

**Address written & delivered by Robert Poskitt for the
New Castle Historical Society Benefactors' Event at the
Janvier Black House, 17 The Strand, on October 4, 2009**

Welcome to the Janvier Black house. Sue and I are delighted to have you here this evening. We are as supportive as you are about New Castle history and the role our Historical Society plays in preserving and promoting it. After my short talk about the house and its background, and before we go off onto a tour, I will ask Mike Connolly our Ex. Dir. to share some thoughts with us about the Society.

Our house is called the Janvier Black house as it was named after two prominent families who lived here for well over 200 years. Obviously, it will be awhile before it is called the Poskitt house.

I would like to break my little talk into two parts.....the first being about the Janvier and Black families and the second about the house itself.

The Janviers, or pronounced Janviere' if you are in the jewelry business here in DE, first came to the colonies in the late 1600's. In fact the first Janvier was Thomas who arrived into Philadelphia in 1686 aboard the ship Desire, or maybe called Desiree' back then? He was an indentured servant to a Mr. Francis Rawls. It was common to be indentured to someone back then in return for things like passage to the colonies, especially if you had little money and wanted to escape French persecution of Protestants. Thomas was a French Huegenot.

Thomas moved to NC and married Sarah Jourdain and had 9 children. He was a founder of the New Castle Presbyterian Church. A 1702 deed from William Penn granted Thomas a water lot if he erected a commercial wharf and paid Penn half a bushel of wheat a year. The church was built on part of this lot that extended through to Second Street.

This area along the water in the early 1700's was swampy and therefore used mostly for commercial shipping. Records show, however, that a building was on this lot as early as the 1720's. It wasn't until 1771 that Thomas Janvier, a grandson of the first Thomas Janvier and a merchant boatman, owned and developed the property more fully as both a family residence and merchants shops and warehouses.

In 1824, though, everything changed as a dairy ancestor of a Chicago cow probably helped ignite a devastating fire that started at the corner of the Strand and Delaware and ravaged this part of the Strand. Fortunately, the Janviers being savvy merchants and businessmen had insurance. The policy was for \$2500. The house was rebuilt in brick as was the earlier structure documented in the insurance policy taken out by Thomas in 1810. The new style was federal with all the latest detail befitting a successful merchant of New Castle. The house was built on the original stone foundation from the early 1700's.

In 1835 Ann Janvier married Dr. Charles Black from Delaware City and they become the owners here. Two years later their first child is born, John Janvier Black after whom the house is named. John studied at Princeton and Penn, got his MD, and then traveled and studied extensively for a number of years throughout Europe. His New Castle office for close to 30 years was what is now the kitchen. In fact during our kitchen renovation in 2004, we found evidence of extensive shelving that was probably part of his personal apothecary.

During that time period of the mid 1800's, New Castle was quite a thriving city. In fact in an 1855 letter from a lady (Mary Robeson) who was a member of this family, we learn that she would look forward to returning to her home in NC on the river so could look out her window and see the latest dress fashions. She also mentioned that it would be her main amusement while here. Has much changed in the last 154 years?

Dr. Black published 4 books, 3 of which we have. Two came with the house and the third was a gift from Dick and Barbara Cooch. They define a new thinking of natural medicine, the use of the diet to improve health. He gained this insight from his European studies and travels. He also was a well known botanist and cultivated different varieties of pears and peaches.

Dr. Black was an early leader in the fight against Tuberculosis. He worked closely with Emily Bissell on that behalf nationally and started the Easter Seal drive to raise money for that cause. Dr. Black, his ancestors and descendants are all buried in the Episcopal church cemetery on Second Street.

As an interesting aside, shortly after we moved into the house, we noticed a mark in the cellar about 6 feet high. There was a date of 1878 on it. I concluded there must have been a hurricane or flood but I was not sure. It wasn't until I read one of Br. Black's books entitled "Forty Years in the Medical Profession in New Castle" did I solve this problem. He mentioned in his book the following: "On October 16, 1878, the great tidal wave swept the shores of the DE and carried away the river banks of the city. They were not replaced until June of the following year." Almost coincident at that time, there was a large earthquake that occurred in Charleston, SC. Perhaps this was our own east coast tsunami?

This house remained in the Janvier and Black families until 1960. Sue and I are the 4th owners since then.

Now, if there aren't any questions about the Janviers or Blacks.....I will focus now on the house itself.

For New Castle, this is a fairly large attached town house, 30 feet wide and having close to 5,000 sq. ft. of living space on 4 floors, indicative of a successful merchant family in the 1800's. The house is Janus faced.....anyone know what that means? It has 2 faces or accesses. The street access is the polite or more formal end having a very large hall and living spaces and conveying the utmost of luxury in the early 1800's. The other face is its business side on the busy, commercial river. That side enters at the cellar level where work areas exist. It still is an important entrance, though, due to the marble threshold at that level. And since the house is on a commercial alley, Alexanders' Alley, the rear entrance was very convenient for routine commercial use. The house is built on a grade down to the river so the street entrance is one floor up from the river entrance. There are indications in the cellar that the earlier house was a stand alone structure in the 1700's as a couple cupboards in the now common wall with our neighbor Alice Jarvis were earlier outside cellar windows.

