

The Met purchase of the Gadsby's Ballroom

Exhibit at Gadsby's Tavern Museum: Summer 2017



Photograph courtesy of the American Wing, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gadsby's Tavern Museum is most famous for the events hosted in the 1792 ballroom of what was once known as the City Hotel. The setting for political dinners, grand balls, and, most famously, Birthnight Balls, by the mid-1800s the grand ballroom had been subdivided into three smaller rooms for guests to rent. While the rooms still held hints of the grandeur George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the Marquis de Lafayette experienced, the room's original purpose had been lost.

The buildings that are now part of Gadsby's Tavern Museum became caught up in the early 20th century preservation movement. This movement was sparked by a worldwide rise in industrialism, urbanization, and nationalism. It resulted in hundreds of historic buildings having their interiors removed and put on display as backdrops in museums.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, industrialization swept the world, bringing with it massive changes. Mass production and electricity enabled more and larger factories, and populations quickly shifted from farms to urban centers. As with any change, people felt their traditional ways of life threatened and the flood of immigrants to fill new jobs only increased this fear. A spirit of nationalism grew in countries around the world as societies struggled to maintain their national identity in the midst of change.

It was within this context that the idea of featuring period rooms began, first in Europe and then in the United States. The Met was one of the first to experiment with this model in the US. In 1909, as part of a state-wide anniversary celebrating the history of New York, the Met arranged a period room exhibit, "The Hudson-Fulton Exhibition of American Industrial Arts." It featured Colonial decorative arts - furniture, ceramics, and silver - with one display using the backdrop of a fireplace wall from an 18th-century Connecticut farmhouse. The result was a nostalgic look at the founding of the region and country, incorporating patriotic symbols and romanticizing early America. The exhibit was a huge success, drawing around 300,000 visitors in ten weeks. The Met immediately began plans to build a new American collection by acquiring historic architectural rooms in which to display the nation's decorative arts.



These postcards depict parade floats from the Hudson-Fulton Celebration. Postcards created by the Hudson-Fulton Celebration Commission, collection of Gadsby's Tavern Museum.

To capture the spirit of early Americans, particularly the men who led the revolution and republic, the Met actively sought examples of early American architecture for the new American Wing. Their goal was to immerse visitors in architecture and decorative arts from the Colonial, Revolutionary, and early Republic eras. Chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Arts R.T.H. Halsey sent Curator Durr Friedley to travel the country in search of rooms. In a letter between the two, Halsey specifically suggested, *“We must only put beautiful rooms in the new wing...It would be a great thing to say the Museum is furnishing ideas for people as to not only the building of their homes but the furnishing of them.”* In addition to beauty, Halsey sought rooms associated with great figures in American history. He believed if contemporary Americans, both long-time citizens and recent immigrants, could experience the decorative arts of the country’s founders, they would gain a greater appreciation for the ideals they should be emulating in their own lives.

Curator Friedley was impressed by the size of the ballroom and its connection to Founding Fathers. In a letter to the Met’s Committee on Purchases he writes, *“No other room similar to this is known to exist in the United States... The design ranks with the best, the size is unique, and the historical connection with Washington and Lafayette adds to its interest as a Museum specimen. The other woodwork included in the purchase is also of exceptional character, and would add materially to the effect of the American installation.”*

To facilitate the purchase, Friedley reached out to local Washington, D.C., lawyer John P. Ryan for help in purchasing the woodwork. Ryan served as the middle man, keeping secret the fact it was indeed the Met purchasing the room. Competition for interiors could be fierce and hiding the museum’s interests kept the price lower.

Mr. Ryan reached out to sisters Rebecca Irwin and Ruth Irwin Brookes, whose family had owned the building since 1815. They were open to selling the woodwork and proved to be capable negotiators, agreeing on a final price of \$4,397; the Met authorized the purchase on May 21, 1917. Included were the following items: all of the ballroom woodwork, excluding the window sashes; two mantels from the first floor; and the City Hotel front door. The price also included carpentry and wallpaper to repair the room, as well as \$50 for the tenant who had to relocate during removal.



The woodwork as it looked upon opening of the Alexandria Room at the Met. Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress, 1933.

Although World War I delayed the Met’s plans for the American Wing, it eventually opened to the public on November 10, 1924 to stellar reviews. The enthusiasm that visitors felt seeing the woodwork in New York, however, was not shared by the citizens of Alexandria, once they learned of the sale.

After World War I, Congress chartered the American Legion, a patriotic veteran’s organization. Alexandria’s Post #24 organized in 1920, and Gadsby’s Tavern was the first site that members considered when looking for a permanent home. Through the buildings, they could honor the past and present: a monument to veterans, a civic center, and an educational museum.



*Local preservationist
Rebecca Ramsay Reese.
Photograph courtesy of
Gadsby's Tavern
Museum.*

On January 11, 1929, Post #24 purchased the buildings and began an ambitious remodeling project. Individuals, such as local preservationist Rebecca Ramsay Reese and civic groups including chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the National Society of the Children of the American Revolution, were key in completing the restoration in time for the 200th anniversary of Washington's birth in 1932.

For decades, Post #24 continued restoring and furnishing the building, including contracting with noted restoration architect Thomas T. Waterman in 1940 to reproduce the ballroom woodwork on display today in the museum. While the Met has most of the ballroom's original woodwork and had scraped the paint from it, they left behind the window sashes. Fortunately, one window retained the original layers of paint. Paint analysis revealed the layers and chemical composition of the paint. Today, the recreated ballroom, painted a Prussian blue, is on view during tours and is once again the backdrop for special events, including an annual Birthnight Ball.