

The following articles present some universal perspectives, philosophies, and examples of collection use.

David Guynes

## The Guise of Summer: Seasonal Changes in Historic House Furnishings

American historic house museums differ immensely, ranging from humble 17th-century New England farmsteads to pompous Georgian plantation mansions. Many memorialize an elite family or individual, but nonetheless were places people lived. The “things” a historic house museum exhibits are sometimes only appreciated as objects d’art, quaint oddities, or icons of association. Whether famous, infamous or obscure, former residents of historic places were real people who ate, slept, and lived together. Houses have items in their collections once used by people.

Interpretive programs and furnishing plans may provide insight into seasonal housekeeping cycles without injury to the structure or valuable museum collections. J. Henry Chambers, in *Cyclical Maintenance for Historic Buildings*, contrasts historic housekeeping methods with modern methods, then recommends ways to safely clean historic structures and meet modern historic preservation standards. He emphasizes that many housekeeping techniques used by former inhabitants were clearly detrimental to the long-term preservation of the house. The same may be said of cleaning formulas and housekeeping methods directed toward furnishings.

Men hated the confusion of the biannual house cleaning and generally despised the ritual. It was the one time of the year when women seized the reigns of household government and determined where in the house men could enter, where they could sit, and even when they would have dinner. *Harpers Bazaar*, 1879.



Domestic guides and advice books published during the late-18th and throughout the 19th century are helpful in exploring historic housekeeping routines and are valuable sources for learning about seasonal variations in housekeeping. Similar sources are studied in a valuable discussion of the challenges women faced in keeping house found in Susan Strasser’s, *Never Done: A History of American Housework*.

Some collection items may be cautiously moved and aligned with seasonal historic housekeeping routines. Collection movement may be accomplished prudently if it avoids handling old, badly deteriorated collection items. In establishing routine furnishing plan changes, any scheme should be based on study of the history of the house and period interpreted, followed by consultations with conservators and historic architects. Each historic house curator can evaluate potentially affected collections and review opportunities to incorporate housekeeping cycles in the interpretive program without harm to the structure or collection.

Our discussion of seasonal housekeeping cycles starts with winter in America. Inhabitants of historic houses endured the discomfort and hindrances of winter with some difficulty. To withstand its rigors, many New England homes were banked or “blocked up” with leaves or seaweed, windows were sealed with paper or baize, and doors weatherstripped. Leather door sweeps date from the mid-18th century well into the 19th century. Eliza Leslie published a popular guide to housekeepers in 1840 and suggested “listing” doors by nailing strips of wood covered with baize in door gaps. Present-day historic houses could benefit from “listing” doors, both for energy conservation and controlling insects and rodents that frequently enter beneath ill-fitting door jabs. Most historic architects would frown on “banking” a house with leaves or seaweed, but it shows an early understanding of the principles of home insulation.

Metal stoves were often reassembled in the fall, having been dismantled and stored in spring

if they were not used for cooking. Franklin fireplaces and close (airtight) stoves were not in general use until the early-19th century. Reassembly was regarded as an infernal nuisance by contemporaries who complained that stovepipe pieces never rejoined properly. Curators may choose to forgo the same problems and frustration recorded in historic sources and leave parlor stoves together year-round. As in other seasonal routines, this one may be detrimental to artifacts affected.

Other collection items dedicated to keeping warm were fire screens, foot stoves, and settles. Fire screens, both pole screens and hand-held screens, fostered personal comfort near the fire; they blocked drafts, held in heat, and protected portions of the body from excessive heat since close proximity to the fire was necessary to stay warm. Pole screens with folding leaves to extend their coverage not only protected a lady's face from excessive heat, but sheltered her silk dress from scorching. Catherine Beecher, who wrote domestic guides and was Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister, advocated screens well into the second half of the 19th century. Small tin-and-wood foot stoves were fitted with an iron dish of hot coals and used for additional personal warmth. Often described as a feminine piece of furniture, it was sometimes called a "woman's stove." Leaving either of these items on exhibit beyond winter does not reflect seasonal cycles of use.

"Settles," with high-backs and draft-shielding sides, were highly coveted seats taking prominent positions before winter fires. They usually were reserved for the very old and very young. Unlike some other winter artifacts, settles had a seasonal use beyond cold weather. The high wing backs often formed a frame over which gauze netting was strung in summer to make a seated refuge from flies and mosquitoes.

Throughout cold winter months families huddled around parlor stoves or kitchen hearths with their small pockets of heat. Since fuel was expen-

sive and required effort to obtain, families often chose to have only one fire burning. Usually it was the kitchen since food still needed to be prepared. Fireplaces were the least efficient sources of heat and by the middle of the 19th century, iron stoves had begun to replace them for heating as well as cooking. Curators of historic structures usually forgo the realism, risks, and damage to museum collections and historic structures from live fires in hearths and iron stoves.

