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Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

The Lowe House Dependency

To the extent that buildings reflect the way people really live, architecture can be, like letters, journals and other documents, a record of historical truth.

—Mills Lane, *Architecture of the Old South, Mississippi and Alabama*



VOLUME 30, NUMBERS 1-2, SPRING/SUMMER 2004
SIX DOLLARS

Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

VOLUME 30, NUMBERS 1-2, SPRING/SUMMER 2004

Contents

5 Backyard Adventures: In Search of Historic Outbuildings

DIANE ELLIS

11 Early Days on Williams Street

SARAH HUFF FISK

15 Uncovering Pieces of a Puzzle: The Lowe House Dependency

FRANK J. NOLA, JR., AIA

37 Archaeological Finds at the Lowe House

ROBIN L. DENSON

Contributors

Robin L. Denson earned a Ph.D. in Archaeology and Fluvial Geomorphology from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland in 1995. She co-founded the Gulf Archaeology Research Institute in Florida, where she worked in historic, prehistoric and underwater archaeology until relocating to Huntsville in 2000. Currently, she works at UAH on the National Space Science and Technology Center's Education and Public Outreach team and serves as Executive Director of the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Education Coalition.

Diane Ellis has been a contributor to the Quarterly since 1992. She currently edits the publication with Lynn Jones and Patricia Ryan.

Sarah Huff Fisk is a past president of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the author of several books on local history.

Frank J. Nola, Jr., is a practicing architect and a principal of the firm SKT Architects, PC. He received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Miami and a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Virginia. He maintains a diverse architectural practice involving institutional, residential and historic preservation projects. He is past president of the North Alabama Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Alabama Architectural Foundation.

Acknowledgments

The editors of the Quarterly wish to thank **Cynthia Doubet**, Special Events Coordinator, Office of University Advancement at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, for providing guided access to the Lowe House property; **Dr. J. Derald Morgan**, Executive Director, UAH Foundation, and Vice President, Office of University Advancement at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, for sup-

porting the editors' plans for the Quarterly; **Gerri Sturges**, Office Manager at SKT Architects, PC, for helping with information retrieval; **John Michael Vlach**, for suggesting scholarly sources on antebellum outbuildings; and **Bruce Hiles**, of Designwise, for continuing to provide excellence in the design and production of the Quarterly

Correction

The article titled "Recycling Redstone: Preservation on a Massive Scale," which appeared in the last Quarterly (Volume 29, Numbers 3-4, Fall/Winter 2003), incorrectly identified Don Kennedy as Jeff Kennedy's grandfather and Joe Kennedy as Jeff's father. The article should have said that Harry Kennedy is Jeff Kennedy's grandfather, and Don Kennedy is Jeff's father.

Editors for this issue of the Quarterly were Diane Ellis, Lynn Jones and Patricia Ryan.

Credits

Photographs and illustrations in Ellis, Fisk, and Nola articles courtesy Frank J. Nola, Jr., SKT Architects, PC. Photographs in Denson article courtesy Robin Denson.



A fragment of Huntsville's 19th-century landscape

Backyard Adventures: In Search of Historic Outbuildings

Diane Ellis

With this issue of the Quarterly, we inaugurate a series of occasional articles about outbuildings in Huntsville and Madison County, beginning with those from the antebellum period and, we hope, moving on to 20th-century structures. The topic has been on our to-do list for some time, assuming greater priority with our recognition of the buildings' growing vulnerability to demolition by neglect or intent. Happily, as we were brainstorming about how to get started finding, photographing and interpreting examples of our subject, Frank J. Nola, Jr.'s important study of the Lowe House dependency appeared, and we were on our way.

Frank's architectural analysis, Sarah Huff Fisk's historical research, and Robin Denson's archaeological discoveries at the site offer a tantalizing peek into the past life of the property and its occupants. But it's still only a peek. The function of the smokehouse is obvious, for example, but how the rest of the dependency was used when it was attached to the early main house, or later, when it became a separate outbuilding, remains a matter for speculation.

Seeking information on antebellum outbuildings, we turned to John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House, The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*.¹ Vlach's book is a fascinating study in text, photograph and drawing of the kinds, numbers, styles and configurations of outbuildings found in antebellum agricultural life and the interaction of slaves and slaveholders that created the architectural landscape. As you would expect, outbuildings on a self-sustaining, income-producing plantation were many and varied. A quick look at the plantation architecture heading in Vlach's index finds page references for well houses and water towers, dovecotes and blacksmith shops, cotton presses, rice mills, smokehouses, slave quarters, granaries, and barns.² And that's a partial list of the structures discussed in the book.

