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Source: *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. 8, People, Power, Places, (2000), pp. 201-218

Published by: Vernacular Architecture Forum

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3514414>

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Ann Smart Martin

Commercial Space as Consumption Arena: Retail Stores in Early Virginia

Becca, an enslaved woman, was found guilty of theft in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1807. Her story sets the scene for a new understanding of stores in early Virginia. Becca had entered a well-appointed store and asked to look at some lace in a show case on the counter. The storekeeper, William Ingles, unlocked the case and showed her several pieces. None suited her fancy, so he closed the case but did not lock it. She then asked to examine some bonnets high on a shelf behind him, which he turned to procure and handed down. None pleased her, and he left the room. As he returned into the store, he saw a piece of lace fall from “her Bosom or Some Where about her” onto the floor. Quickly recovering from her error, she picked it up and asked if the merchant “could sell her such a Bargain of Lace as that.” Ingles, seeing his mark on the lace, claimed she had stolen it.

Becca denied his charge, saying she had gotten it from another woman. To her poor fortune, her friend denied her story and the theft was charged.¹

An enslaved woman shopping for lace was not unusual. By the end of the eighteenth century, retail stores were semipublic arenas where a broad cross section of society—men and women, rich and poor, black and white—participated in a common act of consumption performance. What is remarkable in a society defined by formal stratification of class, race, ethnicity, and gender is that no group seemed to be systematically excluded from participating in the new world of goods by shopping at stores. Despite occasional rhetorical dismay and attempted legal boundaries, even blacks, the most fettered of all Virginians, crossed the store’s thresholds to buy and sell with regularity.²

This triangulation of merchant, customer, and artifact was continually redefined based on the performers, the setting of the stage, and its location in town or country. The richest matron and the poorest slave both faced a merchant across the counter in the store. Yet only one might be invited to the office to have tea. To be consumers, wives might be freed from husbands, slaves from masters, and girls from mothers. They then entered a distinct relationship—to the merchant, the market, and the world of goods. Even men stepped out of their more comfortable business identity to negotiate the vagaries of fashion and consumer choice. It is in this sense that stores were places where larger cultural paradigms are acted out and recast in new economic and social scenarios.

The store building's form and finishing both shaped and responded to these paradoxes of social action in commercial life. This chapter demonstrates how stores evolved in response to increasing consumer demands for new amenities and fashions by a broader cross section of the population. The needs of the merchant to display goods to entreat purchase and control them to prevent loss form one axis of his ability to succeed in business. The merchant's need to control access for some and to cultivate business for others is another. His larger purpose was to make money, and how he achieved that goal tells us much about the larger world of Virginia society.

By the end of the eighteenth century, retail stores were perhaps the most common nondomestic buildings on the Virginia landscape—in towns, at crossroads, or on plantations. With our rising scholarly interest in commerce and culture—consumerism as a cultural form and the economic shifts to capitalism—these buildings are gaining fresh interest as one of the most important institutions and places of everyday life. Historians have shown

a rising tide of household consumption in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; most of these new things were manufactured goods brought to the Chesapeake in exchange for the staple crop of tobacco.³

The provision of imported manufactured goods to seventeenth-century Virginians was problematic. There were few specialized places where goods were sold. More common may have been entrepreneurs who opened a pack of goods and hence carried on the trade. Wealthy planters also imported and sold a limited range of goods on their property. There were thus options for consumption, but probably few purpose-built structures with extensive choices. Several important factors changed the business climate after 1730. The Tobacco Inspection Act that year removed the onus of judgment from the merchant to the inspector. Greater population density enabled the regular stocking of goods on a year-round basis and changing business organization put full-time storekeepers or merchant partners on the ground to buy tobacco and sell goods. An important result of these changing business conditions was the building of retail stores as permanent structures at specified locations.

Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the single most important source for new consumer goods for most of the population was the local retail store. Like the village shops of England, these stores supplied the colonists with the common necessities and amenities of life. Such objects were usually purchased on credit, with payment made in crops, cash, or services. Because the wealthiest planters were most likely to use the consignment system of marketing—selling their own crops and obtaining goods on account in England—the patrons of local retail stores were usually lesser farmers who turned to the local storekeeper, often an agent of an English or Scottish firm. One Virginia

merchant wrote in 1767 that “the best customers a store can have” were “those people who have one or two h[ogsheads] to dispose of” and who wanted goods instead of cash.⁴ The demand of these customers was for local access to consumer goods in the latest styles at reasonable prices, and twice yearly it was customary for merchants to complete an extensive order of the goods necessary for the following season’s trade.

While the organizational details of these retail businesses differed, a common problem faced all merchants. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, too many merchants had made competition fierce and the selection of goods for sale became even more important. One merchant wrote with exasperation to his supplier that his success depended on the completion of his orders for goods “with dispatch, exactness and judgement in the choice of the goods.” They were to be particularly attentive to the “quality, collours, patterns and fashions.”⁵

As consumers became more particular about the kinds of things for sale, merchants also competed by providing better shopping experiences. Simply put, at the beginning of the eighteenth century having goods appropriate to the market was a basic predictor of a merchant’s success. A century later a merchant needed to store, display, and actively present a wide array of fashionable amenities and luxuries to assure patronage. Providing the appropriate consumption arena meant a fixed place of a recognizable form that controlled access and movement of customers but simultaneously allowed the powerful desires of consumption to unfold. A new stereotypical figure thus emerged: the man behind the counter, willing to please. By the end of the nineteenth century the department store could arise as consumption palace.

