

Architectural Description – Exterior

Framing

The Thomas James Store was built with an "English frame," meaning that it has a joined box frame with a base of continuous sills. English framing was common in rural construction from approximately the time of the American Revolution through the middle of the nineteenth century. The joints are mortise and tenons that are pegged only at the more significant joints. The building has half dovetail lapped down braces, and flush-framed walls intended for an interior wall finish. The roof is framed in the common rafter style footed on a board false plate, with the rafters neatly aligned with the joists.



Exterior of original front (now east) wall of old store - photo by Jorin Hood

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Exterior of original back (now west) wall of old store

The sills and corner posts of the frame are cut from oak, with most of the other framing components made of yellow poplar. Since these types of wood were more commonly used earlier than the construction date of the Thomas James Store, they are likely a simple reflection of available timber in the area at that time. The structural timbers are hewn square and pit-sawn, a technique which was commonplace in Virginia until approximately 1820. The nails used in framing the store are machine cut with double-struck heads, which were only commonly used in the area between 1805 and the early 1820s.^[1] The nails used to clinch the double-thickness doors, however, are all forged, hand-made nails - machine-cut shanks usually break in the clinching.

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Exterior (present east) - details of original roof structure - photo by Jorin Hood



Attic - note neatly spaced nails on collar ties

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Exterior (present east) wall showing counting room window and corner brace - photo by Jorin Hood

[i] Willie Graham, "Sibley Store, Mathews Courthouse, Virginia, ca. 1810-20," Report, 3 March 2006, pp.3-4.

Foundation



Photo by Jennifer Glass

The foundation of the Thomas James Store is of brick piers laid in English bond with concrete block infill. This is probably not the original foundation, as the building was likely moved and set on a new foundation. However, since English bond was not commonly used past about 1825, the foundation is early if not original.[i] It is interesting that the foundation wall on the original front (now – after the building was moved from its first site – east) wall is full length, as it probably was when it was erected. It is as if, after the building was moved to its present site, the front wall was still fully finished to receive customers.

It seems that the building may originally have been set above a raised cellar, rather than the crawl space that currently separates the floor joists from the ground. The joists beneath the store appear to be lime-washed beneath the floorboards; this could be either an aesthetic detail or an early procedure to prevent insect infestation.[ii] If aesthetic, it only makes sense if the joists were to be seen from below, as in the case of a cellar.

The illustration above shows the original brick pier foundation and the north wall foundation prior to the changes of 2010, which are detailed in *Preservation 2010 Report*.

[i] Graham, p.5.

[ii] Mark Wenger, "Thomas James Store – Matthews (sic), Virginia," Report, 27 November 2008, p.7.

Roof

The Thomas James Store has a gable roof with an approximately 40 degree pitch, with gently sloped shed roof additions on the east and west sides of the building. Since it is likely that the original front façade (facing Main Street, or west) of the building was the side that now faces east, the gable was originally side-oriented.

The roof of the store is currently covered in asphalt shingles, which are a modern alteration. Early roofing shingles were found in the rafters of the shed additions, having been used to shim up the rafter feet. These shingles likely came from the roof of the store when it was re-shingled, and were square butt shingles that had been laid with an exposure of approximately 6¾".^[i]

^[i] Wenger, p.5.

Cladding

The store is clad in mill-sawn beaded weatherboard siding with corner boards. This is not the original siding, which was likely replaced with the construction of the east and west shed additions. (Much of this siding was found in 2010 to be so rotten that it was replaced with machine-cut, yellow pine boards - the exterior surfaces of both north and west walls are entirely replaced, parts of the other two walls were replaced. None of the 1810-1815 period siding remains, anyway. (See *Preservation 2010 Report*.)

Upon his investigation of the building, Mark Wenger noted that the placement of the original weatherboard could be seen in parts of the original exterior east wall, where framing was exposed. Dirt and debris from inside of the wall had collected on the upper edge of each weatherboard, leaving behind a mark on the exterior of the stud even after the original cladding was removed. Measuring the distance between these marks shows that the exposure of the original weatherboards was between 7" and 7 3/8".^[i] The siding noted above was kept, as much as possible, during the stabilization project of summer, 2010. However, all of the north wall siding had to be replaced, with pine boards exactly matching the earlier ones; all of the west wall siding was likewise replaced, the 1950s era windows removed, and a new door consisting of vertical boards in the old manner (fabricated by Henry Schlenk), with reproduction hinges and staple fastener, with an antique latch installed. Siding replacement on the east and south walls was minimal.

