Official Publication of the
Lynchburg Historical Foundation and
the Lynchburg Museum Foundation

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Fall/Winter 2025

LYNCH'S FERRY

JOHN MEEM PAYNE: LYNCHBURG IN THE 1850S • LAST RITES
RECOLLECTIONS OF LYNCHBURG BY AN OLDER INHABITANT OR A STREET WITH A VIEW OF THE RIVER

"ONCE IN THE EARLY 1920S, ON AN OVERCAST DAY..., SOME OF US SAW A BIPLANE FLYING LOW AND WATCHED IT LAND ON THE ISLAND. WE RUSHED DOWN TO SEE IT JUST AS THE PILOT IN HELMET, GOGGLES, AND JACKET WAS CLIMBING OUT.

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PHOTO BY VICTOR WOOD

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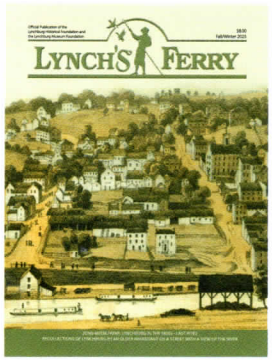

FRONT COVER:
This 1855 panoramic lithograph by Edward Beyer is the closest thing we have to a photograph of Lynchburg from that time. This detail shows downtown between Eleventh and Twelfth Streets.

LYNCH'S FERRY

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from the editor

In recent years, newspapers ranging from our local *News & Advance* to the global *New York Times* have increased their habit-forming puzzle and game offerings in an effort to retain existing subscribers and hook new ones. This "gamification" strategy appears to be working, perhaps in part because, in addition to serving as welcome, sanity-saving distractions, these various brain teasers are now often touted as longevity boosters and as preventive measures in the fight against cognitive decline. Is there any truth to it? Well, this issue of *Lynch's Ferry* offers some anecdotal evidence in support of such claims, though the challenges the following authors have undertaken go far beyond a Sunday-morning crossword.

Trapped indoors on a wintry day in January 1931, the ninety-year-old retired lawyer John Meem Payne devised his own memory-jogging game, setting out to recall and map the block-by-block 1850s Lynchburg of his boyhood. Starting at the south bank of the James River, he "walked" every street of the canal-era city, naming every household and business along the way. The document he left behind—created to "amuse the present generation of the city"—was recently unearthed at the Jones Memorial Library and transformed into a beautifully illustrated article by *Lynch's Ferry* designer and publisher Nancy Marion.

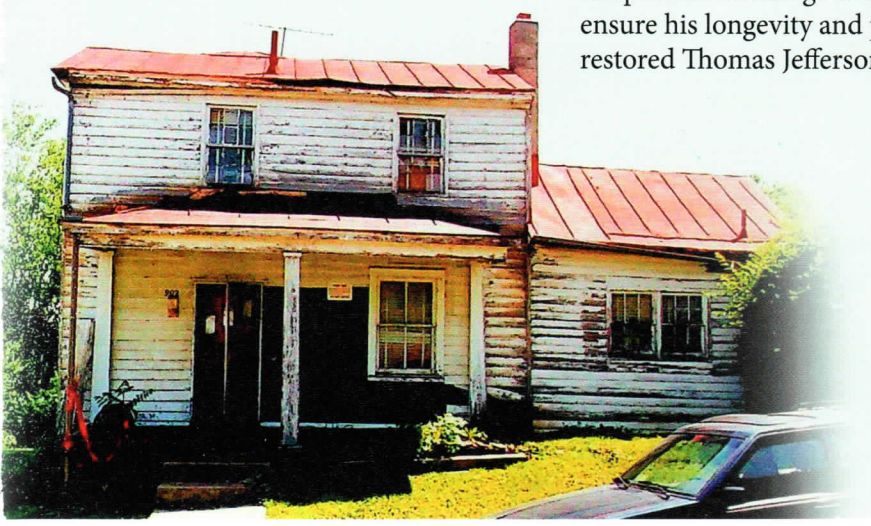
McDonald's article ends with an appeal for readers to help him locate more dilapidated buildings to decipher and jumbles to solve.

