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Interviewee: Waller, Carroll (Mrs. William); Lyle, Mary Jane
Interviewer: Capers, Charlotte

Title: Governor's Mansion Report, February 4, 1972 / by
Charlotte Capers

The following is a report on a visit to the Governor's Mansion by Charlotte Capers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History; Mrs. William L. Waller, wife of the Governor of Mississippi; and Miss Mary Jane Lyle, interior decorator, Louisville, Mississippi; on Friday, February 4, 1972.

Capers: This is Charlotte Capers reporting on a visit to the Governor's Mansion, in Jackson, Mississippi, with Mrs. William L. Waller, wife of the Governor of Mississippi; and Miss Mary Jane Lyle, interior decorator, from Louisville, Mississippi, this morning, Friday, February 4, 1972. I am making this report at the request of Mrs. Waller, who asked me to make a list of suggestions for the administration of the Mansion during the proposed restoration.

Mary Jane Lyle and I arrived at the Mansion a few minutes before ten o'clock. The front door of the Mansion was locked, because the Mansion is at present unoccupied, having been declared unsafe by engineers and architects employed by the previous administration of Governor John Bell Williams. We went to the back door of the Mansion, rang the bell, and opened the door, which was not locked. A security officer came into the kitchen where we were, and told us that we were expected. We had a cup of coffee while awaiting Mrs. Waller.

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Mrs. Waller arrived at ten o'clock, and took Miss Lyle and me on a tour of the Mansion. The downstairs rooms on the east side of the building consist of a kitchen, a family dining room, a state or formal dining room, and a front parlor. In commenting on the furniture in these two rooms Miss Lyle thought that the table in the family dining room was more suitable for permanent use in the main dining room than the massive table presently located in the state or formal dining room. There was considerable discussion about the furniture in all of these rooms, and Miss Lyle and I concurred in thinking that there was nothing of special value included in this collection, unless the Victorian furniture in the front parlor could be considered valuable. It is very nice, but neither Mrs. Waller, Miss Lyle, nor I know of any historical association connected with it. Mrs. Waller told us that the massive dining room table and the heavy ornate carved dining room chairs in the state or formal dining room were acquired for the Mansion by Mrs. Hugh White, through Mrs. Ruth King, interior decorator of Jackson. Mrs. Waller did not know from whom the table was acquired. Miss Lyle suggested that if it was acquired from Manheim's, New Orleans, papers on it would be available and should be sought out.

It was agreed by all of us that the wood carving or decoration on the doorways of this downstairs part of the Mansion were not original. Mrs. Waller felt that they had been added some

time after the original residence was completed, but that they held a warm place in the affections of Mississippians, and therefore should not be removed. Miss Lyle felt that they should be removed. Miss Lyle, in commenting on the gold draperies in the front parlor and in the front parlor on the west side of the Mansion, said that she liked them very much, that they were beautiful and had grown mellow through use. Mrs. Waller commented that they were rotting and worn. Miss Lyle commented that she did not think this mattered, she would like to keep the draperies in these two rooms, but the center panels or curtains were "storebought" and inappropriate. She suggested Battenburg panels to be substituted for the present panels, but again stated that she thought the present gold draperies were handsome and should be retained.

The doorway between the west parlor and the music room was discussed. It was thought by Mrs. Waller that the original doors, which have been removed, were still contained within the walls between the two rooms. Miss Lyle thought that the original doors should be taken out of the walls, and finished in a wood finish rather than the white paint which is used on other doors. Again, Mrs. Waller commented that the people of Mississippi were very fond of the carving on the doorways, and again Miss Lyle said she would like to see the carving go. There was some conversation about the carpeting. Mrs. Waller said that she was surprised to learn from Mr. Peterson, restor-

ation architect from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that carpets, that is to say wall to wall carpets, were used in residences of the period. Mrs. Waller said she had envisioned refinished floors and oriental rugs. Miss Lyle said that she thought carpets were probably used, but not plain carpets, as now exist in the Mansion. She felt that floral patterns would have been used throughout. It was agreed that either a wall to wall carpet with a floral period pattern, or wood floors with oriental rugs, would be appropriate if they could be purchased for the restored Mansion.

In the music room, Miss Lyle felt that the draperies there should remain, but that Battenburg panels should replace the relatively cheap panels now existing.

Comments were made on much of the furniture, about which little is known. Most of the information on the furnishings and furniture of the Mansion is hearsay information. There is no documentation available, though it is known that a good deal of the furniture that was once there no longer remains.

Mrs. Waller felt that any piece of furniture associated with a governor should remain in the permanent collection, regardless of its intrinsic value or artistic merit. In this Miss Lyle and I concurred. There is very little furniture that can be directly identified with any governor, but the desk used

by the first Governor Paul B. Johnson is such an example. It is located now in the hall between the old and the newer part of the Mansion, which was added in 1908. The desk, in itself, is not an antique nor is it very handsome, but it could be used in some part of the house and pointed out as the desk used by Governor Johnson.

