

I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRIOR RESEARCH, INVESTIGATIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS AT DUMBARTON HOUSE¹

Founded in 1891, The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America (The National Society) is an organization devoted to furthering an appreciation of our national heritage through historic preservation, patriotic service, and educational projects. During the first thirty-five years of its history, The National Society coordinated and financed several important historic preservation projects, including reconstruction of the church at Jamestown, Virginia (1907); construction of a Neoclassical portico over Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts (1921); establishment of an endowment for Sulgrave Manor, England (1925); and governance of Gunston Hall, Virginia (1932). Despite these laudable accomplishments, however, by 1927 the organization felt it had not done anything “for itself,”² and began to look for an appropriate historic building that would serve as its national headquarters and museum. At the Eighteenth Biennial Council in 1927, it was “RESOLVED, that this Council authorize the President to appoint a Committee to take steps toward acquiring a home in Washington and be given power to act in consultation with the National Officers.”³ The following year, The National Society purchased Bellevue (as Dumbarton House previously was named) and set about restoring the structure to its earlier glory. In the years that followed, The National Society undertook extensive research to learn more about the early history of the property and its residents. This research would help to guide The National Society as it set out to furnish and interpret the period rooms of the museum before they ultimately opened the building to members and the public in 1932.⁴

Over the course of many months in advance of the initial restoration, Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar, former president of The National Society and then-Chairman of the Headquarters Committee, researched land deeds, wills, plat maps, and other historic documents to guide the

¹ The property has held several names during its more than two-hundred-year history. These include: “Cedar Hill,” the name given the property by Samuel Jackson, the builder, and retained by Joseph Nourse during his residency from 1804-1813; “Belle Vue,” the name applied by Charles Carroll and retained by subsequent owners-occupants until its purchase by The National Society; and “Dumbarton House,” the name applied on December 9, 1931, by agreement of a majority of the members of the Executive Committee of The National Society and used to the present. For the purposes of this document—and to ensure consistency—the name “Dumbarton House” will be used throughout.

² Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar, *A History of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America from 1891 to 1933*, (Atlanta: The Walter W. Brown Publishing Company, 1934), pp. 184. To date, this remains one of the most thoroughly written publications about the early history of The National Society.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a thorough discussion of the initial restoration and furnishing of Dumbarton House see, “Dumbarton House, Restoration and Furnishing,” in Lamar, pp. 204-215.

Committee with restoration decisions. While Joseph Nourse was a name that would become familiar to Mrs. Lamar and members of the Headquarters Committee during their research, little to no detailed information was discovered about how he might have furnished or finished the interior spaces of the house. The National Society also engaged Fiske Kimball, then-Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a noted architectural historian, to consult on the proposed restoration and retained local architect, Horace W. Peaslee,⁵ to serve as the principal restoration architect. As The National Society considered the restoration of Dumbarton House, Fiske Kimball wrote a letter to Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar and Mrs. Stephen Bonsal that seems rather prescient and applicable even today⁶:

Dear Ladies:

It has interested me extremely to learn of the purchase of Bellevue by the National Society of Colonial Dames, and of the project for its restoration. I have long known the house in its present form, and have greatly enjoyed the opportunity of seeing the old photographs showing it in two previous incarnations.

The photographs taken before 1880 show the house to have been originally (as it still is potentially, though not as it now stands) one of the very finest and most beautiful houses in the United States. May I take the liberty of urging most strongly that the house be restored fully and completely to its original condition? I am confident that no compromise short of this will ultimately satisfy you, and indeed all the ladies of your organization.

I can well understand that, since (when you purchased the house) it was handsome in its way and in excellent repair, it may not have been realized how very much the house had suffered from changes made since 1900, and thus it was not realized that any substantial sum would need to be spent in restoring it. Unexpected expenditures are naturally always unwelcome, but let me say that in this instance they would be justified and repaid by the vastly more beautiful and more valuable house which you would have if complete and faithful restoration were undertaken.

Mr. Peaslee, I am sure, would agree with me, that the admirable steps he has proposed to bring the house nearer to its original condition (steps limited by the amount of money hitherto thought to be available) fall far short of what is wise and desirable—but clearly he is not in a position to urge a large expenditure. What I write is entirely on my own initiative.

When I say a full and faithful restoration, I mean one without any compromises or concessions, many of which I judge from Mr. Peaslee's drawings may have to be made on account of expense. As an instance, I may mention the windows in the two circular bows which had been cut down into French windows, destroying

⁵ To date, the papers of Horace Peaslee have not been located. Efforts by numerous scholars to locate them have proved unsuccessful.

