

Helm Place: Inventory of Contributing Interior Features

by Janie-Rice Brother



Kentucky Archaeological Survey

Jointly Administered By:

The University of Kentucky

The Kentucky Heritage Council

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Helm Place: Inventory of Contributing Interior Features

Fayette County, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT

In October 2017, Janie-Rice Brother with the Kentucky Archaeological Survey at the University of Kentucky, undertook an inventory of the historic interior of Helm Place (FA-304). Helm Place, listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1978 (NRIS 78001318), is located at 2575 Bowman's Mill Road in Fayette County, Kentucky. The property is listed under Criterion C. In addition to the individual listing in the NRHP, Helm Place is a contributing feature in the NRHP-listed Bowman Mill Road Rural Historic District (NRIS 99000901, listed 1999).

Along with the NRHP listings, Helm Place was designated as a Landmark by the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG) in 1990. The house, six contributing outbuildings, one contributing structure, and two contributing sites, along with 53 acres, are included within the H-1 Overlay zoning parameters.

The two-and-one-half story brick dwelling has a central passage, double pile plan, and is remarkably intact. Though the date of construction was a subject of debate in the original nomination, the antebellum dwelling is a high-style example of Greek Revival architecture in Fayette County. The purpose of this report is to inventory the interior contributing features of Helm Place in order that an easement to preserve those features in perpetuity may be developed.

Taking both the original nomination and the H-1 Landmark Designation into account when arriving at a Period of Significance (POS) for the interior contributing features, this report recommends a POS of 1850-1920. This span includes both the initial period of construction as well as the Helm's family early 20th century remodeling. It is the author's finding that while the principal rooms, with the highest level of architectural finish, are naturally on the first floor, the interior details of the second floor rooms are also contributing, and are included within the recommendations for preservation in-place. Given that exterior elements, including the original double-hung sash windows, are protected under the H-1 overlay, they are not included in this report.

The recommendations include not just the finish elements of the rooms (principally woodwork and the murals by Katherine Helm), but also the internal flow and configuration of the dwelling. The interior layout and plan of Helm Place is integral conveying its significance, and its remarkable level of integrity is an important feature of the dwelling.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Helm Place (FA-304) is located in southwest Fayette County (Figure 1) within the Inner Bluegrass Region of Kentucky. Helm Place rests on a hill on the north side of Bowman Station Road (Figures 2 and 3). The conventions of boundary demarcation for NRHP properties in the 1970s meant that usually only the footprint of a building and a small buffer around that footprint were sufficient. This was the case with the 1978 nomination, but the boundary was expanded in the 1999 rural historic district nomination. The H-1 overlay includes 53 acres around the house (Figure 4).

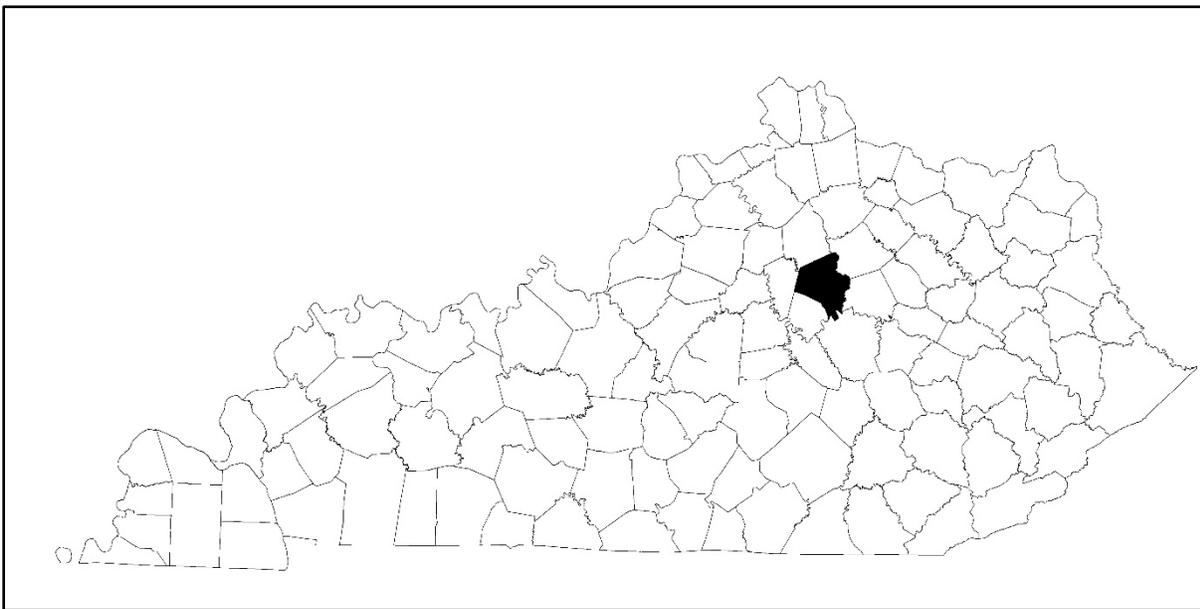


Figure 1 Location of Fayette County, Kentucky.

Todd's Station, an 18th century stockade fort built by General Levi Todd, was the first EuroAmerican structure on the site of present-day Helm Place. The station was utilized only briefly following its construction in 1779-1780. After the station was abandoned, Colonel Abraham Bowman obtained the land through a military land grant. The Bowman family was responsible for the construction of Helm Place, then known as Cedar Hill, as well as the grist mill on South Elkhorn Creek from which Bowman Mill Road derives its name.

