

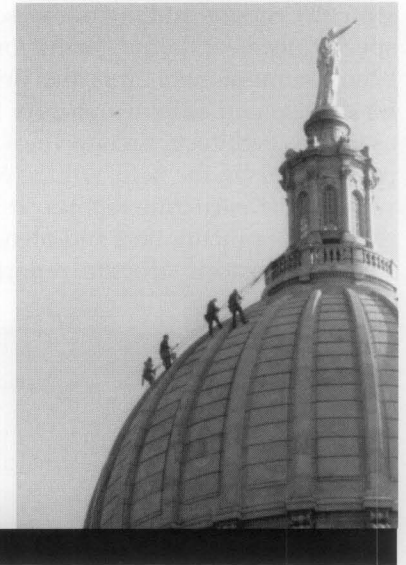
43 PRESERVATION BRIEFS

The Preparation and Use of Historic Structure Reports

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A historic structure report provides documentary, graphic, and physical information about a property's history and existing condition. Broadly recognized as an effective part of preservation planning, a historic structure report also addresses management or owner goals for the use or re-use of the property. It provides a thoughtfully considered argument for selecting the most appropriate approach to treatment, *prior* to the commencement of work, and outlines a scope of recommended work. The report serves as an important guide for *all* changes made to a historic property during a project—repair, rehabilitation, or restoration—and can also provide information for maintenance procedures. Finally, it records the findings of research and investigation, as well as the processes of physical work, for future researchers.

A historical "first." The first historic structure report prepared in the United States, *The Moore House: The Site of the Surrender—Yorktown*, was written by Charles E. Peterson of the National Park Service in the early 1930s (Fig. 1). In the decades since the Moore House report was completed, preservation specialists commissioned by owners and managers of historic properties have prepared thousands of reports of this type. Similar studies have also been used for many years as planning tools in France, Canada, Australia, and other countries, as well as in the United States. Although historic structure reports may differ in format depending upon the client, the producer of the report, the significance of the structure, treatment requirements, and budgetary and time restrictions, the essential historic preservation goal is the same.

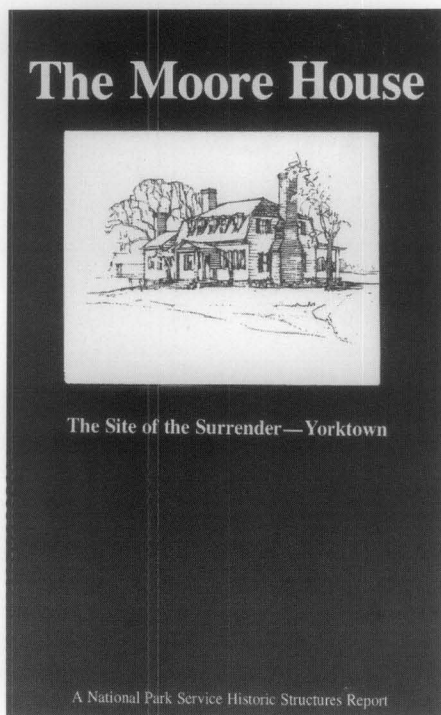


Figure 1. In the introduction to the first historic structure report in this country, Charles E. Peterson of the National Park Service wrote in 1935 "any architect who undertakes the responsibility of working over a fine old building should feel obligated to prepare a detailed report of his findings for the information of those who will come to study the structure in future years." Since then, thousands of historic structure reports (HSRs) have been prepared to help guide work on historic properties. Photo: National Parks and Conservation Association.

Just as an art conservator would not intervene in the life of an artistic artifact before obtaining a thorough knowledge of its history, significance, and composition, so those engaged in the preservation of buildings . . . should proceed only from a basis of knowledge. Too often in the past, the cultural integrity of countless buildings . . . has been compromised by approaches to restorations grounded on personal whim, willful romanticism, and expedient notions of repair . . . The preparation of a historic structure report is the first step in adopting a disciplined approach to the care of a historic building.¹

In response to the many inquires received on the subject, this Preservation Brief will explain the purpose of historic structure reports, describe their value to the preservation of significant historic properties, outline how reports are commissioned and prepared, and recommend an organizational format. The National Park Service acknowledges the variations that exist in historic

structure reports and in how these reports address the specific needs of the properties for which they have been commissioned. Thus, this Brief is written primarily for owners and administrators of historic properties, as well as architects, architectural historians, and other practitioners in the field, who have limited experience with historic structure reports. It also responds to the requests of practitioners and owners to help define the scope of a historic structure report study.

