



MOORHEAD'S CO

A Story of Restoration

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COMSTOCK HOUSE

THE SIGHT OF A GRACIOUS VICTORIAN HOME rising in the frontier town of Moorhead in 1882 must have made many residents envious. Solomon G. and Sarah Ball Comstock, married for eight years and with two children at the time, needed a home for their growing family. In his first decade in Moorhead, Comstock had been named Clay County attorney. He had established a successful

Solomon, Sarah, Ada, and Jessie Comstock in front of their substantial new Moorhead home, about 1885

law partnership, begun a long career in the Minnesota legislature, and become a partner in a Red River Valley land company with empire builder James J. Hill. The construction of a stylish 11-room, two-story, wood-frame residence stood as a symbol of his years of civic and business success.

The Comstocks chose the architectural firm of Kees and Fisk of Minneapolis and Moorhead to design their house in the latest style, combining Queen Anne elements with those of popular English designer and critic Charles Locke Eastlake. The house was set on a full block in the Highland Addition to the city, one of the highest points in the area and safe from the Red River's flood plain. Outbuildings included an ice house with a privy, tool room, and food-storage room, as well as a two-story barn for the family's three horses and three carriages.¹ When construction was complete in the spring of 1883, the entire block was fenced.

Today the Comstock Historic House is owned and operated as one of the Minnesota Historical Society's (MHS) historic sites, given by descendants George and Frances Comstock in 1965. The Comstock Historic House Society, a group of local advocates, formed in 1974 to assist in restoration and prepare the house for tours. Restoration began in 1976 to return the site to its 1880s and 1890s appearance. Over the past decade, these efforts have continued

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through a partnership between the MHS, the Comstock Society, and Dr. Robert Loeffler, volunteer site manager since 1976.

As curator of historic sites collections in the MHS's museum collections department, I had the pleasure of working on many interior restoration projects at the Comstock House for nearly 10 years. The restoration plan is now 90 percent complete, but the journey to this point was filled with many interesting discoveries. As anyone who has tried to restore an old house knows, persistence and hard work eventually

pay off, but the quest for accuracy is filled with blind alleys, false hopes, and, sometimes, plain good luck. Selected stories from the Comstock House restoration, as well as the step-by-step research strategy, may interest prospective house restorers, visitors to the site, and those who have yet to discover this historic treasure.

IN 1988 I BEGAN MY WORK at the Comstock House when I was asked to complete an ongoing project: replacing wallpaper in most of the rooms. Such house-wide projects cannot be approached piecemeal but must be a part of an integrated furnishings plan. My first step was careful research to establish what had existed in the house during its first two decades. I pored through files to learn everything that I could about the house, previous restoration projects, and the Comstocks. What kind of people were they? What defined their taste in furnishings? Several accounts of Red River Valley history helped to establish a context. Biographical material, interviews with household workers, and a family reminiscence sketched in the details of the Comstocks themselves. Agricultural and population census data for Clay County, which contains Moorhead, showed how the family fit into its community and was influenced by its surroundings.

How does this information relate to interior restoration of the house? Lacking specific documentation, it provides a way to understand the mindset of family members. What did they value, and what did they do with their time? Was their main objective building the biggest house, with a three-carriage stable and the finest of everything? Or were they about something else? Were they at the top of Moorhead's social circles? Or were they respected and dignified citizens who through a combination of hard work, good timing, and luck earned enough money to provide a substantial home for their family with enough left over to contribute generously to their growing community?

Solomon Comstock spent 51 years in this house, and Sarah, 59. They raised three highly educated, successful children while continuing as community leaders and filling the role of a founding family.

Solomon was born in 1842 in Maine, the son of a lumberman. He graduated from a preparatory school in his home state at the age of 24

¹ Robert Loeffler, "The Comstock House," *Red River Valley Historian*, Winter 1974-75, p. 13, 17, 19; Loeffler, "Comstock House Historic Site Operational Manual," revised 1980, p. 3, copy in author's possession.

and completed law school at the University of Michigan in 1869. That year he took a job with the railroad, working in Texas before traveling north on the Mississippi River to St. Paul. After a brief stint as a lawyer in Minneapolis, he was hired as a laborer, constructing the Northern Pacific on its way west. He reached the end of the line—the village of Moorhead—in 1871. There he stayed because he had no money to make a return trip.²

