

Fresh Advices

NOVEMBER 1983

Beyond the Pale: Architectural Fieldwork for Colonial Williamsburg

by Edward Chappell, director of architectural research

One fall day, a Williamsburg visitor stopped to tell members of the Crafts Department about the survival of a tobacco press said to have been used to pack hogsheads at a Nelson County farm. The apparatus, according to the story, was very large, very ancient, and in imminent danger. Alterations were planned for the barn, and the press was to be demolished within a week! While the description was predictably vague, the machinery sounded tantalizingly similar to the presses (also known as prizes) pictured in eighteenth-century engravings. Unquestionably, it appeared to be a very long shot: a rare vertical tobacco press surviving in an unlikely location on Wintergreen Mountain 150 miles from Williamsburg. Similar stories had sometimes yielded less than exciting results.

With time running out and no reliable means of verification from a distance, we decided to ignore the questionable odds and mount an expedition. Early one morning a pessimistic group of craftsmen and architectural historians headed west toward the Blue Ridge.

Three and a half hours later, we discovered that the tip had been a good one, that here indeed was the only farm press of its kind known to survive in Virginia. Well into the evening the group happily drew, measured, and photographed every detail of the press and its contemporary barn. As a result, we have a substantial amount of information about the form and workings of one aspect of traditional agricultural processing—a permanent record that may eventually be of use to the Foundation in teaching about tobacco culture. Furthermore, the attention the press received has assured its preservation.

Useful leads about hundreds of comparable

artifacts and buildings have come to us from a variety of sources: other fieldworkers, local historians, Colonial Williamsburg and Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission archives, and preliminary fieldwork such as the intensive survey of Isle of Wight County farms Camille Wells conducted in 1981. There has seldom been a lack of material to study. Rather, a chief concern has been to make well reasoned decisions about which subjects can reveal information most critical to understanding and interpreting the eighteenth-century Chesapeake.

Architectural fieldwork is not a new method of research at Colonial Williamsburg. In the
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Why Curators Do Fieldwork

by Sumpter T. Priddy III, museum consultant and former teaching curator

What exactly is fieldwork as it applies to a curator? The most obvious answer is that it means going into the field—away from one's routine work place—to do research. It means going out to the homes of collectors or of people who have been fortunate enough or far-sighted enough to save things that belonged to their ancestors. It might mean going to other museums hoping to find objects or facts that relate to things in one's own collection. But it can also mean venturing into the marketplace—going to antique shops or previewing auctions in the hope of finding another piece that sheds light on the past.

Architectural historians go into the field because they don't have any alternative if they want to seek out primary evidence. The same need is apparent for an Egyptologist who teaches in Kalamazoo. But how about curators who sit in the midst of a museum filled with the things they curate? Do they necessarily have to, since many of their objects reside in museums or in museum storage, and in most instances can be studied without stirring
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late 1920s and '30s Perry, Shaw and Hepburn architects searched the Chesapeake countryside for details that could be used to flesh out skeletal designs based on documents and archaeology. The notebooks of distinguished designers like Susan Higginson Nash and Singleton Peabody Moorehead are filled with photographs and precisely drawn sketches of mantel architraves, window muntins, and innumerable other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century building components. It is, in fact, largely due to the careful attention and recording by people like Nash and Moorehead that the Historic Area is as well crafted and satisfying upon close examination as it is in overall impression.

This tradition has continued. In the 1960s, for example, Foundation architects created a very believable domestic work complex at Wetherburn's Tavern by drawing on information about dairies, smokehouses, and kitchens in tidewater Virginia. Today, buildings as diverse as the new Public Hospital and the small shed for papermaking behind the Printing Office owe details to early buildings both inside and outside Williamsburg. At Greenhow Store the form of the shelves as well as the general design are based largely on fragmentary remains of about fourteen early stores in eastern Virginia.

As much as any other building in Williamsburg, the James Anderson Forge will illustrate lessons learned from fieldwork. At the Anderson site, archaeology defined the plan, placement of forges, and sequence of development and provided important evidence for the character of the building (solid but relatively sloppy brick foundations, dirt floors, and an interior devoid of plaster finish). Neither illustrations nor descriptive documentation exists for the building, so the implications provided by archaeology have to be interpreted in light of what we know about the range of quality employed in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century work buildings. Both primary fieldwork carried out by Dell Upton and more recent recording by the Agricultural Buildings Project have been directed toward establishing a system of construction and finish that is consistent with the archaeological evidence and the functional implications of an industrial site. By portraying the impact of function and economic circumstances, construction of the Anderson forge will introduce building methods not recently familiar in the Historic Area. Nevertheless, its riven fram-

ing, shuttered windows, and clapboard roofs will be as closely based on regional prototypes as are the subtle details of eighteenth-century brickwork that we hope to re-create at the Public Hospital.

