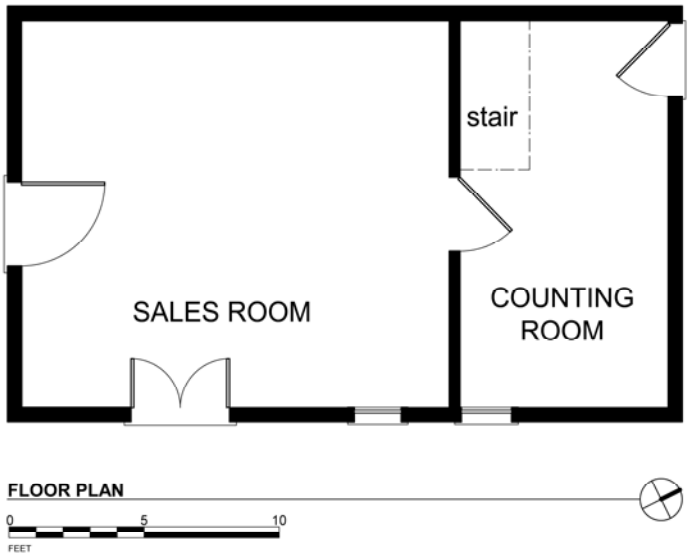
**Sibley Store**
**Mathews Courthouse, Virginia**
ca. 1810-20

Sibley Store is a Victorian commercial building on the main street that runs through the town of Mathews Courthouse. Passing through the storeroom of this building into a warehouse space at the rear, there are signs of an earlier, antebellum store that was subsequently remodeled into the present set up. If you were to continue out the rear door you would see a short distance away an earlier frame building set upon masonry foundations. It, too, originally served as a store but has since been relegated for storage. This earlier building is the subject of the following essay.[1]

As a rare survival of a commercial form that passed from general use in the early 19th century, Sibley Store represents one of the last vestiges of a once dominant commercial plan type. It is a 15′ by 25′ single-story frame building with its long wall facing the street. The front door leads directly into a sales room and there is a counting room connected to it through an interior doorway. A stair rose from the counting room to an unfinished upper-floor storage loft. Although it is a fully developed traditional store plan, it is the simplest kind of the period—the lack of living accommodations on the upper floor, the absence of a storage cellar, and the exclusion of a chimney to heat the counting room all attest to its paired-down nature. Only a handful of stores laid out on this plan survive in the South, and with few exceptions the others tend to have a counting room chimney, a finished apartment for the storekeeper, and additional storage space. This building, then, may represent store architecture at its most basal form and its preservation should be encouraged for its rarity and for the insights it offers into early commercial building practices.




The store deserves more intensive scrutiny than it has been subjected to so far. However, the aggregate of the observed evidence is consistent with a store-use theory as an original building function. The front elevation was originally the eastern long wall (that is, in the

[1] My observations are based on two brief trips to the store—the first with Rick Guthrie (who alerted me to the building's existence) and Cary Carson, the second trip with Rick, Graham Hood and Earl Soles. Their insights were extremely helpful in deciphering this building. I assume the name "Sibley" is a relatively modern one and is not associated with the earlier building when it operated as a store. Documentary research would be useful to flesh out the story of the site's development.

building's current orientation). Two windows and the widest of the door openings make up the fenestration for this wall. No trace of other windows was discovered on the ground floor. A smaller door (3′ wide) is centered on the south gable, but this wall seems unlikely as a front façade given its lack of windows.[2] Although classic store plans—especially in towns—face their gable to the street (such as the orientation of Prentis Store in Williamsburg), long-wall fronts are common in rural settings and smaller towns where lot frontages were not a serious financial consideration (the Farish Print Shop in Port Royal makes a useful comparison). The north gable also has a door, this one set against the corner post and is in an appropriate location for a back door out of the counting room. Stores usually limit the amount of windows, especially in the store room, to maximize wall space for shelving as was done at the Sibley Store.

Dwellings of the period rarely had two exterior doors leading from a single room other than circulation spaces. At the Sibley Store, the larger room does. Although two doors are not common even in early store plans, they do rise in popularity in towns in the early 19th century, probably with the secondary door serving as an alley-fronting loading door. This was undoubtedly the case here.

Finishes at Sibley Store are also consistent with a planned use as a store. For instance, the walls of the sales room are sheathed with wide, horizontal boards planed on their room face and edged with a narrow bead. The ceiling joists were left exposed and are planed and beaded. Most surviving early stores show evidence of board walls and either planed-and-beaded ceiling joists or board ceilings, making this space consistent with them. The counting room was trimmed with a chair board (a planed board beaded top and bottom) and the walls are presently otherwise sheathed floor to ceiling with horizontal ciphered boards that date to a third-quarter 19th-century remodeling. The presence of a chair board and the use of rough-cut ceiling joists in this space suggest the room was originally intended to be plastered and is worth investigating further for such evidence. Although the stair to the attic was removed in the 19th century, framing in the ceiling demonstrates it was in the counting room and a surviving board indicates how it was finished. If this structure were planned as a dwelling instead of a store, it would likely have had a chimney at least in the larger space and the inner room would have had the more inferior finish of the two. Given the lack of fireplace evidence, the two exterior doors in the larger room, and the finish selection for the two spaces, an original function as a store seems most compelling.

