Restoring a Kentucky Landmark

BY GREGORY LEFEVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

"You see Betty's hand in all of this, throughout every room of the house," Wesley Newkirk says, walking through his stately 1812 Kentucky landmark home while describing the painstaking efforts to restore its original grandeur. Here is the meticulously recovered stenciling, over there the precisely correct period wallpaper, down the hall the colorful carpet re-created from a scrap of original fabric found in the basement.

"Betty did the research and worked with the experts to select the paints, the wallpapers, and the fabrics," he explains. "She scraped layer after layer of paint off of all these mantels and even some of the bricks outside."

Newkirk and his wife, Elizabeth, searched for twenty-five years to find the right old house, then spent another fourteen years restoring it. In 2002, just a few months before it was finally livable, she died. "Yes, it's sad that she didn't get to enjoy it," her husband says. "But we had many good times associated with this house, and we all know Betty would be pleased with it."

Today the Coleman-Desha House—named for two of its prominent previous owners and located outside of Cynthiana in Harrison County—is regarded as one of Kentucky's premier historic homes. It is both a historic landmark (listed on the National Register of Historic Places) and a monument to the vision, enthusiasm, and hard work of Elizabeth Newkirk.

BUILT TO IMPRESS

Sometime between 1796 and 1810, James Coleman began building his house on the Oddville Pike on a 100-acre tract originally granted by Virginia governor Patrick Henry on April 30, 1785. Coleman, a native of Caroline County and a three-year veteran of the Virginia militia, became a land speculator, lawyer, and surveyor as well as a farmer. He purchased and

After years of sitting vacant, the once grand house had seriously dilapidated by the time the Newkirks discovered it was for sale and took this photograph.

TOP:
After searching twenty-five years for her ideal house to restore, Elizabeth Newkirk spent several more years in loving but painstaking restoration work, including hand-scraping old paint from the home's brick walls. Courtesy of Wes Newkirk.

OPPOSITE:
Sitting at the end of a long, cedar-lined drive, the 1812 Coleman-Desha House is a prime example of Georgian architecture found on farms of wealthy Bluegrass planters in the early 19th century.

sold land throughout northern Kentucky and into Ohio between 1796 and his death three decades later. Elizabeth Newkirk's research turned up eight pages of Coleman's land transactions in county deed books. Some were tiny parcels of fewer than 10 acres, others massive tracts of up to 5,000 acres.

Coleman finished the house in 1812. Judging by its architecture, location, and size, it was meant to impress. Built of brick in the late Georgian style, the house had a first-floor dining room and bedroom separated from a living room and another room by a central hall. A corresponding hallway divided the two original bedrooms from a large ballroom on the second floor. Coleman also built the detached kitchen from brick.

When the country went to war in 1812, Coleman left his wife, the former Eliza Warfield of Maryland, and their children to command a Kentucky cavalry company, fighting under William Henry Harrison in the 1813 Battle of the Thames. He returned to Cynthiana in 1814 with the rank of captain and resumed civilian life.

Coleman's farmstead—known as Poplar Springs—was one of the area's most prosperous, with several outbuildings on about 160 acres. Although owning thirteen slaves made Coleman one of the largest slaveholders in the area (the average owner had fewer than five), the scope of his holdings did not qualify as a plantation.

By the mid-1820s Coleman had become ill and started rapidly selling off land. He sold the farm in June 1827 to Kentucky Governor Joseph Desha (pronounced de-SHAY) and died the following summer.

