A Style of Life: Recreating Huntsville of 1819

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In 1809, Indian agent Return Jonathan Meigs wrote to Washington: “People [in Madison County] come from the East, West, North, and South and have brought with them their passions and their virtues. When civilization and refinement shall be well established, this will be a desirable part of the United States.”1 Within the span of a decade, the people of Madison County fashioned a lifestyle of “civilization and refinement,” bringing with them the tastes from their previous homes, combining them with the realities of a new environment, and revising those tastes in the face of changing cultural and social patterns.

At Constitution Hall Park, our duty is to present that style of life in all its fullness, taking into account the diversity and transience of any society. How did the interior of an 1819 Huntsville building look? We obviously do not have any living eyewitnesses and so must rely on a variety of documentary evidence. The architectural historian works with existing structures, using their information to discern what the original period structure was like. In the interior of a home, the features of woodworking, plastering, mantels and even paint colors often remain intact over the years and provide a starting point for historic room recreation. But furnishings and room arrangements are not locked into place. A table, even though it has been in the house for one hundred and fifty years, might have been moved and used in numerous ways over the lifetime of a home.

William Seale, in his landmark book Recreating the Historic House Interior, states that furnishing a period room is much like writing an historic essay. “To recreate is to approximate,” he writes. “An interior is recreated in much the same way that a history book is written. Both are based upon historical investigation, analysis, and synthesis.”2 In upholding these standards, Constitution Hall Park needs to open itself to study by scholars, with files ready to “footnote” the reasons for selection of each item and the logic behind its arrangement within the room itself.

Since the finished essay is the room itself, this article will focus on the types of information available and select certain curatorial decisions which reflect the use of that information.


us with physical evidence of the past from the site itself. Several digs of varying quality were conducted on the half-block site over the past decade. From these thousands of pieces of artifacts, we can catch a small glimpse into the past—from numerous arrowheads to broken chards of china to pieces of type from the Alabama Republican newspaper. One doorknob serves as prototype for the reproductions used in the Park. The herringbone patterns of the brick walk and floors found in the John Boardman complex are recreated. William Wesley wrote in a 1971 Historic Huntsville Review article:

It seems that some of the citizens in the vicinity of this half block area...were people who smoked clay pipes, dipped or sniffed snuff, and drank wine. Some carried pocket knives and firearms, and the women did a lot of sewing. Gourds and jimsonweed grew in the immediate vicinity or somewhere nearby, and someone played a harmonica.3

Sifting of the evidence has just begun. Eventually, archeology can influence our choices in china, glassware, and pipes.

LOCAL FURNITURE. A second reliable source of information on the 1819 Huntsville interior is the study of local furniture. No scholarly work has yet been done on Alabama furniture, although fine studies exist for Kentucky and Georgia. The period of settlement which we portray at the Park was followed so closely by the development of national uniformity in furniture styles that a strong local school had little chance to grow. By 1823, imports from New York and New Orleans were becoming the fashion, making life hard on the local cabinetmaker.

Still, some antiques with a sound Alabama history have come to light. They suggest strong similarities with Tennessee and Georgia furniture of the age, as well as with that of Virginia and North Carolina although to a lesser extent. In the Park collection are two chairs from Prattville, a fine writing desk from Mooresville, and a small table with an Alabama provenance. Several other pieces with a local history have also been studied, and many more will undoubtedly come to light.

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS. Relying on the Alabama Republican, the Southern Advocate, the Nashville Wig, and the Clarion & Tennessee Gazette, our research can put together a broad outline of the styles and tastes of 1819 Huntsville. Advertisements, as in our own day, trumpet the latest fashions from the urban centers of the East. Cabinetmakers Arnold and Jamieson, for example, advertised "all kinds of furniture of the newest fashions and of the first quality, and on the most reasonable terms."4

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4Alabama Republican, October 19, 1819.
From these newspaper advertisements, we garner a host of small details about the style of life. W. & S. Cruse's establishment (read an 1818 ad) had just received: "Patent Curriers Knives, Warfield Irons, Patent Sideboard, Prime Chewing Tobacco, Weeding Hoes, and Spencer Dresses." We also learn, among other things:
—Wallpaper was advertised locally in 1819 and had become common by 1823. Floorcloths, while not mentioned in the earliest Huntsville papers, were sold in varying sizes and patterns in nearby Nashville.
—Specialized trades developed quickly in Huntsville. We find mention of a milliner, a confectionary shop, a gilder, a piano tuner, a watchmaker, a tinsmith, and a hat maker in the newspapers.
—As many as ten cabinetmakers worked in Huntsville between 1818 and 1830. Among them was Walker Allen, the owner of Constitution Hall.
—Goods for trade came from New Orleans, Philadelphia, New York, and other eastern cities. The quantity of large goods shipped that distance was undoubtedly small, but necessary, considering the strong demand for goods that must have accompanied such rapid economic growth.

PROBATE ESTATE INVENTORIES AND PERIOD LETTERS. These long lists of household furnishings, says historian Nina Fletcher Little, "remain the best source of information concerning the contents of any individual house." Many inventories are extremely detailed. Items listed include

- a half loaf of sugar
- one stone jar, handle broken
- four window panes, two broken.

