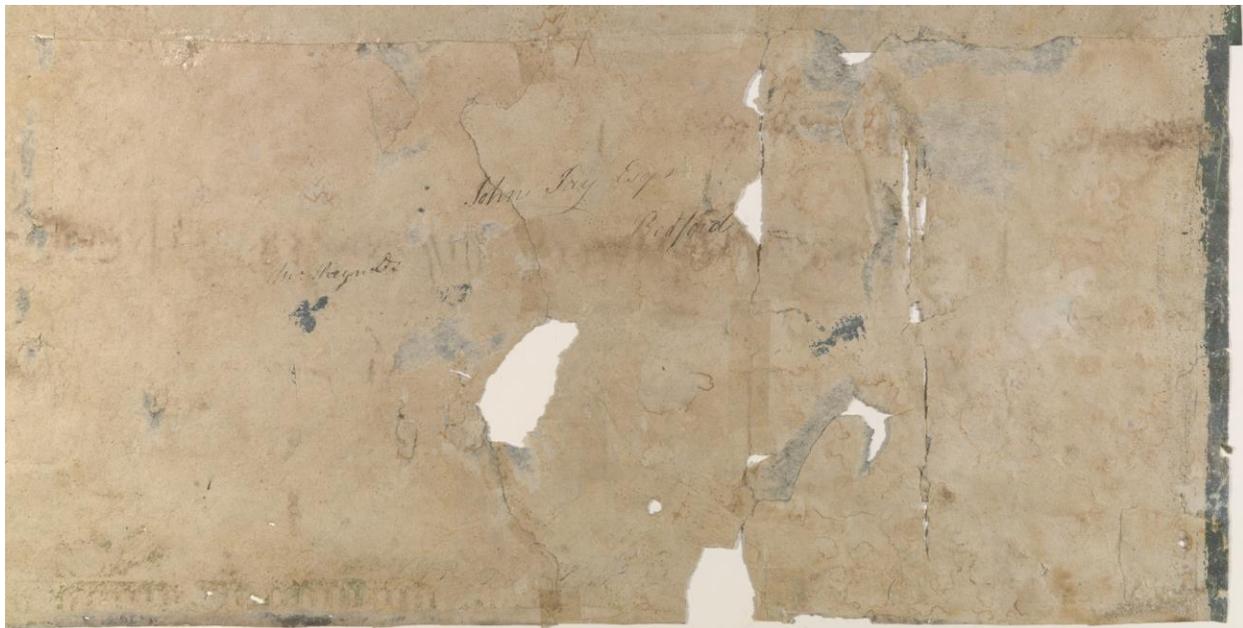


Historic Wallpaper Fragment

c. 1820-1830

Materials: Cotton paper, ink

American



During the restoration of the Homestead in the 1960s, wallpapers dating to the first quarter of the nineteenth century were found in the Library. Four layers of wallpaper were discovered behind the earliest of the built-in bookcases, which is on the east wall. According to curator Lewis C. Rubenstein, the papers were obtained by cutting a hole in the wall from the other side (in the service hall) and removing a complete cross-section of plaster without disturbing the bookcase.

The bottom layer of paper (c. 1801) is a green and white leaf pattern, which has been reproduced and installed in the Front Parlor. The second paper (c. 1805-1815), is the yellow and white hop flower pattern that is currently reproduced in the Dining Room. The third layer (c. 1810-1825) is a stylized pineapple or pine cone pattern printed in ochre, black, and white and is reproduced in the Hall. This top layer is a pillar print with an elaborate floral and foliate motif in black and green on a yellow ground; it can still be seen through cracks in wall behind the bookcase. All of the wallpapers are block-printed on sheets of paper that are made up of squares pasted together to form long strips.

The section that was removed by the curator can be definitively dated to John Jay's period of residence because there is a pencil inscription on one of the layers. On the underside of the top layer of paper, a pencil inscription reads: "John Jay, Esq./ Bedford" and "...Mr. Reynolds." Mr. Reynolds was a local man whom Jay hired for deliveries while he lived in Bedford. This lets us know that all the wallpapers date between 1801 and Jay's death in 1829.

Each of these layers have been examined by wallpaper historians who believe that they are a mix of English and American made paper. In fact, the two earliest layers, which were made c. 1800, can be attributed to a London manufacturer named William Harwood. The pin-print background of the green and white paper is characteristic of Harwood's production. Typical English wallpaper of that time feature stylized floral, foliate, and fruit motifs against a dense, patterned background, which was often stippled.

According to Joanne Warner, the wall coverings curator at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in Manhattan, it was common for wealthier families to replace their wallpaper as often as every seven to ten years. She believes that all the layers were made between 1800 and 1830, as they appear to represent the same style and time period.

While the other walls were stripped of their wallpaper, these four layers of wallpaper were protected by the bookcase, which was most likely added in the early 1830s. Originally, John Jay's barrister bookcase was probably located in the library. His son Peter Augustus inherited his father's bookcase upon his death in 1829, which forced William to find or build this replacement.

We have several written references of wallpaper that date between 1810 and 1830, which is the period we interpret the house in. The first is in a letter from Sarah Louisa in Albany written to her father in Bedford on April 12, 1814:

The paper which sister Ann purchased here last Fall she told me she wished to have exchanged, as it had an unpleasant smell. if she will send it town [sic] & direct it to be sent by the steam Boat I will attend to it & get it exchanged as soon as possible as I know

Nan is anxious to have her dining room painted & smarted up. and sal likes the smell of paint & new paper very much.

“Sal”, as she refers to herself, was interested in discussing the new wallpaper that her sister Nancy was contemplating for the dining room at that time. It appears to have been a popular discussion and topic among the Jay household. A few weeks later, Maria also wrote to her father from Albany regarding the latest choice in wallpaper, saying, “I hope you will like the paper. It was very fortunate you did not put up the other the few warm days we had made the room in which we hung it quite offensive.” A few years later, in April 1819, Nancy wrote to her father about the latest wallpaper she had just purchased for the Bedford house.

On April 13, 1829, almost a month before John Jay died, William recorded in his ledger an expense of \$14.43 for “Paper of parlour.” Around two months later, William wrote to his sister Maria, commenting on the state of the household: “...The house is in tolerable good order the parlor painted & papered etc.”

Years later, while visiting the Palace de L’Elysees in Paris in 1844, William Jay was reminded of a wallpaper that once hung in the parlor at the Bedford House. He described it in his diary, saying, “most the walls are papered, & I observed in one a paper precisely like the one some years since in the parlour at Bedford, an imitation of white watered silk.” In the early nineteenth century, French wallpaper that was printed to look like fabric was a very popular export. It was usually stylized to appear draped and swagged. It is possible that William was recalling the wallpaper hung in 1829.