Living History on the OHIO FRONTIER

BY GREGORY LEFEVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL TEUFEN

In a part of the house lit only by candles and warmed only by a fireplace, there sits a woman surrounded by furnishings from 1820 and earlier, from the time when Licking County was the Ohio frontier. The tiny woman has long white hair, wire-framed glasses, and is herself quite ageless. She tells two stories.

One story is of Joy Henson, the twenty-first-century woman, married fifty-two years, mother of three, great-grandmother of two, who has put in long hours in the food-service industry and who has scrimped, bargained, and bartered for her extensive collection of early primitive furnishings. The other story is of Lovey Makepeace, recently widowed in 1820, who, to survive, has opened part of her home as a tavern for road-weary travelers making their way through the wilderness to their new lives.

Some would say the house is more suited to Lovey Makepeace than to Joy Henson. For more than forty years, Joy has been acquiring the furnishings she treasures. For at least twenty years, she has researched and worked to keep the house she rescued near Utica historically aligned with early-nineteenth-century Ohio. For eight years, she has shared the home with her reenactment character, Lovey Makepeace. "This is not decorating," Joy says. "This is a lifestyle interpretation."

Joy and John Henson use the early furnishings that surround them. They sit on the chairs from the 1790s and they eat at the 200-year-old tables. They hide all evidence of 2004. The refrigerator resides behind a homespun curtain in the kitchen, as do the washer and dryer in the pantry. Even the shower could be mistaken for a large built-in cupboard in one of the bathrooms. Only part of the house has electricity. The rest relies on daylight or candles for illumination. They installed a fuel-oil furnace but prefer the fireplace for heat much of the year.

"Everything is here for the nuance of the period. Everything is a little bit of early Ohio," Joy says. Her target time and place is 1820, Licking County, Ohio. "I picked it because it was before Ohio was bombarded with machine-made things but still late enough so you could have things that have survived to today."

Licking County today is Ohio's second largest county in land area, forty miles northeast of Columbus. It was settled in the late eighteenth century by families from New England, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia—many to claim land awarded to them in 1794 as payment for service during the Revolutionary War, others attracted to the land's rich soil.

John Henson, who, like Joy, has been in the food-service industry for more than fifty years, has been a true partner in his wife's interests, which—they both admit—some see as quirky. "I support her 100 percent," he says. "I like what Joy does. I enjoy it. She's originated this herself. It's not like she copied anybody—people copy her."

Joy acknowledges the leeway from her husband, who also has saved to buy her some of her prized pieces as anniversary gifts. "John loves old things. Well, at least he likes them now," she chuckles. "I'm not sure he would have gone actively looking for

The pantry adjacent to the keeping room formerly was the room for separating and storing milk. Now it holds a variety of early barrels, tubs, and pantry boxes containing apples, onions, pumpkins, and rye grain, among other foodstuffs. Herbs and tobacco leaves are hung to dry. As with their other modern appliances, the Hensons' washer and dryer are cleverly concealed; in this case, behind the curtain in the pantry.

OPPOSITE:
The kitchen worktable is an early 1800s piece from Pennsylvania. Sitting on it are a wooden bowl and an early Connecticut treen plate, two horn cups, and a c. 1820 bottle. The hanging cupboard above the table is fashioned from an old drawer, and the larger one above the sink is an early-19th-century former built-in still bearing traces of its original red paint. It contains a collection of treen plates, a burl bowl, Bennington crock, and hand-forged knife and fork. The sink cabinet is original to the house; the counter and fixtures are new. Hanging directly above the table is an early-19th-century ratchet and betty lamp, near linen and cotton towels from The Seraph. The unusually large 19th-century kneading bowl is ostensibly from a nunnery.

these things if it hadn't been for my interests. But, if it gets to be too much for him, he always has his golf."

In the late 1970s, the Hensons and Joy's mother concluded that if they sold their respective homes and pooled their resources, they could buy one house to the financial advantage of the whole family. They did not look far. "There was this old house we'd pass on our way to work," Joy recalls. "It was overgrown and had been abandoned for probably fifteen years. We'd climb through the weeds and peek through the windows. It was a mess, but we could tell it could be fixed up."

