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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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LEE MANSION NATIONAL MEMORIAL

FILE NO.

HISTORY DIVISION
RESEARCH

Drawing Room Mantels in the Lee Mansion

By: Murray Nelligan
October 20, 1952

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Lee Mansion
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October 20, 1952

Memorandum

To: The Superintendent

From: Acting Chief, Public Use Section
Through: Chief, National Memorials and Historic
Sites Division

Subject: Drawing Room mantels, Lee Mansion National Memorial

History of the two mantels now in storage
in basement of Lee Mansion

Unlike many aspects of the structural history of the Lee Mansion, that of the above mantels is reasonably complete, with copies of the pertinent letters in the Lee Mansion National Memorial Records. Up until the summer of 1855, the large room on the first floor, just south of the main hall, was unfinished. According to Agnes Lee's manuscript diary entry for September 2, 1855, the walls had not even been plastered until that summer. Then, having been ordered from West Point to service on the frontier with the 2nd Cavalry, Colonel R. E. Lee decided to finish off this room as part of what he termed the "renovation" of the house. This last was a general overhauling of the house with a view to making it more comfortable and suitable for his wife and children during the indefinite period he expected to be away, as well as to ensure its preservation on account of the close and dear associations it held for his family (Lee to Mrs. Lee, July 9, 1855).

Accordingly, Lee ordered three marble mantels of contemporary design from a company in New York - S. Young, 641 Hudson Street. To pay for the mantels, he enclosed a check for \$105 in a letter he wrote Mrs. Lee from Jefferson Barracks, Mo., July 1, 1855; this she was to send to Young if the mantels had arrived "perfect & agreeable to order" (also entry for July 23, 1855, in Lee Memo. Book No. 5). "I hope the mantels have come," he wrote Mrs. Lee on July 3, 1855. Apparently they arrived in good condition and were installed sometime in July or August of 1855,

Copy to: Mr. Hausmann
Mr. Truett

for Agnes Lee mentioned them in her diary as being in place, September 1, 1855. Of the three mantels ordered, two of identical size and design were installed in the drawing room or "large room," as the Lees termed it. The other, of a similar size but minus any carving, was put in place in the adjoining room, replacing an earlier mantel which was probably the counterpart of the wooden mantel in the Custis Sitting Room in the North Wing.

The following spring the new mantels in the drawing room were remarked by a young lady visiting the Lees (Blanche Berard to Mrs. Mary Berard, Apr. 18, 1856). There they remained until 1931, when they were removed and stored in the basement during the restoration of the mansion by the War Department.

The decision to take out the Lee mantels and replace them with replicas of two mantels at Woodlawn is an example of how restoration can go astray when basic principles are disregarded. In this instance, there was a serious departure from the policy and period set forth in the legislation establishing the Lee Mansion National Memorial; insufficient historical research was done before acting in the matter; existing evidence was disregarded; and, above all, personal taste was substituted for historically correct restoration.

H. J. Resolution 264, 68th Congress, approved March 4, 1925, established the Lee Mansion National Memorial, and directed the Secretary of War "as nearly as may be practicable, to restore the Lee Mansion ... to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War" It also stated that the house was to be furnished with articles in use in the mansion during that period, or replicas of such articles, "with a view to restoring, as far as may be practicable, the appearance of the interior of the mansion to the condition of its occupancy by the Lee family."

Disregarding this explicit directive, the "Advisory Board" appointed by the Quartermaster General to direct the restoration recommended in a report dated April 18, 1929, that new marble mantels be installed in the drawing room, these to be similar to those in the double parlors across the hall. No reason was given for this recommendation. A few months later, in a report dated Nov. 26, 1929, the board established as its policy in regard to the acquisition of furniture that all such, other than pieces originally at Arlington, or replicas of such original pieces, should be of the colonial period, and in no case later than 1830. The inconsistency between this policy and the policy established by Congress can only be accounted for by inferring that the advisory board was motivated by personal taste rather than the desire for historical accuracy, and had decided to move the restoration back in period and stress the Custis occupancy of Arlington, instead of that of the Lee family--a most serious deviation in regard to the correct historical interpretation of the house, in that it is the Lee association, not the Custis, that makes the mansion historically important and worthy of preservation. This decision was reached without any research having been done to definitely determine

Lee's associations with Arlington.

