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Uncovering Pieces of a Puzzle: The Lowe House Dependency

FRANK J. NOLA, JR., AIA

The following article has been adapted by the Quarterly editors from the Lowe House Dependency Preservation Planning Study. The study, prepared by Frank J. Nola, Jr., AIA, was commissioned by the University of Alabama in Huntsville Foundation and was funded by a grant from the Alabama Historical Commission, with matching funds provided by the UAH Foundation. The study sought to illuminate the historical and architectural significance of a rare survivor from Huntsville's antebellum period, and to investigate the feasibility of renovation, restoration and adaptive re-use planning to accommodate the current needs of the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

INTRODUCTION

The centerpiece of the Lowe property at 210 Williams Street is an outstanding early 20th-century mansion built in the "chateausque" style. When it was completed in 1902, the house introduced to Huntsville a modest example of a style of architecture typically associated with America's scions of commerce, the Vanderbilts and the Astors. The residence is an essay in the *belle époque* excess of turrets, grand stairs and Tiffany-style stained glass. Presenting a sharp contrast to this mansion is a mysteri-

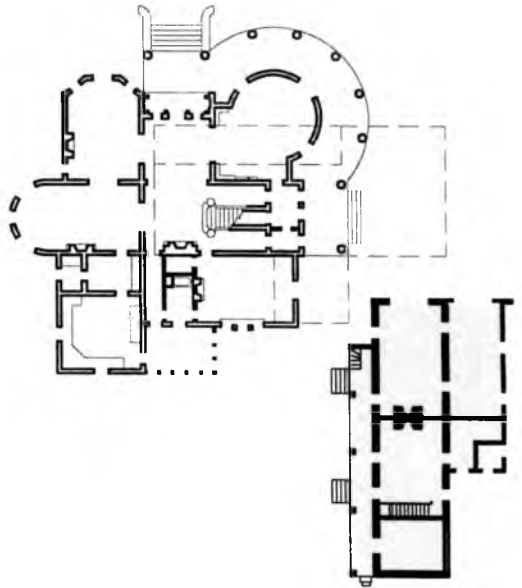
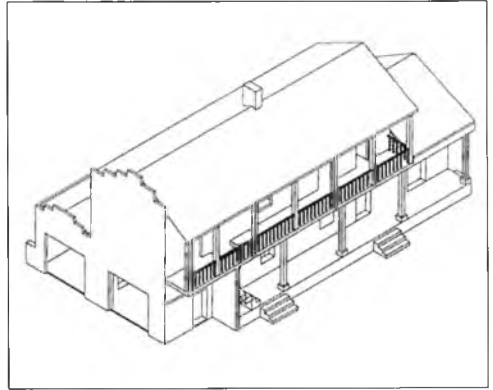


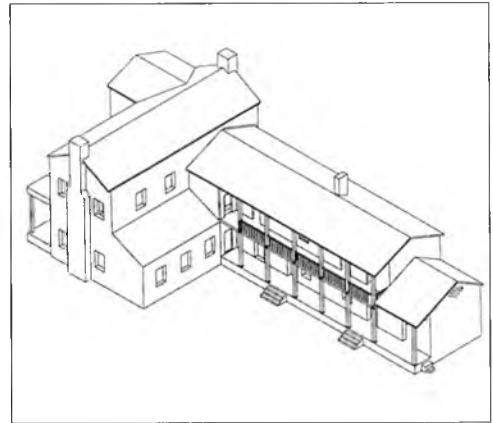
Diagram showing placement of surviving 19th-century structure relative to the 1902 house

ous structure standing immediately to its southeast. A remnant of an impressive early 19th-century residence, the structure is a link to Huntsville's earliest years, when the city was a collection of impermanent buildings, coexisting with a handful of elegant brick structures constructed in the Federal style. Once part of the everyday life of a large antebellum residence, the Lowe House "dependency" offers a unique, if puzzling, insight into Huntsville's early 19th-century domestic architecture.

