

*The Chesapeake House:
Architectural Investigation
by Colonial Williamsburg*

CARY CARSON AND CARL R.
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For those interested in historical architecture, here is a book of both beauty and substance. It is well written and lavishly illustrated with numerous color and black-and-white photographs, line drawings, and digital reconstructions of historical buildings. In an introduction and 16 superb chapters its editors, Cary Carson and Carl R. Lounsbury, have produced an invaluable compendium of the latest scholarship on architectural history and its cultural underpinnings in the Chesapeake Region. The volume's temporal focus stretches from the earliest European settlements in the early 1600s to the 1830s. *The Chesapeake House* reflects decades of research by the Architectural Research Department at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and a generation of scholars. Chapter authors include Susan Buck, Cary Carson, Edward A. Chappell, Willie Graham, Carl Lounsbury, Margaret Beck Pritchard, Orlando Ridout V, Lorena S. Walsh, and Mark R. Wenger. This book reflects a summative statement by a group of researchers who began exploring the historical architecture of the Chesapeake region of Maryland and Tidewater Virginia in the 1980s. Their perspective was shaped through

the study of hundreds of early buildings. The vision presented here is broad and inclusive. It extends well beyond the iconic mansions of the region and the study of architectural style to explore how people and buildings shape each other.

The introductory chapter by Carson outlines the editors' perspectives. As they note, Colonial Williamsburg has long been the go-to source for those interested in architectural history. Its buildings have inspired architects and preservationists the world over. It is a Mecca for those fascinated by historical houses, and is an important resource for architects and researchers the world over. The approach taken in this volume is regional and interdisciplinary. It draws not just from the strengths of architectural historians, but also scholars in allied fields such as archaeology, conservation, and history. Their focus is admittedly regional, and it is also centered on one of the most intensively studied areas of the country; nevertheless, as the authors show us, there is still more to be said. For Carson and Lounsbury, buildings are rich sources of historical evidence that tell us about regional culture and particularly, to use their terms, about "our ultimate quarry" (p. 2), men and women of European and African ancestry, rich and poor, enslaved and free, natives and newcomers. Buildings help us become time travelers and experience something of the past in a powerful and evocative way.

Chapter 2, "Architecture as Social History," was authored by Carson. Here Carson discusses the evolving perspectives of architectural historians, how the field of architectural history was long dominated by a focus

on aesthetics and style, and how current scholars are more focused on how landscapes shape social interactions. In a nod to critical theory he notes that living history museums, such as Colonial Williamsburg, were created or recreated to serve as educational tools. Earlier generations of scholars were in some cases blinded by their adherence to general principles, and they sought a stylistic and aesthetic perfection in the past that simply did not exist. Witness the decision of the architects charged with reconstructing the capitol in Williamsburg who ignored archaeological evidence indicating that the building had been less than symmetrical. This earlier generation saw buildings as showrooms and they spent little time on the people who inhabited these spaces. Carson contrasts this early approach with what occurred 50 years later when a new generation of researchers worked on the Courthouse on Market Square. They interrogated the building, asking how it had been staffed and how it had functioned. Today actors bring 18th-century courtroom drama to life through first-person interpretations. The spaces of the building serve, in part, to choreograph the interactions of these actors with each other. Carson, Lounsbury, and colleagues frame their work broadly, seeing it as a contribution to American social history.

Chapter 3, “Fieldwork” by Chappell, provides a brief and illuminating history of the region’s architectural history, from Fiske Kimball through the more recent Henry Glassie and Dell Upton. The emphasis on archaeological methods is also discussed. The focus was not just on elite structures but everyday structures of poor workmanship, thus providing a democratic architectural history. Researchers wanted to better date buildings, better document them, and understand how they were used and what they meant. New

techniques such as tree ring dating helped refine their understanding of buildings.

Next, Walsh introduces the reader to the region’s social and economic history. Walsh does a good job documenting the region’s history in a succinct and informative manner. Her work is followed by Lounsbury’s chapter on the “Design Process.” Rather than focusing on design elements, the focus is on how buildings were designed and the various factors—cultural, environmental, economic, and aesthetic—that shaped them. In the same chapter we learn of the frustrations of Benjamin Henry Latrobe as he struggled to bring modish architecture to the region. The architectural tour of the Chesapeake continues with chapters on plantation housing, town and country houses, slave quarters, and agricultural buildings.

The next section of the book deals with materials. It will be useful to individuals working in the Chesapeake and beyond. In the chapter on “Timber Framing” by Graham, basic concepts such as the English box frame are discussed, as are the advantages and disadvantages of certain forms of building. Graham introduces us to the Virginia house, a form that evolved from older English traditions adapted to a new locale where wood was plentiful, workmen were expensive, and the economic system was driven by tobacco. This is followed by chapters on brickwork, hardware, and exterior and interior finishes—including the all-important moldings, paint, and wallpaper. Again, much of the information in these chapters will be valuable to individuals working in regions beyond the Chesapeake. The volume concludes with a chapter by Lounsbury on the demise of the distinctive building practices of the region, as dimensional lumber and new designs came to the fore in the 19th century.

This is an important book not just for architectural historians but for historical archaeologists and indeed anyone interested in what houses can convey about regional and American history. It has few flaws. Some of the discussions assume a certain baseline of knowledge that not all readers may have. There is relatively little comparative discussion in terms of other regions. But these are minor flaws in a very strong work. Carson,

Lounsbury, and colleagues should be proud of this magnum opus. It is a major contribution to our understanding of early American architecture and the people who built, inhabited, and used it.

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