Here I Have Lived: The Preparation and Implementation of a Historic Furnishing Report

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“Here I have lived.” With these words Abraham Lincoln summed up his years in Springfield, Illinois—seventeen of them in the only home he was ever to own. It was the home that nurtured his ideals and saw his rise to one of the most important figures in American history. The Lincoln Home and all historic structures are windows to the past, windows through which visitors can catch glimpses of significant people, events, and places. To ensure that visitors have an accurate view of this past world, it is essential that historic houses and structures be accurately restored. The first step on the road toward a successful interior restoration is the completion of a historic furnishing report (HFR).

Historic Furnishing Report

What is a historic furnishing report and why do I need yet another plan? A successful restoration involves more than just applying new wallpaper and arranging the furniture so that it “looks nice.” According to the National Park Service and the cultural resource management guidelines it uses to manage its hundreds of historic structures, “a historic furnishings report provides a history of a structure’s use and documents the type and placement of furnishings to a period of interpretive significance. … The HFR provides guidance for the care and maintenance of furnishings that are exhibited in the structure, including specific instructions for the care of newly acquired objects.” Therefore, an HFR is more than just a list of objects and their placement; it is a source of important interpretive material, documentation of important decisions, a preservation tool, and, most important, a guide to accurate restoration. It will become an essential institutional resource and planning document.

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Report Contents

The first step in creating a historic furnishing report, as in any planning process, is to determine the scope of the report and what it should contain to be most useful. The range and type of project will also affect the outcome. A report that covers just a few rooms of a small house owned continuously by one family would be quite different from one that details an entire house with a sprawling and intricate history.

At a minimum, the HFR should contain three sections covering the following topics: administration, history, and the proposed furnishings and the plan for their use and arrangement. The depth and length of each section will be determined by the scope of the project. For example, the Des Plaines Historical Museum is completing a successful interior restoration of the 1907 Kinder House with an eight-page historic furnishing report. The project does not encompass the entire house. Little is known about the home’s historic occupants, and the goal is to restore the house to a specific time period rather than as the house occupied by the Kinder family. The report lays out what few facts are known and an outline for action. By contrast, the historic furnishing report for the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, the only home ever owned by one of the nation’s most revered presidents, is over four hundred pages long. Nearly half the document outlines the history of the Lincoln occupation of the home and the provenance of Lincoln objects in both the National Park Service collection and other public and private collections.

The first part of an HFR—the administration section—can be quite brief, but it is important because it lays the groundwork for the entire plan. It should include the interpretive objectives for the site as well as the objectives for the house or structure being restored. These will help guide later furnishing decisions.

An operating plan for the site is also an important part of the administrative section. What are the hours and seasons of operation? This information can affect what types of lighting are selected, for example. Are the visitors self-guided or conducted through the area by interpreters? They type of interpretation may affect the types of barriers used, if any, and may determine whether other interpretive media such as exhibit panels are necessary. What is the circulation pattern of the house? Are visitors to walk on areas where expensive reproduction carpets will be used? Perhaps another alternative should be explored. Addressing these issues at the start of the project will make later decisions easier.

The second part of the HFR—the history section—is the heart of the report. It should contain a complete history of the structure or structures that are part of the project. It should include the changes in the structure’s appearance through time and its uses. A list of those who occupied and/or used the structure (including servants, employees, pets, and any others who may have had an impact on the interior furnishings) is important. Note how each room or area was used and when these uses took place. This account should be quite detailed if the uses of your
structure changed frequently. Any information about the history of the structure that will have an impact on the restoration or that must be documented should be included here. This section will become the basis for the decisions made about the final selection of furnishings and will be an invaluable resource for interpretative information. Do not stint on the research required for this section.

The recommendations for furnishings make up the final section of the document. It should include a list of recommended furnishings for each area. The accession and catalog numbers of the objects should be included if they are from the collection. Finally, sketches of each room or area showing object locations are important. They will help not only with final installation but also with replacement when objects are removed for cleaning, conservation, and study.

Your report is not limited to these three sections; others can be added as needed for each particular project. A section of illustrations including relevant historic photographs of the structure and its inhabitants can often be quite useful in documenting decisions. In certain circumstances it may also be useful to list artifacts in other private or museum collections that are not available for the restoration but significant to the effort. A housekeeping guide and preventive conservation plan should be added if they do not exist elsewhere, especially for objects acquired for the project.

**Gathering Information**

The first step in the actual writing of the report is to gather together all of the pertinent data. Begin by reviewing all of the institution’s planning documents, including the mission statement, long- and short-range plans, funding and any other resource studies that are pertinent, such as National Register of Historic Places nominations. Review all of the institution’s cultural resources that are integral to the project including any pertinent archive materials and the museum collection and its associated records.

An important step that is often overlooked during this part of the project is consultation with the important stakeholders of your institution. Be sure to include interpretive staff, volunteers, representatives of funding and granting agencies, and members of the interested public in the planning effort.

“Before” conditions, an important part of the project for the institution’s archives.