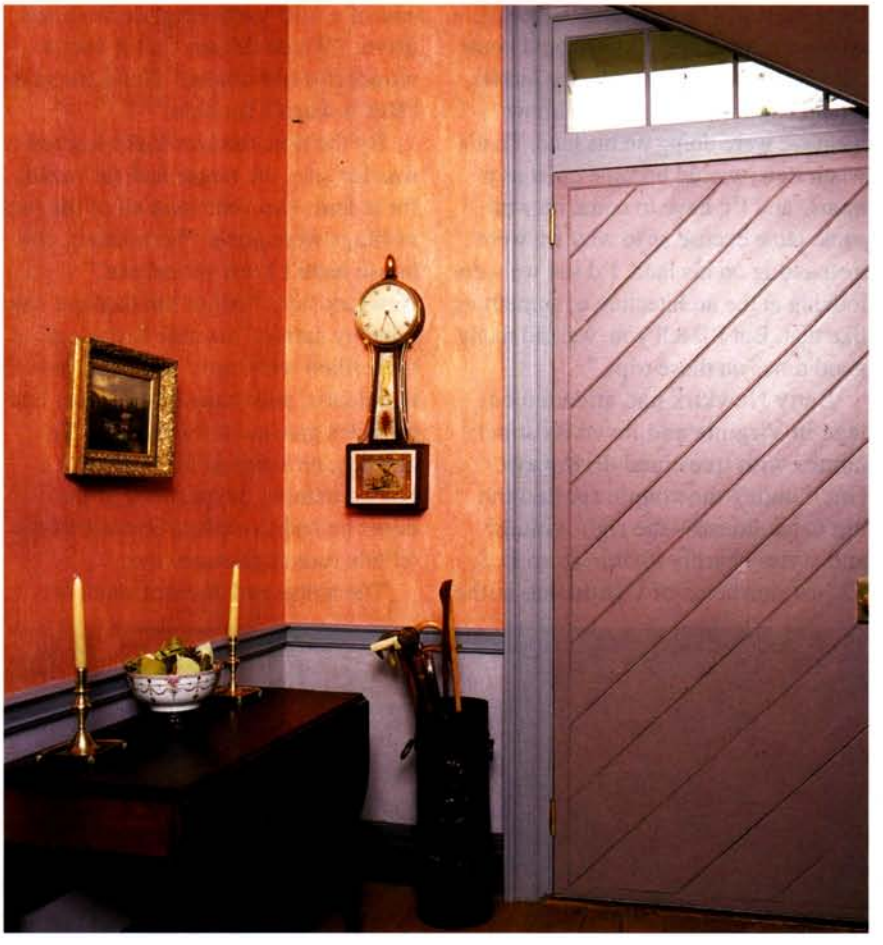
A Pennsylvania native, Desha settled in Kentucky in 1792, distinguishing himself as a farmer and state legislator from Mason County. He fought in the Indian campaigns under Generals Anthony Wayne and Harrison. Under the latter he was promoted to major general during the Battle of the Thames, the same battle Coleman fought in, although no records indicate whether the two were acquainted. Returning to Congress a war hero, Desha chaired the House Committee on Public Expenditures.

Desha's term as governor, 1824 to 1828, became controversial when his son, Issac, was accused of robbing and brutally murdering Francis Baker. Twice found guilty by juries (Judge George "Peg-leg" Shannon, a friend of the governor, set aside the first verdict because of tainted evidence), Isaac attempted suicide. When attending physicians gave Isaac no chance to live, the elder Desha pardoned his son so he would die a free man. When Isaac miraculously recovered, however, Kentucky's citizenry fumed that if a person had good enough connections, he could literally get away with murder.

Legal shenanigans aside, Desha and his family proved good at running what had become a true plantation.

"In the three years following the purchase of the estate, the Deshas turned what was a successful farmstead under Coleman control into a flourishing plantation operated by twenty-seven slaves," notes the National Register document. The governor groomed his eldest son, Lucius Junius Brutus Desha, to run the farm, turning it over to him in 1839.

"What began as a typical settlement farm matured into a prosperous plantation by the middle of the antebellum period," the National Register document continues. "Although never reaching planter status themselves, the Colemans obviously had ample means matched by



This "Indian door" at the rear of the central hallway, like the front door, is reinforced with heavy diagonal woodwork to strengthen it against tomahawks and arrows. Kentucky settlers had frequent confrontations with Native Americans around the time James Coleman built his house. Near the door is a New England gate-leg table and rare Simon Willard banjo clock.

OPPOSITE:
The large central hallway spanning the house is a Georgian feature. Woodwork paint throughout the house is custom-blended to match original colors determined through detailed paint analysis. Next to the front door stands a cherry tallcase Luman Watson clock from the early 1800s. The mahogany Chippendale chest is English.

aspirations to create the environment that could serve wealthy planters of the status of Joseph and Lucius Desha."