In a somewhat similar fashion, the engineer and executive T. Gibson Hobbs Jr. devoted a substantial portion of his retirement years to exploring, photographing, and mapping remnants of the James River and Kanawha Canal, an adventure he recorded and updated over time in a series of lectures to professional and civic groups. In his late eighties, Hobbs was engaged in piecing together the jigsaw of his accumulated research in a book called *The Canal on the James*, which was published posthumously in 2009. However, several years earlier, when he was on the precipice of turning eighty-one years old, Hobbs dramatically diverged from his usual interests to write a personal essay about growing up on Riverview Place. Portions of his memoir—recollections he thought "may be of some interest to my children, my still-living neighbors, current residents, and, hopefully, future generations"—are included in this issue.

The "jumble" author Travis McDonald refers to in his article "Last Rites" is a far cry from the Jumble word game featured in the Lynchburg newspaper. As he describes it:

> At times a collapsed building would offer more of a challenge—that is, it consisted of a mixed-up jumble of old building materials…while not the significant thrill of a major archaeological discovery, each "jumble" was no less exciting its own way and context.

McDonald's article ends with an appeal for readers to help him locate more dilapidated buildings to decipher and jumbles to solve. Respond if you can to ensure his longevity and preserve the brilliant mind that, among other projects, restored Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.



LAST RITES

BY TRAVIS C. MCDONALD

In the past, seemingly evangelical-like appeals to save old buildings were sometimes called the "gospel of preservation." That label or characterization, which likely started in the 1960s, reflected the fervent efforts of early advocates taking a stand in the fledgling historic preservation movement. Those early pioneers were reacting to the widespread demolition of old urban neighborhoods during the Urban Renewal era. They also protested the demolition of individual landmark buildings in a variety of local settings.

In some instances, older buildings were able to adapt and remain standing. For example, downtown businesses resisting the flight to suburban shopping centers in the 1960s and 1970s usually got radical modern face-lifts in an attempt to show progress and retain customers. More recently, however, the reversal of that "face-lift" trend has grown into a national phenomenon. Hidden original ornate façades are now appreciated and uncovered if possible, as witnessed in downtown Lynchburg on Main Street. While small towns and cities might have retained their older downtown building stock longer than larger cities, comparing a photograph of downtown Lynchburg in 1900 with today underscores the extent of what has been lost in a city this size.

Rural areas were not immune, though typically the peripheral landscape of old farm buildings and simple country houses disappeared at a slower but steady rate. In an area like Lynchburg, even if urban sprawl was relatively confined, expanding suburban areas encroached upon and changed rural landscapes and their buildings—again as part of a nationwide trend.

Of course, change is inevitable and often necessary. But, unfortunately, a recording of what gets lost in that march of progress is never guaranteed. In my last article, "Recording the Quickly Disappearing Past," I gave a sampling of the many old buildings I've documented in the Central Virginia area around Lynchburg over the past few decades. These collections of drawings, notes, and photographs are now in the Jones Memorial Library. Some were made as part of my annual Restoration Field School program at Jefferson's Poplar Forest but most were made at other times in response to requests or when time allowed me to pursue my own investigations.

I feel a personal and professional responsibility to record disappearing places for posterity. Does it matter? It matters to me and perhaps to some architectural historians in the future who might stumble upon these records at the Jones Library or at the Department of Historic Resources in Richmond where copies were sent. The state of Virginia has not done a very good job of systematically recording the historic resources of each county, especially in the majority of rural counties. Since the counties around Lynchburg have only received a cursory architectural inventory at best, if at all, I felt all the more inclined to record those disappearing buildings as best I could, even though the effort is not at all comprehensive and might be a drop in the bucket.

If the 1960s "gospel" comparison is accurate—if historic preservation really is something akin to a religion—then I suppose my efforts to record the last vestiges of structures could be considered as giving them their "last rites." This second article is devoted to the many sites I've recorded that have since been naturally demolished by neglect or were intentionally demolished by their owners. Some of these are within city limits and many more

in the countryside. The drawings and photographs in this article serve to give you a sense and a sampling of the larger collection deposited at Jones Memorial Library.

