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Left Out in the Cold: Archaeology of the Sentry Box Ice House and the Ice Business in Fredericksburg, Virginia

Kerri S. Barile

Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, kbarile@dovetailcrg.com

Sean P. Maroney

Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, spmaroney@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

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Left Out in the Cold: Archaeology of the Sentry Box Icehouse and the Ice Business in Fredericksburg, Virginia

Kerri S. Barile and Sean P. Maroney

Ice houses were prevalent features on the properties of many middling and upper class individuals. Both in rural and urban environments, people sought to keep their goods cold to extend the longevity of food products. Due to their mostly subterranean matrix, many ice houses exist archaeologically. Few, however, are explored due to their depth and complex architectural composition. This article describes the unique excavations that took place on the Sentry Box icehouse in Fredericksburg, Virginia—the former home of Revolutionary War General George Weedon. The piece presents the history of this significant late 18th-century property, describes the evolution of ice house technology and the ensuing change in icehouse design, and compares the privately owned Sentry Box ice house to public ice houses in the city to formulate notions on preferred size, construction methods, and use through time.

Les glaciers étaient des aménagements répandues sur les propriétés de nombreux individus de la classe moyenne et supérieure. Tant dans les environnements ruraux qu'urbains, les gens ont cherché à conserver leurs produits au frais pour prolonger la longévité des produits alimentaires. En raison de leur matrice principalement souterraine, de nombreuses glaciers existent archéologiquement. Peu, cependant, sont explorés en raison de leur profondeur et de leur composition architecturale complexe. Cet article décrit les fouilles uniques qui ont eu lieu sur la glacier Sentry Box à Fredericksburg, en Virginie, l'ancienne résidence du général de guerre d'indépendance des États-Unis, George Weedon. La glacier présente l'histoire de cette importante propriété de la fin du 18e siècle, décrit l'évolution de la technologie des glaciers et le changement qui en a résulté dans la conception des glaciers, et compare la glacier privée Sentry Box aux glaciers publiques de la ville pour formuler des notions sur la taille préférée, les méthodes de construction et utilisation dans le temps.

Introduction

It was discovered largely by accident on the grounds of the historic Sentry Box property. On the middle terrace of the east lawn, overlooking the Rappahannock River, subtle terrain shifts caused by decades of landscaping began to reveal the outline of a mysterious, stone-rimmed, circular-shaped depression. Was it a planting bed; a long-forgotten outbuilding; a patio; or simply a deposit of stones bearing a coincidental, though remarkably uncanny, resemblance to a square? Over the years the current homeowners, Charles and Mary Wynn McDaniel, watched as the depression continued to resolve itself into something more pronounced. It became increasingly apparent that the odd feature was not happenstance, but, in fact, something more substantial and purposefully constructed, dating to a previous period in the Sentry Box property's 225-year history.

Uncovering evidence of the home's forgotten past was not new to the McDaniels. Over the years they had uncovered several trash middens in the yard, and in the 1960s had conducted nonscientific explorations of an original, 18th-century brick icehouse. They had also removed modern materials from the interior to return the dwelling to its historical appearance. But they did not know the answer to the mystery of the stone-lined depression. In the spring of 2008 the McDaniels hired a team of archaeologists and historians to research the property, with no suspicion of their upcoming adventure. The resulting investigation revealed not only the nature of the mysterious depression—a stone-lined icehouse—but an amazing trove of historical information on the Sentry Box landscape, the City of Fredericksburg, and the evolution of Virginia's ice industry in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Sentry Box: An Early Suburban Palladian Plan

The Sentry Box, at 133 Caroline Street in downtown Fredericksburg, Virginia, is an early Federal-style home with Greek-revival and colonial-revival modifications (FIG. 1). The lot, designated as lot No. 250 in Bartholomew Fuller's 1806 plat of the city, was first owned by General Hugh Mercer, a local physician and leader in the Revolutionary War (Haring 1990). Upon his death, the empty lot passed to his brother-in-law, close friend, and Revolutionary War compatriot, General George Weedon.

Building "The Box"

Prior to the start of the war, George Weedon operated a lively tavern in the heart of Fredericksburg, at the northeast corner of William and Caroline Streets, approximately 10 blocks north of what would become the Sentry Box lot. Counted among its patrons were some of the most notable men of the day—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry. Jefferson, in fact, started

his "Articles of Religious Freedom" for Virginia at Weedon's Tavern (Ward 1974).

During the war, Hugh Mercer perished from wounds received at the Battle of Princeton. Weedon, however, survived the war, serving with distinction at the Battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Yorktown. Upon returning to Fredericksburg, he established himself as a prominent figure in local politics, highlighted by a term as mayor, beginning in 1785. George Weedon and his wife, Kitty, moved into their newly built home at the south end of Caroline Street in 1786. They named it "The Sentry Box," a purposeful tongue-in-cheek allusion to Weedon's many years of military service (Haring 1990). When originally constructed, the family home was two-stories tall, five-bays wide, and reflected the distinct sense of symmetry that is now so closely associated with the Georgian and Federal styles. The foundation of random, rubble Aquia sandstone supported a timber frame clad in weatherboard siding. The side-gable roof was covered in cedar shingles, a popular technique and material of the day. Interestingly, while the building's facade



Figure 1. The Sentry Box at 133 Caroline Street, Fredericksburg, Virginia. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2007.)

reflected a strong sense of symmetry, the construction and placement of the two chimneys added a decidedly asymmetrical dimension to the house's general configuration, as the interior stack of the northern chimney contrasted with the exterior stack arrangement of its southern counterpart. The reason for this choice of construction method remains unknown.

Isabella Mercer, widow of General Hugh Mercer, and their children—Ann Mercer Patton, John Mercer, William Mercer, George Weedon Mercer, and Hugh Tennant Mercer—moved into the Sentry Box in the 1790s and became part of the Weedon family (Haring 1990). The Sentry Box property's first significant alteration—a two-story addition to the rear (east) elevation of the main house—was made at that time to accommodate the newly expanded family. As a result, the building's original rectangular plan was reconfigured into a distinctive T-shaped design.

Altering the Setting

General George Weedon died in December 1793. As he and his wife Kitty had no children of their own, provisions were made to leave the house and lot to the Mercer children. In 1796 Kitty took out a Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia (MAS) insurance policy on the property. The MAS was established in 1794 to provide insurance policies against "Fire on Buildings" (Edwards et al. 1994: 105–109). The company issued policies from 1796 through 1867, when financial upheavals stemming from the Civil War eventually led to the company's dissolution. When formalizing each policy, MAS agents were instructed to include, among other things, a rough sketch of all insured buildings, depicting their general dimensions, relative position vis-à-vis the property's other built resources, and the materials used in their construction. Though not drawn strictly to scale, the resulting site plans did record data regarding the general placement, dimensions, and construction (e.g., height, materials) for each insured building on the lot. Eleven such plans, issued to successive owners between the years 1796 and 1866, still exist for the Sentry Box property. Collectively, they provide an invaluable perspective on the

evolving physical nature and layout of this historic estate.

