

# Have You Ever Read a Building?

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You have probably read letters, diaries, newspapers, and maps from the past—but have you ever read a building? “Reading” a building uses many of the same powers of investigation that you would utilize to learn about other human-made artifacts. The study of how humans have shaped and built their world (and what the evidence they left behind tells us about them) is called *material culture*. Material culture can include how people dressed (the clothing, jewelry, and accessories they made); how they lived together (the way they shaped the land into farms, cities, and suburbs, and created the kinds of shelters they needed to survive); and where they lived and worked (the architecture and construction of their buildings, as well as the relationships between buildings).

The North Carolina State Capitol provides one example of how North Carolinians lived and worked in the 1840s. By studying clues like the way that the building was designed and constructed, we can learn a lot about the people living at that time.

Similar to reading a book, we’ll examine how to read a building in chapters. You can use these same techniques to read structures in your own community. Are you ready to read? Let’s go!

## Chapter 1—What Is It Made Of?

The materials that people utilized to create a building can tell us a great deal. Did they spare no expense and bring in fancy materials from around the world? Or were they more conservative, using materials found nearby? Are the materials consistent throughout the structure, or did the builders run out of materials (or money) during the process and have to find a new source? Does the building have most of its original materials intact, or has someone replaced many of them? How can you tell?

In the example of the State Capitol, architects chose a local soft granite called gneiss (pronounced “nice”) to form the large outer blocks of the walls. While using local stone may have been cheaper than bringing in marble or harder granite from another state, the large stones were quite heavy. An experimental horse-drawn railroad had to be constructed from the quarry to the Capitol site a mile and a half away. This system meant more time and expense. Also, fancy plasterwork was added to the rooms of the Capitol, greatly increasing the cost of the building—not what the General Assembly had planned! By examining other primary documents, such as letters and requests to the legislature, we see that the original architect’s request of \$50,000 continued to increase. The project actually ended up costing \$532,682.34—more than three times the income of the entire state at that time!

## Chapter 2—Who Made It?

Buildings can be incredible works of art, but unlike works of art, they rarely bear the signatures of all the people who created them. Still, if you look closely, many buildings will give you clues about who was involved in their construction. If you are lucky enough to be able to see into a building's beams (the large posts that form the main structure, similar to your body's bones), you may find graffiti or the signatures of craftsmen and the date they raised the framework. Some craftsmen, such as plasterers, might have left a special style that could be identified. Cabinetmakers might have written their names and the date on the unfinished (back) side of a piece of molding, or decorative strip of wood. These are all cool finds!

Inside the Capitol's massive dome—a place few people get to see—the framework includes large beams with names written on them. These names may belong to the men who worked on the building. We would love to discover more about the people who gave their time to erect this beautiful building. Where were they from? Were they free, enslaved, or indentured? Did they work on other buildings in Raleigh? What were their working conditions like? Did they leave behind letters or other primary documents about their own lives? Maybe someday a junior historian could come and perform the research!

### **Chapter 3—How Was It Made?**

Tool marks, nails, screws, kinds of paints, and styles of construction all provide good clues about how a building was made. Tool marks can be especially wonderful—they are almost like a craftsperson's fingerprints left behind. These marks can tell us what kind of tools a craftsperson used, how that individual utilized the tools, and even whether the person was left- or right-handed! The kinds of fasteners (such as nails, screws, or wooden dowels) that builders used can reveal a lot about which materials were available. They can help us date the time of construction, too, since the material and styles of these fasteners have changed over time. Paint can tell us a great deal about the available local materials, as well as the fashionable styles for colors and wall textures. By examining layers of paint on a wall, historians also can learn much about the people using a building, including their social status and their sense of style and how that changes over time. The type of construction (such as post and beam, waddle and daub, or balloon frame) can reveal the types of technology available to people who created structures at a particular time.

At the Capitol, workers cut the outer stones by hand, on-site. Once they cut the stones to size, workers gave the edges of each stone a fancy finish using a tool called a bit. Different artisans utilized the bits in slightly different ways, so while from a distance the stones all look alike, they happen to be as individual as the people who made them. It is amazing that after almost 170 years, we can still see the bit marks clearly.

### **Chapter 4—How Was It Used?**

Most artifacts take on new lives over time. That is, they are originally designed for one purpose but eventually find new life in other ways. Buildings follow the same pattern. But how can you tell how a building has been used and whether its purpose has changed? In analyzing its past, you can look for wear patterns—places that appear to have seen more use than others. These may be the areas of greatest activity. The layout, or arrangement of rooms, can also reveal a lot about how a building was used. Are some areas fancier than others? If so, the fancier places could have been employed for entertaining, while plainer areas may have seen everyday use. And, odds are that the fancier areas represent the more public spaces, while the private spaces would have been

more simple.

Using your good detective eyes, check into how a structure's use may have changed. Are there places where new materials have been added? This might mean a later addition to a building or a change in a room within it. Have old materials been stripped away in some areas? Do some rooms look newer than others? These could all be signs that people continued to use buildings but updated them over time to suit their own tastes and needs.

In 1840 twenty-eight fireplaces heated the Capitol, requiring more than three hundred cords of wood for each regular session of the General Assembly. Enslaved African American men took the wood up the stone stairs in wheelbarrows every day during the fall and winter to keep the building warm. To this day, you can see the chips in the stairs made by the wheelbarrows' wooden wheels.

### **Chapter 5—Who Used It?**

Researchers may find it difficult to discover exactly who used small historical artifacts. Buildings, however, can give us more definite clues. Letters and diaries left behind can tell us a great deal about who used a structure. Also, graffiti, inscriptions, or other markings can provide information. Many parents mark the growth of their children on a kitchen wall in their home. Children often leave notes or drawings in closets or other small rooms. Young women sometimes carve their initials in a window to test new diamond engagement rings. All of these personal markings offer clues about who used a building. Can you think of others?

At the Capitol, we know the men and women who served in the General Assembly and in the governor's office, because careful records exist. But what about less-recognized people? Union soldiers who occupied the building during the Civil War left graffiti in a hallway leading up to the roof. Countless other young people visiting the Capitol roof in the 1900s did the same. We do NOT recommend leaving graffiti at historic sites, but it is interesting to read what others have left behind!

Using these five chapters, you can start the process of reading any building in your community—schools, churches, houses, businesses, and government structures. You may even want to add chapters as you continue to discover new ways to learn from the buildings in your area. Give it a try! And don't forget to share what you have learned. That's how we all develop a greater knowledge of history.

Now, enough of reading this article—go read a building!

\*At the time of this article's publication, Deanna Kerrigan was working as the site administrator for the North Carolina State Capitol. She is a true believer in exploring your backyard history. The Capitol represents one of North Carolina's twenty-seven state historic sites and properties. For more information about the Capitol or to find a state historic site in your area, visit [www.nchistoricsites.org](http://www.nchistoricsites.org).