^[i] Wenger

Chimney



Sill (present north side, prior to 2010 preservation) interior showing cut for chimney

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information

The Thomas James Store does not have a standing chimney. However, an examination by Mark Wenger produced evidence that the building did at one time have a chimney on the current north gable elevation, with a fireplace in the counting room of the store. A chimney thus located is almost universal in existing rural southern stores with a similar floor plan from this time period. The original sill on the north elevation of the building has a gap centered under the gable of the façade. A thin insert of timber closed the gap (until the sill was reinforced in 2010). This is where the chimney, with a width of 55", would have risen from the foundation. The two cut ends of the sill could be seen from the inside of the building beneath the floorboards, and each had been chased with a lap mortise into which the header of the hearth would have been inserted. The measurement between these laps, and thus the width of the original hearth, is 56¼". Although the original joist at the front of the hearth has been replaced, the joist's original drop mortises were still in place; measuring from these mortises to the inside of the north wall frame suggests that the hearth was 27" deep. The east side of the chimney was located 60" from the inside framing of the east wall. As there is no visible evidence of a fireplace at the attic level of the north gable, it is likely that the chimney had a set of shoulders at approximately attic floor level that narrowed the stack.^[i]

^[i] Wenger, p.2.

Porch

There was initially some speculation that the Thomas James Store may have had a front porch on the east elevation, due to the relatively un-weathered condition of the double-doors and the absence of shingles on the lower section of the original building's roof, which is now covered by the shed additions. However, an examination of the early sheathing just above the eaves of the original building revealed nails and nail holes indicating the placement of the original shingles. The prior presence of shingles in this location makes it unlikely that there was a porch.^[i] This is in keeping with the general architecture of early stores, as porches were much more common on houses and taverns than on retail stores.

^[i] Wenger

Openings



South (original north) wall double door - photo by Jorin Hood

Most of the store's original openings are no longer visible from the exterior, as they have been covered with weatherboard or are obstructed by the newer east and west wings. On the south elevation is a batten board double-leaf door which serves as an entrance to the building. Originally, this doorway would have faced the alley (now Maple Avenue) to the north of the building, and was probably used to load goods from the alley into the retail room. Although this opening is original, it was enlarged at some point and the original doorway was destroyed, though three of the original period hinges were kept. Mortises in the top plate of the doorway indicate that the original doorway was 41" wide, allowing 1 1/4" for the plank jamb linings. The

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information

original door is no longer in place, but was likely a double-width or "folding" door; it is possible that one of these doors was reused in the south opening of the east wing. It is also possible that the double-leaf door now occupying the enlarged south opening was originally located in the loft doorway directly above.

The other original opening that can still be seen on the building's exterior is the garret or attic doorway directly above the double-leaf door on the south elevation. This opening is approximately 62" in height. Although the framing of the opening is original, the batten board door, sill, and linings for the head and jamb are modern additions. This doorway was likely used for loading and unloading goods from the alley into the attic storage area of the building.

There are three openings on the east elevation of the original store, which are no longer visible on the building's exterior due to the east wing addition. The first is a double-leaf wood batten door, which would have served as the store's main entrance. This door is double-sheathed, with an interior horizontal layer and an exterior vertical layer of laminated sheathing secured together with clinched rosehead nails. The layers are offset 1/2" to form rabbets that fit the opposite door and the stops of the door frame. The exterior faces of the leaves have a beaded edge of approximately 2 1/4" width. The doors are hung on strap hinges with driven pintles and are secured on the interior by a wooden bar that is held at each jamb by a pair of closed keepers or staples. The lower hinges and pintles were badly rusted by 2010 and were replaced by identical, hand-made reproductions.

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Interior of original front doors of old store



Detail of exterior of original front doors of old store - photo by Jorin Hood

The other two openings on the east elevation are windows; one of which lit the retail room, and the other the counting room. The retail space window has been enlarged into a doorway, but evidence of the original window can still be seen in the frame. The window was originally framed on the north side by a large post, which was later cut out and moved further northward to create the existing door frame. The cut-off end of the north post still remains in the mortise at its original location. On the south side of the door frame, the *dado* for the opposite end of the original window sill can still be seen.

