

# HISTORIC INTERIORS OF THE FRANKLIN MASONIC HALL

## *Early Decorative Finishes Revealed*

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For decades, myth and mystery characterized the fraternal organization of Freemasonry, shrouded in centuries of politics and power. While there is not a “treasure” at the Historic Franklin Masonic Hall, the building, complete with its collections and incredible historic finishes, are a treasured historic resource. The Hall, constructed c.1823 to 1826, cleverly blends Gothic architecture and country craftsmanship. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, distant cosmopolitan cities such as Philadelphia, served as examples of architectural and cultural inspiration for many county seats in Middle Tennessee. Small town surveyors west of the Appalachian Mountains modeled the street grid patterns that defined a central square. According to historian Lisa Tolbert, “...by the 1790s, Abram Maury, used it for Franklin, Tennessee, naming the town after Philadelphia’s most famous citizen.”<sup>1</sup>

Placement of significant buildings, including courthouses and churches, played prominent roles in Franklin’s early development. Despite their “symbolic placement and accessibility” they were not “the largest nor the finest building in town.”<sup>2</sup> For Franklin, the Masonic Hall, reaching above all other early 19<sup>th</sup> century structures in town, became one of the most central buildings in the community.<sup>3</sup> As the architect for the Historic Franklin Masonic Hall remains unknown, the sincere imitation of William Strickland’s design (1809-1811) of the original Philadelphia Masonic Temple cannot be underestimated in regards to its influence on the architecture of the Franklin Masonic Hall. While Strickland’s blend of Georgian Gothic design provided prominence within the political, social and cultural townscape, so too did the Franklin Masonic Hall.<sup>4</sup>

While there is little doubt skilled brick masons constructed the Hall’s Flemish bond exterior, the attention to interior architectural details, including doors, millwork, flooring, paint, and wallpaper was clearly intentional. The Masonic Hall’s team of skilled artisans and craftsmen remain relatively unknown, however; early research demonstrates artisans and craftsmen had businesses in

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa C. Tolbert, *Constructing Townscapes: Space and Society in Antebellum Tennessee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1999), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Tolbert, 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> James Patrick, *Architecture in Tennessee: 1768-1897* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 151; image of the Philadelphia Masonic Temple, c 1809-1811, designed by William Strickland. <https://philadancehistoryjournal.wordpress.com/category/%e2%80%a2-18th-century/> (Accessed August 21, 2018).

Franklin between 1820-1830, including T. Swain who advertised in the *Independent Gazette* in May 1822 he “returned to Franklin and will continue to carry on the art of Chairmaking in all its various branches...pledging to make as strong and elegant work as any in the United States...He will also carry on the Painting, Glazing, and Paper-Hanging Business...”<sup>5</sup>

The Historic Franklin Masonic Hall received several architectural exterior and interior cosmetic alterations over its one-hundred-and-ninety-five year history. In many ways, it retains much of its original appearance, a rarity among Tennessee’s remaining historic buildings standing from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, including nearly all of its historic interior finishes. Historians and old home owners alike can glean valuable insights by examining a building’s historic surfaces. A careful study of finishes reveals the aesthetic tastes of the building’s owners as well as clues to how they used various spaces in the structure at different times. On the regional level, this sort of analysis provides a window into the machinations and demographics of the workforce, the availability of certain materials, and the level of craftsmanship available at a specific point in time. At Franklin’s Masonic Hall, the historic finishes also impart information pertaining to 19<sup>th</sup> century Masonic symbolism and ritual.

Since January, the Historic Franklin Masonic Hall Foundation has been conducting an in-depth investigation into the building’s finishes. This research has yielded a surprisingly complete chronicle of the historic interior’s various incarnations. The process entails off-site and on-site investigation by staff and qualified consultants. First, a historic paint analyst microscopically and chemically analyzed samples and identified key finishes. On site, staff scoured the walls for hidden paint and wallpaper. To date, four historic wallpapers have been found, as well as an overwhelming amount of Civil War graffiti stemming from Federal occupation (1862-1865) and the Hall’s use as a Federal hospital following the horrific battle scenes at Franklin November 30 and December 17, 1864. The most recent step in the process has been to reveal important painted finishes, specifically those that microscopic analysis identified as possible decorative finishes.

