

Fox Hall - *Part 19*, Front Porch Removal & Wrap-up

By

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Editor's note: For an enlarged view of figures, simply zoom in on your computer.

As a reminder, the restoration of Fox Hall has been covered, thus far, in a series of 18 articles commencing in 2020 on www.ehcnc.org under Decorative Arts/Architecture. Fox Hall is a one-and-a-half-story brick house built circa 1725 for Ann Thelaball on the Elizabeth River in Norfolk County, VA. Figure 1 shows Fox Hall just prior to the beginning of the restoration project. This article is *Part 19* of the series.



Figure 1 *Fox Hall prior to restoration.*

The purpose of this article is to document the final major restoration project at Fox Hall: the removal of the circa 2016 front porch that partially replaced the circa 1900, Roper-period front porch. This was a multi-faceted undertaking including the removal of the porch roof and ceiling structure and columns, restoration of the front or north eave, removal of the porch deck, restoration of the two barred vents in the front foundation wall, repair of damaged brickwork associated with the porch, construction of a new entry platform and steps, installation of a French-drain ground gutter along the dripline of the front roof, and grading around the house to control water runoff. In addition, four foundation vents, two in each endwall cut during the Roper period, were closed, and the incorrect chimney cap on the west chimney was removed. In the following paragraphs, each of these tasks will be discussed and illustrated with photographs or drawings. In places, reference will be made back to previous parts in this Fox Hall series of articles. Figure 2 shows Fox Hall prior to commencement of this latest work covered in *Part 19*.



Figure 2 *View of Fox Hall north elevation prior to porch removal.*

Demolition of Porch Roof and Columns

The roof on Fox Hall was replaced after it was destroyed in a fire circa 1815. During this replacement, the corbeled bricks covering ends of the tilt-plate eaves of the roof were removed, the tilt-plate eave was removed, the original second-floor joists were cut back, and a common false plate and rafter structure with box cornice was installed (Fig. 3). In this series on the restoration of Fox Hall, a full overview is presented in Fox Hall - Norfolk's Oldest House, *Part I*, and a discussion of the replaced roof and eaves is contained in Fox Hall - *Part II*, Second-Floor Assessment.



Figure 3 *Circa 1815 roof structure that replaced tilt-plate eave.*

The first task in removal of the porch was to open the ceiling to reveal its roof structure (Figs. 4 & 5).



Figure 4 *Porch roof structure next to house.*



Figure 5 *Porch roof structure at edge of porch.*

As can be seen in these two figures, much, but not all, of the porch roof structure dates from the Roper period of circa 1900. Removal of this structure was complicated by its rafters extending into the main house roof (See Fig. 4). Furthermore, there is decorative brickwork over the front door that had to be considered (Figs. 6 & 7). Beyond the decorative brickwork, extending to each end of the building, there was a circa 2016, flat, fascia-type board covering part of the roof structure of the house as well as areas of missing bricks at the top of the brick wall (Figure 8).



Figure 6 *Decorative toothed brickwork over front door.*



Figure 7 *Detail of decorative toothed brickwork.*



Figure 8 *Fascia-type board covering areas of missing brick.*

Before the roof structure of the porch could be removed, a question arose about how the original tilt-plate eave would have looked. It became apparent that for the tilt-plate eave to function the roof and rafter tails would have obscured the decorative brickwork over the front door. This obviously was not intended. The original solution to this problem was a kick at the bottom of the roofline with false rafter tails extending over the decorative brickwork, ending in a boxed cornice concealing the tilt-plate eave. Such a roof kick exists on the Mason House in Accomack County, VA on the Eastern Shore, a brick house essentially the same age as Fox Hall (Figs. 9 & 10). After this question was answered, it was decided to leave a short section of the porch roof intact resulting in a suitable kick at the bottom of the roofline of the house. Demolition of the porch roof and columns proceeded (Figs. 11, & 12). The porch deck was left in place to facilitate the eave restoration work.