The 4/4 wood sash counting room window is approximately centered on the east wall of the original room. There are *dados* for another window sill cut into the wall next to the existing window, against the original partition location. However, these *dados* appear to have never been used; the method of installing window frames necessitates the jambs being nailed directly to the flanking studs. Therefore, nail holes on the studs above the *dados* should be seen anywhere that a window was framed. There are no holes above the *dados* in this instance, suggesting that the window was originally intended for placement against the partition, but was moved further north before being framed. The exterior shutter on the window is original and, like the doors, is of double-layered sheathing with a beaded edge. It is hung on H-shaped side hinges.^[i] The shutter is secured by a wrought iron bar hung on a pin at the top of the jamb and run diagonally across the exterior of the window. A pin at the lower end of the bar would be wedged inside the shutter so that it could not be opened from the exterior. Every piece of the ironwork for this window is original.^[ii]

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



North wall (originally south) single door



Detail of hinge showing leather washers.

On the north elevation of the store, covered on the exterior by weatherboard, is a single original double-sheathed door set against the northwest corner post, which served as an exit from the counting room. It is secured by a stock lock and staple, as well as a wooden bar set in keepers like that on the east entrance. This door swings on small H-L hinges, which are secured to the frame by clinched nails with leather botching behind the heads. All ironwork on this door is origi-

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information

nal. A simple board was nailed to the top of the door at an early period to keep it firmly shut. It was partly broken off in recent years, exposing the original, unpainted surface below. This raises the important question of whether any surface in the early store was ever lime-washed.

At the garret level of the north façade, also covered on the exterior with weatherboard, are two windows. Originally, these would have flanked the chimney stack.

There are several exterior openings on the east and west shed roof additions that are not original to the store. The west wall of the west wing now serves as one of the building's principal entrances. From about 1950-2010, it featured a modern single-leaf wood paneled door with four lights, with wood tripartite windows, each consisting of a central square fixed light flanked by 2/2 wood sash windows. (These windows and the door were removed in 2010 and the siding all replaced, with the new door being a vertical board-type with reproduction hinges and staple fastener, with an antique latch installed. The west wall siding was also totally replaced at this time.) On the south elevation of the east wing is a single-leaf, double-sheathed wood batten door hung on strap hinges. Although this opening is not original to the store, it seems likely that the double-sheathed door (or at least parts of it) was reused from the original south façade opening after it was widened and a new double-leaf door installed. [iii]



Interior surface of south wall single door

[i] Wenger, pp.5-6.

[ii] Graham, p.3.

[iii] Wenger, pp.6-7.

Architectural Description – Interior

Floor Plan

The original 15' by 25' store was divided into two rooms by a partition wall. The larger of the two rooms, currently on the southern end of the building, was the retail room. It was connected to the smaller northern counting room by an interior doorway near the center of the partition wall. The location of the partition wall can be seen in the joist above the vanished wall. Two sets of bevel lap mortise, originally used for setting the studs of the partition wall, are evident in the joist. The spacing of the mortise, and thus the studs, indicates the width of the partition doorway between the retail and counting rooms. One set of laps is later than the other, cutting partly into the earlier set. Upon inspection, Mark Wenger suggested that it is possible only the later set was used to set the partition studs.

The store's main entrance on the east elevation, as well as a freight loading door on the south elevation, opened into the retail room. A single exit door from the counting room was located in the northwest corner of the room. A staircase to the store's attic was located in the southwest corner of the counting room, against the wall partition. The staircase was removed sometime in the nineteenth century, and it is uncertain whether it was a conventional wooden stair, or a simpler ladder stair. Mark Wenger recommends removing the sheathing on the upper west wall of the counting room where the stair rose to the attic. The presence of nails or nail holes for winders or a landing would indicate that a conventional staircase was used.^[i] The attic space of the building was a single unfinished room over the same footprint as the ground floor.

The east and west shed roof additions are each a single room, presumably added onto the building for extra storage. The east wing accesses the original retail room by the original east elevation double-leaf front door, as well as a single doorway that was originally a window. The west wing had no interior access to the original store until 2010, when later boards in the southwest corner of the old store were removed.

