

Burlington County Times

The house of her dreams in Riverton

- By Sally Friedman Correspondent
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Mary Louise Bianco Smith and Ken Smith (right) outside their home in Riverton, with her father Daniel Goffredo.

- Carl Kosola/Staff Photographer
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RIVERTON — There are times when Mary Louise Bianco Smith and her husband, Ken, find people at their door asking to have a look around inside.

Angelica, the adorable white bichon frise who sniffs out all visitors, stands sentry. Good-natured as they are, the Smiths understand the curiosity about this grand old dowager of a home that looks out on the Delaware River, and seems straight out of a movie set with its columns, handsome trim and magnificent grounds. When she was a little girl, Smith had that fascination with the house that she loved to stare at. And now that “staring” is done as the home’s delighted and proud owner. “And I never forget how lucky we are to live here,” said Smith, a longtime marketing executive for Rowan-UMDNJ. The riverfront home, built in 1851, reaches back to the Clothier family of Strawbridge & Clothier department store fame, who were among the 10 leading Philadelphia businessmen and merchants who staked out this land as a refuge from the bustle of the city and the heat of its summers. It turned out to be the country’s very first planned community. Designed by Samuel Sloan, a prominent mid-19th century architect, the Clothier home was designed in the Greek Revival style with characteristic gable roof and dentil cornices for Caleb Clothier. Over time, some changes have been made, but nothing has compromised its grace and beauty. For Smith, there was a special magnetism about the riverfront home. “I grew up in Riverton, and would ride my bike past the house. There was just something about it. I even said out loud that someday, I’d love to live there.” “Someday “ came after a divorce and remarriage in 1999 to Ken Smith, also a health care executive. “I knew how much my wife loved the house, but when we found out it was for sale, I admit I wasn’t as enthusiastic. At first, I didn’t even want to see it because of its size and its age.” But of course, there was no keeping his wife away, and when she stepped inside, she cried. “I knew I had to buy this house.” Almost every room — there are 20-plus on three floors — reveals some new surprise. Light pours into the 30-foot living room, a huge, elegant formal space in the front of the house. It’s a perfect place for a grand piano and an organ, for period furniture that seems custom made for the space. A mandolin collection, etchings and engravings that have special meaning for Mary Louise Smith’s father, Daniel Goffredo, a 90-year-old chemical engineer whose work helped create the inking process etchings

utilize. The formal dining room, with elegant floral wallpaper, is perfect for family holiday meals, and the large kitchen has the sturdy, original cabinets.

A butler's pantry holds the couple's collection of classic Spode Blue Italian china. One of the most charming rooms in the home is the front library/den, with its expanses of wood, leather sofas and beamed ceiling.

A Ken Smith family treasure in that room is the practice piano used in Carnegie Hall by Ken's late uncle, a blind pianist, and other musicians. Tiffany style lamps add sparkle to the home, and so do a collection of cherubs that sweeten the decor. The grounds, including a waterfall, pool and recently discovered stone wall once covered by ivy, add to the home's appeal. So do the plantings, flowers and walkways that made the home a very popular attraction during the Riverton Porch Club's recent garden tour. There's one additional feature at the old Clothier estate that remains a semi-mystery. In the home's basement is what appears to be part of an underground railway link.

"It's still being researched," said Ken Smith, "but the evidence is mounting that this home was part of that network."