Figure 9 *Roofline kick on Mason House.*



Figure 10 *Original roofline kick construction detail on Mason House.*



Figure 11 *Roof and column demolition in progress.*



Figure 12 *Roof and column demolition complete.*

Eave Restoration

Once it was decided to restore a roof kick across the front of the house, the porch rafter stubs were sistered as necessary for strength and final dimensions. Since the porch did not extend all the way across the front of the house (See Fig. 12), new kick rafters had to be installed at each end (Fig. 13).



Figure 13 *Framing for the kick roof and eave.*

There has been a lingering question since the beginning of the Fox Hall restoration project about the decorative brickwork over the front door. Was it only a decorative element highlighting the principal entrance, or did it extend across the full front of the house? Also, was it across the back of the house? During the restoration of the eave on the back of the

house, the top of the brick wall was readily accessible and was thoroughly examined. There was no evidence of the toothed brickwork; consequently, a simple box eave was installed. This work is covered in *Fox Hall - Part 11, Second-Floor Assessment*.

Across the front of the house on either side of the decorative work there were two courses of brick missing. As on the back of the house, there was no evidence of toothed brickwork until a short section of Roper trim was removed at the west end of the house. Here was found several mortar joints and angled bricks clearly proving that the toothed brickwork did, indeed, extend all the way across the front of the house (Fig. 14).



Figure 14 *Evidence of decorative, toothed brickwork across house front.*

This important discovery precipitated a call to our project mason, "Cheetah" Waller. As our mason and his crew began restoring the missing sections of toothed brickwork, our project carpenter, Tony Russell, finished enclosing the roof kick with a fascia and soffit (Figs. 15, 16, & 17).



Figure 15 *Masons restoring decorative brickwork.*



Figure 16 *Brickwork complete, soffit of kick near completion.*



Figure 17 *Both kick roof and brickwork complete.*

Note in Fig. 18 that the toothed brickwork stopped just short of the end of the building. Here, on both ends, the corbeled brickwork, removed after the circa 1815 fire, originally covered the ends of the tilt-plate eave. This was discussed in *Fox Hall - Part 11, Second-Floor Assessment*. Similar corbeling is in place on the Mason House (See Fig. 9) and on the Lynnhaven House in Virginia Beach, VA (Fig. 19). Lynnhaven House is discussed in *Fox Hall - Norfolk's Oldest House, Part 1*.



Figure 18 *Area of missing corbel.*



Figure 19 *Corbel on Lynnhaven House.*

Porch Deck Removal

With completion of the front eave work, the porch deck was demolished (Figs. 20 & 21). Here, Fox Hall is finally beginning to look like the early 18th century treasure it is.



Figure 20 *Porch demolition in progress.*



Figure 21 *Porch demolition complete.*

Barred Vents

The barred foundation vents are discussed in Fox Hall - *Part 2*, Barred Vent. Based on the partial remains of one of the original three vents, two replacement barred vents for the front of the house were constructed by the project cabinetmaker, Jack Carter. An illustrated discussion of his work is contained under Update at the end of Fox Hall - *Part 13*, Dormer Construction.

The locations of the two front vents can be seen in Fig. 21. However, these two openings had been altered at least twice since the initial construction of Fox Hall. In the remaining original barred vent on the

south side of the house, the top of the opening is one header course below the watertable (Fig. 22). At some point, the tops of the front openings were reduced a rowlock and stretcher course to accommodate a smaller vent (Figs. 23 & 24). Subsequently, these replaced vents were removed, likely by Roper before construction of his porch. The bottom of the east opening was lowered two courses of brick, while the west opening was lowered five courses. While it cannot be proven, Roper probably removed the barred vents and enlarged the openings to allow access for timbers he used in structural repairs under the house.

Examples of Roper's structural work can be seen in Fox Hall - *Part 3*, Hall Floor Lift. These openings were simply closed with boards, as they would not be visible under Roper's porch.



Figure 22 *Original south barred vent.*



Figure 23 *East front vent opening.*



Figure 24 *West front vent opening.*

Considerable brickwork by project mason, "Cheetah" Waller and his crew, "Smoke" Haskett and Shakir Bullock, was required to repair damage to the vent openings and to restore them to original dimensions prior to installing the new barred vents (Figs. 25 & 26).