Likewise, no effort was made to find out whether or not the Lee mantels antedated the Civil War. Dr. Charles Moore, Chairman of the Fine Arts Commission which had final approval on all aspects of the restoration, testified at a hearing on H. J. Resolution 264, held May 28, 1924, that the mantels "never were used in the Custis time or the Lee time." He was also of the opinion that the drawing room had not been finished off prior to the Civil War. Moore gave no reasons for his opinions, even though Gilbert Rodier, an architect who had made measured drawings of the house in 1924 (used in the restoration of the mansion by the War Department), had pointed out in an article published in the Architectural Forum, March, 1924, that many of the details in the house, such as some of the mantels and woodwork, were definitely early Victorian, and assumed that they were pre-Civil War. Two years later, historian J. G. de Rouelac Hamilton, in an article on the mansion published in Current History, August, 1926, stated correctly that the Lees had had the drawing room plastered and painted and "the mantels put in" in the 1850's. In a letter to Representative Louis C. Gramton, dated Jan. 24, 1929, Charles Moore receded from his earlier position to the extent of conceding that the mantels had been installed (inferentially by the Lees) subsequent to Mr. Custis' death in 1857.

In spite of this and similar evidence that the mantels were indeed original pieces, and so of historic importance, those in charge of the project continued to enlarge on the policy of "colonial" restoration established by the advisory board. Once committed to that policy, the Army officers and architect in charge of the restoration logically found it necessary to remove all traces of what they loosely termed "a later period" throughout the house. This included the removal of the two marble mantels in the drawing room, the one in the adjoining room, those in the upstairs bedrooms, and a wooden one in the basement kitchen (Col. L. H. Bash to Quartermaster Supply Officer, May 29, 1929). About this time Gen. W. E. Horton, Chairman of the advisory board, wrote Mrs. Oscar W. Underwood (June 25, 1929) for permission to inspect Woodlawn in order to ascertain the type of dining room and mantels used in "early Virginia homes." It was probably at this time that Horton heard of the close resemblance between the two marble mantels in the dining room at Woodlawn and those in the double parlors at Arlington and the story that Lafayette had given the four mantels to G. W. P. Custis, who in turn had given two of them to his sister, Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, for Woodlawn. At any rate, the story seems to have been accepted at its face value (there is no evidence whatever for it) and it was decided that replicas of the Woodlawn mantels should be made and installed in the drawing room at Arlington.

In subsequent months the decision to remove and replace all the mantels on the second floor was changed to removing only the marble mantel in the Lee bedroom and replacing it with a wooden replica of that in the Custis Sitting Room (Col. C. G. Mortimer to Quartermaster General, Sept. 24,

1929). Those in the drawing room and large dining room were to be taken down and stored pending a decision as to whether they should be replaced (Gen. L. H. Bash to Quartermaster Supply Officer, Sept. 30, 1929). Whether or not the drawing room mantels were actually taken down at this time and subsequently put back in place is uncertain. An item for \$2,000 for replicas of the Woodlawn mantels to replace them was included in an estimate submitted to the Comptroller Division, Quartermaster Corps, April 4, 1930, but consideration of this item was postponed, according to a memorandum from General Bash to the Quartermaster Supply Officer, dated April 9, 1930.