Comstock was named county attorney the next year, a position somewhat less impressive than it sounds, considering the population. In 1870 the census recorded only 92 settlers in all of Clay County. This was the frontier. The now-famous bonanza wheat farms were just starting in the Red River Valley, but Clay County produced not a single bushel of wheat that year.³

The combination of the railroad, cheap, fertile land, and an influx of immigrants brought tremendous changes in just 10 years. By 1871 two railroad companies were accessible to farmers within 40 miles of Moorhead. Immigrants could now move possessions into the area and their crops out to faraway markets by rail. The 1880 census found 5,887 people in the county, an increase of almost 6,300 percent.

A staunch Republican, Comstock served four terms as state representative, one as state senator, and one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. He was also a pioneer in business and education. With a group of area entrepreneurs, he founded the First National Bank of Moorhead in 1881 and became a principal in the Moorhead Foundry, Car, and Agricultural Works, incorporated in 1882. That same year James J. Hill made Comstock his agent to obtain the right-of-way for the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad and to locate township sites along the proposed route. Comstock platted a large number of towns in Minnesota and North Dakota, incorporating the Northwest Land Company in 1883 and serving as its president until 1914.⁴

Given the growth of the county's population, which doubled again between 1880 and

1890, it is clear why Solomon Comstock and his business partners enjoyed such great success.⁵ There were townships to be plotted along the ever-expanding rail lines. Banks were needed to supply capital for buying farms, building houses and barns, buying livestock, and financing other start-up costs. Farmers planted wheat because it promised cash returns in the shortest possible time and was suitable for the fertile



Comstock family, about 1890: Ada, George, Solomon, Sarah, and Jessie

² Gregory Harness, "Solomon Gilman Comstock: Portrait of a Pioneer," *Red River Valley Historian*, Winter 1974–75, p. 5–6.

³ Here and below, United States, *Census, 1880, Population*, 66; U.S., *Census: Statistics of Wealth and Industry*, 1887, p. 181; Edward Van Dyke Robinson, *Early Economic Conditions and the Development of Agriculture in Minnesota*, University of Minnesota, *Studies in the Social Sciences Bulletin* 3 (Mar. 1915), 38.

⁴ W. F. Toensing, comp., *Minnesota Congressmen, Legislators, and Other Elected State Officials: An Alphabetical Checklist, 1849–1971* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1971), 23; Harness, "Comstock," 8–9; Loeffler, "Site Manual," 10.

⁵ U.S., *Census, 1890, Population*, pt. 1, p. 26.



Moorhead as a frontier outpost in about 1870 (above) and a bustling market town complete with a square just 10 years later



prairie soil and short growing season. New methods in flour milling and the invention of automatic agricultural machinery suddenly made large-scale wheat farming both possible and profitable, and the Red River Valley became synonymous with bonanza farming. Families like the Comstocks who arrived early, bought land cheaply, developed connections with the right people, possessed the necessary

skills in entrepreneurship, and were lucky enough to avoid the host of potential disasters often were rewarded handsomely.

The Comstocks were generous with their money. Intensely interested in providing the community with educational opportunities, Solomon was instrumental in donating land and building the Bishop Whipple School in Moorhead in 1882. (The school closed in 1887 and became Concordia College in 1892.) He also donated land and sponsored a bill in the Minnesota legislature that led to the establishment of Moorhead Normal School, today Moorhead State University.⁶

Solomon was not the only family member of note; his wife, Sarah, was a charter member of the Moorhead Women's Club in 1893 and served as its president in 1894, 1896, and 1900. She proposed the establishment of a library in town and raised money for it, securing a \$12,000 donation from Andrew Carnegie. She went on to serve as the first president of the library board.⁷

Ada Louise, born in 1876, was the most accomplished of their children. After completing two years at the University of Minnesota, she graduated from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1897, returned to Moorhead Normal School for a year, and then completed her master's degree at Columbia College in 1899. Remaining in academics her entire career, she established the position of dean of women at the University of Minnesota in 1901, served as academic dean at Smith College from 1912 to 1922, and became the first full-time president of Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, holding the position for 20 years until her retirement at age 67. After retiring, Comstock married for the first time, spending the next 26 years with her husband, Dr. Wallace Notestein.⁸

Solomon and Sarah's middle child, Jessie May, was born in 1879. She graduated from the University of Minnesota and did graduate work at Radcliffe from 1905 to 1907. Trained as a schoolteacher, she taught in Minneapolis for many years before retiring to care for her aging parents in Moorhead. The youngest child, George Madison, was born in 1886. He graduated from Harvard University, served in World War I, and returned to Moorhead to become a businessman in banking, farming, and real-estate development like his father. George and

⁶ Harness, "Comstock," 9–10.