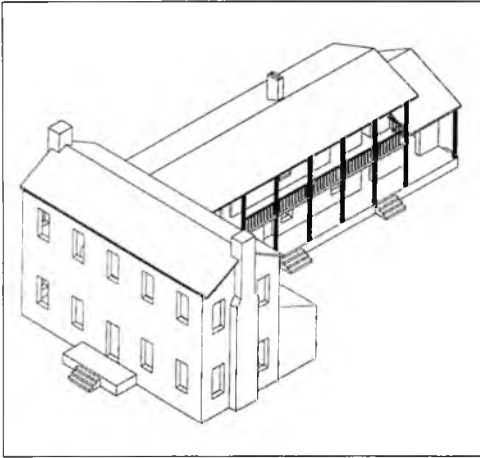
The two-story service building is clearly the one shown on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps dating from 1894, as well as the 1871 "birds-eye view" of Huntsville, and the 1861 map of the city that was published by Hartley and Drayton of Louisville. The moulding shapes, joinery, tool marks and other abundant clues indicate that this gabled brick building dates from about 1820 to 1830, much earlier than the present main house. (Evidence of an earlier house's presence on the site of the 1902 mansion was observed in a 1998 inspection of the Fletcher-Lowe property by the late Harvie Jones. Jones found large ax-hewn and hand-sawn timbers among the attic framing of the present house, which he judged to have been salvaged from an earlier dwelling. He also found evidence that parts of the foundation walls of the present basement have been used before.)



Three-dimensional diagram of structure as it appears today



Conjectural diagram, based on 1894 Sanborn map, showing relationship of wing to main house

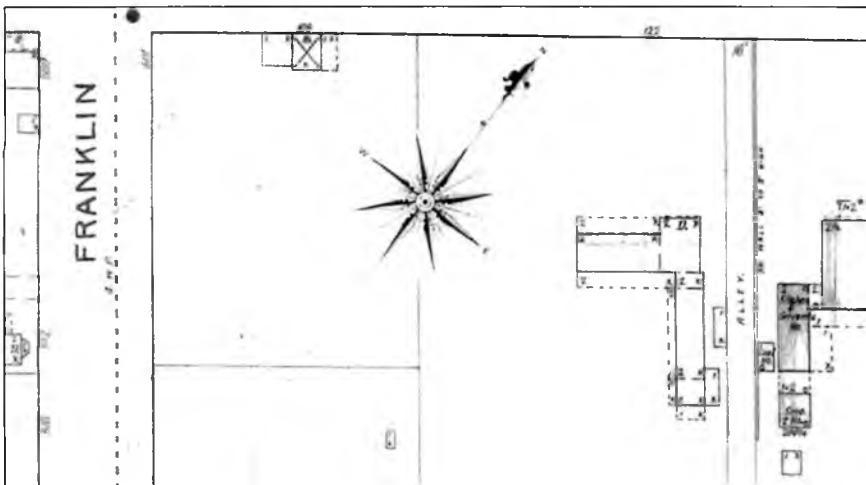


Conjectural diagram of main house as originally constructed

a “two-over-two” I-house plan with central stair hall and a symmetrical front. Historical research indicates the house was built between 1817 and 1820, placing it among a handful of large brick residences that immediately followed the con-

The situation of the structure—sitting several feet apart from the house—has prompted it to be thought of as a dependency. But with 19th-century maps and physical evidence indicating that the building was an “L” attached to the original main house, it may be more accurate to think of it as a remaining “fragment” of the early 19th-century residence that occupied the site until about 1900.

That early main house appears to have been typical for the period, probably



1894 Sanborn map showing Fletcher-Lowe house

struction of the first permanent residence in Huntsville, LeRoy Pope's Poplar Grove, built in 1814. It seems likely that the "L" attachment was a later addition to the original house. The pattern of development in other extant structures suggests that houses developed incrementally, corresponding to growth in prosperity and family size. Stylistically, the structure suggests pre-1830 construction. The south room of the building is a complete intact smokehouse, whose location as part of a wing attached to the main house was typical of 19th-century domestic building arrangements. Except for a small one-story garage that was added on the east side of the structure in the 20th century, and the north room of the building that was converted into a garage at that time, this rare survivor of a Federal Period service building remains virtually intact.