But what about outbuildings in a town setting? Certainly many needs of town dwellers matched those present in rural life: living quarters for the property owner

and the servants; food sources, and food storage and preparation areas; laundry facilities; arrangements for domestic animals and carts, wagons or buggies; and privies. Concerning living quarters in cities, John Michael Vlach writes in his article “The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting, The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina” that “urban slaves usually worked as servants for wealthy whites, but many worked as artisans in their owner’s shops. In either case, slaves were usually housed in their masters’ homes. Such arrangements, which put blacks and whites under the same roof, were quite different from the common plantation experiences where slaves inhabited separate quarters from their owners.” Wealthy property owners with several slaves did build separate slave quarters, on the side or at the back of the house lot, in a more plantation-like arrangement.³

The functions and activities of daily life might be carried out on a smaller scale in urban communities, but dependencies were still a part of the household setting. In a 1980 article written for the *Quarterly*, the late restoration architect Harvie Jones noted that in the early Federal period in Huntsville—1805 to 1835—most houses “began as essentially two-room, two-story houses (one room per floor) with perhaps two service rooms (kitchen and servants’) in a detached structure in the rear, and frequently a small room about eight feet square at the front of the upper stair hall. Other household needs called for appropriate outbuildings, which Jones said would usually include “a smokehouse, shelter for horses and conveyances, a well-house, the ‘necessary,’” and perhaps others.⁴

Over time, rising land values in cities, population growth, changing fashions in building and landscape design, and the ever-present urge to modernize have taken a toll on old outbuildings in urban communities. Rural outhouses, unused barns and forgotten sheds might be ignored and allowed to settle into old age on relatively spacious farmland, but city dwellers on smaller lots would be more likely to see the virtue in removing “eyesores” from their back yards. This phenomenon, and the tendency in the past to overlook the rustic in favor of the refined, and thus to record in picture and word grand residences rather than the essential workaday buildings

that sustained them, mean fewer examples of urban outbuildings left for us to interpret.

Savannah and Charleston have the largest collection of extant urban dependencies, according to architectural historian Robert Gamble. But a modest sampling of representative urban dependencies can be found closer to home, in Huntsville's historic districts. A stroll through Twickenham, for example, reveals slave quarters—frequently adapted for use as guesthouses—kitchens, smokehouses, and a few outbuildings of unknown purpose. We look forward to prowling through other people's backyards to investigate and document these remaining survivors of a fast-fading architectural landscape.

If you know of an historic outbuilding that fits our project, please call Lynn Jones, 256/534-6671.

Notes

- 1 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House, The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Mr. Vlach relied heavily on images from the Historical American Building Survey (HABS) for his book. Many example plantations in the book are Alabama plantations, and several of these were restoration projects undertaken by the late architect Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, and his Huntsville firm, Jones & Herrin Architects. The editors used Harvie Jones's personal copy of Mr. Vlach's book, which is now part of the Harvie P. Jones Architectural Collection of the M. Louis Salmon Library at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. His copy includes personal notes, including the following observation written in 1993 on the title page: "Excellent book. The only one on this subject I've seen, & well-written, too."
- 2 Vlach, 256.

- 3 John Michael Vlach, "The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting, The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina," *Southern Cultures*, 5:4 (Winter 1999): 52-53.
- 4 Harvie Jones, "Federal Period Residential Architecture," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture & Preservation*, VII:1 (Fall 1980): 4-9.

Further Reading

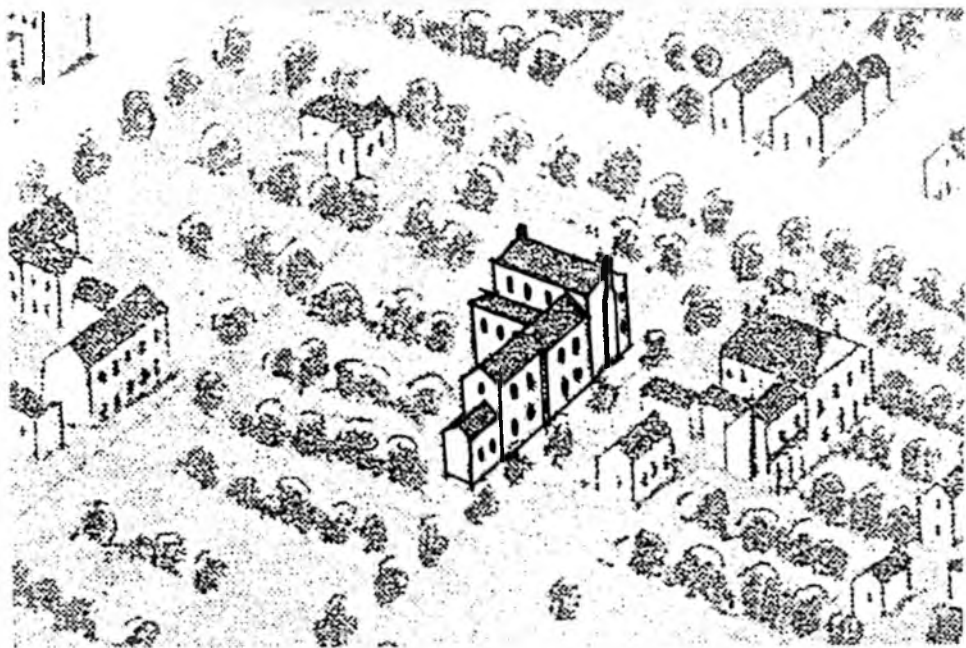
Mr. Vlach also recommended the following resource, which the editors were unable to obtain in time for publication: John Michael Vlach, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture VI*, edited by Hudgins and Cromley (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities, The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).



