

Docent Notes

Brief Family History

More information is on the website, but briefly William T. Wells and his wife Nora Stanford Wells were reasonably well placed in New York state society. William was a successful engineer and businessman and his brother was a respected professor. Nora was the daughter of a State senator and niece of Leland Stanford. By the time they came to Melbourne they had three children, Prescott, Stanford, and Gladys. You will note that on the second floor there are four bedrooms, presumably allocated to Father and Mother, Prescott, Stanford, and Gladys. We don't know much about their life in Melbourne. The early photos show a man and a woman watering trees in the barren ground around the house when it was newly built. Later photos show the trees in fruit, two beautiful horses, family members with strings of fish, a party in a horse cart evidently going on a hunting trip.

Oral history and news articles from the paper talk about the family entertaining at the Carlton hotel. Green Gables would not have provided much accommodation for guests. The dining room and kitchen are both small. But the Carlton would provide comfortable sleeping rooms, dining facilities, and a lobby in which to entertain. Oral history says that Wells constructed the present day Riverview Avenue so he and his family could drive his two horse carriage to the Carlton in style (sadly we have no photographs of whatever vehicle he drove). Remember that by 1896 there were already several houses along the bluff, but the houses all faced the river on which all the traffic flowed. Harry Goode, Sr., in his book Pineapples are Never Black or White, talked about traveling with the Wells boys in one of their launches.

Browse through the historic photos, look at the floor plans, visit the web site, and by all means ask questions. John Daly loves to talk about Green Gables.



The House

First Floor

Porch and Octagon

The original porch was wooden rather than concrete. We have no date for when the change to concrete was made. The Octagon was added soon after the house was built, and is a wonderful place to sit and enjoy the river breeze. The roll up wooden shutters were added soon after the turn of the century and provide shelter in storms or when the river breeze gets cool.

Reception Room

Visitors would be received in this room. Note the wooden fretwork which family oral history says was acquired on a trip to India. Note also the stenciling revealed when the mirror above the fireplace was removed.

Parlor

Moving to the left (west) from the Reception Room is a room that would be called a formal parlor on home plans of the period. We have no data on the use of this room during the historic period. Stanford Wells used this as an office until his wife's mother came to live with them, at which time it became her bedroom. The bay window was added about 1900, four years after construction.

Sitting Room

Moving forward (north) from the Reception Room is a room that would likely have been a family sitting room in the historic period. It has windows that look over the river and a connection with the original dining room. Notice the beam running across the ceiling (north-south). From early photos we are certain that the room ended at this beam and that the fireplace was set at a diagonal similar to the fireplace in the Reception Room. We do not have a date at which the room was expanded, although the metal lathing in the plaster suggests that it was several decades after construction. The large picture window was added when the room was expanded.

Dining Room

Moving west from the Sitting Room is the original dining room. The door in the north wall leads into the kitchen through an area that could serve as a pantry. This is a very common configuration for houses of the period. The area is not really set up as a pantry, and it's not clear that it was in fact used for that purpose. In later years this room became Stanford Wells's office and the family used a newly constructed room on the north side of the kitchen (originally intended to be an apartment for Stanford Wells mother-in-law) as the dining room.

Breezeway

Moving back into the Sitting Room and then north is a passage between the main house and the kitchen. It was common in the south to have the kitchen separated from the main house to reduce the heat in the main house and perhaps minimize cooking odors as well. Usually it was inconvenient to have the separation be large enough for protection from fire, the purpose was simply to avoid heat and cooking odors. Although we use the term "breezeway" the area has been closed off for years as you see it now. Notice the decorated glass in the door to the east, and the small bathroom.

