



## >Welcome to Historic Cherry Hill



Cherry Hill was the home of five generations of the Van Rensselaer family and their descendants for almost 200 years, from 1787 to 1963. They left behind an unusually intact family collection of 70,000 items including a wide variety of household furnishings, textiles, documents and photographs.

Each of the five generations to occupy Cherry Hill made their mark on the house. Today, the house appears the way the last family, the Rankins, left it in 1940's and 1950's. Philip Van Rensselaer's great-granddaughter, **Catherine Rankin** (1857-1948), was largely responsible for preserving her family collections and re-creating a colonial home which glorified her Van Rensselaer family heritage. This idealized vision of her colonial home was inspired by the *Colonial Revival* design movement.

**Take a moment to look at the Orientation Exhibit in this room, which outlines Historic Cherry Hill's nationally significant story.** Catherine, along with other old and elite families, looked to the past as a means of coping with profound social, economic and political changes.

Just as it was Catherine Rankin's passion to restore her family home, now the museum is embarking on a similar effort to repair and restore the historic building. **This special *Behind-the-Scenes Tour* will provide a unique opportunity to see a historic house**

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**in the midst of restoration, with parts of the inner structure exposed.**

## **Restoration Timeline**

In 2009 the house was packed up, and work began in 2010. There are four stages to the restoration:

- 1. Completed: Structural stabilization through sill repair.**
- 2. In progress: Tightening of the building envelope:** Window restoration and installation of storms are complete. Roof repairs and drainage improvements are planned for this summer.
- 3. In progress: Updating mechanical systems:** The HVAC system was installed spring of 2015, including two large condensing units in front of the house which will eventually be hidden under a restored front porch; a fire detection system will be installed this summer.
- 4. In progress: Interior finishes:** Lath and plaster repair, wallpapers, floor refinishing, painting, etc.

This is a very exciting time at Cherry Hill! This year we are finishing a restoration that has taken us ten years and nearly \$2 million to complete. That is more than 10 times our operating budget! We are all looking forward to the unveiling of the restored house and its rooms once again overflowing with Van Rensselaer family treasures, at the end of this year.

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**Help us keep you safe,  
& preserve the Cherry Hill collection  
for another 230 years:**

**Please move carefully around the collections. Be sure  
not to lean against any of the boxes.**

**Please “look with your eyes,” and do not touch any of the  
displays. Only enter open rooms marked with numbers.**

**Everyone must wear masks at all times while inside the  
historic house. Please maintain social distance from  
other groups and individuals outside your party while  
inside the house as possible.**

**→Go up the hall steps to the first floor.**

**WATCH YOUR HEAD at the top of the stairs.**

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## ROOM 1

## FRONT HALL

We are restoring the 1787 house to its appearance between 1945 and 1954, the period most marked by Catherine Rankin's *Colonial Revival* vision.

The front hall you are standing in was the “hall of ancestors,” where portraits of Cherry Hill's second generation owners (Catherine's grandparents), Arriet and Solomon Van Rensselaer, greeted visitors.

Forty of the 83 pieces of art that once hung in the Front Hall needed some basic conservation work, such as cleaning, rematting, and new backing boards. The prints, photographs, and paintings are finished and ready for reinstallation!

**Our Restoration Philosophy:** It is critical that we do not lose the authenticity of the Rankin family home. It is our responsibility to preserve all of the “evidence” embodied in the structure. We are treating the house like an artifact, keeping the *layers of history* that can currently be found.

**What do we mean by “Layers” of history?** In the Front Hall:

- The original 1787 Georgian layout, with a center hall flanked by 4 rooms.
  - Sliding Doors added by the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (1830's): The addition of a second wall created the “pocket” for sliding doors. Notice how close the wall comes to the window and the niches
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to accommodate the front window shutters. We believe the shutters are original.

Despite the structural damage you see, we have received compliments from architects and conservators for our preservation work and collections care. Historic Cherry Hill received the 2014 Stewardship Award from the Historic Albany Foundation for our efforts to restore the windows and our constant efforts to maintain and preserve the house.

**How did we get to this point?** Damage to house was largely caused by the weight of our collections. The Edward Frisbee Collections Care Center, located across the property, was opened in 2003. The Frisbee Center has allowed us to better care for the collections, to restore the house, and has created far greater opportunities for interpretation.

**Where are the collections now?** Collections that are usually exhibited in the historic house have been packed in double-wall cardboard and remain in the house. They are protected from dust, restoration work, and environmental changes. Their locations are tracked in a special database.

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## **ROOM 2**

### **Family Parlor**

This was the family parlor; a recreational space used by all generations to relax, play games and music, assemble scrapbooks and photo albums, and read aloud to one another.