Southwest view showing smokehouse at left. One-story addition with parapet was added about 1950

Physical evidence that the "L" wing was attached to the main house includes removed floor joists and two former door openings in the wing's north wall. The upper portion of this present masonry wall was clearly prepared for plastering, and a large area of plaster can be observed immediately around the corner on the east side. The 1871 aerial view also suggests that the roof of the surviving structure connected below the cornice line of the demolished main house, which would be consistent with the likelihood of much taller ceiling heights in the main house. Ceiling heights in the surviving building are approximately 10 feet on each floor.

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THE NORTH ELEVATION

The **north elevation** [see page 38] features a **stepped parapet** treatment on the gabled end wall facing Williams Avenue. The one-story portion is a 20th-century



Detail of stepped parapet with sandstone coping. The parapet was probably constructed when the main part of the Federal-style house was removed. The sandstone coping material is possible salvage from the main house.

garage addition. The garage bay was probably added at the same time. Construction evidence suggests that the floor elevation of the north room of the original structure was approximately 30 inches higher, and that the room was divided into two rooms, as evidenced by a masonry wall removed on the second floor.

It seems likely that the unusual stepped parapet on the north wall was constructed following demolition of the main house, around 1900. A change in masonry technique makes for a clear horizontal demarcation in the north wall where the parapet was likely added to create a satisfactory resolution to this wall once the main house was removed. The parapet configuration is similar in appearance and construction to that of a neighboring dependency at the circa 1825 Mastin House at 310 Williams Avenue. The Lowe wing's sandstone coping materials were most likely salvaged

from the demolished portion of the main residence. Evidence of such salvage is found at several locations in the “L,” as well as in the present garden and throughout the 1902 house. It’s likely that the Mastin House dependency’s early 19th-century parapet served as the model for the Lowe outbuilding renovation undertaken about 1900. But while the coping on the subject wall is hand-cut sandstone, what is missing from this stepped parapet treatment is the corbeling to conceal the cornice of the building. Such corbeling is present at the Mastin House structure, the Fountain Branch Carter House in Franklin, Tennessee, and Wakefield in Florence, Alabama.

The north wall’s appearance seems to have been altered again sometime after the 1900 remodeling. This is suggested by the asymmetrical configuration of the parapet, which seems inconsistent with the obvious intent to provide a



Top: End wall parapet, Wakefield, ca. 1835, Florence, Alabama

Middle: End wall parapet, Carter House, ca. 1830, Franklin, Tennessee

Bottom: End wall parapet, Mastin House dependency, 310 Williams Street, ca. 1825

more formal elevation facing Williams Street. Further, there is clear evidence that the northwest corner of the structure was reconstructed when a portion of the wall was removed. This would explain the makeshift and awkward structural bracket and lattice wall that terminates the upper gallery, and the later masonry wall, with crude workmanship and wirecut brick, that terminates the lower gallery. As originally constructed, the building corner would have been only a short distance

from the present 1902 residence. A portion of the wall was probably demolished to allow a vehicle to pass more easily between the buildings. This work might have been done in the 1920s when the garage structure, now demolished, was added behind the smokehouse.

THE GALLERIES

The upper and lower galleries on the west side of the building appear to be original. With no internal doorway between rooms, the galleries serve as the only means of circulation to the rooms of the “L.” The **upper gallery** is supported by seven slender round columns with no bases and primitive capitals suggesting the Doric order. Although highly attenuated, the columns are turned with entasis, and were conceived with an obvious aesthetic intention. Two of the columns are replacements. Between the columns is a unique railing system without surviving precedent in the area. A cambered top rail, with elliptical profile, spans from column to column, and is mortised into the column shaft. Vertical pickets at 5 inches on center are mortised into the bottom of the rail, and into the floor itself,



Detail of upper gallery column, modified Doric style capital with filleted neck

with no bottom rail. The railing in the northernmost bay is of later construction and probably filled an opening left when the upper gallery on the south side of the main house was removed. The ceiling of the upper gallery is plaster.