Electrical System

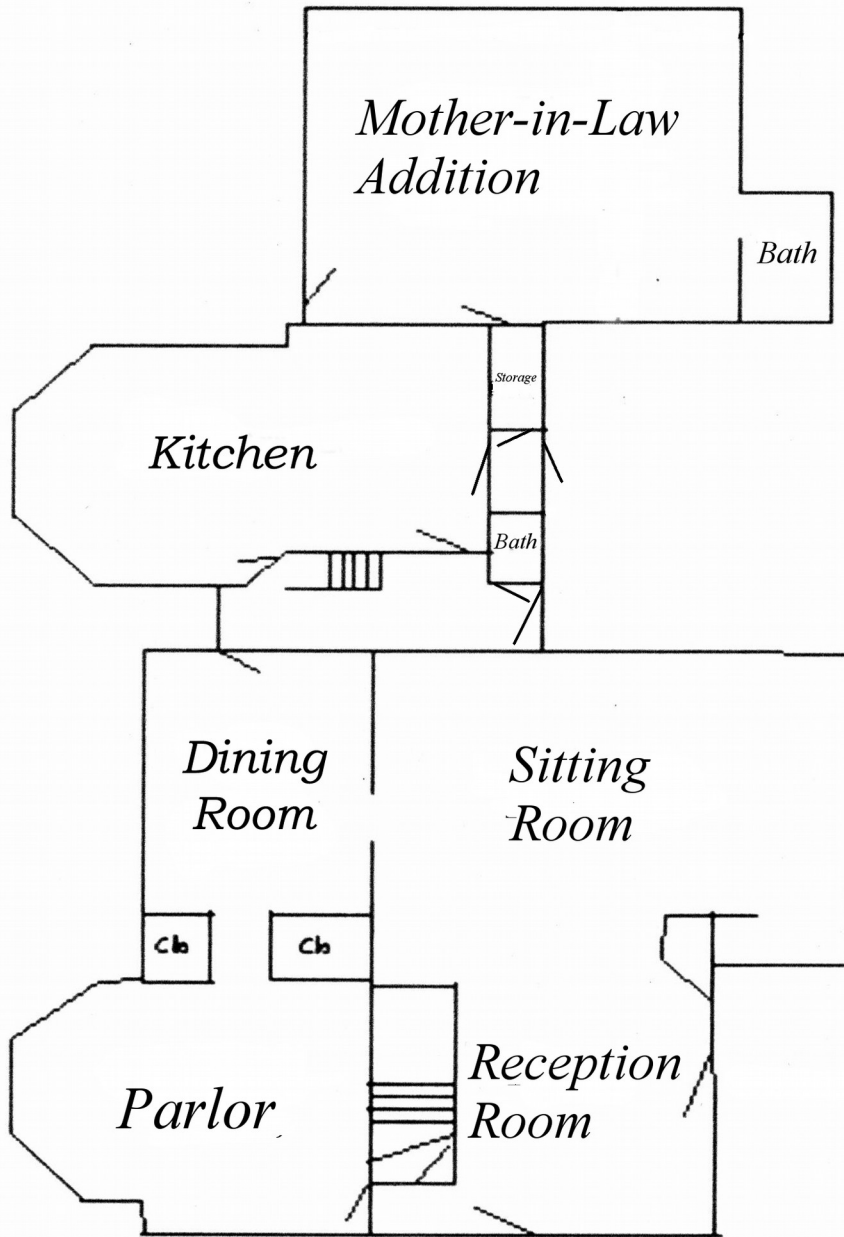
Early electrical wiring is visible in the breezeway. This is a beautifully crafted knob and tube wiring system. The fuse box is located in the breezeway on the second floor. There is oral history that the house was wired for electricity when it was built. There is no documented proof of this, and the equipment that we see now dates from about 1915. However, Wells was an engineer from New York/New Jersey and would certainly have been aware of residential electrical systems. In 1896 such systems were generally powered by stand-alone electrical plants as there were only a few central generating stations. In the north these were generally powered by small steam engines, and the family would employ a servant to act as engineer to run the system when required. Oral history here holds that Wells used a generator powered by a turbine at the head of a strong artesian well. There was a fountain to the east of the house that could have been supplied by the exhaust of the turbine and then drained to the Indian River.

Kitchen

The kitchen area was enlarged about 1898 with an addition to the west. The beam across the ceiling marks the original area. The door on the south wall goes through the pantry area into the dining room. There is also access to the outside here. On the north wall is an access door (now blocked by an addition). Family oral history is that this door was used for delivery of ice into the ice box which would have stood by the door. As a practical matter, this door could also have been used for wood for the cook stove. The pipe for the stove is visible in the ceiling at the west end.

