Life in a Victorian Parlour

A parlour was a very formal room traditionally used to receive guests. It took its name from the old French word *parler*, which means to speak; fitting as they were often used as a place to speak formally with someone. Decorated with the family's most prized possessions, it was a way of showcasing their status and wealth.

The walls of the parlour were typically painted with dark, rich colours while the windows were covered by heavy drapes. Parlours were often quite crowded as well, with plenty of seating for the family and their guests as well as with displays for various valuables. Even the walls would be full of paintings, plaques, and stitched samplers. If a family owned a piano or organ, it would often be found within the parlour. Young women would often play music or sing, both to entertain guests and show off their musical skills.

The front of the Fultz House Museum parlour is seen above.

Parlour games were another popular form of entertainment for groups, often involving guessing, running around, or embarrassing acts. Here are a few popular examples:

Blind man's bluff : one person is blindfolded and tries to capture and identify the other people who are running around the room

Change Seats!: Chairs are placed in a circle. One player stands and says "Change seats!". All players must change seats, and a new player is left standing.

Some of these games, such as charades, or variations of them are still played today at parties.

A parlour was also a necessity for courting in the Victorian era. After a gentleman has been introduced to a young lady he is interested in, he may call on her at her home. This often involved the couple sitting in the lady's parlour and conversing, all under the watchful eye of a chaperone, to ensure nothing improper were to occur. This was a crucial step in the courting process and was one of the couple's few opportunities to get to know each other before committing to a proposal of marriage.

Parlours were very important for celebrating major family events, such as receptions for weddings and births. They were also used for more somber occasions, like a death in the family. When a family member died, they were often laid out in the parlour. Family and friends would bring food for the grieving family and pay their respects to the dead. It is from these traditions that modern funeral homes are derived.

The above hearse was used in the Bedford-Sackville area to deliver bodies, and is a part of the Fultz House Museum collection.

Two factors contributed to the decline of the parlour in the 20th century: modern innovations, such as the telephone and automobile, making visiting easier while society became more casual. The need for a formal reception room was lost and the other functions of a

parlour were easily taken on by other sitting rooms. This led to the rise in popularity of the living room in America and the drawing room in Britain.