

Preservation Efforts to Date

After it was suspected that the Thomas James Store might be architecturally and historically significant, the Mathews Historical Society began the process of research and preservation. The first step taken was to invite Willie Graham, architectural curator for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, to inspect the building. Graham briefly visited the store twice in early 2006, and produced a document describing his findings in March of 2006. He determined that the building was indeed significant, using the physical evidence to deduce its original use as a store, as well as an approximate construction date. Graham declared that the building was architecturally rare, as only a few Southern stores with the same floor plan still existed. He also suggested the probability that the building originally fronted Main Street, and had been moved in the nineteenth century. The Thomas James Store was deemed by Graham to be worth preserving for its architectural and historical significance.

The next major step taken to preserve the Thomas James Store was its nomination and subsequent listing on the Virginia Landmark Register and the National Register of Historic Places. Becky Barnhardt, local historian and archivist for the Mathews Memorial Library, conducted an in-depth record search to construct a history of the store and its original owner, Thomas James. This information, along with the architectural report from Willie Graham, was used to prepare a National Register Nomination for the store. The nomination was accepted, and the Thomas James Store was listed on the Virginia Landmark Register in June 2007, and the National Register of Historic Places in March 2008.

At the time of nomination, the building was owned by Mr. Michael Brown, who held the entire property including Sibley's General Store. After learning of the store's significance, Brown agreed to donate the building to the Mathews County Historical Society on the condition that the building must be relocated from his property. Plans were begun for the building's relocation to a small plot of land next to Tompkins Cottage, the Mathews County Historical Society headquarters. However, in September 2008 Michael Brown sold the property on which the Thomas James Store and Sibley's General Store sit to the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center, finalizing the building's donation to the Historical Society and making relocation unnecessary.

In January 2009, Mark Wenger, architectural historian from Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, and Baker Architects in Williamsburg, asked to inspect the James Store. One of the purposes of Wenger's visit was to answer some of the questions that Willie Graham had raised about the building, including whether the store had ever had a chimney, and whether the counting room was ever plastered. Wenger's visit and subsequent report were very enlightening, as he answered the major questions of the chimney and plaster walls, and made a number of other interesting observations as well. Wenger agreed with Graham that the store had more than likely been moved from its original location.

Also in January 2009, Matthew Webster, architectural conservator with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, visited the Thomas James Store to determine its physical condition and make recommendations regarding its stabilization and future preservation. Webster's observations will be used as a basis for the initial physical preservation of the James Store over the next several years. His recommendations will be detailed in the following section of this report.

Recommendations for the Conservation of the Thomas James Store

Although the Thomas James Store is in relatively good condition for its age, there are a number of issues that must be addressed to prevent any further deterioration of building materials. The following recommendations are based upon observations from a site visit by Matthew Webster, conservator of architecture, and Dr. Carl Lounsbury, senior architectural historian, both of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. These recommendations are for steps to be taken over the next several years to stabilize and conserve the historic fabric of the store.

Drainage

The first and most important step in conserving the Thomas James Store is to improve water drainage on the building's property. Currently, the store sits in a low-lying area with concrete on three sides, which serve to channel rainwater toward the store's foundation. The store has roof gutters on the east and west facades that simply pour water down the sides of the building, adding to the pool of standing water around the foundation. The moisture at the base of the building is wicked up through the brick piers of the foundation, and into the wooden sills and studs of the frame. Some rot has already occurred in the wooden components, and further damage will occur if drainage is not improved. Excess moisture also puts the building at risk for insect, including termite, infestation and damage. In addition to protecting the building's frame, controlling moisture will prolong the life of the historic bricks and mortar that compose the foundation.

To facilitate adequate drainage, it has been recommended to MCHS that shallow trenches be created under the east and west eaves of the building, each connecting to a trench running west to Main Street. A lip should be created on the expanse of blacktop behind Mathews Electronics to the south of the building, which will guide rainwater into one of the trenches to also be carried out to Main Street. I also recommend that an improved gutter system be installed on the building, with downspouts that channel water from the roof into the trenches below. This will reduce the incidence of water flowing down the side of the building, or splashing back from the trench onto the foundation.

