

CARROLLCROFT AS WOMEN'S SPACE: AN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY¹

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Abstract

What does the Colby house tell us about the Colby family? This paper engages a wide range of sources about the original design and subsequent use of Carrollcroft to show how the home was shaped by powerful women. Period photographs, diaries, family letters, wills, paintings, insurance plans, and family memoirs illustrate how the house was a fluid and flexible living environment regulated by Harriet (Hattie) Child Colby and her daughters Abby Colby Aikins and Jessie Colby. As powerful agents of architectural change, they transformed the house from a popular pattern book design to the epicenter of the family's cultural landscape, adding considerably to the Colby's sense of cohesion and pleasure.

Résumé

Que nous révèle le domaine Carrollcroft sur la famille Colby? Cet article, basé sur une variété de sources témoignant de la conception initiale et des utilisations ultérieures de Carrollcroft, démontre comment la maison a été transformée par des femmes influentes. Des photographies d'époque, des journaux personnels, de la correspondance familiale, des testaments, des tableaux, des documents d'assurances et les mémoires de certains membres de la famille Colby permettent de mieux saisir comment la maison constituait un cadre de vie évolutif et flexible régi par Harriet (Hattie) Child Colby et ses filles Abby Colby Aikins et Jessie Colby. En agissant comme de puissants agents de changement architectural, elles ont fait de la maison, d'abord inspirée d'un design populaire, le noyau du paysage culturel familial, favorisant considérablement l'unité et le bien-être des Colby.

Carrollcroft (Fig. 1), an exquisite Victorian rural villa, is set in a picturesque landscape in Stanstead, Quebec. It was completed in 1859 and later became identified with several generations of Colbys, a family whose accomplishments at the local and national

levels include political service, community engagement, and entrepreneurship. Named in 1887 for their distinguished New England forebears, it became a house museum in 1992: the Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.² Since that time, 72,770 visitors have admired its fine furniture, works of art, books, household implements, decorative art objects, and textiles, displayed in period and exhibition rooms. The museum has also been home to the Stanstead Historical Society (founded 1929) since 1992, when the house was given to the Society by Helen Colby, and holds more than 18,000 artefacts, including 3,000 items from the Colby family. In 1992 one of the family's ground floor rooms was transformed to house the institution's impressive archives, which include a comprehensive collection of the family's correspondence and numerous photographs. The society has mounted dozens of exhibitions regarding the history of the region; scholars have consulted its extensive collections, resulting in papers, lectures, and at least one academic book.³ Surprisingly, no architectural history has been published on the house. What does the Colby house itself tell us about the Colby family? How did family members shape the house according to their needs? What is the role of domestic architecture in the construction of family and gender identities? How does this complement what we know from textual sources?



Fig. 1: The Colby house, 1859, was likely inspired by a model in A.J. Downing's popular pattern book Cottage Residences of 1842. The picturesque landscape and fence, shown here in 1905, were important features of Downing's vision. Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

In this paper we engage visual and spatial sources to argue that Carrollcroft is essentially women's space.⁴ We illustrate how these women-shaped interiors were a relatively fluid and flexible living environment. We also attempt to bring together in one paper all extant information regarding the architectural evolution of the buildings that comprise 535 Dufferin Street in Stanstead. Apart from the house itself, which is still in excellent condition, the most important historical sources on the architecture of Carrollcroft are period photographs, women's diaries, and letters written by and to family members, as well as wills, paintings, insurance plans, and family memoirs.

Our argument for the house as a space shaped mostly by women is double-edged, depending on both the absence of men and the presence of women. Charles Carroll Colby (1827–1907), who played an important role in the construction of the villa, had a multifaceted career as lawyer, entrepreneur, businessman, and politician at a national level. For this reason, he was frequently absent from home. Historian Marguerite Van Die suggests that due to his “innumerable and generally disappointing business trips in pursuit of a financially secure livelihood”⁵ he was just as often absent from Carrollcroft before 1867 as after, when he was mostly in Ottawa, first as an Independent Conservative representing Stanstead County in the House of Commons, then as Deputy Speaker, and finally as President of the Privy Council. The absence of Colby as father, husband, and patriarch, however, is insufficient to reconstruct the house as a feminine space. The powerful presence and design interests of his wife, Harriet (Hattie) Hannah Child (1838–1932), and the very different ways his daughters Abby Lemira (1859–1943) and Jessie Maud (1861–1958) occupied the house as adults are key to what we see as the feminization of Colby house architecture. Feminization, in our minds, refers to a social/cultural process that extends beyond the mere act of shaping space toward an individual's own needs.⁶ Indeed, Colby women metamorphosed the house from a popular pattern book design to the epicentre of the family's cultural landscape.



Fig. 2: Perspective of Design V, a “cottage-villa in the bracketed mode, as conceived by Downing in a picturesque setting.” Courtesy of www.archive.org.

The House: Construction

Charles Carroll Colby's parents Moses and Lemira took the initiative for the construction of the house. As physician Moses Colby's health deteriorated, Charles Carroll and his brother William took over, transforming the project into a much more ambitious and expensive building than their father had planned.

Unfortunately, no original architectural drawings for the house have survived.⁷ Perhaps none were ever created. As several historians have noted, the Colby house closely resembles Design V (Fig. 2), a "cottage-villa in the bracketted [sic] mode" published in the popular pattern book *Cottage Residences* by Andrew Jackson Downing in 1842. Certainly many wealthy and middle-class families adapted ideas from pattern-book houses in the late nineteenth century, which as architectural historian Dell Upton has noted, alleviated the need to hire a professional architect for design drawings.⁸ Downing's designs were considered the epitome of good taste: "To the general public it [the book *Cottage Residences*] presented designs for moderate-sized, picturesque houses in avant-garde styles, styles that only the most adventurous architects and clients were yet undertaking in