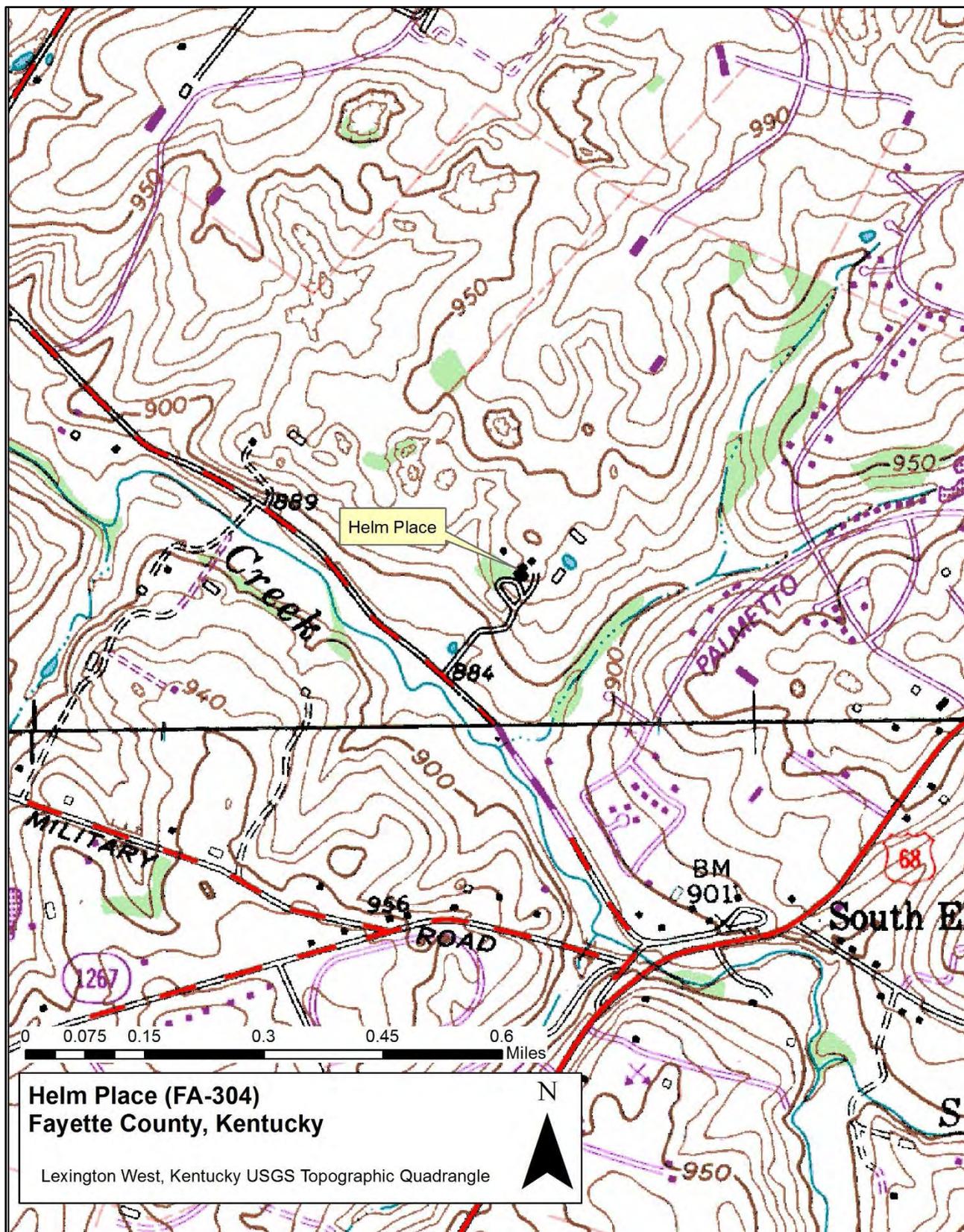


Figure 2 Section of the Lexington West, Kentucky topographic quadrangle showing the location of Helm Place.



Figure 3 Aerial view of Helm Place.

