

## **PERSPECTIVES ON THE TENNESSEE LANDSCAPE: THE VERNACULAR PAINTED INTERIOR IN TENNESSEE**

Anne-Leslie Owens  
Tennessee Historical Society

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Stenciling, landscape painting, woodgraining, and marbling were popular decorative painting techniques in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only in this century have historians considered these painted interiors as a valuable subject for material culture study. The majority of the early scholarship in this field focused on New England interiors despite the wide variety of painted interiors throughout Tennessee and other southern states.<sup>[1](#)</sup>

To date, Tennessee's decorative painting tradition remains relatively unacknowledged by historians and unappreciated by the public and homeowners. The Tennessee State Museum's "Painted Room, 1861," is the only nineteenth-century decoratively painted domestic interior accessible to the public. The museum describes this interior as "the only completely decoratively painted room known in Tennessee." yet, since its acquisition in 1981, several other completely decoratively painted interiors have been surveyed and documented.<sup>[2](#)</sup>

Carroll Van West of the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University has identified several 1880s interior paintings by Fred Swanton. West's article in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, "Middle Tennessee Houses and the Plain Painter Tradition: The Work of Fred Swanton in the Late Victorian Era," is a result of his Century Farms and National register research. West's study alone proves the existence of other completely painted interiors and indicates the need for more survey, research, and documentation of decoratively painted interiors in Tennessee.<sup>[3](#)</sup>

This paper looks at four significant examples that represent the wide variety of painting styles in Tennessee's nineteenth-century interiors. The "Stencil House" in Wayne County features motifs popular during the mid-nineteenth century. "The Beeches" in Robertson County, the Mead White House in Hardin County, and the Maple Dean Farmhouse in Bedford County contain vivid examples of several late-Victorian decorative techniques and motifs.

The earliest known house in this study is the "Stencil House," located near Clifton in Wayne County. This small, unassuming, log dogtrot house contains the most extensively stenciled interior known in Tennessee to retain its original decoration.<sup>[4](#)</sup>

The entrance hall and parlor of the "Stencil House" contain red and green stenciled designs composed of six floral

patterns. These motifs are enclosed by a large leaf pattern along the cornice, and a small leaf pattern along the wainscoting, and are divided into vertical sections by a repeating diamond-shaped pattern.

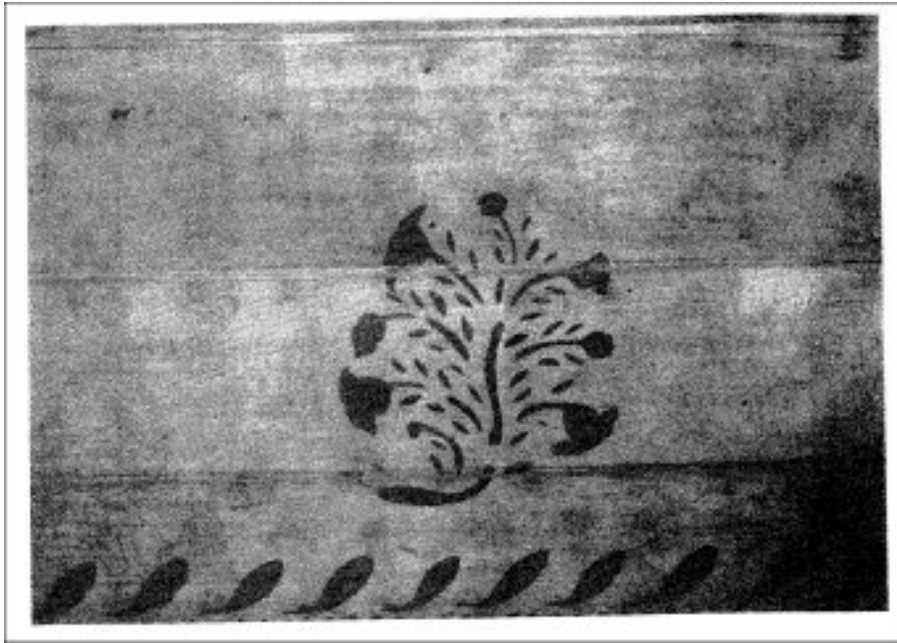


Fig. 1. "Stencil House," parlor, stenciled wall detail  
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The parlor design is composed of three large motifs: a weeping willow, pineapple, and flowers (Figure 1). These motifs are enclosed by a festoon and tassel pattern along the cornice and a vine along the wainscoting. A fuller vine divides the work into vertical sections.

