



Inheriting a home from your parents is not unusual. Inheriting one that stretches back through six generations of your family is.

## Historic Hand-Me-Down

>>By David Serchuk  
Photos by John Nation



It's easy to miss the Hikes-Hunsinger House as you drive down Hikes Lane in southeastern Louisville. Surrounded by the suburbia of the Hikes Point neighborhood, you could be forgiven for blowing right by the solid brown-brick house. But if you knew what to look for, it would be impossible to miss — a comparatively large two-story structure on two acres of land. The home is not all that imposing, but it looks classic and tasteful, and literally from a different era.

The home's current owner and caretaker is Charles "Chas" Stephens. He is a bit of a raconteur, especially at ease talking about his home, which has been in his family since it was built in 1820 (some histories say 1824) by Stephens' direct ancestor, George Hikes Jr. Today, thanks to Stephens' patient and continual care, the house looks both of its time and invitingly livable, highlighted by a cozy Victorian back porch, flowering magnolia trees, and rooms filled with period antiques, either inherited (such as a chest that came with the family from Pennsylvania that dates to the mid-1700s) or purchased

by Stephens. But to him this isn't a museum; it's simply home, as it has been to his family since James Monroe was president.

Stephens, 49, is president of C.E. Stephens Inc., a local packaging firm, as well as a partner with his older brother Claude in Generation 14, a consulting firm hired to make businesses environmentally sound. Though born and raised in Jeffersonton, Stephens spent his entire life around the home and eventually took it over from his mother, Barbara Hunsinger Stephens, in 2006. When he was a child, the house was a working farm on 50 acres, which tied him to the land from an early age and led to all sorts of Tom Sawyer-ish adventures. "Oh, hell yes, I loved coming here," Stephens says. "I grew up in J-town, but Claude and I were here all the time. The family was farming corn, beans or barley and, when they'd harvest, my grandfather would keep 20 to 30 bales of hay that we'd play in."

By today's standards some of Stephens' stories can surprise. For example, he learned how to drive courtesy of a '50s-era Plymouth the family had around. The twist is that he was only seven when this



Opposite page: Owners Chas Stephens and Kim Laramore-Stephens, and (inset) a c.1895 photo of ancestral residents Julia and Mary Ellen Hunsinger. This page: Charles and Lena Hunsinger and family in the 1890s, and the present-day home, with its artifact-filled parlor.



took place, and a second twist is that he was taught by his nine-year-old brother. “It started right up,” Stephens says, “and we’d have a hell of a good time.”

The family’s history in Louisville dates back to 1790 — “I don’t think anybody has been on their land as long as we have, maybe in the state of Kentucky,” says Stephens — before Kentucky was even a state. It begins with George Hikes Sr., a Revolutionary War colonel who, according to *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, purchased the land from another Revolutionary War officer, William Meriwether, in either 1790 or 1791. (Stephens says the land — somewhere between 1,500 and 4,000 acres — was a grant from the newly formed United States.) At the time, Jefferson County belonged to the state of Virginia, as Kentucky didn’t gain statehood until 1792.

George Sr. was industrious and civic-minded. He opened gristmills and sawmills along the south fork of Beargrass Creek and encouraged the development of churches and schools. He parceled out his land in 200-acre plots to his four children, including George Jr., the architect and builder of the Hikes-Hunsinger House. The house was built in the Federal manner, America’s first native architectural style, of local stone, including thick slabs of limestone for the basement. It is for these early Hikes family members that the Hikes Point area is named. According to the National Register of Historic Places — which registered the home in 1975 — George Jr. built and operated a gristmill and a distillery, though the family spirits were described as good only for “medicinal purposes.” He also served as a Jefferson County justice in 1833, and during April 1845 deeded an acre of land to build the Hikes Grade School.

He passed the house on to son Edward Jones Hikes, who passed it to daughter Lena Crawford. She passed it to son Claude Hobson Hunsinger, who passed it to daughters Barbara Hunsinger Stephens and Marjorie Hunsinger Weeks. The former then purchased her sister’s share, and when her husband Charles passed away in 2005, she lived there one additional year before their son Chas got the home.

George Hikes Jr.’s older brother Jacob also was an important figure in Louisville life. He made Louisville’s first writing paper, owned a cloth-fulling mill and held \$10,000 worth of stock in the Louisville and Bardstown Turnpike Co. He served with Gen. (and later President) William Henry Harrison at the Battle of Tippecanoe, taking a slug he would carry the rest of his life. But his greatest achievement was a moral one. A slave-owner conflicted about that “peculiar institution,” Hikes was a committee member of the American Colonialization Society — which supported repatriating slaves to Africa — as early as 1836 and paid for an entire family of

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his own slaves to move to Liberia.

