

The house has been saved, now we need to tell its story.

Reflecting on the vision

Over the last fourteen years the Downers Grove Park District and Downers Grove Heritage Preservation Corporation have joined with the larger Downers Grove community to safeguard the 1846 Blodgett House and the cultural heritage that it embodies. Now that the structure has been moved, preserved and gifted to the Park District, we can turn to helping visitors to appreciate this Pioneer House as the unique historic artifact that it is. Three significant themes of Downers Grove's cultural heritage provided the primary impetus to save the House.

The Blodgett family's involvement with the Underground Railroad provided the original, compelling justification for preservation of their 1846 home. The Underground Railroad theme has significance well beyond Downers Grove - for DuPage County, Illinois and our nation as a whole. The Period of Significance for this primary cultural component runs from construction of the house in 1846 through 1864, the end of slavery in the U.S.

The second major theme is the architecture and construction of the house itself, which are significantly different from features of the following Victorian era and industrial age as exemplified by the Charles Blodgett House and elsewhere on the museum campus.

The third primary theme involves the Blodgett family's early "pioneer" living conditions, including their meaningful relationship with the Indian population in the area. Avis and Israel Blodgett's living conditions during the Period of Significance were quite different from those during the later lifetimes of their daughter and sons.

It should be noted that these three themes are not isolated from one another. In fact, they are intrinsically tied together, revealing an interweaving of culture, architecture and personal beliefs and values.

Charley Smart spoke to visitors as an "unofficial docent" during the Merry and Bright "Soft Opening" of the 1846 Blodgett House in December 2019. You can click on the Charley's picture to hear and see him talk about a few of significant stories we can now tell and relate to future generations.



[Click Here To View "Unofficial" Docent Charley Smart's 2019 Video Talk On What The House Itself Can Tell Us About The Blodgett Family](#)

The vision in practice

While it is difficult to assign exact values, it may be appropriate to agree on the relative emphasis of subject matter. Given the vision and mission of the project, it is important to prioritize the areas of focus within the period of significance. It has been suggested that a reasonable emphasis would be:

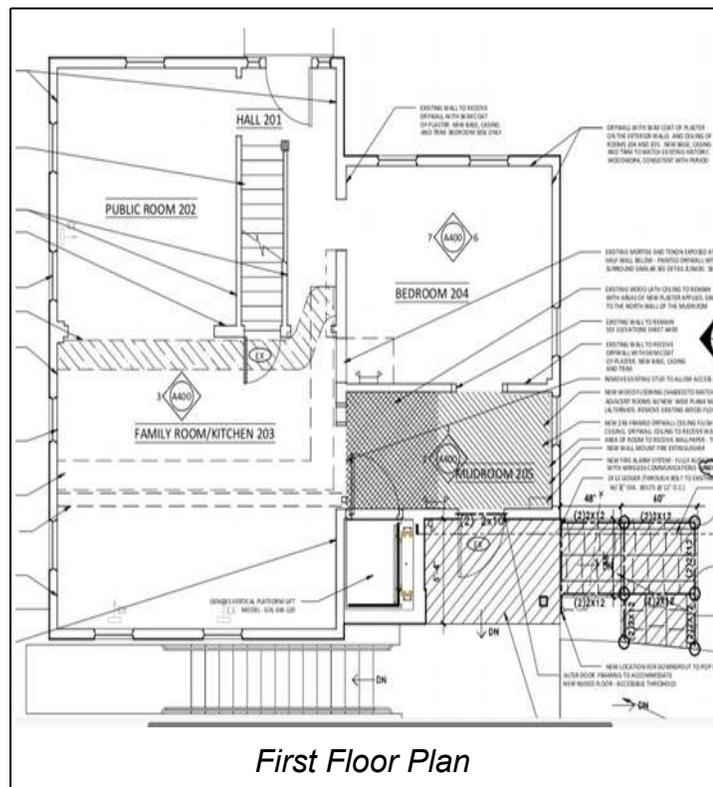
- 35% Underground Railroad
- 25% House Architecture, Construction, and Preservation
- 25% Early Blodgett Family Life
- 15% Seasonal and Special Programs

