

Green Gables Docent Fact Sheet

Introduction

This is a first draft extracted from the draft Historic Structure Report. The goal is to have a single source of verified information that docents can reference. Initially, John Daly will be the keeper of this document. As all of our docents are knowledgeable, please give John your comments for information that should be included. If possible, include the source. Sometimes we have stories that we've simply heard and that may or may not be true. I'm sure that most of our guests simply enjoy stories and don't want a history lecture with footnotes. But we do owe it to ourselves, our guests, and history to at least differentiate in passing between information that is verifiable, information that seems reasonable, and stories that are just stories.

Overall architecture

As you approach Green Gables, the Octagon Porch and the tower stand out as defining features. As you walk around the west side of the house notice the bay windows on both the first and second floors.

However, Green Gables today is much different than when it was built in 1896 as a vernacular American Four-Square. It was basically a large box with a porch around the front and east sides on both floors. [picture of early Green Gables].

In very short order the family added an extension onto the kitchen and a bay window on the west side. [picture of Green Gables with these added]

And within another few years they added the iconic tower and octagon porch. [picture of Green Gables with these additions].

Sometime later they built an addition onto the second story porch providing a bathroom connected to the front two bedrooms plus a small sewing room. [contemporary photo showing this addition]. [East Coast Advocate Mar. 25, 1910, mentions that Mr. Wells is making extensive improvements]

Baker and Bell were the contractors who built Green Gables in 1896, and Mr. J.T. Hogg was the superintendent on the project. Near and Taylor put down the artesian well, [INDIAN RIVER ADVOCATE SEPT. 4, 1896] . We believe that well is still flowing in the front yard.

The Wells family arrived on October 22, 1896, "Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Wells, with their daughter, Miss Gladys, and two sons, arrived in town from New York last evening. . . .It looks as if they surely meant business by the carload of goods they have brought with them, and the fine new house they had built here this fall." [Indian River Advocate, October 23, 1896]

We have no documentation as to whether there were any architectural drawings for Green Gables. Very often houses in rural areas were built without plans by local builders who “just knew” how to build a house (and Melbourne was unquestionably rural at this time). Oral history says that many of the homes in this period were built by men who worked on the riverboats and built houses when they were between jobs. A good project would be to research Baker and Bell as well as J. T. Hogg to learn more about them [John Hiatt may be a good source]. We know that Near and Taylor were established well drillers who continued in business in the area for many years. [How do we know this...Harry Jones drilled wells in Melbourne talked about Near and Taylor and John Hiatt sent me an invoice from them.] It is possible that the Wells family, as they asked for improvement to Green Gables over the years may have helped develop the building trades in Melbourne.

There is very little original furniture in the house. The dining table in the kitchen was returned by a family member. ~~The wardrobe in the small upstairs bedroom was in the house. The art deco dresser, chest of drawers, and double bed were in the house.~~ A large, much damaged headboard was in the back room. A small bed and a dresser painted white were in the house.

Electrical System

The electrical system is very early and has not been upgraded since at least the 1920's. There is a persistent oral history that the house was wired for electricity when it was built. If so, they must have used a local generating system as there was no electrical utility service until the ice plant was built. [A good project would be to research electrical service in Melbourne and in Florida. I'm sure it has been done, so just link to it. It's interesting how the early system of ice plants also provided electricity to their communities as well as providing a network that allowed produce to be shipped from south florida to the north]. Wells would have been familiar with private generating stations as they were the common mode of providing electricity to the better homes. We have a 1905 advertisement offering the Wells home on Crown Island for sale. This ad states that the property included a power house with electrical equipment. It's easy to imagine that the Wells family would have wanted electricity in their Florida home.

Someone would have to run the generator, but wealthy families would have no problem providing staff for this. At Green Gables there is also a oral history that there was a water turbine attached to the well to provide electricity. Again, entirely feasible as the equipment was available off the shelf and the water could have flowed from the well, through the turbine, out to the fountain, and then overflowed into the lagoon. Family members say “John, you know that didn't happen.” And certainly if it did happen, the local papers would have had articles about the lights at Green Gables, and we haven't found any. On the other hand, we have an eye-witness who states that he stumbled across what appears to have been a water turbine along the bank of the lagoon.

