

An Analysis of the Interiors of Fort Hill, The John C. Calhoun House



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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

SITE INVESTIGATION

This report is based on site investigations made December 10th through 14th, 2001, February 11th through February 15th, 2002, and March 4th through March 8th, 2002 by George Fore, Architectural Conservator, Raleigh, North Carolina and Candace Volz, Decorative Arts Consultant, Austin, Texas. The micrographs included with this report were taken by George Fore. The proposed interpretive period for Fort Hill is 1840-1850, when the house was substantially complete. Therefore, evidence from that time period was the immediate focus of this report. Earlier and later evidence is included to help establish the sequence of decorative finishes and for the historical record. During the on-site investigations, the furnishings and collections from Fort Hill were in storage and inaccessible to the investigators. Upon request, several items were brought from storage for analysis and subsequent photography, but the majority of the collection was available only through reference or existing photographs. Because the Fort Hill furniture was in storage, it was not possible to evaluate items for upholstery fabric, style or trimming information. Those portions of this report are based on photographs of the pieces and general information about period upholstery design and techniques. In the late 20th C. photographs, many of the pieces of furniture appear to need repair, finish enhancement to recreate the appropriate early 19th C. "French polish" shine, and reupholstering to restore the appearance of 1825-50 seating pieces.

COLLECTIONS

With his thorough knowledge of the Calhoun family and the Fort Hill collection, Will Hiott, the Director of Fort Hill, was very helpful in the preparation of this report. He provided copies of his Fort Hill "Interpretive Plan 2001 Preliminary Draft" and its accompanying appendix, "Fort Hill Wallpaper Documentation". The "Interpretive Plan" contains transcriptions of several Calhoun and Clemson inventories, an appraisal list, and a sale list which were extremely useful in researching and analyzing 19th C. life at Fort Hill. The Director also provided the following primary and secondary materials from the Clemson University/ Fort Hill collections:

"HABS Historical Report/ Fort Hill/ Narrative/ September 30, 1997"

"HABS Historical Report/ Fort Hill/ Supplemental Material/ September 30, 1997"

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“Inventory of Furniture Taken at Dosoris/ December 1st 1852/ Added to & regulated at August 1853”

“Exhibition & Sale at the American Art Galleries” American Art Association, March, 1929

Abstracts related to Fort Hill from The Papers of John C. Calhoun, University of South Carolina Press

“A Visit in 1849 with John C. Calhoun on his Fort Hill Plantation”

Numerous photographs of the interiors and exterior of Fort Hill, dating from the 4th quarter of the 19th C. to the present

Family Tree of the “Calhoun-Colhoun-Clemson Family”

Transcription of an interview between former Fort Hill housekeeper Jane Prince & Mrs. Dargan, 1936

A Fort Hill visitor’s guide booklet & a video of the furnished interiors before the beginning of the current restoration

“Executive Summary & Recommendations”, conservation survey of the John C. Calhoun home, by Dr. Nathan Stollow, Williamsburg, VA, 1988

Project architect Ellen Harris, Brevard, North Carolina, provided a copy of the “Fort Hill Master Plan” she prepared in 1999. This report includes the room finishes analysis, paint analysis, and construction chronology floor plans developed in 1999 by architectural conservator George T. Fore, Raleigh, North Carolina. Also very useful was the 2002 “Wallpaper Study” prepared by wallpaper conservator Susan Nash of Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

INTERIOR DECORATIVE ELEMENTS

Certainly the most important interior decorative elements found in the current interior analysis are the remnants of approximately 35 rag, block-printed wallpapers and borders uncovered when the 20th C. wallpapers were removed. Some of the samples are large enough to see the joins of the pieced paper ground on which they are printed. Others are later and printed on continuous paper. Overall, they represent high style wallpaper selections for their time periods, further evidence of the Calhoun’s “stylish” household. Borders were found with most of the wallpapers; in a house with no cornices, borders would have been considered essential throughout much of the 19th C.

In her book, Wallpaper in America, Catherine Lynn notes that during the first three quarters of the 19th C., French wallpapers were much more popular in America than those made in America or England. They were considered to have better designs and more naturalistic use of color. Lynn points out that throughout the early decades of the 19th C., the fledgling American wallpaper industry demanded ever higher tariffs on imported wallpapers. In 1824, at the height of French wallpaper importation, a 40% tariff was imposed; by 1846 it had been reduced to 20%, probably reflecting the increasing acceptance of high-quality American papers.

