Look No Further — A Telescope House is Here!

If you’ve made it out to our garden and looked back at Lee-Fendall, you may have noticed that the house has an unusual style of architecture. It stands apart from its two or three-story brick, rectangular neighbors. Lee-Fendall House is different, and it’s this difference that adds to the special character of the house.

Lee-Fendall is an elegant example of a telescope house. These types of residences developed as a series of dependencies or wings attached to the side of the main house, each growing smaller and smaller outward. The sections look like you could collapse them all together sideways into the main house, like you could with sections of a telescope. In most cases, the main block of the house would be constructed first. Several generations later, more space would be needed as families expanded. Instead of building behind the structure, as was common, the new addition would be placed adjacent to one of the sides — usually a gable end — of the main block. Often it would be constructed to look like the main block, employing similar materials, shape, and roof form. Even more generations later, more room, again, may be needed, and another small addition would be built. Rooms were connected via a central passage and often were organized by relative importance to the family, with formal areas in the main block of the home and service quarters down at the smaller end, like at Lee-Fendall.

Where did Philip Fendall come up with the architectural style? Who was the architect who designed this? While the latter is still a mystery, we have an answer to the first question. Fendall came to Alexandria from Charles County in southern Maryland following the American Revolution. The telescope style is a regional style that developed in both the southern counties and eastern shore of Maryland (and oddly enough, in Buffalo, New York). The Chesapeake Bay area is rich in examples of telescope homes — some of which date back to the mid-1600s. In Virginia, a similar style was known as “big house, little house, colonnade, kitchen.”

Left: A view of the back of Lee-Fendall House from the garden showcases the telescoping sections of the house and the self-similarity of the various sections. Note the roof on the main block of the house was altered in a later renovation and would have originally been gabled like the smaller sections.

Right: A diagram illustrating the proportionality of sections in a typical telescope house (from the “Pamphlet Architecture 9: Rural and Urban House Types” by Steven Noll).
What sets Lee-Fendall apart from its telescoping friends is that it was constructed all at one time rather than in stages. This gives us some insight into Fendall’s thought process when deciding what kind of house to build on the corner of Washington and Oronoco streets in 1785. Fendall would have been familiar with the style as several such houses were located near Potomac, his home in Charles County. Given the prominence of the Fendalls in county society, he certainly would have had opportunities to visit a number of these grand homes and become inspired by their design. Upon moving to Alexandria, Fendall probably wanted something familiar to him, and what better way than to design one’s house like the ones back home.

We feel lucky to have such a unique example of the telescope house form in Alexandria — the oldest example you’ll find in the city!

Learn more about the structure of the house in our upcoming Stories from the Architecture tour.

Staff Changes at Lee-Fendall

John Christiansen, who served as the Executive Director of the Lee-Fendall House Museum and Garden for over six years, resigned that position in October to make a career growth move to a new position with The Branch Museum of Architecture and Design in Richmond, Virginia. During John’s tenure at Lee-Fendall, he was instrumental in the growth and maturity of the museum’s programs, strengthened its relationships with other city historical properties, and oversaw many improvements to the condition of the property. He has been an asset and will surely continue to make important contributions to the museum field in his new position.

Amanda Roper, Lee-Fendall’s Manager of Education & Public Programs, has been appointed as Acting Executive Director as the Board of Directors searches for new candidates with a goal of having someone permanent in the position by the beginning of 2020.

A Toy to Spread Joy!

This toy piano, now on display in our holiday toy exhibit, is a favorite among visitors. The piano was possibly manufactured by Schoenhut Piano Company, one of the premier makers of miniature toy pianos in the 19th and 20th centuries. The company was founded by Albert Schoenhut, who, having been born into a toy-making family, began making toy pianos when he was young. In 1866, at age 17, Schoenhut was hired in Philadelphia to repair toy pianos imported from Germany that had broken during their journey overseas.

In 1872, Schoenhut began his company, and 30 years later it was the biggest toy manufacturer in the United States. The pianos created by the company were not simply toys. The sounds they produced were considered high quality, and the pianos were renowned for staying in tune for years. Depending on the model, the pianos had between one and three-and-a-half octaves (a full-size piano has seven-and-a-half). The keys on these toys were properly spaced, and the pianos came with sheet music, so children could learn proper technique from a young age. By 1935, Schoenhut Piano Company had more than 40 styles and sizes of toy pianos.

Shop with Lee-Fendall this Holiday Season!

Find unique, locally-crafted items for purchase in our gift shop — there’s something for everyone on your list. And don’t forget to treat yourself! Get the gift that keeps on giving with a Lee-Fendall House Museum membership for 2020.
Exploring the Tales of Textiles

At the Lee-Fendall House Museum, we have a dedicated group of research volunteers who help us uncover the history behind items in our collection. We interviewed one of our research volunteers, Gwendolyn White, to find out what she enjoys most about volunteering with us.

How did you decide to volunteer at the Lee-Fendall House?
I had seen that the Lee-Fendall House was looking for volunteers to do research a couple of years ago, but I was involved in several different projects at the time and decided I didn’t have the time. However, this past summer I was ready to see if they still needed research help. Luckily for me, they did!

What skills did you bring with you?
I have a PhD in American History and have had a wide range of work experience, mainly in public history and digital history. Virginia history is my main interest, especially the eighteenth century, but I have done research and writing on all eras.

What do you enjoy most about your volunteer work here?
Having the opportunity to research the museum’s amazing textile collection is a joy. Every day that I volunteer feels like my birthday. I am presented with a box, and I can’t wait to see what’s inside. While I don’t have a background in textiles, I’ve been able to apply my research skills and along the way learned so much. There are a lot of things to consider when trying to figure out when a specific item of clothing was made: the style of sleeve, the shape of the skirt, and the types of decoration used are just a few. Also, there are so many different kinds of fabric, many were used specifically at one time period or another and are no longer as commonly used.