The **lower gallery** appears considerably less intact than the upper gallery. As noted earlier, the lower gallery was shortened approximately six feet, probably in the 1920s, about the time a new garage was built. The primary architectural feature of the lower gallery is a group of four round Ionic columns and a square Ionic pilaster. (One column was recently removed because of decay and is in storage in the smoke-house.) The use of Ionic columns is no doubt the result of some salvage operation. With numerous examples of architectural salvage found throughout the property, it is likely that these columns were formerly located on the front porch of the main house. Aside from their stylistic inappropriateness, two other clues point to their probable relocation from another structure. First, the columns are of insufficient length to span from the floor to the beam above and had to be raised on short brick plinths. Second, the spacing in relation to the spacing of columns above is uneven. Only one lower column aligns with a column above. What appears to have generated the lower spacing is a sandstone coping, also probably salvaged from the original house. Upon inspection, it is obvious that the stone was modified when relocated. This sandstone coping was specially



Detail of exterior stair at lower level gallery. Components appear to be re-assembled from previous construction.



Detail at top of stairs, upper gallery



Ionic column at lower gallery

shaped to accommodate the column bases. The lower gallery column spacing thus corresponds to the stone coping and not to the columns above.

The floor of the lower gallery is early 19th-century brick laid in a herringbone pattern. The floor-to-wall joint is articulated with what appears to be a Federal Period baseboard, with a simple beaded profile at the top. The stairs at the north end of the gallery would have been reconstructed when the gallery was shortened. The stairs are constructed of early 19th-century stair components reassembled for their new location.

THE ROOMS

Lower Level

The **lower level north room** was converted into a garage sometime in the mid-20th century. Evidence of a masonry wall removed from the space above confirms that this was originally two rooms. The level of the hearth suggests that the floor level was lowered approximately 30 inches. [see page 30]

The **lower level south room** is approximately 22 feet by 16 feet. Window and door trim is typical of the Federal Period, with an elegantly profiled backband

combined with a flat beaded casing. The fireplace mantel has been removed, but the brick hearth remains, fashioned in a pattern typical of the early 19th century, although the bricks appear to be machine made and of much later manufacture. Two



The only surviving mantel is in the lower level north room. The floor level of the room was lowered approximately 30 inches when it was converted to a garage.

architectural features of the room appear to be salvaged from another structure. One is the staircase, which connects this space to the upper gallery. Its components are awkwardly cut, suggesting that it once was installed elsewhere on the property. The other feature is a fragment of a Federal Period cupboard with raised panel doors that is located under the staircase. The panel configuration suggests that the cupboard was installed upside down.

The **smokehouse** is approximately 17 feet by 14 feet and retains its dirt floor and blackened roof framing. It appears to have been used as storage once it stopped being used for its original purpose. The south gable wall contains two sets of diamond-patterned ventilation holes in the masonry. A third set is at the top of the east elevation. This ventilation method was designed to retain smoke inside the smokehouse, allowing it to dissipate slowly out the vent holes in the masonry. [see pages 33, 34]

Upper Level

That the **upper level north room** more than likely connected through two doorways to the main house is evidenced by the filled-in doorways on the north wall. The room was originally approximately 17 feet by 15 feet. It contains its original Federal Period trim on the east, north and



Typical Federal window and door casing. This profile is found in all rooms except the upstairs center room and the smokehouse.



Doors throughout the structure are mixed and matched from different styles and periods. Most have been modified to fit their openings and were probably salvaged from the original house. Not shown here, the plank door of the smokehouse appears to be original.