Guiding the Treatment of Significant Historic Properties

A historic structure report is generally commissioned by a property owner for an individual building and its site that has been designated as historically or architecturally significant, particularly buildings open to the public, such as state capitols, city halls, courthouses, libraries, hotels, theaters, churches, and house museums (Fig. 2). It is certainly possible, but is less common, to prepare a historic structure report for a privately owned residence.

Besides the building itself, a historic structure report may address immediate site or landscape features, as well as items that are attached to the building, such as murals, bas reliefs, decorative metalwork, wood paneling, and attached floor coverings. Non-attached items, including furniture or artwork, may be discussed in the historic structure report, but usually receive in-depth coverage in a separate report or inventory. One significant property may include multiple buildings, for example, a house, barn, and outbuildings; thus, a single historic structure report may be prepared for several related buildings and their site.

Historic structure reports can be prepared for other historic resource types as well, including bridges, canals, ships, mines, and locomotives, which are categorized as structures by the National Register of Historic Places; sculpture and monuments, which are categorized as objects; and college campuses and industrial complexes, which are categorized as districts (Fig. 3). For battlefields, gardens, designed landscapes, and cemeteries, which are categorized as sites, parallel evaluation and investigation is usually undertaken through a separate document called a cultural landscape report.



Figure 2. Historic structure reports are prepared for many types of structures with various intended uses. Examples include courthouses and state capitols still serving their historic function (upper left, Wisconsin State Capitol, Madison); significant properties that are to be rehabilitated and adaptively reused (center left, New York Merchants' Exchange, from former bank headquarters to hotel); and properties that are to be restored as house museums (lower left, Willa Cather Childhood Home, Red Cloud, Nebraska). The scope of such studies includes the interior as well as exterior of the historic structure (lower right, Stanley Field Hall, Field Museum, Chicago). Photos: upper and lower left, Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.; center left, Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, Inc.; lower right, McGuire Iglesias & Associates, Inc.



Figure 3. The University of Vermont has more than thirty contributing buildings in four historic districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The Campus Master Plan recognizes a commitment to respect and maintain the historic integrity of these facilities. Historic structure reports are available for many of the University's historic structures. Photo: University of Vermont Historic Preservation Program.

A team approach. With such an array of subject matter, it is not surprising that preparation of a historic structure report is almost always a multi-disciplinary task. For a small or simple project, the project team may include only one or two specialists. For a complex project, a team may involve historians, architectural historians, archeologists, architects, structural engineers, mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, landscape architects, conservators, curators, materials scientists, building code consultants, photographers, and other specialists. The disciplines involved in a specific historic structure report reflect the key areas or issues to be addressed for the particular property. The project leader or designated principal author for the report is responsible for coordinating and integrating the information generated by the various disciplines. Designation of a principal author may depend on the



Figure 4. For small or simple projects, the project team may include only one or two specialists while complex projects may involve a large number of investigators and specialists. For example, evaluation of this barn may primarily involve a historian, an architectural conservator, and a structural engineer. Photo: Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.

Value of the Historic Structure Report

The completed historic structure report is of value in many ways. It provides:

- A primary planning document for decision-making about preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, or reconstruction treatments
- Documentation to help establish significant dates or periods of construction
- A guide for budget and schedule planning for work on the historic structure
- A basis for design of recommended work
- A compilation of key information on the history, significance, and existing condition of the historic structure
- A summary of information known and conditions observed at the time of the survey
- A readily accessible reference document for owners, managers, staff, committees, and professionals working on or using the historic structure
- A tool for use in interpretation of the structure based on historical and physical evidence
- A bibliography of archival documentation relevant to the structure
- A resource for further research and investigation
- A record of completed work

goals of the historic structure report and on which disciplines are emphasized in the study.

