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December 4, 2008

Graham,

Here is the revised version of the James Store report with cardinal directions revised. Thanks for pointing this out. If you see anything else, don't hesitate to let me know—I want to be sure all is correct. I am also enclosing the CD of photos. Jenn had given it to me earlier, and I forgot to include it.

Please do let me know of further developments.

Best,

Mark

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November 27, 2008

To: Files
From: Mark Wenger
Subject: Thomas James Store – Matthews, Virginia

As part of our consultation on the William Woodruff printing shop in Little Rock, Arkansas (1824), Jennifer Glass and I conducted a survey of the Thomas James Store in Matthews, Virginia. First constructed between 1810 and 1825, it is an important example of the commercial building type prevalent in Virginia during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Because William Woodruff's printing shop was the scene of much retail activity—much as the *Virginia Gazette* office in Williamsburg—commercial architecture of the Federal era is directly relevant to the interpretation of surviving evidence concerning the Arkansas structure.

Arrangements were made with Frank Lansinger to visit the building. As it turned out, Willie Graham of Colonial Williamsburg—and others--had previously surveyed the building. Mr. Lansinger kindly provided a copy of Willie's report and also a floor plan he had done.[1] Based on first-hand observation of the building, Willie concluded that it originally functioned as a store, and to confirm that assertion, he identified several questions needing further study:

- Was there a chimney, and if so, where?
- Was there porch on what was originally the front of the building?
- Was the space supposed to have been the counting room originally plastered?

To produce a plan and assessment suitable to our purposes, it was desirable to resolve all questions relating to the building's layout and interior finish. We visited the site, then, on November 3, 2008, in the company of Frank Lansinger, Graham Hood, Earl Soles, and Dunbar Lawson. The following description of our findings builds on Willie Graham's report of March 3, 2006. The revised plan serves to summarize our findings relative to the building's original layout (Figures [1] and [2]).

The Questions

Chimney

On the north elevation, facing the Maple Street, the bottom weatherboard was off, exposing the sill of the main building. Near the middle of the structure there were two scarfs in this sill, suggesting that the middle third had been inserted at some point. Because chimneys typically interrupt the sill, the inserted piece of sill represented a possible chimney location. If the building really was a store, this point, centered on the gable-end of the supposed counting room, was precisely

where one would expect to find a chimney. Confirming a chimney here would remove any doubt that the building originally functioned as a store.

With permission, three modern floor boards were removed to examine the north sill from the inside. This exposed the two cut ends of the sill where it had abutted the sides of the original chimney. The inside dimension between the ends was 55," indicating the approximate width of the chimney. Moreover, each of the sill's free ends had been chased with a lap mortise to receive the header that trimmed the end of the hearth. The inside to inside dimension between these laps indicates that the hearth was about 56 ¼" wide. The joist that once trimmed the front of the hearth had been replaced. However, looking below the floor and sighting down the existing joist, it was possible to see that both of its ends sat in the drop mortises for the original member. Measuring from back from one of these mortises to the inside face of framing in the north wall gave us the depth of the original hearth--27". The east side of the chimney stood 60" from the inside face of framing, east wall.

There was little time to explore the garret. However, we could see no evidence of a fireplace in the north gable. It is likely then, that the vanished chimney had just one set of shoulders or "weatherings," choking down to the stack just above the garret floor level.

There is no doubting the existence of a chimney on the end wall of the present building, and that chimney confirms the commercial function of this building and the identity of the counting room.

Porch

Based on the absence of shingles in the lower area of the main roof protected by the present sheds, Willie Graham asked whether an early porch might have existed here. The reasoning was that if the lower end of the roof slope had never been shingled, it was because that section had always been protected by a porch roof.

With a ladder and flashlight, it was possible to examine the exposed roof sheathing of the original building. As it turned out, the sheathing just above the eave was early on both slopes, and both areas displayed many nails and nail holes, all deployed in ranks that echoed the vanished shingle courses. It seems, then, that of each slope was originally covered entirely by shingles—there was no porch.

Plaster in the Counting Room

Willie's report left open the question of whether the counting room had been plastered. The walls of the room are presently sheathed, but there can be little doubt that plaster was the *intended* finish on the ceiling and walls alike, for the room had been trimmed out--base, chair board, and window trim—to receive

plaster. Overhead, the joists were hewn and pit-sawn, and above these joists the flooring was gauged and undercut--these unfinished surfaces indicate that the ceiling was to have been be exposed.

