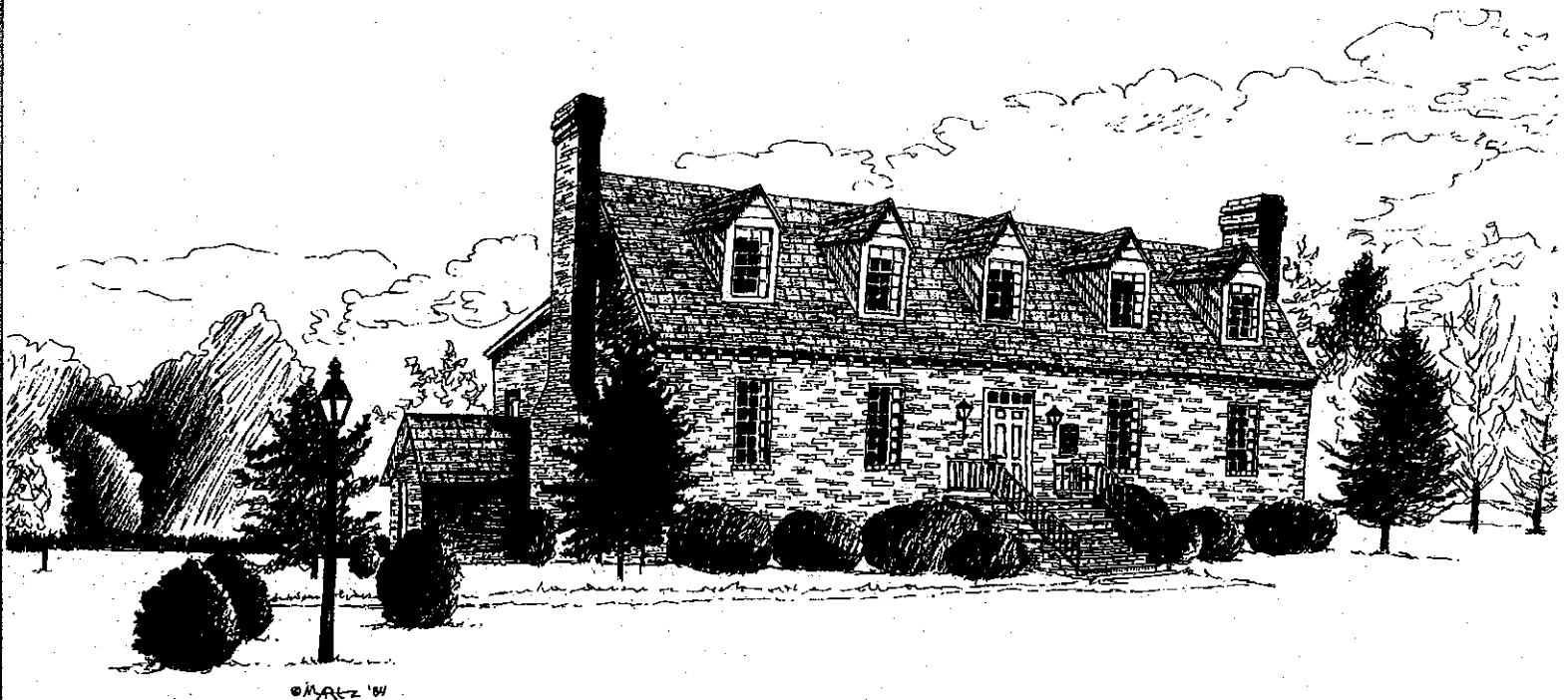


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The Architecture of John Mottrom's Coan Hall

by

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Chroniclers of early Virginia have long celebrated John Mottrom as the first permanent English settler of the Northern Neck, placing his arrival in the area at about 1640. His house—Coan Hall—served as the center of the early colonial community of Chicacoan, which in turn formed the nucleus of what became Northumberland County in 1648. The house disappeared from the landscape by the early 1700s, leaving its form, materials, and size to the imagination of future generations.

In 1897, a reporter for the *Richmond Times Dispatch* described Mottrom's house as "a temporary home, probably of logs felled from the surrounding forest," equating seventeenth-century frontier housing in the Chesapeake with the more familiar dwellings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pioneers farther west.¹

Miriam Haynie, in her 1959 history of the region, took issue with this claim, imagining Mottrom's manor house as a 40' x 20' frame building of one and a half stories, with brick chimneys on either end. She emphasized that although the house was English in style, it was

constructed with materials such as wooden pegs for fasteners and oiled paper or sliding wooden panels for window coverings due to a scarcity of building materials such as nails and window glass. Haynie based her imagined house on two surviving inventories of Mottrom's estate, taken fairly soon after Mottrom's death; on contemporary descriptions of dwellings in seventeenth-century court records; and perhaps she used emerging evidence of colonial architecture uncovered at Jamestown and other archaeological sites.

She characterized the house at Coan Hall as "strong, simple, functional, and . . . medieval" in character.²

Since the mid-twentieth century, archaeologists and architectural historians have examined the remains of seventeenth-century houses across the Chesapeake region, characterizing materials and floor plans as improvised solutions to the tension between adhering to vernacular English housing traditions with which the colonists were familiar and adapting to the unfamiliar economic, social, and environmental

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1. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, January 10, 1897, p. 2, col. 1.

2. Miriam Haynie, *The Stronghold: A Story of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia and its People* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1959), 39–40.

setting of the New World.³

Much of their work attempts to understand the changing social relationships over time among planters, and between planters and laborers, through observed changes to the spaces they occupied.

As part of these more recent studies of how architecture shapes and is shaped by particular historical events and cultural values, archaeologists from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and a cadre of dedicated volunteers are systematically examining the remains of a substantial seventeenth-century dwelling preserved today in a farm field on the east bank of the Coan River. We have found evidence of a sophisticated and somewhat puzzling building that likely sheltered four generations of Mottroms before being replaced in the early eighteenth century by a large house, no longer standing, which was situated closer to the river.

Like Miriam Haynie, we have examined historical records for information about Mottrom's life and about the layout, construction, materials, function, and longevity of the manor house at Coan Hall. Although further research is necessary, it is likely that the house we have found is the structure in which Mottrom died in 1655 and he passed on to his son and heir, John Mottrom Jr. Archaeological evidence indicates that this was not the first colonial dwelling on the property, however, and that a temporary home that preceded the more permanent structure remains to be discovered.

What did Coan Hall look like?