⁷ Loeffler, "Site Manual," 13–14.

⁸ Loeffler, "Site Manual," 10, 15–17.

his wife, Frances, lived in the family home for a few years after Jessie died in 1951, eventually donating it to the Minnesota Historical Society.⁹

AFTER LEARNING ABOUT the Comstock family and placing it in its community context, the next step was to search out documents about the house itself. We were fortunate to have access to the drawings and handwritten instructions of the architects to the Moorhead builder, as well as receipts for most of the building materials.¹⁰ And, of course, we have the house itself to corroborate information found in the written records.

Documents indicate that the house was designed and built with great attention to detail, using the finest materials and workmanship. Repeatedly the instructions from the architects call for “work to be done in the best and most substantial manner,” “thorough and substantial in every part,” and “all to be done in a first class manner without exception and to the entire satisfaction of the architect.” Materials specified were “first quality,” “very best,” “fine oak,” “stained glass,” “ground glass,” and “good hard burned brick.” Solomon himself purchased and supplied some of the best materials, and receipts indicate that he traveled to Minneapolis to obtain specially cut trim pieces and “blasted” and “embossed” glass panes.¹¹

Comparing the documentary materials with the house today, we learned that the interior is almost unaltered; only the bathrooms have been changed. All doors and window frames on the first floor are of solid oak, and the impressive stairway in the entry is constructed of oak and butternut. The banister is butternut, as are the mantelpieces of the three fireplaces on the ground floor. The floors on the first floor are hardwood, except for the bedroom and entryway, which are pine. The dining-room floor has a parquet border.¹²

A house both stylish and well built befit a

family of the Comstocks’ stature and wealth but was still somewhat surprising to find in the early life of this frontier community. A photograph of the exterior of the house soon after it was completed shows it standing alone on a muddy lane, fronted by a wooden sidewalk. There were no other buildings in the vicinity, although during the time that his home was being built, Comstock was supervising the construction of the Bishop Whipple School about three blocks to the south.¹³

Was the Comstocks’ house ostentatious for its time? Certainly to an immigrant family living in a settler’s shanty, it was. But despite their relative wealth and status, the Comstocks were in fact somewhat reserved in their choices. Compared to homes in the Twin Cities or in the

Intricately etched glass door pane, as seen from the Comstock vestibule looking through the entryway into the parlor



⁹ Loeffler, “Site Manual,” 19–20.

¹⁰ The drawings and instructions were transcribed and reproduced in Loeffler, “Comstock House,” 13–16. For the originals, see Home Building, Bills, and Receipts, 1882–83 file, box 36, Solomon Comstock Papers, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center, Moorhead State University; architect’s plans, Comstock House.

¹¹ Loeffler, “Comstock House,” 13–17.

¹² Loeffler, “Comstock House,” 15.

¹³ Loeffler, “Comstock House,” 19.

The restoration process: 1880s Turkish-style chair, almost unrecognizable in its 1920s reupholstery (below); the fragment of original material that launched the search for new fabric; and two of the newly reupholstered chairs, positioned in the parlor exactly as they were in an 1885 photograph that provided many clues for restoration (see pages 28–29).





East, this was a household of good, if modern, taste where education and culture were valued over social climbing.

Interviews with former household servants revealed Sarah Comstock as both disciplined and warm, “very exacting and particular” and “kind and generous.” They especially remembered her in later years sending gifts of money, food, and clothing to former employees during the Great Depression. The simple pine furniture in Mrs. Comstock’s room is evidence that she did not demand fine and extravagant

things for her own use.¹⁴

In reminiscences recorded in 1972, Ada Comstock Notestein remembered her mother as “talkative, firm in her convictions, strong-willed, a perfectionist but kindly and concerned for her fellow man. . . . Everything done in the home was orderly and scheduled.” But Ada also commented that the maid’s room was on the second floor with the rest of the family. She considered the situation “a very bad arrangement and contrasted our house unfavorably with a neighbor’s across the street.” Apparently

¹⁴ Loeffler, “Site Manual,” 14.