In the case of Fort Hill’s wallpapers, it is helpful to be aware of John C. Calhoun’s political position as an opponent of protective tariffs that supported Northern manufacturers and caused Southerners to pay higher prices for imported goods. As Secretary of War (1817-25) and then Vice-President (1825-32), he was no doubt very familiar with the French wallpapers installed in the White House in 1818. The choice of high-quality French

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wallpapers for his home in South Carolina underscored Calhoun's political stance as well as his sense of an appropriately fashionable residence.

LIGHTING

Another area of great significance to the appearance of the interiors at Fort Hill is lighting. During the interior investigation, little evidence of early 19th C. lighting was found. The various Calhoun/Clemson inventories and sale list note very few lighting devices. In researching primary and secondary materials related to the 1825-50 domestic environment, it is readily apparent that artificial light was scarce by today's standards. This very low light level had great impact on the appearance of the rooms, ca. 1825-50. It is the basis for the arrangement of furniture, the use of brightly colored wallpapers, the lack or minimalization of window treatments, and the widespread use of light-reflecting surfaces such as mirrors, gilt, and high gloss wood finishes. In recreating Fort Hill's interiors, it is very important that lighting levels, and numbers and types of fixtures be accurately portrayed for visitors.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

There are opportunities for additional research, beyond the scope of this analysis, on the decorative arts at Fort Hill. It would be helpful to merge the several inventories, auction list, appraisal list, and sale list into a comprehensive listing that would then be divided by type of furnishing (similar to that undertaken by Will Hiott for the Floride Calhoun 1866 Inventory). Obvious duplications could then be deleted and the current Fort Hill collection matched with appropriate items in the comprehensive list (as Will Hiott has done with the Clemson appraisal list). This could also form the basis of an acquisitions "wish list" for Fort Hill. An additional research effort would be to collate Calhoun/Clemson family genealogy and known usage of Fort Hill with the construction and wallpaper chronologies. Often additions and interior renovations occurred when there were changes of ownership or occupancy of a house, and combined with other analysis, this collation effort would help to verify the timing of changes at Fort Hill. It would also enhance the interpretation of the house for the visiting public.

RECOMMENDATION

We know this was Calhoun's principal home, his retreat from public life. The interiors were created 175 years ago by Floride Calhoun, with her husband's support. They represent a different decorative arts vocabulary than ours today. The current investigative efforts, including the analyzation of decorative finishes, development of a chronology of room construction, wallpaper study, and this decorative arts analysis have allowed Fort Hill to "speak for itself". Based on the information uncovered, the recreated rooms may not appear "elegant" by today's standards of taste, and their appearance will certainly be very different from the 1930s "Williamsburg-influenced" interiors that preceded them. These recommendations provide an exceptional opportunity to more accurately interpret the life and times of John C. Calhoun through accurate restoration of Fort Hill's interiors as he knew them. This level of interior restoration will meet the expectations of the National Park Service and the South Carolina State Historical Preservation Office as reflected in the Secretary of the Interior's "Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Furnished Interiors". Equally important, accurately restored interiors for Fort Hill will tremendously enhance visitors' understanding of one of the Nation's first National Historic Landmarks.

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ROOM 104, DINING ROOM

During the Calhoun's era as today, family meals did not all take place in the formal dining room. In the winter, the most inviting room for family dining was the one with the biggest hearth and in the summer, piazzas were informal outdoor dining rooms. Only the wealthiest families had a separate formal dining room and, like most rooms in the house, these were used in many ways. The dining room was a quiet place to read or sew away from visitors in the drawing room or the bustle of the family parlor; it could also be a place for a large seasonal project such as polishing silver before formal events.

In terms of decoration, dining rooms were viewed as more masculine than feminine; they were to be sober, calming, and located away from heat and glare. Prescriptive literature mentions most frequently a color scheme for dining rooms of red curtains, green, red and grey floorcovering, and grey, black and white wallpaper with a green border. Mahogany furnishings such as the Calhoun's dining room pieces were the most fashionable type. One advantage to having a formal dining room was that the table could be left in place rather than being taken apart after use and moved against the walls or out of the room. Even with a formal dining room, extension tables such as those owned by the Calhouns were the most desirable since unneeded pieces could be placed out of the way against the walls or used elsewhere. The Calhoun's set of 10 grained early Empire side chairs and 2 matching arm chairs were customarily lined up against the walls when not in use. These chairs would have been upholstered in black horsehair, considered very appropriate for public rooms and mentioned in Floride Calhoun's inventory.