Benefits for large-scale and long-term projects. In the development of any historic structure report, the scope of work and level of detail are necessarily adjusted to meet the requirements of a particular project, taking into account the property's significance, condition, intended use, and available funding. This does not mean that every significant historic property requires—or receives—a comprehensive investigation and detailed report. Some historic structure reports are of very limited scope. It may be necessary for a project to proceed without a historic structure report, either because of the cost of the report or a perceived need to expedite the work.

Most large-scale or long-term work projects would benefit greatly from the preparation of such a report—and not only from the value of the report as an efficient planning tool. (See box above.) If work proceeds without a historic structure report to guide it, it is possible that physical evidence important to understanding the history and construction of the structure may be destroyed or that inappropriate changes may be made. The preparation of a report prior to initiation of work preserves such information for future researchers. Even more importantly, prior



Figure 5. At the Hudson Opera House, a multi-arts center in Hudson, New York, the historic structure report was prepared incrementally. The first phase of the report focused on assessment and recommendations for repair of the roofing, the most critical issue in preservation of the building. Photo: Gary Schiro.

preparation of a report helps ensure that the history, significance, and condition of the property are thoroughly understood and taken into consideration in the selection of a treatment approach and development of work recommendations. One of the goals of a historic structure report is to reduce the loss of historic fabric or significance and to ensure the preservation of the historic character of the resource.

When to Prepare the Report

Optimal first phase. The historic structure report is an optimal first phase of historic preservation efforts for a significant building or structure, preceding design and implementation of preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, or reconstruction work. Information contained in the report documents existing conditions and serves as a basis for proposing physical changes. As additional information is learned relevant to the history of the building, and as work on the historic structure is implemented, the report can be amended and supplemented.

The length of time required to prepare a historic structure report and the budget established for its development will vary, depending on the complexity of the project, the extent and availability of archival documentation, and to what extent work has already been performed on the building. If the scope of a historic structure report for a simple building is limited to a brief overview of historic significance, a walk-through condition assessment, and general treatment, the study and report may be completed within a few months' time by an experienced investigator. On the other hand, a historic structure report for a larger building with numerous past alterations and substantive problems will require extensive research and on-site study by a multidisciplinary team. This type of report can often take up to two years to complete.

Determining the Scope of Work

The following questions should be answered to determine the scope of work required for the study:

- Is the building's history well understood?
- Has the period of significance been established?
- Does the building represent a variety of periods of construction, additions, and modifications, not all of which may be significant?
- What archival documentation is available?
- Does the building have physical problems that require repair? What construction materials and systems are known to exhibit distress or deterioration?
- Does the building have code or functional problems that interfere with its use?
- Is the building in use? Is a new or more intensive use planned?
- Is funding available to commission the report needed to address these requirements? If not, can the scope of the report be reduced to answer critical questions in a limited report?
- Has the time frame for the overall project been established?

Incremental preparation. If budgetary constraints preclude completing the historic structure report as one project, it can be prepared incrementally (Fig. 5). The work recommendations should not be developed or implemented prior to completion of research and investigation, except for emergency stabilization to prevent immediate failure or damage, or temporary measures to address critical health and safety issues. A partial historic structure report can be completed in preparation for anticipated work that must be initiated to preserve or protect the building. This type of report includes analysis of only those building elements and systems that may be affected by the proposed work, and involves only the specialists needed to address the types of investigation and work planned. For example, research and documentation of existing interior finishes may be required before undertaking localized structural stabilization that will require removal of interior materials.

In undertaking such work prior to the completion of a historic structure report, caution should be taken not to alter or unnecessarily remove changes to the building that had occurred over time. The completed report may conclude that such changes to the building may have acquired significance in their own right and therefore merit preservation.

Documenting past work. Sometimes a historic structure report is initiated when repair or restoration work on the historic building has already been completed. Although it is always recommended that the study be done prior to new work, in this case, the report needs

to document—as fully as possible—the condition and appearance of materials, elements, and spaces as they existed *prior* to the work performed. The extent to which this can be achieved depends on the quality of archival documentation available and physical recording undertaken prior to the completed work. The report should describe the nature and extent of the past repair or restoration work, and, if possible, should also document research performed, reasons for design decisions made, and the construction process for the work already completed on the structures.

