

THE COURTHOUSE AT DUMFRIES by Lee Lansing

On Fairfax Street in Dumfries across from the Henderson House and just south of the Weems Botts Museum and Merchants Park stood the Courthouse for Prince William County from 1761 until 1822 when the population center of the county shifted away from Dumfries. It was the third such courthouse location since Prince William County was formed in 1731, the first having been in Occoquan, and the second in what was called Brent Town.

The exact date of construction of the courthouse had been conjecture for many years and was thought to be 1762. The actual work on the structure was started in early 1759 and the building was occupied in the summer of 1761. No photos of the Courthouse have ever been found and much research has been done in an attempt to find something to give an idea of its floor plan or a narrative description of its facade when it was used as a Courthouse, and in later years as a house of worship. Even its location was a well-kept secret for many years, until oral histories by Mr. & Mrs. Jim Bishop and Mrs. Annie Shumate revealed the site. Mrs. Shumate told of playing in the ruins as a young girl and of watching the courthouse decay as the masonry walls tumbled and citizens salvaged the brick and stone to build their homes. Nothing was found until the summer of 1983 when the administrators of Gunston Hall (George Mason's home) were effecting some repairs and came upon a section of removed window trim on which had been drawn details of what was thought to be a court house.

The desirability of an archaeological sub-surface investigation of the courthouse site had been discussed for some years by the members of Historic Dumfries. The finding of the sketches on the Gunston Hall frieze gave the needed impetus and funds were provided for such

a project by the Prince William County Historical Commission. Authorization to excavate was given by the property owners and fieldwork led by the Dr. Carl Lounsbury, Architectural Research Department, Colonial Williamsburg, was done from May 21-26, 1984 with analysis done during June and July.

Dr. Lounsbury and his crew approached the site both internally and externally and quickly defined the scope of the structure. Judicial use of earth moving equipment defined the external latitude of immediate concern. The team confined themselves to the interior of the structure which revealed paving stone floors, internal wall configurations, entrance ways (with time-worn threshold stones), differences in flooring materials, a surprising apse wall on the south side, and many more points of interest. Some of the more subtle and less evident findings are:

The stonework, while meager in its message due to its lack of recognizable quantity, size and shapes, can be found in close proximity to the courthouse lot. The front step cheek walls of the Henderson House entrance porch contain quoins and other miscellaneous pieces salvaged from the courthouse lot.

The watertable brick, molded with a 45 degree angle, were a scarce item, but one good example was salvaged which contained a mortar mark indicating the wall setback above the watertable. This provided one detail of wall construction for the conjectural facade.

The front entrance doorway would normally be located on the centerline of the entranceway. However, the found threshold stone, well-worn from foot traffic, was off center. We don't yet know why. All of the threshold stones found showed signs of considerable wear.

Evidence that the backup brick was of inferior quality than the face brick was obvious, particularly in the apse wall. Much of this material showed evidence of short burning in the kiln, or brick of a salmon color which did not weather well when exposed.

No clear indication of the location of a fireplace was found within the structure. We were looking for a discoloration of the sub-soil which would mean the presence of a concentration of heat. It is, therefore, evident, that the fireplace was on heavy masonry or perhaps raised on a heavy masonry platform. Insufficient excavation was done to reveal a fallen chimney by a domino or eschelon effect of brick lying just below the surface.

The contractor's trenches, those excavations required to place the base masonry below the frost line, revealed very little of significance, indicating the trench had been well cleaned after the wall was built and before the backfill. That the workmen had been careful to dispose of all debris outside the trench area is an unlikely conjecture. The backfill could have been applied in layers as the wall was completed which would have given the same final result. It is unique not to find mortar tailings in a wall trench but these contained very little.

The use of slate to bring a course of masonry into alignment was very evident in the starting courses. Even in the stone face course location where the stone had been salvaged, the slate was still in place with the mortar holding firm. Those paving stones extant showed evidence of wear from foot traffic like a path across a lawn. The paving stones had been set in mortar with slate used the level the mortar bed.