The Lowe House, Williams Street

This house was built by Herbert Cowell, who came to Huntsville from Joliet, Illinois and lived here for several years. Cowell also built the circa 1902 Wilfred Van Valkenburgh House, with similar Queen Anne massing, at 501 Franklin Street.



The Fletcher-Lowe property as seen on 1871 map. On the viewer's right is the ca. 1836 Governor Thomas Bibb house.

Early Days on Williams Street

SARAH HUFF FISK

The following article has been adapted by the Quarterly editors from material prepared by Sarah Huff Fisk for the Lowe House Dependency Preservation Planning Study. The study, conducted 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.

Williams Street has always been a choice area for homesites. Running along the southern boundary of the original twenty-block town of Huntsville, the level land there once had a magnificent stand of tall poplars and oaks that offered early residents plenty of sturdy building timbers.

LeRoy Pope was the original 1809 purchaser of government land in the town area. In 1817, Pope sold to Henry Minor a little over two acres of land below the southern line of Williams Street for \$346.50. Sometime between 1817 and 1820, Minor had a two-story brick Federal-style house built on the property. Minor was a lawyer who shared a Huntsville office with John M. Taylor in a building on the west side of the public square, next to the Planters and Merchants Bank. In 1817, Minor was the attorney general of the Mississippi Territory and a delegate to Alabama's 1819 constitutional convention. He served as reporter to the Alabama Supreme Court, as a justice of that court and, from 1823 until his death in 1838, as clerk of the court. In 1823 he moved his family to Greene County to be closer to his work.* Subsequent owners of the Williams Street property before the Fletcher-Lowe families entered the picture included George Malone, Josephine DeVendel, Robert Fearn, and Robert Fearn, Jr.

By 1883, A.S. Fletcher was in residence. Fletcher was a trustee for Robert Fearn, Jr., as well as a representative in the Alabama House and a delegate to the 1901 constitutional convention. He and his wife, Mattie Lowe Fletcher, replaced the Federal house with the present chateau-style structure, now 210 Williams Street. The house was completed in 1902. Fletcher's nephew, Robert Joseph Lowe, inherited the property upon Fletcher's death in 1908. Lowe served in the Alabama House of Representatives from 1943 to 1947 and in the Alabama Senate from 1947 until his death in 1951. His widow, Jane Knight Lowe, a benefactor of many educational and charitable organizations, died in 1997, leaving the Williams Street property to the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

**Henry Minor's great-great-grandson Philip Mason helped establish the University of Alabama in Huntsville, the current owner of the Williams Street property.*



West side view of upper and lower galleries. Ionic columns were probably salvaged from demolition of original house, around 1900.



Detail of upper gallery railing. Elliptical profile handrail is intentionally cambered and is mortised into columns.

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-

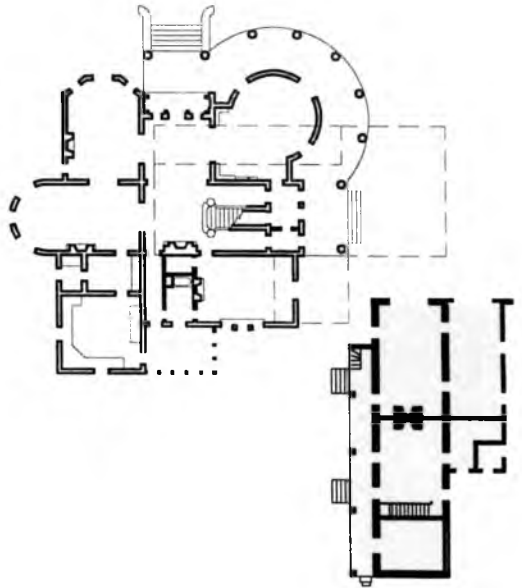
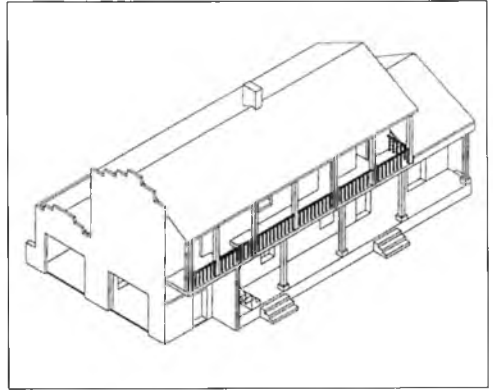


