

Using Traditional Methods, Stone Masons Defy Time

by BRIAN TROMPETER
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Viewed from a steep, narrow road in Markham, Va., the circa-1763 boyhood home of fourth U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall looks like any other weather-beaten farm building. The driftwood-gray boards of The Hollow are unpainted and rough to the touch, its tin roof is rusting everywhere and the whole shebang looks as though a stiff breeze might collapse it.

Edward Ashby, owner of Ashby Masonry Inc. in Marshall, Va., is determined that the building will survive. Working in concert with the nonprofit Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), Ashby is rebuilding the structure's stone foundation. APVA carpenter Mike Adams has jacked up the house, replaced three deteriorated wooden beams and made other repairs.

Northern Virginia's countryside is dotted with historic buildings hundreds of years old, some of which are in dire need of repair. Local stone masons are tasked with shoring up the old structures, using matching stones and historically authentic mortars.

"You have to have the right stonework with a house," Ashby said. "I hate to see a log cabin sitting on cinderblocks."

Stephen Veatch, owner of Rockwork Inc. in Marshall, Va., is among local masons who often eschew modern mortars and man-made "stones" in favor of traditional materials and methods.

Veatch, a Markham native who has practiced his trade for 19 years, said he has worked on everything from octagonal garden sheds, circular staircases and swimming pools to retaining walls and a thatched-roof garden shed.

"The clientele is memorable," he said. "They're so wealthy, they can do anything an architect can dream up. And you get to be a part of it."

Fast-curing modern mortars, such as Portland, are fine for stone veneer work, but clay/lime-putty-based versions are essential when rocks structurally underpin a building.

Mortar's strength is listed on a sliding scale, using the capital letters of a novel mnemonic device: MaSoNrY wOrK. M is the strongest mortar, K the weakest.

Both Ashby and Veatch lament the quality of available building stones, which sometimes are so hard they must be shaped with electric hammer drills and diamond-bladed saws.

Ashby prefers granite from West Virginia, but frequently must use poorer quality local rocks to match ones on the houses he repairs. Veatch likes to work with the local ironstone.

"It has so much iron core that when you hit it with a hammer, it rings," he said.

The Hollow represents a typical hall-and-parlor house of Virginia planter or gentleman who is rising in status, said Cheryl Shepherd of Millennium Preservation Services in Warrenton, who is overseeing Ashby's work. The



Mike Adams, left, and Edward Ashby work on stabilizing the circa-1763 boyhood home of Chief Justice John Marshall. The home is located in Markham.

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house, which had three heated rooms and two exterior-end chimneys, was finely finished with plaster on the interior, she said. Up to 13 people lived in the house at once.

Conservators will stabilize the house, which became askew over the decades thanks to pressure from a later-dismantled chimney.

The house was out of plumb by 15 3/4 inches, Shepherd said.

The initial stabilization phase, scheduled to be completed by Oct. 1, will cost about \$100,000, Shepherd said. The house will not be restored completely, but instead turned into a teaching laboratory where budding architectural historians can learn their trade, she said.

The house has had a metal roof for the past century or so, but originally had wooden shingles, Ashby said. Some of the structure was protected by a 75-year-old addition, which was removed in 1974, he said.

Since work on the house began in June, Ashby and his crew have discovered clay pipes, an old penny, lots of clay marbles, a worn hatchet and an aluminum railroad token at the site.

"It's been a fun project," Ashby said.



Edward Ashby mixes a clay/lime-putty mortar while shoring up the foundation of the circa-1763 boyhood home of Chief Justice John Marshall.