Desha named his plantation The Oaks, derived from the original family name, Des Chenes, meaning "of the oaks" in French. Under Lucius Desha's supervision, it prospered. Starting with 300 acres, he expanded it to 1,050 acres farmed by thirty-three slaves. He grew substantial crops—hay, hemp, wheat, rye, corn, oats, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and peas—and raised cattle, hogs, horses, mules, oxen, and sheep.

By 1860, based on numbers of acres, slaves, and agricultural output, The Oaks ranked in the top one percent of Kentucky landholdings.

With the coming of the Civil War, Union and Confederate troops alternately occupied Cynthiana, and its citizenry was deeply divided. The Deshas supported the South, with Lucius's sons Joseph and Ben serving as officers in the Confederate army. Both were seriously wounded, and The Oaks narrowly escaped damage during the war. (Joseph also participated in the last recorded duel in Kentucky.)

The end of slavery meant that Lucius Desha had to pay farmhands and domestic workers to run The Oaks. Even so, he managed to expand the farm to 2,000 acres by 1880, when he signed over the property to a daughter, Frances, who had married Hugh Cornelius Duffy, a judge and former speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives. The Duffys had a son, Frank, and five daughters, Eliza, Cornelia, Margaret, Lucia, and Eleanor. Eventually, these five spinster sisters took over The Oaks.

Many older Cynthiana residents still remember the enterprising Duffy sisters with considerable respect and fondness. For years, one taught Latin in Cynthiana, another traveled to Covington to teach, one ran the Red Cross in town, and another clerked in the county courthouse (although memories are fuzzy as to which sister did what). They rose early, milked the dozen cows and gathered eggs, selling fresh milk and eggs in town. They made cheese and salt-rising bread, attracting buyers from miles around.

Over the years, the Duffy sisters' health worsened and the house and farm became a burden, slipping into serious disrepair. By 1987, the home's belongings were auctioned off to raise enough money for the remaining sisters to go to nursing homes. The land was subdivided and sold, and the house sat vacant until the Newkirks learned it was for sale.

WEEKEND PROSPECTORS

Wes and Betty Newkirk lived in Hamilton, Ohio, where they raised two daughters while looking for just the right house. The hunt became an important part of the girls' childhood. "I remember every week after Sunday school, we'd spend the day driving all around while Mom and Dad looked for houses," says daughter Susan Wright. "I think that's why today I still love to just get in the car and drive."

Her father remembers the long search in more detail. "We'd spend every Sunday driving through southern Ohio, southern Indiana, and northern Kentucky," he says. "Betty was very inquisitive. She'd have me drive down

these narrow, winding roads to see what was at the end. Dogs would come out barking and sometimes the farmer would come out and want to know what we were doing on his land. That's when Betty would become quiet as a mouse and I'd have to come up with some lame excuse as to why we were trespassing on his land. I'd say we were looking at the architecture or something like that. But I'll tell you, we had many good times on those trips."

Betty Newkirk had attended college in Virginia and loved its stately homes with tree-lined driveways. One Sunday the couple spotted the big brick house—the right vintage and style—barely visible from U.S. 62 just northeast of Cynthiana, at the end of a 100-yard-long, cedar-lined drive. "We could see that it was a wonderful old house," Newkirk says. "But it wasn't for sale."

By the time the Newkirks learned it *was* for sale, the house had sat vacant for at least two years and all of the furnishings were gone. "Fortunately, the house hadn't been vandalized," Newkirk says. "All of the damage was done by nature." Its nine fireplaces were filled with birds' nests and animal debris, and many of the doors had rat holes gnawed through them. To this day, he keeps in his basement a box containing the portions of the doors he had to replace because of the telltale rodent passageways.

The house had an assortment of

The keeping room originally was a brick kitchen, detached from the main house by a dogtrot until the late 1800s when the breezeway was bricked in. The cooking fireplace and large hearthstones are all original to the old kitchen. The two-piece poplar cupboard is likely 19th century and has its original blue paint. Wallace Nutting made the banister-back chair in the early 20th century.

