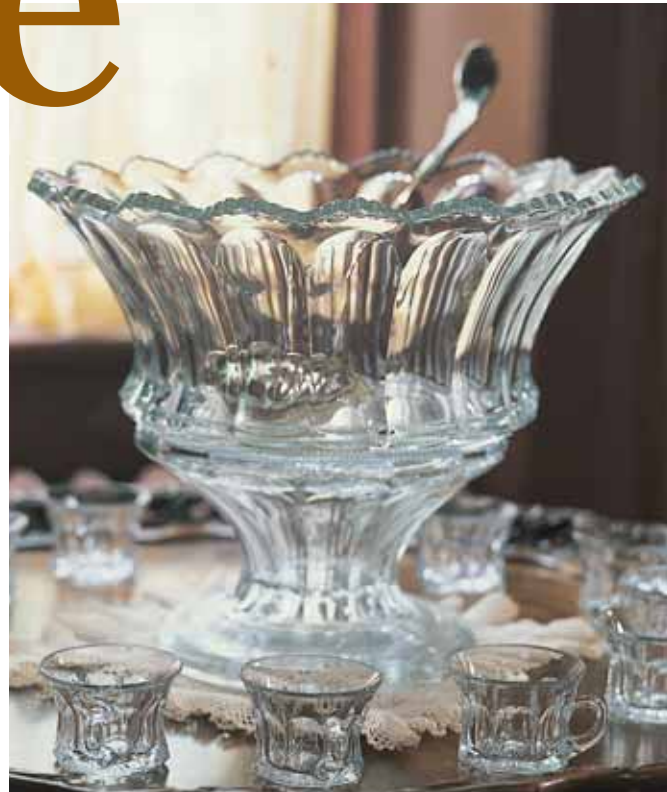


House Over Time

Asheville, North Carolina's first mansion is a souvenir to Victorian living.

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This Heisy punch bowl was a gift to the Smith-McDowell house.

Historic information comes in a variety of forms. Our primary sources are most often official written records, diaries and the observations of objective witnesses, but little of that information is objective. It is usually editorialized from subjective perceptions. In that light, it's reasonable to add equal weight to oral histories passed down through generations—those perceptions of facts that make sense. When you mix up all of these elements in one bag, what manifests is a comprehensive picture. That is the image we have today of the expansive history of Asheville, North Carolina's first mansion, now called the Smith-McDowell House Museum.

In the 1840s, just prior to the Victorian era, brick residences were almost unheard of in the mountains of North

Carolina, where most structures were either log or frame; however, James Smith, who had become one of the area's most affluent businessmen, decided to go high style and build himself what he (but probably nobody else) called a "farmhouse," a Federal style brick mansion, on his 600 acres overlooking the town of Asheville.

This Federal style mansion includes 6,700 square feet of space. Its handmade brick walls are 12 to 20 inches thick, inside and out, and there are four interior brick chimneys. This was a grand upgrade from the log cabin in which Smith was born, but a fitting home for a man who eventually owned one-third of Asheville, including much of the land on which the Biltmore Estate is now sited.

The house was grand by any community standards, with porches on two levels and fluted columns, all typical of

the Greek Revival style. It is rumored—although no records state it as fact—that the house was constructed, at least in part, by slave labor.

Among the elements that make this such a compelling house to visit and understand is that it is interpreted over a span of 60 years, from 1840 to 1900, a period that includes the height of the Victorian era.

Each room at Smith-McDowell incorporates some aspect of design or family history that refers to a specific decade. This is the way most real family homes are designed and decorated. Rather than a snapshot of a moment in history, a house such as this gives the visitor an enlightened perspective into the organic changes that occur in a house and family over time.

In fact, this is more the rule than the exception. Rarely will one find a house, either historic or contemporary, that



This room is styled c. 1890s. Note the Bradbury and Bradbury Aesthetic Movement Cherry Blossom wallpaper that typified the period. The table is set in Haviland China and covered in a Battenberg lace cloth.