Septic System

Who knows. Many houses of this period would have had a privy. There was even a prejudice in some publications about placing a privy inside. Green Gables is supposed to have had the first bathtub in Melbourne.

Miscellaneous

As you tour, notice the window catches. Notice the picture rail in most rooms. It was typical in the period to hang pictures from this rail rather than directly on the plaster walls. You can see the hooks, some of which are original and some of which have been modeled on the originals. It was common to add a floret or something similar to disguise the hook.

Termites

The house has suffered some termite damage. It was tented as a contribution from Slug-a-Bug in 2014 or 2015????? and the house is now under contract and inspected each year.

Foundation

There is an extensive set of photographs of the foundation of green gables located at [need URL???

Roof

From the attic one can see wood shakes leading to the assumption that the original roof was wood shakes. The present roof is metal. It is unknown when the present roof was installed.

Exterior Paint

The exterior wall paint was yellow based on paint samples taken by John Daly. We have not determined the original trim color. For now we will assume that it was green as it is now. Historic photographs are little help, but yellow and green would produce the gray tones we see in the photographs.

Octagon Porch

Almost certainly the family and any guests would have enjoyed the breeze on the Octagon Porch. Notice the roll-up shutters which protect the porch during stormy weather.

Reception Room

As you walk into Green Gables you enter the Reception Room. Visitors would be received first in this room.

In June of 2014 Green Gables was within days of being demolished. The owners had taken out a demolition permit and the work was set to begin soon. In preparation for the demolition the owners removed the light fixtures, doors and mantels from the building.

They also removed the mirror which had hung above the mantle for over 100 years. When they did so they revealed the stenciling that you see today.

[early photos of this room] [2008 photo survey photo of room with mirror]

Note the wooden fretwork which family oral history says was acquired on a trip to India. [Need citation for the idea it came from India]. This is a delicate design hand carved from a wood that we have yet to identify. [hand visitors the small sample]

The door on the east wall opens onto the porch. It was added later as it does not show on the early photographs. It appears there were originally two windows here.

Notice the steps which turn as you go up.

The floors are oak which has been laid over the original floors at some later date.

Need to identify the wood used in the original floors throughout the house. A guess is that it is local pine from the sawmill, but we need to verify that.

Front Parlor/Wells Office

We refer to this room variously as the Front Parlor, the Formal Parlor, and the Ladies' Parlor. Houses of the period typically had a room that was used primarily to entertain guests. Children would not be permitted to play in the room, Dad would not read his newspaper and smoke his after dinner cigar, Mother would not do her sewing or knitting here. In this period the family might not know that guests were arriving until they rode up on their horse, or tied their boat at the dock. So having a room always kept ready for guests would make sense.

However, we now know that this room was originally used as an office for William T. Wells. We have an inventory dated 1930 showing that this room contained (among many other items) a roll-top desk, an iron safe (in the closet), and a surveying instrument. So it is safe to assume that it was an office for Mr. Wells who is the only one known to have used surveying instruments.

The bay window was added later, the room originally ended at this wall.

An interesting feature in this room is the electrical socket on the wall by the door to the dining room. Today we have settled on a standard plug for electrical gadgets. Early electrical systems were intended solely for lighting and the only connection points were screw sockets designed for Edison screw socket bulbs. When the first appliances such as irons and fans became available they came with a screw in connection and that's what would have been connected here.

The front parlor has original pine floors. The original plaster ceiling was damaged during the 2004 hurricane and has been replaced with dry wall.

Notice that the picture rail in this room is a different design from other rooms in the house.

As we move into the dining room, notice the ornate hinges and lock plates.

A good project would be to research early Melbourne telephone systems. We know Melbourne had a phone system fairly early, and the library has many early phone books. It would be interesting to see if there was a telephone at Green Gables.

