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Meaning (and) Materiality: Rethinking Contextual Analysis Through Cellar-set Houses.

ABSTRACT

In early 17th-century Virginia, three people constructed houses unlike anything built in the Chesapeake before or since. These earthfast structures, owned by men of the "better sort" and framed at the bottom of cellar holes, have thus far defied explanation because of interpretive constraints inherent in the positivist underpinnings of archaeological analysis. This article challenges these constraints by engaging the rich contexts highlighted in recent work by "storytelling" archaeologists through poststructural semiotics. Rather than search for a single driving factor that explains these houses, it is argued that it is only when one grapples with the complexity of the context that one can understand how these houses were constituted by/constitutive of their context.

Introduction

Recent historical scholarship, such as that of Rutman and Rutman (1984), and historical archaeological scholarship, such as that seen in the "Archaeologists as Storytellers" edition of *Historical Archaeology* (32[1]) in 1997, demonstrate the potential for constructing rich contexts from the documentary and material record. In constructing these contexts, these works also point up the multitude of factors that affected the use and very presence of material culture in the context. These works, therefore, undermine the notion of positivist archaeological explanation through an isolatable "driving factor." In the introduction to "Archaeologists as Storytellers," Adrian Praetzelis (1998:1) writes "the liberating aspect of modern—or post-modern—archaeology . . . is that by throwing positivism out of the window, we have allowed ourselves the freedom to take on an interpretive approach that does not require us to come up with answers to the big questions, those 'questions that count'."

Yet the value of these interpretive approaches need not be limited to freeing researchers from positivistic agendas. Tempering Praetzelis' statement in a discussion piece at the end of the volume, James Deetz (1998:95) writes "perhaps such an approach does not require that we answer the 'questions that count,' but I believe that there are times when this indeed can happen" (Deetz 1998:95). I read in this statement a hope that postmodern archaeological approaches might be applied not only to new questions about the past, but also to traditional questions of explanation. In answer to this reading, this study is an effort to apply one interpretive, postmodern approach to the analysis of a set of intriguing archaeological features.

In the first half of the 17th century, three English colonists in Virginia constructed houses unlike any seen before or since in the Chesapeake, houses I have defined as "cellar-set" (Carr 1996; 1997). While named for a particular architectural idiosyncrasy, cellar-set houses are defined by a suite of unusual architectural features. These houses are most notably characterized by the fact that the structure, while framed around hole-set posts, was set at the bottom of a cellar hole. The archaeological and architectural assemblages associated with these houses are typified by the presence of status items, such as window glass and decorative tiles. Finally, all of these houses appear to be associated with upwardly mobile colonists, prompting one colleague to ask, "why were all these rich guys living in holes in the ground?"

The first of these houses is associated with Richard Stephens, who eventually became a Councilor for the colony. The house dates to some time after the acquisition of the land by Stephens in 1630. While Lucketti (1990:73) lists Stephens' son Samuel as the owner in 1631, records of land patents from the period indicate that Richard was the landowner and Samuel inherited the land from his father in 1636 (Nugent 1934:48). While it is clear he was the landholder, little in the archaeological assemblage can be used to anchor Stephens to this site. While initially it proves

difficult to tie Richard Stevens to this structure as an occupant further analysis presented in this paper reinforces this possibility.

The cellar hole (Figures 1, 2) is 18 ft.² (5.5 m²) and was roughly 3½ ft. (1 m) deep (Nicholas Lucketti 1996, pers. comm.). The corner posts were about 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter and seated 2 ft. (61 cm) into the ground on the flat bottoms of large postholes. The posts located at the midpoint of each side ranged from 6 to 10 in. (15 to 25 cm) in diameter and were seated in ½ ft. (46 cm) deep holes. The rest are narrow posts set only about 1 ft. (30 cm) into the ground in small postholes. The size of the corner and midpoint posts, the depth to which they were sunk into the ground, and the size of the postholes all are typical of the framing of a Virginia house. The other posts appear to have served to hold up the planking in the cellar. Despite the apparent lack of depth to the cellar, the house appears to have at least a half-partition in the basement. A 2 ft. (0.6 m) wide builder's trench, similar to that seen at Thorogood's house, surrounds the entire structure (Lucketti 1985).

Architectural materials recovered by Nicholas Lucketti's excavations revealed the presence of brick, daub (Lucketti 1985), and window glass in the cellar fill (Nicholas Lucketti 1996, pers. comm.). These artifacts suggest that while brick was incorporated in the structure of the house, possibly as a hearth or chimney, the frame was primarily of timber with daub chinking. The sparse number of artifacts recovered lends some significance to the recovery of architectural status items such as brick and glass. Such materials, in significant quantities relative to the overall assemblage, suggest the occupant of the structure was at least of some social status, perhaps that of a small planter of rising status like Stephens.

The second of these houses is strongly associated by its excavator, Floyd Painter (1959), with occupation by Adam Thorogood, a Burgess and eventually a member of the council. Thorogood built this house sometime after 1635, when he acquired the land upon which it stood from Richard Stephens (Nugent 1934:22). The cellar hole for this structure (Figure 3) was 22 ft. (6.7 m) long, 8 ft. 9 in. (2.7 m) wide and 4 ft. 8 in. (1.4 m) deep (Painter 1959). There is no detailed description of the postholes in Painter's site report. The only evidence we have for the framing of the structure, then, is the picture of

the excavated cellar published in the site report. From this picture, it appears that the posts lining the walls were between 6 and 9 in. (15 and 23 cm) in diameter and seated in very small holes, if not driven into the ground. The corner posts, however, appear to be larger than those along the wall, a fact suggestive of framing posts. If this were so, this structure, like that of Stephens, was framed around larger posts and the other wall posts served to hold up planks lining the cellar. There was a partition across the middle of the cellar. Since the partition posthole to the far right of the picture cuts into the posthole of a framing post, this architectural feature was added after the house was framed. On one side of the house, the pillars are recessed into the wall, demonstrating that the cellar must have been planked from the inside. These vertical postmolds also demonstrate that the cellar must have been at least as deep as the pit, for otherwise any bracing for the next floor would have been revealed in the wall. The other house wall is several inches off the sidewall of the cellar pit. Since the other wall indicates that this gap was not necessary for the construction of the house, it perhaps indicates the beginnings of a builders trench.