While the date of the Stencil House's construction and date of painting are unknown, similarly stenciled patterns were very common in New England interiors during the first half of the nineteenth century. Richard Hulan and Robert Giebner, authors of a 1972 Historic American Buildings Survey report on the "Stencil House," attributed this work to Moses Eaton, a well-known stenciler from New Hampshire.

Referring to Janet Waring's book, *Early*

*American Stencils on Walls and Furniture*, they stated that tradition holds that Moses Eaton made a trip "West." While Moses Eaton may be responsible for these designs, it is not probable. No other painted interiors by this notable artist have ever been documented south of the Ohio River.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the attribution, this elaborately stenciled interior indicates the transfer of a New England decorative tradition into rural southern Middle Tennessee during the mid-nineteenth century. A traveling painter could have offered this style of painting to residents of Wayne County, who may or may not have seen interiors painted in this manner. Possibly a New Englander traveled westward and, after settling in Tennessee, commissioned a local or itinerant painter to paint his interior according to a style with which the homeowner was familiar.

"The Beeches," located near the city of Springfield in Robertson County, is a grand Italiante style home. John Woodard, a wealthy whiskey distiller, constructed his home in 1869. The home's most outstanding interior features are the hand-painted ceilings in the entrance hall and dining room.

The entrance hall design is divided into three square sections; the front of the hall, the rear of the hall, and the side hall with the staircase. The hall forms an "L" shape as it wraps around the parlor. The three sections are very similar, with the exception of the center medallion. The front and side hall sections both have a three-dimensional plaster ceiling medallion with a suspended light fixture. The corner of the "L"-shaped hall has a circular medallion painted with highlights and shadows to provide a three-dimensional effect.

Except for the ceiling medallion, all three of the sections are painted in a similar fashion. Each section has a yellow background framed by a light-blue border and a white interior border. The artist combined white and blue

geometric patterns to create an intricate design. He further decorated these geometric patterns by painting blue scrollwork designs as well as highlights and shadows. The consistent quality of the designs suggests that the artist used stencils, although this cannot be documented.



Fig. 2. "The Beeches," dining room, decoratively painted ceiling  
(Photograph by the author)

The dining room of "The Beeches" is also painted decoratively. Here, the artist painted a wide gray border featuring blue round-shaped medallions midway along each of the four sides of the ceiling (Figure 2). The medallions are adorned with a gold frame and scrolls to each side and white scrolls at the center. Again, the artist used highlights and shadows to create a three-dimensional effect on flat plaster. He gave special attention to the placement of the eight medallions in the room and their relation to the two windows along the west wall. All the gold frames and scrolled designs are painted with highlights and shadows to simulate light from these windows.

The Mead White House, located in Saltillo in Hardin County, was built in 1847 for Mead White, a prosperous businessman, land owner, and farmer. This two-story, five bay I-house is dominated by a full-height porch featuring Victorian millwork. Its interior contains such Victorian-era finishes as woodgraining, marbling, stenciled ceiling paintings, and wall and ceiling papers.

