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Source: *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jul., 1935), pp. 200-208

Published by: Virginia Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4244657>

Accessed: 04-12-2017 14:39 UTC

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THE ROLFE PROPERTY
Warren House at "Smith's Fort Plantation,"
1652-1935

By Anne Page Johns

Legible still, in the finely feathered chirography of a faithful Surry "clark," and treasured carefully in the snug archives of Surry Court House, stands today a certain deposition "Sworne in Open Court held for the County of Surry March 5th 1677":

"Richard Tyas aged about forty-nine years Sworne saith:

'That Mr. Thomas Warren his heirs and Assigns have peaceably and quietly posest and Injoyed in their own rights that plantation on which John Salway is now seated Commonly Called Smith's Fort about 34 years, without any sutes troubles or molestations concerning the same, and further about twenty-five or twenty-six years since ye said Mr. Warren did begin to build yt fifty foot brick house which now stands upon ye said Land and finished ye same without being forewarned or disturbed by any person, and that Mr. Rolfe was then Living and lived several yeares afterwards and was Commonly at ye said Warren's house before after and whilst the said house was building and yt . . . further your deponent was present at a room of ye sd Warren's house on ye sd Plantacion with Mr. Warren Mr. Thos: Rolfe aforesaid and Mr. Mason and several others some certaine time before the said Warren buili ye said brick house where he saw ye said Mr. Rolfe wright a Bill of sale with his owne hands wherein he did make over and sell from him and his heires and Assigns for ever ye said plantation Called Smith's Forts and further ye sd Warren payd ye sd Rolfe parte of ye Consideration which he gave for ye sd lands in Corne'"

Our primary interest in the above excerpt from an ancient document is its reference to "Mr. Thomas Rolfe aforesaid." It also fixes the origin of a certain small, famous house lately added to Virginia's treasury of public historical shrines, and which is still "Commonly known as Smith's Fort Plantation",



WARREN HOUSE AT SMITH FORT



INTERIOR, WARREN HOUSE

the Rolfe property of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.

The meticulous student of history will refrain from naming this historic little building "*The Rolfe House*," however euphemistic from association and tradition that title would be; and although both the historical and the romantic interest attached to Smith's Fort Plantation rests not upon its uniquely authentic antiquity—1652-1935, nor yet on the established fact of having been builded and posed by so worthy and peaceable a citizen as Mr. Thomas Warren. The record of Mr. Warren's titled possession, his "quiet Injoyment" of his property is truly engaging. We admire and thank the wise builder of so staunch and attractive a dwelling; above all, for his courage to found—*in parvo*, yet with an infinite perfection of detail, and deep in a wilderness where massacre and starving-times were no remote ancestral incidents—the very prototype of an English gentleman's fair Country Seat.

But of greater importance to historians, and more stirring to present imagination, is the above deposition's unique personal record of a certain neighbor and contemporary of the good planter, Thomas Warren. Earlier title to ye Plantation-over-the-water is also a matter of historic record. Two other colonial planters had preceded Mr. Warren in the possession of it. They were John Rolfe, Gentleman, husband of Pocahontas, founder of the tobacco industry, a member of the King's Council and Secretary of State in Virginia; and after him his son Thomas, whose connection with and recorded frequent presence at "Smith's Fort Plantation" is second only to Jamestown as the closest link with the first American heroine of history, and her famous family.

Clear, and happily, against the shadowy forest behind Virginia's first century, moves the valiant little figure of the Princess Pocahontas, whose name interpreted becomes "Bright-stream-between-two-hills." At Jamestown, in 1614, after a strange courtship, with the distinguished wooer tortured equally by his conscientious scruples and by the "intricate labyrinth" of his passion for a child of the wilderness—the daughter of

Chief Powhatan was married to John Rolfe, formerly of Heacham, Norfolk County, England. Two years later, with him and her infant son Thomas, she voyaged to England, where "a Virginia Ladye borne" was cordially received and admired by James's court and society. All who met her were delighted, we are assured, with the singularity and charm of "so interesting a being who twice saved the colony of Virginia by her heroism and devotion under circumstances of singular peril and romance." But on March 21, 1616, aged only 21, Pocahontas the brave and loved was buried in the chancel of St. George's Church at Gravesend. What plague or sudden disaster brought down her fine dark head is unknown to history. But of her courage on a bleak foreign death-bed, her husband wrote sorrowfully the record. "All must die," sighed Pocahontas, "'tis enough that my Childe liveth."

He, year-old, Virginia-born Thomas Rolfe, was left in England, with kind Sir Philip Stukely who hastened from Plymouth to receive a small orphaned alien, and who "earnestly desired the keeping of him"—early tribute to any distinguished Virginian. The bereft emigrant John Rolfe took his sad westward passage (booked for three), returning alone to Virginia. Later, he remarried there, had other children, and died in 1622. Meanwhile in England, a paternal uncle, Mr. Henry Rolfe, succeeded to the charge and education of young Thomas. It is recorded that his grandfather Powhatan and another crafty relative, Opecancanough, repeatedly urged that he should not return to Virginia "until he be a man."

