

Rediscovering the "Governor's House"

A report published by the Citizens Advisory Council on Interpreting and Furnishing the Executive Mansion and Historic Richmond Foundation.

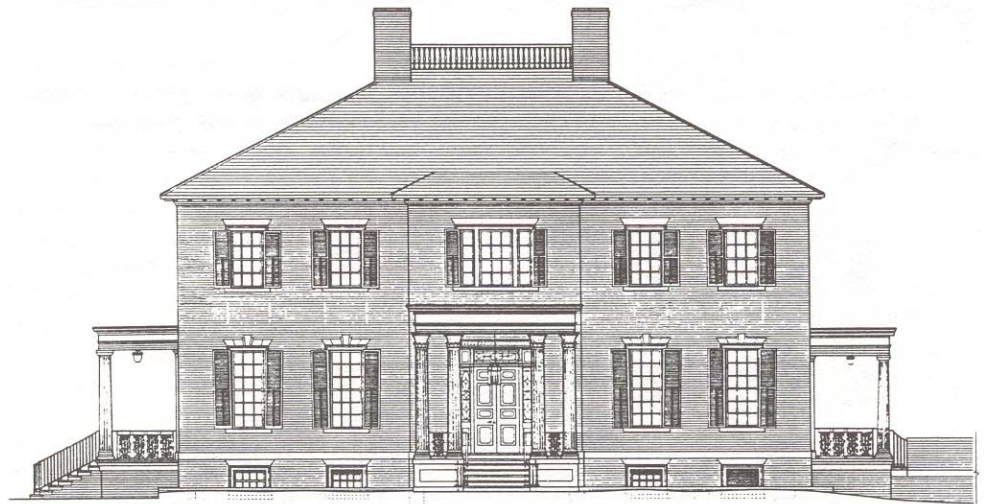
In 1988 Virginia celebrates the 175th anniversary of its Executive Mansion. As the oldest governor's residence in continuous use in the nation, this stately survivor of war, shifting political winds, and deepening shadows cast by the ever-rising surrounding towers of the capital city, will receive special recognition.

Since June of 1986, the Citizens Advisory Council on Interpreting and Furnishing the Executive Mansion has coordinated a program of research with the intention of restoring the exterior of the building and publishing its history. The 175th anniversary marks the occupation of the mansion by Governor James Barbour in 1813. This date is being celebrated although the building actually was not completed for many years and has been modified continually throughout its history.

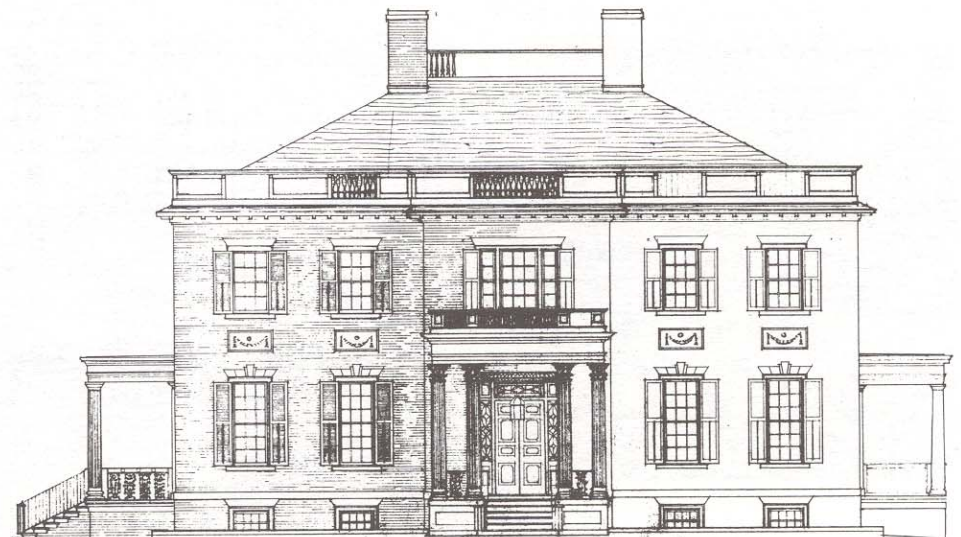
The research has led to innumerable small discoveries, which indicate that today Governor Barbour might not recognize the house as it was completed 13 years after he moved in. A computerized chronology now catalogues many of the building's extensive structural and decorative transformations. The alterations that survive are also reflected in drawings of the Mansion completed in the summer of 1987 by the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), the first complete set of drawings done of the Mansion. When all of these pieces of information were brought together they outlined the most interesting discoveries, the changing facades of the Mansion.

