

Photos: Philip Beaurline



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The Sowell House

Rebuilding a Craftsman’s Abode

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Architects:

**Dalglish Eichman Gilpin & Paxton,
Charlottesville**

Built c.1822 by Pleasant Sowell, who was one of Albemarle County’s foremost furniture makers, this house underwent a series of changes as it passed down to his great-grandchildren. Abandoned in the 1920s and ravaged by weathering and vandalism, the house was relocated to a new site at Michie Tavern for use as an interpretive house museum depicting rural mid-19th century life.

The architects documented the structure on its original site in sketches and photographs, then supervised its removal by stone masons and other craftsmen who dismantled the house piece-by-piece, identifying each part by number. After grading the new site to resemble the original setting for the house, they rebuilt the structure to show visitors its evolutionary changes between the years 1822 and 1870. Areas of horsehair plaster and

lath were left exposed to view as a way of interpreting construction techniques of the period. The contractor, in addition, was able to locate second growth heart poplar for the replacement siding. Investigative analysis allowed for the restoration of original paint colors and the rebuilding of an original front porch and stair, which had long since disappeared.

The jury was impressed by how the construction of the house is explained to visitors by revealing details normally hidden behind solid walls. “As a learning device, it’s something you ordinarily wouldn’t see in a preservation project,” said one juror. Added another: “There’s a lot of sensitivity to the interpretation, the kind of didactic quality which you don’t normally see in historic preservation. This is really a wonderfully interpretive object. And it’s not prissied up.”