America: Gothic, Italianate, bracketed, and ornamental."⁹

As art historian Robert G. Colby (great great grandson of Charles Carroll and Hattie) has illustrated, however, the landscape of the Colby house differs from Downing's original vision in important ways.¹⁰ While Downing's houses were intended to grace picturesque, ornamental landscapes, the Colby homestead accommodated domestic agricultural operations. The property included a cutting garden, a vegetable garden, fields of hay, and an outbuilding that served as both carriage house and barn. This structure accommodated horses, cows, pigs and carriages, and later, during the 1920s, was even used to park automobiles.¹¹

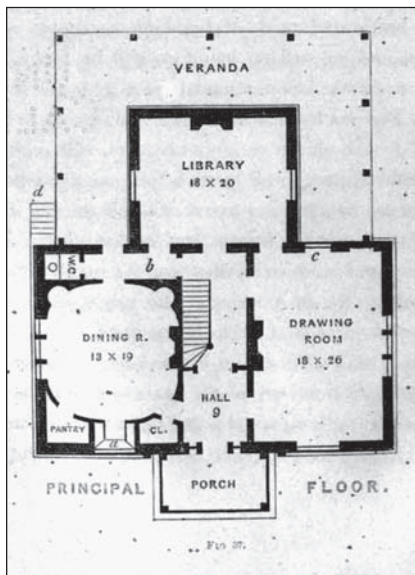


Fig. 3: Plan of the main floor of Downing's Design V, with the unusual, almost round dining room to the left, the drawing room to the right and the library in the back.

Courtesy of www.archive.org.

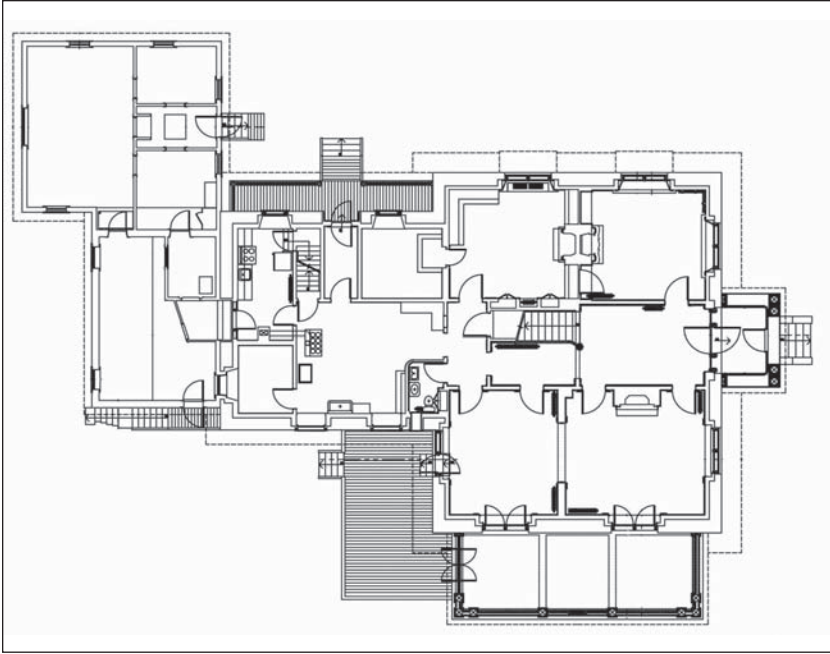


Fig. 4: The Colby house plan differed substantially from Downing's model. It was much larger and featured a large kitchen in the back of the house. Today the house is the Colby-Curtis Museum, shown here in a measured plan redrawn by Carlos Rueda from one by Pierre Cabana, 1996.



Fig. 5: The recently refurbished kitchen in the Colby-Curtis Museum shows the house after the return of the family in 1887, when their financial situation improved. Still, the kitchen remained quite traditional. Photograph by Silvia Spampinato.

A second important deviation from Downing's model is the scale of Carrollcroft. Downing's Design V, a cottage-villa in the bracketed style, is for a house with only three rooms on the ground floor. His floor plan (Fig. 3) shows a projecting entry porch and centre hall entry with a rectangular drawing room to the right and a very distinctive, nearly round, dining room to the left. All three spaces – dining room, hall, and drawing room — lead to a nearly square library in the rear, centered on the front block of the house and framed by a wrapping verandah on three sides. Upstairs in Downing's villa were five family bedrooms, including a nursery. The attic level, of which no plan appears in *Cottage Residences*, could accommodate three servant bedrooms. The kitchen, laundry and other service spaces were located on the villa's basement level.

The Colby house varies from the Downing model in subtle and significant ways. Firstly, as mentioned, it is a much larger building. While the main floor of Downing's cottage-villa is 1760 square feet, that of the Colby house is approximately 3700 square feet. The entry sequence resembles the pattern-book house quite closely; however, the Colby house (Fig. 4) includes two rooms on each side of the centre hall. To the right of the entry, on the north side of the house, is the library; behind it is a room that has had multiple uses, a recurring theme in this paper. To the left of the entry is a south-facing double parlour, divided by pocket doors. In the place of Downing's library, in the rear of the Colby house, is a large kitchen (Fig. 5) with its own entry on the north side and surrounded by smaller service spaces. We speculate that the kitchen was placed in this prominent position on the ground floor because it linked to the relatively messy domestic agricultural operations to the rear of Carrollcroft.

Another difference with Downing's Design V is that rather than a wrap-around porch in the rear, the Colbys built a verandah on the south side, accessible from both the front and rear parlours by French doors. A romantic flower garden, often photographed by family members and used for a variety of entertainment activities,¹² was located on this side of the house, slightly sunken in elevation. These variations from the Downing model are important evidence of how a widely-used pattern design could be personalized to suit the desires of a specific family. In the case of Carrollcroft the process was further intensified by Colby women.