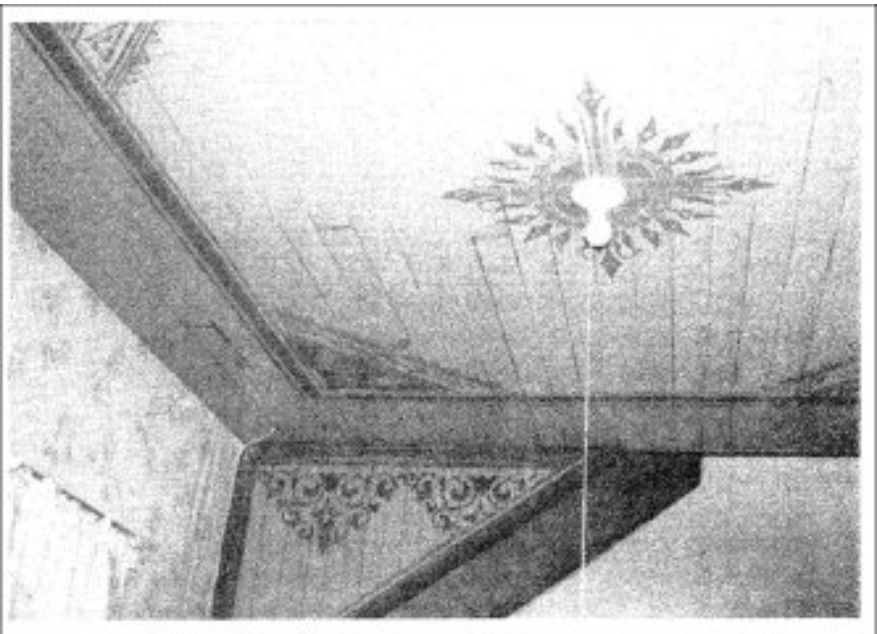


Fig. 3. Mead White House parlor, central hall, decoratively painted ceiling and stair enclosure  
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The Mead White House, located in Saltillo in Hardin County, was built in 1847 for Mead White, a prosperous businessman, land owner,

The first painted scheme appears on the front and sides of the enclosed upper level of stairs. Tulip and scrolled patterns are painted in dark brown on a light brown background (Figure 3). At the back of the central hall are painted designs on the ceiling. The artist painted the background light green and off-white with a dark-green and dark-brown line forming an interior border. Geometric designs in dark green and dark brown adorn the corners and center of the interior square. Many late-nineteenth century painters' manuals included similar geometric stencil patterns.

The room to the east of the central hall features extensive woodgraining on the mantel, baseboards, doors, and window frames. The woodwork, painted to represent three different

varieties of fine wood, accentuates the architectural detailing of these elements.

The original side hall contains stenciled designs on the ceiling similar to those at the rear of the front hall. The ceiling is painted light brown and tan with dark and medium-brown interior borders. At each corner, there is a medium-brown colored geometric design while the center of the ceiling features a diamond-shaped medallion composed of several abstract acanthus leaf designs.

For the most part, nineteenth-century decorative interior painters remain anonymous. John Joseph Christie of Henderson, Tennessee, is one exception. Sometime between 1872 and 1877, Mead White commissioned Christie to paint this interior. An accomplished painter from Ireland, Christie had immigrated to the United States in 1868. After living briefly in New York and St. Louis, he moved to Henderson in Chester County, Tennessee. Christie painted the Mead White House interior during his stay in Henderson.<sup>6</sup>

Dorothy Christie, John Joseph Christie's daughter, believes that the Mead White House is one of the few houses decorated in this way and that her father did the paintings freehand, although they appear to be stenciled. Perhaps he used a stencil to create an outline of the design, they painted by hand within the outline. As described in a nineteenth-century painters' manual, "stencilling has a perfectly legitimate use as a help in laying in decorations which are afterwards to be finished by hand penciling." Christie's designs for the Mead White House walls and ceilings are similar to stencil designs illustrated in several late-nineteenth century painters' manuals written by Franklin B. Gardner. The designs in such manuals provided sources of inspiration for many interior painters. For those not interested in making their own stencil plates, Gardner noted "that a large variety of stencil patterns, working size, are published, and that in most large paint store the cut patterns may be purchased."<sup>7</sup>

The latest house in this study is the Maple Dean Farmhouse, located near the community of Flat Creek in Bedford County. Constructed in 1886, this one-story gable-front and wing dwelling represents the Victorian-era influence of Charles Eastlake with its intricate exterior millwork and interior wall treatments.