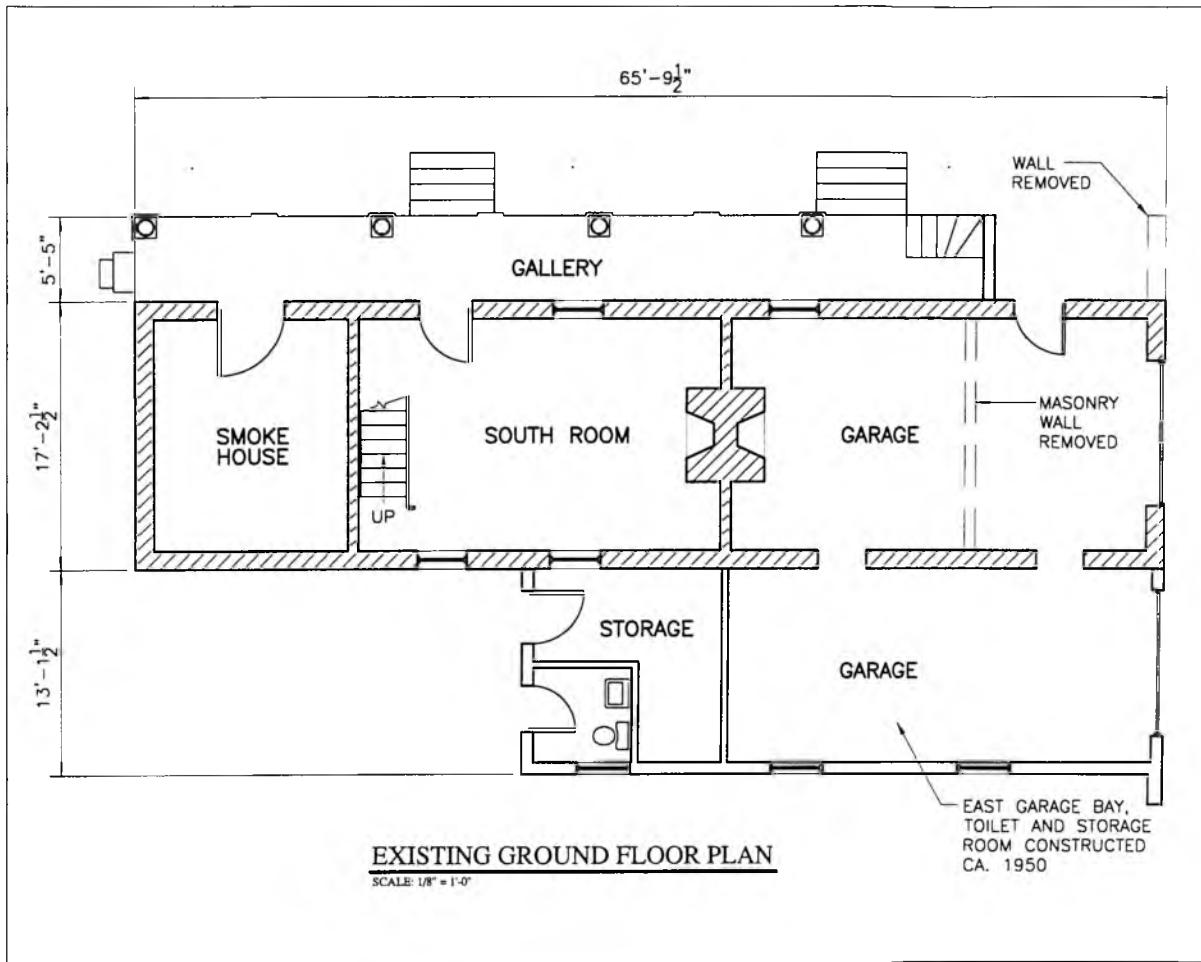
west walls. The south wall was probably removed in the 20th century when the rooms below were converted to a garage. With the south wall gone, the room now incorporates the original “center” room, which was approximately 17 feet by 17 feet. [see page 31] The center room’s east, south and west walls retain a later (circa 1845) Grecian trim. The south wall of the center room retains the original masonry firebox, although the mantel was removed sometime in the 20th century and installed in the 1902 house. The mantel removal is evidenced by the survival of a 1902 mantel now stored in the basement of the Lowe House and a Federal Period mantel installed in an upstairs hall there.

