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Lin-Liu, Jen
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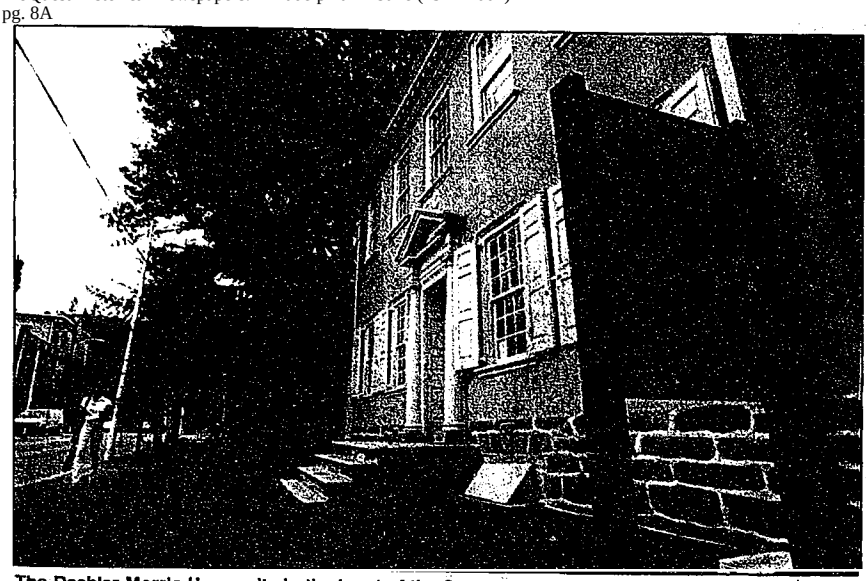

The Deshler-Morris House sits in the heart of the Germantown section of Philadelphia. The house is listed in the National Park Service , but it is almost entirely volunteer run with a dedicated staff of 50 part-timers. *--AP PHOTO/EDDY PALUMBO*

Germantown's rich history overlooked

By Jen Lin-Liu

PHILADELPHIA — On a good day, Anne Roller will watch a dozen visitors walk through Cliveden, a temporary haven for British soldiers during the Revolutionary War. But even those days aren't so good.

While the historic Germantown neighborhood it sits in is just eight miles from Independence Hall and other downtown historical attractions, the poor, urbanized community is relatively unknown to outsiders and difficult to market to tourists.

"We know we have some problems," said Roller, a spokeswoman for Cliveden. "The tourism bureau used to have so little information about us that when people asked about Germantown, they would say 'It's hard to get there from here.' "

While few visit Cliveden and its grassy estate surrounded by tall trees, more than 6,000 tourists see the Liberty Bell on an average day, said Phil Sheridan, spokesman for the National Park Service.

"A lot of people come to Philadelphia and see the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall and feel like they're done with history," said Mary Dabney, executive director of Germantown Historical Society.

But with the cooperation of the historic sites in the area, the historical society is campaigning to get more people to visit the neighborhood where British and American forces fought the Battle of Germantown in 1777, where author Louisa May Alcott was born and where President Washington briefly lived and worked.

The number of tourists that visit the neighborhood remains small, but the results of Germantown's efforts have been encouraging. In the spring, more than 700 people toured Cliveden, compared to 350 in spring 1997, Roller said.

Germantown, founded in 1683 as the first German settlement in America, became a fashionable resort for wealthy 18th century Philadelphians escaping the summer heat. One particular home served as the executive mansion for Washington and his cabinet during Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

Germantown was also home to one of Philadelphia's most famous figures, William Rittenhouse, who built America's first paper mill, also in the neighborhood.

Recently, Germantown's historic sites have begun working together to look at new ways to attract visitors. While each of the sites traditionally has worked on its own, they have realized that cooperation is important.

"It used to be that no two of the sites would be open at the same time," Roller said. Now, several sites have revised their hours so that visitors can see several places in one afternoon.

With cooperation from various attractions, a brochure debuted this spring that outlines Germantown's 11 historic nomes, parks, walking districts and cultural institutions. Germantown is also offering a $9 bus tour that includes a walking tour of the various homes and a shopping tour of nearby Chestnut Hill.

But Germantown representatives acknowledge there is still a lot to overcome.

"Having so many historic sites in Philadelphia is a great thing, but it's also a challenging thing," said Jeff Groff, the executive director of the Wyck House.

Unlike other cultural institutions in Philadelphia that may have an abundance of wealthy donors, historic houses in Germantown rely on government grants and smaller endowments from people who have family connections to the homes.

The Deshler-Morris House is federally funded as a site of the National Park Service, but it is almost entirely volunteer-run with a dedicated staff of 50 part-timers.

A quick drive down Germantown Avenue, the neighborhood's main street, shows the disparity between these sites and Germantown's current state.

The views of many of the historic sites are blocked from the rest of the community by fences and high trees. The preserved homes are locked in time, while their surroundings have undergone suburbanization, industrialization and blight, slow to benefit from the country's longest economic expansion.

Dirty store windows advertise items such as athletic shoes and pagers. On side streets, old Victorian and Colonial homes are in various stages of decay with chipped paint and broken windows. Vacant lots are filled with weeds and piles of rubble.

Jonathan Schmalzbach, executive director for the Independence Hall Association, has encouraged visitors to go to Germantown for years, but also warns tourists of the historic sites' surroundings on a Web site dedicated to Philadelphia's historical sites.

"We do want people to go there," Schmalzbach said. "We don't want to come off as racist, yet how do you delicately phrase the matter? We've included an inoffensively worded warning for tourists to be aware."

Just a few years ago, before the Web site's warning appeared, Schmalzbach recommended the Wyck House to a couple of Minnesota tourists by e-mail. After their visit, the Minnesotans wrote Schmalzbach a scathing letter, upset that they were sent to the inner city without a proper warning.

Most of Germantown's representatives think that the problem isn't the environment, but a matter of informing visitors that Germantown is a tourist destination.

Groff said that visitors going to Germantown should not expect a Williamsburg.

"It's not 'ye olde colonial America,'" Groff said. "We want to show that it's a real mixed area with diverse population and diverse offerings. It's not some recreated historic village. It's real."

An unidentified person walks along the Germantown section of Philadelphia on Sunday, besides being a historical district, the Germantown section of Philadelphia is heavily urbanized and poor. The area with its run down shops is not exactly a place that is easy to market to tourists. *--AP PHOTO/EDDY PALUMBO*

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