But many questions remain. We know little about the physical environs of shopping. Did men

and women jostle at a counter? Were objects for sale draped seductively about or enveloped tightly in wrappers? How did Virginia stores compare to the highly ornamented and sophisticated world of London shopping? How did Virginia structures evolve? What did it mean for a store to be “completely fitted up”?⁶

Vending consumer goods in Virginia responded to pragmatic difficulties of climate and slow stock turnover. While London trade cards and prints often show elegant displays, particularly of fabric bolts draped to display them at best advantage, Virginia stores may have kept much of their general goods covered to avoid devastating losses from insect, rodent, and moisture damage. For example, the inventory of goods in John Bates’s store in 1720 included fabrics and clothing items that had been eaten by rats or moths, and some druggist that had suffered from both. Some handkerchiefs were “spoiled and rotten.” It is in this context that we can further understand the reluctance of merchants to have too much stock left at the end of the season.⁷

Another problem was how to organize and keep sorted the myriad goods that filled these buildings. James Robinson advised John Turner always to keep his goods in “proper order,” adding that it will help them sell. He urged Turner to take them down often and retie them, presumably in papers.⁸ Norfolk merchant Henry Fleming also complained about an assortment of poorly made gloves that he and his assistants are “frequently called upon to shew them & hitherto have had as often the trouble of putting them up again.”⁹ Taking down items from shelves, returning them, and putting them back in order was the heart of a hypothetical scene between a shopping lady and mercer where she tested his patience by having him “tumble” several thousand pounds of goods from shelves for her viewing.¹⁰

Nonetheless, the solution of the polarities of security/access and storage/active display evolved over the course of the eighteenth century. Three extant inventories of store goods, two with accompanying plan or room size, are rare evidence of the detail of goods, their organization, and location. In combination, they can help assess change over time and differences in rural and urban stores. Increasing consumer desires were demonstrated as the axis tilted toward organized goods and display, a process that was accelerated in urban situations.

The first clue can be found in a Virginia probate inventory of 1728. The appraisers of Richard Walker's store in rural Middlesex County in 1728 carefully listed the goods for sale and defined seven spaces by name: "Store loft, below stairs, under the shelves on the floor, lower floor, middle floor, new house, and dwelling house." The goods were mainly stored *in something*; containers for small items shipped in quantity (a cask of nails, for instance) or a jumble of goods in a chest, crate, or barrel. In the loft were two trunks, three chests, two barrels, and seven boxes of assorted goods. One shelf was listed separately holding hose, hats, and eight pieces of fabric. "Under the shelves on the floor" were numerous books, shoes, ironmongery (tools and small metal goods), and small items like beads and spectacles. In a box on the floor was a jumble of stoneware, glass, marking irons, combs, needles, pewter, sugar, and books. In the "New House" was an assortment of tools and other metal wares, such as chaffing dishes and engineer rules, and a hogshhead of ship bread. Along with the heavy iron objects were two boxes of pipes, earthen chamber pots, punch bowls, and other ceramics not contained or packed in any box. In the dwelling house were scattered dozens of pairs of hose and gloves, pins and primers. The overall picture is one of chaotic combinations of objects and spaces.¹¹

This early-eighteenth-century rural store can be compared with John Hook's in rural Franklin County seventy-five years later. A detailed 1801 inventory taken by court commissioners combined with a standing structure gives some of our best evidence of how goods were organized and displayed in rural Virginia stores at the end of the eighteenth century.¹² No shelving remains in the extant fifteen-by-twenty-foot storeroom, but a shelving plan is extant from the same merchant a decade earlier (fig. 11.1). Ten pigeonholes were well filled with different sized buttons, and there were 124 papers of different kinds. Two holes contained razors; others were filled with an extraordinary array of small consumer goods, from knives and forks to ribbons, nearly all wrapped in paper. Elsewhere around the store were barrels of ginger, brimstone, shot, and pepper, casks of brandy and whiskey, even an anvil. Breakable items were nearly all in trunks, such as the forty-one different sizes of looking glasses or the glass goblets, decanters, and vials. Creamware was packed in three crates, window glass in two boxes. But the textiles were all listed separately, as were individual books and household goods, such as pewter, tin, and iron. This suggests, albeit tentatively, that those items may not have been boxed but stacked on shelves or hung in relative proximity to each other. On the counter may have been the two pair of small brass scales and weights next to a few pounds of tea and indigo. Nearby may have been the barrels of brimstone, pepper, and shot that would have been measured. Boxes of chocolate, bags of ginger, and bladders of putty may have been on shelves near barrels of copperas or brown sugar, seed cotton in bags, bushels of salt, chests of tea, and tin candle boxes full of candles.

The snapshot of the contents of this store is remarkably different from the jumble seen at Rich-

