

Much of Modern Architecture, its gift of a purist and sterile utopian environment, has failed. Its, so called, first aim at perpetual innovation for innovation's sake is largely to blame for its having been misinterpreted. Commercialism has seized the high ideals of purist Modernism and reduced it down to economic servitude. Interstate highway systems, large multi-national conglomerations and advanced communication systems have all acted with equal indifference in promoting the "homogenization of the American landscape" ². At the same time, society has rebelled against demagogic movements and now seeks an expression of symbolism and metaphor. The "cult of nostalgia" ¹ has reacted strongly against standardization, in every facet of our daily lives. It is society's search for the sensual and expressive nature in an individual locality that drives this change.

What is sought is not a return to the past, but rather its interpretation and reinterpretation. Finding at the heart of the vernacular culture its history, custom and myths leads to understanding its symbolic content.³ Application of regional packaging of a modernist ideal has no more integrity than does a regression to the past.

What must be found is the way modern social norms and technological advancements can be used in developing an architecture sympathetic to the vernacular cultural values of a given locality.

Influences on these cultural values can be examined individually and evaluated as to their importance. These influences can be grouped into four categories: typology, natural conditions, man-made conditions, and technology. Admittedly, overlapping occurs among these but the differentiation of scale is the quality that separates them.

Preservation of a locality's particular nature is achieved through the conservation of its individual parts. The typology of the existing structures, structures which are well crafted and considered to be markers of the past, should be examined for their parts. How were they made? What materials were used? How were those materials connected? Answering these questions gives specific clues to the way in which people responded to the act of building in the past.

Topography, climate and geography are all utilized as natural determinants in vernacular architecture. Ignoring basic natural conditions and providing the same sterile environment inside each building is an all too common occurrence in built International Style form. Examination of the past responses to the natural environment informs the design of today. Roof forms, window placements,

et cetera. are specific examples of regionally and environmentally specific architectural elements. These examples reflect environmental forces, rather than a representing of "traditional" images.

The man-made conditions are largely the prevailing vernacular traditions of the particular region. Care must be taken to draw a clear distinction between information, typology, and the experience of the vernacular. It is the harmony of the generations-proven way of building combined with the changing availability of materials and technology. This is the human intuition embracing the tried-and-true methods of building in the past.

Technology itself is the most unpredictable force affecting influences of the way we consider building. Here, preservation and progress are most often at direct odds with one another. While the issue is clouded by questions of comfort, economy, and "tradition", the greatest question is one of integrity. How are new materials to be understood within the existing context of stone, wood and brick? In the past generations, even centuries, architects and builders had the opportunity to examine materials to find their place in construction, to have them make their place in the architectural palette. Today the evolution and invention of materials is a yearly event.

Eastern North Carolina, along the coasts of the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds, is an area of particular environmental and historical forces. This is a region once prominent during the early settlement of the North American continent and is now left to the rural agrarian disposition preserved by a harsh, swampy land. One finds preserved here the marks of a culture centuries old, largely uncompromised by modern development.

Poor settlers from the affluent and heavily taxed state of Virginia moved south to seek cheap farm and game lands. This untamed area of the emerging country was caught between the growing colonies of Charleston to the south and Richmond to the north.

The land, being largely isolated and difficult to work, was haven to treasure seekers, ruffians and criminals. With the establishment of seaports and commercial trade along the coast of the Albemarle Sound, homesteaders and farmers were encouraged to emigrate to the area. The direct over land connection to major towns remained difficult and dangerous to travel. By sea, the area was connected to Charleston, New Bern, et cetera. Therefore, the establishment of a population of any kind would naturally take place along the coast.

This sense of isolation is important when considering the peoples of northeastern North Carolina. East coast railroad lines and, later, super highways, would bypass this area. The seaports along all of the coast of the Albemarle Sound have lost their commercial value. Other cities in the region; New Bern, Wilmington, and Norfolk have established commercial seagoing trade.

Images:

(above left) Existing Chowan County Courthouse from front lawn, Edenton, NC. ⁴

(above right) View of existing Courthouse lawn from the second floor of the Courthouse. ⁵

(below) Courthouse lawn as viewed from the front of the Courthouse; photo by author.

