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Documenting a Design: The Thomas Ustick Walter House, 1861-1866, Germantown, Pennsylvania

Stephen G. Harrison
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DOCUMENTING A DESIGN: THE THOMAS USTICK WALTER HOUSE, 1861-1866, GERMANTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

Stephen G. Harrison

A THESIS

in

The Graduate Program in Historic Preservation

Presented to the faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

1992

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to examine the original documentation for an historic structure to test what can be learned from these sources alone. The house no longer survives, providing, in an academic sense, a vacuum in which to examine carefully the primary materials generated by the owner and architect during inception, construction, and occupancy. In this case, the owner and architect happens to have been Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), one of the most important -- yet largely unknown -- American architects of the nineteenth century.¹ His drawings and papers were held in private hands until recently when they were acquired by The Athenaeum of Philadelphia and made accessible to scholars for the first time. The surviving documentation for Walter’s house is remarkably extensive and varied and provides an interesting case study for examining an architect’s creative process without the distraction of the structure itself or successive generations of change.

Thomas Ustick Walter was born in Philadelphia, the son of a bricklayer of German descent. He was apprenticed to his father for five years (1819-24) but soon began to pursue his own interest in architecture becoming associated with William Strickland and later John Haviland. His greatest design in Philadelphia was the group of buildings for Girard College (1834-48). This


Greek Revival masterpiece earned him national recognition and prominence as one of the most successful architects of his day. Such popularity brought him financial success and many commissions, including the remodeling of Nicholas Biddle's country seat, Andalusia.

Unfortunately, the success of the 1830s gave way to tragedy in the 1840s. He was ruined financially in the depression of 1841, and was forced to sell everything including his house, furniture, and most of his architectural library. In addition, his eldest son died of typhoid fever after a trip to Venezuela with him in 1844, and his first wife, Elizabeth, died giving birth in 1847. By 1850, however, he had reestablished his architectural practice and won the important commission for the dome and extensions to the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

The work on the Capitol was to occupy almost fifteen years of Walter's life and become his most significant achievement. He was revered by his peers and helped found the American Institute of Architects, serving as its first Vice-president and later President. He retired in 1865 to the home he had built in Germantown (1861), the subject of this study, but was forced again by renewed financial troubles to resume practicing architecture in the late 1860s. But the design world had passed him by, and he was unable to win major commissions. He finally secured a position with John McArthur, Jr., as second in command for the construction of the Philadelphia City Hall, a position he held until his death in 1887.

Walter was a man of great religious conviction. A life-long member of the Baptist Church, he often attended church all day on Sunday as well as at other times during the week. He regularly taught Sunday school and counted
many pastors among his close friends. His Protestant beliefs were reflected in the way he lived his daily life: devoted to his family and friends; practical and cautious in his purchases; neat and tidy in appearance; conscientious and honorable in his work. In fact, when it came to the practice of architecture, Walter viewed his profession with a reverence only equalled by the church in his estimation. Consequently, he sometimes spent ten to twelve hours each day at his drafting table. In addition, he maintained compulsively organized records and sometimes wrote nine or ten letters a day.

Robert Ennis asserts that this record-keeping and correspondence was “calculated to raise the standards of the architecture profession.”^2 Devoted as he was to his profession, this obsessive attention to detail was probably more a function of his compulsive personality and work ethic than anything else. It is also possible that Walter was aware of the struggles that would eventually ensue over payment for his services to the government and how crucial the documentation of his projects would be in proving the case. Nevertheless, the thousands of items which now comprise the Thomas Ustick Walter Collection and the legacy of his extant buildings illustrate his enormous contributions to American architecture.

This case study focuses primarily on Walter; even though several important craftsmen and artisans were associated with the project. The documentation shows that many of the suppliers and craftsmen Walter used at his house in Germantown had worked for him at the United States Capitol. However, their contributions to the overall design of the house will be examined primarily in terms of Walter’s commission, their execution of his de-

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sign, and the significance of his patronage.

Furthermore, this study does not seek to re-examine accepted knowledge of nineteenth-century architectural styles and decorative forms. No attempt has been made here to explain the Picturesque Movement, for example, or Walter's contributions to it. Such attempts would be reckless in a paper of this scope. Rather, it seems more relevant to place Walter's home comfortably within the margins of an upper middle-class, suburban residence of the mid-nineteenth century and focus instead on what can be learned from the surviving documents as to the design, furnishings, and mechanical systems of the structure.

The primary sources for this study are preserved in the Thomas Ustick Walter Collection at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, including 27 original architectural drawings; over 350 copies of letters by the architect; a household receipt book containing original bills from contractors and vendors working on the house over a five year period; a cashbook recording all expenditures for the house over a six year period; diaries; and two exterior photographs taken sometime between 1863 and 1873. Ancillary documents include canceled checks, account books, letters, and diaries covering the period 1852-1868. The three most important sources -- drawings, correspondence, and receipt book -- deserve a closer look at the outset to facilitate an understanding of Walter's intentions in the design of his house.
Surviving Architectural Drawings 1860-1861

There are 27 extant drawings for Walter’s house in Germantown in the collection of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia. They include elevations, plans, sections, details, and perspectives. Although they comprise the largest number of drawings in the Walter Collection for any domestic structure, they are an incomplete set dating from two main design campaigns.

The first group dates from October and November of 1860 and represent probably the earliest designs for the project. These drawings illustrate some of the architectural finishes and embellishments which Walter first envisioned for his house, the main feature being a conservatory to the south side (Figure 1). It is also apparent from these early elevations that Walter originally planned to clad the exterior in brick with sandstone base and quoins. Later versions show the brick facing replaced with roughcasting (Figure 2), a change that figures prominently in the correspondence. These drawings also exhibit penciled changes which again prompt examination of the other documents to determine Walter’s intention.

The other set of drawings, dating from January and February of 1861, give a clearer picture of the final finishes and materials. They document, for example, the change from brick facing to roughcasting and appear to give a final design for the belvedere, porch, and plan. It is in this group of drawings that details are found for the porch in particular but for the main gate and windows as well. One particularly significant drawing shows the positioning of the house in the landscape with path systems delineated and major plantings marked out in pencil (Figure 3).

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See the Appendix for an annotated listing and illustrations of the drawings.
Figure 1. Detail from an early elevation showing a conservatory delineated in pencil. Note the brick facade.
(WTU 067.018) The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
Figure 2. Top; Detail, showing brick facade in earliest scheme, 1860. Bottom; Detail, showing that roughcasting has replaced brick, 1861. (WTU 067.018; 067.007) The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
Figure 3. Plan, showing the positioning of the house in the landscape. Plantings have been delineated in pencil.
As helpful as these drawings are, they are by nature design documents and therefore suspect as indicators of final construction. Many details and changes were decided in the field, and they can therefore only be used to generate hypotheses which are then to be tested against other documentation. The drawings for Walter’s house are no exception in this regard; some so-called ‘final’ conditions on the drawings are contradicted by the other documents.

**Walter’s Correspondence 1853-1866**

Perhaps the richest source of documentation for Walter’s personal and professional thoughts on the design of his house is the correspondence beginning around 1853 and continuing through 1866. Although he does not mention building a house in Germantown until 1860, the earlier correspondence is still quite useful. These letters provide information about his purchase during the 1850s of furniture and decorative arts which constituted the bulk of his household furnishings upon his move to Germantown. The correspondence also reveals crucial aspects of design such as why a particular construction method was employed, why something was altered or used in the first place, and personal desires and complaints. Thus, they enhance and flesh out the drawings, receipts, and even photographs. In this particular case, client and architect were combined. Since Walter was prevented from physically overseeing the construction because he
was living and working in Washington at the time, he was forced to communicate by correspondence. Fortunately for historians, he made copies of these letters in letter-press books that are remarkably legible, albeit brittle and fragile. A voluminous correspondent, Walter’s diaries show that he often wrote nine or ten letters every day. The letters themselves were not limited to one subject; to a friend who might also be supplying cast iron or some other product for the Capitol, he would expound on other aspects of the work or even unrelated designs. Sometimes he would add personal news of his family, including a mention of his house in Germantown.

During the times in Washington when separated from his wife, Walter’s correspondence would discuss the war; his lifestyle; the work at the Capitol; and, after construction had begun on the house, aspects of its design. The correspondence between the two is a particularly rich source for the historian of material culture because Walter would often take his wife through his day within a letter, usually discussing all manner of ills that he would encounter.