Excavations of this house revealed a number of associated artifacts. Window glass and decorative delft tiles suggest that this structure was not a simple, make-do earthfast house, but an attempt at substance. It seems that this attempt at substance met an unhappy end. The cellar hole was filled with ashes (Painter 1959), suggesting that the house burned, probably soon after its construction in 1635 as Thorogood built a new house of brick in another location at this time (Jester and Hiden 1956:330).

The last of these structures was excavated by Ann Markell at Flowerdew Hundred. The builder of this house is of yet unknown. Markell (1990:3) does not offer any specific owners in her analysis, instead suggesting that the builder was of status between elite and freeman. The 13 x 21 ft. (4 x 6.4 m) cellar (Figure 4) was situated in a hole 20 x 25 ft. (6 x 7.6 m), and had a depth of at least 5 ft. (1.5 m) (Deetz 1993:62). The posts were on 4 ft. (1.2 m) centers and, according to Markell, were of adequate size and depth to act as load-bearing structural members. The cellar was fully partitioned, and wooden stairs ran from one end of the cellar to the outside (Markell 1990:85-86). Markell explains the massive hole

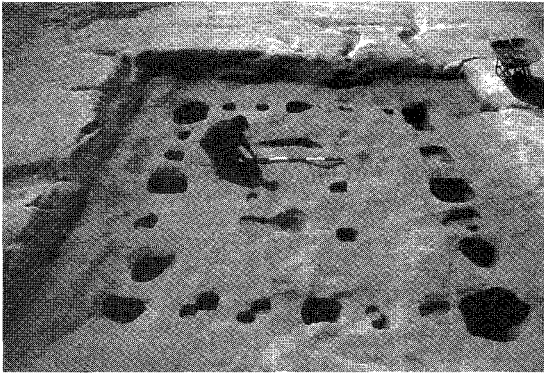


FIGURE 1. Site photo of Richard Stevens' cellar-set house, after the removal of the plowzone, displaying postholes at the base of the cellar pit. (Courtesy of Nicholas Lucketti.)

around the cellar as a builder's trench added after the construction of the house. As in Thorogood's house, there is evidence that the builder nailed planking to the inside of the cellar, obviating the need for the trench at the time of construction. Markell also discounts the idea that the house was simply set into a pit that had previously been excavated for other purposes, arguing that the carefully notched corners of the rectangular pit seem too intentional to be discounted (Markell 1990:91). Instead, she suggests that the builder's trench was added late in the house's life as the builder attempted to upgrade his or her dwelling, possibly through the future introduction of a brick lining to the cellar.

Artifacts associated with Feature 12 include brick rubble from a chimney at the western end of the house (Markell 1990:90). Excavations also uncovered roofing and floor tile, window lead and window glass in various contexts, including the floor of the cellar (Markell 1990:175-189). All of these items suggest an effort at a house of substance, an effort that ended in 1667 with the arrival of a hurricane and the destruction of the house (Deetz 1993:64).

These three structures have been treated as the remnants of idiosyncratic action inexplicable through systemic analysis. These houses defy "standard" explanations of early Chesapeake architecture in large part because the dominant modes of explanation do not engage the vast number of factors that informed human action in the early Chesapeake. Instead, such explanations drift toward a positivist single "driving factor" as the explanation for form.

Architectural Explanation in Chesapeake Historical Archaeology

The best-known work on the development of architecture in the early colonial Chesapeake is Cary Carson et al.'s (1981) "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies." This work is used because it is perhaps the most developed model of architectural change readily available for this context and because its influence inside and outside of historical archaeological circles has been considerable. While the title of the article suggests an examination of one aspect of architecture in the colonies, in fact the authors address the morphology, origins, and demise of this architecture in relation to the rest of the architecture in the colonies at the same time, thereby creating a much larger span of analysis.

According to Carson and his co-authors, impermanent housing found in the southern colonies in the 17th century was "a meager and fragile material culture" revived from early English building traditions (Carson et al. 1981:135-136). The colonists revived this "primitive" form of

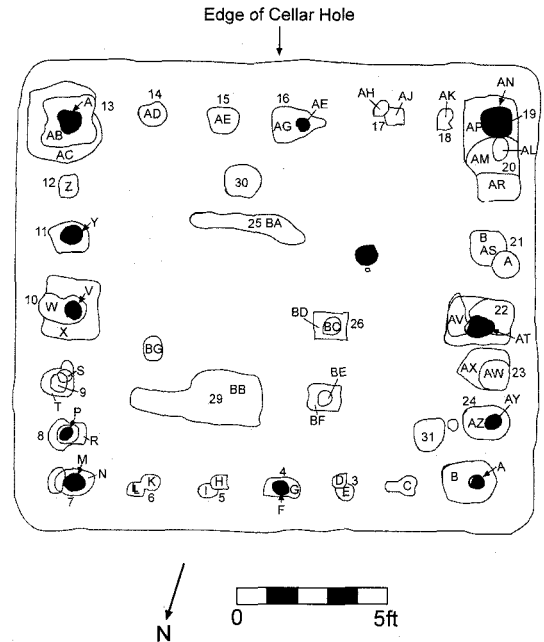


FIGURE 2. Plan view of Stevens' house cellar. Note the larger posts and postholes at the corners and the center of each side, and the large builder's trench around the structure. The letters on the plan refer to observations on the specific features recorded in the field notes. (Courtesy of Nicholas Lucketti.)