Chinese porcelain garden seat in the Comstocks' entry hall, just one example of Victorian fascination with the Far East. With the rich butternut staircase, "Froxfield" reproduction carpet, and "Jonesboro" reproduction wallpaper, this small corner of the house recreates its owners' use of color, pattern, and texture.

Entry and stairway papered in "Jonesboro." This view also shows the English-made, cut-pile "Froxfield" stair runner chosen to complement the highly patterned wallpaper.



that house allowed more privacy by placing the servants' quarters away from family members.¹⁵

AVAILABLE RECORDS ALLOW US to speculate about the interior furnishings that are missing from the house or lack specific documentation. While most of the original furniture and decorative objects remain, there was little evidence of wall, window, and floor treatments—those textile elements that are often worn out and replaced long before other furnishings. For example, many rooms had wallpaper dating from the 1930s, carpets from the 1940s, and curtains more recent than that. Fortunately, we have some important primary evidence—two photographs of the interior of the house, one showing the parlor about 1885 and another the library in about 1900. The house's remaining nine rooms, however, had no such documentation. In its absence, the best alternative was to make informed decisions.

In cases like this we must rely on other primary sources from the period, such as decorating manuals and photographs of other midwest-

¹⁵ Loeffler, "Site Manual," 6, 13; *Reminiscences of Ada Comstock Notestein*, 1972, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.

ern houses. Secondary sources, such as guides to reproduction wallpaper and contemporary books on decorating Victorian interiors, are also helpful. It is important to read as much as possible, not only about wallpaper and carpets but also about furniture styles, popular color schemes, and manufacturing processes.

To make informed choices, I needed to know what was available in Moorhead in the 1880s and 1890s. Where would the Comstocks have bought fabric? Would they have made window coverings at home, or were there upholstery businesses to make them? Was it possible to go to a local shop and buy wallpaper, or were the latest styles available only in Minneapolis or St. Paul? To answer some of these questions I looked at advertisements in microfilmed newspapers and business listings in city directories. The answer to many of my questions was: It depends.

The same river and rail transportation that allowed farmers to ship their crops to market gave farm families and their neighbors in town access to manufacturing centers in the East and Midwest. By 1890 there were almost 12,000 people in Clay County, and in addition to other crops, local farmers grew 1,284,176 bushels of wheat. Unlike later huge corporate farmers who spent their profits elsewhere, these people built and furnished their homes both through local suppliers and through orders with companies in larger cities throughout the region. By the 1890s towns like Fargo and Moorhead were supplying points further west as the frontier gave way to new waves of immigration.¹⁶

While there were more farm-supply and implement dealers than furniture stores in Moorhead in the 1880s, it was possible to get almost anything by rail. As Solomon Comstock shopped for stained glass windows and exotic wood trim in the Twin Cities and shipped it to Moorhead in 1882, so Sarah Comstock found the latest home fashions in her midwestern travels.

Keeping this in mind, I researched period photographs of a variety of Minnesota home interiors to see how people of a similar geographic area, time period, and income decorated their homes. I spent many hours in the library at MHS studying photographs of parlors and hallways, dining rooms and bedrooms, and entryways and sitting rooms, trying to discern patterns and decorative schemes that were simi-

lar to what remained in the Comstock House.

Lacking specific documentation, these photographs became what probate inventories are to historians recreating colonial dwellings. By analyzing enough of them, comparing and contrasting similar and dissimilar elements, it was possible to approximate what might have existed in a particular room at a specific time and place. After a while, I developed an eye for decorative styles, elements, fashion trends, and the latest rages of the late Victorian period. I came to anticipate certain combinations—of patterned walls, ornate carpets, “Turkish” furniture, and “Japanesque” accessories. I began to visualize what the carpet could have looked like in the hallway and what wallpaper could have complemented the Eastlake furniture in the front bedroom.

Unfortunately, some of my visualizations remained in black and white, like the photographs I came to know so well. Developing an appropriate overall color scheme for a restored

Farmers bringing wheat to Moorhead, 1879. Bruns and Finkle's Elevator A, built the previous year, was the first in the Red River Valley to be steam operated.