I often had help scouting the backroads for possibilities. Occasionally, a friend from Campbell County would take me out on trips to see various old properties. To my amazement some were from the late 1700s or early 1800s and never documented or known to the state preservation office. Most could not be seen from the road and most required a convincing argument with the owner as to why I wanted to record them. "Recording," I came to learn, was a misunderstood and suspect term for many owners who couldn't see any non-economic value in their old buildings and wondered why I'd waste my time making notes and taking photographs. Explanations referencing memories of "the good ole days" usually struck a chord. Still, any pride in granddaddy's old cabin had its economic limits. Typically, it was the inherited land that mattered.

Our day trips into the countryside began with list of potential buildings that I would attempt to triage in advance. I would ask my friend, the "county insider," to show me the most tenuous structures first. This meant a building might already be, by weather and gravity, in a heap, or it might be barely vertical, meaning it would most likely be down within a year or so. Buildings that were occupied, in good condition and not in danger, but nevertheless interesting to document, I moved further down the list.

It can seem counterintuitive to record the lowliest and less intact structures first as opposed to racing to document the best or most significant examples. But, to me, a vernacular agricultural outbuilding might be as interesting as the main house and merit special attention because outbuildings tend to disappear more frequently, having long ago lost their original function. Cabins also top the list. In fact, very simple one-room log cabins might be even more significant due to their exceptionally low survival rate. Log cabins typically did not get modern upgrades. By the twentieth century, they were rarely occupied and therefore prone to being abandoned the longest.

To say that outbuildings and cabins were abandoned is a bit misleading. I quickly learned that even the most derelict buildings were occupied, just not by people! Caution was required when interrupting the lifestyles of things that scurried, crawled, or flew. If I only expected to be at a building for a short period of time, with little hope I'd be back, taking as many photographs as possible would suffice. For other buildings, given a portion of a day's effort, I would also take measurements for later annotated plans, still rarely returning to the site.

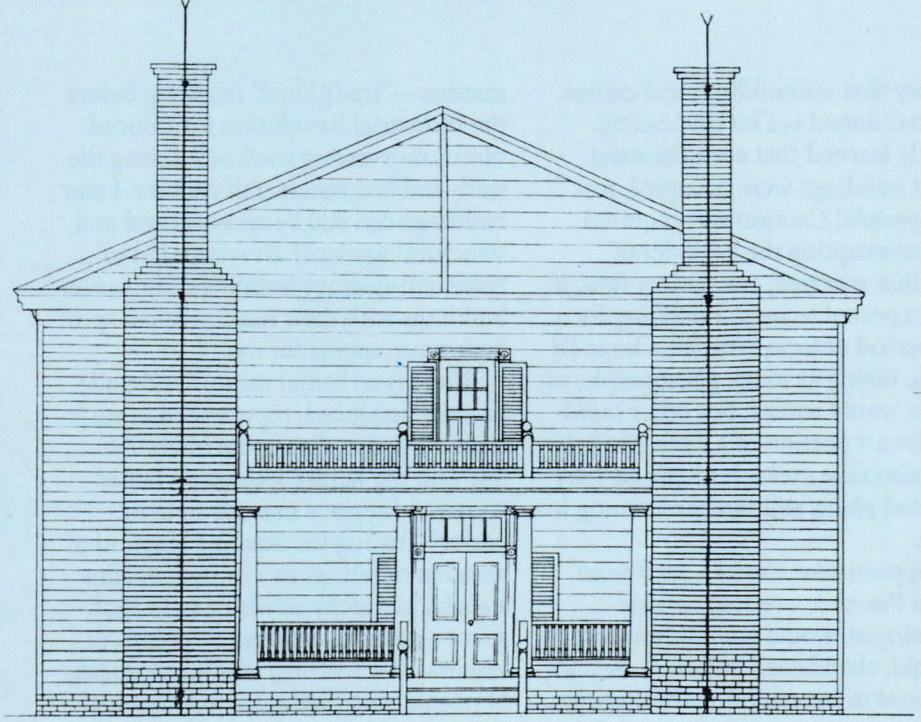
In Appomattox County, my friend Charles Pearson, a retired marine archaeologist, would sometimes alert me to old, abandoned buildings he had discovered in his ramblings of that area. After a career spent examining underwater sites and artifacts, Charlie had developed an appreciation of old things above the ground. He had been in the county long enough to qualify as a local and thus could get permission from owners for my recording escapades. This would entail what for me was a fun day in the country documenting decaying buildings and enjoying Charlie's company while doing so. At times a collapsed building would offer more of a challenge—that is, it consisted of a mixed-up jumble of old building materials. But even if it involved a more precarious effort to do so, Charlie enjoyed pondering the mystery of the remains. As for me, while not the significant thrill of a major archaeological discovery, each "jumble" was no less exciting its own way and context.

