The interior restoration of Staatsburgh State Historic Site: An American Gilded Age example of a holistic restoration approach

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Abstract

Interior restoration planning and implementation at Staatsburgh (formerly Mills Mansion) State Historic Site has been a collaboration among New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP) staff. Within the goal of restoring the house to its 1895 - 1920 appearance, the restoration approach in each restored room has varied, based, in part on the room’s design. This paper discusses how decisions were made for aspects of room restorations and describes challenges faced and lessons learned.

Keywords
Textile reproductions, furnishing fabrics, interior restoration, Staatsburgh, Mills Mansion

Introduction

Staatsburgh State Historic Site (SHS), Staatsburg, New York, was the center of Ogden and Ruth Livingston Mills’s Hudson River Valley estate. [Fig.1] Stanford White, of the New York City architectural firm McKim, Mead, and White designed the house for the Millses in 1895.

The 65-room, Beaux Arts style house was decorated by White and the French firm, Jules Allard et Fils. Until Mrs. Mills’s death in 1920, the house was the family’s autumn and early winter home and served as the showpiece for their entertaining. The family used the house less frequently through the 1920s and seldom visited after Mr. Mills’s death in 1929. [1]
The Mills family donated the house and surrounding estate to New York State (NYS) in 1938 for use as a museum and park. In 1970, the family donated the collections, most of which remained in the house, to NYS. A lack of professional museum management until the mid-1970s, however, led to the deterioration of many collections and resulted in several well-intentioned but unsuccessful “restoration” attempts. The scale of the property and its many conservation/restoration needs made restoring the house seem overwhelming and unattainable to NYS in the poor economy of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. After exploring but rejecting adaptive re-use, the state committed to restoring the house. Planning for restoration began in 1986, when Melodye Moore was hired as site manager (director).

Research and planning

Moore and colleagues at Staatsburgh, in the Taconic Region, and at the Peebles Island Resource Center (PIRC) [2] initiated a research and study period, which continued through the late 1980s. An Interpretive Policy and a Collections Policy were written. These policies, core documents for each of New York’s 36 state historic sites, are developed by site staff in conjunction with PIRC collections and interpretive staff and provide the foundation for sites’ collections, restoration, and interpretive decisions. Staatsburgh’s Interpretive Policy says that the site will be interpreted to 1895–1920, the period when the family used the house most actively (NYSOPRHP, 1980, revised 1994).

Between 1938 and 1986, staff had moved damaged furnishings from their historic locations. In 1987, Moore and site curator Allan Weinreb arranged the furnishings to correspond with the inventory taken at the time of the property’s donation. Using the inventory, the few known historic photographs of the house, and numerous primary and secondary sources, Weinreb drafted a Historic Furnishings Report.
Deborah Lee Trupin, The interior restoration of Staatsburgh State Historic Site (Weinreb, 1993–2001). His research confirmed the hypothesis that Staatsburgh was created to enhance Mrs. Mills’s social prestige and invoke English country houses. [Fig.2]

Once the furniture had been placed according to the 1938 inventory, Moore began to understand Staatsburgh and its restoration needs. To plan its restoration and interpretation, she assembled a team that included Weinreb, a PIRC curator, a Taconic architectural conservator, a Taconic historic preservation administrator, and me (PIRC textile conservator). This team, with some changes in membership, continues to set and implement restoration and interpretive goals for Staatsburgh.

The team agreed that conservation/restoration would support interpretation. To retain a unified look in rooms, conservation/restoration would advance room-by-room, rather than by selecting collections for treatment strictly on their condition. Collections would be conserved to reflect their appearance in the interpretive period. For some treatments, this meant diverging from the long-held precepts of “original appearance” and “artist’s intent.”

As we began to develop restoration plans, one of our biggest questions was how to approach the textiles, since furnishing fabrics, used as window treatments, wall coverings, and upholstery, were key decorative elements. Staatsburgh was fortunate to retain almost all of its original furnishing fabrics, but after ninety-odd years, their condition and appearance were poor.

Fig. 2 -- Staatsburgh Reception Room, c. 1900.
In 1988, we invited ten museum colleagues to a two day symposium on Staatsburgh’s textile and upholstery conservation issues. Participants confirmed the importance of the furnishing fabrics and upholstery to the interiors - both to the interpretation of the house and as a collection of late 19th-century furnishing fabrics. To preserve the fabrics, participants recommended that many be removed from display/use and replaced with reproductions (Moore and Trupin, 1990).

