

"Mansion House" Evolution, Brandon Plantation, Halifax County, Virginia

By

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Brandon Plantation is part of the 1400 acres on the Dan River, purchased by three Brandon brothers in 1746 from Maria Byrd, the widow of William Byrd of Westover Plantation on the James River. The "Mansion House" on the Home Tract of Brandon Plantation is located at the intersection of Henderson and Coleman Roads in Halifax County, VA (Fig. 1, "Mansion House" restored close to its original appearance c. 1843). The Home Tract remained in the Brandon family until 1955.



Figure 1

The “Mansion House”, as it appears today, most likely was constructed in three phases. The first phase probably was a modest, earthfast (post in ground), story and a half, timber-frame dwelling with two fieldstone fireplaces and chimneys, constructed sometime from the middle to the end of the eighteenth century. Based on other modest dwellings in the area, the floor plan of this early house likely was a hall and chamber down with a ladder to an unheated loft above. The only obvious remaining evidence of this early structure is the lower fieldstone portion of the west chimney (Fig. 2, Plan view of early house, drawing no longer to scale).

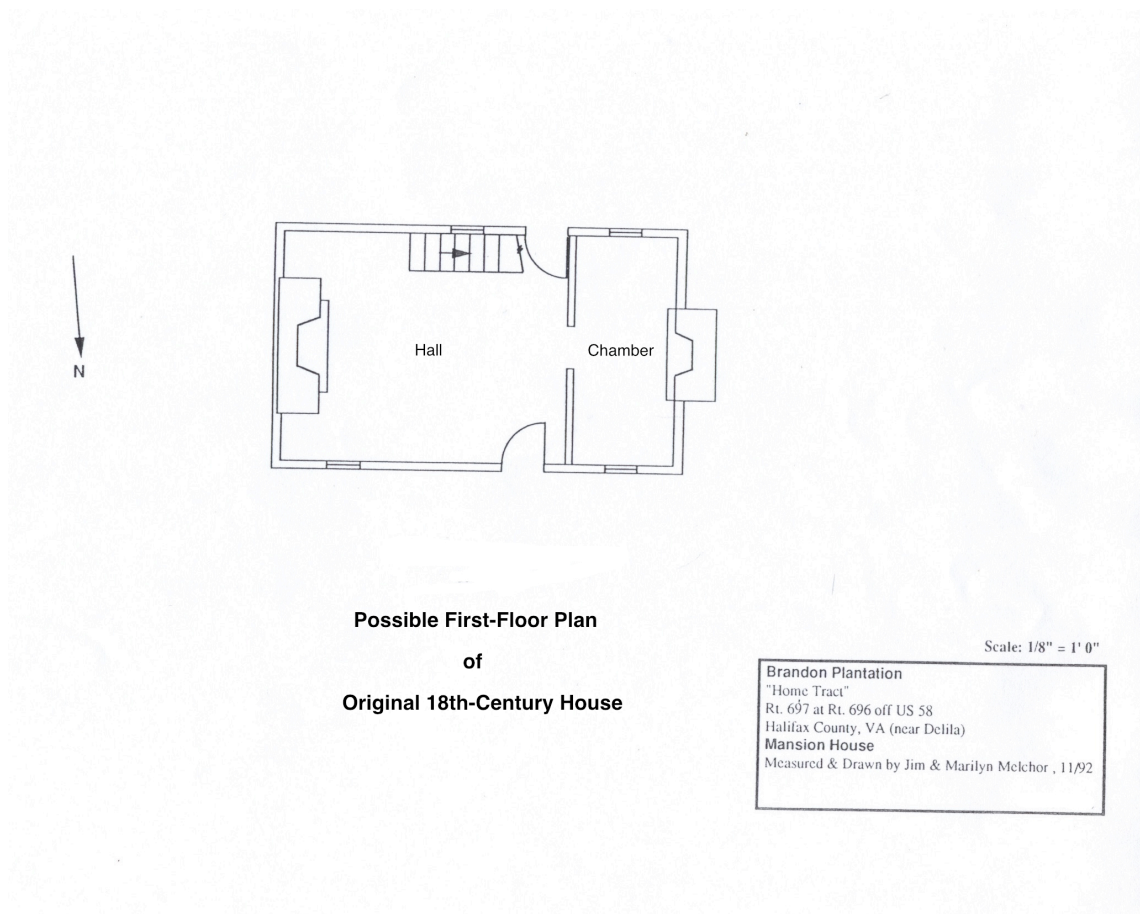
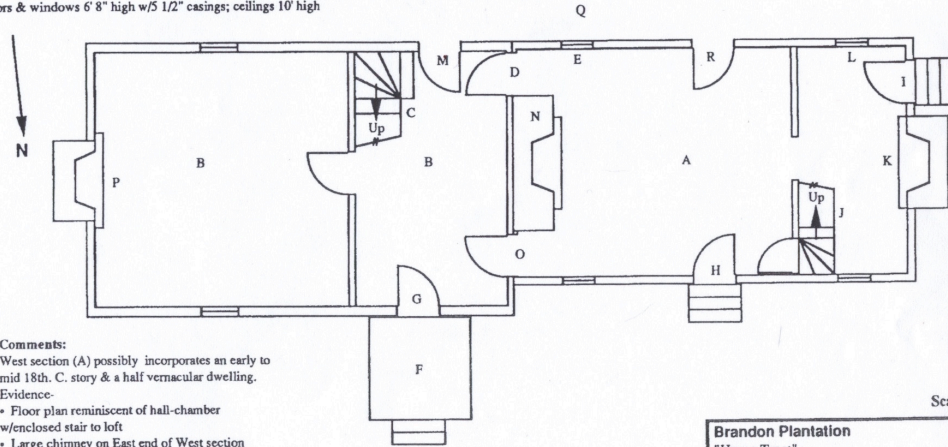