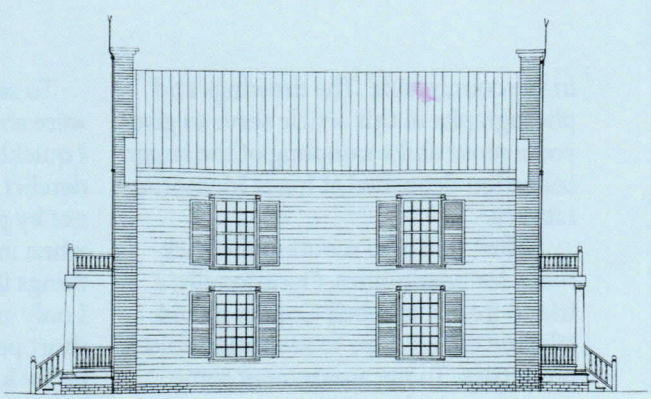
If left to the natural elements, unoccupied buildings have a predictable sequence of decline. The nature of old heart pine lumber, sometimes without paint for many decades, will beat the odds of survival much longer than younger buildings with inferior material. The many gray unpainted wooden buildings seen from the roadsides are a testament to this material. I am always drawn to older buildings—and by "older" I mean structures built before ca.1840. This was a time when buildings were handmade. The lumber, the bricks, the stone, the moldings, the nails, the roof covering, the glass, the iron-forged hardware, and just about every other element of a building was still produced in a traditional manner—"traditional" meaning before the Industrial Revolution introduced more labor-saving methods during the mid- and late nineteenth century. Later buildings can still be architectural and structural works of art compared to twentieth-century buildings, but earlier buildings with their hand-worked spirit have more appeal for me.

There is an initial value, handmade or mass produced, represented in each element that makes up an old building. Did the family splurge on better trim and fireplace mantels in their parlor? Tracing the size and location of wooden moldings in a house explains a social hierarchy of who was in each space—parents, children, servants, or visitors. The anatomy of a house speaks of people who first put it together and the many families who then enjoyed a well-made home for generations. As I described in my earlier article, the thrill of deciphering the age and evolution of an old building is exciting. Knowing the technology of how the original or subsequent parts were made answers most of the questions. Each building, especially the oldest ones, is unique and has technological or human tales to tell through studied observation. They are social and cultural witnesses, mostly mute, and my effort to record even a small percentage of them gives this architectural historian some personal and professional satisfaction. I welcome any leads on buildings you might know of that would warrant documentation.

Travis C. McDonald is the former director of architectural restoration at Poplar Forest. He retired in 2023, after thirty-four years of dedicated service to the project. The same year marked the publication of his book Poplar Forest: Thomas Jefferson's Villa Retreat. *He is taking full advantage of his new status by continuing his work on Poplar Forest and completing a second book.*

For readers who missed the first half of this two-part article, McDonald's "Recording the Quickly Disappearing Past" was published in the Spring/ Summer 2025 issue.





