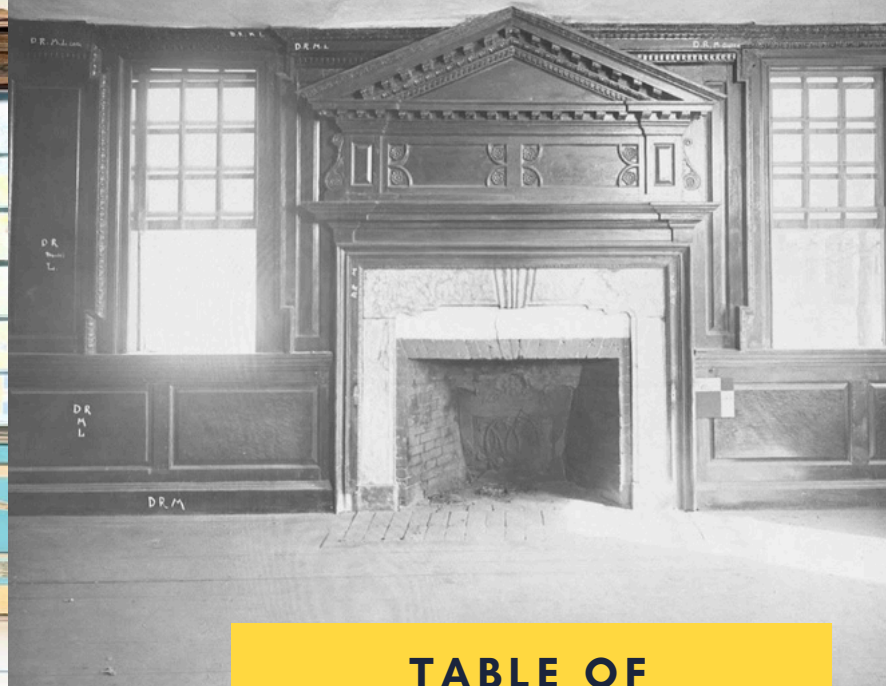




# THE CUPOLA HOUSE ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 4, NO. 1 • SPRING 2026



## ***THE CUPOLA HOUSE...TO DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM...***

by: **Vonna O'Neill, President**

**C. S. Lewis said, "You're never too old to set  
another goal or to dream a new dream."**

Now, after 108 years, the woodwork on the first floor of the Cupola House is nearly restored, and the gardens are truly magnificent. We've reached our goals for increasing tours, and sponsorships for Easels in the Gardens have surpassed our hopes. Our aim to position the site as a center for historic enrichment has also been fulfilled through an engaging Speaker's Series, shared on-site discoveries, and a special educational display celebrating our nation's 250th Anniversary.

**(Continued on page 2)**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

---

President's Message (cont'd) • P. 2

---

Easels in the Gardens • P. 3

---

A chat with our docent • P. 4

---

Calendar of Events • P. 8  
Pop-Up Gift Shop News

---

Spring Series Update • P. 9

---

America's 250<sup>th</sup> Celebration P. 10

---

Breaking News • P. 11

---

Did You Know? • P. 12

[www.cupolahouse.org](http://www.cupolahouse.org)



## THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, CONT'D



PLEASE BUY  
YOUR  
EASELS  
TICKETS  
TODAY!  
HELP US TO  
CONTINUE  
TO MAKE  
DREAMS  
COME TRUE!

A recent article I read stated that “the focus cannot be on what we have saved, but on how we invite others to join the work.” How do we ensure that the Cupola House and Gardens are seen as a civic asset and not as a cultural luxury? Personally, I believe it’s through the stories we tell; how we engage others to recognize that preservation is tantamount to economic security and vitality. The Cupola House connects people to our community life through our stories and the very visible, indisputable changes one can now witness daily. The same article I referenced earlier, said that preservation IS infrastructure for community resilience. I’m proud of your continued commitment to help us be sustainable, relatable and balance history with hospitality. We must constantly remain flexible and embrace new ideas, attract more members and accept changing disciplines and technology. Please enjoy the wonderful, rich articles in this newsletter. Jonathan Tobias shares his varied experiences as our expert tour guide throughout our major transformation; Martha Smith continues to enlighten us with “Did you Know?”; Easels in the Gardens showcases the best of the best; Flags of Independence provides an ongoing history lesson, and the CHA pop-up shop has something special to share.

