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Furnishings Plan
Morning Room
Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National
Historic Site

Ainsley Wilcox House
Buffalo, New York

1986

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Ainsley Wilcox House

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Morning Room
Ainsley Wilcox House

The nucleus of the Ainsley Wilcox House was built in 1838 or soon thereafter by the federal government as an officers' quarters of Poinsett Barracks, a short-lived military post that closed in 1845. At the time the house was built the land was leased by the government from Ebenezer Walden; in 1847 Walden sold the part of the property where this house stood and the Wilcox house began its history as a private home. Probably through a series of alterations and improvements it grew from a modest double house into a handsome Greek Revival residence with a striking temple portico.

It became the Wilcox house in 1883, when Ainsley and Mary Grace Wilcox moved there, her father having bought it for them to occupy. Although Mr. Wilcox never owned the house, he made many additions, the most notable being in the 1890s, when the Greek-Revival house was expanded threefold. Not only did the house become larger, but it also gained a more mansion-like character, with service rooms, bath rooms, back hallways and the many comforts and conveniences that went with a house of that time staffed by servants.

One of the additions in the 1890s that reflected this grander scale of living was the morning room. Although

called on the architect's original drawings a "living room," the term "morning room," used by the family, reflects an adoption of elegant parlance by the Wilcoxes. A morning room was a light and sunny place where the family gathered after breakfast and where they might pass the morning; it was a symbol of leisure, a retreat of people who did not have to go to work. Normally these were very "feminine," decorated in pale blues or yellows, with delicate furnishings, for they are the most closely associated with women. To the contrary, the Wilcox morning room is very masculine, heavy in its Gothic architecture. And in fact through its early history it was more often used by Mr. Wilcox than Mrs. Wilcox.

The morning room would be of no particular interest, had it not become the scene of great historical moments in September of 1901. President William McKinley was shot by an assassin while receiving the public at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. The Vice President, Theodore Roosevelt came to town at once, then when McKinley seemed to be improving, left to go hunting, as an expression of confidence in the President's recovery. But on Saturday September 14 McKinley died and Roosevelt returned that day, arriving in Buffalo at 1:30 p.m. After eating lunch at the home of his friend Ainsley Wilcox, Roosevelt called on Mrs. McKinley, then returned to the Wilcox house where he took the oath of office in the library, a room now accurately restored.

Roosevelt remained in Buffalo from his arrival on Saturday, September 14, 1901 until his departure on the funeral train on Monday, September 16, for Washington, D. C. A guest of Mr. Wilcox, he made the morning room his headquarters while in Buffalo. Away from peering eyes from the street, it was a sunny, ample room facing a side garden. Here Roosevelt first met with his Cabinet in session; here he issued his first proclamation, which declared national mourning for President McKinley.

In the years that followed the Wilcox house welcomed Presidents Taft and Wilson and other famous Americans, but the greatest interest of the house was its association with Theodore Roosevelt's inauguration. Ainsley Wilcox died in 1930 and his wife followed in 1933; since they did not own the house, it was vacated at once, and in 1935 their possessions were auctioned off, while the house passed to the estate of Mrs. Wilcox's father. In 1938 the house was leased for use as a restaurant and extensively remodeled. The interior partitions of the morning room were cut away and most of the lower floor turned into one large dining room.

The federal government purchased the mansion in 1969, following years of lobbying by Buffalo citizens and Roosevelt enthusiasts. It was opened to the public in 1971 as a partial house museum. Today it keeps that function, with the library fully restored to show it as it was the day Theodore Roosevelt

was inaugurated. The dining room which Roosevelt used has also been restored, as well as an upstairs bedroom. This report proposes an historic interior recreation of the morning room, to complete the group of three rooms--library, dining room and morning room--important in Roosevelt's brief tenure in the Ainsley Wilcox house.

The Documentation

Documentation for the appearance of the morning room in the time of Roosevelt's visit is virtually nonexistent. All that is really known for certain is the architectural appearance of most of the room. As for furnishings, family tradition says that a "Chippendale" desk now in the room was used by Roosevelt in the very place in which it stands. We know that Roosevelt asked Wilcox for a copy of the volume of Messages of the Presidents which contained President Arthur's announcement of the death of President Garfield in 1881. A photograph taken at the time of Roosevelt's stay shows a potted plant in the east window of the morning room. Old photographs show the gas lighting devices, which must have been original, because they would have been archaic indeed to have been installed any later than Roosevelt's stay.

That is about the extent of our knowledge about the Wilcox morning room. The earliest known photograph of the room was taken in 1910, while President Taft and his aide

Archie Butt were visiting Mr. Wilcox. This document gives a dim impression of the mantel with candelabra, but is otherwise a blur. The first known full view of the room was published in the Buffalo Times, March 6, 1921. A study of this, and pictures taken of other rooms in the house at the time, reveals that the room had been altered extensively to make it in accord with the tastes of the post World War I period. The decoration in the morning room is in close harmony with the decoration of the other rooms pictured, and all may have been modernized ca. 1915-1921 by an interior decorator. The flavor is stylishly "period," but not in the manner of 1901.

Considering the sources together, it is clear that a restoration of the interior on a level of accuracy matching that of the library is at this time not possible. It is not likely to be possible. Even the earliest family recollection (Mrs. George Plimpton, interviewed September 13, 1985) describes a room like that in the 1921 pictures. What I am proposing is thus hypothetical. I am basing my plan on the 1921 picture, because there are elements in it which probably date from the earlier period. Otherwise I am proposing a recreation of the morning room as a relatively simple interior, full enough to be believable but not so full as to overstate.

Specifications

Architecture

The architectural theme of the room is Gothic, carried out largely in the mantelpiece and the strapwork ceiling, both very handsome and large scale. These elements survive, but two other elements do not: 1) the high wainscoting that surrounded the room and 2) the large double opening that connected the dining room and the morning room. Both are called for in the original plans; the wainscoting is shown in the 1921 picture, and family tradition recalls the doorway into the dining room.

Reproducing the wainscoting is a rather obvious procedure. It was mahogany, Gothic style, and was on all four walls. The doorway offers two options. According to the 1890s plans, a double leaf door was hung in the opening to the dining room. We do not know whether the actual doors were ever put there. Thus there is the option of not having doors, but hanging portieres or door curtains to match the window curtains. This is a quite typical treatment. Given the pinch of space in the two rooms, it would probably have been a good idea.

