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Documenting a Building

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T
he process of documenting a building utilizes two bodies of knowledge. The first is simply acquaintance with what information is potentially available. The second is understanding how to interpret the information into fact or theory pertinent to a specific study. And the process calls for the cooperation of two professionals—archivists to help in collecting and making available a wide variety of information, and architectural historians to interpret it. It becomes increasingly obvious how important is the sharing of knowledge, for what the architectural historian discovers today of perhaps national significance in a twentieth-century urban community may help archivists determine whether to collect certain data on a particular neighborhood—or vice versa.

Before exploring the various possibilities of documentation, consider the depth of documentation necessary for a building. The data needed by a person wanting simply to affix a building date to his house—like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval—is very different from the research required in restoring a house and re-creating not just a physical structure, but a way of life. For the latter, the problem is compounded: the building's documentation includes not only the color of paint, but also the paint's chemical composition. Similarly it does not suffice to know that five outbuildings existed. The preservationist must determine from archaeological excavations the exact locations of

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those buildings and the manner in which they related to the main building. Documentation of a building truly can become an interminable process.

Generally when one seeks documentation, he turns immediately to the archival records or the oral tradition of the "Great-Aunt Marys." To begin, the searcher must know in what city and county the building is located and its current ownership. With this data, he can utilize the superior court records to trace ownership or title backward, keeping in mind the general date of settlement in the area and the fact that an inherited piece of property may never have been recorded. With names gleaned from the deed records, the searcher should check the property values listed in the deeds and tax records at the Ordinary or Judge of Probate Office for noticeable changes in value. These may indicate a house being built on the property or a substantial improvement to that property. Tax records after the Civil War are virtually complete and available in the state archives for every Georgia county.

The next question is: Was the building located within a city? The searcher should learn the town's date of incorporation, for the tax digests indicate the presence of a house only in the city limits. For rural property, the prevailing price of one plot may be compared with a comparable tract in the same area. In Putman County in 1811, for instance, Jourdan Brooks sold 202-1/2 acres (with what was obviously a house on it, because it contained a garden with the grave of his late wife) for $1,200. John Wen in nearby Greene County in a 1805 Land Lottery bought a similar amount of land which he sold for $600 in 1808. Comparing these two statistics, one can see clearly that the Brooks property did, indeed, have some kind of improvement, such as a house, on it. Of course until the mid-nineteenth-century, taxes were paid in the county of residence. Robert Toombs lived in Wilkes County and owned a plantation in Stewart County. Records and taxes of all his property, including that in Stewart County, were kept and paid in Wilkes County, the county of his established residence.

Other valuations of buildings might be found on surveys such as the Cherokee Valuation taken in the 1830s at the time of the Cherokee removal. These surveys provide an exact account and basis of comparison of specific values. For instance, as a result of one valuation, the federal government paid Joseph Vann $19,605 for his Georgia
property, the inventory of which recorded: "One fine house, 800 acres of cultivated land, 42 cabins, six barns, five smokehouses, a grist mill, blacksmith shop, eight corn cribs, a shop and foundry, a trading post, a peach kiln, a still, 1,133 peach trees, 147 apple trees. . . ."

The property descriptions given in the Cherokee Valuations varied greatly. Of the Major Ridge house and property, valued at $5,100, the survey recorded: "dwelling house, 54 x 29 feet, 2 stories high, 4 fireplaces, brick. Eight rooms furnished in neat styles, outside painted, balcony on the side of house, turned columns, 20 glass windows, one glass door leading to balcony, 12 door facings, parlor upstairs, finished in first rate style . . . neatly underpinned with rock." The description of the John Bergis property listed each outbuilding, affixing separate prices, as for the "kitchen 16 x 14 at $25 and stable 12 x 10 at only $5."

Local and regional newspapers can be a valuable source of information, especially in the absence of resources such as the Cherokee Valuation, and tax and deed records. Major buildings of a town, built by a well known craftsman, often receive coverage during construction. Buildings also have been renovated and pictured at times of major events in a family's life, such as for a marriage or mourning. The Toombs house was so depicted at Toombs's death.