Commissioning a Report

Commissioning a historic structure report requires answering a series of questions to establish the scope of work. (See sidebar.) The goals of the report need to be defined and the report should be designed to support planning for the future of the historic structure. This effort may involve gathering information to answer questions about what is significant about the building and site; what uses are appropriate for the building, or whether existing uses need to be modified; what known conditions require repair and whether those repairs are urgent; and what short-term and long-term goals need to be addressed. Finally the available budget for the historic structure report project should be established before a request for proposals is issued.

The procedures for preparing a historic structure report and the outline of report content and organization can serve as the basis to develop a scope of work for the

study and also to solicit proposals for a report that reflects the requirements of the specific structure, and, of course, the available budget. Although the request for proposals should always establish such a scope of work, firms may be invited to suggest adjustments to the scope of work based on their past experience. The request for proposals should require a qualifications submittal from each proposer. This submittal should include resumes for the principal investigators and a description of experience in preparing historic structure reports or similar studies, as well as experience with buildings of similar type, age, and construction to the subject of the study. References and samples of work may be requested from the proposer as part of this submittal. An interview with one or more candidates is highly recommended, both so that the proposers can present their project approach and qualifications, and so that the client can ask questions in response to the submitted proposal.

How Much Will It Cost?

The cost of undertaking a historic structure report is determined by numerous factors, some of which may be unique to a particular property. Common to most projects, however, are seven factors that help determine the cost of a report:

1. The *level of significance* of the property will certainly influence the cost. That is, a property that is nationally significant would likely require a greater effort than a property that is only locally significant.



Figure 6. Historical photographs are an invaluable aid and time saver in establishing a building's original construction and evolution; in guiding the replication of missing features; and even in understanding existing material deterioration. The availability of information, such as archival photographs, surviving original architectural drawings, or HABS documentation, has a direct bearing on the cost of preparing a historic structure report. In this circa 1890 photo of the Rancho San Andrés Castro Adobe, the "lumbering up" on the south end is a character-defining feature of adobe construction, rarely seen today. Photo: Historic photograph from the Historic Structure Report for Rancho San Andrés Adobe by Edna Kimbro, State Historian, California State Parks, Monterey District.

2. The *treatment and use* for which the historic structure report information provides a basis is an important cost consideration. If the decision is reached to maintain a building in its current form, the level of effort required in preparing a historic structure report would be less than where the intended treatment is a comprehensive restoration. A change in building use likewise may increase the level of effort; for example, the additional work involved in addressing different building code provisions.

3. The *availability of information* about the historic resource has a direct bearing on costs. Some historic structures are well researched, and drawings may have been prepared to exacting standards, while others may require considerable original research and investigation to establish the evolution of the structure (Fig. 6). On occasion, a property owner's in-house staff or volunteers may undertake further research in advance of a contracted study as a way to reduce the cost of the report.

4. The *location of and access to a historic building* is a cost factor for some studies. A property in a remote mountain location can involve high travel costs relative to properties in or near an urban area. A structure requiring special techniques for exterior physical inspection would involve higher access costs than a small residential structure (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Numerous factors influence the cost of preparing a historic structure report including the level of significance, size, and complexity of the property; required treatment and use; existing condition; and the location and access to the structure. Historic structure reports were prepared for several small lighthouses along the Oregon coast, including the Coquille River Lighthouse, shown here. Photo: Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.

Collecting Information for the Report

A typical study involves:

- Preliminary walk through
- Research and review of archival documentation
- Oral histories
- An existing condition survey (including exterior and interior architectural elements, structural systems, mechanical and electrical systems, etc.)
- Measured drawings following the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Architectural and Engineering Documentation*
- Record photography
- Selected materials studies (e.g., mortar analysis, finishes analysis, etc.)
- Evaluation of significance
- Discussion with the owner and users about current and future intended uses for the structure
- Selection and rationale for the most appropriate treatment approach (preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, or reconstruction)
- Development of specific work recommendations

5. The *size and architectural character* of a property affect the time required to prepare a historic structure report. A simple four-room vernacular structure would usually involve less effort than a complicated high-style courthouse with many significant spaces.

