

RESEARCH - THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL RESTORATION

Every building has a unique life history of its own. In addition to being interesting this story can serve many useful purposes. Knowledge of the history of a building greatly enhances its charm and often its material value as well. Homeowners willing to seek out their building's secrets will find the project as fascinating as it is rewarding. With such information available, faithful restoration becomes both possible and profitable. Without it, no building can honestly claim the distinction of being 'restored'.

To set the record straight, it should be noted that for most people rehabilitation might be a more accurate term than restoration. Seldom do homeowners actually restore their homes. Restoration implies renewing it exactly to some earlier state, as in an historic house museum. Nearly all homeowners make some efforts to preserve their buildings. As homes age, they occasionally need to be rehabilitated. Rehabilitation implies both preservation and modifications that update a home to present day requirements. Most homes said to be restored actually have been rehabilitated.

One need be neither a scholar nor a historian to achieve worthwhile results. Curiosity, determination, and imagination will suffice, especially when there are many local historians, librarians and others more than willing to help.

Checking the Records

A wealth of scattered, written records exists for every parcel of land. By seeking them out, the basic history of a piece of property can be determined. In the county clerks office, all recorded transfers are indexed both by seller (grantor) and buyer (grantee). Whenever a title passes by will or upon death without a will, the indexes in the county surrogates court records should be examined. In this manner, a title history can be pieced together through these indexes.

The deed to a property will list only the present and immediately preceding owners and the date of transfer. However, an abstract is a series of deeds recording the history of a piece of land. Abstracts indicate and date all leases, mortgages, wills, etc. that have affected the property. An abstract search on a parcel of land dating to 1825 would cost an estimated \$100. This is the approximate fee of an abstract company who are specialists in this field.

Deeds and abstracts do not explain when a house was built on the property. Tax assessment records may indicate, by a sudden increase, when a house or barn was added to the property.

Unfortunately, not everyone leaves a will but a careful study of each available will in the surrogates court will offer clues to the value of the property, perhaps an itemized list of furnishings, and an indication of each family's economic or social standing. This in turn would indicate the types of furnishings they would have used.

Local county, town or village historians offer knowledge of local history and of special sources of information. Their offices sometimes contain files of photographs and histories of early buildings. Town or county officials could supply the addresses of area historians.

Local libraries contain early county histories and old newspaper files that might furnish information about previous owners. Check the names of previous owners in county histories.

Sometimes the local press, if not the library, has retained files of back newspaper issues. These can be checked for the periods when the property changed hands. It may have been advertised in detail at these times.

On the Spot

While the written record offers much of the necessary, indispensable proof, it seldom

tells the complete story. A careful study of the building itself will reveal many of its secrets. This information found on the site will fill gaps in the story.

Date stones are a researchers best friend. Proud owners placed them on their buildings removing future doubts concerning when they were constructed.

The first step is to try to form a clear picture of the house as it was originally constructed, before any changes or additions. Stone walls and foundations usually outline the original structure. Examine where two cobblestone walls meet to determine the original from the later addition. Try to decide the order in which each addition was built. Differing styles of architectural detail will often indicate when wings or porches were added. It would be wrong to assume that every wing was a later addition. Sometimes the original structure included a one story addition extended to the rear or forming an L, often without a basement underneath.

Determine the original floor plan. Close examination of floorboards, ceiling plaster and wooden moldings in each room will indicate where room partitions have been changed. Parallel marks on floor and ceiling will verify this. Baseboard molding may vary indicating where later carpenters had failed to exactly duplicate the original. Vertical cuts in baseboards are clues that a door or partition has been removed.

The relatively unchanging style of eighteenth and early nineteenth century homes determined that most would be square or rectangular boxes with room arrangement limited to another series of boxes within. Possibly because of this, carpenters and masons had to show their skills in more subtle ways. Each room was usually furnished with a different set of moldings on doors and windows. Whenever a room is found with an odd window or doorway, chances are a wall partition has been removed to enlarge the room.

