



THE CUPOLA HOUSE ASSOCIATION, INC.

Spring Newsletter

"History Shapes Our Future"

The President's Message
by Vonna O'Neill

Author Hilary Mantel said, "History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it."

For the past several months this year, the Cupola House interior has undergone a major transformation. The 1960's replicated woodwork is almost completely removed and with it, mysteries have been revealed and more questions have surfaced. Under the careful guidance of Andrew Ownbey, Wade Rogers and Don Jordan have carefully labeled each piece and continue to study the bones of the Cupola House.

During this time, a plethora of guided tours have taken place to the delight of our visitors. Jonathan Tobias' wonderful article about some of his experiences is included in this newsletter...don't miss it!

Your Cupola House Board had an all day strategic planning work session at Hayes in March as heightened interest in our history requires us to adapt. Filming a documentary; updating and expanding our social media; establishing a Woodwork Task Force; hiring a bookkeeper; applying for grants and cultivating relationships with donors; providing wonderful Speaker Series events; establishing a "pop-up" store for CHA; research of our furnishings; constant replacement and maintenance of our great gardens...the list goes on and on. Volunteers and our dedicated members have made the Cupola House Association an admired institution for the past 107 years!

Check out our calendar of events and volunteer to participate so together we can continue to make history! Thank you one and all!



In this newsletter:

Calendar of Events
Did You Know?
The Work of Preservation
Documentary Update
Gift Shop Announcement



Calendar of EVENTS

April 2025

April 4: Spring Speaker Series

Dr. Susan Buck, Conservator and Paint Analyst
St. Paul's Episcopal Church Parish House

April 4: Virginia Beach Garden Club Private Tour

April 5: Roanoke Chowan Literary Festival

Meet the Authors in the lower garden, 1-3 pm

April 10th: CHA Board Meeting

April 11-12: EWC Pilgrimage -- house is open for free tours and our gift shop will be in the gardens

April 24th: Private tour/Holding Family

May 2025

May 2: Private Tour, Rolls Royce Group

May 6: Spring Speaker Series

Andrew Ownbey Restorations, LLC

Shepard-Pruden Memorial Library

May 8: CHA Board Meeting

May 9: Private Tour, AAA Tour Group

May 30: Private Tour, NC Museum of History Docents

May 31: Private Tour, Preservation NC

June 2025

June 2: Private Tour, Samuel Johnston

DAR, Raleigh Chapter

June 12: CHA Board Meeting

July 2025

July 10: No CHA Board Meeting --
Summer Break

VISIT WWW.CUPOLAHOUSE.ORG FOR MORE DETAILS

by: Martha Smith

WILLIAM NICHOLS -

EARLY EDENTON ARCHITECT AND BUILDER

In a 2009 article in North Carolina Architects and Builders, written by C. Ford Peatross and Catherine Bishir, we learn that an English born Architect and builder named William Nichols worked in Edenton and North Carolina from 1800 to 1827. Trained as an architect in Bath, England, Nichols was influenced by the works of Palladio, and used architectural books including Stuart and Revett's Antiquities of Athens to bring Greek Revival and Gothic Revival styles to buildings he constructed across the state. Nichols first came to New Bern around 1800 and by 1805 had married Mary Rew. There are no documented records of any buildings Nichols constructed in New Bern, but several buildings erected there at the time show his design influence.

Nichols first documented commissions came from Edenton, where he lived from 1806 to 1817. His first documented work was the "restoration" of the 1736 St. Paul's Episcopal Church building. He was paid \$3,300.00 plus the cost of materials for extensive repairs including installing a coved ceiling, columns supporting the galleries, and a spire. Nichols made repairs to the 1767 Chowan County Courthouse, and also built some more modest buildings including the Baptist Meeting House and the Chowan County jail, both in 1810, and at least one residential house for a Mrs. Harris. Nichols' most impressive work in Edenton was the construction of the Hayes Plantation house, which he built and oversaw much of the interior design and furnishings from 1814 - 1817. During Nichols' time in Edenton, his first wife died, and in 1815 he married an Edenton native, Sarah Simons.