A rare architectural aspect of the house is two sets of 12-over-12 windows in an interior wall separating the living room from the library. The panes are wood, but the windows could be opened to allow cooling air to circulate from the exterior windows, directly through the house. The wing chair in the foreground is a 1780 Massachusetts piece. The room's walls display the subtle panoramic mural painted by Kris Lemmon. She and Elizabeth Newkirk designed it using colors identical to specks of original distemper paint found there.

other problems typical of old neglected buildings. The foundation, brickwork, roof, plumbing, electricity, heating, water supply, walls, ceilings, floors—everything—needed work. "For years, we commuted back and forth from Hamilton to here, and for several more years I lived part-time in a local motel. We spent every spare moment working on the house," Newkirk says.

The entire family helped. Daughter Susan and family came in from Pennsylvania and daughter Nancie Loppnow and family came in from Michigan for extended weekends and vacations. In September 1988, the Newkirks held an open house for their friends from Hamilton and Cincinnati to show what they had been up to. The family recalls that even during the open house, some ceiling plaster tumbled onto the guests.

"Dad was staying at the motel and Mom would work with him during the week, driving down from Hamilton herself as long as she was able," Wright recalls. "Dad would go home to Mom on the weekends until she died. They

A slant-top desk of burled cherry stands in the large central hallway upstairs. The ladder-back chair with double-bearing arms is maple with a split-hickory seat. It is identical to a 1730 Connecticut chair photographed by Wallace Nutting, although the Newkirks found this one many years ago at an Ohio estate sale. In need of repair, the chair cost them six dollars. Barb Gallagher of The Weavers Loft hand-wove the vibrant Venetian carpet based on a scrap of old hand-dyed fabric the Newkirks discovered stuffed in a basement cranny.

really led a double life—attending the symphony as well as fulfilling all their volunteer obligations in Ohio on the weekends, then focusing on the Kentucky restoration during the week."

At times the restoration was agonizing, with so much infrastructure work—strengthening the foundation, installing and updating the structure's plumbing and electricity, getting modern heating and cooling systems installed—to be done before the decorative work could even begin.

"This house wasn't the type of project where you had a set of plans you could hand to someone and say, 'Do this.' Instead, you'd get one part of it finished, then figure out what had to be done next," Loppnow says. "It was incremental, finishing one part and then moving on. And some parts literally took years to complete."

Betty Newkirk had final say on every aspect of the restoration. "Betty was meticulous about laying out plans for everything," her husband says. "She determined precisely the fabrics, the colors, and where every piece of furniture would go. She spent many, many hours determining how everything would go together."

The Newkirks shipped many samples of woodwork from throughout the house to the country's leading paint analysts, relying on the expertise of Frank S. Welsh of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and Matthew J. Mosca of Baltimore to determine original colors, which then were custom blended for the restoration.

Interior designer Susan Vaaler Myers of Hamilton, Ohio, longtime friend of the Newkirks, based the decoration on Betty's research. "Betty knew very much what she wanted, what she liked. She would tell me what to get, and I would find it. She was very knowledgeable on what the house needed." Myers also sees an unsung hero in the restoration. "Wes

The dining room features vivid, period-true wallpaper and woodwork matching the earliest color identified for the room. At left is a rare, kidney-shaped Hepplewhite sideboard, of inlaid mahogany, made in Maryland in 1790. The dining chairs are reproduction Chippendale. The convex, gold-leaf girandole mirror above the sideboard is an American piece from the late 1700s. The photo below shows the room's centerpiece, a three-part English banquet table, c. 1785. The mahogany serving table between the windows is a 1785 Charleston piece in late Chippendale style.

A late 1700s English fortepiano in superb condition holds a place of honor in the ballroom, as one might have in the home's earliest days. The mandolin belonged to Elizabeth Newkirk's father.

did so much," she says. "He was there every step of the way, doing whatever needed to be done. He's an amazing person, and so patient."

Eventually, the hours of paint removal and other back-breaking chores took their toll on Betty. Her health began to worsen until she could no longer make the trips to Cynthiana. But that didn't stop her.

