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Katina Snyder
Kreutz Creek Valley Preservation Society
5345 Lincoln Highway
Hellam, PA 17406

Dear Ms. Snyder:

I am writing to you with deep concern about the threatened destruction of the historically significant Mifflin House in Hellam Township. I was distressed to learn that this property might be lost, even though it is widely recognized as an historic site associated with the early American patriots, the Underground Railroad and the Civil War.

I also write to you as a professional historian and author. Several of my books have drawn on the history of southern Pennsylvania, and the Lancaster and Columbia area in particular, most pertinently "Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America," which includes mention of the Wright family of Columbia, in Lancaster County, and other local activists. I am currently at work on a history of Congress during the Civil War, which will deal at length with the work of Lancaster Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, who also played an important role locally in the Underground Railroad.

I strongly believe that the Mifflin House should be treated as one of the most significant sites in a region of our country where some of the earliest and most important episodes of the Underground Railroad—the nation's first civil rights movement--played out. The relationship between the Mifflin family of Wrightsville and their relatives, the Wright family--combined with the activities of their agent, Robert Loney, an African-American boatsman--presents an extraordinary example of the larger story of the Underground Railroad in action.

The Mifflin House can help us understand how the Underground Railroad's mass movement of civil disobedience emerged from the beliefs and philosophies of patriots of the American Revolution, and the generations of enlightened religious reformism that came after it. The stories of these families and their contemporaries, both white and African-American, those known and others who may yet be discovered, cry out to have their stories told in an accurate way that is rooted in the actual places where the historic events occurred.

Every time we allow a well-documented site associated with the Underground Railroad to be needlessly destroyed or lost to neglect, we lose a critical opportunity to celebrate how our ancestors worked heroically across racial lines. And within that understanding, we can challenge ourselves today that we need to do more to overcome such lingering divisions in our country.

The potentially imminent loss of the Mifflin House represents a failure of leadership on the part of public officials who have it within their authority under state law to provide for the protection of historic properties in their community. This failure must also extend to the development industry, many of whose ranks seem to lack the creativity or vision to blend profits with preservation.

From my many years of experience and perspective as an historian, I know that the preservation of properties steeped in community heritage results in expanded educational opportunities, contributes to an enhanced quality of life for local residents and visitors, and can foster economic development that generates healthy returns on investment and positive employment. In short, history and development are not mutually exclusive: they can be mutually beneficial partners.

I urge all parties involved with the Mifflin House to come together in the bold spirit of our ancestors, who made the Underground Railroad such a resounding success, and find a way to retain, preserve and re-use this historic site.

Sincerely,

Fergus M. Bordewich