The woodwork color seems correct in its present state and any new staining should repeat this color, a dark mahogany stain, showing very little grain. The ceiling was

almost certainly the same whitewash white it is today and it should remain, if a color analysis does not reveal something else. While the 1921 view may suggest that the plaster walls were merely painted above the wainscoting, I doubt that this was the case in 1901. Family tradition suggests grasscloth, which is possible. I would be more comfortable with a damask or a damask paper, or, a very typical wall treatment of the time, burlap.

Family recollections say that the room was "colorless" or always a kind of "biege." This may refer to the later configuration. I recommend that colored burlap be stretched over the plaster walls and glued down. There are two ways to do this, the most accurate being to use dyed burlap, and the second to put a light coat of paint over the burlap after it is installed on the wall. Either would be suitable in the Wilcox house. The most typical colors were straw yellow, dark forest green and Pompeian red. I recommend the straw yellow.

A possibility for this wall decoration is the vinyl backed colored burlap available on the market. Do not, however, use vinyl simulated burlap; select the kind that has real burlap mounted on a vinyl back. The burlap should be flat and not glossy.

The oak floors should be cleaned, waxed and left as they are. If they are ever stripped, they should be

finished natural, that is, with a light bleaching, only enough to take the red cast out of the wax finish.

Furniture

An accompanying plan shows the proposed furniture arrangement. This room may have contained more furniture, but it will function better, and accommodate its conjecture better, as I propose. The 1921 picture shows two large chairs covered in velvet. I am almost certain that these are earlier massive mode upholstered chairs that have merely been recovered, as they often were. If so, they were once very likely covered in leather, and I recommend that reproductions be made of these in black leather.

Other chairs include a third reproduction stuffed chair (see illustration) and a variety of turn of the century reproductions. A pair of large-armed, upholstered-backed "Jacobean" chairs are on the east wall; a neo-Colonial chair is at the desk. Such furnishings are readily available on the antique and second-hand market. I have proposed that the big Jacobean chairs be upholstered; ones worked in cane would suffice as well. In either case, tapestry or burgundy colored velvet will be appropriate for upholstery or cushions. Often the upholstered chairs are found with their original upholstery, and if it is possible this should be kept. Avoid chintz and leather, and particularly avoid using damask or brocade on such chairs.

In selecting the reproduction type furniture, I prefer those pieces which are not too accurate to history. The appreciation of antiques was not widespread at the turn of the century; the Wilcoxes do not reflect much sophistication about furniture in any of the documentation we do have on their rooms, so let them here, as they seem to have done elsewhere, reflect the upper class popular interests of the time. Old furniture was "quaint," like the bay window in the upstairs bedroom, and it was meant to look crooked or awkward and ancient.

For the center table I suggest the use of the "Fox table" which is now in the collection. If this was supposedly in the house before 1935, it has a ring of accuracy; otherwise it will work because of its scale and design. It carries out the oft-mentioned "heavily carved" idea in recollections of the house. On this table I would place a copy of the book Roosevelt requested, Messages of the Presidents. An embroidered velvet or a lace table cover might be found for this table. Other books and a potted plant would be useful accessories.

Before the fire is a fireside bench, which should be about four feet wide, covered in velvet. Mahogany is probably the safest choice historically, and this seen only on the legs, for the seat is upholstered. A lap robe or throw is folded and kept on the fireside bench.

On the north wall is either a sofa or a large carved secretary or breakfront. If a wide bookcase with glass doors is available, it might be considered. Family tradition says that a large carved secretary was here, one purchased in Europe. This does not survive, nor are there any pictures of it. A suitable piece must be found eventually. Another possibility for the spot is a long upholstered sofa in a deep burgundy damask with stage fringe to match all around the base. I recommend, however, the large piece of furniture, in accord with family tradition.

To the left of the bay window, against the wall, is a small settee. Ideally this is a small Victorian lounge, with an arm on one end and no arm on the other, upholstered in black velvet, with pillows piled on it. A "cozy" can be built with a completely hidden frame that is simply a seat, curtained to the floor, with the pillows put against the wall. If this is made, I recommend that it be covered in cretonne in a stripe or floral pattern that takes up the other colors of the room, red, white, green, black and brown.

To the right of the bay window is the desk. If this is indeed an early piece, it has had some work done on it to enrich its Colonialness. In that it is extremely interesting and should be featured on the tour, in the speculation that perhaps Wilcox himself ordered the alterations. This desk is served by a reproduction shield-back chair with an

upholstered seat. This material can be either fabric or leather; it should be worn-looking, for the desk is to be shown as a work place.

For the table between the Jacobean chairs, select an antique or an early reproduction, out of proper scale for its model. It should not match the chairs. A Pembroke table of mahogany would be correct, and a heavy little table with turned legs would also be desirable.

The furniture finishes in the room should be fresh-looking and glossy. Often this effect can be achieved by leaving an old finish and waxing it faithfully. But while some upholsteries may be seedy, to suggest hard daily use, the finishes should show care and regular attention by the staff of servants.

Window and Door Hangings

I recommend that all hangings be en suite in dark green velvet. They should hang no more than a width and a half; they are equipped with brass or dark wooden rings 7" apart at the heading, with no pleats, and they fall straight to the floor. They hang from brass or wooden rods. Twenty-two inches from the floor is a 1½" stripe of bright blue; 18" from the floor a stripe of yellow gold; and 14" from the floor a stripe of rusty red. The curtains should be lined in material of the same color. The windows should have linen roller shades.

Lighting

Both the 1921 newspaper article and the later photographs of the morning room with all its interior walls torn away provide documentation for the fine Gothic gas brackets that hung on the wall. The 1921 picture shows that some of the brackets were equipped with the Welsbach burners and perhaps even pilot lights, which meant they could be turned on by pulling the chains. My reproductions of the lighting devices are electrified, only they do retain all the features of the earlier gas lights. Since no part of the originals survive, I recommend that they be reproduced and suggest the Craig Littlewood Company of Palmyra, New Jersey. Documents suggest that the room contained six brackets. Their locations are shown on the plan of the room.