The mantel in this important room would have had a very symmetrical arrangement consisting of a mirror, large painting or fine clock in the center; a pair of argand lamps or candlesticks (without candles, which were put in as needed) on either end; and in between, a pair of small vases with bouquets. Paintings in large, elaborate gilt frames were appropriate for dining room walls; they were symmetrically tiered one above the other (the lowest one not hung above eye level). It was stylish in this era to "blind hang" framed art flat against the wall, without visible cords.

Wall-to-wall carpet was very desirable for a fashionable dining room; during meals it was covered under the table with a crumb cloth. Thomas Jefferson used such a crumb cloth on the uncarpeted White House dining room floor to offer protection from grease and "the scouring, which that necessitates".¹ Green baize (heavy, felted fabric with a nap) was popular for this purpose, but did not wear well and had to be replaced every year. By the second quarter of the 19th C., "druggets" were in widespread use. Drugget was a coarse felted wool fabric finished around the edge with carpet binding; it was more durable than baize and could be used alone if the dining room was not carpeted. Popular colors for druggets were green, blue, white, brown, and speckled black and white, which showed the least dirt. Their use is described as follows:

Druggets are very wide, being sometimes two yards, and sometimes four yards. They are chiefly employed to lay over another carpet, to preserve it when the room is in daily use, and

¹ Elizabeth Donaghy Garrett, At Home (New York, 1990), p. 79.

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*only removed for company. Sometimes druggets alone are laid, and when of a handsome brown or marone color look exceedingly well. They should be very tightly stretched on the floor, so as not to present a wrinkle to view.*²

Formal meals were three hour affairs which, when served in the popular “English manner”, involved having all necessary china and silver for each part of the main course on the table at once. To accommodate this type of service, wealthy Americans owned very large china and silver flatware services; this meant dishes did not have to be washed between courses. The various Calhoun inventories list the quantity of china and silver necessary for this level of formal dining. The table was to be set with careful symmetry and emphasis on proportion. Side dishes on the various sideboards matched and were of the same size; these were spaced and arranged very symmetrically, also. For dinner parties, there was always a large ice-filled pitcher of water on the sideboard, and one is listed in the 1866 Floride Calhoun Inventory. Typically, wealthy Southerners had more silver than china. The suggested reason for this was that silver was not easily broken by servants, could be readily locked away, and was quickly sold if necessary.³ Certainly, the Calhoun inventories list at least as much silver as formal china.

Tablecloths were always white and the fabric should be thick, soft and carefully ironed. Shiny damask clothes were most popular, especially double French damask. Mangles were considered better than irons for pressing linens because they imparted more luster. Well-off households had large quantities of linens; Anna Calhoun Clemson’s 1852 Inventory lists numerous dining cloths, along with individual “serviettes” (napkins) an amenity used by very fashionable households. There were probably also cloths to cover the side service tables in the dining room. Anna Clemson had several duplicate dining cloths and this indicates that she followed the fashionable practice of removing the top cloth after a formal dinner, revealing a clean cloth for the dessert coarse, which was then removed so that the fruit and nut course could be served on the uncovered table surface. Her linen inventory also lists “Table Diaper”, which referred to cloths and napkins made of diaper, a kind of linen dimity. This was “woven with lines crossing to form diamonds with the spaces variously filled with lines, a dot, or a leaf.”⁴ Diaper was used for less formal family service.

Sideboards were primarily for display of crystal, cut glass, and silver- items, which the Calhoun family owned in quantity. Ideally, the principal sideboard was not to be placed beside or between windows because the resulting glare would ruin the effect of the silver/ glassware display. Perhaps with this caveat in mind, a place was created on the windowless west wall of the Calhoun dining room for the Constitution sideboard. Lighting the sideboard correctly was also important. Soft backlighting with candles was considered best, with a mirror placed above to maximize the effect. Lighting the dining table was equally challenging; if no hanging fixture was present, candles (half as many as the number of guests) were to be placed symmetrically along the table with their flames 18” above the table surface.

