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Perfect Additions

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Wood-framed houses do not survive for very long without a great deal of care, and those that do are often altered beyond recognition over the years. Most fall victim to changing fashions, adverse economic circumstances, or the march of progress. A small number of houses of architectural or historic merit may be restored to their original condition, but often the restoration is an academic exercise in reclaiming a lost past and little of the original structure remains.

From time to time, however, a house will manage to survive in its original form for a very long period. The secret to longevity appears to lie in an existence just outside the social and economic limelight combined with a succession of frugal owners who are careful to keep the water out but who are otherwise content to leave things pretty much as they are.

The Fawcett-Reeder House in Alexandria, Virginia, is one of those houses. Since the 1770s, it has had only five owners, including Joe Reeder, the current owner. "All had a 'let it be attitude,' the single greatest factor in preserving the place," notes James McCrery II, AIA, whose firm, Franck Lohsen McCrery, Architects Inc., restored and renovated the existing house and designed a sensitive kitchen addition.

Located in the Alexandria Historic District at the corner of Prince and South St. Asaph Streets, the Fawcett-Reeder House

above and right (living) Joe Reeder's collection of period artwork, furniture, and furnishings, some of which are original to the house, maintain the colonial-era atmosphere. Opposite Antoinette Frank, Lohsen, and McCrery designed new cabinets and bookshelves for the small front parlor. They were built by a framing carpenter using only hand-sawn tools in order to match the level of craftsmanship of the original millwork. This can be examined without leaving the original interior.

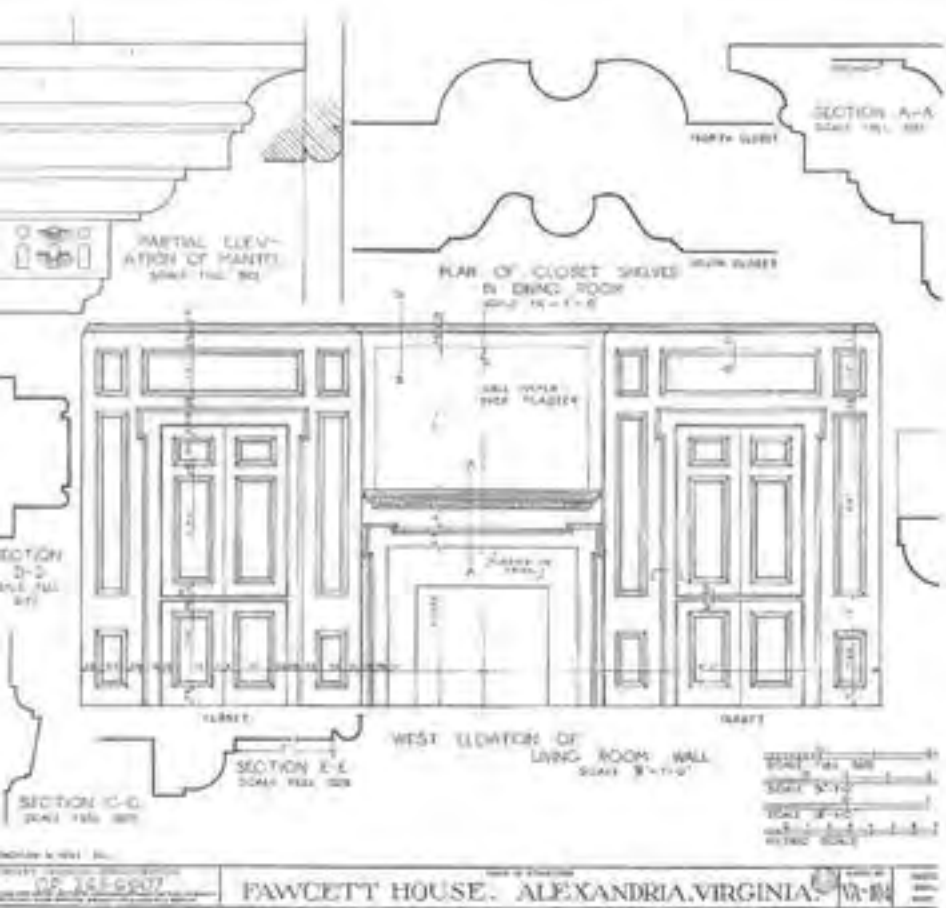
calls little attention to itself despite sitting on a generous corner lot. Even the most careful observer walking up Prince Street from the Potomac River waterfront might walk right past it without realizing what a significant piece of American history it is. But from the corner, with the side of the house in full view, architects Franck Lohsen McCrery carefully peeled away a layer of Victorian-era lap siding to reveal the original broad-plank clapboards of this simple farmhouse. The wide unpainted boards are the first clue that the house might be an unusual specimen of its time. The architects also restored a kitchen porch that faces the corner side yard. Otherwise, the exterior of the house looks much as it has for more than 200 years.