The large central lamp is a kerosene fixture. No evidence tells us that there was a central hanging fixture, although family tradition recalls one. I recommend the central lamp because it is typical of the time and because it, more than a hanging lamp, is likely to fulfill the family's memory of the central lighting device as a "horror." My design is based upon the 1921 lamp base shown, but any tall-stemmed kerosene lamp of the 1890s or early 1900s will suffice. The fancy silk shade, which greatly diffused the light and reduced the glare, was ultimately functional, but the elaborate skirt-like design was very typical. I suggest that it be made by Ruth Vitow, 160 East 56th Street, New York, New York 10022. Obtain the lamp, of course, before you order the shade

frame and shade manufactured. This lamp should not be electrified, but should burn kerosene.

Floorcoverings

Family recollections speak of a "flowery" carpeting. On today's market I find no such carpet or rug that is suitable so I recommend a reproduction of an Oriental pattern, what would have been called an "American Oriental" in the era of the Wilcoxes. This is ready-made and manufactured by the Stark Carpet Company. It is in rusty reds and is called "Pharoh," and comes with a border. A carpet plan accompanies this report, suggesting the size of rug to order.

General Accessories

I recommend that very few accessories be used in the recreated morning room. Books on the desk, with papers and pens, an abundance of potted and hanging plants, some table covers, ash-trays and a useful family picture or two will complete the room. A telephone, vintage 1901, would be an interesting touchstone to a world being reduced in size by modern communications. A second innovation of interpretive use would be a turn of the century typewriter, equipped with "Executive Mansion" letterhead, some of Roosevelt's stationery and calling cards. These materials would have been used by secretary George Cortelyou, but he was present assisting Roosevelt. If there are no original wall pictures to be had, prints can be used in the groupings suggested in my elevations. These can be used with or without cream colored

mats. Hunting scenes, scenes of England in the olden time, nostalgic or historical scenes are appropriate, as are black and white reproductions of fine art. I would avoid the sentimental 19th century parlor engravings and lithographs as "Washington Crossing the Delaware," and "The Shepherd's Chief Mourner." Hang the pictures with blind cords.

Conclusion

The absence of specific information about the morning room is a disappointment, but does not preclude the need for it in smoothing out the visual interpretation of the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site. I strongly recommend that the architectural work be carried out first. The door between dining room and morning room is absolutely necessary, for in showing the connection between the rooms, one gets the picture of the temporary "suite" this provided for Theodore Roosevelt in his difficult days here. The door will unite the two important spaces and also makes the room more understandable as a morning room.

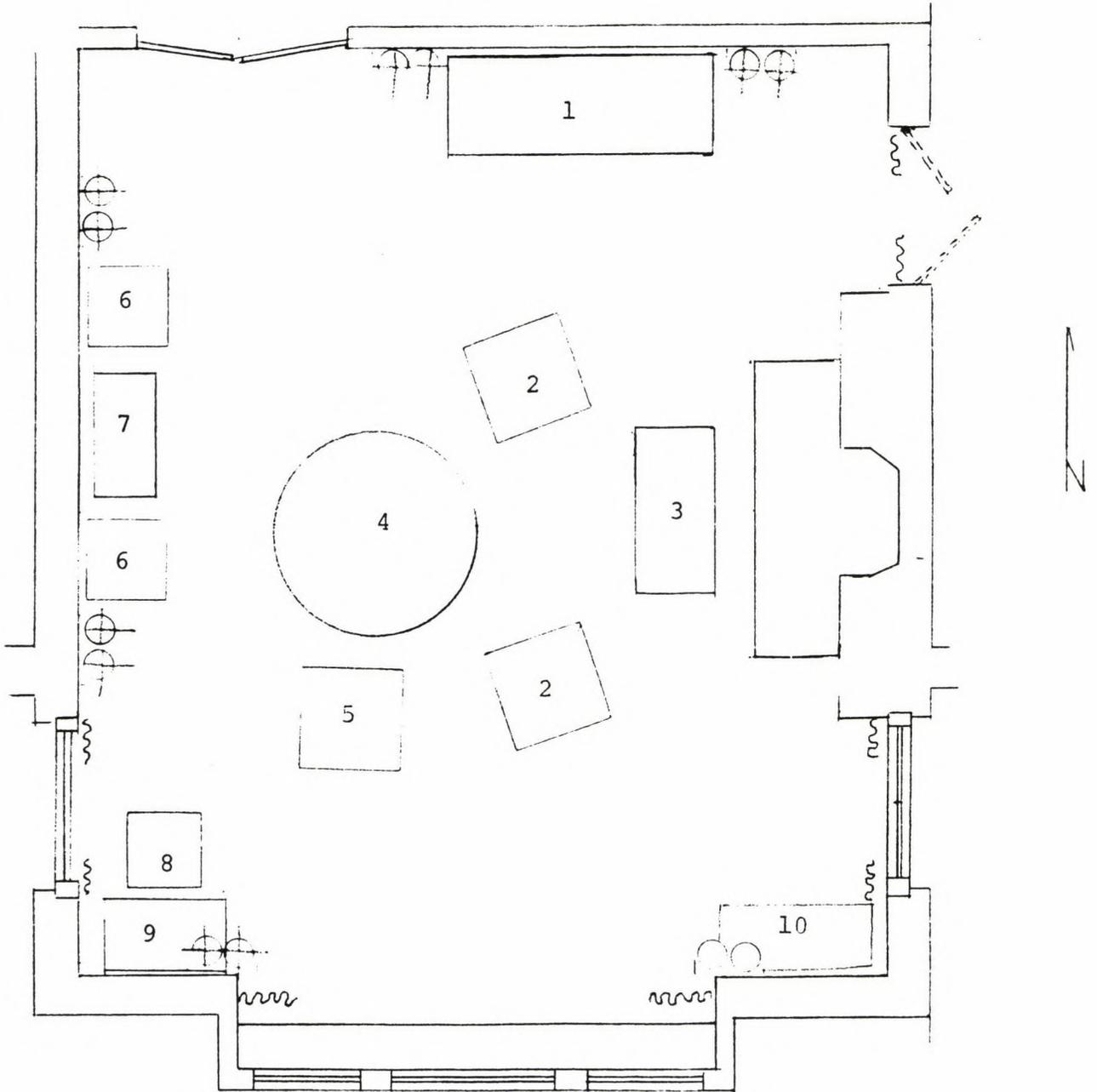
It is possible that all the furniture used can be antique, although I doubt it. If it is determined that it is a good idea to have antiques, the models suggested by me can be departed from, to some extent. In the large leather chairs, for example, there are many sorts of models. But I

would keep close to the two suggested in the 1921 newspaper picture, for I feel certain that they are reupholstered originals.