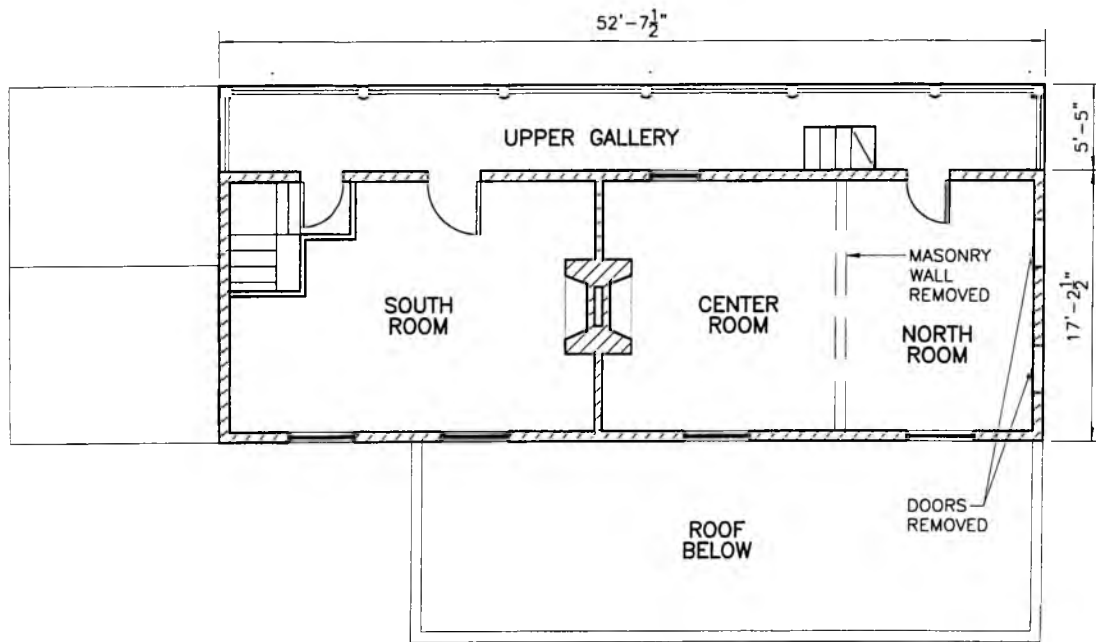
The **upper level south room** retains its original Federal Period trim and its masonry firebox, which backs up to the masonry firebox of the center room. The upper level south room is also missing its original mantel. The room is approximately 22 feet by 17 feet, with a cut-out for a dog-leg staircase that rises from the lower level south room on to the upper level gallery. While it isn't known when this staircase was added or where the salvaged materials came from, it is clear from the empty mortises and lack of trim around the staircase in the upper level south room that the staircase is not original to the structure.

Even with its lengthy history of varied remodelings and adaptations, the Lowe House dependency has survived as an important piece of the 19th-century fabric that is now the Twickenham Historic Preservation District. The building's history parallels much of the city's, making it especially important that it be kept safe from destruction or further inappropriate alterations. With the 2001 inauguration of the Lowe House for use by the president of the University of Alabama in Huntsville, UAH established a significant presence in the heart of Huntsville's social, cultural, business, and government center. An institution founded in support of the city's burgeoning technology industry, the university is now undertaking stewardship of an historic property. The resultant blend of technology excellence and historical focus enhances the university's stature and further enriches Huntsville's unique and intriguing character.



