

Carroll County Times “Carroll’s Yesteryears” Articles

Carroll’s Yesteryears
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Question: Who Was Jacob Sherman?
by Joe Getty

Who was Jacob Sherman? This is a perplexing question that the historical society has been researching for the past several years.

It has been necessary for us to learn more about Jacob Sherman because he was the first owner and builder of the Historical Society’s Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House at 206 E. Main St. in Westminster. The historical society was founded in 1939 when this house was threatened with demolition. A group of Carroll County citizens organized the historical society in order to purchase the house and save it.

The Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House has served for fifty years as a county history museum. In 1983, a planning committee for our fiftieth anniversary hired one of Maryland’s leading restoration architects, Michael F. Trostel, F.A.I.A., to prepare a long range plan for restoring the significant architectural features and upgrading the mechanical systems in the house to modern museum standards.

The research and analysis phase of this project indicated that the house had unique architectural features when it was first constructed. Working with the architect’s findings, the committees and staff at the Historical Society determined that the first period of occupancy – from 1807 when the house was built to 1822 when Jacob Sherman died – provided significant insights about daily life in Carroll County during the early 19th century. Furthermore, this period of time was not the focus of other house museums in this region. A restoration and interpretation plan to this early period of the house would provide the opportunity for the historical society to develop educational programs for a period of local history different from other organizations.

Once these decisions were made, it became necessary to learn more about Jacob Sherman in order to interpret the house accurately. The process of researching Sherman’s life and business interests has been a fascinating study of the early economic development in Westminster and Carroll County. We have been able to document that not only was Sherman a prominent businessman of the early 19th century, but he was also a pre-Revolutionary War innkeeper at the Main Court Inn site in Westminster (located at 205 E. Main St. across from the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House).

When we began our study, we had only a few oral traditions about Sherman and very little documentation to confirm the facts about his life. Much of our work focused on the public documents available from the time period, such as census, wills and probate, and land records. In addition, some unusual glimpses of the Sherman household are found in manuscript materials such as the Shriver papers at the Maryland Historical Society and the Dr. William Willis account books at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

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Research into Jacob Sherman’s life and business enterprises have enlightened our knowledge about other areas of Carroll County history. He was involved in the development of Westminster as a later owner of the “New London” addition. This investment provided revenues from the annual ground rent due on these leasehold lots along Main Street. Sherman was also a slaveowner who freed some slaves upon his death and the chattel and manumission records provide considerable new data about African-American history in Carroll County.

The historical society’s study of Jacob Sherman and his house has led to exciting new revelations about the heritage of Carroll County. Our columns in the coming weeks will present some of the details and documentation about Carroll County during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Through the course of this series, we plan to answer for you the question, “Who was Jacob Sherman?”

Photo credit: Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: Research shows Jacob Sherman was a pre-Revolutionary War innkeeper at this tavern on the Northeast corner of Main and Court streets.