Based on its early frame style, the Hensons figure the house is approaching 170 years old—they are unable to ascertain its exact age because records pertaining to the property were destroyed years ago in a fire at the Licking County Courthouse in nearby Newark—and had never been significantly altered. It had no running water, no electricity, no heat. "An old man had lived here for a number of years, and he had a little stove in one room for heat," Joys says. "He carried his water from a cistern across the street. He was ninety-some years old when he died." With no heirs, the property reverted to the county for disposition, and a neighboring farmer bought it to expand his acreage.

"We found out who owned it and we asked him if he'd sell it," Joy says. "He had no need for the house so he said, 'Sure'." They took possession of the dilapidated house, a couple of outbuildings, and an acre and a half. Then the work began. The Hensons hired work-

The keeping room is where the Hensons retreat from the world and where Joy has placed some of her earliest pieces. The table is c. 1750 with dovetailed battens. The hand-carved ladle is early treen, as is the bowl. The early wide-board cupboard is from Maine, has hand-forged hinges, and retains traces of red and gray paint. A bread peel leans against the fireplace, next to a 1700s frying pan, an anniversary gift to the Hensons from fellow reenactor Mike Wojtseck. The mantel holds redware plates, a pewter charger, and wooden lantern, all from the early 1800s. A 19th-century settle bench provides the perfect place to bask in the warmth of the fireplace. Slices of fruit and vegetables are drying above the hearth, which features a crane and kettle.

ers for carpentry, electricity, heating, plumbing, digging a well, and installing a septic tank. But Joy gives the most credit to Marion Ackerman, of Sunbury, Ohio. "He did almost everything," she says. "He's who made it livable."

Marion, who recently finished reconstructing a 1799 Federal home that had been moved from Massachusetts to Granville, Ohio, still remembers the early days of work on the Henson house. "It hadn't been lived in for several years. It was derelict, but it wasn't all that bad. The windows and the roof were in good condition. We did a lot of patching where we ran the electricity and did the insulating," he says, "but we didn't make huge changes in the house itself." Over the years he has added a couple of walls, built the large fireplace in the keeping room, and re-created a cage bar in the tavern. More recently one of the Hensons' sons, J.T., has constructed or restored aspects of the house to maintain its period flavor.

The Hensons and Joy's mother moved into the house in January 1980. "I'll never forget it," Joy says. "It was freezing cold, but at least we had a furnace and water." But another surprise was in store for them. One of the home's historical features was the original windowpanes throughout. "We turned on the furnace and the heat filled the house. Then the windows started cracking. That wonderful old glass had never been exposed to that kind of heat," Joy says. Whether it was the glass itself or the mullions, something swelled and cracked several panes, which remain in place today.

The large cupboard in the tavern is an early 1800s Ohio step-back, which a trusting dealer forty years ago allowed Joy to purchase in parts, first the bottom, later the top. The chair is an 18th-century New England ladder-back with sausage turnings and splint seat. Joy still uses the walking stick on icy days. Reminiscent of an 1820 Ohio tavern are the old barrel, animal skins, hanging pheasant, powder horn, and gourd canteen.

In décor and furnishings alike, Joy's goal has been to go back in time until the home accurately reflects a dwelling of the early Ohio frontier. Walls are a parchment cream, soot-smudged from sconces and lanterns. Woodwork, wainscoting, and doors are painted dark red throughout—a color no longer available. "If I did it again today, I'd probably go with a shade darker yet," Joy says.

If the Hensons have a favorite room, it is the keeping room. Tucked away toward the rear of the house between the kitchen and pantry, it contains a large fireplace and some of Joy's earliest pieces. It is her sanctuary. "You go into the keeping room and close the door and you don't see anything that's not of the early period," she says. "There's no twenty-first century, no twentieth century, no nineteenth century. I love to come in here at night when the fire's burning and just sit and let my imagination roam."

The keeping room was originally part of a larger kitchen until Joy created it by having a dividing wall erected. The brick fireplace—with crane and hanging kettle—dominates one wall. "You ever try to cook in a kettle like that?" asks John, himself a career restaurant cook. "Well, I decided to make a stew in it. It tasted fine but it took quite a while to cook. I learned that the fire and kettle are the Crock-Pot of the early days."