The Calhoun’s dining room assumed its current size when the original “sitting hall” in the early house was enlarged to the east and a partition wall was added to separate the new room from the smaller North Entry, Room 101. Because of the possible reuse of wallboards, the goal in determining the early decorative appearance of Room 104 was to find the same wallpaper on several walls. Found on the north and west walls at the cornice line were

² The Workwoman’s Guide, 1840, as quoted in Florence M. Montgomery, Textiles in America (New York, 1984), p. 227.

³ Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett , At Home, (New York, 1990), p. 91.

⁴ Florence M. Montgomery, Textiles in America (New York, 1984), p. 218.

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remnants on canvas of a rag border paper in bright shades of pink and yellow on a white ground (Fig. 10 & 11). This border is possibly from the earliest wallpaper installation in the Dining Room, ca. 1820-30. All around the room, glued directly to the wallboards just above the ghost of the original 5 1/2" high baseboard (a section survives adjacent to door 107), are the remnants of a 3 1/2" wide rag border paper (Figs. 12 & 13). This paper has a green ground flocked in darker green and black. It was also found in at least one location at the cornice line on the north wall. On the west wall, remnants of a laid rag field paper were found below the green flocked border (Fig. 14 & 15). This paper has a grey joined-paper ground which is block-printed in a deeper grey and white. In the second quarter of the 19th C., flocked borders in deep, rich colors were considered most appropriate in stylish dining rooms; they were to be used with somewhat lighter, but still deep-toned wallpapers in somber colors.⁵ The only other paper remnant found in the Dining Room, other than the extant mid-20th C. paper, was located on the jamb return of window 105 (Fig. 16). Somewhat over-painted, it is a mixed pulp/rag paper on a white ground with a Classical Revival design in medium and light grey, probably dating from the College era.

The floor in this room has been replaced at least twice, and thus can provide no information about the early floorcoverings used. There is no "Dining Room" floorcovering listed in the 1866 Andrew Calhoun Inventory. As previously discussed, wall-to-wall carpeting was widely used in stylish formal dining rooms in the 1825-'50 time period. Carpeting selected should be in a period design and should reflect the Calhoun's grey, green and red color scheme.

There is evidence on the board ceiling of various electric lighting installations, but the only possible evidence of pre-1850's lighting in the Dining Room is a 1 1/2" circular plug in the ceiling roughly centered on the fireplace and windows 104 and 105. This could mark the location of a hanging oil or candle lamp, although none is listed in Andrew Calhoun's 1866 Inventory.

The windows in the Dining Room have each had the top 1' of their original jamb backbands removed, and replaced with 1930s backband. The original backband is extant on the architrave and lower jamb of each window. This repaired area and large hardware scars on the top 1 foot of each window jamb appear to be from the installation of heavy Victorian-era valances. There are also 20th C. drapery rod holders remaining in each upper window corner.

Evidence of earlier 19th C. drapery installations are the three "bundled arrow" painted wood cornices with a provenance of belonging to John C. and Floride Calhoun (Figs. 17, 18, 19, & 20). These have green arrow shafts bound with gold ribbons; their finials are missing— an arrow point on one end and feathers on the other (Fig. 21). These cornices have been poorly over-painted and should have their original finish restored. There are also three tieback holes on the left side of windows 104 and 105 (window 106 has a replaced left jamb). The first of these holes is approximately 6" above the sill; the second is approximately 6" above the first; and the third is almost 6" above the second. None of these relate to the pairs of tiebacks seen in 20th C. photos.

Andrew Calhoun's 1866 inventory lists no draperies in the dining room. But since this is the only principal room at Fort Hill with three windows, pre-1850s drapery evidence can be inferred from the listing in the 1866 Floride Calhoun Inventory of "3 Red Moron curtains", probably older curtains since they were valued modestly at \$3.00. "Moron" is probably a misspelling of "moreen", an embossed wool or cotton/wool blend used in the 18th and early 19th C. for stylish draperies and upholstery. Another possibility is the listing in

⁵ Catherine Lynn, *Wallpaper in America* (New York, 1980), p. 363.