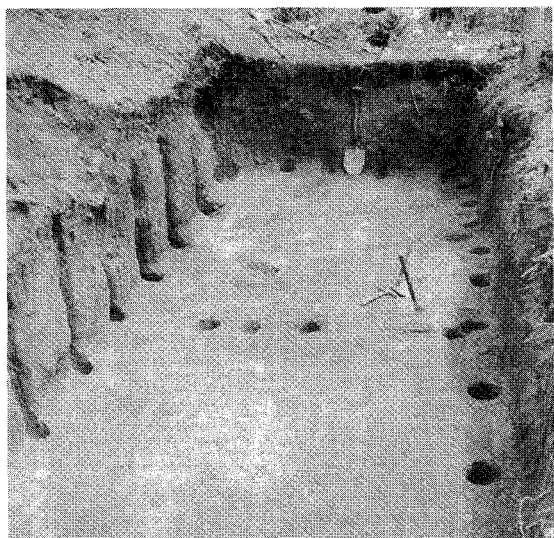


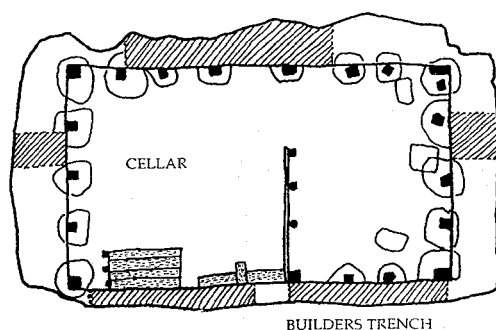
FIGURE 3. 1959 site photo of Adam Thorogood's Chesapeake House. (Reprinted with permission of the Archaeological Society of Virginia.)

architecture because it fulfilled certain needs specific to the context of the Chesapeake. These needs were economic, and the choice of “an appropriate building technology was a critical economic decision for anyone who set out to build a farm or plantation” (Carson et al. 1981:138). The authors suggest that the delay in the building of large numbers of permanent houses can be explained not as the result of a “get-rich-quick and leave” mentality, but as a result of the combination of social instability in the colony and economic insufficiency on the part of the owners (Carson et al. 1981:163). This argument is supported through a correlation of architectural change with demographic and economic changes in the context of Virginia. As sex ratios in Virginia evened out, housing became more permanent (Carson et al. 1981:169-170). As life expectancies rose, housing became more permanent (Carson et al. 1981:169-170). Most importantly, however, as particular parts of the colony gained economic stability through the diversification of their economies, the architecture of the area became more permanent (Carson, et al. 1981:171).

While these correlations provide a seemingly coherent explanation for the broad span of architecture and architectural change we see in the latter stages of the 17th century, it cannot account for the architectural actions of colonists who constructed three cellar-set houses in the first half of the century. At first glance, the

defining characteristics of cellar-set housing seem to run against the “common sense” that informed the actions of other builders in the early 17th century. First, one would have to dig a large hole in which to place the frame, expending a great deal of time and energy on a structure that was little different from its post-in-ground neighbors. Second, once the frame was placed into the hole, the increased amount of timber exposed to the corrosive earth would result in an increased area of decay for the house. In a sense, the builders expended more time and energy to dig a cellar hole for a house that would fall down more quickly than a simple, cheap earthfast house framed on the surface of the land.

Further, the builders and owners of these “more impermanent” houses incorporated expensive decorative items into the house design. Window glass, decorative tiles, brick, and roofing tiles were expensive commodities one would not employ in the construction of a house doomed by nature to last only a few years. While visible displays of wealth were the means by which both the English and the colonists marked social identity, such displays should not be equated to a potlatch where one destroys one’s own wealth as a display of power. In a world where labor was dear and fluctuating tobacco prices constantly cast



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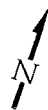


FIGURE 4. Plan view of the Flowerdew Hundred house. Selected post profiles detailed by Markell (1990:88) reveal that the posts were about a foot in diameter and often seated about a foot into the ground. This is ample size and depth for structural posts. The scale is in feet. (Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Virginia.)

doubt on future profits, such behavior would be "illogical."

Within the context of colonial Virginia, "illogical" behavior was not something the colonist seeking social mobility could afford. The competitive nature of the colonial world meant that everyday actions were laden with social importance, and the "functional" was inherently "symbolic." If one built an odd house that fell down quickly, one not only lacked shelter, but also failed socially, just as if one had lost a bet or a verbal exchange of wit. Isaac observes that "to lose in a world where personal prowess was of great consequence—would mean a momentary taste of annihilation" (Isaac 1982:119).

What we are left with are three structures unlike any others found in 17th-century Virginia. All three houses, on the surface, run against the colonial context as we understand it. The construction of these houses, however, must have been rationalized by the owners in reference to the context of 17th-century Virginia. To understand how the construction of these houses existed in a mutually constitutive relationship with the colonial context, we must understand the particular system of motivations and resources that lay at the foundation of this action.

Context as an Explanatory Tool

It is my contention that the failure of the dominant mode of architectural explanation to shed light on these houses is a product of the reductive nature of explanation in this particular aspect of material culture. That the archaeological explanation of this aspect of Chesapeake material culture might be so reductive is ironic when one considers other aspects of the broad sweep of archaeological writing on this context. From the writings of such archaeologists as Ivor Noël Hume and James Deetz to L. Daniel Mouer's (1998) recent article "A True Story of the Ancient Planter and Adventurer in Virginia, Captaine Thomas Harris, Gent. As Related by His Second Sonne," archaeological scholarship reflects an awareness of the rich complexity of life in the early Chesapeake. It is not, therefore, suggested that Carson and his co-authors were unaware of the richness of the early colonial Chesapeake context. Instead, it is suggested that they were handicapped by the fact that there has not yet been a way to effectively

engage this complexity in a manageable, analytical manner.

