



# Athenaeum Rectory

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*A General Assessment of the Exterior and Commentary on Furnishings*

A Public Service Project of the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University



## The Athenaeum Rectory:

### General Assessment of the Exterior and Commentary on Furnishings

In response to a request by board members of the Athenaeum Rectory in Columbia (Maury County), a project team from the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation visited the site on January 25, 2012. The purpose of the visit was to (1) examine the exterior of the building and provide a brief assessment of the current condition and recommendations for repair and maintenance; and (2) to consider and comment on the overall furnishings and provide recommendations.

This report, then, addresses those two issues based on observations, research, and discussion with the attending board members. Further, some options and suggestions are provided in the section “Planning for the Future” as is a basic “Collections Management Policy.”

The Center is pleased to provide this report as a public service to the Athenaeum board. Because it is brief and based on the one-time visit, it should be read and considered a precursor to more involved planning for the building’s repair and maintenance and its evolving interpretive plan. The Rectory, as a rare and intact survivor of the state’s many nineteenth century female schools -- which is also open to the public -- has so much potential for educating citizens and visitors of all ages through its architecture, collections, and legacy. The Rectory is poised to interpret its authentic stories through an original and documented collection that no other site has, and it should strive to build its programming around that unique past to serve present and future generations. The Center staff genuinely commends the board, membership, and friends who contribute to the preservation of the Athenaeum Rectory and who wish to see it evolve into an even more vibrant presence within Columbia and Tennessee.

#### Project Team

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This is a public service project of the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) at Middle Tennessee State University in cooperation with the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a statewide program partially funded by the National Park Service, which is administered by the CHP.

## General Assessment of the Exterior

The board and members of the Athenaeum Rectory are to be commended for their ongoing stewardship of this unique and historic building. While it is time to approach some of the restoration work before problems worsen further, the repairs needed immediately should not be overwhelming in either material or labor costs. As requested, this general assessment, made on the morning of January 25, 2012, deals primarily with the maintenance of the roof and the condition of the millwork on the main façade.

### Roof Description

Overall, the roof itself is in very good shape, and illustrates that the board, first and foremost, has understood the importance and necessity of a sound roof. The intersecting roof planes and areas of high stress created by this design can cause recurring challenges if not addressed with an appreciation of the unique character and features of this building.



One of the recurring problems we were asked to address is the moisture and leaks that are most noticeable in the northwest bedroom and, to a lesser extent, in the second floor “boys’ bedroom” and its adjacent bathroom that is in the southeast corner of the building.



The primary cause of the leak on the northwest room is the leaves that clog the drains on the west side of the house at the parapet and chimneys. The downspout of the guttering system works well on both the west and east sides of the house, delivering the collected water onto the roof and away from the walls. The two drains on the west side, however, are smaller than the one on the east side, and



because of the position and slope of the roof, debris regularly settles right over the drains. With these drains clogged, the water necessarily backs up and spreads out along the roof north and south causing leaks. In addition, leaves and sticks are blocking the screen that protects the gutter of the roof beyond the parapet and chimneys.



## Recommendations

- 1) As part of your cyclical maintenance program, make keeping the roofs free of debris (particularly the west side) a priority, along with keeping the protective screens free of leaves and sticks. Remove debris from the roof inside the west parapet on a regular basis – at least monthly and more in the spring and fall as needed.



- 2) At the same time, remove debris from the screen that protects the gutter. On the southeast corner, check for any debris and pay special attention to the sealant at those places where the minor leakage is occurring. Check the areas protected by sealants on a yearly basis, replacing and repairing failing sections as needed.



- 3) While the edges of the roof and chimneys were initially well sealed with a modern adhesive, this material now needs repair or replacing. Remove existing and apply new sealant where needed around chimneys, gutters, drains, downspouts, and windows. Start with the west side of the house because it is in the worst condition. In some cases, the addition of metal flashing will reinforce and improve the performance of the adhesive material.



- 4) After the repairs to the roof have been done, allow all the areas affected by leaks to dry completely. Make sure all leakage has been stopped by observing the affected areas closely after a hard rain. When the leaks have been stopped and the ceilings are completely dry, repair and repaint them.



## Millwork on Façade

Obviously, the façade with its covered porches featuring Moorish-style arches and exquisite millwork is the most recognizable and unique portion of the Rectory. Because of its location facing north, it also suffers from the elements along with normal deterioration over time. Overall, the millwork is in reasonably good shape though all components could use scraping, priming, and painting.