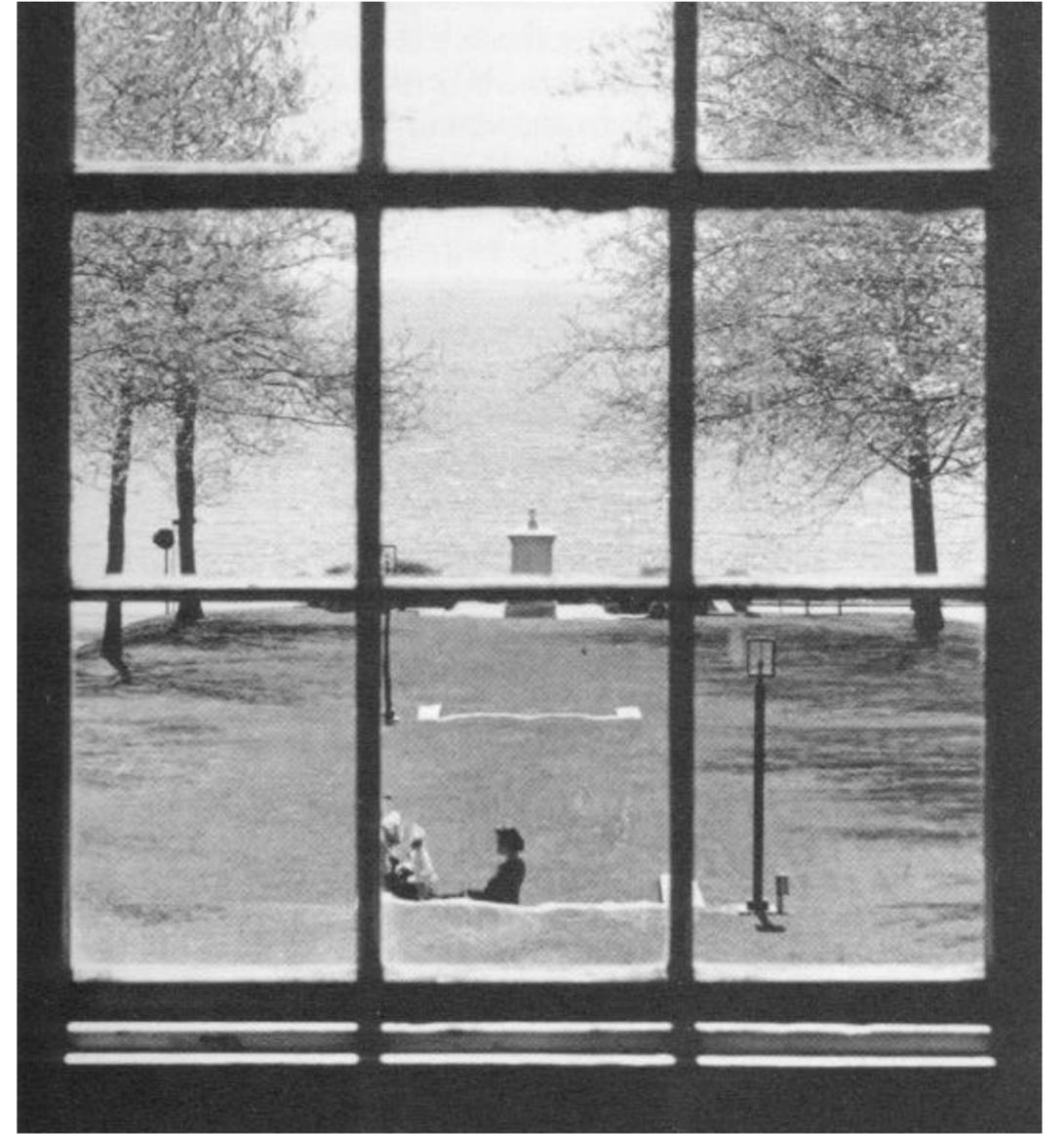
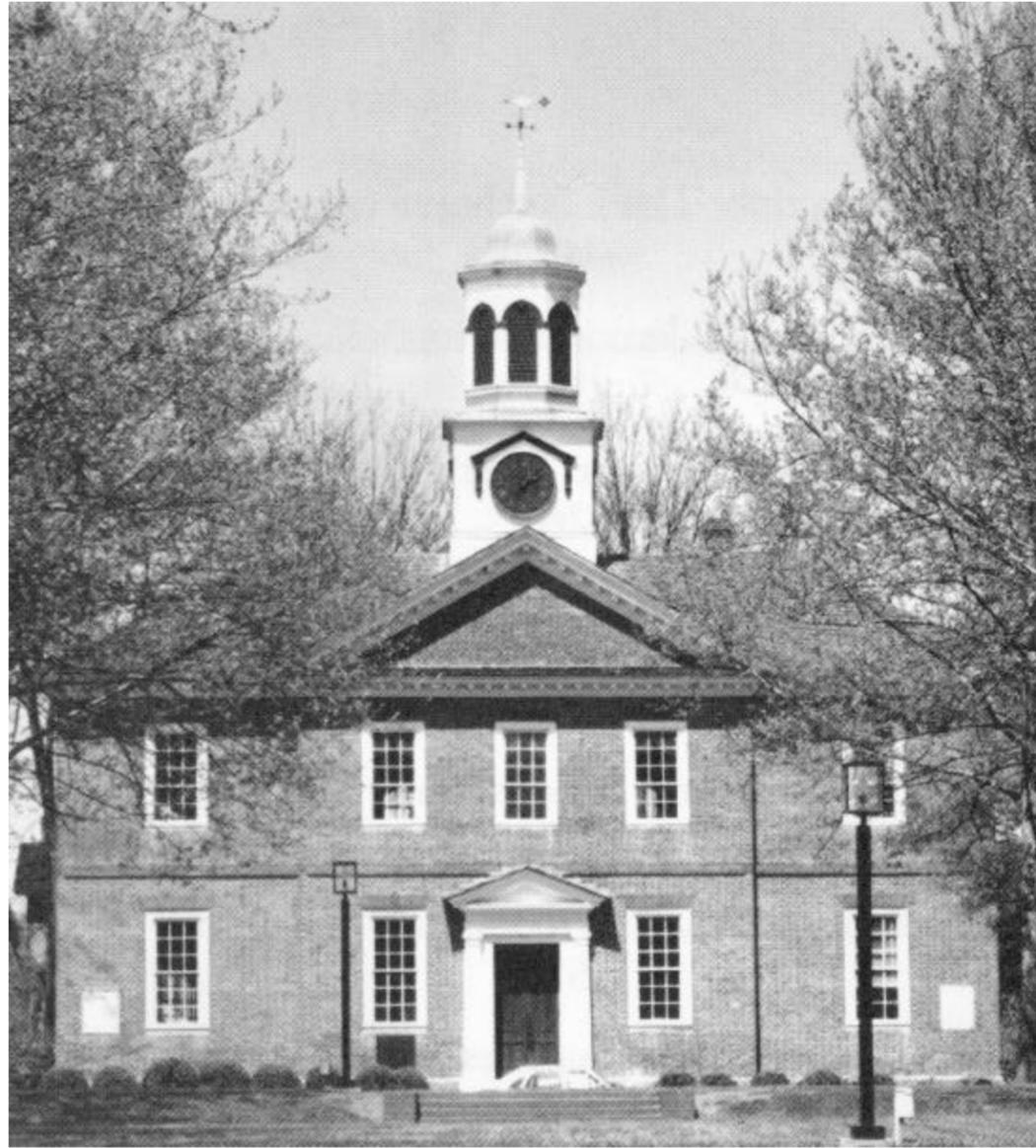
¹ Progressive Architecture, August 1981, p.76.

² Ibid.

³ Architectural Review, May, 1983, p.15.

⁴ Marc D. Brodsky, The Courthouse at Edenton, Published by Chowan County, Edenton, NC, 1989, p.8.

⁵ Ibid., p.13.



The emigrants to the region brought with them the tools and the skills, largely from Virginia, needed to build shelter and establish farms. These were not people of means planning great plantations. They were mostly poor emigrants who had left the Tidewater region of Virginia in hopes of better land and fewer taxes.

The tools they brought were of the crudest quality. At first, the building of houses and barns was done by the owners themselves, usually with the help of their neighbors. It would be decades before craftsmen or even journeymen would be building the structures in the fledgling communities of this area.

Images:

(above) Map of settlement in eastern North Carolina. Edward Moseley Map of 1733. From W. P. Cumming, North Carolina in Maps (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1966), plate 6.⁶

