When Robert and Virginia Campbell’s last surviving child, Hazlett Campbell, died at the age of eighty in 1938, many thought the Campbell’s palatial old townhouse that graced the once-fashionable Lucas Place neighborhood would pass away with him. The Campbell House had been willed to Yale University in honor of Hazlett’s late brother James—a bequest made by Hazlett’s older brother and caretaker Hugh, who died six and half years earlier. The home’s treasure trove of artifacts was willed to surviving Campbell cousins who chose to auction its entirety at Selkirk’s, a local auction house.

Campbell House represents a virtual time capsule, thanks to Hugh and Hazlett, who made few changes to the home. They discarded little after the deaths of their mother and brother James. Their actions unknowingly preserved one of America’s most complete examples of an American Victorian-age townhouse. Preserved within the house were original furnishings and household items: everything from rare art, furniture, and books to dishes and dresses.

Of all the household items inventoried, the Campbell’s unique and rare culinary collections have garnered much attention. A diverse collection of vintage china and silver filled the butler’s pantry and was used to entertain the likes of American Indian chiefs, socialites, and politicians, including President Ulysses Grant, who ate off the china and drank from the crystal goblets. Beyond the dining room the Campbell kitchen retained a cook’s battery of pots and pans, remnants of pantry goods such as old empty cracker tins, and a basket of corks found in the basement wine cellar. All of these artifacts provide evidence of the Campbell House’s foodways, which allow an accurate reconstruction and interpretation of the table traditions enjoyed by the Campbells and their guests.

Fortunately, after eight years of litigation following Hazlett’s death, Stix, Baer and Fuller, a leading St. Louis department store of the last century, bought the house and donated it to the William Clark Society of St. Louis, which oversaw its establishment as a museum.
The William Clark Society, along with history-minded preservationists, combined strengths and assets to purchase most of the Campbell House’s original contents from the estate’s official auction, including the culinary and tabletop collections and Virginia’s handwritten cookbook.

From these important artifacts, along with family history and documented newspaper reports, the museum is able to recreate the grandeur of mid- to late-nineteenth century St. Louis and the Campbell’s elegant dining style and traditions. The collection reflects the lifestyles of Robert and Virginia Campbell and upper-class society from the antebellum period through the Gilded Age, a time when social status and prestige were defined at the dinner table.

*The Gilded Table*
The February 1941 Campbell family estate auction catalog showing one of the highlights of the sale—a magnificent set of hand-painted French porcelain originally sold by the Philadelphia retailer Tyndale and Mitchell. The set was so large it was split into two lots, which when combined totaled more than three hundred individual pieces.
The Campbells purchased the dining room sideboard in Philadelphia in 1855. A vital serving piece, the sideboard dominates the dining room and is intricately carved with fish, fruits, and large stag's head.
Robert and Virginia Campbell
A Place in History, A Place at the Table

Robert and Virginia Campbell are two of St. Louis’ more interesting nineteenth-century residents, whose home reflected their collective adventures, successes, and tragedies. Their house’s story begins with Robert Campbell, who came from County Tyrone in Northern Ireland to America to find opportunity and fortune.

Robert Campbell was hardly a rags to riches story—born in 1804 into a family with status and property. However, Robert’s inheritance left him with little chance for success. Seeking opportunity, Robert followed his older brother Hugh to America, where he found work in the mercantile trade. Within a year after Robert’s arrival he contracted consumption, a condition forcing a move west to St. Louis in hopes of improving his health. This move presaged his future life within that city.

After working as a clerk for fellow Irishman and future railroad magnate John O’Fallon, Robert signed with legendary mountain men William Ashley and Jedediah Smith in 1825 for a trading expedition to the Rocky Mountains. The trip would take Robert to the second Rocky Mountain Rendezvous. The expedition yielded more adventures and opportunities in the West where he could eventually count among his friends Jim Bridger and Kit Carson and the Flathead chief Insula—who called Robert his blood brother. Over the next ten years Robert worked trading for valuable furs with the American Indians and white trappers. His reputation grew and his exploits as a mountain man and American Indian fighter were published in Philadelphia newspapers and related in Washington Irving’s historical account The Adventures of Captain Bonneville.

Ending his western travels, Campbell returned to St. Louis and founded a mercantile store with fur trading partner William Sublette. Robert took over the business after six years when the partnership dissolved due to an economic downturn. The business recovered and prospered, allowing Robert’s savvy business moves to grow and diversify his holdings to soon include mercantile operations, real estate, gold mines, railroads, cattle, banking, and riverboats.

Perhaps one of Robert’s most famous holdings was one of his last major investments, the Southern Hotel. The Southern, renowned for its lavish banquets, was considered one of the country’s finest hotels west of the Mississippi. It soon became an indispensable stop for all manner of social and cultural luminaries.

Besides wealth and fame earned as a fur trader, Robert earned recognition as a colonel in the Missouri Militia and was appointed to the Indian Commission by President Ulysses Grant. Robert remained active in business and civic affairs until his death in 1879.