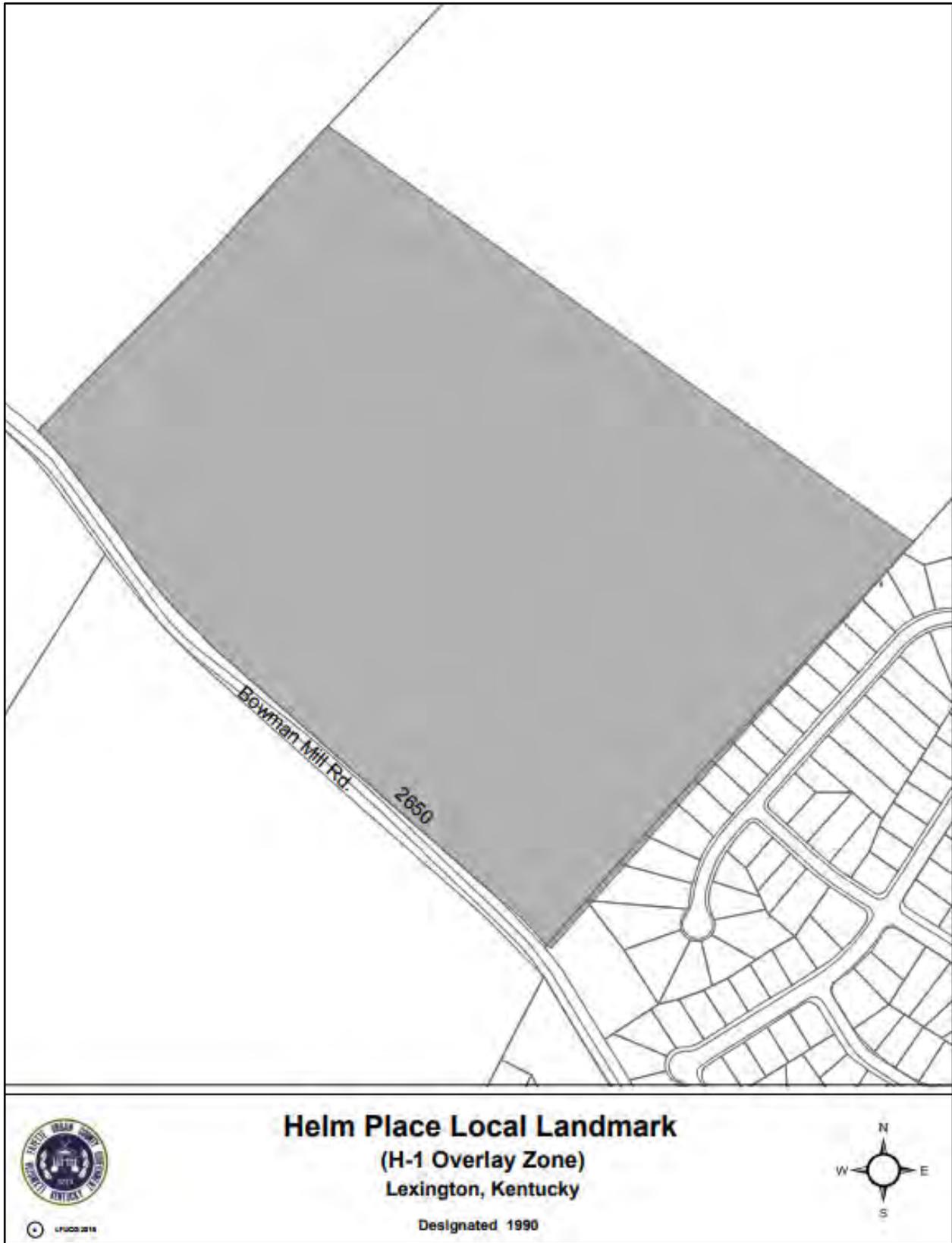


Figure 4 The H-1 Overlay boundaries for Helm Place.

The dwelling is believed to have been built around 1853. The farm passed out of the Bowman family in 1859, and went through a number of owners before its purchase by Emily Todd Helm and her two children in 1912. Mrs. Helm was the widow of Civil War General Benjamin Hardin Helm, and the younger half-sister of Mary Todd Lincoln.

The purchase of the farm by the Helm family was a return, of sorts, of the land to the family, as Mrs. Helm was the granddaughter of General Levi Todd. According to the final private owner of the property, Mary Genevieve Townsend Murphy, Helm Place was in a “sad state of neglect” when purchased by the Helm family.¹

Katherine Helm, the daughter of Emily Todd Helm, oversaw the renovation of the dwelling, which included enclosing the back porch and gallery to create a new dining room, bathroom, and kitchen. Another bathroom was added over the enclosed porch on the second floor, and the second story central passage received a small partition to form a dressing room.

In addition to these modifications, Katherine Helm, a well-known artist, painted pastoral wall murals in the new dining room and second story dressing room. Below the murals in the dining room is a wainscoting made from shutters from the Helm’s previous home in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to the wall murals, Katherine Helm also created overmantels in the upstairs bedrooms, consisting of one of her original paintings set within a paneled surround. This surround appears to match the wainscoting in the new dining room on the first floor.

For the purpose of conducting the room-by-room inventory, each room on the first and second floors was given a number. The floorplan of Helm Place (Figure 6), based after the original executed by Patrick Snadon in his 1978 NRHP nomination, illustrates the layout of Helm Place as it currently exists. The second story floorplan (Figure 37) is not to scale, but was modified from Snadon’s plan of the first floor.

There are certain similar key elements in most of the rooms – one distinction of note is that the majority of the (original) interior doors have Carpenter rim locks (Figure 5). This type of lock, patented in 1830, features brass knobs and a characteristic embossed circular brass seal bearing the royal seal of England, signifying that the company had an official patent. Carpenter locks, due to their “imposing appearance” and relative affordability, became popular for use on the front entry door of houses in the United States in the 1830s and 1840s.

Most of the features called out in this report are affixed ornamentation – baseboards, plaster work, woodwork around windows and doors. Hard elements, such as the original floorboards, are not specifically noted, but that does not mean that the floors are not significant and contributing. The floorboards on the first and second stories of the house are a contributing feature, but this

¹ Mary Genevieve Townsend Murphy. *The Story of Helm Place and the People Who Have Called it Home*. (Self-published, and printed by the Harrodsburg Herald, Harrodsburg, Kentucky, 1995). 22.

report deals with those features that could, by their nature, be easily removed or altered without impacting the use and function of the rooms.



Figure 5 One of the Carpenter rim locks found on almost every interior door the house.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST FLOOR INVENTORY

Six rooms on the first floor are included in this inventory. Several spaces were omitted, based on their utilitarian nature or lack of significant interior detail. These include the following: both glassed-in porches, the butler's pantry, the first floor bathroom, and the kitchen.