Dining Room

Notice that several feet are taken out of the dining room and front parlor by closets on either side of the doorway. These seem unusual. Were they added later? If so it was well done.

Notice in the dining room that there is a stencil under the current coats of paint. That would indicate that that wall is original to the house.

The dining room is relatively small. The Wells family frequently entertained visitors from out of the area [these visits are documented in numerous entries in local papers]. But they were put up at local hotels, most commonly the Carlton which was an easy drive from Green Gables. Oral history says Mr. Wells built Riverside Drive so he could drive his horse and carriage from Green Gables to and from the Carleton. Most of the early houses on Riverside Drive [which I think was originally Indian River Drive] actually face the lagoon because that was the principal means of transport. The Wells family had a launch [documented in Pineapples are never ... and we also have articles that Wells had a launch on Lake George, participated in events there, and we also have a copy of his steam engineers license].

The family came here with three children [check their ages in 1896]. There was no high school. Mr. Wells hired a room in the building which was later known as the Canary Inn, hired a "professor," provided books, and now Melbourne had a high school.

1902 Miscellaneous information, provided by Mrs. Mildred Stewart:

W.T. Wells built an auditorium north and west of where Sully's Lumber Co. was located (corner of Fee and Waverly.) The auditorium was used for 15 years or more. Mrs. Stewart said it would hold about 1,000 people.

Educational Hall, where some school classes were held in the early days was located on the Dixie Highway, about where the gas station at Howard Johnson Motel was located (in the 1970s.) This would be roughly across the street from the ice plant. [from Weona Cleveland]

The gun rack at the north end of the dining room covers a door that led through a pantry area into the kitchen. Staff would prepare meals in the kitchen and bring them through this door into the dining room. The gun rack was installed by Stanford Wells after his parents had passed and he inherited the house.

The dining room has original pine floors.

Family Parlor

We imagine this room as the room where the family would have gathered. The room originally ended at the large supporting beam across the ceiling. At some unknown date the room was extended out onto what had originally been the side porch. The fireplace, which had been at an angle mirroring the one in the reception room, was reinstalled flat against the wall. [East Coast Advocate Mar. 25, 1910, mentions that Mr. Wells is making extensive improvements]

This extension suffered extensive roof damage during the 2004 hurricane. There was a great deal of water intrusion. The oak floors in this area have been heavily damaged.

[vintage photograph of room, survey photo from 2008, contemporary photo with piano?]

The last person to live full time in Green Gables was Katherine Craft who died in ????. The shadow box on the wall contains some memorabilia gathered by her daughter-in-law. Her son and his wife continued to use Green Gables as did other family members when they were in town. In 2004 the house was badly damaged and the utilities were shut off.

Breezeway

As we pass from the family parlor on our way to the kitchen, we pass through the breezeway. In common with many southern homes of the period the main house was separated by a breezeway to keep the heat from the kitchen out of the main living area. This was not intended to be a protection against fire. The small distance between the buildings would not prevent a fire from spreading to the main house. Just think about cooking on a wood stove in Florida in August and September and you will understand why the buildings were separated.

Notice that there are exterior walls on the north and south side. The walls on east west are obviously different, indicating that they were added later. We have no historic photos that show this area of the house clearly enough to make out its construction.

The wall on the south side has been heavily modified. It now appears to be block rather than frame construction. Also, early photographs show that the door was original several feet to the east of its present location. We have no idea when or why this work was done.

There is also access to a small washroom and toilet that may have been originally intended for staff.

If you look up you can see some of the early wiring in the house. The electrical system has not been updated since it was originally installed (see the section on Electrical System0).

Kitchen

The kitchen originally ended at the overhead beam. Historic photos show that it was very quickly extended in a modification that doubled the kitchen size and provided a passage directly from the kitchen into the dining room.

The wood stove was against the western wall as shown by the remains of the flue in the ceiling. There was no chimney, the historic photos show a simple stovepipe extending above the roof. The window on the north wall was originally a door to the outside. The wooden cabinet door is now blocked by a later addition. Family members say that the icebox originally stood here and that the door allowed the iceman to deliver ice. A good project would be to determine when ice first became available in Melbourne. The present ice plant was not built until the 1920's. Until there was local ice production, ice would have been harvested in the north and brought south by ship or train. It would have been very much a luxury good.

