

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Located in Turner's Gap along the National Road, the building known as the Old South Mountain House has hosted visitors for over 200 years. Its physical prominence and its status as a site of public hospitality have occasioned much mythologizing, beginning in the 1870s, with the ownership of Madeleine Dahlgren, who has earned a mini-biography here. Stories of visits by George Washington, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln comprise the lore of the building—stories that, accurate or not, have stimulated great interest in its preservation.

This report acknowledges the importance of the lore but sets it aside to focus on what can be securely documented, to establish a clear record of the building's history. This has required exhaustive research to establish the chain of ownership and, where possible, the names of its occupants and tavern operators. This archival research proceeded alongside a close investigation of the physical fabric to establish how that sequence of owners altered the building to suit new priorities, changing it from a tavern to a summer house and back into a popular restaurant. We have identified six phases of construction, starting in 1819, based upon technical analysis of tree-rings and examination of construction techniques and stylistic cues. Of these six, three major historic episodes brought it to its present form:

- The core of the structure, within the footprint of the present "Elizabethan" dining room and the bedroom above, was built in 1819.
- This core was enlarged to the north, with the two-story wing that fronts the National Road, in 1839.
- This building was enlarged with a new wing to the south and substantially altered with new windows, doors and mantels, for Madeleine Dahlgren in 1876

In short, the essential story of the South Mountain House is one of change.

South Mountain House has been a public site for most of its 200-year history. First built in 1819, its role as a roadside tavern and restaurant was well established by the 1840s, when it was advertised as having five rooms on the ground floor and seven on the second. It was occupied as the headquarters of Confederate Major General D. H. Hill during the Battle of South Mountain on September 14, 1862. One report suggests that the building may have been shelled—if correct, this action did not do substantial damage to its structure.

In 1862, its plan was in the form of a T, with a long front facing the National Road and a wing behind it containing a dining room and a kitchen. It was a substantial stone structure, covered in stucco, with public rooms for diners and private rooms for rent above. In this period, its primary patronage seems to have been summer visitors, drawn by the scenic and historical associations to the region.

In 1876, Madeleine Dahlgren, a Washington, D.C. widow and author, was drawn by those same qualities to make the South Mountain House her summer home. She spent two years remaking the building and enlarging it; she also built the large stone chapel on the other side of the National Road. Her renovations replaced all of the

SOUTH MOUNTAIN HOUSE HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT

windows, nearly all of the doors, and remade the former service wing. She combined the original dining room and kitchen into a single ceremonial hall with an ornamental beamed ceiling. This grand, quasi-Elizabethan centerpiece helped confer a fanciful antiquity on a building that was just 57 years old. Dahlgren and her heirs owned the property until 1920, when they conveyed it to Saint Mary's Academy, an order of Roman Catholic nuns.

Saint Mary's sold the property in 1925, conveying it to members of the Hewitt family. With this transaction, the South Mountain House once again became a place of hospitality when it was converted into a restaurant. It remained a restaurant through multiple owners for nearly a century before being sold to the State of Maryland in 2023. The series of restaurateurs made numerous changes to the building, removing walls, adding new finishes while removing others, and enlarging it substantially with a commercial kitchen wing and, later, a large dining area called the atrium.

These alterations have been substantial. As a consequence, it is difficult for many to grasp the form of the original building or even that of the house as modified by Madeleine Dahlgren. Historic material remains but only in fragments: many such fragments are from the Dahlgren era; there fewer from the antebellum tavern era. Most windows and many doors have been replaced; most ground-floor partitions are likewise gone; only one mantel survives from before 1876. Nonetheless, as this report indicates, enough historic material survives for specialists to recognize and describe its historic form. Enough survives, in fact, to contemplate a restoration of the building to one or more of its significant historic periods.

The loss of historic material is regrettable. More troublesome for its current stewards is the condition of what remains. As the assessments of the building, its landscape, and its systems delineate,

the South Mountain House is in dire need of repairs and replacements to many key systems. There are roof leaks, weakened masonry, sagging floors, deteriorated plaster, a patchwork of electrical wiring, failed plumbing, and inadequate heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems. Significant resources will be required to make it habitable again. There is a wide range of options available for spending those resources, from a museum-quality restoration to its original 1819 appearance to a simple renovation of the structure as it currently stands. Many options between those two will emerge as part of the upcoming public review process. This study establishes the historical and physical framework for an informed consideration of what is to become of the South Mountain House.

Because so much historic material has been lost during the restaurant era, there is no clear choice, from a historic preservation perspective, for how to proceed. To begin exploring the challenges associated with a rehabilitation of the South Mountain House, we imagine three viable alternatives for how to transform the building into a vital regional visitors' center.

The simplest option of the three is to treat the building as a historic shell that can be manipulated and improved according to modern programmatic needs. This approach has, in a sense, a historic pedigree at this site. Madeleine Dahlgren made her own changes to the historic tavern and these were followed by changes for the building's conversion back into a restaurant by the Hewitt family. This approach would not restore missing elements like windows and doors to their historic appearance but would instead only preserve existing historic remnants in place while installing modern doors, windows, walls, and stairs according to need. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards would require these new elements to be distinctive from their historic counterparts, to ensure that visitors could readily distinguish between them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This approach would be the most flexible, offering the greatest latitude in planning and the greatest flexibility in selection of fittings and finishes. But it may also generate the least public interest and minimize the structure's important historic character.

A second option is to restore the building to its historic appearance during the Dahlgren era, from 1876 to roughly 1920. The house as Madeline Dahlgren altered it survives relatively well, including many doors, most mantels, some interior finishes and some windows. In addition, most missing elements, such as exterior porches, are depicted in historic photographs and could be replaced with certainty. With the Dahlgren chapel across the National Road, the entire site could be confidently restored to an important historic period.

From a certain perspective, this approach is appealing because it would both restore the building to an era in which it was a regional landmark of some architectural distinction and because its many missing elements, such as windows and stairs, are largely knowable.

A third option is to restore the building to its appearance during the Battle of South Mountain on September 14, 1862. This would undoubtedly be the most difficult. It would require stripping away the changes made by Madeline Dahlgren, includ-

ing the entire south wing. It would require determining the form of lost interior components such as mantels, a staircase, and all doors and windows. There is strong evidence for the location of lost partitions but scholarly guesswork will be required to restore many aspects of the interior.

Though challenging, the advantage of this option is a singular one. For many people, the associations of the site with the Civil War are the most powerful and meaningful.

Any of these options would benefit from relocating modern facilities for dining or retail outside the historic structure. The first of them, a non-historic rehabilitation, allows the greatest flexibility in the design of this structure because it would not emphasize the building's historic appearance nor present the building as a museum object in the manner of Williamsburg or St. Mary's City. Either restoration option would be best served by planning facilities in such a way that they could serve visitors to the historic structure without intruding on it or concealing key features.

Which of these choices, and of the many others that will undoubtedly emerge during the public review process, best represents a cohesive and compelling 21st-century vision for the site will require careful consideration. We hope that the following report will inform that conversation meaningfully.