



In Living (History) Color

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People may dream in color, but they seem to remember in black and white. They think of history as all black-cloaked pilgrims and snow-white Valley Forge winters, as drab and monochromatic as a Mathew Brady portrait or a 1930s newsreel.

The tendency to decolorize the past seems particularly evident in restored historic homes. Walk into a typical antebellum mansion, and you'll find faded carpets, plain ceilings, and walls that have been whitewashed or painted in muted "colonial" colors.

Memories notwithstanding, the past was not black and white. The pilgrims actually wore brightly colored clothing, the snows of Valley Forge were stained red by a ragtag army's bare and bloodied feet, and homes of the past were often as colorful as those of today. Perhaps even more so, if Louisville's Farmington Historic Home is any indication.

When you walk into Farmington, you encounter a startling profusion of colors and patterns. Thanks to a recently completed \$500,000 restoration project, the home features peach and yellow walls, faux-grained doors, brightly patterned carpets, and ornate—even gaudy—hand-printed wallpaper. This is not your father's historic-preservation project, but it just might be your forefather's.

One of Louisville's most popular house museums, Farmington was built in 1815-16 by John and Lucy Speed and formed the heart of the family's 550-acre hemp plantation off what is now Bardstown Road. While the home never fell victim to the ravages of time, it did lose much of its showy color over the decades. Now, that color has returned with a vengeance.

Visitors first notice Farmington's new (or is it old?) look in the front and back halls that together bisect the 14-room Palladian mansion. Sunny yellow walls compete for attention with "Venetian" carpet, a type of striped, ingrain carpet popular in the nineteenth century. The hall's poplar doors have been painted to simulate mahogany, while blue stippling on the door frames and baseboards resembles marble. (Louisvillian Kyle Hibbs did both the faux painting and stippling.)

How accurate are these details? As accurate as humanly possible, according to Curator Carolyn Brooks, who happens to be a former historic preservation consultant. The Historic Homes Foundation, Inc., which owns and operates Farmington, based its restoration on two important tools: an extensive probate inventory completed after John Speed's death in 1840 and a historic paint analysis conducted by Matthew Mosca of Baltimore, a leading expert in the field. These tools, along with a little detective work, have returned the home to its probable appearance between the 1815-1840 time period.

Farmington's most stunning room is perhaps the dining room, an airy octagonal space off the front hall. Mosca's research indicated that the room had originally been wallpapered, but he could find no remaining scraps of the original. The unusual wallpaper used in the restoration is based on a pattern found in a contemporaneous home, the Senator John Pope House, in Lexington. Both the wallpaper and the swag border (also from the Pope House) were hand-printed by Adelphi Paper Hangings, Inc. using 11 laser-engraved printing blocks, one for each color.

As is the case throughout the house, the dining room's furnishings combine Speed family pieces with purchased items that were produced in or available in Kentucky during the early nineteenth century. Furniture in the room includes a neoclassical mahogany pedestal table (American, c. 1840), a neoclassical inlaid mahogany sideboard (probably English, c. 1815), and a cherry sugar chest (probably Kentuckian, c. 1810).

The dining table and sideboard display part of a rare 100-piece dinner service produced by John Ridgeway in the late 1830s; the pattern, "Villa," features a different Italian villa on each sized piece. Family items on the dining table include coin-silver forks and spoons that belonged to Peachy Peay, the Speeds' daughter who, along with her husband Austin Peay, purchased Farmington after John Speed's death.

Balancing the dining room is the equally ornate octagonal parlor, which Mosca also determined had originally been wallpapered. The reproduction paper used here is based on an original sample of a paper produced by Henry Virchaux of Philadelphia and found in the Library of Congress. Virchaux advertised in an 1816 Louisville newspaper that he was in town and ready to do business, so it's conceivable that one of his designs graced the parlor's walls.

The parlor, of course, would have been used for special occasions ranging from weddings to wakes, as well as for evening gatherings of the family. A circa-1805 Astor and Norwood pianoforte, a predecessor of the modern piano, serves as a reminder of the Speeds' interest in music. Bohemian-born composer Anton Heinrich lived with the family for two years, working on his own compositions and presumably teaching music

to some of the family's 11 children. (Sometimes called the "Beethoven of America," Heinrich helped found the New York Philharmonic in 1842.)

Besides the two large octagonal rooms, Farmington's main floor contains four rooms that have been interpreted as bedrooms: a master bedchamber and three children's rooms. The master bedchamber, designated "Mrs. Speed's Room" in the probate inventory, probably doubled as a sitting room. It features peach walls and the familiar decorative stippling on the woodwork. A small section of the original stipple work has been preserved over one door for visitors to see.

The room's furnishings include a circa-1820 high-post cherry bed, almost certainly made by noted Lexington craftsman Porter Clay. The bed and a Windsor settee have been decorated with bed hangings based on a calico produced in England from 1815-1830. Chairs include a matched set of six Klymos-form Greek Revival chairs and a pair of children's chairs reportedly purchased from Mount Vernon. (The probate inventory listed a total of 70 chairs.) Tucked away in a window sill is Mrs. Speed's medicine chest, where she kept such questionable remedies as ipecacuan wine, essence of ginger, and soda mints.

Twin bedrooms near the front of the house demonstrate that girls and boys have long had different tastes and interests. The girls' room is painted pink and features dolls and a tea set reputed to have belonged to the Speed family. The boys' room is painted Prussian blue (the first synthetic paint color) and includes skates and a primitive oak cobbler toy. Rag carpets in both rooms are based on historical designs from Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill.

John's daughters from his first marriage may have slept in the yellow bedroom. This room's bed warmer and chamber pot are reminders that life in a nineteenth-century mansion wasn't always luxurious.

Downstairs at Farmington, the rooms are less colorful and more utilitarian. One such room is the "travelers' room," which has been interpreted as a sort of guest bedroom. Kentucky was very much the frontier in the early 1800s, and guests were frequently welcomed into homes like Farmington.

One such guest was a young lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, named Abraham Lincoln. A close friend and Springfield roommate of the Speeds' son Joshua, Lincoln visited Farmington for several weeks during the summer of 1841. Joshua's older brother James later served as Lincoln's last attorney general.

Near the traveler's room is another brick-floored room that's been interpreted as James Speed's office. It features a walnut secretary, an American Windsor writing chair, and a Kentucky long rifle. Toward the back of the lower level are the winter kitchen and a room that's been interpreted as a family dining room. Although the room's actual function is unknown, the memoirs of Thomas Bullitt, who grew up on the nearby Oxmoor plantation, discuss an "ordinary" dining room in the basement that was used for most meals. Given that men on a plantation would often come to meals directly from the fields, it makes sense that they would dine in a downstairs room near the kitchen.

Of course, this room may have had a completely different use 165 years ago. But given the impressive amount of research that went into the Farmington restoration, it's

likely that John Speed could walk in from the fields today, muddy boots and all, and feel right at home.