Approaches

Underground Railroad – At the beginning of the project both the Park District and the Heritage Preservation Corporation were concerned about validating and documenting the Blodgett family as abolitionists. The group contacted the *National Underground Railroad Freedom Center* in Cincinnati, to determine what is used to validate underground railroad activity, and whether the Blodgett House, and Blodgett family's involvement could be validated based on the roughly 40 items submitted. The response from the Freedom Center was very positive. In fact, it was unofficially stated that the Blodgett House may be the second most documented site in Illinois, short of Knox College in western Illinois. Further, the Freedom Center was very interested in including the Blodgett House in their own database, and presentations. They also recommended that once the house was moved, settled and open to visits, they would likely put it on the maps of escape routes.

Due to the secrecy of the underground railroad there are relatively few artifacts for straightforward display. None-the-less, a great deal may be told through experiential education, storyline displays. It would be appropriate to aggressively engage the Freedom Center not only to learn effective techniques, but to establish an open-going relationship and dialogue. On that point, building relationships with other local Underground Railroad groups such as Wheaton College, the Filer House (Glen Ellyn), and the Peck House (Lombard) as well as downstate sites such as Jacksonville, in particular. This collaboration would be effective in building traffic and shared programming.

House construction – Architectural and construction details such mortise-and-tenon and post-and-beam building are highlighted throughout the house. One area of focus is in the upper southwest corner of the first floor bedroom (204), where multiple posts and beams tie together. During the recent phase of construction, that area was left exposed so as to provide a view of the structural features. This area should be significantly enhanced both with lighting and presentation displays to both highlight and explain the structural technique and processes. Similarly, other areas should be selected to highlight and explain mortise-and-tenon in the wall studs, possibly even by having pre-cut mortise and tenons for visitors to assemble.



As-originally-built drawings - The original floor plan of the first floor was significantly altered after the 1890 move. In the recent construction phase, the mudroom (205), bedroom (204) and access to family room (203) were reconstructed to original layout. Mortise holes in the beam across the opening between rooms 202 and 203 indicate that a wall with connecting doorway originally separated these two rooms. Restoring that wall would not now be logical or practical. None-the-less, this type of architectural forensics allows determination of many details of the original original floor plan. We have determined that the staircase to the second floor was added in the 1890s. Up to that point a ladder would have been used to access the sleeping loft. The basement staircase was added sometime later, perhaps even in the 1930s. We recommend determining the original configuration, perhaps with the assistance of historic architects for authentication, and creating floor plans and illustrations of how it may have looked. This display would logically be placed on the first floor, perhaps on the east side of the staircase.

Suggestions about displays and storylines

The open house “soft opening” of the 1846 Blodgett House in December 2019 provided us a hands-on learning experience while we served as “unofficial docents.” Please use this [hyperlink](#) to watch a video of Charley Smart's “unofficial-docent” observations about some significant features of the Blodgett's pioneer home and what they tell us about Blodgett family themselves. At that time the very limited number of historic artifacts other than the House itself helped us to call attention to the primary themes embodied by the Blodgett's Pioneer House.

Underground Railroad, native American and community stories – There are many documented significant stories about the Blodgett family's community involvement that should be compiled and saved as a collection, and ideally conveyed to visitors and public. This may be done by programming, or perhaps by having an audio-visual area where visitors could scan through and hear various stories being told.

Western Citizen and newspaper walls – Two storyline threads join here: newspaper covering of the walls and abolitionist activity as indicated by the Western Citizen artifacts. It became evident during the recent open house that it is most convenient and logical to tell those stories together. We recommend providing an example of the newspaper covered walls in the southeast corner of the family room (203) room, rather than in the mud room (205) as previously discussed, so that this feature would be in sight of the Western Citizen remnant display. This makes it convenient to “connect the dots” between the two threads.