The house as conceived by the family was completed in October 1859, when three generations of Colbys moved in: Moses and Lemira, their children William Benton, Emily Strong, and Charles

Carroll, with his wife Hattie and their 18-day-old daughter Abby. After Moses Colby's death in 1863, Charles Carroll Colby, at the time a young attorney, became the head of the Colby household. Nevertheless, from the onset it was Hattie who recorded the construction process of the house: "The house goes on admirably. The plastering, hard-finish +c. to be completed this week. The stone masons are laying granite foundations for verandah & porch. Lightning rods are up. The entire back part of house is wood-finished + above stairs painted."¹³

The House: Evolution

This rear portion of the house, originally made of wood, was re-built in field stone, possibly as a consequence of a fire that destroyed the kitchen in 1873.¹⁴ The only major change to the Colby house footprint, however, was the addition of a doctor's office on the north-east side in 1904.¹⁵ The event is mentioned in the *Stanstead Journal*, 29 December, 1904: "John Colby's office has been completed and his card appears in today's JOURNAL for the first time."¹⁶ A suite of waiting and examination rooms connected through a storage room to the west of the kitchen was created to accommodate the practice of John Child Colby, the youngest son of Charles Carroll and Hattie.

Like a picturesque painting, the Colby house was framed by a low wooden fence that once graced the front of the property, matching railings on the roof of the verandah and the balcony above the front door. This elegant barrier identified the house and grounds as a site of aesthetic engagement, signaling to the viewer on the street that the "natural" qualities of the landscape on the other side were intentional, however much they were cultivated to appear natural.¹⁷ Sadly, the fence was removed about 1960, according to family legend and archival photos. Compounded by the loss of mature elm trees in the post World War II era, the relationship of the grounds to the street is thus obscured today.

Upstairs in the Colby house were four generous bedrooms, including a nursery in the north-west corner. Remarkably, this zone of the house had no less than three direct connections to the servants' quarters: on the landing of the stair, through the south-west bedroom and the nursery. As the floor level of the family bedrooms is a half-storey above those of the servants, the connections in the bedroom and nursery included narrow stairs immediately adjacent to the doors. While the link in the south-west bedroom (sometimes called Jessie's room) remains today, the door and stair between the

nursery and a servant's bedroom has been removed.¹⁸

The Colby house and grounds were also crucially linked to the urban context of Stanstead, a flourishing place by the 1850s. Particularly important to the Colby cultural landscape were a series of village buildings, visible in the plan redrawn from insurance plan of 1897 (Fig. 6): Patton Place, the house directly across Dufferin Street from Carrollcroft, was eventually used by Abby Colby during summer holidays; the house to the south which they rented during the years in which they lost ownership of Carrollcroft; Ingleside, the house directly to the north, was the home of the Lamb family; the Stanstead Methodist Church; Stanstead College; and later the Anglican Episcopal Church (today Christ Church). The Stanstead Inn, a temperance guest house in the village that survived until 1934, was partly owned by Jessie Colby after 1917.¹⁹ These buildings, although isolated (as shown in the plan), operated as a flowing, continuous landscape that emanated out of the house through the Colby women.

This vital social connection between home and community began as early as Charles Carroll and Hattie's generation. As Van Die argues, the couple converted to a liberal brand of Methodist Evangelicalism that was a product of their generation. This new evangelical current saw the family replace the Church as the true centre of religious experience. As a consequence, Van Die writes,

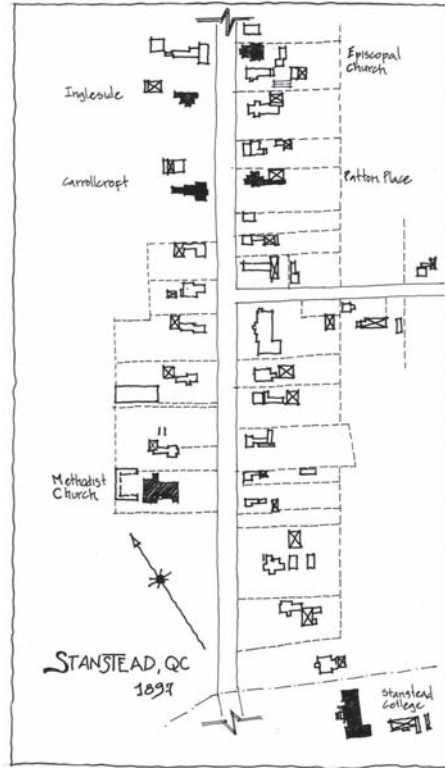


Fig. 6: Carrollcroft is situated in the heart of Stanstead, Quebec. The layout of the village is typical of northern New England linear villages, built along one street, with each house having access to a field behind for the upkeep of horses and perhaps a cow. Institutions shown here in black have significant links to the house and family. Plan drawn by Carlos Rueda from Goad's insurance plans of 1897.

"the home emerges in many of the family letters not as a retreat but as the place of integration, from which gender, school, church, community and nation ultimately assume their significance."²⁰

Women's space: Hattie

Notwithstanding the presence of her mother-in-law Lemira, Hattie gradually assumed the role of matriarch of the Colby family. Vermont-born Hattie had come to Stanstead as a teacher at the college in 1857. She met and married Charles Carroll Colby the following year and together they had seven children, four of whom survived. As noted, she moved into the house as a young wife and mother. "Moved into the new House," she recorded with characteristic brevity in her diary on 15 October 1859.²¹ She lived in the house continuously until her death in 1932, except for the period from 1873 to 1887. During this time the family was forced for financial reasons to sell the house, but was able to buy it back fourteen years later.²² It was at this moment of the family's triumphant return to 535 Dufferin that the house was named Carrollcroft,



Fig. 7: Willbur Reaser's "Reading" of 1910 shows Hattie Colby's love of reading and decoration. Her hair, dress, and the furniture depict her as an upper middle-class woman.

Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

directly linking the family name to the place.²³ While we know next to nothing about the Colby's time away from the house, we believe these years affected decisions once the family reoccupied Carrollcroft. The forced sale of the house, that is, seems to have moved the Colbys to create an even stronger identity for their family and their home once they returned.²⁴

Although always busy at home and in the community, reading and writing were extremely important throughout Hattie's life, a pastime clearly expressed in Willbur Reaser's lovely portrait of her reading from 1910, "Reading" (Fig. 7). Reaser, a frequent visitor to Carrollcroft, depicted Hattie Colby reclining on an upholstered chaise, consumed by a book. Seventy-two-year-old Hattie wears a long, black dress and reading glasses, her hair pulled up and gathered in a bun. Reaser shows Hattie's tome as a bright, white, hard-edged shape in the midst of rich, highly decorated, luxurious objects: the aforementioned dress, the upholstery of the wooden-framed chaise, the curtains and cushions behind Hattie's head, and, perhaps most importantly, the gilded Victorian frame on the wall behind the couch. Hattie's pose seems startlingly informal in the context of these traditional, upper-class domestic trappings, underlined by the dramatic cropping of both the picture frame and the furniture. By both the relaxed pose and the unexpected composition, Reaser's portrait of the older woman anticipates modern snapshot photography in its seeming casualness.

Hattie's inhabitation of the house was striking both as a young mother and a widow, as vividly described in the rich accounts of domestic life sketched in her letters. Many of her accounts confirm a traditional use of rooms.²⁵ She describes, for example, using the living room to receive women callers. As Kenneth Ames, Sally McMurry, and others have noted, this was a principal function of the Victorian parlour: women's tradition of afternoon calling was highly ritualized, inspiring a gamut of material objects such as the hallstand, the card receiver (to hold visiting cards), dishes, silver, and special clothing.²⁶ The parlour, as the venue for calling, was a window through which the family's accomplishments were demonstrated to female visitors through its careful arrangement and fine furnishings. Like other women of her generation, Hattie enjoyed receiving her friends in the living room and saw it and other main-floor spaces as places for show: "I have had the most successful Lunch today for Mrs. Hiriam Davis, Mrs. Milkey and the young Mansurs. [...] Each of the four guests assured me they had had a beautiful time and had enjoyed every moment. As usual the house

came in for admiration, and the rooms and the verandahs as it was so sunny that we stepped out where the double windows are off."²⁷

Most significantly, Hattie's letters illuminate her responsibility for decision-making during her husband's absences and show a deep and constant interest in decorating the house. Even while traveling, the Stanstead house preoccupied Hattie: "Did I say we mean to look at wall papers for the halls and dining room at Carrollcroft before leaving London."²⁸ Hattie's daughters also documented their mother's intense interest in all things domestic. In 1894 Jessie wrote: "The house looks too lovely, better even than in October because it has all the good new things and mother has been giving her attention to every detail. Till the remotest corners and under sides of the shelves are as perfect as the back of the old carvings we read of."²⁹

The Colby interiors were a significant social link to the other local institutions Hattie helped to manage, especially Stanstead College and the Methodist Church. The Colby's much-admired parlour, for example, may have been among the reasons she was asked to help furnish the school. She also became a class leader for a group of women students at the college whom she invited to Carrollcroft for tea.³⁰ A male college student, Murray Brooks, associated such visits with the acquisition of social graces: "In Stanstead and Derby line [sic], in stately, beautiful homes with spacious lawns and lovely gardens," he wrote, "lived a number of the most friendly and hospitable families imaginable: Colbys, Stevens, Butters, Pierces, ... To those wonderful homes the students were frequently invited for teas, suppers and even breakfasts, thereby finding themselves at ease in such richly furnished drawing-rooms and gaining the so very important social graces."³¹ Van Die also reports that Hattie regularly provided hospitality to traveling church dignitaries at Carrollcroft. She thus contributed to the functioning of local religious institutions that had very limited financial means.³²

While many of Hattie's letters and diary entries confirm a traditional use of rooms, she also reacted against rigid Victorian prescriptions. Confirming historian Sally McMurry's findings that rural parlours were more often used for sleeping than urban ones, the aging Hattie occupied the back parlour as a bedroom during the period 1917–32, a choice that favoured practicality and her comfort over the formality of the typical Victorian living room.³³ Her downstairs quarters were separated from the room's more public front half only by heavy plush curtains. John H.E. Colby, son of Dr John Child Colby, described "My Grandmother's Bedroom" (i.e. the back parlour) as a place he was seldom allowed to enter. As a young boy



Fig. 8: The Colby's south-facing verandah was the site of many social gatherings. It offered a view of the family's lovely flower garden, a site of aesthetic investment for women.

Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

John Colby was captivated by the noises that came from this newly configured bedroom: "I remember being fascinated with the noises that used to emanate from my Grandmother [sic] bedroom as she started her day (a good many moans and groans)."³⁴ Hattie had all her meals in her room and would only get dressed at lunch time. Tea was served in the adjoining living room, he remembers vividly.

Another space clearly associated with Hattie Colby was the flower garden, located to the south of the house. Many archival photographs of the house show the significance of cut flowers, which would have come from the cutting garden behind the doctor's office (note that a vegetable garden was located behind the barn/carriage house). The family would often have breakfast on the verandah facing the flower garden (Fig. 8 and 9); and Reaser did a second portrait of Hattie arranging flowers (see Colby, plate 11). Shown from the back and in profile, Reaser places Hattie with a grandchild who helps her to arrange one of three kinds of flowers.



Fig. 9: The sunken flower garden of the Colby house was a source of pride to the women of the family, particularly Hattie Colby who adored cut flowers. Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

Significantly, she sits on a carved wooden chair facing out an open window. The oriental carpet makes clear that the pair are in one of the front rooms, underlining the activity as a genteel pastime. This love of flowers extended to the next generation of Colby women, especially to Jessie. Again, John H.E. Colby recalls this with precision: “She [Hattie] was very fond of flowers and there was always a cutting garden to supply the house with bouquets. Aunt Jessie usually attended to this.”³⁵ Jessie relied on the expertise of Sadie Bond, a landscape gardener from England who stayed at the Stanstead Inn.³⁶ In addition to its role as a source of plentiful flowers for the embellishment of Carrollcroft’s rooms, the garden was crucial for the Colbys’ relationship to their physical and social contexts. This carefully tended space provided the view from inside the house and attracted viewers to it, such as the neighbours and residents of Stanstead. The garden thus provided a visual link connecting the family with the landscape and community.