The first MAS policy, issued to Kitty Weedon in 1796, is an overview of the property just 10 years after the original construction (FIG. 2). Along with the two-story main house and two-story, 20 × 20 ft., east-end addition, the policy's site plan also depicts six detached outbuildings of varying size and function. At the parcel's north end, a one-story, wood-frame study/office, approximately 16 ft. wide and 28 ft. long, stood adjacent to a one-story, 15 × 15 ft., wood-frame icehouse. The area just south of the main house contained a one-story, wood-framed kitchen with an attached shed, a small, square wood-frame dairy, and two similarly sized, wood-frame smokehouse buildings. The placement of outbuildings as shown in the 1796 MAS site plan reveals the intentional use of a symmetrical, Georgian-style, Palladian plan on the original layout of the Sentry Box estate. Throughout the nation, similar plans were employed on plantations and large homes during this period (Deetz 1988, 1996; Glassie 1975; Leone 1988; Pogue 2001). The plan's underlying ideology emphasized such principles as human command over the natural environment and the purposeful creation of aesthetically pleasing and well-ordered living spaces. Some of the most recognizable Palladian plans in Virginia are found on prominent colonial estates, such as Mount Vernon, Stratford Hall, and Shirley Plantation (Barka 1996; Donnelly 2003; Isaac 1982; Pogue 1994). In the case of the Sentry Box, the similarities in dimension and physical placement of the kitchen and study at the north and south ends of the main house, respectively, and the repetition of this pattern with regard to the icehouse and smokehouse combined to establish and showcase the five-part, Palladian plan.

Of particular interest in the case of the Sentry Box, however, is the transmigration of the Palladian plan ideology from its more ubiquitous agrarian context to a decidedly more urban setting on the outskirts of the burgeoning 18th-century port town of Fredericksburg. At the time of his death, Weedon owned a total of 10 town lots, eight of which are located near the Sentry Box parcel (Lots 230, 231, 239, 240, 250 [Sentry Box lot], 251, 259, and 260) (Weedon [1793]). The four

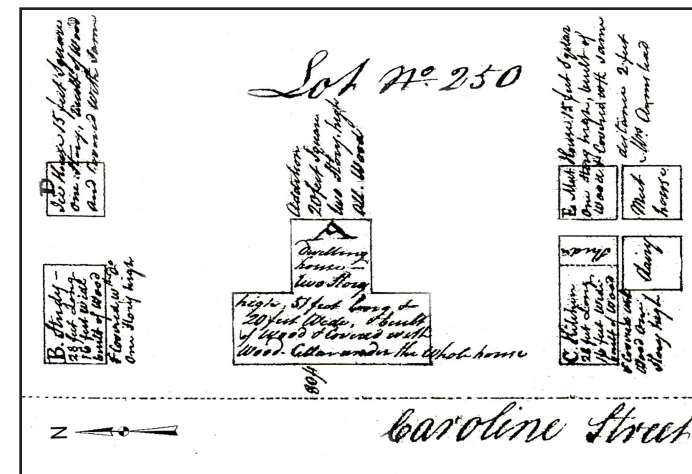


Figure 2. Plan of the Sentry Box estate, from the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia policy, ca. 1796. (Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia [1796]; modified by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2020.) Not to scale.

contiguous lots between Caroline Street and Princess Anne Street and south of Dixon Street (230, 231, 239, and 240), now across the street from the Sentry Box, were likely used by Weedon as pastureland for livestock. Many of the lower Caroline Street residents used the land along Princess Anne Street as pastures for grazing cattle and other livestock. Many also had stables and other equestrian facilities built along Princess Anne near, rather than directly adjoining, their larger family estates on Caroline Street. An advertisement placed by George Weedon in the *Virginia Herald*, dated 7 February 1793, offers a reward for a cow that had strayed from Weedon's plantation in Fredericksburg (*Virginia Herald* 1793: 2). It is possible that the cow was housed on his pasturelands between Caroline and Princess Anne streets. Other uses for the eight lots surrounding the Sentry Box included gardens (kitchen and flower), servants' quarters (both indentured and enslaved), and other domestic areas. As such, it may be more appropriate to think of the 18th-century Sentry Box property as a small suburban farmstead on the outskirts of downtown, rather than an urban residence.

From Icehouse to Schoolhouse

One of the most interesting outbuildings on the Sentry Box property was the original

18th-century brick icehouse located just northeast of the main house and a primary component of the Palladian plan designed by Weedon. The building was described as a 15 × 15 ft. square with a brick foundation and a timber-frame structural system. It was at the same elevation as the primary dwelling itself. When this icehouse foundation was excavated by the property owner in the 1960s it was found to extend at least 20 ft. below ground.

By 1800 John Mercer and Hugh Mercer, Jr., sons of Revolutionary War general Hugh Mercer, were paying taxes on the Sentry Box property (Fredericksburg Tax Office

1800). Although Hugh Mercer, Jr., initially maintained Weedon's original layout, he made several modifications to the property's landscape over the next two decades. By the mid-1810s, the original icehouse had been converted into a schoolhouse/study. The deep brick foundation was sealed, and only the one-story, aboveground wooden portion was used.

The question is, why? The importance of ice to domestic life remained a constant throughout the 19th century, yet the Mercer family discontinued the use of the Sentry Box property's icehouse in the early 1800s. One reason for this seemingly odd choice may relate to a flaw in George Weedon's 1786 icehouse design—a flaw with which the Weedon and Mercer families had to cope as they attempted to keep ice there for several decades. The square icehouse design and location, it turns out, were not optimal for maintaining cold temperatures nor accessing the contents. The following section describes changes in ice-retention technology that had a notable impact on icehouse design and the ideology of the ice industry.

The Icehouse in Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic Region

Though the concept of the icehouse had been introduced to Virginia as early as the

17th century, early proponents had a very difficult time achieving successful results. In 1665, Virginia governor William Berkeley was granted a patent “to gather, make, and take snow and ice ... and to preserve and keep the same in such pits, caves and cool places as he should think fit” (Jones 1984: 75). Berkeley did not build a structure specifically for ice storage, but instead used existing buildings and subterranean pits for this purpose.

Several other Virginians also designed buildings specifically for keeping ice, but the technology for consistent and sustainable storage continued to elude them. In 1784, for example, George Washington stated in a letter that “[t]he House I filled with ice does not answer, it is gone already” (Jones 1984: 75–76). Thomas Jefferson fought a similar battle against nature in his efforts to erect an effective ice-storage facility. While living in Philadelphia in the 1790s, his attempts to build an icehouse failed repeatedly, forcing him to subscribe to an ice service that delivered his ice weekly (Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello 2019). It was not until 1802 that he finally succeeded in constructing an icehouse at Monticello. In designing this new building, Jefferson drew on observations made while touring southern France in 1787. In his journal he described a successfully functioning icehouse in Rozzano:

The Ice-Houses at Rozzano are dug about 15.f. deep and 20.f. diameter and poles are driven down all round. A conical thatched roof is then put over them 15.f.high. Pieces of wood are laid at the bottom to keep the ice out of the water which drips from it, and goes off by a sink. Straw is laid on this wood, and then the house filled with ice always putting straw between the ice and the walls. (Jefferson 1950: 439)

The ca. 1802 Monticello icehouse was constructed of stone in a circular plan. The facility was 16 ft. deep and extended 6 ft. above the ground surface. The building was covered with a wood-frame, gable roof. Jefferson’s design provided access to the building’s interior by “leaving a door 3½ feet wide on the N.W. side of it” (Jefferson 1802).