⁶ Letter of Fiske Kimball to Mrs. Joseph Rucker Lamar and Mrs. Stephen Bonsal, April 30, 1931, in Lamar, pp. 198-200.

the moulded course of brick at that point. The compromise proposed by Mr. Peaslee (filling the lower part of the enlarged opening with a wood panel) is very ingenious and economical, but I am sure Mr. Peaslee would rejoice, as I would, if this could be built in again with brick, and the moulded brick restored. This is only one of many similar instances.

The reason I am so firm in my conviction that nothing short of a full restoration of the house, exactly as it was, will ultimately satisfy the Association, is the analogy with experience elsewhere, in similar cases. Independence Hall has been 'restored' three times, first about 1875, then about 1898, finally about ten years ago. In the first two so-called 'restorations' many compromises such as I have described (and much worse ones) were made. What was done in 1875 had proved unsatisfactory by 1898, and what was done in 1898 equally failed to satisfy a growingly informed knowledge and opinion. That is why at great expense the third and true restoration had to be undertaken. In this last one no such compromises were made. The building was put back exactly as it was at an early period, and thus there is no substantial occasion to expect that it will have to be touched again.

The only firm ground on which to stand is that of making the house exactly as it was. Then there is no question of taste or of future change of taste. Fortunately, you have ample information by which this can be done; not only the old photographs, but descriptions, etc., of the portico of 1813 which had been replaced even before the earlier photographs were taken. Such a restoration will be best economically in the long run, and anything short of it, which will later require to be done over, will be not only regrettable artistically, but wasteful financially.

I earnestly pray that you and your associates may see your way clear to putting this superb old mansion in the condition in which it was before any of the destructive changes.

Sincerely yours,
Fiske Kimball

Space in this report does not permit a full examination of the many changes made during the 1931 restoration,⁷ though it should be noted The National Society and its team of architects did a commendable job. As with any restoration project, however, financial and practical considerations resulted in some compromises having to be made.

With the restoration complete, Dumbarton House officially opened to members of The National Society and to the general public in May 1932. Few restorations or other modifications were made to the structure in the subsequent fifty years.

⁷ For a detailed accounting of renovations and restorations made to Dumbarton House during the 1931 campaign, see the four binders submitted by Kerri Jurgens with her study, *A Preliminary Study of the Architectural History of Dumbarton House, Georgetown, District of Columbia, Headquarters of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America (1998)*, located in the curatorial files at Dumbarton House.

By the late 1970s, as The National Society began to outgrow the existing facility and as years of deferred maintenance took their toll on the structure, The National Society explored the feasibility of constructing a new “President’s House” on the adjacent parcel of land (Square 1285, Lots 813 and 814) as well as undertaking a renovation of the existing structure. In advance of any archaeological work, The National Society commissioned a full review of all relevant land records.⁸ In spring 1983, an archaeological study was undertaken in Lots 813 and 814, which yielded several significant features, including what were thought to be a carriage house and a well.⁹ With the discovery of these features, it was suggested that a more thorough excavation be undertaken.¹⁰ Regrettably, as no further archaeological reports have been located in The National Society archives, it is not known if the subsequent excavation(s) occurred.¹¹

Due to the overwhelming projected cost of the new construction, in the immediate years that followed The National Society decided to renovate and expand the historic structure rather than construct a new building on the adjacent parcel of land. The work was to be completed by 1991, in time to commemorate the impending centennial of the founding of The National Society. The Centennial Campaign, which raised nearly \$3 million, funded the renovation and expansion of the historic structure. The project included the installation of a climate control system, a new roof, renovated administrative offices in the basement, construction of the Belle Vue Room and Lower Courtyard, and landscaping of the East Garden. During site preparation for the Belle Vue Room, excavating equipment disturbed a trash midden (near the location of the present-day north staircase leading from the Upper Terrace to the Lower Courtyard)—possibly from the Nourse occupancy—unearthing a large quantity of late-18th and early-19th century material—principally clay pipe stems, plate fragments, and other related material. Regrettably, this was not a controlled excavation, so drawing conclusions from the recovered material must be done with caution.¹² The newly expanded and renovated facility opened to members of The National Society and the public in 1991.

⁸ See Anneli M. Levy, *Results of Preliminary Research in Preparation for Archaeological Work, 2713 Q Street N.W., Washington, D.C., Lots 813/814, Square 1285*, (1982).

⁹ Pamela J. Cressey and J. N. Leith Smith, *Dumbarton House Archaeological Project Preliminary Report*, (1983).

¹⁰ Pamela J. Cressey, J. N. Leith Smith, and T. B. McCord, Jr., *Proposal, Dumbarton House Archaeological Project, Second Phase Investigation*, (1983).