The Colby women as gardeners could adorn the family home but also shape the world around it, impressing upon it their ideals of order, beauty, and gentility. The ideal nature recreated in the garden, however, also acted as a buffer: a place of visual pleasure, perhaps a space of mediation in times of changeable fortunes for the

family. Hattie's luxuriant plants and flowers, for which she was known and admired, may have boosted the family's image within the community, and offered a neutral terrain, perhaps even a safe topic of conversation during awkward social occasions.³⁷ The garden, regulated by the predictable cycles of nature, may have also helped Hattie herself to cope with the sudden adversities brought about by the family's changing financial circumstances and the premature death of three of her children.

For more than seventy years, Hattie used her considerable skills as consumer and decorator to adorn the house with fashionable and comfortable furnishings. As a voracious reader and lover of flowers, she brought beauty into the private rooms of the Colby home as well as into the arrangements of the local institutions she supported. As Van Die has noted, Hattie used the term home to refer to both the house and its occupants.³⁸ Like many Victorian women, the house and its concerns filled her days and nights (also letters and diaries), contributing substantially to her self-definition as a mother and wife.

Women's space: Jessie

Jessie Maud Colby, who never married and lived in the house for



Fig. 10: The generous double-parlour of the Colby house changed functions several times during the lives of Hattie Colby and her children. It served as back parlour, dining room, and sleeping quarters for aging parents. Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

nearly her entire life, was a particularly powerful figure in the organization and development of the home's interiors. Because of the rich archival resources and the preservation of the house, Carrollcroft provides a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between an unmarried adult daughter and domestic space. Charles Carroll appreciated the skills of his younger daughter and involved her in his political and business ventures. Indeed, Jessie's role in the house was far from the mar-



Fig. 11: Jessie Colby and Abby Colby Aikins shaped the Colby house in different ways. Jessie lived in the house most of her life while Abby was a frequent visitor after she married and moved to Winnipeg. Courtesy of Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives.

ginal and lonely existence associated with so-called spinsterhood in many urban settings.³⁹ Jessie Colby was an engaged and busy woman, influential in her community and her family, perhaps largely responsible for the magnetic appeal of Carrollcroft across generations of Colby family members.

As with Hattie, Jessie's impact was most clearly felt in the double parlour, which was created as such in about 1887 (Fig. 10). As noted above, the western half of this large room was initially used as the dining room. On the suggestion of Jessie, however, the dining room was moved to the so-called north room (currently the site of the archives) when the family reacquired the house, allowing the newly enlarged parlour to be used for special occasions such as evening parties. Charles Carroll objected to the plan in a particularly revealing letter: "As Abby is to leave us soon the double parlor would not be required so frequently."⁴⁰ He wonders if his own elderly mother (Lemira died in 1889) might want to use the north room as a bedroom, making it easier for the servants to wheel her to the back door. Anticipating his own advancing age and failing health, Charles also wondered whether he and Hattie might eventually prefer main-floor quarters. His prediction vis-à-vis his wife's needs as an older woman were correct: "Besides you and I are getting older and it may happen before many years that the climb of the stairs would be difficult to one or the other of us."⁴¹ In the most powerful

line of this important piece of correspondence, Charles Carroll deferred to the women's decision to change the room from dining room to back parlour: "Please you ponder this fairly and your decision whatever it may be will have my approval."⁴² By 1887, Hattie, Jessie, and Abby's authority in household matters was irrefutable. (Fig. 11)

It is important to underline that although the Colby women shaped the house for the most part, the Colby men also maintained an uncommon interest in household decoration. Charles Carroll, for example, frequently took advantage of his travels to Ottawa and Montreal to purchase the goods Hattie, Abby, and Jessie desired in order to improve the appearance of the house.⁴³ Charles William, Hattie's son, assumed this role as consumer by writing in 1895 of his intention to buy new things for the family home at a bazaar, and mentioning his recent purchases. Decorative objects obtained by Abby and Jessie's brother also occupied highly visible and central locations at Carrollcroft. "The bazaar is fixed for sept. 6th. I mean to buy some nice things for the house at it. My presents so far to Carrollcroft this summer are a Greekish rug 6x4 \$[9]0 at Scott's, Montreal, Botticelli's Madonna of the Magnificat framed autotype, & Giotto Campanile - large size. The Botticelli hangs on the north wall of the front drawing room where Abby's lilies were last summer, & the Campanile at the head of the stairs. ... I mean to get at least \$95 of things at the Bazaar if they are suitable for the house."⁴⁴

Her husband's objections to the relocation of the dining room from the back of the double parlour to the so-called north room may have been pondered fairly by Hattie and her daughters, but by 1904, it was Jessie's love of music that established the tone of the room. Jessie had graduated from the Eastern Townships Conservatory of Music and was the organist in the Methodist Church. "John and I have rearranged the whole of the back parlour with reference to the new pieces, moving the piano into the N.E. corner against the hall door and taking Mr. Robertson's big ... [illegible] chair from the library and putting it at the corner of the W. window where one can sit + look at the sunset."⁴⁵ Jessie's music cabinet was a treasured possession of the Colbys' second daughter: "We put it against the north wall in the music room, under Venus de Medici, and on it a beautiful vase Abby and Somerset sent Father..."⁴⁶

Jessie Colby gained business skills working with her father in his various ventures; at home she was an influential decision-maker, carrying on the decorative interests of her mother. For example, she

managed extensive renovations to the house in 1926, including new fireplaces and bathrooms: "we have done up dear old Carrollcroft from top to toe, literally from top of new drawing room chimney, + the other 3, t outside door of back cellar."⁴⁷

Women's space: Abby

Ironically, Abby Colby's role in the shaping of Carrollcroft came mostly from her absence from the house. Moving frequently between Winnipeg and Stanstead, she was something of a family ambassador, embellishing the home with her antique treasures as markers of her growing affluence and travels. Abby's role also included creating a utopian version of Carrollcroft in Carrollhurst, her Winnipeg home with Somerset Aikins and their children.

