Figure 1. Exterior of the Stencil House in Columbus, NY, 1952.

Figure 2. Stencil House dining room before disassembly in Columbus, NY, 1952.

"There is a house that is no more a house" Conservation of the Painted Wall Paneling in Shelburne Museum's Stencil House

Nancie Ravenel, Objects Conservator, Shelburne Museum

ABSTRACT

Often an artifact's past history can provides clues to its current condition and influence proposed conservation treatment. That history can be discerned through physical examination and through archival research. When the painted wood wall paneling from the Stencil House came to Shelburne Museum founder Electra Havemeyer Webb's attention in 1952, it was covered by about five layers of wall paper. Although she was collecting examples of New England vernacular architecture at the time, it was really these painted walls that grabbed her interest rather than the farm house. This paper will consider the available documentation concerning the move of the house from Columbus, New York to Shelburne, Vermont, the ensuing restoration of the wall paneling undertaken from 1952–57, and the issues that they raise. The manner in which the documentation and past treatment influenced the 1999-2000 conservation/restoration treatment of the painted wall paneling will be discussed.

Electra Havemeyer Webb grew up in a household surrounded by fine and decorative arts. Her parents, H.O. and Louisine Havemeyer, collected old master and Impressionist paintings and Asian ceramics and bronzes. The Havemeyer New York apartment was decorated with furnishings designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. In contrast to her parents, Electra sought out American antiques and folk art. The Webbs' homes in Shelburne, Vermont and Westbury, New York overflowed with her treasures.

In 1947, after raising five children and following her husband's retirement, Mrs. Webb concentrated her efforts on creating a museum to share her collection with the public. She purchased a farmhouse to display her collections of ceramics, glass, dolls and pewter. On the surrounding land she decided to build a structure to exhibit the Webb family's collection of horse-drawn vehicles. The structure was based on a horseshoe-shaped barn from Georgia, Vermont built in place using wood salvaged from a total of eleven barns.

Between 1947 and 1952, eleven more buildings were moved onto the property. Most were disassembled and then reassembled on site. Museum staff typically drew floor plans and took detailed photographs of the structures before and during disassembly to guide them in reassembling the buildings once they were in Shelburne.

Sometimes she could be quite inventive as to how a structure would be reassembled. The Vermont House was a clapboard structure that she clad in stone and then furnished as the home of a fictional retired sea captain whose house contained wonderful things that he had acquired during his travels. Her intention was to delight the eye more than it was to educate.

Figure 3. Alan Munro working on Stencil House paneling, circa 1954.

Through Mrs. Webb's numerous letters to her assistants, notes to the workmen, and planning lists in the Shelburne Museum Archives, we know she was an active participant in every decision that was made when these structures were re-erected and the artifacts installed.

When the painted wall paneling from the Stencil House came to Mrs. Webb's attention in 1952 it was covered by about five layers of wall paper (figs. 1 & 2). And rather than the house itself, it was really these painted walls that grabbed her interest. In a letter dated October 1952 to American Decorative Arts scholar Nina Fletcher Little, Mrs. Webb writes:

> I asked Mr. Bayard to get your opinion regarding a stenciled room in New York State …the room seems to me like a very good and rare one. Although I have no special place to put it just now, I would hate to lose it if it is as good as I think.[1]

No longer useful as a dwelling due to structural problems, it was, to quote Robert Frost, "a house that was no more a house, on a farm that was no more a farm."

In November 1952, Mrs. Webb writes to Mrs. Little that the Museum had purchased the Stencil House. The following month, a group of workmen from the Museum went to Columbus, NY to photograph the house, label the interior paneling, and remove it to Shelburne. In the spring of 1953, the workmen returned to label the beams and undecorated boards from the rest of the house and bring them to Shelburne.

In photos of the Columbus, NY work site taken at the time, there is a lot of what appears to be waste wood on the ground around the truck. One can assume that that wood was too rotten to be reused, so there was no point in bringing it back to Shelburne. In Mrs. Webb's correspondence with her workmen between 1953 and 1954, there is quite a bit of discussion about finding appropriate wood boards to reconstruct the Stencil House. In contrast to the other historic houses at Shelburne, it appears that no floor plan was made of the house in Columbus before it was moved, though a floor plan has been established based on the photographs. Additionally, the dining room and front hall were only partially photo documented, leaving gaps in our records as to what the house looked like before it was reassembled at the museum.

