

**Melrose, a multifaceted jewel in the NPS crown:
interdisciplinary contributions to historic
preservation and museum collection management**

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The Melrose estate, a unit of Natchez National Historical Park, provides a case study for National Park Service (NPS) development of a historic house museum site. NPS acquired the 80-acre estate in 1990 to interpret slavery and the antebellum planter class, primarily because of the quality of the resource. Melrose had already received National Historic Landmark designation, with the red brick Greek Revival mansion and outbuildings, grounds, and historic furnishings all cited as contributing elements. An examination of the first decade of NPS stewardship at Melrose shows how management decisions for such museums and their collections must cross boundaries to consider historic structures and landscapes as well as museum objects in planning an effective context for preservation and interpretation. It also shows how cultural resource management must be creative in exploring varied sources to gather information for these decisions, from archives and oral histories to historic photographs, site analysis, and archaeology.

The development of Melrose began in the 1840s, when attorney and planter John T. McMurren constructed a new family home on a roughly 100-acre suburban estate on the eastern edge of Natchez, Mississippi. The property, defined on three sides by deep bayou channels carved into the loess soil, lay fallow as part of a used-up cotton plantation at the time of McMurren's purchase in 1841. In the early 1990s, an exhaustive archival investigation by furnishings curator Carol Petravage of the NPS Harpers Ferry Center, combined with cross-country trips to track down McMurren descendants, turned up a wealth of materials in the form of letters and diaries relating to the McMurren family and their two-decade occupation of the Melrose estate. Some of these materials shed light on resources still remaining at Melrose, such as the great magnolia tree that Mary Louisa McMurren recorded her husband having planted outside their bedroom window. Resources that had been lost over the years were revealed in other letters, such as one written by John McMurren that described in great detail the wooden Venetian blinds he had purchased in Philadelphia for the primary rooms at the Melrose mansion, including the color (French green), and the fact that those purchased for the downstairs rooms had decorative silk tapes sewn onto them.

The museum collections at Natchez National Historical Park contain many objects that can be directly associated with the McMurren family. These include a range of furnishings as well as very personal objects, such as the fine pink and white lace gown from Paris which local oral history maintains was part of the wedding trousseau of the McMurrens' daughter in 1856. A pair of massive walnut bookcases in the Melrose library houses a collection of period books, many with McMurren inscriptions, that help provide insight into the education and mindsets of individual family members. After the death of their daughter and two grandchildren of disease during the Civil War, the McMurrens sold Melrose complete with most of its original furniture. The room-by-room inventory made at that time has assisted NPS curators attempting to determine which of the current Melrose furnishings can be dated to the McMurren era—an act of “inside archaeology” trying to reconstruct accurate layers

of historical context for the objects. The inventory has provided parameters for the park's scope of collection statement and guidance for the historic furnishings plan, as well as becoming an important artifact itself within the park's museum collection.

Elizabeth and George Malin Davis purchased the Melrose estate from the McMurrans in 1865, after Union soldiers occupied their town home, Choctaw, during the Civil War. Documentation of this occupation has suggested a seed of truth in the local myth of a marble table now at Melrose with a design of inlaid birds whose semiprecious eyes were supposedly plucked out by Yankee soldiers. The childhood death of one Davis daughter, Frances, provided the occasion for a beautiful Victorian funerary portrait also now at Melrose. The 1883 death as a young woman of their other daughter, Julia, left her six-year-old son, George M. D. Kelly, as heir to Melrose, Choctaw, two other Natchez mansions, and vast plantation acreage in the fertile Louisiana bottomlands across the Mississippi River. Young George Kelly left Natchez after his mother's death to be raised by his maternal grandmother in New York, and former Davis family slaves cared for the Melrose estate and its furnishings while the mansion was closed for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Alice Sims and Jane Johnson are remembered as the African-American women who lived with their families in outbuildings on the Melrose estate and served as caretakers during this time. Much information remains to be gathered regarding the Davis-era activities at Melrose because a wealth of associated archival material remains unexplored in private hands at this time.

