THE COSMOS CLUB
THE COSMOS CLUB HISTORIC PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

HISTORY

Dupont Circle became Washington’s most fashionable address in the last quarter of the 19th century. Among the first investors was a syndicate of California mine owners, one of whom, Curtis T. Hillyer, built a house on the site now occupied by the Townsend House. The social cachet of the area was set with the building of the British Embassy just south of Dupont Circle at Connecticut and N Street in 1875. Within the next several decades Dupont Circle was ringed with the mansions of families who had made their fortunes elsewhere but wished to establish a social presence in the nation’s capital.

The Townsend House is one of five surviving, exceptionally grand, residences that were built around 1900 within two blocks of Dupont Circle. Although the side streets of the Dupont Circle area are lined with townhouses of varying sizes and degrees of individuality, houses built on Dupont Circle and along the near blocks of Massachusetts Avenue were generally freestanding and much larger. They were designed for entertaining on a lavish scale and their hostesses were important figures on Washington’s social scene.

Mary Scott Townsend bought Curtis Hillyer’s substantial residence and property at 2121 Massachusetts Avenue in 1898. She hired a leading New York firm, Carrère and Hastings, to enlarge and so completely rebuild the house that none of the original 1873 structure is visible, although some of its walls were incorporated. Construction of the Townsend House was begun in 1899 and essentially completed by 1901, although some modifications were made over the next decade.

The exterior is inspired by the style of Louis XVI. The building, of Indiana limestone on a rusticated Milford granite base, consists of a three and one-half story central block flanked by two-story wings, each crowned with balustraded parapets. As was typical of grand houses of its era, the interiors evoke a variety of French historical styles. The house’s principal elevations and reception rooms have been preserved much as they were designed and include a Régence ballroom with rococo furnishings and a wood paneled library in the style of Henry II.

The Townsend House is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and also included in the Historic American Buildings Survey District of Columbia Catalog and is designated as a District of Columbia Landmark.

Note: All historic images on this page are from the Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection, Library of Congress.
HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation was established in 1986 to maintain and preserve the Townsend House and its historic environs. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization. The Foundation has provided significant amounts for preservation of the Townsend House including improvement of the electrical system, a fire suppression sprinkler system and repair of the roof, façade, windows, and gutters.

PHILOSOPHY AND ROLE

The Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation’s Board and its contributors share with the larger public the goal of preserving one of the city’s most beautiful examples of a Beaux-Arts residence and the historic setting in which it stands.

The mansion, a masterpiece of one of the nation’s most noted turn-of-the-century architectural firms, enriches the city of Washington both as a reminder of its history and as a work of art.

As the Townsend House has entered its second century, its preservation will require major rehabilitation efforts in addition to those undertaken in recent years. Continuing vigilance is necessary in attending to the soundness of the fabric, structure and mechanical systems of the mansion and in ensuring the quality and appropriateness of all work done on the historic sections of the building.

The preservation of the majestic setting of the Townsend House in the historic Dupont Circle area is also a challenge. The mansion’s historical aura is enhanced by being part of a neighborhood that has retained many of its grand mansions and fine townhouses, but the area’s proximity to the center of the city creates economic pressures for change.

The Foundation has made historic preservation grants in the community including grants for restoration of the historic call boxes in the Dupont Circle area, for restoration of the buffalo sculptures at the Q Street bridge and for preservation of the historic Heurich Mansion.
Soon after the Townsend House passed the century mark, and a half century of Cosmos Club stewardship, the Club began to consider the need for restoring its ballroom, the building’s crown jewel. The room had grown dingy from years of hard use, accumulated grime, roof leaks, and misguided or shabby repairs. The goal was to reverse the effects of time and bring back the original splendor of the ballroom, which is used by the Club as it was originally intended to be used, for large social gatherings, music, and dancing.