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Thomas Clemson's 1888 "List of Property to be Sold" for "3 Window Curtains", valued at \$0.75, perhaps the same curtains inventoried 22 years earlier, but now quite old and worn. If the "Red Moron curtains" were indeed a once-elegant and expensive set of dining room draperies, the Calhoun's had made a stylish choice- moreen was considered an excellent material for the dining room, and scarlet, crimson or maroon were the recommended colors. Dining room draperies were to be simple and "plain".⁶ "Plain" is a relative term meaning that fewer swags were used than in previous decades. 1830s draperies for formal rooms consisted of a pleated fabric valance, trimmed with decorative braid and tassels and attached to a wooden cornice or with large rings to a decorative rod (Fig. 21). Beneath the valance, heavy side drapery panels were attached to rings on a rod and pulled back to reveal white or cream "figured" muslin sheer curtains. Early 19th C. muslin was similar to what is currently called "batiste". These were all held back with cords and tassels, which matched the trimmings on the valance. Tie-backs were looped over glass or gilt-brass "window pins" on the window frame. Another aspect of the dining room window treatment is seen in an early 1890s photo showing a light-colored roller shade in window 105 (Fig. 22). Roller shades installed at Fort Hill before the 1850s would have been raised with cords rather than the spring mechanism developed at mid-century and still used today.

⁶ Edgar deN. Mayhew & Minor Myers, jr., A Documentary History of American Interiors (New York, 1980), p. 115.

PLATES 5 AND 6.

Similar to plate 1, but has extra folds as shewn on the right side of the drapery, thereby giving an additional richness to the design; with tails formed of three pipes each.

FORMATION.

A. shews the lines for the swag; the measurements are first taken precisely as plate 1, then the extra folds as marked, which is here 1 foot for the front, 2 feet for the distance down the swag, and 2 feet 3 inches for the folding. If a rule is wished for the proportion which the additional piece should be to the swag, the following may be used in most cases. Let the part which

joins, be nearly one quarter the bottom of the swag, and the front one-eighth: the part which folds and is tacked to the cornice, should be rather more than one quarter the bottom of the swag.

THE SWAG (B.) is like plate 1, only it must be remembered the side where the additional piece is sewn should not be rounded, although the lines require to be drawn for obtaining the form at c.

The additional piece is like D., using the measurements as described above: it is required that when joined to the swag, the upper part should project as at e., that in turning over the cornice it may not press too much the other parts of the drapery, and it is better to be left for folding, at the time of putting up, in preference to sewing it in plaits to the tape previously.

THE TAIL (F.) is formed by having the material three times the width it is intended to be when folded and finished; in this instance, being eleven inches wide, a breadth of cotton (of 36 inches) may be used; a line drawn from the front depth to the back will give the bottom; when it is fringed, &c. it must be folded into three pipes, (as described for No. 1 of pipe valances, page 23) and sewed to a tape.

OBSERVATION.

The tails introduced here have a chaste appearance, and have the advantage of taking a very small quantity of fringe, being only at the bottom edge.

