





DEVOTION TO DETAIL

Honoring Edward Chappell's legacy of making the Historic Area 'the best place in the world to study 18th-century buildings'

When Edward Chappell joined The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as director of architectural research in 1980, he took to heart the convictions of his predecessors that reconstructing buildings required the study of similar buildings.

Chappell took that study even further. Before he retired in 2016, he encouraged collaborative initiatives that brought the wealth of his colleagues' working experience to bear in the examination of historic buildings. He also included as part of his research different types of structures and efforts to learn about the people who lived and worked in them.

To ensure the continuation of that architectural legacy, the Edward A. Chappell and Susan L. Buck Endowment Fund was established after Chappell's death in 2020 to provide ongoing financial support for research.

"His pursuit of fieldwork at the highest levels, including not just looking at buildings but making a durable record, tied his work to that of our predecessors," said Jeffrey E. Klee, an architectural historian who came to Williamsburg in 2004 and retired in 2020, having succeeded Chappell as the Shirley and Richard Roberts Architectural Historian. "But he expanded on it consequentially, looking at architecture more comprehensively."

Just as social historians were broadening the scope of what

they studied to include the experiences of ordinary people, Chappell and his team turned their attention to the buildings those people occupied. His tenure included reconstructions of the slave quarters at Carter's Grove; the Public Hospital; the Public Armoury; the kitchen, laundry and quarters behind the Peyton Randolph House; Charlton's Coffeehouse; and the Market House.

"Information has to be gathered from surviving structures, not just books," said Carl Lounsbury, who joined Colonial Williamsburg in 1982 and retired as a senior architectural historian in 2016. "Sometimes we had to go far afield, beyond Williamsburg, to find patterns in the form and construction of buildings like dairies, smokehouses, barns and slave quarters and for unusual structures such as market houses, theaters and blacksmith shops. Wherever we could find them, we recorded their features to inform our designs for reconstructions in the Historic Area."

This intensive research shed new light on Williamsburg's iconic buildings too, like the Governor's Palace and the George Wythe

House. Chappell identified the ways in which 18th-century designers created a hierarchy of decorative finishes, putting more elaborate ornamentation in public rooms than private ones.

"Ed understood that you ▶

(Opposite page): Edward Chappell (kneeling) was concerned about details beyond how a building was constructed. Here he examines a cornice at the construction site of Charlton's Coffeehouse in 2009.



Construction of outbuildings at the Peyton Randolph property offered Edward Chappell a classroom in which to explain how the brick outlines of buildings offered clues about what occupied the spaces.

don't put a cornice in a closet and that not every window was filled with sash," Lounsbury said.

Buildings were repainted as a result of the sophisticated paint analysis of conservator Susan Buck, whom Chappell later married. Sometimes visitors were displeased by the changes, as were some of the many people who had decorated their homes to match those in Williamsburg. But Chappell saw his task as providing the most accurate representation possible of the Historic Area.

Under Chappell, architectural historians worked closely with historians, curators and historic tradespeople. Restoring the Courthouse between 1989 and 1991 depended on contributions from curators, carpenters, brickmakers and even bookbinders, who made the paper covers of the public record books displayed in the courtroom, and weavers, who made the cushions for the benches on which the magistrates sat. Reconstructing the Armoury, which opened in 2013, involved working closely with Master Blacksmith

Ken Schwarz and Master Carpenter Garland Wood, both of whom uncovered much of the evidence showing how extensive that site had been during the American Revolution.

Chappell worked as an archaeologist before turning to architectural history, and that discipline's reliance on fragmentary evidence deposited over time informed his approach to buildings. "Architectural historians peel away layers of a building, just like archaeologists remove layers of soil," said Lounsbury.

Chappell's influence extended beyond exhibition sites. He cared how the streets and sidewalks were paved. He also cared about buildings on the periphery of the Historic Area, insisting that improvements to Merchants Square be carried out to the standards established by architects in the 1930s. He served on William & Mary's architectural review board, and for his services to historic preservation in Williamsburg, the university honored him with its Prentis Award.

His influence extended beyond Williamsburg. Fellow scholars looked to his work as a model for innovation in early American architectural history. Said Klee: "He brought a rigor of analysis to the study of architecture that earned him and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation an international reputation for being the best place in the world to study 18th-century buildings."

The Edward A. Chappell and Susan L. Buck Endowment Fund will support studies of buildings in Maryland, West Virginia, the District of Columbia, North Carolina and South Carolina as well as Virginia. The endowment, created through funds bequeathed by Chappell, will cover the costs of the position of an architectural historian as well as fellowships in architectural history.