This is not to suggest that archaeological engagements with context do not exist. Hodder's contextual archaeology is the most influential framework in which context is critical to the interpretation of meaning in material culture. While this approach was groundbreaking, especially coming as it did on the heels of processual positivism, one aspect of it is highly problematic. When Hodder (1986:128) argues that material culture has a "partly non-cultural meaning" that is practical, technological, and functional, he is treating the symbolic aspects of material culture as separable from functional, acontextual/acultural aspects of the same materials.

The shortcoming of this approach to the contextual analysis of material culture is that it can lead to the very reductionist explanations I am trying to avoid by engaging context in the first place. If material culture can be divided into two parts, only one of which is foundationally affected by the context in which it existed, this reopens the door for reductive explanations that privilege either the (contextual) meaning or the (universal/transcendent) function of material culture as explanatory.

We can overcome this problem by analyzing the epistemological/ontological foundation upon which contextual archaeology is constructed. Hodder's division of material culture is anchored in classical semiology, where the sign is secondary and provisional, a stand-in for a "real thing" that is not present. This semiological approach enables the separation of the symbolic use of material culture, as a secondary function, from the functional use of material culture, which is tied to the physical, "real thing." Following, among others, Deborah Dixon and John Paul Jones III (1998), it is argued that nothing is *either* material *or* representational, as the two mutually imply one another. Therefore, the functional and the symbolic, as subsets of the material and the representational, respectively, also mutually imply one another. To explain how this is possible, we can turn to the poststructural semiotics of Jacques Derrida.

In Derridian semiology, the signifier is not given meaning through a direct relationship to a signified, but through *différance* (to differ/defer), a process in which the signifier gains meaning

through reference to/deferral from everything the signifier is not (Derrida 1982:6). The meaning of a signifier, therefore, is never universal but always reliant upon the context in which it is read and interpreted, for it is only through the deferral of other meanings available within that context that any meaning is established. The context, however, does not stand outside of *différance*, placing limits on its play. Through this process of deferral, the context itself is created and modified. Through *différance*, context and meaning become inextricably bound up in one another, leading Derrida (1988:152) to proclaim "there is nothing outside the context."

Within such a poststructural approach to semiotic meaning, "physical function" relies upon representational meaning in the same manner as "symbolic function," for the meaning of that function is also bound up in the context in which the physical function is interpreted. Let me present an oversimplified example. Think of meaning as a process of deferral, in which one always asks, "but what does it mean to . . . ?" and the process becomes clear. If we begin with a concept such as storage, we might ask "what does it mean to store?" A response might be "to not consume immediately." At which point, we must ask, "what does it mean to consume?" As we go around and around in this ever-more frustrating dance of *différance*, in theory we would cover every concept available to the actor within a particular context. We can begin with the seemingly amorphous concept of power or the seemingly concrete concept of storage, but either way we will come to the same result. All human action, and therefore the material residues of that action, is anchored in the representational meanings available in the context of that action.

This particular method of theorizing "context" is chosen because it places in the foreground the essential and necessary interconnectedness of every aspect of a context without relying on the tautological justifications for such interconnectedness put forth in functionalism. Further, the connections between aspects of a context do not take place at conceptual points of contact that might somehow be severed or separated. Instead, these connections are permanently embedded in one another. This approach, then, disarms the notion of the "single driving factor" as a means of explanation. Any explanatory factor one might come up with is always reliant on other aspects of

the context for its existence. As discussed before, "storage" may be an explanation, but storage has no meaning without economy, biological need, or any number of other aspects of the context.

Timothy Yates (1990:276), argues that when we excavate architectural remains, we are engaged in "the practice of excavating a signifying chain." Blending the analytical approach implied in Yates' argument with the contexts of such archaeologists as Noël Hume, Deetz, Mouer, and the other "storytelling archaeologists," it is argued that when we excavate we engage an analytical context of embedded meanings better represented by a web or a cloud. There is no necessary linear progression through a chain of meanings, but a simultaneity of engagement with all meanings at all times. What can be explained by economics must also be explicable simultaneously by identity, power, and so on down the line. The context becomes a tool for explanation because it has a built-in means of cross-checking one's work.

Having theorized the context, it is now time to locate and engage that context which informed the construction of these houses. To do so, one must select a point of entry into that context from which to begin such an engagement. Perhaps the most straightforward vector available is that of identity, through a study of who the owners were in the context of early colonial Virginia.

Social Situations

We know the identities of two of the owners of the cellar-set houses. For the time being, this discussion is centered upon their houses. At the time they lived in their cellar-set houses, the two owners, Adam Thorogood and Richard Stephens, were between the wealthy elite and the landless tenant farmer, though much closer to the elite. Both of these men were upwardly mobile members of society. They belonged to the same social circles, served in the government together, and interacted on a personal economic level in that Stephens sold Thorogood the land upon which Thorogood's cellar-set house stood (Nugent 1934:21).

Adam Thorogood arrived in Virginia in 1621 aboard the *Charles*. An indentured servant until 1626, Thorogood obtained his freedom and the title "Captain" upon his release. After purchasing land at the end of 1626, he returned to England to marry Sarah Offley, daughter of a member of

the Virginia Company. They returned to Virginia, where Thorogood was appointed to the position of Commissioner at Elizabeth City on 7 March 1628. This began a long string of governmental appointments and service for Thorogood. He served as a Burgess in 1629-30 and again in 1632. In 1634 he purchased the land his cellar-set house occupied. In 1637 he was appointed to the Council. Before he died in 1640, Adam Thorogood had risen from indentured servant to a position of status in the colony (Nugent 1934:21; Jester and Hiden 1956:329).