It all began back in 2012, when Sally Francis Kehayes, Debbie Boyle and Anne Ellis initiated the first Easels in the Gardens event as a biennial fundraiser for the 1758 Cupola House and Gardens. Their efforts brought overwhelming participation from local members of the community! Since then, visitors have come from near and far to experience this event that celebrates the beauty of Edenton's finest gardens and the talents of many creative artists who, this year, are coming from as far away as Florida, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina and as close as eastern North Carolina.

WEEKEND

## COMMUNITY EVENTS:

- ART IN BLOOM AT THE CAC
- BOOGIE ON BROAD
- CRUISES ON THE ALBEMARLE QUEEN



Eleven committee chairs are busy with publicity, art sale reception party logistics, artist coordination, garden procurement and website information upgrades that include ticket sales and attendee tracking. The group working on securing sponsorships has been very successful promoting preservation to the community. Corporate generosity has helped to create an event which puts Edenton on the map in the en plein air world. Countless hours have been spent ensuring that Easels in the Gardens 2026 sets the bar high for years to come!

by: Clara Stage and Jane Ann Magness, Co-Chairpersons

*Easels in the Garden*  
WE HAVE THE *art* IN PARTY!

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TOURS

by: Jonathan Tobias, CHA Docent

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect briefly on the docent experience over these past months.

I want to speak not only about what we've been saying on tours, but about what's been happening to the tours themselves – because they've changed, sometimes week by week, as the house has changed around us.

Let me begin with a simple observation. Visitors do not arrive primarily for information. They arrive for encounter. They want to feel that they have stepped into a real place – not just a preserved structure, but a lived environment with memory, texture, and human presence. When that happens, dates and architectural terms suddenly matter more, not less, because they are anchored in experience.

And that's where the current phase of the Cupola House has become uniquely powerful.

## A living narrative, not a fixed script

The narrative of the tour has had to evolve constantly during the woodwork installation and the dismantling of the reproduction elements.

Every week – sometimes every few days – something changes:

- a panel removed
- original material revealed
- a construction detail clarified
- a new interpretive question raised

In other words, the house itself has been teaching us.

So the tour has become less a memorized script and more a guided witnessing. Visitors are not just hearing about preservation. They are watching it happen. I've found myself saying, more than once: "What we're offering right now isn't just a history lesson – it's a front-row seat to historical recovery. The story is unfolding in real time."

And when visitors understand that, something *shifts*.

They lean in.

They ask better questions.

They begin to see the house not as a finished exhibit, but as a living document.

## What visitors respond to most strongly

A few patterns have become very clear.

**First:** people respond to process. They want to know how we know what we know.

When they hear about:

- dendrochronology
  - architectural forensics
  - the long journey of the original woodwork
  - the decisions required in restoration
- the house becomes intellectually *alive*.

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TOURS (CONTINUED)

**Second:** they respond to the human scale. Not just Francis Corbin, or dates, or stylistic terminology – but:

- who walked these floors
- who looked out these windows
- who argued, prayed, worked, entertained, and ***grieved*** here

When the house is framed as a lived environment, visitors immediately situate themselves within it.

**Third:** they respond to change.

Repeat visitors – and we are beginning to see more of them – notice differences.

They come back and say:

- “This wasn’t here last time.”
- “That panel used to be different.”
- “I didn’t understand this room until now.”

That is an extraordinary opportunity. ***It means the house is not static in public memory.***

It is becoming a site people accompany over time.

## ***The effect of the woodwork installation***

The installation has done something subtle but profound.

It has made the house feel less like a completed museum and more like a place in recovery – a place where history is being reassembled, interpreted, and cared for in public view.

That produces three outcomes:

### 1. ***Credibility***

- Visitors see the seriousness of the preservation work.

### 2. ***Emotional investment***

- They feel they are witnessing something that matters.

### 3. ***Community identification***

- They begin to see the Cupola House not as “a historic site,” but as our historic site.
- That shift from “theirs” to “ours” is everything.

## ***What docents are learning***

From a docent perspective, this whole period has required flexibility – a lot of that. We are not delivering a fixed narrative. We are interpreting an unfolding situation.

That means:

- adjusting explanations
- integrating new discoveries
- acknowledging uncertainty when appropriate: the willingness to say “I don’t know”
- connecting physical change to historical meaning

And I would argue this has made the tours stronger, not weaker.

Because authenticity – even when it includes unfinished work – is far more compelling than polish.

## ***What visitors seem hungry for***

There are three things visitors consistently want more of:

**Story** – not in the sense of embellishment, but narrative continuity. How does this house move through time?

**Embodiment** – sensory detail:

- light
- materials
- sound
- spatial experience

**Connection** – how this place relates to Edenton today.

When those three are present, the tour becomes less informational and more participatory.