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All members of the household gathered here, including Mary Burle and Minnie Knapp, African-American children who were orphaned and raised as wards and servants of the Elmendorf family (3<sup>rd</sup> generation). Minnie's brother, Jimmy, often played games with the family and performed on his violin during visits, as Hattie Elmendorf Gould wrote in her diary in 1879:

*“In the evening I fixed Mary’s stockings & then we had a concert, Jimmy taking the principal part!”*

**Restoration:** In this parlor it is clear why the first step in the restoration-- addressing structural deterioration-- was also our highest priority.

**Cherry Hill’s structural frame is made of timber.** Many of family’s belongings were stored in heavy case furniture like dressers causing the wood to buckle under the weight.

On the east (front) side of the house, four main weight-bearing posts sit on a sill. The posts hold the weight distributed down from the *girt* or *beam*. In between the main posts, the wall is double framed with a row of interior studs and a row of exterior studs.

Water entry had caused the sill and some of the exterior studs to rot. The base of the southeast post was no longer in contact with the sill and no longer bearing any weight. The main northeast post

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was also no longer making contact with the sill due to a damaged foundation.

**So what was holding up the house??** *Nogging* (interior brickwork) and the interior studs bore the weight of the house. Interior studs are not meant to support so much weight. The interior studs were also resting on the floorboards, causing them to turn and crack.

**At this point in the restoration,** the foundation has been repaired, parts of the sill have been replaced and bolted in place, and the brick nogging put back in place with mortar. Rather than remove and replace rotten posts and studs, they have been “Dutchman” repaired—a process by which damaged segments are reinforced with new wood. The lath has been put back up, and the work area was re-plastered.

### **Items from the restoration on display:**

- **Lath (thin, narrow strip of wood):** Laths support layers of plaster that make up the wall. This piece is hand split. There are some pieces of lath used in the house that are milled.
- **Nails:** A number of nails removed during the first phase of the restoration are on display. All of them were hand wrought (hammered) by a blacksmith.

The flooring nails were cut by the restoration workers in order to remove a few floor boards to gain access to the sill for stabilization.

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The small nails are lath nails and have a flat head so that they can be easily plastered over. The finishing nails have a flat tip to prevent the wood from splitting and were used to nail up clapboard.

- **Window weights:** Window weights were used on double hung windows as a counter balance to hold windows in position when they were open. The weights are a part of the **layers of history** we are preserving. The lead weight was tied with some original hemp. As windows were altered and more weight was needed, old nails and newer wire nails were added to maintain the counter balance.
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### **ROOM 3**

### **Formal Parlor**

This was the formal parlor, used for special guests and occasions. This was where Catherine married Edward Rankin (1850-1932) on June 3, 1884.

At the time of their marriage, the Elmendorf family was facing financial ruin. Harriet Maria Van Rensselaer Elmendorf, Catherine's cousin and adopted mother, had just lost ownership of the house. Four days after the wedding, Cherry Hill and the surrounding property were sold at public auction. Catherine and Edward stayed at Cherry Hill as renters, raised three children, and purchased Cherry Hill in 1896.

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In December of 1911, Catherine's youngest child, Emily Rankin (1889-1963), made her debut in this room.

**Layers of history:** The mantel in the 1948 picture is not the original. It was installed when the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (1830's) made updates. The wooden mantle now leaning against the north wall is one of the original 1787 mantles, probably from a bedroom. It was kept by the family in the attic after a new mantel was installed. We invite you to take a close look at the mantle (but please do not touch), and look for the etchings created to resemble mahogany, an expensive wood.

**Restoration:** The original sill was made of chestnut. It is still present in this area, with some decay. The sill did need to be repaired and reinforced. Conservators were able to retain much of the original wood including some original connecting mortises and tenon joints, where studs joined the sill.

This side of the house was propped up outside while repairing the sill. Areas of rot were cut out with hand tools, and white oak and epoxy were used to fill in the crevices. All elements were then bolted together.

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## **ROOM 4            Dining Room**

**Layers of history:** In 1872, the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation at Cherry Hill installed the oak flooring, and the dumbwaiter. In the 1930's, a wood pantry had been converted into a kitchenette, which became

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the primary kitchen. The dumbwaiter was closed off at this time, as the basement kitchen was no longer in regular use. A large china closet was built in its place, to showcase the family's collection. Remnants of the dumbwaiter remain visible in the main kitchen, and in the cabinet below the closet.

The wainscot was installed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, replacing 19<sup>th</sup>-century beadboard. The ceiling was also updated in the 1930's. In the 1949 photograph, the dining room embodies Catherine Rankin's cultivated atmosphere of refinement and reverence for the idealized past of her colonial ancestors.

**Restoration:** We invite you to take a close look at the wallpaper and wainscoting to spot areas of water damage. Water entry has been a major "enemy" in the preservation of Cherry Hill, as the house is located midway up a slope. The pantry has had issues with moisture resulting in mold. Improving drainage on the west side of the house will alleviate the issue.

