

Phoebe

Berks

Through the years

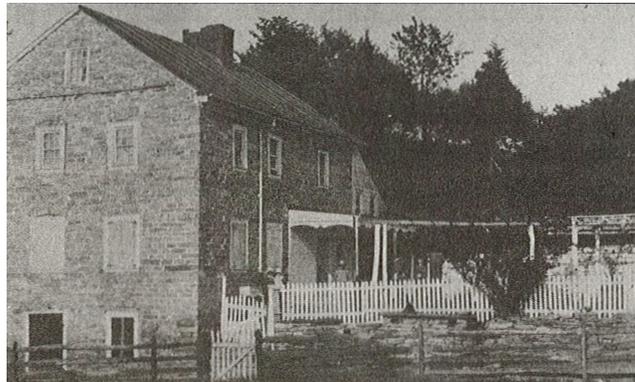
1735—George Hehn (Hain) is granted land in Pennsylvania by the Penns.

1747—George Hain (II) inherits the farm from his father.

c. 1755—George Hain builds his limestone house, which would later come to be known as the Conrad Kershner Home.

1772—Conrad Kershner purchases the Hain farm.

Phoebe Berks is a hallmark in the region for skilled care and rehabilitation, with a focus on resident engagement and promoting active, wellness-centered lifestyles. Long before its inception, Phoebe Ministries had built a reputation for serving older adults in its Lehigh Valley community and had begun to look for avenues to expand its ministry to a wider area. In the late 1980s, a team of local ministers and community leaders were searching for a way to bring Phoebe's passion for quality care and service to Berks county, and settled on the site where Phoebe Berks stands today. But the campus itself is steeped in its own rich history, one that stretches back nearly 300 years.



The site was once part of a larger farmstead owned by George Hehn (Hain), who had been granted the land in 1735 by the proprietors of what was then the Province of Pennsylvania (it was known as a proprietary colony). Hain's son, also called George, inherited the farm in 1747

and built a large limestone house there, presumably around 1755 based on a date scratched in the plaster in the attic. Rather large for its day, Hain's house boasted six bedrooms and an unusually elaborate carved plaster ceiling in the parlor. Local history of the Hain's Church nearby maintains that the house was built by two craftsmen from Germany—a mason and a carpenter, termed "redemptioners"—who sold themselves into indentured servitude in order to repay the shipping company for the cost of their passage across the Atlantic, a common practice for European immigrants. Close to the house Hain built a summer kitchen and smokehouse, a storage cellar, a stable, and a barn. Some of these structures are visible in photographs dating from the early days of Phoebe Berks, and some of the stone foundations can still be seen today, carefully preserved on the grounds of the



The remains of George Hain's limestone farmhouse as they can be seen today.

retirement community.

The Hains' farm was purchased in 1772 by Conrad Kershner, later a militia captain of the Revolutionary War. Frederick Hain (1756-1812), a descendant of the George Hain who first owned the estate, later served as a soldier in Kershner's company, 7th of Foot, 3rd Battalion of Militia, in 1777/78. Kershner and his family lived on the farm until 1803, but it is his name that the house would bear in legacy. One of his descendents, the Rev. Nevin Kershner, attended the groundbreaking at Phoebe Berks in 1990.

1803—Kershner and his family move to Windsor Township, selling the farm to William Werner.

Kershner left for Windsor Township, where the land was better suited for farming than the rolling hills of Wernersville. He had sold the farm, now 66 acres, and the house to William Werner, who lived there with his brother Henry until 1844. William's son Henry inherited the estate in April 1848, and lived there until 1867 when the history of the farm enters a blank period.

The record of the house picks up again in 1890, when the land was sold yet again to George Kintzer. His family farmed the land through three generations, and direct descendants maintain a connection with the site even to the present day. One of them, a Dr. William Fisher, still lives in a Phoebe Berks Village cottage on the site today, just opposite the farmhouse he knew as a boy, and has collected a great deal of historical information on the region. His father, Charles Fisher, worked on the farm as a boy and throughout his adult life. Dr. Fisher's second cousin, Anna Kintzer Blatt, also spent her childhood on the farm, returning there years later as a resident of Village Commons, where her room overlooked the farm site.

