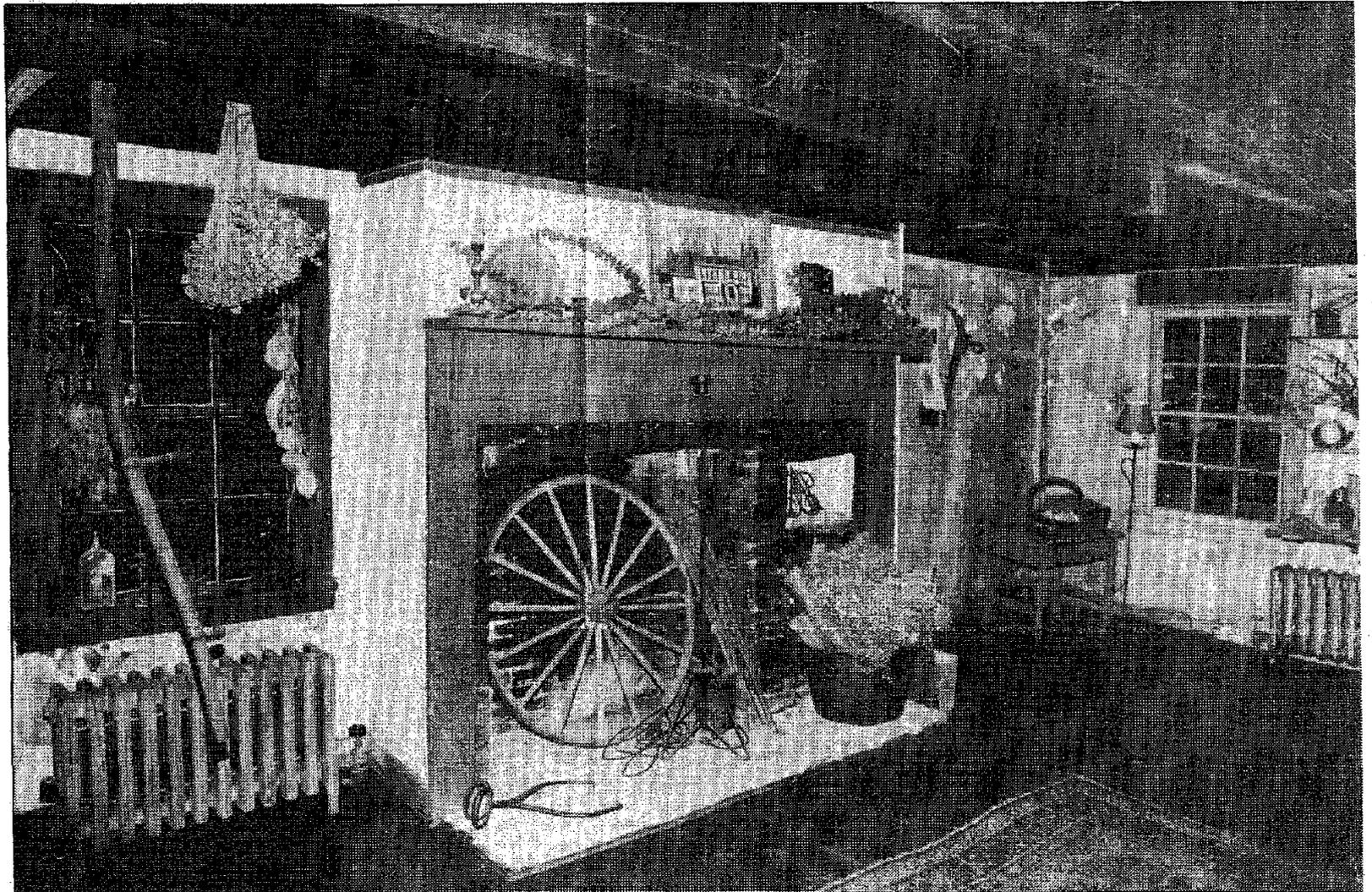
The middle section of the house, consistent with the kitchen architecture with six-over-six style window panes, was built around 1820 as a one-story addition. The early Victorian upstairs addition, with its Honduran mahogany stair banisters, carved fireplaces and arched bay windows, was the final section, built around 1840.

When the restoration effort began in 1985, it appeared a formidable task, Hyde noted, but slowly a new foundation was put in place, ceilings were shored up, new pine board floors installed, walls painted and furniture acquired.

Although the house is being restored as closely as possible to its original condition, with hand-hewn ceiling beams and brick inner walls, it still features such modern-day conveniences as steam radiators, electric fixtures, smoke detectors and, of course, burglar alarms. In addition, the foundation was replaced and enlarged.

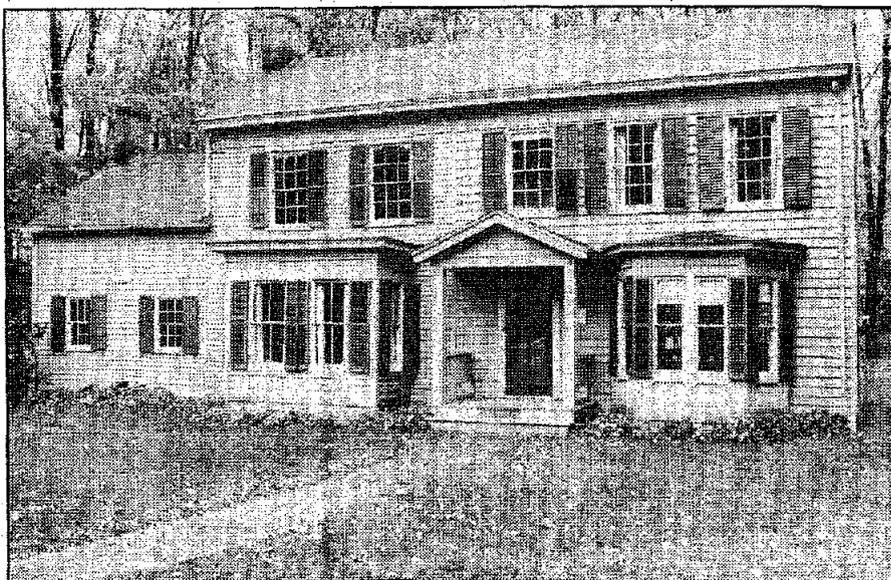
To raise funds to continue the restoration, the house is available for rent and is used as a cultural center and meeting place for various community groups in Mountainside, Hyde explained. She added that recently a wedding was held there. A new Friends of the Hetfield House organization has been formed.

Hyde, a long-time member of both the Mountainside Historic



The original 1755 fireplace in the Hetfield House

Photos by John Oller



(Above) An exterior view of the house. (Right) An 1849 wedding dress is displayed inside



Preservation and Historic Restoration committees, said history was the last thing on her mind when she was growing up.

"I never was that interested in it," she said. "But it gets into you, and you're driven to study it."

The feeling was echoed by Stephanie Laucius of Elizabeth, president of the Union County Historical Society. "In fact, when I went to high school, I hated history," Laucius said. "I hated it with a passion."

She added that she was more interested in science and didn't

develop an appreciation for history until a friend coaxed her into attending an historical society meeting 10 years ago.

"When you just read about it, you don't really get the feel of the people and the time," Laucius said. "But once you get into it, you begin to imagine how they managed. For example, I think about how the women had to keep house and cook over an open fireplace. That's an unusual type of thing to do."

For those still uncertain about whether they want to become history buffs, Laucius added one encouragement: "Come on, you'll enjoy it, you'll enjoy it."