



Victorian revival at the Heritage Square Museum

BY Denise Reich

Tust outside the Perry House, an austere white Italianate structure dubbed Mount Pleasant by its original owners, there is a small sign in the grass. It reads, in part: This Place Matters. Those words succinctly state the credo of the Heritage Square Museum near the Arroyo Seco. The octet of Victorian structures that make up the museum's collection matter greatly.

One of the reasons they matter so much, and are so carefully guarded, is starkly illustrated by an unassuming glass showcase on the ground floor of the Longfellow-Hastings House. At first glance, the case's contents are unremarkable. There are some black and white photographs. There's a bit of a wooden staircase banister, still partially painted white.

There's a tile that is remarkably bright. The bits of rubble are the only extant pieces of the Salt Box and the Castle, two lost Victorian mansions from Bunker Hill.

The Salt Box and the Castle, both Los Angeles Cultural-Historic landmarks, were meant to be the very first houses preserved at the Heritage Square Museum. In fact, the museum was founded in 1969 with the specific goal of saving them from the razing of Bunker Hill. The structures were successfully relocated to the parcel of land that had been set aside for the purpose, but they were destroyed by fire less than a year later.

While the two Bunker Hill houses were not saved, the dream of preserving some of Los Angeles' other decaying Victorian houses endured. During the 1970s and 1980s, the museum acquired additional structures from



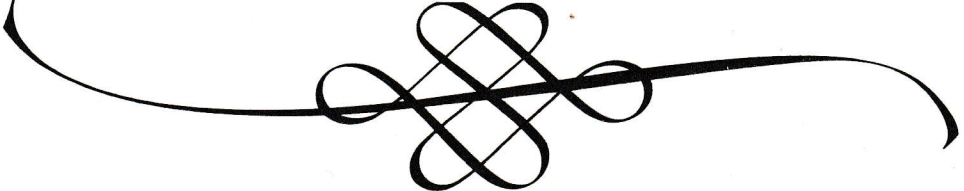
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various parts of LA and Pasadena. Some, such as the Hale and Longfellow-Hastings houses, were donated by family members. Others, such as the Palms Depot, one of Los Angeles' old railway stations, came to the museum after campaigns were mounted to save them from demolition. Transporting the fragile structures to the museum grounds was a complex operation that sometimes involved temporarily removing roofs or splitting the buildings into manageable pieces; the work was usually carried out at night.

Some of the structures are immediately intriguing. The rooms of the octagonal Longfellow-Hastings House jut out from the center like spokes on a wheel, and a skylight and open atrium at the radius provide light and remarkably good ventilation. With others, a closer look

is necessary. The Ford House, for instance, looks to be an unremarkable middle-class 19th century home, until one notices the elaborate wood carving that decorates both the interior and exterior. The work was done by the house's original owner, John Ford, a talented artisan whose work appeared in the Iolani Palace in Hawai'i.

The homes are also in various stages of restoration. The Perry house, Mount Pleasant, is immaculate; it is used for filming so frequently that the staff keeps the furnishings on the ground floor to a minimum to avoid having to constantly move them out of the way. The Hale house, a delicious explosion of Victorian turrets and colored glass, is so lavishly decorated that it is overwhelming. At the other end of the spectrum is the Ford House, again, where the walls are bare, the floors are



creaky and the balustrade has not yet been reattached to the staircase. A raw brick gash on the wall reveals the place where the living room was divided in half to form two studio apartments. Renovating the houses requires both sensitivity to original materials and design and adherence to modern building codes. It also, understandably, requires a great deal of capital, and the budget is tight.

Budget constraints notwithstanding, the museum makes strenuous efforts to present a complete living history experience for visitors. The houses sit in a dignified row, surrounded by trees, much as they might have done in 1900. Chickens roam the grounds. The Palms Depot hosts the museum's gift shop, a bookstore with a variety of fascinating selections on local history, and the admissions desk. Costumed interpreters, decked out in outfits ranging from turn-of-the-century swimming trunks to servants' uniforms to affluent Victorian attire, conduct tours of the property.

Over the course of the year, Heritage Square hosts a variety of special events that allow visitors to delve deeply into Victorian culture, including classic car shows, period fashion galas, and Halloween-season explorations of mourning practices and traditions, complete with mock funerals and demonstrations of spirit photography. This season, volunteers are interpreting clothing and characters from several pieces of classic literature. School children who visit the museum are shown how to do laundry by hand, the way their great-great-grandparents might have done, and they take to their washboards with glee. The museum's executive director, Jessica Maria Alicea-Covarrubias, stresses the importance of recognizing all the social strata of Victorian society. As she stands in the kitchen of the Hale House, she asks visitors to imagine how it would feel to be cooped up in the small, poorly ventilated space, working over a hot stove for hours on end, as a Victorian servant might have done.

The museum is buoyed by a strong outpouring of support from the Los Angeles community. Day to day operations are supported by a team of nearly 90 enthusiastic volunteers who dedicate their time and talent for everything from furniture restoration to Web design. Individuals who are related to the houses' former inhabitants have donated stories, documents, photographs and furniture from their relatives. The contributions are not one-sided: the museum is currently hosting an educational program for returning veterans, who are learning restoration and construction skills.

What is most apparent, however, is that the houses at the Heritage Square Museum are loved. As she walks around the grounds, director Alicea-Covarrubias speaks proudly of the museum's projects. In the Perry House, she explains the scandal that sent the proper Mr. Perry to Italy to retrieve a wayward, rebellious daughter who had dared to pursue a singing career. Over at the Hale House, Alicea-Covarrubias gestures toward the ceiling in the formal dining room and points out the wallpaper. It is speckled with gold constellations, and looks as though it were designed in the 1950s or 60s. It's actually authentic to the Victorian era, and was placed in the dining room so that the family could eat under the stars.

These places do matter, the people who inhabited them matter, and Alicea-Covarrubias and her staff are dedicated to protecting them. "Architecture for me--when I give tours, especially--is the cover of a great novel. You're literally opening the book to incredibly strong, in depth...intricately woven stories of these people." ❶

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The Heritage Square Museum is located at 3800 Homer Street. Tel: (323) 225 - 2700. www.heritagesquare.org.