^[i] Wenger, pp.3-4.

Wall and Ceiling Finish

The wall and ceiling finishes in the retail room differ from those in the counting room, due to the likelihood that the counting room was intended to be finished with plaster. This is common among early stores; the counting room would have been the more nicely finished of the two rooms, while the retail room would have been simply sheathed to simplify wall shelving. In the retail room, the walls retain a lime-washed finish. They are sheathed with wide horizontal boards that are planed on their outer face and have a narrow beaded edge. The exposed ceiling joists are planed and beaded, and the underside of the flooring above was also planed smooth. This is an indication that the ceiling was meant to be exposed from the time of construction.

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Beaded ceiling joists of retail room and unplanned joists in counting room, showing salt efflorescence



Original back wall of retail room, showing traces of shelves and brackets.

The ceiling surface - and the ceiling joists - of both rooms evidences a thick, soft coating resulting from salt efflorescence. It is more visible at the south end of the building. It results from salted hams being hung to cure in the attic (nails are visible, neatly spaced, on each of the collar ties between the rafters of the roof). Salt was also probably stored there. The floor of the attic was thickly coated with residue, most of which was removed during the recent preservation efforts.

The counting room walls are covered in horizontal bevel-edged board sheathing, dating to a remodeling that likely occurred in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.^[i] This sheathing predates the removal of the partition wall between the counting and retail rooms, as it stops at the vanished wall. The void in wall covering left when the partition was removed was covered with a beveled board. The counting room is trimmed out to be plastered, with an original base board, beaded chair board, and window trim. The hewn and pit-sawn ceiling joists were left unplanned, and the flooring above was gauged and undercut rather than smooth finished, indicating that the ceiling was to be covered in plaster as well. However, though the room was obviously intended to be plastered, it does not appear that plaster was ever actually applied. An inspection behind the sheathing on the north wall produced no sign of plaster. The bevel-edged sheathing appears to be the only finish ever applied to the counting room walls. Since the sheathing on the north wall may be later than that on the east and west walls because it covers the opening where the chimney once stood, Mark Wenger recommends examining beneath the sheathing on the adjoining east wall to be certain that none of the counting room walls were ever plastered.^[ii]



Ceiling joists of counting room showing original stair opening to the attic and original location of wall dividing the two rooms

The interior of both rooms were covered in a lime-wash at some point, most likely when the interior partition was removed, as the finish was applied over the beveled board that covers the gap left by the wall. It is certainly not original in the counting room; when the present exterior siding was installed over the counting room door, a cleat was nailed over the top edge of the door to fasten it shut. Subsequently, this cleat split horizontally, revealing that there is no lime-wash underneath (see illustration of north wall door above). The finish was therefore not applied to the wall until after the new siding was installed. Both the retail room and the counting room were at one time shelved to display goods and for storage, and ghosts for the shelving can still be seen on the sheathing of the east, west, and north walls; the interior sheathing on the south wall has been removed. (See illustration above – "Original back wall of retail room...") The ghosts on the west wall, opposite the main entrance, are likely from the original shelving, as this is where the retail counter would have stood with display shelving behind. Two of the shelves, located approximately 33" and 60" above the floor, were supported with either ogee brackets or a straight stanchion two-nailed to the wall sheathing from both sides. The west wall shelving continues into the counting room, where it is likely a later extension of the original retail room shelving; there is a ghost of a shelf edge on the counting room door, indicating that the shelf was installed after the door was secured shut. This ghost shows a shelf of approximately 18" deep, which may have also been the depth of the retail room shelving. The shelving on the east wall of the store also seems to be a later addition, which is in keeping with the main entrance being on the (current) east wall, and therefore the unshelved public area of the retail room. The ghosts for the east wall shelving span the beveled board installed to cover the gap when the partition wall was removed, so at least this section of shelving, if not all of the east wall shelving, was installed af-

ter the partition's removal. A finish of lime-wash was applied after the installation of the shelving, as the ghosts are present with an outline of the finish.^[iii]

^[i] Graham, p.2.

^[ii] Wenger, pp.2-3.

^[iii] Wenger, pp.4-5.