In 1900 George Kelly married a New York debutante, Ethel Moore Kelly. The following year he brought his bride to Natchez for the first time. They selected Melrose as their primary home, and their efforts to restore the mansion after its years of closure are generally credited as the first historic preservation efforts in the state of Mississippi. Their inherited wealth enabled the Kellys to indulge their passions for traveling and hunting. It allowed them to purchase what is thought to be the first automobile in Natchez. It also permitted them to acquire a series of cameras that recorded invaluable images of the Melrose house and grounds dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The Kelly occupation of Melrose lasted until Ethel Kelly's death in 1975, and NPS investigations into the Melrose barn and carriage house have catalogued hundreds of site-specific tools and other camping, hunting, gardening, or automobile-related artifacts from this era.

With its inclusion in the first Spring Pilgrimage tours of Natchez historic houses in 1932, Melrose underwent the beginning of a significant transition from private home to tourist attraction. During the Spring Pilgrimage, Natchez ladies dressed in the historic costumes of their ancestors to receive visitors into their homes, and the promotion of Pilgrimage tours provided more occasions for early formal photography within the homes. A 1930s photograph of the Melrose drawing room presents two local women wearing black silk dresses associated with Elizabeth Davis and her daughter Julia—dresses now in the park museum collection—but it also provides important information about the fabric on original furnishings before their later re-upholstering. Ethel Kelly directed the planting of masses of pink azaleas to beautify the property, and she added some of the fine historic furnishings from Choctaw to the original furnishings left behind by the McMurrans at Melrose. These included two sets of rich silk draperies—one rose and gold, and one midnight blue and gold—which she hung in the parlor and dining room at Melrose. She also installed the matching rose-and-gold-upholstered parlor suite of rococo revival furniture in the Melrose parlor, along with a rosewood piano and marble-topped center table and a walnut étagère. NPS curators have used the only existing historic photograph of the Choctaw interior to sort out the appropriate origins for some of the resulting blended collection of furnishings at Melrose. At the same time, the presence at Melrose of Jane Johnson provided an ongoing source of continuity and oral tradition at the estate. Both she and George Kelly lived until 1946.

After Ethel Kelly's death, Melrose was sold once again with most of the furnishings intact, this time to Callon Petroleum Company at the height of the 1970s oil boom. John and Betty Callon directed a massive restoration of the historic structures and grounds, which served as their private home, a venue for lavish corporate entertainment in a park-like setting, a bed-and-breakfast establishment, and the location for a number of movies shot over the following decade. The Callons considered preservation issues as part of their restoration, and NPS curators found cabinets in the Melrose attic filled with historic fabrics removed from furniture at the time of reupholstering. Fortunately the Callons also took hundreds of photographs documenting their Melrose projects, photographs which provide the only existing record of old chicken houses demolished and historic fence lines removed.

The 1990 purchase of Melrose by NPS after the oil boom went bust marked the estate's final transition, from 130 years as a private home to a house museum dedicated to historic preservation and interpretation. In the early years of the 1990s, NPS emphasized scholarly research and documentation of the estate's cultural resources. This took such forms as a full set of measured Historic American Building Survey (HABS) drawings and accompanying documentary photographs, a historic structures report, a cultural landscape report, and a historic furnishings report. A historic resource study encompassing all three Natchez National Historical Park units (Melrose, the William Johnson House, and the Fort Rosalie site) also included a new, more detailed National Register nomination for Melrose. This nomination ascribed national significance to those resources associated with the antebellum planter class (McMurrin and Davis), state significance to the Kelly-era resources (based on their early historic preservation efforts and their role in the beginnings of heritage tourism), and local significance to the Callon-era restoration because of the importance of the 1970s oil boom to the local economy.