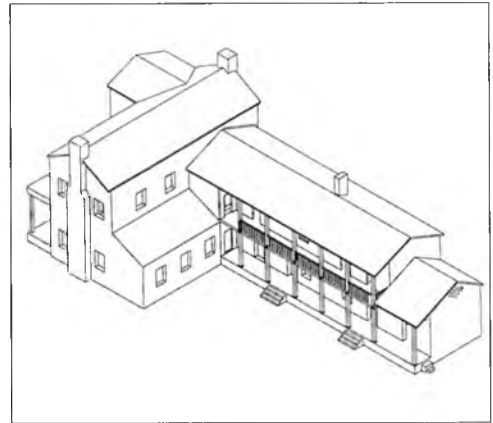
Diagram showing placement of surviving 19th-century structure relative to the 1902 house

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.

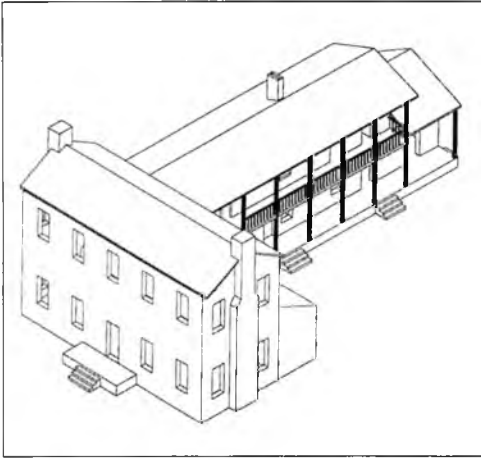
The two-story service building is clearly the one shown on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps dating from 1894, as well as the 1871 "birds-eye view" of Huntsville, and the 1861 map of the city that was published by Hartley and Drayton of Louisville. The moulding shapes, joinery, tool marks and other abundant 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

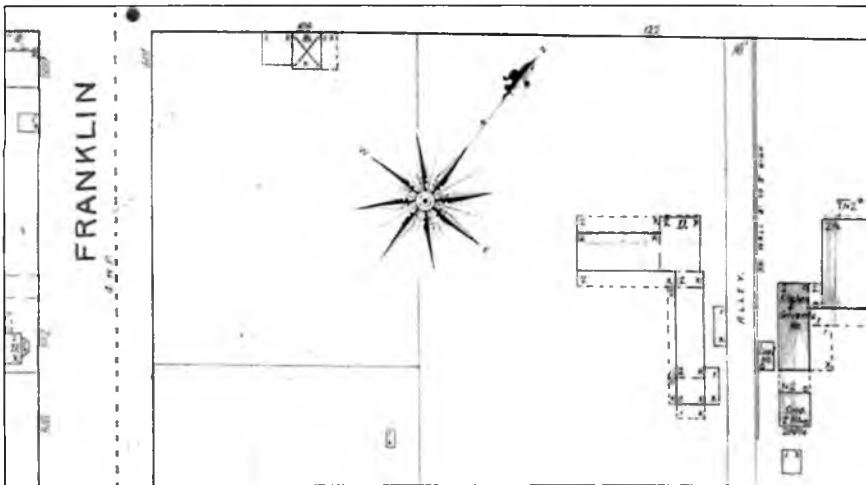


Conjectural diagram of main house as originally constructed

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

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-



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 sug-

gests 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.

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.

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



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



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.