Another family connection, Ellen Sheidy née Kintzer, lived at Phoebe Berks in 1995 and had spent some of her childhood at the farm. Sheidy's father, Adam Kintzer, was the son of George Kintzer, who bought the farm in 1890. (Sheidy was born in 1898.) The farm passed through George to his other son Michael, and to Michael's son Lloyd.

The last Kintzer to live in the house was Michael R. Kintzer, who moved in 1937 to a house at 339 Church Road in Wernersville, selling the Kershner property to James Weber, then president of the Muhlenberg Dairy. Weber apparently never lived there—the house was rediscovered in the 1950s, dilapidated and covered in ivy, by a group of priests from the Jesuit Novitiate in Wernersville. One of the priests shared the story with his family, who were friends of the du Ponts in Delaware, where a museum had opened for the public in a former private home called Winterthur. Henry Francis Du Pont, for the whom the museum was named until recently, was collecting early American interiors and artifacts to display in the mansion that

1848—Henry Werner inherits the farm from his father.



George Hain's barn was in ruins by 1990. This is one of the last photographs taken of the structure before its demolition.



A plaque close to the old farmhouse commemorates the site as the Kershner House.



The Village courtyard shortly after its completion (top) and in 2016.

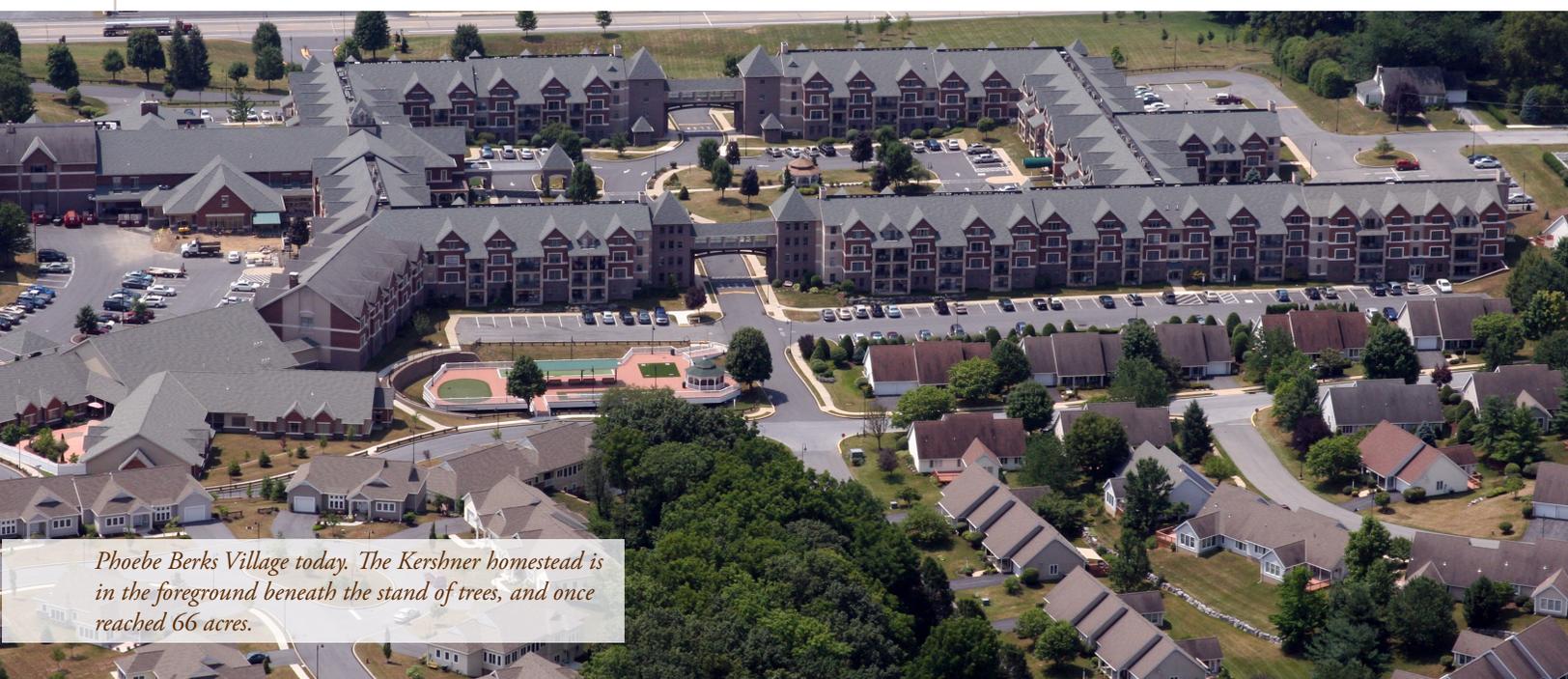
1890—The farm is sold again to George Kintzer.