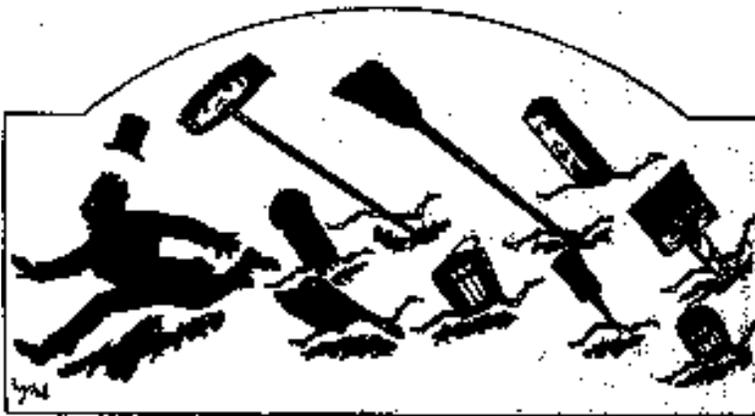
Bed-warming pans of copper or brass were usually kept in the kitchen during the winter to be easily filled with hot coals. They were not left in beds but passed between the sheets of four-poster beds with heavy woolen bed curtains to help insulate sleepers from cold bedchambers. Bed warming pans were also used to remove dampness clinging to bed sheets. Soapstone replaced warming pans in the second half of the 19th century.

Winter's cramped intimacy around fires was uncomfortable, but it bound families as a social unit. Activities that would otherwise be spread throughout the house were confined near a source of heat. Kitchens that became sitting rooms drew furnishings from the rest of the house, including such things as looking glass, rocking chairs, desk, workstand, books, clock, and carpets. Shaving apparatus—razor, hone and strop—might end up near the only source of hot water. Winter exhibits may take into account the location of the family sitting room. Many of the routines of winter life found themselves played out in close proximity to the kitchen hearth or iron stove.

Spring arrived. Soot deposited by long months of winter fires and lamps was cleaned away and the house prepared for the widely divergent temperatures of summer. To accomplish this the house underwent a housecleaning of gigantic proportions and incredible effort. To male household members, spring cleaning seemed the reign of total chaos. It completely exhausted female family members even when they hired help to accomplish it. Eliza Leslie suggested spring cleaning coincide with the departure of the master on a business trip. Men were unattended during these times and afterwards complained they could not find anything. As a remedy, Eliza Leslie suggested he gather up his papers, lock them in his desk, and depart.

Chores during spring cleaning included sweeping chimneys, washing windows and frames, dusting wallpaper, washing woodwork, whitewashing walls, cleaning out closets, and scouring floors. Spring cleaning began with the upper floors and came down, whitewashing walls as it proceeded. Rooms were stripped of furniture, which was taken outside or stacked in the center of the room and covered with old carpets. Fireplaces were

*Men were tormented by the thoroughness of the cleaning ritual as in this nightmarish scene where animated implements of house cleaning drive the gentlemen from his rightful place in 19th-century home life. Harpers Bazaar, 1893.*



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*The problem of flies and fly-specking furniture and household furnishings may have been more pronounced in the 19th century because of the prevalence of horses, the absence of modern sanitary facilities, in addition to the fact that window screening was not universal. Pencil drawing by William Marshall Merrick, Sketchbook, 14 July 1860. Print Collection, New York Public Library.*

cleaned and adorned for summer. Brass andirons were removed, cleaned, rubbed with mutton suet, sprinkled with lime and wrapped in brown paper or muslin and stored in the garret. Parlor fireplaces were cleaned and “closed” with a decorative board and a large Oriental jar with cedar twigs was sometimes placed on the floor of the hearth.

Curators avoid drastic measures of historic spring cleaning, as they avoid winter open flames that necessitated such measures. Other aspects of the seasonal cleaning ritual may be illustrated to visitors so they see the results of spring cleaning rather than the action.

Curtains were taken down to remain in storage until the fall. Eliza Leslie argued that leaving curtains up in summer fades them and they become dusty from open windows; left up they impeded the flow of air into the room, something housekeepers were beginning to worry more about during the 19th century. Eliza Leslie recommended venetian blinds and linen shades for summer windows. Curtains were shaken out, brushed off, aired outside, afterward folded up with camphor or tobacco, then sewn up inside clean white sheets or tablecloths, and stored in a trunk reserved for curtains. Only the woolen curtains were taken down; muslin under-curtains were washed, bleached, ironed, and rehung.

Bed curtains were also taken down for the summer to be rehung in the fall. Removing curtains offered an opportunity to disassemble beds and, after washing the joints with soap and water, the whole bedstead was completely varnished. “Chintzes or [bed] Buggs” resided in cracks and crevices. Bedsteads often were made with turnposts that allowed easy disassembling using a “Bed Wrench,” or “Bed Key.”