People leave not just informed, but oriented.

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TOURS (CONTINUED)

## **Architecture and furnishings**

I'd like to speak briefly to an interpretive question that I know is part of our ongoing conversation – the degree to which the interior should be furnished or left spare.

There is real value in allowing the architecture to speak clearly. When rooms are open and uncluttered, visitors can see proportion, craftsmanship, and structure in a way that is sometimes harder when the space is fully dressed.

But what we've observed on tours suggests that architecture alone is only part of what visitors are seeking.

Again and again, the strongest responses emerge when the house feels inhabited.



Before the furnishings were removed, visitors consistently lingered with:

- the Walleston portraits of Penelope and Thomas Barker
- the early imported china
- the cotton-twist glasses, especially those with the briar-rose etching
- the case-clock, and even the corner potty-chair in the southeast second floor room

And, perhaps most strikingly, in the children's room:

- Sarah Bond's 1835 inscription in the window, "When this you see, remember me,"
- and the quiet, haunted, melancholy story that surrounds it.

These moments created emotional stillness. People slowed down. They asked questions. They **connected**.

The house becomes, in these moments, not only an architectural achievement, but a **human environment**.

As a docent, I've learned something important from that.

Architecture tells visitors how a house was built. **Furnishings and personal traces tell them how a life was lived.** Not only Francis Corbin, but 141 years of the Dickinson and Bond families living, growing, moving and experiencing, and dying here.

**Both matter.** And together, they allow the house to be understood not just as an object of preservation, but as a place of memory.

# A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON TOURS, (CONTINUED)



## **A gentle recommendation**

If I may offer one reflection moving forward:

As we approach the grand reopening in June, we have a rare opportunity to frame the Cupola House not only as a preserved artifact, but as an ongoing act of stewardship.

The installation phase has shown visitors:

- that preservation is costly and earnest labor
- that interpretation evolves
- that history is something we tend, not something we finish

If that ethos continues into docent training and public messaging, it will distinguish the Cupola House from many historic sites.

Not as a place frozen in time – but as a place actively cared for by a community.

## **Closing**

I'll end where I began.

Visitors arrive seeking encounter.

Right now, the Cupola House offers something unusually powerful: a chance to encounter history not as something sealed behind glass, but as something being recovered, assembled, and understood in real time.

The re-installation has made the house feel less like a finished exhibit and more like a living document.

And in my experience, that has deepened the tour experience considerably.

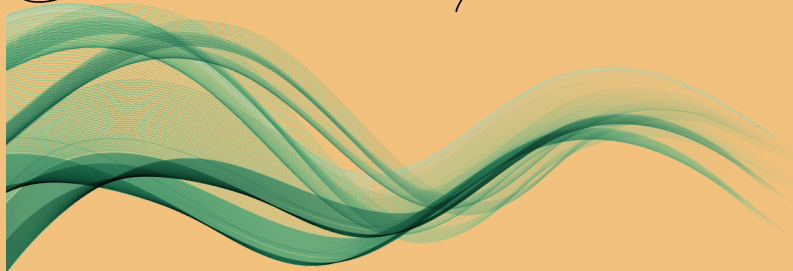
It invites curiosity.

It invites return visits.

And most importantly, it invites people to see themselves as participants in the ongoing life of this place.

Thank you.

*Jonathan Tobias*



# 2026 UPCOMING EVENTS

## January

- 8th: CHA Board Meeting
- 23<sup>rd</sup>: Spring Speaker Series **POSTPONED**

## February

- 5th: Spring Speaker Series -- Robert Leath, EHC Executive Director
- 12th: CHA Board Meeting

## March

- 6th: Spring Speaker Series --Beth Yarbrough, A Southern Voice Blogger
- 12th: CHA Board Meeting
- 16th: Flags of Independence unveiling begins at the Cupola House fencing
- 20th - 21st: Edenton Preservation Seminar
- 28th: Private Garden Event - Carr Wedding

## April

- 7th: Easels in the Garden Sponsor Appreciation Party
- 9th: CHA Board Meeting
- 14th: Spring Speaker Series -- Andrew Ownbey Restorations, LLC
- 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup>: Easels in the Gardens



## May

- 5th: Spring Speaker Series --Speaker TBD
- 14th: CHA Board Mtg

## June

- 11th: CHA Board Mtg

NEWS FROM OUR POP-UP

## gift shop



The Cupola House pop-up Gift Shop will be open during Easels - offering a host of new Spring items for home and garden. Along with the very popular tea towels, notecards and Cupola House ornaments, we have many exciting new items to take home! We will be set up in the Cupola House, alongside the Will Call desk on both days, April 17th and 18th from 10 am until 4 pm.

