

The Mansion as a Memorial

In the final months before Henry Clay died in June of 1852, his son James B. Clay promised his father that he would assume the responsibility for Ashland, as Clay had desired. James and his family planned to occupy the historic estate, but there was a serious problem: Henry Clay's nearly fifty-year-old house had been rapidly deteriorating for decades and the structure was by this time dangerously unstable. Clay had made a critical error in the construction of his house: the brick he had purchased were of inferior quality and its porosity resulted in severely cracked supporting walls. The New Madrid earthquakes and aftershocks of 1811 and 1812 also likely rendered the structure dangerously unstable. Even after repeated efforts at repair, the mansion was in a precarious state and it was thought there was little to be done to stabilize the house.

James asked architect Lewinski, to ascertain whether the structure was safe for his family to inhabit. The architect "pronounced it unsafe, and, moreover, that it would tumble down of itself, in a very few years." James soon made his decision: "Under these circumstances, I determined to rebuild..." The symbolic significance of Henry Clay's house had grown for his family and for the public after his death, but Clay had unfortunately left behind the seriously dilapidated mansion; his burgeoning legacy was ironically accompanied by a deteriorating house. James wanted to reconcile these opposing realities by building a fresh, improved Ashland in honor of his father while remaining largely faithful to the original. James intended to present Ashland as a lasting public memorial to his father.

Enlisting architect Lewinski, James opted to create an idealized Ashland that the public seemed to want, a mansion that would retain key architectural features of his father's mansion while adding tasteful embellishments and improvements. James took liberties with the physical and literal realities of his father's house. With James's rebuilding, the truth of Ashland's former condition—the dilapidated structure in perpetual need of repair—would quickly fade from the collective consciousness.

James gave public notice in July of 1854 of his plan to raze the old mansion that summer. By early 1857 the new Ashland was complete. James replicated the original house by building upon the original foundation with the original floor plan and utilizing original materials. It retained the original Federal-style arrangement of space. The original proportions of the house were maintained with the thirteen-and-a half foot ceilings, the extra tall doorways and the graceful elliptical staircase in a central stairwell, crowned by an oval-shaped skylight. The magnificent Latrobe-designed library with the vaulted ceiling and skylights was rebuilt. Robert Spiotta says that James, "working a little like a modern preservationist" salvaged as much of the old house as he could "both in style and materials" for reuse in the new structure.

Yet James adapted the new Ashland's design to his time and its aesthetic. Lewinski managed a complex architectural feat by integrating the Federal style with the newer Italianate and Greek

Revival characteristics, combining the basic design of the old house with the fresh characteristics of an Italian villa. The entire effect of the combination Federal-Italianate architecture was said to have been “odd, but not unpleasant.” While Ashland’s symmetrical Federal floor plan remained at the heart of the structure, and the rooms assigned for uses corresponded to those in Clay’s original house, now the interiors were much more lavishly adorned. James left the literal Ashland behind for one that he envisioned as noble and world-class; a home that paid tribute in the most distinguished way possible. Ashland was effectively transformed as a public monument through its style. James spared no expense to create a modern, luxuriously furnished mansion. While Henry Clay, too, had furnished his Ashland with items from France and England as well as fine American-made goods, James’s taste for the most opulent foreign furnishings reveals that the new Ashland was a very different place. Henry Clay’s straightforward Federal sensibility gave way to his son’s rich Victorian aesthetic, the proof of impeccable taste in the 1850s. The house now served as a Henry Clay memorial museum and the beautiful interiors were specifically meant as a backdrop for the display and interpretation of Clay artifacts.