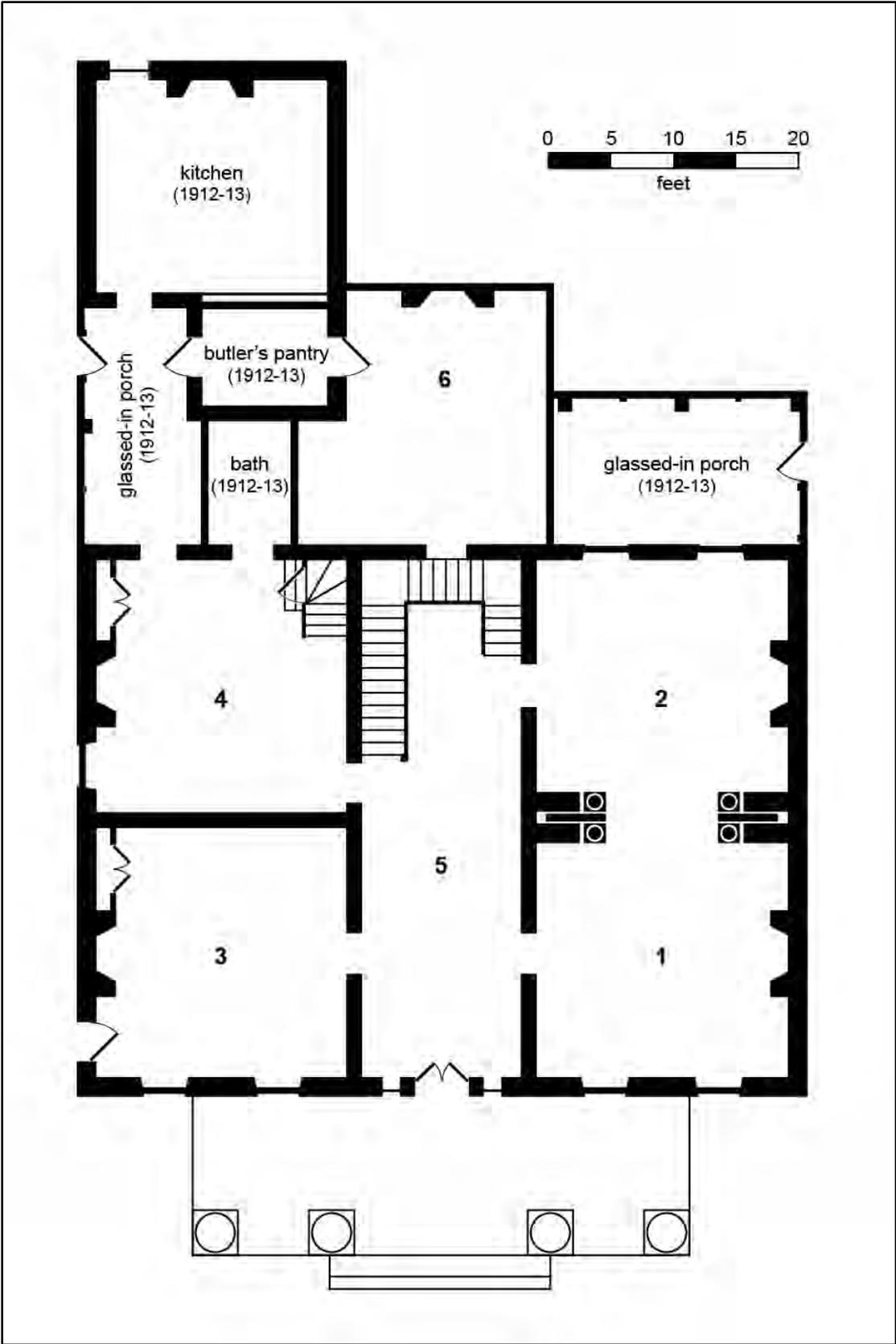


Figure 6 First floor plan of Helm Place. Adapted from the original by Patrick Snadon.

Room 1

The front parlor or drawing room and its rear twin are the two rooms which would have been the most finely finished in the house. That interior fabric is still intact, and any changes, such as the early 20th century replacement mantel, have now achieved historic significance. Rooms 1 and 2 are separated by a nicely detailed screen with Ionic columns and pocket doors.

The key features in this room include the following:

- The chimneystack, firebox opening, hearth and mantel
- The screen with pocket doors between the two parlors
- Doors, door hardware, and window and door surrounds, including inset panels underneath windows
- Baseboards.



Figure 7 Room 1 mantel, firebox and hearth.



Figure 8 Inset panels underneath facade window, Room 1.



Figure 9 Screen with pocket doors between Rooms 1 and 2.



Figure 10 Door leading into central passage, Room 1.



Figure 11 Detail of baseboard and window surround, Room 1.

Room 2

The back parlor or drawing room is identical to the front parlor with the exception of the window on the east gable end wall beside the chimneystack. The window surround is a less-ably executed copy of the original window surrounds (found on the north wall of Room 2), with stylized corner blocks of flower petals.

The key features in this room include the following:

- The chimneystack, firebox opening, hearth and mantel
- The screen with pocket doors between the two parlors
- Doors, door hardware, and window and door surrounds, including inset panels underneath windows
- Baseboards.



Figure 12 Mantel in Room 2.



Figure 13 Detail of the Ionic columns on the screen between Rooms 1 and 2.



Figure 14 The surround for the newer window on the gable end in Room 2 – a cruder copy of the original foliate design (Figure 14).



Figure 15 Detail of the surround on one of the original windows in Room 2.



Figure 16 Door leading into the central passage, Room 2.

Room 3

The library/office, as this room has variously been dubbed, has a slightly less high-style finish than the double parlors. The baseboard is lower, and the stylized floral corner blocks of the doors and windows in the parlors is here substituted with square corner blocks with oblique diagonal lines. The mantel is a nicely executed Federal style piece, with a central sunburst and two paired colonettes. There is some thought that this mantel is not original to the house; however, barring any documentary evidence of its provenance, it is considered a contributing feature of this room.

The key features in this room include the following:

- The wall press beside the chimneystack
- The chimneystack, firebox opening, hearth, and mantel
- Doors, door hardware, and window and door surrounds
- Baseboards.



Figure 17 Gable end wall of Room 3, showing from left to right: the door leading to the garden, the mantel/firebox, and the wall press.



Figure 18 Detail of the baseboard in Room 3.



Figure 19 Exterior door, leading to garden, Room 3.

