

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28, 2021

LIVING HISTORY



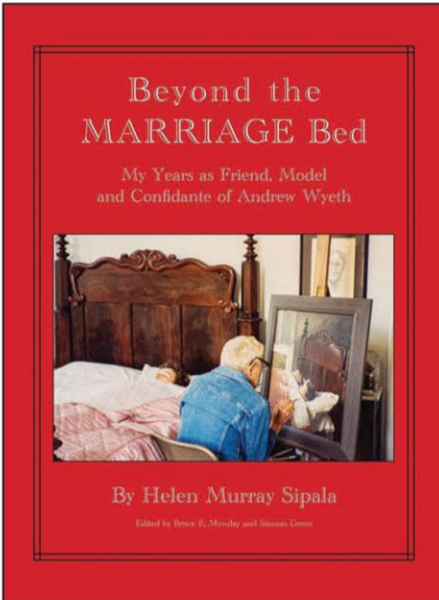
by Gene
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A family's heritage and an artist's final years

Helen Sipala didn't know when she moved to Chadds Ford that she would become friends with one of America's most gifted painters, have a direct link to a famous school, or that her home was part of a local family legacy which went back centuries. In 1974, she and her husband George moved into a house on Baltimore Pike dating to the mid-1800s. That historic house is one of several that dot the surrounding countryside. Their collective memories could fill many books with stories of the early colonial period, the Revolutionary War, local dairy farms and talented artists.

Samuel Painter emigrated to America in 1699 and purchased a parcel of land in Philadelphia. In 1707, his son Samuel Painter, Jr. bought land in what is now Birmingham Township and subsequently built a log cabin there for his family. The structure was replaced in 1723 with a brick house; a second portion was added in 1738. One brick in the wall is a date marker which reads "IS73S8," which has been interpreted to mean "Isaiah Smith" (the builder) and 1738 as the year, with the "1" in the year missing and the second "S" indicating the month of September. If it could speak, this house would share tales of bravery and sadness. The Battle of the Brandywine raged nearby. British General William Howe's troops occupied the property for five days after the battle, using it as a hospital.

The Painter family was prominent in Chester County. In "Chadds Ford Then and Now II," author Phyllis Recca describes their extensive land holdings and activities over



Helen Sipala's book *Beyond the Marriage Bed*.

the years. James Painter, the grandson of Samuel Painter, Jr. built a two-story house in 1770, partly with "ballast" brick used in the holds of sailing ships. More than a century later, Charles E. Mather purchased the property, adding white Ionic columns. His 930 acres, known as Brandywine Meadow Farm, was purchased in 1963 and turned into Radley Run Country Club. Mather's home was known as the Mansion House.

Yet another Painter would indirectly have an impact on the art world. William Painter, a fifth-generation descendant of Samuel Painter, married Phoebe Churchman, who bore him nine children. Their ninth child, Margaret Churchman Painter, married William Pyle. Their son was Howard Pyle, who later became a renowned illustrator and founded the Brandywine School

of Art. His most famous student was N.C. Wyeth, who would soon become one of the most successful illustrators in the nation. William Painter's house was constructed in the early 1800s and is now the site of Brandywine View Antiques on Baltimore Pike.

Another descendant, also named Samuel Painter, built an Italianate-style home in Chadds Ford in 1857. The house was elaborate for its time, prompting some neighbors to disparagingly term it "Painter's Folly." A dairy farm operated on the grounds, for years called Lafayette Manor Farms due to its immediate proximity to the Gideon Gilpin House in Brandywine Battlefield Park, where the Marquis de Lafayette is believed to have spent time leading up to the battle. It is an unusual coincidence of history that a house owned



Samuel Painter, Jr. House at Oakland and Harvey Roads.

Courtesy Photos



Mather's Brandywine Meadow Farm house - Radley Run Mansion circa 1903.

by a man named Painter would later become the home for... a school of painters. Howard Pyle rented the house for his art school during the summers from 1898 to 1903, where N.C. Wyeth, Frank Schoonover and other artists studied. This is the same house where Helen Sipala and her husband George later lived. In 1989, they noticed someone walking outside their home and asked him who he was. It was Andrew Wyeth, son of N.C. Wyeth, scouting the house and grounds because he had known it as a child when he was taken there to be treated by Dr. Cleveland, who owned the property in the early 1900s.

Painter's Folly has 16 rooms, 10 bedrooms and lovely furnishings. Andrew Wyeth was so fascinated by the house he visited regularly, becoming good friends with the Sipalas, even getting access when they were gone. Wyeth freely explored the entire home, checking out the "Widow's Walk" on the roof where he often painted. He loved the Sipalas dearly, inviting them to

parties and film debuts, where they met celebrities like Charlton Heston and Phyllis Diller, local artists including George "Frolic" Weymouth and many others.

Over 20 years, the Sipalas became Andrew Wyeth's confidantes. They held many long conversations with him about life, art, history and other topics, delving into ideas which made it onto his canvases. Wyeth considered their home a treasured sanctuary and created dozens of paintings there, including ones featuring Helen as a model. Helen describes her friend Andy as "a free spirit," unlike anyone she'd ever met before. Wyeth would often surprise the Sipalas, showing up in the early morning hours, even jumping playfully into bed with them, laughing due to the precious bond they were building.

The friendship between Wyeth and the Sipalas bore fruit. Helen kept a diary in which she described the many times they met with Andy, talked with his friends and accompanied him to events. They

bared their souls to each other and Helen knew she wanted to describe their relationship in writing. She did. Her book *Beyond the Marriage Bed* highlights many fascinating experiences she shared with Wyeth and others in the art and entertainment world. Andy passed away in 2009, his wife Betsy in 2020. In his later years, perhaps envisioning his own passing, Wyeth told the Sipalas, "I'll always be with you..." You can still feel his 'presence' as you stroll the rolling hills of Chadds Ford and the historic countryside where he loved to roam.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books and conducts an historical lecture series throughout the mid-Atlantic region. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution," available at www.Amazon.com and his website is www.GenePisasale.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



The William Painter Farm circa 1905 showing Edith Painter and mother Elizabeth Thomas, photo courtesy Lu Dickinson.



Painter's Folly.



Helen and George Sipala with Andrew Wyeth. Photo courtesy of Helen Sipala



Helen Sipala at Painter's Folly.