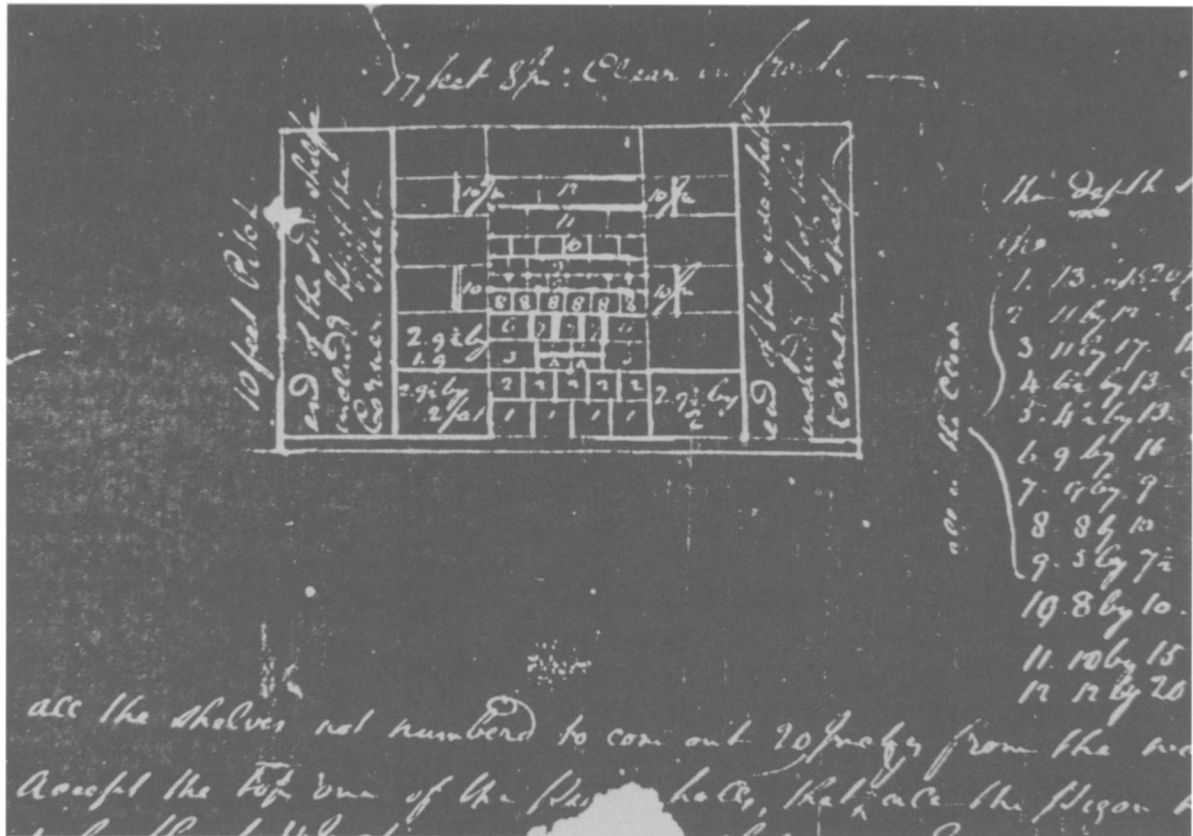


Fig. 11.1. Shelving plan from John Hook's 1771 store. Original Hook store drawings, New London, Bedford County, Virginia. John Hook Papers, undated. Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

ard Walker's store in 1728. While barrels and boxes still probably lined the walls, the picture here is one of relative order. Small consumer goods were stored in pigeon holes, and breakable items were packed together. It is not clear how the immense array of fabrics were stored or displayed, but they were also listed in a distinct and organized way.

Urban store goods at the end of the eighteenth century were even more carefully organized and displayed. William Parrott's Richmond estate inventory in 1798 also remarkably listed the goods on the

shelves and can be combined with a Mutual Assurance Society plat recorded less than a year earlier.¹³ At thirty by twenty feet, the storeroom was larger than John Hook's. Shelves completely lined two walls and at least a part of another. The inventory takers moved through the space, first recording large quantities of alcohol in casks. Shelves on the east wall were filled with carefully grouped grocery items, followed by textiles and clothing. The far end of those shelves and the south and west wall shelves were stacked with less expensive and breakable ceramics

and glassware. On the floor on the west side were bushels and barrels of foodstuffs, like corn, salt, potatoes, and preserved fish. Shelving continued in the front two windows, and one was stacked with glass plates. An ancillary lumber house contained large quantities of alcohol, another sacks of salt and barrels of corn.

These three inventories show the evolution of spaces with specialized architectural fittings, like shelves and pigeonholes. They also demonstrate the increasing wish to display goods in an orderly way in rural stores. If some objects remained in shipping crates in late-eighteenth-century rural stores, gone is the sense of jumble and chaos. In urban stores the need to display, not just store, was perhaps even stronger. Ceramics and other breakables were still in boxes in Hook's rural establishment, but they were stacked in view in William Parrot's store. Shelving, too, continued in the front windows to entice the customer from the street. Shopping was still hardly self-service, as the merchant worked hard to protect (from eager rodents or sticky fingers), show, and sell. Nonetheless, the duality of display and protection had begun to shift.

The buildings themselves give further evidence of the importance of wooing yet controlling customers. Before the second quarter of the nineteenth century most Virginia stores employed the same vocabulary as domestic dwellings. Some standing stores moved from dwellings to stores and vice versa, and eighteenth-century property sellers sometimes hinted that stores could be transformed to dwellings at small expense. Like houses, their size varied greatly, depending on wealth, location, and the wish of merchants to impress. Interior space on the first floor ranged from 300 to more than 1,000 square feet. Within those walls, a store and a counting room or office were the norm with occasional additional spaces and ancillary buildings for other uses.¹⁴

While these two basic units were most common, the placement of the rooms on the lot, alignment to street, addition of other rooms, and location of doors and windows differed. One simple organizing plan predominated. In one version, seen here in the Prentis store in Williamsburg, the gable end faced a street: a large room served as the store, with the counting room or office behind it (fig. 11.2). The most salient feature is the fenestration: the placement of windows and doors easily identified purpose-built store structures. A door and flanking windows pierced the gable end. If there was storage upstairs, a hoist and door might enable easy loading. Windows clustered toward the back of the side wall, lighting the back of the store and the office. A broad uninterrupted wall space allowed for continuous shelving, even if it left an asymmetrical facade. In a second example illustrated by the John Hook store, the building's long side faced a street and the two rooms stood side by side, often with two doors on the street. This allowed access to carry out business in the office, even if the storeroom remained locked. The need for long uninterrupted continuous shelving still affected the placement of doors and windows (fig. 11.3).

The heart of the building was the main storeroom. It was often square or nearly square and ranged in size from about 200 square feet (16 by 14 feet, for example) to almost 500 square feet. Typical are the drawings for John Hook's store in New London from 1772 (fig. 11.4).

The long side of his 42-by-20-foot building faced onto the street on his two-acre lot. On the ground floor were a store, counting room, and a storage room that Hook may have referred to as the "lumber room." The storeroom was 20 by 20 feet with a 2-foot-10-inch-wide counter nearly bisecting the room on its east-west axis. On the street side (to the south) was a door and two windows; the facing wall—behind the counter—was lined



Fig. 11.2. Prentis and Company Store, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1739. Photograph by author.

with thirteen shelves and forty-nine small pigeon holes, ranging from 4.5 by 13 inches to 13 by 20 inches (fig. 11.1). A door on the east wall to the storage room was on the public (south) side of the counter; the door on the west wall to the counting room was behind the counter, thus controlling public access. Under the counter were three tiers of cross-divided drawers, including a cash drawer. This structure no longer exists, but its appearance was probably similar to that of the Farish Print Shop on King Street in Port Royal, Caroline County, which has a quite similar plan and size (fig. 11.5).¹⁵

Several discrete zones split the storeroom; one for customers, the other for the merchant. The counter and shelves framed the merchant's world. Although a table or desk could serve a similar func-



Fig. 11.3. John Hook Store, Franklin County, Virginia, c. 1784. Photograph by author.