Estate records are another major source of information, not only for specific dates but also for the interpretative research of a museum-quality restoration. Inventories taken at the time of death, or even when a family moved, often were categorized by room or wagon load. In these are found listings of furnishings, accessories, stockyard animals, plantation tools and slaves. The inventory of the Washington, Georgia, physician, farmer and statesman, Joel Abbott, in 1827 included items from a $65 cotton gin to a pair of mirrors valued at $75, and a pair of plated candlesticks at $12. The very detailed inventory of Robert Toombs's estate, dated 1885, included in the long list "25 pillow slips at $10.00, . . . 21 sheets, carpet in the hall at $140.00," and "$500 worth of law books."

From inventories, the searcher often can determine a relative number of rooms furnished, how the occupants lived and what they held of value. The incidence of certain items,
such as mirrors and silver candlesticks, reflects the sophis­
tication and wealth of the owner.

Census records are also a source of information. A population census, required by the Constitution, has been recorded every ten years since 1790. Georgia's earliest extant population census dates from 1820, and gives only age group and sex designation. In 1850, the census first listed all members of a household by name as well as age. Not only was the size of the family apparent, but also an itinerant carpenter living with the family would have been listed, thus giving a clue to possible new construction. The David Singleton House in Putnam County, for example, according to oral tradition was built by a man named Suiter. The 1860 census supports this claim to some extent in that a twenty-four-year-old carpenter named S. J. Suiter from North Carolina with $50 stayed with the William Spivey family near the Singleton property.

The agricultural census records for each decade from 1850 to 1880 are available at the Georgia Archives and on microfilm from the National Archives. These give only farm statistics, with no reference to buildings, but do supply statistics on machinery, livestock, and farm products that in turn give clues to the size and type of agricultural opera­tion. After the mid-nineteenth century, the industrial and manufacturing census recorded specific names of mills, gins, and manufacturing centers.

Letters, diaries, catalogues, orderbooks, published books, and travel accounts, if one is fortunate enough to find them, often offer valuable insights. George Kollock, in a letter to his wife on December 24, 1851, for example, alluded to the problems in building his mountain house.

You had better send for Mr. Van Buren and tell him it will be a personal favor if he will put the house up at once ... Mr. Habersham will give him the plan and the detailed manner in which I wish it to be built ... and urge him to be on with it at once and without stopping until he has completed a good deal of the frame, sashes and doors ... There is a plenty of tin in the celler for what may be needed on the roof. I will endeavor when I go up to take a carpenter with me so as to finish what I have to ...
Maps of all kinds—plats found in courthouse records, gazetteers, and modern road maps with structural locations—can aid in building documentation. The Wilkes County map of 1901 by Columbus Granade located the Robert Toombs House outside the city's incorporated limits, significantly aiding the research. For all lands opened after the Revolution there are plats available which give the size and dimension of the farms as they were parcelled out to the successful applicants. Unhappily, these provide data about dwellings only in rare cases.

The land on which the Henry Lane Log Cabin is located was issued to Lewis Brantley in the 1808 Land Lottery. By September of that same year, Brantley had sold this land lot #314 to Henry Lane for $500. With this information and details about the cabin, the construction of this sophisticated log cabin can safely be dated between 1810-1815. A building with the sophistication of this one—beaded siding and beaded rafters—could only have been built several years after the settlement date. An earlier, cruder structure must have preceded this present one. Thus, the date of construction can be placed several years after the land grant date.

Maps actually are part of a larger, vast potential source of information: pictorial materials. These include old photographs, measured drawings, old sketches, engravings or paintings, even needlework. In New Orleans, every building offered at sheriff's sale was drawn to scale and tinted. As a result, the city has thousands of excellent documents comprising an invaluable resource.

In Virginia, the Mutual Assurance Society insured buildings as early as the late eighteenth century, and in so doing often sketched and described the buildings. The owner's name, building location, type of structure and appraised value, description of roof and wall materials, dimensions, and the use of the building were given. As new policies were issued, changes in the physical structure could be noted. In Georgia, the Southern Mutual Assurance Company, dating from 1848, kept similar records, not all of which have been destroyed.

