

# Fox Hall - Norfolk's Oldest House, *Part 1*

By

Jim Melchor and Tom Newbern

Fox Hall is an eastern-Virginia, brick, vernacular house located on the northeast side of Norfolk. It is sited on land formerly in Norfolk County but later annexed by the City of Norfolk. Fox Hall dates circa 1725-30 (Figs. 1-3, Fox Hall as of January 2020). The house faces north.



Figure 1





Figure 2



Figure 3

Fox Hall is currently undergoing extensive restoration. The stated purpose of this article, as well as subsequent articles in this series, is to document fully the investigations into the house and each of the various restoration projects that have been undertaken. Several authors will be involved in writing this series.

While numerous people have been involved in the various restoration projects, the individuals who are mainly responsible for the execution of these projects are listed here. Those marked with an asterisk (\*) also provide extensive, hands-on construction work in addition to their primary duties on the restoration team.

Meet the restoration team:

Susan Sutherland - owner, boss, cook (she feeds the team well), \*.

Dr. Paul Sutherland - husband, financier, \*.

"Cheetah" Waller - mason.

Jack Peet - consulting mason.

Tony Russell - carpenter/construction superintendent E. T. Gresham Inc.

Jack Carter - cabinetmaker.

Dick Gresham - architect, \*.

Jesse Banks - plasterer Ocean Plastering, Inc.

Jim Melchor - restoration manager, blacksmith, \*, and general "PITA" to all of the above with his "my way or the highway" style.



In *Part I*, we will present an overview of the changes that Fox Hall has undergone during and since its initial construction.

Fox Hall is close in design to, but considerably larger than, the Lynnhaven House, another vernacular brick house, located nearby in the City of Virginia Beach (Figs. 4, 5, & 6, Lynnhaven House). The door next to the chimney in Fig. 6 was originally a window.



Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6

While the brick bonding is different, Fox Hall is Flemish bond (Fig. 7, Fox Hall bonding) and Lynnhaven House is English bond (Fig. 8, Lynnhaven House bonding), the overall design of the two houses is so similar, it is probable that the same undertaker built both of them. *Note: In the context of period architecture, undertaker is a builder.*





Figure 7



Figure 8

Like the Lynnhaven House, the first floor of Fox Hall was initially planned as two rooms, a hall and a kitchen. In this period, a hall was a multi-purpose room where people socialized, conducted business, ate, and slept. Meals were prepared in the kitchen, and people slept there as well. Interestingly, Lynnhaven House and Fox Hall, both had a small annex (now missing on both) that likely served as a kitchen chamber and possibly as a pantry also (Fig 9, Lynnhaven House kitchen-chamber door, to right of modern pent) (Fig. 10, Fox Hall kitchen-chamber door, now reduced in width, right side original opening, left infilled, note original threshold mortise lower right).



Figure 9





Figure 10



Another similar vernacular brick house, located nearby in Virginia Beach, is Weblin. As with Fox Hall, the brickwork on this house is Flemish bond. Weblin has undergone some extensive alterations and repairs to its brickwork. The most obvious change was altering its roofline from gable to gambrel, and the massive chimney has experienced considerable restoration (Figs. 11 & 12, Weblin). While Weblin shares some brickwork and overall design similarities with Fox Hall and Lynnhaven House, its link with the other two is less clear, and it probably was built by a different undertaker.



Figure 11





Figure 12

While Fox Hall was initially conceived with a hall-kitchen floorplan, it was actually constructed as a hall-central passage-kitchen. This was not a later alteration but a change order during construction. This was the first major change to Fox Hall. Evidence for this change is in the floor framing, flooring, plaster lath, and in the asymmetrical placement of the front and rear doors hard against the passage-hall wall.

Apparently, all the first-floor floor joists were cut, seasoned, and installed prior to the change order. These are approximately five by six inches in cross-section and are roughly evenly spaced. The joist needed

to support the new wall delineating the central passage from the hall in the change order is different. It consists of two timbers roughly three by ten inches set side-by-side about two inches apart and inserted between two other joists (Fig. 13, Change-order joists).



Figure 13

The flooring in Fox Hall is original first period. *Note: Fox Hall flooring will be discussed in detail in a subsequent article in this series.* Each space (kitchen, central passage, and hall) has its own continuous flooring terminating under the bottom plates of the two walls. Flooring does not



extend into adjacent spaces, thus indicating it was all laid as the house was being constructed and prior to the framing of the walls.

Another bit of evidence is the plaster lath in the walls on both sides of the central passage. It is riven, tapered on the ends, overlapped, and secured with a single wrought nail at the joints, exactly the same in both original walls (Fig. 14, Plaster lath in passage).