Did Mottrom's house look back to rural life in England, as its name suggests, or did he embrace the pragmatism of the emerging architecture of the tobacco colonies that prioritized expedience, relied on a limited pool of craftsmen,

and employed local materials? Can the house help us to understand Mottrom's vision for the Chicacoan settlement and his place within it? Before examining the evidence of Coan Hall and exploring its meaning, it will be useful briefly to introduce Mottrom and the community he helped to establish.

The Origins and Early Life of John Mottrom and his Settlement at Chicacoan

Both the early life of John Mottrom (also spelled variously Matrum, Matrom, Mottram, Mottrum, and Motterum), and his English origins, have not yet been well established, although they have been subject to much conjecture based on limited documentation. They should be the subject of another article. Here we shall deal only with what already is known with some certainty.

What appears to be the earliest extant record of Mottrom in the Chesapeake region dates from April 12, 1640, when "John Matrom of Virginia gent." sold his plantation in "Capt. Wormley's Creek" in Charles River County (now York County). The purchaser, "Nicholas Brooks Mercht. the younger of Virginia," offered "six servants and a bever" in payment "at the next yeares shipping" and four additional servants "the yeare after at the said time of shipping." Matrom exempted from the sale "one howse and some tenn foote of ground about lett to Mr. Harris, Master of the Shipp Honour, for Seaven yeares to haile up his boate."⁴

Unfortunately, no earlier record of Mottrom in Virginia seems to have survived, but this one clearly suggests that he had arrived in Virginia by the late 1630s.

Although he continued to do business along the Charles (York) River, we found no evidence

3. Three recent sources on seventeenth-century Chesapeake housing, which are part of an extensive literature on the subject, are Cary Carson, Joanne Bowen, William Graham, Martha McCartney, and Lorena Walsh, "New World, Real World: Improvising English Culture in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 1 (2008): 31-88; Carl R. Lounsbury, Willie Graham, Carter L. Hudgins, Fraser D. Neiman, and James P. Whittenburg, "Adaptation and Innovation: Archaeological and Architectural Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake," in Carl R. Lounsbury, ed., *Essays in Early American Architectural History, A View from the Chesapeake* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 33-74; and Cary Carson, "Plantation Housing," in Cary Carson and Carl R. Lounsbury, eds., *The Chesapeake House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 86-114.
4. *Virginia Land Patent Book (VLP) 1*, 719 (Library of Virginia digital collection), which is abstracted in Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623-1666* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1934), 122.

that Mottrom acquired land there after the sale of his plantation in 1640. The next extant record of his ownership of land dates to July 20, 1642, when he patented nineteen hundred acres of land called "Matrum's Mount" on the north side of the Piankatank River in what is now Middlesex County.⁵

Many well-known archaeologists and historians have suggested that Mottrom had settled in the Chicacoan area by the early 1640s and that he may have begun his settlement along the Potomac in or near St. Mary's City. The earliest extant reference to Mottrom in the Maryland records dates to April/May 1643. Given the ongoing tensions between the Maryland Proprietary and the Virginian settlement on Kent Island, and then with "Chicacoan,"⁶ it is quite likely that Mottrom had settled at Chicacoan by that time, when he faced fines in Maryland for aiding the removal of Angat (Angad, Angud) Baker from the proprietary.⁷ William Claiborne, who had claimed Kent Island for Virginia in the early 1630s but lost it to the Maryland Proprietary, sought to reclaim the island with a group "newly arrived from Chicacoan" in 1644.⁸

Although it seems highly likely based on this evidence that John Mottrom had settled along the Coan River by 1643, even perhaps a

bit earlier, the earliest extant explicit mention of his being from Northumberland is from late 1645, when he was named the representative of the Northumberland district to the General Assembly in Jamestown.⁹

John Mottrom and His Family at Coan Hall

Northumberland was officially recognized as a county by the colony of Virginia in 1648. John Mottrom represented the county in the House of Burgesses in 1652 and served as a county justice and colonel in the militia.¹⁰ During his lifetime, sessions of the county court were held at his home, and his local leadership is also shown by the fact that those Northumberland residents who were obliged to sign the Oath of Allegiance to the English Commonwealth, on April 11, 1652, went "up the Cone" to his home to do so.¹¹

Local residents traded furs and other goods on his property via "Mr. Hawkins," who "kept ye store at Mr. Mottrom's house" in 1652; and Richard Wright, a London merchant, who operated a store on the property in 1655 and married Mottrom's daughter Anne shortly after her father's death. Mottrom had died by June 19, 1655.¹²

John Mottrom lived the final months of his

5. Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, 132.
6. For more on these tensions, and the migration of numerous settlers from Kent Island to the Chicacoan and nearby areas in the 1640s, see Thomas A. Wolf, "Virginia's Eastern Shore and the Lower Northern Neck in the Seventeenth Century: So Near and Yet So Far," *The Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 51 (2014): 4-29, and the references therein.
7. William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland: Judicial and Testamentary Business of the Provincial Court, 1637-1650* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1887), 114, 198, 204-5; also available at "Archives of Maryland on Line," vol. 4, <http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/000001/000004/html/index.html>.
8. Browne, *Archives of Maryland*, 458-59.
9. William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, vol. 1 (New York: Bartow, 1823), 299.
10. "Mottrom-Wright-Spencer-Arris-Buckner," *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1908): 54; Walter B. Norris, ed., *Westmoreland County Virginia: 1653-1983* (Montross: Westmoreland County Board of Supervisors, 1983), 43; James Rice, *Nature & History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 121; William G. and Mary N. Stanard, *The Colonial Virginia Register: A List of Governors, Councillors and Other Higher Officials, and also of Members of the House of Burgesses, and the Revolutionary Conventions of the Colony of Virginia* (Albany: Joel Munsell's Sons Publishers, 1902), 65; and Lyon G. Tyler, "Washington and His Neighbors," *William and Mary Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1895): 28.
11. Thomas A. Wolf, "The Pace of English Settlement in Northumberland County in Its First Quarter Century (ca. 1645-1670)," *The Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 52 (2015): 79-93.
12. *Northumberland County Deeds and Orders 1650-52*, 70; *Northumberland County Record Book 1652-58*, 114, 115, 117-21, and 145; "Virginia Gleanings in England (continued)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 13, no. 2 (1905): 191-205; and *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1908): 54.

life at Coan Hall with his three children (Anne, John Jr., and Frances) by his first wife; with Ursula (Bysshe) Thompson Mottrom, his second wife (whom he had married sometime after 1649), and her children, Richard, Sarah, and Elizabeth Thompson. Also living there were five slaves or servants of African or Afro-English descent named Joan, John, Daniel, Elizabeth Key, and her son; and six indentured men and boys, including Thomas Hazelipp (Haslip), Walter Owen, John Warner, William Taylor, George Slytham, and Thomas Hamond.¹³ Three others are known to have been indentured there previously and to have earned their freedom; they likely represent just a fraction of the household members in service during the dozen or more years that Mottrom lived at Chicacoan.¹⁴

Two inventories of the estate, taken in 1655 and 1656, show slightly different arrangements and numbers of furnishings.¹⁵ Both describe a house containing a communal and service room known as the hall, Mr. Mottrom's bedchamber, a parson's or minister's room (where Mottrom's house servant Elizabeth Key also slept), "Edward's room,"¹⁶ a kitchen, and a loft. (Some of the contents of the plantation store, presumably located elsewhere on the property, also were inventoried.)