After Walter and his family moved into the Germantown house on December 17, 1861, the family used it primarily as a summer residence until his retirement from the Capitol in 1865. The correspondence during this period between Walter and his caretaker reveals how the house was maintained during the months when the family was not in residence. Walter would send detailed instructions about readying the house for different seasons, particularly spring and summer. Here one finds discussions of plant materials for the garden, directions for overseeing workmen and repairmen, and a general view of how the house was used and maintained.
Walter began keeping a record of all expenses related to the house with the receipt of his payment of $5700 in October 1860, for the lot on which he was to build. As the project progressed, Walter pasted into a ledger nearly all of the bills and receipts related to work on the house. For those individuals who did not supply a receipt, he wrote one out himself and had the merchant sign, thereby preserving a near total record of goods, materials, and labor costs for the construction of a mid-nineteenth-century domestic structure. Some very obvious omissions -- such as the absence of any receipts for furniture -- keep it from being complete. Nonetheless, it remains a highly significant document of construction. Besides the obvious value in determining who supplied goods for the house, the services they provided, and the materials they used; this group of receipts provides important corollary information for the other documents, namely the drawings and correspondence.

Changes in material, design, or method of application (discussed at great length in the correspondence and annotated on the drawings) can be confirmed or reputed with the information available in the receipt book. In some instances, they provide the only record of an installation or purchase. At other times the receipts embellish information gleaned from another source by stating such information as color, size, and location of intended use.

Walter validates the significance of the receipt book, as a record of what was actually purchased for the house during the years 1860-66, through several references in his correspondence. In one letter he specifically asks for a re-
ceipt to preserve the accuracy of his records: "This would not be necessary were it not that I want the vouchers for the house to be complete." In another he writes, "I will thank you to receipt and return to me by mail, as I desire to preserve all the vouchers of the building." This obsession with keeping a complete record of the accounts for his house was consistent with his compulsive personality, perhaps a product of his earlier history of alternating prosperity and near poverty.

Together these documents -- drawings, correspondence, receipt book -- provide an unusually complete record of the design and construction of a house. Each without the others could be misleading. Collectively, they reveal the spectrum of design for aspects of this house that ultimately provides fruitful ground for scholarship on Thomas Ustick Walter.

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4 Letter; August 24, 1861; to Joseph Johns.
5 Letter; December 14, 1861; to Messrs. J. & G. H. Gibson.
Walter first mentioned the possibility of designing a house for himself in September 1860, in response to a letter from a potential client. He states that he has decided to decline any further private commissions while engaged with the Capitol extension, unless he were to build a house for himself. Two weeks later he writes to his son, Robert, of his plans to relocate. This is the first recorded instance of his desire to retire to Pennsylvania: "We expect ourselves to go back to Penna. to live, perhaps during the coming year; we are making arrangements now to that effect."

These arrangements amounted to an enquiry, first to a realtor in Baltimore about purchasing a house and lot, and then to Realtors in Germantown about a lot on which he could build a house himself. This initial correspondence regarding Walter's eventual home in Germantown reveals two important criteria for construction: fashion and cost. The house had to be built of the finest materials and in the prevailing taste but as inexpensive as possible. This philosophy was closely aligned with views expressed by Downing, who wrote in 1850:

The first and most obvious of these rules of utility is, that the cost of the building should not exceed the means of the owner or occupant....The second rule governs the quality of the materials and workmanship employed in the construction. That the materials should be of the soundest and best quality in the best edifices, and of ample strength and durability for

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6 Letter; September 3, 1860; to Rev. S. R. White.
7 Letter, September 14, 1860; to Robert Walter.
the end in view, even in those of the humblest in class, is a rule which may never be for a moment violated by the builder, without injury to the structure.  

The inevitable collision of these two conflicting considerations of fashion and cost led to constant deliberations between Walter and his vendors, some of whom may have submitted to his demands out of frustration with his voluminous correspondence over small sums and trivial details. The themes of economy and quality permeate the construction phase but are also evident in the early negotiations over the lot in Germantown.

In a letter to his daughter, Annie, Walter describes his requirements for a suitable lot:

I prefer to build if I could get a good lot...I want to be in a good neighborhood & require about an acre -- would like a good many trees on it, and want it so situated as not to require any digging down. I am afraid that I shall be hard to please.  

His statement that he would be “hard to please” would eventually be an accurate characterization of all aspects of his supervision of the project. Unfortunately, his restlessness to leave Washington and his necessary absence from the site caused him to purchase a lot on the corner of High and Morton Streets in Germantown that he later said he would not have purchased had he had more time to examine the land.

Still, he wrote to his friend, John Rice, that he liked the lot very much. His offer of $6000, between $1.75 and $2.00 per square foot, was made in a letter to his realtor in which he reveals his desire to sell securities and pay for

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Letter; October 2, 1860; to Annie E. Walter.
the lot and construction of the house in cash. His assertion that "cash dealing is the most satisfactory" articulated a philosophy of fiscal responsibility that may have emanated from his bankruptcy twenty years earlier at the time of the collapse of the United States Bank. This philosophy guided him throughout the construction of his house; he often used the promise of prompt cash payment to secure discounts and special considerations from his vendors. In the end, he was able to purchase his lot for $5700, even less than he had originally offered.

Although he had procured a lot, Walter still entertained the idea of buying another house even after drawing the initial studies for his own design. He wrote in mid-November of 1860 that he might possibly purchase a house "ground and all, for less than it would cost me to build, and thus save money, and have a place ready to occupy at once." This impatience and pecuniary caution is deceptive without the knowledge that war was beginning to loom heavily on the horizon. Indeed, in that same letter he continues, "I want to get my family away from this place [Washington, D.C.] -- a very few weeks may make this the fighting ground of the whole country." Such haste would prove frustrating once excavation began on the site; only a shallow layer of topsoil concealed the solid rock below that threatened his design for an extensive cellar.

By early 1861, he was so upset at the obstacles of excavating the site that he had completely reversed his opinion about the lot in Germantown. The correspondence between Walter and his foreman as well as to friends in the building trade is peppered with references to his unfortunate choice. One let-

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10 Letter; October 15, 1860; to Messrs. Gummey & Sons.
11 Letter; November 16, 1860; to John Rice.
ter in particular reveals his disgust: "I was very much deceived in the land; I supposed I was buying ground, when, as it has since turned out, it was simply a huge boulder: they tell me that it is worth its weight in gold; I would rather have the gold." 12

As the correspondence continued, references to the cheapest (yet, most able) workers abound, no doubt fueled by the unexpected costs of blasting out the rock for a cellar (a cost he later partially recovered by reusing the stone and selling the excess). Eventually, Walter’s taste and good sense of construction overcame his preoccupation with expense in the final selection of vendors and workers. He chose mainly local craftsmen with proven reputations for quality work such as Samuel Collum of Germantown, who Walter found had built “most of the good houses in the neighborhood of [his] lot.” 13

Walter came to rely heavily on his contractors to supervise construction, since his work at the Capitol prevented him from overseeing it himself. Perhaps this forced absence resulted in his apparent paranoia about expense and corruption on the job site. He frequently requested his friend, John Rice, or his father-in-law, Dr. Richard Gardiner, to ride over to the site and report back to him. When it seemed that work was progressing too slowly, Walter sent angry letters to John Skirving, his first foreman, complaining that time was money and questioning the hours reported by the workers. 14

The combination of disappointment over the lot, frustration over the initial estimates, the distraction of his work at the Capitol, and the impending civil war drove Walter into depression and retrenchment by the early months of 1862. He felt he had to do something about relocating his family out of har-

12 Letter; February 8, 1861; to John Rice.
13 Letter; January 30, 1861; to John Rice.
14 Letter; February 21, 1861; to John Skirving.
m's way, yet he had not intended for it to be as expensive as it was turning out to be. He wrote to one of his daughters, "if things don't all go to ruin, [I] will build a plain house." 15 Then to his contractor, "I am also discouraged at the high estimates I received for my house, and the great expense the grounds are to be to me...I must reflect well before I get into it any deeper and I am now so hurried with my business that I can't take time to deliberate." 16

This idea of a "plain house" was reflected in the early designs. The similarity to a "cheap cottage" he designed in 1859 for Gen. Sam Houston in Texas is striking (Figure 4). 17 Except for the projecting side wing and the absence of a third story, the two designs are virtually identical, particularly the belvedere and first floor plan. The design for his own house also closely resembles two of his designs in the book he co-authored with John Jay Smith, Two Hundred Designs for Cottages and Villas (1846) (Figures 5 & 6).

Although reflecting the prevailing taste of Venetian Picturesque, 18 the facade was quite symmetrical and ordered. Ornament was limited to a bracketed cornice, quoins, a portico with chamfered beams, and a belvedere surmounting a hipped roof. A chaste example of a tasteful, suburban house, Walter's design reflected the Picturesque aesthetic more in plan than in ornament with varying room sizes and irregular placement of stairs.