It seemed to be a matter of keeping up with the Astors.



These charcoal portraits are of William Wallace McDowell and his wife Sarah Lucinda. Oral history recalls that this was the first piano brought to Asheville. It is said to have arrived on a buckboard.

includes objects, furnishings or artwork that adhere solely to a one- or two-year design period. Instead, a home is usually full of objects passed from one generation to another, as well as things gathered by its current occupant. The Smith-McDowell house, therefore, offers a genuine look at a continuum of Victorian design.

The downstairs rooms of the mansion—including the parlor, dining room and front hall—are designed to reflect some of the later years of the

Victorian era, the 1880s and the 1890s. Upstairs, two of the rooms are done in c. 1860 and 1870 décor. Those upper-floor rooms contain mantels and trims that are original to the house, while those on the lower levels were replacements added some decades later.

According to Tammy Walsh, acting house manager, among the ways one can evaluate design years is to look at the wallpaper. The more colors printed, she explains, the later the historic period. This is because the Industrial

Revolution made it easier to screen additional colors into printed paper. Most of the wallpapers at Smith-McDowell are by Bradbury and Bradbury, many from the Victorian collection. Walsh also suggests that rooms with the most cloth-abundant window treatments are closer to the end of the Victorian era because textiles became more easily shipped to outlying areas once the railway system was in place.

All of these design periods are loosely determined, however. What was



This upstairs parlor dates to 1860 in design.



Left: This room dates to the 1870s. Note the Eastlake bed and elaborate wallpaper quaintly titled Widow Clark's Stripe. Typical of the times, the room contained a small tub for washing.

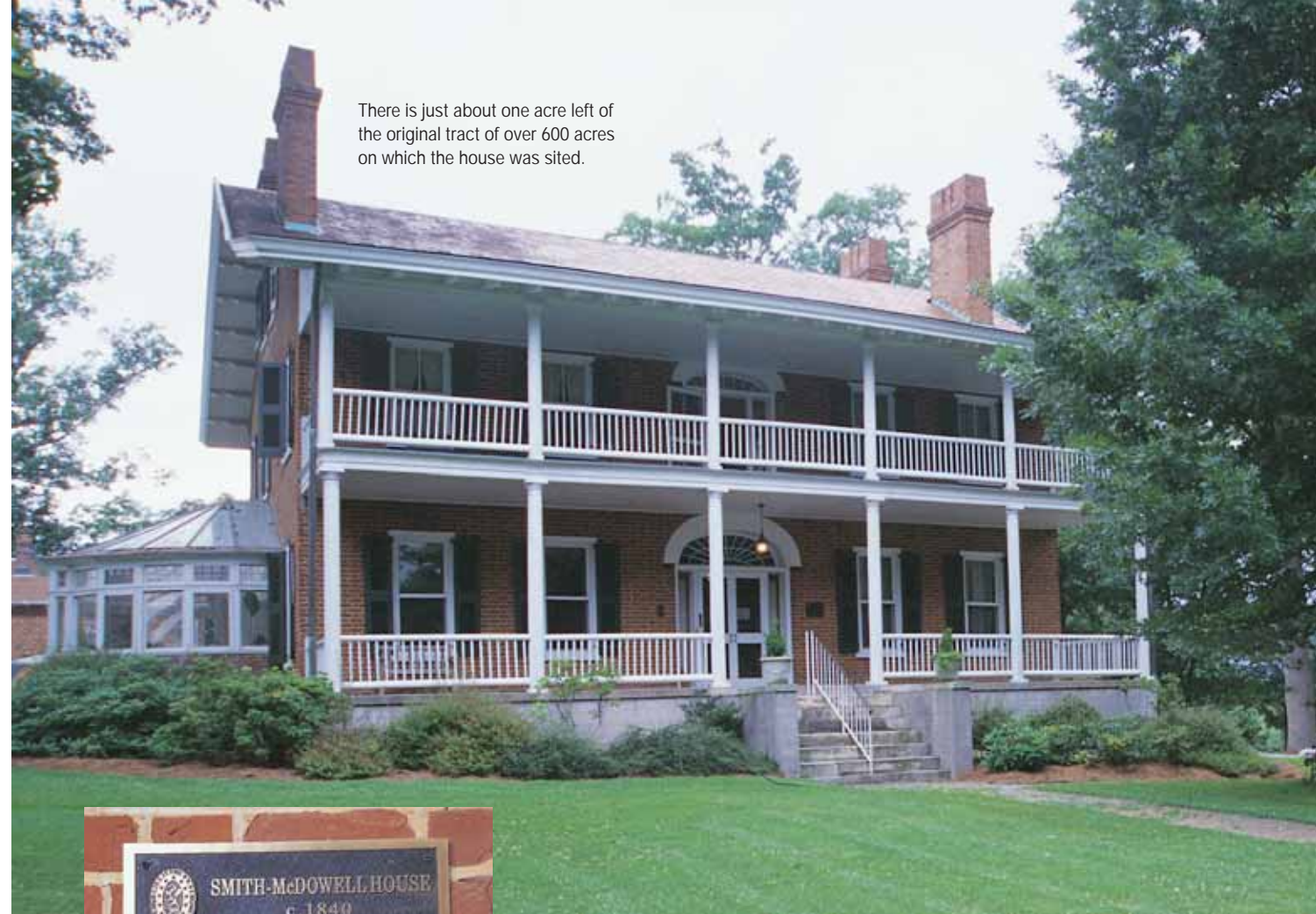
Above: The bedroom also features a piano-legged vanity authentic to the era according to the house manager.