The hall contained a wide assortment of goods, including beds and bedding, a table, chairs and stools, chests, "chains and other old iron" in a closet, guns and ammunition, pic-

tures, silver, pewter, books, tools, casks of malt, and building supplies, including "about 10,000" nails of six-, ten-, and twenty-pence size; forty-seven panes of glass; and a parcel of diamond-shaped or square window panes known as quarrels. Each of the rooms enumerated had beds and bedding, with a variety of pots, kettles, pans, and a "great copper" in the kitchen. A number of hogsheads of tobacco also were stored in the "great house."¹⁷

An examination of bedding helps to clarify who was allowed to live in the house. In the more detailed of the two inventories, nine beds are listed within the dwelling, and one in Mottrom's sloop, the *Coan*. The two in Mottrom's bedchamber were probably shared by him and his wife and one or more children. In addition to two beds for the use of the parson, in the room designated as his, and a small feather bed used by Elizabeth Key, references are to one bed in the hall; beds for Edward and "negro John"; and another bed in the loft.

It is likely that beds and bedding belonging to Mottrom's stepchildren were not inventoried, because they may not have belonged to him; and it is possible that the bedding used by servants belonging to Ursula also were not counted among Mottrom's possessions. Although the exact number of residents of the house at any one time is unknown, there appear to have been sufficient beds to accommodate the people listed in the inventory, meaning that the house was a

13. *Record Book 1652-58*, 124. Ursula Mottrom's first husband, Richard Thompson, died about 1649. See Edward C. Papenfuss, Alan F. Day, David W. Jordan, and Gregory A. Stiverson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Maryland Legislature 1635-1789* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 816.
14. These three known indentured servants were William Grinstead, Thomas West, and Henry West. Grinstead married Elizabeth Key by 1656 (Warren M. Billings, ed., *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century, A Documentary History of Virginia 1606-1700* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, rev. ed., 2007], 199). Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers*, vol. 1, 246-47, says Mottrom claimed headrights for Thomas and Henry West in 1650. Two depositions dated November 4, 1653, indicate that Winton Chapman had brought the West brothers into the colony four to five years earlier. Henry was to serve a five-year indenture; his younger brother, Thomas, was to serve for seven years. John Mottrom bought their indentures (*Record Book 1652-58*, 37). Mottrom had acquired ten servants from his land sale in Charles River County in 1640, and these did not include the West brothers, so clearly one or more additional servants of his lived on the property prior to his death.
15. Most likely a period of time passed between the first and the second inventory, and items were moved or removed from the property from one accounting to the next. The earlier inventory was taken on June or July 5, 1655 (*Record Book 1652-58*, 117-19); the second was signed March 5, 1655/56 (*Record Book 1652-58*, 121).
16. This man was possibly Edward Gower or Glover, a headright of Mottrom's who arrived in Virginia in 1655. See George Greer Cabell, *Early Virginia Immigrants 1623-1666* (Richmond: W. C. Hill, 1912), 132.
17. *Record Book 1652-58*, 117-21.

shared space not only for work, but for round-the-clock living.

In September of 1657, George Colclough, the new husband of the widowed Ursula Mottrom, recorded a list of debts to be charged to Mottrom's estate. Among these were 914 pounds of tobacco "paid Holland and Raven for covering houses" and an additional 300 pounds "to nails for covering the houses and boats."¹⁸ Apparently these costs were an advance for work to be done at Coan Hall, for in July of 1658, the county court ordered carpenters Daniel Holland and John Raven to fulfill their commission

to cover the Hall, Chamber, Kitchin & Shade belonging to them¹⁹ & to cover the Store, Brew-house & Old Quarter & to fitt up the Brew-House & fitt up ye Quarter for a Stable, the sd. housing formerly belonging to Coll. Jno. Mottrom, deced., & now standing at Chicacoan.²⁰

The hall, chamber, kitchen, and shed were either a single structure or part of a compound that was conceptualized as one unit. The above entries confirm the presence of dependencies on the property, adding a brew house and "old quarter" to the previously mentioned store. The reference to the "old quarter" suggests either that Mottrom had another house that predated the current hall-chamber-kitchen-shed—and

hence was "old"—or that he had housed some of his workforce separate from the main house in a building that had stood long enough to be considered old. Archaeological evidence, discussed in the following section, suggests that the former interpretation is correct.

John Mottrom Jr. inherited Coan Hall. He married Hannah Fox about 1669 and subsequently wed his second wife, Ruth Griggs, sometime prior to his death in the early 1680s.²¹ His son Spencer Mottrom inherited the property and likely lived there until his death by September 1698.²²

Spencer's daughter Mary was his heir and moved to Coan Hall with her husband, Joseph Ball, sometime after their marriage, which took place circa 1706. Ball added to the Mottrom estate and by his death in 1720 or 1721, he owned sixteen hundred acres. The property next passed to Mary and Joseph's sons, Spencer and Richard Ball. Archaeological evidence indicates that in the early eighteenth century, Mottrom's manor house was abandoned, and the Balls built a large new dwelling closer to the Coan River, which may have stood into the early nineteenth century.²³

Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake Architecture and the Construction of Coan Hall

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Chesapeake landscape was dominated by buildings

18. *Record Book 1652-58*, 123.

19. Meaning the shed belonging to the hall, chamber, and kitchen, not that the hall, chamber, kitchen, and shed belonged to Holland and Raven.

20. *Northumberland County Order Book 1652-65*, 172.