The next year, Thomas Moore published *An Essay on the most Eligible Construction of Ice-Houses*, in which he attempted to share successful building designs and techniques from Europe with American property owners

dealing with the same problems George Washington had experienced at Mount Vernon. Moore’s (1803) essay, based on his own experiments, prescribed the following design principles: “The most favourable situation is a north hill side near the top. On such a site open a pit twelve feet square at top, ten at bottom, and eight or nine ft. deep.” The roof of the icehouse “may be composed of any materials, and in any form that will defend the contents of the pit from wet, from the direct rays of the sun, and also admit a free circulation of air.” Based on his experience, such a simple yet effective icehouse could be constructed for \$20. An icehouse built of stone or with a roof other than thatch, Moore noted, would cost more (Moore 1803).

The widespread availability of Moore’s essay and its quick adoption throughout the Mid-Atlantic between 1805 and 1820 is evidenced by the proliferation of icehouses on plantations and urban residential lots during this period. Designs mirroring those outlined in the writings of Moore and Jefferson were built in several locales. Each of these had either a conical or square plan with rounded corners, extended a minimum of 15 ft. in depth, and had a simple, short, and tightly built roof.

Examples of such icehouses were documented during the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) at the Fisher-Seymour House in Accomack County, Virginia (Historic American Buildings Survey [1933a]); Green Hill Plantation in Campbell County, Virginia (Historic American Buildings Survey [1933b]); Toddsbury Plantation in Gloucester County, Virginia (Historic American Buildings Survey [1933c]); and Hopewell Plantation in Frederick County, Maryland (Historic American Buildings Survey 1977), among others. The interior cone-shape typical of this building type’s massing can also be seen on measured drawings from the Hampton icehouse in Baltimore County, Maryland (Historic American Buildings Survey [1959]).

Hugh Mercer, Jr., and a Bigger, Better Icehouse

By the 1820s, Hugh Mercer had become a wealthy and important man. His prosperity derived from and mirrored the relative eco-

nomical success experienced by the community of Fredericksburg as a whole around this time. Indeed, the first quarter of the 19th century proved to be one of the most prosperous periods in the town’s history. By the early decades of the 1800s, what had been a small river-port community had grown exponentially into a large and successful shipping market. Fredericksburg and nearby Falmouth’s exports of flour, which had reached their highest point in 1816 at 160,000 barrels, were reported at 126,000 barrels in 1831—the third-highest export volume in the state of Virginia, behind only Richmond and Alexandria (Johnson 1997: 31).

Mercer’s Ferry and Store

Around 1820, the Sentry Box property’s complex of outbuildings was expanded through the addition of what was described as a one-story “Dwelling & Store” along the west side of Water Street (now known as Sophia Street). It was constructed of wood and brick, and measured roughly 16 × 33 ft. At the time, the dwelling/store would have stood within the floodplain at the bottom of the terraces visible today on the east lawn of the Sentry Box estate (FIG. 3) (E. Sachse & Co. 1862). Such a

building would have been well positioned to service patrons of the ferry operated near this location by Hugh Mercer, Jr., during the early decades of the 19th century and very near the present-day location of the City Dock. The ferry tied the lower Caroline Street area to the Ferry Farm parcel on the east side of the Rappahannock, then owned by John Coulter. On Mercer’s side, the operation was flanked by a number of new businesses that had been established along the riverfront as commercial activities intensified in and around the town wharf area.

An announcement published in the October 24, 1837 *Political Arena* informed local residents and would-be travelers of the pending discontinuance of ferry service:

from the wharf in Fredericksburg, to the lands of John Coalter, in Stafford, commonly called Mercer’s, and now Coalter’s Ferry, as a public Ferry, reserving to the proprietor the right to re-establish it, whenever it is necessary, or he may think proper to do so, with all other rights appertaining to said Ferry. (*Political Arena* 1837: 1)

The dwelling/store building at the foot of the ferry remained extant through the Civil War. Much like many of the old estate’s early



Figure 3. Detail of *View of Fredericksburg, VA. Nov. 1862*. The Sentry Box and Mercer’s store are circled. (E. Sachse & Co. 1863; modified by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2020; courtesy of Library of Congress.)

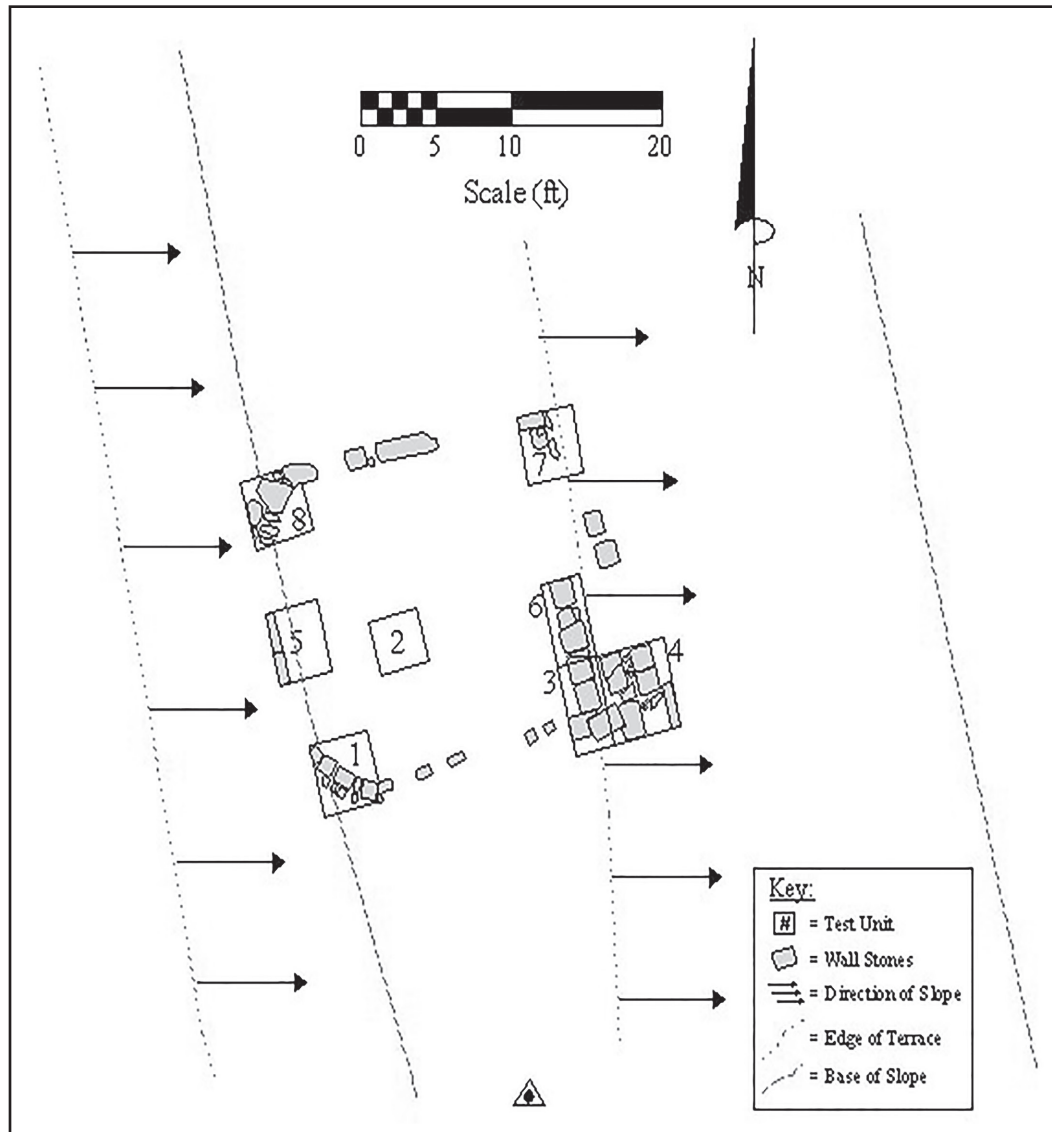


Figure 4. Map showing location of test units at the Sentry Box Icehouse site. (Map by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)