¹⁶ U.S., *Census, 1890, Agriculture*, 371; U.S., *Census, 1890, Population*, pt. 1, p. 26.

house can be a problem, especially for the Victorian era when both color and pattern were ubiquitous and the possible combinations were endless. I had to develop an eye for the colors of the period, wherever I could find them.¹⁷

The first clues were in the house itself—not only in the furnishings but in the interior elements. Light fixtures, fireplace tiles, wood trim, stain choices, and decorative objects all hint at a room’s color palette. Color abounded in the Comstocks’ interior—in the stained-glass windows in the entryway, the velvet trim in the matching portraits of Ada and Jessie still hanging in the parlor, the original painted fire-screen, the fireplace tiles, and the appliquéd table cover visible in the 1880s photograph and still on the table in the parlor today.

In this sleuthing, it was important to recognize and then exclude objects from later periods. Most people do not buy all new furnishings when they move into a house; instead, they bring possessions from their previous dwelling. Furthermore, the color of the paint on the walls or the wallpaper most likely changed frequently. By 1870, once the process for making wallpaper was mechanized with giant steam-powered printing rollers, wallpaper was cheaper to purchase than paint. The cost of labor, a factor in modern decorating decisions, was the least expensive part of such room redecorations.

Fortunately, historic houses may hold evidence that is not at first apparent. Behind radiators, light-switch covers, baseboards, and wall-to-wall carpet, original wallpaper or paint colors may be preserved. More recent wallpaper may be hiding earlier layers, and these usually can be separated to reveal a gold mine of information. Ghosts of rods for portieres in doorways or for curtains or roller shades in windows, nail-hole patterns, or, occasionally, the hardware itself may be present although it has been overlooked for years. A careful and thorough examination and written tally of the findings can add to the mounting information.

While Victorian fashions did not change quite as rapidly as they do today, the age was a time of mass production and unbridled consumerism. Manufacturers even then knew how to create demand by popularizing something new and different, and the public caught



Pattern and texture abounded in the Comstock parlor, seen here in the black-and-white photograph from about 1885 that proved an invaluable research tool.

on quickly. According to Catherine Lynn in *Wallpaper in America*, “During the late nineteenth century, the American wallpaper industry boomed, and was able to effect steady decreases in the cost of its products. The public responded. . . . [and] demanded new patterns, not only annually, but also seasonally.”¹⁸

The colors popularized for wallpaper in the 1850s and 1860s—chrome yellows, brilliant blues, warm browns, and bright, piercing greens

¹⁷ See William Seale’s two seminal works: *Recreating the Historic House Interior*, 1979, and *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors through the Camera’s Eye*, 1981, both published by the American Association for State and Local History in Nashville.

¹⁸ Catherine Lynn, *Wallpaper in America: From the Seventeenth Century to World War I* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980), 313.



(later found to be poisonous)—relied on the cheaper, synthetic pigments developed earlier in the century. These were very different from the grayed-down palette that people desired by the early 1880s, when the Comstocks were building their house. These colors, too, were made possible by developments in paint technology as well as in color theory. By the 1870s paints were manufactured with premixed pigments, allowing for precise colors in values from light to dark. With the introduction of shade cards, consumers could see the effects of com-

binning different colors before actually painting. Tertiary colors such as olive green, russet, terra cotta, citron, peacock blue, plum, and claret were particularly popular. Some designers recommended decorative schemes for intricately carved cornices that contained up to 10 different hues, each reflecting a color used elsewhere in the room's ornamentation.¹⁹

In his 1880 decorating guide, tastemaker Clarence Cook observed: "Most of us, whether we have plenty of money, or only a moderate portion to lay out in making our rooms handsome with furniture and ornaments, find ourselves nonplussed when, in the process of fitting up and furnishing our houses, we come to the question, 'What shall we do with our walls?'" Wallpaper was the answer that Cook advocated. It was easy to apply and easy to renew. At a time when the American population was highly mobile, what better way to clean and freshen a new dwelling than to paper the walls and paint the woodwork? He pointed out that tastes change from year to year, that smoke and soot from interior heating and lighting dirtied walls, and that health and sanitary concerns also dictated the need to apply new paper.²⁰

For formal, public rooms Cook and many other design critics recommended a three-part treatment: a three-foot dado or wainscoting at the bottom and a fill paper in the middle, topped with a wide frieze or a narrower border. Many times this was combined with patterned ceiling paper. He cautioned that for this treatment to be appropriate, there must be elegant or rich furniture in the room. In plainly furnished rooms or bedrooms, critics recommended a plainer treatment of fill paper, perhaps topped with a narrow border at the ceiling or above the picture molding.