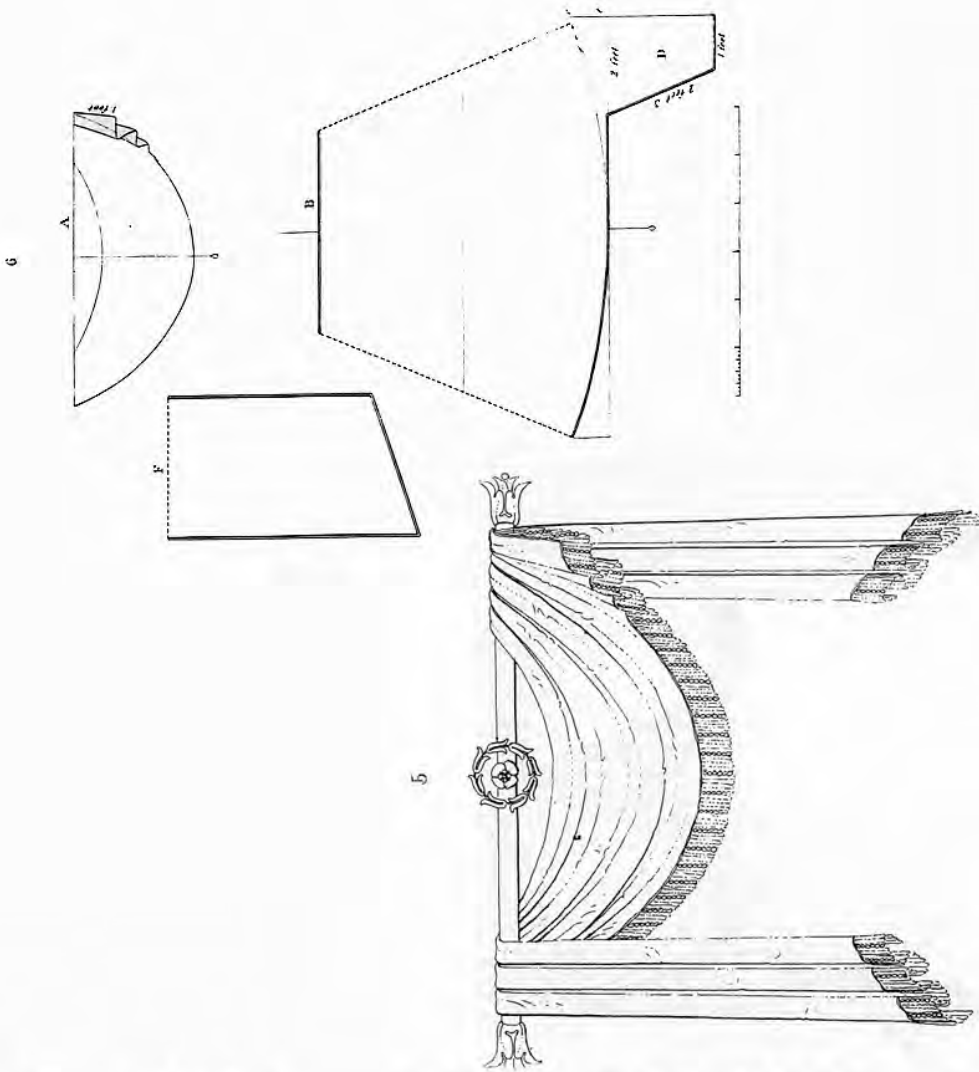
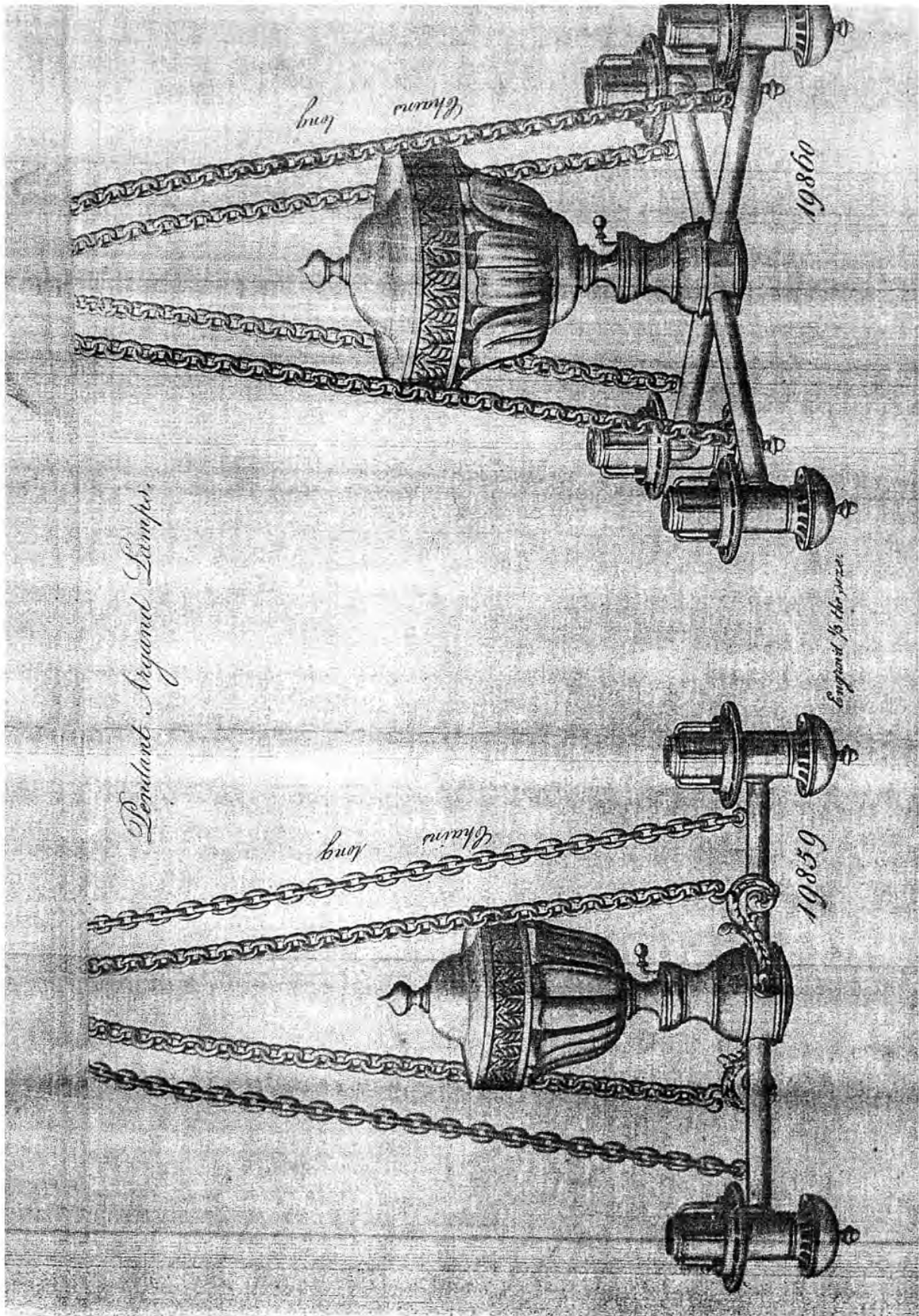
