



Welcome to *historic* Maria Hall on the campus of Villa Joseph Marie High School

An Exquisite History

Welcome to Maria Hall, where you can step back into the fascinating past of Bucks County, Pa., in a place that has witnessed so much of its history...

The history of Maria Hall begins in 1683, when Willam Penn purchased the land on which it stands from the Lenape tribe of Native Americans. The land, which was largely wilderness at the time, passed through Penn's heirs until 1739, when 250 acres of the property were purchased by Adrian and Mattie Cornell, originally of the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. The Cornell family settled the land, building a homestead, launching a farming enterprise, and raising a family.

Little is known about the original homestead, although it most likely was built of fieldstone, as were most other homes of the period. The only remaining original building is the fieldstone smokehouse, which remained in use until the mid-1950s. The Sisters of St. Casimir, who would own the property much later and found Villa Joseph Marie High School, were famous for the bacon they produced in the smokehouse.



Adrian Cornell
1818-1870

The Cornells became successful farmers and businessmen, and active members of the local community. Several generations stayed in the area, farmed the homestead and various other properties in the area, and raised their families. By the time the fourth generation of Cornells had been born, the family owned more than 700 acres of land in Northampton Township, a mill and the land upon which it was built, and 400 acres in Upper Makefield Township.

In 1860, Adrian Cornell, the great-great-grandson of Adrian and Mattie, razed the original homestead, where he had lived all of his life, and built the mansion house now known as Maria Hall. Built in an Italianate style, it was

one of the largest and grandest homes in the area and cost \$20,000 to build—a fortune in its day. The house is of a center-hall design, with three full stories and a belvedere tower on the roof. Ceilings in the rooms on the first floor are 12 feet high and 10 feet on floors two and three. The elliptical staircase brings drama to the entrance foyer. Early visitors to the home were surely impressed by its modern kitchen conveniences—including a No. 2 cast-iron Franklin range (shown at left), which remains to this day.



The dining room was built to be the most beautiful room in the house, featuring fluted columns and pilasters; tall, paneled doorways; and Mercer

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Maria Hall Timeline

1683 | William Penn purchases a parcel of land, encompassing the current property where Villa Joseph Marie High School now stands, from the Lenape tribe of Native Americans.

1739 | Mr. and Mrs. Adrian Cornell, of Flatbush, Brooklyn, purchase 250 acres of Penn's original tract from Isaac Pennington, a wealthy Bucks County councilor, assemblyman, member of the Bucks County Court, and relation of William Penn. They build a homestead and begin to farm.

1774 | Adrian's son builds the smokehouse, which still stands today.

1860 | Adrian's great-great-grandson razes the original homestead and builds the Cornell Mansion, now known as Maria Hall.

1904-1932 | The home and farm, which came to be known as Maple Lane Farm, change hands several times.

1932 | The Venerable Mother Maria Kaupas, Foundress of the Sisters of St. Casimir and Villa Joseph Marie High School, purchases Maple Lane Farm to be used as an East Coast country retreat for her Sisters, whose Motherhouse was in Chicago, and a school for young Lithuanian girls.

1932-1960s | Maria Hall is used as both a dormitory for boarding students of Villa Joseph Marie High School and the Sisters who taught them. Rooms in the mansion were also used as classroom space. Following the move to the new school building, Maria Hall was largely abandoned and fell into disrepair.

1990s-early 2000s | Maria Hall is painstakingly renovated, room by room, by Sr. Madeleine Bunevicius, SSC.

Mid-2000s-2012 | Maria Hall is used for development, alumnae, and special school functions.

2012 | Maria Hall is devastated by fire on January 23.

2014 | A newly restored Maria Hall reopens with the first Villa Joseph Marie High School Wall of Fame induction ceremony on September 13.



The Venerable Mother Maria Kaupas, SSC

tiled floors. Painted landscape wallpaper, imported from Italy, adorned the room and gave a feel of outdoors to the large room. The dining room is also where one of the most unique features of the home may be found. The Cornells were very active politically, and though they originally owned slaves, they emancipated their slaves sometime around 1793. Evidence suggests that the Cornell Mansion was a stop on the famous Underground Railroad. In the dining room, there was a hidden compartment on the left side of the three-section built-in china cabinet. There was just enough room for an adult or two to fit into the space.

The stately home served the family in good stead until 1904, when it was sold by the Cornells and changed hands several times before being lost during the Great Depression. It was then that The Venerable Mother Maria Kaupas, Foundress of the Sisters of Saint Casimir, purchased 203 acres of the property for \$40,000, with the intent of creating a Pennsylvania retreat for her Sisters and a school devoted to the education and spiritual development of young women.

Mother Maria, born Casimira Kaupas, emigrated to the U.S. from Lithuania in 1897, settling in Scranton, Pa., where she served as a housekeeper for her brother, Anthony, who was a priest. At the age of

18, she experienced a personal epiphany and decided to commit herself to religious life. After years of study, spiritual guidance, and intense preparation, Casimira's dream was realized in 1907, when the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Casimir was founded, and she received the name Sister Maria. Over the course of the next 20 years, the Congregation grew, and the Sisters spread their mission across the U.S. In 1932, Mother Maria, as she was by that time called, decided it was time for the Sisters to take their next big step, and they purchased the former Cornell property after a lengthy search.

Villa Joseph Marie High School was promptly founded, and students quickly flocked there. At the time of the purchase, there were several buildings on the grounds—the mansion house (renamed Maria Hall), Regina Hall, a large barn, and other farming structures. Maria and Regina halls served as both dormitory and classroom space for the Sisters and their students, who worked together to continue farming the land. The harvest from the farmlands and orchards, along with the Sisters' famous homemade bread, was sold to support the growing school. As the student population grew, however, the Sisters realized they would need to build a new school and move to a traditional day-school structure.

Once the new school and convent were constructed, Maria Hall fell out of use for some time. In the 1990s, Sister Madeleine Bunevicius, SSC, a former student and art teacher at Villa Joseph Marie, moved in to Maria Hall and undertook the huge process of restoring it, room by room, to its original grandeur. Once again, Maria Hall became an active part of the Villa Joseph Marie community. It was used for development and alumnae functions and other special events until a fire, caused by faulty wiring in the basement, devastated substantial portions of the building in January 2012, casting a shadow of uncertainty on the fate of Maria Hall.

Fortunately, this living piece of history was able to be preserved. Through the efforts of Villa's President, Mary T. Michel, working closely with historical architect Daniel T. Campbell, and Stephen McIntyre, President of Twining Construction, Maria Hall has been meticulously restored and even improved, as the building now complies with all contemporary use and occupancy codes. Maria Hall was officially reopened on September 13, 2014, when it served as the venue for Villa Joseph Marie High School's first Wall of Fame induction ceremony. In October, several members of the Villa Administration relocated their offices from the school building to the second floor of Maria Hall. The first floor, with its expansive kitchen, dining room, and parlor areas, is used regularly for various school meetings, social gatherings, and special functions, as well as for private events.

Maria Hall

To arrange a tour or to reserve Maria Hall for special occasions, please contact
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The restoration of Maria Hall has been recognized by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia as the winner of its 2015 Preservation Achievement Grand Jury Award.