

Salem Towne House at Old Sturbridge Village gets historically accurate makeover

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Lori Stabile, The Republican



STURBRIDGE – The Salem Towne House at Old Sturbridge Village, the “crown jewel” and centerpiece of the town common, has had a makeover of the historical kind.

Renovations to the foyer were completed in June, giving the space a fresh coat of paint, new flooring, new wallpaper and a new stair runner, touches that help restore the 1796-built building to its original grandeur.

Using artisans who specialize in recreating historical patterns and themes, the Towne House’s entryway got a bright green glaze – a common color used in the 1820s, the period the village is recreating.

J. Edward Hood, vice president for museum program at Old Sturbridge Village, said the entryway had many coats of green paint over the years. By doing a paint analysis, they found the original one – a bright green.



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The Salem Towne House in Old Sturbridge Village has had a historically accurate makeover of its foyer.



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J. Edward Hood, vice president of the museum program at Old Sturbridge Village, stands next to the staircase in the newly renovated foyer of the Salem Towne House, the most elaborate house in the village.

"This space had a lot of wear and tear ... The paint was worn down to bare wood," Hood said.

Because historically accurate paint, wallpaper and flooring are not easily purchased, Hood said they had to find people who specialized in these areas. And, as the foyer is one of the most dramatic spaces in the house and the first space visitors glimpse, they wanted it just right.

"There's no guide to furnishing a house in this time period," Hood said.

The wallpaper, light blue with orange birds, reflects the style seen in the 1800s. Called "Arabesque Pigeons," it is from a 1794 pattern based on a French design; the village had a fragment of it in its collection from a home in Sutton.

Adelphi Paper Hangings of New York reproduced the paper using a historically accurate block printing process. If a visitor looks carefully, the lines in each "block" of wallpaper can be seen. It was hung by Robert M. Kelly of Lee, a historic wallpaper expert.

"The rooms were lit only by windows, candles or lamps, so they wanted bright colors that would shine back at you," Hood said during a recent tour of the home.

The home, which was built in Charlton, was owned by Salem Towne, a local businessman and farmer who also invested in land. It was moved to the village in 1952 and reflects 18th-century rural opulence, with 1,100-square-foot on the first floor alone.

"It's a big house even by today's standards," Hood said.

He said the foyer was last updated in the 1980s, but the home has had some changes over the years. The shutters were repainted a bright green, again reflective of the time period, and the barns were restored in 2006 and 2007.

The foyer project was put on hold due to financial difficulties the village was experiencing, and resumed in late 2009, finishing in June, Hood said.

Another interesting addition is the "floor cloth." Hood said the cloth, painted yellow with a red design, is like a painted canvas, and few survived intact from that time period.

"Floor cloths were a practical choice for homeowners of the period because they are quite durable and could be easily washed and repainted as needed," Marylou Davis of Woodstock, Conn., consulting conservator on the project, said in the village's Visitor magazine.

Hood said the floor cloth design is based on the one in George Washington's sister house, "Kenmore," in Fredericksburg, Va.

The staircase now has a colorful, striped stair runner that was hand-woven by textile historian Rabbit Goody, who has provided textiles for historic sites such as Mount Vernon.

Hood said the project was made possible through a private donation from Gertrude Wells Brennan, a descendant of Old Sturbridge Village founder J. Cheney Wells. Hood estimated the cost of the renovations at approximately \$70,000.

Another unusual fact about the Towne House: its sister house, constructed by the same builder, was on Old Sturbridge Village property until it burned in 1929.

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