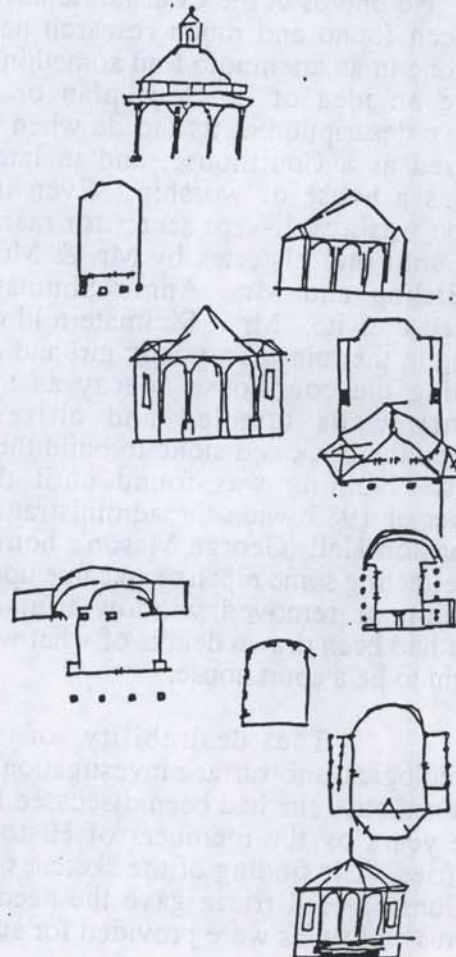
The existing hollow or excavation to the southeast of the courthouse beyond the fence line where it is thought the jail or gaol (there were two) were located, could be the basement

excavation and could yield some very interesting data.

Only a small portion of the structure has been uncovered but that portion is adequate to compare with the Gunston sketches which are further borne out by what has been found in the ground.

Of the significant architectural features found and highlighted by Dr. Lounsbury, it has been possible to determine much of the necessary points required to reconstruct the floor plan of the courthouse. From the meager findings, as a result of the explorations, and the fact that they "fit" very closely the sketches from Gunston Hall, it is evident that the courthouse at Dumfries was unique, a very different design from any other Virginia courthouse of the Colonial period yet discovered.

Figure 6.--The Gunston Courthouse Sketches

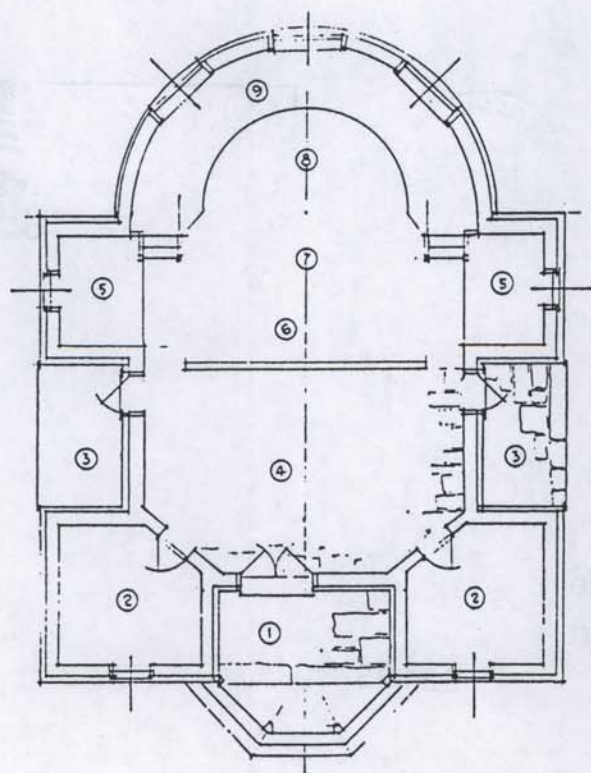
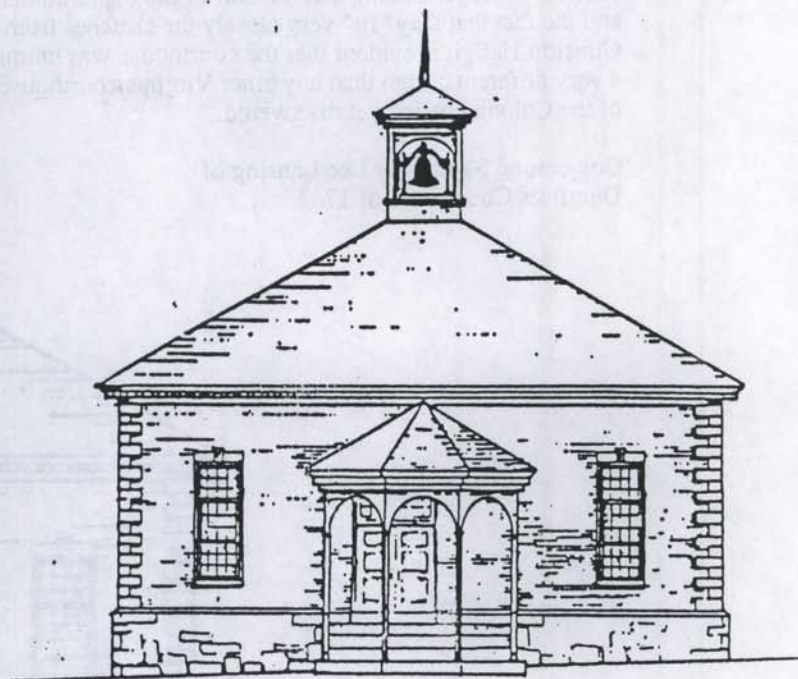


