

William R. Davie House: A Building Tells Its Story

By the Eastern Office Staff, Historic Preservation Section *

We generally think of public documents—such as land records, wills, and death certificates—as the main primary sources available for historic research. In the field of historic preservation, however, buildings themselves often become the primary source of information. Buildings can teach us a lot about the lives and accomplishments of the people who lived and worked in them.

William R. Davie, for example, was considered a leading figure in North Carolina in the 1700s. Davie was a member of the 1787 Constitutional Convention, governor from 1798 to 1799, an envoy to France, and founder of the University of North Carolina. We can read about him, but we can also examine his home in the historic town of Halifax in northeastern North Carolina for insight into Davie’s lifestyle and social standing.

While most North Carolinians during the 1700s lived in simple, one- or two-room houses, Davie lived in a spacious, two-story home with seven rooms—indicating that he was a prominent and wealthy man. Architectural elements that tell us that the Davie house was expensive for its time include the elaborate carved cornice and multiple-pane windows on the outside and the decorative staircase and raised-paneled doors with handmade hinges on the inside. These architectural details are associated with the Georgian style of architecture—an English style of design liked by educated, wealthy Americans of Davie’s time.

The layout and use of interior spaces give us a glimpse of family life. Davie chose a floor plan with a hall on one side and a large interior chimney on the opposite side—a fashionable house design more common in large towns. With his big family of three boys and three girls, Davie may have used this house plan to show his social standing in the community. A large entry hall and parlor take up most of the first floor, showing the importance of formal or public spaces in the home. Davie and his wife likely used the largest second-floor room as their bedroom. Just as today, boys and girls usually had separate bedrooms, but in the 1700s it was common for many more children to occupy one small bedroom. This was likely the case in the Davie house.

The location of a historic house can reveal much about the residents’ personal and professional lives. Davie chose to live in Halifax, an important trading port on the Roanoke River and seat of much political activity before and after the American Revolution. As a practicing attorney, Davie needed to be in a town and a county seat where he had many legal clients and where court was held. His job certainly influenced his decision to build his residence in Halifax. Davie’s interest in local, regional, and national political affairs also made Halifax a good place for him to live. During the late 1700s, Halifax was the meeting site for the North Carolina Provincial Congress and the Council of Safety—earlier forms of our General Assembly and National Guard.

By combining the study of primary sources related to a person with a study of the style, layout, and location of the house they lived in, a more complete picture of that person’s life is possible. Try using the example of William Davie’s house to learn more about buildings and people in your area. Buildings can be excellent primary sources for studying history!

*At the time this article was written, in spring 2009, the Eastern Office Staff, Historic Preservation Section of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, included Reid Thomas, restoration specialist for eighteen counties in northeastern North Carolina; Scott Power, regional supervisor and preservation specialist; John Wood, restoration and preservation specialist for eight counties in the northeastern region; and Stan Little, the office administrative assistant.