

RESTORATION NOTES: ROSSON HOUSE

General statement: The restoration of the Rosson House began in 1974 although no actual work commenced until 1975. The term restoration implies that as far as evidence and money permits, the house would be restored to its original condition. This evidence can be found in three forms: PHYSICAL (that which is actually still in place); DOCUMENTED (from photographs, letters, etc.); and INFERRED (that which is known based upon evidence from similar homes of the same period in the same area).

Exterior Paint Colors: When the Rosson House was purchased, it was painted white. Old photographs revealed that it has originally stood in its plain red brick condition for some time. Initial attempts to remove the white paint proved to be damaging to the bricks and mortar, so it was decided to paint the house a brick-red color. Shortly before completion of the project, a gentleman appeared at the job site who had removed paint on some restorations in the East. His sample method proved effective and he was hired to remove both the white and the new brick-red paint. In the process, the wooden trim was damaged, and this all had to be repainted. The trim colors of black and dark green and blue on the porch ceilings were found to be on the bottom layer of the wood and were typical of colors used in Victorian times.

Exterior Ironwork: The metal cresting adorning the roofline and the iron railings on the porch had been seen in early photographs of the house. As the porches were enclosed, the iron railings disappeared. Later, the cresting on the roof was donated to the round-up of iron during W.W.II. The designs for the reproduction of these items were drawn to scale from enlarged photographs of the old house.

Porches: The porches of the house were gradually enclosed; first, with screening, and finally, with walls and windows to enlarge the living space within the house. The new additions had to be carefully removed so as to not destroy remaining physical evidence. Floorboards had to be replaced on the porches due to the deterioration of the wood. Use of old photographs was helpful in determining the original shape of the house.

Parquet Floors: Various patterns of lovely parquet flooring are found throughout the downstairs of the house. This was a mail-order item in the late 19th Century, the pieces being installed by local craftsmen. The individual pieces of parquet have a cheesecloth backing, indicating that they were to have been glued down, Instead, they were nailed down which indicates a lack of knowledge on the part of the workman. The northeast room downstairs contains the remnants of four patterns found in the other rooms. The parquet floors were preserved inadvertently by a layer of linoleum. Only minimal damage was found upon removal of the linoleum, and the floors were easily refinished by sanding and then applying several layers of varnish and wax.

Woodwork: By 1974 the oak and pine woodwork within the house had many layers of paint or stain. The sliding doors off the parlor had been walled off for years, and thus escaped the whim of further treatment. Using the finish of these doors as a guideline, the remaining woodwork on the doors, doorframes, and windows was stripped and stained to match. Two coats of shellac and one of varnish were then added.

The oak used in the staircase and the mantles was stripped to the bare wood and refinished to its natural condition. Below the staircase in the entry hall, a pine bench had been hand-grained to look like a finer wood. An example of the original craftsmanship of handgraining remains untouched on a door beneath the stairs. Although the quality of the workmanship was not that good, the same look was attempted in reproducing the handgraining on the bench.

Mantles and Overmantles: During the restoration, the mantles and overmantles were removed from the walls to look for evidence. Several mantles had shipping labels attached to the backside from a company in Louisville, Kentucky. Evidence that all the mantles had overmantles was found in marks and plugs in the walls above each fireplace. Several were missing, however. As recently as 1985, an original overmantle was discovered in northern Arizona. It was purchased, refinished, and returned to its original position in the north bedroom.

CEILINGS:

The pressed tin ceilings had many layers of paint. Microscopic examination of paint chips showed what the bottom layer had been. These chips were sent to a paint chemical lab in California to be analyzed as to original content and sheen. Next, the chips were sent to an expert in color-coding paint chips according to an historical color-coding system. The paints were then reproduced locally.

Removal of the paint from the ceilings was controversial. Some wanted to paint on top of the old layers; others wanted to remove the old paint first. Finally, it was decided to lightly sandblast the ceilings in place, leaving at least one sample in each room untouched for posterity.

When the house was remodeled, presumably during the 1940's, a second staircase was cut through the ceiling in the upstairs turret area. Those ceiling tins were apparently discarded. To replace them during restoration, the ceiling pieces from the northeast first-floor room were removed because the pattern matched the pattern in the upstairs hallway. That room now has a new ceiling created from an old tin ceiling purchased in Ohio.