Another possibility for the use of this door would have been as storage for firewood for the stove. In the historical photos you can, with the eye of faith, see a small box where this door is located. It would make so much sense for that to be a woodbox.

Closet

The door in the east wall leads to a closet and then to an exterior door. The glass window looks into a small bath that may have been used for staff.

Mother in Law Suite

In the thirties [and we need to be more specific about dates] the elder Wells died and their son Stanford took over the house. He married Pearl [what was her previous name -- Lyman]. She had three children [get their names from my notes...confusingly one was named Gladys] and a mother. They built this room to accommodate the mother. It has a private entrance, a nice little

private bath, windows to provide cross ventilation, and ready access to the family kitchen. Family lore is that she didn't like this room because it was at the back of the house, their is mention of trees, and in any event she wanted her bedroom to be the room we described as an office for W. T. Wells. His son Stanford had continued using that as his office, but now had to move the office into what had been the dining room, and the "mother in law suite" became the family dining room. We are using it as an education and conference room.

Stairway to Second Floor

This is the back stairway and we prefer to use it as it has very secure handrails and we feel more secure bringing guests up this way. Please notice the wear patterns on the stairs, evidently staff always started up these stairs using their left foot.

At the landing there is a small metal patch which was added because a mouse was living there [David Fletcher recollection].

Second Floor Landing

The window at this landing is obviously of later date than the rest of the house
At the landing at the top of the stairs, we have the fuse panel for the house. Notice that the rooms served by each fuse is marked on the inside of the door. The patent dates on this equipment indicates that it was installed after 1915 [????? research --- sorry, drawing a blank on a name I should know]. This argues against the house being wired in 1896, but is not dispositive. This may have been a modification installed when the house was connected to the utility mains.

Trunk Room

The family always referred to this as the trunk room. We have an early inventory prepared by Nora Wells that uses the term. The trunks were used by them as they traveled and stored here when not in use. On the other side of the wall on the east end of the landing are the remains of a pulley system that may well have been used to raise and lower the trunks rather than taking them down the narrow stairs.

There is a book case on the east wall of the room. Mrs. Nora Wells was very interested in education and culture and was very instrumental in the establishment of a library in Melbourne during the twenties [picture of Mr. and Mrs. Wells and Madame Campbell and ??? by library??] While we have no documentation, it is tempting to believe that she may have used this as part of an early lending library.

Bathroom

The original bathtub was taken by one of the family members, but it's easy to see where it was installed. Oral history holds that Green Gables had the first bathtub in Melbourne. Owners of another early house now claim that theirs was install a few months before this one.

Notice the diamond windows. Notice that the partition against which the toilet is installed cuts across the face of one of the windows. Now notice that there is a sloping ceiling at the north and south of this room. From the early photos we can tell that this room has been extended out several feet. That would imply that the east wall was not originally there. And from the attic you

can see that the wall has been moved resulting in some inaccessible space which, with an eye to romance, can be imagined to have hidden illicit liquor during prohibition. [this section could be expanded some more] What is the date of the linoleum on the floor?? Note the electrical outlet in the wall. There was a sink on the west wall under the medicine chest.

Upstairs Hall

Notice the ceiling fan typical in southern homes after electricity became available. These are capable of changing the air in the house every few minutes, offering the opportunity to bring in cooler outside air. Also notice the door stops that are somewhat unusual.

Small Bedroom

This is a small bedroom with a view over the Indian River Lagoon. Notice that there is no closet. There was a small wardrobe in this room when we began our project. The floors are the original pine. There is some damage in the north east quarter of the room. Notice that the south wall is angled in. This provides a hall on the other side to access a door onto the second floor deck. The remains of a pulley mechanism that may have been used to raise and lower items to the second floor are visible from the north window. We have decorated this as a child's room, although the Wells children were older when they moved here.