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15 Letter; February 2, 1861; to Mrs. J. Davis King.
16 Letter; February 7, 1861; to John Skirving.
Figure 4. Top; Drawing of a "cheap cottage" for Gen. Sam Houston, in Texas, 1859. Bottom; Elevation, T. U. Walter Home, Germantown, 1861 (WTU 067.007). The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
Figure 5. Plate XXXVII, from Walter and Smith, *Two Hundred Designs for Cottages and Villas* (Philadelphia, 1846). Courtesy, *The Library Company of Philadelphia.*
The only two surviving exterior perspectives 19 show that Picturesque notions of placement within the landscape were considered (Figure 7). It is doubtful that these renderings are actually from Walter’s hand. They are more likely the product of his foreman, John Skirving, who would send him sketches of the site from time to time. 20 These perspectives no doubt reflect the ideal rather than the practical since the landscape was apparently a low priority from the start: "You speak of the trees; why I have ceased to think of them long ago; I think of nothing but the stones." 21 Only after he and his family occupied the house would he begin to think of laying out the garden and graperies.

19 Drawings, WTU 067.026 and WTU 067.017, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
20 One sketch (WTU 067.017) is probably another house altogether since it clearly depicts a set of railroad tracks in the foreground, and contemporary atlases show that there were never any railroad tracks in High or Morton Streets.
21 Letter; March 23, 1861; to John Skirving.
Figure 7. Top and Bottom; Perspectives showing the Picturesque placement of a house. These were probably drawn by John Skirving, Walter’s foreman. (WTU 067.026; 067.017) The Athenæum of Philadelphia.
After it was suggested to him that the stone from the cellar excavation could be used for the front walls and gate or else sold, Walter’s mood became a bit more optimistic. In a letter to the friend who suggested the solution, he writes, “You have come to the rescue, and have put me in good terms with my lot; you have also removed some very unpleasant surmises from my mind in reference to the cost of what has been done;--I shall now go on with confidence.” 22 The work progressed on the house as spring came to the region, and Walter’s interest in the project continued with renewed zeal.

The correspondence, drawings, and receipts prove that changes were made to the original design throughout the course of construction. What is so significant about many of the changes, particularly those to architectural elements and materials, is that Walter often articulated the reasons for them in the correspondence to his contractors and vendors.

One such example involved the exterior facing of the house. In the earliest extant drawings (October and November 1860), the house is clad in a pinkish brick. 23 By January 1861, however, the brick facing had been abandoned for roughcasting as indicated in the series of elevations bearing that date. 24 Ennis suggests that Walter was “experimenting” with design elements, including the exterior facing, and made the change based on aesthetic consid-

22 Letter; February 12, 1861; to Elliston Perot.
23 Drawings, WTU 067.018, WTU 067.0—, WTU 067.005, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
eralations. However, the correspondence suggests that a lack of faith in the craftsmen was the primary factor: "I intended to face the house with smooth brickwork; finding, however, that it was doubtful whether I could get a creditable job of brickwork in Germantown I abandoned the idea and adopted roughcasting." In this case his insistence on quality workmanship precipitated change; in other examples, economy was the motivating factor.

In a letter to Janes, Fowler & Co. of New York, his cast iron supplier, Walter describes another change:

I send today, by express, 3 drawings showing rustic corners, window heads, and a facia, or belt, for a house I am about to build for myself in Germantown, Pa. -- I propose to make them all of cast iron; I intended at first to make them of brownstone, but they cost entirely too much.

The same was true with regard to the use of marble tiles on the front porch: "The tiling of the porch will be omitted, it is too costly." The surviving drawings of the porch clearly show a pavement of black and white marble tiles. In addition, a diary entry records the change: "Made design of new front porch." Without the explanation given in the correspondence and diary, an inaccurate assumption might be made regarding the employment of such tiles. The absence of a receipt for marble tiles further corroborates Walter's written intentions.

Changes in exterior design elements were not limited to building mate-

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26 Letter; March 16, 1861; to Allen Bard.
27 Letter; February 28, 1861; to Janes, Fowler & Co.
28 Letter; February 18, 1861; to John Skirving.
30 Diary 1861, June 25.
rials. From the very beginning, the idea of a conservatory on the north side was considered, according to both the architectural drawings and a crude sketch in a letter to his contractor, John Skirving. 31 There are several penciled changes to the conservatory on the drawings, confirming what Ennis has suggested -- that Walter experimented with several aesthetic alternatives. Once again, however, the correspondence reveals that, although the changes in its design may have been aesthetically motivated, its omission from the final as-built condition was prompted by practical rather than design considerations. In 1862 he considered a large bay window extension to the north side of the house where once he had envisioned a conservatory, but in the end he chose to spend his money on a pair of gilt mantle mirrors “for no other reason than that it would not require such a carving up of the house, and would not cause so much dirt and confusion.” 32

These sorts of practical considerations for making design decisions reinforce the already accepted notion that Walter was driven in his work by moral principles and prudent realizations. His Protestant background and practical way of life, although never dictating taste, conditioned him to establish parameters for his design: “I must not think of luxuries until I know that I can meet all the cost.” 33 Never more was this personality trait evident than in the building of his own house.

Walter’s correspondence also reveals theoretical positions about aspects of design and construction such as masonry and roof construction. For example, to his contractor he writes about the merits of mortar in the construction of walls:

31 Letter; March 1, 1861; to John Skirving.
32 Letter; February 11, 1863; to Messrs. J. S. Earle & Son.
33 Letter; March 23, 1861; to John Skirving.
...please make all the walls of the house every where, bottom and top, mortar walls--I want no space as big as a sixpence from the bottom of the first stone to the top--This is a thing I provide for everybody else, and I want it for myself also -- don't have one single stone laid dry in any part of the work -- grouting is not good -- I have always repudiated it -- it is a great mistake to grout -- the many gallons, or barrels of water used in making grout eventually dry out and leave cavities throughout the walls -- I have taken down grouted walls and found them like wasps' nests; cavities everywhere. Don't let us have any grout; -- nothing so good as filling up the interstices with good mortar--let the first stone be laid in mortar -- this has been a provision in my specifications for 20 years or more.  

Here one is able to discern Walter’s method for laying up a wall. It can be inferred that such wall construction had proven itself to the architect over the term of his career, given Walter’s strict adherence to excellent workmanship and durable quality.

Likewise, he is equally obstinate about the method for applying a roof to a structure:

The bills and receipts came safely to hand; also the proposals for tinning -- the latter we will consider hereafter; -- I have not, for years, permitted a sheet of tin to be put on any of my works except with maleable [sic] nails called "cleats," clinched on the under side, and I always demand a clamp for every sheet (at least) hence I never lose a roof, never have a leak, and nobody who trusts to me in that matter is ever kept awake at night by the rattling of the tin -- I must be as faithful to myself as I am to others, so nothing short of that mode of putting on any of the roofs will be listened to at any price. And again, I must have "English-leaded-charcoal-cross tin" none other can be depended on.  

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34 Letter; March 26, 1861; to John Skirving.
35 Letter; March 23, 1861; to John Skirving.
A description of this sort and the one before have enormous implications for both the architectural historian and the preservationist. They establish precedence and reveal the preference of an influential arbiter of taste in the nineteenth century, thereby providing a model for replication or preservation.
Chapter 3: Interior Finishes

When it came time to begin fitting up the interior of his house in the fall of 1861, Walter was finally able to think of luxuries. Heretofore, it will be recalled, he had eschewed excess ornament and settled for less expensive alternatives as long as they were of the highest quality. However, his approach to the interior, although not radically different, seems to have been more liberal in allowing for the latest fashionable amenities.

One reason for this different attitude may be the influence of his second wife, Amanda. The correspondence between Walter and his wife was prolific during this period; he often sought refuge from the mounting military tensions by writing to her. When he could get away for a few days to Philadelphia to visit his family and the construction site in Germantown, they nearly always traveled together on purchasing trips either into Philadelphia or New York. These trips continued through 1864 according to Walter's diaries.

Her participation in the whole project becomes much more apparent as the house nears completion implying that, following the prevailing trend of the period, the interior was considered the woman's domain even in the Walter household. Both his diary and cashbook for 1861 contain entries for subscriptions to Godey's Lady's Book, which was published primarily for a fe-
male readership.  

This documentation places Walter among the thousands who turned to Louis Godey for advice in fitting up their homes. The extent to which Walter himself retained control over the fittings is significant, even though he was careful to include his wife in almost every transaction concerning the interior. Although Walter sometimes used his wife’s desires and complaints as the basis for his negotiations with the vendors, he was always the one corresponding with them.