A cursory inspection reveals that some pieces of the millwork between the first floor arches and the balustrade may need replacement. If, on closer examination, this millwork is rotted beyond repair, it must be removed completely and replaced. A competent carpenter can reproduce decayed portions with similar materials based on the patterns of the existing millwork.

## Recommendations

- 1) The first priority is the millwork on the main façade. Once that is repaired and painted, give attention to other sides as funds are available. Repair and painting on all porches and exteriors need not be done at one time, but can be phased in over a period of two or three years. Inspection and careful attention should occur on a regular basis as part of your cyclical maintenance program.



- 2) The junction of the porch floor and the column above often traps water, which leads to deterioration. The bases of the columns should be inspected closely and any necessary repairs made.



- 3) The base of the west corner pilaster is rotten and must be replaced. Other pilasters should also be closely examined at the same time and any necessary repairs made.



- 4) Several planks on the porch need replacement because they are a safety hazard, as well as being unsightly.



- 5) The western railing on the porch is loose and unsafe. It should be secured just like the other railing, which is properly bolted and solid.



- 6) Also, mildew is especially noticeable under the east side porch. Not only is this unsightly but it spreads. It can be removed with an inexpensive wash made with diluted bleach.



- 7) There is not as much damage to the building fabric on the other elevations because they are more protected from the elements, but when the necessary scraping, priming, and painting are done, these areas can be examined carefully for evidence of decay. For example, some damage can be seen under the balcony outside the boys' bedroom on the second floor.



## Commentary on Furnishings

The **mission statement** of any historic site is always the guiding factor that must be referred to when making decisions about anything related to the site – interpretation, programming, space use, fundraising, and, of course, the collection. In the case of the Athenaeum, it is our understanding that the board operates under the mission statement of the Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities (APTA) which reads:

Our mission is to promote and encourage active participation in the preservation of Tennessee's rich historic, cultural, architectural and archeological heritage through restoration, education, advocacy and statewide cooperation.

The Athenaeum should consider developing its own specific mission statement, one that is in keeping with that of the APTA, with regard to interpretation, collections, preservation, and education and follow it in all matters. Each board member as well as the membership should be fully aware of and reminded of that mission statement regularly. All discussion and all decisions should be based on mission statement, and our recommendations follow those tenets in this report.

The Athenaeum has a significant collection of furniture that is both unique to the site and to Maury County and as such, deserves serious consideration as to its display, its role in telling the stories of the Athenaeum, and its conservation and appropriate disposition. The first priority of the board and/or those members specifically charged with the management of the furnishings should, of course, be the appropriate display and preservation of pieces that are original to the Athenaeum. Other period pieces, with no association to the site, may be functional or aesthetic but are of secondary importance to the mission. Other pieces which have been accepted by the Athenaeum, which may be lovely but which have no real connection to the site and are not useful to the interpretation and programming, are of the least importance. However, since they have been accepted, they must be responsibly cared for unless other provisions can be made for their appropriate distribution, preferably to other museums. Decisions about which pieces to display and when, what to place in storage and when, or even to deaccession, should be guided by the mission statement and by practical considerations related to space, resources, and programming.

The general consensus is that too much furniture and too many objects and artifacts are currently on display. Not only does this lead to a cluttered appearance, but too many pieces of furniture and accessories cannot be interpreted effectively. Some of the rooms of the Rectory are approaching a state of open storage rather than carefully designed displays that educate and inform. Moving tours through the rooms can be a challenge, and housekeeping duties required of so many pieces is time-consuming. A final concern expressed by the board is that

much of this furniture, at least in the parlors, has to be removed when special events take place.



The Athenaeum Rectory is currently fulfilling two roles. The first is that of a historic house museum that tells the stories of the property and the people associated with it through the collections, including the furnishings. The second is that it serves as an event center that hosts public and private functions, such as weddings. The latter is an income-producing decision that helps to fund the former. These two roles sometimes are at odds because people who rent the Rectory and attend events do not necessarily appreciate the house and its furnishings. With each event, the removal and/or rearrangement of a number of pieces is required and then the reverse following the events.

Heavy use of the building, including the furnishings, can undermine the mission of the site so strict adherence to a policy for rental use should be in place and reviewed regularly. The policy should dictate the spaces available for public use, what can and will not be moved, and site staff should be on hand for all rental events to ensure the proper use of space and property. A hefty deposit should be part of the policy, if not already, to help cover any damage to floors, walls, and furnishings that may occur. Revisit your insurance policy, if this has not been done recently, to be sure of the site's liability with regard to special events that do not fall within the mission of the Athenaeum.