Even the way the doors and windows were fitted is suggestive of commercial usage. The pair of doors that survive on the east wall are double sheathed—this was a common treatment for buildings in which security was of concern such as stores. More compelling, perhaps, is the hardware on the window shutters. A wrought-iron bar on the

[2] This opening has since been enlarged, but mortises in the top plate indicate the size of the posts and its original width. The evidence could be construed as framing for a now-missing chimney. However, the stack would have been extremely small and its use to heat the room that was least-well finished would also have been an anomaly. I have interpreted his evidence, then, as suggesting the framing was for a gable-end door, not a chimney.

exterior of the window pivots on a pin near the top of the jamb and is used to secure its shutter closed by running the bar diagonally across it and placing a removable pin through the opposite, lower corner. This latter pin could then be wedged from inside for security. This type of shutter hardware and setup is commonly used in stores and warehouses and is not typical of domestic arrangements.

Attic fenestration is puzzling given what is known about the lower floor. A single window is centered on the south gable, but two are used on the north. Had the building had a chimney in the counting room, then two make sense because they could flank the stack. But a center post on the ground floor prohibits the presence of a stack that would rise between these windows and there was no further indication that a stack was ever present.

Given the current orientation of the building relative to the alleyway on which it abuts, it seems most probable that it has been relocated. Presently the north gable (that of the counting room end, the most secondary of the two gables) faces this alley and the east wall is oriented towards the main street. Since the building sits on relatively early foundations it is assumed that it was turned and relocated here possibly when the antebellum section of the front store was raised. If the building originally sat on the main street in the location of the Victorian store, then the present south gable door would have opened onto the side street and been useful as a loading door.

Presently a shed extends off the east façade and some of its framing members are early. Whether these timbers represent reused material needs further investigation, but its roof frame is modern. The shed roof protects the lower portion of the rafters on the main structure and sheathing in this lower section is exposed. The lack of clear evidence of shingle nail holes here is suggestive of a structure originally extending off the front of the building, and given its beaded weatherboard siding, double-sheathed door and windows on the east façade, a porch is the only feature that makes sense of this evidence. Porches are not typical of early stores and is perhaps unprecedented (they are more common for houses and taverns). Evidence in the roof sheathing should be verified for the lack of nail holes—perhaps in my cursory investigations I simply failed to see the indication of nails, or conceivably the roof sheathing was replaced at a later date when a shed or porch was added to the building.

Documentary research or dendrochronology may one day help to tightly date this building, but technological clues do offer insight into the time frame in which it was built. Combined, the evidence suggests a construction date range of ca. 1805-25, with ca. 1810-20 the most likely candidate; the major technological and stylistic components of the building neatly fall into this span.

The fabrication of structural timbers is consistent with this time period. They are hewn square and pit-sawn to size, a technique used throughout the colonial period in Virginia and common until about 1820. Virginia's slave-based economy ensured that it remained

a viable alternative to mill sawing through the middle of the 19th century. Wall sheathing was sawn at a sash mill and several boards retain lumber marks from when they were raw material stacked in a yard. Mill sawing is known in the region throughout the late colonial and antebellum periods but only becomes commonplace after 1800.

The building's frame was conceived and raised in a traditional fashion and in a manner consistent with other rural work that dates any time near the Revolution to as late as the 1850s or '60s. It is "English framed"—that is, it has continuous sills at the base of a joined boxed frame. Except for half dovetail-lapped down braces, most joints are simple mortise and tenons, pinned for the more significant joints, but left un-pegged at the studs. The walls are "flush-framed," a term used to describe posts cut to the same thickness as the studs so that applied interior finishes can completely hide the frame. Flush framing becomes ubiquitous in rural and small-town Virginia after the middle of the 18th century and remains standard until the Civil War.

A board false plate is used to carry the feet of a common rafter roof and the rafters nicely align with the joists in the fashion of good quality early 19th century work. The choice of materials for the framing members seems a bit old fashion and presumably is a reflection of timber availability in this region at this date. Sills and corner posts are made of oak, while most of the other timbers are cut from yellow (or "tulip") poplar. Although traditional in form, the precise manner in which the frame was laid out is perhaps a testament to its early 19th century date.

Machine cut nails with double-struck heads are used in the framing. In this region they are generally not found much earlier than 1805 and are rare after the early 1820s. There may also be some machine cut nails with flattened heads used in the structure; if so, these likely date somewhere between ca. 1810 and the 1820s.