Charles Eastlake, a prominent British decorative arts critic of the late-nineteenth century, published *Hints on Household Taste* in the United States in 1872. As Eastlake recommended, the bedroom in the Maple Dean Farmhouse features a tripartite horizontal wall division comprised of wainscoting or dado at the bottom of the wall, crown molding or wallpaper along the cornice, with wallpaper between them in the fill area.<sup>8</sup>

Above the wainscoting and the papered walls is the Maple Dean Farmhouse's finest interior feature, the painted cornice and ceiling (Figure 4). The cornice area, defined by a brown painted crown molding, is painted tan with yellow, blue, and red flowers. In the cornice are medallions with freehand landscapes on the east, south, and west walls. These landscapes feature trees, hillsides, mountains, a castle, and a bridge. While the north wall does not have a cornice painting, it has two landscape paintings



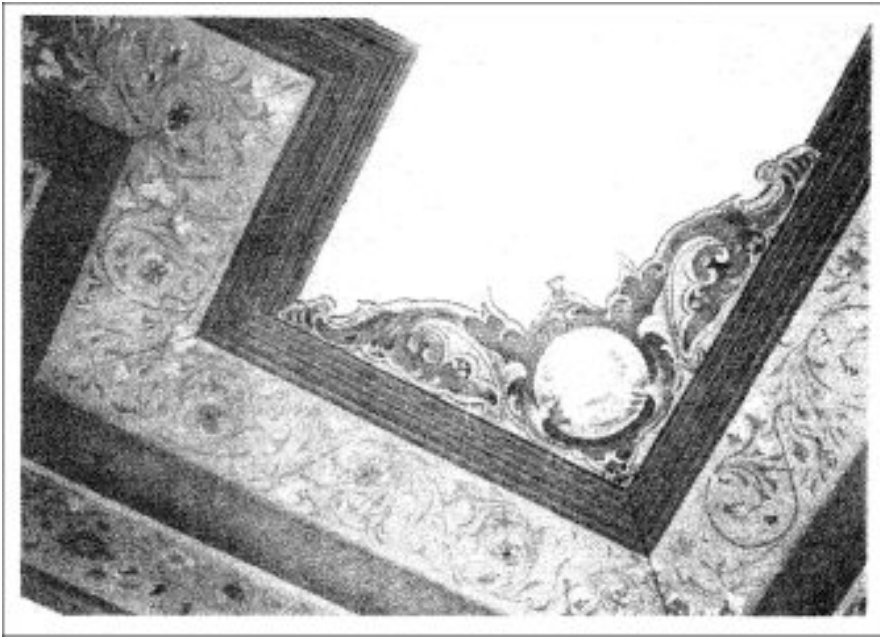


Fig. 4. Maple Dean Farmhouse, bedroom, mountain and lake landscape painting on ceiling  
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at the fireplace. A medallion painting on the mantel is of a lake surrounded by trees, while the firescreen below is a painted waterfall scene. Each pilaster features a bouquet of red, tan, and white flowers. Above the flowers are geometric lines designs in the Eastlake tradition.

The repetitive, freehand design on the tan background is continued on the ceiling in the same manner. The artist painted brown and tan rococo-like scroll patterns on wooden cutouts applied at each of the four corners of the room. Circular landscapes including trees, hills, mountains, lakes, a bridge, and a small cottage, are painted in the center of these scrolled patterns.

Centered on the ceiling is a circular gray-brown and white scrolled design painted to resemble a plaster ceiling medallion. Around it is a wide white band. Connecting this circular white band to the corners are four long triangular-shaped areas. The area in between is painted a lavender color.

Fred Swanton, the artist responsible for the Maple Dean Farmhouse, is another exception to the usual anonymity of the decorative interior painter. Elizabeth Dean Crigler specified that she and her husband commissioned Fred Swanton of Buffalo, New York, to pain the interior of their new home. Upon Swanton's death, the corner's report of April 12, 1888, in the Shelbyville *Gazette* noted that Swanton was "a painter who has been living here for some time past." According to Crigler family tradition, Swanton came to Middle Tennessee as a former "circus painter." Interestingly, one of the most famous carousel manufacturing companies was located just outside of Buffalo in the lumber town of North Tonawanda, New York. Allan Herschell of the Tonawanda Engine & Machine Company built his first carousel between 1883 and 1884. Swanton could have worked with this company or been influenced by the carousel scene paintings.<sup>9</sup>

