



The Architectural History and Current Renovations of the Peale in Baltimore An Interview with Jackson Gilman-Forlini February 2020

Jackson Gilman-Forlini

My name is Jackson Gilman-Forlini. My title is historic preservation officer. I work for the Department of General Services, City of Baltimore. In that role, my agency is like the property manager for city owned buildings many of which are historic landmarks. Also, many of which have been used for museums for many years, used as museums. So my job is to make sure that the city, as the property owners are stewarding these buildings to historic preservation standards. One of our buildings is the Peale Museum. This is a national historic landmark, which was America's first purpose-built museum founded by Rembrandt Peale in 1814. He was the son of Charles Wilson Peale. The city actually acquired it in 1830 to serve as the first City Hall. It's had a long storied history, but most recently it was left vacant in 1997. The city has really struggled for a long time to find a good use for it.

So when I started working for the city in 2012, I initiated a partnership with the Peale Center, nonprofit organization whose mission was to restore and reopen this building for the public as a kind of museum. So we've been busy with that. We've made some capital improvements to the building already. We have there's a few things that are original. So there're different levels of original, right? So there's original to the building's construction but then there were several renovations that happened throughout the 19th century. Each one of which has by itself acquired significance in its own right. So it is like a Pallium set. With each generation there's new meaning that's ascribed into the walls. The earliest period, a lot of the beams, and joists, and the floors, some of the exterior brick walls are original. When we opened up one of the ceilings on the first floor... But we did find the look to be evidence of the original floor joists for the second floor that it had at a later date, been sistered with another newer joist. So it looks like rather than taking up the old ones, at least by 1930, that there was some repair and stabilization of the existing.

But then there's also like the windows for example, are probably not 1814 windows. But they do appear to date to perhaps the first renovation of the building which occurred in 1830 when it was converted to City Hall. Many of the windows did exhibit advanced age. Also, the method of assembling and glazing as well for those windows, is very similar to other 1830s and 1840s era windows that have been found in other Baltimore buildings. Most of the wall configuration will stay the same. Actually, in some places we'll be returning the spacial characteristics to an earlier period. So there's a drop ceiling on the second floor, and we will be restoring the original ceiling height in that room. There will be some modification though. Most notably for the interior elevator, which unfortunately does require that we carve some space aside in one of the existing rooms for that elevator shaft. But in all cases, we're trying to minimize the amount of alterations that we have to make to just those that are strictly necessary.

A fun discovery that I really enjoyed was actually when they were restoring the original window frames on the front of the building. The sashes are hung with a counterweight system. When they were removing the old counterweight hardware for restoration they discovered that the pockets in which the



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counterweights were set, those jams actually had been lined with recycled signs. Basically, sheet metal signs that had been cut, and then fit as a liner for those counterweight pockets. We said, "Well, isn't that interesting? Why are these metal signs here?" Well, it out that in the night early 1920s, late 19 teens, there was actually a sign fabrication shop that was renting space in the Peale. Basically, renting space from the city for their business.

Based on photographic evidence, we were able to determine that those particular windows where we found the sheet metal signs had been closed up in the 19th century, but then were reopened in the 1920s, and coincided exactly with the period when the sign shop was using that space. So we think that actually the signs that were used to line those pockets were recycled by the owners of the sign shop. Who were then basically, reusing the materials that they had on hand to restore the windows.

So there wasn't much left in the building for when I started in 2012 there were some... Actually it's funny that the city was using it as a place to store memorabilia from a former mayor's administration, Mayor Kurt Schmoke. All of his awards and diplomatic gifts that he had received as mayor were being archived in the basement. Many of which has now been removed and actually sent to the Baltimore City Archives for proper storage. I did learn that in terms of the billings earliest period, there was in the 1970s, an excavation of a portion of the basement to create additional storage space down there. There was an archeological excavation done, or archeological survey done of that ground as part of that project.

Those artifacts still exist. They are now at the Maryland Archeological Conservation Lab in Calvert County, Maryland. They were conserved, and I was able to go through some of them a few months ago. There's some interesting stuff. There's a lot of pottery. Also, there's a sword, like ceremonial sabre that had been thrown in there. I guess they'd been using the basement as something of a garbage dump. So there's a cool size of material culture that came out of that, that's still available for research if anyone would want to go through it.

We kind of have a sense of was going on back there in the 19th century. The Peale family actually using the backyard to manufacture gas for their gas lighting. That's one of the things the Peale is known for is the birthplace of gas lighting in America. One of the birthplaces I guess, birthplace of the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company was started out the Peale. The first public building in Baltimore that would be lit with gas lighting. So we know that there was a rudimentary gas manufacturing apparatus back there, that the Peale's we're using to make the stuff from coal. So it would be really interesting if we could find some evidence of that operation.



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But also too, we know that there was also a residential presence off of Watchhouse Alley, which is the alley that runs behind the Peale. We know that there was relatively large African American community in the 19th century that lived back there. Not least of all, the Peale itself was the first public high school in Maryland open to black students. So any kind of evidence that we could find that dated to that period, I think would really help us fill in some of the stories that we're trying to tell about the building's history.

Honestly, I think the hardest part at this point has been trying to come up with the funds to continue this process. For whatever reason it's been very, very difficult to get public entities, and private, and individuals, and philanthropic foundations to really see this as a worthwhile investment. So, I don't know why, I feel like it's a great project but there's still a lot that needs to be done. So anything that involves getting the money to make it happen, I think has been the most difficult part.