BALDWIN HOUSE

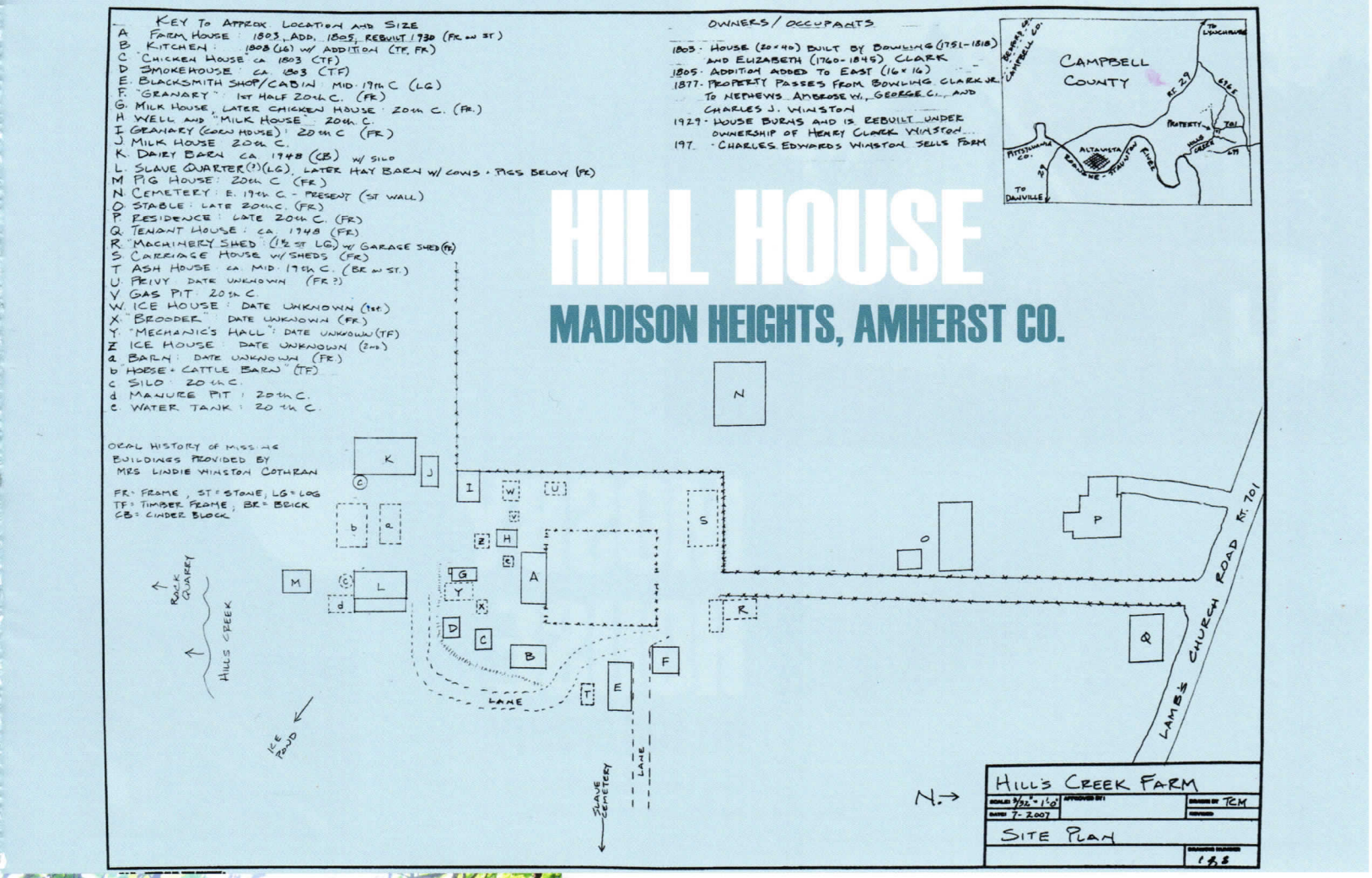
CHARLOTTE COUNTY

Poplar Forest Restoration Field School

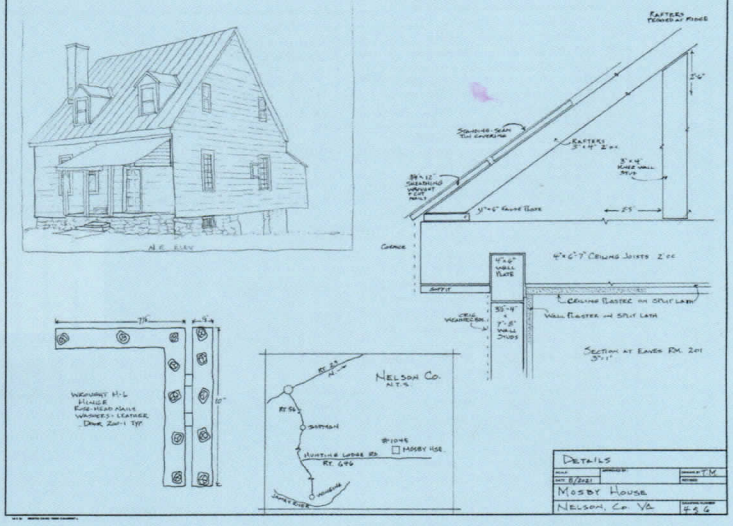
Unusual ca. 1840 house with dual gable end chimney facades