He left Edenton in 1817 and moved to Fayetteville where he built 2 banks. He became the State of NC Architect and remodeled the NC State House in Raleigh. From 1822 - 1827, he improved or built new several buildings on the University of North Carolina campus in Chapel Hill.

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The Cupola House papers have several documents related to William Nichols: An account bill and payment receipt dated September 20, 1806 show Nichols was paid for 36 days for work on the Chowan County Courthouse, including:

- raising a ladder
- framing and raising a scaffold around the cupola
- replacing the roof
- fixing a new ball on the spire on top of the cupola
- painting and striking the scaffold.

A bill to the Commissioners from Nichols dated March 26, 1808, and dating back to work begun in June 1807, included 2 ½ days of glazing windows at the Court House, taking off and placing new locks, putting a new lid on the “box” (this is assumed to be the box encasing the water pump on the green in front of the Court House), 1 day’s work making a frame for the pump, 6 days hire of Negro workers, 8 days’ work at the pump and putting sills around the Court House, 1 ½ days’ work making housing for the pump, and hanging shutters at the Court House. Also included was a bill for 89 feet of scantling wood, 23 feet of poplar planks, 2 pounds of small spikes, and 2 hooks.

Excitement ensued when another document was found listing payments made to jurors for the June 1801 County Court. This would place William Nichols in the area much earlier than previously documented anywhere, with none of the previous records of Nichols placing him in Edenton until 1806.

The document is torn, with the top half missing. On the back are scribbled multiple notes, listing amounts paid to several different people and appears to be in the handwriting of Edmund Hoskins, the Sheriff of Chowan County. Hoskins was good about writing the month and day of these transactions, but unfortunately not the year.

On the back appears the notation that on February 28th, \$168.00 was received for the meeting house and the notation “paid William Nichols.” Further examination, however, concluded that by using the term “meeting house”, it indicated that Hoskins was talking about the Baptist Meeting House, which Nichols built in 1810 and therefore does not support any kind of documentation that Nichols was in the area at the time of the 1801 date on the front of the document. It seems that Hoskins was using the back of an older, torn document to record later transactions.

THE WORK OF *Preservation*

by: Jonathan Tobias
originally published in
The Chowan Herald

A local forty-something man and his family toured the Cupola House recently. “I’ve lived here over twenty years,” he said as he exited the 267 year old main entrance, “and this is only the first time I’ve been inside this beautiful house. Why did it take me so long? Now I see what I’ve missed all this time.”

Few things make a docent happier than to open up doors to the past, to long memories and former beauty restored. This is a rewarding mission – to invite everyone and anyone into the halls of real history, to be an eyewitness of excelsior craftsmanship, both bygone and very much in the present. To walk on stair steps and floorboards that bear the marks of over two and a half centuries of wear. To be up close and personal to domestic articles like a three-sided crib used two hundred years ago by a young mother in the very room where she actually lived.

And maybe to hear, when only your heartbeat echoes in the quietude, voices muffled by the distance of countless seasons and changes, footsteps in the hallways, shutters creaking in the gusts from the Sound, a violin barely heard in the parlor.

Yes, the Cupola House is haunted – haunted by the lives of those who lived there and worked and visited there, both free and enslaved.

That young (and fortysomething is young now, from my point of view) man and his family felt the presence of this beauty burnished by time, and I think they heard the voices.



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I confess that I had thought visitors wouldn't like tours of the House during this unprecedented business of restoration. You've heard, I'm sure, that after an absence of 106 years, the original interior woodwork of the first floor is coming back home. The story is exceptional and poignant. In 1918, the Georgian interior woodwork was removed from the first floor and was taken to the Brooklyn museum. For 45 years, the Cupola House served as the first home of the Shepard-Pruden Memorial Library. But when the library left, the first floor was empty. Then, a miracle happened – a miracle of not only preservation, but restoration. Craftsmen – well known in this community, amongst them the great gardener herself, Frances Inglis – fashioned an exact replication of the original woodwork and made the first floor the splendid Georgian celebration it had been before and now became again.

Then, last Fall, another miracle happened. The original woodwork returned from its long retreat up north and came home to Edenton. Such a homecoming of a historic house's interior woodwork after so long has never happened before in America. This is truly an exciting moment not only for Edenton, but for American history.