Recommendations from the symposium set the direction for Staatsburgh’s interior restoration and team members refined the vision for the site’s restoration and interpretation. While we wanted to begin by restoring rooms with the greatest restoration needs, we recognized that we did not have the resources to do so. Instead, we began with a pilot project in a relatively uncomplicated room to learn how best to approach total-room restoration projects.

A second goal of our pilot project was to advance fundraising for Staatsburgh’s restoration. Due to the costliness of reproduction fabrics and trims, we agreed to raise private funds for their purchase. Recognizing that this would be a huge fundraising challenge, in 1988 Moore established the Friends of Mills Mansion (the Friends). Through memberships, solicitations, and fundraising events, the Friends have raised about $500,000 for interior restoration and at least that much in support of programming.

**Pilot restoration project - Mr. Mills’s bedroom**

We selected this room as our pilot project partly because we had learned, during a visit by a representative of French fabric house Prelle, that Prelle once had the damask used in this room in its line and could weave it again. This was our first lesson: take advantage of opportunities as they occur, rather than create and follow a list of rooms in priority order for restoration.

Mr. Mills’s bedroom proved to be a good pilot project, as it contained examples of all of the mansion’s restoration problems: vast amounts of coal soot on all surfaces, damaged plaster from past leaks, damaged and soiled painted surfaces, badly deteriorated historic fabrics, and a range of furnishings, hanging artworks, and objets d’art requiring conservation treatment. [3] The process used to restore this room provided the framework for restoring others.

We began by commissioning Prelle to reproduce the damask, working through their then-agent in Boston. We were very pleased with the results. With this first reproduction fabric, we established our procedure for reproductions: a fabric house provides a cost estimate, from which we develop a contract. We loan a sample (typically a full curtain) to the fabric house, with the stipulation that final payment will not be made until we have received both the sample (in the condition in which it was loaned) and the reproduction fabric. The fabric house develops and sends us designs and yarn colors for approval. We select colors at Staatsburgh, in the room where the fabric will be used. The fabric house sends us a weave sample for approval and then weaves the fabric.

Obtaining the reproduction damask was only the first step in restoring the room’s textile elements. We also needed to obtain trims, lining, and interlining fabrics. We learned that obtaining reproduction trims was as complicated as obtaining reproduction fabrics and that trims are costly. Those for Mr. Mills’s bedroom cost almost half as much the damask; this has proven to be a good “rule-of-thumb” for estimating costs for other rooms.

We next turned to making the fabrics and trims into reproduction curtains or upholstered furniture covers. While restoring Mr. Mills’s bedroom, we established two guiding principles. First, we decided to keep Staatsburgh’s original pieces as intact as possible, with the hopes of some day featuring them in exhibitions. For ethical/philosophical and aesthetic reasons we rejected the practice, seen at some historic houses, of applying old trims to new fabrics. We found these combinations of old and new on a single object to be visually unsatisfying and we did not want to make hybrid objects that were neither collections nor reproductions.
The second guiding principle was that in order to return Staatsburgh to its 1895 appearance, we would use the reproduction fabric in the same way as the original. Thus, in the frequent cases where an original curtain had an odd seam, or a section of fabric that was oriented in the wrong direction, we would repeat these oddities in the reproduction.

The reproduction damask in Mr. Mills’s bedroom was used for two pairs of curtains, a bed cover, and as upholstery covers for a chaise longue and armchair. The curtains and bed cover were made by an extremely talented and dedicated volunteer who worked at PIRC under my supervision. She continued as a volunteer until her retirement at well-past 80 and made the curtains, valances, bed covers, and dressing-table skirts for three more rooms, contributing over 1,000 hours of work.

Fabrics used as upholstery covers became part of the conservation treatments done in the PIRC textile and furniture conservation labs. These treatments were done according to upholstery conservation principles and practices (Gill and Eastop, 2001; Trupin, 1994; Trupin 2002).

While the upholstered furniture was being conserved, restoration of the room envelope began. During the 1980s research phase, Taconic architectural conservators had conducted paint analysis and determined the extent of plaster repair needed. This prepared the way for Taconic restoration crew members to repair the plaster, paint the walls and ceiling, and thoroughly clean and re-wax the floor.