21. "Mottrom-Wright-Spencer-Arris-Buckner," *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1908): 54, states that Mottrom Jr. married Hannah Fox about 1669 and that this is stated in her father's inventory, which the authors have not read. Her father's will, written November 4, 1669, lists her as single (*Lancaster County Will Book 1709-27*, 366). Robert Griggs, Mottrom's second father-in-law, wrote his will on January 22, 1684, and referred to Ruth Mottrom's husband as being deceased (*Lancaster County Will Book 1674-89*, 91). See also "Virginia Gleanings in England (continued)," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 13, no. 2 (1905): 202.

22. *Northumberland County Order Book 1678-98, Part 2*, 838.

23. *Richmond Times Dispatch*, January 10, 1897, p. 2, col. 1, briefly discusses Spencer Mottrom's inheritance, but its accuracy is suspect. See Stanard and Stanard, *Colonial Virginia Register*, 94; *Northumberland County Order Book 1699-1713, Parts 1 and 2*, 344 and 431; and *Northumberland County Record Book 1718-26* for information about Mary and Joseph Ball. In 1819, Mottrom Ball was compensated \$1,400 by the federal government for "the destruction of his buildings on Old Courthouse Point." Other records of compensation specifically mention houses, so it is unclear whether this sum included the dwelling or other structures on the property (United States, *References to Acts Authorizing the Payment for Property Lost, Captured or Destroyed by the Enemy While in the Military Service, Etc.* [Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911], 3).

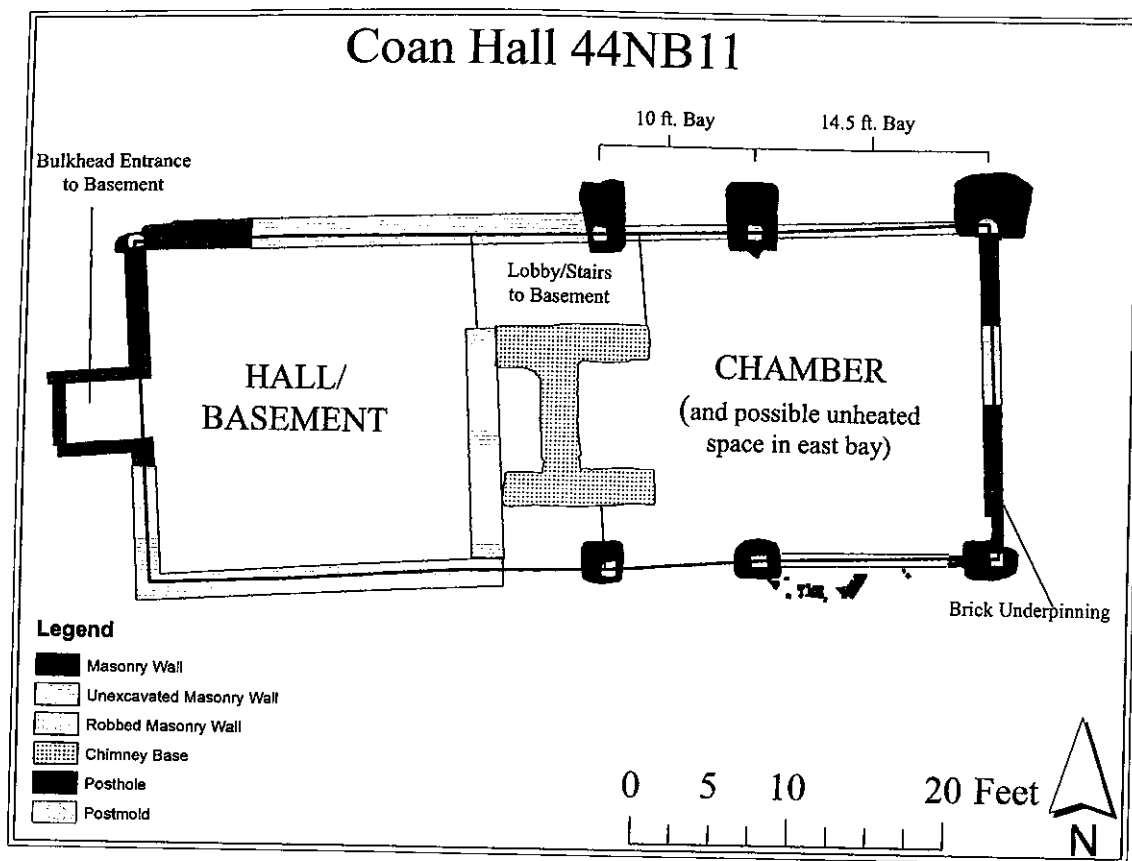


Figure 1:
Plan of the
manor house
at Coan Hall
based on
archaeological
excavations

in the style known as “the Virginia house”: timber-framed dwellings anchored by posts set in the ground and given strength and rigidity through the use of riven clapboards that formed the walls and often the roofing material.²⁴ This type of architecture came to define most Virginia and Maryland housing following a forty-year period when immigrant landholders experimented with a variety of forms and construction materials to find a style compatible with the environmental, economic, and demographic conditions of early colonial life.

Stephen Potter first identified the site of Coan Hall in the 1960s by noting concentrations of seventeenth-century artifacts on the surface of the field, and he returned in the 1970s with

Gregory Waselkov to conduct a more systematic study of surface scatters.²⁵ Archaeological excavations sponsored by the University of Tennessee have been carried out at the site since 2011, exposing large sections of a seventeenth-century domestic structure. Unexcavated areas within the footprint of the main house, along with indications that the building underwent one or more episodes of structural repairs, complicate the interpretation of the evidence. Nonetheless, the footprint of the structure has been sufficiently revealed to offer hypotheses about the plan of the building and its likely internal arrangement. The earthfast (*post-in-ground*) and masonry house had a central brick and stone H-shaped chimney (i.e., back-to-back fireplaces),

24. Carson, “Plantation Housing,” 86–114; and Carl R. Lounsbury, “The Design Process,” 64–85, both in Carson and Lounsbury, *The Chesapeake House*.

25. Stephen R. Potter and Gregory A. Waselkov, “Whereby We Shall Enjoy Their Cultivated Places,” in Paul Shackel and Barbara J. Little, eds., *Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 23–33.

with two rooms east of the chimney and one or two to the west. A brick and partially stonelined basement extended beneath the entire western half of the house. At 54' x 21.5', the house was much larger than most of its contemporaries, and the size of the basement, estimated to be about 20' x 21.5', also was unusually large (see figure 1).

