

Chadds Ford Township

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## **Painter's Folly: A Comprehensive History**

Inspired by his time in France, Samuel Painter, a prominent community figure and farmer, constructed this summer residence between 1856 and 1857. When construction of the ornate dwelling began, neighbors took note of this immense home in contrast to their modest farmhouses and began teasing Painter, referring to this home as "Painter's Folly." Upon completion of his home, Painter proudly adopted the name "Painter's Folly." Painter's Folly still remains the only example of the Late Victorian/ Italianate architectural style in Chadds Ford. **This property later became known as "Lafayette's Hall" or "Lafayette's Farm" when the property was operated as a dairy farm and orchard in the 20th century.**

In 1870, Painter's Folly was sold to Joseph Turner of Philadelphia, who owned it until 1903. From 1898 through 1903, famous illustrator Howard Pyle, the nephew of Samuel Painter, rented the summer home, using it as an art school and studio for 10 of his best students. During the summers, Pyle and students of his Brandywine School would use the property while studying and painting the local landscapes. Pyle and his family would live in the "Big White House" (Painter's Folly) while the students stayed in two farm houses on the property. The male students would stay in the old Washington Headquarters, while the female students would stay in the former Lafayette's Headquarters. These two farm houses are now part of the Brandywine Battlefield State Park. Just a short walk from Painter's Folly was Pyle's studio, the old Turner's Mill, which is now the Chadds Ford Township Building.

After a long week of exploring and painting the countryside, Pyle would have his students join him on the large veranda of Painter's Folly, where they would talk and entertain each other for hours. During the cooler Saturday nights, the group would retreat to the large front room where they would continue their activities in front of the large fireplace. On these nights, Pyle would often pull out his drawing board to work on a pen illustration. His students always marveled at his ability to maintain his concentration while still participating in the surrounding laughter and festivities.

Notably, Howard Pyle was one of the first American art teachers to accept women into his school. Pyle did not charge tuition for this summer school, allowing him to choose from a larger group of students. Although he made the students pay for room, board and art supplies, he helped them find local jobs or illustration commissions. In exchange for room and board, N. C. Wyeth tended and milked a cow herd, while other students waited on tables at a local

boardinghouse. One summer, Pyle helped Frank Schoonover acquire a commission to illustrate *In the Hands of the Red Coats* by Everett T. Tomlinson.

The Brandywine Tradition style of illustration developed at this school, as well as many famous illustrators, including Allen Tupper True, Clifford Ashley, Ethel Franklin Betts, Anton Otto Fischer, Elizabeth Shippen Green, Violet Oakley, Frank Schoonover and Jessie Willcox Smith. In 1902, N.C. Wyeth began his notable career, becoming a student at the Brandywine School and moving to Chadds Ford. While staying at Painter's Folly, Pyle worked on notable illustrations such as 'Travels of the Soul,' 'The Pilgrimage of Truth', 'In the Valley of the Shadows' and possibly 'The Good aged Doctor.'

In 1903, this property was sold to Arthur Cleveland and soon after, in 1908, again sold to Richard Meade Atwater, who used it as a doctor's office. Richard Atwater was known during this time for his early scientific glass making. He owned this property until 1953, when it was sold to John and Mary Fisher. After living there for 20 years, the Fishers sold the home to George and Helen Sipala in 1974.

While the Sipalas were living there, Andrew Wyeth, son of N. C. Wyeth, began painting the property. Over the years, Painter's Folly and the Sipalas became the inspiration and subject of many Wyeth paintings, including "Painter's Folly," "Widows Walk," "Renfield," "Dovecote," "Cornet," and "Marriage," which featured the Sipalas. Many of the elements featured in Wyeth's work still remain on this property; including the stone mermaids featured in "Painter's Folly" and the marriage bed where the Sipalas were painted for "Marriage". Wyeth also frequently used Painter's Folly as a studio because he loved the way the light hit various rooms, often working on multiple paintings a day, depending on the daylight. According to Helen Sipala, Wyeth came almost daily to paint, having his own house key. In an featured article, in the July 1991 issue of National Geographic, Andrew Wyeth is pictured climbing from the roof through a window of the Painter's Folly cupola, where he was often seen painting.

The Sipalas owned this property until 2018 when it was purchased by Chadds Ford Township, with the intention of historic and open space preservation. Currently, the Painter's Folly Steering Committee is being formed to help guide the planning for future use of this beautiful home and surrounding grounds.