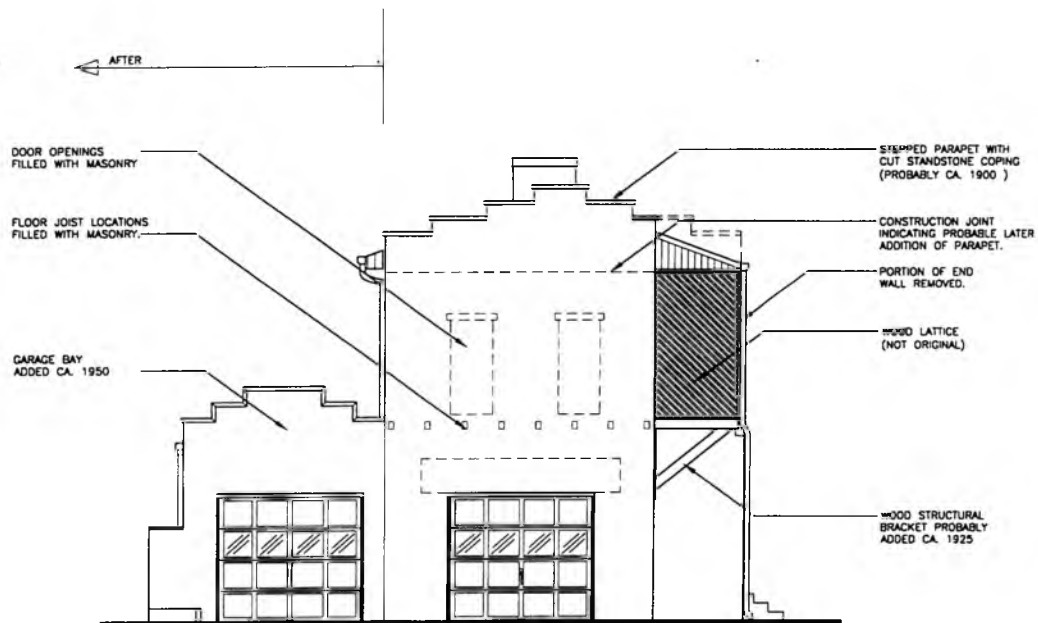
Detail of boxed eave at west side of structure. The ogee gutter and corrugated downspouts are recent additions





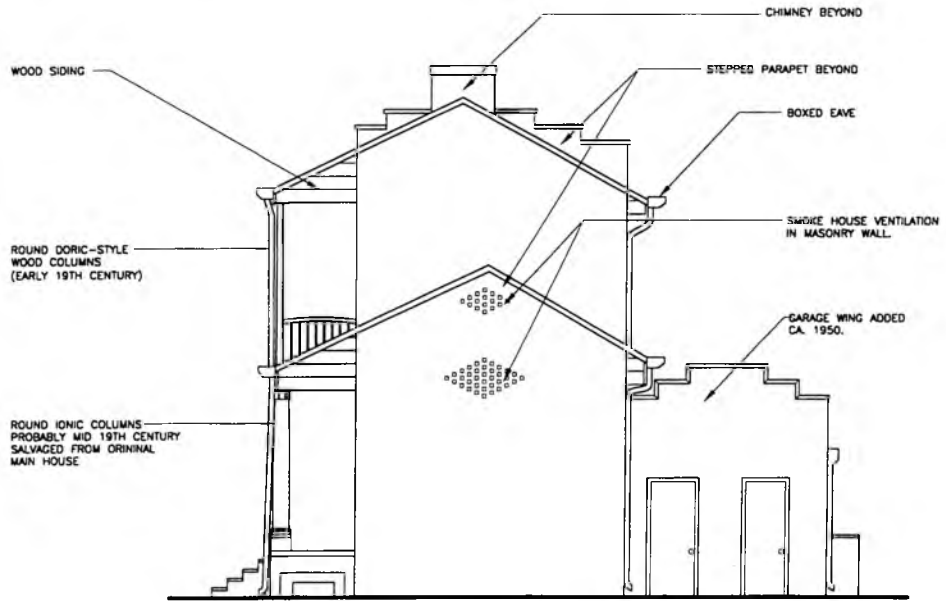
EXISTING UPPER FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