Archaeological evidence of earthfast architecture consists of backfilled *postholes*—dug to seat the posts that framed the building—and *post molds*, sediment-filled columns of earth that mark the location where the posts once stood. The fill of *postholes* often contains artifacts that were left during construction of a building; the contents of the *post molds* may include artifacts that were used to fill in the void caused by the removal or decay of the post when a building was later destroyed or renovated. Thus the fill of *postholes* and *post molds* can provide important chronological information about when a structure was built, when it was repaired, and when it was abandoned or razed.

The Coan Hall manor house was supported by substantial hole-set wooden posts arranged in two parallel lines. The remains of six structural posts that framed the east portion of the building have been documented, and three have been partially excavated. A seventh structural post was revealed at the junction of the basement walls in the northwest corner of the building and has been partially excavated. The northwest corner post had rotted completely and first appeared as a void in the surrounding sediment. A similar void found twenty feet to the east almost certainly represents another post. The patterned placement of the posts uncovered to date should make the discovery of additional structural posts fairly straightforward (see figure 1).

In the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, carpenters used a number of different methods to erect the posts required to support the buildings. Two of the most common were to raise the posts as opposing pairs connected by a *tie beam*, which together were known as *bents*, or to join the posts in a line connected by a *wall plate*

that formed one *sidewall*.²⁶ Erecting *bents* required less skill in carpentry and was less labor intensive. *Bent* and *sidewall* construction are not compatible and would not be part of a single construction episode; however, evidence of both types of construction can be seen in the pattern of *postholes* at Coan Hall. To understand their chronological and spatial relationship requires looking at the orientation of *postholes* relative to each other, measuring the distance between them, and observing their placement in relation to the chimney.

The spacing and orientation of the *post molds* show that the Coan Hall manor house was oriented with its long axis aligned east to west, and that it was raised using *bents*. After the posts were set in place, they were joined together with plates, braces, and some type of sill to form the skeletal frame to support the roof, and around which the studded and clapboard-covered walls were assembled. A substantial stone foundation for two fireplaces, arranged back to back, was roughly centered along the length of the dwelling. At least three of six other Chesapeake earthfast houses with *center chimneys* that have been recorded were bent-raised (see table 1).

The distance between two adjacent posts along the length of the building is known as a *bay*. Coan Hall was divided into four regular ten-foot *bays*, with the fifth—eastern—*bay* measuring 14.5 feet. Carpenters used the ten-foot-bay system and house widths of roughly twenty feet with regularity as early as the 1620s; this system became the norm by the 1650s. Within each *bay* and between the posts, vertical *studs* were used to attach the exterior wall clapboards that gave the structure rigidity. The length of wall clapboards became standardized at five feet as part of this system.²⁷ At 54' x 21.5', the overall dimensions of Coan Hall match up well with this development. Although the 14.5-foot east *bay* falls outside the norm, it is still compatible with the five-foot framing system. It would have been relatively straightforward to add this fifth bay to the east end of the house using *bent* assembly.

26. Carson et al., "New World, Real World," 55, fig. 6.

27. Garry W. Stone, "The Roof Leaked, but the Price was Right: The Virginia House Reconsidered," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 99, no. 3 (2004): 313–28.

Table 1
Sites in the Chesapeake Region Comparable to Coan Hall

Site	Date	Foundation	Bays	H-Shaped Fireplace			Porch	Lobby Entry	Rooms	Dimensions	Frame
				Assym. Length	Assym. Width	Centered					
Yeardley	1619	Stone	4	x			x	?	3	41' x 24'	Uprights set in footings
Mathews Manor	1630s	Earthfast	5			x	x	x	2-3	46' x 18'	?
Country's House	1635	Stone/Brick	4-5	x	x		x	—	4-5	50' x 18'	—
St. John's	1638	Stone	5	x	x		—	x	2	52' x 20.5'	—
Richard Kemp Townhouse	1639	Brick	2	x	x		—	x	2	35' x 20'	—
Rich Neck	1640	Brick	2		x		—	x	2	35' x 20'	—
Hallowes	1640	Earthfast	5	x	x		—	x	3	50' x 20'	Bents
Pettus	1640s	Earthfast	5			x	—	—	2	50' x 18'	Individual posts
Coan Hall	1640s	Earthfast, Stone/Brick	4-5		x		—	?	3	51' x 21.5'	Bents
Drummond	1648	Earthfast	3	x	x		—	?	2	36' x 18'	Sidewall
Newman's Neck	1650	Earthfast	4	x			—	?	2-3	40' x 20'	Bents
Clifts	1670	Earthfast	5	x	x		x	?	3	41' x 18.5'	Bents
Carvill Hall	1695	Brick	3		x		x	x	2	≈ 40' x 20'	—

Note: For the plans of the different sites, see *Yeardley* (Carson et al., "Impermanent Architecture," 152; and Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 94); *Mathews Manor* (Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 95); *Country's House* (Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 98); *St. John's* (Carson et al., "Impermanent Architecture," 142; and Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 95); *Richard Kemp Townhouse* (Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 95); *Rich Neck* (Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 96); *Hallowes* (Neiman, "Temporal Patterns," 266; Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 97; and Hatch et al., "Archaeological Reassessment of the Hallowes Site," 15-24); *Pettus* (Carson et al., "Impermanent Architecture," 157; Neiman, "Temporal Patterns," 268; and Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 102); *Coan Hall* (Barbara J. Heath, "Coan Hall Excavation Interim Report," 2017; and Drummond [DECA]); *Newman's Neck* (Heath et al., "Archaeological Reassessment of Newman's Neck," 2009); *Clifts* (Fraser D. Neiman, "Domestic Architecture at the Clifts Plantation: The Social Context of Early Virginia Building," in Dell Upton and Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986], 292-314; Stone, "The Roof Leaked," 317; and Carson, *Plantation Housing*, 97); *Carvill Hall* (Wenger, "Town House and Country House," 124).

Given the placement of the chimney at Coan Hall, it would have been highly unusual for the ten-foot-wide second bay to have been the only room on the east side of the building, as the fireplace for the east room projected almost two feet into the space. Therefore, the longer span of the east bay more likely was the result of a conscious decision on the part of the builder, reflecting a desire for a slightly longer house that could accommodate two or more rooms to the east of the fireplace base. The chimney stack at Coan Hall was centered longitudinally; in eight of the twelve other examples of dwellings with H-shaped center fireplaces, the placement of the stack created an asymmetrical floor plan that could accommodate more than one room on one side (see table 1).