While circus, carousel, and interior painters all had established traditions, they were undoubtedly influenced by other popular forms of art. With the introduction of chromolithographs in the mid-nineteenth century, examples of fine art were available to everyone. Chromolithography, the color reproduction of original paintings, could have influenced Fred Swanton's work. Chromolithographic images, like those of Currier and ives and others, were sold in America by the millions from 1840 to 1900. By making images of fine art available to the masses, chromolithography was the democratic art of the late-nineteenth century. Even if chromolithographers did not inspire the work of carousel and circus paintings, and popularity of chromolithographic prints certainly would have made Swanton's flamboyant interior style more acceptable to Middle Tennessee homeowners. It is likely that the Criglers were familiar with landscape chromolithographs and the common practice of hanging them on the walls in homes.<sup>10</sup>

Laura A. W. Phillips, in her recent study of North Carolina's decorative interior painting tradition, concludes that "the clientele was as varied as the painters themselves. As might be expected, some were wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs who occupied large and architecturally impressive homes." Phillips goes on to point out that "a surprising number could be described best as 'middle class' and lived in relatively simple vernacular dwellings." The clients in this study follow the pattern that Phillips describes. John Woodard with his thriving wholesale whiskey distillery industry and Mead White as a prosperous landowner and farmer represent wealthy homeowners while Walter and Elizabeth Crigler, a schoolteacher and his wife, are best classified as middle class. The ownership of the "Stencil House" is unknown. While it is a simple log structure, its fine interior detailing indicates a middle-class owner.<sup>11</sup>

The diversity of the clients dispels the misconception that decoratively painted finishes were only used by those unable to afford finer interior embellishments. John Woodard and Mead White were both affluent homeowners who could and did add currently popular interior details to their homes' interiors. John Woodard chose plaster cornices and ceiling medallions while Mead White displayed French wall and ceiling papers. Both chose interior painting even though other forms of Victorian decoration were available and affordable.

These examples of decorative interior painting illustrate the variety of techniques used to decorate Tennessee interiors. Both wealthy and middle-class homeowners chose decorative painting as an aesthetically pleasing interior treatment which could be individualized with popular design motifs. Affluent homeowners often chose this painted finish in addition to other forms of interior ornamentation. For some, decorative interior painting was a way to update an interior while others may have appreciated it as a familiar and traditional form of decoration.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Edward B. Allen, *Early American Wall Paintings, 1710-1850* (Cambridge, MA: 1926; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968); Janet Waring, *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture* (New York: William R. Scott, 1937; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968); Nina Fletcher Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting, 1770-1850* (1952; reprint, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972); Robert L. McGrath, *Early Vermont Wall Paintings, 1780-1850* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1972); Laura A. W. Phillips, "Grand Illusions: Decorative Interior Painting in North Carolina," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV* (Columbia: University of Missouri press, 1991); Buie Harwood, *Decorating Texas: Decorative Painting in the Lone Star State from the 1850s to the 1950s* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Accession No. 81-259, "Painted Room, 1861," Antebellum Exhibit, Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN; Morristown *Citizen Tribune* 17 July 1981; Knoxville *News Sentinel* 16 August 1981.

<sup>3</sup>Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Agriculture: A Century Farms Perspective* (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Agriculture, 1986); Jennifer Martin and Carroll Van West, "Green-Evans House, Moore County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, May 1992, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville; Carroll Van West, "Julius Freed House, Gibson County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, September 1993, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville; Anne-Leslie Owens and Carroll Van West, "Maple Dean Farm, Bedford County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, August 1994,

Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville.

<sup>4</sup>Richard H. Hulan Robert C. Giebner, "Stencil House, TN-190, Wayne County, TN, "Historic American Buildings Survey, 1972, and Summer 1985, Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Nita Rutledge Vaughn, "Meady White House, Hardin County, TN, "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, March 1993, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville, 13.

<sup>7</sup>Vaughn, 13; Franklin B. Gardner, *The Painter's Encyclopedia* (New York: M.T. Richardson, 1894), 357-67; F.B. Gardner, *How to Paint* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1872), 82-86; F.B. Gardner, *Everybody's Paint Book* (New York: M.T. Richardson Co., 1892), 58-62.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, 4th ed. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 68; Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 116-17.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Carlton Fulcher, *Clipped Obituaries from the "Shelbyville Times Gazette"* (Brentwood, TN: By the author, 1979), 28; Jacob G. Crigler, interview with author, May 1994, Flat Creek, TN; Shelbyville *Gazette* 12 April 1888; *Forms of the Traveling Fairs, Carousels and Carnival Midways* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), 102.