"There came a time when Mother did basically all of it in her head," Loppnow says. "She would be in Hamilton with her books and her magazines and her samples, drawing up plans. She continued to be very engaged in every aspect of it. She just never got a chance to see it finished."

The work continued despite her absence. "There was a period, and actually it was a nice period for us," Newkirk says, "when I would give her reports on what was happening. I'd tell her the furnace was finally

installed, that the plumbing was fixed, and she would just visualize how the house was progressing. We had a lot of nice times just talking about the work on the house and how it was coming together."

In December 2002, seven months after Betty Newkirk died, the family celebrated its first Christmas in the Coleman-Desha House, although it had no furniture and things still needed to be done.

"We always celebrate Christmas as a family and we all wanted to celebrate this one in the house to honor Mother," Loppnow recalls. "We knew it wouldn't be perfect—not the way Mother would have done it—but we could feel her spirit there with us in the house, and it was wonderful." ★

Gregory LeFever is a freelance writer of historical topics, currently living in Lynchburg, Ohio.

The second-floor master bedroom displays stenciling carefully replicated from the original design and colors. Kate Smith of Eaton Hill Textile Works wove the fabric for the worsted wool hangings, patterned after those on a bed at Winterthur Museum. They cover a 1750 mahogany Chippendale bed.

The ballroom encompassing half the second floor was the largest room for miles around when James Coleman built his house in 1812; it likely served as a site for civic meetings. During the 1800s the ballroom was partitioned into two rooms, the rear one remaining virtually unused, allowing the distinctive stenciling to survive. Today the room is regarded as a premier showcase of early-19th-century American stenciling.

Archaeology and Artistry

One part of the Coleman-Desha House had been neglected for more than a hundred years, resulting in a spectacular discovery—rare, untouched stenciling that covered the walls.

No one knows the name of the stenciler who adorned the walls with brightly colored, whimsical patterns that had never before been documented. Only some playful initials are dabbed on an attic wall, along with splotches of paint where the artist tested colors. The experts' best guess is that the stenciler—probably an itinerant painter who spent weeks, if not months, creating the rich floral and bird motifs—drew on similar patterns found in New York State.

As first built, half the second floor served as a ballroom. Sometime in the nineteenth century, a partition was constructed that subdivided the ballroom into two rooms, front and back. Through the years, owners redecorated the walls of the more heavily used front room with whitewash and layers

of wallpaper. But no one touched the walls in the rear room, leaving the stenciling exposed.

When the Newkirks discovered the stenciling, they knew it was critical to preserve and restore it, a task they entrusted to Kris Lemmon, a skilled decorative artist who is also proficient in paint microanalysis and replication.

"It was incredible," recalls Lemmon, who travels extensively to decorate historic homes, churches, and other buildings. "The stencils were intact, but the background had deteriorated. The paint had broken down and was heavily infiltrated with dirt. Eighty percent of the wall color was gone."

Her job was to determine the original hues of the paints and to restore the stenciled patterns and wall colors. Meanwhile, restoration efforts elsewhere in the house revealed even more of the unknown stenciler's creations. The second-floor hallway had once been decorated with stenciling, as had the larger of two upstairs bedrooms. Then specks of the same type of distemper paint used upstairs were found in the first-floor living room.

Lemmon's assignment expanded

The meticulously restored stenciling in the second-floor hallway and ballroom have distinctly different patterns, though each makes use of whimsical tree, floral, and bird motifs. Though the stencil artist remains unknown, decorative historians believe the Coleman-Desha artwork was influenced by early 1800s stenciling found in New York State.

accordingly. "I bivouacked in the house," says the artist, who resides in Cincinnati. "I worked on it over the course of four years. I'd spend a few months on one aspect of it, then come back a few months later when we were ready to work on another part."

To restore the ballroom stenciling, Lemmon used a consolidant that creates an intergranular bond to strengthen each part of the individual surviving stenciled decoration, essentially rebuilding the paint. Then she applied a rubber frisket, or mask, over each stenciled design to protect it, enabling her to clean, repair, and repaint the background wall. Finally, she could remove the frisket.

