

James W. Mason House (Old Hall)
Scottsville
Albemarle County
Virginia

HABS No. VA-1201

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JAMES W. MASON HOUSE (Old Hall)

HABS No. VA-1201

Location: Scottsville, Albemarle County, Virginia.

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Walls.

Present Use: Residence.

Present Condition: Excellent.

Significance: The James W. Mason House was built circa 1830 near the James River in Scottsville, Virginia. It is a good example of a house built during the transition from Federal to Greek Revival style -- employing elements of both. Remarkably, the house is virtually unaltered, except for the addition of a nursery in 1851, the installation of plumbing and electricity, and the addition of brick steps on the front portico, and a back porch. This house, with its unusual tripartite windows, has only been owned by 3 families, and remains in excellent condition.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The James W. Mason house is believed to have been built in 1830. Although it is not possible to prove this date through a deed search; stylistically, 1830 is a very reasonable date for the house. Furthermore, the Beal family, (the second owners--from 1850-1957) and the present owners have been very involved with the house and its history, and to them, there has never been any doubt at all about who the original owner was and when the house was built.

M. E. Beal, the last Beal owner, passed on information to the present owners concerning the house, as follows:

In 1830 James W. Mason built the house and brought his bride there. He hired a builder/architect by the name of MacGruder. In her book, Scottsville on the James, Virginia Moore states that MacGruder was the original owner, not J. W. Mason. The families disagree, and there is absolutely no deed, will, or tax records supporting this statement.

There is further evidence, mentioned later in this report, that "to James W. Mason, Scottsville, Virginia" appeared on one of the blinds after the original paint had been taken off. It would be highly unlikely that J. W. Mason would have added the blinds at a later date.

James W. Mason was the president of the Bank of Scottsville. Since the house is large and "high-style" in relation to many other houses

in Scottsville, and since it occupies a very prominent location in the town, it would be natural that it would be occupied by a prosperous, prominent member of the town. It is believed that James W. Mason moved to Hatton Grange in 1850.

Joseph R. Beal purchased the house from Mason, and 1 year later added the nursery. The Beals occupied the house for 101 years, except when, during the Civil War, D. R. Moon and his wife Lotty (both doctors) converted the house to a hospital, and occupied it. This could perhaps explain holes in the front facade which look as if they may have been placed there to support a large sign.

Apparently northern troops may have occupied the house during the war and from Virginia Moore's book is the quote: "'Old Lady, we are going to starve you out", said Sheridan's general to the mistress of 'Old Hall'. 'You'll have to pull up every sprig of cress growing in Gantt's field', said Mrs. Beal, 'and it's Springtime.'"

There were apparently grand parties at the house -- the legend being that the orchestra would be on the stairlanding while guests danced below in the hall.

It is also believed that Jackson Beal was born and died in the 2nd floor east bedchamber.

Chain of Title:

The James W. Mason house was originally built for and owned by James W. Mason. There is no record of ownership from 1830 to 1892.

The following is the chain of title to the property on which the James W. Mason House was built. Deed and will records can be found at the Records Office at the Albemarle County Courthouse and the Charlottesville District Courthouse. Each record is referenced by either County Deed Book (ACDB), City Deed Book (DB) or Will Book (WB) followed by the volume number and page.

1892, February 1, ACWB 30-89.

"Whereas by will...J. R. Beal devised to his sons W. S. Beal and Jackson Beal and daughter Nellie Beal undivided 1/3 interest...Nellie Beal forfeited her share to her brother upon her marriage.

1931, October 13, ACWB 35-30.

"Whereas by will probated..." W. S. Beal dies and leaves the house to Jackson Beal.

1933, June 23, ACDB 219-518.

Jackson Beal & M. E. Beal sold to Ashby Mayo a portion of land fronting 123 feet on Bird Street and 89 feet on Page Street.

1933, September 28, ACDB 220-446.

Jackson Beal and M. E. Beal took a loan on the property from E. H. Copenhauer.

1941, July 30, ACDB 251-325.

Jackson Beal "conveys for and in consideration of the natural love and affection to Mary Emma Beal, her heirs and assigns forever"...

1957, November 15, ACDB 298-047

"This deed made...by and between Mary Emma Beal, widow of Jackson Beal, deceased, of the first part and Vera M. Walls and Robert J. Walls, husband and wife, of the second part... M. E. Beal does hereby grant, bargain, sell and convey...to Vera M. Walls and Robert J. Walls..."

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The James W. Mason House is a good example of an early Greek Revival house, but it also shows how Federal style elements persisted into the 1830's.