The history is being compiled by Dr. William Seale. Seale is the author of a recent two-volume history of the White House entitled **The President's House**. His history of Virginia's Executive Mansion will be published by the Virginia State Library in the fall of 1988. Sarah Driggs, a University of Virginia graduate student and part-time employee of Historic Richmond Foundation, has worked with Seale and the Mansion Council on in-depth original research on the construction and decoration of the house. Susan Smead, another graduate student from U. Va., has outlined the social and political history of the building and its inhabitants for Seale. They have assembled their research in detailed chronologies from which Seale is developing a manuscript.

The Governor's Mansion as it stands today is reflected in the drawings of the Mansion completed in the summer of 1987 by the Historic American Building Survey (HABS). The Mansion Council and the Department of General

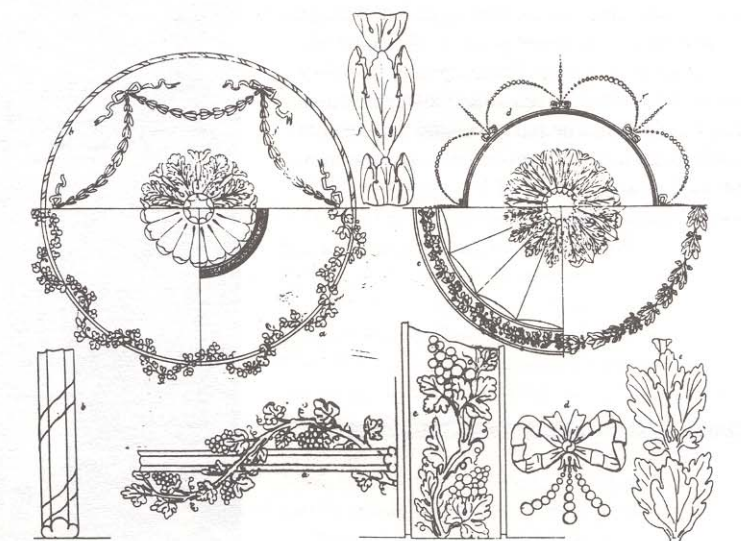
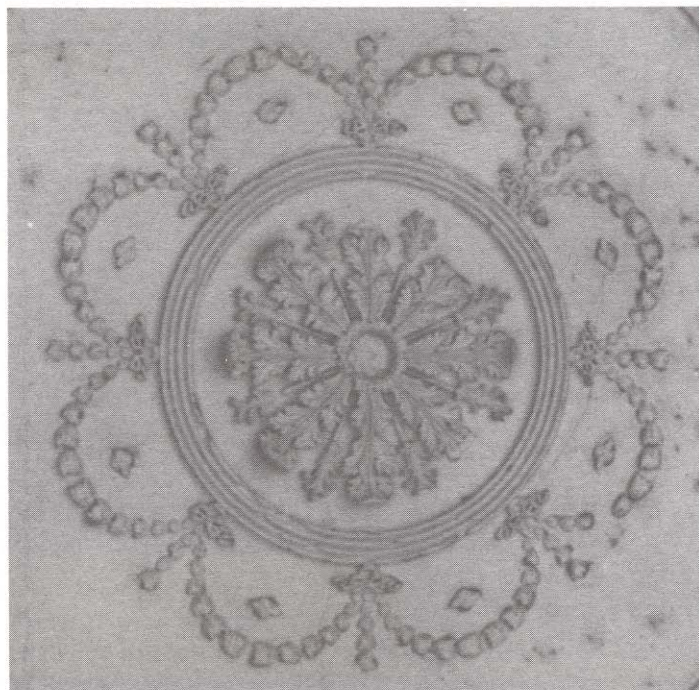
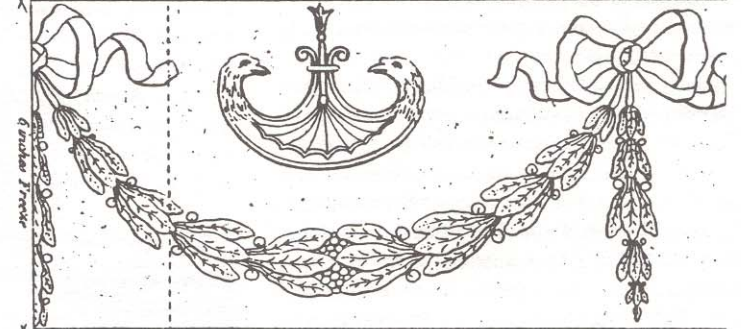
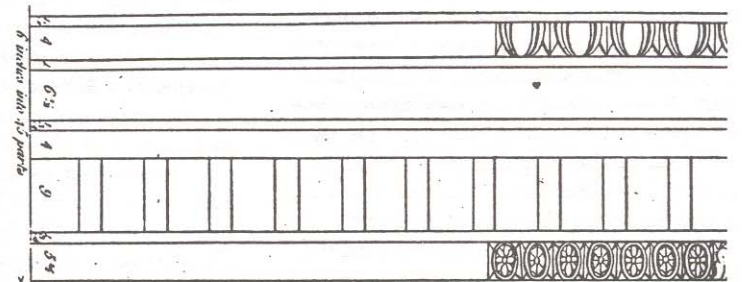