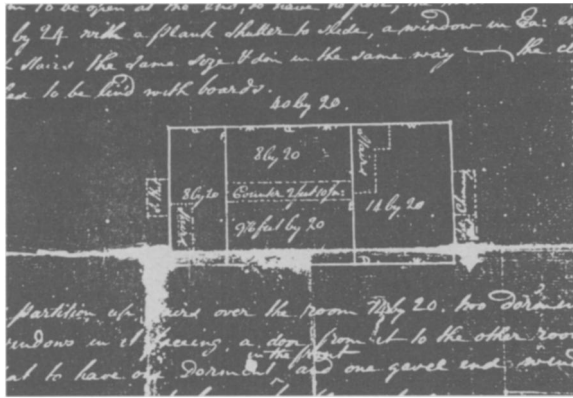


Fig. 11.4. Plan of building. Original Hook store drawings, New London, Bedford County, Virginia. John Hook Papers, undated, probably 1771. Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.



Fig. 11.5. Farish Print Shop, Port Royal, Caroline County, Virginia. Photograph by author.

tion, the counter emerged as the standard surface for writing, measuring, and displaying goods. On the counter, bundles were unwrapped, goods shown and handled, and money weighed. The propensity for small items to disappear from open counter displays can be seen by the small glass cases

increasingly for sale. The most specialized stores included glass casing, such as the “three mahogany counters, with glass fronts, fit for a jeweller’s shop” advertised in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1803.¹⁶ Drawers underneath counters also allowed control of goods and money. Finally, the counter served as a barrier over which a thief must reach to acquire his or her prize. The counter thus not only demarcated a physical space but a symbolic zone as well. The poem “The Village Merchant” published in 1792 contains the long travails of a young farmer’s plan to become a merchant, although he speaks with pride of a counter “behind whose breast-work none but he might stand.” Only a “brother merchant from some other place” could broach his place of honor.¹⁷ “Life behind the counter” became a catch phrase for a shopkeeper’s career (fig. 11.6).

Few standing stores contain their original shelving and trim. The White Store in Isle of Wight County probably dates to the middle of the eighteenth century, and an elaborate system of pigeonholes and shelves covered the entire back wall. The store at Marmion Plantation in King William County is another early surviving example, and its construction date probably closely followed mid-eighteenth-century house construction (figs. 11.7, 11.8). The storeroom was sheathed with unpainted vertical boards (as was common) and the walls capped with crown molding. A waist-high shelf on brackets still lines the side wall. Ghost lines there also indicate the presence of shelves, and the missing shelf and brackets lie in a pile of lumber in the corner. Nails and hooks above the shelf indicate that other items were probably hung for easy viewing (fig. 11.9). Another set of hooks of unfinished (bark-covered) wood clustered in the southeast corner of the store at six feet high and approximately two-foot intervals. Next to each hook was

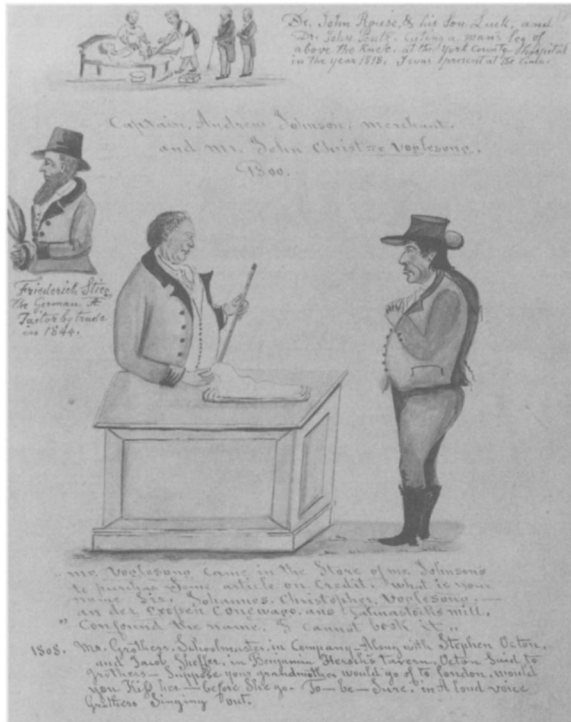


Fig. 11.6. “Captain Andrew Johnson, Merchant,” Lewis Miller (1796–1882) Sketchbook. Courtesy, The Historical Society of York County, Pennsylvania.

a large wrought-iron nail. A second set of wrought spikes was probably placed in the eastern wall later in the century. While it is unclear what hung from these large spikes, nails, and hooks, we might imagine a zone of larger agricultural tools, implements, hanging ropes, and saddlery items. The Marmion store also allows us to see other probable zones of storage; the northeast corner, for example, had no shelves or hooks but may have had a place for larger containers and hogsheads. Indeed, in that corner can still be found a packing crate of southern pine with wrought-iron hardware of probable eighteenth-century origin. The counter was likely removed along with the original floor, making its

placement conjectural; but it undoubtedly fronted the shelves, dividing the space on its north-south access. Defining features of rural storerooms are sheathed walls, exposed joist ceilings, shelving and a counter, and a lack of any form of heating.

While no original interiors for urban stores have been located, urban plans were often more refined. The Langley Store in Washington at the end of the century was on a street corner and included a large window flanked with colonnades or pilasters over cellar caps on each street providing two directions of lighting into the storeroom. The semicircular shelves below the windows could be used to display objects to passers-by. Inside, a long counter sided on one window with shelving on the two opposite walls.