It is the responsibility of the board, as well as their ultimate liability, to be certain that the site is meeting Internal Revenue Service regulations of non-profit organizations with regard to the types of functions permitted beyond the precise preservation and education mission as stated in the by-laws under which the Athenaeum, as part of APTA, enjoys tax-exempt status. Finally, though the revenues brought in by facility rental are tempting and are channeled back into programming, is this use in keeping with the mission statement of APTA and does it best serve the preservation of the Rectory? Are there other ways to raise operating funds? Can special events that are not related to the mission of the site be confined to the porches and grounds? Think carefully on this challenge and concern.

### **Collections Management**

For the reasons addressed earlier, the adage of “less is more” is germane to the Athenaeum. Not all objects, artifacts, and furnishings in a collection need, nor should they, be exhibited at the same time. Rotation of various pieces can help avoid wear and tear due to daily exhibition. Objects not being used need to be stored in a secure, insured, organized, and a temperature-controlled environment.

A good way to approach prioritizing the furnishings and accessories to use in the Athenaeum is to ask very specific questions about each artifact and object:

Does the display of this piece help to achieve the mission of the Athenaeum?

Is this piece original to the Athenaeum?

Does the provenance and research conclude that it is?

Does this piece help to interpret the most important story or stories of the Athenaeum?

Would it make any difference to our interpretation if we did not have this piece on display?

Can this piece be used elsewhere?

Could it be part of a special exhibit?

Do we have the space and funds to store it properly?

What is its condition?

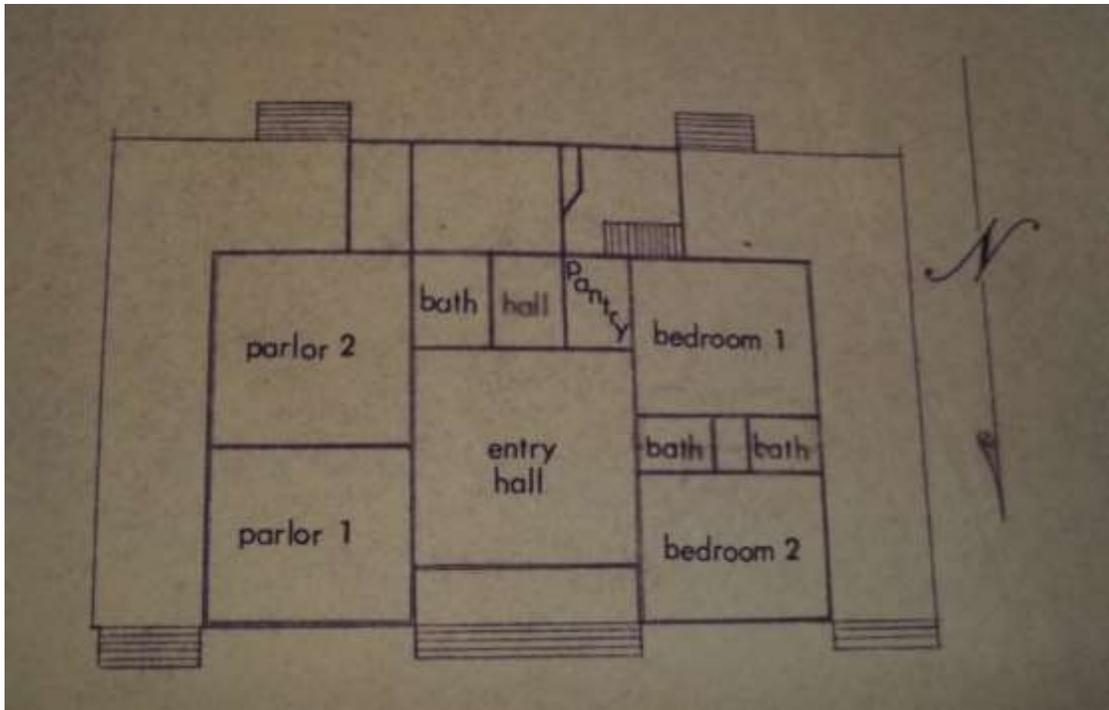
If in need of conservation, can we afford it?

If the piece has no connection to the site and we cannot properly store and care for it, should it be deaccessioned?

