

Snow Hill
(Col. Samuel Booth House)
NW side of Va. Rt. 40, .55 mi. E
of bridge over Otterdam Swamp
Otterdam vicinity
Surry County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1045

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SNOW HILL
(COL. SAMUEL BOOTH HOUSE)

HABS No. VA-1045

Location: NW side of Va. Rt. 40, .55 mile east of bridge over the Otterdam Swamp, Otterdam Vicinity, Surry County, Virginia.

Present Owners: Mrs. John Leo Wilcox, Waverly, Virginia.
Mrs. Rosalie W. Priddy, Ashland, Virginia.

Significance: This is a typical Tidewater Virginia plantation house of the pre-Civil War era. Constructed in 1836, it is a five-bay, central-hall, single-pile structure of two-and-one-half stories. It exhibits characteristics of the late eighteenth century which remained prevalent in rural southeastern Virginia well into the nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Samuel Booth was a middle-class Tidewater Virginia planter who owned 500 acres of farmland eleven miles southwest of the James River in Surry County. His father, Beverly Booth, was a Revolutionary War veteran, a farmer, and a Baptist minister who brought his wife and several young children from Southampton to Surry, probably in 1791, and became pastor of the Otterdam Baptist Church.

Samuel Booth was born in Surry in 1794, probably attended a local school taught by a member of his father's congregation, and followed the most likely livelihood available to a young man of his upbringing--that of farming. He enlisted in the Surry County Militia at an early age, was commissioned a Lieutenant in 1827, and was promoted to Captain in the following year. Although all records for the Surry County Militia between 1830 and 1840 have been destroyed, he was most likely promoted to Colonel in the early part of the decade. His obituary (died January 20, 1876) refers to him as Colonel, and his grandchildren, alive as late as 1956, fondly referred to him as "Colonel Sam". Nonetheless, when Surry's post-1840 records were surveyed, no mention is made of his name, and it is likely that he retire in order to devote full time to the construction of his home and the development of his plantation.

By the mid 1830's Booth owned considerable property, some of which he sold, and some of which formed the basis for his plantation. Construction of his house was undertaken on a 172 1/2 acre tract of land, probably in the fall of 1836, and was completed at a cost of \$1380, according to the Surry County Land Books for the year 1837. As Surry's "Personal Property Tax Books for 1837" note, Samuel Booth was assessed for "20 slaves, 9 horses, and a riding gig valued at \$75" during the year "Snow Hill" was constructed. When the relatively low cost of the structure is considered,

it is reasonable to assume that slaves played an important role in its construction: felling trees, sawing, hewing, and joining timbers for the frame, and making bricks. Yet the over-all construction was undoubtedly overseen by a professional housewright. Another house, known as "Oak Hill" (situated on Virginia Route 31 between Surry Court House and Scotland Wharf) was undoubtedly built by the same overseer, and is very similar in plan, detail, and brickwork. Surry County's Land Books for 1840 show that in 1839 additional expenditures amounting to \$618.75 went toward the construction of "Snow Hill" probably for dependencies.

According to Booth family tradition, a difficult winter during the construction of the house resulted in the name "Snow Hill", but the earliest documented use of the title is not found until the 1859 deed of sale transferring the plantation from Samuel Booth to William H. Hood of Southampton (Surry County Deed Book 14, page 264).

By 1852 "Snow Hill" had grown to include various adjoining parcels of land containing a total of exactly 500 acres. Samuel's wife died later in the decade and, with his children grown, he sold the house and surrounding land in 1859 for the sum of \$4500. He then married a widow from adjoining Sussex County, and went to live with her on the farm she had inherited from her deceased husband.

William H. Hood held the property from 1859 until 1875, when the outcome of a court case decreed the land be sold, and it was purchased by Samuel Booth's son, Binns Beverly Booth, who promptly moved in with his family. Just prior to the death of Binns Beverly Booth, he sold the house and two hundred acres to his son Samuel Peter Booth, a bachelor. "Sam Pete", as he was known, remained in the house until incapacitated in 1930, at which point he went to live with his nephew, John Leo Wilcox, of Waverly, and later to a nursing home. Tenants inhabited the house after 1930, and the house was willed by "Sam Pete" Booth, upon his death in 1933, to his nephew.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is a typical Tidewater Virginia plantation house of the pre-Civil War era, and has undergone little alterations since its construction in 1836. It is a five bay, central hall, single pile, two-and-one-half story frame structure, and exhibits characteristics of late 18th century architecture which remained prevalent in rural, southeastern Virginia well into the 19th century.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. General Character: A five bay, two-and-one-half story structure covered by beaded-edge weather boards, possessing a fine modillion cornice and fielded-panel doors which tell a continuity of architectural tradition in conservative, slave-holding, tidewater Virginia.
2. Foundations: The building is set upon brick piers, adequately spaced to allow free circulation of air around the structural timbers—a necessity in the damp, termite filled climate of the tidewater.
3. Brickwork: All brickwork, both in the foundation walls and in the chimneys, is laid in five course American bond. Bricks measure approximately 8" x 3" x 3-3/4" and five courses rise 16".
4. Structural system: The building is of frame construction, of Virginia pine. Larger framing members, such as the major bearing plates which rest upon the brick foundations, are hand hewn. Smaller members are sawn. Studs measure roughly 3" x 4" and are placed 16" upon centers. The bearing plates measure approximately 10" x 12".
5. Doors: Front and back entries have double doors, each consisting of three fielded panels. All other doors in the building are single, and of the traditional six panel variety.
6. Hardware: The house is fortunate enough, although some have been replaced with Victorian examples. Rooms on the second and third floors have square iron plate latches, with thumb bolts and brass knobs. These are unmarked, but are probably of English origin. Of the five box locks originally found on the first floor, only two remain--on the closet door beneath the stair, and on the door between the hall and the dining room. This latter example is marked by "Carpenter & Company, patentees", and the keeper is stamped with a crown and the initials "W R", representing King William IV, ruler of England from 1830 until 1837. On the upper floors there is only one box lock--on the door of the small room just above the south entry. It has neither knobs nor a thumb latch--only a key for locking--suggesting that the room was used only for storage, and not as a nursery or sewing room as has occasionally been suggested. The double doors which open off the back side of the hall to the exterior never had a lock of any kind, only a wooden bar placed in iron holders.