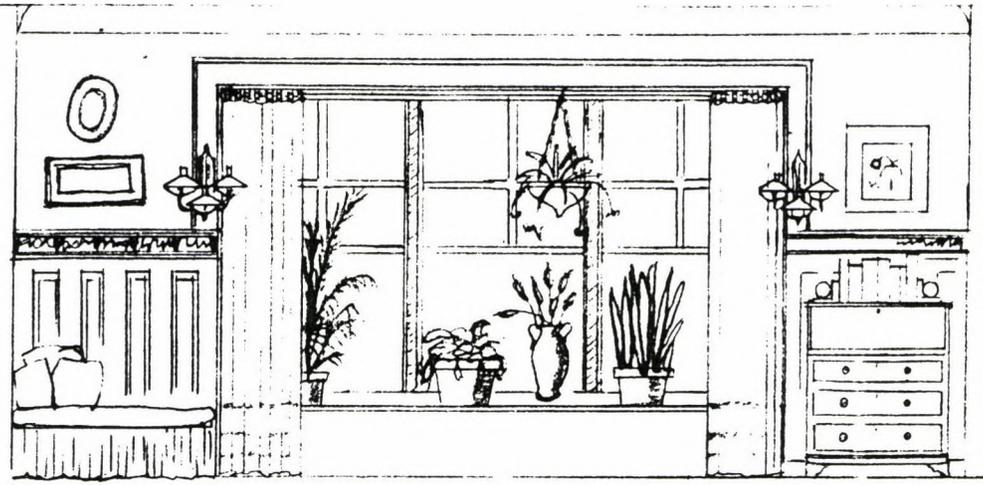
It may be that accessories such as the candelabra on the mantel will turn up in the possession of family members. I encourage the staff at the site to actively pursue objects from the house which are still in the family. In a sense, time is running out, as the 1930s are already a half-century away. Small objects are always more likely to be found, passed down through the generations.

Key to Plan of Morning Room

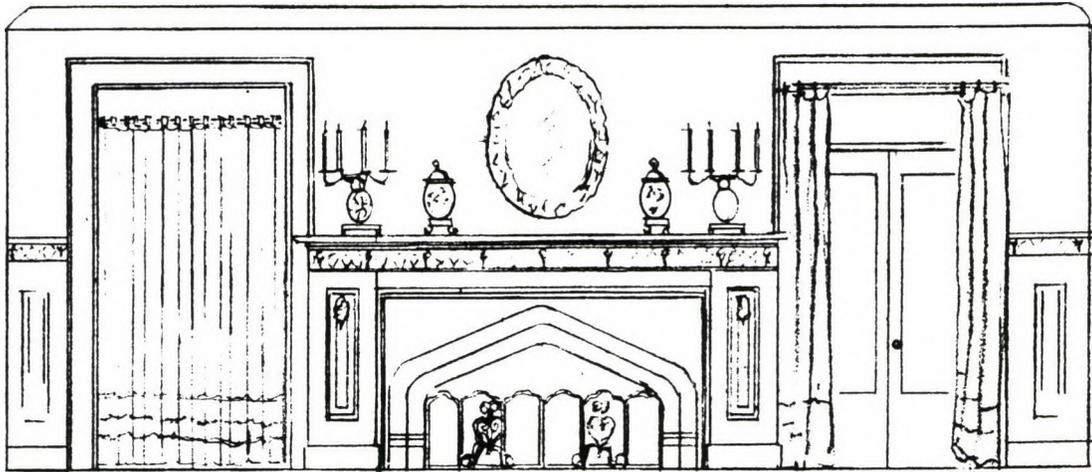
1. Upholstered sofa or large, ornate breakfront/desk
2. Upholstered leather chairs
3. Fireside bench
4. Center table with lamp ("Fox Table" now in collection).
5. Upholstered chair
6. Ornate Jacobean armchair with tapestry upholstery
7. Table with or without drop-leaves. Either a heavy table of oak, ca. 1900 or a "Colonial" table, which could be of the Pembroke type, but if not an 1890s reproduction, no later in date than about 1840.
8. Shield-back "Colonial" chair, reproduction, ca. 1900. This should be rather heavy, not an exact reproduction; seat to match curtain velvet.
9. Desk presently in the collection and in this location.
10. Small lounge covered with Turkish pattern material or small open-armed love seat of oak or mahogany. In either case, this is to be supplied with cushions with tassels at the corners.



Wilcox House
Plan of Morning Room
Scale: 1/4" = 1'