6. The *physical condition of the structure* and also the *extent of physical fabric that is accessible for study* will be cost determinants as well. Obviously, a property in good condition is usually less problematic than one in a deteriorated state. For a structure that was continuously occupied and where alterations cover earlier fabric, the opportunity to extract information from physical fabric dating to early periods may be limited without extensive removals that are usually beyond the scope of the historic structure report study. Even where buildings are vacant, there are instances where certain physical investigations may need to be limited because of the destructive impact that will occur to historic fabric.

7. The *type of final report* that is required can significantly affect the cost of the project, but is an area where costs can readily be controlled. Historic structure reports do not necessarily need to be professionally bound and printed. In-house desktop publishing has become commonplace, and a formal work product can often be obtained without excessive costs. Overly sophisticated printing and binding efforts represent a misplaced funding allocation for most historic

properties. There are distinct advantages to having a report prepared in an appropriate electronic form, thus reducing the number of hard copies and facilitating future updates and additions to the report. For most properties where historic structure reports are prepared, ten or so hard copies should suffice. Providing one copy of the report in a three-ring binder is a helpful and inexpensive way to furnish the owner with a “working” copy of the document.

Suggested steps for collecting information prior to configuring the data into the actual report are as follows:

Preliminary walk through. A preliminary walk through of the building and its site with the owner or site manager, appropriate building staff representatives, and key members of the historic structure report team is important to review the project scope of work. During the walk through, a brief review of existing conditions can be performed to highlight user concerns and gather information about distress and deterioration observed. Building staff may also be able to provide information on recent repairs, current maintenance procedures, and specific areas of active deterioration. A brief review of existing documentation available on site is also useful. Site personnel may be able to recommend additional archival resources.

Historical research. Archival research should be directed toward gathering information on the building’s history, original construction and later modifications, occupancies, and uses over time (Fig. 8). Research for the report is not intended to produce a large compendium of historical and genealogical material, but rather selected information necessary to understand the evolution of the structure, its significance, and justification for the treatment selected. For significant sites where other types of studies such as archeological investigations or a cultural landscape report have been completed or are underway, coordination is required to ensure that research information is shared and that the research effort is not duplicated.

If a National Register nomination or other inventory has already been completed for the building and its site, the bibliography of that document may suggest possible sources for further research. In addition, a completed National Register nomination can serve as a starting point for development of the historic structure report sections on history and significance, and can be included in the appendix of the report.

Public and university libraries, and state and local historical societies, are likely sources of relevant materials. Municipal records collections often contain deed and building permit information that is useful in developing a chronology of ownership and construction. Architectural, engineering, and construction documents, shop drawings, repair documents, and maintenance records are valuable sources of information. The original