Since they were taken with varied quality, care must be used with estate inventories, but studied over comparative time spans, they provide a superb look at the style of life in 1819 Huntsville. Furthermore, they help us guard against the imposition of our modern concepts of the "Early American" look into the past. Over the last decade, hundreds of oriental carpets have come up off the floors of major restorations like Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village, as scholars, using inventories, found them inappropriate.

At Constitution Hall Park, we do not have an inventory for a single building now in the complex. Instead, we must rely on similar buildings and homes. For example, in furnishing the law office of Clement Comer Clay, the 1824 inventory of lawyer Arthur Henderson was used. When Clay relinquished his private practice in 1819 after his selection to the state Supreme Court, he directed his clients to the firm of Henderson and McClung. Following Henderson's death, Clay became a partner with James McClung. Hence, our law office contains a secretary, a writing desk, a small cherry table, and several inexpensive chairs.

Inventories are also helpful in understanding the usage of rooms during the period under study. Even in our day, the parlor has come to be called the "living room," which, in turn, is now commonly referred to as a "great room" when combined with the "TV" or "family" room. Three Madison County inventories before 1845 provide insight into room usage. The most detailed is the 1823 list of the home of John Williams Walker, U.S. Senator, member of the Constitutional Convention, and son-in-law of LeRoy Pope. The homes of Toney Harris and John Allen, both of whom died in the 1840s, had beds in main floor rooms meant for general use. Harris' sitting room, for example, had:

1 Bedstead and furniture
1 Bed & mattress & counterpanes
1 Pr. shovel and tongs
1 doz. cane bottom chairs
1 Piano
2 Side tables

5Alabama Republican, March 24, 1818.
4 Curtains
Curtain and hearth rug.

To explain the period terminology, a bedstead was the upper frame of a canopy bed, the furniture referred to the hangings from it, the bed, then, referred only to the basic endboards and rails. The piano was quite expensive at $250 but shows the propensity of the upper classes towards that musical instrument. In John Allen’s house, a bed is found in the dining room. While this may seem surprising to our tastes, it was quite common during the Federal period. Rooms were not as clearly defined by function, and in most homes, with the one-room over one-room design favored in Huntsville, those functions had to be combined. The bed was usually the most expensive piece of furniture in the house and could be proudly displayed in the parlor.

Traced over time, inventories also show the introduction of new fashions. Carpeting, either Brussels or ingrain, is found in only a few homes in 1819, but by 1830, the middle classes have purchased it for their parlors. “Yankee clocks” are frequently mentioned in inventories of the late 1820s and early 1830s. Venetian blinds are found in at least one 1833 list. By combining these inventories with newspaper advertisements, fashion becomes measurable, to an extent. One particularly interesting inventory comes from the estate of Andrew Veitch, local merchant, who died in the 1820s. Page after page notes the latest material or gimmick which found its way to the counters of a Huntsville store. The information found in local inventories is just barely touched. As Nina Fletcher Little wrote, “One is constantly amazed at the evidence which early inventories present.”

PERIOD PICTURES. Even if we found a totally accurate list of the furnishings of the buildings in Constitution Hall Park,
we should still not know how those furnishings were used and placed within the house. At this point, the researcher can turn to the period picture. Carlisle Humelsine, past president of Colonial Williamsburg, wrote, "Rooms [at Williamsburg] are based on evidence, on contemporary inventories to determine what was used there, and on paintings and prints to illustrate how it was used." These views into the past preserve the interior spatial arrangements without the bias of changing taste. For example, in numerous "Early American" homes, the trusty family rifle hangs over the mantel in the parlor. A fine decorative touch, but one that finds little support from pictures of the early 1800s, where they are usually found over the door to the outside.

Southern interior pictures for the period under study are extremely rare. Some fine "genre" pictures were done, however, in the Federal period by a young artist named Johann Krimmel, the so-called "Hogarth" of America. Krimmel traveled widely, but his better drawings were done around the Philadelphia area. In the "Quilting Party," we see a young couple being presented with a betrothal gift by an enthusiastic group. The picture rings true—the gun over the door, the contrasting colors above and below the chair rail, the china press topped by the ever present demijohn (found in virtually every focal inventory), and the Windsor chair. In the corner, a superb tall case clock stands unassumingly.

Study of the accumulated pictures of the era create central themes around which a room can be recreated—how curtains are hung, where chairs are placed, where firetools were kept.

Each of these sources alone might leave important gaps which could seriously distort our perceptions of the past, but combined they prove a historically definable style of life for 1819 Huntsville. Research is just beginning, and as years of work change our early perceptions, we must stand ready to alter our interpretation at the Park. The ideal, according to Thomas Schlereth of Notre Dame University, is that "revisions in interpretation would occur as new historical information was uncovered or speculative hypotheses become more plausible."9

One certainty is that the people of 1819 Huntsville believed that they lived in a vital period in our history: "a memorable epoch," as Governor William Wyatt Bibb said. Anne Royall, visiting Huntsville in that year, wrote: "The land around Huntsville...is rich and beautiful as you can imagine; and the appearance of wealth would baffle belief. The town displays much activity. The citizens are gay, polite, and hospitable, and live in great splendor. Nothing like it in our country."10 Constitution Hall Park recreates that important period and serves as a keystone to the efforts of the residents of present-day Huntsville as they build a "refined and civilized" style of life.


9Thomas Sclereth, "It Wasn't That Simple," American Association of Museums Reprint, p. 7.