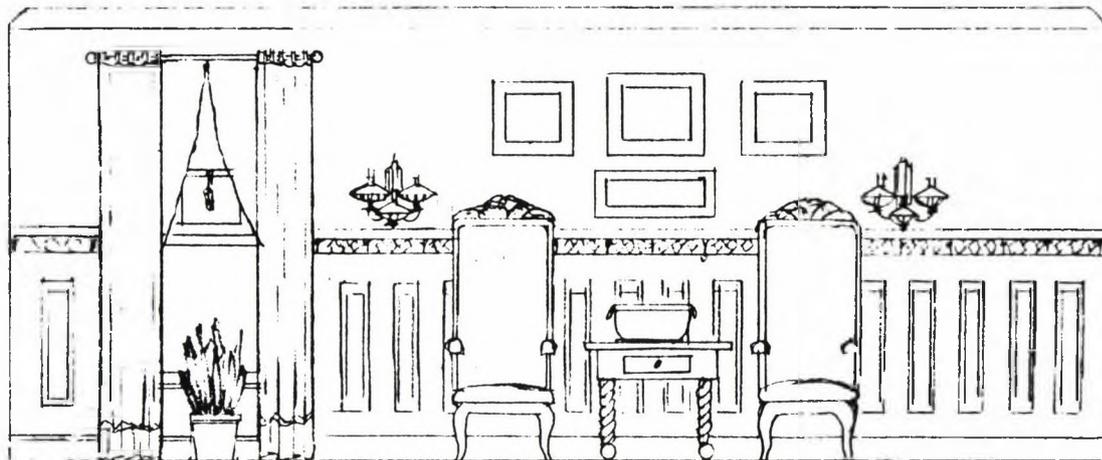


South Wall Elevation

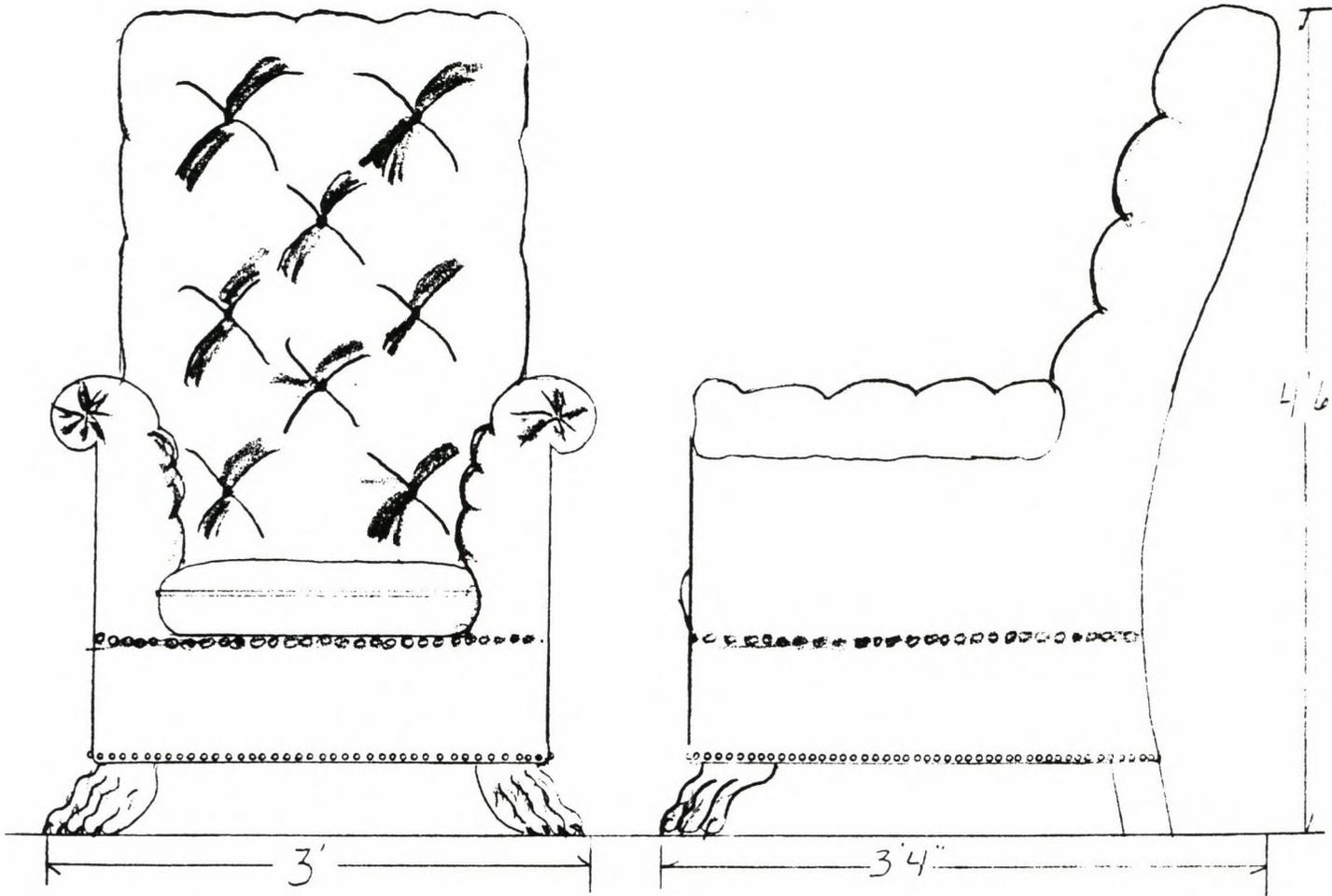


West Wall Elevation

Wilcox House
Morning Room



Wilcox House
Morning Room
West Wall Elevation



Black leather, deeply tufted on back and inside arms; otherwise smooth. Trimmed in brass studs, but the buttons themselves are black leather.

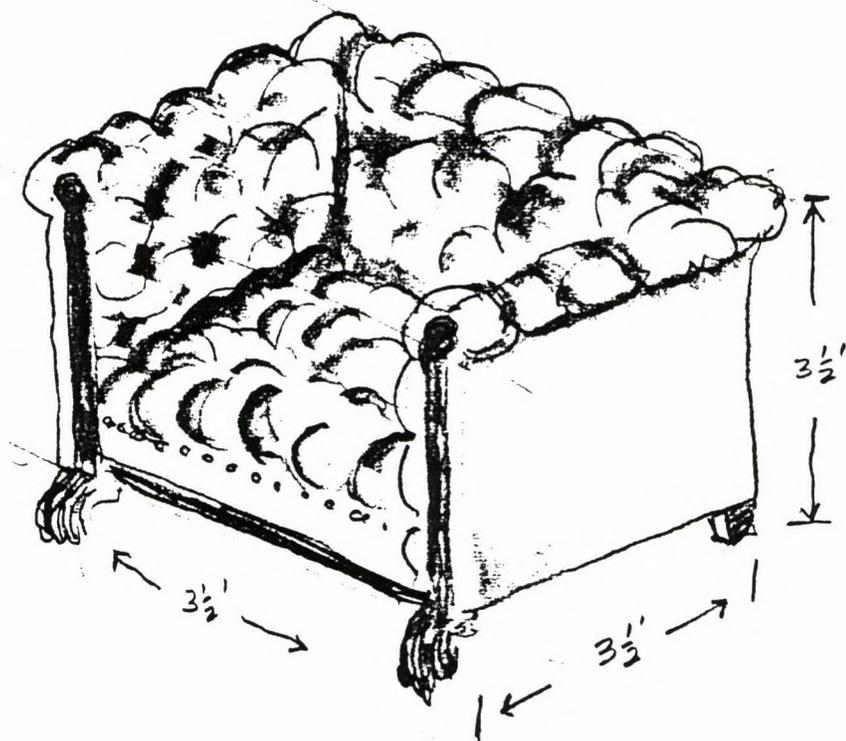
Loose innerspring cushion.

