

Two years' dusty work reveals 16 Cumberland County homes from pre-1730

By THOMAS BARLAS, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 6, 2013 12:45 am

Joan Berkey spent the last two years crawling through dusty attics and basements as part of her search for an important part of Cumberland County's history.

That search — which also included tedious reviews of old deeds, nails, floorboards, hand-hewn ceiling beams and some fireplaces big enough for a small person to step into — remains ongoing.

But the work has paid off, as Berkey found some of the county's oldest existing wooden homes, including about 16 built before 1730. A few of those homes date to the mid- to late-1600s. The earliest is the Log Granary, built in the Greenwich section of Greenwich Township around 1650.

While it may seem surprising that those old wooden homes are still standing, Berkey said their existence is a tribute to their sturdy construction and design by the Dutch, Swedes, Finns and other immigrants who settled the area centuries ago. Also helping to preserve the homes is the fact that many of the structures continue to serve as private homes, she said.

"I found more than I thought," said Berkey, 60, who lives in a more than 200-year-old house in Dennis Township, Cape May County.

Berkey is documenting the old homes as part of a project for the Cumberland County Historical Society. The work is funded by an \$11,000 grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission.

The study focused only on wooden structures because they are less likely to withstand the passing of time. Brick and stone homes are easier to find because they last longer than their wooden counterparts.

While Berkey's search covers all of Cumberland County, most of the homes she found are in the small community of Greenwich. Greenwich is considered to be Cumberland County's oldest settlement. The course of Greenwich's main street — Ye Greate Street — has not changed since it was laid out in 1684.

Sarah Hancock, a 52-year-old special education teacher in Bridgeton, lives in the Dixon-Sheppard House on Ye Greate Street. She bought the house, which was built around 1690-1710, a decade ago.

"I saw it and I just fell in love with it," Hancock said.

Part of the charm of the house, which has been enlarged over the centuries, is that its 7-foot-wide fireplace — originally used for cooking and heating — has the original, massive, hand-carved