So now, things have changed profoundly if not drastically in the Cupola House interior, especially on the first floor. The restoration woodwork that was put up by our friends in the 1960's is being taken down painstakingly by Andrew Ownbey, Wade Rogers, and Don Jordan. Some jaw-dropping discoveries have been made in the dismantling process. Some mysteries remain, and others have been added.

When you open the front door, it is immediately obvious that there is a “work in progress” going on. The furniture, the fine china and cotton-twist glassware have been carefully packed up and moved elsewhere. Tools and ladders and sawhorses crowd the room we used to interpret as Dr Dickinson's medical office. The parlor is completely dismantled. The hallway is bare. The rugs are rolled up. Bare (and original!) lath is exposed.

It is, to be frank, not the most salubrious look for a house museum tour, and that is the reason why I wondered whether anyone would be interested in seeing the House “as is,” as a “work in progress.”

I couldn't have been more wrong. I haven't heard a single discouraging word or complaint. Everyone seems to be singularly invested, at an almost emotional level, in what is at stake here. It is as though they actually want to be part of this chapter, part of this miracle of bringing home the original woodwork, of putting history back together again.

That is true of every visitor I've taken through the House since the dismantling began. But I confess that nothing is better than to welcome someone who has passed by the Cupola House for years, even a lifetime, who was almost overly-familiar with a peripheral view of the structure passing by as he drove down Broad so many times, but never once stepped inside. Until the day he walked in, when I told him “This is your history. It is everyone's history, whether you live in town or in the county, or anywhere else. And history tells us who we are, who we've been and who we ought to become. That is why real history must be preserved.”

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Documentary Update

by: Heidi Nastasi



When the Cupola House Association learned last year that the original Cupola House woodwork – removed in 1918 and transferred to the Brooklyn Museum – would return to Edenton, the Board of Directors understood that this unprecedented event in historic preservation had to be recorded. Indigo Productions, Inc., a documentary film company in NYC, was commissioned to capture not just the story of the woodwork and its return, but the history of the Cupola House, the remarkable story of its rescue, and the dedicated work of the Association founders, and those who followed them, in preserving the house and preparing it for the years to come.

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THE WORK OF *Preservation*

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No, scratch that. There is one thing better. A few weeks ago, a group of fourth-graders came to visit this beautiful house. We stood in the garden, viewing the front elevation. In quick fashion, I told the story of this wonderful preservation, and why the “work in progress” was so special, and why they ought to be proud of what was being done.

One of the girls asked “What is that word you used – preservation?” I was ready for this. As we stood looking at the pristine lines of the house, from the cupola itself to the “FC1758” finial to the overhanging jetty and the corbels, then to the green shutters and the front porch, I brought out a sepia copy of a January 1918 photo taken of the same aspect. But the house in that photo was in disarray and unpainted disrepair, obscured by briars and suggested only forlorn hints as to what it used to be.

“Look at this,” I said, pointing to the photo, letting the melancholy of the picture sink in. “Now,” I said, pointing to the house as it is, “look at that.”

“That,” I said, “is preservation. That is what we do here, and that is what you can do, too.”

And so can you, dear reader. Join us. Go to the Cupola House Association website: www.cupolahouse.org. Keep track of the “work in progress.” Become a member. Help us preserve.



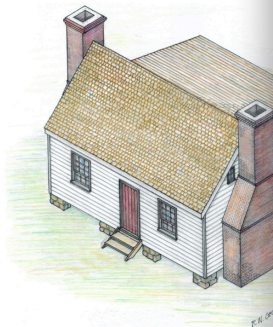
Documentary Update *Continued from Page 7*

This spring the Indigo film crew visited Edenton twice. Working from the research of Benbury Wood, who compiled a comprehensive list of Cupola House Association Founders and their descendants, the team interviewed selected descendants and other Edentonians with direct memory of the early days of the Association. Stories of the Cupola House as town library, the fundraising tea parties, the reacquisition of the grounds, the development of the garden and more, captured on film.

