Legacy

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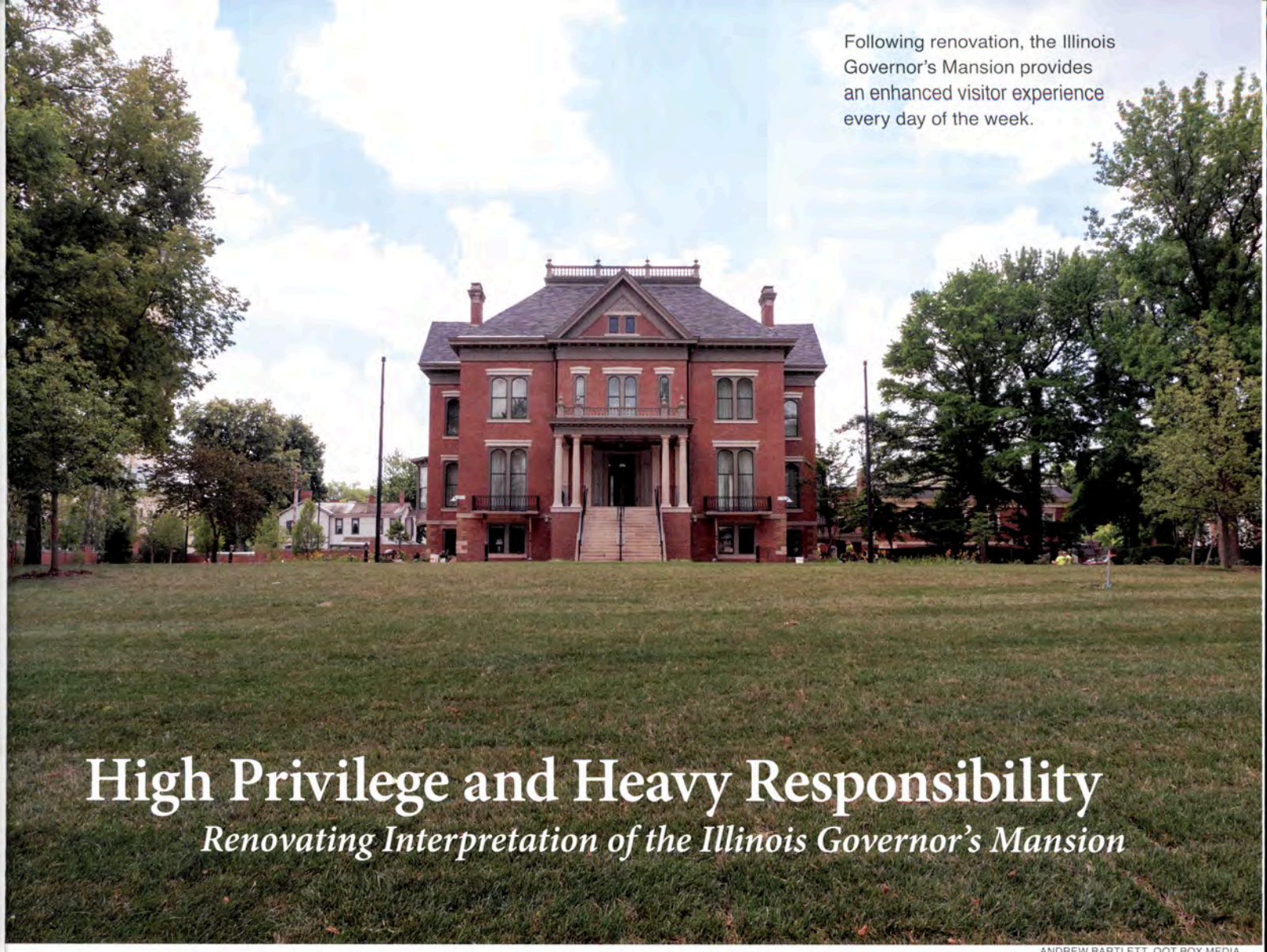
MISINFORMATION IN INTERPRETATION



Following renovation, the Illinois Governor's Mansion provides an enhanced visitor experience every day of the week.

High Privilege and Heavy Responsibility

Renovating Interpretation of the Illinois Governor's Mansion

ANDREW BARTLETT, OOT BOX MEDIA

Laughter erupts from the top of the elliptical staircase. Two floors below, I'm certain I know what caused it—the story of two children sliding down the banister during an inaugural ball delights most guests at the Illinois Governor's Mansion. When I hear applause from that area a few moments later, I know our guides have successfully turned the humorous anecdote into a meaningful message about courage and determination in leadership. That hasn't always been the case.

JENNIFER CALDWELL

The Illinois Governor's Mansion was first completed in 1855, and has endured several cycles of restoration and renovation throughout its 160-year history. Like other homes, its occupants would update it to match current trends, repair or replace broken features, and improve efficiency. From 1889 to 1971, multiple renovation projects would ensure this important symbol of Illinois could stand the test of time.