<sup>10</sup>Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1979), xi.

<sup>11</sup>Phillips, 157.

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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College

400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: [htallant@georgetowncollege.edu](mailto:htallant@georgetowncollege.edu)

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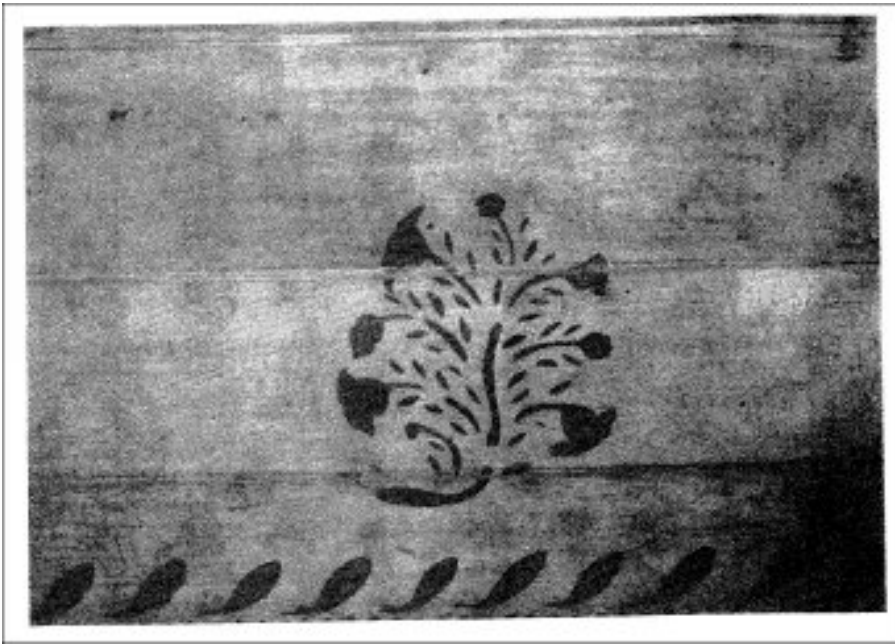


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Fig. 2. "The Beeches," dining room, decoratively painted ceiling  
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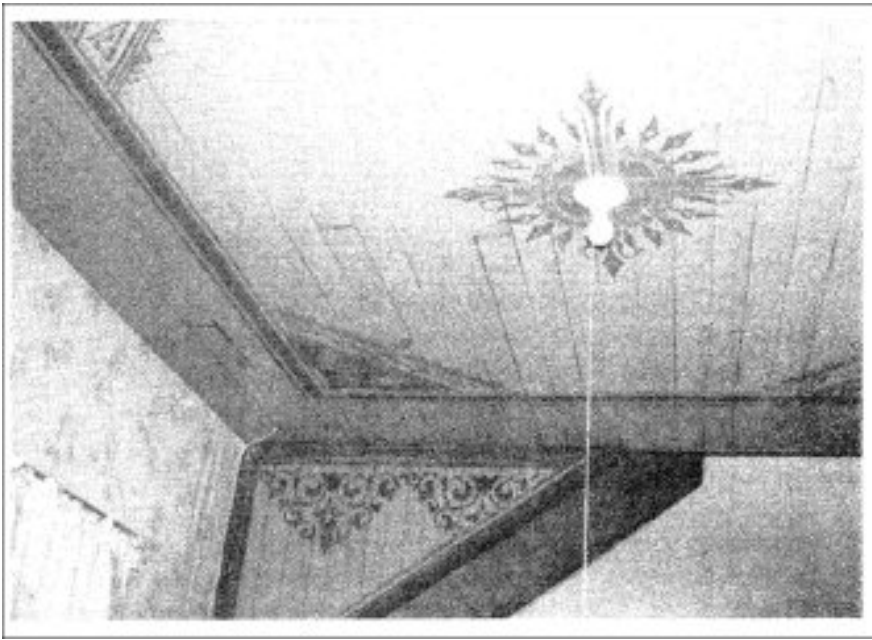