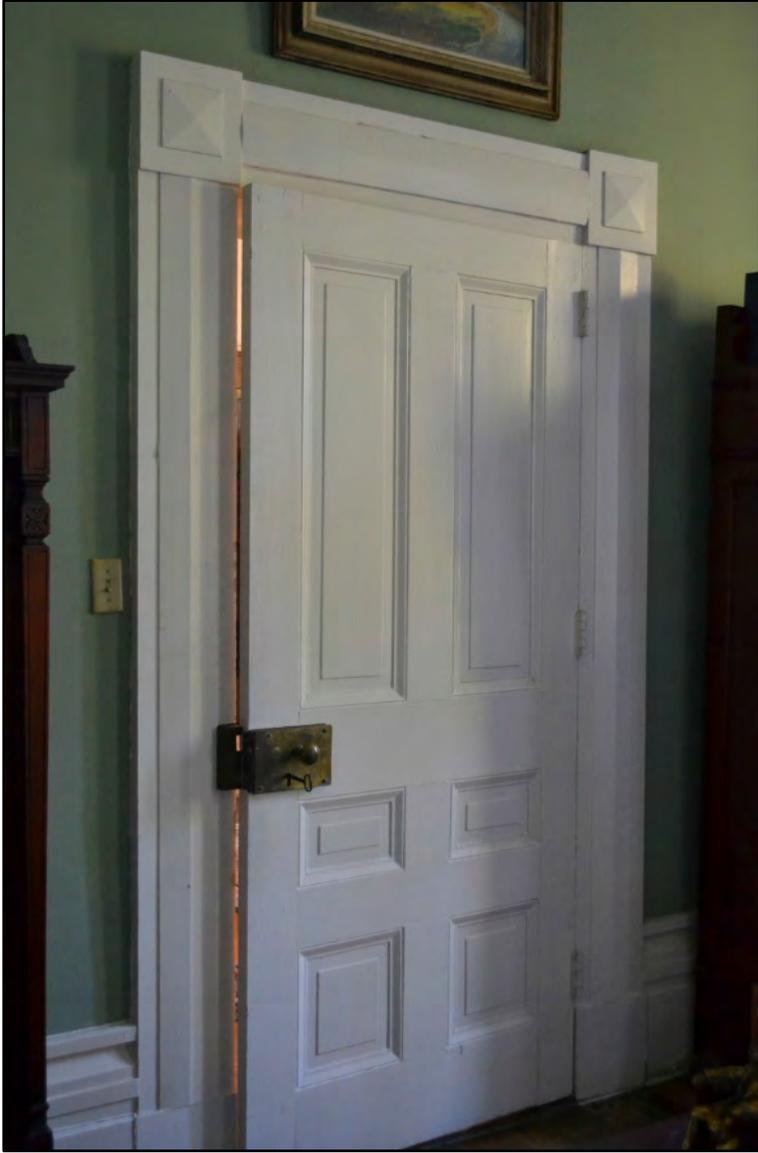


Figure 20 Interior door leading into central passage, Room 3.



Figure 21 Mantel, firebox and hearth, Room 3.

Room 4

This room has experienced the most alteration from its original use, layout, and openings. These changes, however, were carried out by the Helm family with a thoughtful deliberateness. The openings on the rear wall now include two doors; originally, the door opening on the left was a window. The door itself is a five-panel 20th century door. The door on the right leads into a bathroom created from enclosures on the rear porch. The late-19th century cast iron mantel and coal burner illustrate the evolution of interior heating in the house in the 19th century.

The key features in this room include the following:

- The wall press beside the chimneystack
- The chimneystack, firebox opening, and hearth
- Doors, door hardware, and door surrounds, including the small two-panel door underneath the stair
- Window surround
- The enclosed staircase
- Baseboards.

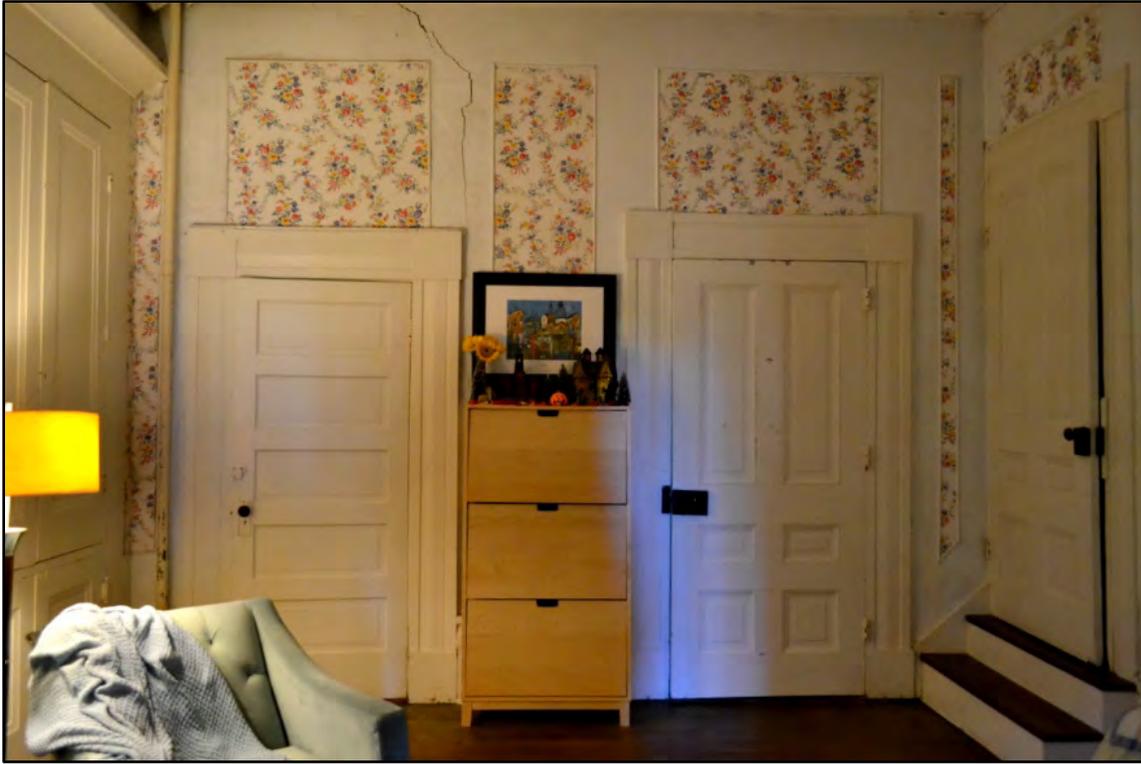


Figure 22 Rear wall of Room 4, with doors leading to porch on left, and bathroom on right.