If any part of the collection does not help to accomplish the mission of the site, and does not assist with the interpretation or programs of the site, then decisions should be necessarily be made by the furnishings committee based on the site's collections policy. In all cases, be certain that the Athenaeum has clear title to the piece and its ultimate disposition. If your collections policy does not cover all options, then the board should revisit its policy and update it accordingly. Photographs of all pieces should be attached to the donor gift sheets. Likewise, the acceptance of any additional pieces that do not fit the goals and objectives, based on the mission statement, should be avoided; that is really quite easy to do when you follow your approved collections management policy. For your review and consideration, a basic collections management policy is attached.

### **Reordering of Space**

If the board continues to rent out the interior of the Athenaeum for various functions, then the two parlors and the entry hall should be minimally furnished with pieces that remain in place. These few pieces can provide the atmosphere of the parlors for tours, but will not require any moving when events are scheduled. Essentially, by allowing events to take place in these rooms, you are making the decision that this is the more important use of this space, so choose and place furniture accordingly.



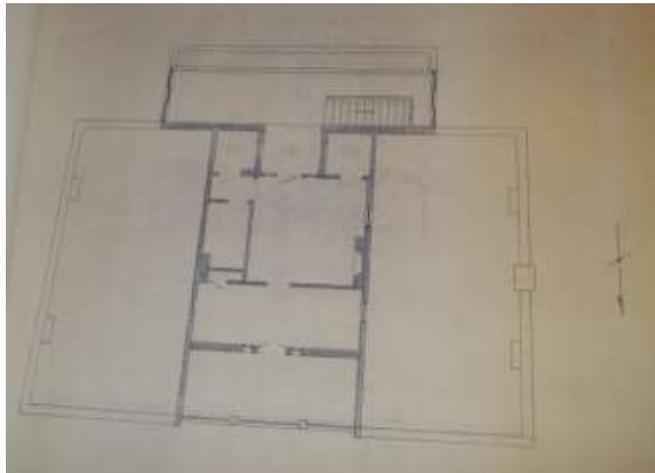
Consider reordering and rearranging the southwest bedroom to display furnishings and memorabilia that deal with the well-documented and highly significant history of the Athenaeum as a female academy. This would allow a space for materials including the dormitory furnishings, remaining library books, and other articles, including diplomas and the like that are currently found throughout the house to be displayed and interpreted in one space and to a very good advantage. This room, which can be locked when special events are taking place, becomes a way to truly focus on the education of women in the nineteenth century which the Athenaeum can appropriately and seriously interpret within its collections in a way no other site in Tennessee can do.

Leaving the northwest bedroom to interpret the Smith family's residency and contributions remains appropriate, though you may want to reconsider which pieces can best do this.

If the boys' room upstairs is to remain interpreted in that way, for those visitors who wish to make the trek upstairs, then select only pieces that can tell that story well. For example, some pieces now in that room would not have been appropriate (see below).



Use the large upstairs west room as a controlled and organized collections management area, where a volunteer or intern could work, with storage for smaller and lighter pieces. The hall, as was the case in most households, could hold an extra bed and a few well-chosen pieces.



# Planning for the Future

## Maintenance

If the board is not accustomed to following a regular **cyclical maintenance** program, develop a reasonable plan or work with someone or some group who can assist you in this most important element of your site's preservation and operation. With a check list and schedule in place, matters that need attention will be assessed and dealt with on a regular basis, and problems can be noted and most often dealt with before they become major expenses.

## Interpretation

Allow this unique building and the wonderful collection it houses to tell stories that are different from other historic house museums. Vitality in a site and in its docent-led tours, along with an experience that is beyond the usual recitation of the "life and times" and a description of furnishings is demanded and expected by visitors today. Marketing a site that wisely interprets its singular stories, based on documented research, to a broad audience is not only practical and easier, but entices more visitors. The site must be prepared to offer to the visiting public well-maintained buildings and grounds and stories that are true, individually and collectively fascinating, and delivered in a manner that creates understanding.

For example, rather than have three rooms all interpreted as family bedrooms, set up one as a **girls' dormitory room and library** to display the numerous pieces that tell the story of the female academy. It is our understanding that the collection has period furnishings and objects that could accommodate such an interpretation. This would allow for a far more interesting story and one that is so appropriate to the Athenaeum. In such a room, visitors could truly focus on what it meant to be a student at the school in the mid to late nineteenth century. No other historic house museum in the can tell this story, but the Athenaeum can.

