

Sweetbriar

This stately house upriver on the Schuylkill was the year-round home for the prominent Breck family for 38 years. Patriarch Samuel Breck was a successful and prosperous merchant when he built Sweetbriar in 1797. A philanthropist, politician, amateur artist and a historian, Breck's worldly interest were truly vast and are fortunately well preserved. Living to the age of 91, Breck's interest in American history, politics, philanthropy and literature survive in a large collection of diaries, travel logs, manuscripts, lecture transcripts, notes and graphics held at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. He would later go on to serve multiple terms as a Pennsylvania State Senator and a term as a US Congressman. Breck knew many leading figures of the day, including George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Daniel Webster, John James Audubon, Nicholas Biddle, and many distinguished French dignitaries including Joseph Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon. Glimpse colonial life through Breck's own words and learn interesting stories on topics such as his 1825 dinner party at Sweetbriar for the Marquis de Lafayette, what his thoughts were when the British invaded Washington in 1814, or why he called his wife, "Jean the Unready."

Sadly, Lucy, Breck's only child dies at the age of 21 from typhus in 1828. Within 10 years, Breck, heartbroken, sells Sweetbriar and moves back into Philadelphia. The "fever and ague" induced by the swamp conditions created by the building of the dam at Fairmount convinced the Brecks that country living was no longer healthful.

In 1867, the City of Philadelphia acquired the property and incorporated it into Fairmount Park. Various concessions and restaurateurs frequently established their businesses in park houses during the last decades of the nineteenth century and Sweetbriar was no exception. An ice company and beer gardens are a few of the uses during this time of commercial occupancy.

Sweetbriar became a museum and the headquarters of the Junior League in 1927. The League restored and furnished the house in collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Junior League later turned over its responsibilities to the Modern Club. The house avoided substantial modification until 1975 when the City of Philadelphia restored it in preparation for the Bicentennial celebration.

Sweetbriar is a classic three-and-a-half story home in the Federal-style built of stucco-faced rubble with a center hall plan. The front and rear facades are almost identical. Epitomizing the house of a cultured gentleman, the spacious dwelling was described by Beck as "a fine stone house, rough-east, fifty-three feet long, thirty-eight broad, and three stories high, having outbuildings of every kind suitable for elegance and comfort." Sadly none of the outbuildings have survived. During Breck's tenure, the house also featured well-tended gardens and a fifty-four foot greenhouse full of tropical fruit trees with a broad four hundred foot wide lawn stretching to the river.