

## Hillsdale man reconstructs history of his 163-year old house, piece by piece

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Dr. Charles Kaufman has written a book about his Hillsdale home.

"If these old walls could talk," the saying goes.

Sometimes they can – if you ask the right questions. Dr. Charles Kaufman has been doing what amounts to an ongoing interview with his 163-year-old house in Hillsdale since he moved in, 50 years ago.

He's pulled up floorboards. He's consulted property records, tax records, municipal records. He's met with previous occupants, and heard their stories.

The results, gathered in a self-published book called "The House," go back 15 generations – to the Lenapes who first lived on his land, to the Dutch settlers who later cultivated it, to a farming family named Storms who built the house he lives in now in 1850, and continued to live in it until 1921.

"One thing just leads to another," says Kaufman, 84. "I just started sniffing around a little bit."

Kaufman, it should be said, is a congenital sniffer.

A musicologist who taught at New York University, Hunter College, and is dean emeritus of the Mannes College of Music, he is someone who is naturally drawn to local history, preferably old and arcane: witness a previous book, "Music in New Jersey: 1655-1860."

"This is an itch that is endemic to the human race," Kaufman says. "The fact that it provides education and enlightenment to subsequent generations is a bonus."

When he and his wife, Rhoda, then Paramus residents, happened on the house in 1963 – there was a "for sale" sign out front – they were merely drawn to the architecture, and the site. It was Victorian-Italianate, wooden, two stories, eight rooms and kitchen, on three-quarters of an acre with a brook in back. What was not to like?

"It was a good example of an old Victorian," Kaufman says. "There was some terrific Arts and Crafts period stonework adjacent to the house."

Less than a year after they moved in, they had a visitor: Frank Liveright, a cousin of Louis Bamberger of department store fame, a founder of the Newark Museum, and a previous owner, who had lived there from 1922 to 1952. "He was a very convivial old man, and I think he kind of wanted to share some of his experiences," Kaufman says.

Even before then, Kaufman had been thinking about his old house. But now, with Liveright's visit fresh in memory, he began to poke around the place – in the cellar, in the attic, on the grounds. He began to find all kinds of interesting relics.

An issue of the humor magazine Puck, from 1883. A cigarette card, probably from the early 1900s, of the once-sensational actress Lillian Russell (cigarette cards were the bubble gum cards of their day). A penny from 1810. Shards of 18th-century Chinese ceramics. By consulting town records and ancient maps, he began to piece together a history of his house, and his property, going back to the first Dutch settler, one Lucas van Tienhoven, in 1695.

He even found descendents of the Storms family – the longest tenants on the place – who had the property since 1747, and built his house in 1850 (a previous one had burned down). "They were ancient ladies when I found them living in California," Kaufman says. "They had been born in this house, their parents had been born in this house, their grandparents were born in this house."

Bit by bit, he began to reconstruct the story of his home. Those hand-cut beams on the cellar ceiling? They must have been, Kaufman concluded, from the previous dwelling – the one destroyed in the 1850 fire.

"The Storms family had a sawmill down the creek, and the house was built with wood cut from their own sawmill," he says. "They were first taxed for the sawmill in 1784. If you had a sawmill, why would you use hand-cut beams in the basement? I assume those beams must have been left or recovered from the mess after the fire in 1850. They must have recovered them. Frugality reigns."

Naturally, all this investigation has given him a renewed pride of ownership. It's also given him a deeper sense of the long historical chain that goes back many generations before him – and will continue after he's gone and the next tenant moves in.

"I sit here in the living room and look out the front window of the house, and I see the stone wall," he says. "I must admit, I've wondered how many Storms have looked out the window, at that wall."

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