Figure 25 *East opening ready for vent installation.*



Figure 26 *West opening under repair.*

Prior to installing the new barred vents, all four edges of each were fully enclosed with copper and sealed with construction adhesive by coppersmith, Carl Matthews. This was done to reduce the chance of rot and/or insect damage. In addition, hardware cloth or rat wire was installed on the inside of the vents (Fig. 27).



Figure 27 *New vent with copper enclosed edges and rat wire.*

With repairs to the vent openings complete, final installation of the new barred vents was straightforward (Figs. 28, 29, & 30). Only painting remained.



Figure 28 *East vent installed.*



Figure 29 *West vent installed.*



Figure 30 *Only painting the vents remained.*

Brickwork Patches

There were a number of areas of damaged brickwork associated with Roper's porch. Four in particular were joist pockets cut by him for his porch. These required relatively minor masonry repairs as did several repairs of broken bricks, a small settlement crack, and the removal of nailer blocks (Figs. 31 & 32) (See Figs. 16, 17, & 18).



Figure 31 *Joist pocket repair.*



Figure 32 *Brick repairs.*

20th Century Foundation Vents

There were four foundation vents of various sizes, two in each endwall on either side of the chimneys. Based on materials used, they were likely cut at different times during the Roper period. These have now been closed by the project mason and his crew (Figs. 33, 34, 35, & 36).

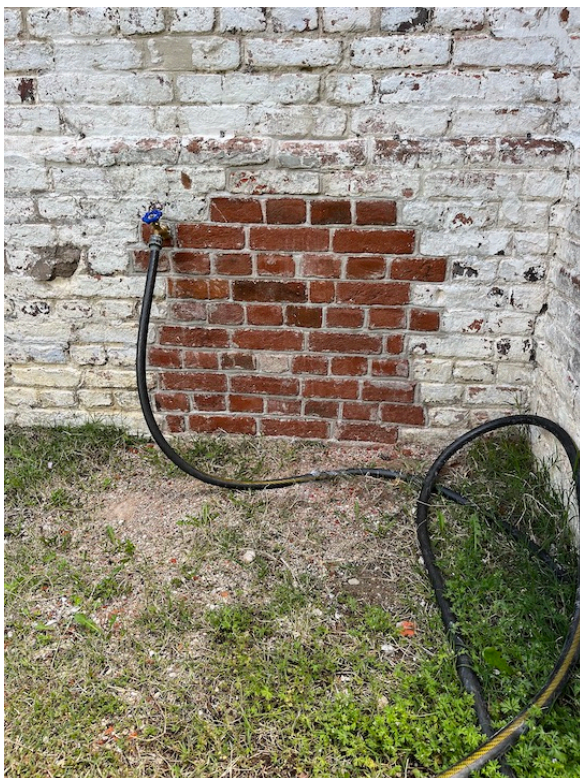


Figure 33 *West endwall north vent.*



Figure 34 *West endwall south vent.*



Figure 35 *East endwall north vent.* Figure 36 *East endwall south vent.*

French-Drain Ground Gutter

Rainwater flowing off the front roof had to be addressed. Installation of a conventional gutter across the front edge of the kick roof, along with downspouts and splash boxes, was not considered appropriate to the period of the house and would detract from the view of its restored north elevation. In this case, an unobtrusive solution to rainwater management was a French-drain ground gutter installed along the dripline of the kick roof. The centerline of the dripline is 27 inches in front of the house wall (Fig. 37). The ground gutter consists of filter cloth, a four-inch, perforated drain tile, pea gravel, and brick pavers. The drain tile slopes both east and west from its high point centerline of the front door and terminates roughly ten feet from each end of the house in gravel filled dry wells (Figs. 38 & 39). A copper rainfall diverter will be installed on the roof above the front door and entry platform.