In 1635 Thomas Rolfe arrived from England. He was soon a man of importance in the colony. Like his father, he became a successful tobacconist, a pioneer trader in Virginia's already leading export. He took up his share of his father's wide claims; finding his inheritance on the fertile south shore of the James—a plantation "commonly known as Smith's Fort," running back from high bluff along Gray's Creek, immediately opposite Jamestown. Here, one mile inland, had canny Captain Smith built for the shivering colonists a "New Fort," during the black winter of 1609. In 1614, on his marriage to

Pocahontas, John Rolfe came into possession of this tract of land, including on it the New Fort, "by Guifte of the Indian King." To insure his title, we learn that he also took out a royal patent on the said lands. Smith's Fort Plantation descended duly to Powhatan's English grandson. And an interesting sidelight on the character of our famous colonist is the record that certain tenants who, during the thirteen years of his absentee ownership, had taken out patents in their own names on the said lands "did later become tennants to ye said Mr. Rolfe." To them, however, we may owe much of the recorded early history of the place. For it was the litigation arising a generation later, between the heirs of the said tenants and the legal assigns of ye said Thomas Warren, that brought about the treasured deposition quoted above.

Under the will of Thomas Warren, dated March 16, 1669, the place descended to his son William Warren and wife Alice. After her husband's death, Mistress Alice Warren married Matthias Merriott, and by them, on July 23rd, 1673, Smith's Fort Plantation was sold to Mr. John Salway and Elizabeth, his wife. Mrs. Elizabeth Salway inherited the place under her husband's will of April 10, 1678. She married next Mr. John Thompson, and her son, Samuel Thompson, became owner of the said house and lands adjacent on January 27, 1698.

Such frequent changes of fortune, begun in the seventeenth century, apparently followed in the long annals of Smith's Fort Plantation. By 1885 it had become the property of a negro farmer, who shortly began the thrift practice of selling, brick by brick to unquibbling sightseers, a large part of its fine old water-table and chimneys. From him, in 1928, after many years of unfruitful effort to redeem the house on the part of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, it was eventually purchased by Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., through Colonial Williamsburg. History then was repeated, and for the second time "By royal Guift" the place changed hands. In courteous return for the co-operation of the As-

sociation for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities in the Williamsburg restoration, and in further token of his regard for the work and ideals of the Association, Mr. Rockefeller presented the deed to the Rolfe property to the late Mrs. J. Taylor Ellyson, president of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, with the understanding that the house would be restored and opened as a public shrine of history.

True to this trust, the Association promptly made the necessary appropriation from its reserve fund for the restoration. Work was begun in 1934, under the direction of the architects, Messrs. Singleton P. Morehead and A. Edwin Kendrew, of the Williamsburg Restoration, and supervised by a committee from the Thomas Rolfe Branch of the A. P. V. A. in Surry County, the redemption of the Rolfe property has been accomplished.

Authorities: "Colonial Virginia, Its People and Its Customs" by Mary Newton Stanard, and records at Surry Court House.

Restoration Work at the Warren House

By Singleton P. Morehead and A. Edwin Kendrew

Now that the Warren House has been restored and opened to the public, it would seem of interest to offer a brief account of the work of restoration and the more interesting details brought to light by it.

The house is of ruddy brick, one and one-half stories high, with dormer windows ranged in a steep, gabled roof. It rests upon a high basement pierced by arched windows and commands a broad vista to the west of rolling meadows descending to Smith's Fort and Gray's Creek, while its principal elevation looks eastward to the present highway. The conventional plan separates the two first floor rooms with a stair hall, treats the second floor in a similar manner and divides the basement into

two large rooms. Each of the first and second floor rooms is provided with two deep closets flanking the fireplaces.

Excavation of the adjacent ground indicates that the house stood near the center of a long rectangle, presumably defined by fences which linked together an outbuilding at each of the four corners, enclosing others within its area—the kitchen, well house, dairy, etc., standing east of the house with the garden outbuildings symmetrically disposed to the west.

From without, the appearance before restoration was that of a house on the verge of ruin. The brick walls had lost their original beauty by applications of whitewash, while in many places the face bricks had been removed. Fortunately the original window openings were in evidence, but the design and treatment of the exterior doors had been altered by crude replacements. On the roof, although not ancient, the shingles were badly decayed, while the dormer windows later rebuilt were largely without glass. The original cornice and verge boards had been replaced with rough lumber. Evidences of late additions to the building existed and in some instances original windows had been changed into doors to serve these portions.

