

Thomas James Store
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Architectural Information

The Thomas James Store in Mathews County, Virginia, encapsulated within the late nineteenth century building you see here, is an excellent and rare example of an early nineteenth-century rural commercial building. Although it has undergone some alterations and was likely moved from its original location, the store retains most of its original fabric and is remarkably well preserved for its age. With construction dating to 1820, it appears to be the oldest building in the downtown commercial district.



Thomas James built his store in 1820. The James Store is a one-story vernacular A-frame wood structure located on tax parcel number 106 in downtown Mathews. The floor plan of the original building measures approximately 375 square feet, with an attic above that has the same footprint.

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Original south (now north) interior wall of old store

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Original back (now west) interior wall of old store

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Original front (now east) interior wall of old store

Thomas James built his store in 1820, very likely on Main Street. By 1835 it was one of four "mercantile stores" in the Mathews Courthouse area listed in Martin's Gazetteer. Ten years later, James sold the store and the land on which it stood. Soon after that, the new owners evidently moved the old store to the back of the site, to be replaced by a larger building (visible in the top photograph, to the left).

The larger building was itself moved back about 1899, to make way for the even bigger store that still faces Main Street (barely visible in the top left corner of the photograph at top). This was built by Thomas James's grandchildren, Henry and Francis Joseph Sibley, who had recently acquired the property. Their descendants ran it until its sale in 1989.

This remarkably complete, historic site was thus a center for retailing in the heart of Mathews County for almost two hundred years, most of that time being owned and operated by one family. It is now a Registered National Historic District and the Historical Society opened it in 2013 for display and interpretation.

The old store has the distinction of being one of the best-preserved stores in the entire South. "We'd kill to have a building in this kind of original condition at Colonial Williamsburg," noted a senior architectural historian from that nearby Foundation. It is owned by the Mathews County Historical Society, and

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stands on a plot of land measuring less than half an acre immediately adjacent to the later stores mentioned above that are owned by the Mathews County Visitor and Information Center.

The Thomas James Store has recently been stabilized. Under sections titled PRESERVATION and interpretation DOCUMENTS are the various reports, documents, and illustrations that have guided preservation and interpretation.

The purpose of this report is to compile the various informative documents that have been prepared on the James Store over the past several years into a single cohesive report and database. This database includes a history of the building, its uses, and its owners; a thorough architectural description of its exterior and interior; major alterations that have been made to the building; the efforts that have been made thus far to preserve and stabilize the building; and finally goals and suggestions for the future management and interpretation of the James Store.