In many ways the interior of Walter’s house was as typical and predictable as any of that period, certainly as much so as the exterior. However, domestic structures reflect their builders and owners, and Walter’s house was no exception. Because of the prestige and notoriety assigned to him as the Architect of the Capitol Extension, Walter was on friendly terms with the leading craftsmen and vendors of the day, most of whom were involved at the Capitol and who gladly accepted commissions to work on his house in Germantown, particularly when work was suspended on the Capitol at the outset of the war. It was the association with these artisans that so distinguished Walter’s house from the great many other Italianate structures throughout the country.

Perhaps the best known craftsman to have worked on Walter’s house was Constantino Brumidi (1805-80), who executed the frescoes at the Capitol. The idea to have the ceilings of his own house decoratively painted was first articulated in a letter to another painter at the Capitol in September 1861.

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Cashbook 1861, July 26, “Godey, Harper & Frankles .46”
Cashbook 1861, September 4, “Harper & Gody [sic] .55”


38 Letter; September 3, 1861; to E. Carstens.
In this letter, Walter expresses his desire to employ some of the unemployed workers from the public works at his own house provided they could do the work cheaply and swiftly. The instructions and accompanying sketch (Figure 8) contained in that letter are an extraordinary expression of a typical decorative painting scheme of fashion and taste:

I propose to paint all the ceilings either in oil or in encaustic, whichever is the cheapest, as I abhor the mud paint they call fresco, which you remember gave us so much trouble on our ceilings in Washington. I shall want an estimate for each ceiling complete, and also the length of time it will require to paint them...I will give you an idea of what I want, and you can probably give me an estimate at once sufficiently accurate to enable me to decide whether I can afford to have it done.

All the ceilings are finely plastered without panels or centre pieces, or any ornament, and the cornices are like those of my Washington house.

Parlor A. Simple moldings shaded. B. Two boquets [sic] of flowers about like those in Washington. C. A center piece painted around the gas pipe. All the rest of the ceiling I want to be in flat tints without any vines or ornaments of any kind whatever...No. 2 is the dining room which is exactly the same size, and which I want painted exactly in the same manner.

No. 3 is a library 16 feet square: on that ceiling I want nothing but the outer moulding...and the centre piece around the gas pipe -- this completes the lower story.

The 2nd story has 2 rooms each 16.0 x 24, and one room 16 feet square, and the 3rd story has one room 16 x 24 and 3 rooms each 16 feet square -- In all of these rooms I want the same moulding and nothing else except something small in the centre without any circumscribing circle around it; either a small boquet [sic]...or a cherub with a wreath or a flower, or any simple thing. 39

Here Walter states that he "abhors" fresco painting and prefers oils and encaustics. Such a statement is highly significant because fresco painting was

39 Letter; September 3, 1861; to E. Carsten.
Figure 8. Detail of a sketch in a letter from T. U. Walter to E. Carsten, 1861. 
*The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.*
popular at the time and used extensively at the Capitol. For Walter to declare his distaste for it based on his own experience in its application indicates that the quality of fresco painting in America must not have been very superior, Brumidi notwithstanding. At the very least, Walter obviously felt that it was more trouble than it was worth. In terms of the decoration of his own house, this description not only reveals facts about each room -- such as dimension and pattern -- but also establishes a hierarchy of rooms and their design. What is also apparent here is Walter’s familiar insistence on simplicity even if it was within the context of a decorated ceiling.

Although he mentioned haste, Walter was not to have his painted ceilings until 1863 when he then engaged Brumidi to execute what he had planned two years earlier. However, from later correspondence it appears that Brumidi was given more of a free hand to create what he deemed appropriate: “I leave the whole matter to you; your taste is never at fault.” 40 Brumidi and his workers moved into the house in February 1863, and resided there until they were finished forty-eight days later. The receipts further reveal that Brumidi employed five assistants and charged $1500 for “designing and painting ceilings in oil.” 41 The rest of the painted surfaces throughout the house were executed by the firm of Hunnecker & Brant, whose itemized bill includes the amounts of each different pigment and medium used and the time it took to perform the job, such as “128 1/2 days graining, 534 days plain painting.” 42 43

40 Letter; February 2, 1863; to C. Brumidi.
41 Cashbook for Germantown House, 1860-68.
42 Household Receipt Book, Hunnecker & Brant, p. 103.
43 A receipt such as this one would be extremely helpful in determining original paint colors and graining patterns if used to corroborate surviving evidence in a structure through the use of micro-analysis.
Floor Coverings

Just as the decorative painting scheme was unified throughout the house, so too were the floor coverings. A letter to Stewart & Co. of New York gives another example of Walter’s meticulous instructions conveyed through correspondence:

I selected some carpeting a few days ago, and was waited upon by Mr. E. Many, to whom I gave the order; I will thank you to hand him the enclosed tracings which will be his guide as to dimensions. No. 1 shows Drawing room, Dining room, Library and Halls which will all be of one pattern, we also want 17 yards of the same pattern for the stairs...the pattern selected is No. 1372, velvet.

No. 2 shows chamber and Bath room which will be of pattern No. 710, Brussels. As the Bath room is so small and irregular Mrs. Walter thinks you had better not have that carpet made but send enough material and her upholsterer will make it. She also desires me to say that the trimming and fitting of the carpets around the walls, particularly in the halls, had better be done on the floor by the upholsterer...There will be 24 stair rods required of the pattern we selected. 

A passage such as this one is rich in information about pattern, design, and placement as well as the number of risers on the stairway. More significant is the clear division of labor between Walter and his wife. They both participated in the selection and purchase of the carpet in New York. Yet, the job of supervision was left to Mrs. Walter, who was at ease issuing instructions to the vendor, if only via Mr. Walter.

Other references to floor coverings include a receipt for marble for the entry and eleven feet of carpet strips, indicating that, although tiled in marble,

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"Letter; December 7, 1861; to Messrs. Stewart & Co."
it was probably covered by either carpet or an oil cloth. 45 A subsequent letter to James H. Orne in Philadelphia confirms that Walter purchased an “oil cloth” and a “floor cloth.” 46 Further documentation can be found in the cashbook of 1862: “Oil cloth for kitchen 9.42,” indicating that a floor cloth was used in the kitchen at least. 47 Finally, one last reference to floor coverings appears in a letter to the furnace repairmen: “I ought to have said that every inch of our house is carpeted from bottom to top.” 48 This sort of corroborating evidence is typical of the multiple documentary references generated by Walter in connection to this house.

Window Treatments

Documentation for window treatments is relatively sparse. In fact, there are no direct references to any type of draped or curtained treatments except for an inconclusive mention in a letter to a furnace supplier that the “parlor is curtained.” 49 There is no description of pattern or fabric. However, there is a reference to window shades in Walter’s diary: “Went to Ph[iladelphia]...bespoke window shades and paid for them $11.50 (Caryle).” 50 Window

46 Letter; January 9, 1862; to J. H. Orne.
47 Cashbook 1862, March 3.
48 Letter; January 10, 1862; to Hayward, Bartlett & Co.
49 Letter; January 10, 1862; to Hayward, Bartlett & Co.
50 Diary 1861, May 27.


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shades, in colors of “pale buff, blue, rose-color, white, with green centres, with gilt borders,” from William H. Carryl’s furnishings store were reported in the August 1854 issue of Godey’s Lady’s Book to have ranged in price from $2 to $20.70. Unfortunately, no bill or receipt survives in the household receipt book to identify these particular window shades.

An example of multiple documentation for a window treatment does exist relating to the stained glass for the stairwell windows from J. & G. H. Gibson, one of the most prominent firms in the city for glass and the makers of the skylights in the Capitol. A diary entry in 1861 mentions calling on the Messrs. Gibson to discuss the purchase of stained glass for the entry as well as the stairwell for $100.

Another description of the glass that was delivered is found in the household receipt book: “To making and glazing rich, ornamental, stained glass in vestibule doors, transom & side lights also in stair case windows 2d. & 3d. story as agreement...$100.00.” A letter also acknowledges the receipt of the glass as well as the bill and pledges prompt payment. Finally, one of the only two surviving photographs shows the windows in place on the south side of the house (Figure 9).

One final reference to window treatments occurs in the correspondence. In a letter to his carpenter, Walter requests screens for the kitchen windows in order “to receive gause [sic] netting to keep out flies.” This request

53 Diary 1861, September 4, “Went to the City about Stained Glass -- agreed with Mr. Gibson to execute all for $100, viz. 2 windows on main stairs, side lights of side door, transom lights of inner front door, and lights of d[itto].”
55 Letter; December 14, 1861; to J. & G. H. Gibson.
56 Letter; February 16, 1863; to Allen Bard.
Figure 9. Photograph, showing exterior view of S. W. flank, ca. 1863-73. Note the presence of stained glass in windows above side entrance.