Within the house, the plan had luckily not been altered, nor had the design of the wood finish, plaster work and structural frame been changed to any great extent. However, rough usage and weather penetration if allowed to continue would have ruined the interior in a few years.

All of the original outbuildings, gardens and fences had disappeared, and the picture that the property presented was semi-ruinous. In spite of the apparent deterioration, it is particularly fortunate that after thorough investigation enough evidence was brought to light to restore the house accurately.

The restoration of the exterior of the house was undertaken first. It was evident that the original size and shape had not been changed. The brick walls were laid up in Flemish bond above the ground level and in English bond below. The bricks below the water-table were $8\frac{3}{8}$ by $4\frac{1}{4}$ by $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in size;

above this line to the cornice they were $8\frac{1}{4}$ by $4\frac{1}{4}$ by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and on the gables from this line up they reverted in size to the former dimensions. The original mortar contained oyster shell lime. To match this old mortar experiments proved the necessity of using white instead of the usual yellow sand. It is interesting to note that the precise kind of sand desired was found on the property near the house. The removal of the whitewash revealed brickwork of unusual color, beauty and texture. Many bricks had pitted surfaces, indicating that during manufacture they had been subjected to the action of rain previous to their being burned in the kiln. Where additional bricks were needed, it was necessary to procure them from ruined building sites nearby in order to match the textures of the originals. Enough of the ancient chimneys remained to indicate the treatment of the molded caps.

Evidences of all the window openings in the brick walls were found. The ground or gauged brick arches above them were in need of repair, but only two had to be entirely replaced. The brickwork at the first floor window jambs was ground after the fashion of the period. Although weather-beaten beyond repair, the original basement window grilles remained,—their solid frames were built of poplar and joined with mortices and pegs. The first floor window frames were of similar construction and material, with double membered architraves and molded sills. The original sash had disappeared, but their exact size and thickness was indicated by the frames themselves.

Upon investigation it was found that the original brickwork at the top and jambs of the front entrance on the exterior had been rebuilt. The door and frame were missing, but their sizes were determined from the undisturbed brickwork on the interior. The removal of the modern brick revealed clearly defined slots for ground or gauged brick panels at either side. An original curved brick mortar joint above the door established the top and radius of a segmental, gauged brick arch which was found to be identical to the one clearly indicated

over the garden entrance door. The design of the new door frame followed that of the ancient one at the garden entrance. The new doors were designed to follow the original interior doors. Excavation revealed no foundations for the entrance stoops or open porches. An incised line scratched on the brick below the water-table established their width, but it was necessary to use precedent from other contemporary buildings to establish the design.

The only opening in the ends of the house was at the south, providing a basement entrance. Despite the fact that the original frame and door had been replaced at a later period, enough marks and slots remained in the brickwork to establish their sizes as well as the run of steps leading to the basement floor.

The shapes of the cornice and verge boards were largely indicated by marks in the whitewash and by the cutting of the rafter and floor joist ends which projected to receive the cornice members. Tucked away in the attic was an ancient, unused cypress shingle with a round butt. This formed the pattern for the new shingles which were hewn by hand. When the plaster was removed at the second floor, the original roof framing was exposed to the eye, and showed the position, shape and type of the dormers. Much of the framing of the dormers themselves remained. They were encased anew with finish patterned after conventional precedent of the period.

The restoring of the interior consisted chiefly in removing modern parts, patching and repairing. In the basement the existing dirt floor was covered with old brick from a nearby source, the steps and stair restored, and ruinous walls and chimney foundations repaired. On the first and second floors almost all of the original woodwork remained and in general it was of a simple yet fine treatment. It was wrought by the original builders into forms of great beauty and dignity at the stair, with its turned balusters, molded rails and strings, and at the fireplace end of the north room where fluted pilasters carry a handsome cornice breaking about them to enframe the over-mantel panelling and the arched cupboards with their "but-

terfly" shelves. The plaster throughout was falling and had to be replaced. The floors required patching, which was done with ancient boards procured elsewhere. Little new hardware was needed, but when employed was copied by hand from existing, ancient examples in the building. On the new entrance doors, however, conventional patterns were installed. Again, as in so many instances in the building, the original paint colors gave sufficient evidence to point the way to the selection and extent of the colors. These comprised chiefly a strong, flat blue for the woodwork, a dark red for the basement and a tempera white for the plaster.

In any general consideration of this building the most important fact cannot fail to be that enough of the ancient structure survived the hardships of age and use to provide such ample evidence for restoration. This was so true that it is better, perhaps, to refer to the work as repair and renovation than as a restoration. With this in mind it makes the permanent preservation of the house doubly valuable as a part of our architectural background—and brings us closer to the true picture of the original structure. During the work those engaged in it found that many features of the building served as food for thought, and felt that these would unquestionably throw more light on the whole field of future study of Colonial architecture of the Virginia Tidewater.