Carpets were taken up. In some households, carpets were not removed for the summer, but simply untacked, shaken out and replaced. Carpets were stretched tightly and secured with tacks that



had little patches of leather under them to prevent tearing the carpet. A “carpet fork,” a “little carpet crowbar,” became essential to the effort. The removal provided an opportunity to put something beneath the carpet before it was returned. Some preferred cedar branches, others shredded tobacco or cracked black pepper, all as deterrents to moths. Some domestic manuals called for a bed of straw under carpets, others coarse paper, still others, straw matting. Eliza Leslie preferred “drugget,” a coarse, durable cloth sometimes used under dining tables as a crumb cloth.

Illustrating any of these excessively brutal housekeeping measures in a historic house would damage textiles in the museum’s collections. But few original textiles survive in historic house collections; if they do, it is usually wise to remove them from use in the house, retain them as documentation and replace them with modern reproductions. Even reproductions should not be abused. Storage and management standards for modern museum collections should apply to reproductions also since they represent valuable museum assets.

In the second half of the 18th century, straw matting was often left on floors year-round, or, if they replaced carpets in spring, when autumn approached carpets that had been in storage returned to cover straw mats. Tacking carpets was a practical solution that allowed dragging furniture from its usual position against the walls to be used. Often the carpeting did not extend to the walls, but was tacked down just short of the line of furniture along the walls. Baize was used to cover vulnerable portions of carpet such as that in front of the fireplace. Modern furnishing plans forego the damage to carpets and historic floors of “tacking” down rugs. Seasonal removal of original rugs would be discouraged by conservators. The same caution should apply if the rugs are reproductions.

Aside from eliminating sooty nuisances from winter fires, spring housecleaning was to marshal protection and counter new threats from summer



*Households were plagued by infestations in the bedsteads and by nighttime mosquitos. Illustration by David Claypoole Johnson in Scraps #3 (1832). Winterthur Library.*

dust and pests. Pictures and looking glasses were cleaned of winter smoke and the accumulation of flyspecks. One recipe from the period called for cleaning mirrors with a splash of gin and gilded frames with water boiled with onions and leeks. Once cleaned, gilded frames were covered with gauze, muslin or tissue paper held on with small pins. Lamps and chandeliers had gauze covers tied with ribbons. As a protection from dust, upholstered furniture was fitted with light cotton or linen covers, often with ties in the back resembling modern hospital gowns.

To prepare for summer's invasion of "Lilliputian lancers," each bed was enveloped in about 20 yards of mosquito netting or pavilion gauze. Fabrics to deter insects were also placed at windows as blinds or screens. Thomas Jefferson used wire screening at the White House and Monticello. When used in this way, wire screening was fitted into folding frames. Fabric was preferred to wire mesh because it was more easily obtained, less expensive and did not rust. Window screens were not used more extensively because of the growing concern in the 19th century that they impeded the flow of fresh air into the room.

Modern suggestions that screens on historic houses are intrusive may be overcome to some degree if screens were in use during the late-18th century and throughout the 19th century. Screening historic houses that have their windows and doors frequently opened is a preventive measure that will greatly decrease the invasion of all kinds of insects that damage collection items and will preserve historic structures.

Summer arrived. The family adjusted its living arrangements to fit the weather, choosing to reside in airy rooms, to reopen doors and windows and in other ways escape the confinement of the winter sitting room. Life in the house now moved to the windows and doorways, to breezeways and halls as family members sought to stay cool and comfortable. Through-halls became the summer sitting room, dining room, music and game room. Furniture appropriate to a summer sitting room was moved to the center hallway.

When the summer ended, the seasonal cycle of cleaning away the accumulated dust repeated itself in fall housecleaning and preparations for winter began anew.

Residents of historic houses responded to seasonal changes in various ways. The patterns and practices discussed here were true for a large segment of American homes in the late-18th century and for much of the 19th century. House cleaning of the magnitude described, using harsh methods provides an interesting insight into the past. Many of the housekeeping customs discussed involved movement of furniture and objects that were used. Dressing a historic house in its summer costume of upholstery covers, gauze insect shields and straw matting, mimics the actions of real people attempting to deal with the rigors of seasonal climatic changes. Changes that we hardly notice today. Most of the items involved in dressing a historic house for summer should be reproductions of the original gauze and cloth covers. Furniture handled and moved seasonally should be carefully screened and selected based on its ability to withstand routine movement. Collection items involved in seasonal changes should be periodically inspected by a conservator.

Certainly many historic housekeeping customs and techniques are quaint and remote to our own experiences. They are themselves relics of the past. A past that was a real part of peoples lives and, with adequate research and preparation, can be conveyed in various ways to the visiting public of historic house museums without damage to the museum's collections.

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*Early kitchens were important living spaces and often filled with implements and items of use, in addition to food stuffs. Historic house kitchens are often overly sparse in their furnishings in comparison to what was actually in early kitchens. Cookbooks and housekeeping advice books from the period are a good source of kitchen inventories, as are probate records, since some kitchen implements were valuable. Cover plate of The Kitchen Companion and Housekeeper's Own Book, 1844.*