Although the Townsend House history had been extensively researched, a new avenue for exploring it opened in 2003. The Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation learned from Paul F. Miller, Curator of the Preservation Society of Newport County (Newport Mansions) that the Townsend interiors were designed by the Parisian firm, Jules Allard et ses Fils, interior designer for some of the greatest Newport mansions, including the Breakers and Marble House. Miller had found an Allard foreman’s reference to work on the Townsend House. Allard, who had a New York office, worked simultaneously on the Townsend House and on The Elms and Rosecliff in Newport.

This discovery shaped the course of the restoration as we now knew that the ballroom brought together the skills of a leading firm of Beaux-Arts trained architects, Carrère and Hastings, and Jules Allard, one of the era’s finest interior designers. Our new knowledge enhanced Club members’ understanding of the historic context of the Townsend interiors and their significance in the general history of the best period mansions from Newport to Washington. As in all such prestige properties, the architects relied on expert help to create interiors that drew inspiration from different French period styles. At the Townsend mansion, the architects and the interior designer designed the ballroom in the early 18th century Régence style (1705-30), freely interpreted to accommodate the scale of turn-of-the-twentieth-century mansions and modern conveniences. Because so many of the New York homes of Allard’s clients have been demolished, the Townsend House is significant as a rare surviving example of Allard’s work in an urban American residence.

Exploration and education became central to the success of the restoration: exploring the feasibility of restoring each of the historical features of the ballroom and educating both the leadership and the membership of the Club on the aesthetic and historical value of the room and the Townsend House as a whole. To address the specifics of restoring the ballroom, the Foundation requested Paul Miller to evaluate what would be required to achieve an accurate restoration of its various elements, bringing to bear his experience in Newport. The next step in exploration was to select the preservation firm, JMA Preservation to develop a Master Plan for restoration of the ballroom. JMA Preservation assembled a team of specialists to assist in the evaluation of the gilding, plaster, paintings, historic lighting, and mechanical systems. The JMA Preservation Master Plan (2007) described the ballroom as “as one of the most elegant surviving Beaux Arts ballrooms in the United States” and “worthy of careful and skillful restoration.”

The more the Club and the Foundation Board learned about the quality and historical value of ballroom from these studies, the more committed we became to accuracy in their restoration. JMA Preservation was retained as architect for the restoration. Whiting Turner was selected as general contractor and Matthew Whalen served as owner’s representative on the construction site. John Canning & Co. was chosen, in a national search, to restore the decorative finishes. Canning’s previous commissions in Washington included the White House and the Capitol. Canning used two local specialists, Page Conservation, Inc., for artwork conservation and Gold Leaf Studios for some gilding. Paul Miller and the architects and historians on the Foundation board were active participants, advising on critical decisions and providing research support.
SIGNIFICANT DESIGN FEATURES

Floor Restoration
Plaster Restoration
Gilding Restoration
Ormolu and Boiserie Restoration
Wall and Ceiling Painting
Fine Art Conservation
Chandelier Restoration and Recreation
Sconce Restoration
Drapery Recreation

KEY ORGANIZATIONS & INDIVIDUALS

National Trust for Historic Preservation:
Under agreement between the Cosmos Club, the Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Trust reviews Foundation projects to ensure that they are consistent with preservation standards, including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines.

TIMELINE

2007 Master Plan for Restoration of Ballroom
2012 Restoration of architectural finishes and fine art
2016 Installation of draperies

RESTORATION TEAM

Owner: Cosmos Club
Partner: Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation
Architect: JMA Preservation
Construction Manager: Whiting Turner
MEP/FP Engineer: Loring Engineers
Lighting Designer: Lighting Design Collaborative
Acoustics: Polysomics
Architectural Finishes: John Canning & Co.
Water and Roman Gilding: Gold Leaf Studios
Fine Art Conservation: Page Conservation, Inc.
Floor Restoration: John Canning & Co.
Mechanical Contractor: Mallick Mechanical
Electrical Contractor: Valid Electric
Chandeliers and Sconces: Matthieu Lustrerie and Acu-Brite
Draperies: Knightsbridge Interiors, Inc., Tassinari & Chatel and Lesage Interieurs
**FROM D.C. TO THE COSMOS**

An interior restoration project in a historic building in D.C.