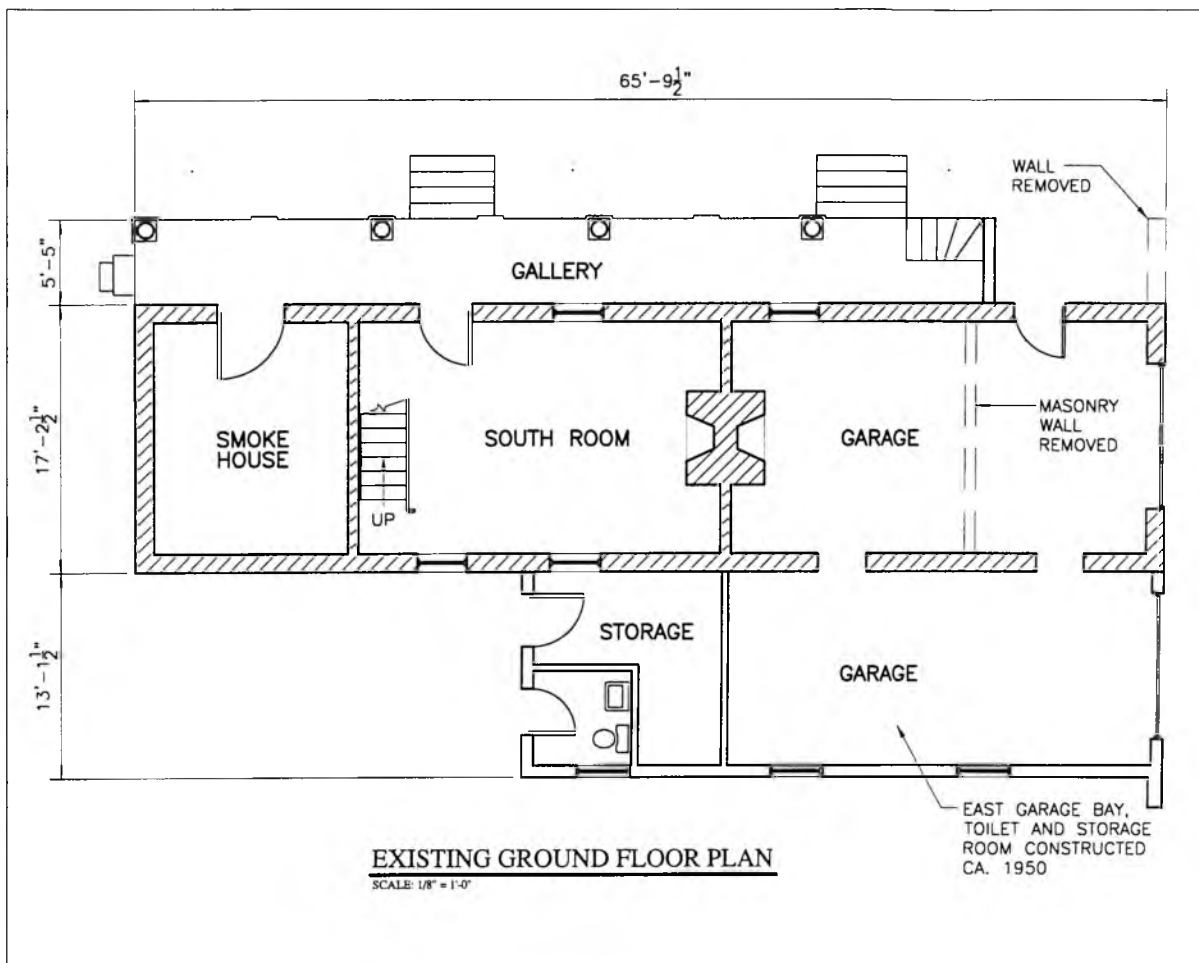
west walls. The south wall was probably removed in the 20th century when the rooms below were converted to a garage. With the south wall gone, the room now incorporates the original “center” room, which was approximately 17 feet by 17 feet. [see page 31] The center room’s east, south and west walls retain 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.

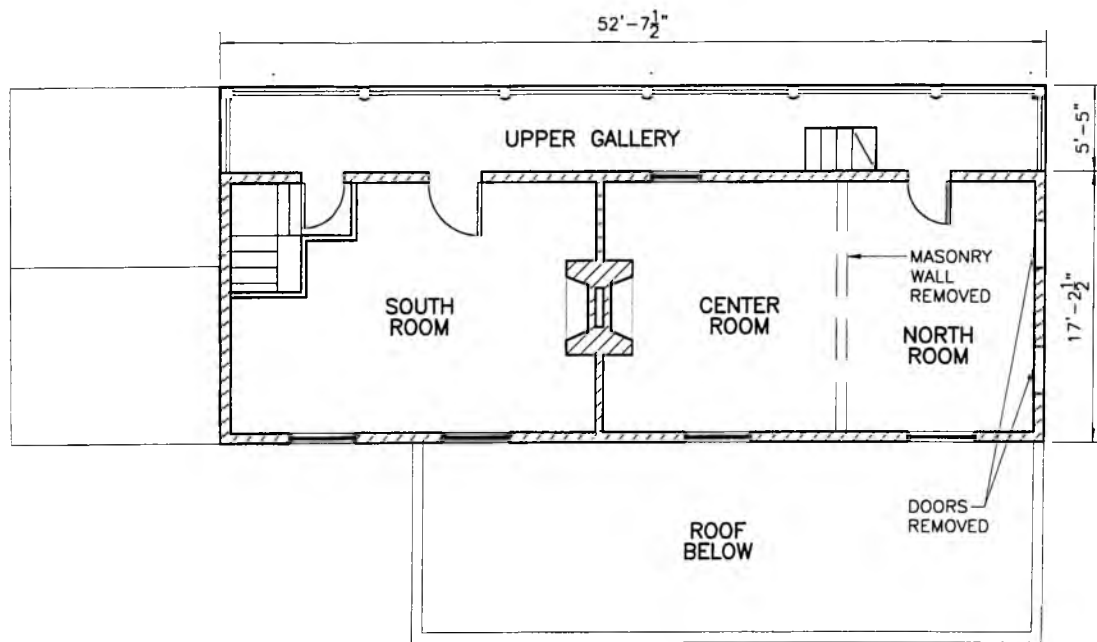
The **upper level south room** retains its original Federal Period trim and its masonry firebox, which backs up to the masonry firebox of the center room. The upper level south room is also missing its original mantel. The room is approximately 22 feet by 17 feet, with a cut-out for a dog-leg staircase 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.