¹¹ Cressey or McCord may possess their detailed original field notes and/or uncompleted reports of these excavations.

¹² Since we believe the original kitchen was located on the main floor of the east wing, and we know the house originally was located about 50-100 feet to the south of its present location, this would have been a reasonable location for a privy or a trash dump for household waste.

Shortly following the centennial celebrations in 1991, The National Society received a large quantity of archival material pertaining to Joseph Nourse and his family, donated by the estate of Mrs. Charles J. Nourse, Jr. (Margaret Strong), the spouse of a Nourse descendant. The material included many years of personal correspondence between Nourse and his many family members, including the time of his residency at Dumbarton House between the years 1804 and 1813, as well as personal invitations, bills of sale, account books, receipts, journals, and other ephemera.

Recognizing the importance of this material and the invaluable assistance it would provide in learning more about the history of the property and its earliest known occupant, the Dumbarton House Board organized a “Research, History and Manuscript Committee” to catalogue and transcribe the material to make the information contained therein more accessible. In 1994, the museum presented the exhibition, *In Search of Joseph Nourse, 1754-1841: America’s First Civil Servant*, organized by members of the Research, History and Manuscript Committee, co-chaired by Mrs. Julie Young and Mrs. Jeannette Harper, and curated by Dr. Oscar P. Fitzgerald, former Director of the Navy Museum in Washington, D.C. To complement the exhibition, The National Society published a catalogue, the first biographical study of Joseph Nourse and his contributions to the early American government.

Building on the momentum of the exhibition and the enthusiasm it generated to learn more about the history of the building and its early occupants, in 1998 the Dumbarton House Board contracted with Karri Jurgens, an architectural history graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University, to undertake a complete survey of architectural modifications made to the structure and surrounding grounds. Jurgens thoroughly examined early land deeds and recorded property transfers; auction sale notices published in the *National Intelligencer* and other contemporary newspapers; correspondence between Fiske Kimball, Horace Peaslee and Mrs. Lamar pertaining to the 1931 renovation contained within The National Society Archives and the Fiske Kimball Papers at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and archival material related to the Nourse family and its occupancy of the property contained within the Nourse Manuscript Collection, Dumbarton House, Washington, D.C.; the Nourse Family Papers at the Alderman Library, University of Virginia (UVA); and in the Starkey Papers at the Maryland State Archives. Her research resulted in her report, *A Preliminary Study of the Architectural History of Dumbarton House, Georgetown, District of Columbia, Headquarters of the National Society*

of the *Colonial Dames of America*.¹³ Her paper has since served as the baseline reference on which all subsequent architectural studies have been based.

In an effort to better determine what decorative interior finishes (i.e., paint colors, door graining, wallpaper, etc.) may have been employed at Dumbarton House during the Nourse occupancy, the Dumbarton House Board retained the services of Matthew Mosca to analyze the plaster wall surfaces, door surfaces, and all decorative wood trim surrounding the windows, doors, baseboards, and chair rails. Mosca examined the first floor in 1998¹⁴ and returned to examine the second floor in 2001.¹⁵ His highly detailed reports will serve as the guide for future decisions regarding the decorative finishes throughout the historic core.

In an effort to learn more information about the specific usage of wallpaper by the Nourse family at Dumbarton House, in fall 2002, the museum engaged Robert Kelly, a wallpaper historian and principal of WRN Associates. Using his vast knowledge of historic wallpapers, combined with the findings from the Mosca analysis and primary source material provided by Dumbarton House, Kelly was tasked with recommending appropriate types and quantities of wallpaper for re-installation at Dumbarton House. These recommendations may be found in his report, *WRNA Report on Wallpaper at Dumbarton House (Cedar Hill)* (November 13, 2002).

To better understand room usage and room hierarchy during the Nourse occupancy, the Dumbarton House Board retained Betty C. Leviner, retired Curator of Exhibition Buildings at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.¹⁶ Leviner recommended The National Society retain an architectural historian to undertake more specific examinations and commission a furnishings plan to guide decisions regarding interior finishes and furnishings.

Following this recommendation, in September 1999, Dumbarton House engaged Mark Wenger, architectural historian formerly at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, to undertake a general survey of the architectural evolution of the historic structure in an effort to determine

¹³ April 28, 1998. Jurgens's report contains one significant error in her conclusions—that concerning the bows on the north façade. Subsequent research in examining the joists in the attic reveals they are continuous in extending to the sill of the bows, thus proving the bows are original to the first-period construction to the house and are not later additions. For more specific information regarding the dating of the bows, see the reports of Mark Wenger, *Dumbarton House, A Preliminary Survey, September 22, 1999* (October 1, 1999), pp. 3-4, and *Dumbarton House Investigations, August 18-20, 2000* (March 30, 2001), pp. 16-19.

