Leaving home: Butler Greenwood’s parlor

Thanks to the Classical Institute of the South, the original parlor furnishings of a Louisiana plantation have been researched and recorded before being dispersed.
By Matthew A. Thurlow, Alice Dickinson, and Adam T. Erby

The burden of unwieldy inheritances can bring antiques “fresh to market” and present momentous opportunities for museums. The inheritors may value and appreciate their families’ legacies yet lack the means or desire to shepherd them to the next generation. Or perhaps that next generation balks at the prospect. Heirlooms are turned out, sent to wander the antiques market in search of loving caretakers. After 154 years of devoted matriarchal oversight, one of our nation’s best-preserved Victorian parlors is preparing to leave home for the first time (Fig. 1).

Located in Saint Francisville, Louisiana, a Mississippi River town teeming with vestiges of the region’s prosperous ante-bellum agricultural trade, Butler Greenwood (Fig. 2), known simply as Greenwood until the 1970s, has been maintained by seven successive generations of the Flower, Mathews, Lawrason, and Butler families. The house’s interior focal point since the Civil War era has been a modestly scaled yet elaborately appointed drawing room. In 1859 and 1860 Harriet Flower Mathews (Fig. 4) ordered a suite of richly carved and dressed rosewood furniture, exquisite window treatments, intricate pier mirrors, and rich carpeting to outfit her primary reception room. The parlor furnishings remain nearly untouched and conjure the prescriptive writings found in Godey’s Lady’s Book, a treatise on Victorian design by Gail Caskey Winkler, or a Neal Auction Company annual Louisianan Purchase sale catalogue.

Greenwood was truly Harriet’s domain. The house came as an inheritance on the death in 1813 of her father, Dr. Samuel Flower, a transplant from Reading, Pennsylvania. She spent much of her married life as a single woman while her husband, prominent local jurist George Mathews, traveled throughout the state as a justice of the Supreme Court of Louisiana. During her thirty-seven years of widowhood, Harriet operated four plantations spread across three parishes, placing her among the

Fig. 1. Parlor of Butler Greenwood (known as Greenwood until the 1970s) in the fall of 2013. A portrait of Charles L. Mathews (1824–1864), c. 1850, hangs above the fireplace. Except as noted, photographs are by Keely Merritt, courtesy of Anne L. Butler.
most prominent female land- and slave owners in the state.

Fueled by the enormous production of 11,400 acres and upwards of five hundred slaves across the four plantations, the house and parlor at Greenwood developed as a testament to Harriet’s stronghold on southern agricultural wealth prior to the Civil War. The furnishing of her drawing room coincided with the construction of an addition to the house (see Fig. 3) for her son Charles L. Mathews (see Fig. 1), his wife, Penelope Stewart (1828–1897), and their growing family. Harriet also developed formal gardens in this period, and her geometric parterre, lattice gazebo, sundial, and cast-iron urns and benches still survive. With French windows abutting the front gallery to the north and affording a view of the gardens, the parlor represented a refined retreat from the ongoing agricultural work to the south of the house.

Rather than patronizing a prominent New Orleans, New York, or Philadelphia cabinetmaking firm, as many of her contemporaries did, Harriet sent her order in 1861 to the nearly anonymous partnership of Hubbell and Curtis in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The means by which Harriet came to procure furnishings from the obscure firm of Penelon Hubbell (1810–1892) and Carlos Curtis (1811–1896) remains elusive, but letters and an invoice from the firm in 1865 and 1867 document the scope of her purchase as well as her failure to remit payment of $467.05 for the rosewood parlor suite, walnut dining furniture, textiles, and stamped brass cornices, as well as purchases by other family members. Whether Harriet ever paid for her order is unknown, but Hubbell and Curtis’s diplomatic missive speaks to the declining financial outlook of Harriet and her planta-
tion-owning contemporaries during the Civil War and into Reconstruction.

In contrast to the furniture, Harriet used local sources for the room's soft furnishings. The elaborate and oversized lambrequins and pier mirrors (see Fig. 5) were supplied by the New Orleans furniture dealers C. Flint and Jones in 1859 and 1860. The Wilton tapestry carpeting with its intricate central medallion formed by three adjacent strips, perhaps the room's most notable feature, was probably obtained from Meyer, Hoffman and Company of Bayou Sara, the Mississippi River port servicing Saint Francisville's plantations. The ornately carved and turned rosewood étagère (see Fig. 1) that dominates the south wall may have been ordered from C. Flint and Jones by Charles and Penelope Mathews in 1859, when an item of that description was purchased for $215.

Worthy of special attention are the five pairs of calla lily curtain tiebacks (see Fig. 6) likely ordered in conjunction with the window treatments but which do not appear on the C. Flint and Jones invoice. Marked by the renowned Birmingham brass founder R. W. Winfield and Company, they also bear a registered design mark dated 1845. Winfield and Company was well known for its innovative lighting devices, bedsteads, and seating furniture in brass and other base metals. The company's reputation was further bolstered through accolades obtained during London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851.