Although it was centered on the length of the house, the 10' x 11.5' chimney mass at Coan Hall was not centered on the width of the structure. Instead, it was shifted closer to the south wall, leaving a larger space along its northern edge (3.68 feet from the south wall versus 6.68 feet from the north wall) (see figures 1 and 2A).

This asymmetrical arrangement suggests that the main entry to the structure was via a lobby installed between the north cheek wall of the fireplace and the exterior wall. So-called *offset* fireplaces like this one commonly are associated with lobby entries,²⁸ and in eight of the other twelve Chesapeake buildings with H-shaped fireplaces, the base of the chimney was *offset* significantly toward one of the long walls (see table 1).

Excavations also suggest that an interior entrance to the basement was located along the north side of the chimney, and it may have been built off-center of the structure to accommodate a set of interior basement stairs. Future excavations are needed to confirm their presence.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the three posts on the north wall to the east of the fireplace were replaced, and the orienta-

tion of the *postholes* here suggests that the new frame for these two bays was erected as a *sidewall* unit. This repair must have been relatively difficult to accomplish, as the plate for the new *sidewall* assembly could not have meshed easily with the tie beams that connected the original paired posts. Raising the new posts individually would have been a much less challenging solution, and it is unclear why the builder chose to use *sidewall* construction instead.

Remnants of brickwork were found running in line with the three north wall posts, with gaps where the posts were located. Similar evidence was found running between the two east wall posts, where two courses of an English bond foundation remain largely intact, and between two of the south wall posts. Given the extensive nature of the repairs represented by replacing the posts, it is likely that the masonry foundation was laid at the same time.

Horizontal timbers known as *sills* likely ran between the *posts* to support the studded walls and to anchor the *joists* running below the floorboards. The *sills* likely were attached to the *posts* at a point fairly close to the ground and thus would have been highly susceptible to rot. The sills on all three walls may well have needed to be replaced with new members that were installed higher up to better protect them from moisture. The bricks could have been added to close the wider opening between the bottom of the new sills and the ground surface.²⁹

Artifacts were recovered from the *postholes* and *post molds* for *square holes* associated with *bents* excavated along the south wall, and from one *rectangular hole* and *post mold* associated with *sidewall* construction excavated along the north wall. Unfortunately, none contained diagnostic material that could help pinpoint the time when they were filled, but the presence of architectural debris, bottle glass, ceramics, and English flint in both sets of holes indicates that a scatter of construction material and domestic

28. Fraser D. Neiman, "Temporal Patterns in House Plans in the 17th-Century Chesapeake," in Theodore R. Reinhart and Dennis J. Pogue, eds., *The Archaeology of 17th-Century Virginia* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1993), 251-83; Carl R. Lounsbury, "The English Origins of the Jamestown Rowhouses," in Carl R. Lounsbury, ed., *Essays in Early American Architectural History, A View from the Chesapeake* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 75-94; Mark Wenger, "Town House and Country House," in *Chesapeake House*, 120-54; and Carson, "Plantation Housing," 94-98.

29. Stone, "The Roof Leaked, but the Price was Right," 320.

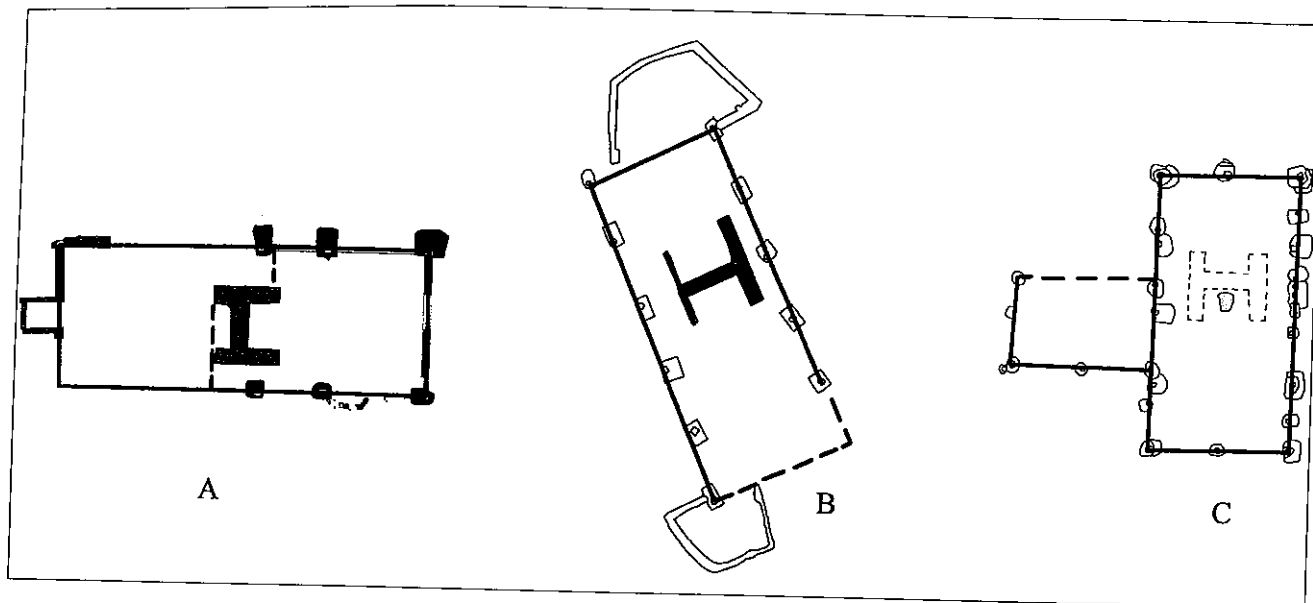


Figure 2: Seventeenth-century houses on the Northern Neck with center chimneys and lobby entry plans: (A) Coan Hall, Northumberland County; (B) Hallows Site, Westmoreland County; and (C) Newman's Neck, Northumberland County

trash was on the surface at the time that the walls of the house were erected and repaired. The presence of these artifacts in the earlier holes is one clue that another building predating Coan Hall had been present at the site.

A second line of evidence also suggests the presence of an earlier historic occupation. One of the original posts along the south wall line of the house intrudes into a one- to two-foot-wide trench that runs diagonally across the site, cutting beneath what later would become the east room. The brickwork for the east wall of the house was built over the trench, indicating that the trench was present—and filled—at the time the wall was laid. Preliminary excavations in 2017 revealed that the trench contained a hand-wrought nail and a mold-made tobacco pipe fashioned of local clay using European technology. These two historic artifacts, and the trench that contained them, suggest that someone had modified the landscape to build a fence or palisade prior to the construction of Coan Hall and had abandoned it before the main house was built. The presence of these features strongly implies that one or more structures also stood at the site. Following the course of the trench may lead us to a building, perhaps the “Old Quarter” that the Mottrom household occupied in the first phase of settlement before the manor house

was constructed.