The building is a T-shaped, three-bay, single-pile, two-story (with an English basement) house with a one-story front portico. The most striking element of the house is its tripartite windows on the 1st and 2nd stories in the front and on the 1st story in the rear. These are unusual in either the Federal or Greek Revival style, and there are few examples in Virginia.

The house is in excellent condition. When the present owners purchased it in 1951, it was in a state of disrepair, but the condition was not serious, and there had been no significant structural damages. The present owners are very knowledgeable concerning the house and its history, and have very carefully preserved and restored it. Any changes or additions they have made have been sympathetic to the structural integrity of the house and have been in keeping with the character of the house.

Exterior:

Foundation -- Brick, with no water table.

Walls -- Brick. The front facade is Flemish bond, and the sides and rear have a 5-course American bond.

Portico -- The portico is a 1-story, 1-bay, wooden structure. There were originally wooden stairs leading to it, but because of ground moisture they frequently rotted, so the present owners built brick steps. The floor boards of the portico have been replaced, but the columns and entablature are original. The columns are fluted Greek Doric, and can be closely compared to Plate D from Asher Benjamin's The American Builders Companion. There are bases for these columns, and they are the same size as the abacus of the capital. The echinus is almost exact to the Benjamin example, but the architrave and frieze are thinner. There are plain metopes between the triglyphs, with each column being below a triglyph. There are mutule blocks on the soffit above each triglyph, but not each metope. There is a boxed cornice with a simple, flat fascia.

On the undersurface of the entablature is a Greek revival moulding design which consists of fluting (the same size as on the columns) but on a flat surface.

There are 2 engaged, fluted pilasters with flat pedestals and plain capitals, which form the visual wall/portico support.

There are two wooden benches on the portico which, although not fixed, are thought to be original to the house.

In the 19th century, a Beal child died by falling from the roof above the portico, so the family sealed the door to it and tore down the balusters. The present owners built the existing balusters, based on the design for the interior newels.

Windows -- There are double-hung, tripartite windows on the first floor front and rear, and on the second floor front. All the rest are single, double-hung. All the windows have heart pine lintels with end blocks above them. All the windows have louvered heart-pine blinds. When

the old paint was stripped off by the present owners, they discovered the words "to J. W. Mason, Scottsville, Virginia" written in pencil. For the Tripartite windows, there are 4 blinds.

Chimney -- The chimneys are inside-end chimneys except on the cellar/grade level, where they step out to accommodate the fireplaces. Each services three fireplaces. There is a single chimney which services the nursery addition.

Roof -- The roof is presently slate, and difficult access to the attic resulted in the inability to gain evidence as to its previous type.

Interior:

Cellar -- The cellar is the most altered portion of the house, although no structural elements have been changed.

Floor -- Originally brick, and although there is still brick remaining, it was covered in 1956 with concrete and tile. At the same time the present owners had to replace the pipes, and stated that when they did so the plumbers dug down approximately 8' of brick foundation to replace the pipes.

Walls -- Brick with plaster. The present owners have covered the walls in the center hall and the east room with 1-1/4" natural wood panelling.

Ceiling -- Originally, the 1st-floor joists were exposed but the laths in between them were rotted, so the present owners removed them and covered the beams with plaster.

Mouldings -- The architrave wooden door and window mouldings remain intact throughout most of the cellar. However, in the areas where the wood panelling exists, the mouldings are recessed.

Central Hall -- This is exactly the same size as the entrance hall above it, except for it doesn't extend beyond the arch supports.

East Room -- This room is exactly the same size as the parlor above it, except its entrance to the hall is in a different place, the ceiling is lower, there is an outside egress to the right of the fireplace, and the windows are not tripartite. The exterior egress was originally used as a means of access to the outside kitchen which used to be southeast of the house. This fireplace is operational with simple but original mantel details. Like all the fireplaces in the house, it was rebuilt, had a damper added, and had 18th century Dutch tiles added in 1953.

West Room -- This room is exactly the same size as the room above it, and has the same differences as the east room does to the room above it. However, this room has not been panelled, and no mouldings remain. Running water has been brought into this room, and it is presently used for storage and clean-up. The fireplace is not operational; when the present owners bought the house, this mantel had been badly burned, so they closed it up, and used the flue for the furnace, which is also in this room.

Kitchen -- The kitchen is on the other side of the arch supports, and was put in by the present owners in the late 1950's or early 1960's. It was originally used as a pantry. The window was enlarged at the same time the appliances were put in; the present owners remember it having iron bars over it. The room doesn't have panelling but is extensively covered with counters, cupboards and appliances.

Stairway -- To the right of the kitchen are the stairs, which are panelled and lead to a small highway with a door leading to the nursery addition on the right, and a small flight of stairs to the left which lead to the first floor hallway. There is a window straight ahead which has been altered.