outbuildings, no aboveground evidence of its existence remains visible today.

The growth of the wharf area along Sophia/Water Street, combined with changes in early 19th-century landscape design aesthetics, gave rise to several other major alterations on the Sentry Box property during the antebellum period. The expansion of river traffic and commercial activity along Water Street quickly transformed what had long

been a private complex of residential buildings in the remote suburbs south of town into an open and highly visible landscape. The previously sheltered work yard between the main house and the river quickly became a public venue. In light of this increased visibility, Hugh Mercer drew upon his financial resources to make certain improvements to his house and surrounding outbuildings. His goal was simple, to create a viewscape that more

appropriately reflected his prominent social status. Among the improvements he made was a new, modern icehouse.

Mercer began construction on a new stone-lined icehouse in the mid-1820s. By then, Weedon's original icehouse had been converted into a schoolhouse, and the family had been without a private icehouse for over a decade. The decision to build a new icehouse was likely predicated on two primary conditions: one, icehouse technology had dramatically improved since George Weedon built the first icehouse on the property—one that was known by family members to be somewhat ineffective—thus giving Mercer greater comfort in knowing that ice could be properly maintained; and two, Mercer's social and economic status had undergone a distinct improvement during this period, thus giving him the funds and impetus to maintain a private ice supply. The new building was erected in the east yard, in full view of the now-thriving riverfront area, and its design prescribed a facility not only more effective, but also visually more impressive than its predecessor. Ice was supplied by local residents who

cut it from nearby rivers and streams and sold it to those who owned ice facilities. It is this building which is associated with the mysterious stone feature noted by the property owners in 2008 (Barile et al. 2008).

The Dirt on the Sentry Box Icehouse

Archaeological studies on the icehouse were completed by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group of Fredericksburg. The team excavated eight test units across the site of the stone-lined depression, identified as Site 44SP0613 (FIG. 4). The results of the excavations helped the archaeologists better understand how the replacement Sentry Box icehouse was built and subsequently used.

Test Units 1, 5, and 8 were placed along the west wall of the feature. The excavation goals for these particular units were to investigate the interior and exterior of the stone wall and examine the surrounding stratigraphy. Work revealed that the icehouse foundation had been constructed with straight sides and rounded corners (FIG. 5). The construction material proved to be coarse sandstone, rather



Figure 5. The curved southwest corner of the icehouse. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)

than finer Aquia sandstone employed in the original foundation of the Sentry Box main house and at other sites throughout the Fredericksburg area during earlier periods. Use of this unrefined sandstone has been recorded at numerous early 19th-century building sites in Stafford County and the City of Fredericksburg, and helps confirm an 1820s construction date for Mercer's replacement icehouse facility (Schamel-González and Barile 2007).

The archaeologists made several initial deductions regarding the structure's construction and function. First, the walls of the building were over 2 ft. thick. While the exterior faces of the stone wall were rough cleaved, the interior faces had been fine cleaved and far more carefully dressed. From this pattern it

was clear that the structure's interior was the primary use space, while the exterior was immediately buried and not visible. Analysis further revealed that the facility's walls had been constructed at a slight angle, with the lower portions of the wall canted inward. This methodology produced an inverted cone on the interior, with the bottom section being narrower than the top. Finally, the excavation revealed that the laid stones had been secured with a combination of lime and mud mortar, and that the walls had been repointed many times over the years.

Test Units 3, 4, 6, and 7 were all excavated along the eastern wall of the icehouse. Unit 7 was placed at the northeast corner of the structure, while Units 3, 4, and 6 were clustered at the southeast corner. To learn more about the

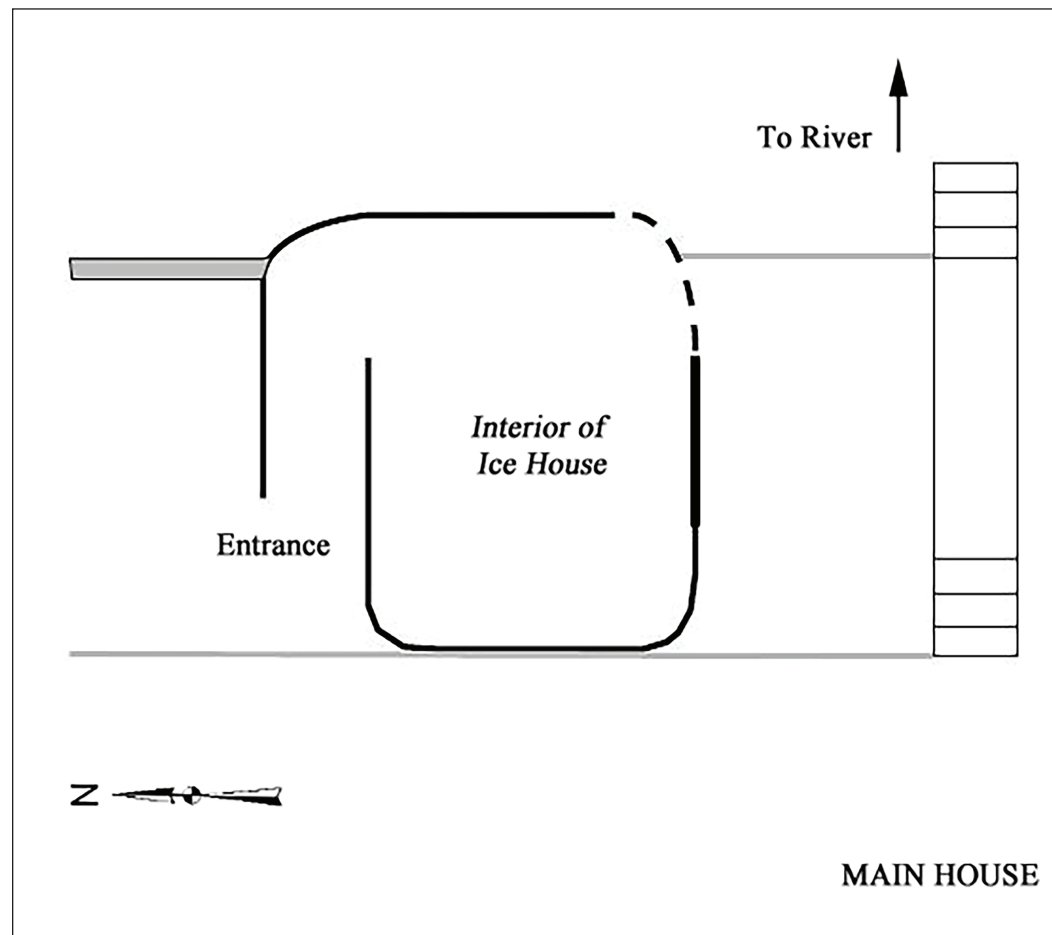


Figure 6. Plan of the Sentry Box icehouse. (Drawing by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.) Not to scale.