ELECTRICAL:

When the walls of the Rosson House were laid bare, it was discovered that the entire house was originally wired for electricity, without the auxilliary gas back-up that was so common in the early days of electricity. Over the years the original lighting fixtures were removed and replaced with more modern ones. During the restoration, old brass fixtures were found which had the typical dual electric/gas capacity. These were installed as typical of the period, although we had no evidence of what precisely hung from the ceilings.

STAIRWELL NICHE:

The niche in the front stairwell was discovered quite by accident. One day a workman was running a screwdriver along the wall while descending the stairs. He noticed a hollow sound and poked a hole in the wall. Further investigation uncovered a sizeable niche which had been walled-up and covered with six layers of wallpaper. The surrounding walls have seven layers of paper. Pieces of the plaster roping which trims the niche were found in the base. The wooden shelf which now serves as the base of the niche was designed on speculation as no evidence remained.

TELEPHONE:

The telephone to the right of the carriage door hangs where the original phone was placed. Whitelaw Reid's letters refer to a telephone in this location which sent the restoration team to investigating the area. There were four wooden plugs in the wall used to anchor heavy objects and telephone wire behind the plaster running into the attic. A phone manufactured in the 1890's was donated to the house and ironically, the four screw holes of the phone match exactly with the four plugs in the wall.

WINDOW TREATMENTS:

The window treatments and the portiere or draping at a doorway were based upon the discovery of physical evidence. Several pieces of roller shade hardware and curtain brackets were found in the northeast room downstairs. (doctor's office) These pieces of hardware had patent dates in the late 1800's. Examination of the nail holes in the woodwork around all of the windows indicated that this same hardware had once hung elsewhere in the house. By consulting photographs of other Victorian homes, it was decided that the Rosson House probably had green roller shades and lace curtains at the windows. Today the windows are dressed with the dark green shades and contemporary laces manufactured in Victorian patterns. The curtain hardware was reproduced, but the roller shade hardware is new.

Two circular marks were found opposite each other high on the doorframe encasing the sliding or pocket doors. These circles had no shellac on them, indicating that something had been there prior to finishing the woodwork. Since the use of portieres or heavy draperies in doorways was common, it is likely that these circular marks indicated the presence of a drapery rod bracket. A fabric was selected for the Rosson House portiere that is a reproduction of a heavy silk material available in 1895.

HARDWARE:

Much of the hardware was still in place. At the time of the restoration, several old houses were being torn down which had the same door hardware, so those replacement pieces were obtained. Some of the window hardware was missing and had to be reproduced.

SPEAKER'S TUBE:

When the walls were opened to see what was inside them, a strange pipe was discovered running from the first floor straight up to the attic. It was not connected to the plumbing and seemed at first to serve no purpose. In the back hallway of each floor the pipe had a short T-section extending out toward the wall. This was the forerunner of the modern-day intercom system. The mouthpieces that are now attached to the tubes were purchased in a flea market in Pennsylvania.

WALLPAPER:

The wallpapers in the house have been reproduced with one exception. In what is currently the North Bedroom, there hangs oatmeal wallpaper and a shaded, gilt-trimmed border paper that were both manufactured before the turn-of-the century. This room was selected for this treatment because evidence showed that that bottom layer in this room was the third layer in the parlor, indicating that it had been decorated at a later time.

In each room, many layers of wallpaper were discovered. Each layer was peeled off, leaving the bottom layer in place for documentation. Then these papers were removed in pieces and placed between sheets of acid-free milar plastic. The designs were authenticated as to approximate date, and the wallcovering samples were sent to two manufacturers to be reproduced.

In the kitchen, the wallpaper had been so expertly removed at some point, that it was believed that no paper existed originally. When a one-inch wide strip of quarter-round molding was inadvertently removed from above the wainscoting, five layers of wallpaper were discovered. Fortunately, the simple tile pattern was easily redesigned.

PICTURE MOLDING:

When the wallpaper was stripped to the bottom layer, a band containing many nail holes was discovered at the bottom edge of the frieze or border papers. An original piece of picture molding was found under the porch. From this, a mold was made and the old molding was reproduced in plastic instead of wood with plaster relief. The reproduction molding was then painted gold as the original sample had been.