Figure 37 *Dripline of kick roof.*

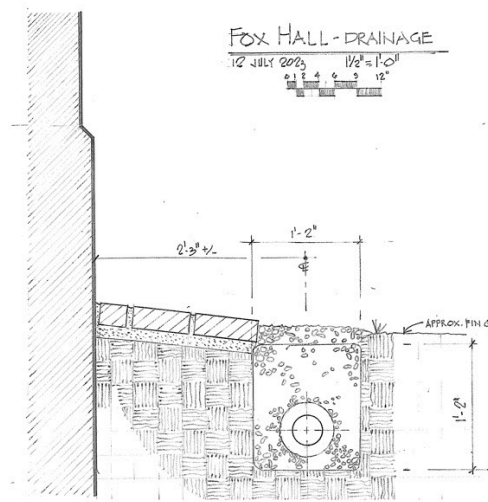


Figure 38 *Ground gutter design*
(zoom to enlarge).



Figure 39 *Finished ground gutter.*

New Entry Steps and Platform

Once the porch was removed, a determination had to be made as to how the front door was originally accessed from ground level. Was it by simple wood steps as seen at the Mason House (See Fig. 9) or the Lynnhaven House (See Fig. 4 in Fox Hall --- *Part I*)? Since Fox Hall has a basement and its front door is higher above grade than these two houses, such steps were not likely. Two additional possibilities were brick or stone steps and platform or wood steps and platform. An investigation in front of the entrance door was undertaken to determine if there was any surviving evidence to answer the question. Surface searching and shovel tests did not result in any evidence of an early brick or stone structure. However, there is a visible, vertical wear line, highlighted in whitewash, on the brick wall below the watertable about six inches to the left of the front door (Fig. 40) and faint traces of a similar line to the right of the door (Fig. 41). An excavation in front of the line in Fig. 40 revealed a post mold with a small portion of the dark brown wood post still in place (Fig. 42). Clearly, there was a wood entry platform with steps providing access to the front door. This structure certainly predated Roper, but there is no way of knowing if it was the original or a subsequent replacement. Considering the evidence available, the decision was made to construct a wood, post-in-ground platform and steps (Figs. 43, 44, & 45). Two posts of the new platform can be seen in Fig. 39 on either side of the front entrance. The post on the left is situated directly on top of the post mold seen in Fig. 42.