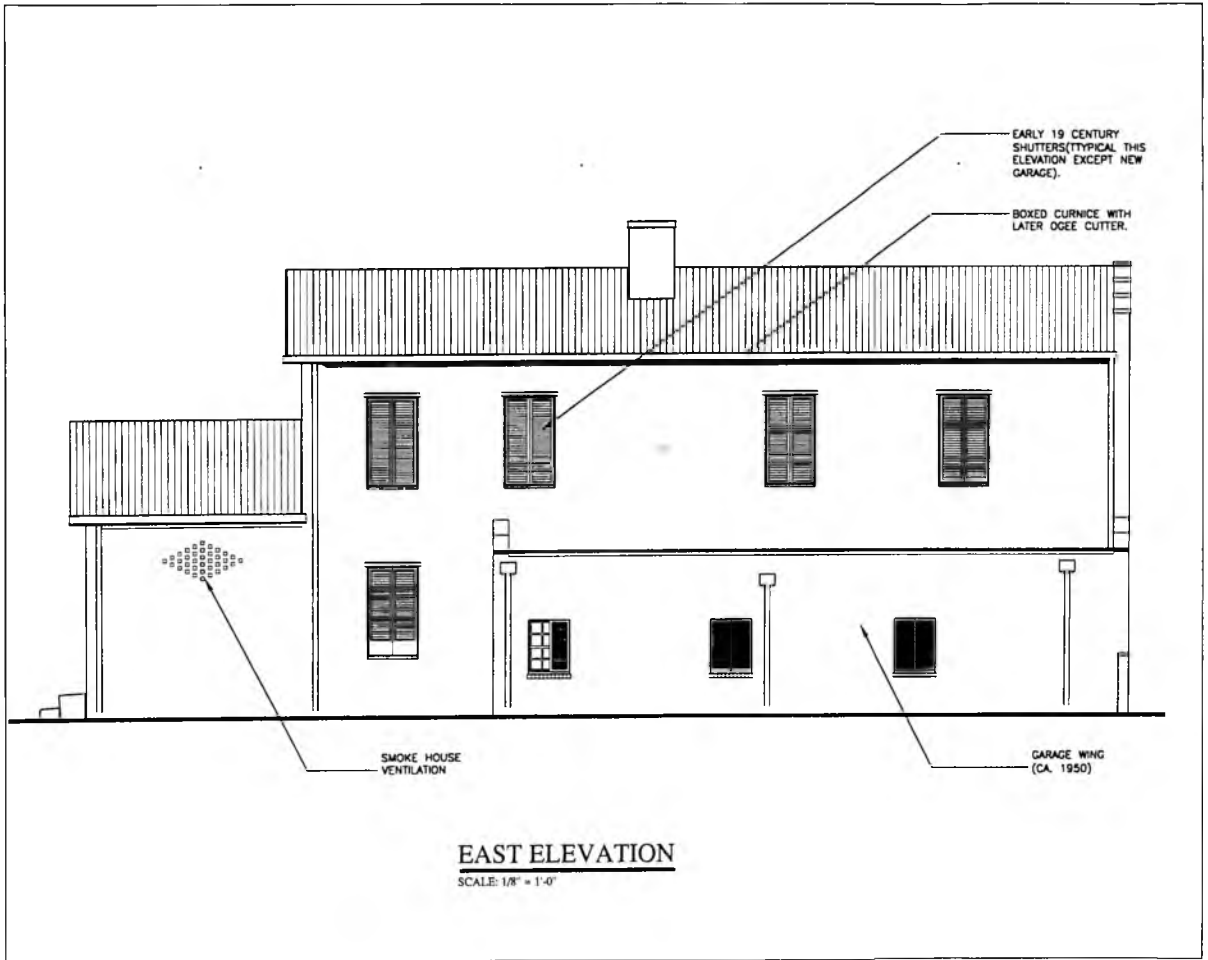
NORTH ELEVATION

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



SOUTH ELEVATION

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"





WEST ELEVATION

SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



*David Jones and Stacey Blazer of Wallace Construction
discovered the site beneath the porch floor*