The round of historic reports generated by NPS relied on a variety of sources, including archival materials, oral histories, historic photographs, archaeology, and on-site investigations. A finishes analysis conducted by architectural conservator George Fore found very delicate interior painted finishes, such as pale rose glazes, on some plaster walls, and dark baseboards painted to resemble fine wood grain—all buried beneath nearly one hundred years of paint layers. Fore used historic photographs showing the tinted blocks and veins painted onto the exterior stucco surfaces of the mansion as the basis for his investigations of exterior marbling. These areas had also been covered with white paint since the first Kelly restoration projects of about 1903-1905. Similarly, the cultural landscape report team headed by Ian Firth and Suzanne Turner combined an examination of existing landscape features with historic maps of the property and related archival materials to recapture the original design elements of the Melrose grounds. The research efforts of all the reports were enhanced by oral history interviews with Fred Page, a current NPS tour guide who has worked in various roles at Melrose since 1950 and whose earliest memories of the Melrose mansion and grounds date back through changes made by the last two sets of private owners.

NPS implementation of the treatment recommendations that grew out of these reports has pushed Melrose into a new leadership role for Natchez historic houses. The park set a high priority on the installation of wheelchair-accessible public parking, pathways, and restrooms, as well as a wheelchair lift allowing access to the first floor of the mansion and a videotaped tour of the second floor. However, some of these changes at Melrose have violated local expectations for operation of a "tour house" that have developed since the 1930s. The removal of many of the pink azaleas planted by Ethel Kelly—overgrown by the end of the 20th century into massive thickets surrounding the mansion—provided one example. The NPS emphasis on accurate, scholarly interpretation rather than oft-repeated local mythology has provided another. In particular, NPS has made a major effort to incorporate interpretation of those slaves who lived and worked on the estate into the basic tours and

exhibits at Melrose. This contrasted with an existing unwritten local code not to introduce “unpleasant” subjects such as slavery into house tours, a code preserving the illusion that paying visitors are actually guests in the historic homes. At Melrose, the slave bells on the back gallery of the mansion have become important artifacts treated with a level of care and concern comparable to that awarded to the high-style McMurren furnishings. Ironically, the NPS archaeological investigations of what was thought to be a rare slave privy behind the remaining slave cabins on the estate revealed no materials that could be dated to the antebellum period and places construction of the structure more likely during the postwar Davis period of ownership.

The establishment of NPS standards for the exhibition of museum collections has created additional distinctions between Melrose and other Natchez houses. Installation of the reproduction Venetian blinds based on John McMurren’s letter helped to alleviate the completely dark setting for the furnished rooms created by initially closing the exterior shutters on the mansion to prevent light damage. After the parties carried out at Melrose during the Callon years, NPS has imposed its museum standards for pest monitoring and control, which include prohibiting any food, drink, smoking, or fresh floral arrangements inside the Melrose mansion. Stanchions and ropes have been placed inside the mansion to keep visitors from wandering freely through the furnished rooms. In effect, NPS has exchanged the local tradition of hospitality for new paradigms of preservation and security. In that context, in 1997 NPS removed from exhibit the only original draperies left hanging in the house, a set of twelve-foot-high green silk panels with silk tassels and trim dating back to the McMurren era. Visitors familiar with the house and its contents lamented no longer being able to see the “real historic stuff.” But a collection condition survey carried out by textile conservator Jane Merritt of the NPS Harpers Ferry Center determined that the draperies were too deteriorated to remain on display. To preserve their value to researchers, Merritt oversaw their removal from the drawing room windows and preparation for placement inside a rolled textile storage cabinet in a modern museum storage building constructed by NPS on the rear of the Melrose property. NPS has subsequently installed reproduction draperies in the Melrose drawing room matching the pattern and color of the originals.

With its innovative status as a partnership park, Natchez National Historical Park has also crossed boundaries in providing new levels of interpretive guidance or technical assistance to other historic houses, or even to private individuals with collections of personal treasures. One method has been a series of public workshops on the care of historic houses and their furnishings. Since 1995, these workshops have been carried out more than twenty times in seven different states by the author (a museum curator), often in the context of meetings for historical societies, garden clubs, preservation groups, or state museum associations. These efforts have paralleled the interpretive outreach efforts of park ranger Janice Turnage, whose effective uses of specific historical information has made her much in demand as a public speaker to churches, civic groups, and other tourism agencies. In conclusion, the gathering and use of information across interdisciplinary lines, the integrated approach to planning and programming, and the setting of new standards for cultural resource management, interpretation, and outreach have all contributed to establishing Melrose as a multifaceted jewel in the National Park Service crown.