Good fieldwork must do more than carefully record details that might someday be incorporated into a restoration or reconstruction. One value of reconstructions, if approached intelligently, is that they encourage the researcher to ask significant questions about the implications of original buildings. Much of the literature that resulted from architectural recording of American and European buildings in the era of Colonial Williamsburg's inception is related to connoisseurship, to the discovery and appreciation of the fine design qualities in traditional craftsmanship. Although there was unquestionably much careful craftsmanship in eighteenth-century Virginia, not all buildings—probably not even most buildings—received the costly attention that was expended on the majority of original houses and stores lining Duke of Gloucester Street. In a museum village, authenticity demands the careful reproduction of things known to have existed in another era. Of equal significance, though, is the need to use these components in a proper context, for realism is only approached when we understand what was *and wasn't* used in a particular situation. While plastered walls and modillion cornices may be appropriate for a large house, their appearance on a laundry or lumber house should be regarded as highly suspect.

Recently, research has increasingly pursued a full range of building possibilities, extending from the finest gentry houses to the outbuildings of the poorest surviving farms. This refocusing reflects not merely a democratization of perspective, but rather a growing interest in the connections between buildings and social systems. At one level, researchers can use the variety of building techniques to pose questions about the separation of activities into different areas of a house, town lot, or farm complex. At another level, groups of buildings can be linked to individuals whose social position in the community is known from documents. In either case, interest and complexity are created by the fact that conditions vary substantially in different times and places.

In order to address problems of interpretation, the Agricultural Buildings Project pri-

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marily focuses on building complexes rather than individual structures. One result is that we can study the differing importance expressed, for example, in the exterior and interior finish of dwellings, domestic work buildings, agricultural buildings, and slave houses. By establishing the relative degree of craftsmanship invested in each, the historian begins to understand past perceptions of social order, as well as something of the variety of eighteenth-century living conditions. This is precisely the kind of variety that will be richly expressed at both the Anderson site and the Public Hospital. For the hospital, details of a reconstructed patient's cell have been developed to illustrate eighteenth-century attitudes toward people considered mentally ill. These attitudes result in an approach to building that is different from that expressed by the public image of the exterior or in a cell—also planned for the hospital—reflecting a radically different mid-nineteenth-century approach to insanity. At the Anderson site, industrial work conditions will contrast sharply with the relatively affluent domestic conditions implied by the expensively finished house. The character of the kitchen, whose position and relative quality are known from archaeology, will fall midway between the two.

Like other approaches to social history, fieldwork can provide us with fresh insights into some of the realities of past life. Our general need is to understand, in specific terms, the relationships between artifacts and society. The ultimate discovery, then, is not the last of a threatened species of tobacco machinery or impermanent building but an understanding of how these and other components are part of a dynamic social system. Lessons learned in the field can animate our interpretation of the Historic Area and enable us to teach a more useful form of history.

Curators, *continued*

beyond the confines of their daily work place? Why would a curator want to do fieldwork? Or, more importantly, why does a curator need to?

To begin, let's define curators. *The Oxford English Dictionary* calls them "keepers" or "custodians," those who have charge "of a person or thing." This reinforces the common perception of curators as guardians. They see to it that objects are preserved, unaltered when possible, so that future scholars can continue to use those objects as primary evidence

for interpreting the past. But curators have other responsibilities. They collect objects, research and write about them, all the time increasing public awareness and appreciation for them.

Most people are aware how significantly museums, particularly history museums, have changed over the last decade. Museums have shifted their focus from major events, important individuals, and masterpieces toward a greater emphasis on social history and the ways that everyday objects help define people's lives. Increasingly, as the questions we ask of history have changed, so has the role of the curator.

Curators are aware how an object helps to define the life of its user or maker, but they also realize that no object exists in isolation. Each thing created exists in a context. Other very different objects coexist with it, are used with it, and help to complete a picture of the material world that surrounds its user or owner or maker at a given time. But there is another type of context as well. This is the context of an object in relation to others of the same kind that were made either before or after it. Placing objects in a progression and tracing the subtle features that characterize each particular one at a given point becomes, in essence, an opportunity to trace the situation or the *changing* situation of the people associated with it.