We also recommend consideration of an interactive display developed to present the Western Citizen artifacts. This display could use lighting techniques to highlight the corner wall coverings, and the return attention to the artifacts, as well as present information about the Western Citizen and Underground Railroad activities.

Basement logs – Perhaps one of the most compelling visual aspects of the house are the logs in the basement ceiling. Proper skim-lighting techniques should be used to highlight the bark and the size of logs in addition to the mortice-and-tenon of the logs into the hand-hewn beams.

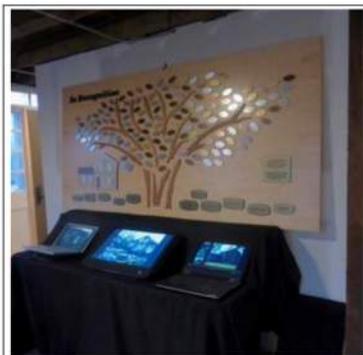
Family room stove and second floor heat – The second floor loft (301) reveals a tin plate which was placed in later years to cover the hole where a stovepipe ran from a heating stove in the family room (203) up to the chimney in the loft above. It is certain that the loft was used as a sleeping loft for the Blodgett boys, and the only heat would be from the exposed stovepipe. We recommend placing a period-appropriate heating stove in the family room where the original would have sat, with a stovepipe running vertically to the second floor, and the placing a perceived continuation of the stovepipe from the floor in the loft upwards towards where it connected to the chimney. Because there is now a walkthrough near the chimney, it would be most logical to stop the stovepipe short of the walkthrough.

Second floor loft – Because the second-floor loft was used as a sleeping area, it would be logical to place a rudimentary period-appropriate bed to reinforce the point. In addition, display and attention should be made of the floorboards in the loft point out their size, and unique construction.

Lean-to kitchen door and presentation – It is clear that during the period of significance, there was no kitchen in the house itself, but rather a documented lean-to-kitchen. However, the door that led to the external kitchen remains intact, having been discovered sealed in the wall in its original place where the west window on the south wall now exists. We recommend placing the door very near the window almost as though a person would walk through it. Then place artist illustrations of the what the kitchen may have looked like, along with illustrations of the outside of the house with the lean-to kitchen attached in its original configuration.



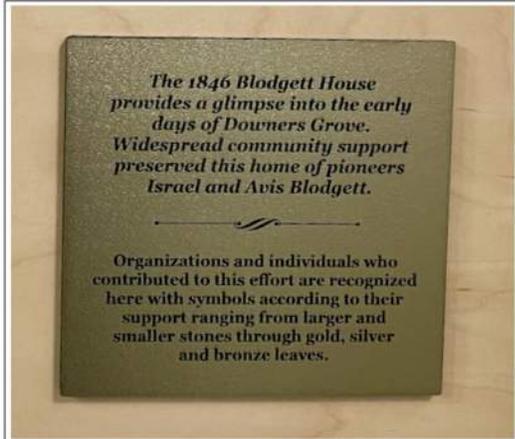
Possible Lean-To Kitchen Door Presentation



Soft-Opening Donor Recognition Display

Donor recognition display panel – At the soft opening event for the 1846 Blodgett House in December 2019, the donor recognition display panel was mounted on the east wall of public room (202) next to the staircase. This placement was well suited for introducing visitors to the community-wide nature of the campaign to preserve the structure and its cultural significance. Three video screens were used to show several aspects of the preservation work including moving the house back to the museum campus and onto its new foundation.

The donor recognition panel has now been relocated onto the east wall of the



Donor Panel Detail



Donor Recognition Panel Display

basement, where it is mounted in a custom cabinet that would be suitable for use with various educational materials including interactive video screens.

Charley Smart & Gordon Goodman