

REST ASSURED: HISTORIC NASHVILLE HOME CONTINUES TO EDUCATE TRAVELERS

Posted on [September 2, 2014](#) by [Michelle Hedenskoog](#)



by **Jordan Gass-Poore**

Schoolchildren played antique games with wooden toys on the grounds, while birds scuffled in the stately magnolia tree in front of the historic Travellers Rest Plantation and Museum in Nashville, Tenn.

Stop. Stay awhile, the white, two-story house seemed to say, its green shutters and wooden doors open.

And many did stay awhile.

The nine-acre site has brought solace to many weary – and high profile – travelers since former Judge John Overton built it in 1799.

Some weary parents of first graders at Krisle Elementary School in Springfield, Tenn., found solace inside Overton's creaky four-bedroom house from the rain drizzle on a weekday in May. The parents helped chaperone the school's field trip to Travellers.

Pride and mild embarrassment played out on the faces of some of the parents as a tour guide asked the children questions:

Who was the first president of the United States?

The parents and schoolchildren murmured. *Lincoln*, one child with multiple braids finally responded. *Obama*, another child said with a beaming, toothless smile.

The guide, clad in period dress, announced that George Washington was the first U.S. president and moved on with the tour of the house – the oldest historic house open to the public in Nashville.

But Travellers wasn't always old.

In its heyday it entertained the likes of Andrew Jackson, the seventh U.S. president.

A portrait of Jackson hangs in Overton's room and serves as a reminder of Jackson's many visits to Travellers and his close ties to the man of the house.

The two men, both native Virginians, became friends in 1789, and Travellers later served as the site of Jackson's presidential campaign fundraiser.

Such events help solidify Travellers' place in history and allow the staff to continue to interpret and tell the stories of life in antebellum Tennessee through its former residents.

Tonya Staggs, Travellers' education director, said some historic homes in Nashville can't address events of the early antebellum period because it's not studied as much as the American Civil War, which many people think of as the city's historical starting point.

"We feel like it's a really good place to talk about all the different changes that Nashville went through, from settlement to much more modern times," Staggs said.

How the city has changed can be seen in some of the site's other structures. Blackened brick, like the crisp bottom of an oven-roasted baguette, serves as a reminder that the modest one-room structure with its wooden panel door saw much activity as a smokehouse – an important structure that not only preserved meats but also household order.

A sign inside the smokehouse provides a rare mention of the Overtons' ownership of slaves. Slave labor was responsible for the building's construction around 1830 and food was used to control the property's slave population through rationing. The structure's very location near the main house was purposeful: to monitor the meat supply and deter theft.

Overton, like many wealthy men of his time and location, had slaves who worked both inside and outside of his home.

Although this fact was only briefly mentioned during the schoolchildren's tour of Travellers, to many it plays an important role in Nashville's history.

You "need to tell the story of all people that participated in life at this site," Staggs said.

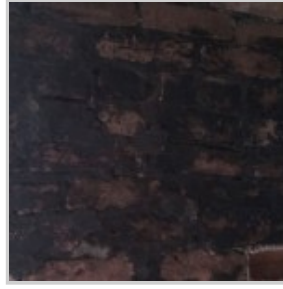
That's what Travellers has been working to accomplish since the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in Tennessee purchased the property in 1954.

After being passed down to generations of Overtons, then to a doctor at Vanderbilt University for a short-lived stay and later to railroad employees, Staggs said the Dames stepped in to rescue the grounds and house from demolition.

Education became one of the primary responsibilities of Travellers from the get-go, Staggs said. The nonprofit site offers unique, hands-on activities, including its "Travelling Through History" program that brings aspects of the museum to the classroom and "living history" experiences that enable young people to dress in period clothing while learning the "arts of becoming a 19th century lady" or the battle techniques of a Civil War soldier.

Staggs said the educational approach has changed the way children who visit the museum think about history.

"They learn that history is fun, it doesn't have to be boring," said Staggs. "They may not be able to remember all the dates and facts and stuff that they heard today, but they'll remember kind of the concepts of their time here."



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