# Beyond The Technology

**Welcome to the Beyond the Technology section of our website. We hope you find it interesting.**

The purpose of this space is to offer information, observations and musings on a myriad of topics relating to the conservation of historic or heritage plaster.

Today we are talking about museums, with an emphasis on "Historic House Museums", which should be of particular interest to museum volunteers and professional staff. Every house museum is different but most operate with some combination of effort from professionals and volunteers.

Here is a list of and brief discussion about the museums we have worked with to preserve the integrity of plaster:

## Dundurn Castle

We’ve been involved at Dundurn for many years. Way back in 1995, when the exterior of the building was being renewed, Craig Sims and I worked with Taylor Hazel Architects to record and document the details of the ashlar block pattern in the original stucco. When the building was re-plastered after structural repairs, our pattern was followed and as a result, the building looks very much like it did before the intervention. If you visit, look on the north side under the front port-cochere and you’ll see in perfect condition some samples of the original 1830’s stucco that we fought hard to retain. I looked at it last time I was there and it's still fine.

In 2006, we dealt with the dining room ceiling. Major structural problems in the floor system above meant that we had to support the ceiling while the floor was reinforced. It was during this project that we invented out [**Micro-Jack**](https://historicplaster.com/content/tools) system and an early version was used here for the first time.

Currently we have been asked to consolidate the ceilings of some rooms on the upper floor where the access is limited to an impossible crawl space. We’ll be using our remote access tools for this and expect it to be fairly straightforward.

## Lower East Side Tenement Museum (LESTM)

If you’ve never visited it, the LESTM is a wonder in the middle of bustling Orchard Street in the lower east side of Manhattan. The museum is one entire tenement building that was boarded up as a condemned property in the 1930’s and not occupied again until purchased by the folks who started the museum in the late 1980’s.  The mandate of the museum includes preserving many of the apartments in an “as found” condition, which in some cases means as a ruin for research.

HPCS was invited there with Jablonski Building Conservation to stabilize plaster ceilings and to re-adhere peeing wall paper on them using our TRI Funori™ product. Who would have thought that Japanese seaweed would find a use in a NYC tenement?

## Annandale National Historic Site

We became involved at Annandale after the main work was completed on the historic house and just as the connections between the new art gallery/museum space built onto it was being created. Rita Corner, the curator, had called us because the ceiling plaster was vibrating and she was worried about something going wrong. The first day I arrived, we found a workman using a 60 lb jack hammer to break through the main house wall so a cooling duct could enter from the new addition. Needless to say, the battering was stopped and more appropriate tools were found.

This started a friendly relationship that continued until every decorated ceiling in the house was fully stabilized and re-adhered. It took several years but it is complete now and the place looks wonderful. The restoration painting was done by our dear friend, the late Andrew Kwiecinski.

## Glanmore National Historic Site

Glanmore NHS in Belleville, Ontario is a second empire masterpiece that stayed in the same family from its construction right though to sale/donation to the city for museum purposes in the mid 1960s. We got involved late in the game when a ceiling on the second floor collapsed under a snow load that was set to bring the roof in. Structural repairs were major and our work in the first of several phases included stabilizing all the second floor ceilings.  At Glanmore, continuity is everything: both the curator and chief superintendant have been there since the beginning. Mack knows the place like the back of his hand.

We’ve been back to Glanmore for two more plaster conservation projects dealing with all the decorated plaster ceilings on the main floor. Glanmore is important to us because it is where we first got a chance to experiment with TRI Funori for use as a fixative for calcimine paints. The ceilings were painted with what looked like egg tempera and had completely lost their binding. You could blow the pigments off the surface like dust off a wall. We brought in Dr. Ian Hodkinson, professor emeritus from Queen’s University, and he used the TRI-Funori successfully to “fix” the paint (as he put it) and clean some particularly delicate areas.

This carries on a fairly common practice where we introduce the museum community to a special resource person and they stay on long after we are finished.

