

Fox Hall - *Part 5*, Cellar Entrance

By Dick Gresham and Tony Russell

In *Fox Hall - Norfolk's Oldest House, Part 1*, the first article of this series, numerous changes to the house were discussed. Several of these changes were additions to the back or south side of the house. Of particular importance to this discussion was a frame addition and porch that extended eastward across the back of the house along the hall wall. This addition was built by the current owner's great aunt around the middle of the twentieth century. It contained a bathroom and a kitchen to convert the hall into an apartment. To provide access to this addition from the hall, a doorway was cut into the hall-passage wall in the southwest corner of the hall. This doorway has been closed in the current restoration (Fig. 1, Bathroom and Kitchen addition) (Fig. 2, Doorway cut into hall wall).

Originally Fox Hall's cellar was entered via an exterior south-facing stairwell enclosed in a gabled annex near the southeast corner of the house. Apparently, this was removed when the addition was added, and a new east-facing cellar entrance with a gable roof was incorporated into the addition (See Fig. 1 right side above car roof) (Fig. 3, 1960s photo showing new cellar entrance, left side of photo).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

The current owner removed her great aunt's addition and the stucco finish covering the south exterior wall of the hall (Fig. 4, South wall of hall after demolition, owner is lower right).



Figure 4

There is ample evidence of the original cellar entrance in the form of a "ghost" left in the exterior whitewash. The whitewash was applied early on, most likely because of structural issues that troubled the house from its beginnings (Fig. 5, Ghost of original cellar entrance) (Fig. 6, Ghost of original cellar entrance, outlined for clarity).



Figure 5



Figure 6

At the bottom of Fig. 6, note the patch in the brickwork. This patch covered the original timber header over the stairwell opening into the cellar. This header was exposed by the masons when the patch was removed and replaced with proper brickwork (Fig. 7, Cellar stairwell header).



Figure 7

The stairwell in the original cellar entrance was replaced with a crudely constructed, east-facing, concrete and cinder block stairwell that projected out beyond the house's building line (Fig. 8, Replacement cellar stairwell).



Figure 8

Recently, a raised concrete deck, the first phase of a proposed covered porch, was constructed along the open south face of the original house (Fig. 9, Recent concrete slab). This new construction was never completed as the restoration manager sought cessation of the work and dismissal of the contractor. Despite our best efforts and those of the restoration manager and masons to convince the owner to remove this slab, she opted to keep it as an open patio.



Figure 9

With the stairwell being open to weather (See Fig 8), rain, snow, and sleet provided floodwaters, mildew, and humidity into an already damp cellar. Also, the open stairwell was a convenient pathway for rodents.

Since the stairwell was not historic and not abutting the original house, an opportunity developed for an appropriate accessory structure to cover the stair. The design was drawn and revised for a gabled rectangular structure with proportions that would mimic Fox Hall. The design of the structure was further tweaked so that the ridge of the roof was at the exact elevation of the roofline of the original cellar entrance.

The design called for six courses of English-bond brickwork as a base to a frame structure with shiplap siding. Bricks culled from the fireplace demolition piles (See *Part 4* of this series of articles) were used as face brick and laid in the restoration mortar. The joints were struck using a jointer custom made in the style of an early eighteenth-century one (See *What Is It?* article under Historic Trades on this website). With the exception of the bricks and door hardware, all other materials were modern. These included: Hardie Plank cementitious siding, Azek PVC trim, PVC eave gutter, plastic faux cedar-shake roofing, pressure treated wood, and modern sheathing and house wrap.

We built it. (*Editor's Note:* Dick designed it, and showing deference to the team masons, laid the brick; and Tony, with assistance from others on the restoration team and considerable aggravation from the restoration manager, did the carpentry).

A key element in the design was an era-appropriate batten door with wrought-nail studding. The restoration manager laid out the studding pattern, installed the studs, provided and installed period door hardware,

and hand forged and installed the period-appropriate, eave-mounted gutter brackets.

The eave gutter, designed to capture rain from the roof of the cellar entrance and transport it away from the main house, was fashioned after eighteenth-century wooden gutters occasionally found on vernacular buildings.

The following figures show the construction sequence of the cellar entrance.



Figure 10, Brickwork base



Figure 11, Completed base



Figure 12, Cleaned brickwork



Figure 13, Initial framing



Figure 14, Doorway framing



Figure 15, Siding and trim complete

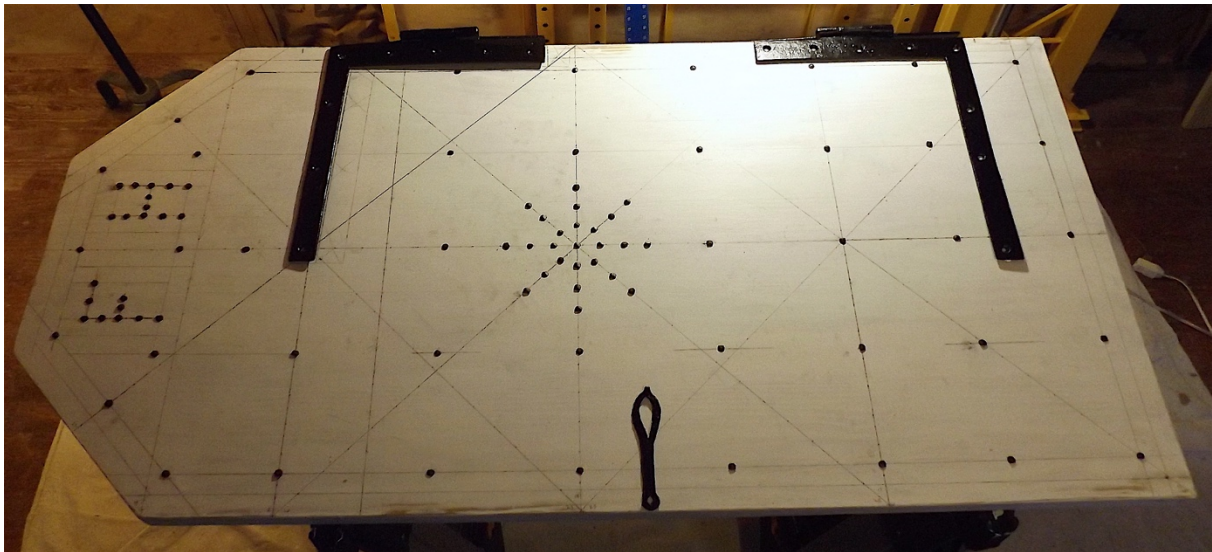


Figure 16, Wrought-nail studding on door



Figure 17, East elevation of cellar entrance



Figure 18, Roofing, eave gutter, and wrought-iron gutter brackets

Construction of the new cellar entrance was beset by difficult site-related conditions. The stairwell's width varies greatly, the steps are not square to each other, and the stairwell itself is square with neither the original house nor the concrete deck. These issues challenged us. However, the end result provides a modicum of appropriateness to the setting.

The restoration manager dubbed this new cellar entrance "Dick's Dog House". We cannot imagine why.



Figure 19, "Dick's Dog House" completed