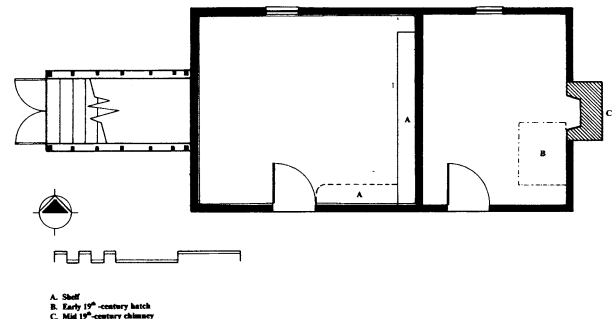
Stores (like other commercial structures such as taverns) were paradoxical spaces, privately owned but open to the public. Nonetheless, like churches and courthouses in colonial Virginia, architectural fittings defined zones of exclusion. A patron only advanced to the middle of the room to be stopped by the counter; only his or her gaze could travel ahead and sometimes around. This more exclusionary zone in courthouses and churches is often marked by railings and contains the symbolic elements of the power of church and state. In commercial enterprises like stores, the demarcated power is the world of goods.

The other major room in store buildings was the office or counting room, where the merchant tended books and entertained customers. The higher level of architectural finishing suggests a different kind of space than the storeroom. These counting rooms were most often finished like a domestic interior; walls were most likely lathed and plastered, with chair boards and washboards. Some were papered. They were also heated and may have been quite well furnished. The presence of chairs,



Fig. 11.7. Store at Marmion Plantation, King George County, Virginia. Photograph by author.

Fig. 11.8. Plan of store at Marmion Plantation. Measured by Carl Lounsbury and author. Drawing by Carl Lounsbury.



drinking vessels, and tea equipment demonstrate the entertainment necessary in the wooing of customers. Indeed, James Robinson urged a new storekeeper to give “all good usage and drink in abundance.”¹⁸ Access to this room was carefully arranged. There was often a separate public entrance from the street so that the storeroom could remain locked if the merchant withdrew. In other cases, the counting room could only be entered through a door behind the counter in the store-

room. A set of stairs could lead upward for storage or living space for assistants.

The counting house of the Alexandria firm of Hooe and Harrison contained desks, tables, chairs, scales, money chests, and a bed. All the equipment for writing was there: quires of paper, ink bottles,

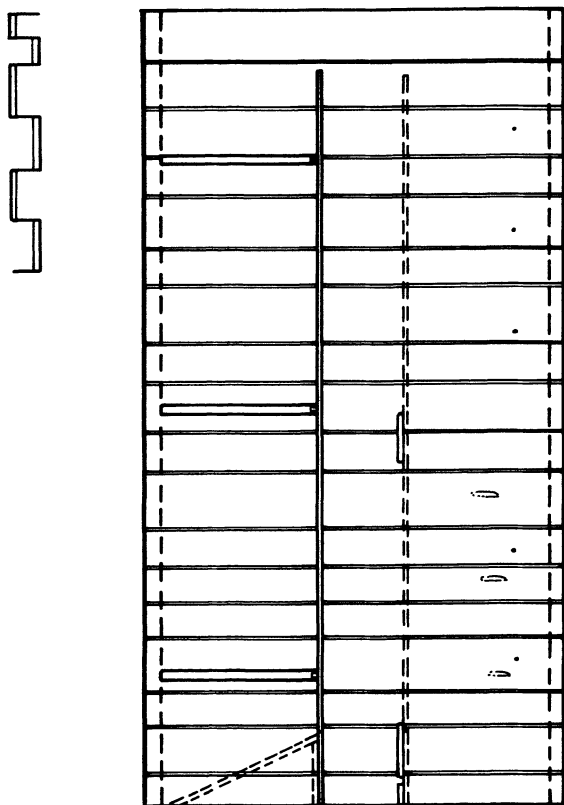


Fig. 11.9. Interior elevation of east wall shelving, Store at Marmion Plantation. Measured by Carl Lounsbury and author. Drawing by Carl Lounsbury.

lead pencils, Dutch quills, paper cutters, seals, and, of course, the set of books for the firm. The merchant could consult several published treatises on trade and law, reading late at night with the aid of the “compting House Candlesticks” (valued at an extraordinary seventy-five pounds) or by the light of the fire. When tired, he could stretch out on his bed, put his head on his pillow, pull up his sheets and blankets, and enjoy a good night’s rest.¹⁹

Other ancillary structures and spaces completed the store’s setting. Some merchants had a need for (and could afford) extra storage and sleeping for

shopkeepers, apprentices, or slaves, hence the added extra rooms on the first or second floor. Clerks often slept on the premises for security, usually upstairs or in the office. The Syme store in Newcastle included a “bedroom” as well as a counting room. Back shedding was not uncommon. Others added stables, warehouses, granaries, and log houses for storage of goods and the reception of slaves for sale. On more elaborate sites, two stores were built, one to accommodate dry goods, the other for liquors and bulky wholesale items. Underlying the use of space in all these commercial establishments was a basic need to store, unpack, and/or display goods (both wet and dry), keep books, conduct business, entertain important clients, and receive slaves or other servants on errands.

Urban plans also often combined domestic space for the merchant and his family with store space for goods. For instance, the Dudley Digges store in Yorktown was advertised in 1754 as a “commodious Brick store-house which has necessary Apartments for private family.”²⁰ But how the commercial and private spaces were combined is less clear. One option for providing domestic space was to include a side passage or alley to allow access to a back or side entry to an upstairs living space. Another was to provide a second block with side entrance leading to a stair passage. The plan of the Langley Store shows how stores were combined with dwelling houses and multiple outbuildings on urban lots. The door opened out on the corner of South Capitol Street and South N Street, allowing access from two directions. The counting room was heated with access from the storeroom. A commodious parlor lay behind with a separate entrance onto a stair passage; the other living spaces lay overhead. A kitchen behind faced a fenced courtyard with a

large warehouse with gable entrance (fig. 11.10).²¹ William Parrott's two-story structure also combined domestic and commercial space. A one-story structure on the site by 1796 was occupied as a grocery; by 1798 it had been expanded to a two-story building with a one-story back counting room. Entrance to the upper floor was probably through a side entrance into a back passage with staircase. Upstairs were a back chamber and a well-finished front parlor. The garret contained more sleeping space.

