

# The Mansion as a Museum

One of the features of the museum in its early years was the Museum Room where small artifacts and objects, which were difficult to display in the rest of the house, could be exhibited.

When Ashland officially opened to the public in 1950 as a house museum, interpreting Ashland's creator and his intentions was complicated by the fact that five generations of his family and much of the remaining evidence of those generations remained at Ashland. Ashland reflects no particular era fully, not even the McDowell era that it visually most closely matches. While Henry Clay is the focus at Ashland, restoring the house completely to his time has never been feasible because of the generational 'layers' of James's rebuilding and the McDowells' remodeling. Despite the descendants' many changes, Ashland was nevertheless interpreted strictly as Henry Clay's house from 1950's opening day. Because of the messy generational reality, the temptation for the institutional museum has long been to simplify Ashland's story and to interpret it very narrowly.

In the 1991-92 restoration of Ashland, the decision was made to fully and purely interpret—not Henry Clay's era—but the McDowell era. The Foundation had for decades opted to emphasize Henry Clay even though the house and much of what filled it were not his. It was the consensus that restoring to the first half of the nineteenth century would be impractical, too expensive, with too little extant visual evidence to facilitate the process. The rebuilt house and remodeled interior were simply too far removed from Clay's era. The Foundation looked to professionals to guide them in this decision. The architects for Ashland's restoration made their recommendation: because of the substantial changes that the McDowells had made in the 1880s, they said, "it would be most appropriate to interpret both the interior and the exterior...to the mid-1880s period." The rediscovery of the McDowells' photo albums, as director Colleen Holwerk explained, also led to the new approach. The restoration and new interpretation were artifact-driven when the Foundation realized they "owned nearly everything in those pictures" and the objects and pictures became the visual basis for how the house was reinterpreted. As Holwerk claimed, it was just as "Mrs. McDowell" had it. "It's very charming in a way," she said, "It's four generations of Clays' life at Ashland..." A great deal of study and consultation with experts resulted in a close imitation of the McDowell-era Ashland. The Foundation was serious about painstakingly copying the McDowells' 1880s interiors as seen in photographs.

The 1991 restoration was the first full restoration of the house since the McDowell era.

The early-1990s restoration was a major turning point in Ashland's history. Not only was the house repaired and renovated, but its interpretation was thoroughly examined, questioned, and redone. The restoration project became an opportunity to consider the interpretation "from scratch," Ashland Curator Eric Brooks explains. For the first time people asked how the structure and furnishings could work for the interpretation of the house, instead of treating all Ashland's artifacts as permanently located and bending the interpretation around them. Interpretive choices could be made *tabula rasa*. Now it became possible to actively plan the interpretation, room by room, era by era, and to place artifacts and furnishings in the most appropriate places. Suddenly there was something of a master plan to interpret Ashland along with solid research to back it up.

The McDowell family emphasis was considered fresh and exciting. A 1992 Lexington Herald-Leader feature declared: "Ashland isn't just Henry Clay's home place anymore. Warmer, more inviting...It's a place where families laughed and cried, lived and died..." (Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, 28 October 1992) Historian and Board member Thomas D. Clark said of the restoration, "I think they've done a lot to enliven it...The place has been enlivened so much that Henry Clay would not recognize it, but his granddaughter would feel right at home..." (Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, 5 September 1992.)

The post-restoration tours concentrated largely on the decorative arts and unique features of the house. A few designated spots on the tour were dedicated to Clay's life and career, but the McDowells were emphasized because the rooms reflected their time. The interpretation was driven by what was in front of everyone's eyes: rooms furnished to the 1880s. Henry Clay's full significance was obscured in the enthusiasm for the McDowell family interiors and furnishings. When the National Trust conducted a facilities survey at Ashland in 2000, their strongest recommendation was to return to Henry Clay: "Henry Clay is Ashland's *raison d'être*" they insisted, "both historically and at present. He is the site's founder and primary draw." But they acknowledged that Ashland's interpretation presented a distinct challenge and pinpointed the central challenge of Ashland's interpretation: Henry Clay "out of context." Indeed Clay was, since his death and the razing of his original house, and always will be, "out of context." But the Trust advised that Ashland nevertheless concentrate on Clay because he could "still be appreciated and understood out of context, but to do so requires more attention on the man and his work and less on the trappings of the given context: the main house, the McDowells, and the decorative arts...The McDowells will get their due, but not until Clay gets his and the visitor is clear on the distinction between the two eras." ("National Trust for Historic Preservation Recommendations to the Henry Clay Memorial Foundation for a Space Allocation and Use Study for Ashland, The Henry Clay Estate, July 2000." Ashland Archives.)

The vision for Ashland's interpretation has expanded. McDowell interiors remain, but the attention to them has lessened. The acquisition of a substantial number of Henry Clay artifacts since the early 1990s has also measurably enabled a Clay-centered interpretation. McDowell interiors provide a rich background for the many Henry Clay artifacts now on display in most rooms at Ashland. The museum now attempts to contextualize the various generations in relationship to Ashland's creator.