One of the most exciting discoveries for any curator is finding an object still in its original context. Context—this is such an important word. It is something the archaeologist and architectural historian take largely for granted. A house usually remains standing where it was built; a broken artifact is usually found where it was discarded. But being able to place an object in context is one of the most important needs of the curator. It is also one of the most difficult since most household objects move as their successive owners move. Retracing the steps is usually impossible. When it is possible (through documentary evidence, family history, or photographic or other visual verification), it gives completely new meaning to the object. For curators, knowing what type of house an artifact was in or what other objects coexisted with it helps them to extrapolate something about the people who used such things and how the material world helped to define their lives.

Consider two examples: in the first, a curator is given a portrait of a colonial Vir-

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Curators, continued

ginian by a descendant of the subject. Unfortunately, the descendant isn't sure who painted the portrait or which of four great-grandfathers it really is. The curator immediately recognizes the painting as an early Wollaston because of its similarity to another portrait in a private collection. He then enlists the aid of a genealogist to help trace specific information on the donor's ancestors. After some work the genealogist discovers that two of the possible candidates were poor planters who owned less than a hundred acres each and couldn't have afforded a portrait by one of the colony's leading painters. Of the other two candidates, only one was still young enough during Wollaston's travels in Virginia to qualify as the subject. A subsequent check in county records turns up a full inventory of his home with specific reference to portraits that hung in the passage there.

In the second example, a curator discovers an early Virginia table in a New York antique shop, but the dealer is unable to provide him with any background information on the piece. The table is rather uninspired in appearance and has a replaced leg, which destroys its value as a museum piece. The drawer construction is atypical of Virginia work, so the curator makes copious notes for his files. Several years later a superb desk and bookcase with glazed doors and classical pediment appears on the market. Again the construction is atypical. The curator checks his files, finds that the two pieces are identical on the interior, and ascribes them to the same shop, which prior research had indicated was in Williamsburg. It appears that the shop in question not only made high style showpieces for the parlors of the gentry but more utilitarian pieces for small planters as well. More importantly, the desk and bookcase has stylistic features that relate to a Williamsburg chest of drawers made some fifty years before, emphasizing the continuity of the Williamsburg cabinet trade in the eighteenth century and reinforcing its similarity to London.

It is impossible for museums to attempt to preserve every morsel of the past. In the first place, keeping things and maintaining them is a very expensive proposition. But not everything is worthy of preservation. One must be selective, discriminating: sometimes this means choosing what is rarest, sometimes what is most accomplished, sometimes what is most valuable—but increasingly it also means

what is most representative. Making such a choice is difficult unless those who must decide have been exposed to a broad range of objects, and fieldwork helps give curators the exposure that lets them determine what is rarest, most accomplished, or most representative.

Despite the vast corpus of objects made by a people at any given time, few objects survive for posterity. Of those that do survive, only a few remain in their original context. Far more often than not the objects have been changed from their original appearance, made more elegant, stripped of paints that offend modern sensibilities, altered in some way to fit how people want to perceive the past rather than the way it was. As things go, few of these goods serve an important role in a museum exhibition. Nonetheless, many are important from a documentary standpoint. They help fill in the gaps, help to provide a broad view of the alternatives originally available in the past, help to complete a picture of the full progression of a certain type of object. These objects generally are not in museum collections (and generally they should not be). But for a curator who knows how to interpret the subtle distinctions between objects and how to look through alterations, even a compromised object can be important.

It's no secret that curators sometimes go into the field hoping to find rare and valuable objects to add to their collections. But most are far more realistic. They don't spend their lives riding through the countryside knocking on doors, hopping from museum to museum, or going to uptown auctions. They usually go only when definite leads suggest a trip is worth the investment of time and energy. But good curators always seek those leads, maintaining close contacts with other curators and collectors, with antique dealers and auction houses. More often than not, the things they find are not exceptional or one of a kind or beautiful, but have been altered, changed, made less than they were, distorted. Even the remnants help to place other objects in context and, in doing so, help the curator fit another piece—albeit a small one—into the unfinished puzzle of the past.