Moisture contributed to an infestation of carpet beetles and moths in the dining room carpet. The infestation traveled to the front parlor carpet. All carpets have now been frozen to kill the larva, vacuumed, thoroughly examined and are ready for reinstallation.

**We invite you to take a closer look in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs...**Can you find the dog scratches from one of Emily Rankin's Dalmatians? The unruly dog was routinely locked out of the Front Hall when the family received guests. We will keep this authentic interpretive element intact.

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## → UP THE STAIRCASE to the Second Floor

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### **Room 5      Boys' Bedroom**

This bedroom was shared by the boys of the last generation Rankins, Edward “Elmendorf” (1885-1961) and Herbert (1887-1918). Elmendorf resided in the room into adulthood, as seen in this 1949 photograph. Both boys attended Albany Academy and later Princeton University. Herbert tragically died of influenza in 1918 traveling overseas to serve as a captain in World War One.

**Layers of History:** The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation also used this room as a nursery, as seen in the 1880's photograph.

The **1827 murder at Cherry Hill** occurred in this room: Jesse Strang, a hired farmhand having an affair with Van Rensselaer relative Elsie Whipple, shot Elsie's husband John from the window. Elsie and John shared this room with John's niece.

**Restoration:** Please take a moment to look out the South window, to see that we are in the midst of restoring the entire site to reflect the 1945 to 1954 period. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century arbor and garden temple were recently recreated, and Emily Rankin's garden beds reframed. The peonies date back to the 1930s. Future plans include recreating a dog yard. Check out the *Self-Guided Tour of the Grounds* to learn more about the landscape.

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### **Room 6      Guest Bedroom**

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This was Catherine Rankin's bedroom as a girl and later became a guest room.

**Restoration:** As the cosmetic stages of restoration begin, we strive to preserve the authenticity of the family home. Catherine personally hung the wallpaper and her daughter Emily later varnished the floor herself. The wood filler strips between the wide floor boards were added in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Rankins. We do not want to replace the work of *their* hands with the work of ours unless we have absolutely no choice.

**Layers of History:** Guests often commented on the intrusive changes that occurred over the years. Train tracks were completed in front of Cherry Hill mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and houses on McCarty and First Avenues were built shortly after the family lost the property in the 1880s.

This photograph shows the room as it was at that pivotal time. **Did you notice the large wardrobe pushed in front of the South facing window?**

The landscape photograph from 1882 shows young Eddie (Elmendorf) Gould of the 4<sup>th</sup> generation and his nurse, Mary Burle, with the train yard close by.

Later changes include the Port of Albany built on Van Rensselaer's Island in 1926 and Interstate 787 which was being built at the time that Cherry Hill became a museum in 1963.

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## **Room 7      Emily's Bedroom**

**Layers of History:** The photograph from the 1940's shows the bedroom Emily Rankin used her entire life, except for the five years she was away for college prep and at Smith College.

Emily was Catherine and Edward Rankin's youngest child and the last inhabitant of the house. Emily is the reason you are here visiting today. She willed Cherry Hill to become a museum at the time of her death in 1963.

Before it was Emily's bedroom, this room was used as a library. Before that, it was part of the second story hallway and used as a gathering space.

**Restoration:** We invite you to step closer to examine the painted paper that is peeling on the walls. We don't know when this room was painted white. The nurse who took care of Emily and Edward until 1963 made a few interior changes to "spiff up" the house. For many years, we wondered what the family had actually put on the walls before they were painted over.

**Now we know!** A conservator performed a paint analysis on a sample of the wallpaper. It was discovered that under the sooty white layer, was a lovely creamy yellow, Emily Rankin's favorite color! Please take a minute to look at the Benjamin Moore sample. We think Emily applied a lining paper and painted it yellow.

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The crushed plaster at the doorway was caused by the weight issue. There was floor-to-ceiling steel shelving in the attic above this wall, which was stacked with magazines. Evidence of the impact is visible on every level below.

**Do you notice the dirt framing the spaces where prints once hung?** Today, Cherry Hill's envelope has been sealed, keeping harmful pollutants out. Imagine how much dirt has entered this house. This is not a housekeeping issue. Cherry Hill is in close proximity to I-787, the railroad, and the Port of Albany. The pollutants created by traffic and industry easily entered the house through loose windows and doors and settled on objects. Chemicals in the air react with objects, especially metals. Sealing out these pollutants provide a better environment for our collections.

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## **Room 8      Master Bedroom**

**Layers of History:** This was the master bedroom for Catherine and Edward Rankin. It may have always been the master bedroom; it was where first generation matriarch Maria Van Rensselaer resided during the 1827 murder.

