

A short walk from Washington Park and the bustle of Over-The-Rhine, stands a humble two story brick house that holds a piece of nearly forgotten Cincinnati history. In 1996, the Betts House in downtown Cincinnati was labeled a historical landmark by the National Parks Service as the oldest brick house in Ohio and the oldest surviving settlement in Cincinnati. Having been saved from destruction and ruin, the house is now a local museum open to the public aimed at educating people about the Betts family and the history of the neighborhood.

The Betts House was built on a 111-acre plot of land in 1804 by William Betts after he moved to Cincinnati from New Jersey with his wife, Phebe, and their children. The couple started their lives in Cincinnati in this two bedroom brick house meant to fit William, Phebe and their 16 children. William died in his home in 1819 and 100 of his 111 acres was sold in 1833. This left a much smaller space for his granddaughter, Adeline Betts McCrea, who inherited the house from her family. Her daughter, Florence, was the last Betts family member to be born in the house her family built.

Soon after, the Betts family sold the house entirely, and in subsequent years it was passed around from owner to owner in varying states of ruin and disarray. There it sat empty for several decades until Martha Tuttle, a descendent of William Betts, finally found her family home in 1988 after she grew up hearing stories about it from her grandmother and other family members. Horrified to see the state it was in, she recruited other residents of Cincinnati to help save it. Tuttle was uniquely qualified for this harrowing task as a member of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA)

The NSCDA is a women's organization that formed in 1891 with the mission "of education, historic preservation and patriotic service." The NSCDA has owned and operated the Betts House since it first help renovate it in 1994. They have also labeled the Betts House as the headquarters of its Ohio Chapter.

This social and historical organization is selective when accepting new members who must prove that they are a direct descendent of someone born before 1776 that "contributed to the growth of society in that period" as Cynthia Cole, the current Museum Properties chairwomen for the Dames of Ohio and former Ohio NSDCA president, explains.

"In proving [genealogy], you have to actually have documentation that connects you with whoever that ancestor is," Cole says. "Birth, death, marriage records. All of them for every generation going all the way back. For some people it can be 14 or 15 generations back to a colonial ancestor."

The Dames' focus is on historical education and preservation as a way to showcase how life had once been. Tuttle enlisted the help of the Dames to help restore the house to its current state, each room a snapshot of different generations throughout the history of the Betts family.

As it stands today, the Betts House shows no sign of the neglect it sat in for years. Each room encapsulates a different year and is painted a different color to set them off from one another. No original items from the Betts family remain so the house is decorated entirely in borrowed pieces from the Dames' personal collection. Artifacts from the time period sits on every shelf accompanied with a placard denoting its significance to the time period.

The task of telling the story of a centuries old house has been left to the brave four part time workers currently employed at the house. Eagerly they explain each area of the house,

from how the shape of the rooms changed throughout the years to the floorboard that was replaced by Adeline to create a wealthier image, to the black lines drawn on the walls and floors to demonstrate where things would have been over two centuries ago.

Dylan Bean is the Betts House's newest intern. Bean graduated from Ohio University in 2017 with a communication degree. His love of history pulled him towards a job at Cincinnati's Museum Center and then to the Betts House, where he is halfway through a six month internship.

He excitedly conducts tours of the property for anyone who walks through the door, but there is no steady stream of guests. "Sometimes we get two people a day. Others, we're lucky to get two a week," Bean admits.

No detail is too small for the tour spiel, from the kinds of vegetables the family planted in their garden every year to the exact width between the houses in the neighborhood. (The Betts House is located only inches from its closest neighbor).

Bean bounds up the stairs and proudly instructs the tour to look at the floor of the children's room. "This is the only flooring that is still from 1804," he proclaims. "You can see the steps that they took back then."

Much of the tour is given with the same passion and enthusiasm, allowing guests to exit the tour feeling as if they were another member of the ever growing Betts family.

"It's definitely a hidden gem of Cincinnati," Bean says.

Bean's love of history is appropriately shared by Kendall Neyer, the Betts House Program manager. Neyer recently moved back to her home of Cincinnati after completing her masters in museums with an art concentration from John Hopkins University.

Neyer is at the Betts House three days a week with a never ending list of duties. She spends her work days researching different aspects of the Betts family and historic Cincinnati, applying for grants and other funding, creating exhibits, managing their collection, and other development work the museum needs. On her office wall hangs a Betts family tree that takes more than 14 pieces of paper to cover. The taped together pages are stuck on the wall, orange highlighter circling the key members of the family.

Neyer knows that going to a centuries-old house doesn't appeal to everyone, but she and her team work everyday to find new and interesting ways to keep the audience engaged. She believes that the history of the Betts family in particular is an important story worth telling.

"I think it's worth telling to people because when content is more relatable, it's easier to digest," Neyer explains as she sits among bookshelves and framed photos of news articles about the museum. "It's a way for us to make the history of the city more digestible to a larger community. A lot of times historic houses and museums, even though they have a lot to offer in terms of education and programming, are kind of a turn off for a lot of people because they can't relate to it."

Neyer believes that one thing that is inviting about the Betts House is the fact that it was a home of a normal working family as opposed to a political or wealthy home. The lives led by the residents of the house mimicked the ones most others in the city lived. William worked as a brick layer and Phebe stayed at home with their children until they were old enough to get a job or get married. The children helped with chores or tended to the peach field that occupied most

of the many acres the family once owned. Their story what living in Cincinnati really was like in that era.

“No matter who you are, you can come in here and try to relate to some of the content that we’re displaying,” Neyer said.

But the Betts House staff aims to do more than just tell the story of one family; they want to explore the history of the surrounding neighborhood itself and how it changed from a quiet rural area to an urban landscape.

“It’s really important to get exposure to different kinds of experiences,” Neyer says. “You learn from history.” Neyer explains. Her words are reminiscent of the adage ‘Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.’

Like Neyer, the NSCDA has a love of learning and sharing history.

“Historic preservation is a huge part of their mission,” Neyer explained. “If you look at the national organization, the Dames own and manage a lot of historic house museums and properties. Keeping the history alive is a big part of what they do.”

The goal of the Betts House is to do more than tell the story of a singular family, but to zoom out to show them in the context of their time.

“We want to show people how this city and the house and the family grew over this 200+ years of time, in a way that people can see it,” Cole says. “I can say all of this but seeing it makes it much more impactful.”

For people like Cole, Neyer, and the other people who have dedicated time and money into

Together, the women of the NSCDA and the team at the Betts House work towards the same mission: Preserving this piece of history located in the heart of Cincinnati.

“[History has] always been a passion of mine,” Neyer reveals. “It’s a labour of love.”

Cole, who finds time to fulfill her role for the Dames between her job working for legal aid, believes that the message the Betts House provides is bigger than what can be captured in a narrow brick home.

“It’s about who we are as a community,” Cole explains. “It’s important for all of us to learn from history and to know how did our community start. Who were some of the early people who were contributing to Cincinnati? I think it’s really important not to forget that.”