In addition, Indigo interviewed preservation experts, including Dr. Susan Buck and Robert Leath. As the 1960's reproduction woodwork was carefully removed from the house the film team captured footage of the work done by Andrew Ownbey, Wade Rogers, and Don Jordan, along with extensive interviews. More filming will occur over the coming months as the main floor is repaired and the original woodwork is reinstalled. The completed film will document a unique moment in Edenton and North Carolina preservation history.

ON-LINE | POP-UP
GIFT SHOP
IN PERSON SHOPPING AT
TIMES ANNOUNCED
THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER

*Edenton's 1718 House
Mr. Ogilby's*

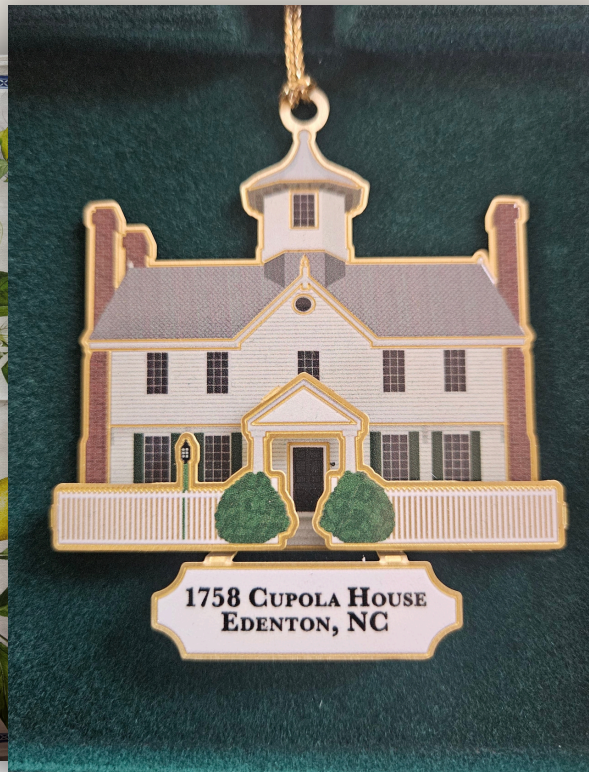


Thomas R. J. Newbern Michael L. Marshall

1718 House
Mr. Ogilby's
Tavern



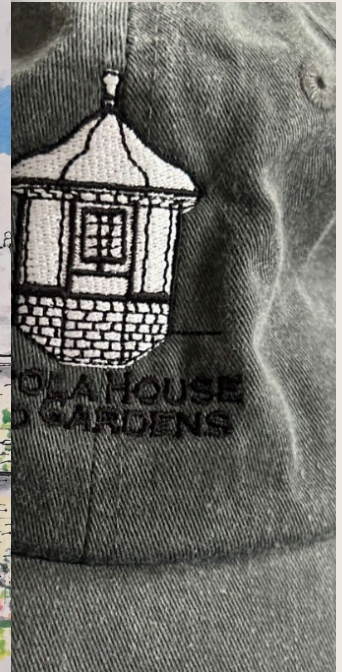
Exquisite
Tea Towels



Christmas Tree Ornament



Double matted
watercolor print
by Nora Crouch



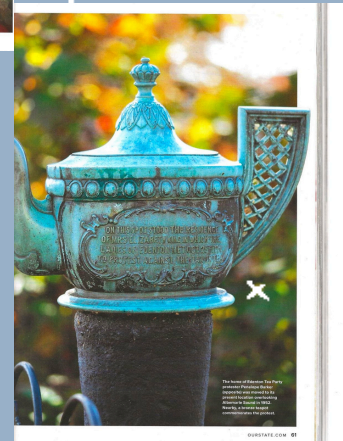
Baseball
cap

[HTTPS://CUPOLAHOUSE.ORG/MERCHANDISE/](https://cupolahouse.org/merchandise/)

CHECK OUT THE APRIL 2025 ISSUE OF OUR STATE MAGAZINE FEATURING TEA IN NC! PENELOPE BARKER'S PORTRAIT FROM THE CUPOLA HOUSE AND THE TEAPOT ON THE COURTHOUSE GREEN ARE FEATURED!



www.ourstate.com



WE'RE IN THE NEWS!

WWW.CUPOLAHOUSE.ORG