Mrs. Waller asked the opinion of Miss Lyle and myself on the advisability of furnishing period rooms upstairs in authentic period furniture, or with historically associated furniture, but not letting these rooms be occupied. They would simply be on exhibit. I replied that I felt this was wrong, as it would make the Mansion more of a museum than a home. I felt that the rooms should be restored authentically to a certain period during which the Mansion did house a governor, and that these rooms should be used as guest rooms for state visitors. Mrs. Waller feared the state visitors would burn up the Mansion. Miss Lyle suggested that a highway patrolman could walk up and down outside their room with a water bucket all night to be sure they didn't set the Mansion on fire, but Miss Lyle also felt that the rooms should be used. There was no meeting of the minds on this point.

We went up to the second floor. In the front west parlor I noticed that the mantelpiece was wood, as opposed to the marble mantelpieces downstairs. Also, the mantelpiece in the

front west bedroom is decorated with wooden stars or medallions, much like the decoration the architect, William Nichols, used in the lintel over the governor's office in the Old Capitol. I suggested that this may have been used to designate the bedroom of the governor. At any rate, Miss Lyle said she liked wooden fireplaces very much, felt sure they were original, and could not wait to tear out the marble fireplaces downstairs, which were inappropriate. The second bedroom on the west side also had the original wooden fireplace, or mantelpiece. The furniture in this room is late Victorian. There is an armoire - A-R-M-O-I-R-E - or wardrobe, a bed and a couple of chairs. They are not pretty, they are massive, but they are appropriate to the Mansion, and they do have some historical association. It is known that Governor John Bell Williams slept here, as he has just gotten up, and it is suggested that Senator John F. Kennedy, later president of the United States, slept here on his visit during the Coleman administration. All of the bedrooms contain atrocious furniture, mixed in with some period pieces of reasonable relevance to the Mansion.

Note was taken of the art contained in the Mansion. Mississippi artists are represented in several paintings, and the portraits of many of Mississippi's first ladies hang here. There is also a good deal of irrelevant calendar art, primitive paintings by unknown artists, sketches and engravings of no particular historical or artistic significance. It was suggested that a

Mississippi art collection be maintained in the Mansion, and that undesirable paintings be relegated to some safe storage place.

The annex, or part of the Mansion added in 1908, is more horrible than the rest. It is unbelievable that the governor of any state in the union and his family could live in such surroundings. The furniture is awful, the bathrooms are unbelievable, the physical decay is apparent, and a total lack of taste pervades. It is expected that this part of the Mansion may be razed and a new residence built for the first family in its place. When we completed the tour, we discussed the so-called Governor Claiborne bed in the front east bedroom. As far as I am concerned, it is blatantly late Victorian. I asked Miss Lyle, who is knowledgeable about antiques, how she would date the bed. She said, "Unquestionably late Victorian." Therefore, it is impossible that the bed was ever associated with Governor Claiborne, who was a territorial governor of Mississippi. We spoke to Mrs. Waller about the mythology which has grown up around the Mansion, and found her not only willing but eager to correct these misconceptions.

Mrs. Waller is faced with many problems, chief among them the job of maintaining good public relations while disposing of undesirable, irrelevant, and inappropriate furnishings. She asked us for suggestions. I suggested that a Mansion committee

of control, or some sort of acquisitions committee, be established, as a shield for her. This committee would not only be charged with the responsibility of acquiring items for the Mansion, but would also be required to refuse items which might be donated and which are inappropriate. I do not know how this can be accomplished, but it occurs to me that if Dr. McLemore and the Board of Trustees of the Department of Archives and History saw fit, they might create a Governor's Mansion division of the State Historical Museum. If this could be done, acquisitions could be handled in the same manner as the acquisitions to the Museum are handled, and policies should be spelled out governing these acquisitions, which would protect Mrs. Waller and also protect the Mansion. Mrs. Waller asked me to go into this more carefully, and give her a written report of my recommendations.

We spent about two hours in the Mansion, at which time Mrs. Waller left to keep an appointment at Mississippi College. Miss Lyle and I felt that a great opportunity exists here to be of service to Mississippi, and to educate Mississippians in their heritage and in the history of the decorative arts during the life of the Mansion. It also seems to me that the restoration of the Mansion, under Mrs. Waller's direct control, will be a great public relations opportunity for her. I feel that educational television, commercial television, and the media should be used constantly to communicate the aims of the

restoration to the general public. I feel that as Mrs. Waller has a very good television personality, this is an opportunity for her to do a selling job for the proper restoration of the Mansion.

I would like to add - and this should be inserted earlier in this paper - that it is desirable to make gifts to the Mansion tax exempt, if possible. This could be accomplished by making the Mansion a part of the Museum, as gifts to museums are tax exempt. However, this brings on the problem of people making gifts of furniture or furnishings, for a tax break, when the gifts themselves are not appropriate to the Mansion. This is the ticky-tacky part, and this is where an acquisitions committee would have to act as a shield, not only for Mrs. Waller, but for the protection of the Mansion. They should be able to turn down furnishings that were not of the quality or of the period desired.

(Transcribed by Mary H. Mingee)

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