We invite you to look at where the Rankins patched the wallpaper themselves. This is another area where we will preserve this authentic representation of the family home.

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**Restoration:** The historic house is both the largest object in our collection AND houses a large portion of our collection, so the environment inside the house is important. Maintaining the correct temperature and humidity is critical to the long-term preservation of the collections.

Completing the window restoration has created a tighter building envelope. We will also install blown-in cellulose insulation in some of the exterior walls. Repairing the drainage, roof, and gutter system will continue our efforts to seal the building.

**Cherry Hill's furnace and forced air system dated to roughly the 1950's.** An energy efficient HVAC system has been installed to provide a better environment for our collections. We reused the forced air registers and vents when installing the new system. Heat dries the air so we keep the relative humidity *up* in the winter by only heating the house to 50 degrees. We did not add humidification because adding water to the air in the winter can cause condensation on the wood-frame structure, which can lead to rot. In the summer, there is central dehumidification and cooling to keep the relative humidity *below* 65%.

Light is another major concern, because it fades and degrades fabrics and finishes. As part of our reinstallation, we will be installing a new system of mesh shades that reduce light levels but reduce glare for improved viewing.

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**→Return to the first floor. A guide is there to direct you to the basement kitchen.**

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## Room 9      Kitchen

**Layers of History:** The Rankins could have updated this kitchen, based on the 1950's and 1960's advertisements on display. Instead, they chose to keep the kitchen of their childhood, using the heat stove for cooking and attempting to back bread in the old brick oven.

This was the site of five generations of baking and cooking, a task performed by enslaved women and female servants, overseen by a succession of mistresses of the house. Live-in servants and enslaved people were a thing of the past by the time of our mid-20<sup>th</sup> century interpretive period. However, we have chosen to display the bedroom of Dinah Jackson, who lived and toiled in this room.

**Dinah Jackson:** The last enslaved person at Cherry Hill, Dinah Jackson resided in the open back room. As the cook, she slept close to the kitchen, storing grains and other food items in the front partition of her room. Dinah slept in the back, often accompanied by Elsie and John Whipple's young son, Abraham. She would have had little privacy and most likely suffered Cherry Hill's periodic flooding in her dark, dank quarters. Enslaved New Yorkers were emancipated on July 4, 1827. Now a free woman, Dinah testified later that month in the murder trial of Jesse Strang. According to court transcripts, she stated that although she believed Jesse had tried to intimidate her into leaving Cherry Hill, she believed:

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*“This was my home, my proper place, and I should not go.”*

Dinah Jackson remained at Cherry Hill for the rest of her life.

**Why would Dinah Jackson stay at Cherry Hill after her emancipation?** This summer, Historic Cherry Hill was awarded two grants which will allow us to research and use items in our collection to answer this question, and many more about the underrepresented people who lived at Cherry Hill and in the surrounding neighborhood.

**Historical African American Experiences at Cherry Hill** will make primary resources available for researchers and schools on the digital archive *New York Heritage*. With funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities, we began researching and digitizing documents and objects in the collection related to the African Americans who resided at Cherry Hill in July of 2020.

We are also thrilled to announce that Historic Cherry Hill received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. **More Voices on the Hill: A Reinterpretation Project at Historic Cherry Hill** will take a fresh look at the site, working with scholars, interpretive specialists, and members of our community to shine a light on the historic home’s underrepresented voices. We have been planning this project for nearly two years; its launch could not be more timely.

Both projects will be used in school programs and in the reinterpretation of the Cherry Hill story and core tour. Through this work, we hope to discover the voices of the residents of Cherry Hill that have been left out of the narrative. We look forward to

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being able to tell the stories of people like Dinah Jackson who were part of the pulse of Cherry Hill.

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## **We hope you have enjoyed this behind-the-scenes glimpse of Cherry Hill!**

The success of the capital campaign has ensured the restoration and preservation of Historic Cherry Hill as an authentic family home. We are still working to raise funds for the preservation and care of our vast collection. This funding will allow us to serve as stewards and provide access to researchers near and far, including from local colleges and universities, in our Frisbee Collection Care Center.

Throughout our ten year, major restoration, the museum has continued to offer award- winning school programs, special events and publications to tell the fascinating stories of the Cherry Hill family. These programs are only made possible through access to a well preserved and cared for collection.

**For more information about upcoming events, programs, and initiatives, check out our [website](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).**

After the current restoration project is complete, we have another project lined up! The front porch and archways will be restored, concealing the HVAC system under the front stairs. The exterior of the house will be repainted the traditional yellow-- a paint analysis was done to determine the historical accuracy of the color.

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**We welcome your support.** Please visit  
[www.historiccherryhill.org/donate/](http://www.historiccherryhill.org/donate/) to make a donation.

**We invite you to explore Cherry Hill's historical gardens & grounds!**

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