While the story of Richard Stephens is not like the Horatio Algeresque tale of Adam Thorogood, it too is a tale of a rise to power. Stephens, a painter in London, received a share of land in Virginia through the Virginia Company on the 27th of March 1623. He immediately traveled to Virginia with goods and belongings worth three hundred pounds. He arrived to a place in the House of Burgesses, which he held until 1624. Though not listed as holding office between 1624 and 1632, Stephens must have been politically active, for in the latter year he sat on the Council and was made the Commissioner for the Warwick River. At the time he became a Councilor, Stephens married Elizabeth Peirse, the daughter of cape-merchant Abraham Peirse. Also at this time he acquired the land upon which his cellar-set house is located. Before Stephens died, sometime before 1638, he had risen to social prominence as indicated by both office-holding and marriage (Jester and Hiden 1956:315-316). Therefore, despite the scant evidence for Stephens' occupation of this structure, one cannot ignore the parallels between the close social links of Thorogood and Stephens and the similarities in the architecture of the two houses, especially as all evidence suggests Thorogood lived in the structure on his land (Painter 1959).

To summarize, we have two of the most upwardly-mobile men in the colony constructing what appears to be illogical housing within the context of colonial Virginia. These two men, part of the same social network, did not succeed in Virginia because they were prone to illogical action. Instead, the social success of the owners of these houses suggests that these houses incorporate an alternative mobilization of meaning, acceptable within and structured by the colonial context.

An Analogy for the Cellar-set House

The use of analogy in archaeological reasoning is well documented and discussed. Such discussions, however, rarely treat analogy as a thinking tool from which one can approach archaeological data in a new manner, stimulating new hypotheses about the nature of the materials at hand (Binford 1967:1). Instead, most analogical reasoning is used to *answer* specific questions about the nature of the materials at hand. In the case of the cellar-set house, such specific analogies cannot be drawn to any known architectural form, as they do not exist. This suggests that these houses cannot be explained as holdovers from England or the simple, pragmatic manipulations of English traditions. Instead, they were products of/productive of their context.

Only two other examples of such structures are known. The only known archaeological example of a similar structure was uncovered by Brian Davison in Thetford, located in East Anglia. While Thetford is not far from Thorogood's place of birth, the house predates the 13th century (Davison 1967:194). There are no other examples of this architectural form recorded in the literature on English and East Anglian architecture between the 13th and 17th centuries (Oliver 1912; Gotch 1919; Brunskill 1971; Smith 1975; Schlofield 1994). This example, therefore, probably was not the model upon which these men based their houses.

The other example of this housing has not been recovered archaeologically, nor is it located in Virginia. Instead, it is found in the documents of colonial Massachusetts. Its owner, Samuel Symonds, was born in Great Yeldham, Essex, only a few miles from Thorogood's birthplace. The similar behaviors of the two men in such disparate locations suggests a shared referent for their architectural action. Nonetheless, no examples of this form of architecture were found in any of the literature on East Anglian architecture.

Therefore, the primary justification for the analogical use of this structure is Symonds' explicit statement of his intentions in a building contract dating sometime after 1638. Symonds wanted his house to be between 30 and 35 ft. (9 and 10m) long by 16 to 18 ft. (5 to 5.5cm) wide. He also wanted the house "sellered all over,

& soe the frame of the howse accordingly from the bottom" (Carson et al. 1981:146). In short, Symonds wanted a cellar-set house similar to those described in this paper. Symonds goes on:

I would have [the house] covered with very good oake-hart inch board, for the present, to be tacked on onely for the present, as you tould me. Let the frame begin in the bottom of the sellar, & soe in the ordinary way upright, for I can hereafter (to save timber within the grounde) run up a thin brickwork without (Carson et al. 1981:146).

One finds interesting parallels between the documentary account of Symonds' house and the archaeological evidence for the Thorogood and Stephens houses. Both of the frames are set into cellars and the subterranean aspects of these frames appear to have been lined with planks (Painter 1959; Lucketti 1985; 1990). In each house, several of the posts set into the cellar floors are large enough and seated deeply enough to suggest they are structural and not just supports for a lining to a cellar beneath a more conventional structure, such as one resting on sills.

The other critical parallel is that both the Thorogood and Stephens houses are surrounded by trenches that, though wide enough to accommodate a brick lining, do not seem to have been integral to the construction of the houses (Painter 1959; Lucketti 1985; 1990). Nor does the evidence for these trenches suggest that they were simple repair trenches. Stephens' house is completely surrounded by a trench, yet only a few posts show evidence of having been replaced (Figure 2) (Lucketti 1985). While the trench associated with Thorogood's house runs along only one side of the house, there is no evidence from the site photographs suggesting that post replacement occurred (Figure 3) (Painter 1959).

Despite the obviously large differences between New England and the Chesapeake at this time, the level of similarity between Symonds' description and the archaeological evidence for the houses in Virginia suggest an entry point into the context which informed the construction of the Virginia houses. Symonds was describing a house that was not the product of illogical building, but of calculated actions reflecting planning for the future, when the house might be improved. The morphological similarity between these houses suggests that similar planning might have been expressed in the Virginia structures. Perhaps

Thorogood and Stephens intended to brick in their cellars when they had the time, capital, or bricks.

To test this point of entry, there are several important issues that must be addressed. First, we must look at the plausibility of this sort of behavior at this time. The architectural expression of planning for the future is well documented in colonial Virginia. Carson et al. (1981:140) discuss this behavior in their article, arguing that while a very few colonists could build substantial houses immediately, "many more could not or recognized the wisdom of choosing an easier, quicker, and cheaper form of building to meet their present need." These colonists usually worked through steps from "primitive shelter to temporary, impermanent buildings, to the 'fayre houses' that many yeomen and even husbandmen were used to from England" (Carson et al. 1981:140). These steps reflect planning for the future through the construction of cheap, "disposable" structures that could be replaced at a later date.