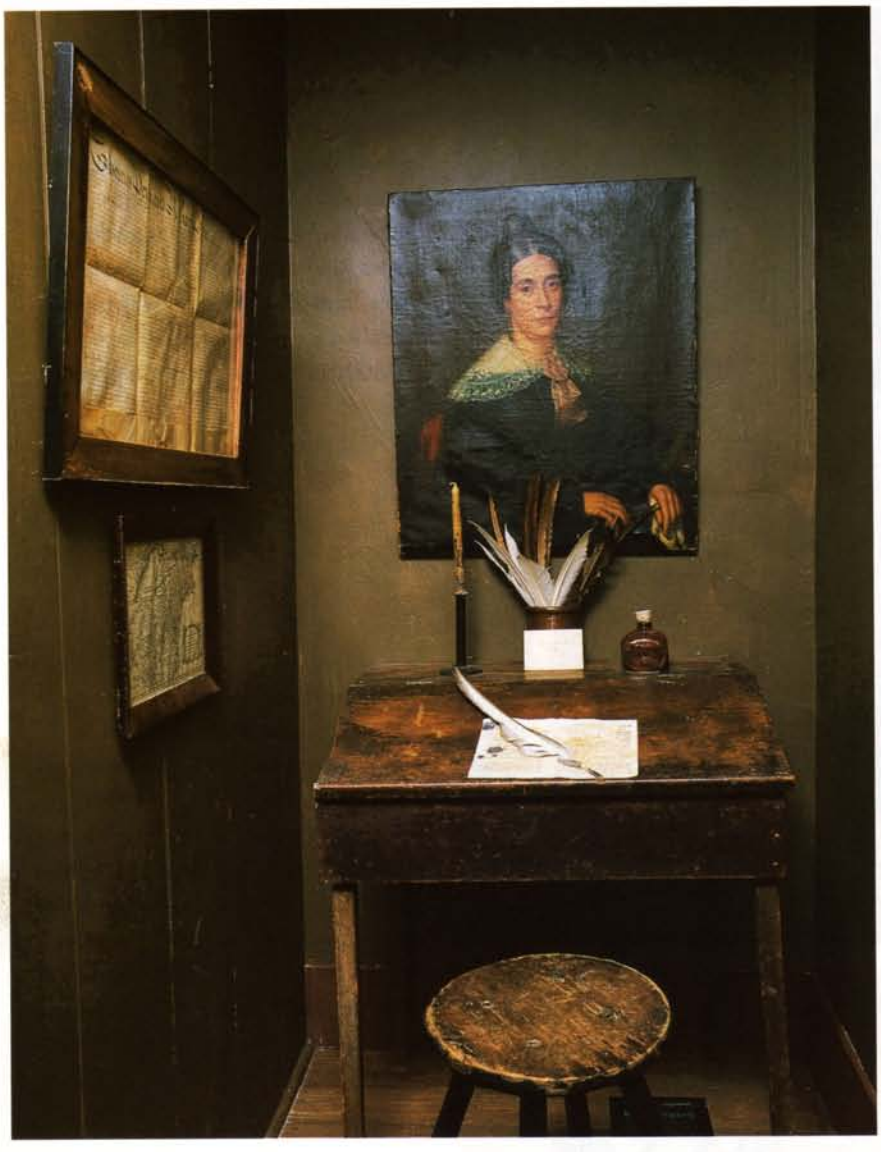
The keeping room features a table and child's highchair, both from the 1700s, and an early 1800s wide-board Maine cupboard with worn layers of red and gray paint and hand-forged hinges. The adjacent pantry supports the character of the keeping room. Here Joy has assembled barrels, tubs, and pantry boxes—some dating back nearly 200 years—containing the storables appropriate to the time of year: apples, onions, pumpkins, rye grain, and a selection of herbs. The room originally had been where milk was separated and stored when dairy cattle were raised on the farm.

If the keeping room is Joy Henson's

The tavern's cage bar is based on one in the York Tavern in York, Pennsylvania, and was re-created by Marion Ackerman. The bar features whiskey barrels, reproduction bottles, a wooden tray, burl mortar and pestle, and dried tobacco leaves. Joy made the sugar loaf that sits next to c. 1800 hand-forged sugar nippers.