The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
reflects the efforts of people to protect against unsanitary conditions in the
nineteenth century and a rare early use of window screens in America.  

Wall Coverings

From a bill of Howell & Brothers 58 in the Household Receipt Book, it
appears that all the major rooms in the house were wallpapered, except the
kitchen which was plastered and painted. The delineation of the rooms
which were papered is a significant aspect of this bill:

| 75 [rolls] | 4 Rooms 3rd Story | 1 not hung |
| 7 | 1/2 not hung |
| 60 | 3 Front & back rooms 2nd Story | 1 not hung |
| 6 2/3 | border |
| 12 | NW Room - 2nd Story | 1 not hung |
| 1 | border |
| 29 | 3 Rooms 3rd Story back building | 1 not hung |
| [?] | border |
| 21 1/2 | Boudoir | 1 not hung |
| 4 3/4 | border | 1 not hung |
| 48 | Parlor, Dining Room, Library |
| 15 | border |
| 48 | Entry | 1 not hung |
| 9 | border 59 |

Although the halls and stairwell are not specifically mentioned here, the
amount of rolls listed under "Entry" equals that for the "Parlor, Dining

57 Walter often wrote to his wife from Washington complaining about the unsanitary condi-
tions there; he particularly despised insects and rodents.

58 Howell & Brothers was described as "undoubtedly the largest in the United States, and
probably larger than any similar European manufactory," in Freedly, p. 371.

For more information on wallpapers of this period see Catherine Lynn, Wallpaper in
America from the Seventeenth Century to World War I (New York, 1980).

59 Household Receipt Book, Howell & Brothers, December 6, 1861.
Room, [and] Library," thereby implying that halls and stairwell are meant to be included with the entry. It is also unclear whether or not multiple listings means that all of those rooms had the same paper. This would seem unlikely, particularly in the bedrooms; more probably, multiple listings of rooms indicate different papers of the same price.

The fact that Walter papered the rooms in his house is not particularly significant; such extensive use of wallpaper was commonplace by mid-century. What is more significant is that this bill points out the importance of having multiple sources of documentation. The only other references to wallpaper are brief and not specific. ^60^ While names of patterns are not given, the inclusion of room names confirms which spaces were indeed papered, proving that Walter favored such interior decoration as did his contemporaries and the leading household journals of the day.

^60^ Diary 1861, October 10, "Went to city [Philadelphia] with Mrs. W. and Gardiner [son] to look at carpet, paper etc."

Letter; October 13, 1863; to Howell & Bros. This letter acknowledges repair work done on the wallpaper in the entry in 1863.
Chapter 4: Furnishings

Perhaps more than any other aspect of a dwelling, the furnishings are a measure of personality and station in life. For that reason, it is important to determine what types of objects were used in Walter’s house so that one might more fully determine his lifestyle in Germantown. Ironically, furnishings constitute the most difficult aspect to assess about Walter’s house because he and his family brought many things with them when they moved. There are no receipts in the household receipt book for furniture or other decorative arts. A few other references are found in the cashbooks and diaries, but the letters on this subject are less specific than with other aspects of the house.

Because of the economic depression of 1837, Walter was forced to sell his house and possessions, including his library. 61 Easier times and financial prosperity came to him once again in the late 1840s and especially when he began work on the Capitol in 1851. The period from his bankruptcy in 1841 leading up to his move to Germantown in December 1861, seems to have been when he purchased most of the furnishings that he brought with him to Germantown. The surviving documentation for this period is less comprehensive than in later years; nonetheless, clues about the furniture are revealed in the cashbooks and letters.

The most significant of the several entries for furniture listed in the receipt book for the period 1834-51 are those from Crawford Riddle and George

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Henkels. The first receipt from Riddle in 1846 indicates “Cabinet ware as per bill of this date 70.00,” and the second, a year later, states, “in full of all demands for furniture to this date 48.00.” Unfortunately, the bills that accompanied these receipts have not survived so there is no further description of the furniture that Riddle made for Walter.

Similar receipts were recorded for George Henkels in 1848 and 1849; one mentions a center table for $10. A significant point about Henkels and Riddle is that Henkels took over Riddle’s shop in 1850 and eventually became the largest manufacturer of furniture in Philadelphia. Walter’s purchase of furniture by Henkels, who began his cabinetmaking career in 1843, indicates an early recognition of Henkels’s talent, predating the celebrated suite made for Asa Packer’s home (ca.1860) by more than a decade. It serves to underscore Henkels’s rise to prominence in the late 1840s and early 1850s, by associating him with Walter, one of the leading architects of the period.

Other cabinetmakers Walter patronized included Charles A. Baudouine, Benchi & Kimbel, and E. W. Hutchings of New York; Hiss &

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For general information on nineteenth-century cabinetmakers, see Eileen and Richard Dubrow, American Furniture of the Nineteenth Century, 1840-1880 (Exton, PA, 1983).

63 Receipt Book 1834-51; April 21, 1846; Crawford Riddle by H. E. Shaw.

64 Receipt Book 1834-51; February 17, 1847; Crawford Riddle.

65 Receipt Book 1834-51; December 11, 1848; Geo. H. Henkels by H. S. Stiles. Receipt Book 1834-51; August 21, 1849; Geo. H. Henkels by H. S. Stiles.
Austin of Baltimore; J. T. Hammitt and A. LeJambre of Philadelphia. It is impossible to determine the form or decoration of the pieces made for Walter except on a very general level because only the vaguest descriptions are given in the cashbook entries. Their work for Walter was almost certainly solidly built from excellent materials but of modest ornament and carving. The few pieces that were purchased for the new house and listed in the cashbooks of 1861 and 1862 bear descriptions such as "camp chairs," "cottage set for Ida's room," and "rustic furniture." Indeed, twice in his correspondence Walter asserts that "Mrs. W[alter]. has a great aversion to carving." Such a position illustrates his wife's influence in such matters but reaffirms that Walter himself is the one who dealt with the vendors even in matters concerning the household.

One exchange, preserved in the correspondence, between Walter and LeJambre over the reupholstery of the parlor furniture indicates the tasteful, modest manner in which the Walters decorated their house in Germantown. It began with a request from Walter to LeJambre to remove the furniture from the house at the first of the year, 1864:

We understood you to say that you would be ready to take our parlor furniture in hand about the beginning of the year... We want it done in the best possible manner, the covering to be of the brocatelle, in small figures, which you showed us.-- You will please do any repairs you may find necessary, and varnish

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A note on spelling: this cabinetmaker's name was spelled 'LeJambre' by the firm and in printed sources. Walter, however, spelled it as 'Lejambre'.

67 Cashbook 1861, December 6.
   Cashbook 1861, December 17.
   Cashbook 1862, March 25.

68 Letter; November 15, 1858; to J. E. Gould.
   Letter; November 17, 1858; to J. E. Gould.
and polish the wood work.

Mrs. Walter particularly requests that you will put a tuft or wad of curled hair on each of the front corners of the chairs, to prevent the wearing out of the covering, and then to put a small piece of the covering on each corner before putting the main covering on. She says that...there will be something to 'darn' to when the corners begin to wear out.

She also directs me to request you to save all the old covers, as she has other uses to which she desires to apply them.

The furniture will be delivered to you with the chintz coverings on, for protection, and it may be returned in the same way. Mrs. Walter says that she will have it washed and repaired after the furniture is returned.\(^6^9\)

Here again, the influence of Mrs. Walter is evident in the instructions given to LeJambre, although it is Mr. Walter who is writing to the craftsman. An emphasis on durability and practicality is paramount and underscores a frugal, yet tasteful approach to interior decoration. The sturdy brocatelle fabric, chintz slipcovers, and instructions for ‘darnable’ corners are interesting decorative features for the design historian and further illustrate the point.

A letter sent the same day to his caretaker in Germantown reveals the number of upholstered pieces that comprise the Walter parlor suite:

Mr. Lejambre will send for our parlor chairs and sofas, in order to re-cover them before the family comes on; you will therefore please deliver them to whoever he may send; they consist of 2 sofas -- 6 chairs -- 2 arm chairs, and 2 straight backed chairs, making in all 12 pieces.\(^7^0\)

The number here suggests a typical set of parlor furniture (without mentioning center tables, sofa tables, and etageres), just enough to fill the parlor comfortably. The fact that Walter had them all reupholstered in the same fabric

\(^6^9\) Letter; December 26, 1863; to Mr. Lejambre.