Above is the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) front elevation of the house, drawn exactly as it looked in the summer of 1987. Below is the same elevation drawn by Henry Browne, A.I.A. showing the proposed restoration of a parapet at the eaves, a balustrade above the porch and the ornamented panels between the windows.

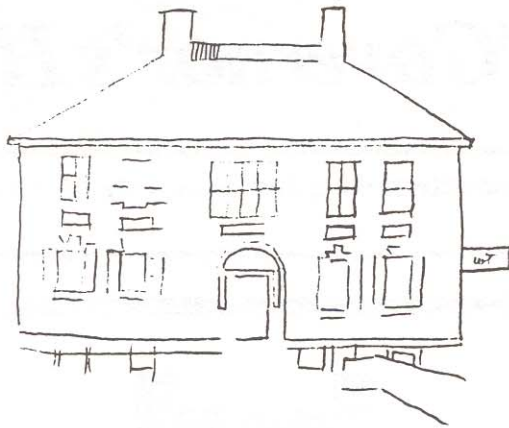




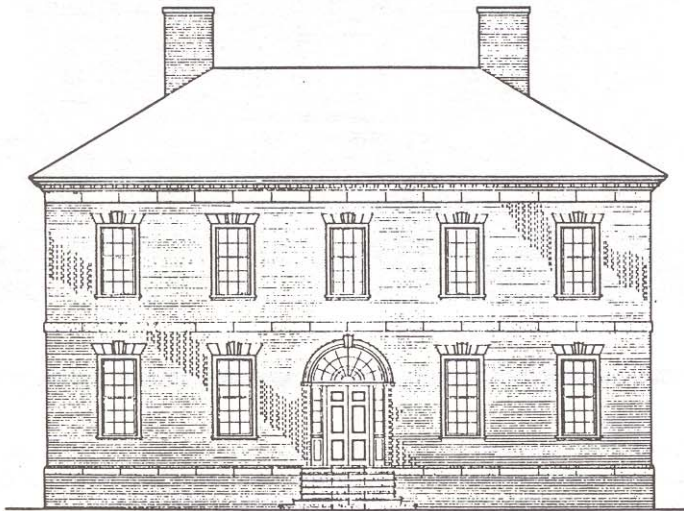
Frederick J. Linstrom of the HABS team is shown measuring details in the Mansion hall. Note the similarity between the hall frieze and those pictured in the two plates (above right) from an 18th century English pattern book by William Pain. Pain's designs also influenced the woodwork in the Williams house. Below them are two more plates from pattern books. To the right is a swag by Pain and below it are swags in suggestions for ceiling medallions from Asher Benjamin's **American Builder's Companion**. The designer of the Benjamin plate was Daniel Raynerd, a master plasterer, who co-authored early editions of the book with Benjamin. Raynerd, who later worked in Norfolk and Richmond, is known to have made a bid on work at Monumental Church. Unfortunately, construction records do not exist for the church, so it is not known whether Raynerd actually worked there. The swags that appear in these plates are very similar to those that originally ornamented the exterior panels at the Governor's Mansion and the Monumental Church Portico (below left).



