



# POWER *in* PRESERVATION

**In 1853**, Louisa Bird Cunningham of South Carolina saw the deteriorated state of George Washington's Mount Vernon and wrote to her daughter, Ann Pamela Cunningham, "If the men of America have seen fit to allow the home of its most respected hero to go to ruin, why can't the women of America band together to save it?" Ann took her mother's words to heart and established the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, the nation's first private preservation organization, that same year.

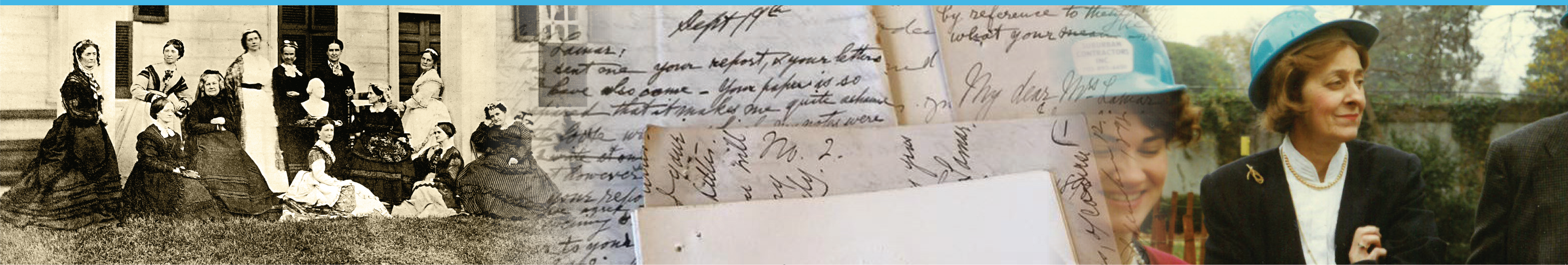
The beginnings of the historic preservation movement in the United States can be traced back to the ideal of Republican Motherhood. This concept embodies how women instilled republican values in, and served as primary educators for, their young children. Although technically working outside of the home, women could circumvent societal expectations through their acts of patriotism and preservation, saving the former homes of important figures in the founding of the nation. As the 19th-century progressed, more women's organizations with a penchant for preservation—including The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America (1891)—were established.



Women have continued to play a significant role in the broad field of preservation for over 160 years, though not without challenges. Although initially seen as a volunteer and often amateurish undertaking, preservation became professionalized throughout the years. Preservationists of the mid-to-late 20th-century were increasingly expected to have formal training as architects, a profession that was (and to a large degree, continues to be) white male-dominated.

*Power in Preservation* celebrates the significant impact that women have made on the field of preservation by exploring the work of women who are active today. The ten featured preservationists represent only a fraction of the women who are currently blazing trails in preservation, but they form a microcosm of the important work, activism, and research that women across the country are undertaking.

Additionally, this exhibition focuses inwardly to explore how the NSCDA—through their own efforts and the work of others—has shaped the preservation of Dumbarton House for over ninety years.





# FOUNDATIONS *of* PRESERVATION

## The Mount Vernon Ladies Association

*est. 1853*



George Washington's Mount Vernon was in a deteriorated state when Louisa Bird Cunningham viewed it from a Potomac River ferry in 1853. Cunningham's daughter, Ann Pamela, founded the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) after appealing to women around the country for financial support to save the mansion. The MVLA formally purchased Mount Vernon in 1860.

## The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities *est. 1889*



**PRESERVATION  
VIRGINIA**

Though not a women's organization, the APVA was founded by two women: Cynthia Beverley Tucker Washington Coleman of Williamsburg, VA and Mary Jeffrey Galt of Norfolk, VA. Known today as Preservation Virginia, the APVA was the first statewide historic preservation organization in the country.

## The Daughters of the American Revolution *est. 1890*



The DAR is a women's lineage society with members tracing their ancestry to the American Revolution. Since the organization's founding, historic preservation has been an important component of the DAR's activities.