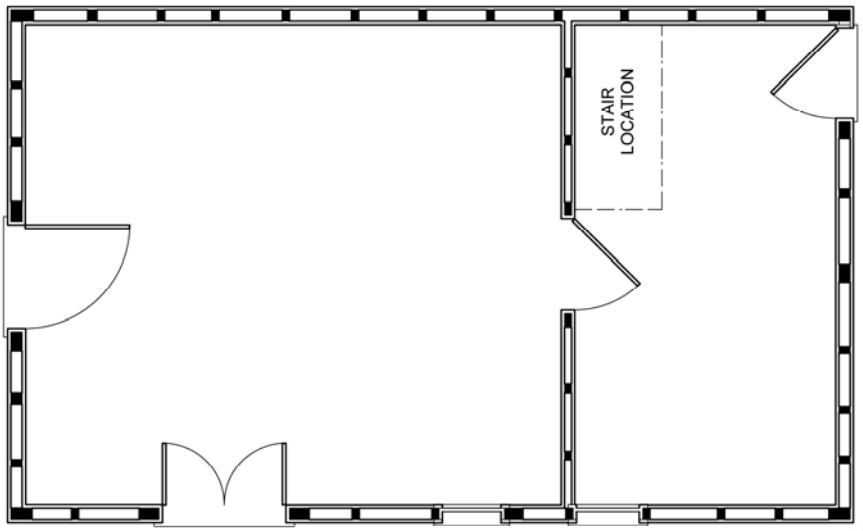
Even the manner in which the flooring was laid can help in refining a construction date estimate. The lower floor was replaced in the 20th century but that in the loft is original. It was not gauged and undercut as is typical of 18th and early 19th century work. By 1820 flooring of consistent thickness became relatively common; the 1810s were the transition years from the dominance of one system to the other. Still, it wasn't unusual to see floors that were not undercut when the ceiling was intended to be exposed on earlier buildings. In surviving examples of decorative-joist ceilings the boards are often planed on their lower face for the sake of appearance and to help regulate their thickness. The Sibley Store floor may be an early example of abandonment of undercutting, but done to fit with an exposed and decorative aesthetic.

Trim (the narrow beads on the wide sheathing in the store room), the doors (double-sheathed), and the hardware (H hinges, wrought-iron straps on the windows) either point to a first-quarter 19th century date or are at least consistent with this date range.

Sometime in the nineteenth century the building underwent renovation. The current foundations are brick laid in English bond, which is an early detail, but the orientation of the building and its relationship to the main street suggests it may have been moved. If so, the foundations likely date to a second-quarter of the 19th century site phase. Still, English bond is much out of favor by 1825 and the earlier phase II can be established, the easier it is to tighten the date range for phase I.

Probably some years after the move, most likely during the third quarter of the 19th century, the building was remodeled largely to its present form. The wall separating the counting and sales rooms was removed, the stair to the attic eliminated, and the counting room was sheathed in boards. Evidence for shelves at and above counter height dates to this phase. Perhaps this is when the core of the front shed was built. If so, the entrance may have shifted to the south gable. Whether the building continued use as a store (with a typical Victorian layout without a separate counting room) or was simply a wareroom for the store to its front is unclear.

Willie Graham
3 March 2006




**FLOOR PLAN**

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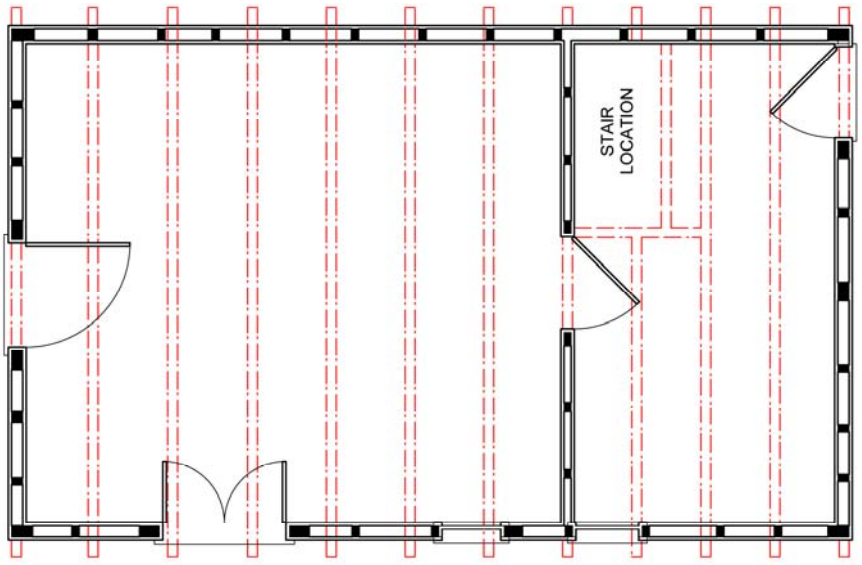


**REFLECTED CEILING PLAN**

**SIBLEY STORE, MATHEWS COURTHOUSE, VIRGINIA**
Measured by Cary Carson & Willie Graham 2003
Drawn by Willie Graham

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