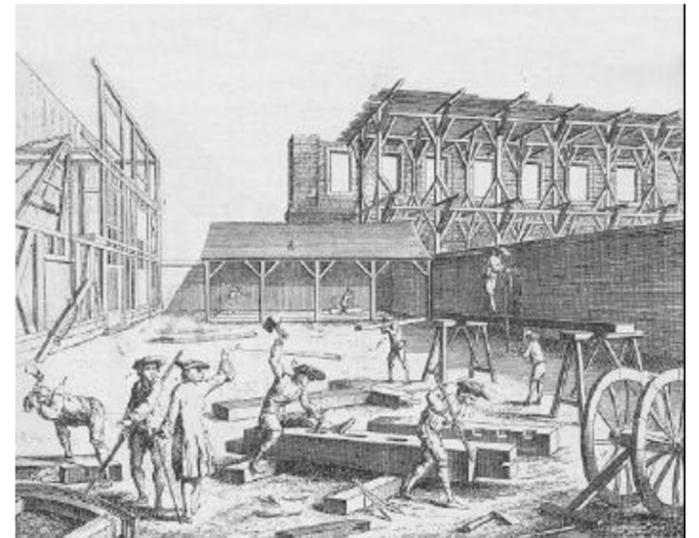
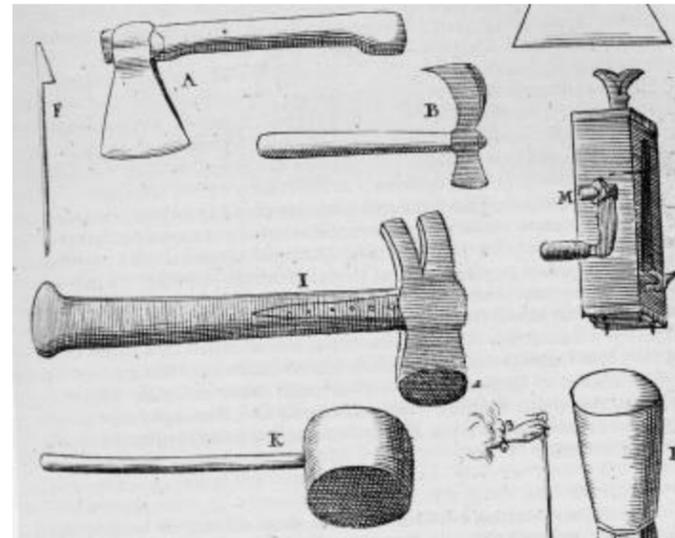
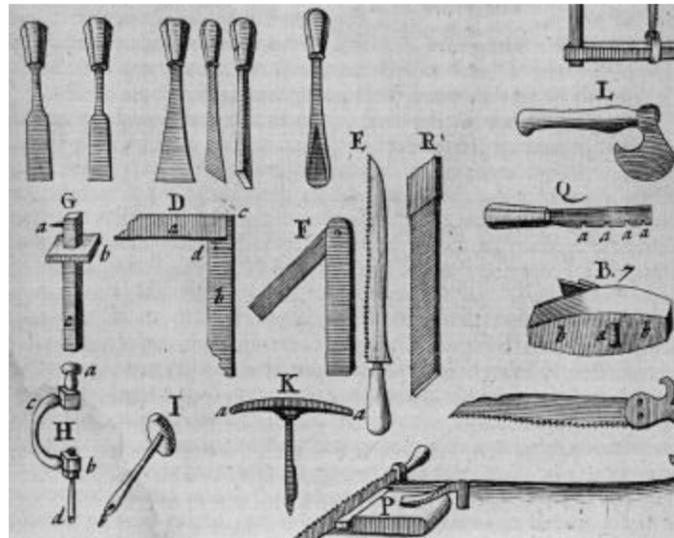
(below - left and center) Joiner's and Carpenter's Tools and Moxon's Mechanick Exercises.⁷

(below right) Construction site. This Eighteenth-century French illustration shows the variety of skills and labor organization necessary for the erection of large buildings. From Denis Diderot, Encyclopedie (Paris: Bariansson, 1751-65), vol. 2, plate 1.⁸

⁶ Catherine W. Bishir, Charlotte V. Brown, Carl R. Lounsbury, and Ernest H. Wood III, Architects and Builders in North Carolina / A History of Practice of Building, The University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p.11

⁷ Ibid., pp.28-29.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.



When the settlers arrived in the area they found the land to be comprised of the same sandy soils they had left along the Virginia coast.

Wood was provided from the indigenous groves of small pines, as it had been in tidewater Virginia. Hand-made brick was also available to the emigrating colonists. Several examples of the earliest brick foundations and fireplace chimneys remain today, their wood frame houses above having rotted away decades earlier. Without any rock strata in this geologic region building with stone was virtually nonexistent.

By far the largest portion of building was done out of wood. Hand-hewn framing members were notched, fitted and pegged to one another; this was prior to the availability of iron nails. Early on, all this was set into large log foundation posts, marking the earthen floor. Later the floors were raised to be above the wash of the rains with a brick perimeter base provided.

It was not a sophisticated type of construction. It was not monolithic. Each piece was light enough to be lifted by one or just a few men. The built structure was very much about the building process of assembly itself. The details of the connections were not shrouded in cladding. Without the need, desire or where-with-all to adorn the structures, they were left as honest assemblies by a practical people.

The brick and wood employed were left with the imprint of the men who not only assembled them but actually fabricated them.

Images:

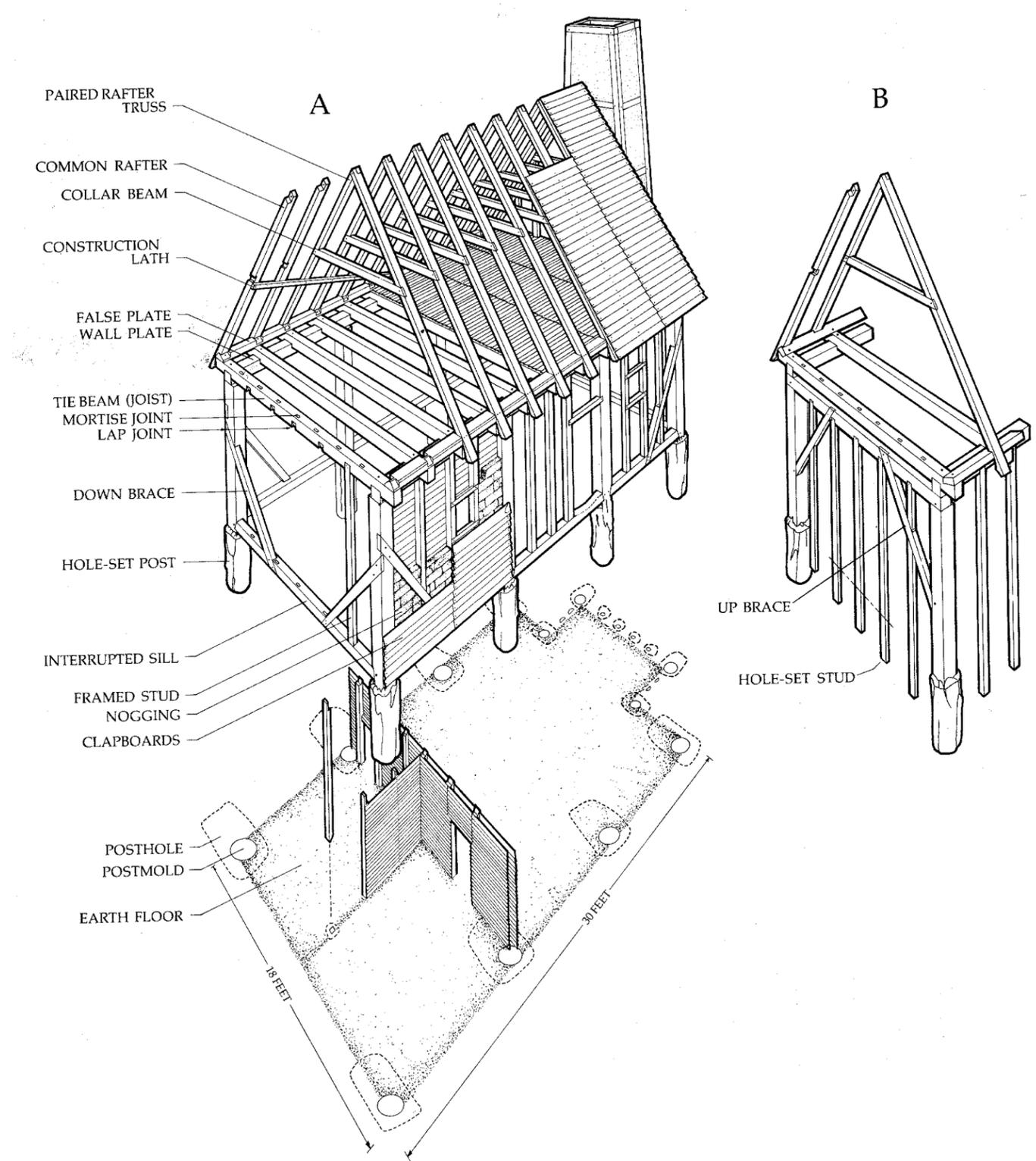
(left) Framing methods used in earthfast construction in the Chesapeake and Albemarle areas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹

(above right) Two-story porch detail from a regional residence; photo by author.

(center right) Roof soffit from a Chowan County, NC farm house; photo by author.

(right below) Front porch and railing from a Chowan County, NC farm house; photo by author.

⁹ Bishir, *Architects and Builders in North Carolina / A History of Practice of Building.*, p.17.



The buildings, barns and shelters built in the region were built following what must have been a set of rigid rules. The forms of the buildings were largely identical. The skills of the owners were limited and gave rise to buildings of specific detailing.

The people themselves were of a like-minded nature. They did not wish to stand apart from their neighbors. To have built a house different form that of your neighbor would have been to shun him and his house.

The basic design of the predominate building type followed a few standard ideas:

- The house form was limited to the two-story rectilinear box with gable roof traversing the greatest length. The simplicity of this construction lent itself to the limited skills and means of the owners.
- Two fireplaces, each extending through the ends of the gable roof, were provided to heat the house. This approach allowed the central portion of the house to be opened for cross-ventilation.
- The window openings were small and symmetrically spaced on each side of the house.
- The formal presentation of the house to the road was enhanced by the front porch. It was centered on the front and extended nearly the width of the front face.
- The whole of the wood structure was raised and set on a brick masonry base.
- Most rural houses were built as farm houses with the fields stretching out in all directions away from the house. This resulted in the need to provide one or two large deciduous trees tight to the south side for shading from the summer heat. Since the houses were of wood construction, not brick, they had no adequate protection from the ravages of the direct summer sunlight.

These principles, based as they were on a pragmatic view toward building, were the foundation of what would become the house icon for this region.

Images:

(above and below - left) Two different barns in Chowan County, North Carolina; photos by author.

(above and below - center and right) Four different houses in Chowan County, NC; photos by author.



The history of development for a seat of government for North Carolina follows the development of coastal commerce and trade.

Bath, NC was the first Capitol of the colony of North Carolina. From there the capital was moved to Edenton, NC in 1722 when the town was officially incorporated. Following the American Revolution the capitol was moved south to New Bern, in the 1760's, and finally to Raleigh in 1792.

With the strength of the shipping trade, the coastal region population flourished. Since it was easier and safer to transport goods and people over water than land, the coast towns grew in stature. This condition would continue until the building of the railroad line away from the coast would end up isolating this region.

Remnants of masonry public buildings and a few timber private residences show the development of a building community during the boom of the northern coastal region. While not austere, the structures built by the more affluent settlers were well considered signature buildings.

At the same time, a majority of the buildings were simple and practical. This supported the state's label of being "a good poor man's country".

Images:

(top) Map of settlement in eastern North Carolina. Edward Moseley Map of 1733. From W. P. Cumming, North Carolina in Maps (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1966), plate 6.¹⁰

(below left) St. Thomas Parish Church, Bath, NC, begun 1734 (Photo, 1977, Michael Southern, North Carolina Division of Archives and History).¹¹

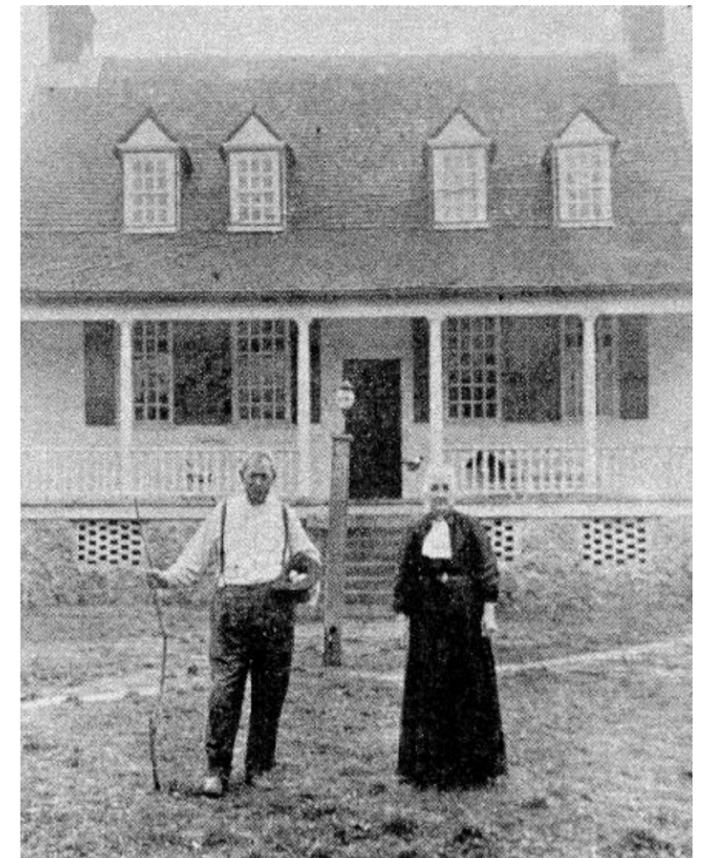
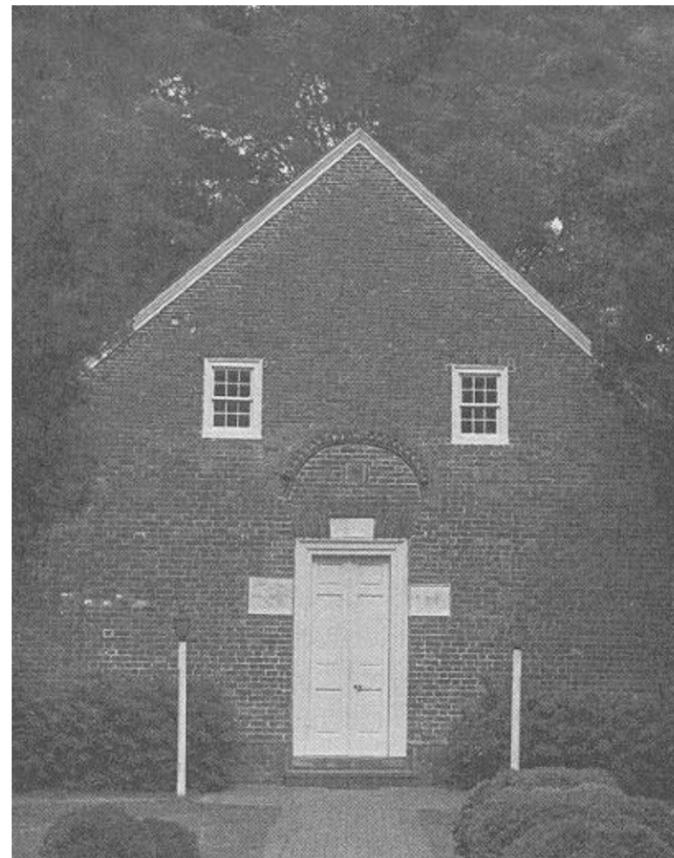
(below middle) St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Edenton, NC, ca 1736.

