

History Lives Here

Walk through 200 years of American history in less than 1,500 square feet of space at the Christian C. Sanderson Museum in Pennsylvania's Brandywine Valley.



PHOTO BY STACY TILLILIE

BLINK AND YOU MIGHT MISS IT, for the Christian C. Sanderson Museum looks like any humble country house that you'd find dotting the roads of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, about 25 miles southwest of Philadelphia. But it's not the house that's the object of fascination here; rather, it's the eclectic collection of more than 1,500 items depicting some 200 years of American history—from the American Revolution to the American Civil War to both World Wars—on display inside the last home of Christian C. Sanderson (1882–1966) that captivates visitors.

"Chris Sanderson was a teacher, a lecturer, a musician, a radio broadcaster, a historian and a collector who got his love of history from his mother [with whom he lived until her death on Christmas morning in 1943]," says Charles Ulmann, the museum's curator. "He was also good friends with the Wyeths [the family of famous artists lived nearby]; in fact, since Chris was—let's say, 'regularly behind on his rent,' N.C. Wyeth and, later, Andrew Wyeth told Chris' landlord that they'd guarantee payment of his rent. Andrew was also one of the founders of the museum."

Marking its 50th anniversary this year, the volunteer-run museum is a treasure-trove of history, art and family keepsakes (think everything from Sanderson's baby cradle to a ticket from the 1915 World Series to a piece of his raincoat that he wore to a presidential inauguration) showcased floor-to-ceiling throughout eight themed rooms on two floors of the home. You

could say that Sanderson was a hoarder of history. Witness Sanderson's quote posted on the wall: "Please excuse the look of the house, but everything is precious to me." Just a fraction of his lifetime collection is on display—the rest was either deemed unsalvageable after his death or is in storage.

In the Battlefield Room, you'll discover a pocketbook belonging to Jennie Wade (the only civilian casualty of the Battle of Gettysburg); cannonballs from the Revolutionary War; and early 20th-century photographs of Washington's Brandywine Headquarters in Brandywine Battlefield Park. (Sanderson lived in the house from 1906 to 1922.) The Music Room houses a Victrola record player, Sanderson's vintage violins from his days as a fiddler in his band the Pocopson Valley Boys, and a square dance booklet that he authored for the Hires root-beer company. And in the Autograph Hallway, photographs and autographs from such legends and luminaries as Geronimo, W.F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Teddy Roosevelt, Alexander Graham Bell, Helen Keller and more cover the walls.

Throughout the museum, you'll also find more than 40 pieces of artwork by the Wyeths, including paintings and sketches by N.C., Andrew and Jamie, along with personal letters and family photographs. Of special note for Andrew Wyeth admirers are what's believed to be the artist's only pastel drawing; his 1940 painting *The Country Schoolmaster*, which is a portrait of Sanderson; and the 1937 Map of Historic Chester County, which was compiled by Sanderson and illustrated by Andrew. Also, it was Andrew who brought to the museum the famous barber shop sign painted by N.C. Wyeth that, referring to the Battle of Brandywine, reads: "THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE WASHINGTON & LAFAYETTE HAD A VERY CLOSE SHAVE."

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), the museum is presenting the exhibit "Wyeth Unplugged," featuring artifacts, letters and photographs from Sanderson's collection, providing a window on the friendship between the two men and their families. The exhibit, which will run from May through the end of November, will be small, but its impact won't be, says Ulmann. For even within the confines of a cozy little country house, the compelling stories told through Sanderson's extraordinary collection shine larger than life.

WHAT: Christian C. Sanderson Museum

WHERE: 1755 Creek Road, Chadds Ford, PA

WHEN: March–November, Saturday–Sunday, noon–4 p.m., and other times by appointment by contacting the curator at curator@sandersonmuseum.org.

HOW MUCH: \$8 for adults, \$5 for children ages 6–12, and free for children age 5 and under.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: 610/388-6545 or sandersonmuseum.org