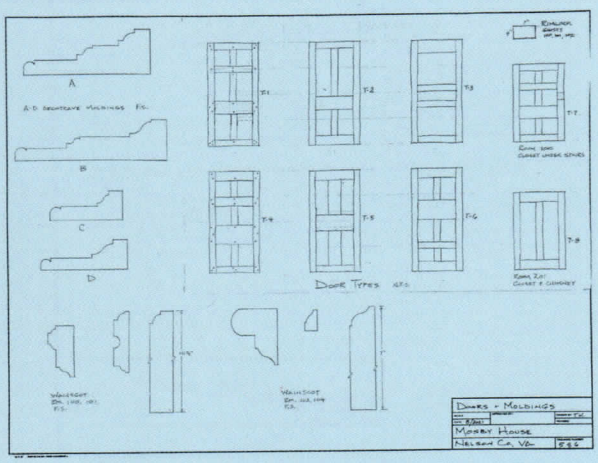
HILL HOUSE

MADISON HEIGHTS, AMHERST CO.



High style 1811 Federal-era house with wonderful interior details

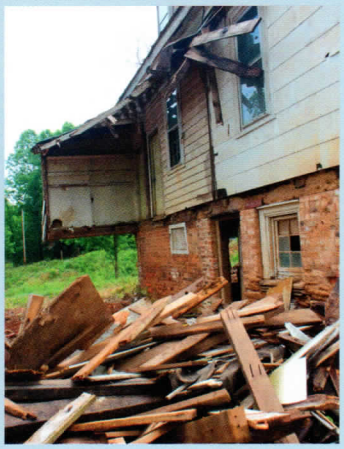




MOSBY HOUSE

NELSON COUNTY

Late 18th-century house owned by Col. Mosby's family



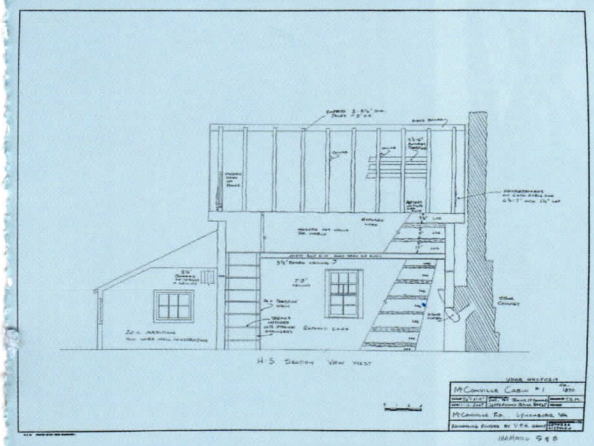
