

Shannon Lindridge, Correspondent Published 4:39 p.m. ET Dec. 1, 2016 | Updated 4:40 p.m. ET Dec. 1, 2016



(Photo: Provided photo / The History Center)

For thousands of years, people have been striving to make their impersonal dwellings into a home. One way to do that is to decorate the walls using paint, fabric or some other type of wall covering.

The wallpaper we know of today came into use in the 16th century when printed paper or embossed leather was hung on walls as a cheap alternative to expensive tapestries. Although wallpaper was inexpensive compared to tapestries, it was made by hand and still considered a luxury, until machine-printed paper started to become available in the late 19th century.

With the availability of inexpensive wallpaper, papering a room was an economical way to “redo” a room. With wallpaper now available to the masses, wallpapering one’s walls in the more affluent homes became passé.

However, wallpaper did come back into fashion with more affluent households in later years with a growing interest in Japanese design, and with the beginning of the Arts and Crafts design movement. These “new” and expensive wallpapers were being imported to the United States and Europe from Japan. The design was embossed into canvas or heavy paper and was called “leather papers.” These papers were commonly used in the public or more formal areas of a home such as halls, stairways, dining rooms, studies and libraries.

In the collections at The History Center in Tompkins County, there is an example of “leather paper” dating from circa 1888. The paper has a repeating embossed floral pattern with brown branches, green leaves and red flowers. The background is gold with an embossed hatching pattern. According to the center’s records, the paper was hung at “the Treman home.” The paper could have come from any one of the homes owned by the Tremans, and the purchase may have been the result of a remodeling project, or for decorating a new home.

The Treman family was a very influential and affluent family in Tompkins County, and they would have been able to afford such luxurious wallpaper. The Tremans owned Treman, King and Co., one of the largest hardware dealers in northern New York; they were involved in the local banking industry; and with Cornell University, as well as with many community activities. Their imprint on Tompkins County can be seen in such memorials as the Robert Treman State Park, and even in the name Trumansburg, named for Abner Treman, an early founding member of the family.

Over the past 100 years, wallpaper has gone in and out of fashion as a decorative choice for homes. Currently wallpaper is frequently replaced with a variety of faux painting techniques. Contemporary designers often use computers to design wallpaper to be used only on one wall of a room. Contemporary and modern wallpaper designs reflect the environment in which people live, and are presented more as a standalone piece of art rather than a decorative element that is added to with complementary furniture.

When remodeling, homeowners sometimes peel back the layers of old wallpaper, and that reveals the history of a home and the people who lived there. By looking at the wallpaper’s pattern, what it is made of, and when it was made, a homeowner can sometimes determine the social class of past inhabitants, as well as how often they remodeled.

Of the many elements used to decorate a home, wallpaper is often the least preserved, and sometimes the most interesting.

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