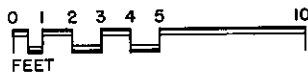
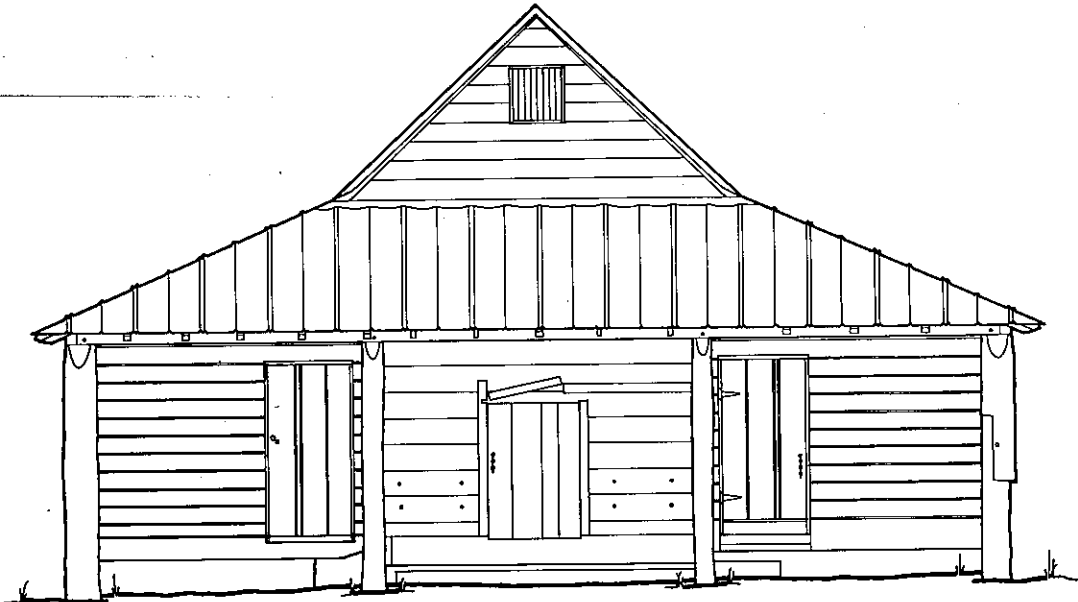
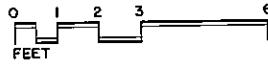
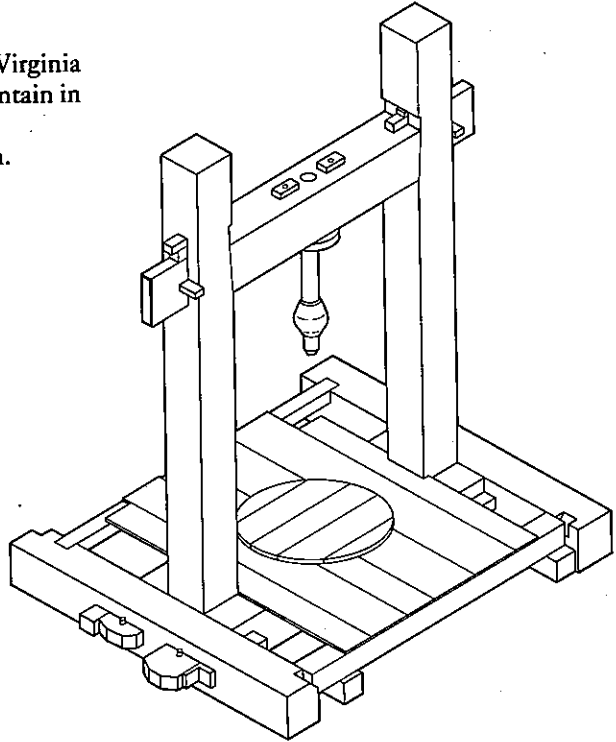
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Editor: Lou Powers