The original structure actually consisted of two buildings. The main house was built as a timber frame with brick nogging and plank clapboard siding. A separate brick building housed the kitchen, an overseer's office, a laundry, and a smokehouse. This was a common arrangement for southern colonial houses. Separating the kitchen from the main house reduced the risk of destruction by fire, and it kept the heat of the kitchen hearth away from the main house during the hot summer months. The kitchen building also featured an ingeniously designed attached privy, with three compartments opening directly to the outside at the rear: one for the master of the house, one for his wife and children, and a third for the slaves. All three compartments shared a single brick-lined septic pit, which was naturally vented through openings in the brick foundation then through a









its present site at that time, but little more than the absence of tax records supports his theory. He also notes that the house and the brick kitchen building appear to be contemporaneous.

In 1794 a saltbox addition was added to the rear of the house along its entire length, which for the first time provided the family with a separate formal dining room and a “proper” master bedroom away from the street and equipped with its own fireplace. The saltbox filled in the space between the main house and the kitchen building, connecting the two structures for the first time. The windows of the new dining room, on the north side of the house, were likely relocated from the rear wall of the original house. The newly exposed clapboard siding on the north side tells this part of the story beautifully, with the outline of the original house plainly visible.

Sometime after 1810 the saltbox addition was extended laterally to the south, beyond the side wall of the house. The master bedroom fireplace was moved, and an attached master bedroom privy was added. The original street-front entry to the house, which opened directly into the parlor, was removed and replaced with a window. A new formal entry was added on the south side, which had the effect of concealing the otherwise awkward saltbox extension. The interior was further subdivided to create a hallway from the new side entry to the center of the

brick flue that projects through the roof and looks like another chimney. A brick wall divides the privies from the laundry and the smokehouse, ensuring acoustic and olfactory separation. Another brick wall originally partitioned the laundry from the smokehouse so that the heat of the smokehouse could be used to dry the laundry without the smoke permeating the clothes.

The original main house was a typical mid-Atlantic farmhouse of the Georgian period, though it was notably devoid of ornament. McCrery describes the original owner (and presumed builder) as “a farmer aspirant of the middle class.” Far from being a gentleman farmer, he was known to have worked in the fields alongside his farmhands and slaves. The house has more in common with the wood-framed hall-and-parlor vernacular farmhouses of colonial tidewater Virginia than it does with the high-style southern Georgian manor homes of the surrounding countryside. On the first floor, the house originally consisted of two rooms of unequal size, a large parlor and a smaller bedroom, with a narrow central stair leading from the rear to two attic bedrooms. The main second floor bedroom features an original coal-grate fireplace, a rarity for its time because coal was an uncommon fuel for heating. A notable departure from the local farmhouse vernacular is the lack of a central hall, another sign of the owner’s modest means.

Like many colonial houses, the Fawcett-Reeder residence grew over time, and the complete provenance of the house is unclear. The trail of tax records grows faint before the 1780s, when the house was part of a 700-acre farm just outside the original municipal boundary of Old Town Alexandria. McCrery speculates that the original structure may have been moved to

Below: A drawing of the wing over the millwork done by the original American Builders Group. Photo and caption: The original colonial-era windows in the large front parlor remain built on casement windows with a bit of the framing that have the original window and sash hardware from in the walls of the house itself.







house. The home then remained virtually unchanged until Reeder purchased it several years ago.

The most remarkable feature of the house is the condition of the interior. All of the original plaster walls as well as the floors, fireplaces, and built-in cabinetry are intact and in excellent condition. The original cabinets to either side of the fireplace in the front parlor boast the original faux wood-grain finish on the inside of the cabinet doors, and they have the original shelves and hardware. The interior walls of the original colonial kitchen, with its massive hearth, are in pristine condition, with no sign of wall attachments or other alterations for later cabinets or appliances. The hearth consists of two fireplaces and two flues in a single firebox, a common eighteenth-century arrangement that allowed for more than one item to be cooked at a time and at different temperatures. The laundry retains its original whitewash finish and—unbelievably—the original wood laundry racks. Like the main house, the second floor of the kitchen building is divided into two rooms of unequal size, which were likely slave quarters. The only alteration that mars the original interior of the kitchen building is a doorway through the wall that once separated the laundry from the smokehouse, which had been converted to a storage shed by a previous owner.

