

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

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There's much more than old bricks to house restoration
by Jay Graybeal

During the month of May, groups throughout Maryland are observing National Historic Preservation month. Much attention is being given to the "bricks and mortar" aspect of restorations. For many restorers, however, restoring the architectural details is a prelude to refurnishing with appropriate household objects.

Although few owners desire accurately furnished rooms, a perusal of the historical record can be a rewarding experience for the homeowner. The historical society is now in the process of refurnishing the recently restored Sherman-Fisher-Shellman house in Westminster. The research for this project can serve as a model for other local properties.

The personal papers of former occupants, such as account books, receipts, diaries and letters often include references to the acquisition, use and disposal of household furnishings. Regrettably, papers of the Jacob Sherman and John Fisher families have not been located and may not survive. Several letters written by the last owner Mary B. Shellman mention a number of objects that she disposed of in the 1930s.

Local business papers also provide clues. The Fishers made several purchases from F.A. Sharrer, a Westminster cabinetmaker and undertaker. In 1860 Sharrer charged \$1 for "maken bed rales" and three years later Mrs. Fisher purchased an expensive "coffin and case" costing \$100 for her late husband.

Shellman also patronized the Sharrer firm. In 1895 she bought an "oak chamber suit, 3 pieces" (\$21), a "Cordoroy Couch" (\$8) and an "Oak Comode" (\$5.75). She made partial payment with a used rocking chair worth \$2. Six years later she purchased an "iron bedstead" (\$4), "woven wire springs" (\$2.75) and "mattress" (\$2.50). In the same year she bought a new "Perfect Range" (\$12.50) from the Westminster Gas Light Company.

Family photographs can often provide information on the type and placement in late nineteenth century and later homes. The historical society is fortunate to own a remarkable set of images taken of the Shellman's stairhall in 1907 which show the furnishings and the scenic French wallpaper removed in the 1930s.

Because family papers, business papers and historical photographs are fragmentary or non-existent, researchers must rely heavily on public documents particularly those associated with estates. Wills and inventories, which are maintained by the Register of Wills are often the best sources for learning about the furnishings of former occupants. Wills often contain bequests of important possessions such as a tall clock, silver, or portraits.

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Two types of personal property inventories are often found in estate papers. An inventory of personal property was usually recorded at the death of anyone with possessions. A typical inventory entry include the name of the object, occasionally accompanied by a descriptive term such as painted, mahogany, or old, and the appraised value. By comparing the list of possessions with the floor plan one can often recreate the path of the appraisers as they walked through the house and outbuildings. This process may clarify or reveal an earlier use of a room.

An inventory can also help to determine if a property owner actually resided in the house. The 1863 inventory of John Fisher's possessions included five venetian blinds in his parlor which matches the architectural evidence. More important was the entry for 18 stair rods and carpeting. There are 18 risers on the main stairs and each bears the telltale scar from the attachment of the brass rods.

An inventory was also recorded by the Register of Wills when personal property was sold to settle an estate. A typical entry on a sale of personal property inventory includes the name of the object, the auction price and the purchaser.

A comparison of estate inventories can often yield additional details about individual objects and their disposition. The appraisers of Jacob Sherman's estate noted a "picture" in 1823. Twenty years later Mrs. Sherman's estate included a "large painting." Susanna Zacharias, the Sherman's niece, purchased the painting at the sale of her late aunt's possessions. When Susanna died in 1852 her inventory listed a "large portrait" appraised along with a fireboard, which suggests that Susanna hung the portrait above the mantelpiece.

Although research can provide a list of furnishings, one must also examine the history of the occupants and their community. Determining the cultural roots of the household is especially important when dealing with a pre-1850 property. Prior to this time strong ethnic traditions influenced the design of certain furnishings. When Jacob Sherman died in 1822 his bedroom furnishings included a painted chest which likely once held the dowry goods of Mrs. Sherman. Because she was of Pennsylvania German extraction, the chest may have been bought painted with motifs unique to that cultural group.

Historical archaeology can also provide information about household furnishings, especially glass and ceramic wares. During the society's bakeoven excavation at the rear of the property hundreds of fragments of tablewares were found. The fragments provide the evidence for acquiring the exact type of objects once used by the residents. Once a refurbishing plan is developed, the search for appropriate objects can begin.

The historical society is presently seeking a number of early furnishings for display in the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman house. Among the important pieces being sought are an early nineteenth century sideboard, dining tables, low post bed, Windsor chairs, silver spoons and numerous glass and ceramic items. Please call the historical society if you have objects that may be appropriate.

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A workshop about "Furnishing Your Old Carroll County House" will be sponsored by the Historical Society of Carroll County on Wednesday at the Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 E. Main St., Westminster. For information, call 848-6494.