¹⁴ For detailed recommendations for the historic finishes on the principal floor, see Matthew Mosca, *A Report on the Historic Finishes, From Samples Collected in the Hall, and the Principal First Floor Rooms*, March 24, 1998.

¹⁵ For detailed recommendations for the historic finishes on the second floor, see Matthew Mosca, *A Report on the Historic Finishes, From Samples Collected from the Second Floor Rooms*, (April 2, 2002).

¹⁶ Betty C. Leviner, *Summary of Comments from August 5, 1999, Visit to Dumbarton House* (undated).

“the degree to which original building fabric had survived the vigorous campaigns of remodeling and restoration.” His findings may be found in his report, *Dumbarton House, A Preliminary Survey* (October 1999).¹⁷

Mark Wenger returned to Dumbarton House in August 2000 to investigate and address numerous questions that stemmed from his previous study. Specifically, he attempted to determine the existence and location of an earlier chimney that serviced the east rooms on the main floor; the existence, location, and character of the original attic stair; the authenticity of the door between Rooms 308 and 309; the authenticity of the door between Rooms 305 and 306; the authenticity of the door between Rooms 305 and 307A (rear passage); the authenticity of the rear bows; the existence of visible evidence for the original main stair; whether there were rooms other than bedchambers on the upper floor; and to what degree the hierarchy of surviving trim could illumine room function. The answers to these questions are contained in his report, *Dumbarton House Investigation, August 18-20, 2000* (March 30, 2001).

Shortly after the visit by Mark Wenger in August 2000, Dumbarton House hired Brian J. Lang as its first paid, professional curator to oversee the museum collection, to organize temporary exhibitions, and to direct all research and restoration programs of the museum.

Concurrent with the museum’s preparation for the AAM accreditation process (2004-2006)—and in light of the newly gained information through these various directed architectural studies regarding the Nourse family and their occupancy of Dumbarton House—discussions were held between the Dumbarton House Board and museum staff regarding a potential revision to the museum mission statement. As early as the mid-1990s, Dumbarton House operated under a mission statement, that read:

The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America is a not for profit historical and educational organization.

Its mission at the Dumbarton House Museum is to preserve the historic structure and its collections of both decorative arts and original manuscripts and to use these resources to educate the general public about life in Washington, D.C., in the early years of the Republic from 1790 to 1830. As a center for the study of the Federal period, the house and its collections provide a unique and important resource for scholars, students, and all those interested in this period.

¹⁷ The findings of this report should be compared with the report from his follow-up survey, *Dumbarton House Investigations, August 18-20, 2000* (March 30, 2001) before any conclusions may be drawn. This is particularly important with respect to the age of the central stair and the authenticity/age of the plaster cornices in the front half of the central passage (Room 307A&B) and in Rooms 305 and 306.

As the organization of administrative components of museum operations continued to evolve, and as additional information regarding the Nourse family and its occupation of Dumbarton House came to light, the previous mission statement proved too general in nature and too unwieldy to implement. Therefore, the following mission statement was adopted by the Dumbarton House Board in April 2003. The current approved mission statement of the museum reads:

The mission of the Dumbarton House Museum, a Federal period historic house museum, is to preserve the historic structure and its collections and to educate the public about life in Washington, D.C., during the early years of the Republic. Emphasis is placed on Joseph Nourse, first Register of the Treasury, and his family, and their occupation of the property from 1804 through 1813.

Synthesizing the information contained within the nearly eight years worth of architectural studies and evidence for furnishings and interior finishes at Dumbarton House during the Nourse residency, the museum curator prepared a *Preliminary Dumbarton House Furnishings and Interpretive Plan* (April 2003) and presented the document to the Dumbarton House Board for review at its spring 2003 meeting. Two notable conservation and restoration projects were also completed between 2004 and 2008. The first is the historically accurate re-upholstering of the Philadelphia sofa (97.8), between 2004 and 2006; and second, the restoration of the door that originally led from Room 306 and connected the central block to the west hyphen.¹⁸

In 2006, author and historian, Ellen Donald, was hired to complete the formal processes of a historic furnishings plan for Dumbarton House. The researching, interpreting, and writing of a final analysis of the accumulated information has sent Donald on searches through multiple states, collections, and interviews. This document is the fruition of her work, along with the aid and assistance of the Dumbarton House Board, its staff, and many others over the four-year process.

¹⁸ For documentation supporting the restoration of this door, see the report submitted by Mark Wenger (2004).