A licensed engineer has offered to donate drawings of the proposed drainage solution. To enact this solution, permission will be needed from Mathews County Visitor and Information Center and Mr. and Mrs. Keith Morgan, as the improvements will be undertaken on their properties. In addition, a title search was ordered by the County Administrator on February 25, 2009 to determine the ownership of the easement along Maple Avenue; permission to install the trenches will also be needed from the owner of this easement, the Potomac Supply Corporation. The estimated cost of this project is as yet undetermined.

A drain on all four sides of the building was installed in 2009, courtesy of local member John J. Digges.

Structural Stabilization

Several structural problems were noted during Webster and Lounsbury's inspection of the Thomas James Store. First, when the north wall chimney was removed, presumably when the building was relocated, the gap left in the north sill had to be patched with a piece of replace-

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ment timber. Both the original sill and the insert are now loose. The sill has also suffered from damp rot, which extends to the corners of the north wall. In addition, some of the vertical studs on the north wall have separated from the patched sill, resulting in an unstable wall. Some of the floor joists have separated from the east sill, particularly in the northeast corner of the building. Finally, the foundation has deteriorated, particularly on the north side of the building. At least one of the piers has settled, and many of the bricks and concrete blocks are loose and can be manipulated by hand, indicating severe mortar deterioration.

Henry Schlenk, a local contractor who is familiar with historic buildings and materials, also inspected the James Store and offered solutions to these structural problems. To stabilize the north wall, Schlenk suggested that the brick and concrete block foundation be removed on the north side so that concrete footings can be poured beneath the foundation. A new brick foundation wall would then be laid atop the footings by a mason. It is desirable that the original foundation brick be used to build the new foundation, and that the original mortar mixture be copied as closely as possible. Where the original brick is too deteriorated for reuse, historic brick of a similar color and texture should be used. The new brick foundation would be topped with a moisture barrier, such as a copper sheet, to avoid moisture wicking into the wooden sills through the foundation in the future. A strong salt-treated beam would sit atop the moisture barrier, and the sills would rest atop the beam. Any loose studs would be reattached to the sills using metal-brackets for stability. The floor joists in the northeast corner of the building could be reattached similarly.

If severe damp rot is found on any of the building's original wood components, it should be repaired or patched if at all possible, such as with epoxy or dutchmen, rather than being replaced in whole. Should any wood components need to be replaced, local timber from the same or a similar species of tree would be most desirable to closely match the original historic fabric of the building.

Schlenk provided a rough cost estimate for the above stabilization treatments, with the warning that the actual cost could vary quite a bit once work begins and it becomes clear exactly what must be done or replaced for the most secure stabilization. His estimate for stabilizing the north wall is \$2000-\$3000, plus an additional \$600 to remove the floorboards and stabilize the joists in the northeast corner.

See Preservation 2010 Report below.

Salt Infestation

The ceiling boards of the retail room were at one time soaked in brine solution, as the attic of the store appears to have been used to hang cured meat. This has created a salt outgrowth on both the top surface of the boards (the floor of the attic, where it is particularly thick), and the bottom surface (the ceiling above the ground floor, particularly on the south end of the building). The salt could expedite deterioration of the wood, and should be carefully removed when the interior of the building is cleaned. To do so, both the top and bottom of the ceiling boards will need to be brushed and vacuumed. Henry Schlenk estimated that this process would cost approximately \$600.

Exterior Siding

The exterior weatherboard siding on the Thomas James Store is deteriorating in places, most noticeably on the north wall of the building. Some of the wood has been softened by damp rot, causing sagging, cracking, and general weakness. The weatherboards must be repaired or pieced together where possible, with some lengths needing full replacement. Henry Schlenk's cost estimate for repairing and replacing the siding on the north wall alone is \$1600 plus the cost of any replacement lumber. Once the weatherboard siding has been repaired, it is recommended that the building's exterior paint be touched up as necessary rather than being stripped and repainted.

See Preservation 2010 Report below.