OAKLAND

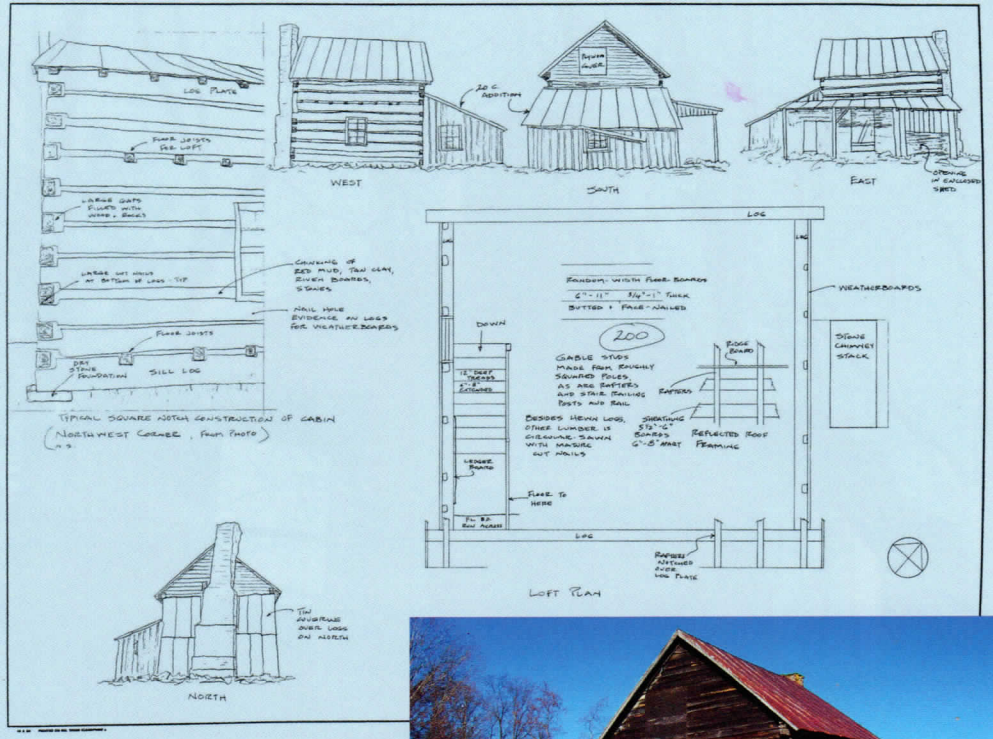
BEDFORD COUNTY

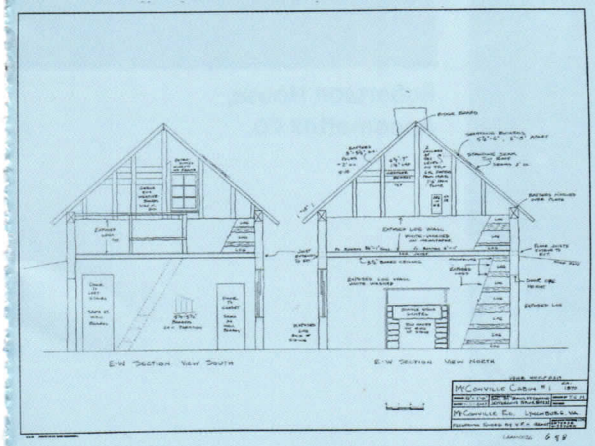
Early 19th-century house of Dr. Mitchell

Typical condition of basement and attic in abandoned houses with the remains of family life

This piano remained in one corner when someone removed the floor boards.