Figure 7. Overview of the Sentry Box Icehouse site after mechanical exploration, looking east towards the river. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)

foundations, subsequent stripping and backhoe excavation were completed by the homeowner and monitored by archaeologists. This work revealed an intriguing plan. It appears that the icehouse actually had a "spiral" plan and two entrances (FIG. 6). The basic form was square, but the corners were all rounded. The primary entry was on the west side towards the house, where a set of steps and a stone-lined passage would have allowed paid servants and enslaved individuals, as well as the homeowners, easy entrance to the building to obtain ice on a daily basis (FIG. 7). A second, smaller entrance was near the southeast corner, facing the river. This was likely a loading door and used to restock the icehouse as needed.

The archaeological and archival studies provide extensive knowledge on the form and appearance of the icehouse. The upper portion of the icehouse was likely composed of a short, timber-frame structure capped by a gable roof. The substructure had a unique and complex form, with two entries providing for both household access and easy riverfront loading. The construction of such an elaborate plan would have been costly; the additional expenditure highlights Mercer's intention to create a building of both visual prominence and struc-

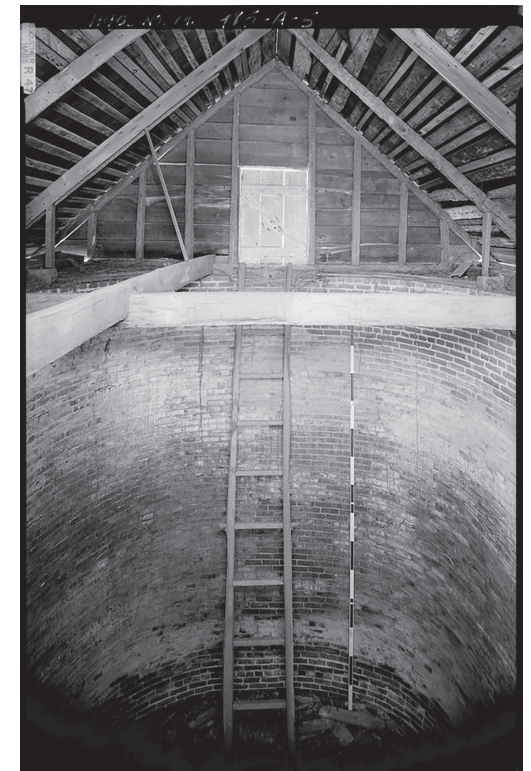


Figure 8. The interior of the Cottage icehouse in Prince George's County, Maryland (Boucher [1933]).

tural complexity. Most icehouses during this period were accessed via wooden ladders, rather than a structurally integrated set of stone steps and passageway allowing convenient and easy access to the interior of the space (FIG. 8) (Boucher [1933]).

The Icehouse in Nineteenth-Century Fredericksburg

Some of the same philosophies of icehouse design noted at the Sentry Box were employed throughout the Fredericksburg area in the 19th century. Due to issues with design, productivity, and profitability, very few residential/commercial icehouses existed in Fredericksburg prior to the 19th century. Those who could afford to do so—including prominent landowners, such as George Weedon and Hugh Mercer, Jr.—often built one on their own properties for private use.

As knowledge of more successful icehouse designs became more mainstream in the 1820s, however, entrepreneurial-minded individuals began marketing the new technology and opening formal, public icehouses as commercial enterprises in towns across America. Local operators in Fredericksburg gathered ice from a variety of locations, including the Rappahannock River, Alum Springs, Tackett's Pond, and other small creeks and streams (*Fredericksburg News* 1877: 3; *Weekly Advertiser* 1860: 3). The ice was harvested in sheets several inches thick and transferred to the icehouse, where it was packed in layers of straw or sawdust, or both.

Newspapers from the early to mid-19th century make reference to various commercial icehouses around town owned and operated by men such as Sam Beale and Fayette Johnston. John Ferneyhough advertised his "Sligo Ice House" in the 29 August 1827 issue of the *Political Arena*, and in 1832 he partnered with Thomas Wright to open the town's first public icehouse along Hanover Street near the Fredericksburg Baptist Church (FIG. 9) (*Political Arena* 1827: 3, 1832: 3). This same facility was purchased by William S. Chesley, who operated the icehouse through the early 1860s. A headline appearing in a local news piece published in 1853 reported: "Fire destroys William S. Chesley's ice house in Ten Pin Alley"

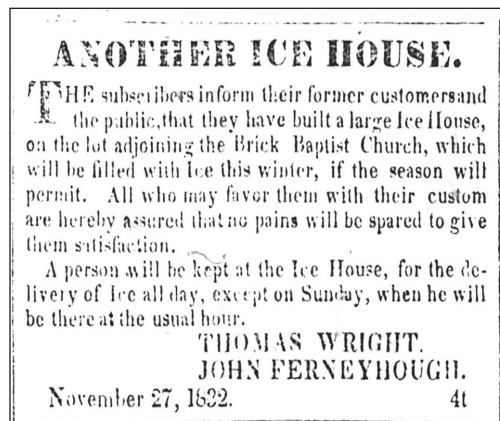


Figure 9. Ad for a new public icehouse at the corner of Sophia and Hanover streets in downtown Fredericksburg (*Political Arena* 27 November: 3).

(*Weekly Advertiser* 1853: 38). Despite fire and the actions during the Civil War, this icehouse remained in operation until around 1905 (Barile et al. 2014).



Figure 10. West wall of the ca. 1832 Wright/Ferneyhough public icehouse, excavated in Fredericksburg Riverfront Park. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2013.)

Archaeological evidence of this icehouse was uncovered by Dovetail in 2013 (Barile et al. 2014); see also Barile (this issue) for additional information on this excavation. Despite numerous construction episodes on the parcel in the 20th century, the foundation of the icehouse was found to be intact approximately 3 ft. below ground surface (FIG. 10). The foundation, measuring approximately 50 × 25 ft., was formed of handmade brick laid in a 3:1 common bond and secured with mud mortar; the interior of the icehouse may have been whitewashed. A probable entrance was found near the northwest corner of the icehouse, facing Hanover Street, allowing for easy street access for patrons. Whether there was river access is unknown due to the limited nature of the archaeological work, but it is probable that a second entrance was located on the east elevation, facing the Rappahannock River. This would have allowed ice cutters to bring their product into the building directly from the river, which supplied both the ice as well as the transportation route for the cut product. From a business perspective, having a second entry would have created both private and public access points to separate the spheres of the economic enterprise.