Wilcox House
Morning Room
Upholstered leather armchairs
Scale: 1" = 1'

Frame of oak or mahogany (where exposed)

Upholstery black leather

Normally these had claw or bun feet on
the front and blocks on the back



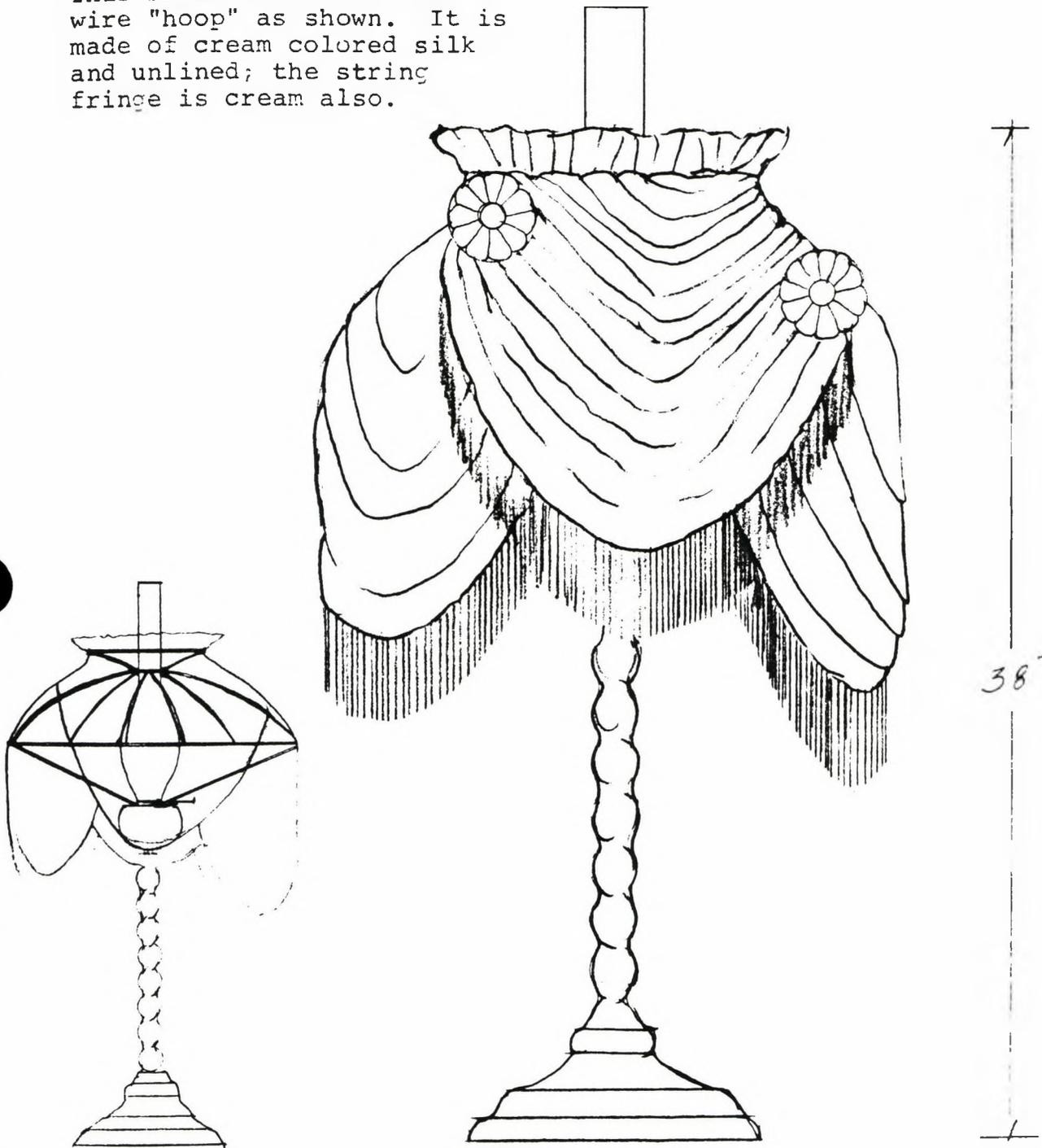
Wilcox House

Morning Room

"Square Chair"