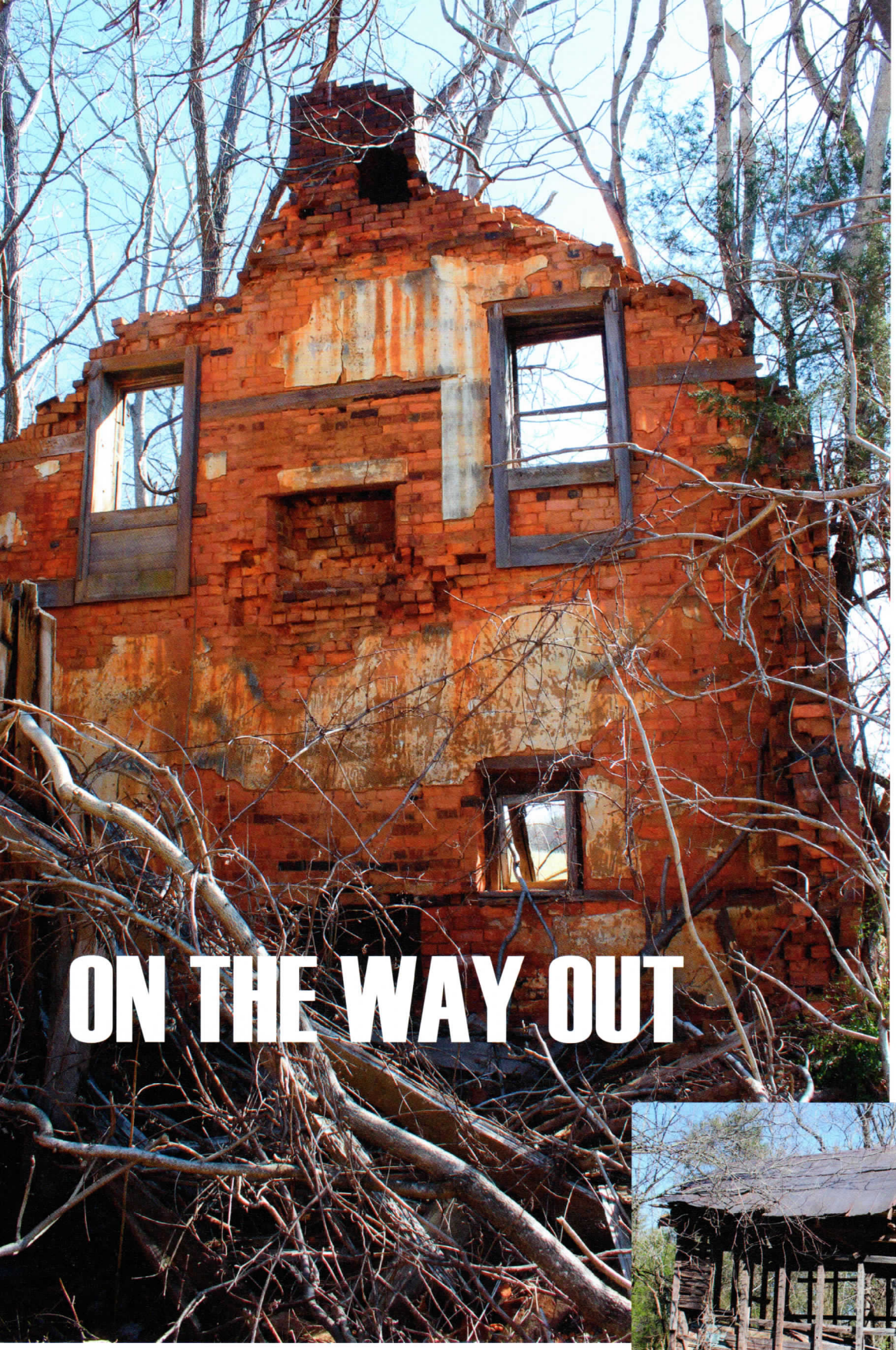






McCONVILLE CABIN

ON THE WAY OUT



Burke House, Appomattox Co.

Robertson House,
Appomattox Co.

Burke Building, Appomattox Co.

Villeview Cabin, Charlotte Co.

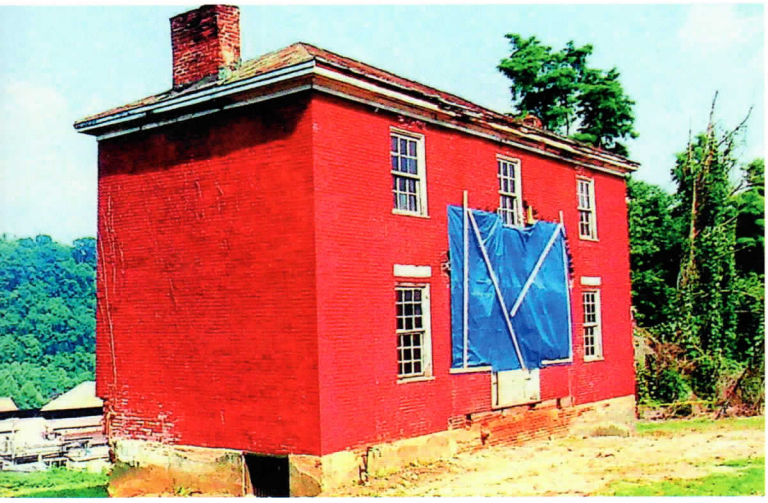
Flood House, Appomattox Co.

Irvingdale, Campbell Co.

Monroe House Kitchen, Amherst Co.

LOST

Flood House, Appomattox Co.



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Mingea, V.E.S. Campus, Lynchburg

902 Monroe Street, Lynchburg

Cabell Farlow House, Nelson Co.

St. James Church, Rt. 221, Lynchburg

Poindexter House, Rt. 221, Bedford Co.

Villeview House, Charlotte Co.