(below right) Clear Springs Plantation House, Craven Co., ca. 1760 (Photo, North Carolina Division of Archives and History).¹²

¹⁰ Bishir, Architects and Builders in North Carolina / A History of Practice of Building., p.11.

¹¹ Ibid, p.23.

¹² Ibid, p.55.



Edenton, NC has a past experience of building and design unique to that of Eastern NC or the tidewater VA region. Edenton preserves the urban development of the eighteenth century and the buildings that comprise it. Its isolation following the elimination of shipping trade along the Albemarle Sound and the fact that it was not along the new train and automobile corridor make it an unequaled case study. It is a place where time has had limited influence on development.

Language, too, indicates the area's isolation. A distinctive dialect still exists today, though very faint due to the greater current influences than those in the past. Electronic communication has growing influences since travel to the town is still not easy.

The rigid rectilinear order of the grid plan conveys the democratic ideals which were also displayed in the planning of Charleston, Savannah, et cetera.

Antebellum houses, most of them moved to their existing locations, now line Water Street, along the shore of the Sound. The remnants of the vital shipping of the past are almost gone. Most importantly, the change in purpose for these few blocks did not mean a change in configuration for the entire community.

From early plans, the regimented street grid is broken only for a public lawn. Early recognized for their importance in lending a sense of community, green lawns were part of the design of many settlement towns.

The plan for the town layout has expanded to the north, maintaining the original plan.

Churches and other public buildings requiring greater area and position in the community have been given special consideration. They break the pattern of the whole by occupying wider lots, being taller than the residential and commercial scale and being set back farther from the road. The only public space lost to development was a public lawn between the Courthouse and Queen Street along Court Street. This change occurred prior to 1872.

The town's edge along the waterfront also does not conform to the rigid shape of the standard block. It is the result of a balance between the town order and the undulating shoreline.

The developed urban layout seems to balance the democratic ideal of the unbroken grid and the need to provide for a place for community gathering.

Images:

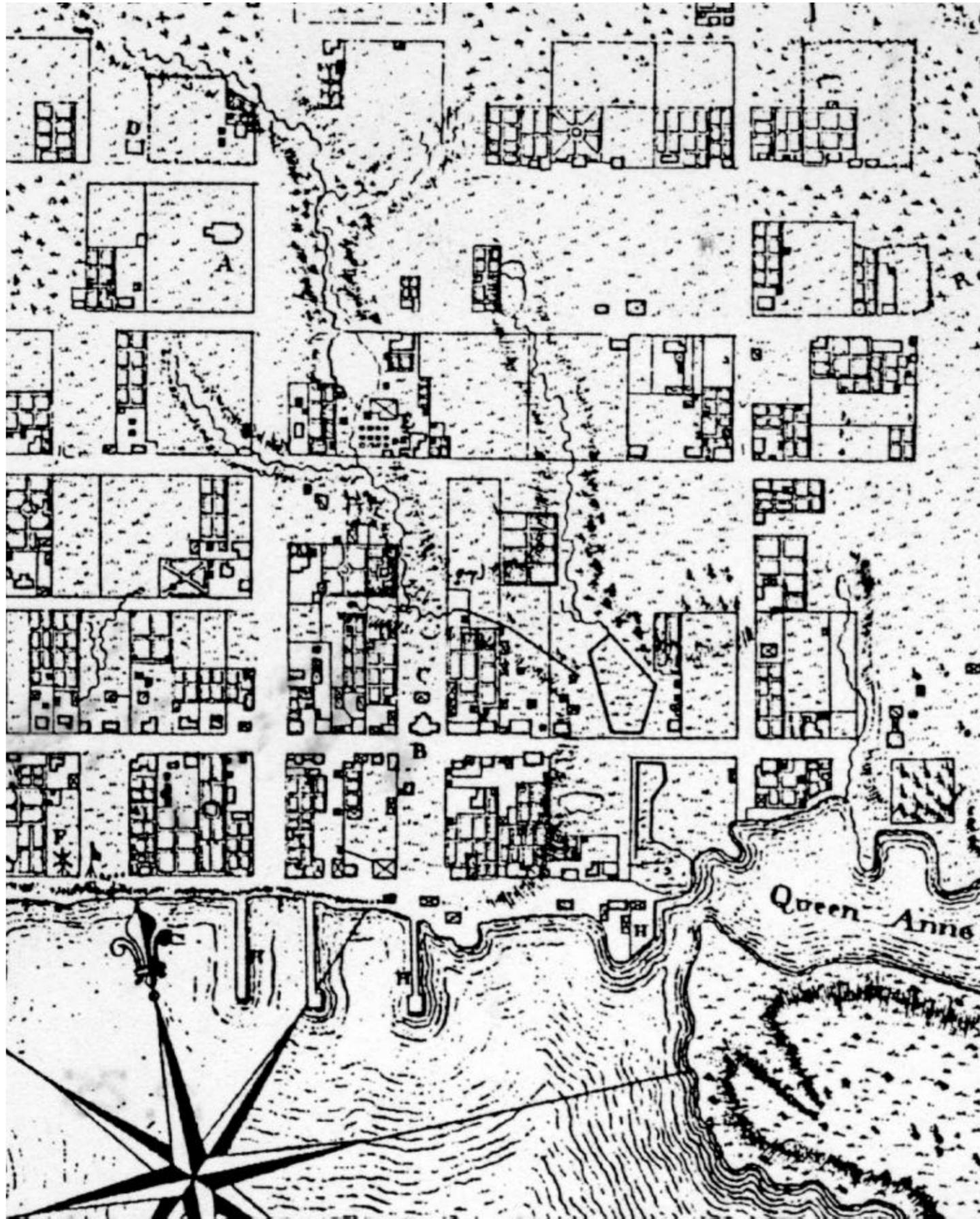
(left) Map of Edenton drawn by Claude J. Sautier in 1769.¹³

(above right) Tree-lined sidewalk demonstrating the current edge-of-block condition typical to Edenton. Photo by author.