One has to wonder if Mrs. Webb was still thinking of the decoratively-painted walls as the object that she was acquiring, and the house simply as a container for their display. Letters to Nina Fletcher Little indicate that Mrs. Webb was looking for more painted wall paneling to add to the house and that she was already concocting stories to make it into a "historic house." Architectural alteration was not unusual within her circle of collector colleagues, which included Henry Francis Dupont and Katherine Prentis Murphy, particularly if the alterations made the building or interior room more symmetrical, more comfortable in dimension or more harmonious with an exterior landscape.

That sense of the architecture as a backdrop for the paneling and the collections is further reinforced

by an undated memo from Mrs. Webb entitled "Suggestions for Stencil House." She says,

> Must use Holmes boards in this house. We also have some other very fine wide planks which could be cut and used on the walls or on the floor…Maybe in this case the stairs could be worked in on the West side. Let us try and find an open stairs which would be nicer than closed in. Like the little stone house or even with simple spindles. See page 196 Old American Houses by Williams.[2]

In the case of the Stencil House, it seems Mrs. Webb was creating an exhibition building from salvaged lumber, as she did with the Horseshoe Barn, rather than saving an example of domestic architecture. The house is no more a house; it's an exhibit hall.

This paper addresses the documentation and treatments of three of the rooms in the house—the parlor, the dining room, and the front hallway. Documentation from the 1950s of what was actually done to the painted paneling in the parlor consists of a series of un-annotated photographs from the museum's archives. No similar documentation exists for the other two rooms. In 1990, University of Vermont historic preservation student Letitia Richardson interviewed former Shelburne Museum employee Alan Munro to fill in some of the blanks.[3]

After the house arrived in the 1950s, Alan undertook most of the work on the painted wall paneling in the parlor (fig. 3). It appears he also worked in the front hallway, but probably did not work in the dining room. Generously, he described his methods of removing the wall paper and incorporating new wood boards with the old.

At some point while the house was in New York, the windows throughout the house were enlarged and the paneling was chopped out to accommodate the larger windows. The windows currently in the house are smaller than they were when the house was acquired, so he had to add new boards under the windows in his reconstruction (fig. 4). He also had to add new boards to the parlor and front hallway to accommodate the changes in the floor plan that Mrs. Webb desired. For example, with the exception of the boards under the windows, the three walls other than the fireplace wall were in original paint. The fireplace wall is unusual because so many panels were completely added.

He described the Stencil House work to Letitia as a "dirty, dusty, lousy job." His system for incorporating new boards into the old was to first coat them with a protein glue based gesso to give them the right textural feel, then to apply an oil-based paint. The appearance of age, the old hand-worn appearance Mrs. Webb so desired, was provided by a layer of varnish followed by paste wax on to which rottenstone, raw umber dry pigment, and pumice were worked into the surface.[4]

By 1990 Alan's varnish had unevenly discolored in the parlor and the front hallway, and the painted surfaces in the dining room were cracking and shearing off the wood paneling (figs. 5&6). For more specificity of what was done to the walls,

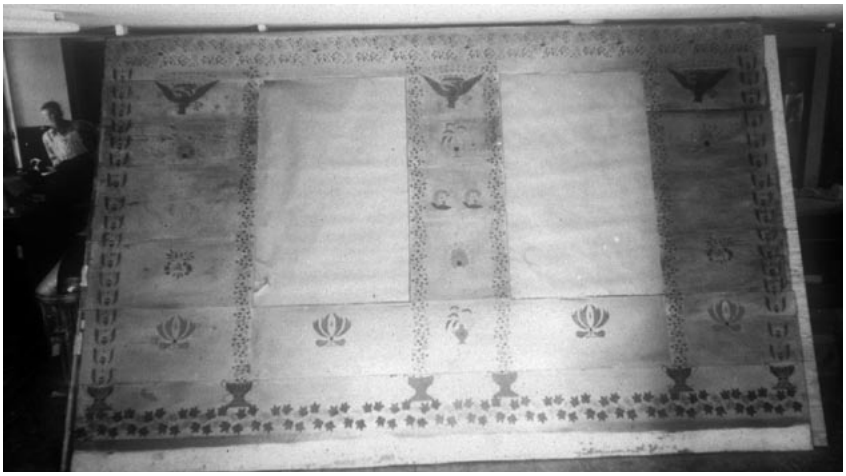

Figure 4. Wall, during treatment, with panel fills under the windows, circa 1954.