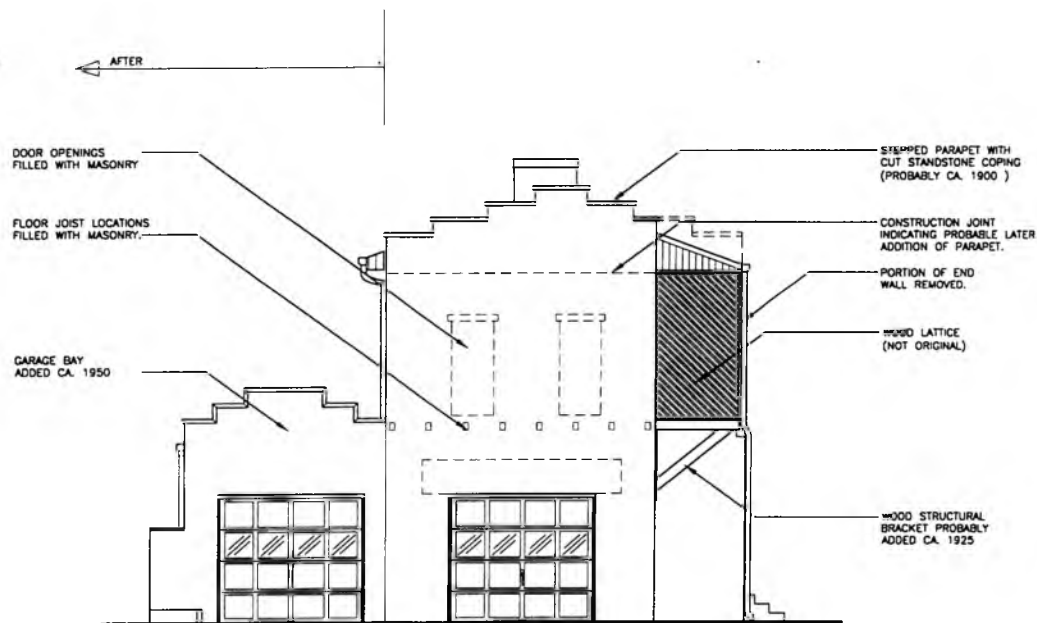
Detail of boxed eave at west side of structure. The ogee gutter and corrugated downspouts are recent additions