As expected, the size of publically used Ferneyhough's icehouse, as it is known, was much larger than the private Sentry Box icehouse. Ferneyhough's icehouse also likely had several access points for loading the product and selling ice, whereas the private Sentry Box icehouse only had two, as the need for separate product/customer entrances was not a requirement. The two also had different building materials. The use of brick to construct Ferneyhough's public business speaks to the utilitarian nature of this facility as compared to the carefully cleaved and intricately formed stone walls of the Sentry Box building. Masonry was a must for icehouse construction, but the choice of materials is a clear indicator of status and use. Interestingly, though, the two icehouses were abandoned around the same time—in the first decades of the 20th century. Upon disuse, the interiors of both deep spaces were filled with sand from the nearby river and household debris, creating time capsules of early 20th-century Fredericksburg life.

The Tumultuous 1860s

The Sentry Box, and surrounding land, were sold to Charlotte Thornton in 1859. Thornton, who also owned several nearby parcels, lived on the property with her grandson, Wiley Roy Mason, Jr., his wife Susan Gibbons Thornton, and their young daughter Margaret (Fredericksburg Tax Office 1859). Just two years later, Wiley Roy Mason placed an ad in the *Democratic Recorder* (1861: 1) announcing his intentions to sell the property: "Having determined to purchase under my place of business and offer for sale PRIVATELY ... THE SENTRY BOX, the former residence of the late Col. Hugh Mercer." According to the ad, among the property's various attributes were a large two-story main house and a diverse set of support buildings, including a detached kitchen, smokehouse, storeroom, washroom, servants' quarters, office, and a "Stone Walled-Ice House." Mason's plans to sell the property were soon abandoned with the onset of the Civil War (*Democratic Recorder* 1861:1).

As Captain W. Roy Mason, a courier on General Robert E. Lee's staff, Mason was living in the Sentry Box in the winter of 1862 when the war came abruptly and violently to the Fredericksburg area. Mason had been classmates and friends with Union general Ambrose Burnside (Haring 1990); this association took an ironic turn in 1862 when Burnside's army stormed past the Sentry Box during the Battle of Fredericksburg. Thousands of soldiers crossed the Rappahannock River at the middle pontoon bridge situated adjacent to the Sentry Box estate, moving westward up the hillside towards Marye's Heights and the Sunken Road beyond (Reilly 2006). Mason's home and outbuildings were riddled by bullets and cannon fire. According to one eyewitness: "We rode into the yard of Roy Mason's house, where formerly lived Hugh Mercer. ... The Sentry Box, as he prophetically called it, is riddled with shot and the grounds where Washington walked once with his friends are scored with rifle pits" (Chamberlayne 1932: 189).

The Ice Industry during the War

Many of the city's public and private icehouses were destroyed, abandoned, or repurposed in the wake of the intense fighting that

took place during the war. The icehouse at Federal Hill, for instance, was used as a temporary burial vault after the Battle of Fredericksburg. Hundreds of corpses were deposited within its walls to await a more formal reburial in the spring (Hennessy 2007). W. Roy Mason, Jr., commented on the Federal Hill interments himself (Mason 1887: 100–101):

That day I witnessed with pain the burial of many thousands of Federal dead that had fallen at Fredericksburg. The night before, the thermometer must have fallen to zero, and the bodies of the slain had frozen to the ground. The ground was frozen nearly a foot deep, and it was necessary to use pick-axes. Trenches were dug on the battle-field and the dead collected and laid in line for burial. It was a sad sight to see these brave soldiers thrown into the trenches, without even a blanket or a word of prayer, and the heavy clods thrown upon them; but the most sickening sight of all was when they threw the dead, some four or five hundred in number, into Wallace's empty ice-house, where they were found—a hecatomb of skeletons—after the war.

Although there is no written evidence that the Sentry Box icehouse was used for the temporary burial of Union soldiers, it is certainly possible. The facility was very close to the river and near the pontoon-bridge crossing where so many soldiers lost their lives. The deep, cool chasm would have made a very convenient and effective repository for their temporary interment. Here again, Mason's own words provide some important perspective on the situation. In his staff-officer's report on the events of that day, he describes the dead soldiers strewn across his property and his efforts to help bury several soldiers in a mass grave by the wharf (Moore 1887: 102):

I was told by the sergeant that Colonel Sumner had sent him to me to inquire as to the burial places of the Federal soldiers whom I had found dead upon my lot and in my house after the battle of Fredericksburg. I told him that I had found one Federal soldier stretched on one of my beds. In my parlor, lying on the floor, was another whose entire form left its imprint in blood on the floor,—as may be seen to this day. In my own chamber, sitting up in an old-fashioned easy-chair, I had found a Federal lieutenant-colonel. When I entered, I supposed him to be alive, as the back of his head was toward me. Much startled, I approached him, to find that he had been shot through the neck, and, probably, placed in that upright position

that he might better breathe. He was quite dead. I had all these bodies, and five or six others found in my yard, buried in one grave on the wharf. They had been killed, no doubt, by Barksdale's Mississippi brigade, in their retreat from my lot.

Mason's retelling does not, however, provide explicit details of the location of this grave. If the slain had indeed been placed in the Sentry Box icehouse, they were removed after the war and reburied in the newly established federal cemetery, like so many other interments across town.

Certainly not all icehouses were adapted as tombs. Other such facilities in Fredericksburg were partially destroyed by fire and/or so riddled with bullets that they were rendered unusable (O'Reilly 2006). Some were robbed of their building materials after the war to help rebuild homes lost during the fighting. In this war-torn community, shelter was likely viewed as a higher priority than ice.

Rebuilding "The Box"

As a result of damage incurred from shelling and gunfire during the First Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, the Sentry Box estate's complement of built elements had been reduced to just the main house and a detached kitchen. Shortly after the end of the war, W. Roy Mason, Jr., hired a local contractor to rebuild the house (*Fredericksburg Ledger* 1866: 3). A small, woodshed addition at the southeast corner of the main house was probably constructed at that time to address the lack of covered storage space—space formerly provided by the now-destroyed complex of outbuildings. This phase of construction also likely included the addition of a second story on the wood-frame detached kitchen that had stood for so long near the south end of the main house.