There is, however, evidence for an alternative architectural expression of planning for the future, the construction of houses that, while not initially "fayre," were intended to be improved upon, as opposed to discarded. The Matthew Jones House, constructed along the James River in the first quarter of the 18th century, is an excellent example of this expression. Upon its initial construction, the house was of earthfast framed construction with two large brick chimneys at either end (Graham et al. 1991:43). By 1730, however, the original earthfast frame was modified to incorporate a porch tower and lean-to shed, and the walls were rebuilt in brick. The investigators' interpretation of this structure was that "[a]lthough Jones' house was not mean, it was not of the quality to which he ultimately aspired." "Whether it was a lack of capital or time that caused him to phase the construction," is immaterial to the authors, for "this pattern of building and rebuilding in stages to eventually acquire one's desired plans has been repeated many times throughout Virginia in the 17th and 18th centuries" (Graham, et al. 1991:60).

The other, rather self-evident, issue is the fact that neither of the Virginia houses' cellars were actually bricked in. That they were not is explained by a number of factors. Both houses seem to have been occupied for a fairly short time before they were destroyed, suggesting that

the builders either did not have the means or the order of bricks completed before the houses were destroyed. Bricks were expensive items at this time. While a house was already costly in the colony (Carson et al. 1981:168), the addition of bricks might have increased the expense to the point that the purchase of both the wood framing materials and the bricks was beyond the financial capabilities of the builders. Also, bricks were not easy to get. Instead, one had to wait several months for the correct clay to be set and fired into the required number of bricks. Therefore, it seems the intentions of the builders went unfulfilled due to circumstances of economics, brick manufacture, and bad luck.

While these factors may explain why the cellars were not bricked in, they do not complete the test of this point of entry, for one must still ask why plan to build a bricked-up cellar? Though common in Massachusetts, full cellars are rare in Virginia before 1650. The cellars all seem far too shallow to serve as living quarters, and the lack of windows and proximity to the damp earth probably made these cellars undesirable living quarters. Living conditions aside, neither Stephens nor Thorogood had extended families large enough to require the extra living space. The storage needs of the 17th-century Virginia planter were fulfilled by the construction of earthfast sheds and outbuildings, such as those associated with the cellar-set house at Flowerdew Hundred (Figure 5). Such sheds would have been far more economical than the construction of a massive cellar hole. The construction of a cellar to fill these ends does not fit into the colonial context, for it would be far simpler and more economical to construct outbuildings to serve storage purposes. Therefore, while these cellars probably were *used* as storage space, this is not an adequate explanation for their construction. Instead, I believe that the answer to why these houses were materialized in this particular manner lies not in a functional consideration of building technology, but in a consideration of the entire house, where decorative items, frame, and cellar are not stand-alone features of these houses, but part of a suite of symbols whose meanings were constituted by and constitutive of the colonial context. These meanings (and) materialities become apparent as we continue to trace the vector of identity in this context.

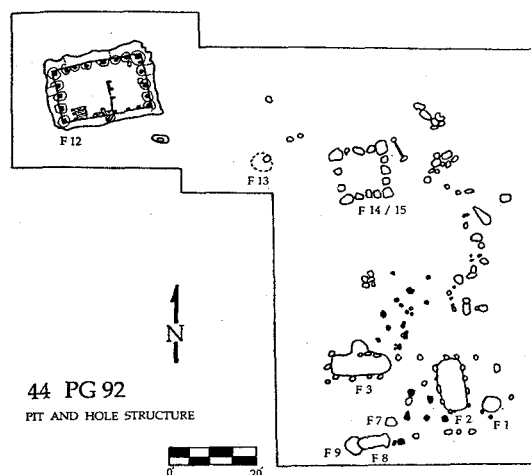


FIGURE 5. Site map of 44PG92 showing the remains of a cellar-set house at upper left (F 12) and surrounding earthfast outbuildings (F 2, F 3), where F is an abbreviation for feature. (Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Virginia.)

A Shared Referent for Action

Since Thorogood and Stephens knew each other, were of the same social "sort," and acted in a similar manner architecturally, the motivation for this action must exist somewhere in the shared context of Adam Thorogood and Richard Stephens. Since these two men are from disparate architectural and social contexts in England, Stephens from London, and Thorogood from Norfolk, this shared context exists only in Virginia. Therefore, it is to the shared world of Thorogood and Stephens that we must turn to find the motivations and resources that will reveal the logic behind the unusual aspects of this architecture.

The shared referent for the actions of Thorogood and Stephens was probably rooted in the construction of Abraham Peirse's great house at Flowerdew Hundred in 1626 (Figure 6). Peirse, the cape or head merchant for Virginia, arrived in the colony "a verie poore man" (Morgan 1975:120). The quintessential tough and fortunate member of Virginia society, Peirse "swindled" his way to "the best Estate that was ever yett knowen in Virginia" by the time he died in 1628. Among this estate were 39 servants (Morgan 1975:120) and a massive house. The house stood 24 x 41 ft. (7.3 x 12.5 m) and stood upon a solid foundation. The bottom layer of the foundation was imported