Figure 23 Cast-iron mantel and coal burner, Room 4.

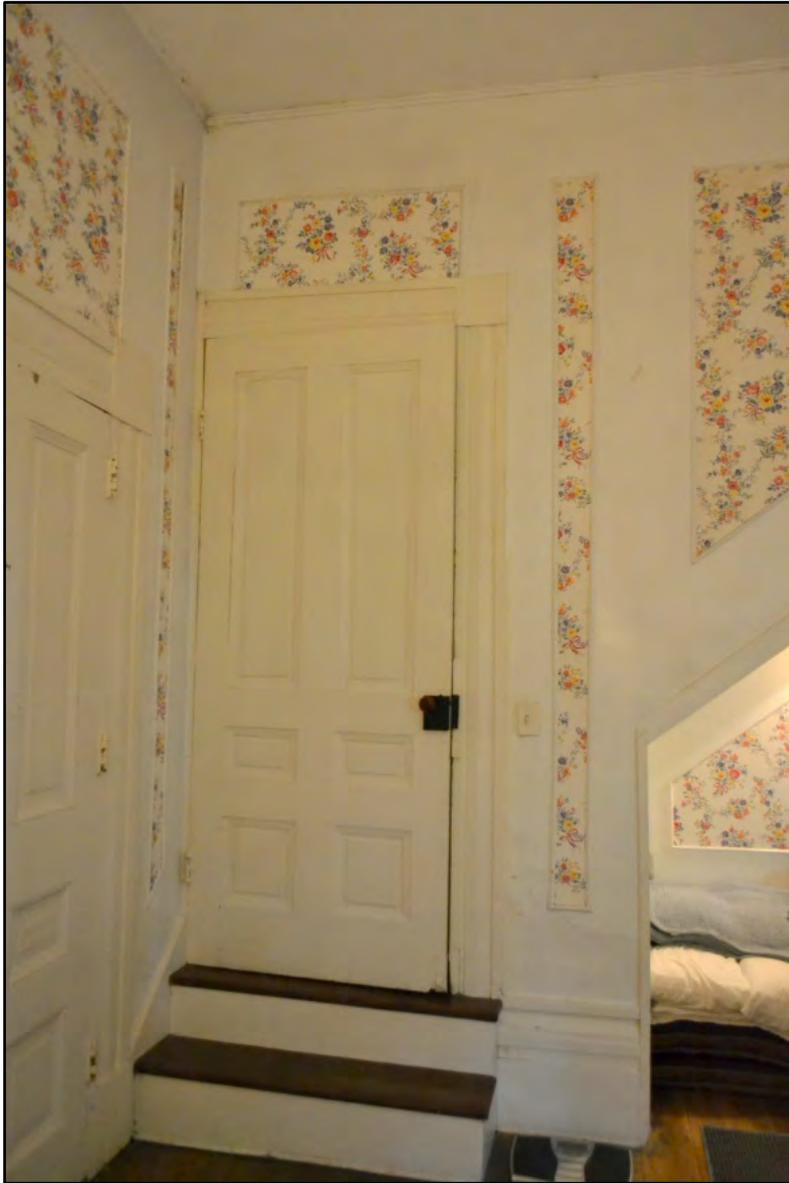


Figure 24 Backstair, Room 4.



Figure 25 Door underneath stair, Room 4.



Figure 26 Baseboard, Room 3.

Room 5 (Central Passage)

The first floor central passage not only served as an important circulation network during the antebellum period, but also would have introduced visitors to the type of dwelling in which they stood. To that end, the level of detail in the hall is comparable to that in the double parlors (Rooms 1 and 2). As with other rooms in the house, the significance of this space lies not only in the finish applied to walls and ceilings, but its size, configuration, and openings.

The key features in this room include the following:

- The staircase
- Doors and door surrounds
- The baseboard and floors
- The plaster ceiling medallion.



Figure 27 Staircase leading to second floor, Room 5.



Figure 28 Doorways leading into Rooms 3 and 4, as seen from Room 5.



Figure 29 Detail of baseboard, Room 5.



Figure 30 Plaster ceiling medallion, Room 5.



Figure 31 Front door surround, as seen from Room 5.



Figure 32 Door leading into the dining room (Room 6).



Figure 33 Door undeath main stair.

Room 6

The dining room, created from the enclosure of the gallery in the early 20th century, most clearly displays the stamp of the Helm family. As Snadon states in the NRHP nomination, the “additions were simple and sensitively accomplished.”

The key features in this room include:

- The wall murals executed by Katherine Helm
- The wainscoting on the walls, formed by interior shutters from the Louisville home of the Helm family
- The chimneystack, mantel, and hearth.



Figure 34 Wainscoting and wall murals, Room 6.



Figure 35 South wall of Room 6, showing wall mural by Katherine Helm and wainscoting.



Figure 36 Mantel and hearth, Room 6.

CHAPTER 3

SECOND FLOOR INVENTORY

For the most part, the floor plan of the second floor matches the main core of the first floor. Three large bedrooms were accessed from the central passage, while a fourth bedroom (the “stranger’s room”) originally accessed only from the back stair, and that contained the access to the attic, was slightly smaller. During the Helm family renovations, access to the attic stairs was moved out of this bedroom and into the central passage itself. At that time, the direction of the stairs was changed as well. Additionally, the south end of the central passage was partitioned off to form a small room, variously referred to as a dressing room or a small bedroom, the walls of which are covered with scenic murals painted by Katherine Helm.