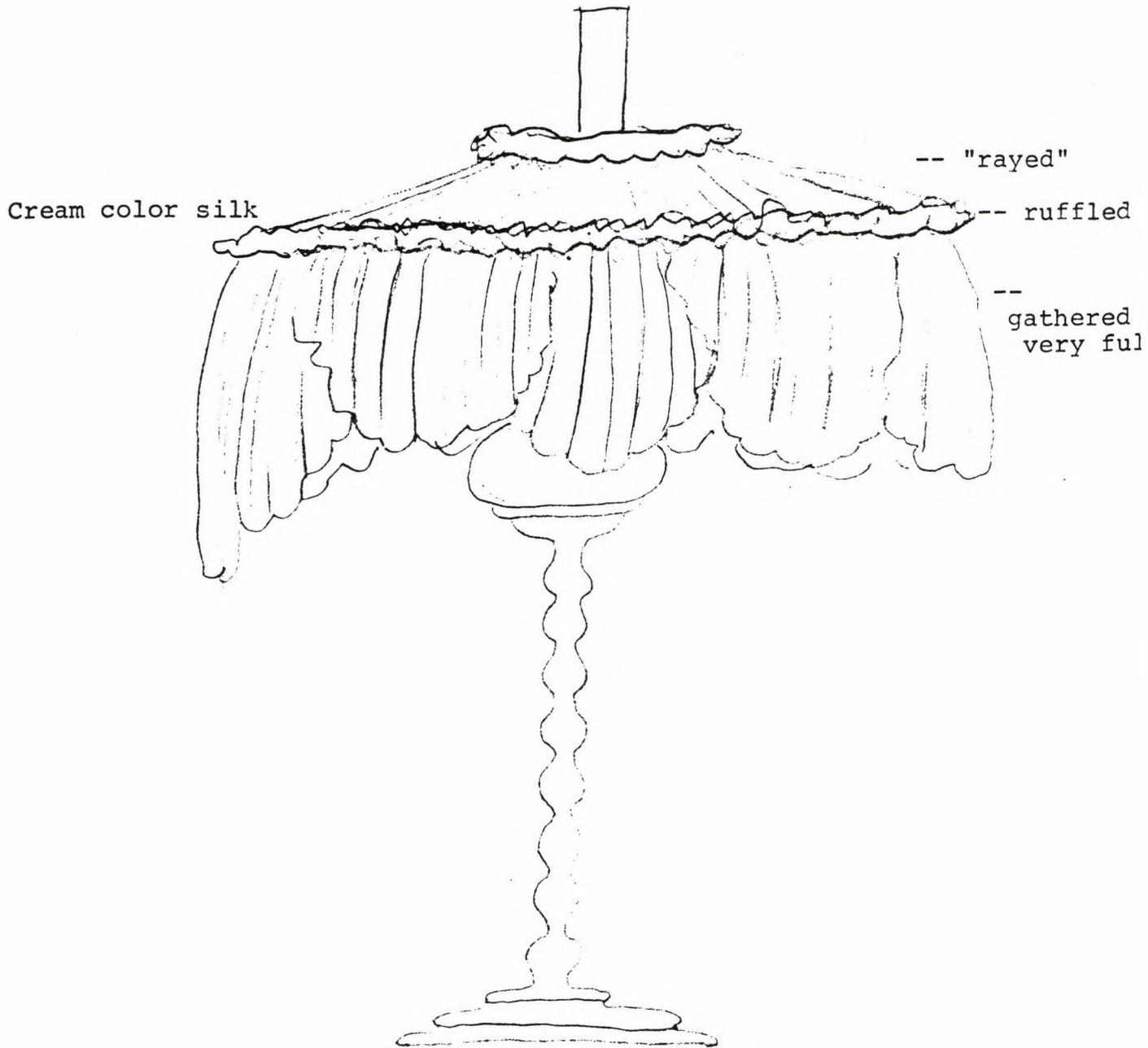
(#5 on plan) Not to scale

This shade is formed over a wire "hoop" as shown. It is made of cream colored silk and unlined; the string fringe is cream also.



Kerosene lamp, ca. 1900, could have a variety of types of columns, including a figure.

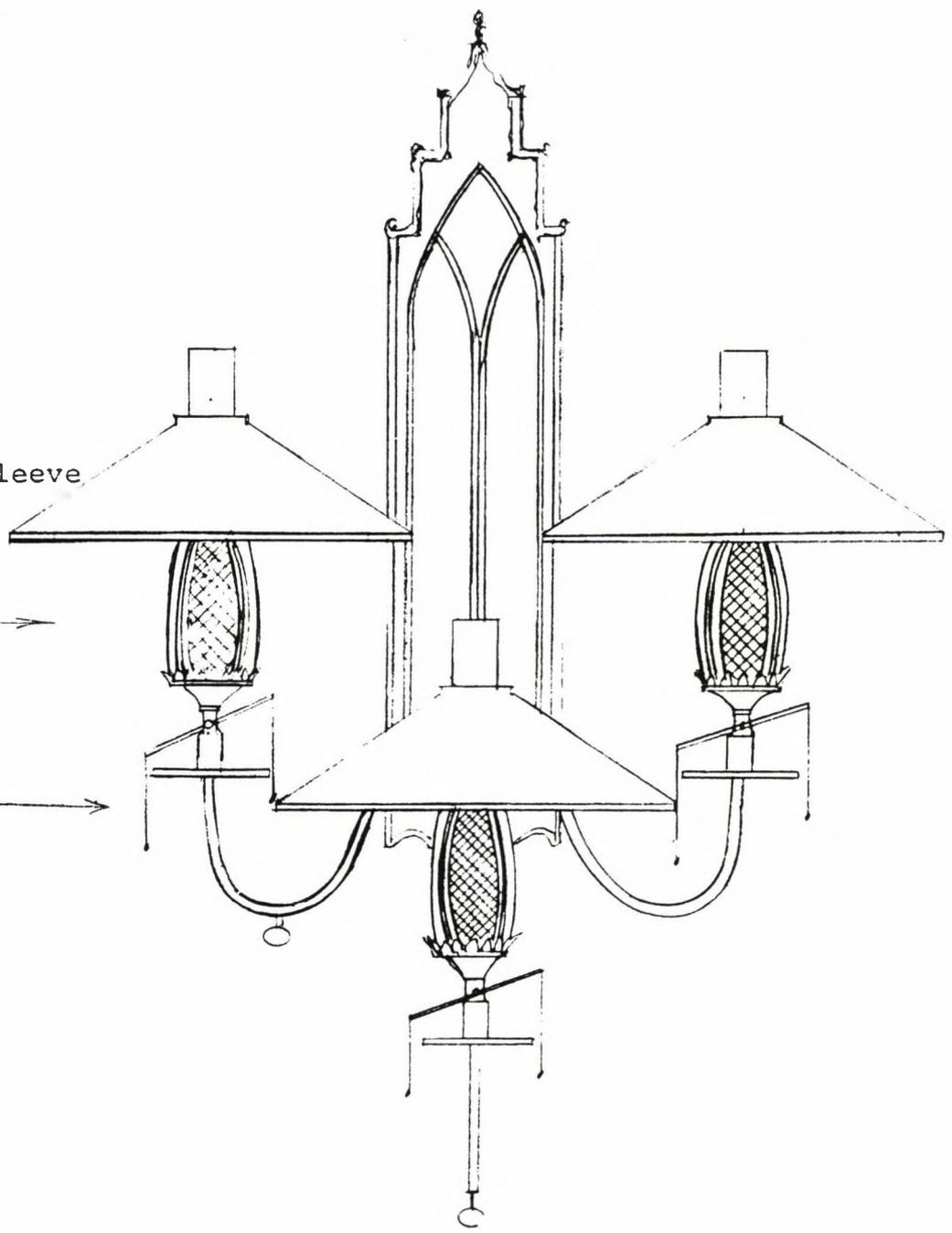
Option 1
 Wilcox House Morning Room
 Center table lamp
 Scale: 3/16" = 1'