Minnesota interior photographs from the period reveal that the full tripartite treatment rarely occurred in private homes. Most middle- and upper-middle-class homes in the state simply used the narrow border or wider frieze papers, whether in elaborately Victorian parlors or simple bedrooms. Perhaps because most Minnesota houses were minted in the later Victorian period, they did not have adequate ceiling heights to allow for the proper proportions. The two nineteenth-century photographs of the Comstock House show no borders at all.

As for pattern and design, most American

¹⁹ Lynn, *Wallpaper*, 317–18; Gail C. Winkler and Roger W. Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration: American Interiors, 1830–1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986), 124, 128–31.

²⁰ Clarence Cook, *What Shall We Do With Our Walls?* (New York: Warren, Fuller, and Co., 1881), 1.



Comstock library photograph, about 1900, which provided visual clues to the home's original decor

critics by the 1880s were rejecting what they called “French” wallpaper—three-dimensional, realistically shaded scenic prints, trompe l’oeil statuary, architectural elements, and multicolored cabbage roses that had been hand-printed in France since early in the century. American manufacturers had adapted these designs for machine printing by 1850 and offered inexpensive copies that dominated the American market. In the 1860s in England, however, the Reform Movement began rejecting cheaply made, mass-produced, overly ornate designs in all types of household furnishings, particularly those designs most closely associated with the rococo revival. The theories of English design reformers such as John Ruskin, William Morris, and Charles Eastlake called for a return to honest workmanship based on simple designs and quality materials. They favored forms inspired

by medieval art and geometric shapes with two-dimensional, abstracted patterns. Such flattened and nonrealistic forms, although still drawn heavily from nature, did not intend to fool the eye. The Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 helped to popularize this reform aesthetic in America, and many wallpapers of the period reflected the change.²¹

Also introduced at the 1876 centennial were exhibits from far-away countries in the Middle and Far East. Japanese and Turkish wares in particular caught the public’s fancy. These styles soon found their way onto wallpaper designs, upholstery and curtain fabrics, and many decorative and functional household furnishings. In the Comstock house, the Oriental influence was everywhere. From the silk embroidered folding screen in the parlor to the large Chinese porcelain garden seat in the entry hall,

²¹ Winkler and Moss, *Victorian Interior Decoration*, 252, 319; Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1868).

the Comstocks' interior reflected this penchant for the exotic.²²

With all this research firmly in mind, I began the wallpaper projects in the Comstock dining room, entryway and stairwell, upstairs hallway, and two bedrooms. My goal was to write a furnishings plan for all the rooms needing paper, keeping in mind how one room flows into another, and then purchase the wallpaper fairly quickly. Today's wallpaper market is mercurial. Patterns can be discontinued without notice, which can have a domino effect on a furnishings plan. With many of the images of wallpaper from the historic photographs and books in mind, I turned to a helpful resource, *Wallpapers for Historic Buildings*, for information on locating appropriate reproductions.²³

Lacking specific documentation for most of the rooms in the house, selections had to be based on an interpretation of all the research assembled. For the entryway and stairway, I chose a Japanesque paper named "Jonesboro." Printed in tertiary tones of russet, gray-green, golden yellow, and black on an olive ground, the design features an asymmetrical pattern of circles, triangles, and squares. When combined with an eight-inch matching border of flowers and leaves over a narrow band of repeating single flowers, the papered room was clearly Victorian with a Japanese influence.

For the adjacent parlor and library, I took cues from the 1880s photograph of the parlor. The camera had picked up a subtle but indiscernible pattern on the walls, so I opted for a low-contrast, pinkish-beige tone-on-tone paper with a two-dimensional swirled effect reminiscent of 1880s designs. In photographs, this paper takes on a mottled appearance similar to that in the historic photograph.