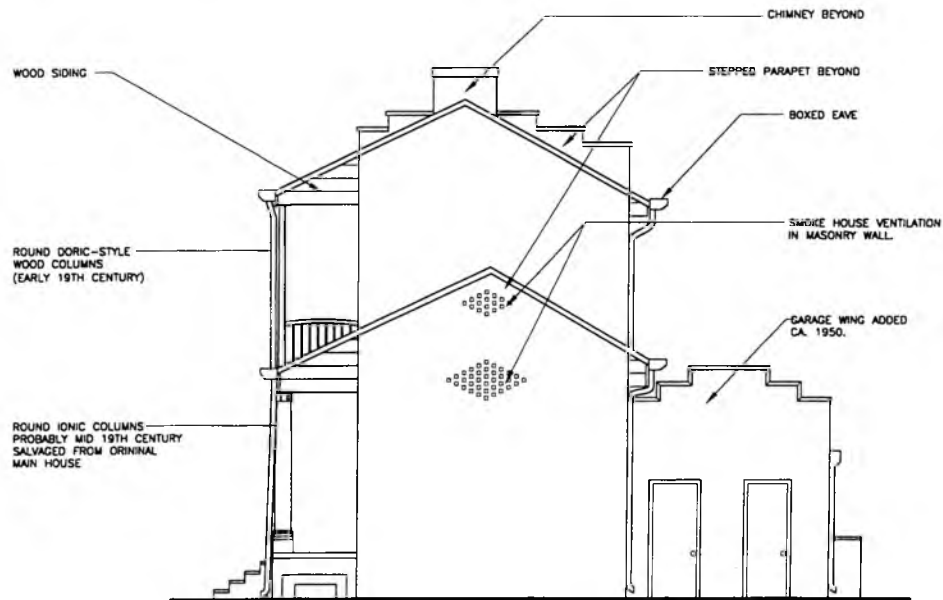
EXISTING UPPER FLOOR PLAN

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



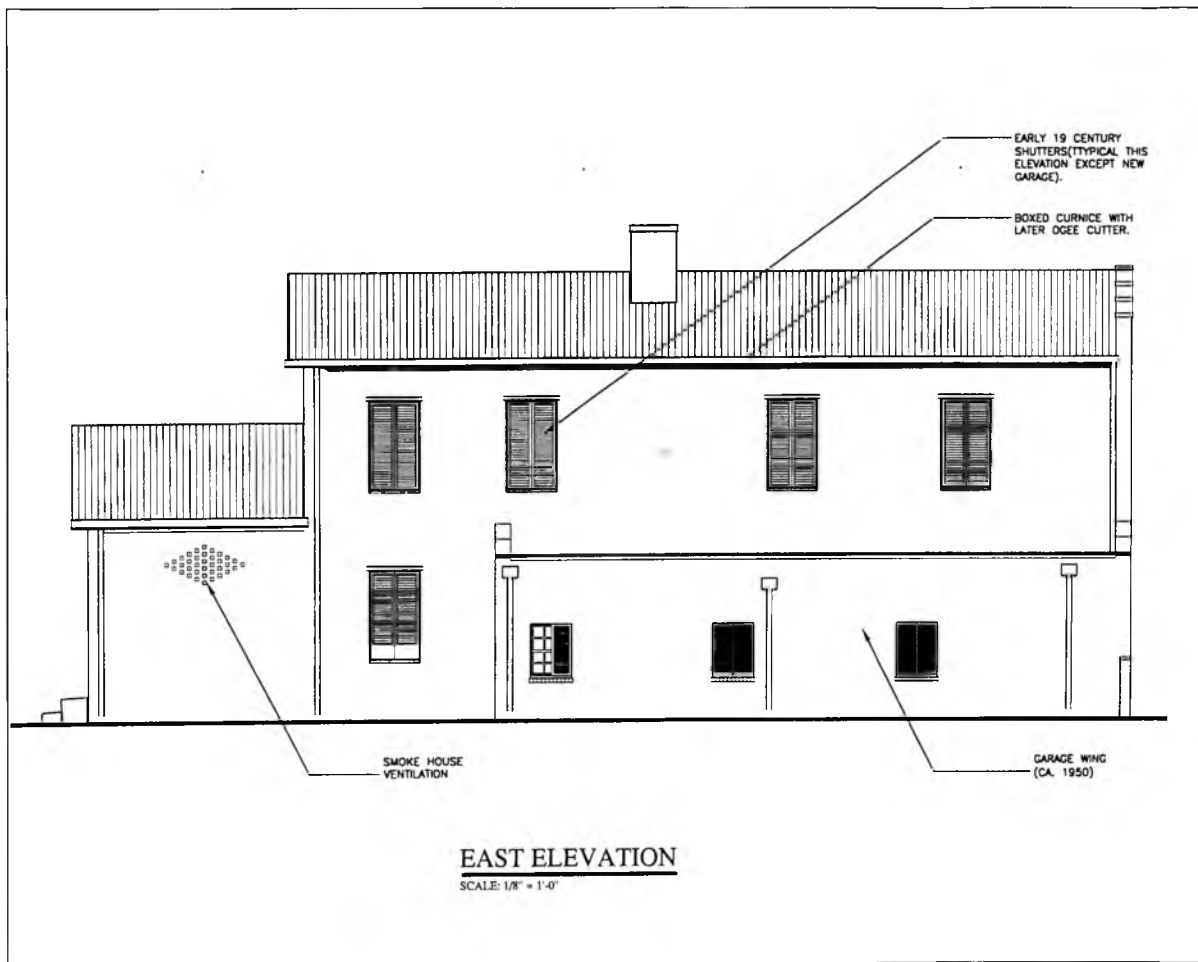
NORTH ELEVATION

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*

Archaeological Finds at the Lowe House

Notes from the Initial Discovery

Robin L. Denson

First finds, early May 2003

An effort to shore up a sinking porch foundation on the Lowe House outbuilding led to the beginning of the Lowe House Archaeology Project, when, in May 2003, a construction crew at work on the project unearthed a repository of archaeological materials at the site.

Johnnie Wallace, a contractor from Decatur hired by the University of Alabama in Huntsville Foundation to undertake restoration of the outbuilding, was the first to discover the archaeological trove. Wallace and his crew had been removing soil from an area directly under the gallery and out about six feet to where an old outer retaining wall had been constructed, when they noticed glass, bone and ceramic artifacts coming from the soil matrix. Johnnie and his team collected some of the material as they dug, and when Dr. Derald Morgan, the UAH Foundation's Executive Director examined it, I was asked to visit the site to determine its nature and extent and to make recommendations to the Foundation for its disposition.