Other Recommendations

Matthew Webster and Carl Lounsbury made several other recommendations for the conservation of the Thomas James Store. All original ironwork in the building, such as hinges, latches, and staples, should be treated to avoid any further corrosion. The eastern double doors, each being held by only one remaining unbroken hinge, should be removed to relieve the stress on that hinge. The broken hinges should be repaired if possible before the doors are rehung. The exterior door on the west wing must be repaired so that it can be effectively locked; an estimate from Henry Schlenk priced this adjustment at \$75-\$100. Given that it is currently indeterminate whether there is any active insect infestation, any areas that appear affected should be treated with borate injections.

Goals for the Future of the Thomas James Store

Much has already been done to facilitate the preservation and future use of the Thomas James Store; yet, much remains to be done in order to fully utilize the building. The short- and long-term goals for the store can be placed under three major headings: preservation, ownership, and public interpretation. There is funding available in the form of grants and loans, both public and private, that may facilitate MCHS's goals for the James Store. A list of possible funding opportunities, provided by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, is included in [here](#).

Preservation

The conservation goals for the Thomas James Store are discussed in detail in the previous section. It is in the best interest of the store that the aforementioned treatments, including drainage improvements, structural stabilization, salt removal, exterior weatherboard repair, iron conservation, door repair, and insect control, be carried out in the near future. Stabilization of the building occurred during 2010. See Preservation 2010 Report below.

In addition to conservation treatments, the preservation of the James Store, and indeed the process of obtaining funding, as well as the public interpretation of the store, could be enhanced by an expanded knowledge of the history of the building and its owners. Because most of the Mathews County records were burned during the Civil War, little information about the store and

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its original owner, Thomas James, has been found in the historic record. Becky Barnhardt, local historian and archivist for the Mathews Memorial Library, has done a wonderful job of searching the records that are available locally and compiling a report on her findings. She has been asked to continue her search by examining records available outside of Mathews and fleshing out her report on the history of the store. The estimated cost of this commission is \$1500.

In the long term, it is strongly recommended that MCHS commission a professional Historic Structure Report on the James Store. Such a report would contain an extremely thorough examination of the building's physical attributes and condition, as well as a detailed history of the store and its owners. It would also include graphic documentation of the building, such as photographs and measured drawings. In the case of the Thomas James Store, dendrochronology would be an important part of the examination and report as a method of determining a construction date for the building. A Historic Structure Report is an expensive endeavor, but a very worthwhile one, as it can propose detailed schemes and goals for the appropriate method of treatment, as well as serving as a guide for future alterations and maintenance. Having such well-defined goals can be a starting point for obtaining grants and other funding needed to complete the treatments recommended in the report, and for the long-term maintenance of the property. The cost of a Historic Structure Report on the Thomas James Store, as estimated by Mark Wenger of Mesick, Cohen, Wilson, and Baker Architects, would be approximately \$31,600 including dendrochronology.

Ownership

The original intent for the future of the Thomas James Store was to relocate it to a plot of county owned land next to Tompkins Cottage. The move would have involved the removal of the building's east and west wings in order to fit the store into the proposed space; additionally, the building would only fit onto the property with its gable end facing the street. Furthermore, the roof would have been removed and replaced during the move, resulting in the damage of some original historic material. The relocation was approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources when the land containing the James Store was owned by Mr. Michael Brown, and it appeared that the only alternative to moving the building was its destruction.

With the sale of Michael Brown's property to the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center, MCHS was given permission to leave the James Store on MCVIC's property indefinitely. Given that the alternative to moving the building was no longer destruction, it became desirable to let the James Store remain in the position in which it had stood for over 100 years. Moving the store in the light of this new development would risk not only the loss of historic materials and context, but the loss of the store's National Register of Historic Places listing as well, which would limit funding opportunities in the future.

On March 18, 2009, MCHS conclusively decided to leave the Thomas James Store in its current location rather than moving it to the Tompkins Cottage site. The goal now is to determine future ownership of the building. One option is to consider transferring ownership of the store to Mathews County. Another would be to transfer the building to MCVIC, in an effort to share the cost of maintenance and the interpretation duties for the store. A third option is for MCHS to retain ownership of the store, and explore with MCVIC the possibility of either a long-term lease or the purchase of the land upon which it sits.