In the 1860's the census listed 11 people living here, a couple being servants. What is now the attic is plastered and finished, indicative of a large, 30 ft. sleeping dorm. The stair hall is over 9 feet wide on all 4 floors. In the late 1800's the upper floor halls were colonized into small rooms with storage areas, one being a bath and laundry room while the other is a bedroom. In fact you will see in the second floor hall, one of a very few remaining original closets in New Castle from 1825. The closet doors are 8 feet high.

These two formal rooms on this floor are both 18 by 19 and 11 and a half feet high. The fireplaces are King of Prussia marble. The windows which look in proportion to the outside of the house are actually quite oversized, being 8 feet high and 4 feet wide, many with the original sashes, weights, and glass. Each pane of glass is 14" x 18". The fluted window and door moldings are quite high style with some detail repeating in the carving on the marble mantels. The detail and height of the baseboards are also indicative of the importance and wealth of the people living here in the 1800's.

As you proceed upstairs the moldings are still very detailed, but are not fluted. They are a receding pattern of rectangles and the mantels are wooden with the exception of a late 19th century Italian carved mantel in the Master Bedroom.

The third floor details are much plainer as is typical with other New Castle houses.

The two large pier mirrors in these two rooms were purchased in NYC in the 1860's by Dr. Black's parents. Being married in 1872, Dr. John Janvier Black soon thereafter takes up residence here at number 17 and opens his practice at the rear of the house.

When we bought the house there was no chandelier in the DR. But, in one of the upstairs bedrooms was a very tarnished, electrified chandelier that was not even working. To make a long story short, we found that it was the original DR chandelier, made in England in the early 1800's. We de-electrified it and now it is back where it belongs.

Downstairs you will find the original kitchen used until the death of Br. Black in 1910. The larger original fireplace was reduced in size in the late 1800's probably to conserve heat. The original hearth is the full width of the room. After Dr. Black's death his upstairs office became the kitchen. We are fortunate to have some original cupboards downstairs both in the hall and in the kitchen itself. The two windows to the back of the original downstairs kitchen once looked out onto the river and commercial water activity. They now look onto a porch, an outdoor dining area, our garden, and then the river. There is also a tavern window from the cellar hall into the old kitchen indicating that before the fire that area was a pub or tavern for the merchants and boatmen. The marble threshold tells you how well used that room was.

The pictures on the wall down there are early photos of the house from the river side, all about 100 to 110 years old. One picture shows a very large merchant warehouse in the area that is now our formal garden. In another you can see how really close the river came to the house and how the water could have easily reached 6 feet in the cellar during the tidal wave of 1878. Over the years the back yard has been filled to protect river front properties like this from future flooding.

Sue and I got bitten years ago into collecting antiques as I am sure some of you have been. We are not really focused in any one area or time period except for George Washington and porcelain.

Sue actually told me to NOT spend any time on our first president as it would ensure an early evening for everyone. You may have noticed him in the hallway when you came in and you may choose to spend more time there as you wish. You also are welcomed to return at any time to learn more.....at your own risk!

But as far as porcelain is concerned, our main interest is Chinese Porcelain made for the American market from about 1740 to 1825. We also dabble a little in Japanese Imari which is in the DR and some new Italian pieces which are in the kitchen along with some Canton over the range. Here in the LR it is primarily armorial porcelain, custom made in southern China in the Hong warehouses on the Pearl River for Americans who wanted to showcase their family logo and initials in their china.

We also were fortunate a number of years ago to buy a Janvier made tall case clock here in the LR. It was made in the Odessa area, originally known as Cantwells Bridge, about 1780 by John Janvier, a brother of Thomas who you may recall lived here in the late 1700's. It is 9'2" and the metal clock works were made by Richard Miller of NJ. It is the only Janvier Miller clock having a silvered face known to exist today. The good news is that it was not owned by Thomas' family in 1824 when this house burned.

In the DR on the cherry chest is one other unique piece. It is a 3 tiered glass pyramid of syllabub glasses for fancy desserts. All three glass levels are original along with early 18th century glassware. (It was part of Cora Ginsberg's estate which we purchased at auction). And yes, we will be having dessert, but no, they will not be served in those glasses.

The dining room table and chairs are Centennial while the sideboard is from Baltimore, about 1800.

Well, that's about it for a brief history of the Janviers and Blacks and the house itself. But before we head off on a tour for those interested, I would like to turn it over to our good friend and Ex. Dir. Mike Connolly.