The west room of the house sat above a basement approximately 20' x 21.5', at least five feet deep, accessed through a bulkhead entrance located in the center of the west gable and possibly through the aforementioned set of interior stairs. The north wall of the basement, built first, was constructed partially of stone; the interior was faced with brick. The west wall and the bulkhead foundation were made entirely of brick, with wooden steps inset between the bulkhead's cheek walls. The west basement wall was laid in English bond with an infill of brick that allowed its width to equal the width of the corner post; the north wall was substantially wider.

Several thin layers of hard-packed sand and clay represent a series of floors laid down within the basement. A narrow channel running from the northeast corner of the bulkhead due east, beyond the limits of our excavations, may represent the remains of a drain that carried rainwater from the bulkhead to an interior cistern or sump. Although the exact relationship between the east end of the basement and the chimney awaits further excavation, a portion of the basement clearly extends to the northeast, filling a roughly six-foot-square space north of the chimney cheek wall. This area later was filled with rubble and capped with an informally

laid brick floor.

It appears that at the time of construction, workers excavated a hole for the basement that was slightly larger than what was needed. When the masonry was complete, they filled in the extra space with sediment; in so doing, they created a feature that archaeologists know as a builder's trench. A section of that trench running along the west wall of the basement was excavated and did not contain a single artifact. The absence of artifacts suggests that this portion of the house was part of the original construction episode, because if the basement had been built after the house was occupied for a prolonged period of time, domestic debris that had accumulated on the ground surface would have been mixed in with the fill.

The Building Materials

Cataloging the thousands of artifacts recovered at the site is still underway, but even anecdotal evidence based on field notes already has contributed to our understanding of the house at Coan Hall. Mottrom's inventory listed ten thousand nails of varying sizes stored in the hall, but many thousand more went into the construction of his house. Hand-wrought nails are ubiquitous and abundant at the site, testifying to the regular replacement of clapboarding that covered the walls and roof, to the presence of wooden flooring, and likely to interior trim.

Thin fragments of window glass, dark green in color due to iron impurities in the sand used in its manufacture, were found in layers of fill associated with the destruction of the house. Although broken, portions of diamond-shaped panes, or quarrels, have been uncovered that originally were held in place by window leads, also recovered from the site, and fitted within casements.

Within the basement, a thick deposit of broken plaster, discarded as the house was being dismantled, attests to bright, smooth interior walls constructed of framing and lath and coated with one, and sometimes two, layers of plaster made from lime mortar.

Glazed windows and plastered walls were a marker of wealth and status in the seventeenth-

century Chesapeake. Together, these artifacts refute earlier ideas that Coan Hall residents were forced to "make do" with local substitutions for unavailable English materials and to live "simply."

Perhaps the most interesting building material on the site is the purple sedimentary stone used in the construction of the chimney base and in the north wall of the basement. Although its source remains unknown, it is not local to the area and most likely arrived as ballast on an English ship. Construction with imported stone is generally associated with early houses that were built before the widespread availability of bricks made in local kilns. It is possible that the stones that make up the foundations of the chimney and the north basement wall were recycled from an earlier dwelling.

Coan Hall in Context

Given what we know about the house based on excavations, what is its broader meaning?

One way of answering this question is to compare the plan of Coan Hall with other contemporary domestic sites in the Chesapeake region and in England. The placement of the chimneys within the footprint of the house is the main character-defining feature of the plan of the Chesapeake house in the seventeenth century. Houses with a *center chimney* serving two adjoining fireplaces, forming the shape of an H, were a standard feature of farmhouses throughout England, in both urban and rural settings, from the late sixteenth century until the beginning of the eighteenth century. Frequently such a chimney could accommodate flues for up to three fireplaces.

The manor house at Coan Hall generally conforms to this plan, which also was adopted in the Chesapeake region more generally during the first three quarters of the seventeenth century. The *center chimney* was particularly useful in the Chesapeake area because it could be inserted into a timber-framed building without great disruption to the framing system.³⁰

In England, houses with *center chimneys* generally contained three or four rooms clustered around the chimney stack. A common

30. Neiman, "Temporal Patterns," 263-70; Lounsbury, "The English Origins of the Jamestown Rowhouses," 83-85; and Carson, "Plantation Housing," 98.

variation of the plan, known as the linear farmhouse, had rooms arranged side by side in a line. The chimney was roughly centered on the building, either with two fireplaces arranged back-to-back to heat the main rooms (the hall and the parlor/chamber), or with just one fireplace to heat the hall and other fireplaces arranged along the exterior walls as needed. Often one or two unheated rooms were located on one end of the house beyond the hall. Plans of this type may have included a corridor, known as a cross passage, separating the heated room from the service spaces.³¹ Cross passages allowed for the free flow of family and servants through the structure via a corridor that ran the width of the house.

For dwellings such as Coan Hall, with *center chimneys*, access was restricted to a principal doorway that also was centered. People entered into a lobby bounded on one side by the chimney base, which was shifted off-center of the house to accommodate the space that the lobby required. Some lobbies contained a stairway leading to the second level. In urban contexts, where the tighter confines and narrow lots encouraged long structures with party walls, the entrance was shifted to the gable wall facing the street.

In either case, the lobby served as a buffer between the inside of the house and inclement weather, and served to segregate unwanted visitors from the activities of the household. Lobby-entry plans also allowed for a symmetrical arrangement of the facade due to the central location of the doorway, an aesthetic consideration that became increasingly important during the course of the seventeenth century.³²

A number of colonists in the Chesapeake area erected houses with *center chimneys* and lobby entries, which approximated the English linear farmhouse plan (see figure 2). The form had gone out of favor by the fourth quarter of the seventeenth century, however, when chimneys more commonly were placed at one or both ends of the house. The decline of the lobby entry may have been related to changing relations be-

tween household members and laborers. An advantage of the lobby entrance over direct entry into one of the main rooms was that it provided a measure of privacy and control for the household members.