*By John Comstock & Co.*

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**Ballroom Restoration, cont’d**

Photos by Gillie Segaloids

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**Preserving Historic Decorative Finishes**

By John Comstock & Co.

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**COSMOS CLUB**

A Test for the Ballroom

*(Page 26)*
1. Townsend Mansion (1901)
2. Peaslee Addition (1950-1952)
5. Warne Ballroom
REFLECTED CEILING PLAN
FLOORING

The ballroom floor was structurally sound but the original parquet floor of quarter-sawn white oak in 18 inch squares was in need of repair and refinishing. There were some fractures to the shoulders of the tongue and groove joints along with scars, stains, and poor repairs.

There were three steps to the floor conservation and finishing: the removal of the buildup of floor finish and maintenance coatings; repair of damage to the surface and structure of the wood flooring; and application of a finish that would combine maximum durability with ease of maintenance.

To preserve the wood, the old finish and wax buildup were removed with stripping gel and hand scraping. Staining was removed or minimized with oxalic acid and then neutralized. Small patches were applied. Where needed, white oak Dutchman repairs were installed using hand tools. Repairs were toned with stains to blend with the aged original material.

The floor was finished with Waterlox Interior Tung Oil in high gloss sheen to replicate the sheen evident in the historic photographs.
PLASTERING

Allard’s elaborate plasterwork scheme, inspired by the Regence period style of Louis XV’s reign, remained in place throughout the Townsend ownership. The only significant modification in the Cosmos Club’s 1950s conversion of the ballroom into the Club’s principal reception room was the installation of air diffusers in the center ornamentation of the north and south coffers.

However, although still in place, the plasterwork, much of it staff, required major restoration. Over the years water damage had caused cracks in both flat and ornamental plaster areas, loss of ornamental elements and efflorescence. Previous repairs to the plaster had been crudely done. The plaster in some areas of the ceiling and cove had been damaged beyond repair by water leaks. Close inspection as restoration began revealed much more extensive water damage than was visible on the surface.

Wherever the plaster work could be repaired in place unsound previous patches were cut out, consolidant was applied where efflorescence had occurred and missing ornamental elements were filled in with moulding plaster. These profiles were carved and tooled as needed to match the surrounding areas. When necessary, damaged plaster was selectively removed for repair.

In locations where the plaster was damaged beyond repair whole sections had to be removed and replaced. For every section of plaster that had to be removed, Canning Studios was able to locate an identical section elsewhere in the room from which it could make a mold to replicate exactly the lost plaster. Thus all damaged or missing plaster decorative elements were restored to their original appearance without guesswork.

In the north coffer much of the plaster had separated from the wood furring above due to water damage and could not be salvaged. Casts were made of the ornamentation on the south coffer and were inserted in the north coffer. Similarly, a deteriorated section of the cove in the northwest corner of the room was replicated from an identical section of plaster ornamentation in the southeast corner.

View of the South Cove where molds were made to replace the damaged elements of the northwest cove and north coffer

Water damaged plaster above West Door

New coffer casting installed where moisture had damaged ceiling
WALL AND CEILING PAINT

The ballroom walls are composed of floor to ceiling wood paneling in a complex design that includes curved and shaped styles and rails with inset raised panels with plaster ornamentation. The panels are constructed from thin wood laminates, an early form of architectural plywood used at the turn of the twentieth century. In some areas water intrusion had caused warping, splitting and delamination. The plaster of the cove and ceiling also suffered from water intrusion in some areas. Both wood and plaster painted surfaces exhibited numerous areas of paint discoloration, flaking and loss.

Paint analysis showed as many as ten layers of paint, with each campaign a successively darker color scheme as painters matched new paint to a layer darkened by exposure and grime. It also revealed that the ballroom’s multi-tone gray scheme with much darker ceiling than walls was not historically accurate.