SKETCHES FOR A COURTHOUSE

6 1/2" x 8 1/2" DRAWING BY H. L. LOUNSBURY, 1938. DRAWING FROM GUNSTON HALL



Since we have no delineation of the exterior facade, no photos or paintings, or word descriptions from which we may determine in a reasonable fashion what the structure consisted of, we must employ the pieces of information that we do have to put together like a jigsaw puzzle, a conjectural picture of its facade. We know of its base stonework, its brick masonry and its stone trim; we know of its flagstone and wood floors, and a few other small details from which - with Dr. Lounsbury's report and the sketches from Gunston Hall - a conjectural sketch can be formulated. Perhaps someday a photo will be found that will fill in such things as the type and style of its windows, the ceiling height, the cornice and roof pitch which will permit us to determine just how closely the conjectural sketch has come to the real thing, without question a gem of Colonial design.



DUMFRIES COURTHOUSE FLOOR PLAN

PLATE D

Plate D - Is a final floor plan, strictly conjecture, combining results of the sub-surface investigation, and using historical facts as to courtroom layouts of the period, as defined by Dr. Lounsbury in his report.

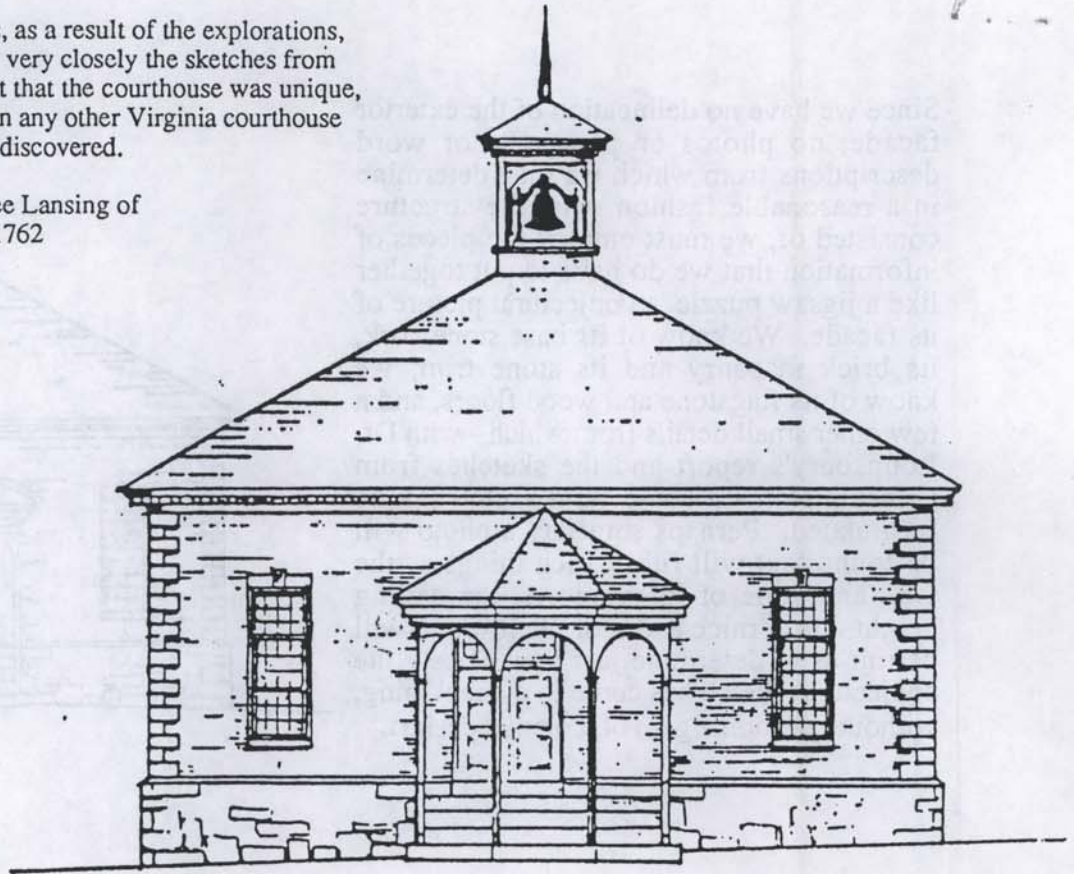
LEGEND FOR PLATE D

Area allocations are conjecture

- 1 Entrance vestibule
- 2 Jury Rooms
- 3 Arcade (side) entrances
- 4 Public area
- 5 Sheriff and/or Cryer
- 6 Litigants and lawyers
- 7 Court Clerk
- 8 Jury
- 9 Justices/Magistrates

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Conjectural Sketch by Lee Lansing of Dumfries Courthouse of 1762



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