

The Museum as Artifact

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Sharie Mooney Prout; from *Trail End Notes*, March 2013

As you all know, Trail End is a historic house museum. What you may not know, however, is that we consider the building itself to be an artifact, just like the collections it houses. This means that there are certain things we can and cannot do with the building, and special factors we have to take into consideration when doing projects. It also means that the building comes with benefits that are unique to historic structures.

When your building is also an artifact, you have to balance maintenance and care with education. I mean, what's the point of having a fantastic building if no one is able to see and learn about it? But do you really want 14,000 visitors a year photographing your wood-paneled walls with flash, fading the woodwork and causing irreversible damage?



Trail End Master Bedroom, 2008 (TESHS Collection)

As museum professionals, we are charged with preserving the past for future generations. We protect the artifacts, care for them on behalf of the public, and interpret them so visitors can learn about our history. At Trail End we do all of that, while maintaining the delicate balance between preservation and education.

Practically everything in our museum is an artifact, from doorknobs to coat racks. You can ask the public “please do not touch” until you’re blue in the face, but it is so hard for every curious hand to avoid touching at least something! So, we devised a compromise. We have identified items in the house that are sturdy enough to be handled, and have signs on them that say “please touch.” While you may not be able to open every closed door, at least now you can open a few, and see what’s inside.

For example, our foyer has two doors “hidden” in the woodwork. The public isn’t sure what they’ll find, but even the most seasoned museum visitor’s curiosity is piqued when they are told

they can actually touch the doorknob and open the door. "It's a liquor cabinet!" or "It's an elevator!? I didn't know they had those back then!" The public may not get to touch everything they see, but having a few "open me" or "please touch" signs throughout the house has proved to be very popular with our guests, because they tell us that they like being able to do "something."

Another challenge is creating exhibits within the home. We want people to be able to see everything, but the artifacts are not in display cases and the rugs they would be walking on in the rooms are original. So how do you balance security and preservation with good interpretation and education? This problem is both a challenge and a unique opportunity. You cannot walk into the bedrooms, for example, because we have plexi-glass in the doorways. Although you cannot go into the rooms, the clear barriers do allow visitors to see the rooms in context as they would have been used, and also allow us to display a wider range of artifacts without the fear of something "walking off." The rugs stay clean and are not being constantly trampled on, and smaller items can safely be left out on the dressers.

An added benefit to the barriers is that they help us achieve the feeling that the Kendrick family just stepped out, and we're stepping in. Mr. and Mrs. Kendrick did not have velvet ropes and metal stanchions running through the middle of their bedroom, but maybe they did have reading material and eyeglasses on the nightstand, or a dressing gown thrown over the foot of the bed.

Because we have so many items throughout the museum, it would be impossible to label them all. It would also detract from the authenticity of the rooms if every object had a label beside it. Our solution is a text panel for each room - a concise informational sign that tells what the area was used for and by whom, additional details as they relate to any special exhibits, plus photographs or documents that otherwise would be missed within the rooms.

But even displaying signage is a special problem for us - we don't want to go around putting holes in the wall for every sign! Thankfully, the house has picture rails throughout, which allow us to hang the panels without damaging plaster and wallpaper. For larger areas, we had custom standalone sign holders built that sit on the floor and can be re-positioned anywhere as needed.

When caring for the building itself, there are certain guidelines that we follow. We have to maintain the mansion in a way that not only accomplishes what needs to be done, but also helps preserve its authenticity. Floors have to be refinished and water-damaged ceilings have to be fixed. Even dusting the woodwork and furniture requires knowing that we can't use polish or wax (which would build up a residue over time), but a dry dust cloth instead.

The well-worn rugs in the foyer, main stairs, and second floor hallway were replaced with reproductions, so that the originals could be preserved for future research, and the areas retained the original look and feel while allowing visitors to walk on them. The sun faded and almost unrecognizable wallpaper pattern in the main stairway was replaced with a reproduction, so the space would look the way it did when the Kendrick family moved into their home.

All of the windows are also covered with an invisible film which blocks out harmful UV rays and prevents further sun damage. Now the rooms can be viewed the way they would have been used - with the shades open, instead of constantly drawn shut.

Having a museum in a historic building definitely presents different challenges than you would find with a museum in a brand new building. But besides placing artifacts in context, it has additional benefits and rewards. Instead of just reading about certain construction techniques, you can see them up close. Visitors can stand in the ballroom, for example, and marvel at the construction of the high ceiling and ponder how it supports itself.

When your building is also an artifact, it requires additional care, maintenance, and consideration. It also provides endless material and opportunities for education and interpretation, something you will not always find with modern construction.



© 2020 – Trail End Guilds, Inc. & Trail End State Historic Site

All Rights Reserved

For more information, visit www.trailend.org