While this work was being done, PIRC conservators were treating many of the room’s collections. The textile conservators washed and conserved the large rug, the furniture conservator cleaned the armoire on-site, the objects conservator conserved the objets d’art, and the paper and frame conservators treated some of the 19 elaborately matted, framed prints. Ideally we would have liked all the room’s collections conserved/restored by a given date, but the reality of competing projects and deadlines within the historic site system made this impossible. Nonetheless, once the major restoration/conservation work was done, the room regained its historic appearance, and the public responded favorably.

The experience of restoring Mr. Mills’s bedroom confirmed that it was best to work at restoring Staatsburgh on a room-by-room basis, as this had a major visible impact and was a way to meet interpretive goals effectively. We learned how we needed to plan ahead to coordinate the work of staff in many disciplines.

The restoration of Mr. Mills’s bedroom also convinced Mills descendents that NYS was committed to restoring Staatsburgh. Between 1938 and the 1980s, family members had become displeased with how NYS was caring for “their” house. Beginning in 1987, Moore gradually reaffirmed the site’s connection with the family, sending them restoration updates, visiting them, and inviting them to see progress. Gradually, some descendents, especially Mrs. Mills’s two granddaughters, pleased with restoration efforts, began making significant donations. Family members have made generous contributions toward the costs of reproduction fabrics and trims.

**Restoration of Mrs. Mills’s bedroom**

In 1997, we had sufficient funds to commit to restoring Mrs. Mills’s bedroom, interpretively one of the most important rooms in the house and the room most in need of restoration. In this room it was the fabric that drove the restoration. [Fig.3]
Fig. 3 – Mrs. Mills’s bedroom before restoration, 1992.

Fig. 4 – Mrs. Mills’s bedroom after restoration, 2003.
Nearly 200 meters of raspberry silk damask, in a bizarre pattern, were used for window and bed hangings and wall and furniture upholstery. We canvassed fabric houses, seeking proposals for the fabric. Because of the wide repeat (c. 130 cm), all the companies initially responded that they would have to weave it half-width and seam it. For the fabric used as wall upholstery, this would be a fairly significant change, resulting in twice as many seams interrupting the flow of fabric around the room. Just as we were about to agree reluctantly to this, Scalamandre informed us they had access to a loom that would allow them to weave the fabric in the 1895 width. We followed the reproduction fabric procurement process outlined above, and, four years after deciding to have the fabric reproduced, we received the reproduction. It was as close to perfect as one could hope.

In planning the restoration of Mrs. Mills’s bedroom, we expanded our team to include more PIRC conservators because we wanted to complete its restoration for a grand opening. We needed to be sure that all involved made this project a priority.

Once we committed to restoring the room, the Taconic architectural conservator developed specifications for work needed on the walls and ceiling. The Taconic restoration crew and PIRC furniture and textile conservators removed the wall damask, after documenting how it had been installed. We stored one wall of fabric at PIRC. Following training by an historic plaster specialist, the Taconic restoration crew stabilized damaged plaster, carefully removed layers of overpaint from the cove molding and ceiling medallion, and repainted the walls and ceiling.

At the beginning of the project, PIRC conservators surveyed the room’s collections to identify conservation needs. Following standard practice, we prepared condition reports and treatment proposals, for approval by Moore and a PIRC curator. We treated collections at PIRC during restoration of the room envelope. The PIRC objects conservator, collaborating with a restoration crew electrician for removing and re-installing electrified pieces, treated decorative architectural elements, including ormolu sconces and curtain tiebacks. The furniture conservator faced a difficult challenge in treating the room’s white painted furniture (chairs, the bed, a huge mirror, and an armoire), which had been overpainted with acrylic wall paint in the 1950s–60s. Multiple techniques were required to restore the surfaces of these pieces to their 1895 appearance (Bayne, 1997-2003).

One of the most difficult challenges in Mrs. Mills’s bedroom was obtaining a reproduction chandelier. We considered purchasing an antique chandelier or commissioning a new one. Eventually, with collaboration between Moore, the PIRC objects conservator, and a custom chandelier manufacturer, we installed a reproduction chandelier. Its design was drawn from photographs of a chandelier that hung in the Millses’ New York apartment; the reproduction looks like it has always been in the room. [Fig.4]

We celebrated the restoration of Mrs. Mills’s bedroom in 2003, with an afternoon program attended by Friends, reproduction vendors, and museum colleagues. We used the program to review the project and lessons learned from it.