With the wallpaper projects completed, I next turned to upholstery. The 1880s photograph of the Comstock parlor clearly shows Turkish influence in two overstuffed, uphol-

stered chairs, part of a parlor suite consisting of four chairs and a settee. In her seminal work, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery*, Katherine Grier defined the Turkish style, with its "elaborate and complete upholstery," in detail. Chairs, larger in scale than the norm, were set on low legs often covered by fabric or deep fringe. Upholstery was "buttoned or pleated and included an extra roll of stuffing around the top of the arms and back [that] could be manipulated in attractive ways by upholsterers."²⁴ The two chairs visible in the Comstock photograph fit this description.

The Turkish parlor suite suggests that, like many in the middle class, the Comstocks considered themselves worldly, comfortable, and cultured. According to Grier, the style appealed to the American middle class because it "both expressed a cosmopolitan grasp of the world and fitted neatly into new visions of domestic coziness."

Sometimes exactly what you need is in plain view, but you've never noticed. Both site manager Loeffler and I thought that the tufted and fringed Turkish chairs shown in the photograph were no longer in existence. I assumed that they had been replaced by the set then in the parlor—a multi-colored tapestry-covered suite of five pieces with large, modern, moss-green velvet buttons at intervals along the skirt. While studying the 1890s photograph of the parlor for the hundredth time, I suddenly realized that the furniture in the room was the same Turkish set seen in the photograph. I was flabbergasted.

The 1920s reupholstering had totally transformed the pieces. Gone were the deep tufts of cut and voided velvet and the nine-inch-long bullion fringe. The overstuffed profile had been replaced by a sofa and four chairs that were slimmed down and flattened out. Now, it was as if someone had walked in and given the site back its original furniture. Well, almost. Little did I know that this was the beginning

²² Robert C. Post, ed., *A Treatise Upon Selected Aspects of the Great International Exhibition Held in Philadelphia on the Occasion of Our Nation's One-Hundredth Birthday* (Washington, D.C.: Museum of History and Technology, 1976), 13–21, 176–87.

²³ Richard C. Nylander, *Wallpapers for Historic Buildings: A Guide to Selecting Reproduction Wallpapers* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1992). Other guides in this series include Helene Von Rosenstiel and Gail C. Winkler, *Floor Coverings for Historic Buildings* (1988); Jane C. Nylander, *Fabrics for Historic Buildings* (1990); and Roger W. Moss, *Lighting for Historic Houses* (1988).

²⁴ Here and below, Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850–1930* (Rochester, N.Y.: Strong Museum, 1988), 183–84, 193.

of a six-year odyssey into the restoration twilight zone.

In hopes of finding the original fiber content and color, we sent two chairs to an upholsterer in Moorhead to dissect. Luckily, he found a minuscule fragment under the head of a tack. That was all we needed. The MHS conservation lab tested the tiny sample and concluded that the burgundy red weft fibers were wool and the white warp fibers were cotton, proving that the fabric was not synthetic and therefore could be from the 1880s period. We were in business.

I first hoped to find a matching fabric available on the market, without the expense of custom reproduction. Although I located several companies selling 100-percent wool-plush upholstery fabric in a similar color, I was told there was a minimum order of 35 yards for embossing. I needed only seven yards, and it was difficult enough to justify the cost of the plain fabric at \$200 per yard. We were in no position to purchase 28 extra yards just to get the fabric embossed.

It was obvious from the 1885 photograph, however, that only an embossed floral pattern would do. There had to be a company that could help us. I worked with one vendor for more than 15 months, trying to piggyback onto someone else's order to attain the minimum yardage. In the meantime, Loeffler had a site to run, and I had 17 other sites and many other projects. We both became frustrated with the upholstery problem. All the while, the parlor was without two chairs that were stripped and awaiting their new Victorian garb.

Through a museum colleague I learned of Classic Revivals, Inc., of Boston, to whom I explained our dilemma. That firm recommended a company in France that would emboss a 10-yard minimum. Eventually we received a beautiful sample of 100-percent wool plush in the color "rouge scarlett" and copies of 35 different embossing patterns. The price: less than half of others we had considered. We thought that the project's end was in sight.

It happened to be a very busy year for the upholsterer, and our project was more labor intensive than estimated. We, in turn, had to be patient, both in fairness to the company and because we did not want to rush the job. Quality was more important than time. The chairs were brought back in stages, with the settee arriving

last, all minus their bullion fringe.