## The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America *est. 1891*



Like the DAR, the NSCDA is a women's lineage society with members tracing their ancestry to the settling of the colonies and the founding of the United States of America. The mission of the NSCDA is to actively promote American heritage through historic preservation, patriotic service, and educational projects.

## The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs *est. 1896*



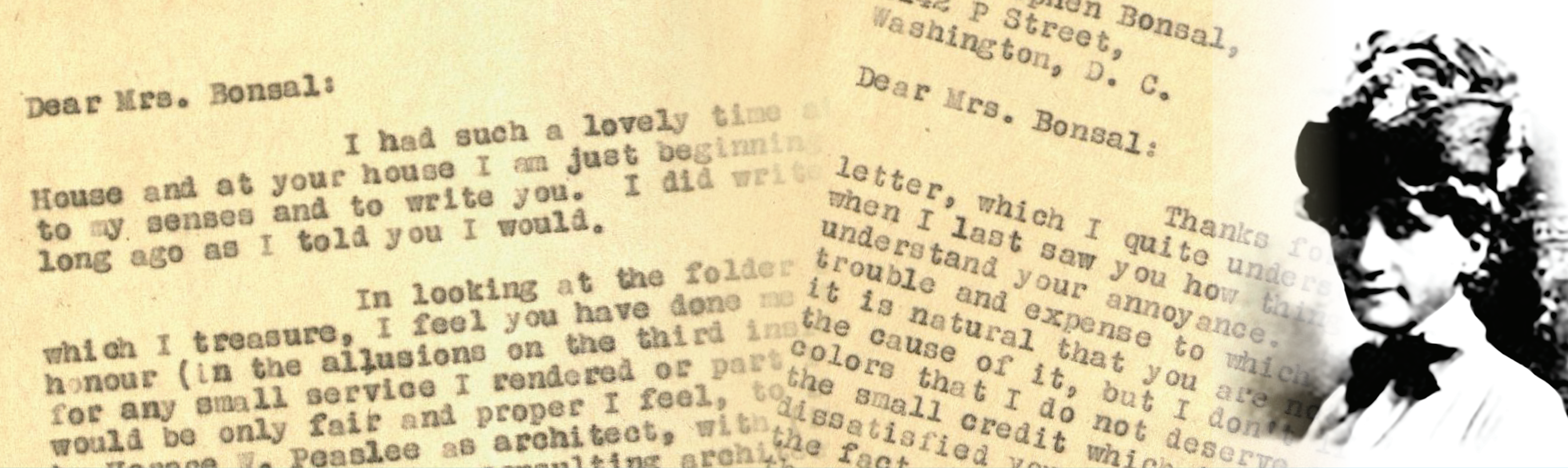
In 1917, the NACWC, led at the time by activist, suffragist, and educator Mary B. Talbert, became an owner of Frederick Douglass's Cedar Hill. The NACWC completed the first restoration of the house in 1922, forty years before the National Park Service would take over ownership.

## Preservation Society of Charleston *est. 1920*

**PRESERVATION  
ESTD SOCIETY 1920  
of CHARLESTON**

The PSC has the distinction of being the oldest community-based historic preservation organization in the country. It was founded by Susan Pringle Frost, who dedicated her life to the preservation of Charleston's historic built environment.





## WHO WAS MRS. BONSAI?

**In 1931**, Dumbarton House underwent a significant restoration under the direction of local architect Horace W. Peaslee (1884 - 1959) and consulting architect Fiske Kimball (1888-1955). The two men—both highly respected architects—were instrumental in bringing Dumbarton House close to its original early 19th-century appearance.

Was there a third architect involved in this early restoration effort?

Letters in the archives at both Dumbarton House and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Kimball was Director for thirty years, suggest that someone named Mrs. Bonsal played a significant role in the restoration of the house.