Attempt to blueprint the order in which major structural changes were made.

A close examination of internal walls will reveal much. Many owners wallpapered or painted layer upon layer leaving a detailed record of previous decorating tastes. Carefully removing and saving this record layer by layer, will provide valuable clues to the building's past. More important perhaps, these will offer home restorers a variety of colors and paper patterns to guide the most faithful restoration possible. Examine the reveals, or edges of doorway moldings, where they meet the wallplaster. Close examination may indicate the outline of earlier baseboard moldings at the base or of chair-rails (dados) halfway up the reveal.

Where wall moldings are missing, their outline can be traced in the original plaster. This is because in older homes, using well seasoned woods, it was possible to set woodwork in place first, with the plastering completed later. Wherever a mantelpiece, or other woodwork has been removed or altered, its outline is recorded as long as the original plaster remains.

One of the most common methods of restoration requires only a razor blade and a magnifying glass. Used properly they can reveal how each room had been decorated through the years. Choose an unobtrusive spot in each room. Holding the blade firmly but lightly, carefully scrape away one layer of paint at a time. Assuming the average house gets a fresh coat of paint every ten years and estimating the age of the house, one can predict the number of layers to expect. The object is to uncover the entire series of colors until at least a square inch of each color is visible. If the wall has not been scraped clean previously, the layer of paint closest to the woodwork or plaster was probably the original color of the room. This could be duplicated for a truly faithful restoration. Spot checks of other painted surfaces in the room will verify the test area. When an out of the way spot is used, the area could be left permanently unpainted as both a record and a point of interest.

Attics, basements, sheds and barns may reveal tangible evidence of moldings, shutters, hardware, furniture, etc. Every object remaining once served some use. A simple wooden molding fragment found in a shed might be a piece of a mantelpiece removed long ago in an attempt at

modernization. From such evidence, together with illustrations of typical mantelpieces of the period, the original might be reproduced. Save each object until its original use can be determined. Whenever making structural changes, save and label each type of molding, window, shutter, nail, etc. Generations to come will thank you for your consideration. Leaving a record of changes made is a special responsibility of historic housekeeping.

Playing Detective

Having examined all available records and the building itself, the next step is to track down all the remaining clues.

Descendants of the previous owners are a possible source of information concerning alterations or structural changes. They often possess family photographs that reveal earlier landscaping, porches, windows, and a wealth of other detail. Asking questions of older area residents will help to locate these people. Finding one such person will provide leads to others.

Put It in Writing

Organizing such a wealth of evidence into a well written story need not be difficult. The simplest method is to list all previous owners whose occupancy is dated by the deed. As more is learned about these families it becomes easier to assign specific changes to each of these periods of occupancy. Add all facts that can definitely be dated and then those dates that can only be estimated. Once this is established much of what was uncertain will become clear.

This written record will be of ever increasing value to succeeding generations. They will find it invaluable as a guide to preserving the historic value of their homes.

To insure its continued value, keep this record up to date. Record and date any changes or major repairs. Add to its value by including a photographic record of all important features or changes. Take such photos both before and after changes are made. Safeguard this record by making several copies to prevent its loss or destruction. Presenting one copy to the Cobblestone Society will insure this and also add another valuable resource to our growing research library. The local library or historian would also appreciate a copy.

Most important of all, put this record to use. Use it for the most faithful restoration possible. Use it to keep all future changes in harmony with the building. Although our ideas of interior decoration have changed, today's most successfully decorated cobblestone homes are those that blend the best ideas, colors, and furnishings of both eras. Finally, use it to more thoroughly understand and enjoy the unique story of your home.

Bibliography

Anyone restoring a cobblestone structure would find the following sources invaluable:

<u>Cobblestone Architecture</u>	Schmidt, Carl
<u>Greek Revival Architecture in the Rochester Area</u>	Schmidt, Carl
<u>Old American Houses and How to Restore Them</u>	Williams, Henry L. and Williams, Ottalie K. Doubleday and Company, New York 1946