
Based on actual fieldwork conducted by the present and past staff of Colonial Williamsburg, this book is reminiscent of the 1976 title, Building Early America: Contributions toward the History of a Great Industry. While that work was issued by the Carpenters’ Company and the result of a symposium, both books in large measure present extensive documentation of the history of building with particular emphasis on materials and construction techniques. Both titles also serve the dual purpose of informing historians of early American architecture as well as helping train preservation personnel. What sets The Chesapeake House apart from that earlier work as well as other architectural histories of the region is the way in which fieldwork has impacted the choice of line drawings and photographs and how they in turn clearly support the text. The staff of Colonial Williamsburg has used their well-established field recording methods to carefully study and register findings and to present this evidence in a thorough fashion.

The Chesapeake House is divided into seventeen chapters with four major divisions. Cary Carson provides context and background, which is then followed by an explanation of the nature of fieldwork, especially at Colonial Williamsburg. Carl Lounsbury’s chapter on the design process is a very useful overview of design sources and strategies, such as proportion and ornamentation. The next section of the book focuses on various types of housing, from the town-house to slave dwellings. The chapter on timber framing includes information on wall systems and roofing techniques. The evolution of brickwork is traced from the brickmaking process to a description of patterns and a comparison of brick sizes by region. This book also covers interiors with detailed studies of hardware, wallpaper, and paint and describes how color choices evolved through time.

This book builds upon earlier studies such as those by Thomas Tileston Waterman, Henry Glassie, and Dell Upton, thus enhancing our knowledge of the early architecture of Maryland and Virginia and the evolution of domestic architecture in eighteenth-century America. An appendix by location supplements the index and image credits. The notes are clear and extensive, but no bibliography has been included. Nonetheless, The Chesapeake House is an important addition to the literature of the period and region and should be considered for both public and academic libraries.

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