The front room was different. There, the joists were planed, their lower edges beaded, and the underside of the flooring was planed smooth—all because the framing over head was to be exposed. Unlike the counting room, moreover, it seems that the sheathing in the retail space is original and was intended from the beginning.

The differing finishes first *envisioned* for the two rooms typified stores in early Virginia—generally the counting room was the better space and so was often plastered, while the retail space was typically sheathed for a flexible shelving installation.

It seems, however, that the original intent to plaster the counting room was not carried out. Today, the walls are covered with bevel-edged sheathing ("cyphered and capped" in early parlance). In the one location where we could look behind this finish (next to the exterior, gable-end doorway) there was no indication of plaster. This makes sense only if the room was never plastered, or if the wall by the doorway was previously wainscoted. The latter possibility is discounted by the presence of a beaded chair board, a type of trim rarely seen in concert with wainscoting. It appears, then, that the counting room was never plastered, and that the present sheathing is the first and only finish applied to the walls of that space.

This sheathing predated the removal of retail/counting room partition, since it stopped at that wall. Later on, when the partition was removed, the resulting void was covered over with a beveled board.

The sheathing on the fireplace wall may be later than that on the other walls, since it covers over the opening where the chimney once stood. Presumably, this finish was installed when the building was moved, leaving the chimney behind. Significantly, the present sheathing copes around the truncated end of the chair board, covering the space formerly occupied by a chimneypiece.

To factor out the complicating changes to this fireplace wall, one board should be removed high up on the adjoining east wall. If no plaster evidence is found behind this board, then we can be confident that there was never plaster in the space.

Another place to look behind the sheathing is on the west wall--in the corner where the stair rose to the upper floor. At present, the sheathing bears no evidence of this stair. If the ascent was by ladder stair, that stair probably didn't interact with the wall. But if the ascent was by a conventional stair, as indicated by Willie Graham, we would expect to find nailing for winders or a landing in this corner, hidden behind the present sheathing. That evidence would probably be sufficient to reconstruct the ascent of the stair.

To summarize, the present in on the walls of the counting room is not original, but no evidence of earlier plaster has been found. Removing two more sheathing boards should allow us to resolve the question of how the counting room was first finished.

Additional Observations

Partition

In the joist above the vanished partition, were two sets of bevel lap mortise, one later set cutting partly into an earlier set. (Figure [3]). Originally, some of these were used for setting the studs of the partition. Though we did not have time to examine the laps closely, it may be that only the later laps were actually used for setting the partition. In any event, the spacing of the studs indicates the width of the doorway, and this was surely basis for the doorway on Willie Graham's plan.

Interior Limewash

At the time the present sheds were added to the building, new siding was applied to the exterior, covering over the counting room door. At the same time, a cleat was nailed over the top edge of this inoperative door to fix it shut.

In recent times, this door was forced partially open, revealing that the limewash that covered the interior of the store is not present the cleat. Clearly, the interior limewash in the counting room is not original. In all likelihood, it was applied when the interior partition was removed, since the finish runs through both spaces and over the cleat that fills the void left by the vanished partition.

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Shelving

Ghosts for shelving were visible on all but the south wall of the building, where the interior sheathing has been removed. On the east wall, these ghosts cross over the cleat installed after the partitions disappeared. At this point at least, the shelving in both rooms post-dates removal of the interior partition—an alteration that made the entire ground floor into retail or storage space. This shelving was still present when the limewash was applied, since all the shelves were outlined by this finish.

It makes sense that the shelving by the old front door would be late—this was the public area of the retail space and so is unlikely to have had shelving in period I.

However, the ghosts on the opposite wall may represent early shelving, since this portion of the room, with its blind wall, was surely behind the counter. It appears that the shelves ended well short of the south wall. Two shelves—one about 33" and another at about 60" above the floor were carried either on ogee brackets or,

more likely, on a straight stanchion. Nail holes in the sheathing show that that at one point the back edge of the bracket or stanchion was two-nailed into the sheathing from both sides.

The shelving in the counting room was probably a later continuation of this first shelving, so the ghost on the rear door showing a shelf about 18" deep, may be indicative of the depth for the earlier shelves in the front room, as well.

Shingles

Early shingles had been reused to shim up the rafter feet of the present sheds. These were square butt shingles, laid with an exposure of about 6 ¾".