Before restoration of the ballroom was begun, Professor Richard C. Wolbers, Art Conservation Department, University of Delaware, conducted extensive testing of both the painted and gilded surfaces of the ballroom walls, coffers and ceiling. Microscopy paint analysis by Wolbers revealed that the original paint color of the ballroom was a pale warm gray, with no distinction between walls and ceiling. The color was confirmed by Canning with the discovery of remnants of original paint under a sconce.

Paint testing also showed that although the same shade of gray was used originally on the wall and ceiling, in some areas of the cove and ceiling the paint appeared to have a surface coating that would have created some contrast. In consultation with Paul Miller, it was decided to use a slightly darker shade of the gray where there may have been clear coating that would have accentuated the architecture. These locations included the ceiling spandrel molding backgrounds, the cove of the three coffers, the central coffer rectangle panels and the stage cove. It was agreed this accent provided just enough relief from the lighter gray and created added depth to these architectural features.

John Canning told the Foundation that one of the greatest challenges of the project was finding a modern paint that would recreate the rich enamel feel and appearance of the original paint on the wood paneling. Both European and American paints were tested. Wood paneling was sanded down to remove the visible brush strokes in the existing acrylic paint and most areas received a skim coat of wood filler to hide cosmetic damage and veneer variations. An acrylic primer was followed with three coats of alkyd eggshell finish in Benjamin Moore color HC-78 thinned with linseed oil for a smoother application. Paints were applied by brush with sanding between coats.

Before launching the full restoration, John Canning prepared a floor to ceiling restoration of paint and gilding in one section of the ballroom alcove for viewing approval.

A mockup of the painting scheme of the central cove reveals the contrast between the original color scheme and the much darker scheme which had developed over time.
Painting of the cove before gilding

Completed painting

Completed painting

Completed painting after installation of draperies

Preparing lower panel for painting

Painting of the cove before gilding

Painter cutting in finish with artist brushes around ornament.
GILDING

The ballroom before restoration retained the illusion of the extensive original gilding that highlighted the plaster ornamentation on the walls and ceilings and outlined the wall panels, chair rails and baseboards. However, virtually all gilding had been overpainted with bronze powder paint and it had none of the intended shine or luster of the original scheme. The chair rail and some baseboard moldings were coated with acrylic paint.

Allard sought to recreate for his American clients the French interiors they admired on their European tours – rooms with the patina of a century and more. He created the illusion of age in part by the use of three forms of gilding – water gilding, oil gilding and roman gilding. In water gilding the substrate, often wood, is smoothed with gesso, then covered with bole, a mixture of clay and animal or fish glue to which gold leaf is glued. It can be burnished to a high sheen. In oil gilding an oil size is applied to a sealed surface, and after the size dries to the right level of tackiness gold powder or leaf is applied. This creates a matte finish but it can be burnished to create highlights. Roman gilding is similar in technique to oil gilding but uses bronze rather than gold powder, giving an impression of age, with gold leaf selectively applied and burnished to create highlights.

Richard C. Wolbers tested 25 locations to determine the nature of the original gilding in various locations of the ceiling, coffers and walls.

Additional testing revealed that solvents could remove the bronze overpainting on most of the wall decorations and that, although missing some pieces, they retained much of their original finish. The vast majority of the roman gilding of the wall ornamentation was conserved: layers of bronze radiator paint were removed, it was cleaned and sealed with a reversible protective coating that provided luster to the finish. However no solvent could remove the bronze paint that had been applied to the gilded coffer and ceiling decoration without taking off the original finish. These surfaces were re-gilded using traditional materials and techniques such as 22k gold and slow-set oil size. Water gilding on the chair rail and door filets was severely abraded. Although intact water gilding was cleaned and conserved, those areas of heavy damage required full replacement, using traditional water gilding materials and techniques.
FINE ART CONSERVATION

The six paintings Allard installed are integral to the decorative scheme of the ballroom. Discolored varnish and years of accumulated grime had darkened all these paintings, obscuring their rosy tones designed to complement the deep rose (Rose du Barry) of the draperies.