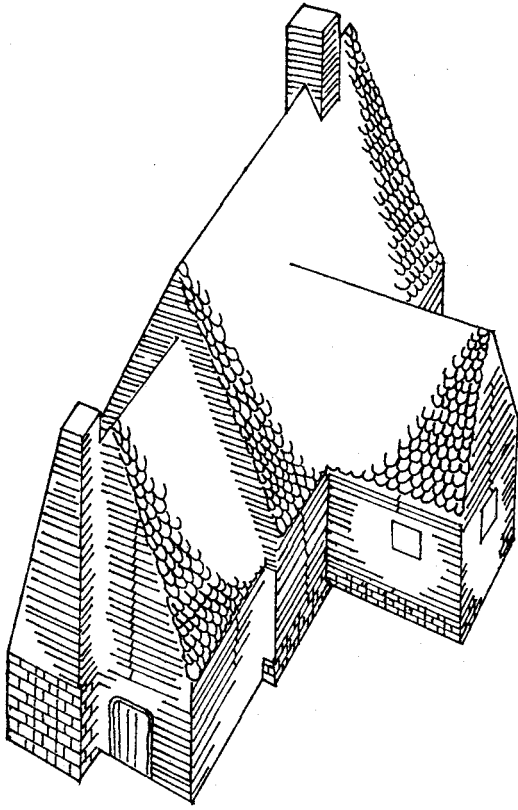


FIGURE 6. Reconstruction of the Peirse House showing brick piers and roofing tiles.

siltstone, which served as a base for brick walls that may have risen several feet above the surface of the ground. Associated artifacts indicate that the roof was tiled, the house had a brick chimney, and possibly decorative brickwork (Deetz 1993:36-37). All of these items were extremely expensive and rare at this time.

The house was Peirse's pride and joy. In his will, he asked that he be buried in the garden plot "where my new frame doth stand" (Deetz 1993:24). Indeed, it is fitting he is buried there, for it represented the Cape Merchant's self-image. The construction of the house was a massively expensive undertaking. As mentioned previously, a colonist would spend a great deal more on a standard English-framed building in Virginia than he or she would spend on a comparable structure in England (Carson et al. 1981:168). Glass, brick, and decorative tiles, expensive items rarely found in Virginia's architecture from this period, added to the cost. The imported siltstone found

in the Peirse foundation is *unique* in the building of this period, which suggests this measure was beyond the capacity of all but a very few people in Virginia. It was not until Berkeley constructed his mansion at Green Spring Plantation between 1643 and 1649 that the spectacle and grandeur of Peirse's house was equaled or surpassed (Morgan 1975:146).

However expensive and unreasonable such a house might seem in the frugal context of early colonial Virginia, it fits the colonial context. From within the context, Peirse's house was a statement of material worth and success, a social statement of power, reinforcing his position at the head of society. This process of social legitimation also perpetuated the semiotic fixation of meaning within the context of Virginia. His house, standing "like a swan among dun-colored ducks" (Deetz 1993:38), stood as a symbol of his superiority over his fellow colonists, every day reinforcing Peirse's social status and naturalizing the meanings that gave him status. Men like Thorogood and Stephens saw the house and read its meaning through the colonial context. Thorogood and Stephens interacted with Peirse and one another in the government of the colony,

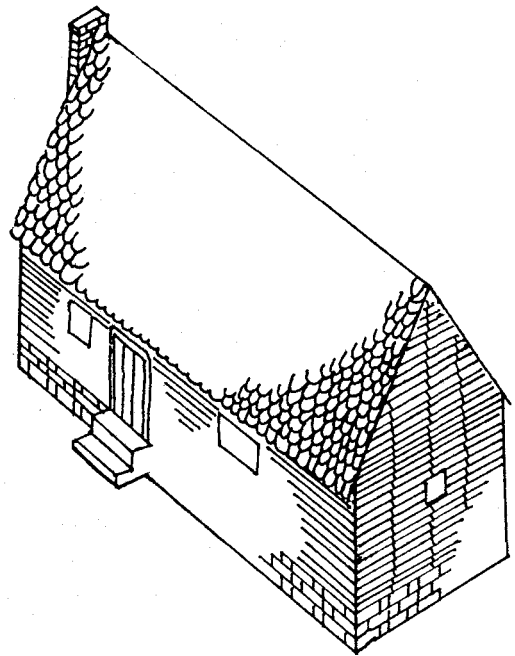


FIGURE 7. Reconstruction of the Thorogood house with bricked-in cellar, chimney, and roofing tiles.

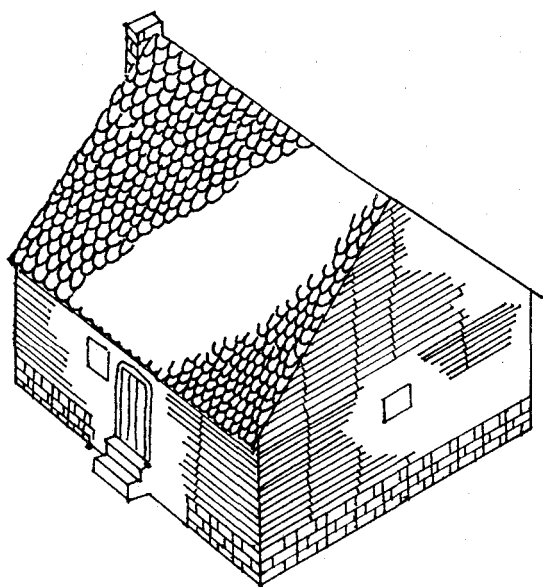


FIGURE 8. Reconstruction of the Stephens house with bricked-in cellar, chimney, and roofing tiles.

through marriage (in the case of Stephens) and through business deals. The blatant symbolic meaning of Peirse's house, and the inability of these men to escape its implication in their everyday lives, motivated them to respond. The response was the cellar-set house.

If we construct Thorogood's and Stephens' houses (Figures 7, 8), using archaeological evidence for architectural features *and* we construct them with bricked-in cellars, as probably they were intended, an interesting pattern emerges. The facades of the houses, while smaller and differently-shaped than Peirse's, all possess key items that reflected social status. Glass windows, decorative tiles, either on the roof or in the architecture, and a few rows of brick along the base of the house suggested to the world an expense similar to that of Peirse. The incorporation of these aspects of the Peirse architecture into their houses suggests that the status markers in Peirse's house were actually an encoded system of symbols that Thorogood and Stephens were able to decode and incorporate, as markers of group identity, into their own building. Seen in this manner, the construction of a house set into a cellar hole becomes not anomalous or "illogical," but a manipulation of symbolic meaning fixed within the context of colonial Virginia.