The condition of the interior is even more remarkable when one considers that it is not legally protected from alter-

above the dining room features the current owner's collection of colonial-era brass. Right behind it, Victorian-era wallpaper reveals the original wall-plank cabinets, which nicely illustrate the dichotomy of original house and the new effort to restore the nineteenth-century smokehouse to its original function. For more information on this project, contact the author at reeder@reeder.com.

ation. For Reeder and the architects, the rare condition of the interior, preserved by all previous owners for such a long period of time, was a critical factor in the renovation. No legal obstacle prevented them from building a completely modern kitchen in the existing colonial kitchen, but out of respect for the house and mindful of their role as only temporary stewards of this national treasure, they developed a solution that left the existing colonial kitchen intact. In designing the new addition, the architects took great pains to ensure that no damage would be done to the original structures and that all the new work would be completely reversible. To connect the addition to the existing house, they used two existing exterior door openings, one to enter the master bath from the bedroom and the other to enter the new kitchen from the original kitchen building, in the process creating a tiny interior courtyard that preserved original window openings. The kitchen addition runs parallel to the original kitchen building—a mere 18 inches away—with the gutters of the two buildings barely 1 inch apart. A window in the new kitchen aligns with a window in the old kitchen, creating a view (and admitting light) all the way through the colonial kitchen to the north side of the house.

It took an entire year to obtain the approval of the Board of Zoning Appeals (for a setback variance) and the Board of Architectural Review (for conformance to Historic District





Hawcett-Reeder House



RESTORATION ARCHITECTS:
 FRANCK LOHSEN MCCRERY
 YEAR BUILT: CIRCA 1770
 YEAR RESTORED: 2002
 3 BEDROOMS
 1 BATHROOM



First Floor

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 LIBRARY | 7 NEW KITCHEN |
| 2 LIVING ROOM | 8 ORIGINAL KITCHEN |
| 3 MASTER BEDROOM | 9 SMOKE HOUSE/LAUNDRY |
| 4 DINING ROOM | 10 KITCHEN GARDEN |
| 5 COURTYARD | 11 PRIVY |
| 6 GUEST ROOM | 12 SIDE PORCH |

Top The north elevation of the house as it appeared following construction of the saltbox addition, and as it appears today. Above Floor plan showing the new kitchen and master bath addition. From upper left, moving left to right, are the kitchen garden, the new kitchen, and the new master bathroom. Note the tiny, fully-enclosed courtyard, and the narrow exterior space between the new kitchen and the original, colonial-era kitchen. This design solution ensured minimal contact between new construction and the original house, and minimal alteration of existing exterior surfaces. None of the new construction is visible from the street, and all of it is fully reversible and removable.



restrictions), which McCrery cites as “testimony of their great care.” The authorities were ultimately persuaded by the strategy of building new in order to preserve the old. “The Board of Architectural Review has no jurisdiction over the original interior,” says McCrery. “We essentially invited them to have jurisdiction.” It also helped that owner Reeder and McCrery’s firm had done several previous projects in Alexandria; as McCrery notes, “Our firm has an explicit commitment to traditional architecture. We do nothing else.”

In designing the new addition, the architects drew inspiration from the original house. In keeping with the workaday craftsmanship of the original, the new kitchen is “architecturally naïve,” with a large oversized dormer and what McCrery calls an “overstructured roof, because in colonial times it took less effort to make a big piece of wood than a smaller one.” The timber frame was assembled with peg joinery, and the whole addition was sheathed with random-width planks. The floor is random-width, plain-sawn walnut, in keeping with the plain-sawn pine floorboards of the original house. The kitchen fireplace chimney is stepped, a nod to eighteenth-century practice when brick was an expensive building material. The new kitchen also features a pair of Dutch doors beneath a deeply overhanging roof, which McCrery readily acknowledges as “a complete invention pinned to the owner’s desire to open the kitchen to the garden.” The kitchen “cabinetry” is actually a series of old reclaimed dry sinks with a maple countertop.

Other than the restoration of the kitchen porch and the uncovering of the original clapboard siding, the original house has received only the lightest touch. The pine floors, which had

above: A dry sink in front of the window of the original colonial kitchen, which has been left with a window in the new kitchen, a new dormer beyond, and an open view of the new kitchen from the kitchen garden, showing the original Dutch door and the farmhouse table below. In good weather, the garden and kitchen become one big room.

been painted black, were stripped and restored to their original natural finish. Reeder wished to furnish the smaller front parlor as a library, so the architects designed new cabinets and shelves along the front wall to be easily removed without damage to the original interior finishes. So as not to upstage the original colonial millwork, the new library cabinets have a “comparative commonness” with the rest of the house. Rather than hiring a finish carpenter, the architects hired a framing carpenter and instructed him to do the best job he could using only the tools of his own trade.

The Fawcett-Reeder House has been fortunate to have Reeder as its most recent steward. A former Marine, he is an avid collector of historical artwork, artifacts, and furnishings—and houses. As McCrery describes him, “He loves history and feels that he is a part of it. There is no limit to his degree of interest in doing justice to the property. He seeks and finds the right way to do things.”

The house has been no less fortunate to have Franck Lohsen McCrery as its architects; they see themselves as part of history, too. McCrery muses, “We could spend all of our time designing new buildings. And we hope that 100 years from now, someone will take care of our work, so we like to spend at least part of our time taking care of the buildings of others.” *NOV*

Michael Tardif, a freelance writer, lives in Bethesda, Maryland.

For Resources, see page 102.