First floor -- This floor has had very few changes; the details have been maintained carefully, and are in excellent condition.

Floors -- Heart pine, with varying floorboard widths.

Walls -- Masonry with plaster.

Ceiling -- Plaster.

Doors -- Six panel (almost identical in style and proportion to an example in plate 38 of Asher Benjamin's The American Builder's Companion. (The two doors to chamber and parlor are not currently stored and preserved by the present owners.)

Windows -- All the windows are tripartite on this floor (except for the sidelights on either side of the portal). There is symmetrically-moulded trim around and between each of the three window sections. Where the vertical trim meets the horizontal trim above the windows, there are corner blocks with square moulding. Under the window sills are beaded raised panels, and where the two center mouldings which divide the tripartite windows meet the sills, are small low relief panels. Each of the side sections contains five lights (3/2) and is double-hung. The main, central sections of the windows contain 9/6 lights and are also double-hung.

Moulding -- The floor moulding is 10-1/2" high and consists of a flat plain surface leading to a cyma reversa curve, then a thin torus resting on the edge of a scotia, the top edge of which is the top of the moulding.

Central Hall -- The central hall is not symmetrical with the front entrance portal. Since the parlor to the left is a larger room than the bedchamber to the right, and since the portal is in the center of the house, there is more hall space to the right of the portal. The entrance portal has the same features on the interior as the exterior except where the symmetrically moulded horizontal trim, the corner blocks have a round moulding design. This trim moulding has one large, central torus and two smaller toruses surrounded by beaded edges.

The doorways to the bedchamber and parlor are directly across from each other, and each has the same symmetrically moulded trim and corner blocks as the interior entrance portal--including the simple flat block (which is slightly shorter than the beaded floor moulding) that it rests on. The

inside surfaces of the doorways contain molding between the stiles and rails, which has a very large center torus, sided by beaded cyma reversa curves.

The most striking feature of the halls is the elliptical arch which leads to the second, stair portion of the hall. This arch, being an continuation of the end walls of the parlor and chamber is structural as well as decorative. It is masonry with plaster and moulded wood. The decorative moulding rests on moulding the same height and design as the floor moulding. The northeast and southwest sides of the arch contain symmetrical Greek moulding which is fluted and leads to a cyma reversa curve which is the beginning of an architrave panel. Inside this panel is a round moulding similar to the round design in the corner blocks of the doorways. The panel is topped by a cavetto curve which is beaded. From here the arch begins to curve toward the center of the hall. Starting with the inside edge, which is beaded, the moulding is flat, leading to a small torus which is immediately adjacent to a rope moulding. Then there is a flat surface on top of which are 2 toruses, then beading, then a design where triangular pieces fit into each other at 2 different angles -- creating an interesting effect which from different views catches the light differently. There is then a small, thin, flat surface which forms the outside edge of the moulding. At the center of the arch is a symmetrically moulded keystone. At the top, the keystone meets the ceiling and extends down about 1" below the arch moulding. It is slightly wedge-shaped; with the wider end being at the ceiling; the result is that all the vertical elements are also slightly wider at the top. The two outer pieces of the keystone are flat on the outside edge. There is a cyma recta curve leading into a torus which then leads to a single, center vertical rope moulding.

These keystone elements continue under the keystone, but the inside surface of the arch elsewhere does not have the same elements as the northeast and southwest surfaces. Instead, where the arch rises from the entablature, are 2 beaded

edges which contain thin horizontal ribbing all the way to the keystone. The entablature panel, being more horizontal on this surface, has between its stiles and rails a raised panel with inverted semi-circular junctures where the corners would be.

Shortly beyond the arch, on the right, against the wall, the stairs begin. The stairs are open-well and three run. They are open string with ornamental brackets at the side of each riser. The treads are heart pine with rounded nosing. The balusters are simple, thin, rectangular, and there are three per tread. The handrail is solid mahogany, and cut from unusually large stock as there are only three joints in the entire staircase. The three newel posts are almost exact copies of the first example on plate 34 in Asher Benjamin's The American Builders Companion. What is most interesting about the newels on the upper stairs runs is that they "extend" through the floor (1st floor ceiling) with small ornamental pendants.

The first run and half of the second run have decorative panelling under them. The first set of stiles and rails are beaded, the next 2 (inner) sets are not, then there is a center panel) which is not raised). There are 4 sections of this panelling under the 1st run of stairs, and 2 sections under the half of the 2nd run of stairs.

To the left, the hall continues under half of the second run and all of the third run of stairs, to an outside back egress.

Under the 2nd run of stairs is a double door with a vertical split, which due to early settling of the house, had to be rehung; the result is the panels on both sides are not at equal heights.