Option 2
Wilcox House Morning Room
Center table lamp

cotton gauze sleeve
on wire frame
conceals
electric
light
bulb

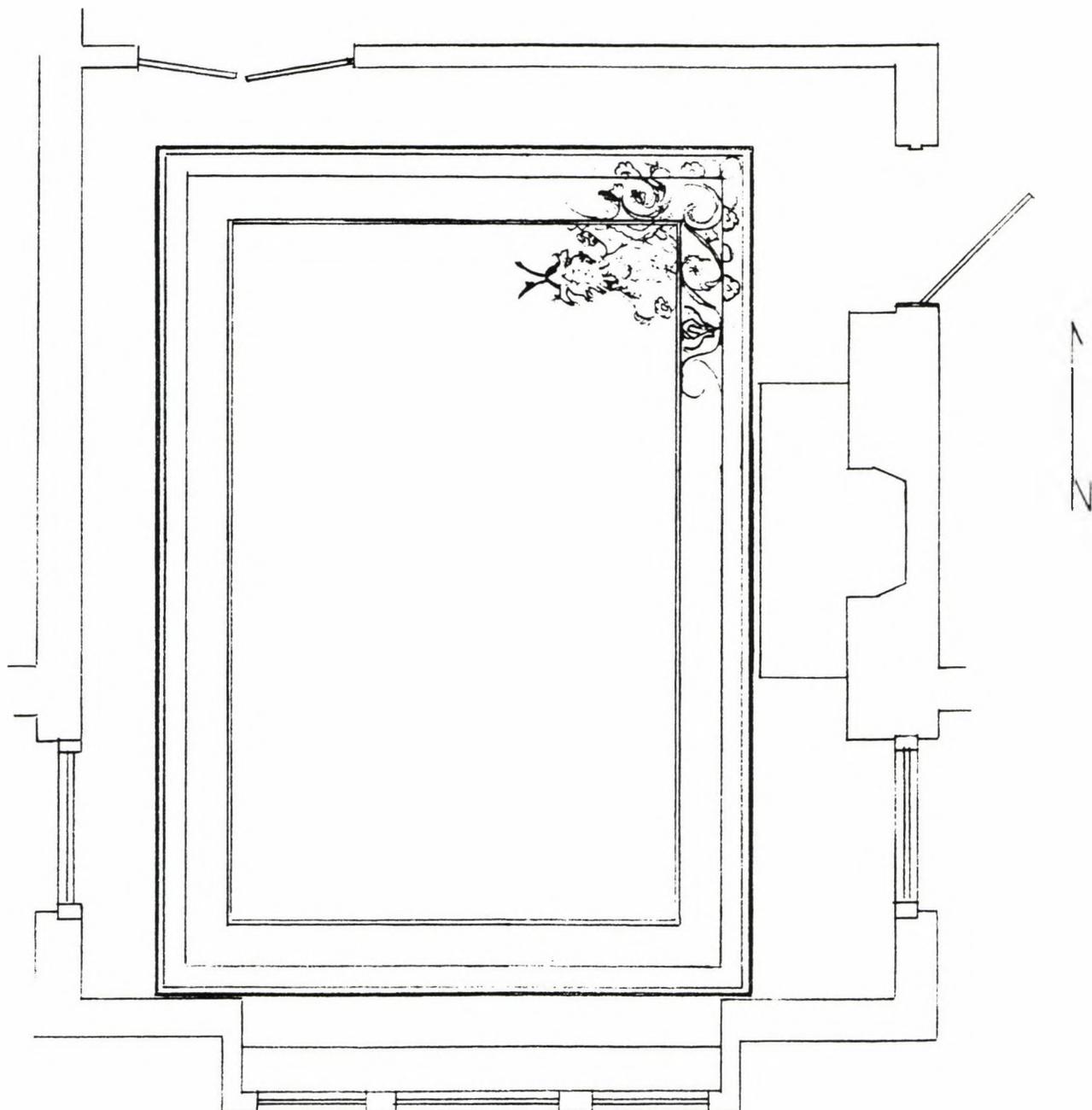
pull chain



Scale: 1" = 1'

Finish: cast metal "aged" with
pigmented lacquer to
an old bronze color.

Wilcox House
Morning Room
Gas Brackets, showing
Welsbach Burner and
Pilot light and white
shades of glass



Carpet source:
 Stark Carpet Company
 979 Third Avenue, NY

Pattern: "Pharoh", red Oriental
 with border; In-Stock Designers Collection.

Wilcox House
 Carpet Plan, Morning Room
 Scale 1/4" = 1'

Interview with Mary (Mrs. George) Plimpton
Buffalo, New York - 13 September 1986

Aunt Grace and Uncle Ainsley

- Morning room "had no furniture. . .it was never furnished."

- Called "Big Room"

- "I lived in that house. I lived in that room in the corner and did my lessons on a little velvet settee. Little Mary piled her books at one end of the settee and did her work on the other. The sofa was at right angles to the terrace door. No color in the room; no curtains, but beige taffeta or something--very plain, never drawn. Hung outside. All the other furniture was two large ordinary chairs covered in I don't know what with two conventional little tables with ash trays."

- "Reasonably sized, comfortable" fireplace opening.

- "I got my culture through the cracks" listening to Aunt Grace's literary meetings.

- "Absolutely round table"

- "Extraordinary ceiling lamp. . .tan shade on brass rod. Like a great big lamp shade. Might have had fringe--I doubt it."

- Furnishings - beside the ordinary settee with ordinary velvet; I mentioned the ordinary chairs - they had standing lamps on sides of the chairs, toward the fireplace. Bay window was filled with green plants. Awfully pretty--you saw only the plants, barely the arbor beyond. I can see Uncle Ainsley yet, sitting in the corner at his desk, a window at his side; he'd work until 2 or 3 in the morning and go out and prune his arbor. . .

- "Where the many pictures are now was a large desk--about like that [indicates her own] Mother got it in France--paid \$83.00 for it."

- Big round table had every known magazine set in circles; plant in center. Then that terrible lamp--on a brass rod. A Chest on wall opposite the fireplace--looked like a coffin. Uncle Ainsley's coffin was on this wall--open. I thought it spooky.

- Picture of Uncle A. over mantel--I'm not sure.

- A friend says rug was like a "flowery field." Remembered a china cow they'd fill with milk and let the children milk it. Rug felt like a flowery field.

- Round table would have seated 12. Was for books, or with lace cloth for tea.

- Center lamp, probably pleated silk.

- You could look from the morning room into the dining room. There was a large doorway. About 4 small straight-backed chairs around the big table. There were 2 handsome wall chairs - Italian with leather backs.