## Colonial Building

The Colonial Building will one day be the Museum of Newfoundland and Labrador. It was once the seat of government and as such has a distinctly political past. When we were clearing out the attic getting ready to do the consolidation there, locals kept asking if we had found the lost ballot box. We had no clue what they were on about but it turns out that since the referendum in 1948 on the subject “Join Canada as a province or stay a colony of England”, the losing side has always claimed (the vote was close and some ballots were lost) that someone stashed a ballet box up in the attic to swing the vote. Also: lost in translation to us was the option of returning to independent nationhood. Even more interesting though is how curators will interpret the historical events that took place in the Colonial Building. A museum curator couldn’t wish for a more demanding task. Newfoundlanders know and love this building. The most common thing we heard, as people “from away”, was with a sigh of resignation “if that building had ears” what stories it would tell.

It was the place that heard the debates when the Colony of Newfoundland became an independent state. Later, it would have heard the discussion about contributing to the imperial war effort for WWI during which an astonishing 90% of its volunteers became casualties. Then fifteen years later, bankrupt and suffering in a collapsed world economy, it shook with riots, fires and the debate about returning to British Colonial Rule. Scoundrels were identified. Then, in more recent times, the plebiscite to join Canada as a province occurred there. Different folks have different ideas about how stories should be told and what is important. Our small part in the Colonial Building project has contributed to the re-valuing of the resource that could - “if it had ears” - tell about the walls of marble and pillars of granite that our investigations have opened windows to and shone bright lights upon.

In short, the unassuming Greek Temple building between Bannerman Park and Government House is a rich source of cultural value for any curator.

## Castle Kilbride NHS

Castle Kilbride was having a municipal office building attached to its behind when we were asked to consider the problems of its beautifully decorated plaster ceilings and walls. We did our thing and saved several ceilings so that conservators could restore the painted surfaces. I mostly remember the tavern across the road: it had a ceiling that was almost certainly decorated by the same artists, where I sat and worried nightly about every detail of the project.

## Ruthven NHS

We haven’t got a project page for Ruthven, because we’ve never done a project there. But we love the place, and its CAO and curator, Marilynn *Havelka*, has allowed us on several occasions to bring student groups from Willowbank School of Restoration Arts in Niagara on the Lake to the museum to practice of obscure bits of plaster conservation well away from the main traffic areas of the house. As a conservation person dealing with the practical physical realities of plaster and gravity, it was very refreshing to sit in on a session Marilynn convened with the students that covered a wider spectrum than our technical subjects. In this case, the discussion about the family dynamics of the owners of the house at the time it became a museum was fascinating.

## Spadina NHS

Our work at Spadina was long after the big show of opening this spectacular historic mansion to the public as a museum. We worked “below stairs” as it were, in the basement, and because it was considered almost secondary (not curatorially, but from a “wow” factor perspective) we were allowed to experiment. So, after figuring out how we would make it possible to walk above and view the archeological exhibits under the floor, we addressed the problem of stabilizing the plaster on both sides of a standing plastered partition wall that carried very delicate calcimine paint. This was long before TRI-Funori. Suffice it to say we worked it out, and the wall is still standing some twenty years later. Buried in that basement for half a summer “below stairs” as it were, we learned a serious lesson about consolidation of both sides of a standing partition – we can do it!

## Fryfogel Inn

Located at the edge of Highway 7/8 – the former Huron Road - this wayside inn built in 1845 recalls the rugged days of early settlement of the Perth County. It was along this road that settlement in the area first began, and the Fryfogel Tavern was a very popular place for weary travellers to stop for beer and whiskey and God knows what else. The building is now owned by the Perth County Historical Society and is protected by an easement from the Ontario Heritage Trust. A community group comprised of some very dedicated people is trying to preserve this iconic structure, and have done a wonderful job taking care of the building’s envelope. As a service to this group, HPCS volunteered to consolidate the original plaster ceiling in one of the rooms. We occasionally do pro bono work such as this, especially when we share the same heritage conservation aspirations with the people responsible for the building.