Restoration work begins on Lowe House outbuilding to shore up sagging porches



Historic ceramics, glass, animal bone and metal discovered by the construction crew warranted further investigation to identify the nature and extent of the archaeological deposits

Assessment and reconstruction, late May 2003

Initially, the contractor's finds appeared to be coming from throughout the surface of the old walkway that was buried directly under the present one. It appeared that the material was a component of the trench that builders had formed to construct the early wall. To test this assumption, we made plans to conduct a preliminary site assessment. The assessment would include the following: testing of the retaining wall's builder's trench that ran along the length of the gallery, using a minimum of two one-half meter test units; documenting the construction work with respect to the subsurface archaeological deposits, the wall and its current construction features; monitoring the remainder of the wall's removal; and, overseeing the extraction of and the subsequent screening of the bulk materials for artifacts.

The two one-half meter test units proved to be most telling for understanding the nature and extent of the intact archaeological deposits at the Lowe House. The first test unit was placed just south of the original northernmost entry point into the dwelling, now bricked over but still discernible from the exterior façade. The second unit was placed south of the smokehouse door entry. Wallace's workers had removed the top of the buried soil surface down to a naturally occurring clay layer that sloped downward almost eight inches from the north end of the building to the south end. This older, buried clay layer contained no artifacts in the two test units, or in the early builder's trench portion of the test units.*

The second test unit did, however, offer evidence strongly suggesting that the artifacts were coming from two discrete deposits on either side of the smokehouse entry door and on top of the naturally occurring clay layer. In the case of the first test unit, the archaeological deposits had already been removed by the contractor and the spoil pile laid nearby on the property. Most of the second test unit's archaeological deposits had also been removed, but enough remained to confirm the site's original nature. This type of refuse disposal pattern, where debris was discarded just outside the door and alongside the entry points, is consistent with residential waste disposal patterns evident during the era of the site's purported occupation in the early-to mid-1800s.

Since the bulk of the site's contents had been transferred to the contractor's spoil pile, it was agreed that recovery of the artifacts from the spoil could provide useful and datable insight into the site's occupation. UAH agreed to coordinate with Alabama Constitution Village to develop a public or student archaeology program for the purposes of education and retrieval of the site's valuable archaeological information and artifacts.

Bringing in the children, late August 2003

The artifact recovery project ran for five days, with an average of thirty students visiting the site each day. Students worked in teams of four to six persons led by

an EarlyWorks Childrens Museum volunteer crew chief who chaperoned them through the activities. Each team participated in recovering, cleaning, sorting and cataloging their finds during their half-day visit. Artifacts recovered included pottery, glass, metal and bone. A cursory view of the materials shows that the bone—primarily pig, cow and deer—was consistent with that of butchering and the functioning of a smokehouse at the site, and that the dates of the pottery and glass artifacts consistently point to the mid-1800s (1820-1850). At the close of the week, a good deal of soil still remained to sift, and yet the students had recovered, cleaned and sorted literally hundreds of artifacts in each classification of finds.



Young archaeologists classify a find.

Following up, September and October 2003

The UAH Foundation agreed that the remainder of the site's finds would be recovered, weather and time permitting. An additional weekend of work took place in the fall with assistance from members of the local Alabama Archaeological Society chapter. Future weekends are planned for 2004 to complete the recovery portion of the project. The equipment support of the Archaeology Department at Jacksonville State University and its offer to provide students to help catalog and analyze the materials helps make this plan feasible. Further analysis and cataloging of the entire collection will be completed once the remaining artifacts are recovered from the spoil.

The University of Alabama in Huntsville Foundation provided support for the archaeological project in its efforts to maintain and conserve the historic integrity of the property. With the numbers and kinds of historic artifacts being recovered from this early period in the city's history likely to far exceed that which has previ-

ously been collected from other historic sites in the area, the research and educational benefits of this project are still being fully realized. The nature of the finds suggest that the quality of life on Williams Avenue was good at that time for the residents at the Lowe House, with some of the ceramic wares clearly belonging to high-status individuals.

**The eight-inch incline was what had caused the continued settling of the porch and the outbuilding roof. Once this was determined, the contractor stepped down the foundations of the new retaining wall eight inches at the northernmost end of the building. Evidence from the old wall indicated that it had been reconstructed at least three times, probably because of this dramatic difference in slope across the site in the clay layer.*

The author extends special thanks to the following organizations that have supported the project: **Wallace Construction**, for assisting with the early investigations; **Jacksonville State University's Archaeological Research Lab**, for the loan of its field equipment and comparative collection; **National Space Science and Technology Center's Education and Public Outreach Office**, for the loan of its field equipment, labs and administrative support; and **Alabama Constitution Village**, for coordinating the public education and community outreach.



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