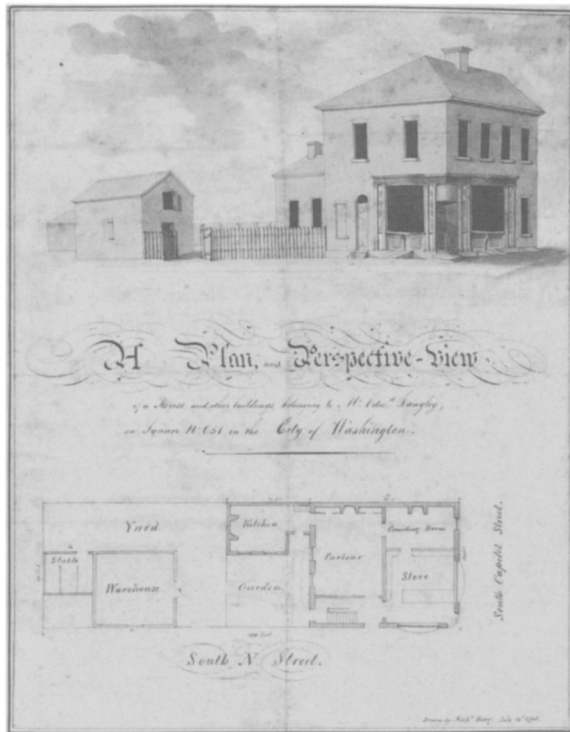


Fig. 11.10. “A Plan and Perspective-View of a House, and other Buildings, belonging to Mr. Edward Langley, on Square No. 651 in the City of Washington” by Nicholas King, July 14, 1798. Courtesy of Winterthur Library, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.

While the Parrott store was rebuilt to add domestic space, other stores were renovated as their ownership evolved from commercial to domestic.²² The Spooner store in Fredericksburg was built as a house and a store for the lot owner's daughter and her new husband, the merchant and shipping agent George Spooner (fig. 11.11). Two years later the family relocated, and Spooner listed the structure for sale the following year as a “well finished two story House with a passage, two rooms, and a store on the first floor; and a passage and three rooms on the second floor, a cellar under the whole house.” The lot included “every necessary outbuilding, with a well-enclosed garden.” The store was home to different tenants and changed hands repeatedly in the next forty years. A second merchant purchased it and ran a store in 1803; after his death in 1811 the building was reconverted to a dwelling for his widow, and later their married daughter. It would not return to its commercial function until 1835, when it was used as a grocery, but probably for only the next two years. From 1796 to 1835 it can be precisely documented as a store for eight years, run by three different merchants. Its owners also had other commercial interests, from auctions to taverns, some of which may have been carried on in that building.²³

This cycle—from store to dwelling and dwelling to store—makes analysis of its current plan even more difficult (fig. 11.12). Renovations have obliterated some of the important original fabric necessary to discern precise changes in plan. Of special interest, however, are the ghost lines of shelves on boxed and beaded ceiling joists, with traces of original blue paint on the north wall of the front room. It is likely that the front room was unheated and the current fireplace added in the early nineteenth century, when the store was converted to a dwelling. A partition may then have been added and later removed. The door to Caroline Street prob-



Fig. 11.11. Spooner Store, 1794, Fredericksburg, Virginia. Photograph by author.

ably entered at the center of the room. The advertisement for two rooms and a store on the first floor in 1799 is perplexing but suggest that the back room may have been divided into two spaces, one for business (counting room) and one for family use (parlor). Upstairs was a second commodious room that may have served as another formal living space, as it was more highly finished than the other chambers.

Urban stores continued to evolve plans to accommodate family residence with commercial use. Again, issues of security and access arise. On the one hand, living space on the first floor meant that merchants could join family at meals while keeping the store open and available.²⁴ On the other hand, arrangement of landscape and domestic space to enable access only to appropriate parties

was a continuing concern of Virginia's hierarchical society.²⁵ William Parrot may have solved this by moving family space upstairs while providing downstairs sleeping space for a hired clerk, as expressed by the bed and gun in the back counting room. Thus, amongst all the shifts in plan to accommodate family residence, office space for the merchant, and outbuildings and cellars for storage, the storeroom remained the central core from which decisions flowed.

The combined architectural and documentary evidence helps provide a detailed analysis of the environment of shopping. The ordinary consumer confronted a building to the scale of a large dwelling; the storeroom itself may have matched the size of many Virginia dwellings.²⁶ It was constructed in a conventional plan of several rooms designed to con-