Because whitewash and wallpaper had obliterated the front half of the ballroom, "there wasn't enough to save, so we recorded the precise placement of each stencil, then did a total replication of the original design," Lemmon explains. Likewise, the upstairs hall and bedroom had only enough of the original artwork to determine what the walls originally looked like, but not enough to salvage. Lemmon used a combination of stenciling, spongework, and freehand painting to bring the original designs back to life.

The downstairs living room was more of a mystery. Specks of distemper paint indicated original color, but no designs survived. Betty Newkirk had wanted a mural somewhere in the house, so the living room became the place. Lemmon based her beautiful, subtle, panoramic mural on the room's original colors. She presented several object designs—trees, birds, hills, clouds, and the like—for Newkirk's approval. "I referenced Rufus Porter big time," Lemmon says, "but it was only a reference because he used a much bolder palette. To maintain the integrity, I used soft glazes and layer after layer of thin washes to create the softer, aged appearance."

Along the attic stairway and an attic wall, where the unknown stenciler had tested colors and a few designs, he also dabbed three letters—BRP or BBP, perhaps his initials?—in mirror-style reverse on the wall. Lemmon had never found such a personal artifact of an early artist. "It was amazing to see," she recalls. "It's living history. You

Stenciling in the rear of the ballroom was astoundingly intact when the Newkirks discovered it, though it was heavily infiltrated with dirt. The photo above shows a section of wall near the mantel, which was removed to rebuild the fireplace. Restoration artist Kris Lemmon determined the original hues and rebuilt the stenciled patterns and background, carrying the design to the damaged front of the ballroom, where it was hidden beneath whitewash and wallpaper. The photo opposite shows the fully restored stenciling in the area above the same fireplace. Photograph above courtesy of Wes Newkirk.

think of stencilers as these itinerant artists—who knows how long that person stayed in the house to complete the work?—and here was this more personal sign. It was quite a find."

Although the restored stenciling has achieved acclaim among some of America's most noted decorative historians—it is featured in *American Wall Stenciling 1790-1840*, by Ann Eckert Brown (University of New England Press, 2003)—Lemmon credits Betty Newkirk and her insistence on the labor-intensive, accurate preservation and replication of the original wall designs.

"I've had clients who are in such a hurry to just get the job done. But it's a certain type of person who will go to the extent that the Newkirks have, and when that happens, it's absolutely rewarding," the artist says. "Betty was so wonderful to work with, very energetic and completely dedicated to doing this thing right. She was deeply involved in every aspect of the project. She scrutinized and selected each individual color and finish, and the result is a fabulous, fabulous restoration." ★

The Newkirks were surprised to discover a woman's shoe, dating to the early 1800s, under an attic floorboard. Historians believe it is the home's "concealment shoe." The English tradition of intentionally hiding a worn shoe somewhere in a house's substructure dates to medieval times and was intended to provide a talisman against evil entering the home.

SOURCES

PAINT RESEARCH
MATTHEW MOSCA
216 East University Parkway
Baltimore, MD 21218
410-466-5325
e-mail: mjmosca@charm.net

FRANK S. WELSH
WELSH COLOR & CONSERVATION, INC.
P.O. Box 767
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
610-525-3564
www.welshcolor.com

STENCILING
KRIS LEMMON
DECO WORKS
Cincinnati, OH
513-349-9507

INTERIOR DESIGN
SUSAN VAALER MYERS
SALTBOX INTERIOR DESIGN
Hamilton, OH 45011
513-896-9399

CUSTOM WEAVING
BARB GALLAGHER
THE WEAVERS LOFT
24647 Zimmer Road
Guilford, IN 47022
812-576-3904
www.weaversloft.com

KATE SMITH
EATON HILL TEXTILE WORKS
334 Jake Morton Road
Marshfield, VT 05658
802-426-3733

FABRICS & WALLCOVERINGS
SCALAMANDRÉ
300 Trade Zone Drive
Ronkonkoma, NY 11779
631-467-8800 or 800-932-4361
www.scalamandre.com

BRUNSCHWIG & FILS, INC.
75 Virginia Road
North White Plains, NY 10603
914-684-5800
www.brunschwig.com

F. SCHUMACHER & COMPANY
79 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016
www.fschumacher.com