The configuration of the second floor is, like the first floor, one of the most important features of the space. Like the first story, the second story rooms retain their original floorboards, which are a contributing feature of the space. Additional contributing features include (covered in more details in the following pages) the woodwork, doors, the chimneystacks and mantels, the wall presses, and paintings and murals by Katherine Helm.

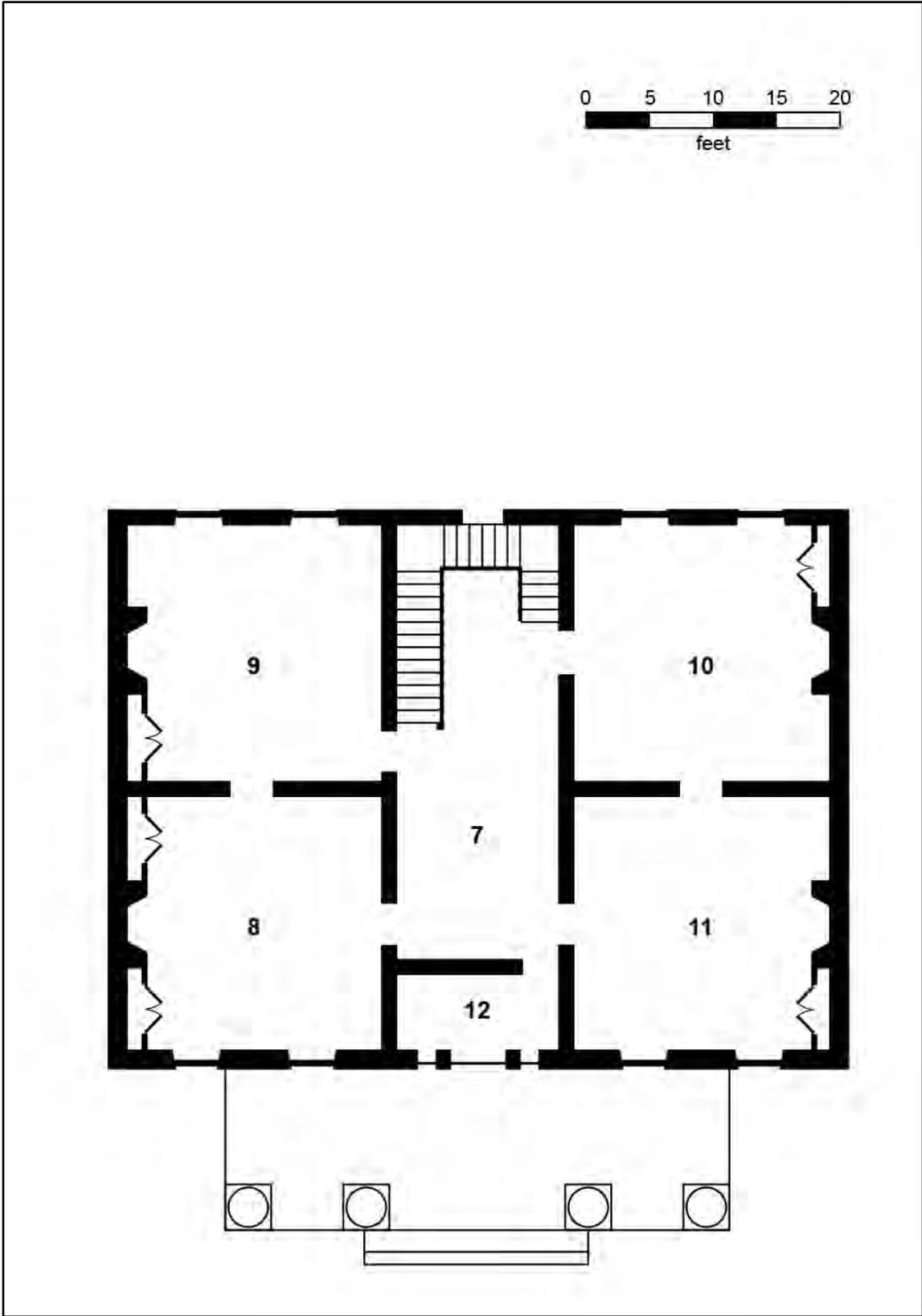


Figure 37 Second story floor plan of Helm Place. Adapted from the original first story floor plan by Patrick Snadon.

Room 7

The central passage on the second floor lacks some of the dramatic effect of the first floor hall interior finished– which is to be expected, since this floor was not intended for public display. The passage contains a small landing leading to the attic stairs, added during the Helm renovations, and a partition at the southern end.

The key features in this room include:

- The staircase
- The baseboard
- The attic landing
- Openings into each of the five rooms
- Doors, door hardware, and door surrounds.



Figure 38 Detail of stair balustrade, second floor.



Figure 39 Baseboards in second story central passage, Room 7.