On Harriet's death in 1873, her widowed daughter-in-law Penelope, with five children in tow, assumed the responsibilities of caretaker, albeit with farm operations at a fraction of their antebellum clip. The house descended from Penelope to her daughter Sallie Mathews Ventress, who was a toddler when the furniture was ordered. When Sallie's estate was inventoried following her death in 1934, the parlor suite with mirrors and étagère
family, at which time it will cease to operate as a historic house museum. Anne has already placed portraits, silver, clothing, books, and porcelain from the assembled holdings in public and private collections in preparation for her departure, including items that were traditionally displayed in the parlor. Anne does not take these decisions lightly but is also anxious to be relieved of shouldering the full weight of her family's history.

Although Anne's efforts to locate an organization willing to take the parlor en masse as a period room installation have not yet borne fruit, she believes the parlor will be best served by a museum with the curatorial and conservation expertise to ensure its preservation. A few institutions have expressed interest in dividing the furniture and window treatments into more manageable and affordable parcels. A proper home for the parlor will ease her anguish when it departs from Greenwood after 150 years of matrilineal stewardship.

While the glory of seeing those objects and textiles in situ will shortly cease, a nascent fieldwork effort has documented and photographed the parlor's contents for the benefit of historians of all stripes. Over the past three summers the Classical Institute of the South, founded by New Orleans attorney Paul M. Haygood, has sent graduate students to historic sites in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to catalogue objects that remain in their original location or reain provenance. Inspired by the pioneering efforts of Frank L. Horton and his staff at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Haygood envisions a similar pursuit in the Gulf South.

The collection at Butler Greenwood was inventoried during the institute's inaugural field season. When recording the lambrequins with their resplendent floral damask, tape, and tassels, the survey team e-mailed photos to a textiles specialist to solicit her opinion. At first glance, the remarkable condition of the damask and passementerie led her to suspect that they were reproductions. The original tufted damask upholstery found on the Hubbell and Curtis furniture was in a similarly remarkable state of preservation. With louvered shutters blocking direct light from beneath the front gallery, limited southern exposure through the glazed doors to the dining room, and access to the parlor restricted for much of the twentieth century, the degradation from light and wear and tear had been lessened.

The Classical Institute's cataloguing covered a broad range of items at Butler Greenwood relating to the Gulf South's nineteenth-century history. For

constituted nearly 50 percent of her personal property's value. 9

The current proprietor of the house is Anne Butler, an author and historian who represents the seventh generation of Flower family members to hold sway in Saint Francisville. She recalls visiting Greenwood as a child (see Fig. 7), when the house was the domain of her grandmother Annie Mathews Lawrason Butler (1878–1962), a talented gardener and nurserywoman who helped keep the house and property intact during the Depression. Anne has protected her family's heritage for forty years, including the decision to ensure the house's preservation and upkeep by opening it for public tours and operating a bed and breakfast in the site's dependencies, and feels her grandmother's legacy most sharply. Many relatives have generously returned items to Greenwood over the years, but the house is standing and accessible because of the conscientious efforts of Anne and Harriet, Penelope, Sallie, and Annie.

Anne is now preparing to turn the house over to her son and daughter-in-law and their growing

Fig. 7. Anne L. Butler with her cousin Virginia Bruns Marshall in a photograph by Harriet Butler Bruns, c. 1945. Butler collection.
generations Anne Butler and her ancestors have served as caretakers for the material life of disparate yet prominent families between New Orleans and Natchez, including inheritances from lateral descendants and distant cousins who died without issue. Of particular note is a coat (see Fig. 9) thought to be a piece of exceedingly rare slave livery worn by a footman under the ownership of Dr. William N. Mercer, who was a distant relative of the Butler family. The coat, which bears buttons with the Mercer family crest, was recently acquired by the Historic New Orleans Collection, where it will be properly conserved.

A house that was once a proud and prodigious receptacle for the heirlooms of many of Louisiana’s most prominent nineteenth-century families is now shedding the weight of two centuries of portraiture, porcelain, and patrimony in order to provide a more comfortable and private setting for a young family with small children. Fortunately for scholars and the museum-going public, some of these illustrations of Louisiana’s antebellum culture will be examined, conserved, and displayed in top-flight New Orleans institutions. And with the assistance of the Historic New Orleans Collection, three years’ worth of data and images collected by the Classical Institute of the South’s field research teams will be available through LOUIS, the Louisiana Digital Library, later this year. With a shoestring budget, financial support from private donors, and a grant from the Decorative Arts Trust, the Classical Institute will commence a year-round program this year, seeking to build on the momentum of these recent discoveries.

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As we went to press, the acquisitions committee of the New Orleans Museum of Art unanimously agreed to acquire the parlor furnishings of Butler Greenwood and mount a comprehensive conservation program to ensure their preservation for future generations.