Decorative finishes became extremely popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Numerous written guides from this period exist, instructing glaziers on how to execute an array of faux finishes. The purpose of a faux finish is to make a surface appear to be made from some material that it is not through the application of a series of painted and glazed layers. While 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative finishes usually imitated more expensive materials, the process became an art form, and hiring a glazier or grainer to execute high quality decorative painting could be sometimes more expensive than having that element crafted out of the real material.

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<sup>5</sup> *Independent Gazette*, May 22, 1863. Courtesy of the Williamson County Archives.

The Masonic Hall's original decorative finishes, executed around 1826, are remarkably high quality—particularly when compared to later finishes—and unusual. Two finishes in particular stand out: a faux mahogany graining on the second floor doors and a marbled finish on the third floor lodge doors. Faux mahogany was perhaps the most popular of decorative finishes for doors in 19<sup>th</sup> century American buildings. Faux mahogany was executed various ways but was usually a three-layer finish involving a light yellow or pink base coat, a translucent reddish-brown glaze manipulated to mimic the wood grain, and an over-glaze of the same translucent reddish-brown. The base coat provided a warm hue, and the layering of translucent glazes gave depth to the finish, rendering it a convincing imitation of wood.

The faux mahogany finish on the Masonic Hall's second floor doors, however, was executed in a more striking manner. Here the base coat is a vivid red, spread thinly and carefully so that no brush strokes are visible in its dried surface, with a brown figuring and an over-glaze applied on top. The painter embellished the door's panels with a feathered edge and an inset, pale yellow border and applied a protective coat of varnish over the completed work. Nathaniel Whittock identified this bold approach as an imitation of Spanish mahogany in his 1828 publication, *The decorative painters' and glaziers' guide*:

*"This species of [Spanish] mahogany differs greatly from the last specimen [Honduran]. The ground is a much richer tint, the mottle is much more varied, and if executed properly, it is the highest test of the grainer's art."*<sup>6</sup>

Marbleizing was another popular 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative finish. Often found on baseboards, plinth blocks, and fireplaces, the marbleizing at the Masonic Hall appears in an unusual location: on the third floor door panels in the lodge room. The rails and stiles of the door are painted with a monochromatic, well-ground gray oil paint. All of the drama here occurs on the marbled panels. This finish consists of a pale blue-gray base, dark blue-gray, free-hand painted veining, and a thick border of the same blue-gray around the panel's perimeter. Study of this finish suggests that it was one with which the painter was less practiced. Its overall effect, while striking, is less harmonious than that of the second floor doors.

Study and identification of these decorative finishes reveals some interesting clues about the Masonic Hall's original craftsmen.

One: the painters who worked on the Hall were trained and highly skilled, much more than would be expected in what was still in many respects a frontier town. The possibility that these men received training on America's east coast or from someone with ties to the east coast or Europe is conceivable.

Two: the designer behind the Masonic Hall's original interior finishes was aware of trends in European decoration.

Three: the designer understood the color wheel and its proximal

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<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Whittock, *The decorative painters' and glaziers' guide* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinton, 1828), 35. What Whittock refers to as Spanish mahogany is a type of cedar.



relationships. He realized that the red found in the faux graining base played off the second floor hall's bold Prussian blue surrounding woodwork and cream faux stone walls more effectively than a faux finish with a pastel base would.

Today, the Hall continues to serve as the meeting place of Hiram Lodge No. 7, the oldest continuing lodge to exist in its original location in Tennessee. As a Masonic Hall, it is one of ten of the oldest halls standing in the United States. And as such, its designation as a National Historic Landmark (1973) requires tremendous care given to every aspect of the preservation efforts to restore its historic architectural elements and interiors. As historic preservationists continue their work, much research remains to be done on this remarkable building, which ties into so many aspects of Franklin's, middle Tennessee's, and America's history. The work, however, is off to a good start, and the history and future of Franklin's historic Masonic Hall look promising as we uncover its historic interior mysteries.