Abby married John Somerset Aikins (called Somerset) 13 October 1887 in an elaborate Stanstead wedding. As the son and daughter-in-law of Manitoba's lieutenant governor, Somerset Aikins and Abby lived among Winnipeg's elite. Her numerous letters from Manitoba show how the elder Colby daughter remained a major force in her family home, even from the vast distance of more than two thousand kilometers. Abby's far location and elite social position likely gave her added influence in design decisions. Perhaps this gave her access to new design resources (magazines, shops, professionals, and educated peers). For example, during her travels in Europe, she frequently commented on and purchased things for the Stanstead house. These elegant souvenirs, together with objects and artefacts assembled by her sister and mother, created a domestic setting that showcased the family's genteel cosmopolitanism.

Abby was clearly considered an expert in antiques by family members, including her husband.⁴⁸ Among her papers are several antique china and silverware catalogues and many antique dealers' business cards. Her prized possessions remained in the house, even long after she left. John H.E. Colby remembers, for example, that Abby's Audubon print collection was kept in a "big wooden book stand" in the parlour.⁴⁹

For most of her adult life, then, Carrollcroft was a place she used as a reference point for the idealized home she created with her husband. Most interesting, we think, is the way Abby used Carrollcroft as a point of reference in the domestic architecture she contracted. Abby and Somerset Aikins commissioned a house from architect George Browne. It was under construction in 1900 and Abby instructed Browne on many details that summer. Abby seemed to have considerable architectural knowledge and confidence, even

prior to the project on the house. She used Carrollcroft and another address as a reference point in letters to Browne with regards to its circulation pattern. "The chief thing I think you might consider an appreciation in their new plan is that it w'd be necessary to pass through the drawing room to get to the dining room (unless one went through the butler's pantry) but both at Wellesley Street + Carrollcroft they go through other rooms to get to the dining room & I never think it seems a great [decision] in those cases."⁵⁰ She sent her husband a "rough plan" for a house 3 August 1895, from Carrollcroft. The house she designed seemed to be smaller than those in the rental market; it was somewhat amusing that she opted to omit "back stairs" but hoped they would have "neat looking maids."⁵¹

Remarkably, Abby named her Browne-designed house Carrollhurst, in reference to her family home.⁵² The name of Abby and Somerset's first child also made direct reference to his maternal grandfather. Naming the Winnipeg home after Carrollcroft created a sense of lineage to Stanstead, the same way their son's name, Charles Carroll Aikins, echoed back two generations. When Somerset died in 1911, Abby returned to Carrollcroft, dying there in 1943.

Women's space: Servants

The Colby house was always a busy and complicated, multi-generational space, managed by strong women, some of whom were also servants. In fact, servants and non-relatives sometimes comprised nearly half the household living at Carrollcroft. Not surprisingly, as the family's financial woes increased, the number of servants diminished. The 1861 Census reports the household as comprised of twelve persons. In addition to seven family members, the initial household included five servants: four women and one man. Ten years later, the family still had seven members, plus only two servants, a woman and a man; and in 1891, there were only five family members, plus two servants, including Rosalie Vallée, a much loved employee hired in the 1870s and retained until the 1920s. To this Census data we would add relatives and friends, such as a Mrs. Sarah Bailey, who often spent long periods of time at Carrollcroft. The 1911 census taker did note the presence of a family friend, Elizabeth Dickerson, already aged 79. She spent the last ten years of her life with the Colby family and passed away in the house.⁵³

In terms of purpose-built domestic spaces, the family servants occupied a major section of the rear of Carrollcroft on two floors. As was typical of Victorian houses, nearly half the square footage of Carrollcroft was devoted to their work and well-being. The upper level, as John H.E. Colby recalls, consisted of a series of small bedrooms accommodating only the female staff, plus a shared bathroom and a sitting room. The male staff would rent rooms in the village.⁵⁴ As for the kitchen, it was the centre of a network of spaces devoted to the production of food and to the efficient work of the servants.

On the south-west side was a storage room, where several shelves held provisions, kitchen utensils and probably an ice box. To the north-west was a laundry room, from which a service staircase provided access to the quarters upstairs. On the north wall was the door to the cellar, which had wood storage, a coal-burning furnace, and coal room, in addition to cool storage space for food (a second way to access the basement was under the main staircase). The kitchen was also linked to the exterior through a small hall on its north side, allowing the easy delivery of goods and providing a secondary entrance to the house. On the north wall a door opened onto a servants' sitting room.⁵⁵

The year 1887 saw the family make major changes to the kitchen area. From the evidence we have gathered, we speculate that a pantry for washing dishes was added to the east portion of the Colby kitchen at this time. In the aforementioned letter from Charles Carroll, he refers to a "new pantry" and worries about the consequent circulation patterns in the house: "It would cut off the cellar door from the kitchen and would make the passage from the dining room to the kitchen through the new pantry rather a crooked one."⁵⁶ In fact, the cellar door in the hall was transformed into a closet, and the access under the main stair was closed off. Photographs taken during the refurbishment of 2009 confirm these changes, as does material evidence left *in situ* (holes in the floor for water pipes, marks on the walls for shelves) for the location of the ancillary spaces. The small bathroom located to the south-east of the kitchen was once a second, smaller store room, and we wonder if it might have been transformed into a bathroom during the renovation of 1887. John H.E. Colby remembers it as a particularly good place for arranging flowers.⁵⁷ Again, we sense from the correspondence that the connection of the kitchen area to the work life of the outdoors was strong.