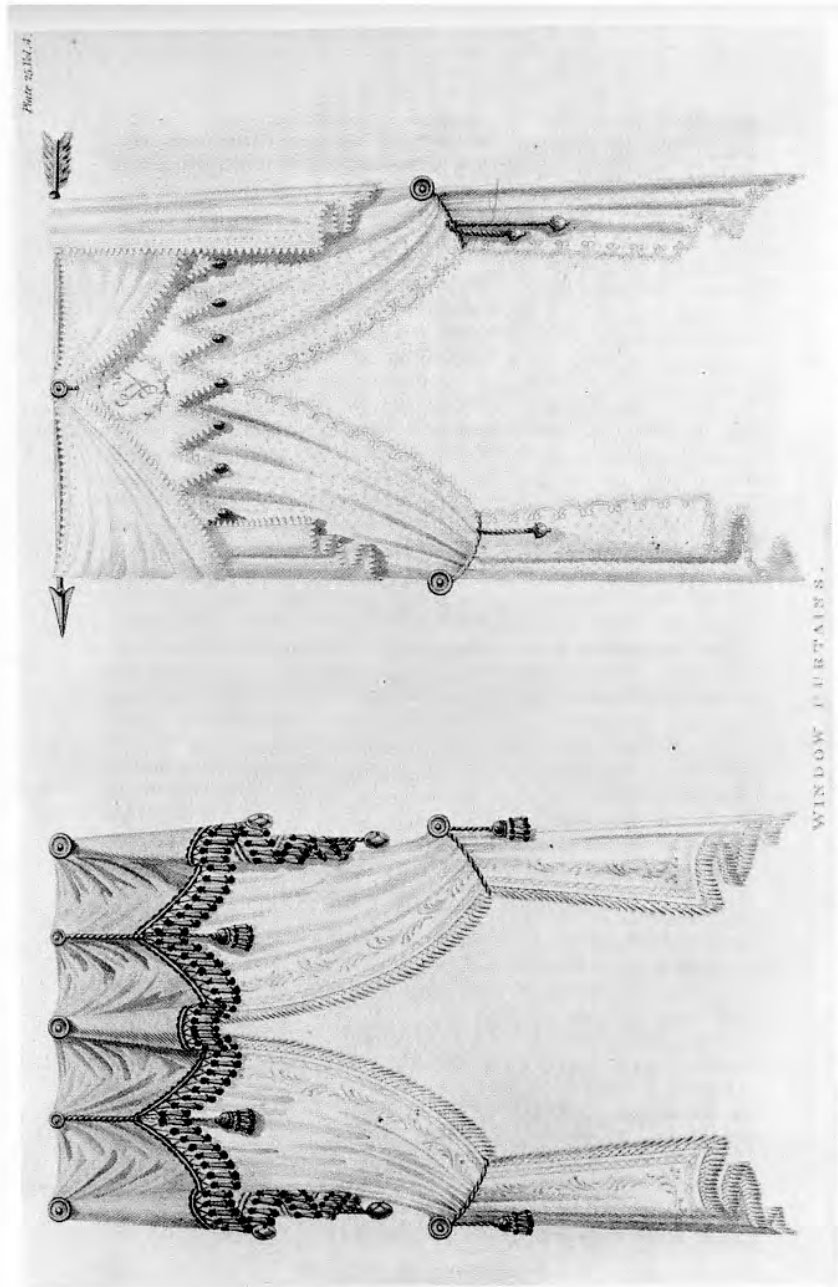