Special Note: To honor our nation's 250th birthday, the Cupola House Gift Shop is offering the **1758 Cupola House Garden Seeds Collection**, a curated selection of herb seeds from its garden.

Early colonists planted herb - or medicinal - gardens that were essential for cooking, medicine dyes, fragrance, and more. This Spring, plant a taste of history with the 1758 Cupola House Garden Seed Collection. (\$ 14.95 Quantities are extremely limited)



**The Cupola House Association's 2026 Speaker Series got off to a late start this year because of winter weather. But once underway, Edenton audiences have been treated to two exceptional presentations.**

**On February 3,** Robert Leath, Executive Director of the Edenton Historical Commission, spoke to a standing room only audience on "Restoring a North Carolina Icon: Edenton's Cupola House Part 1 ½."

Leath recalled the odyssey of the original woodwork's journey from Edenton to the Brooklyn Museum and back again. He described the painstaking work that has gone in to the process of removing the reproduction woodwork from the 1960's and replacing it with the original, including paint analysis, examination of nail holes, discovering missing doors, and placement of reused wood siding.

Much has been learned about the building of the house, but many questions remain to be answered through additional research and future discoveries.

**On March 6,** the CHA hosted Beth Yarbrough, founder of the online platform "Southern Voice" and preservation advocate. Yarbrough recalled her journey from artist and interior decorator to photographer of old houses to author. Believing that the preservation landscape needed a form of Cliff Notes to help people to easily understand how they might get involved, she wrote her most recent book - *The Grassroots Guide to Saving What Matters*.

## Spring Speaker Series 2026

by Heidi Nastasi



In writing the book, Yarbrough hopes that it will encourage more people to get involved to save historic structures. "Sometimes its as simple as just making a phone call to get the ball rolling" she said.

A book signing followed the presentation. Copies of the book are available through the Cupola House gift shop and online at

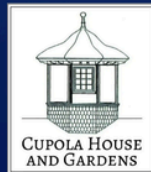
[www.cupolahouse.org/merchandise](http://www.cupolahouse.org/merchandise)



# FLAGS OF INDEPENDENCE

SPONSORED BY THE  
CUPOLA HOUSE ASSOCIATION  
COMMEMORATING

*America's*  
250<sup>th</sup>

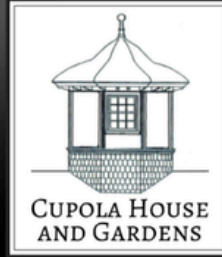


The Cupola House stood watch over the Albemarle Sound eighteen years before the revolution! In celebration of our nation's 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence from British rule, we are showcasing replicas of many of the flags of the era. On the fence surrounding the Cupola House, you can see these flags and take advantage of the accompanying narrative to further educate yourselves on the fascinating history of these symbols of our declaration and acknowledgment that it was victory or death!

***"THESE ARE THE TIMES THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS. THE SUMMER SOLDIER AND THE SUNSHINE PATRIOT WILL, IN THIS CRISIS, SHRINK FROM THE SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTRY; BUT HE THAT STANDS IT NOW DESERVES THE LOVE AND THANKS OF MAN AND WOMAN. TYRANNY, LIKE HELL, IS NOT EASILY CONQUERED; YET WE HAVE THIS CONSOLATION WITH US, THAT THE HARDER THE CONFLICT, THE MORE GLORIOUS THE TRIUMPH."***

**THOMAS PAINE, *THE AMERICAN CRISIS*, NO. 1, DECEMBER 19, 1776.**

Their fighting spirit was fueled by the knowledge that this would be a long and difficult war against the most powerful and entrenched power of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Celebrate Freedom!



# Homecoming Gala!

IN CELEBRATION OF THE RETURN AND  
REINSTALLATION OF THE 1758  
WOODWORK

Saturday, September 19, 2026

5:30 pm - 7:30 pm

\$75/person  
\$125/couple

Cupola House and Gardens  
408 S. Broad St.

Save  
the  
Date




# War of 1812

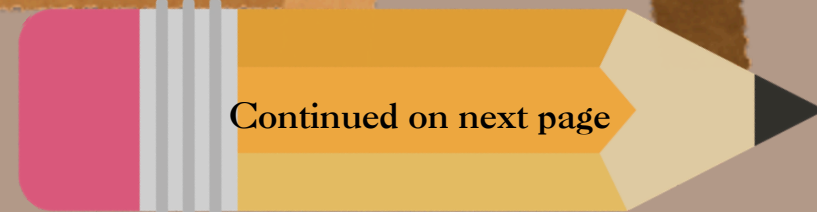
by: *Martha Smith*

Did you know (or more pertinently, DO you know) anything about the War of 1812? Most of us do not know much. As the majority of the fighting was not on NC soil, local records, including those of the Cupola House papers, do not contain a lot of information about the war.