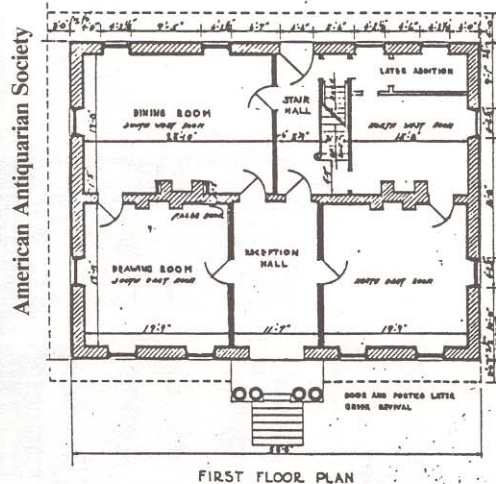
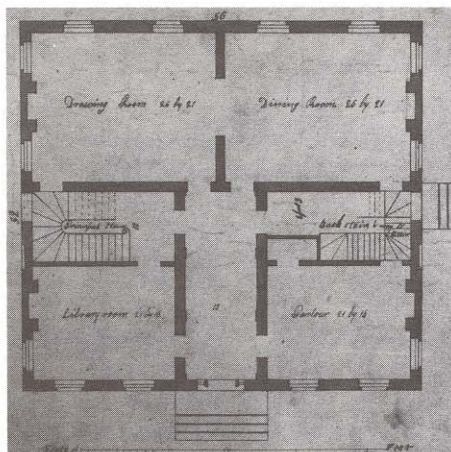
Drawings courtesy of the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks, from an original in the Virginia State Library and Archives.



Above is a tracing of an 1826 sketch of the Governor's Mansion included in the background of a more careful drawing of the Capitol building. It shows the house as built with a fanlight over the front door and no porch. The panels are indicated, and the upper balustrade, added in 1823, also appears here.



This HABS drawing was executed just before the demolition of the William C. Williams House in 1936. Williams, who was on the furnishings committee for the Governor's house, had this luxurious residence built for himself in 1810. Although it also had a porch added later in the 19th century, this reconstruction led researchers to investigate other similarities between the two buildings. The parlor of Williams' house is now the "Richmond Room" in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.



The floor plans pictured above are (left) Governor's House in Parris' own hand, and (right) the Williams House. The odd feature of two doors at the end of the hall is repeated in both houses, and similar plans appeared in Parris' sketchbook as early as 1806.

Services co-sponsored this project. All concerned felt that this meticulous treatment was merited. A set of HABS drawings are so detailed and complete that if the house were destroyed it could be reproduced in exact detail.

As the reconstruction of the history and design of the house developed, it became obvious that the papers and work of Alexander Parris, its original designer, needed to be consulted. To undertake this, John G. Zehmer, Jr., chairman of the council, Ms. Driggs, and Calder Loth of the Division of Historic Landmarks went to Boston to do research at the Boston Athenaeum, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the American Antiquarian Society and the New England Genealogical Society. Relationships between the Mansion, the Wickham-Valentine House (Parris' other surviving Richmond building), and other structures in Richmond and surrounding counties emerged when Boston buildings were examined. Carpenters employed at several Richmond buildings, including the Mansion and Monumental Church, were even found to be Parris' cousins. This indicated that his influence in Virginia lasted long after he returned to New England in 1812 and that further study of Boston sources could potentially expose more.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the project has been documenting the early appearance of the exterior of the Mansion. When the Mansion reached completion in 1830, it looked quite different than it does today. Before the recent research, the appearance of the house on completion was recorded only in a few engravings and one distant photograph, and the complete original configuration of the facade could only be guessed. Now it is clear that originally the house had more Federal appearance, with a fanlight over the front door and no porch. Handsome recessed panels ornamented with swags were set between the first and second floor windows. At that time, a commission appointed to superintend the work suggested that,