Removing the central fireplaces and shifting their location to the exterior end walls opened up the middle portion of the structure and meant that visitors likely entered the house directly into one of the two primary rooms. This seeming reduction in privacy was made possible by devoting other structures on the property to processing and storage activities that previously had been carried out in the house, which reduced the presence of laborers in the dwelling. In this scenario, the private space was less likely to be violated by unwanted visitors and laborers, and the open plan allowed easier surveillance to ensure against such intrusions.³³

The trend away from lobby entries and *center chimneys* in the Chesapeake paralleled events in England, where those features were also supplanted by a preference for gable-end chimneys. The most obvious advantage of removing the *center chimney* was to save valuable space within the building. The extra space could be used to increase the size of rooms, or could be filled by a more commodious staircase. In urban settings such as London and later Charleston, South Carolina, central staircases were added, but soon they were replaced by installing more efficient stairs in passages running from front to rear on one end of the house.³⁴

In the Chesapeake region, the stair generally ran up the partition dividing the two main rooms, or was tucked into a corner to one side of an end chimney. For many homeowners, the concern for privacy and control of access to the dwelling continued to be met by an exterior entry or porch, but by the late seventeenth century, wealthy builders took the step of adding a second partition to form a center passage that spanned the width of the house. The passage served as a buffer and as an entertaining space, and lent itself to greater symmetry of design on both the exterior and the interior. The popu-

31. Carson, "Plantation Housing," 90-93.

32. Lounsbury, "The English Origins of the Jamestown Rowhouses," 84-85; Carson, "Plantation Housing," 91-92.

33. Neiman, "Temporal Patterns," 267-70.

34. Lounsbury, "The English Origins of the Jamestown Rowhouses," 84-85.

larity of center passages grew steadily over the course of the eighteenth century as rooms took on more specialized uses.³⁵

The plan of Coan Hall is similar to the linear farmhouse layout that was a staple of English building practices for several hundred years, which featured the *center chimney* plan that was popular during the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century. A number of building sites in the Chesapeake that have been excavated also have *center chimneys* and are similar to the Coan Hall plan, and all bear some resemblance to the English linear house plan. The three excavated sites that most closely resemble Coan Hall are St. John's, located in St. Mary's City, Maryland and constructed circa 1638; Hallowes in Westmoreland County, built circa 1647; and Newman's Neck in Northumberland County, probably built in the early 1670s (see figure 2).³⁶

Other buildings with similar plans in Virginia include the Yeardley House (1619) in Prince George County; Mathews Manor (ca. 1630s) in Warwick County; Richard Kemp's townhouse in Jamestown (1638–1639) and his Rich Neck plantation house (1640) in Williamsburg; Pettus (ca. 1640s) and Drummond (1648) in James City County; and the Clifts (ca. 1670) in Westmoreland County. The Country's House (ca. 1635) in St. Mary's City also appears to have had a similar plan in its earliest form; Carvill Hall (1695) in Kent County, Maryland, is the latest known example of a *center chimney*,

lobby entry house in the Chesapeake.³⁷

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We began with some questions about Coan Hall and its meaning, and after three seasons of extensive archaeology, we are closer to answering them.

Mottrom's house was substantially larger than most houses of the period. Beneath the commodious west room was an unusually large basement with well-laid masonry walls and at least one entryway. The windows were leaded and glazed, the walls secured by abundant nails, and the interior walls coated in plaster, all in the fashion of the period. The plan of Coan Hall would be easily recognizable to an English audience, not as a product of the colonies but as a respectable British farmhouse. Rather than "simple" and "medieval" in character, in some respects the house was modern for that time, favoring a symmetrical facade and facilitating the segregation of interior space that became the hallmarks of eighteenth-century plantation dwellings throughout the Chesapeake.

Yet the house also is an odd combination of what has come to be known as "impermanent architecture," characterized both by hole-set timbers that supported the walls and roofing (recall the earlier discussion of *postholes* and *post molds*), and the greater permanency that comes with a building of brick and stone. In this way, it was a hybrid, a product of life in the Potomac River valley frontier and English

35. Wenger, "Town House and Country House," 122–28; Carson, "Plantation Housing," 102–5.

36. D. Brad Hatch, Lauren K. McMillan, and Barbara J. Heath, *Archaeological Reassessment of the Hallowes Site (44WM6)*, report submitted to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, manuscript on file (Richmond: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2013); D. Brad Hatch, Barbara J. Heath, and Lauren K. McMillan, "Reassessing the Hallowes Site: Conflict and Settlement in the 17th-century Potomac Valley," *Historical Archaeology* 48, no. 4 (2014): 46–75; Lauren K. McMillan, D. Brad Hatch, and Barbara J. Heath, "Dating and Chronology at the John Hallowes Site (44WM6), Westmoreland County, Virginia," *Northeast Historical Archaeology* 43 (2015): 18–36; Barbara J. Heath, Eleanor E. Breen, Dustin S. Lawson, and Daniel W. H. Brock, with contributions by Jonathan Baker and Kandace Hollenbach, *Archaeological Reassessment of Newman's Neck (44NB180)* (University of Tennessee Archaeological Reports, manuscript on file [Richmond: Virginia Department of Historic Resources, 2009]); and Barbara J. Heath, "Dynamic Landscapes: The Emergence of Formal Spaces in Colonial Virginia," *Historical Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 27–44.

37. Cary Carson, Norman F. Barka, William M. Kelso, Garry Wheeler Stone, and Dell Upton, "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies," *Winterthur Portfolio* 16 (2/3) (1981): 135–96; Carson, "Plantation Housing," 94–98; and *Database of Early Chesapeake Architecture (DECA)*, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia (accessed May 2017).

sensibilities.

In describing John Lewger's St. John's in St. Mary's City, Maryland—a house that was contemporary with Coan Hall and with which Mottrom would have been familiar—architectural historian Cary Carson has argued that Lewger “deliberately planned a private residence in which he could also host sessions of the general court and meetings of the assembly.”<sup>38</sup> Carson added that other important officeholders “built houses with halls and parlors (chambers) separated by a central chimney and lobby entry,” including governors Samuel Mathews, Richard Kemp, and George Yeardley.<sup>39</sup> Both

Yeardley, who was the first of this group to build in this style at Flowerdew Hundred in 1619, and Lewger owned houses with a similar combination of masonry and earthfast construction, whereas Kemp's houses in Jamestown and Rich Neck were entirely of brick.

That Mottrom's Coan Hall compares favorably to the houses of this group of influential and powerful men suggests that he intended the house to legitimize and symbolize the importance of Chicacoan in the broader political landscape of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake region and to showcase his own position of leadership.

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38. Carson, “Plantation Housing,” 95.

39. Carson, “Plantation Housing,” 95.