Mrs. Mills’s boudoir

After assembling a variety of funding sources, we agreed to restore Mrs. Mills’s boudoir, a comparatively small room that was her office/sitting room. We applied for and received an IMLS grant that paid the salaries of two assistant conservators to treat the gilded frames and furniture. Grant funds were matched by time PIRC conservators spent treating these collections. Money from the family and Friends paid for the fabrics, while work on the room envelope was funded by NYS.
In this boudoir, the room envelope presented the main restoration challenges. The walls have Louis XV style, painted panels with gilded stucco decoration. The gilded stucco ornaments on the ceiling rosette and cove molding are rococo style. Like the painted furniture in Mrs. Mills’s bedroom, the boudoir’s walls had been overpainted by NYS with a flat, white paint. Although the room looked “wrong”, we did not know how it was intended to look in Mrs. Mills’s lifetime. Had some gilded elements been overpainted white? Were all of the gilded elements in the room originally the same gold color? PIRC conservators had tried to answer these questions with a gilding study in 1995, but the results were inconclusive.

The PIRC architecture and frames/gilded objects conservators began the project with a thorough analysis of painted and gilded surfaces. This clarified which surfaces had been painted and which gilded and permitted them to develop specifications for cleaning, repair, repainting and in-gilding. We contracted the
work for this project to Foreground Studios, a meticulous firm whose work improved our understanding of the room’s intended appearance.

Fig. 6 – Mrs. Mills’s boudoir, detail after restoration of room envelope, 2010.

Because fabrics are not a key decorative element in the boudoir we commissioned a reproduction of only one fabric (used on four chairs and a sofa). Another fabric, in relatively better condition, was conserved. We replaced three others with modern fabrics similar in color, pattern, and scale to the originals. We commissioned one digitally printed fabric, our first experiment with this approach. Because collections
have not yet been reinstalled, we have not yet evaluated this mixture of fabrics. We are, however, confident the results will be a success.

In Mr. Mills's bedroom, we had not been pleased with the contrast between the conserved rug and the reproduction fabrics. When we restored Mrs. Mills's bedroom, we avoided this imbalance by purchasing a custom-dyed reproduction of the original plain broadloom. As it would have been prohibitively expensive to have the boudoir’s very large rug reproduced, we were again forced to combine a conserved rug with new fabrics. Because there are fewer reproduction fabrics in this room, we believe that the conserved rug will work well in the restored room. (Trupin, in press)

Looking ahead

In 2006, Mrs. Mills's last granddaughter left Staatsburgh a significant bequest, which we agreed should be used to purchase reproduction fabric for the Reception Hall – the room where visitors enter the house. The prohibitive cost of 100 meters of silk velvet had prevented us from doing this sooner. In June 2009, we received the fabric, a velours gothiques woven by Tassinari et Châtel, through their New York representative, Old World Weavers/Stark Carpet. We are now working on obtaining reproduction trims and planning the restoration of the Reception Hall.

Simultaneously, we are launching a huge new restoration project. In December 2009, the Taconic Regional offices, located in Staatsburgh’s basement since 1938, relocated to another building. This presented us the opportunity to restore and interpret bachelor guest bedrooms, male servants’ rooms, servants’ dining and sitting rooms, and the kitchens. The lessons from restoring upstairs rooms at Staatsburgh will guide us in this work.

Conclusions:

We have been working on the restoration of Staatsburgh for over 20 years. While keeping the vision for the site in mind, we have learned to be creative and flexible so as to take advantage of opportunities as they occur. We have learned the importance of beginning a project with a team that represents a full range of disciplines. We are still learning new things about the site and its restoration and interpretation possibilities, as we continue—one room at a time—to return the mansion to its 1895–1920 appearance.

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Endnotes:

[1] For more on Staatsburgh’s history, see: http://www.staatsburgh.org/.

[2] The Peebles Island Resource Center provides technical support to New York's state-owned parks and historic sites. Staatsburgh is one of seven sites and nine parks administered by the Taconic regional office. See: http://www.nysparks.state.ny.us/

[3] In 1999, Staatsburgh received an environmental improvements grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal agency. This project included cleaning the ductwork and made a huge reduction in the coal soot problem.
[4] This work, like all interior and exterior building restoration at the NY State Historic Sites is done in accordance with the United States Historic Preservation Law (Section 14.09).

All photographs are courtesy of New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Staatsburgh State Historic Site.

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