
Project Completion Report Washington Bedchamber Restoration

Joseph Webb House
211 Main Street, Wethersfield, Connecticut



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Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum
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When paint research was completed on the Washington bed chamber as part of the 2005 Historic Structures Report, conservator Brian Powell made a surprising and exciting discovery. Based on an earlier paint analysis by his colleague Morgan Phillips, the chamber was painted red in the 1970s. In reexamining the room, Brian determined that the earlier layer of red paint was actually the ground coat for graining and evidence of the original decoration was uncovered in two test areas --- on a closet door to the left of the fireplace and on the corner post in the southeast corner of the chamber.



Washington bed chamber prior to restoration. The red color on the woodwork was believed to be original in a paint analysis completed in the 1970s, but later was found by

Brian Powell to be the ground coat for cedar graining when he reanalyzed the room for the 2005 Historic Structure Report.



Sample of original cedar graining uncovered by Building Conservation Associates, Inc. as part of the Historic Structures Report completed in 2005

In the Winter 2008, the Museum completed the structural stabilization of the Webb House and used \$79,733.73 of its Save America's Treasures grant of \$ 150,000. The project was completed significantly under budget---leaving a balance \$70,644.27. On September 10, 2008, the National Park System approved the use the remaining grant funds to restore the Washington bed chamber and begin much needed woodwork repairs and exterior painting at the Webb House.

The executive director of the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum, Charles Lyle, prepared a *Request for Proposal* for the restoration of the Washington bed chamber and submitted it to the National Park Service for review on August 3, 2009. Several changes were requested and the NPS gave approval to proceed with the bidding on August 31, 2009. Because the graining of the Washington bed chamber is very specialized and requires the services of a specialized craftsman, there was a limited pool of qualified people to submit proposals. The director consulted with Connecticut Landmarks, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation for the names of qualified bidders. Three prospective contractors were contacted and sent the approved RFP on September 1, 2008. Two of the three bidders submitted proposals on or before the September 25th deadline. The third visited the site and decided not to

submit a proposal. Proposals were received from John Canning Studios of Cheshire, CT, and Marylou Davis of Woodstock, CT. Both were judged qualified to do the work and have considerable experience working on restoration projects at National Register caliber sites. John Canning's bid was for \$30,165 and Marylou Davis's bid was for \$26,400.

Historic paint expert Marylou Davis was selected to restore the Washington bed chamber and the project started in November 2009. All of the furnishings were removed from the room in early November, and Marylou conducted a detailed examination of all of the woodwork and opened several test areas to confirm the existence and the location of the original faux cedar graining. By raking a bright light over the surface, she was



The existence of the original graining is confirmed by test areas opened up on the woodwork throughout the room.

able to see raised striations of the original graining through layers of later over paint and trace the designs on Mylar. The striations are caused by the coarsely ground paint pigments used at the time. Using this technique, she was able to replicate about fifty percent of the original graining. For the restoration, all of the woodwork in the room, including the shutters, was cedar grained except for the mop or baseboard and the sash.

The graining at the Webb House is the same period as the Wetmore Parlor at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, which also dates from the mid-18th century and is very similar in style. Careful inspection of the original graining that survives in tact on the paneling at the Wetmore Parlor revealed a number of remarkable similarities indicating that the two

rooms were possibly done by the same craftsmen. The Mylar tracings taken from the Webb bed chamber were very similar in style and technique and the vertical painted slash lines observed on the cornice at the Wetmore parlor were also found at the Webb House.



Marylou Davis tracing original designs telegraphing through later layers of paint on to Mylar. This post is located in the southeast corner of the chamber.



Vertical slash marks used to decorate the moldings. The design element was first noticed on the paneling at the Wetmore Parlor. Clear evidence of slashes was later found by Ms. Davis in the Webb bed chamber.



Wetmore Parlor from Middletown, CT. ca. 1763. The room is one of a rare few painted rooms from this period in America that has survived intact. Wadsworth Athenaeum, Harford, CT

Ms. Davis's assistant Mike Fineran began work on November 19, 2009 stripping the floorboards to their mid-18th century appearance. This project ended up requiring more time and effort than originally anticipated and took several weeks to complete. Next, Mr. Fineran painted the ground coat for the graining on the woodwork prior to Ms. Davis doing the actual graining.



Mike Fineran and Marylou Davis stripping floors.

Using her extensive knowledge and experience in the field of American historic decoration combined with period written sources, the Mylar tracings, and the evidence provided by the Wetmore parlor, Marylou began the actual graining in December. A drawing was prepared to show the layout and composition of the grained surfaces. All of the woodwork was primed with a latex based primer tinted to the ground coat color. Graining glazes were mixed on site and applied with over-graining brushes, a striping brush, rags and cardboard. All grained surfaces were coated with one coat of tinted varnish to create the appearance of cedar wood. The process was fascinating to watch as it progressed and the final results are spectacular.



Marylou Davis graining the woodwork in the Washington bed chamber.



Completed bed chamber with newly stripped floors, cedar graining and LED lighting. The reproduction flocked paper in its original colors will be installed on a removable panel to be installed between the room end and window on the north wall to the right.

In addition to restoring the dramatic woodwork and stripping the floor boards, the project included installing new track lighting with state-of-the-art LED bulbs, which are low in energy and conservation friendly. Ten 50 watt halogen fixtures were replaced with ten 3 watt LCD fixtures, reducing energy consumption from 500 to 30 kilowatts per hour. Furthermore, the lights are now on a motion detector and automatically turn on and off when visitors enter or leave the gallery.

One panel on the original door between the bed chamber and hallway is used to document the paint history and all stages of the project, including the original graining, the red paint used on the woodwork, the new ground color and

the recently completed cedar graining. The earlier test patches opened by BCA to show the evidence of graining were also preserved for interpretive purposes.



Door panel preserving earlier paint finishes. The door goes to the hallway and is usually left opened so the panel is out of sight.

Currently in progress, but not completed in time for this report, is the reproduction of the flocked wallpaper in its original colors. It will be installed on a panel that leaves an air space to protect the original paper underneath located between the paneled room end on the west wall and the window on the north wall. It is being done to show visitors the brilliant colors of the original wall paper and the vibrancy of the original color scheme. The reproduction paper will be installed next to the cedar grained paneling to give visitors the full impact of the original decoration. The wallpaper will be produced by Adelphai Wallpaper, which reproduced the wallpaper design several years ago and added it to their line. They will for the first time do a flocked version in its original brilliant colors based upon scientific paint analysis using a scanning electron microscope and FTIR organic analysis under the direction of David Dempsey of Smith College.