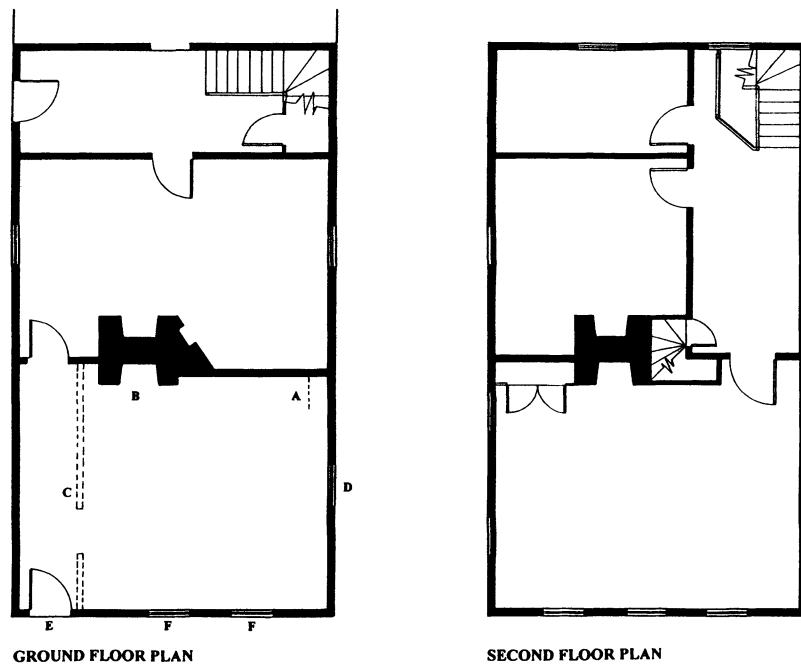


Fig. 11.12. Plan of Spooner Store, 1794, Fredericksburg, Virginia. Measured by Gary Stanton, Carl Lounsbury, and author. Drawing by Carl Lounsbury.

trol their access to goods through the use of doors and counters. Light came nearly all from one wall; thus the store may have been relatively dark, and we might imagine the merchant pulling items from the shelves behind the counter and carrying them to the better-lit side of the room on cloudy days. The store-room was not heated; a customer could have been invited into the warm counting room, which was architecturally finished to the standard of a good dwelling. Merchant and consumer could have sat, socialized, or haggled. At the same time, even if a customer did not have complete access, goods were stacked enticingly around the store. While many remained wrapped in paper or stored in large hogsheads, boxes, or other containers, a large number of items may have been on shelves in plain view.

Combining this evidence suggests that Virginia stores, like Virginia dwellings, represented a broad range of options. Some, especially rural stores, may have been little more than shelters for the valuable stock of goods inside. Increasingly, however, the structure itself came to be a large investment for a merchant; the store and its related buildings ranged in value from £300 to £1,000. The size and interior finishing of these stores reflect permanency and year-round use, but also a need to store and display a vast range of consumer goods to suggest both order and fashion. Important business clients had to be entertained with drinking and treating, and in most cases storekeepers, clerks, or slaves needed housing. A number of supporting ancillary structures may have given the store a look of a little plantation.

Moreover, the most important point might be that by the third quarter of the eighteenth century these stores were often only that: a single-function building where goods were stored, displayed, sold, and traded in a standardized setting. That specialization of place means that the act of consumption was something distinctive, defined by action and reinforced by space. The store building for many Virginians was as defining a place on the landscape as house, church, tavern, and courthouse. Behind those doors a whole world was inside—a world of color and fashion, hard-nosed bargaining, and impulse decisions.

Between 1750 and 1830 market economics and consumer demand shifted massively throughout the Western world. Retail stores stocked more and different goods to please more and different people. The ability of consumers to see and touch and handle new things further released new desires. Nonetheless, *how* Virginia stores evolved as specific shopping environments tells about the particular economy that produced them and the society that frequented them. Virginia merchants relied mainly on imported manufactured goods in exchange for agricultural products, and as the economy diverged from a reliance on tobacco to a more diverse market economy more petty entrepreneurs arose. Merchants could no longer, at face value, judge a customer's ability to pay. As more people of differing classes, races, and genders wanted ribbons and teapots, stores changed to serve them. The need to display goods to entreat purchase and control them to prevent loss, to allow access for people on the economy's margins, and to court patronage for the well heeled continued to guide merchants' actions in how they allowed the consumption performance to unfold. That slaves bought ribbons did not release them from bondage; that women bought teapots did not

make the legal or household structure less paternal. These actions, nonetheless, created new social performances in an economic setting. Thus the dialectic of stage and performance continued to evolve. Changes in form and fitting were incremental, but together they began to create an environment that encouraged shopping as leisure. As the nineteenth century progressed, purveyors of the world of goods continued to peel back the skin of the building, insert multiple large windows filled with commodities to lure the customer, and add heating and lighting. A Virginia girl's diary in 1836 describes repeated visits to local stores to see the new goods and ogle the neighborhood young men. One day a large group dallied for several hours in a store, then one more hour in another. On another visit, a merchant treated them with almonds and candy.²⁷ This was shopping as entertainment, the new triangulation between merchant, customer, and consumer goods at the new local store.

Notes

1. Examination of Becca, a slave the property of Robert Nicholson, July 23, 1807, Petersburg City Hustings Court Minute Book 4, 1800–1807, n.p. My thanks to Mick Nichols, who generously shared records of this and other store thefts.
2. For analysis of slave purchases at Virginia stores, see Ann Smart Martin, "Complex Commodities: The Enslaved as Producers and Consumers in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" (paper presented at the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Annual Conference, Winston-Salem, June 1997), and John T. Schlotterbeck, "Internal Economy of Slavery in Rural Piedmont Virginia," in *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (Portland, Oreg.: Frank Cass and Co., 1991), 176.