Tell us about a favorite item that you researched.
Each item is special in its own way and has a story to tell – from a child’s white coat made in the 1890s to a pair of women’s wedding slippers from 1861. However, one item that really stood out was a beautiful wedding dress. It’s not what we think of as typical for weddings today, but this two-piece dress was an absolute confection of femininity. The skirt was made of off-white crepe with a ruffle around the hem, but the bodice of the dress was of pink silk with a green velvet stripe. It was decorated with lace, rosettes and large puffed sleeves. There is no question that all eyes would have been on the bride on her wedding day! This project was especially fun because with a little further research we were able to learn exactly where and when the wedding took place. The donor had provided a name, and we discovered that the dress was worn on October 3, 1894, in Van Wert County, Ohio. Knowing this information added another level of context to the history of this dress and a real connection to the bride that wore it over a hundred years ago.

Lee-Fendall Expands Its Digital Footprint

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are everywhere – including in the museum community! Over the past year, the Lee-Fendall House has been working to develop social media strategies that capture the attention of new audiences. Maybe you’ve seen (or liked!) our posts, as we share day-to-day scenes from around the museum and strive to give our audience a deeper look. Behind-the-scenes posts are always popular, giving people a peek at event set-up, exhibit development, or rarely-seen spaces. Our friends love it when we pull back the curtain and show them what goes into keeping the museum up and running.

Storytelling is very important to our mission at Lee-Fendall, and social media platforms also help us share the personal narratives of the different people who have lived and worked at the property over the years. We are always looking for opportunities to tie those stories to larger narratives like the struggle for civil rights or the way great changes in history affected daily life. And we always enjoy the chance to celebrate a “National Day,” whether we’re sharing photos of Myra Lee Civalier’s beloved pooch Hal for National Dog Day or magazine instructions for the first female cyclists on Bike to Work Day.

These posts are part of a broader strategy to secure the future of the museum and continue to grow our audience and impact. Our social media outreach is helping ensure the future of the museum as we reach new audiences, deepen our connection to the community, and turn one-time visitors into returning guests and members of the museum. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter to keep up with everything that’s happening at the Lee-Fendall House!
Dreaming of a Green Christmas

Looking to add some variety into your holiday décor? Consider taking the Victorian approach to preparing your home for the holidays! During the mid-19th century, the German-rooted tradition of displaying a Christmas tree for the holidays became commonplace in the United States. In towns across the country, Christmas trees were beginning to be commercially sold to families who could enjoy them throughout the season. Beyond the Christmas tree, Victorians looked to adorn their homes in other ways too. Much like today, Victorians often found themselves cash-strapped around the holidays, and so they looked for cost-effective ways to enhance their homes. One of the simplest places for them to turn was to their gardens, which even in the winter offered a vibrant selection of plant life from which they could borrow. As Christmas approached, they would collect dried flowers, pine cones, plant cuttings, and other similar items from their gardens to use as decoration throughout their homes.

Today we continue this tradition at Lee-Fendall as we decorate for Christmas. We gather trimmings from our boxwoods to make festive kissing balls that hang from the doorways. Sprigs of holly are scattered through the house with their angled leaves and bright red berries adding cheerful pops of color. Bold magnolia leaves and fruit are gracefully strewn across the mantles. Anywhere you look, you are sure to find a bit of the outdoors brought inside and contributing to the splendor of the season.

Come and experience the beauty of our holiday greenery firsthand and get inspired to use these ideas in your home too. Many of us have our own gardens or yards that would make decorating like this possible. Look for different types of evergreen plants or things such as berries or pine cones that could be used to create wreaths, centerpieces, or other type of décor. These touches of greenery can add a traditional Christmas feel to any home.

Learn how to make a kissing ball in one of our new holiday workshops!

Mark Your Calendars!

Thursday, December 5, 6:30 PM &
Sunday, December 8, 2:00 PM
HOLIDAY KISSING BALL WORKSHOP
Learn how to create your own traditional holiday kissing ball in these hands-on workshops using fresh boxwood from Lee-Fendall’s own garden. All materials are provided.

A Victorian Christmas

Saturday & Sunday
December 14-15
11:00 AM, 12:30 PM, and 2:00 PM
Experience the wonder of the season by joining us for a Victorian Christmas at the Lee-Fendall House! Enjoy traditional décor, holiday crafts, sweet treats, seasonal story time, photos with Santa, and more!

Yuletide by Candlelight

Saturday, December 14, 5:00 - 9:00 PM
Experience the holiday season with festive activities and fare at historic sites throughout Alexandria! Discover Alexandria’s holiday traditions through the centuries. Dance in the ballroom at Gatsby’s Tavern Museum, warm yourself by the fire at Carlyle House, and make a Victorian keepsake at Lee-Fendall House.

Happy Holidays from Lee-Fendall House!

Saturday, January 11, 2:00 PM
Stories in the Architecture ★
Venture behind the scenes from the basement to the attic and explore the history of the Lee-Fendall House through its architecture in this tour. Changes in style and home technology have all left their mark on the home, from when it was built in 1785 through its continued use as a home in the 20th century.

Saturday, February 8, 2:00 PM
Under the Same Roof: Enslaved and Free Servants ★ at the Lee-Fendall House
Explore the Lee-Fendall House from the perspectives of the enslaved and free African Americans who lived and worked in the home as domestic servants, both before and after the Civil War. Hear the stories of the people who helped build and shape the Lee-Fendall House over its long history.

Visit www.leefendallhouse.org:
- View the most up-to-date list of upcoming programs
- Get full event details and ticket information
- Purchase tickets for your favorite events