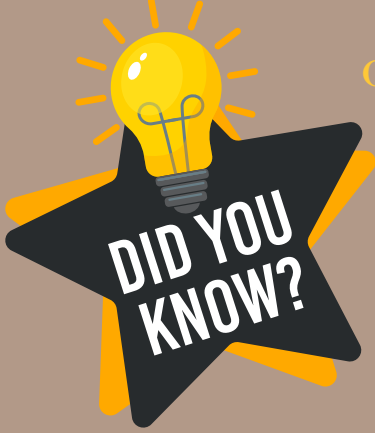
According to the history books, the British did briefly occupy the north side of Ocracoke Island and the south side of Portsmouth Island near Ocracoke Inlet as part of their plan to blockade the coast and interrupt trade. The raid occurred on July 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 1813, causing significant panic. Fortunately, they did not occupy their positions on the islands long, and trade was only minimally impacted. The towns along the coast, including Edenton, feared a larger invasion, but it did not occur, largely due to the shallowness of the NC sounds making naval operations difficult.



**DID YOU  
KNOW?**



Continued on next page



Continued from  
previous page

THE WRITER COMPLAINS OF BUT A SMALL PROFIT "IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE LATE ACT OF CONGRESS REGULATING THE MARSHALS' FEES IN SELLING PRIZE GOODS." HE SAYS HE THINKS IT HARD THAT THE MARSHALS CANNOT HAVE 1% OF THE GROSS SALES, NOTING THAT DUTIES AND EXPENSES MUST COME OUT OF THE TOTAL FIRST. THE WRITER THEN CONTINUES WITH THE MOST INTERESTING PART, ONE THAT TAKES US RIGHT INTO HISTORY, SAYING:

THE WRITER CONTINUES TO SAY THAT IN EDENTON:

*WE HAVE HAD, UNDER ARMS, ABOUT 300 MALISIA (SIC. - MILITIA) FOR FIVE OR SIX DAYS, BUT AT THIS TIME, 200. WE SHALL, IN ABOUT 24 HOURS, HAVE THE TOWN IN A TOLERABLE STATE OF DEFENSE, TWO BREAST WORKS - ONE ON THE PUBLIC WHARF, AND ONE OPPOSITE THE COURT HOUSE WITH TWO 18-POUNDERS ON EACH.*

ALTHOUGH THE BRITISH DID NOT COME, EDENTON WAS READY TO MAKE A STAND. TWO HUNDRED ARMED LOCAL SOLDIERS, PROTECTIVE BREAST WORKS ALONG THE WATERFRONT, AND FOUR CANNON, ALL AT THE READY TO DEFEND THE TOWN AND ITS CITIZENS.

*WE HAVE BEEN IN A GREAT BUSTLE IN EDENTON FOR FIVE OF SIX DAYS, PART IN CONSEQUENCE OF SEVERAL BRITISH SHIPS COMING IN AT OCRACOKE, TAKING POSSESSION OF ALL THE VESSELS THAT DID NOT MAKE THEIR ESCAPE. THEY LANDED AT PORTSMOUTH AND CARRIED OFF SOME LIVESTOCK. WE RECEIVED LETTERS FROM WASHINGTON TWO DAYS AGO THAT THE ENEMY HAD LEFT THE BAR ON THE 16TH INST.*

by: *Martha Smith*

FOUND AMONG THE CUPOLA HOUSE PAPERS IS A LETTER WRITTEN IN EDENTON ON JULY 20TH, 1813. UNFORTUNATELY, THE NAME OF THE WRITER OR TO WHOM IT WAS WRITTEN WAS NOT FOUND ON THE DOCUMENT. MOST LIKELY, IT WAS WRITTEN BY ONE OF NORTH CAROLINA'S DEPUTY MARSHALS TO ANOTHER DEPUTY MARSHAL AS THE WRITER IS ASKING THE RECIPIENT FOR ADVICE AS TO WHAT TO DO WITH TWO BRITISH PRISONERS CAPTURED BY A PRIVATEER, AND NOTES HE HAD JUST COME FROM NORFOLK, WHERE HE CONDUCTED THE SALE OF GOODS TAKEN BY THAT PRIVATEER. .



Photo by L. Artman



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