Addition

About mid-century a mother-law suite was added for Pearl Wells's mother. It is a well appointed apartment with a small bathroom and easy access to the kitchen. However, the mother preferred a bedroom in the main house and this became the family dining room.



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Second Floor

Floor Plan

The rooms in the second floor plan were named by one of our members with imagination and flair.

Stairway

The front stairway at Green Gables is not pretentious. The daughter of the family never glided graciously down this staircase in a hooped skirt. Nonetheless, when the second floor is open climb the staircase from the Reception Room.

Hallway

There is a single hallway providing access to all the second floor rooms. To the right (east) it leads to the large bedroom with the turret . At the east end of the hallway is the flue for the fireplaces downstairs and to the left of that a door leading onto the second story porch. Notice how the north wall is at a diagonal.

Riverside Room

The Riverside Room is aptly named with its delightful view of the Indian River. The turret is built out over the porch. Wells had this turret added after the house was built. Notice the lines in the floor showing the extent of the original room. Notice also the stenciling along the wall near the ceiling on the east wall. The original plaster is exposed here showing the wooden lathing and bits of the horsehair originally embedded in the plaster to give it body.

Gardenside Room

Of course there will be a garden on this side. Look carefully and you will see that the bay window here is a later addition. From this room look at the doors in the south wall. At some point, perhaps these are the extensive renovations that the local paper describes being made to the house in 1910. Look at the early photographs and you will see that originally there was a door leading (probably from the Riverside Room) onto a second story porch. Convenience and comfort eventually trumped style and a bathroom and sleeping porch were added on the porch. Green Gables is surprisingly comfortable even in summer when there is a nice breeze blowing from the river. But no doubt there were nights when the Gardenside Room, at least, could become uncomfortably warm. The sleeping porch would provide a place to sleep with a bit more air circulation. Sleeping porches were a very common feature of southern houses, although today most have been converted to rooms.

Hallway

Walk back through the hallway and look up. Behind the louvers in the ceiling is a whole house cooling fan. These were another feature of southern homes once electricity became available. The goal was to have a fan that could move enough cubic feet of air per minute to replace the air in the house every few minutes. Doing so would quickly cool the house with that cooling breeze off the Indian River. At the

very least it would bring in fresh air and provide a breeze through the house.

Study

The Study was surely used as just another bedroom. Notice that it has no closet, but an original wardroom is still in the room.

Chamber

The Chamber was also used as a bedroom. Notice that this room and the Gardenside Room have closets. Take a look in the closet to see more of the early wiring system.

Back Stairs

Every house of any pretension had to have back stairs, if nothing else than to give the children something to play on. The Wells family did have staff and the back stairs would have provided convenient access for cleaning.

Bath

It isn't much to look at now. The claw foot bathtub is gone, but you can well imagine William T. Wells relaxing in his tub looking through the diamond shaped windows at the Indian River and congratulating himself on having one of the very few bathtubs in the area. The artesian well would have had no trouble driving water to the second floor. One problem in the 1890's would be heating the water, and we have no oral history to guide us here. Early photos show a stove pipe for a wood stove, and wood stoves could in fact be obtained with heating coils to warm water which would then be stored in a large tank behind the stove. Or maybe staff just heated the water in a pot and brought it up. The current plumbing would have provided hot water from an electric water heater that is located in a closet off the kitchen.

So did they have a flush toilet in 1896? Notice how curiously the room is now divided. There is no oral history to guide us here. Perhaps archeology will provide an answer if we find a privy pit (or perhaps it is now buried under the Reflections parking lot).

Trunk Room

This room has been used to store trunks for as long as anyone in the family can remember. When a family traveled in this period, their traveling possessions were packed in large wooden trunks and shipped to the steamer. We have photographs of William and Nora Wells in Venice and other exotic places. So we know they traveled. Two trunks are still in this room.

Back Hallway

So now consider how the trunks got out of the house. Surely not down either the front or back staircases. Look at wall at the east end of this hallway. Now walk into the Study and look out the window at the eaves just over the end of that hallway. There are the remains of a hook and pulley that presumably were used to hoist the trunks out of the house and back again when the family returned. Also notice the fuse panel for the early electrical system.