BOTTOM:
The Hensons' bedroom was the original parlor and showed little signs of use through nearly two centuries. Here Joy keeps some of her 19th-century Ohio baskets and a knitty-knotty from Vermont for winding yarn. The large pine corner cupboard is 18th-century Hudson Valley, with its original hand-forged H-hinges. The chair is a c. 1780 ladder-back from New Hampshire. The c. 1800 trundle bed has a straw mattress.

OPPOSITE:
The 1820-style tavern is stocked with items travelers required, most from the early 1800s. In the foreground is a single-board tavern table, set with two pewter basins, a hogscraper candleholder, decorated horn cup, and 17th-century spoon from the Netherlands. Two ladder-back chairs flank the table. The table in the corner is 18th-century Massachusetts, with a pine top and birch base. On it rests an 1818 *Niles Weekly Register*, stoneware ink bottle with quill, horn beaker, and fur mittens. The chairs next to it are an 18th-century ladder-back and a Windsor. The hanging shelf is a hand-sawn country piece, holding pewter plates and pitcher. An 18th-century New England lantern is suspended from the ceiling.



The entry hall is one of the few structural modifications the Hensons have made to their house, erecting the wall on the left, adjacent to the bedroom, thus creating the hall between the bedroom and tavern. The desk is an early Ohio piece and has authentic period documents, including the wax-sealed 1842 letter. The oil portrait bears the identification of a Mrs. O'Connor, New York, 1835. The large document on the left wall is a 1762 land grant to a John Rice for a tract in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

refuge, the tavern at the front of the house is assuredly the domain of Lovey Makepeace. The reenactment character of the widow Makepeace and the re-creation of an 1820 Ohio frontier tavern came about simultaneously. For several years Joy had given tea-party lectures on folklore, herbs, gardening, and local history, among other topics. Seven years ago, a new vision formed. "I got to thinking, if it were 1820 and if you lived out here in the country and you needed to make some money in the winter when you couldn't farm, what would you do? People were pouring into Ohio and the roads were clogged with wagoners. You might realize that with all of the travelers going by who needed a place to stay, why not open a tavern?"

During her research, Joy found a photograph of the historic bar cage in the York Tavern in York, Pennsylvania, and asked Marion Ackerman to build a replica in the front room she had designated to be the tavern. Today, Lovey Makepeace's tavern is museum quality, replete with furnishings from 1820 and earlier: an eighteenth-century New England lantern, one-board tavern tables, ladder-back and Windsor chairs. The tables are set with early-nineteenth-century pewter, hand-forged eating utensils, horn cups and beakers.

With the rigors of the wilderness, abundant corn-mash whiskey, and a hodge-podge of travelers, a tavern such as Lovey Makepeace's was not a genteel place. "They were loud and dirty places, with plenty of smoke and commotion," Joy explains. The frontier ambiance is evident. A dead pheasant and bear and badger skins adorn the sooty walls, while rugged personal accessories such as a buffalo bag, fur mittens, powder horns, and a gourd canteen hang from pegs.

From her research, Joy was able to provide the essentials of tavern life. "Often the travelers weren't sure exactly where they were, so they relied on maps," she says, and has supplied the tavern with several maps, including period reproductions. "The mail was picked up from the taverns, so the travelers often wrote their letters here," she says, and has supplied quills, a stoneware ink pot, and writing paper. "And the tavern is where they got their news," she says, holding a small 1818 edition of the *Niles Weekly Register* from Baltimore.

As a refuge from the raucous tavern, women travelers could convene in the ladies' parlor, a room the Hensons have situated between the tavern and their kitchen. The room was the original kitchen for the house, with a stove and chimney. Today it has a large fireplace mantel, comfortable camelback couch, spinning wheel, and a tallcase clock. "This is a more peaceful setting where the women could drink, smoke, and discuss the fashions of the day, away from the rowdiness," Joy explains. A hanging shelf holds paraphernalia more kindred to the feminine arts: a selection of early-nineteenth-century books and a hymnal, a flax hatchel, and sewing items.

The bedroom at the front of the house was the original parlor. "It must not have been used much, because there was very little wear," Joy says. The home's original floor plan had no entry hall, but the Hensons decided to erect a wall in the original parlor—now the bedroom—to create an entry hall between the tavern and the bedroom. Nestled at the end of the hall is an early Ohio desk. "This is where Lovey does her ledgers," Joy notes.