\(^7^0\) Letter; December 26, 1863; to Charles Winfield.
suggests that he was aware of the prevailing taste and had probably owned them for some time to warrant re-upholstering.

Finally, Walter addressed the issue of style in a letter to LeJambre three days later:

I forgot to say to you in my letter of Saturday, that Mrs. Walter desires the furniture to be covered in the same manner as it now is; that is to say, the 2 sofas, the 6 chairs, and the 2 arm chairs to be tufted, and the 2 straight backed chairs to be covered smooth, as they now are.

It has become fashionable to cover furniture smooth, without tufting, probably because it is more easily kept clean; but this we do not care about, nor do we mind the fashion; tufted furniture looks far richer, and is in better taste than plain covering; we therefore desire it to be continued on all the furniture that is now tufted. 71

Although a contradiction may appear between Walter’s desire to retain a ‘rich’ appearance and his apparent conservative nature, the passage actually reveals otherwise. In stating that they do not mind the fashion or worry about keeping the furniture clean, Walter and his wife express their determination to disregard fashion. They prefer instead to maintain a tasteful and prosperous decor. After all, by this time the parlor had become the best room in one’s house; if Walter could achieve a sumptuous image with upholstery or such obvious symbols of status as pianos and organs, he would not have to resort to heavily carved furniture which his wife did not like anyway.

The importance of a piano or melodeon to the interior of a well-established, upper middle-class household was immeasurable by mid-century. A musical instrument in the parlor was as much a staple as wall-to-wall carpeting, and Thomas U. Walter can be documented as having at least two pianos

71 Letter; December 28, 1863; to Mr. Lejambre.
and one melodeon before moving to his house in Germantown. In the inventory of his household goods at the time of his bankruptcy in 1841, a piano is valued at $385, presumably marked for sale in the auction of his household goods. 72 A receipt, dated 1848, records repair work by Thomas Loud to a piano, reestablishing the existence of a piano in the Walter household at least by 1848. 73 Whether or not these two are the same piano is really irrelevant; the significance lies in the fact that Walter, like his contemporaries and with several females in his household, felt it appropriate to own one. Such an accessible symbol of stability must have appealed to Walter after his earlier financial humiliation.

The first reference to a piano in Walter’s correspondence comes in 1856 when he contemplates purchasing an instrument which combined both an organ and piano in one from the Messrs. Gilbert of Boston:

They [Mrs. Walter and their daughters] have returned, and agree with me in doubting the possibility of uniting a wind with a stringed instrument -- the change of temperature in a drawing room filled with company would naturally tend to lower the tone of the strings, while the rarification of the air would raise the portion of the instrument that depended on wind and thus produce discord; such has been the case with those they have heard, and I cannot conceive how it can be obviated....the wind attachment, if it were possible to make a perfect and durable harmony with the strings, would certainly be an invaluable invention, and I would not hesitate a moment in ordering one, but our prejudices are against them and Mrs. Walter thinks that we had better take no steps in the matter until I can make a visit to Boston, and hear them for myself. 74

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72 Inventory, among financial papers of 1841, Thomas Ustick Walter Collection, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
73 Receipt Book 1834-51; December 7, 1848; Thomas Loud by T. R. Loud.
74 Letter; August 19, 1856; to R. H. Neale.
Walter’s curious, yet practical nature is evident in this passage, preferring as he does to hear them for himself before committing to purchasing one.

Walter continues in this letter to a Boston friend that the only reason he even contemplated bypassing the firms in Philadelphia and New York was to obtain an instrument from Chickering and Sons, “that celebrated establishment.” 75 He added, “I was prepared to take whatever you [his friend in Boston] might select from that concern; but Mr. Gilbert’s letter unsettles me, and leads me to think that there may be more things in Boston than were ever dreamt of in my philosophy.” 76

Walter’s excitement over the discovery of Boston as the center for musical instrument manufacture is particularly significant here because it indicates how little he knew of that industry beyond the “celebrated.” Still, it would be a misconception to believe that Walter did not care about the quality of the instrument itself. When he finally purchased another instrument in 1858, it was a $275 parlor organ. 77 The correspondence surrounding the purchase deals as much with the tone of the instrument as the decoration of the case, although Walter confesses that they all need a teacher to understand how it works. 78


For an excellent, comprehensive survey of musical instruments during this period, see Laurence Libin, American Musical Instruments in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1985).

For a comparison of the piano and the parlor organ and their cultural impact, see Kenneth L. Ames, “Material Culture as Non Verbal Communication: A Historical Case Study,” in Edith Mayo, American Material Culture (Bowling Green, OH, 1984), pp. 25-47.

76 Letter; August 19, 1856; to R. H. Neale.

77 Expenses for 1858, November 30, in “Notes on Executive Mansion Repairs.”

78 Letter; November 15, 1858; to J. E. Gould.
Letter; November 17, 1858; to J. E. Gould.
One can see that Thomas U. Walter took the same approach to furnishing his house as he did to building it. The furniture was of the highest quality but not the most elaborate and expensive pieces available. His taste was modest and practical, as much a product of his conservative Protestant values as it was from earlier financial ruin. There seemed to be a need to have all of the necessities that society dictated yet there was a subtlety and refinement at play with Walter. His opinions on upholstery are indicative of this view: taste and practicality were the most important criteria. In this way he shared Downing's view that a man should have the best that he could afford.

The documentation is not as descriptive about individual pieces of furniture as with other aspects of his house, so it would be only speculation to authenticate pieces based on information in these sources. However, the sources give a good representation of Walter's taste and attitudes about interior decoration, not the least of which is the extent to which he consulted his wife, Amanda. A clear division of spheres of influence, long described by historians of women's roles, is revealed in this correspondence.
Chapter 5: Mechanical Systems

The mechanical systems of his new house greatly interested Walter; consequently, there are many references to them in his correspondence, drawings, and receipt book. In this study, three systems -- heating and ventilating, plumbing, and lighting -- will be analyzed according to what they reveal about Walter’s preferences in design and technological advance.

Heating and Ventilating

The warming and ventilating of a space is a subject that has always plagued builders, but with the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century, ventilation became an even more complicated and debated topic. The architectural critic, A. J. Downing, devoted an entire chapter to the topic in his book, The Architecture of Country Houses (1850), and wrote that “there is no subject directly connected with domestic life on which there is so large an amount of popular ignorance as ventilation.” 79

Thomas U. Walter, however, was well-versed in its application by the time he came to build his own house in 1861. His most recent and, arguably, most complicated heating and ventilating system had been at the Capitol. Although the debate still rages about the attribution of the system; the contributions of those who participated in its design; and its overall effectiveness;

79 Downing, p. 461.
no one would doubt that it was a remarkable attempt to solve an incredibly complicated problem. For Walter, at the very least, it was a fascinating design challenge.

When it came time to procure a system for his own house, Walter was insistent that he be the one to design it:

My intention is to design the apparatus myself, making all the calculations of heating surface, contents of rooms...myself so that anyone can make it, and I think I shall fare better with Janes & Co. than with anyone else. My object is to have the thing in my own way at the least possible cost, but as the apparatus will not be wanted before fall I have plenty of time to get up the plans and make the bargains.

His decision to design the system himself may well have been grounded in the experience he had undergone at the Capitol of too many people with conflicting ideas. Also, his remark about Janes & Co. of New York is significant because they were the firm he had employed to cast the iron fittings at the Capitol and the Library of Congress. Once again, this correspondence shows Walter to be concerned with quality and cost, preferring to design his own to save expense and insure effectiveness.

The system, conceptually similar to that employed at the Capitol, was apparently one of hot air blown over coils of steam-filled pipes. The drawings are particularly effective for showing the placement of the air columns and registers, which utilized both chimneys and wall space, as well as the place-

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81 Letter; January 21, 1861; to John Skirving.
ment of the furnace in the cellar. Each room had two registers for heat and ventilation, the sort of arrangement that Downing had advocated ten years earlier. In the end, the registers and furnace were installed by Hayward, Bartlett & Co. from Baltimore. The correspondence not only lists how many registers were used but their design as well:

The rim around the eight registers in the first story to be plated.-- The rest may be finished in the ordinary way, that is, either in enamel or paint. All the registers throughout the house, both for heat and ventilation, to have no ornamented skreen [sic] of any kind in front, but to be entirely open, nothing but the rim, and movable slats or blinds being required. All the registers required for ventilation to be arranged with cords and pullies for opening and shutting. -- the whole number is 38.