Because of the fine collection of books that remain from the notable library, include these volumes, which are now stored elsewhere, in the room devoted to interpreting the school. Here these books, many of them rare editions, can be properly cared for and displayed. This library has been documented in sources including the Quillen thesis entitled, *A Study of the Life of Franklin Gillette Smith* (Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, 1960). Such a room could also display other appropriate memorabilia in the collection such as the rare Confederate patent secured by Smith and geological specimens as well as period laboratory equipment. The interpretation of the school, which is the most important story of the site, would be greatly enhanced by providing a space to bring these items together so visitors can be educated and enticed by the items remaining from that period (also, see discussion on this recommendation in Commentary on Furnishings).

When interpreting the stories of the Athenaeum, use images, as well as readings and quotations from **primary sources** such as lectures, letters and diaries of Smith, students, and other people associated with the site to lend veracity and interest.

Obviously, any change in space and furnishings requires revisiting the **storyline** being delivered by docents. That is often a good thing for both the docents and the visitors as it provides fresh materials and new ways and means of delivering the stories. The board is encouraged to offer "**docent continuing education**" through sponsorship to attend museum conferences such as the Tennessee Association of Museums, or by bringing in an experienced interpreter to offer new methods and ideas for explaining and involving visitors in the stories of the Athenaeum. A successful docent, whether paid or volunteer, is the professional link between the sites to the visitor. Like any other profession, docents and imaginative and responsible boards must continue to learn new ways to fundraise for programming and to help the visitor enjoy and understand the site.

## **Programming**

In studying the life of Franklin Gillette Smith, the sciences were a paramount force, and he included a substantial amount of math and science along with the arts in the Athenaeum's curriculum. Also, Smith sponsored special lectures which were open to the public. We know that the first lecture by Smith was on Astronomy. To perpetuate Smith's legacy, a series of **lectures**, once a quarter for example, could focus on some topic of the sciences that would have broad appeal. Perhaps even begin with astronomy. These lectures might be offered in conjunction with the advice and co-sponsorship of the science departments of Columbia State and Columbia Central High School. As seating space would be limited, take reservations, being sure that some spaces are offered to and reserved for students. On occasion, students could provide the lecture or participate in the program as part of a forum panel asking questions or speaking about their own related research and interest.

Sponsor a **jeopardy contest** at the Athenaeum, with contestants on the porch and audience on the lawn, high school students (public and private as well as home-school associations) who have been selected by their teachers or schools to participate. This could take place over a period of 2 or 3 Saturdays over a month's time, so that different people would visit the Athenaeum to encourage the students. Again, seating would be limited, but that can be managed with reservations. Prizes could be in the form of a computer, I-pad, software packages, gift certificates, some of which could be donated for publicizing the donor. Again, work with local educators. This would fit in well with the Smith's legacy as well as recent educational mandates to promote and encourage the sciences in classrooms across Tennessee. While this would take some time to plan, it would not cost the Athenaeum an outlay of funds.

Sponsor a **Maury County Women Educator's Hall of Fame** as a way to honor the heritage of the Athenaeum and local teachers. Not only would this honor deserving teachers, perhaps one or two a year, but it could also serve as an annual fundraiser for the site. Again, this is something different that

would engender broad community response and publicity and is a program that is appropriate for the Athenaeum.

Host a **symposium on women's education** during March which is traditionally Women's History month. Begin, for example, with a speaker who would address nineteenth century women's education in Tennessee as compared to early twentieth century education for both black and white women.

Because Smith and his staff offered scholarships for students, offer an **Athenaeum scholarship** at Columbia State for an education, history, or science major that would, in the course of the year, provide some specific service, research, or product to the Athenaeum. Both the site and the scholar would benefit.

### **Volunteers**

Create a **Junior Board of Directors** from across the community aged 12-18. This allows these young people the opportunity to experience civic engagement and provides the site with volunteers and new ideas. An entire or partial new junior board could be named each year and this begins to grow a pool for adult volunteers and board members for the future. Listen to these young people, provide good experiences, teach them, and let them teach you. This is a traditional philosophy of the historic school and part of its legacy.

As unique and different programs are developed and aimed at a wider audience, engage more with education majors at Columbia State and other teacher-training institutions including MTSU and Martin Methodist College (which was originally a women's college) in nearby Pulaski. Majors are in need of student interaction hours for their classes and for their resume'.