Figure 5. View of two parlor walls, 1990.

I mapped the paneled surfaces either on photographs or on measured drawings with the help of volunteers. We noted the condition of all the paint, the 1950s additions and alterations, and the alterations that were likely to have been made after installation.

We learned that additions made in the 1950s were easily distinguished because of a difference in texture due to that gesso layer under the paint. The original is much thinner in appearance and almost free of brush strokes while the paint applied in the 1950s has a pronounced brush stroke.

To support our observations, cross sectional samples were taken throughout the house and stained with fluorescent dyes to indicate the media in the layers. There was a good deal of original paint visible under the varnish and wax layers that had been applied by Alan Munro in the parlor and front hallway. Samples from the parlor and front hallway show a priming layer of glue, topped with a distemper paint, followed by the varnish that Alan described applying. In the front hallway and parlor, the discolored varnish was removed and overpaints were reduced creating a more unified appearance to the walls.

In terms of condition and structure, the painted surface in the dining room was much more complex. The texturally uneven paint surface suggested that these walls had been completely repainted in the 1950s, and this top layer covered areas of original paint as well as large areas where original paint had been lost. It is in this room that we see the hand of Mrs. Webb. I don't mean to suggest that she got out her paint brush and had at it herself, but the paint cross sections from the dining room are very different from those in the other rooms.

While a few dining room panels seemed to have been overpainted with just oil paint, on most panels whatever salmon-colored original background paint remained was covered by a thick layer of gesso followed by a number of different colors. Lack of grime between those paint layers above the gesso suggests that they were applied in quick succession. I think what we see is Mrs. Webb searching for what she might have considered a better background color for her furnishings in this room.

The gesso appeared to be pulling whatever original paint that might have been left off of the wood. Since the overall goal of the treatment was to create surfaces that were harmonious within the house,

Figure 6. Detail of painted surface on dining room walls in raking light, 1999.

Figure 7. Fireplace wall in dining room after repainting, 2000.

consolidating and overpainting flaking surfaces in the dining room was not a reasonable option. Moreover, since so much original paint survived in the front hallway and parlor and there wasn't sufficient early photo documentation to indicate how much original paint was in the dining room before the room was repainted in the 1950s, the curators and conservator made the difficult decision to recreate this room with museum painters and a decorative painter hired for the project.

After the dining room walls were documented as they existed, the flaking paint resulting from the 1950s restoration was mechanically stripped. Where gesso was not present, the surfaces were coated with an isolating layer of Acryloid B72 prior to repainting. Finally the stencil-painted decoration on those walls was recreated using the salmon color discovered in the analysis as the background color and repeating the stencil pattern applied in the 1950s (fig. 7).

In closing, fairly complete photo documentation of the parlor and its treatment in the 1950s combined with an oral history from the workman involved with the project in the 1950s provided the current caretakers, the curators and conservators with a very good picture of the history of these wall panels.

In contrast, the lack of early photo documentation of the dining room, a lack of oral histories from the workmen involved in this project, the poor quality of the stencil painting executed in the 1950s and the very poor condition of the paint left conservators and curators to make educated guesses about what the painted surfaces might have looked like and how to recreate them.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. Letter from Electra Havemeyer Webb to Nina Fletcher Little, October 21, 1952. Shelburne Museum Archives, Electra Havemeyer Webb papers, Box 3, Folder 10:30.

2. Electra Havemeyer Webb, "Suggestions for Stencil House," n.d. Shelburne Museum Archives, SMA-254 Box 8, Stencil House (4.19) Contents 1953–1958 folder.

3. Alan Munro Stencil House interview, 1990. Part of Sound Recording Collection, Shelburne Museum Archives. Audio cassette.

4. Alan Munro Stencil House interview, 1990.