THE EDGAR ALLAN POE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE  
532 N. 7th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123

"A Tour of Poe's Philadelphia House"

The house you are about to enter was occupied by Edgar Allan Poe, his wife Virginia and his mother-in-law, Maria Clemm during the years 1843-1844. It is a small house called a "half-house", for it is only one room wide. The stairs are steep and narrow; there was little room to waste. As the Poes had to be careful walking up and down the stairs, and on the uneven brick walks, we ask you, too, to be cautious.

Edgar Allan Poe left very little information for us to use in recreating his life here. He was a writer, yet he kept no diary of his activities in this house. We know more about Poe's literature than we do about his life.

The National Park Service is continually gathering information and sorting fact from myth. Much of what you are about to see is based on this research and on tradition. As we discover new material, Poe becomes more human and his life makes his creations all the more remarkable.

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Where you are now standing would have been the Poe family's garden. Attached to the brick wall before you would have been a porch where the Poes may have enjoyed many pleasant evenings. The door you see in front of you was an entrance to the house from Seventh Street. Please enter the house through this door and step down into the parlor.

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"My address is 234 North Seventh Street, above Spring Garden, West side."

Edgar Allan Poe to James Russell Lowell, 1843.

Poe and his family warmly received many literary figures in this house. Possibly, there were discussions of matters such as international copyrights and the writings of other authors. These would be evenings of enjoyment and nights to be remembered. Mayne Reid, an author and friend of the Poe family recalled:

"In this humble domicile I can say that I spent some of the pleasantest hours of my life -- certainly some of the most intellectual."

While guests were entertained in the parlor; perhaps Mrs. Clemm would be in the dining room preparing refreshments.

(Cross the hall to the Dining Room)

Mrs. Clemm was described by Mayne Reid as the "ever-vigilant guardian of the house, watching it against the silent but continuous sap of necessity . . ."

The year the family lived here was a difficult time. Poe, who had been an editor of three magazines prior to this time, was now "unemployed". He was what we would call today a free-lance writer. Unfortunately, this was not financially profitable, so poverty joined the Poe household.

During these difficult times the family needed Mrs. Clemm, who was a person who got by with little. Her work here in the dining room and in the little wooden shed kitchen (which no longer stands), was as important as Poe's for the survival of the family.

While Mrs. Clemm managed the household, Poe, perhaps, worked on his writing on the second floor. As you go up, keep in mind the 19th century design of the steep stairway and walk carefully.

(Go up the stairs and turn right into Poe's study)
"They who dream by day are cognizant of many things that escape those who dream only by night. In their grey visions they obtain a glimpse of eternity and thrill, in awakening to find out they have been upon the verge of the great secret."

"Eleanora" (1842)

For Edgar Allan Poe, the world of imagination was his most important sense. Imagination, used intuitively, became for Poe an 'almost divine faculty which perceives immediately the inner and secret relations of things', according to Charles Baudelaire, the French poet.

Poe used his imagination extensively when it came to his writings. This is evident in the writings of Poe that were published when he lived in this house: "The Black Cat", "The Gold Bug" and "The Tell-Tale Heart".

(Cross the hall to Poe's bedroom)

"His imagination faced in both directions toward the normal and abnormal, giving him a permanent endowment in the heightened sensitivity and visionary power of the poet and artist."

Vincent Buranelli
(Poe biographer and Critic)

Poe was a dreamer, but he was not a dark sinister man, locked in a damp and dingy basement doing his writing. As you can see, the house Poe lived in was unlike the setting of many of his stories. It's southern and eastern exposure give it a bright and cheery atmosphere conducive to thinking and writing.

(Go up the stairs to the room on the left)

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This room was perhaps used by Maria Clemm as her bedroom. Mrs. Clemm seems to have been a strong woman of great character. Yet, Muddy, as Poe called her, was much more than a mother-in-law or housekeeper. During his adult years, Edgar Allan Poe came to think of Maria Clemm as his mother. His sonnet, "To My Mother" is a beautiful tribute to the poet's dear Muddy. This poem can be seen downstairs in the exhibit room.

(Proceed across the hall and watch your step)

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This may have been the room of Virginia, Poe's wife. Only 21 years old when the family lived here, she was dying of tuberculosis. Virginia was not always confined to this room, however. Whenever possible, the family would picnic along the Schuylkill River or Wissahickon Creek.

Poe's love for his wife and the sadness about her illness and death are captured forever in the famous poem, "Annabel Lee" (text in exhibit room).

"But we loved with a love that was more than love —
I, and my Annabel Lee".

In April 1844, Edgar and Virginia Poe left Philadelphia and this house, and moved to New York City. Mrs. Clemm stayed behind for a short while to attend to financial matters. She would join the Poes later. Philadelphia marked the peak of Edgar Allan Poe's literary life. He had worked as an editor and literary critic. Thirty-one of his short stories were published while in Philadelphia. As Arthur Hobson Quinn, Poe's eminent biographer, stated:

"For part of his stay he was even happy, and when he left it, (Philadelphia) it is not too much to say that he left happiness behind him".