...the comfort and conveniency of its inhabitants, would (in their opinion) be greatly increased [sic] by the superstructure of a terrace surrounding the eaves of the building, and of a portico to the door fronting the Capitol...

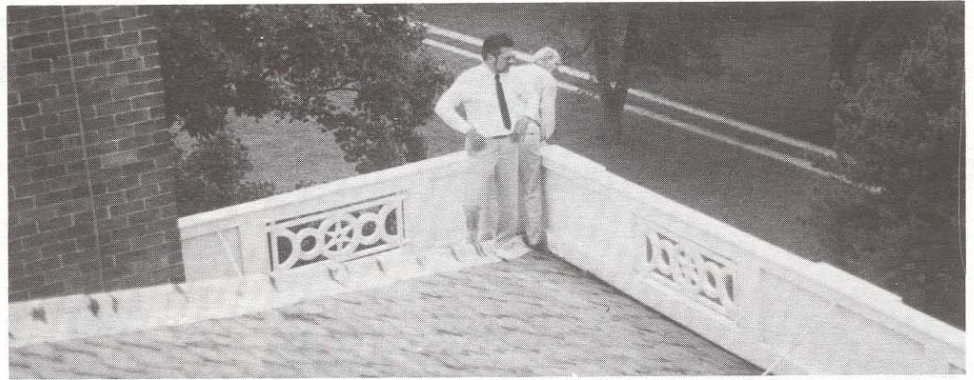
In 1830 the commissioners advice was taken and a parapet was added just above the eaves of the roof, along with a Neoclassical entrance porch. The deterioration of the panels and parapet forced their removal shortly after the Civil War. Fortunately, two previously unknown photographs taken in 1865 have been found recently. These are the models for restoration drawings now under way. It is the hope of the Mansion Council that these important features can be restored during the 1988 anniversary year.

Determining the actual details of the elements to be restored has led to a closer study of several Virginia buildings as well. Similar panels on the

Warwick House in Lynchburg led to the discovery, in the collection of Mr. Luther Caudill, of one of the best early photographs of the Mansion. The swags in the recessed panels bear a striking resemblance to those on the ceiling of the portico of the Monumental Church. These are based on ones found in plates in the **American Builder's Companion** published by Bostonian Asher Benjamin. The plate was drawn by Daniel Raynerd a master of decorative plaster who did work in the Massachusetts State House and was in Richmond when the Mansion was built. It is known that he was considered for work at Monumental Church.