### **Internship**

Consider investing in an intern by offering a stipend of \$500.00 to \$1000.00, depending on the product. Public History graduate students at MTSU, for example, are required to complete an internship and many are from the area and prefer to do their work locally. Interior design students specializing in historic furnishings at MTSU and O'More College of Design in Franklin should be considered for an in-depth furnishings assessment, updating of the collections manual including photographs, and a space plan. Other topics could include including the development of an interpretive plan; devising a marketing and heritage tourism plan, including better signage, preparing a preservation site plan including a plan for cyclical maintenance; or designing an exhibit for "The Athenaeum during the Civil War and Reconstruction," would be suitable projects that would provide the site with a valuable product.

## Funding

As state and federal funding is much harder to come by for historic sites, the necessity of broadening the service and support base locally is paramount. This requires some creative thinking that will entice new heads and hands to help. What worked at house museums in the decades of the 1950s through the 1990s does not necessarily work well any more. The board and membership must grow with the times in order to be able to preserve this site.

**Partnering** with others is the key to success and “cooperation” is a keyword in your mission statement. Whether it is sponsoring fundraising events, approaching grantors, developing programming and publicity, attracting volunteers, or requesting paint and lumber for repairs, working with others in the town, county, and elsewhere will leverage resources of staff, time, and money in positive ways. It is very difficult for a non-profit to go it alone these days, so partner with others in ways that have not been done before. Yes, you may have to be more flexible and operate differently in some areas. Taking steps and opportunities to leverage each and every dollar and resources of time and effort is simply being responsible to your mission.

A successful approach to entities that award **grants** requires that the organization have a clear goal and objectives which can translate well into proposals. If the Athenaeum does not have a **planning document** for the next five years, or more, then that would be a reasonable accomplishment for the existing board to develop. Having a planning document in place that has an achievable, practical and clear goal and objectives will translate well into a grant proposal(s) that is much more likely to be to secure funding from local and state agencies, corporate and private foundations, as well as individual donors.

## Signage

The Athenaeum needs **better signage**. Even though it is just off a main thoroughfare, unless someone happens to see the street sign, they would not know where to turn. Consider a **Tennessee Historical Marker** or partner with other sites on a **Tennessee Civil War Trail Marker** at the intersection of Athenaeum Street and West 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Obviously, as West 7<sup>th</sup> is also a TN and U.S. highway, you will need to work with the city as well as the Tennessee Department of Transportation for placements. The advantage of a Tennessee Civil War Trails marker is that the TN Department of Tourist Development assists with those logistics. Yes, there are costs involved with each of these markers, but they quickly pay for themselves through an increase in visitors, many of whom will be enticed by these markers and who otherwise would not know the site existed or would not know the location of the building.

Another option would be to partner with the owners of the shopping center and parking lot at this intersection. Rarely is the parking lot full and partnering with the owners to install a sign in the corner of the lot would allow people to pull safely off the street to read it. For the merchants, additional customers are a likely possibility. Certainly good publicity at an unveiling of such a sign/marker could be a product of this partnership as well as much-needed long-term signage for the Athenaeum.

## Landscaping

The substantial and park-like setting that was part of the Athenaeum no longer exists. Perhaps the most useful landscaping feature would be the planting of a buffer of trees and/or shrubs along the western property line. Consult a person knowledgeable of native trees and plants that would have been a part of the historic landscape. A special day of planting could be planned for volunteers in November in celebration of Arbor Day. This event could attract people who have not visited the site before. Donations of trees and plants could be made in memory or in honor of individuals to help with the overall landscaping plan on a continuing basis.



If not already involved, engage the Maury County Master Gardeners to help plan and maintain appropriate plantings would enhance the remaining grounds. As new classes are held regularly, this would bring new audiences to the site and engage them in its preservation and programming efforts.

The National Register nomination for the Athenaeum was prepared in 1972 and, as was customary in those early years of the program, has very little detail. An update of this nomination would be a useful document describing more fully the architecture and historical significance of the house and grounds. Also, on the current rack card, the statement is made that the house is listed on the “National Registry of Historic Places.” When this is revised and reprinted, it should read, “National Register.”

## COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT POLICY GUIDE

A collection policy, reflecting the mission of the site, should be in place for any acquisitions and in turn only objects in certain categories and of a certain quality are accepted into the collection. If the Athenaeum currently does not have this in place, it is of utmost importance to for the board or collections committee to define a collection policy. If a policy has been in place for some years, the board may want to update or redefine certain portions in order to better define how the collection helps convey the mission of the historic site.

### COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT

Usually a basic collection management policy should address the following:

How does the collection relate to the mission statement and fulfill your purpose?  
How are items acquired?  
How are items de-accessioned?  
What legal ownership policies are in place?  
Who decides what is accepted?  
How will the museum properly care for the object?  
How will the museum handle donor requests/restrictions  
How are collections processed, recorded and cared for?

#### Accessioning

The process by which an object is formally and legally included in the collection is called accessioning. The Athenaeum should already have a system in place. A review of the current system should be conducted in order to better organize the process as the organization moves forward with using its unique collection as an asset for promoting the site.

Each object is given a unique accession number that is applied to the object for easy reference. Many sites use a numeric number with a date. For example:

2012.001.1

2012 = Year of Donation

001 = Chronological order of donations received that year

.1 = Object number

Once the accession number has been determined every artifact must have a physical marking on it. There are different methods for different artifacts and it is best to consult a current publication for best practices, such as AASLH Technical Leaflets (<http://aaslh.org/leaflets.htm>). Always place the number or tag in an unobtrusive area. The creation of an alphabetical donor catalogue is useful for quickly finding and locating an artifact when only the donor's name is known.

This accession documentation process is of great value for insurance and /or replacement purposes and can either compiled as a hard paper copy, such as a ledger,

or in electronic form, such as an EXCEL program. For security purposes it is highly recommended that a back-up copy should be kept off site.

A simple accession form with the pertinent information categories can be developed to accomplish this documentation task. The accession should incorporate the following information:

#### Accession Number

#### Description of the Object

Written with enough detail that the artifact can be visualized including dimensions, materials of construction, function, markings, maker plus note any alterations, repairs, refinishing  
Images should be included showing all sides, including top and bottom

#### Donor Information

Name  
Address/Phone/Email  
Biography or history about/of the donor

#### Date of Donation

#### Type of Donation

Permanent  
Loan Dates  
Note any restrictions placed on either permanent or loaned items

Please note if the donation is permanent an instrument of legal ownership should be issued when the item has been officially accepted as part of the site's collection. This legal document transfers ownership of the material from the donor to the historic house museum. This document must be signed and dated by both the owner or legal representative and a historic house museum official. Any Internal Revenue Service documents, such as an 8283 form, should also be completed and on file.

#### Location of Object

It is important to keep track of the object whether it is stored or on display. Please allow enough space on the form to note the movement of the object (i.e. object moved from storage to display or from one display area to another or back to storage).

#### **De-accessioning**

De-accession is the process of disposing or selling objects from a historic house museum collection. There are ethical issues to consider since many donors of objects typically expect the site to care for them in perpetuity. As a courtesy it would be appropriate to notify the donor when you are de-accessioning. The de-accession of an

object in a collection may be appropriate if the object does not reflect the period of interpretation or if the site museum has more than one example of that object. It may also be appropriate if an object is badly deteriorated or threatening other objects. Once the de-accession decision has been made by the appropriate authority, such as the site's board or collections committee, then method of disposal should be addressed. Checking with other historic sites to see if they have an interest in the object is one option. Open market sales are generally expected to take place at reputable auction rather than through private sale.

## **COLLECTIONS CARE**

Collections management and care is a primary function of all museums, including historic sites. Collections care can be expensive and may seem to be beyond the means of small institutions, such as the Athenaeum, but all institutions can improve collections care through inexpensive materials and simple but effective procedures. The single most important action regarding a historic site's collection is to establish the proper environment for both exhibition and storage of the objects, which will ensure the longest possible survival of the various museum objects in the collections. A proper environment includes cleanliness, light levels, temperature and relative humidity, and the property itself--a watertight, airtight building with proper drainage.

### **In general, the best environment will include the following conditions:**

- ✓ Constant temperature in the human comfort zone (perhaps 70° Fahrenheit)
- ✓ Constant relative humidity at 50%
- ✓ Low light level, not to exceed 10 foot-candles for paper and textiles (preferably no light for items in storage)
- ✓ Absence of ultraviolet radiation (use only incandescent lamps or use UV filters on fluorescent lamps and/or windows; another option, particularly useful for lighting individual items, is the use of fiber optic lights which do not contain heat, or UV or IR radiation)
- ✓ Absence of harmful biological agents, i.e., fungi, insects, rodents, mold, etc.
- ✓ Absence of air pollution, both particulates and gases which might condense as acids
- ✓ Storage materials and furniture which are chemically neutral, support the item well, and provide dust-free environments when possible (e.g., acid-free boxes; metal shelves with doors for closed storage; acid-free tissue)