While looking at the structure, begin to determine security needs. What types of barriers, locks, and alarms are necessary? Are any changes required to meet applicable building, life safety, and fire codes? Coordinate with your local officials to determine these needs. Finally, define any changes that are needed to make your institution accessible to visitors with disabilities.

**Accessibility**

Many historic structures are not designed to accommodate visitors with disabilities. However, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 makes access to sites open to the public a civil right, and historic properties are not exempt.
Providing accessibility while maintaining the historic character of an interior can be as simple as installing a small ramp at a step or retrofitting doorknobs with levers, or it may be as complex as adding an elevator. Before moving forward with any physical changes to your structure, it is advisable to consult historic preservation professionals, such as your state historic preservation office staff, as well as disability experts to ensure the best accessibility solutions for your institution. Even if you feel that your site meets the ADA requirements, it would be wise to seek a consultation in the restoration process to ensure that no surprises await you after you think you are done.

Writing the Plan

Now that you have done a great deal of research and have considered the issues, it is finally time to start the report. Begin by thoroughly reading all of the materials you have gathered. Become familiar with all of the assembled primary and secondary sources relevant to your project.

After your research is well on its way, it is time to begin to make what is sometimes a difficult decision: what time period will you select for your restoration? If your site has a long history of occupancy, this can be a complex process. Perhaps the most important period of your structure is the least well documented. The structure may have changed extensively since your chosen period of significance. How do you explain an entire second floor added one hundred years after your structure’s period of significance? This is where the materials gathered for the administrative section will be helpful in keeping you focused on your mission and purpose.

Begin to evaluate the collection and winnow what will and will not be used in the restoration. As you do this, assess the conservation needs of the collection materials to be used. Make a note of objects that will require work before exhibition or that are too delicate or deteriorated to be exhibited. Make plans for their reproduction if necessary.

Implementation

The planning phase is finally complete and now the physical work of the project can begin. Start by arranging for any conservation that is needed for the objects to be used. If anything is to be reproduced for the project, now is the time to begin with that as well.

Start acquiring the needed furnishings and reproductions such as wallpaper, window and floor coverings, and furniture. Some fabrics and wallpapers appropriate for use in historic structures are still available only “to the trade” or through showrooms available only to designers, decorators, architects, and others in the interior design field. However, because of an increased interest in restoration that has spread to the public in the last few years, it is much easier to acquire historically accurate furnishings on the open market than it was even a decade ago. Many local wallpaper and paint stores now offer extensive lines of wallpaper reproductions from historic documents and made available directly to the public.

The Internet is an extraordinary source for historic furnishings. Web sites with historic and reproduction wallpaper, fabric, floor coverings, and furnishings abound on the Internet. A good way to start your Internet search is to purchase a restoration magazine such as Old House Interiors, Old House Journal, or Traditional Buildings and peruse the advertisements for vendors of furnishings that may be appropriate and then check out the web sites of those companies. These sites will frequently lead you to other sites with useful information. More and more companies put their information on the Web every day, but there are still many good sources that do not yet have an Internet presence, and standard research techniques and resources are still a must.

Before the work begins, arrange to protect all original furnishings and materials that will be retained during the restoration process. During the work, monitor the original materials closely to ensure that they are not damaged.

The work is completed and now it is time to install the artifacts. Make any necessary changes to the locations of the objects that are noted on the catalog cards and on the charts prepared for the HFR.

After everything has been installed, the final step is to take detailed photographs of the completed areas. These photographs will not only document the project but also will be useful for other purposes such as publicity, staff training and security.

Note


Resources

National Guild of Professional Paperhangers (www.thepaperhangers.com) The guild provides valuable information on the wallpaper trade and has links to many manufacturers.

National Park Service/Heritage Preservation Services (www2.cr.nps.gov) This site introduces a broad range of products and services, financial assistance and incentives, educational guidance, and technical information in support of the preservation historic properties.

Old House Interiors, PO Box 56009, Boulder, CO 80322-6009, (800) 462-0211.

Old House Journal (www.oldhousejournal.com) PO Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235, (800) 234-3797; A magazine devoted to the restoration of old houses. It also has a very helpful web site.

The Old House Web (www.oldhouseweb.net) A web site devoted to ideas, advice, and community for old house enthusiasts.

Paint Analysis (departments.mvc.edu/bhp/uvv/Resource/Slbuck.htm) A good Internet article discussing paint analysis.
Preservation Briefs
(www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm) This series of leaflets assists owners and developers of historic buildings in recognizing and resolving common preservation and repair problems.

State Historic Preservation Office
(www.sso.org/ncshpo/shoplist.htm) This web site provides a useful list of all state historic preservation officers and contact information.

Clem Labine's Traditional Building
(www.traditional-building.com) This web site is the gateway to 480 suppliers of traditionally styled products and services provided by Traditional Building magazine.

www.Victoriana.com
A web site specializing in nineteenth-century lifestyles, decorating, and restoration that features links to many vendors, museums, and sources of information.

Further Reading