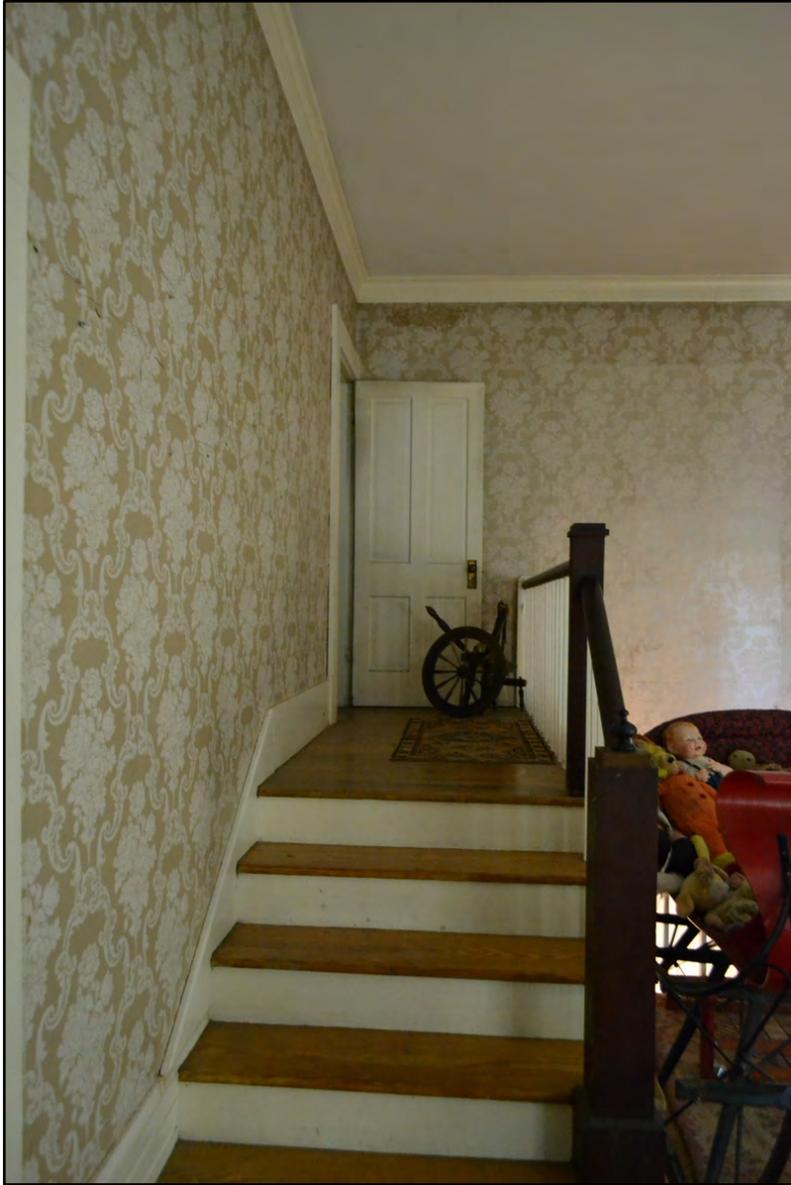


Figure 40 Stairs and landing leading to attic stairs, Room 7.



Figure 41 Doorways leading into Rooms 11 and 12.

Room 8

Room 8, the southwest bedroom on the second floor, contains the following contributing features:

- The overmantel, including the Katherine Helm painting
- The two presses flanking the chimneystack
- The baseboards
- The doors, door hardware, and door surrounds
- The chimneystack, mantel, and hearth.



Figure 42 Gable end wall in Room 8, showing the overmantel artwork by Katherine Helm, mantel, and wall presses.



Figure 43 Baseboard in Room 8.



Figure 44 Door leading from Room 8 into the central passage.

Room 9

Room 9, the northwest bedroom on the second floor, contains the following contributing features:

- The overmantel, including the Katherine Helm painting
- The single press flanking the chimneystack on the south side
- The baseboards
- The doors, door hardware, and door surrounds
- The chimneystack, mantel, and hearth.



Figure 45 Gable end wall of Room 9, showing overmantel with painting by Katherine Helm, and the single wall press.

Room 10

Room 10, the northeast bedroom on the second floor, contains the following contributing features:

- The overmantel, including the Katherine Helm painting
- The wall presses flanking the chimneystack
- The baseboards
- The doors, door hardware, and door surrounds
- The chimneystack, mantel, and hearth.



Figure 46 Gable end wall in Room 10, showing overmantel, mantel, and wall presses.



Figure 47 Door leading from Room 10 into central passage.



Figure 48 Door between Rooms 10 and 11.

Room 11

Room 11, the southeast bedroom on the second floor, contains the following contributing features:

- The overmantel, including the Katherine Helm painting
- The single press flanking the chimneystack on the south side
- The baseboards
- The doors, door hardware, and door surrounds
- The chimneystack, mantel, and hearth.



Figure 49 Gable end wall of Room 11, showing the overmantel and wall press.



Figure 50 Mantel and hearth, Room 11.



Figure 51 Door leading from Room 11 into the central passage.

Room 12

Room 12, the small room partitioned off at the southern end of the central passage, is notable for the walls murals by Katherine Helm. The key features of this room include:

- The baseboards
- The door, door hardware, and door surrounds
- The Katherine Helm wall murals.



Figure 52 Katherine Helm wall murals in Room 12.



Figure 53 Katherine Helm wall murals in Room 12.



Figure 54 Wall murals and door on the partition wall separating Room 12 from the central passage.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In October 2017, Janie-Rice Brother with the Kentucky Archaeological Survey at the University of Kentucky, undertook an inventory of the historic interior of Helm Place (FA-304). Helm Place, listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1978 (NRIS 78001318), is located at 2575 Bowman's Mill Road in Fayette County, Kentucky. The property is listed under Criterion C. In addition to the individual listing in the NRHP, Helm Place is a contributing feature in the NRHP-listed Bowman Mill Road Rural Historic District (NRIS 99000901, listed 1999).

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The recommendations include not just the finish elements of the rooms (principally woodwork and the murals by Katherine Helm), but also the internal flow and configuration of the dwelling. The interior layout and plan of Helm Place is integral conveying its significance, and its remarkable level of integrity is an important feature of the dwelling. Also noted in this report are the chimneystacks and firebox openings in each room – removal of any stacks or enclosure of the firebox would detract from the integrity of the space.

The principal rooms on the first and second floors, as noted above, are included, but the attic space was not assessed. It is the author's feeling that this space, always intended to be utilitarian and transitory, can be renovated in the future without impact to the integrity of the house.

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