Henrietta Fairfax Morris Bonsal (1874-1955) was born in Ohio and spent much of her adult life in New York City. She married Stephen Bonsal (1865-1951), a war correspondent and diplomat, in 1900. From letters, it

is clear that Mrs. Bonsal, who was a member of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America, played a key role in the restoration of Dumbarton House's Federal period appearance and in the opening of the house as a museum in 1932. Additionally, many of the earliest objects in the museum collection were donated by Mrs. Bonsal. Despite these tantalizing clues that a woman was actively involved in the restoration of Dumbarton House, proof of the full extent of her involvement has not been found.

Read the letters and observe how Mrs. Bonsal and Fiske Kimball communicate with one another. Does Kimball treat her like a peer? Does she appear to have influence on the restoration efforts? Was she a trained architect? Did her preservation activities extend beyond Dumbarton House? Use the QR code to write your own description of the mysterious Mrs. Bonsal!





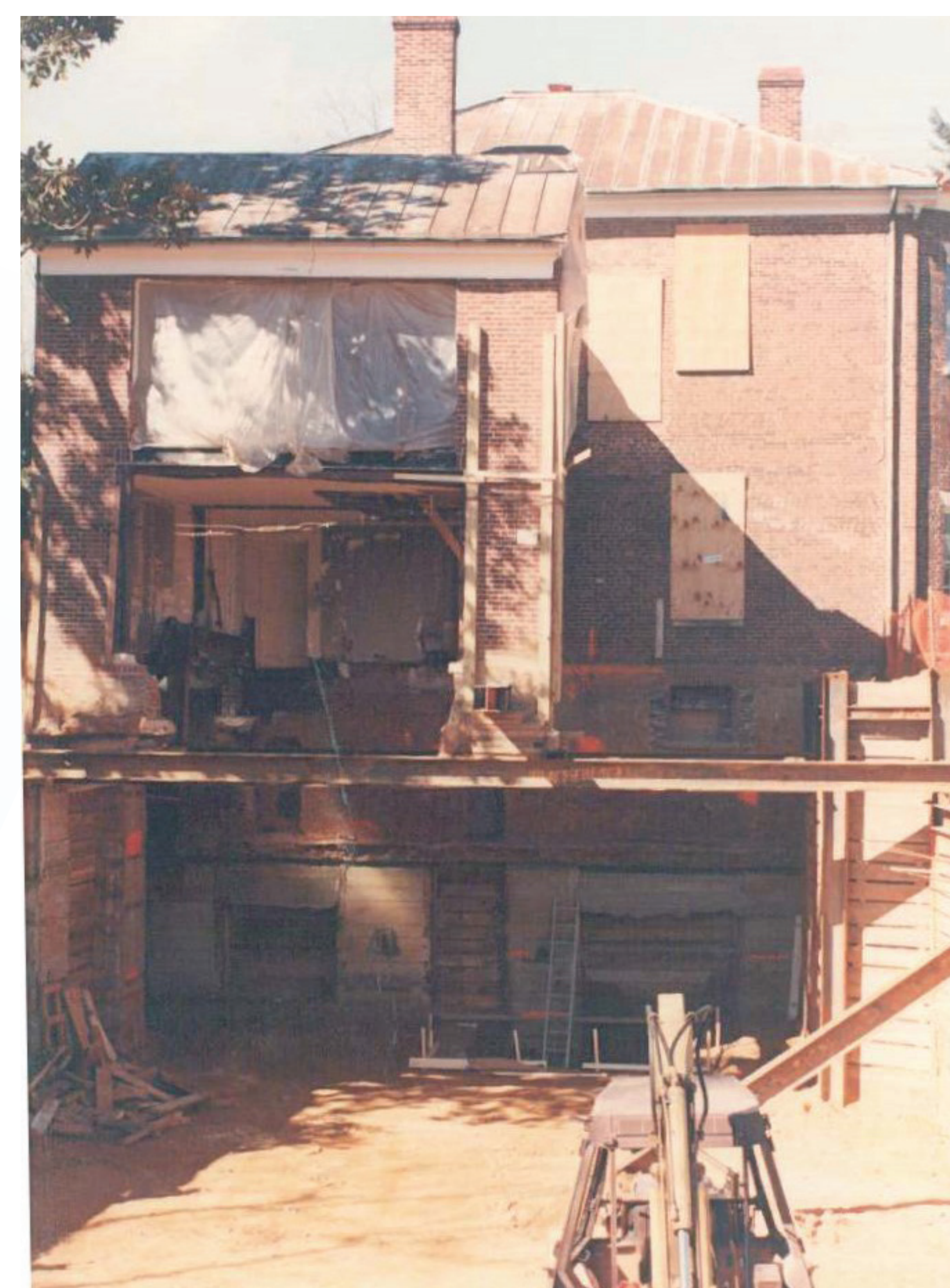


# DUMBARTON HOUSE: Preservation through the Years

**Dumbarton House**, built in 1799, was home to many different owners before it became a museum in 1932. For over 125 years, the various owners altered the appearance of the house by adding details popular during their respective periods of occupancy, like east and west wings. Though the house was not radically or irreversibly changed, The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA) nevertheless commissioned the restoration of the house after purchasing it in 1928.