An unsigned classically themed painting, or tondo identified as the Wedding of Amphitrite, dominates the center coffer of the ceiling. Painted on canvas in a studio, it appears to have been created expressly for the ballroom. Numerous Gilded Age reception rooms had similar ceiling paintings.

Allard often used architectural salvage from Europe to enhance the illusion of age and authenticity in his period rooms. Three late eighteenth or early nineteenth century overdoor paintings in hues of rose are installed over the interior doorways and two related paintings fill the lunettes on either side of the alcove.

Tondo

There were thousands of small losses of paint and ground from previous aqueous cleanings. It also had been extensively and poorly restored at some point with heavy repainting of the flesh tones of the figures and some clouds and water. It had then been coated with a brown-tinted varnish. Page Conservation removed dirt, discolored varnish, and overpaint and inpainted with reversible paints.
Overdoor Paintings and Lunettes

The overdoor paintings hark back to an eighteenth century tradition of overdoor panels painted in monochromatic schemes, either en grisaille -- in shades of gray -- to simulate marble relief panels or in cameo colors such as the rose camaieu of the Townsend ballroom.

These salvaged panels were originally rectangular, both taller and narrower than they are now. For reuse in the ballroom, Allard’s firm widened the lower portion of the paintings by tacking on pieces of canvas cut from the upper part. His workmen also heightened the drama and romanticism of the paintings, intensifying the shading of the figures and adding branches and leaves to the trees, and shrubbery to the sides and base, some of which was crudely done.

The canvases were no longer tight on their stretchers and resulting bulges and ridges contributed to the flaking of the paint. The panels were removed to Page Conservation’s studio for paint consolidation, mounting on a rigid frames and cleaning. Removal of the discolored varnish took off most of the Allard overpainting because the varnish, applied before the paint had fully cured, had melded the two.

The lunettes were cleaned and restored in place. Cleaning revealed that one original canvas of putti on a see-saw had been cut in two to create the lunettes, each of which was two-thirds early nineteenth century and one third an Allard creation.

The delicate, restrained depiction of nature and the cooler tones that cleaning revealed in the original paintings bore little resemblance to the appearance of the paintings as installed in the ballroom in 1900. The distinct contrast between the two presented a dilemma in the restoration. The Foundation concluded that the elements that had been added or reworked in the 1900 installation should be restored to the paintings in order to recreate the original appearance of the ballroom. However, recognizing that some of the overpainting was amateurish and incompatible with conservation standards, the Foundation requested that it be done in a more competent hand. The original paintings were given a protective coating and overpainted with reversible paint.
CHANDELIERS

The ca. 1910 Frances Benjamin Johnston photographs of the ballroom show the room lit by 12 wall sconces and a large chandelier suspended from the center of each of the two side coffers. The initial three hanging light fixtures shown in the 1901 Architectural Record photograph of the ballroom appear to have been a provisional installation. The lack of ornamentation of the ultimate location of the sconces indicates that they were part of the original scheme although not yet installed.

The Townsend House was designed with all electric light, still a relatively new development. The design of the chandeliers reflects the novelty of historically derived models for electric lighting. The branches that support the candle lights are in the style of Louis XV. The curved arms holding the downward facing Edison light bulbs, shielded by glass leaves, reflect the influence of the Belle Epoque. The chandeliers and matching sconces are thought to be the work of Maison Baguès of Paris.

When the Cosmos Club adapted the Townsend House for its use in 1950-52, it removed the two chandeliers, one of which was in poor condition, and installed air diffusers at the center of the north and south coffers for its new heating and cooling system. The chandelier in good condition was sold to the Bedford Springs Hotel in Pennsylvania. The original sconces were retained.