These doors lead to a small set of steps which go down to the nursery level and meet the top landing of the cellar stairs. Straight ahead is the doorway to the nursery which has architrave moulding around it.

Parlor -- This room was originally the parlor, and continues to be used so today. It is the same

size as the room below it, but has its entrance to the center hall in a different place; directly opposite the fireplace. This room is the only one in the house with 2 tripartite windows, and they are directly opposite each other. Above the windows are brass window cornices with gold leaf; present owners believe these to be original to the house.

Long-time residents of Scottsville remember plaster ceiling medallion in this room and in the hall. It is believed that these fell when M. E. Beal was mistress of the house.

The fireplace mantel is the largest and most detailed of the seven in the house. Like the others, the bricks were rebuilt and dampers were added in 1953. At this time, the present owners added mid-eighteenth century magnesium purple Dutch tiles around the opening.

Bedchamber -- This room is the same size as the room below it but the hall entrance door is in a different place. It is presently used as a formal dining room, but was originally a bedchamber. This room only has one tripartite window, and it doesn't have the brass/gold leaf cornice above it.

Opposite the tripartite window is a large, heavy, heart pine door which leads down to the 1851 nursery addition. It appears as if this door was always there as there is no evidence showing that there might have been another tripartite window in its place. If this door is original, then one can presume there must have been some type of porch or that the grade was considerably raised where the nursery is now. If the door was added, it mostly surely was added when the nursery was built.

Nursery Addition -- It is believed that the nursery was built in 1851, one year after the Beal family bought the house. Because it is a later addition, it is not consistent with all the elements of the rest of the house. The window on the northwest wall has on the exterior, symmetrically moulded corner blocks with a round design. The northwest and southwest exterior walls are in 3 inches from the other exterior walls. The entire room is 3 feet and 2 inches lower than the first floor, and there are 5 stairs leading down from the

bedchamber doorway. There is a simple, flat chairrail in this room, and a corner fireplace with its own chimney. Around the opening are primitive 17th century dutch tiles, and around this is a very simple architrave moulding with one bead. On either side of the opening are symmetrically moulded low-relief pilasters resting on pedestal blocks which are higher than the floor moulding. The frieze contains 2 horizontal raised panels above the fireplace opening, then 1 large cavetto curve leading to the thin mantle shelf. Since this fireplace is in the corner, the chairrails meet with the pilasters 2/3 of the way up.

The southwest door leads out to a porch which was added by the present owners.

For many years, the Beal family used this nursery as a kitchen. The fireplace was closed up, and there was a stove which vented out the chimney flue. There was water running into this room, and the wooden floor boards had been covered with several layers of linoleum.

Second Floor

- Floors -- Heart pine with varying widths.
- Walls -- Some masonry with plaster, and some of unknown construction.
- Ceilings -- Plaster with thin wooden moulding.
- Windows -- Northeast windows are tripartite. Southwest are double hung 6/6 sash with brick flat arches above them.
- Doors -- All 6 panel.
- Mouldings -- Are beaded architrave around doors and windows.
- Stair Landing -- At the top of the stairs, one can see the unusual way the stair railing and balusters connect with the corner wall of the bathroom. This may be original, or it could have been altered at the same later date. The landing leads to an arch support which meets perpendicularly with the landing.

Bathroom -- The walls in this room are not masonry, and this room could have been added at a later date (which might suggest the unusual railing connection). In addition the door, while the same construction type, has differently proportioned panels. However, the center window positioning (and lack of Greek Revival exterior corner block designs like the nursery added window) and the hall wall mouldings being exactly like those on the stairs and 1st floor suggest that this room is original.

The plumbing fixtures were added to this room by the present family in 1962. Although there had been water piped to the building, this was the first time a toilet was installed in the house.

Hall -- This hall serves to connect the stair landing and bathroom and the three bedchambers. Here, the moulding is different than the stairway and 1st floor -- it is shorter and simpler.

East Bedchamber -- This room is the largest bedchamber, and is located above the parlor. It has one tripartite window on the northeast wall and directly across from it is a double hung 6/6 sash window which has a brick flat arch above it on the exterior wall. To the left of the fireplace is a closet which was added by the present owners.

West Bedchamber -- This room is directly at the other end of the hall from the east bedchamber. It has the same window treatment and the addition of a closet to the right of the fireplace. It is a smaller room and has a simpler fireplace mantle.

Middle Bedchamber -- This room has no fireplace nor closet. It is smaller than the other bedchambers but has a door leading out to the portico roof where the center 9/6 lights would be in the tripartite window. This door is original.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture. The documentation was prepared by Kate Black, Graduate Student in Architectural History during the Fall Semester 1982. The material was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. It was not produced under HABS supervision, no edited by members of the HABS staff.