It is evident from the furnishings in the Henson house that Joy was precocious in her fondness for early, primitive pieces, which she began collecting in the 1960s. "At the beginning I had no real focus," she recalls. "I had to learn the hard way." By that, she means it took time for her to realize what she valued—pieces circa 1820 and earlier—and to systematically search for, save for, and acquire them.

Her first piece? "I remember buying this little washstand back in the early '60s. It had twenty layers of paint and it cost me three dollars." She kept the little washstand for several years but even it too eventually was sold—like the modern furniture the Hensons had acquired—to fund earlier, more primitive pieces. "You end up with the earliest pieces you can afford," she says, "but you usually don't start out that way."

Joy has developed close relationships with antiques dealers throughout the Midwest and East over the years but holds a special fondness for Marjorie Staufer of Medina, Ohio. "Margie has this wonderful eye for these pieces and has really helped me for a number of years," Joy says, holding receipts on which Marjorie had written the vintage and origins of the pieces Joy purchased.

Marjorie too acknowledges the long-standing relationship between the two women. "I'd say we grew together in all of this," she says. Marjorie replenishes her inventory of primitive pieces through the use of pickers, auctions, collectors, and on buying trips to the East Coast and New England. "I must say, these pieces are getting harder and harder to find."

Joy tells the story of the early 1800s Ohio two-piece step-back cupboard that resides in the tavern room. She saw the cupboard in the 1960s and loved it, but she could not meet the dealer's asking price. "I was young, didn't know what I was doing, so I asked him if he'd sell me part of it and I'd buy the rest later. He said he would," she recalls with a smile. "So I took the bottom half home, sold some other furniture, and went back for the top part. The dealer said, 'I knew you'd be back. I wasn't worried.' And that's how I got this beautiful cupboard. It seems pretty unbelievable now when I think back on it."

Some of her pieces speak to a particular aspect of the frontier mentality—the longing for finer furnishings. The circa 1790 birch tea table from New England in the ladies' parlor has four scalloped corners, a feature usually reserved for more formal pieces.

The ladies' parlor is the refuge from the rowdiness of the tavern, more suited to genteel comfort. The c. 1790 tea table is from New England, made of birch, with scalloped corners to add a touch of formality. On the table are an 18th-century wallet with bargello stitching, a 19th-century pewter candleholder, and an 1864 *Webster's Dictionary*. The two banister-back chairs are c. 1750, also from New England. Today's visitors find comfort on the camelback couch from The Seraph. The tallcase clock is early 19th century, but Joy says there is contention regarding its maker and age.

The ladies' parlor was the home's original kitchen; the Hensons added the fireplace mantel at the location of the cook-stove chimney. A 19th-century spinning wheel displays flax on its distaff. A c. 1730 Queen Anne mirror hangs above an 18th-century chest of drawers in original red paint, a present from John to Joy. Sitting on the chest is a c. 1850 dark green box and 1849 Methodist hymnal.

Another, somewhat cruder, example is the hand-sawn ornate scroll pattern on the top of an early-nineteenth-century Ohio hanging shelf in the tavern, a design again associated with a more refined lifestyle.

In keeping with the Hensons' philosophy to actually live with their antiques and not simply view them, Joy has an abundance of barrels, tubs, and wooden boxes for storing her and John's belongings. Most are of indeterminate age, from the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. "It's a funny thing about barrels," she says. "You don't often see many of them in homes that have early furnishings." The Hensons, however, have barrels in the tavern, in the kitchen, and abundantly in the pantry. "People back then used them to store all kinds of things. They were the Tupperware of their day."

Like the candlelight, the stories of Joy Henson and Lovey Makepeace flicker back and forth through the evening, from the Ohio frontier to today and back again. In the end, it all comes down to a simple statement by Joy: "I just put myself in the place of somebody who'd be living back then, and I go from there." ★

Gregory LeFever is a freelance writer living in Lynchburg, Ohio.