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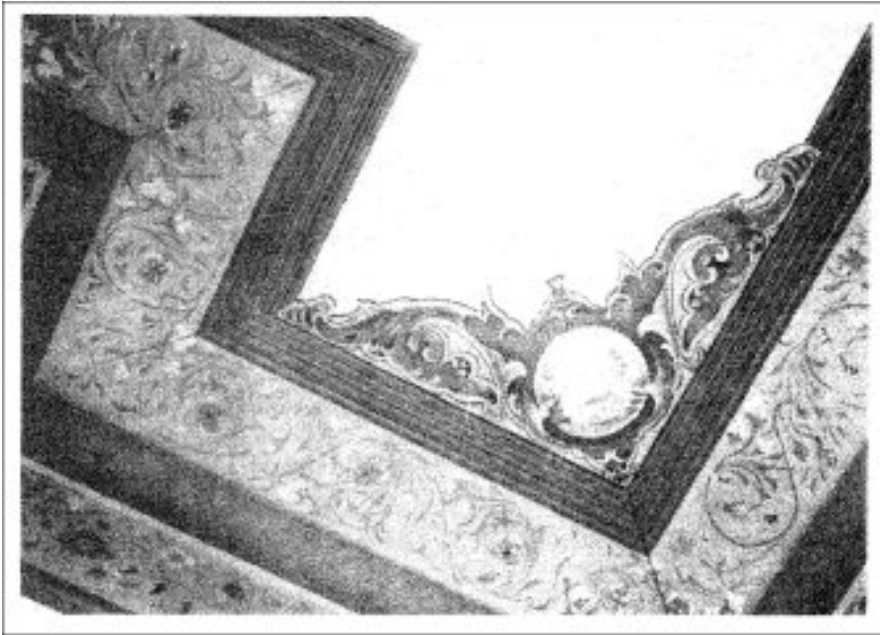


Fig. 4. Maple Dean Farmhouse, bedroom, mountain and lake landscape painting on ceiling  
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Above the wainscoting and the papered walls is the Maple Dean Farmhouse's finest interior feature, the painted cornice and ceiling (Figure 4). The cornice area, defined by a brown painted crown molding, is painted tan with yellow, blue, and red flowers. In the cornice are medallions with freehand landscapes on the east, south, and west walls. These landscapes feature trees, hillsides, mountains, a castle, and a bridge. While the north wall does not have a cornice painting, it has two landscape paintings at the fireplace. A medallion painting on the mantel is of a lake surrounded by trees, while the firescreen below is a painted waterfall scene. Each pilaster features a bouquet of red, tan, and white flowers. Above the flowers are geometric lines designs in the Eastlake tradition.

The repetitive, freehand design on the tan background is continued on the ceiling in the same manner. The artist painted brown and tan rococo-like scroll patterns on wooden cutouts applied at each of the four corners of the room. Circular landscapes including trees, hills, mountains, lakes, a bridge, and a small cottage, are painted in the center of these scrolled patterns.

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While circus, carousel, and interior painters all had established traditions, they were undoubtedly influenced by other popular forms of art. With the introduction of chromolithographs in the mid-nineteenth century, examples of



fine art were available to everyone. Chromolithography, the color reproduction of original paintings, could have influenced Fred Swanton's work. Chromolithographic images, like those of Currier and Ives and others, were sold in America by the millions from 1840 to 1900. By making images of fine art available to the masses, chromolithography was the democratic art of the late-nineteenth century. Even if chromolithographers did not inspire the work of carousel and circus paintings, and popularity of chromolithographic prints certainly would have made Swanton's flamboyant interior style more acceptable to Middle Tennessee homeowners. It is likely that the Criglers were familiar with landscape chromolithographs and the common practice of hanging them on the walls in homes.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