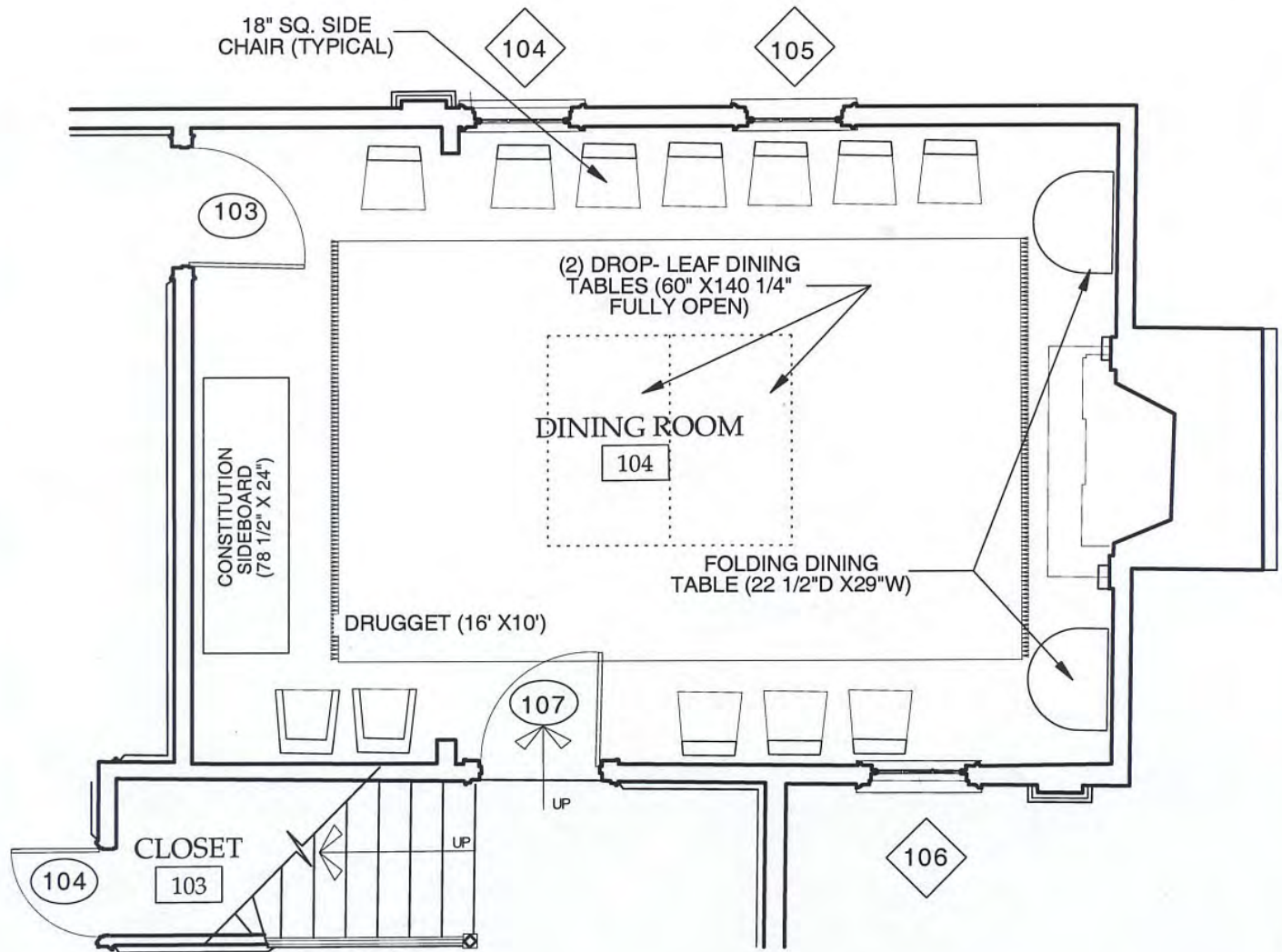
Fig. C



"Lampbook" ca. 1830, English Winterthur Archives



Window Curtains from Rudolph Ackermann, *The Repository of Arts* (Oct. 1810) "fine spotted muslin over a gilt dart"



1 FURNITURE PLAN- ROOM 104
 SCALE: 1/4" = 1'-0"



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