Chairman Moore of the Fine Arts Commission continued to press for the removal of the Lee mantels. "Every time the members of the Commission ... go to the Arlington Mansion they ask when the mantels in the south room are to be changed to make them harmonious with the rest of the house," he wrote Gen. Bash, July 17, 1930. He made much the same comment a year later in a letter to Bash, dated Oct. 1, 1931. "I understood you to say you had taken up the question of having the old mantels .../in the double parlors/ duplicated but that the expense was prohibitive. There are two mantels of the period in the Y.M.C.A. home on E Street. Will you not look at these mantels and see if they will answer your purpose?" In reply to this last letter, General Bash informed Moore that a contract had been let for replicas to be made of the mantels in the double parlors, the medallions in the center of each replica to be like those at Woodlawn "which were originally ordered for the house by Major George Washington Park Custis" The new mantels, he said, would be installed in the drawing room by the end of the year. About this time, Colonel Mortimer, the officer directly in charge of the restoration, stated in an interview: "The large reception room never received the mantelpieces intended for it, but years later two so-called 'up-to-date' Victorian mantles were installed. We hope to replace these with two of the design and material of those originally ordered for this room by Mr. Custis" (An Old Mansion Becomes a New Shrine, American Motorist, October, 1931). From his statement, it is apparent that a myth with absolutely no factual basis had become established as a fact in the minds of those charged with the restoration. According to Mr. L. M. Leisenring, architect in charge of the restoration (statement to M. H. Nelligan, June 17, 1949), the advisory board recognized that the mantels to be discarded had originally been installed by the Lees when they finished off the drawing room, but decided to replace them "because they were Victorian." For the same reason, it was decided to drop the plan of copying certain furniture owned by Dr. George Bolling Lee (for which arrangements had already been made with the owner and W. J. Sloane).

Accordingly, the new mantels were made and installed in the spring of 1932. (Mortimer to Bash, Mar. 24, 1932). The old ones from the drawing room were stored in the basement, where they are now; but what became of the others which were replaced (large dining room, Lee bedroom and winter kitchen) is unknown. Fortunately, the woodwork, particularly the door frames, which is also "Victorian," was not removed from the drawing room.

The above constitutes a case history in the incorrect restoration of an historic house. There was no reasonable excuse to deviate from the basic restoration policy intended by Congress. Such a restoration was practicable since there was enough information available on which to base it. To compound the error, once it had been decided to "improve" on the original by taking out the Lee mantels, the opportunity was lost of copying, and perhaps later acquiring, the original furniture of the room owned by Dr. G. B. Lee, relics which are now on display at the Virginia Historical Society. The large sum of money spent on what are essentially fake mantels might instead better have been spent on copying furniture or portraits that were originally in the room. As it is, the "restored" room little resembles the one with which Robert E. Lee was familiar and of which he was justifiably proud.

However interesting to the professional historian the life and services of G. W. P. Custis may be, it is because of its associations with Robert E. Lee that the Lee Mansion is significant to the visiting public. This is as it should be, for the associations were real, many, and close, and it was in recognition of this fact and appreciation of Lee's services to the nation, as well as to the South, that Congress established the Lee Mansion National Memorial. Therefore, I recommend that the Lee mantels, now stored in the basement, be reset in their original positions in the drawing room, preferably this fall, before the room is repainted. With the mantels, the sofa recently donated by Mrs. Gerald M. Drew of Omaha, and the portrait supposedly of Mildred Lee, now awaiting cleaning and re-touching, as a nucleus, a start can be made on gradually returning the room to its original appearance. More is known about this room, the details of its furnishings, colors, etc., than any other room in the house, and it will require little in the way of funds to accomplish its correct restoration. The result will be the gradual transformation of what is today an essentially meaningless room into one charged with significance as the one Lee was primarily responsible for finishing off, decorating and furnishing.

Murray H. Nelligan
Acting Chief, Public Use Section

Enclosures 3

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Enclosure (1) Elevations & details of mantels and s. wall, drawing room, Rodier & Kuntz, 1924.

(2) Photograph of Lee mantels in place in drawing room, c. 1930.

(3) Photocopy of drawing room in Anderson House, Savannah, Ga., showing mantel of similar period and design as the Lee mantels. From Richard Pratt, Ladies Home Journal, November 1951.

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