

Carroll Yesteryears

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Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House a Window into Early 1800s

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

With gas prices high this summer, why not visit a place close to home. Westminster's East Main Street is a lovely part of town with towering trees offering pleasant shade and some of the town's oldest and prettiest homes. Three of them constitute the Historical Society of Carroll County's campus and can be toured Wednesday through Saturday for a modest fee or free next Sunday, July 17, during the Society's Sundae Scoop event between 1 and 4 p.m.

Elisabeth D. Garrett, an expert on American decorative arts and social history, wrote *At Home: The American Family 1750-1870*. One chapter discusses dining rooms in homes of the period. The Historical Society's Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House at 206 East Main fits perfectly into that time frame and its dining room is one of the prettiest rooms on the campus.

Garrett wrote: "Meals at home in early America were served in the dining room, sitting room, drawing room, bedchamber, kitchen, hall, piazza, and any other convenient location. Flexibility was essential when servants, weather, health, and family composition were ever-changing. When family members were ill, and they often were, they ate in bedchambers. Before central heating became available, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the family ate in a hearth-warmed room in winter. In summer they would gather where it was coolest." For Jacob and Elizabeth Sherman, who built their home in 1807, the dining room fireplace would provide heat during winter months, but as summer approached, the large windows could be thrown open to bring in whatever cool air was available.

The presence of a dining room marks this family as being one of the more affluent in the area. Not everyone could dedicate a room primarily to eating. Garrett explained: "A specialized dining room was a symbol of economic success, and a spate of nineteenth-century architectural design books, published both here and abroad, jealously guarded this indicant of middle-class status for those who had both sufficient money and admirable taste. . . . And just as few rooms in the American home were used for one purpose alone, even formal dining rooms had to accommodate a variety of activities."

In addition to the dining table surrounded by chairs, visitors to the house will see a slant-top desk, a grandfather clock, an elegant sideboard, and other furniture which reveal the family used the room for more than meals. They probably gathered around the table at various times to write, sew, or read. Jacob used the desk for business matters. Mirrors on two walls helped capture and spread sunlight from the windows during the day, while at night they reflected light from candles on the table, the fireplace mantel, or elsewhere.

An inventory made after Jacob's death in 1822 revealed curtains hung at the windows and a large picture on one wall. Today, a Winchester portrait hangs over the fireplace. During a recent restoration, an expert in wood graining restored the doors of the room and the cupboards to their original faux mahogany appearance creating additional elegance.

All these decorative elements testify to Jacob's financial success. Prior to building this house, he owned a tavern across the street. Operating it would have been a profitable business on a busy thoroughfare which carried a tremendous amount of traffic in and out of Baltimore.

See for yourself how a well-to-do Westminster family would have lived 200 years ago even though they were 30 miles from sophisticated Baltimore. You can also tour the two other buildings that are part of the Historical Society campus. Enjoy a visit during the July 17<sup>th</sup> Sundae Scoop event. In addition to a tour, you can purchase frozen custard, Italian ices, and other cool summer treats from The Cow between 1 and 4 p.m.

*Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



*Image 1: Courtesy Historical Society of Carroll County. Caption: Exterior view of the 1807 Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House*



*Image 2: Courtesy Historical Society of Carroll County. Caption: The dining room of the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House at 206 East Main Street, Westminster, offers a glimpse of how an upper-middle class family would have lived at the beginning of the 1800s.*