Mason and his wife, Susan, remained in residence until the 1880s, raising a family of 10 children. After Susan passed away in 1879, the Masons' daughter, Monimia Mason, became the Sentry Box's primary resident. The parcel was sold by the Mason family in 1887. A plat drawn at the time shows the numerous and significant changes that had occurred on the property as a result of changing financial conditions over the years and, of course, the

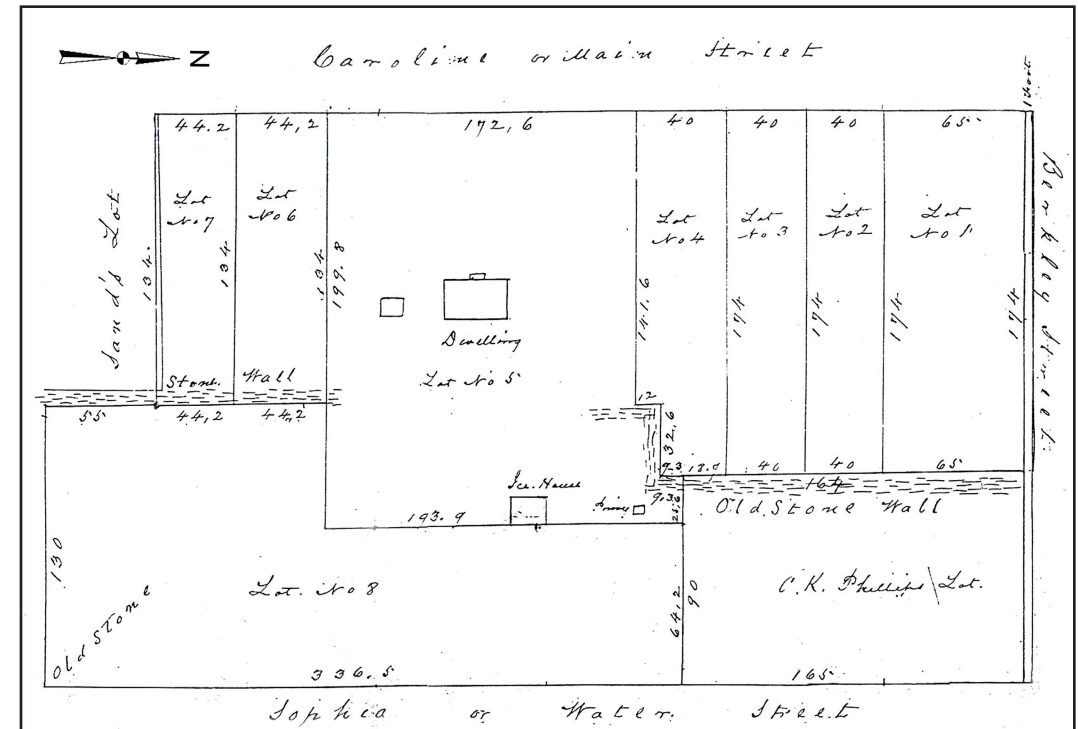


Figure 11. Plat of the Sentry Box property, ca. 1887 (Fredericksburg Circuit Court [1887]; modifications by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2020). Not to scale.

destruction incurred during the Civil War (FIG. 11) (Fredericksburg Circuit Court 1887). The 1887 plat map reveals several developments of note: one, the eastern portion of the lot along the river had been sold off after the Civil War; two, the dwelling/store along Water/Sophia Street was officially gone by 1887; three, the stone retaining wall still visible today on the east side of the property was likely constructed in the late 18th or early 19th century, as it is described as "old" on the plat; and four, several outbuildings had been reconstructed by this time, including the kitchen, the stone-lined icehouse, and a privy at the northeast corner of the property. Both the kitchen and icehouse had been reconstructed on their original foundations.

Ice Is Back

As the town recovered after the cessation of fighting, life slowly began returning to normal. The resumption of Fredericksburg's ice industry was one such "return to normalcy." In addition to a growing number of commercial ice ventures, some private home-

owners restored or built new icehouses for their personal use. Ice was cut from the Rappahannock River and brought on shore to fill the stone- or brick-lined vaults in which it would keep through the summer.

The reemergence of Fredericksburg's commercial ice industry continued during Reconstruction and into the later decades of the 19th century. An article published in the 17 January 1883 edition of the *Virginia Star* announced: "Messrs. Myer & Brulle, and Rowe & Co., have respectively filled the two large icehouses on Water Street. There is not a public or private icehouse in town now empty" (*Virginia Star* 1883: 3).

Dr. William Scott owned an icehouse near Tackett's Pond in nearby Stafford County in the late 1800s. Other owners/operators from this period included Colonel L. O. Magrath, Graham Howison, and Hay B. Hoomes. Another, William I. King, operated five large icehouses on Sophia Street in the 1890s (*Fredericksburg Star* 1899: 3). The contractor he hired to build them, George W. Wroten, was the same man W. Roy Mason, Jr., had con-

tracted to rebuild the Sentry Box in 1866 (*Fredericksburg Free Lance* 1891). Kenmore, another prominent historical property in Fredericksburg, had its own private icehouse, as confirmed by an 27 February 1922 article in the *Fredericksburg Star* that announced the rediscovery of this long-abandoned out-building (*Fredericksburg Star* 1922: 1).

From Trash Dump to Terraces

The subdivision and sale of the Sentry Box estate continued from 1887 through the 1910s. In June 1917, the house and what remained of the original property were sold to city councilman and local businessman George W. Heflin and his wife (*Fredericksburg Star* 1917: 3). Heflin ran the G. W. Heflin Stove House at 900 Caroline Street, one of the first businesses in town to offer steam heat and indoor plumbing. The Heflins completed several modifications to the main house, including a small addition on the east elevation, and orchestrated several significant landscape modifications—marking the Sentry Box property's final transformation from a somewhat remote estate on the outskirts of town to prominent downtown landmark.

In the mid- to late 1920s, the Heflin family oversaw the re-terracing of the property's east lawn, returning portions of the lot to their 18th-century appearance. The tri-level terrace configuration currently visible from the river was established at that time to approximate and emulate the look and feel of a colonial-period lawn. This substantial effort necessitated the removal of the stone icehouse that had stood in the east yard for over 100 years (FIG. 12). The upper sections of the stone wall were removed. Much of the interior was first filled with sand from the river and then topped by an infill of household refuse to create the flattened-terrace configuration visible today.

The Heflin's Trash Is Our Treasure

Archaeological testing conducted at the icehouse in the spring of 2008 uncovered thousands of artifacts dating to the Heflins' tenure of occupation, all purposefully deposited within the former building's stone-walled interior. All told, 3,640 artifacts were recovered from the eight test units. Such a large cache of household artifacts is common on domestic



Figure 12. The rear of the Sentry Box showing the 1920s terracing. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)



Figure 13. Lydia Pinkham medicine bottle found at the Sentry Box Icehouse site. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)

sites, especially those located in an urban setting in which daily life was regularly intermixed with continuous building and landscape maintenance (Barile et al. 2008).

In addition to the typical fragments of ceramics and architectural materials often encountered on such sites, many interesting Heflin-era bottles were also found during the excavations. A few of the more notable glass artifacts include a whole Davis Baking Powder bottle (ca. 1886) and several whole Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound bottles (FIG. 13). Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound originated as a folk herbal remedy developed by Mrs. Pinkham to cure women's ailments: "all those painful Complaints and Weaknesses so common to our best female population," i.e., mainly menopause and infertility (Smithsonian Institute 2020). When her husband faced bankruptcy in 1875, Mrs. Pinkham began advertising and selling her product as a means of support. Regarded as the first successful woman-owned business, Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound proved to have lasting and widespread popularity, perhaps due to the product's 20% alcohol content (ingender 2008). Sales of the vegetable com-

pound remained steady, particularly through the era of the temperance movement and Prohibition, but the newly created Food and Drug Administration demanded certain changes to the product's original recipe, which eventually led to declining sales. The recovery of numerous Pinkham's bottles in refuse deposits dating to the Prohibition period at the Sentry Box property would appear to offer strong support for early sales prior to the change in recipe.