- ✓ Isolation of museum objects which may harbor biological or chemical agents harmful to the rest of the collection (especially nitrate film which is subject to spontaneous combustion)
- ✓ Padded hangers or mounts for stable costumes (historic clothing), with care not to over-extend into the shoulders (wire hangers bent into shape, covered with batting and a final cover of muslin sewn into the appropriate shape work well to support most garments); textiles and fragile garments should be placed in acid-free boxes with as few folds as possible, using acid-free tissue to pad out all necessary folds
- ✓ Removal of staples, metal paperclips, and metal pins from objects, especially papers, costumes and textiles, and photographs (use instead acid-free folders or boxes, plastic coated paperclips, archival-quality plastic sleeves such as polypropylene, polyethylene, and Melinex©, etc.)
- ✓ Removal of any inappropriate framing techniques that do not employ acid-free materials (framed items should have acid-free backboards and mats with reversible V- or T-hinge mounts using an acid-free tape; glass should ideally be UV-filtered or acrylic, though acrylic should not be used with watercolor, chalk, or charcoal prints); framed items and paintings should be hung in storage to prevent damage, if possible

**The following are basic guidelines to follow when handling objects in the collection of a historic site:**

- Limit the amount of handling whenever possible. Use white cotton gloves. Do not allow visitors to touch objects; only trained staff or volunteers should move objects.
- Treat all objects with respect, as if they are the most valued piece in the collection.
- Think, then act. Consider how the object should be handled, what equipment may be necessary, how many people are needed, where are you taking it, what obstacles are in the way, and do you have a proper storage place for it.
- Go slowly, both in picking objects up and moving them. Only move one object at a time. If you need help, get it before you start moving the object.
- Record any changes you notice in the condition of the object. If damage occurs, record it immediately.
- Do not have food or drinks nearby when handling and/or moving objects.

- Do not undertake any treatment or use any product on an object which is not completely reversible. If you are not sure, contact a qualified conservator. Remember that the cost of a conservation consultant is much less expensive than having to replace a valuable historic artifact.

Even with a suitable environment and proper handling, some museum objects will continue to noticeably deteriorate. When deterioration of items in the collection occurs positive conservation actions should be taken either by historic site's staff (in simple cases) or by a professional conservator (for complex cases and for any object of high value). The historic site staff should be familiar with the appropriate conservation treatments for the following types of materials:

- Paper
- Wood
- Skin and leather
- Metal (iron, copper, tin, lead, gold, silver)
- Textile (wool, silk, cotton, linen)
- Ceramics (vitreous and high-fired earthenware)
- Glass
- Bone, ivory, teeth
- Stone
- Photographs

The historic site staff is ethically and legally obligated to respect the integrity of the historic site museum's collection. Specifically, do not alter an object for exhibition purposes, and do not subject valuable, irreplaceable artifacts to the wear and tear of "hands-on" educational programs. Items to be used in "hands-on" educational programs are typically reproductions since constant use and handling may destroy the item.

An excellent guide to conservation practices for a small museum can be found in Per E. Guldbeck and A. Bruce MacLeish, *The Care of Antiques and Historical Collections*, second edition (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995); see also, Simon Knell, *Care of Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Some current museum-quality storage supply companies include:

Gaylord  
[www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)  
(800) 448-6160

Hollinger Corporation  
[www.hollingercorp.com](http://www.hollingercorp.com)  
(800) 634-0491

Light Impressions  
[www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)

(800) 828-6216

Bags Unlimited

[www.bagsunlimited.com](http://www.bagsunlimited.com)

(800) 767-2247

### **Selected State and National Professional Museum Associations**

If you are interested in professionalizing your historic site museum's exhibitions and learning best practices, joining a state or national professional museum association is highly recommended. These associations provide access to current literature on best practices as well as workshops, conferences, and connections to colleagues who can help a museum avoid pitfalls. Please find a list of selected associations below.

American Association of Museums

<http://www.aam-us.org/>

1575 Eye Street NW Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20005

(202) 289-9132

American Association for State and Local History

<http://www.aaslh.org/>

1717 Church Street, Nashville, TN 37203-2991

(615) 320-3203

Southeastern Museum Conference

<http://www.semcdirect.net/>

P.O. Box 9003, Atlanta, GA 31106

(404) 378-3153

Tennessee Association of Museums

<http://www.tnmuseums.org/>

P.O. Box 330984, Nashville, TN 37203

(866) 390-3638