In all, four Hikes sons built homes around the same time, in similar styles, but only the Hikes-Hunsinger House remains in the family. This is not lost on Chas Stephens. A passionate gardener who grows many of his own vegetables, he says that as he works the land he thinks back to all the generations that preceded him. "As I dig in the garden, it's interesting to think about the family getting food from the same piece of ground for 222 years," he says. Not long ago he and his daughter Caroline dug up a brick pad near their smokehouse and found a host of artifacts — a glass medicinal bottle that looks a century old, some shards of an old crock and a horseshoe — and he's also found stacks of old family letters. "I've been learning here forever," he says. "How to drive, how to strip wood, refinish furniture, plant trees. Whoever lives here is learning all the time."

**T**o walk through the home is to see the results of the never-ending piddling — his term — of both Stephens and his wife, Kim Laramore-Stephens. Antique touches abound. There is a parlor, complete with matching 19th-century sitting chairs; a couch from 1790; an antique bureau left by a lodger; paintings of long-deceased relatives, including Eliza Hikes, Chas' great-great-aunt; a collection of old stoneware jugs. In general, everything in the house looks from a period not our own, except for the modern stainless-steel refrigerator. A statue of an American eagle, a wooden carving created during the time between the American Revolution and the creation of the Constitution in 1787, has been in the house since it was constructed. The dining-room table would not be out of place on *Masterpiece Theater*, and the 77-key Boardman & Gray piano dates from at least 1860.

The day I arrived Stephens had just finished working in the garden, chopping wood and polishing the wide-beamed original floors. It struck me that these are basically the same chores he would have done 100 years ago. "It's a great house if you're ADD," he says, "because there's always something that needs to be done."

"She's friendly and comfortable, but also tough," says Claude. "It's a structure, and structures crumble. When it needs your attention, it demands your attention. A leaking roof is (like) an ongoing argument with the spouse. You have to fix it."

The most recent major renovations happened in the 1980s, when a heating and air-conditioning system was installed. The roof is on its third generation — from a traditional "shake" roof to a tin roof to a modern shingle roof. A coal fireplace was added in the 1880s.

The historic house includes some 4,500 square feet — 10 rooms, with a cellar and

an attic in addition to the two floors. Despite all that, and its impressive resume, the Hikes-Hunsinger House assessed for only \$233,100 in 2007. (It's up for review next year.) Stephens estimates that the average annual maintenance cost, including insurance, heating and air, runs between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

The home's generous size has allowed the entire clan to gather for special meals, like Thanksgiving, when upwards of 50 people might adjourn, with multiple fireplaces roaring. Looking back, Claude says he was so cozy with the home that he didn't realize how special it was as a child. "I thought every child had some big old house; I just hadn't seen theirs," he says. The family's deep roots in the Louisville area, he says, provide a unique sense of his personal history. "I know where a good number of people in my family were born and died," Claude says. "I don't mean in Louisville — I mean within a few square feet."

The brothers estimate that since the home was built, perhaps 20 people have perished in the house — including their father and grandfather — but just as many were born there, too, including their mother, born in 1932. She remembers that, as a child, she would walk a mile to get the school bus and not see a car pass. Hikes Lane, so busy now, was once a dirt road that doubled as a driveway for the house. Growing up in the house, Barbara Hunsinger Stephens says, has made her feel extra connected to Louisville's history. During the Civil War, Union soldiers camped alongside nearby Beargrass Creek, and her great-grandfather gave them potatoes and hams out of the smokehouse. "And in return," she says, "he asked them not to bother the people in the house, or the people on the farm, who were slaves." The soldiers did as asked, even as they kept an armed guard around the home to protect it from guerilla action from Southern sympathizers. They stayed for two to three days and then marched on to the Battle of Perryville.

Laramore-Stephens, a recent addition to the house's long history, says there's another element that makes the house special: being welcomed by some of the home's non-corporal inhabitants. "I don't say it's haunted," she says. "I say they have family spirits, and they played a few tricks on me at first." Not long after she first moved in, she says, she was in the shower when she heard loud footsteps at the door. She yelled but there was no answer. Her husband assured her it hadn't been him. "I said I had company, apparently," Laramore-Stephens says. But the spirits have remained benign as they've gotten to know her. "The spirits are quiet, because they feel the love in the house," she says. ■



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