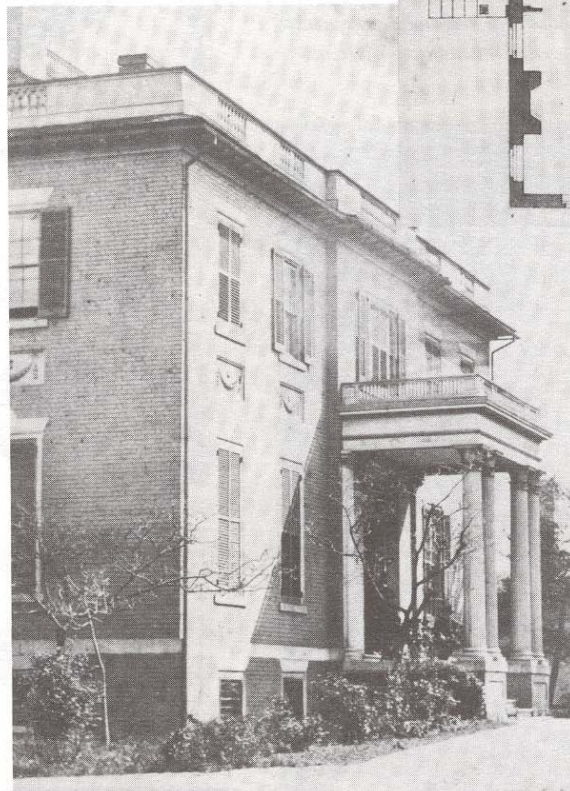
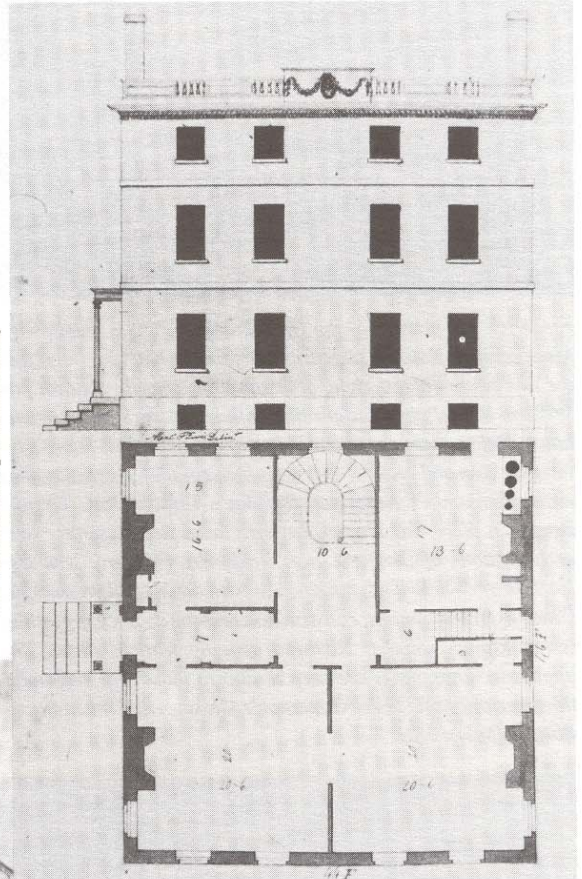
The swags also occur in the ceiling medallion in the hall of Hampstead in New Kent County. The house, built c.1825, not only has the swags, but is the only house in Virginia known to retain its original roof parapet. This parapet is taken directly from a plate in the same Asher Benjamin book. The Mansion parapet was constructed only five years after Hampstead. Many of Hampstead's features relate to other buildings in central Virginia and it is quite possible that the same workmen produced both parapets. The Benjamin plate and Hampstead's parapet serve as the models for the one designed for the Mansion. Mr. and Mrs. William J. Wallace, the owners of Hampstead, kindly let the researchers climb on their roof and explore every nook and cranny of their superb house.

There are many people without whom the Mansion project would never have been realized. The staff of the Virginia State Library, Division of Historic Landmarks, Wendell Seldon, Director of the Department of General Services, and William Campbell and Allen Platt of his staff, have all taken a keen interest in the project. Henry Browne, A.I.A., advisor to the Council, provided technical assistance and expertise. Without the enthusiastic endorsement of Historic Richmond Foundation's Executive Committee, neither Mr. Zehmer nor Ms. Driggs could have given their time to see the research through. Funds for research and publication have come from a number of individuals, especially members of the Mansion Council. The movement to see this building returned to its rightful architectural sophistication would never have begun without the enthusiastic interest of Virginia's First Lady, Mrs. Gerald L. Baliles.



*William Campbell and Henry Brown, advisors to the Mansion Council, are shown inspecting the parapet at Hampstead in New Kent County. This parapet, which was placed on the roof when Hampstead was erected c.1825, is similar to the parapet published in the **American Builder's Companion** in 1806, and several in Parris' sketch-book as early as 1805. Although the parapet at the Mansion was not added until 1830, it was recommended by the commissioners of the building in 1813. The drawing to the right by Parris, dated 1805, shows a scheme for a house in Maine with a parapet like Hampstead's and a floor plan much like the Mansion's. Below is the recently discovered photograph which clearly shows the parapets and the swags in the recessed panels.*

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