

History Detectives Uncover Secrets at the Mill



It's 1 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon, and Colvin Run Mill manager and historian Mike Henry attempts to interpret the original interior color scheme of the newly restored miller's house. "It's tastefully challenged by today's standards," he quipped as he gestured toward the Spanish brown and Prussian blue trim that accents the white plaster walls. "It shows that ours is not a monochromatic past."

The miller's house was close to being condemned in 2014 when the Park Authority developed a plan to breathe new life into the 209-year-old structure, once owned by the Millard family. Soon, the house will serve as a rare and historically significant example of the way the rural manufacturing class lived during the 19th century federal period.

"At that time, about five percent of the population was gentry, 80 percent was in farming, and the 15 percent in between included millers, skilled artisans and shop owners," he said. "There are plenty of examples of gentry and farming homes from that timeframe, and only a few like this that represent those who would become middle class."

More than a year after the Park Authority began restoring the old house and discovering its secrets, history detectives are left with more questions about its past. The hall and stairwell are flanked by two identical rooms, but why were they independently framed? "There's a basement below one side and a crawl space below the other," Henry said. "The joists were 24 inches on center. Everything today is 16 inches on center." Even the second level presents questions for which there are no apparent answers. "One side was leveled by shimming, and the other was leveled by shaving. Both

ways solve the problem, but we don't know why each side was constructed using different methods."

As the history detectives peeled back the interior paint layers, they were surprised to discover that in more than 200 years, the original paint was just four or five layers deep, and there was no evidence of any wallpaper. "I've been here 31 years, and the house is still teaching me things," Henry said. One ground-level room was trimmed in Spanish brown. "It was probably the family room, because brown paint was made from common materials - rust and dirt - and was affordable," Henry says the blue room reflects the miller's social status. "It is the more formal of the two rooms and probably where the miller and his wife entertained guests. The mantle is a little more ornate, and the bowfat [china cupboard] has an unusual arch feature. The paint was very expensive because the pigment was man-made and not readily available. The blue room shows off a little bit and says 'We're doing pretty well - well enough to throw a little money into paint.'"

The final step in the restoration process is to install historically accurate furnishings and to develop an interpretive exhibit. Henry says the timeline will reflect the period's local, national and world events, "to make the house historically relevant to multi-cultural visitors." The greatest challenge may be to furnishing the house exactly the way the Millards did. "We don't have any inventory and don't really know what they had," Henry said. "It's a physical mystery to solve, and that's the fun part. It's what we like to do."

The new miller's house exhibit and restoration are expected to be complete by the beginning of 2019.