Archaeological discoveries can be equally valuable in the documentation process. On the coast, a certain river island shown on the original grant of 1767 to James Forrester can be found on later maps of 1848 with plantation sites and of 1888 with extensive subdivisions and industrial developments.
by various development reclamation companies. The archaeologist successfully questioned that the development took place because collection of artifacts revealed domestic items rather than industrial.

From this pictorial information and study of the actual building and site much comparative and interpretative data can be gned. The building itself, an often overlooked source, is usually the best primary resource. All written and oral historical evidence should be used with extreme caution, for it does not always follow that the building described is the one found on the site. What someone wrote in a letter or drew on a map illustrating his intentions may never have occurred. The trustees of Lawrenceville Female Seminary, according to their minutes, were resolved to rebuild the Seminary "of wood one story high and of the original size—three rooms." At the same time they resolved to allow the Masons "to build a lodge room on the new building above the proposed." The building as it stands now is a substantial two story brick structure, and the only conclusion one can draw is that a later decision to use brick rather than wood was never recorded.

It is by careful study of the site and the building that the structure, heretofore studied with archival resources, becomes a source itself and can provide important data. If a person is familiar with both general architectural styles and specific regional characteristics,* understands the cultural lag, is aware of craftsmen's techniques, he should be able to date a building within a ten-year period and perhaps gain a clue to the builder as well.

Additions to structures often correlate with changes of ownership or family events. Take for instance the Toombs House. Documents reveal a house on the property by 1797 and architect Edward Neal has found within the Toombs place what is thought to be the Joel Abbott house of 1797. Sometime in the late 1820s or early 1830s the house was enlarged, as evidenced by changes in style and detail. During Toombs's ownership in the 1850s, the front facade and dining room were

*See the Historic Preservation Handbook: A Guide for Volunteers available from the Historic Preservation Section, Department of Natural Resources, 270 Washington Street, S.W., Room 703 C-10, Atlanta 30334.
added; and later, according to style and a newspaper account of the house's renovation, a year after Toombs died his nephew refurbished the structure, making changes and possibly adding a side room and greenhouse.

The actual drawings of a house, whether made by a contemporary or by the Historic American Buildings Survey, can be of immeasurable help. In Columbus, Joel Early Hurt bought 30 acres of land lot 59 Coweta Reserve in 1857 for $5,000, an unusually large sum for plain acreage. The plan of his house reinforces the deduction that a structure stood on the plot at the time of purchase, and that Hurt built his Dinglewood around a four room, central hall house.

From the plans and general building design of numerous houses, one can ascertain the origin of the builder, who usually was also the owner. The Rock House was built by Thomas Ansley of New Jersey and the construction and plan—the manner in which the chimney is designed—has a New Jersey-Pennsylvania origin. The massive chimney and the unusual, unheated room off the front central hall of the Governor Gilmer House in Goosepond immediately suggest his Virginia origin. The Cabiness Hungerford House in Jones County, with its Virginia-inspired, 2-story, one-room central section and two 1-1/2 story appendages was built by a family who just moved from Virginia. The hex symbol made on the addition to the Freeman House in north Georgia suggests the Pennsylvania origin of the owners.

The known work of a specific builder may also help in the documentation of nearby structures. Although the builder of a group of houses in Lincoln County is unknown, this group of houses obviously was built by the same crew or master-builder. The massive, gabled character, plan and detail of door and window trim are either identical or form a progression of the work that was obviously done by one man.

Hardware, including nails, hinges and locks, as well as brick patterns are good potential sources for date referencing. The determination of hand saw or circular saw marks is another relative age determinant. Documenting the establishment of the local saw mill can aid in dating a structure. For Washington, Georgia, a source suggests the use of the saw mill as early as 1830.

The documentation process is long, involved, and as
suggested in the beginning, never ending. For the archivist and the researcher it demands innovative use of traditional materials.