high style in New York in 1860 probably didn't reach Asheville or any of the other distant mountain communities until years later, owing to the time it took for materials to arrive and for people to travel to see and incorporate what was the latest fashion in more cosmopolitan areas.

As in any home, historic or contemporary, what is included is always subjective, furnished to the tastes of the homeowners. Daughters didn't always follow the styles of their peers, perhaps preferring the more traditional tastes of their mothers and grandmothers. Fortunately, some of the furnishings, art and accessories at Smith-McDowell were the property of the original owners—little was changed with successive generations. Others are gifts given to, and furnishing purchases made by, curators over the years, with an eye toward keeping the house both locale and time accurate.



This room was designed to reflect the period of 1880. The furnishings are Eastlake and the wallpaper has what the museum staff refers to as a "Morris feeling."



There is just about one acre left of the original tract of over 600 acres on which the house was sited.



A house such as this gives the visitor an enlightened perspective into the organic changes that occur in a house and in a family over time.

This house stayed in the original family for about 40 years. James Smith's daughter, Sarah Lucinda, and her husband, William Wallace McDowell, owned it until financial reversals forced them to sell in 1883. But much of the design imprint had been made by Lucinda and her mother. Their initial style seemed to set the pattern for subsequent owners.

After the 1890s, much of the design thrust was focused on landscaping. Dr. Charles Van Bergen, who purchased the house in 1898, commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to create a landscape design for his new house based on what Olmsted's father, Frederick

Law Olmsted Sr. had done at neighboring Biltmore. It seemed to be a matter of keeping up with the Astors.

As was typical of grand houses of the era, the mid 20th century brought an institutional sale of the house. It was purchased by the Catholic Church to be used as a boy's dormitory. With the closing of the school some 20 years later, Smith-McDowell became part of the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College. The small school recognized a major piece of history and raised funds for its restoration as a museum.

Today, as in the case of so many museum houses, restoration is an ongo-

ing process. There is the continual upgrading of artifacts, research into history and documentation of those artifacts. Among the goals of the curators and board of directors, is improved landscaping to finish the Olmsted plan for the grounds.

Playing second fiddle to the neighboring and overpowering Biltmore Estate is no easy task, as any museum house would be humbled by comparison; however, the Smith-McDowell offers its own appeal as a house that reflects the passage of time in a mountain community and as a compelling destination for lovers of all things Victorian. 🌿