Originally made of metallic threads for use on the padded shoulders of military uniforms, bullion fringe of combinations of silk, cotton, or wool was ubiquitous on Victorian upholstered furniture and elaborate window treatments.²⁵ Finding a suitable reproduction fringe was in some ways more difficult than locating the upholstery fabric. National sources suggested several leads, none of which panned out. Through another project, however, I learned about a Minneapolis woman who could possibly make a custom reproduction. After an initial meeting, we decided to ask her to produce a strike-off, a one-yard sample, so that we could all be sure of the final product. I then had to find the funding.

By the end of the year I had an arrangement with the Minnesota Historical Society and the Comstock Society to share the costs equally. The fringe was a distinctive and important finish to the overall look of the suite, and we were getting 13.5 yards of custom-made, hand-dyed silk-wool blend to our exact specifications for almost half the price of commercially available fringe made from historically inaccurate rayon.

As with the upholstery, each step of production took longer than expected, but again, quality was our goal. I picked up the completed fringe and delivered it to the Comstock House, and Loeffler made arrangements for a nearby upholsterer to sew it on. With the project finally completed, the six-year odyssey concluded with spectacular results for the Comstock House and with a real education for me. In addition to doing careful research and having an overall plan, I learned that successful restoration requires clear specifications, historically accurate techniques, and ample time.

Subsequent restoration projects at the Comstock House were easier and less time consuming. The most recent was the replacement of the 1930s diamond-shaped floral-bouquet carpet in the entry hall and the threadbare gold carpet in the upstairs hallway. At the same time, we added a runner with borders on the stairs, returning the stairway to the appearance Ada Comstock Notestein described in her reminiscences.

Working with the bold Japanesque olive-

²⁵ Isabel B. Wingate, *Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1979), 88–89; Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 302.

green, gold, and russet wallpaper, we needed a calming effect in the carpet. Most of MHS's photographs of entryways, as with most Victorian rooms, contained pattern upon pattern on walls, floors, ceilings, upholstery, portieres, and draperies. Often, decorative schemes changed from room to room, whether or not there was a clear view from one to the other. The challenge for us was to add a patterned carpet without overwhelming the space.

I turned to a well-known supplier of reproduction carpets, John Burrows of J. R. Burrows, Ltd., in Rockland, Massachusetts, who represents Woodward Grosvenor and Company in the United Kingdom. In continuous production for more than 100 years, the firm still weaves carpets on nineteenth-century looms with the original jacquard cards. Its archives contain thousands of patterns that are available in original or modern color combinations.

Burrows sent samples of several less obtrusive patterns dating from about 1890. When I inquired about a Wilton or cut-pile weave named Froxfield, he gave us some very good news. If we were willing to place the order within the month, we could go in with another order he had for a residence in Boston, which would save us money. This was too good to pass up. We placed our order.

Loeffler meanwhile located a carpet installer in nearby Fargo who knew the art of hand sewing 27-inch strips of carpet together, as all early power-loomed carpet required before the invention of wider, room-sized machines. The carpet arrived from the mill in England in record time, and the installation went smoothly and quickly. The visual results transformed the space.

The completion of the stair-runner and carpet project leaves only one remaining major restoration project on our long-range plan. With the diligent assistance of John Burrows, we recently located carpeting for the Comstock parlor and library. From the same mill in England, it bears a remarkable resemblance to the small-scale floral pattern seen in the 1880s photograph. The colors of the mill's mid-1880s design are from the same tertiary color palette found throughout the Comstock House: olive, brown, gold, russet, gray-green, and peacock blue.

Once we have the funds to purchase this car-



Solomon Comstock and granddaughter Susan Comstock (later Clemedtson) about 1920, in what was then a newly reupholstered parlor chair

pet for the parlor and adjoining library and continue the Froxfield pattern from the entryway into the back parlor, the furnishings plan that we started almost 10 years ago will be complete. Every project has been both a true learning experience for me and a labor of love. I hope that readers will visit the house and see the results of our restoration odyssey. While we probably will never know exactly how the original interior looked, I think Sarah and Solomon Comstock would feel at home.

The picture on p. 27 is courtesy the Clay County Historical Society; p. 33 is from the Comstock House; and those on p. 23–26 are in the MHS museum collections department. All others are in the MHS library.



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