(below center) Typical street-edge house. Photo by author.

(below right) Waterfront pier along Water Street. Photo by author.

¹³ Marc D. Brodsky, [The Courthouse at Edenton](#), p.25.



Enforcing the town plan by “building the edge” of the blocks has been an important part of the town’s urban development. The formal positioning of the houses on their relatively narrow lots has strengthened of the urban fabric from the beginning.

The composition of the buildings and individual lots is unique. However, some standards with regard to the relationship of the houses to the street (the public space) and the neighboring houses (the private spaces) do exist.

The area from the edge of the street to the front door is subdivided into four parts which are used to define a complex series of stages for moving between the public and private realms:

- The Sidewalk and the grass strip at the street - This is the public area. This is the protected area where one is able to move about freely without social commitment. It is where neighbors meet without social obligation. Being at the edge of the block, it affords the public a limited opportunity for seeing into the private interior space of the block’s center.

This is the area from which a neighbor is invited into the individual’s private realm. It is also the area to which the individual makes a presentation.

- The Sidewalk through the Lawn - While this space is technically a part of the private realm, it also serves as the longest barrier to the public edge. The sidewalk is usually narrow, straight, and directly in line with the front door. The presentation of the house is very formal.

- The Steps - At the front of all houses are, on average, between 3 and 7 steps up to the first living level of the house. The houses are raised, as discussed earlier, for foundation ventilation and flood damage prevention. The steps provided to reach house are formally positioned and are often wider than the sidewalk.

The steps are often used for informal sitting and visitation by the private house owner and his neighbor. While in the private area, the steps are a stage for providing the neighbor with some hospitality but very limited access to the individual.

- The Porch - This is the last level of public-to-private procession. This is an area which most often extends the entire width of the house front. This area is much larger than any programmatic requirements.

Historically the porch was used to shade the house, preventing heat build-up on the interior. It was also used to provide a covered and cool outdoor space where one could lounge or visit with neighbors.

These past purposes are still relevant today, and the consistency of their use has given the porch a cultural significance.

This raised platform for viewing the public realm is buffeted by columns, railing, tall planting, et cetera.

The relationship of the private house to its neighboring house is relatively understated. The lots are narrow and the houses are relatively wide so as to make a formal presentation to the public space. The remaining side yard area is very small. This area serves complex functions in the relationship of the two adjacent houses. Such as:

- It is an unbuilt portion of the fortress-like protection afforded the neighboring houses to preserve the interior of the block.

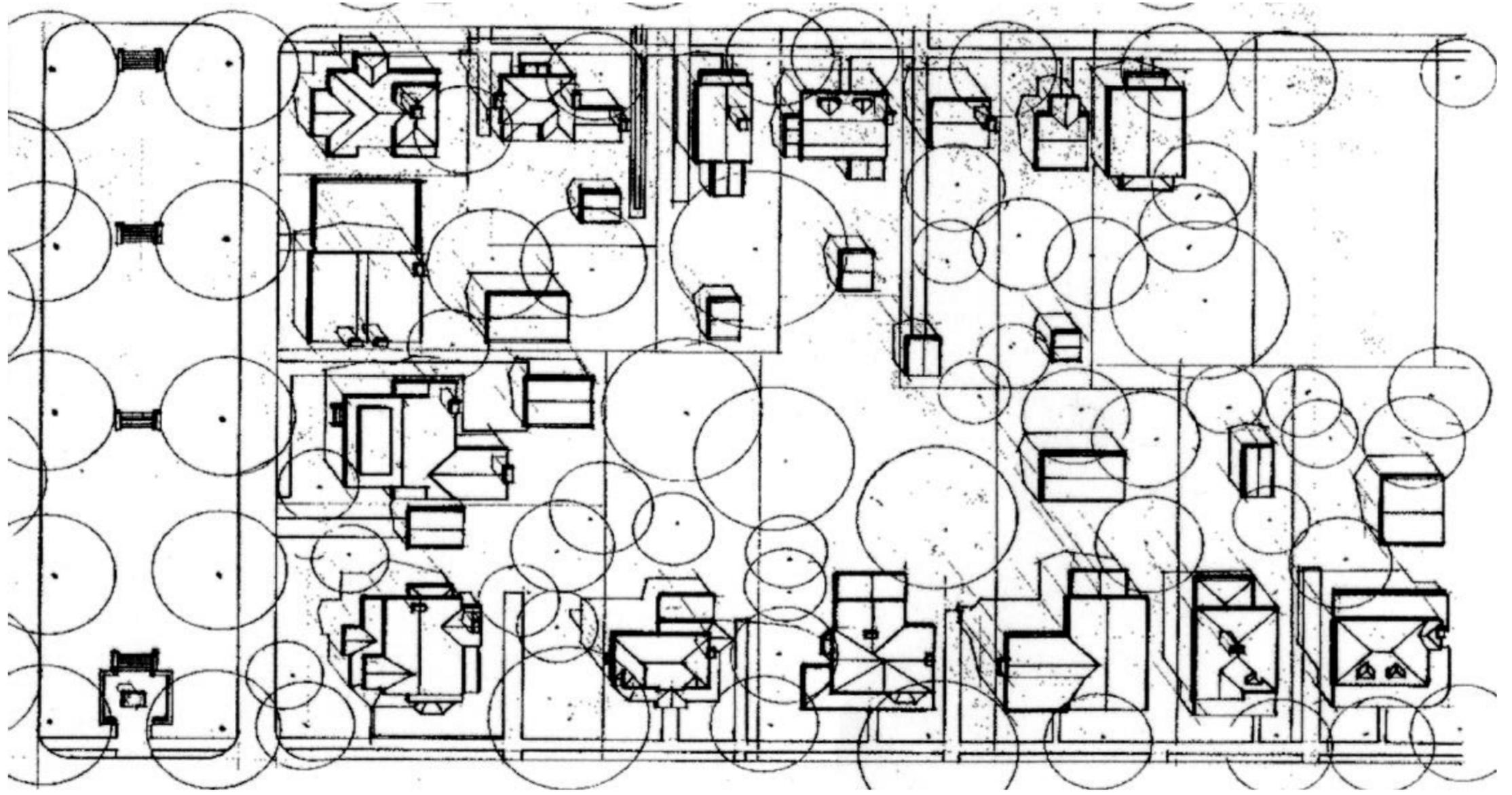
- It serves it relate at some level between the two houses without joining them. The chimneys, located to the sides, serve to complete the view of the front of the house.