Flooring

Although the flooring on the ground floor of the store was replaced in the twentieth century, the attic flooring is original. It was gauged and undercut above the counting room, and planed smooth on its lower face above the retail room. Gauged and undercut floors are far more typical in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but by 1820 flooring of consistent thickness had become more common. Still, it is not unheard of for a pre-1820 building to have flooring that was not undercut when the lower face of that flooring was intended to be exposed rather than plastered. In other similar examples of exposed joist ceilings, the underside of the flooring was often plane in the Thomas James Store to give the boards an even thickness and a more decorative appearance.^[iv]

^[iv] Graham, p.4.

Architectural Description – Site

The Thomas James Store sits on a 0.1268-acre plot of land containing both the James Store and the Victorian Sibley's General Store. Main Street (VA-14), which runs through the center of downtown Mathews, is immediately to the west of Sibley's. The Thomas James Store is located directly behind, or to the east, of Sibley's. Maple Avenue runs along the property line to the north of the store. Across Maple Avenue from the James Store is the south side of a modern concrete block building. To the east of the building is a curving asphalt driveway leading to a parking lot behind the local library. The south side of the Thomas James Store faces the rear edge of a formerly commercial building on the next lot (now part of Mathews Memorial Library), as well as the concrete pad behind it, and the Mathews Memorial Library two lots to the south. The property line closely bounds the Thomas James Store on the north, east, and south sides, leaving space for only a small well-tended lawn. There are no trees or designed landscaping on the site.

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



Site from northeast, November 2010

Architectural Description – Site Alterations

Since the time of its construction, the Thomas James Store has undergone numerous alterations and additions, both major and minor. In spite of these various changes, the overall historical integrity of the building has remained intact. In fact, some of the alterations were completed so long ago that they have become a part of the building's history themselves.

One of the major alterations made to the Thomas James Store is its likely move from its original location, presumably facing Main Street, to its current location behind Sibley's General Store. It appears that the building was also turned when it was moved, as the current east elevation of the store was almost certainly the original front elevation, and therefore would have faced west onto Main Street. With this original orientation, the south gable door would have opened onto the side street, and could have been used as a loading door for goods.

Below is seen an unusual feature (on the outside of the current south end of the east sill, and matching an identical feature on the west sill), which was likely where the cables used to move the building were bolted. From its original location, therefore, the building would have been winched (with block and tackle) or towed (by horses, mules, or oxen), rolling on logs, and moved northward into the alley, then turned in an eastward direction and rolled until it was turned again southward and its present destination reached. This accounts for the 180-degree change in its axis.



Although there is no historical evidence to conclusively indicate that the Thomas James Store was moved from its original location, the architectural evidence for the move is compelling, as noted by both Willie Graham and Mark Wenger. The current east façade appears to be the original front elevation for several reasons; first, it is the only elevation of the original store with window openings. Stores from this time period usually limited the number of windows in the retail room to maximize wall space on which to hang shelving, with their only windows being on the front elevation, as is the case with the James Store. The widest door opening is located on the east elevation, making it a likely front door. An orientation with the current east wall originally facing Main Street would also be in keeping with the common antebellum practice of building stores with their long wall facing the street in rural areas where lot frontages were often larger and less expensive. Finally, this orientation would explain the current south-facing door; it would originally have faced the side road that is now Maple Avenue, making it useful as a loading door.^[i]

In addition to the orientation of the store's elevations and openings, the lack of a chimney in the counting room could point to an early relocation. Evidence for a chimney can be seen in the sill, but not in the brick foundation where the chimney would have been. Therefore, it seems likely that the chimney was left behind when the building was moved and placed on a new foundation. This would explain the patching of the sill without any corresponding evidence in the foundation. Another detail that points to relocation is the presence of lime-wash on the underside of the ground floor joists. This is a purely aesthetic detail that only makes sense if the limewash were to be seen, pointing to the original presence of a raised cellar. Currently, the building sits over a small crawl space, which does not explain the finish. The cellar was likely left behind with the original foundation and chimney when the store was moved.

