

Remodeling to Invoke the Spirit of Henry Clay

The granddaughter, Anne Clay McDowell and her family resided at Ashland by the beginning of 1883 and they provided Ashland its new public face. They, like the press and the public at this time, in many ways believed the 1880s Ashland was still Henry Clay's home. Yet there was no question that it also served as the McDowell family home as they modernized and remodeled to suit themselves. Like James before them, the McDowells considered it crucial to bring the mansion up-to-date in order to make it suitable for entertaining, comfortable for their family—and worthy of Clay's memory and image in the world. The McDowells without question sought to memorialize Clay at Ashland, and this, to them, meant modernization. They boldly made decisions that affected the permanent structure of the mansion and their sweeping 1880s remodeling was greeted with nothing but praise. As historic interior design specialist Gail Caskey Winkler observed, the "son built," but the "granddaughter modernized." The McDowells would leave a profound and permanent mark on Ashland as they were the ultimate definers of the mansion's overall structure and appearance. They had numerous motivations for the changes they made.

The well-connected McDowells, now as stewards of Ashland, were preparing for frequent and often large-scale hospitality. The house had to do what it had done for Henry Clay and James and Susan before them: provide a gracious destination for their many guests—but now on a grander scale. They were also preparing for the presence of their children and grandchildren and all of the accompanying needs and desires of young people. Additionally, they were preparing for life at Ashland with paid servants as opposed to slaves. It is very possible that the McDowells were the ones to raze the extant domestic slaves' quarters, not only to modernize their property, but to erase from view the uncomfortable reality of slavery at Clay's Ashland. This would be the first time in Ashland's history that free and paid staff would provide the cleaning, cooking, childcare, and other domestic service—and this would require changes in household arrangement.

The McDowells were among the wealthier families in Kentucky and desired to live in a gracious and cultivated style. They envisioned Ashland as a modern place of beauty, both of form and function. Their sophisticated ideas of beauty, function, and appropriateness would dictate their choices. Many of those ideas manifested in such impermanent things as furnishings and wall treatments, but also in dramatic and more permanent structural changes such as the removal of walls, replacement and addition of staircases, and the construction of a conservatory onto the back of the mansion. The McDowells were clearly unafraid to modify Ashland, even to the point of slightly altering Clay's Federal floor plan that James had been so careful to preserve. They were interested in modernizing through the creation of a sense of spaciousness. 'Open planning' was a significant architectural innovation during the 1870s and 1880s and the McDowells utilized this concept to enhance Ashland's interior spaces. They had not wanted to drastically change Ashland's floor plan, but they maximized the existing spaces for a modern effect. The entrance hall, drawing room, and dining room were united—all doors open wide—as one expansive public space for entertaining. Previously less-public rooms, such as those in the library wing, were now open wide to visitors. Replacing the central staircase dramatically opened up the entrance area of the house as well. Smaller, less invasive changes were made,

too, such as the addition of a full-length mirror in the entrance hall that reflected light and gave the illusion of a larger space.

The McDowells made Ashland as elegant as possible, transforming the mansion into a *fin de siècle* showcase of sophistication as they embraced a mix of decorative styles: the late-Victorian and Eastlake styles, but particularly the Aesthetic Style that was popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Oriental carpets, “Japanesque” patterned anaglypta, potted palms, art pottery, portières, richly colored wall finishes and thinly slatted hardwood floors comprised this look—and found their places at Ashland.

A further catalyst for change in the 1880s was the availability of new technology. While James had added such upgrades as coal-burning fireplaces and probably an updated indoor kitchen, the McDowells would dramatically usher Ashland into the twentieth century. Many modern upgrades were regarded as necessary in late nineteenth-century upper-class homes. Privies, outdoor kitchens, and oil lamp lighting may have been perfectly respectable in Henry Clay’s period, but would be looked upon as woefully primitive by the end of the century. The McDowells possessed the means to modernize the house and to do it with style. Modern innovations allowed them to make Ashland a much more habitable place than it had ever been with the addition of indoor plumbing, central heating, gas (and later, electric) lighting, and telephone service. Because the estate was too distantly located for municipal gas service, the McDowells introduced gas lighting to Ashland with the innovative Springfield “gas works” Machine system buried in the front yard which supplied vaporized gas to all the light fixtures in the home. They replaced virtually all of the light fixtures in the house with elegant gas lamps and chandeliers of European stained and beveled glass, brass and silver plate, and elaborate globes. From the dramatic vaulted ceiling in the library, they installed an exotic serpent-shaped gasolier fixture.

The conservatory was installed by the McDowells in 1883. The sleeping porch above was added much later and deemed too hazardous for use by Madeline McDowell Breckinridge. The new McDowell Ashland, while not as sumptuously Victorian as James and Susan’s, was, all the same, much more dazzling than Henry Clay’s original. An 1883 guest described the net effect of their changes: “Ashland is a beautifully planned house for entertaining—five rooms ‘en suite.’ Friday night it presented a most magnificent appearance. The whole house thrown open, brilliantly lighted, elegantly furnished, and filled with rare and beautiful gems, and decorated with the greatest profusion of exquisite flowers and blooming plants. The drawing room opens into a conservatory filled with palms and rare plants of every variety, and lighted with gas lights...” (Lexington (Ky.) Weekly Press, 16 May 1883.)