Figure 14

The front door of Fox Hall is centered on the front elevation of the house (See Fig. 2). However, as viewed from inside of the house, the front door is not centered on the central passage but opens hard against the passage-hall wall. If Fox Hall were built as initially conceived on a hall-kitchen floorplan, the front door would have fully opened into a spacious hall. The back door is aligned with the front door at the end of the

central passage (Fig. 15, Front door, inside view) (Fig. 16, Reconstructed back door, inside view).



Figure 15





Figure 16

In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the concept of gentry living was trickling down from the upper crust of society, where it had always been practiced, to the more middling types in American. Under this

concept, depth of access into one's home depended upon the status or family relationship of the visitor, or the nature of the visitor's business with the homeowner. A visitor might be obliged to conduct business outside of the house or possibly in a central passage. A visitor of more importance might be invited into a more formal parlor or chamber or even invited to share a meal in a dining area.

Hall-kitchen and hall-chamber floorplans did not lend themselves readily to this level of gentrification. Houses built on these floorplans did not really have an inner sanctum in which to segregate visitors. As the middle class in America became more prosperous, it desired to move upward and emulate higher levels of society. After circa 1730, parlor-passage- dining room floorplans became the norm for new construction of modest dwellings, especially here in eastern Virginia. In some cases, prosperous middle-class homeowners, who already were residing in substantial homes built on the earlier floorplans, decided to modify their buildings to accommodate this new trend. If room permitted, walls were moved, sectioning off portions of a kitchen and hall to form a central passage. This, however, was not always possible.

The Matthew Jones House on Fort Eustis in Newport News, Virginia, is an innovative solution to this problem. Circa 1720, Jones built, between two large brick chimneys, an earthfast house, a frame dwelling whose major structural post extend into the ground without a foundation. Jones intended to upgrade this structure to a full-brick house. In 1727, he



constructed a brick kitchen with name and date bricks, "Matthew Jones 1727". Later, beginning around 1729, the frame building was bricked.

Since the original frame house between the two chimneys was too small to accommodate a central passage, Jones solved the access problem by constructing an attached brick porch tower. The first-floor vestibule in the porch tower served the function of a central passage in controlling access of visitors to his home. Matthew Jones died before construction was complete, and his son and son's guardian were left to finish the job (Fig. 17, Computer rendering of Matthew Jones House circa 1730).



Figure 17

After construction, the Matthew Jones House with its porch tower and external kitchen contained all the requisite spaces necessary for gentry living during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Understand, Jones did not invent this solution. He just incorporated it in the rebuild of his house. In fact, Arthur Allen, a social elite, built his grand house, now known as Bacon's Castle, in Surry County, Virginia, in 1665, well before Fox Hall. Here, he incorporated a porch tower to control access to his home. It was purpose built, not an addition. Besides the Matthew Jones House, there were a number of other early eighteenth-century, middling houses in eastern Virginia with porch towers, including Criss Cross in New Kent County and Malvern Hill in Henrico County.

In 1993-94, Matthew Jones House was preserved as an architectural-history museum for Fort Eustis under the direction of the Norfolk District, U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. The above information about the house is contained in a visitors' brochure prepared by the Corps.

The total cost of the Matthew Jones House preservation project was roughly \$750,000.00. A dollar figure is included in this article only to demonstrate that historic preservation and restoration is not an inexpensive proposition. Obviously, the cost of such projects varies widely, and this figure is not reflective of what the restoration efforts at Fox Hall will ultimately cost. At this point, we just do not know. Hands-on owner participation in the restoration process, as well as extensive volunteer consulting, management, and hands-on labor services from



others, and reduced-cost professional and vendor services have gone far in tempering the restoration costs at Fox Hall.

As noted earlier, Fox Hall is considerably larger than its comparable, contemporary structure, the Lynnhaven House, that is built on a hall-kitchen floorplan. Fox Hall was initially planned on a hall-kitchen floorplan, but at the time of its construction, circa 1725-30, the concept of gentry living was in full swing. Considering a spacious hall was planned for Fox Hall, it was a simple matter during construction to change to a hall-passage-kitchen configuration, thus bringing Fox Hall up to prosperous middle-class standards of the time.

Despite having a functional central passage, Fox Hall owners apparently continued using the hall as their social, dining, and sleeping space, and the kitchen for cooking and other household chores, well into the nineteenth century. There is no evidence that cooking was ever moved to an external structure or another interior space from the time of construction until late in the nineteenth century.