Figure 2

In the second phase of around 1800, this earlier structure was replaced with a full two-story house. This c. 1800 house, which constitutes the west section of the present house, originally was constructed on a hall-chamber plan with an enclosed stair to the second floor. The first-floor walls were originally sheathed. The second floor most likely consisted of a large heated chamber separated from a small stair passage, basically following the first-floor plan. The fieldstone west chimney was extended in brick to clear the second story. Its fireplace heated the new first-floor chamber. A new east chimney with two fireplaces was constructed to serve the large hall and second-floor chamber.

During the third construction phase of the “Mansion House”, c. 1843, a large, two-story, side-passage and parlor addition was added to the east end of the second-phase house by William Brandon. The second floor of this addition consists of a generous chamber and a stair passage. A closed stair rises from the second-floor stair passage to the loft above. A brick chimney with two fireplaces was constructed on the east end to heat this addition. The loft of the addition is not heated (Fig. 3, Pre-restoration, first-floor plan of "Mansion House", no longer to scale).

Notes:
A West section c. 1800; reportedly w/sheathed interior walls now removed; all 20th. C. changes c. 1955
B East Federal addition c. 1840; drawing represents this period
C Open-string stair; pitch 8 v : 11 1/2 h first step then 9 v : 11 h; 10 steps above turn rise to second floor
D Door cut through c. 1840; original configuration - evidence of shelves between fireplace and South wall, possibly behind a closet or cupboard door; present 20th. C. configuration (not drawn) - closet on East or passage side, open shelves on West side
E Window closed in 20th. C.
F Original porch now missing, replaced in 20th. C. w/two-story, full-length porch
G Original door replaced w/side-light door in 20th. C.; East-section doors & windows 6' 8" high w/5 1/2" casings; ceilings 10' high
H Door now closed, reportedly still in wall; West-section doors 6' 3" high; original door available for reinstallation
I Door to detached kitchen now closed
J Division wall & enclosed stair removed in 20th. C. to convert West section into a knotty pine kitchen; second-floor joists replaced at this time
K Fireplace converted into kitchen range; mantle shelves shown on drawing
L Original window enlarged to a double window
M Original door replaced with a smaller door to porch bathroom; original door available for reinstallation
N Fireplace reworked to a modern fireplace w/raised hearth; original fireplace surround available for reinstallation
O Door cut through c. 1840; original configuration - probably similar to D
P Firebox reworked in 20th. C. w/low brick hearth; original serpentine surround & baseboards faux painted in blue marble; same painting in chamber above and on baseboards & stair risers in passage
Q 20th. C. enclosed porch w/bathroom (not drawn)
R Original door replaced & shifted West