Laura A. W. Phillips, in her recent study of North Carolina's decorative interior painting tradition, concludes that "the clientele was as varied as the painters themselves. As might be expected, some were wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs who occupied large and architecturally impressive homes." Phillips goes on to point out that "a surprising number could be described best as 'middle class' and lived in relatively simple vernacular dwellings." The clients in this study follow the pattern that Phillips describes. John Woodard with his thriving wholesale whiskey distillery industry and Mead White as a prosperous landowner and farmer represent wealthy homeowners while Walter and Elizabeth Crigler, a schoolteacher and his wife, are best classified as middle class. The ownership of the "Stencil House" is unknown. While it is a simple log structure, its fine interior detailing indicates a middle-class owner.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

The diversity of the clients dispels the misconception that decoratively painted finishes were only used by those unable to afford finer interior embellishments. John Woodard and Mead White were both affluent homeowners who could and did add currently popular interior details to their homes' interiors. John Woodard chose plaster cornices and ceiling medallions while Mead White displayed French wall and ceiling papers. Both chose interior painting even though other forms of Victorian decoration were available and affordable.

These examples of decorative interior painting illustrate the variety of techniques used to decorate Tennessee interiors. Both wealthy and middle-class homeowners chose decorative painting as an aesthetically pleasing interior treatment which could be individualized with popular design motifs. Affluent homeowners often chose this painted finish in addition to other forms of interior ornamentation. For some, decorative interior painting was a way to update an interior while others may have appreciated it as a familiar and traditional form of decoration.

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## NOTES

<sup>[1](#)</sup>Edward B. Allen, *Early American Wall Paintings, 1710-1850* (Cambridge, MA: 1926; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968); Janet Waring, *Early American Stencils on Walls and Furniture* (New York: William R. Scott, 1937; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1968); Nina Fletcher Little, *American Decorative Wall Painting, 1770-1850* (1952; reprint, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972); Robert L. McGrath, *Early Vermont Wall Paintings, 1780-1850* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1972); Laura A. W. Phillips, "Grand Illusions: Decorative Interior Painting in North Carolina," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, IV* (Columbia: University of Missouri press, 1991); Buie Harwood, *Decorating Texas: Decorative Painting in the Lone Star State from the 1850s to the 1950s* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1993).



- <sup>2</sup>Accession No. 81-259, "Painted Room, 1861," Antebellum Exhibit, Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN; Morristown *Citizen Tribune* 17 July 1981; Knoxville *News Sentinel* 16 August 1981.
- <sup>3</sup>Carroll Van West, *Tennessee Agriculture: A Century Farms Perspective* (Nashville: Tennessee Department of Agriculture, 1986); Jennifer Martin and Carroll Van West, "Green-Evans House, Moore County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, May 1992, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville; Carroll Van West, "Julius Freed House, Gibson County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, September 1993, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville; Anne-Leslie Owens and Carroll Van West, "Maple Dean Farm, Bedford County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, August 1994, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville.
- <sup>4</sup>Richard H. Hulan Robert C. Giebner, "Stencil House, TN-190, Wayne County, TN," Historic American Buildings Survey, 1972, and Summer 1985, Washington, D.C.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Nita Rutledge Vaughn, "Meady White House, Hardin County, TN," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, March 1993, Tennessee Historical Commission, Nashville, 13.
- <sup>7</sup>Vaughn, 13; Franklin B. Gardner, *The Painter's Encyclopedia* (New York: M.T. Richardson, 1894), 357-67; F.B. Gardner, *How to Paint* (New York: Samuel R. Wells, 1872), 82-86; F.B. Gardner, *Everybody's Paint Book* (New York: M.T. Richardson Co., 1892), 58-62.
- <sup>8</sup>Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, 4th ed. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1878; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 68; Gail Caskey Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830-1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 116-17.
- <sup>9</sup>Richard Carlton Fulcher, *Clipped Obituaries from the "Shelbyville Times Gazette"* (Brentwood, TN: By the author, 1979), 28; Jacob G. Crigler, interview with author, May 1994, Flat Creek, TN; Shelbyville *Gazette* 12 April 1888; *Forms of the Traveling Fairs, Carousels and Carnival Midways* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), 102.
- <sup>10</sup>Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1979), xi.
- <sup>11</sup>Phillips, 157.

E-mail: [htallant@georgetowncollege.edu](mailto:htallant@georgetowncollege.edu)