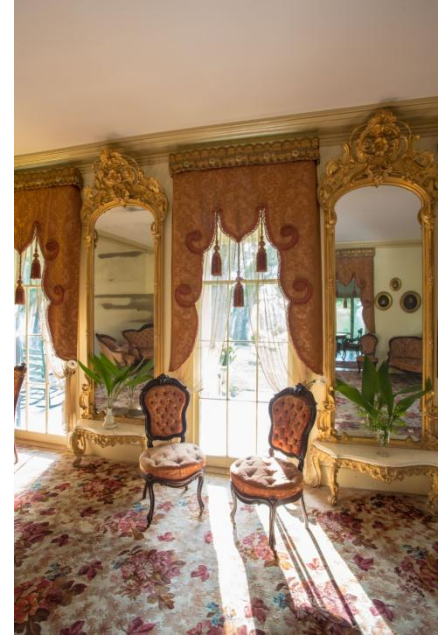


Louisiana Parlor | Louisiana Life

OVERVIEW

The exhibition *Louisiana Parlor: Antebellum Taste & Context* on view at the New Orleans Museum of Art from June 26 – October 14, 2015 offers the opportunity to glimpse the lives of the nineteenth century inhabitants of Greenwood Plantation in West Feliciana Parish, LA. Harriet Flower Mathews, the daughter of the founder of the property and matriarch of six generations who called the plantation home, redesigned the parlor in the 1850's, completing her order to a northern furniture retailer just one day before Louisiana seceded from the United States. The completed parlor was exquisitely maintained by Harriet's descendants and is complimented by Mathews family records preserved in the Louisiana State University library.

The material objects include upholstered seating furniture, étagère cabinet, silk lambrequin curtains, gilt pier mirrors, and wall-to-wall carpet. When considered in conjunction with U.S. Census records, family letters, invoices, and receipts the parlor invites inquiry into themes of nineteenth century life.



Parlor at Butler Greenwood Plantation, August 2014. Images courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Photo by Roman Alokhin.

DISCUSS

- Why do you think the Mathews family preserved the parlor intact over 150 years?
- What is the role of an art museum in preserving the elements of an historic room?
- What is the significance of the Rococo Revival style for a Louisiana plantation?
- What can we learn about life on a plantation by looking at census records?
- How do the Mathews family documents add to our knowledge of their life?
- What were the costs involved in assembling the parlor?
- How do those costs compare to other expenses on the plantation?
- What were the roles of women in the Mathews family?
- How did the Civil War affect life on Greenwood plantation?
- How did the Civil War affect business relations between northern merchants and southern customers?
- How were the Mathews family finances affected by the war?
- What changes came to the plantation during reconstruction?

ENGAGE

Write

Use the primary sources from the Mathews family documents to write a parlor play that tells the story of each element of the room. Create groups or pairs of students and give each group a set of 3 – 6 documents -- (Ex. 1850 census records, Mathews family account from Hebrard & Co. Louisiana Steam Manufacturing, and receipt from I. Meyer & Hofman showing purchase of carpet). Ask students to work together to see what narrative they can develop. Link the short plays together to tell the story of the parlor and plantation.

Family records include only documents received by the family, and does not include their responses. Write a letter from Greenwood Plantation. What is your role at the plantation?

Write a 5-W (Who, What, When, Where, Why) poem from the Butler-Greenwood Parlor.

Write a story that takes place in the parlor. Is it satire? A ghost story? A romance?

Research

What do we learn from the family documents about lives of freedmen at Greenwood in the years immediately after the war? Examine contracts or similar documents from other southern plantations. In the aftermath of the Civil War, how did plantation owners respond to the call for employing formerly enslaved workers? How did Harriet Flower Mathews respond?

Look into your own family history. Is there a decorative object such as a vase, piece of furniture, tapestry, or pottery that has been maintained over many years by family members? Research the origin of the object and why it is special to your family. Give a report in the style of “Antiques Roadshow.”

Debate

Did the working conditions of freedmen change much after the Civil War? Why or why not? Use the Mathews family documents to make your case.

File a fictional lawsuit against Harriet Flower Mathews for neglecting to pay her furniture bill. Assume the roles of defense attorney and prosecution. Use the primary sources as evidence.

Compare

Compare census records from 1860 and 1870. What is different in the documents themselves? What change can be detected in the Mathews family?

Look at examples of Rococo furniture and design and Rococo Revival. What similarities does the revival style have to the original? How are they different?