By 2015, the site had fallen into disrepair. Despite staggering cost estimates, those who understood the historic value of the site believed it could (and should) be saved. The Governor's Mansion is where our state's leaders thought about how to respond to wars and economic crisis, how to expose flaws in our system and insist upon justice for all, and how to graciously handle defeat. It is also a home, where families have shared joy and sorrow, triumph and tragedy. The potential existed for the site to inspire current and future generations.

Among those who recognized this potential was First Lady Diana Rauner. Understanding that the cost of renovation was more than the state's budget could bear, as chair of the nonprofit Illinois Governor's Mansion Association she spearheaded a private fundraising effort to cover the entire cost of the project. Once the construction work was approved, Mrs. Rauner organized another "renovation" of sorts—creating an interpretive program that would help guests find personal meaning in the

newly renovated site. A team of history professionals, volunteers, museum experts, and others was asked to collaborate on improved methods of telling the Mansion's story. We set about to dispel the myths that haunted us and fill in the missing information that eluded us.

An analysis of the visitor experience revealed that like the house itself, the interpretation needed some work. Tours were enjoyable, but guests were not always leaving with the "revelation" and "provocation" Freeman Tilden emphasized. Some of the stories did not match up with the artifacts used to tell them, and others were missing reliable sources. With a 160-year history and 32 different families residing in the Mansion over the years, the potential certainly existed to fulfill the First Lady's vision of a place that inspires leadership and civic responsibility. She suggested a 1952 quote from Governor Adlai E. Stevenson II to guide the process: "As citizens of this democracy, you are the rulers and the ruled, the lawgivers and the law abiding, the beginning and the end. Democracy is a high privilege, but it is also a heavy responsibility."

Communication between those working on the physical restoration and those responsible for historic research helped to identify which stories would best bring to life the newly restored rooms. Each architectural feature and artifact provided us with the first clue in a "treasure hunt" of sorts. Newspaper archives, personal memoirs, family documents, and other sources helped us connect the path to greater meaning for our guests.

The idea of "high privilege" is apparent upon walking through the house—grand entertaining spaces filled with beautiful furniture and art remind guests of the freedoms we enjoy as part of a democracy. Research revealed that some pieces had stronger connections than had previously been shared with guests. A pink-rimmed porcelain soup tureen that had been proudly displayed for generations was indicated as being part of the state's first official set of dishes. New research helped expand its story to create more meaningful connections.

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This view of the Mansion's central staircase suggests the courage young Florence Fifer would need to slide down the banister in 1889 – the same courage she would need to lead as State Senator Florence Fifer Bohrer.

Newspaper accounts and other sources reveal the set was in use from the mid 1870s through the beginning of World War I. Photographs show the set being used to serve President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. The timeline also implies the set was in use in 1874 when President Grant arrived to speak at the dedication of the Lincoln Tomb and in 1893 when Governor Altgeld labored over whether to expose a failure of the judicial system at the expense of his career. While the fine tableware itself is a symbol of "high privilege," many felt the "heavy responsibility" of leading our state and nation as they were served from it. The one surviving piece is more than a soup tureen, it is a witness to history.

In a suite now decorated to reflect the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, guests can see another witness to history—a set of furniture hand carved by William Bartels of Carthage, Illinois. The intricately detailed furniture, considered to be among the best of its time, was displayed in the Illinois Building at the Exposition hosted in Chicago. Newspaper reporters of the time suggested well-known people had

offered large sums to purchase the furniture; we were unable to verify their accounts. In the process, however, we uncovered a more meaningful story that refocused our interpretation. Mr. Bartels, a farmer, was plagued by typhoid and used wood carving to pass the time while he recovered. His work became so sought after that he eventually gave up farming to pursue carving full time. Bartels's opportunity to pursue a talent and passion full time is something many people hope for and can relate to.

Just outside of that suite is the aforementioned elliptical staircase, where guests enjoyed laughing at the story of Florence Fifer sliding down the banister during her father's inaugural ball. When the laughter subsided, many struggled to understand it as more than a humorous anecdote. Florence Fifer Bohrer's memoirs and other accounts remind us the boldness and courage she demonstrated that evening were critically important in her adult life. As the first woman to serve in the Illinois State Senate, from 1925 to 1933 she worked on developing a system of state parks, improving conditions at facilities for the disabled, and addressing social welfare issues. Her life embodies the ideas of the "high privilege" and "heavy responsibility" of democracy. Living in the Governor's Mansion is the high point of many careers; it was only the beginning for Florence.

In a place with so much history, one of the biggest challenges was creating a conclusion to the experience. We chose to focus on another Illinoisan who, like Florence Fifer Bohrer, found the Governor's Mansion to be a beginning rather than an end. The final stop on the public tour is the room where Governor Adlai E. Stevenson II learned he had been defeated in the 1952 presidential election—an experience that may not sound inspiring until guests hear the rest of the story. Stevenson's concession speech that evening looked forward to a time "when all children grow in freedom and dignity in a world at peace," and his work to bring that about would take him from Illinois to the world stage as a foreign policy leader and ambassador to the United Nations. Leaving the Governor's Mansion was not the end for Stevenson, and we hope it is not the end for our guests. We want them to see the site as inspiration to find their own role in shaping our democracy.