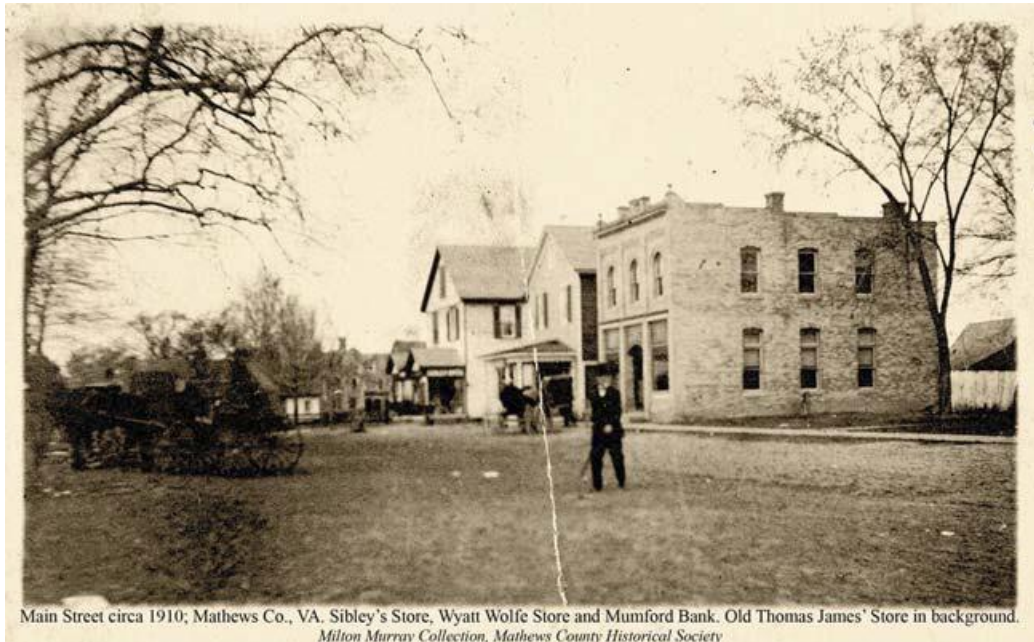
Thomas James Store
Architectural Information

There is little evidence to disprove the relocation of the James Store other than the lack of conclusive evidence to prove that the move did occur. It is possible, though unlikely, that the store was constructed in its present location, set back from Main Street. Although we can be fairly certain that the current east elevation was the front of the building, perhaps the store was separated from Main Street by another building, as it is currently, and faced a small alley or road to the east rather than the main road. It is also possible that Maple Avenue at one time connected Main Street with Buckley Hall Road, making it a shortcut to downtown from the northeastern part of the county. If this was the case, it would have made more sense for the store to face east, because it would be facing the traffic coming southwest into downtown. It is interesting that the foundation of the (current) east front is a continuous brick wall, suggesting that this was indeed the public front, rather than the more utilitarian, spaced brick piers on the remaining three sides. Even so, there is still the lack of chimney evidence in the current foundation to explain, unless the building was simply raised and set on a new foundation after the chimney was removed.

Assuming that the Thomas James Store was relocated at some time after its construction, it is difficult to determine an approximate date for this move. The building's current foundation is fairly early, indicating that the building may have been moved when the antebellum, rear section of Sibley's General Store was constructed in the 1840s. The brick foundation is laid in English bond, which was largely out of favor by 1825, making it possible that the store was moved even before the construction of Sibley's.^[ii] It also cannot be ruled out that the building was moved more than once.

Another major alteration made to the Thomas James Store is the addition of shed-roof wings on the east and west elevations of the building. These were added sometime between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, most likely for additional storage space. After both additions were in place, the weatherboard on the exterior of the building was replaced to create continuous siding between the central building and the wings.

Thomas James Store
Architectural Information



The earliest view of the James Store (seen above to the extreme right) dates between 1900, when Sibley's Store (the left building of the three large structures behind the man crossing the street) was completed, and 1910 when this card was postmarked.

The store underwent a series of smaller alterations, most likely during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, which remodeled the building largely to its present interior form. The staircase from the counting room to the attic was removed, as well as the partition wall between the counting room and the retail room. The walls of the counting room, which had never been plastered, were sheathed in boards. New shelving was added in the retail room at and above counter height. Willie Graham notes that the core of the east shed addition may have been built during this remodel, shifting the main entrance of the building to the south gable door.^[iii] The west shed addition was expanded by four feet c. 1950, concrete slabs poured in both shed additions. The flooring on the first floor of the original building was replaced at some time after its initial move.

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