

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Everyday life is theme of talks
by Jay Graybeal

The historical society will be offering a series of enrichment lectures on local history for its house museum guides and the general public.

A major theme of the enrichment series is what museums now call "everyday life," a field of study that only recently became of interest to historians and museum curators.

When Americans were rediscovering their history and arts after the Centennial, the nation was experiencing great social changes brought about, in part, by industrialization and immigration.

Many prestigious museums and wealthy collectors began accumulating and displaying "beautiful" objects once owned by the Colonial elite. These objects were viewed as examples of the best of the American past and as proof that the early upper class had been as "genteel" as their European contemporaries. The message of such interpretation was clear: Americans had inherited a legacy for the colonial upper-class, which now resided with the contemporary elite. This approach presented a distorted and incomplete view of the American past. Largely ignored were the lives of the vast majority of the population and disturbing themes such as dissent, conflict and differences.

By the mid-twentieth century American history was largely viewed as the history of the middle class. Many Americans felt that their country had always been what it was for them: a land of middle-class families who shared common values and economic success. The social upheaval of the 1960s exposed deep resentments in some groups and revealed that the study of history must include the experiences of women, children, blacks, Native Americans and the poor. The studies which have resulted from this broader approach show that America has known greater diversity and conflict than earlier interpretations had shown.

Everyday life is the underlying theme in most of the work of the historical society. The recently restored Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House in Westminster offers a unique opportunity to explore the lives of the diverse nineteenth century families who lived there, Pennsylvania German and English, wealthy and poor, men and women, black and white, and master and slave.

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Although far from complete, their stories form a part of the social fabric of life in the region. They shared common experiences of raising families, laboring in the household or workplace, and dealing with the many external forces over which they had little or no control. They experienced the full range of human emotion from joy to sorrow and not infrequently, they fought or cooperated amongst themselves or with their neighbors.

Once these personal histories are at least partly revealed, the house becomes much more than simply an impressive example of architecture or a backdrop for handsome furnishings. Contemporary visitors will find that they have much in common with the former residents. For many this makes history interesting, relative and worth remembering.

The five lectures and one bus trip are intended to provide a broader understanding of county history. The following topics will be explored:

- * Oct. 1 – Highlights of Carroll County History.
- * Oct. 8 – The Architectural Heritage of Carroll County.
- * Oct. 15 – Introduction to Local Furniture Styles and Craftsmanship.
- * Oct. 22 – A Historical Perspective on Decorative Arts in Carroll County.
- * Nov. 5 – Everyday Life in Carroll County.

Lectures will be held in the Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 E. Main St. in Westminster. Admission is free for current and potential house museum guides who agree to donate 18 hours of service. For all others the admission fee is \$12 per lecture or \$55 for the series. The fee for the bus trip is \$3 for members and \$36 for non-members.

Photo credit: Courtesy of the Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: In this turn-of-the-century photo, Ruth Immel of Taneytown demonstrates spinning, a scene that would have been familiar to most households in the 18th and 19th centuries.