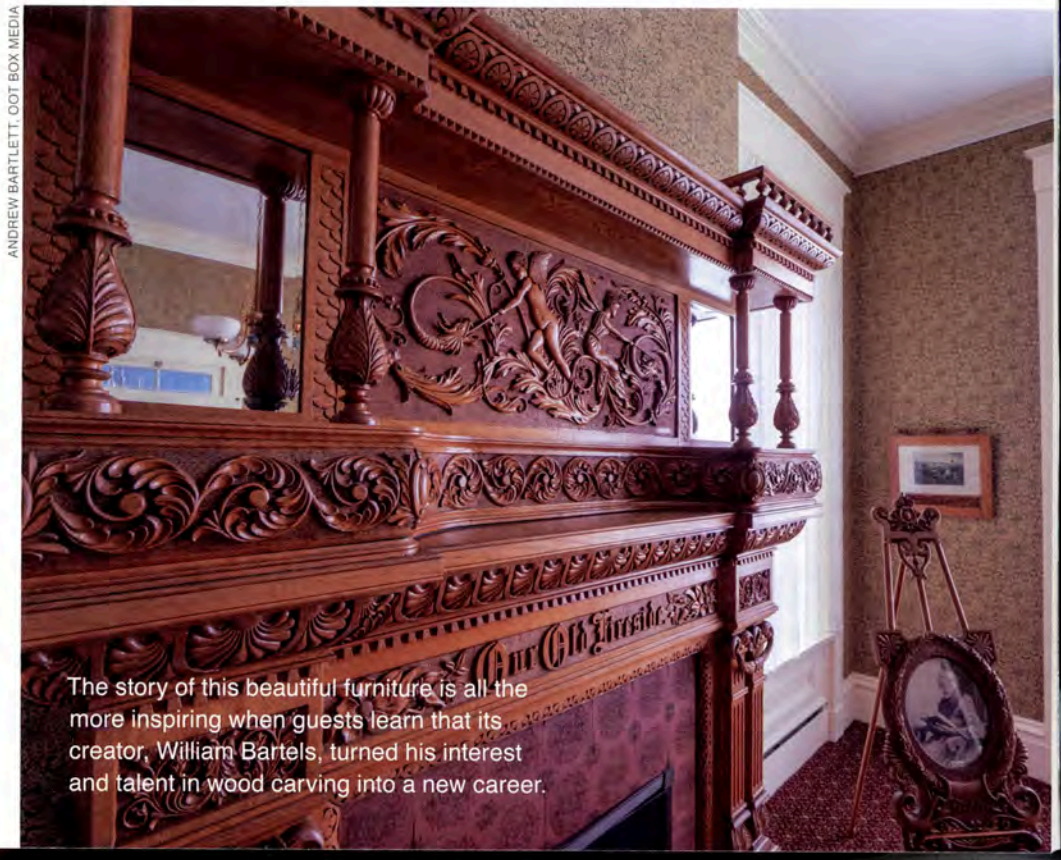
Guests can find ways to demonstrate civic responsibility within the site itself. In our new education center, guests have an opportunity to write to the governor. Another display offers cards to take home with suggestions on how their talents such as writing, creating, organizing, or speaking can be used to directly impact their community.

This is only a sampling of the new interpretive experience that awaits guests at the Mansion. We are excited to continue research going forward. An ongoing project is improving the approach we use with groups of youth, guided by the memoirs of Florence Fifer Borher, who lived here as a child: "Democracy must be earned anew by each generation. It is not the danger that confronts us but the manner in which we meet it that is important. It can either destroy us or help us on the way." Our team views the project in the same way that Governor Stevenson and Senator Bohrer viewed democracy—as both a privilege and a responsibility that must be earned anew again and again.

First Lady Diana Rauner's vision, leadership and private fundraising efforts have resulted in a transformation that draws interest far beyond the borders of Illinois. The Illinois Governor's Mansion is once again a visually stunning symbol of pride for our state, with an interpretive program that brings history to life for our guests. While guests have enjoyed the guided tours offered for generations, they now leave with a stronger connection to our past and inspiration to help shape our future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Caldwell is a Certified Interpretive Guide who has spent the past five years as a full-time site interpreter at several state historic sites managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, including the Lincoln Tomb, Old State Capitol, Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices, Vachel Lindsay Home and Dana-Thomas House. For the past two years, she has been involved in the interpretive planning for the Illinois Governor's Mansion, which reopened to the public in July 2018 following renovations funded entirely by private donations.



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The story of this beautiful furniture is all the more inspiring when guests learn that its creator, William Bartels, turned his interest and talent in wood carving into a new career.