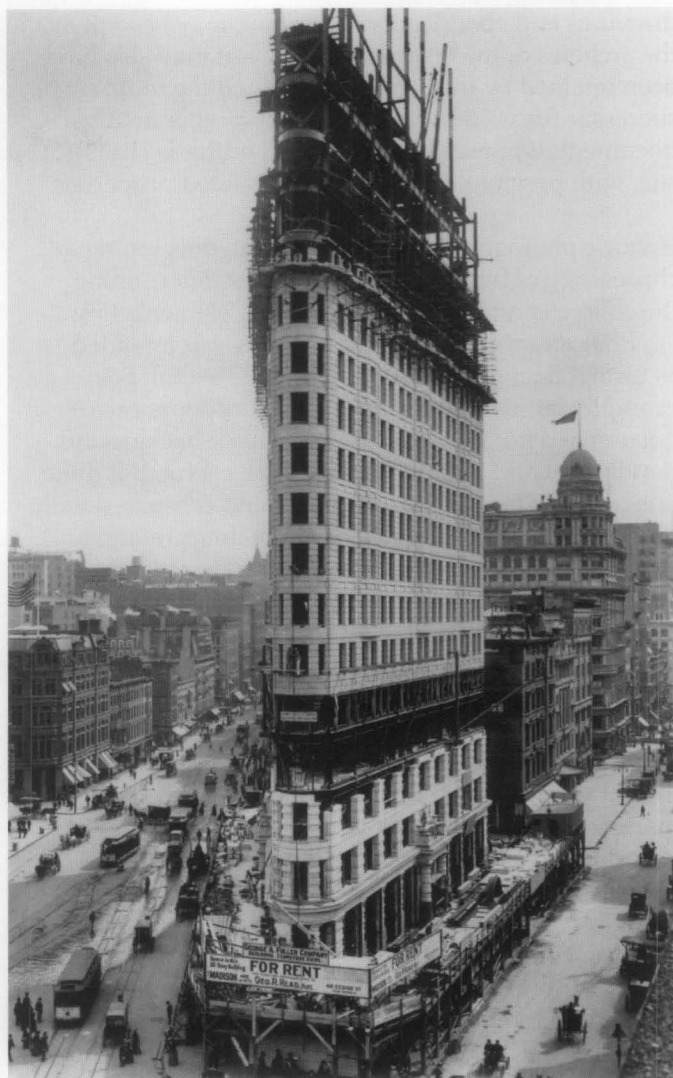


Figure 8. Historical research is directed toward gathering information on a structure’s history, original construction and later modifications, occupancies, and uses over time. Research may range from national repositories such as the Library of Congress to local collections or private family records. Old newspapers, architectural journals, and even manufacturing trade catalogs can be surprising sources of historical accounts and illustrations. This circa 1902 photograph of New York’s Flatiron Building is of the construction in progress; such photographs are useful in understanding building chronology as well as concealed conditions of as-built construction such as building framing. Photo: Library of Congress, LC-D401-14278. The interior photograph of the former Bemir Drug Store in Rochester, New York, showcases a rubber tile floor as illustrated in a 1925 publication by the United States Rubber Company.



drawings and specifications, if extant, may be kept at the archives of the historic building but may also have been retained by the firm that designed the building or successor firms. Building records and other archival documentation may have remained with the structure or site, with previous owners, or with related properties.

Historic photographs are invaluable in developing a chronology of building changes and in determining the character and detailing of missing elements (Fig 9). Photographs in private collections, not intended as formal documentation, can often be useful. For example, family photographs taken outdoors can document a building that appears in the background. Renderings and paintings can also be useful, but these images must be carefully analyzed and compared with other information to ensure accurate interpretation. Correspondence and oral histories can be important additions to the overall information, but may be unreliable and should be confirmed, when possible, by comparison with photographic documentation and physical evidence.

Fire insurance maps, such as Sanborn maps, can provide information on type of construction materials. When maps from different years are available, these can be useful in developing a chronology of additions and other changes to the structure.

Existing condition survey. A survey is performed to document physical spaces and elements, and to assess the current condition of building materials and systems. In conjunction with historical research, the condition survey helps determine the historic integrity of a structure. The survey and inspection should address the building's exterior and interior materials, features and

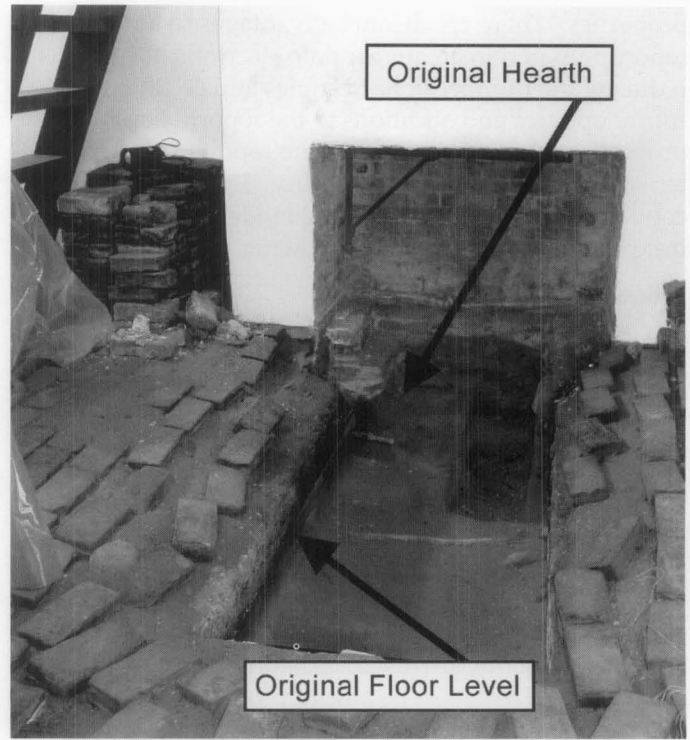


Figure 10. Archeological studies may be valuable in uncovering important evidence of changes to a historic structure. Following historical research and after several archeological soil probes, a decision was made to excavate an area in front of a mid-nineteenth century fireplace, revealing the original dirt floor and hearth undetected by earlier restoration efforts. Photo: Kaaren Staveteig, National Park Service.

