

# The Genteel Activist – Harriet Beecher Stowe

## ***Inspiring commitment to social justice***

Jan Fiore \*



One of the earliest surviving images of Harriet Beecher Stowe House, c. 1874-1882. The Stowe Center consulted early photos such as this one to plan for and conduct all exterior repairs, maintaining the architectural integrity of this National Historic Landmark.

**H**artford's 1871 Harriet Beecher Stowe House has recently undergone extensive preservation, including state-of-the-art fire suppression, a new climate control system, and renovation of 44 historic windows. Inside, new carpeting, wallpaper and paint all reflect Harriet Beecher Stowe's decorating choices. The museum's entirely new interactive tour provides visitors with a conversational experience that showcases the Beecher-Stowe family furnishings and Stowe's own decorative arts and paintings. Visitors will leave feeling inspired that they too can create positive social change, just as Stowe did with her bestselling antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born in Litchfield, Conn. in 1811. She was the author of more than 30 books, but it was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852, that catapulted her to international celebrity and secured her place in history. The book set off an international outcry for abolishing slavery and was a building block to the Civil War. She lived in this historic house from 1873 until her death in 1896. Restored and opened to the public in 1968, it was one of the first house museums in the country and one of the first focusing on a woman. The Stowe Center holds the largest collection of materials related to Stowe's life and work, illuminating important themes in nineteenth-century subjects, including women's history

and U.S. racial history and attitudes.

Cindy Cormier, Project Curator, and Beth Burgess, the Stowe Center's Collection Manager consider this the project of a lifetime. "Rather than preserve one room at a time, or maybe replace a fire suppressant system, as museum's usually do, the Stowe Center decided to roll it all into one big restoration project," said Cormier. The house had not been renovated in over 50 years, and upgrades to the infrastructure and mechanical systems were vital to preserve the home and its historic collections.

### Interior preservation

A tremendous amount of research went into recreating the interior of the house and

information on Stowe's decorating style came from a number of sources. Visitors to the famous author wrote about the front and back parlors in surprising detail, mentioning color schemes, furnishings and paintings on the walls. In addition to her house on Forest Street, Stowe also owned another house nearby named Oakholm, and one in Florida. Nineteenth-century photographs of Stowe's houses were carefully examined, as were letters from family and friends. To ensure the preservation plan was historically accurate, the museum engaged professional consultant Jean Dunbar of Historic Design in Virginia, who reviewed all of the museum's period sources, in addition to extensive national and international wallpaper and floor covering archives.

A lot of new information has come to light over the past 50 years, allowing experts to recreate Stowe's home from her own words and images from the era.

In the 1960s restoration, the front and back parlors were treated like one large room with the same wallpaper and the same carpeting, but new research shows this was not historically accurate. "Today, we are aware they were very distinct rooms, and we can reproduce the very fancy black border from the front parlor by making custom wallpaper based on photographic evidence and a lot of historic research," said Cormier.

#### Furnishings

Highlights of family furnishings include a wedding present from Stowe's father, an 1830s drop-leaf parlor table on which Stowe wrote the first two chapters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "The table provides a tangible connection to this important American author's writing of a world-changing literary bestseller. Another is the Stowe family's Empire mahogany secretary exhibited in the formal parlor," said Burgess.



Oakhalm double parlor, c. 1865. The finishes that Stowe selected at Oakholm have inspired the new finishes in Stowe house, especially where limited photographic evidence exists.



Photograph of Harriet Beecher Stowe in her Forest Street, Hartford home, 1886. This rare photo was used by the Stowe Center to reproduce new finishes for Stowe House interiors.



Wallpaper, 1853. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wallpaper was quickly and cheaply produced in Britain at the height of the antislavery novel's success.



Oil portrait of Harriet Beecher Stowe by Alanson Fisher, 1853. Copy of one commissioned by A.H. Purdy of the National Theatre in New York City, home to one of the longest running productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

## Decorative art and paintings

Stowe filled her house with souvenirs from frequent travels across America and Europe. "The museum is filling the Stowe House parlors with decorative arts to authentically reproduce Stowe's original décor intent," said Burgess. "Among them is a bronze sculpture, *African Woman at the Well* by Charles Cumberworth, awarded to Stowe by the Boston Anti-Slavery Fair Managers in 1853." Another is a Limoges spill vase illustrating the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* characters Eliza and her son Harry. Paintings include mid-nineteenth-century copies of old masters such as Raphael and Giorgione, several paintings conserved through funding from Bank of America and two still-lives painted by Stowe herself.

Stowe's writing is an example of courage in action. "Harriet Beecher Stowe was a hard working mother who took a stand and made a difference, and we want people to



Oil on panel, *Florida Orange Fruit & Blossoms* by Harriet Beecher Stowe c. 1867-1884. Stowe donated some works to fundraisers for emancipated slave schools and churches in Florida.



*African Woman at the Well*, by Charles Cumberworth.



Wallpaper installation in the Stowe House Dining Room, done by Denis Picard of Kensington, CT. The paper being hung is a reproduction of a paper in the Stowe Center's archive.

know that they too can enrich their community in ways they may not have imagined," said Cormier.

*The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center is a museum, program center and research library at 77 Forest Street in Hartford, Conn. On June 10, the passive lecture-based house tour was replaced by a new interactive dialogue-based tour experience using conversations about Stowe's story, Uncle Tom's Cabin, its impact, and connections with modern social issues. For more information, call 860-522-9258 x 317 or visit [www.HarrietBeecherStowe.org](http://www.HarrietBeecherStowe.org).*

Right: Limoges spill vase. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* characters Eliza and her son Harry are running across the frozen Ohio River to their freedom. The vase is painted in vibrant colors and careful details, according to the purchaser's specific order.



## Stoudts Black Angus: Year Round Antiques

ADAMSTOWN, PA - Stoudts Black Angus is open every Sunday, year round, from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. featuring over 300 dealers in 70,000 square feet of high quality antiques that span every decade. In addition, there are more than 200 outdoor dealers selling their wares. In spite of Stoudts' reputation for specializing in fine antiques, there are always bargains to be found.

The Antique Capital's largest under-roof antique mall, this giant complex offers something for everyone. A one-stop shopping experience, the sheer variety and volume of merchandise is staggering. Rare examples of the finest early American and European furnishings, toys, estate jewelry, lighting, crystal, linens, china, glassware and coins are offered week in and week out.

In addition to antiques, Stoudts has a renowned microbrewery, fine restaurant, and a "Wonderful Good" artisanal bread and cheese shop open Friday through Sunday from 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.

For more information, visit [www.stoudts.com](http://www.stoudts.com).

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## Simple Goods Announces Fall Show

MANSFIELD, OH - In its 11th year, the fall Simple Goods Early Country Antiques & Primitive Goods show will be held on Saturday, Nov. 4. The show features 50 dealers representing 15 states from the Midwest to the East Coast. The dealers feature early country, primitive antiques, and one-of-a-kind handcrafted wares in every price range. The Simple Goods family of dealers are friendly and love to share information about the antiques they are selling. The

show has become a meeting place for friends to gather and catch up while shopping.

Simple Goods will be held at the R&L Banquet Center, 781 Fifth Avenue, Mansfield, OH 44905 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission is \$5 and parking is free. Food is available on the premises.

For more information, contact Christina Hummel at 570-651-5681, or visit [www.picturetrail.com/simplegoods](http://www.picturetrail.com/simplegoods).

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