Within the contextual approach laid out earlier in the paper, however, it is not enough to claim identity as the driving factor behind these houses, for identity is inextricable from such other contextual concepts as power and economics. Indeed, these houses are shot through with the economic ideals fostered within this context. Builders in the 17th century knew that placing a brick layer between the wood and the earth would greatly prolong the life of a house (Carson et al. 1981:156-158). For example, Cedar Park, a large hole-set house in Maryland, was encased with brick fifty years into its life. Many of the posts, including the parts of the posts embedded in the ground, are still intact after almost 300 years of use (Carson et al. 1981:156). Therefore, lining the cellar-set houses with brick would create a structure of a much greater durability than that of a simple earthfast structure. The large initial investment of effort and capital to construct such a house would result in a structure that would stand many times longer than a standard house, allowing the owners to eventually recoup the cost of investment. This anticipated durability explains why the owners incorporated expensive status items into the architecture. The anticipation of this lining is consistent with the colonial context, as it suggests the intent to create a substantial house that would not fall or need repairs, minimizing the owners' costs while enabling the incorporation of other status items into the architecture to draw symbolic connections that made a statement of the owners' means.

The ties between these houses and the economizing aspect of the colonial context are not limited to the preservation of the wood in the frame. As discussed before, bricks were an expensive commodity and a status item in this period. Brick piers, seen in the Peirse House, were a common means of masonry construction in England. To line the cellar of Thorogood's house with a one-brick-thick layer would require roughly one-third the volume of bricks required to build an 18 in. (0.5 m) wide, 3 ft. (1 m) tall pier. The ratio is the same in the Stephens house. Setting the house into the cellar, and lining it with brick to simulate the appearance of a brick piercing above the ground, fits into the larger logic of the colonial context that served as the foundation for building in the Chesapeake at this time. Thorogood and Stephens found a highly economical way

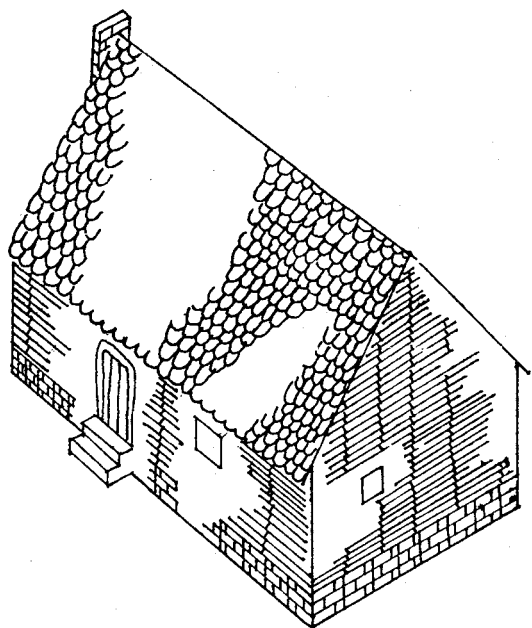


FIGURE 9. Reconstruction of the Flowerdew Hundred house with bricked-in cellar, chimney, and roofing tiles.

to replicate the system of symbols encoded in Peirse's house.

The argument for the contextual decoding and application of this system of symbols is strengthened by the Flowerdew Hundred house, constructed twenty years after Thorogood and Stephens built their houses, and fifteen years after the deaths of the two men (Figure 9). The unknown owner of this house almost certainly did not belong to the same social circles as Thorogood or Stephens, and probably did not employ the same builder. The unknown owner, however, constructed the house within sight of Peirse's house, and the archaeological evidence for a house framed at the bottom of a cellar (Figure 4) accompanied by window glass, a brick chimney, and decorative and roofing tiles (Markell 1990) suggests that the owner was responding, via a similar context, to the same system of symbols as Thorogood and Stephens before him. Again, the economy of the cellar over pining is apparent, as the one third ratio reappears.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, it is hoped to offer an explanation to the simple

question "why were these houses constructed in this particular manner?" To answer this question, however, it is necessary to introduce a concrete means of addressing a positivistic archaeological question without resorting to reductionist explanations that do not engage the rich contexts we as archaeologists explore. The introduction of poststructural semiotics, and the application of this approach to the study of these houses, therefore, was an attempt to overcome the division between positivist and post-modern approaches to the archaeological record. These are not mutually exclusive approaches to material culture and the past it represents. Instead, they are different perspectives on the same materials that can be combined to answer the "questions that count."

In the case of the cellar-set houses, a poststructural concept of context enabled archaeological explanation by suggesting a means of cross-checking one's own conclusions. As an explanation of the cellar-set houses was approached, I conceptually separated identity and economics into discrete "aspects" of context. These "aspects" were then used as entry points into the context which informed/was informed by the construction of these structures. By the end of this explanation, however, the essential interconnectedness of these "aspects" should have become clear. My explanation negotiated between economics, identity, and the material evidence at hand until the three were woven back together in a manner that presented an explanation for the cellar-set houses that engaged, instead of reducing, the richness of the colonial context.

The approach pursued in this paper is far from the only one available to archaeologists. While Derrida's concept of context has been used, one could easily transform a context from the setting for analysis to an analytical tool through Michel Foucault's concept of power or the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, to name two other appropriate theoretical frameworks. Regardless of the specific theory through which it is done, it is critical that context be engaged as more than setting. The recent writing by storytelling archaeologists (not to ignore the influences of such writers as Deetz and Noël Hume) highlights that fact that material culture is constitutive of and constituted by the rich, complex contexts (and not single factors) in which it was used. The analyses of the materials we find in these

contexts, then, cannot be undertaken through analytical approaches reliant upon the poverty of a single driving factor.

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