Personal items recovered from the excavation reflect the lives of the Heflins as well as those who worked at the house (FIG. 14). Clothing-related objects included a pewter button, two brass buckles, a milk-glass button with four holes, and a button made of shell/mother of pearl. Another interesting clothing item recovered was a small garter or corset buckle from the Spirella Corsetry Company. Invented in America in 1904, the "Spirella" corset was named for the tightly wound spirals that replaced the rigid boning of previous corsets. Spirella corsets were first sold in London in 1910, and factories later began opening worldwide. Saleswomen fitted individual clients for the appropriate model of

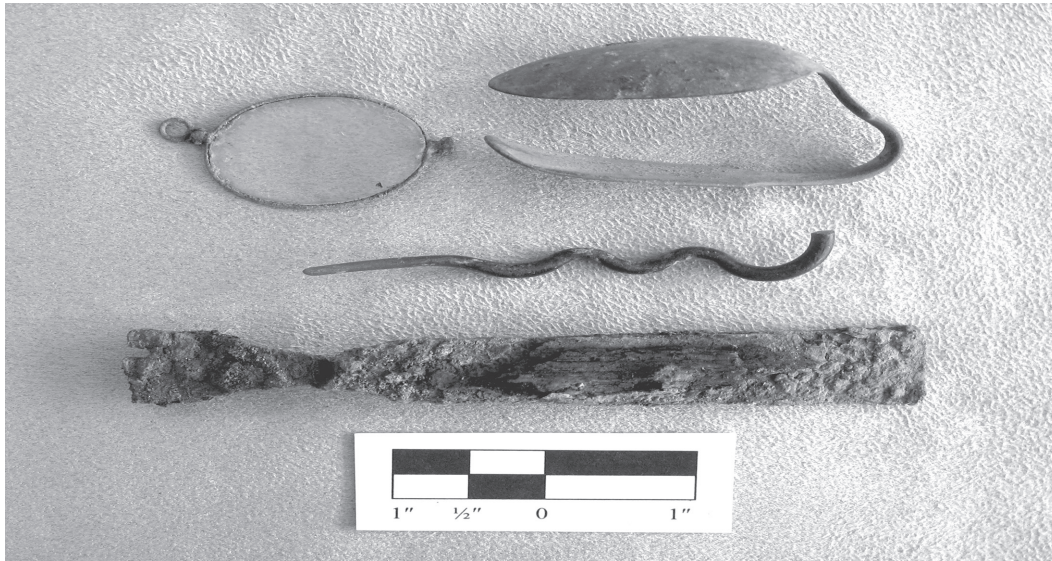


Figure 14. Personal artifacts from the Sentry Box Icehouse site, including (top to bottom) a section of eyeglass frame or a pince-nez, silver-plated spoon, Bakelite hair comb, and utensil handle. (Photo by Dovetail Cultural Resource Group, 2008.)

corset in their own homes and then delivered the finished product after required alterations had been made (Ivy Leaf's Tribute to the Corsetiere 2008). A variety of grooming instruments, including several Bakelite combs and hair pins, were also among the recovered assemblage.

Writing utensils comprised another significant portion of excavated materials, including graphite pencils and 20th-century pencil tips. Archaeologists also found a penny dating to 1920, a jewelry or watch fob, and part of an eyeglass frame with an intact lens. The only kitchen utensils found were a three-pronged, wooden-handled fork and a Roger's Brothers silver-plated spoon. Toys and munitions rounded out the personal artifacts category. A clay marble and a toy cap gun reflect the centuries-old preoccupations of a child's play. A much more dismal event, the Civil War, is also represented in the form of a Civil War-era .58 caliber bullet and a clay-pipe stem. These artifacts reflect the dichotomous nature of life at the Sentry Box and this area of Fredericksburg—ranging from the things of children's games and other routine aspects of day-to-day life on the river to the physical remnants of tragic violence and death experienced by soldiers and those who lived there during the Civil War.

Completion of the Colonial Revival Landscape

The yard terracing begun by the Heflins in the 1920s was completed less than a decade later. The end result reflected a colonial-revival aesthetic—a modern image of manicured lawns and landscape design derived from and configured in homage to the ordered symmetry of the once-grand and now long-faded colonial-era plantations. This interpretive return to the past produced the most ironic of effects—the obliteration of any visible trace of many of those built elements that had once embodied and defined the property's Palladian-inspired symmetry. Over time, grass would grow on the newly formed terraces, and the remains of outbuildings would be hidden beneath accreted layers of soil and vegetation. Conversely, though the Heflins orchestrated several major modifications to the landscape, they also helped maintain the visual connection to the riverfront that had become such an integral part of the Sentry Box mystique. Like Hugh Mercer, Jr.'s modifications, the Heflins' terraces served as a viewshed focal point in what continued to be one of the busiest areas of town.

In the early 20th century, the area along the river was gradually converted from a busy

shipping wharf to large-scale industrial landscape. Despite the shift, however, the area continued to serve as a focal point and backbone of Fredericksburg's economic development. At one time, near the present-day location of the City Dock, Standard Oil Company (later known as Esso) maintained two large storage tanks, a garage, a warehouse, and office building. An early gas plant was also located at the foot of Caroline Street, constructed to provide gas for streetlights (Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. 2014: 44). It was not until the middle of the 20th century that the industrial machine that had flourished for decades along the river's edge began to decline. Gradually the factories, storage tanks, and warehouses disappeared, and were replaced by open, grass-covered lots that became the park space visible today.

After 45 years of ownership, the Heflins finally sold the Sentry Box to a young couple, Charles G. and Mary Wynn McDaniel. The McDaniels, who continue in residence today, are now the latest stewards of the home and legacy built so long ago by General George Weedon and shaped over time by some of Fredericksburg's most prominent citizens. The property's successful listing on the Virginia Landmarks Registry in 1990 and the National Register of Historic Places in 1992 are testament to the vital significance of this history (Haring 1990). Although several once-extant outbuildings and former landscape features are no longer visible above ground, traces survive in archaeological deposits below.

Ice and the Sentry Box

The Sentry Box property is primarily known today for the architectural integrity and unique qualities of its main house and the historical importance of its inhabitants. The house and lot were owned or occupied by three notable American military figures—Hugh Mercer, George Weedon, and Hugh Weedon Mercer—all of whom who had a profound influence not only on Fredericksburg but also on the entire nation. The property was also ground zero during one of the most important and costly military engagements of the Civil War, having been nearly destroyed as a result.

The Sentry Box is not only one of the best examples of late Georgian/early Federal domestic architecture in this part of Virginia, but its story and the stories of those who lived there also encapsulate many important aspects of the Rappahannock River region's larger social and economic history. The evolution of this home and landscape largely reflects the growth of the surrounding area during the late 18th century, the town's prosperity experienced during the antebellum years, the significant and destructive physical impact of the Civil War on area buildings, and the region's physical rebirth in the postbellum era and early 20th century. What began as an archaeological investigation of a mysterious depression on the east lawn became an historical exploration of Fredericksburg's ice industry—showcasing both the highs and lows of necessity and invention, and of affluence and adversity, in this community.

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Author Information

Kerri S. Barile
President/Principal Investigator
Dovetail Cultural Resource Group
Fredericksburg, Virginia
kbarile@dovetailcrg.com

Sean P. Maroney
Independent scholar
spmaroney@gmail.com