Comments:
West section (A) possibly incorporates an early to mid 18th. C. story & a half vernacular dwelling.
Evidence-
• Floor plan reminiscent of hall-chamber w/enclosed stair to loft
• Large chimney on East end of West section could accommodate a cooking fireplace
• Stone portion of West chimney approximate height to serve story & a half house
Problems-
• Most of the interior fabric of the West section was removed and/or altered in 20th. C. alteration
• Wall framing not presently exposed for examination

First Floor Plan View

Scale: 1/8" = 1' 0"

Brandon Plantation
"Home Tract"
Rt. 697 at Rt. 696 off US 58
Halifax County, VA (near Delila)
Mansion House
Measured & Drawn by Jim & Marilyn Melchor, 11/92
Sheet 2 of 2

Figure 3

The interior trim throughout the third-phase, Federal addition is by Thomas Day, a free-black cabinetmaker. The marbleizing on the baseboards, stair risers, and fireplace surrounds is attributed to Samuel Shelton. Day and Shelton were both working in nearby Milton, NC (Figs. 4 & 5, Thomas Day fireplace surrounds with Samuel Shelton marbleizing) (Figs. 6 & 7, Samuel Shelton marbleizing on baseboards and stair risers).



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

With the construction of the c. 1843, third-phase addition, the first-floor room usage of the expanded “Mansion House” changed drastically. With a new formal parlor and passage, the old hall became the dining room, and the old first-floor chamber became a warming kitchen/service area to receive food from the detached, c. 1843, newly constructed slave house/kitchen (See Fig. 3). It was during this construction phase that the west door was cut (See Fig. 3, I) (Fig. 8, Slave house/kitchen prior to restoration) (Fig. 9, Slave house/kitchen after restoration).



Figure 8



Figure 9

The “Mansion House” was subjected to a Victorian-style alteration in the late nineteenth century, namely a porch (Fig. 10, Victorian porch).



Figure 10

To accommodate this porch, John David Brandon had to remove the original front porch and alter the north entrance door of the 1843 addition.

In the mid-1950s and 1960s, the house again was altered, this time by new owners, Doug and Hilda Martin, who inherited Brandon Plantation from Bruce Brandon in 1955. A “Gone with the Wind” porch replaced the Victorian one on the north elevation, and aluminum siding replaced the beaded weatherboards (Fig. 11, "Mansion House" prior to restoration).



Figure 11

Also during the Martin alterations, the first floor of the second-phase house was opened to a single-room kitchen/den, the enclosed stair was removed, the north and west exterior doorways were abandoned and enclosed in the walls, first and second-floor levels were raised roughly 6", and knotty pine replaced the sheathed walls (Fig. 12, Bruce Brandon {front} with Doug and Hilda Martin, showing original sheathed walls in background).



Figure 12

The second floor of the second-phase house was reconfigured into a passage and two bedrooms, and access was cut through to the third-phase addition. The back porch of the late nineteenth century was enclosed, and two bathrooms were installed in the house at that time. The upper, brick portions of the three chimneys were parged.

Before the Victorian alterations, the 1843, north, exterior doorway assembly contained a single door with a transom light. This door assembly was located in an aperture between two 5"x7" door posts tenoned into the sill and the second floor girt. The 39" opening between the two posts contained no header for this door. Instead, the self-contained doorway assembly was placed and nailed into the opening. A cripple stud, necessary to carry the plaster laths across the top of the door opening, was nailed into the bottom of the girt and the top of the door frame.

During construction of the c. 1843 wing with Thomas Day trim, the unobtrusive winder stair was placed in the southeast corner at the rear of the new passage. This necessitated offsetting the rear door to the west roughly 18", which interrupted the geometry of the fenestration of the rear elevation. The door was not positioned in the center of the passage and was not centered below the passage window above. Apparently, a conscious decision was

made at the time to align the front door with the rear door rather than centering it under the second-floor passage window on the front of the house. While maintaining the balanced geometry of the floor plan, this decision compromised the balanced geometry of the front and rear elevations.