In addition to the change order during initial construction altering its floorplan, Fox Hall has undergone numerous other alterations throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, some minor and some major.

Sometime in the eighteenth century, the hall was decoratively upgraded with a baseboard, chair board, and crown molding. Wooden nailer blocks, cut into the brickwork of the south wall at appropriate elevations, are clear evidence of these upgrades (Fig. 18, Wooden nailer blocks for chair board). Late-nineteenth-century plaster and lath have been removed from this wall. Original plaster here was damaged by moisture, thus necessitating the late nineteenth-century plaster and lath (Fig. 19, Remnant of original plaster, above & to right of nailer). All four walls in the hall have now been re-plastered. On this wall, ventilation space was left at the top, behind, and bottom of the plaster for air circulation to prevent moisture buildup. Also, a baseboard, patterned on a later eighteenth-century example along the stair in the central passage, has been installed. An appropriate chair board and a cove crown molding have been milled and will be installed in the hall.



Figure 18





Figure 19

The central-passage stair was replaced in the late-eighteenth- or early-nineteenth century. It is typical of ubiquitous, open-string stairs found in turn-of-the- nineteenth-century houses all over eastern Virginia (Fig. 20, Fox Hall stair). Evidence of the original stair remains in the form of two small rectangular mortises cut in the floor next to the present stair (Fig. 21, Mortise of earlier stair to left of newel of existing stair).



Figure 20



Figure 21

The original stair likely would have resembled the original closed-string stair with cubby in the Lynnhaven House, but it is doubtful that we will ever know (Fig. 22, Lynnhaven House stair).





Figure 22

There are no plans to replace this existing stair with a speculative earlier stair. The existing stair is part of the evolutionary history of Fox Hall and does not significantly detract from the house. Other similar bits of the house's evolutionary history are being left in place during the restoration of Fox Hall. These will be discussed in subsequent articles in this series.



Based on the width and height of the original front-door jamb with its transom lights, Fox Hall would have been fitted with a double door. This door was lost sometime in the past and replaced with what appeared to be a large office door glazed with opaque glass (Figs. 23 & 24, Incorrect office door). Fortunately, the owner was able to find a double door from a salvage company. This door has been fitted to the door jamb (Fig. 25, Salvaged double door) (See Fig. 15).



Figure 23





Figure 24





Figure 25



The decorative, hounds-tooth brickwork above the front door is of special note (Fig. 26, Decorative brickwork).



Figure 26

Late in the nineteenth century, an addition was added to the back of Fox Hall to accommodate a bathroom off the stair landing. This compromised a dormer and required a penetration in the back, brick wall. Early in the twentieth century, a much larger wing was added to the back of the house to provide more space for modern living. This addition compromised another dormer, required another wall penetration, and necessitated extending the stair landing west for access to this addition. Later in the twentieth century, additional minor expansions were made to these two additions. The second addition is

currently being further modernized to twenty-first century standards. By modifying Fox Hall with these additions, thus allowing the house to remain as a viable modern residence, the house has been saved from destruction. Beyond this very important aspect, the additions are of no consequence to the restoration of the original house.

The most obvious change to the original house was the addition of the large gable and porch on the front (See Figs. 1, 2, & 3). These likely were added sometime in the 1920s and can be seen in a photo thought to be of that timeframe (Fig. 27, Fox Hall circa 1920s?).



Figure 27



These two changes, along with other roofline modifications are, most definitely, of consequence to the restoration of Fox Hall. There is some evidence in the form of nailer blocks that there was a porch of some sort in the nineteenth century, but this cannot yet be confirmed. The meager evidence could only be remnants of the porch seen in Fig. 26. The present porch has been heavily rebuilt. Restoration plans will be based on extensive examination of the roof structure to determine the nature of the original roof framing (e.g. tilt-plate vs. box cornice, dormer size and spacing, rafters, joists, etc.). Ultimately, the large gable will be removed and the original roofline restored. The porch is still useful to the owner, and its future is not certain at present. The roof and porch project will be covered fully in at least one additional article in this series.

Other articles in this series, not necessarily in any order, will include:

Ownership history of Fox Hall

Current family history at Fox Hall

Restoration of the fireplaces and chimneys

Exposing and restoring original floors

Leveling floor framing in hall

Reconstructing basement bulkhead

Restoration of original windows

Restoration of barred vent

Measured drawings

Study and restoration of the second floor

In addition to a set of measured drawings, these articles will range from in-depth analyses to short photo essays, depending upon the complexity of the individual projects.

Additional articles will be added to this series as new discoveries lead to further restoration projects at Fox Hall.