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Mathews County Historical Society purchased the land on which Thomas James Store stands from Mathews County Visitor and Information Center in 2011.

Interpretation

A very important long-term goal for MCHS, second to stabilizing and repairing the building, is determining how the Thomas James Store should be interpreted to the public. The store is significant to the history of Mathews County, and should be available for viewing by both Mathews County residents taking an interest in their county's history and tourists alike. Its physical and historical relationship to Sibley's General Store, the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center headquarters, will boost the number of visitors to the store, so it would be wise to link the interpretation of the James Store with that of Sibley's. Indeed, if interpreted and marketed correctly, the store may generate increased tourism in the county. The first step to determining a method of interpretation is deciding on a general method of treatment for the building; specifically, whether the store will be preserved or restored to its condition at a particular time period. Preservation would entail stabilizing the building, repairing it as needed, and cleaning it in preparation for display. Restoration, on the other hand, would require a more in-depth study of the building's evolution over time. Once a specific date has been chosen for the store to be restored to, all features of the building would be returned to their appearance at that date. For the James Store, the most significant date might be around 1820, when the building was relatively new and run as a store by Thomas James. To restore the building to its 1820 appearance, the east and west wings would be removed, the interior wall partition and staircase to the attic would be reinstated, as well as the counters and wall shelving.

My recommendation for the James Store would be to preserve the store as-is rather than attempting to restore it. There are a number of reasons that I make this recommendation; first, current historic preservation ethics call for preservation over restoration where appropriate. Restoration would introduce new materials into the fabric of the building, and would destroy features that may not be original, but have gained historic significance over time, such as the east and west wings of the building. Preservation, on the other hand, would retain the significance of the building's evolution over time. Second, restoration should only be undertaken when the alterations made to the building to return it to its previous appearance can be deemed absolutely historically accurate; there should never be any assumptions or guesswork involved. In the case of the James Store, we can determine the location of many previous features, but the lack of documentary evidence makes some features speculative at this point. For example, we cannot be certain of when the wings, interior partition, and staircase were removed, and it would take a great deal of investigation to determine these dates, if even possible at all. In addition, a restoration would be much more expensive than simple preservation, and may be cost prohibitive for MCHS. Finally, preserving the building rather than restoring it will allow for a much broader and richer interpretation of the store. If the store is restored, its interpretation would relate mainly to the time period to which it was restored. The building would be displayed as an artifact of that time period, with some insight into the history of commerce in the county at that time. On the other hand, if preserved, the building could relate the history of commerce in the county, while also relating the architectural evolution of the store over 200 years and simultaneously the evolution of commerce and social history in Mathews. The store could also be used to educate visitors regarding the process of preserving the building.

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One method of interpretation that has been suggested by Pam Schenian and Randolph Turner of the Virginia Commonwealth Department of Historic Resources is computerized virtual interpretation. Virtual interpretation is undoubtedly the best choice for the Thomas James Store, particularly if MCHS decides to preserve the store rather than restore it. Visual and computerized tours and lectures are a great way to reach out to modern audiences from today's computerized age. They can prove to be much more powerful than a spoken guided tour and, although requiring a substantial amount of start-up funding to create the virtual program and visuals and to install the technological equipment, would not require that trained tour guides be available. It would afford audiences a glimpse of the building's historical appearance in a more cost-effective way than restoration.

My suggestion is that the building be altered as little as possible beyond stabilization and repairs, with new interior furnishings or artifacts introduced after careful consideration, relying mainly on a virtual tour in the form of a video and a few visuals for interpretation. The virtual tour could be available both in the James Store for visitors, and also on a website for remote touring. The tour would include 3-D graphic images of the store as it evolved over the years, including animated scenes of daily business between the shopkeeper and customers. It would explain and illustrate each major change to the store or its history, such as the removal of a wall or a change in ownership or building use. The audio of the tour would dictate not only the history of the store, its owners, and its functions, but also provide an overview of commercial history in Mathews County and the part played by the Thomas James Store in commercial and social history. Finally, the tour video could conclude with a summary of the methods used to preserve the building so that it can be viewed for generations to come. The virtual tour could be complemented with 2-D visuals strategically placed around the building, with drawings and explanations of certain features. The Matthew Jones House on Mulberry Island in Newport News is an example of a historic building nearby that uses a similar form of digital interpretation. The Matthew Jones House also educates visitors about the architectural features of the building via 2-D visuals, which might be an option for the Thomas James Store as well.