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The only wrought iron to be found in the entire house are the strap hinges which hold the exterior shutters. These hinges, however, are attached to the shutters with screws, and not with nail as might be expected. Nails throughout the house are of the early machine cut variety. Hinges on all doors are of cast iron, those in the parlor and dining room have examples which raise the doors a total of 1/2" as they are opened--suggesting that there may have been some floor covering which the owner did not want the moving doors to scrape.

6. Windows and shutters: All windows are wooden double-hung sashes, unweighted, consisting of "nine-over-nine" light sashes on the first floor, and "six-over-six" on the second floor. The small double-hung sashes which light the third floor are of the "four-over-four" variety.

Shutters were originally hung on the exterior only on the south front of the building--facing the road which runs in front of the house. During the last quarter of the 19th century shutters were added to the north side and to the third floor, but these have long since disappeared.

7. Roof: An old roof (possibly the original) of heart pine or cypress shingles still exists beneath the current roof of tin, added in 1972 to prevent water damage. All of the shingles are of random width, measuring 18" in length, 6" of which was exposed to the weather. All shingles have rounded ends to prevent warping in the hot sun.
8. Lightening rods: The lightening rods seen on both chimneys of the house in old photographs may have been original. Only sections still remain.
9. Porches: The front porch, visible in old photographs, was original to the house, but was taken down in 1950 when its structure had become unsafe. Another porch was added at that time, but that too has since been removed. Included in the drawings accompanying this report is a proposed reconstruction of the porch, taken from old photos, measurements, and the existing cutlines still visible on the front of the house.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Woodwork: Panelled wainscots are found throughout the first floor and extend up to the stairwell to the second floor. The second floor has chair rails and baseboards throughout, and the third floor has only baseboards. There are no cornices of any form in any of the rooms.

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2. **Painted Interiors:** The interiors of "Snow Hill" have escaped the ravages often dealt by well intentioned renovators. With the exception of woodwork in the dining room, painted by tenants in the mid-20th century, the original painted, grained, and marbled surfaces are extant throughout the house. Although wear and tear, natural aging, and even abuse have taken their tolls upon the surfaces, much is exceptionally well preserved. The wainscoting hallway is painted a deep, almost olive, green, and the risers of the steps are marbled. Newel posts are "mahoganzed," and the stick balusters are painted the same green. The wainscot now found in the parlor, and that now painted over in the dining room, is representative of the fancy painting which reached its height in the era between 1820 and 1840. The baseboards are marbled, rails and stiles of the wainscot are simulated mahogany, and panels are painted in imitation of birds-eye and curly maple. The dado cap, the door and window jamb mouldings, are all painted a deep blue. Sunbursts in the parlor mantel are gilded with gold leaf. Doors throughout the house are painted with mahogany stiles and rails and with maple panels, identical to the wainscot of the first floor. Plaster surfaces throughout the house were applied over split lathes, and were left white. They were probably whitewashed often, and contain no signs of stenciling or wall painting.
 3. **Flooring:** All floors are of Virginia heart pine, varying in width from three to six inches. Without exception single boards run the complete length of a room.
 4. **Fireplaces:** There are four fireplaces in the house--2 each on the first and second floors. There are no fireplaces on the third floor. All hearths are of square brick tiles. The finest mantel is grained, has herringbone and Greek key moldings, and gilded sunbursts, and is found in the parlor.
- D. **Site:** Within the immediate environs of the house are known to have been a smokehouse, an icehouse, barns, a kitchen, and a building referred to as the "weaving house". None of these are still standing, although the frame of the smokehouse has been salvaged and will eventually be reconstructed. Woodwork from the kitchen, taken down in 1959, is in storage, and the chimney and foundations for the building still exist. There are no known photographs of any of the other buildings, with the exception of the "weaving house".

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of a project undertaken by the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Associate Professor of Architecture. This project was researched and drawn in the Spring semester, 1974, by Sumpter Priddy III, architecture history student. The documentation was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was not produced under HABS supervision, nor edited by members of the HABS staff.