The instruction for there to be no ornamental screens is unusual but fairly indicative of his aversion to excess ornament. However, he confirms the usual hierarchical arrangement of rooms, those on the first floor being more formal, by requesting plated rims for use in first floor rooms but not elsewhere. Where expense was not necessary, he did not indulge, preferring instead the modest to the ornamental. This philosophy seems to have worked well for him as this comment to Hayward, Bartlett & Co. after their installation would attest: "The registers are perfect, and every body admires them. They are more convenient, and in better taste than anything of the kind I have ever seen. -- The execution of them is faultless."  

Unfortunately, there were problems from the start. When Walter and

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82 Drawings; WTU 067.020, WTU 067.003, WTU 067.002, WTU 067.004, WTU 067.013; The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
83 Downing, p. 467.
84 Letter; July 30, 1861; to Messrs. Hayward, Bartlett & Co.
85 Letter; October 14, 1861; to Messrs. Hayward, Bartlett & Co.
his family moved into the house in December 1861, there was no heat in the back portion of the house and very little in the front. Although he had presumably designed the system, he confessed to Hayward, Bartlett that he needed advice on how to run it, signaling the inevitable conflict between those who make a product and those who use it. However, by February, Walter was able to write, “I consider the apparatus a complete success. The information we derived from Mr. H[ayward] during his recent visit has enabled us to overcome some difficulties we found in warming the lower floor. We now have an even temperature throughout the house, and a perfect ventilation.” Apart from needing a few adjustments, the system remained effective throughout the period under review in this study.

Plumbing

The correspondence and receipts give little more than a general description of the arrangement of the plumbing. According to the drawings, the house was equipped with two bathrooms located on the second and third stories. Additionally, two bedrooms on the third floor had wash basins in the room. In a letter to his foreman, Walter explains the sewage system:

We will take the slops from the kitchen and closets &c. into wells -- please put them where you think best -- I shall want a cistern for rain water, as we drink nothing else -- it had better be in the angle formed by the front house and the back

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86 Letter; January 10, 1862; to Messrs. Hayward, Bartlett & Co. For the historian of technology, this correspondence is especially interesting as it details the environmental conditions in the house, the way the furnace was run, and the resulting inadequacies of the system.
87 Letter; February 15, 1862; to Messrs. Hayward, Bartlett & Co.
building, on the side next to Morton St.-- you had better have an underground drain made at that point leading to Morton St.-- if we should conclude to do without cisterns we can use said drain to carry off the rain water which we may concentrate at that point -- if we have a cistern it will do for an overflow -- but do as you please in the matter. 

Here is an instance in which the documents contradict one another. The passage above obviously leaves the matter unresolved but reveals Walter’s opinion that the cistern should be located on the Morton Street side of the house. However, one of the drawings shows a cistern marked in pencil directly out from the kitchen at the back of the house. None can be conclusive, and the placement is really irrelevant. What is interesting here is the process of design and the assertion by Walter that they only “drink rainwater.”

According to the household receipt book and a letter to Miller & Coats of New York, Walter chose typical fittings for a mid-nineteenth-century bathroom:

2 pans for water closets     pattern selected
4 wash basins, marbled, gilded    "    "
3 do do marbled, plain      "    "
1 sink                       "    " 90

The inclusion of pans indicates that he used pan toilets, the most common type of water closet in use at the time. 91 The basins were painted to resemble marble, also a common practice of the period. The plans illustrate where these fixtures were placed in the bathroom with the toilet being at the end of the tub (Figure 10). Although such bathrooms were still considered more of a

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90 Letter; August 30, 1861; to the Messrs. Miller & Coats.
Figure 10. Plan of Third Story, showing placement of bathroom fixtures in the foreground, 1860. (WTU 067.003) The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.
luxury than a necessity by mid-century, their use in structures of the size and stature of Walter’s house was becoming more widespread as the century progressed.

Lighting

By this point in the nineteenth century, gaslighting was the principal form of lighting in a domestic structure of the size of Walter’s home in Philadelphia. 92 Gas had first been introduced in Philadelphia in 1836 and came to Germantown in November, 1852. 93 It comes as no surprise then that Walter would have chosen that form of lighting for his own home. It is also not surprising that he used Cornelius & Baker fixtures throughout the house as well. Cornelius & Baker were the largest manufacturer of gas fixtures in the country at the time, and they provided the gas fixtures for the Capitol and the Treasury Building. Their ability to produce exactly what Walter required was well-known to him. Founded by Christian Cornelius at the turn of the nineteenth century, the firm began manufacturing gas fixtures from the outset of gas production in Philadelphia. Until the death of Christian Cornelius in 1851, they were known as “Cornelius & Son” or Cornelius & Co.” 94 After that they were joined in partnership by Isaac F. Baker, and became known as “Cornelius & Baker.” 95

92 For more information on gaslighting and an excellent pictorial source, see Denys Peter Myers, Gaslighting in America (New York, 1978).
94 Myers, p. 39.
95 Myers, p. 63.
The receipt from that firm lists only four gasoliers: a six, eight, and two four-light fixtures respectively. These were almost certainly placed in the principal rooms on the first floor. Additionally, there were forty-six brackets, two lanterns, two pendants, and four drop lights, that comprised the bulk of the lighting fixtures. The large number of brackets indicates that this form was preferred for lighting most of the rooms. Unfortunately, no other documentation exists as to their form or appearance.

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96 Household Receipt Book, Cornelius & Baker, p. 94.
When Thomas Ustick Walter tallied up in July of 1868 what he considered to be the final expenses for his house, the total came to $52,407.63. Despite his earlier notions of a “plain house,” Walter had managed to build himself a grand suburban villa which may have contributed to his second major financial reversal beginning in 1869. He was forced in 1873 to sell his Germantown home and move to humbler quarters in the city, where he died, still revered by his peers, but virtually penniless. Sadly, the house he had carefully designed, built, and retired to in the peaceful suburb of Germantown was razed in the early 1920s to make way for semi-detached housing.

It is remarkable that the documentation for this house remains so relatively intact given the fact that Walter was forced to sell it so soon after completion. Because of the varied types of documentation, this house provided a useful case study for analysis. Studied from an objective point of view without the burden of physical evidence to anticipate information, these documents illustrate what can and what cannot be learned from similar documentary evidence.

In the end, the receipts and letters provided the most definitive proof of building materials, craftsmen and vendors, finishes, furnishings, and mechanical systems. The receipts show what goods and services were actually purchased for the house. For example, in the wallpaper bill the exact number of rolls that were used is delineated. Similarly, the letters reveal intentions,

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97 Cashbook, 1860-68.
both realized and abandoned, as well as actual purchases. The exchange between Walter and his upholsterer, LeJambre, is a good example of how the letters enhance the understanding of how the furniture was upholstered. Yet, in both instances -- wallpaper and upholstery -- these documents only reveal so much. The questions left unanswered include what pattern, color, texture, and material; these questions are crucial to a restoration and might be answered in a physical examination of the structure.

The drawings illustrate the architect's design process, including changes in plan, siting, materials, and forms. They give a fascinating visual dimension to what was contemplated; however, they fall short in providing definitive proof of what was actually built. Without the other documents, the drawings can only suggest a final condition; they serve only to corroborate not to define.

Photographs, when available, often provide the most accurate image of arrangement and form. In the case of Walter's house, only two, undated, photographs are known. While they confirm certain aspects of the exterior facade and landscape, they remain static views of an unidentified point in time with the added limitations of angle, light, and perspective. In many cases, photographs can be excellent tools for interpretation. Here they only serve as corroborative documents proving that some sources may or may not be fruitful resources for recreation.

In the final analysis, recreating an historic site is a tenuous proposition, requiring as it does, informed assumptions at all levels. Those who seek to learn from the past by studying the built environment and its concomitant material culture must not rely on physical or documentary evidence alone,
nor should they let one source dictate and distort what can be learned from another. Rather, objective analysis is required to establish an accurate assessment of an earlier condition.

This study has not produced enough information from the documentary evidence of Thomas Ustick Walter’s house in Germantown to recreate the house in its original form. More importantly though, it has attempted to demonstrate the capacities and limitations of documentary evidence in historic restoration.
Appendix:

An Annotated Listing of the Drawings for the
Thomas Ustick Walter Home, Germantown, PA

*Thomas Ustick Walter Collection,*
*The Athenaeum of Philadelphia*
"Side Elevation, October 27, 1860." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & wash: 52.7 X 65.4 cm.

Shows evolution of facade after 067.018: brick facing; string course between second and third floors; belvedere on roof; modillions not bracketed cornice; side entrance on Morton Street facade; roundel in third floor stair landing above side entrance; kitchen entrance off rear facade; parapet on front porch roof; framed projection off back wing, Morton Street facade.