Pam Schenian recommended a couple of consulting firms that have experience in creating virtual tours. The first is Versar in Springfield, Virginia (703-750-3000); the other is Proviz Professional Visualization Services in Richmond, Virginia (804-591-2631). The creation of an animated 3-D virtual tour can be costly, so it may be wise to search for a local or independent consultant to lower the cost. Ms. Schenian also suggested that MCHS might be able to find a high school or college student willing to take on the project as an internship.

Since the Thomas James Store is historically linked with Sibley's General Store, it would be most effective for the stores to be linked in their interpretation so that guests can experience the stores together for a fuller grasp on the evolution of commerce and commercial architectural styles in the area. Sibley's is already a key destination for many tourists in Mathews County, as it houses the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center. MCVIC's plan for the future of Sibley's is to use the main building fronting Main Street as a visitor's center and gift shop, and the rear c.1840 building as a museum to tell the story of the general store and of Mathews County. According to Rebecca Grow, historic Mathews County artifacts will be on display, and possibly an exhibit showcasing Mathews family history. MCVIC and MCHS could work together to ensure that the interpretive information in Sibley's flows into that in the James Store. For example, Ms. Grow indicated that MCVIC was interested in obtaining an information kiosk for Sibley's. This could be placed in the General Store so that visitors encounter it upon entering the

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building, and it would contain an introductory overview of the history of the store complex and of the development of commerce in Mathews County. The General Store could also have interpretive materials regarding the history of Sibley's from its construction in 1899; since the building remains largely as it was in the early twentieth century, this could be exhibited easily with 2-D materials such as photographs and drawings.

Visitors would then walk through to the rear c.1840 building, which would house MCVIC's memorabilia and family history exhibits. To tie it in with the other two stores, the interpretation of the stores as a complex or district would continue in this building with materials describing Mathews commerce in the second half of the nineteenth century. This could be done in the form of informational plaques and drawings, or an animated 3-D video similar to that proposed for the Thomas James Store. Once more information is found on the history of the c.1840 store, drawings or 3-D renderings of its historic appearance can be incorporated into the exhibit. If MCHS and MCVIC wish to highlight the evolution of architectural features in the three commercial buildings over time as well, plaques could be placed strategically in each store to point out and explain the features, materials, and construction methods typical to each time period.

Finally, visitors will exit through the rear of Sibley's and enter the Thomas James Store, which would be interpreted virtually so that visitors can see how the building physically changed over the years. All three stores will be opened and closed each day by the volunteer stationed in the Visitor Center. In this way, visitors are effectively walking back in time, following the evolution of commerce and commercial architecture in Mathews County from the twentieth century, to the mid-nineteenth century, to the early nineteenth century. A pamphlet printed with supplemental information could also be available to visitors when they enter Sibley's to aid in the interpretation of the stores as a unified district.

There are many other ways that MCHS and MCVIC could join forces to aid in the interpretation and promotion of the Thomas James Store and Sibley's. Since MCVIC's "Visit Mathews" website is probably the best source of information for potential visitors, MCHS could aid MCVIC in expanding the section of the website that deals with historic sites. Currently, neither Sibley's nor the Thomas James Store is included. Perhaps the website could include a map of Mathews County, with historic sites marked and some brief information about the history of each site, whether it is open to the public, and the hours that it is open. Another method of interpreting the stores is to apply for and sponsor a Virginia Historical Highway Marker printed with a brief history of the Thomas James Store and Sibley's. Finally, living history interpretation is a fun and very informative activity. Although it is not practical to have costumed interpreters in the stores at all times, MCVIC and MCHS could host interpretive activities at certain times of the year when a high volume of visitors are likely to be present, such as during the annual Mathews Market Days festival. Each of the stores could have interpreters dressed from that store's prominent era present to speak with visitors and demonstrate the daily activities involved in running a store during that era.

