

An Interpreter

Interpreters play a key role in preserving important cultural resources by communicating the value of these resources to visitors. Objects from architectural study collections can tangibly speak to visitors through their authenticity and can fire the imagination especially when the stories told are founded in the historic structures reports and other supporting documentation that provide the context by which we understand the overall structure and the role this individual element played in it.

Building the Story

Corky Mayo

Reconstructed forts, tarnished hinges, adobe ruins, elegant courthouses, dismantled mantels, truncated Doric columns, crumbling timber fragments and massive lock gates are only a few of the many objects, buildings and structures available to the park interpreter; the storyteller, the conveyer of meaning. These architectural elements and features are often the essential raw materials which the interpreter uses to construct his or her story in an effort to help the visitor understand the value, complexities and nuances of human activity and achievement. Only through understanding and appreciating what these elements represent can the visitor develop a true preservation ethic, a genuine commitment toward protection of these unique and irreplaceable resources.

When restoration craftsmen began stabilizing the Clara Barton National Historic Site in Glen Echo, MD, they discovered that rather than plastering her walls or hanging wallpaper as most Victorians did, Clara Barton had devised a wall treatment peculiarly her own in which she tacked unbleached muslin to the studs and then painted the fabric with a stiff sizing. By studying portions of the original muslin which had survived under later layers of wallpaper, restoration craftsmen were able to reinvent the lost art of muslin-hanging, and restore Barton's Red Cross offices to their former appearance. Interpreting this makeshift wall treatment to visitors reveals far more about the frugal, inventive nature of Clara Barton in a single glance than a dozen biographies ever could.



A historic artifact made it possible for the re-creation of this craft practice. Photo courtesy Clara Barton National Historic Site files.

Around the Pioneer Square neighborhood of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park in Seattle, WA, there remains a wealth of buildings and architectural features, legacies of the 1889-1902 Gold Rush period. Impacted and influenced by the Great Seattle Fire of 1889, the Panic of 1893 which virtually stopped new construction, and the boom of the 1897-1898 Gold Rush, these structures provide the background for a lively 90-minute walking tour.

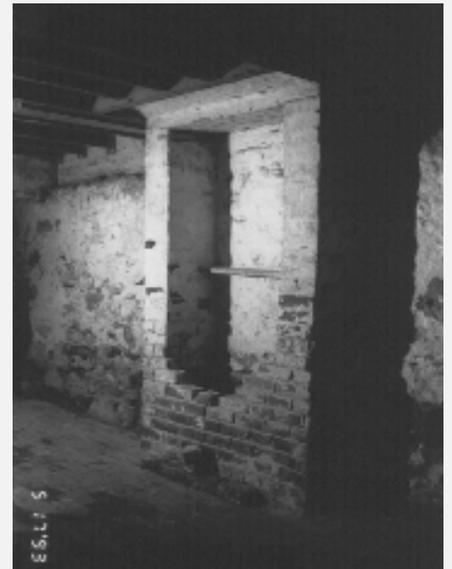
Of great interest is the Interurban Building (built in 1890, Seattle, WA) which abounds in Pacific Northwestern environmental motifs such as the Green Man, the salmon, and Tlinkit designs. These designs reflect an early concern for integrating the natural environment with the built environment. The gradual lightening of the brick as it rises to a white cornice symbolizes the North Cascades and Olympic Mountains, and the Green Man over the entrance-way looks down on all who enter to ensure honesty and fairness in the business dealings of the day.

In the basement of the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, PA, there is a false fireplace. Was it perhaps the inspiration for the dark fictional story *The Black Cat* which tells of a husband's intent to kill and then to conceal the murder behind the false fireplace? What is a false fireplace? Why would someone build one? What function did it serve? Was this a unique instance or was this built in response to a fad or fashion? The interpreter has the opportunity to use the fireplace as a catalyst to help visitors to better understand the singular nature of Poe's genius and to see him as a person who was also a part of his time.



While this example underscores the importance of preserving and retaining original historic material and features in place—how wonderful to be able to walk down the street, down 90 minutes worth of streets and structures, to see buildings, doorways and features as others have seen them in previous generations—decorative elements are often found in architectural study collections. Photo by Marianne Mills.

While this fireplace is a feature that is still within its historic context, elements like this fireplace could be found in an architectural study collection—there are fireplace mantels in the study collections of at least four national park units. The opportunity to discover the stories they have to tell is possible only because we have access to these resources. Photo by Regina P. Jones Underwood.



While this fireplace is a feature that is still within its historic context, elements like this fireplace could be found in an architectural study collection—there are fireplace mantels in the study collections of at least four national park units. The opportunity to discover the stories they have to tell is possible only because we have access to these resources. Photo by Regina P. Jones Underwood.

These are but three examples of the many interpretive stories and insights that are inspired by architectural features or fragments. Building perceptive and provocative programs from the fabric at hand in order to instill a higher level of understanding regarding the built environment is clearly part of the business of interpretation.

Corky Mayo is chief of interpretation for the National Park Service. He is a founding member of the National Association for Interpretation and has an M.A. in History.