Weatherboards

On the exterior of the present east wall, evidence for the original siding was clearly visible in areas where the framing had been exposed. At the top of every weatherboard, debris from inside the wall had accumulated against the upper edge, leaving a kind of "tide line" on the outside face of the stud. The measurement between these lines ranged between 7" and 7 3/8", approximating exposure of the original weather boards.

Window – Counting Room

The counting room window centers, more or less, on the longitudinal dimension of that space—and that has always been its location. Nonetheless, we saw dados for another window sill cut into the cheeks of the adjacent wall cavity, against the vanished partition. It seems that these dados were never used.

The evidence for this involves the method of installing the frames. The jambs of the surviving window frame are simply two planks, each dadoed on the inner face to receive the plank head. To install one of these frames, the carpenter dadoed the studs to receive a sloping plank sill, set his sill in the dados, cut the bottoms of the jambs to fit the sill, and then nailed both jambs directly to the flanking studs. Anywhere there was a window, then, we should see nail holes in the cheeks of the adjoining studs. No such holes are visible above the dados. Clearly, the counting room window was originally intended for the location shown on Willie's plan. During construction, however, he moved it to the present location, cutting a second set of dados to receive the sill.

Window – Retail Space

The window that once lit the retail space is correctly shown on Willie's plan. The northern side of the original opening was framed by a large post, for which the cut-off end still remains in the mortise (this post was cut out and moved northward to its present location to create the present doorway). The

corresponding dado for the opposite end of the sill is still to be seen on the stud that presently trims the south side of the doorway.

The positioning of these windows confirms Willie's conclusion that what is not the east wall of the building is the side that faced the street.

Windows – North Gable

We did not have an opportunity to explore the garret in detail. Willie Graham reports that the space was lit by a pair of windows in the north gable. It now appears that these windows flanked the stack of the chimney.

Ground-Floor Doorway - South Wall

On what is now the south gable-end end of the building a doorway once opened onto the alley, probably as an access for loading goods. It was subsequently destroyed when the opening was enlarged. However, large mortises in the end girt above the present opening reveal the original extent of the original opening. The clear opening seems to have been 41 wide," (shown 36" on the Graham plan), allowing 1 ¼" for the plank jamb linings. It is likely that this was a double-width or "folding" door. One of the doors for this opening may have been reused in the south end of the modern east shed. It too, is a double-sheathed door, but without the beaded edging on the exterior. The door that now occupies the much-enlarge alley doorway may have come from the loft doorway directly above. (Figure [4]).

Garret Doorway – South Gable

Above the alley doorway is a gable door, for which the framed opening was about 62" high. The present door, sill, and linings for head and jamb are modern, but the framed opening is entirely original. This opening was almost certainly used for transferring goods to and from the upper floor which is unfinished and appears to have functioned as a storage space.

Shutters and Doors

The exterior window shutters and doors on the front (east) wall are the originals. They are composed of two laminated layers of sheathing, secured to one another with clinched rosehead nails. To better face the elements, this sheathing is vertical on the exterior and horizontal on the interior. The exterior faces of doors and shutters alike are edged with a beaded piece approximately 2 ¼" wide. The doors and swing on strap hinges hung on driven pintles, and the shutters are hung on H-shaped "side" hinges. (Figures [5] and [6]).

The layers of the door are offset ½" to form rabbets that engage the stops of the door frame and also the rabbet on the opposite door. (Figure [7])

The original back door of the counting room also remains *in situ*. It too is double-sheathed. We were unable to examine the exterior face to determine whether this door also had beaded edging around its perimeter. The door swings on unusually small H-L hinges secured by clinched nails with leather botching behind the heads. It is secured by a large stock lock and staple. This door and that on the east ~~south~~ wall of the retail room were both secured by a wooden bar, set into a pair of closed keepers driven into the jambs. (Figure [8]).

Cellar

It appears that this building originally stood over a raised cellar--the removal of modern flooring revealed that the joists below the retail/counting room floor are limewashed. This makes no sense in the building's present situation, standing over a crawl space.

M.R.W.

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[1] Photo – Matthews Store
[2] Plan – Matthews Store – Original Layout
[3] Bevel Laps for Partition
[4] Photo - Door to Freight Doorway - Matthews
[5] Photo –Front door - Matthews Store
[6] Photo – Window shutter - Matthews Store
[7] Offset sheathing layers – main door.
[8] Photo - Counting Room Door - Matthews Store