The original door and exterior trim, in all likelihood, was identical to the extant 36" wide, 6'8" high rear door and trim (Figs. 13 & 14, interior and exterior views of rear exterior door).



Figure 13



Figure 14

The Martins also removed the Victorian door, frame, and trim and altered the rough opening to receive a stock 6'-wide modern doorway assembly with side lights. This alteration involved cutting and removing most of the original left door post and the adjacent stud. The Martins left roughly 18" of the upper portions of the post and stud in place. They flipped the bottom portion of the left door post and reused it as part of the framing of the rough opening for

the new 6'-wide doorway assembly (Fig. 15, Martin north doorway alteration).



Figure 15

The new Martin doorway was centered below the window in the passage above, thus correcting the geometry of the original front elevation. This doorway with its side lights also provided light for the passage.

In 1992, descendent, John R. Brandon, purchased Brandon Plantation and began an extensive restoration of the "Mansion House" and slave house/kitchen, beginning with the slave house/kitchen (See Figs. 8, 9, 11, & 1).

In 1996, Brandon removed the Martin porch. In 2000, he acquired a c. 1843 doorway assembly salvaged from a destroyed Halifax County house, the Conners-Watts House, also with Thomas Day trim. This is a double doorway with side and transom lights, requiring a rough opening of 5'8", closely approximating the 6' width of the Martin doorway. To install this doorway, the rough opening was reframed with salt treated lumber on the left side for an opening of 5'8". Because of the height of this Thomas Day period doorway, it was necessary to remove the stub portions of the door post and stud cut by the Martins when they installed their doorway. These two fragments along with the remainder of the left door post have been placed in the wall to the left of the period doorway installed by Brandon. This adaptive reuse renovation of the doorway continues the front elevation geometry established by the Martins, provides adequate light to the passage, and also preserves a Thomas Day doorway by incorporating it into a Thomas Day house (Figs. 16, 17, & 18, Installation of salvaged Thomas Day doorway).



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

The design of the porch in this renovation was based on and scaled from four porches on three similar-period houses. Two of these houses, Woodside and the Clay-Lewis-Irvine House, are in nearby Milton, NC, where Thomas Day lived and worked. The third house, the Satterfield House, is on Rt. 58 in VA about six miles east of Brandon Plantation. The design of the columns came from

the columns seen in the c. 1960 photograph of the west doorway of the "Mansion House". These columns likely were moved from the front porch to this location during John David Brandon's c. 1900 installation of the Victorian-style porch (Fig. 19, Porch columns in background).



Figure 19

The limestone, rams-horn, bottom step reproduced for the front porch is based on the 1960 photo of a now-lost, portion of such a step at the back of the "Mansion House" (Figs. 20 & 21, Reproduction rams-horn step and photo of original step).



Figure 20



Figure 21

The shape and exposure of the weatherboards used in this renovation were based on ghosts of the original weatherboards

found on an extant piece of c. 1843 door trim at Brandon Plantation (Fig. 22, Ghosts of original weatherboards).



Figure 22

Restoration of the “Mansion House” and slave house/kitchen was completed in 2005. The north, east, and west elevations of the house now appear essentially as they did when the three-phase construction was completed in c. 1843 (See Fig. 1). The south elevation also has been restored to its original appearance; however, the enclosed c. 1950s-1960s porch has been adapted for modern living. The floor plan of the second-phase portion of the house remains as it was altered in the 1950s-1960s. The interior of the third-phase addition remains essentially intact from the c. 1843 period.

The slave house/kitchen has been restored to its c. 1843 appearance, inside and out.

Brandon Plantation is listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

The Brandon Home Tract cemetery, dating to the early nineteenth century, is located on a hilltop approximately a half mile north of and overlooking the "Mansion House". It is enclosed with a low, fieldstone wall and has an annex enclosed with iron fencing (Fig. 23, Brandon Home Tract cemetery).



Figure 23

Photo Credits

Figures 10, 12, 19, and 21, Courtesy of Doug and Hilda Martin.

All other photos are by the authors.

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