finishes; structural systems; interior spaces; mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems; and fire detection and security systems. Further study may be required such as non-intrusive or intrusive investigation, field testing, sample removal, and laboratory testing and analysis of materials.

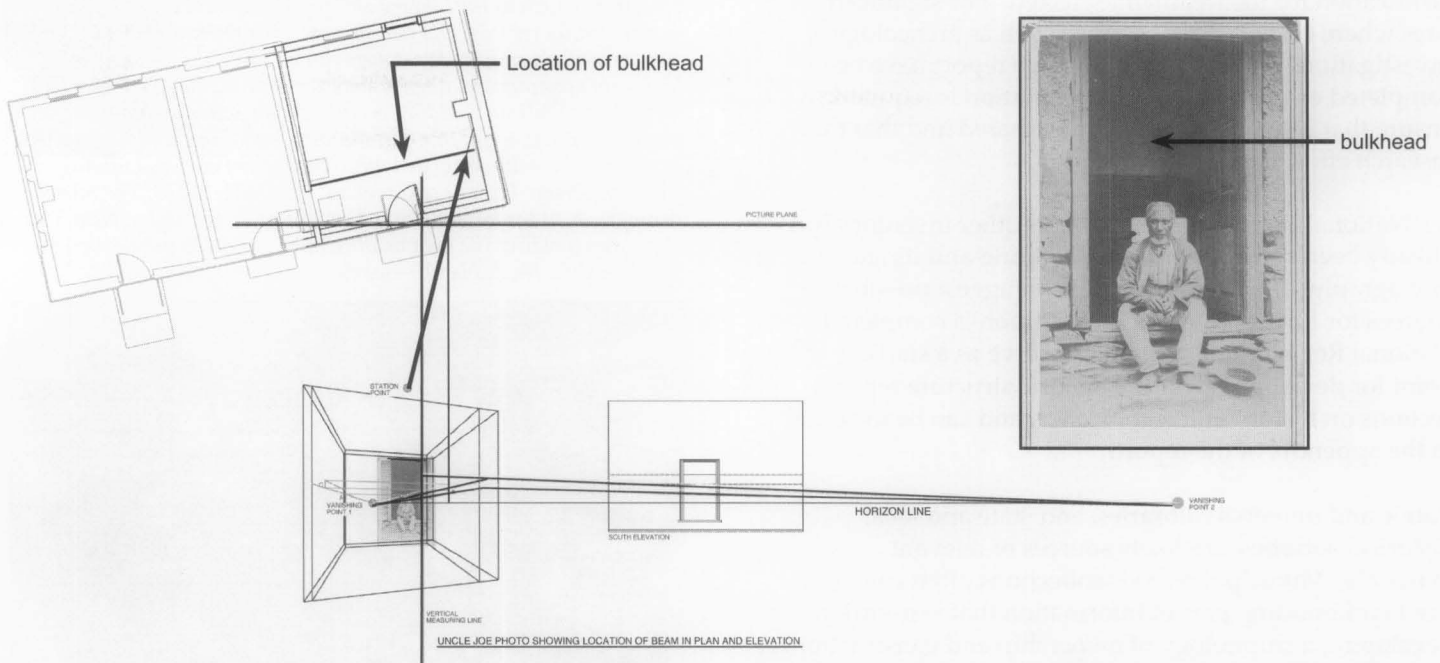


Figure 9. A CADD perspective analysis facilitated study of the location of a long removed interior bulkhead wall. The bulkhead appears in a historic exterior photograph of a man seated in the door entrance to a mid-nineteenth century plantation dependency. Drawing: John Volz & Associates, Inc.; historic photo: National Park Service files.