- It is seldom fenced. This would send a message to the neighbor that might be misinterpreted.

Images:

(top) Map by author, typical Edenton residential block.

(below - left, center, right) Photos of Edenton houses by author.



In the residential blocks, single narrow lots were established extending from one road to the next. These lots were later subdivided, as a matter of course, to provide for two houses, each with street frontage. With the blocks themselves being wider than depth, the interior of the block was a large open opportunity for creating protected community spaces.

The commercial strip was, and is today, along Broad Street, which extends from the waterfront to the edge of town. With the town's economic life originally based on shipping, the waterfront buildings were warehouses and shipping stations. Goods were off-loaded at the waterfront piers, stored in the warehouses and sold along Broad Street. The Broad Street buildings were sparest sort of construction.

The commercial center of Edenton continues to be along the relatively narrow sidewalk of Broad Street. Along the storefronts the complexity of the residential block patterns is not realized. Instead, the whole of the experience is one of public space and public interaction.

Similarities to the overall residential pattern still exist however. The stores are formally presented along Broad Street where the buildings are aligned and of similar height. However, exceptions to rigid patterning do exist to mark special buildings. These occur at street corners for banks and municipal buildings.

Images:

(top left, center, right) Photos, by author, of Edenton houses.

(below) Photos, by author, of Edenton commercial strip along Broad Street.



The presentation of this community as democratic is broken only by the public buildings that earn special placement within the urban fabric. The Chowan County Courthouse is one such building. This eighteenth-century Georgian structure is seated at the head of an unoccupied lawn which slopes down to the shore of the Albemarle Sound. The Courthouse's prominence as the formal vista at the opposite end of the lawn is unique in Edenton. While St. Paul's Episcopal Church and its cemetery occupy an entire block and the bank holds a dominant position at the corner of Broad and King Streets, the formality of the siting of the Courthouse is a very special case.

In many ways, the Courthouse demonstrates at an urban scale the position of the common house in this town. Its formal two-story façade, raised entry and frontal relationship to the Lawn recall the existing structuring of each house in the community.

The siting of the Courthouse, which was built in 1722, in symmetrical relationship to the public lawn was not originally envisioned nor planned prior to this building's completion. The earliest plans for the town did not allocate this lot for this purpose and, indeed, the public lawn as it exists now, had to be cleared of the earlier wooden Courthouse building.

Of special note, regarding available regional building materials, is the existence of stone steps at the front entry to the Courthouse. This construction is very unusual in this region since the nearest stone supply is many miles away. As it happens, these stone steps were, in fact, originally used for ballast in one of the many merchant ships that ported at Edenton in the eighteenth century.

Images:

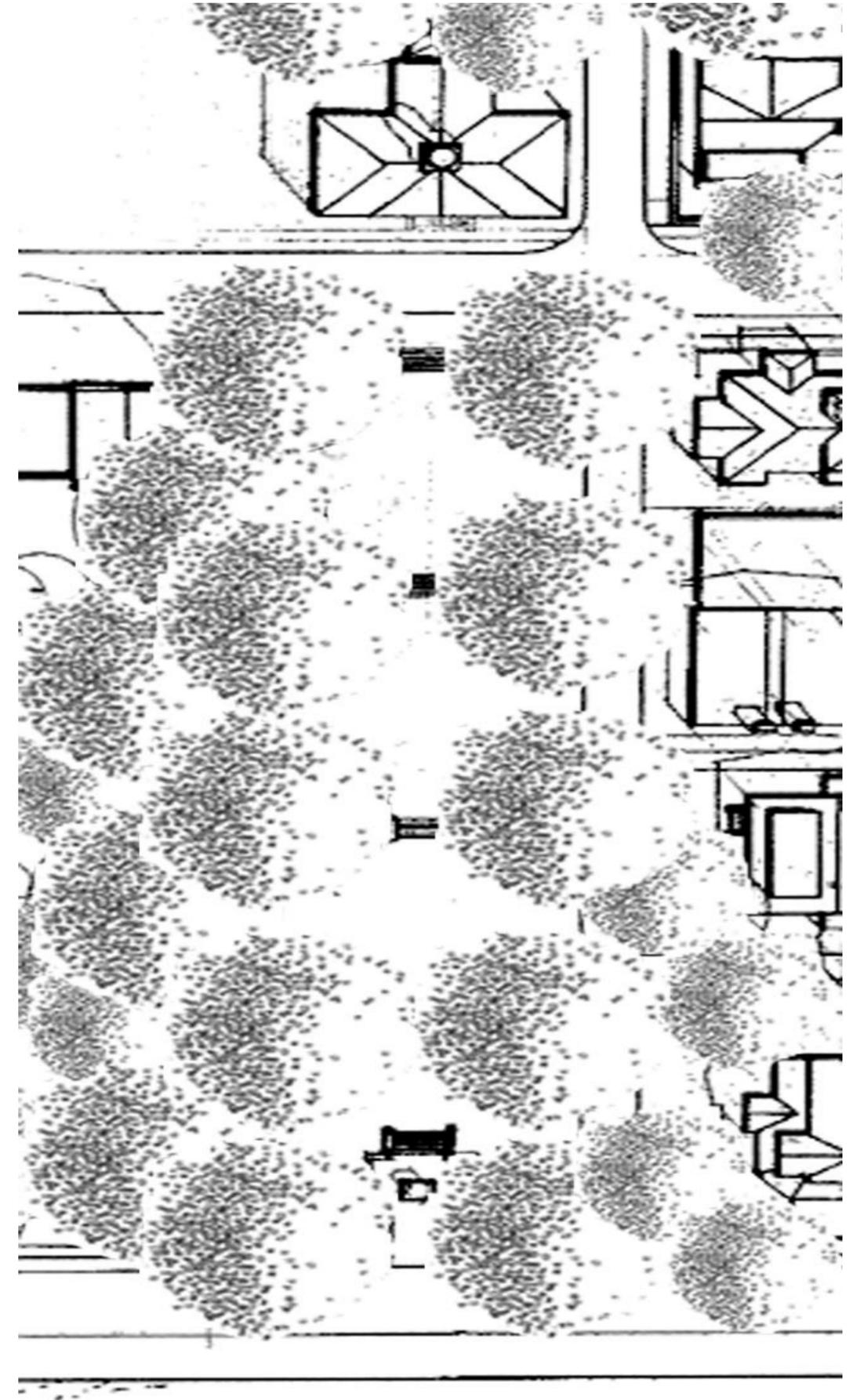
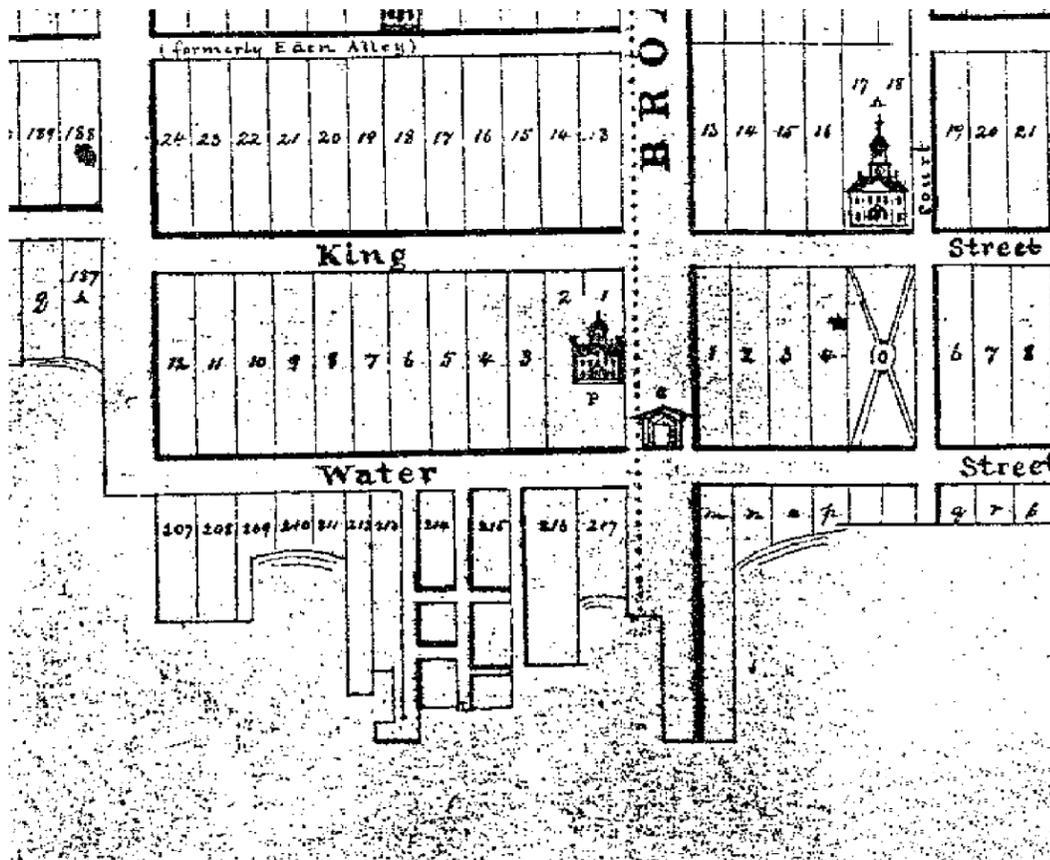
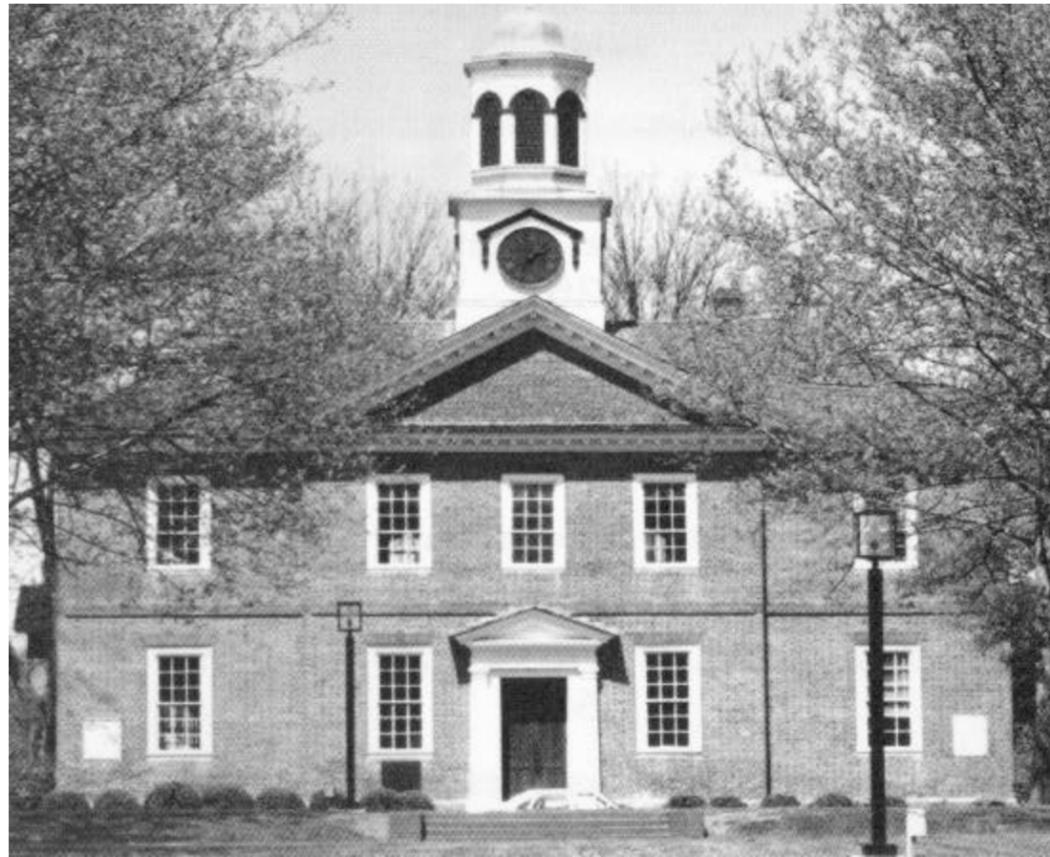
(above left) Photo of Chowan County Courthouse. ¹⁴

(below left) Augusta Gaylord's map of Edenton, 1872. North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, NC. ¹⁵

(right) Plan, by author, of the Lawn. Courthouse is at the top of the page and the Albemarle Sound is toward bottom.

¹⁴ Marc D. Brodsky, *The Courthouse at Edenton*, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.



The project building-type chosen for this thesis is a new Courthouse to supplement the existing municipal buildings. It is to be a new Chowan County Complex - encompassing the addition of a new Courthouse, sheriff's office, jail, Department of Environmental Management building, Education Department building, and a new Health and Social Services Department building.

The City Manager indicated a need for a new Courthouse since the existing aging structure is ill equipped to meet the needs of a modern judiciary. The current county functions are provided in a three-story brick building next to the existing Courthouse and is also inadequate for the county's needs.

The existing municipality-driven proposal is to put the new Courthouse and services in a new building several blocks away along Broad Street in a 'Greek Revivalist' style building. It would not have any relation to the existing Courthouse in spirit or context.

Currently, at the rear of the existing Courthouse is an underutilized parking lot, the old jailer's house and the old jail. When the Courthouse was originally sited, it was the only building that interrupted the urban fabric of this block.

As it currently exists, the Courthouse is not anchored to the urban fabric. The random voids at the block's edge eliminate any chance at a unified composition.

Images:

Map of Edenton, by author, circa 1990.

NORTH