Museum-type lighting and comprehensive labels for self-guided tours were introduced into the building in 2012-2013, without any intrusion into, or sacrifice of, original elements. Facilities for physically handicapped visitors were also made available.

Conclusions

The Thomas James Store is one of the most significant examples of historic architecture in Mathews County. Not only is it architecturally significant for its age and rarity, but it is locally important for the story it tells of the history of commerce in Mathews County. The building, though altered several times over the years, still retains much of its original historic fabric and is in surprisingly good condition for its age. Historians such as Randolph Turner from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources have referred to the James Store as "a gem," and have praised the Mathews County Historical Society for the steps they have already taken to preserve the building. However, there is still much to be done to ensure that the building survives in the decades to come, and many decisions to be made regarding its future use. With further investigation and research, local support, and financial assistance from public and private grants, the James Store will continue to teach us much about its history far into the future.

Preservation 2010 Report

Thomas James Store Structural Stabilization, May-August 2010

Work on the original building focused on the east and north walls. On the east wall, floor joists that had separated from the sill (fig. 1) were rejoined, using least invasive methods and treated lumber material (fig. 2).



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North wall foundations had subsided and were disintegrating due to lengthy moisture problems (fig.3). The central brick pier was removed and cement footings poured (fig. 4).





Since the original sill had been cut to fit either side of the original brick chimney, and lacked a central support, a brick wall (consisting of old, local brick, identical in size and color to bricks in the northwest-corner pier, with period-type mortar) was built between the two corner piers (fig. 5). Remnants of the original sill were laid on the brick wall – with a copper sheet moisture barrier – and a treated lumber section shaped at each end and placed between them (fig. 6). Wall joists were strengthened with treated lumber extensions, the whole secured by a new 2x8 treated board placed on its side on the wall (fig. 7).

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Long-term plans call for future interpretive/public use of the east and west “wings,” so the “**envelope building**” had also to be stabilized. All sills were extensively worm-eaten or rotted (having been laid on the ground, the cement slabs poured inside them), and had to be replaced (figs. 8; 9; 10; 11).



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As much of the old (but not original) siding as it was possible to keep was retained, though virtually all of the north wall siding was rotten, much of it crumbling in the hands (fig. 12).

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The 1950s west wall treatment (much of it rotten) was replaced by boards and a period-style board door (fig. 13). The west wing had been widened for this addition. This was strengthened (fig. 14).

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At the south end of the west wall of the original structure, the original siding had been cut and removed, being replaced by later boards (fig. 15). These were removed and an opening left for future people circulation within the building.

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The rare ironwork survivals in the building were treated *in situ*, (for example, fig. 16) by Richard M. Guthrie, who also fabricated exact reproductions of the original lower hinges and pintels on the original front doors – rusted through and broken (fig. 17). Detritus residue on the inner, hinge edge of these doors seemed to indicate a prior flooding level (fig. 18).

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Salt efflorescence on the ceiling (fig. 19) was lightly brushed off, and the dirt on the attic floor, mixed with grease from curing hams, which had been hung from the collar ties (fig. 20) was vacuumed up.

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All new exterior siding was primed and the whole building painted (figs. 21; 22; 23; 24).



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For the above work, local artisans Bobby Stewart Sr. (far left), Henry Schlenk (second from right), and Hirbry Payton Jr. (far right) were joined by former Colonial Williamsburg master blacksmith Richard M. Guthrie (fig.25).

In the fall of 2009, a drain was installed around the entire building (most visible in figs. 23 and 24). The building is now registered as an archaeological site with the Commonwealth of Virginia's Department of Historic Resources.

Report by Graham Hood, October 2010.

* There is a more complete photographic coverage of the stabilization project, with an accompanying list in the Archives of the Mathews County Historical Society, housed in the Archives of Mathews Memorial Library.