Finishes: red brick; sandstone trim; grained and varnished door and window sashes; porch trim to match sandstone; rear projection, cream; tin roof.
“Plan of Cellars, October 27, 1860.” 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 65.4 cm.

Shows plan of basement floor: gives room placement -- provision, pantry, furnace, coal; cellar door to the right of side entrance; directions for the “floor above these cellars to be iron beams with brick arches.”
"Plan of Third Story, October 27, 1860." 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 62.8 X 52.7 cm.

Shows plan of third story: room placement with dimensions; cavity wall construction; placement of fixtures in bathroom; basins in two rear bedrooms of main house; stairs on Morton Street side of house; back stairs on Morton Street side as well; penciled extension of rear projection to third floor; heating and ventilating columns delineated.
WTU  067 . 004

"Section from A to B, November 3, 1860."  1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 65.4 cm.

Shows placement of heating and ventilating registers in rooms; design of doors and frames; first floor doors are double panels; illustrates section of gutter; floor heights changed from 11'6" to 12'0" (2nd floor), 11'5 1/4" (3rd floor);

Finishes: doors grained; woodwork white; penciled changes to quoin design at left; design of quoins marked "adopted" at right.

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WTU 067 . 005

“Coach House & Stable, November 28, 1860.” 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 64.8 cm.

Gives details of coach house and stable: design of cornice with dimensions; brick facing; cupola with weathervane; bracketed cornice; gabled tin roof; two stories; plan of lower story shows coach house, harness room, stalls for horses, cow, feed box, closet, and privy room.
WTU 067.006

"Front Porch, No. X, January 16, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 64.8 cm.

Shows elevation, plan, and details for front porch: dimensions; penciled additions to elevation show two different schemes for lattice work between pillars; two schemes for upper termination of pillars -- rounded, capital; graduated steps have been changed to steps between plinths; black and white tiles; penciled sketch shows grade of steps.
WTU 067.007

"Front Elevation, No. V, January 16, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 53.3 X 67.3 cm.

Shows roughcasted finish; bracketed cornice; string course between second and third floor; double front doors, glazed rectangular panels above fielded panels; back wing projecting to S.W. instead of N.E. as in earlier scheme; side entrance on S.W. facade as well; octagonal conservatory projecting from Morton Street facade; penciled balustrade on porch; penciled extension of belvedere; dimensions of quoins and height of rear wing given.

Finishes: doors and window sashes grained; quoins and trim lighter in color than roughcast facing.
WTU 067.008

“Details of Front Porch, No. XII, January 16, 1861.” 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 67.3 cm.

Shows dimensions of brackets and mouldings; penciled change to head of pillar; gives section and elevation.
"Front Porch, No. XI, January 16, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & wash: 52.7 X 65.4 cm.

Shows longitudinal section and plan of ceiling for front porch; gives dimensions; shows drainage of porch roof; gutters carry water down through pillars; coffered ceiling.
WTU 067.010

"N.E. Flank Elevation, No. VI, January 16, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & pencil: 52.7 X 67.3 cm.

Shows dimensions of cellar windows; bay window on second floor has replaced earlier framed projection on this facade; conservatory erased and large window substituted with much moulding around it; urn penciled in for front steps; parapets penciled in for belvedere.
WTU 067. 011

"S.W. Flank Elevation, No. VII, January 17, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & pencil: 52.7 X 66.7 cm.

Shows dimension of cellar windows; cellar entrance is to the left of side entrance; chimney termination extends to pipes; penciled parapet to belvedere erased; roundel in third floor stairwell over side entrance crossed out; other stairwell windows marked "stained"; penciled bay to the right of side entrance.
WTU 067.012

"Back Elevation, No. VIII, January 17, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & pencil: 52.7 X 66.7 cm.

Shows dimensions of cellar windows and quoins; rear wing three bays across; portico over rear entrance shown with brackets originally, and penciled lattice supports; no shutters on rear facade.
WTU 067.013

"Transverse Section, No. IX, January 22, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 67.3 cm.

Shows that register and door placement have been reversed from arrangement in earlier scheme (067.004); reflects reorientation of side entrance; more detailed design of doors and door frames than in previous section, fielded panels; second and third floor heights changed to 12'0" and 11' 4½" respectively.

Finishes: doors grained; woodwork white.
WTU 067.014

“Details of Exterior, No. XVI, January 22, 1861.” 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 53.3 X 67.3 cm.

Shows section and elevation of corners of front building; delineates “rustics, water table, ashlar, sub-base”; gives dimensions of cornice, rustics, and base of rear wing.
"Details of Main Cornice, No. XV, January 22, 1861." 1 sheet wove paper: ink & wash: 52.7 X 66.7 cm.

Shows "facia under window of third story"; shows full size detail of window head; gives the full size profile for an interior stucco cornice.
Plan of First Floor and Plot, February 22, 1861. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 74.3 X 64.1 cm.

House: shows placement of rooms on first floor; delineates "drawing room; library; dining room, store room [2]; china closet; kitchen; porch; conservatory"; placement of both sets of stairs to the S.W. of the central hallway.

Outbuildings: delineates "summer house; coach house/stable; wash/iron house; tool house; hot house.

Landscape: shows carriage way off of High Street; pencilled planting patterns; path systems delineated; grade of drive specified; vegetable garden, chicken coop, dung pit delineated; no foundation plantings apparent; cistern and well location delineated; arbors drawn over paths to be planted with grapes; yard behind house to be a "clothed yard"; north circle in carriage way to be planted in roses; south circle to have a tree in the middle; trees to be planted along perimeter of High Street and in front of stable yard; side yard to have an undulating border of shrubbery; field to be freely planted with trees and shrubbery.

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Perspective of Exterior, n.d. 1 sheet laid paper: wash: 19.7 X 30.5 cm.

Shows a house on a knoll with a detail of a gate. Among the Walter papers when acquired by The Athenaeum of Philadelphia but attribution to Thomas Ustick Walter is doubtful because the style is inconsistent with all other known Walter drawings. Possibly by John Skirving, Walter’s friend and foreman who sent him sketches during the course of the construction of his house. However, there are no known specific references to perspectives such as this one and 067. 026 in Walter’s correspondence. In any event, the house depicted here is almost certainly not Walter’s house or his lot because the railroad tracks in the foreground were never present in either High of Morton Streets in Germantown.
WTU 067.018


Shows probably the earliest scheme for the front elevation: hipped roof; hipped porch; front doors, glazed center panels with rounded heads; cornice with modilions not brackets; brick facing; no string course between second and third floors; floor heights -- cellar 8', first 13', second 11'6", third 11'; conservatory drawn in pencil, square shape; belvedere drawn in pencil then erased.
WTU 067. 019

Plan of Second Floor [?], n.d., ca. October 1860. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 52.7 X 34.3 cm.

Preliminary floor plan: bathroom crossed out and redrawn opposite back stairs; side entrance on Morton Street side; possible placement of beds in chambers.
Plan of Third Floor [?], n.d., ca. October 1860. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 33 X 53.4 cm.

Preliminary floor plan: shows possible placement of beds in chambers; shows five chambers in main house; heating and ventilating columns delineated.
Elevation of Exterior Wall and Gate, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 45.7 X 118.1 cm.

Shows elevation and details of High Street wall and gate. Note the placement of a human in the elevation for scale and perspective. Gate is grained and varnished.
WTU 067 . 022

Elevation of Exterior Walls, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 63.5 X 125.7 cm.

Shows elevations and detail of exterior wall on High and Morton Streets. Gates are grained and varnished.
WTU 067.023

Section of Cellar, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink & pencil: 24.1 X 45.7 cm.

Shows foundation section and detail; dimensions between supports; concrete floor; describes depth in relation to curb height on High and Morton Streets.
WTU 067. 024

Section of Cellar, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink: 19.7 X 37.4 cm.

Shows foundation section and detail; gives dimensions; more detailed than 067. 023.
WTU 067.025

Site Plan, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink, pencil & wash: 38.1 X 22.2 cm.

Plot plan of Walter's lot. Shows dimensions of lot; distance from all four sides of house to perimeter of lot; location of house and stable within lot; path systems delineated; carriage way changed from Morton Street orientation to High Street; interior dimensions of stable.
This perspective sketch is similar to 067. 017 and shows a house amidst lush plantings. Again, should likely be attributed to John Skirving for the same reasons discussed with 067. 017.
Map of Germantown Neighborhood, n.d. 1 sheet wove paper: ink: 29.2 X 29.2 cm.

Map showing location of Walter's lot in Germantown neighborhood. Indicates position of lot relative to other landmarks -- Scott's lot, Market House, Old Market Space, railroad depot, Baptist Church; gives dimensions of Walter's lot.
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