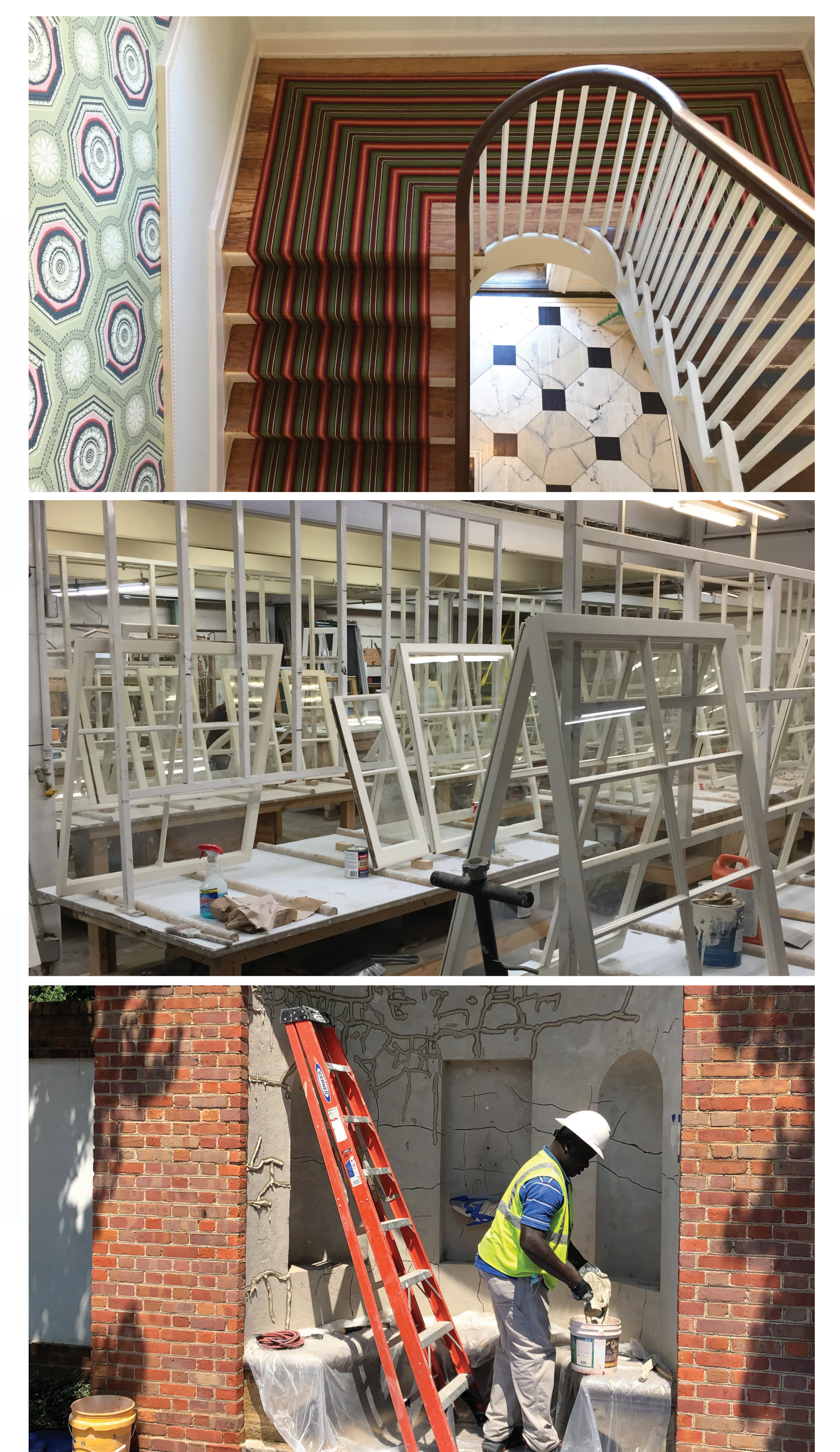


The first restoration was conducted to restore the house closely to its original 1799 appearance and to transition the house to a museum (remember, up until this point the house was a fully functional home). When Dumbarton House opened to the public as a museum in 1932, the central, historic block of the house looked similar to how it would have looked to its very first residents.



The next major construction efforts on the house were completed in 1991 to mark the celebration of the NSCDA's centennial. This project was conducted to emphasize that the house was a museum and a headquarters. The grounds east of the house were excavated for the construction of a meeting space, kitchen, elevator, and storage and office spaces. Additionally, a vacant lot was transformed into a garden with herbs and plants appropriate to the early 19th-century history of the house and grounds.