Middle Bedroom

This is a slightly larger bedroom. Notice that it has a closet. Electrical wires to the attic are on the back wall. Notice that closets of the period tended to have hooks on the side walls. These are very familiar in old houses. There was a white dresser in this room when we began work.

Side Hall

This small hall leads to the Tower Bedroom and then to a door that leads out to the second story deck. Notice the vent in the wall which is on the chimney and allows heat to rise from the first to the second floor. Notice at the west end of this hall the access hatch to the attic.

Tower Bedroom (SouthEast)

This was originally a square room to which the tower was added. You can see in the floor where the tower has been added. It's an open question why a family with as much money as the Wells did not have the original floor replaced, and perhaps the answer is that the engineer didn't see any point in it, or perhaps they planned to put down carpet (wall-to-wall carpet would have been uncommon). Notice that there are traces of a stencil in the east wall where a mirror had originally hung (thank goodness for mirrors that get hung and aren't taken down for years). The octagon is built out over what was originally the second floor deck, so some slant to the floor can be attributed to the slant of the deck roof that allowed rain to run off. However, the plaster in this room is cracking badly, indicating that the slant also relates to settling of the building. In the northeast corner of the room there is an indentation for the chimney for the fireplaces downstairs. The extensive damage to this plaster is the result of the chimney shifting. This has to be dealt with as a structural issue, and the shift has also caused a crack in the roof

which allows water intrusion. Notice on the west wall that there is an electrical socket in the floorboard. There is also a heavy plug socket in the north wall.

There is extensive damage to the ceiling joists in this room. Cause not determined, possibly from termites or from water intrusion. Nonetheless it is a potential hazard. There is extensive damage to plaster in walls and ceiling.

In the south west corner of the room is a door that leads into a closet and thence to a bathroom installed after the original construction. This bathroom is shared with the West Front Bedroom

West Front Bedroom

This room contained an art deco dresser, chest, and bed frame when we started.

There is a closet in the north wall, a bay window in the east wall, a door into a small sewing room on the south wall, and to the east of that door there is a door leading into bathroom shared with the Tower Bedroom. This room has extensive damage from water intrusion. The ceiling plaster and lathing have been heavily damaged. The floor boards on the south are also heavily damaged and have been covered with plywood.

South Bathroom

This was added after the original construction, perhaps as part of the improvements of 1910.

We need to do some research on the time period of the fixtures, but they look about 1910.

Notice the small lights over the sink. Notice the handles on the taps which say "Hot" "Drain" and "Cold".

This room has also suffered extensive water damage. When we began work the tub was full of water and we were concerned that the weight might cause it to fall through the floor (it didn't).

Notice the hopper window on the west wall.

Sewing Room

When we began work we found the remains of a bed in this room and assumed it had been intended as a sleeping porch. However family recollection and the inventory show that it was a sewing room. The floor has been extensively damaged and is covered by plywood. The windows may originally have been installed in the south wall of the house before this addition was made.

Attic

Access to the attic is through a hatch in the hallway. The main point of interest here is the ladder/stairway that leads up to the hatch that leads to a walk space on the roof. In the early photos there is a railing around this space. I don't have a measurement, but guessing it's about five feet square. Who knows what purpose it was intended to serve. While there is easy access from the attic to the roof, there is no easy access from the house to the attic. And the platform is somewhat small to enjoy. John Daly has noted that opening the hatch would allow hot air to vent from the house...if there had been vents from the second floor into the attic. But there's no evidence it was ever used that way..

Plaster

Green Gables Docent Fact Sheet updated February 11, 2022

It seems unlikely that there were skilled professional plasterers in Melbourne in 1896. Green Gables would have been plastered by amateurs unless Wells brought in experts from another city.

A reason to maintain the existing plaster is to preserve the original stencils which are visible in several rooms.

Preservation Brief 21 says minimum thickness of plaster over wood lath should be $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{5}{8}$. At Green Gables it is much less.

Metal lath came into use in the late 19th century, so the metal lath in the living room remodel is not inconsistent with work in 1913.