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Historic Trippe House Interiors Return to Maryland after 107 Years

In an extraordinary moment for historic preservation, the interior woodwork of the 17th-century Trippe House has returned to Maryland's Eastern Shore after more than a century at the Brooklyn Museum. Thanks to the efforts of the Nanticoke Historic Preservation Alliance (NHPA), the Trippe family descendants, and preservation advocates, these architectural treasures will soon be part of the Three Cultures Center at the Handsell Historic Site in Dorchester County.

The Trippe House, also known as Carthegena or as My Lady Sewall's Manor, is a circa 1690 brick home located in Secretary, Maryland. Around 1730, Henry Trippe III adorned the house with elaborate wood paneling and an ornate staircase to reflect his prominence in the county. After decades of serving as a residence to many, the house's interiors were sold to the Brooklyn Museum in 1917. For 107 years, the woodwork was displayed in the Museum's period rooms, which showcase 17th- to 19th-century architectural interiors. The Museum has long been a dedicated steward of such interiors, preserving and interpreting these spaces while allowing millions of visitors to learn about the history of their occupants and the objects they possessed.

In summer 2024, as part of strategic efforts to open more gallery spaces for its collection, the Museum decided to deaccession the Trippe House interiors. A week before the scheduled auction, Elizabeth Hughes, Maryland State Historic Preservation Officer and Director of the Maryland Historical Trust, contacted NHPA to alert them to the upcoming sale. This led to a swift collaboration between NHPA and descendants of the Trippe family, including Nanny Trippe of Easton, Tracy Leaser of Baltimore, and Ken Trippe, owner of the Whitehaven Hotel in Whitehaven, Maryland. Through an emergency grant from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) and donations from Trippe family members and NHPA supporters, the group raised enough to make a hopeful bid for the interiors. On the eve of the auction, the Brooklyn Museum offered the materials directly to NHPA, reflecting its intent to bring the woodwork back to its original county.

"We are delighted that the Trippe House interiors are returning to Maryland, where their history and significance will resonate deeply with the local community," says Catherine Futter, Director of Curatorial Affairs and Senior Curator of Decorative Arts at the Brooklyn Museum. "Their new home at the Three Cultures Center will ensure that future generations can continue to explore and celebrate the rich cultural and architectural heritage of Maryland's Eastern Shore."

“The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority was honored to play a part in returning the Trippe House period rooms to Dorchester,” says Rebecca Flora, Maryland Department of Planning Secretary and MHAA Chair. “This unique piece of our state’s history amplifies the stories of the Eastern Shore and shines a light on the valuable resources that can be found in the Heart of Chesapeake Country Heritage Area. Maryland is grateful to the Brooklyn Museum for its care of these rooms over the past 100+ years and its commitment to returning them to their home state.”

The interiors will be installed in NHPA’s forthcoming Three Cultures Center, a barn-inspired structure that will serve as an educational and cultural hub. Construction on the ADA-compliant center is slated to begin in 2025, coinciding with NHPA’s 20th anniversary. Along with housing the alliance’s offices, the Trippe rooms will form a performance and meeting space, allowing visitors and students to experience 18th-century craftsmanship firsthand. While the interiors will not be restored to the Trippe House, now used as a rectory and offices by Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, their return to Maryland brings them just 13 miles from their original site. There they will illuminate this fascinating aspect of the region’s architectural past.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reconnect the Trippe House with its history and ensure that these artifacts remain accessible to the public,” says Midge Ingersoll, Vice President of NHPA. “The return of the Trippe House interiors is not only a victory for historic preservation but also a testament to the power of collaboration and community.”

ABOUT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

For 200 years, the Brooklyn Museum has been recognized as a trailblazer. Through a vast array of exhibitions, public programs, and community-centered initiatives, it continues to broaden the narratives of art, uplift a multitude of voices, and center creative expression within important dialogues of the day. Housed in a landmark building in the heart of Brooklyn, the Museum is home to an astounding encyclopedic collection. More than 140,000 objects represent cultures worldwide and over 5,500 years of history—from ancient Egyptian masterpieces to significant American works, to groundbreaking installations presented in the only feminist art center of its kind. One of the oldest and largest art museums in the country, the Brooklyn Museum remains committed to innovation, creating compelling experiences for its communities, and celebrating the power of art to inspire awe, conversation, and joy.