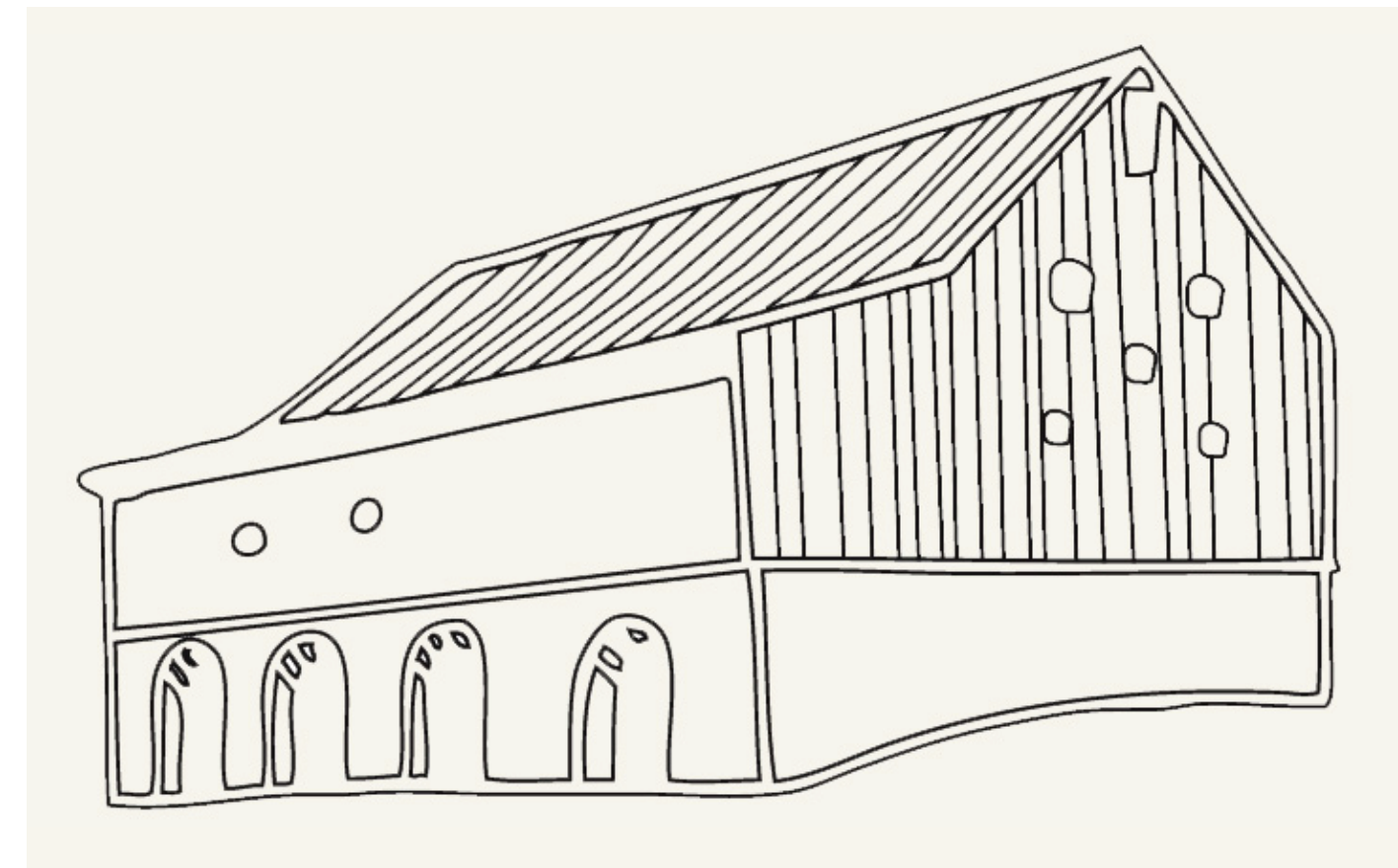
In recent years, preservation efforts have been focused on specific aspects of the house. In the early 2000s, plaster restoration was conducted throughout much of the historic block, and period-appropriate carpets and wallpapers were installed throughout the first floor. In 2017—during a six-month closure of the museum to allow for the installation of a new heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system—the historic windows in the original block of the house were fully restored (the windows of the early 20th-century wings were restored in 2019). And in 2020, a 1931 Fiske Kimball designed garden niche in the North Garden underwent a preservation process to stabilize and repair interior stucco.





# WHAT'S IN THE GROUND?

**Today,** Dumbarton House sits on just over one acre of land, but when first constructed, it occupied the top of an eight-and-a-half-acre urban farm. Records indicate that the early 19th-century land contained vegetable patches,



wheat fields, animal enclosures, a combination smokehouse-dairy, an octagonal icehouse, a shed, a privy, and a three-story carriage house, barn, and stable. Dwellings for enslaved and indentured servants were also likely somewhere on the property.

Over time, the Dumbarton House property shrank to what it is today. But what happened to the other structures that accompanied the house? What was left behind from former owners and workers? What evidence of the farm still remains?

Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered with certainty. Structures were likely removed by previous owners of the property or lost when pieces of the land were sold off. Additionally, a massive ground disturbance occurred in 1915 when the historic central block of Dumbarton House was moved from the center of what is now Q Street to its current location. The historic wings were demolished for the move, so additional disturbance to the property would have occurred when new wings were constructed in the 1920s.

The loss of much of the original property and the movement of the house has made it difficult to determine exactly what the land around Dumbarton House might have looked like. Despite the difficulties, archaeological efforts of recent decades have shed some light on previously unanswered questions.

*Archaeologists conducting an archaeological survey at Dumbarton House in 2014*



A significant development was the 1983 discovery of building foundations within the East Park, indicating the likely location of the three-story carriage house, barn, and stable. Additional archaeological surveys of the land have revealed objects (perhaps once thought of as trash) left behind by past residents. While these items don't offer a significant amount of insight into the people that may have left them behind, they do offer tantalizing evidence that the history of the land around Dumbarton House is alive with stories of the past.



*Bottles found at Dumbarton House during a 1983 dig*