

Why has a head stared from an attic window in Peach Bottom for more than a century?

By TOM KNAPP | Staff Writer | Dec. 27, 2017

The pale, expressionless face has gazed from a third-story window in southern Lancaster County for more than 100 years.

To the family that lives in the centuries-old brick house in New Texas, near Peach Bottom, it's just "the head in the window."

To people living nearby, or passing the house as they travel Route 222 just north of the Maryland border, it's the face of a grieving widow who waited fruitlessly for her husband — or, some say, her son — to come home from the Civil War.

The truth behind the wan face is much more mundane.

Waiting for the call

LNP reader Dale Bezzard posed the question via LancasterOnline's We the People journalism project. Readers ask questions and vote for their favorites, and LNP reporters find the answers.

"What is the 'real' story behind the house with the head in the upstairs window on Route 222 south close to the Maryland border?" Bezzard asked.

The house, at 2500 Robert Fulton Highway, dates to the 1700s.

Angeline Stowe lives there with her husband John and their children: Aiden, 12, and Hailey, 11.

"I've been waiting for this call," Stowe, 39, said Friday, having heard that her home was the subject of curiosity.

Raised in Rising Sun, Maryland, Stowe says as a child she heard stories about the head in the window. She often saw it on trips north, she says, and she always thought it was creepy.

Shortly before she got married, her future husband called to tell her he'd bought a house at auction.

She was shocked to discover it was that house.

"I actually cried. I was terrified," Stowe says. "I thought, 'I can't live in that house.' Now, I love it."

Making it home

Stowe moved into the house in February 2005.

The head in the window was the only thing left behind by the former occupants, she says.

She planned to get rid of it, she says.

"But, once I walked through the house, I was fine," she says. "Right away, it felt homey."

And the head, she soon realized, was "a big deal" in the area. "So we decided to leave it there," she says.

People often stop to ask about the head or take photos from the street. Stowe says a man in his 80s told her he used to come by to see the face when he was a child.

Many people believe the face represents a woman waiting for her husband or son to return from a Virginia battlefield, where he died during the Civil War.

Others say the head was put there by a 19th-century slave owner to convince workers he was always watching, or that a woman had a death mask made to torment her philandering husband.

A lawyer who helped arrange purchase of the house told Stowe the head's true origin.

"I know why it's really there," she says. "Unfortunately, it's not a glamorous story."

Studying the bumps

The house was featured in a book titled "Pennsylvania Dutch Country Ghosts, Legends & Lore," Stowe says. It was also written up in a 1939 edition of National Geographic, in an article titled "The Face on Carter's Hill."

That's the same title as a poem by Frederick W. Hammond, published in booklet form in 1910, according to Eric Conner, assistant stationmaster at Strasburg Rail Road. Conner provided a copy of the poem to LNP, as well as a 1952 article from The Pennsylvania Dutchman about the head.

Carter, Stowe says, refers to Professor Henry Carter, who owned the house in the late 1800s.

"Henry Carter was a phrenologist," Stowe explains. "He used the head to teach his students."

Phrenology was a Victorian-era belief that mental faculties and character traits could be read by studying bumps in the skull.

When Carter died in 1896, his daughter Kate inherited the house, Stowe says.

"When she was going through his personal belongings, she found this head and put it in the attic window just to see people's reactions."

Stowe admits the head's humdrum origin are disappointing.

"I was like, are you kidding me?" she says. "I wanted something exciting."

Keeping it where it is

The head, made of hard white plaster, resembles a child or small woman, Stowe says.

"It has ears, but that's about it," she says. "There's an indentation for eyes, but there are no eyes. It has the shape of the mouth and nose."

It sits on the broad sill of the attic window, where it's been largely undisturbed for more than 100 years.

But Stowe has come to believe another legend surrounding the head — that it brings bad luck to anyone who removes it.

The year after they moved in, she says, she and her husband replaced a concrete landscaping wall along Route 222 with a more attractive block wall. At about the same time, she decided to replace the head.

"I bought a pretty mannequin head from a cosmetology store and put it there instead," she explains. "I figured if I had to have a head in the window, it should be a pretty one."

Bad idea.

"I was nine months pregnant with my son, about ready to go to work, when I heard a commotion outside," says Stowe, who works at Swift Middle School in Solanco.

The wall had collapsed into the highway, she says. Firefighters from Robert Fulton Fire Company were on the scene, shifting debris to get traffic flowing.

"After that, I put the head back," she says. "I got rid of the mannequin head. I didn't want our head to be jealous."

Now, after 13 years, "I'm completely used to it," Stowe says. "It doesn't scare me. It's almost like it's watching over us."

Besides, she adds, "my husband and I could stand on the porch buck naked and no one would see us. They'd all be looking up at the head."