

Façade Undergoes “Extreme Makeover”

For the last two weeks in May, the façade of the Speaker’s House was hidden behind scaffolding and screens during a workshop that gave hands-on training in historic masonry techniques to four students and performed much-needed conservation work on the building.

This project was a joint venture between The Speaker’s House, the Heritage Conservation Network, and Andy deGruchy, owner of deGruchy Masonry in Quakertown. With the project now completed, the restored façade enables the house to put its best face forward along Main Street and offers a more accurate picture of its appearance during Muhlenberg’s time. The masonry workshop was funded by a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. Rather than use the money simply to hire a mason to perform the repairs, Mr. deGruchy suggested hosting a workshop to train apprentices in the art of working with lime-based mortar, noting, “There is a huge demand for masons who can work on old stone buildings but no one is being trained in this profession anymore. My hope is that these apprentices will get jobs in the trade as a result of their experience here.” Apprentices were chosen based on their commitment to pursue a job at which they would use the skills learned during this workshop.

Participants included Anya Gonzalez (Virginia) Mike Fade (Ohio), Randy Ruth (Lancaster), and Phil Clark (Norristown). Each had different reasons for participating in the workshop, ranging from a desire to work in construction to a love of old buildings.

During the ten-day workshop, the masons removed non-historic white paint from the locally-quarried red sandstone, repaired damaged mortared joints, and repointed joints that had receded. The apprentices, many of them working in masonry for the first time, performed the work under the direction of Mr. deGruchy and members of his crew.

While Mr. deGruchy has led several masonry projects that were “staffed” by volunteers, this was his first attempt to incorporate a serious training element. “I’m really impressed by the work that they did and happy that they got hands-on experience in each step of the process.”

The façade of the house now looks much as it did at the time of its c. 1764 construction. Explains Lisa Minardi, chair of the Restoration Committee, “The restored façade with its raised ribbon pointing helps to convey the grandeur of the house during Muhlenberg’s occupancy. Future projects will include the reconstruction of built-in benches that originally flanked the front door and a triangular hood above the door.”

Based on the highly-successful model of the masonry workshop, the Speaker’s House plans to continue serving the community by offering training opportunities in historic preservation, improving the house’s appearance, and preserving the property for generations to come.



From lower left corner to right: Anya, Randy, Mike, and Phil began their work at Andy’s lab. Prior to any work on the site, much of the preparation takes place in the lab. After taking multiple mortar and stone samples, the apprentices were given the job of creating mortars and stone patch samples that matched in color and texture to the original.



Anya uses a chisel to remove deteriorating mortar. Only mortar that was failing was removed. The goal was to save as much of the existing mortar as possible.



Phil is applying Lithomex, a hydraulic lime stone repair material that is used to repair damaged sections of stone. Left without repair, the damage would cause undue weathering of surrounding masonry, leading to accelerated decay of otherwise sound elements. Several different shades of Lithomex stone patch were developed because the color of the stone varied across the surface of the building.



This tool is used to sculpt the distinctive ribbon pointing.