1903—Phoebe Deaconess and Old Folks Home is established in Allentown.

he had enlarged greatly after his father's time. The museum acquired parts of the house in 1957, and undertook the painstaking task of dismantling the fine plaster ceiling, the doorways, the vast kitchen fireplace, and one entire exterior wall brick by brick, and removing all of it to be reassembled at Winterthur as part of an exhibit on architecture in the colonial period. What became known as the Kershner Rooms—a parlor and a kitchen—joined similar artifacts from New Hampshire and North Carolina, and were furnished with carefully researched period benches, beds, lanterns, and pottery, all carefully selected to reflect the means and style of living as it would have been for the Conrad Kershner household at the end of the 18th century.

The property came to the attention of Phoebe Ministries in the late 1980s, when the Rev. George Miller came upon it by accident one day on a drive. Rev. Miller was part of the group of local ministers and church members scouting for a property that would be suitable to develop into a retirement community and nursing home. They had been repeatedly stymied through one cause or another, so that the discovery of the Kershner farm seemed like a sign from heaven. Rev. Miller looked around the site and, confident his cohorts would agree that it would meet their needs, began to make inquiries. He learned that the property was caught in an estate dispute going back three generations, and that the current owner wouldn't be unwilling to part with it on the right terms. Rev. Miller also reached out to the Rev. Dr. Grant Harity, the president of Phoebe Ministries, and in a short amount of time negotiations for the property had begun.

Phoebe largely took over the project from there, and in a little time had transformed the land into a full-scale retirement community, welcoming its first residents in 1991. The health care center, with 120 skilled-nursing beds, was completed in 1992, along with 37 independent living cottages. By 1994 residency had met capacity, and the second phase of construction was initiated—at its conclusion 194 apartment



Phoebe Berks Village today. The Kershner homestead is in the foreground beneath the stand of trees, and once reached 66 acres.

1937—Michael R. Kintzer, grandson of George Kintzer, sells the farm to James Weber and moves into Wernersville.



An artist's rendering of the original vision for Phoebe Berks Village, which wasn't as large as today's completed structure. The courtyard was enclosed in the second phase of construction.

1950s—Jesuit novitiates discover the mouldering house and word of its architectural value passes to the Du Ponts, who purchase parts of it for the museum at Winterthur in Delaware.



The first cottages at Phoebe Berks: Numbers 18, 16, and 14 East Berks Drive became the first homes occupied on site. In the background, the health care center takes shape.

late 1980s—Rev. George Miller finds the abandoned site and brings in Phoebe Ministries to develop it into a retirement community.



The most recent building phase saw the completion of the Vista cottages on North Penn Drive.

1991—Phoebe Berks opens its health care center with 120 beds.

1994—After another phase of construction, Phoebe Berks opens new apartments and cottages.

2016—Phoebe Berks celebrates 25 years of serving older adults.

units and the Village Commons Personal Care Community with 51 assisted-living rooms had been completed.

Over the years the community at Phoebe Berks has changed little in terms of what it represents both to the people who live and work there, and to those in the surrounding region. In the areas of advancing care, providing greater and more specialized services, and growing into an established facility widely known for the quality of its services, it has certainly made great strides. Twenty-five years on, Phoebe Berks represents everything Phoebe stands for. It is a vital, active community—a village, in the best sense, where neighbors know each other and where a helping hand is never hard to find. Through the hard work of staff, the selfless dedication of volunteers, and the outstanding generosity of our donors, Phoebe Berks continues its commitment to providing the best in long term care and leading the region in services for older adults—for another 25 years, and more to come.

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe...
for she has been a helper of many.*

