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Quarters A at the Old Charleston Navy Yard: A Historic Interior Furnishing and Interpretive Plan

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A century has seen the showpiece of the Charleston Navy Yard, the Admiral’s Quarters, transform from a community hub to a neglected site. This project aims to raise awareness for the house, propose an alternate use for the interior, and highlight the possibilities inherent in this beautiful historic structure.

Charleston’s Naval Yard now resembles a ghost town, but it was once the most active industrial district in the area. The base employed hundreds of thousands of South Carolina workers who built warships and Navy infrastructure throughout the 1900s. When the Admiral presided over this bustling base, he lived on Officer’s Row at Quarters A. His house was the hub of social life on base, providing a space for military ceremonies, weddings, and public relations visits from celebrities. Charles Lindbergh, Helen Keller, and FDR are some of the notables who walked the halls of Quarters A—halls that are now silent.

Since the Navy decommissioned the base in 1996, Quarters A faces neglect and deterioration. Although the exterior is in poor condition, the interior is remarkably intact. Under Historic Paint Scheme

Using cross section microscopy paint sample analysis, we determined the historic paint colors from the 1940s: cream, white, yellow. By the mid-40s, the entire interior was painted in what most people from the Navy remember as “sick bay green.” We believe this was a result of wartime rationing. We recommend modern shades of cream, white, yellow, or green to restore a historic 40s finish.

Historic interior furnishing and interpretation plans are often used by house museum proprietors to restore the interior of a building to a specific time period. Our purposes were slightly different.

The purpose of this project is to raise awareness for the site by creating a sensitive interior furnishings and interpretation plan for this architecturally and historically significant space. This document merged several types of research—Navy furniture allotments, historic photographs, paint sample microscopy, archival research, and oral interviews—to create an accurate picture of what the house once was and what it can be.

We propose a new use for the building: a public event and reception space that highlights the WWII-era apex of Quarters A. It was our goal to give the house’s current owner, City of North Charleston, inspiration for reestablishing Quarters A as a profitable and enriching showpiece in the community.

Research Methodology

Rolling Back the Clock: Creating a 1940’s-inspired Event Space

Entry hall redesigned with 1940s inspirations. Several other bases around the US have turned their officer’s quarters into profitable reception and event spaces. We propose furnishing this space with early 20th century furnishings that can be moved and replaced with tables for larger receptions.

Interpretive History Panels

Throughout the event space, we propose placing mementos from the 1940s on blank walls. Newspaper articles featuring famous visitors, WWII recruitment posters, and images of ships that were built on the Navy Yard are viable options. Norman Rockwell was once stationed here, so the cartoons he drew while on base should also be considered.

Plan Endorsed by: The Preservation Society, Naval Order of the United States, Charleston Commandery
Prepared by: North Carolina City Council
Proposal Covered by: Charleston Post and Courier, 292 Preservation Brief

Presented to: The Preservation Society, Naval Order of the United States, Charleston Commandery

A family gathering in the entry hall, 1944. Anne James Yellot, left, was the daughter of Admiral Jules James and lived at Quarters A during the 40’s. She kindly provided us with her memories and her photograph depicting a family gathering in the entry hall, 1945. Anne James Yellot, left, was the daughter of Admiral Jules James and lived at Quarters A during the 40’s.