Figure 40 *Clear vertical wear line to left of door below watertable.*



Figure 41 *Traces of wear line to right of door below watertable.*



Figure 42 *Post mold with fragment of wood post (center, slightly left).*

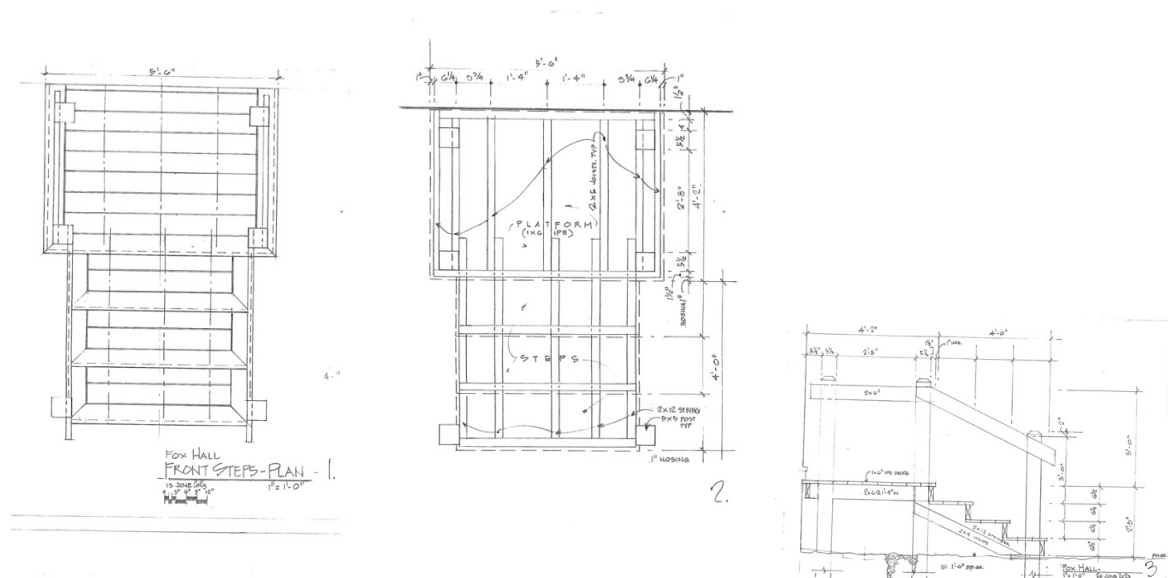


Figure 43 *Design drawings for entry platform and steps (zoom to enlarge).*



Figure 44 *Entry steps and platform under construction.*



Figure 45 *Entry steps and platform completed.*

Grading

As discussed previously, water running off the roof and face of the building is managed by the French-drain ground gutter. In addition to this system, grading the front and side yards was necessary to divert surface water away from the house. This task has been completed, and the graded areas have been seeded.



Figure 46 *Grading for surface-water management.*

Chimney Cap Removal

The final structural task in the Fox Hall restoration project was the removal of the circa 1900, Roper-period chimney cap on the west chimney (Fig. 47, Fig. 48, and Fig. 49). Once removed, several of the original mortar joints on the inside of the main flue, near the top of the chimney, required tuck pointing. Since the fireplaces will no longer be used for fire safety reasons, the two flues were covered with heavy slate pavers cut to size. A gap of roughly a half inch was left under the slate covers to allow the flues to breathe or draw, thus preventing condensation that could damage the chimneys from the inside. While the east chimney did not have a Roper chimney cap, the same flue-covering treatment was applied earlier during the restoration project.



Figure 47 *Chimney cap before removal.*



Figure 48 *Chimney cap removal in progress.*



Figure 49 *Chimney after chimney cap removal.*

Conclusion

First and foremost, Fox Hall is a private home that has been continually lived in for nearly 300 years. Over that lengthy period, the house has undergone numerous alterations, a few additions, and two near disasters by fire. Throughout all this, the basic structure has survived intact. Around five years ago, the present owner decided to restore the early house and to renovate the late 19th. - early 20th. century additions

bringing the additions up to modern living standards. All this work is essentially complete. The restoration work has been documented in the 19-article Fox Hall series published on www.ehcnc.org under Decorative Arts/Architecture.

Years ago, long-term friend, noted author, scholar, and craftsman, Wallace Gusler, stated his philosophy for dealing with cultural resources. "Listen to what an object is trying to tell you." In his career at Colonial Williamsburg, serving first as Master Gunsmith, next as Curator of Mechanical Arts, then as Curator of Furniture, and finally as Director of Conservation, Gusler applied his self-imposed philosophy. The Fox Hall restoration team adopted Gusler's approach to guide the restoration project from inception to completion. Throughout the project, Fox Hall did not disappoint. The house willingly revealed its secrets, and the team listened. When something incorrect to the period of the house was remove or a previously unexplored nook was examined, new evidence about the house often was discovered to guide the team. This discovery process has been discussed in the published Fox Hall series mentioned previously.

Proper restoration of historic structures is a time consuming, expensive, painstaking proposition. Hiring a contractor with trades not experienced in historic structures can lead to irreparable damage. An interdisciplinary team of individuals well versed in historic preservation is a considerably better approach that will yield results sensitive to a particular structure. Such a team is well positioned to analyze a structure, research historic

records, formulate a restoration plan, design the various aspects of the plan, estimate costs, review qualifications of additional trades people not on the team, and properly guide, manage, and execute the restoration work.

Another long-term friend, noted author, scholar, craftsman, and former MESDA Editor, John Bivins, now deceased, opined "Don't try to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and in the process ruin a perfectly good sow's ear". This bit of colloquial wisdom applies equally well to the restoration of historic structures. Less eloquently stated, avoid the Colonial Revival tendency of making a building more beautiful and grand than it was originally. The Fox Hall restoration team has strived to follow the advice of both Gusler and Bivins. The team has listened to the house and has diligently tried to follow the evidence throughout the restoration project. Fox Hall now appears as the 300-year-old Virginia vernacular treasure that it is (Fig 50). Furthermore, no original fabric was damaged or lost in the restoration process.

Restoration and maintenance of historic structures is never really complete. As issues arise at Fox Hall through time, new evidence surely will emerge. Listen!



Figure 50 *Fox Hall restoration complete.*