JMA Preservation examined the Bedford Springs chandelier in preparation for its Master Plan for the ballroom. The chandelier, stored unprotected in an outbuilding, was relatively intact and its nearly complete glass was stored, unwrapped, in a box. The Hotel subsequently gave it to the Club. The chandeliers are close to seven feet tall and are 44 inches wide. The glass components, of the highest quality lead crystal, include 128 curled glass leaves of two different sizes and 136 pendalogues, 6.5-inches - 8-inches in height in 12 different patterns, each hung from a rosette.

The chandelier was sent to Mathieu Lustrerie, a firm in Provence, France which specializes in restoration and replication of antique chandeliers. The original chandelier was repaired and gilded and a replica was made and fitted with pendalogues closely matching the crystal of the original one. The restoration took almost two years.
SCONES

The sconces, as they appear in the ca. 1910 Johnston photographs, had a central glass spike and four candle light branches hung with pendalogues similar in size and shape to those on the chandeliers. More pendalogues hung from above. At some point the Cosmos Club installed a central light in place of the spike and changed the crystals.

The sconces were rewired and restored by Acu-Brite, Inc., with pendalogues and rosettes matching those of the replicated chandelier.
DRAPERIES

At the outset of the ballroom restoration the Foundation did not anticipate that it could recreate the draperies because all that was known of them was the Architectural Record description: “Curtains are of Rose du Barry silk, embroidered in silver and gold” and what little could be seen in the Johnston photographs. Furthermore, during the restoration the Foundation learned that Prelle, the largest French silk-weaving firm, had files on fabric orders for all the Townsend House rooms except the ballroom’s, presumably misfiled.

Thus, when a Foundation delegation searched the Design Center for a Rose du Barry fabric in a pattern suitable for a room designed by Allard in 1901, they were skeptical when a manager who represented another French firm said she could find the original order and fabric. A month later she brought the full 12 foot repeat of the original silk and linen fabric from the files of Tassinari & Chatel to the ballroom.

When seen in the ballroom, the original fabric brought the Allard color scheme alive. The deep rose of the silk and linen fabric, with its hint of bronze, created a dramatic contrast to the golds and soft gray of the walls and ceiling while bringing out the rose cameo of the overdoor paintings and the pinks of the tondo.

The fabric was clearly the answer, both historically and aesthetically and it launched the Foundation on a four year project spanning three continents: replicating the fabric in France, embroidering of valences in India, and custom trims and fabrication in the United States. Although it is less lustrous than silk, the Foundation chose to have the drapery fabric replicated in Trevira which meets flame retardant requirements for public rooms and is more durable and colorfast.

To digitize the pattern for Tassinari & Chatel’s modern computer programmed looms the original pattern had to be recreated on paper by hand which required weeks of work. Matching color was still more challenging. The elaborate floral pattern is created by weaving three shades of rose threads, each a different texture, in various combinations and the highly reflective fabric appears to change color with every movement. It took three strike-offs, each with multiple options, to come close to the color of the original fabric.

Historic photographs show that the lambrequins (valences mounted on a rigid backing) were decorated with embroidery and pleated tape but the colors, textures and obscured portions of the design required interpretation appropriate to the period. The Foundation chose Lesage Interieurs, a firm based in Paris and Madras with extensive experience in embroidery for historic interiors.

Substantive work on the lambrequins could not begin until the background fabric, matching the satin ground of the draperies, was woven in France. Developing and refining the design with computer simulations and several iterations of embroidered samples took more than a year. The final embroidery took 30 men, working in teams of ten, about 30 days to complete, a total of approximately 2560 man hours.

Installation of the draperies in February 2016 completed the ballroom restoration. The deep rose brings the original color scheme back to life and the curve of the lambrequins reinforces the ballroom’s symmetry of arched mirrors alternating with arched windows and door openings.
Lambrequin ready for installation

Drapery installation complete, February 2016

Sample of embroidery

Prior to installation of draperies

Original silk and linen fabric from archives of Tassinari & Chatel, 1901

Embroidery in progress

Embroidery in progress

Lambrequin ready for installation

Drapery installation complete, February 2016

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