The kitchen was certainly the main servants' space, where the Colby women would manage the staff.⁵⁸ However, they also used this work space on their own during times of strained finances. This situation was experienced in particular by young Hattie, as her husband's economic situation deteriorated and her mother-in-law's health began to fail. For a woman who loved to read and aspired to project her family's best image through a carefully-arranged house, this must have been a particularly difficult time. Even Hattie's health was affected by having to take on more housework. In a letter to Charles Carroll she apologized for her unclear handwriting caused by her wrist shaking from ironing.⁵⁹ Exhaustion from housework may have contributed to Hattie's deteriorating health in the 1880s and 1890s as well.⁶⁰

As we have shown, once the family's economic situation improved and the Colbys were able to buy back Carrollcroft, their letters contained frequent references to furniture, fabrics, carpets, and objects purchased to embellish rooms, revealing their lively and continuing interest in interior decoration. The evolution of the kitchen tells a different story. Most middle-class North Americans were modernizing their kitchens with easy-to-clean materials (tiles, linoleum), continuous surfaces of work, and efficient modular storage systems. But at Carrollcroft, the improved financial condition of the family inspired a peculiar attachment to their traditional arrangements. Dining remained separate from cooking and there was little investment in upgrading the kitchen. The kitchen, moreover, is notably absent in the family correspondence and does not appear in any extant archival photos.

While the kitchen has been recently refurbished with a specific consideration to the presence of servants, most of the other spaces inhabited by staff had been previously converted to different uses. This makes the servants' presence in the house today less legible than that of other family members. However, the servants' contribution is happily still traceable in correspondences and diaries. Certainly, the servants took part in the changes made to the house: "Finished cupboard with Rosalie's help," wrote Jessie in her diary at the time when the family was furnishing a doctor's office for John.⁶¹

Conclusion

Generations of Colby women acted as powerful agents of change, shifting the domestic arrangements of Carrollcroft as the family's situation evolved. Life events such as marriage, maternity, widowhood, sickness, and death inspired the ways specific rooms in the Colby house were defined. Their collective impact illustrates the remarkable fluidity of the Victorian home, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Architectural historians tend to think of the Victorian house as rigid and overly orchestrated, with its increasing emphasis on separation and categorization by gender and social class. But the detailed archival evidence of the Colby family over three generations shows how furniture and room use changed easily and quickly. The dining room, for example, always a carefully delineated space in architect's drawings, moved from the back parlour to the north room and back again. The Colby house also shows a relatively blurred division between family and servant spaces. It is important to note that we would know nothing about the fluidity of the household arrangements and women's powerful role as shapers of these spaces if it were not for the detailed family records preserved in the archives.

We conclude that decisions about the design of the house added considerably to the Colby family's sense of cohesion and pleasure. Carrollcroft brought generations together and shortened the miles between Stanstead and Ottawa, in Charles Carroll's case, and for Abby Colby Aikins, Stanstead and Winnipeg. The Colby women's constant discourse about domestic details and arrangements filled their letters, diaries and perhaps their days. Hattie, Abby and Jessie Colby transformed their home into the heart of their family's cultural landscape, providing a centre towards which family members converged, as well as a place from which family members reached outwards, connecting to institutions in the immediate community of Stanstead and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to Robbie G. Colby, Robert L. Colby, Kathy Curtis, Aileen Desbarats, Peter Gossage, Cynthia Hammond, Marie-Ève Harbec, Jean L. Manore, Monique Nadeau-Saumier, Pierre Rastoul, Peter Southam, and an anonymous reviewer. We also acknowledge the important foundational work published by Marguerite Van Die: *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada: The Colbys of Carrollcroft*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2005.
2. Nadeau-Saumier, "CARROLLCROFT," 14.
3. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*.
4. This approach builds on previous work by Adams and Gossage, "Chez Fadette," and Adams and Gossage, "Sick Children and the Thresholds of Domesticity: The Dawson-Harrington Families at Home," in Gutman and de Coninck-Smith, eds. *Designing Modern Childhoods*. More generally it contributes to a growing feminist literature on the history of the home. See, for example, Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way*; Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House*; Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*; Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior*; Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home*.
5. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 12.
6. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*.
7. Architect Pierre Cabana has done measured drawings of the existing house that are very useful. The most recent set is from October 1996.
8. Upton, "Pattern Books and Professionalism," 112. On Downing, see 125–7.
9. Davies, "Davis and Downing," in Tatum, George B. and Blair MacDougall, Elisabeth eds. *Prophet with Honor*, 86.
10. Robert G. Colby, presentation to the Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives board of directors, 29 January 2010.

11. John H.E. Colby, "Memorandum," 15–6. John H.E. Colby describes the building's uses, including a two-seater toilet. His description corresponds to the plan of the outbuilding on the Goad insurance plan of 1897 with a stable in the centre and a tool shed attached to the rear.
12. When Jessie and Abby were young women residing at Carrollcroft, a tennis court was created in the garden and appears in a few photographs. Other forms of recreation are also visible in photographs: a screen for cinema projections and even a tame bear.
13. H.H.C.C., Series 1: Correspondence, Other correspondence sent, nd–1915, Box 3, File 6, from Stanstead, 12 September 1859.
14. Hall, "Hattie Hannah Colby & Her Carrollcroft," 27.
15. The relationship of doctors' offices and their homes is the subject of Adams and Burke, "A Doctor in the House: The Architecture of Home-offices for Physicians in Toronto, 1885–1930."
16. *Stanstead Journal*, 29 December 1904: 5. The clipping is pasted to Jessie's "Boots scribbling diary" for the year 1904, 107. J.M.C. (1861–1958) Series Two: Personal Diaries, Box 1, 1904 II.
17. These insights are from Robbie G. Colby, personal correspondence, 10 February 2010.
18. Today the Director's office occupies this former servant's bedroom.
19. In Jessie's will of 1956 a sum of \$20,000 was left to the two institutions with which she had been actively involved: the Centenary United Church and the Stanstead College. "Last Will and Testament of Jessie Maud Colby," 10 December 1956, no. 67059, registered 5 May 1959.
20. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 103.
21. H.H.C.C., Series 2: Miscellaneous Material, Box 1, Diary for the year 1859, 15 October.
22. Note the deed of sale 26 April 1872 to Mrs. Harriet A. Smith, widow of the late George R. Robertson for \$7,880, reacquired 20 May 1887 for \$5,000 from Harriet Smith. C.C.C. to C.W.C., Series Four, Personal Affairs, Sub-series A, Correspondence, Box 1, File 9, 1878–1905, "Deed of sale," from Registry Office in Stanstead. The story goes that Charles William unwisely invested money after the discovery of a type of marble at Belden's Falls, Vermont, that promised to be as good as Carrara marble. As it turned out, there was not much marble there. See C.W.C., "Garrulities of an Octogenarian," 24.

23. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 86.
24. Visitors to the Colby-Curtis Museum and Archives today experience a house mostly shaped during this critical period in the building's history, 1887–1907, from the moment of reoccupation to Hattie's inheritance of the house upon the death of Charles Carroll.
25. Among the earliest explanations of changing room use is Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*. See also Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*; Schlereth, *Victorian America*; Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home*. On the differences between urban and rural parlours, see McMurry, *Families & Farmhouses in 19th-century America*; and more specifically McMurry, "City Parlor, Country Sitting Room."
26. On the material culture associated with calling, see Ames, *Death in the Dining Room: 7–43*. On the rituals of calling, see McMurry, "City Parlor, Country Sitting Room" and Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 150–1.
27. H.H.C.C. to C.C.C., Series 1: Correspondence, Box 1, File 7, 1884–1907, 10 April 1894.
28. H.H.C.C. to A.L.C.A., Series 1: Correspondence, Box 2, File 6, 1892–1911, 10 Aug 1892.
29. Jessie to her brothers, J.M.C. and family (jointly), Series 1, Correspondence, Box 2, File 1, 12 April 1894.
30. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 141.
31. Brooks, Murray G. "Diary of a Student, 1902–04". Virtual Museum Canada, Stanstead Historical Society, *The Colbys of Stanstead*, http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/pm.php?id=search_record_detail&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000270&rd=149462&sy=&st=breakfast&ci= (accessed on 17 February 2010).
32. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 142.
33. McMurry, *Families & Farmhouses*, 145.
34. Colby, John H.E., "Memorandum," 3.
35. Colby, John H.E., "Memorandum," 6.
36. Colby, John H.E., *Growing Up At Carrollcroft*, 52. On the significance of women as amateur and professional gardeners, see Harris, "Women as Gardeners," *Encyclopedia of Gardens: History and Design*, 1447–1450; and Harris, "Cultivating Power."

37. In 1920 May Williams Colby, wife of doctor John Child Colby, wrote to Abby that "it was a proud moment when I was able to present your mother with garden peas and sweet peas in advance of hers, for it is seldom indeed that I have anything that she has not". It is remarkable that Hattie was, at that time, 82 years old. May Williams Colby to Abby Colby Aikins, 9 August 1920, transcription by John H.E. Colby (undated). We are grateful to Cynthia Hammond for pointing out the flower garden as a way to avoid potentially unpleasant topics of conversation. Personal correspondence, 22 February 2010.
38. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada*, 65.
39. Our findings are sympathetic to the work of Stairs, "Matthews and Marillas," in Christie and Gauvreau, eds. *Mapping the Margins* 247–67. See also Berend, "The Best or None!"
40. C.C.C. to H.H.C.C., Series 4, Personal Affairs, Sub-series A, Correspondence, Box 4, File 7, 1886–1888, 6 June 1887, Ottawa.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. On other occasions, trips to these cities were organized expressly for shopping. See, for example, Jessie's diary for the year 1887–88, entry of 31 January 1888: ... "Father + Abby made shopping expedition to Montreal." J.M.C., Series 2, Personal Diaries, Box 1, Diary for the year 1887.
44. Letter by Charles William to his mother Hattie, Series 1, Subseries A, Correspondence, Box 1, File 9, C.W.C. to C.C.C. and H.C.C., 1894–1906, 1 August 1895.
45. J.M.C. to A.L.C.A., Series 1, Correspondence, Box 8, File 1, 1898, 27 December 1898.
46. J.M.C. Series 2: Personal Diaries, Box 1, 1904 II, "Boots scribbling diary," week 18 to 21 December 1904, p. 104.
47. J.M.C., Series 2, Personal Diaries, Box 2, Diary for the year 1926, 4 January 1926.
48. In 1899 Somerset Aikins wrote to Abby: "I am not an authority on antique things and would rely on your judgment." A.L.C.A. from S.A., Series 1, Correspondence, Box 4, File 7, 1899, 15 July 1899.
49. Colby, John H.E., "Memorandum," 4.
50. A.L.C.A. to Somerset Aikins, Series 1, Correspondence, Box 1, File 2, 1895, 3 August 1895.
51. Ibid.

52. Newspaper clipping pasted to Jessie's "Boots scribbling diary," J.M.C., Series Two: Personal Diaries, Box 1, 1904 II, "Boots scribbling diary," 14 June 1904, p. 50.
53. Elizabeth Dickerson occupied the former nursery, according to Colby, John H.E., "Memorandum," 13.
54. Colby, John H.E., *Growing up at Carrollcroft*, 65–6.
55. The maids' sitting room was most likely removed after 1976 when Helen Lovat Colby, the home's final resident, established her quarters there.
56. C.C.C. to H.H.C.C., Series 4, Personal Affairs, Sub-series A, Correspondence, Box 4, File 7, 1886–1888, 6 June 1887, Ottawa.
57. Colby, John H.E., "Memorandum," 7.
58. In 1864, for example, Hattie wrote of her struggles to Charles: "Alex is on a spree this week while he ought to be doing the Christmas butchering." H.H.C.C. to C.C.C., Series 1, Correspondence, Box 1, File 1, n.d., 1859–1868, 23 December 1864.
59. See H.H.C.C. to C.C.C., Series 1, Correspondence, Box 1, File 4, 1874, 4 September 1874.
60. In 1877, according to Charles William, Hattie became so tired from overwork that she and Abby went to Colorado to a sheep ranch in order to restore her health. "Garrulities of an Octogenarian," 30.
61. J.M.C., Series 2, Personal Diaries, Box 1, 1904 II, "Boots scribbling diary," 18 October 1904, p. 86.