GIVING HISTORY A PERSONALITY

To appreciate the research, thought, and effort that have gone into the Henson home, it helps to know Lovey Makepeace—the 1820 reenactment character Joy developed when she was inspired to re-create an Ohio frontier tavern in her home.

Lovey and her husband, Justus—to whom she usually refers as Mr. Makepeace—moved from Massachusetts to Vermont shortly after the Revolutionary War. He was a veteran, had received a land grant, and would live near Colonel Wait Wright, with whom he had served in the war.

"But we found that farming in Vermont was hard. The land was so filled with rocks," says the Lovey character. The land was inhospitable, the winter winds from Lake Champlain were bitter, and Colonel Wright had moved on to the new land of Ohio. "He wrote letters back to us about the beautiful Ohio frontier and the rich farmland, so Mr. Makepeace decided we should follow him."

Colonel Wait Wright was an actual historical personage. The 1881 *History of Licking County, Ohio: Its Past and Present*, compiled by N.N. Hill, Jr., notes that in 1817, the year Burlington Township was organized, "It is said that Colonel Wait Wright treated the 'boys' to two gallons of whiskey for the privilege of naming the township, and thereupon called it after his native place in Vermont."

The Makepeaces' journey to Burlington Township was hard and left its scars on Lovey, but true tragedy still awaited her. After settling into their new Ohio home, her husband left the house one day to hunt food. "Mr. Makepeace tripped on a log and his fowling piece went off and he lay mortally wounded," Lovey recalls.

The widow Makepeace had to choose between staying on the frontier or returning to New England. "I couldn't force myself to go back because the trip here was one of the worst things that had ever happened to me," she says. "All those miles, with all the dirty places we had to sleep, and all the dirty people we had to be around."

Lovey's reminiscences are based on diaries and journals Joy Henson has researched. One she particularly relies on is *A Journey to Ohio in 1810*, by Margaret Dwight, who recorded her experiences traveling from Milford, Connecticut, to the back-country settlement of Warren, Ohio.

"My companions were all disturbed by the wagoners who put up here & were all night in the room below us, eating, drinking, talking, laughing & swearing," wrote Mrs. Dwight of a night in a roadside tavern. Of another tavern: "We were put in an old garret that had holes in the roof big enough to crawl through. Our bed was on the floor, harder it appear'd to me, than any boards could be & dirty as possible."

These are the experiences Lovey Makepeace recounts to her visitors. For several years now, groups of women have come to the Henson home to meet and learn from Lovey. They eat 1820s fare, usually pork, root vegetables, and pumpkin. "I have to tell them where they are, because a lot of travelers aren't certain of where they've arrived, and I tell them they might have to share a bed with someone they don't know."

Sometimes greater shocks are in store for the visitors. Startled women have been known to shriek when confronted by Johnny Jelloway. Another actual historical person, Jelloway was a mixed-blood Delaware and is the namesake of Jelloway, Ohio, thirty miles northeast of the Hensons. Long-time friend Mike Wojtseck, of Mount Vernon, Ohio, portrays Jelloway.

"We come here because the white-haired woman's a little crazy and she might give us whiskey," his character says. With his red and black-painted face, linen hunting shirt, loincloth, woolen leggings, and moccasins, this Jelloway has suddenly appeared in doorways or hidden silently in the keeping room.

Other friends have participated more peacefully in Lovey's world. Two of Joy's women friends assumed identities named Elspeth Pore and Lucy Halfpenny, and they and Lovey carried on an extensive, historically based, written correspondence with one another, commiserating on the challenges of life on the Ohio frontier.

SOURCES

MARJORIE STAUFER
ANTIQUES
2244 Remsen Road
Medina, OH 44256
330-239-1443

MARION ACKERMAN
RESTORATION & CONSTRUCTION
10290 Rosecrans Road
Sunbury, OH 43074
740-965-4977

J.T. HENSON
CARPENTRY
614-477-9376

THE SERAPH
420 Main Street
Sturbridge, MA 01566
508-347-2241
5606 Route 37
Delaware, OH 43015
740-369-1817
www.theseraph.com

FURTHER READING

History of Licking County, Ohio, by N.N. Hill, Jr. (Newark, Ohio: A.A. Graham & Company, 1881)

A Journey to Ohio in 1810, by Margaret Van Horn Dwight (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, reprint, 1991)