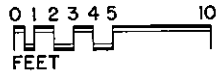
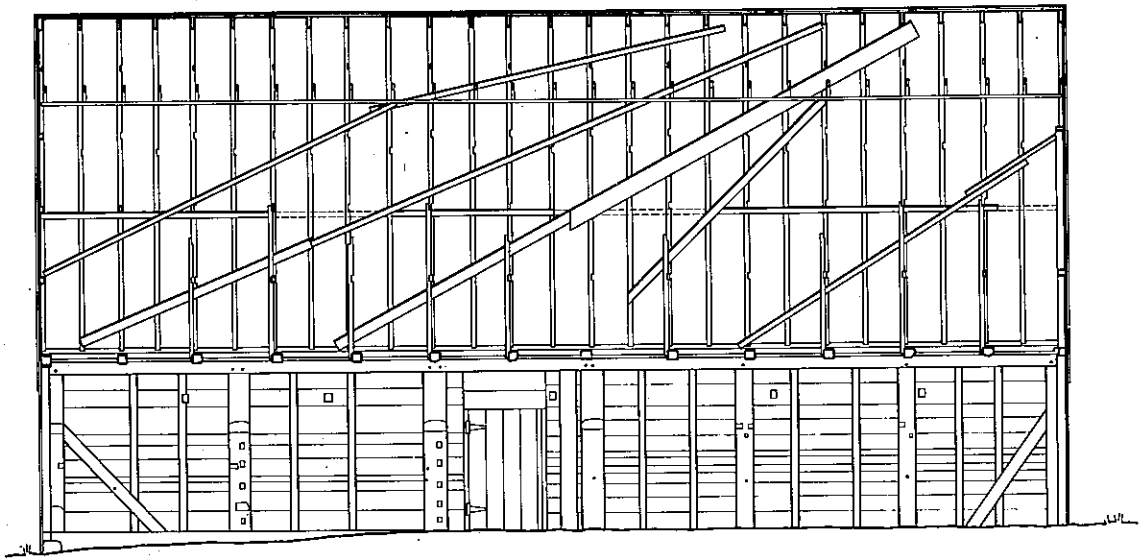
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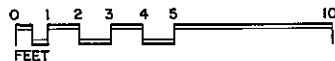
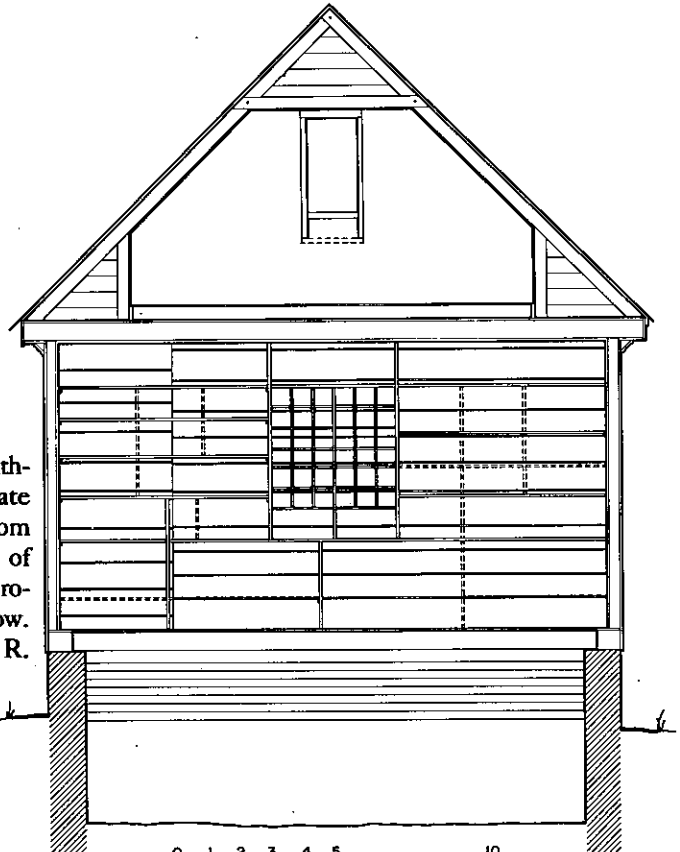
The only vertical press of this variety in Virginia was found in a barn on Wintergreen Mountain in Nelson County.
Drawing: E. Chappell and W. J. Graham.



Our shed for papermaking derives its unhewn ground-set posts and other unfamiliar construction features from surviving structures like an early porch on the Barrett smokehouse in Southampton County.
Drawing: D. R. Taylor



A variety of tobacco barns contributed details to the experimental barn now under construction at Carter's Grove. The chief source for framing details and the system of tobacco hanging is the Burrage's End barn in Anne Arundel County, Maryland.
 Drawing: W. J. Graham and M. S. Schara.



Greenhow Store illustrates an eighteenth-century division of public and private spaces that was principally learned from structures like White's Store in Isle of Wight County. White's Store also provided precedent for shelves at Greenhow.
 Drawing: C. Bergengren and D. R. Taylor