3. The literature on consumerism in the eighteenth century is growing rapidly and cannot adequately be summarized here. A good place to start is Cary Carson, Ron Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Desires: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1996). Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982). T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicanization of Colonial America, 1690–1776," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (October 1986). Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). For a summary of the literature on consumerism from the view of the consumer goods, see Ann Smart Martin, "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework," *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 2–3 (summer/autumn 1993): 141–57.
4. James Robinson to Bennett Price, Oct. 7, 1767, in *A Scottish Firm in Virginia, 1767–77*, ed. T. M. Devine (London: Clark Constable, 1982), 2.
5. John Hook to Walter Chambre, Dec. 28, 1773, Letter Book 1763–84, 1796, 1797, n.d. Virginia State Library, Richmond.
6. Property sale advertisement of Theodorick Bland in Prince George County; *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), July 23, 1767.
7. Inventory of the Estate of John Bates, Merchant. Goods in Poplar Spring Storehouse, June 10, 1720. York County Order and Will Book 15, 1716–20. Johnathan Newell's store inventory from 1672 included coarse men's castor hats "eaten with the Ratts around the Brims"; a dozen women's castors, some "damnified"; and "4 dozen and 4 Ratt eaten Cabbage Nets"; Feb. 29, 1671–72, York County Deeds, Orders, and Wills 6, 1677–84.
8. James Robinson to John Turner, Apr. 22, 1769, in T. M. Devine, ed., *A Scottish Firm in Virginia, 1767–77* (Edinburgh: Clark Constable, 1982), 12.
9. Henry Fleming to Fischer and Bragg, July 29, 1774, Fleming Letterbook, 1772–75, Cumbria County Council Archives Department, Microfilm, CWF.
10. Daniel Defoe, *The Compleat English Tradesman [1727]* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969), 68.
11. Inventory of Richard Walker, Mar. 7, 1728, Middlesex County Will Book B: 1714–34, 335–43. Walker's total estate (including personal goods) was valued at over £1,300.
12. "Inventory of John Hook's property relieved by the Supersedens issued from the High Court of Chancery, sworn 16 January 1802, Ross. vs. Hook, Chancery Court of Virginia." Microfilm, Special Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University.
13. Inventory of William Parrott, Jan. 8, 1798, Richmond City Hustings Court Deed Book 2, 1792–96, 391–95. Mutual Assurance Society, vol. 13, no. 297, reel 2. Both documents found at the Library of Virginia.
14. An earlier version of this analysis can be found in Ann Smart Martin, "Buying into the World of Goods: Consumerism and the Retail Trade from London to the Virginia Backcountry" (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1993). The database for this expanded study comes from multiple sources with help from many: Architectural plans of rural stores from the Agricultural Buildings Project, Colonial Williamsburg, early 1980s, partially summarized in Edward A. Chappell, "Architectural Recording and the Open-Air Museum: A View from the Field," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri

- Press, 1986), 35–36. Williamsburg’s four important standing stores are detailed in Donna Hole, “Williamsburg’s Four Original Stores: An Architectural Analysis,” Colonial Williamsburg Research Report Series 188, 1980. The author has examined eight additional stores in Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Falmouth, and the counties of Franklin, Prince George, and King George. Camille Wells culled nearly two hundred store advertisements in her study of the *Virginia Gazette*, and I thank her for sharing that information. From that database and with additional evidence from newspapers, court cases, insurance records, and merchant records, the size of more than twenty additional stores were documented. Willie Graham, Gary Stanton, and especially Carl Lounsbury have been wonderful partners in fieldwork and all have shared information with enthusiasm and have taught me new ways to look and think. Mick Nichols generously shared his urban court documents, including the Petersburg thefts and William Parrot’s store inventory. The combination of documentary and field evidence recorded details of Virginia stores spanning from about 1740 to 1830.
15. For a brief description of the Farish Print Shop, see Ralph Emmett Fall, *Hidden Village: Port Royal Virginia, 1744–1981* (Verona, Va.: McClure Printing, 1982). The Farish shop has one less dormer window for lighting the upstairs storage area, and the office and storage area are of slightly different dimensions. The chimney is also placed differently. Overall, however, the forty-by-twenty-foot size, organization of space, and the fenestration of the first floor are remarkably similar; Hook even mistakenly wrote the dimensions forty by twenty on his plan, although the room dimensions added up to forty-two by twenty. The structure may have been used as a tavern in the late eighteenth century. Port Royal, like New London, was also a small mercantile town, home to five or six Scottish merchants and about twenty or thirty houses in 1775, although it lay on navigable water. Robert Honeyman, *Colonial Panorama 1775: Dr. Robert Honeyman’s Journal for March and April*, ed. Phillip Padelford (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 1.
 16. *Charleston Courier*, Jan. 14, 1803. The ultimate solution to the merchant’s dilemma—the competing pressures for control and display—was thus found in a relatively small material culture innovation. The small glass case on the counter from which Becca the enslaved woman could pilfer some lace might only be expanded to counter size at large expense, justified by the value of the jewelry for sale within. With changing technology, glass could be made in larger sheets and at a smaller price. The same process that enabled larger shop windows was used to address the continual problem of theft, dirt, and order. By the later nineteenth century, glass counters were advertised as a means to promote viewing (and consumer desire) and prevent shoplifting (seemingly rampant when goods were left unguarded on counters).
- These glass cases were promoted at the end of the nineteenth century as allowing the customer to see (hence saving the merchant’s time in handing down goods that did not suit) and keeping goods clean (from dust and too much handling). The most important theme throughout advertisements for these store fittings was that “goods can be displayed without risk from the nimble fingers of the shoplifter” (78). These three themes were the heart of the eighteenth-century merchant’s dilemma, although later nineteenth-century thievery seemed to have turned from the more marginal part of society to middle-class women. Elaine Abelson ultimately argues it is

- the consumption palace that released consumer desire, sometimes in ways that could not be controlled by the individual; “*When Ladies Go A-Thieving*” *Middle-Class Shopkeepers in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
17. Judith R. Hiltner, *The Newspaper Verse of Philip Freneau: An Edition and Bibliographical Survey* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitson, 1986), 487. Thanks to Vanessa Patrick for this reference.
 18. James Robinson to John Turner, Oct. 4, 1768, in Devine, *Scottish Firm*, 11.
 19. “Inventory of Household and Other Furniture on hand belonging to the Concern of Hooe and Harrison at Alexandria, December 31, 1779,” Hooe, Stone, and Company Invoice Book, 1770–84, New York Public Library (microfilm, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation). For sleeping in the store, see *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Sept. 16, 1737. Mr. Lidderdale’s storekeeper and another man were sleeping in the store in Prince George County when three “rogues” came to the store while Lidderdale was away. The intruders demanded entry on the pretense of leaving a letter, “rush’d in, bound the Two Men, and stole about 70 pounds in Cash, a Watch, A pair of Pistols, several Shirts, etc.”
 20. *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter), Sept. 20, 1754.
 21. The 1798 “Plan and Perspective-View of a House, and other Buildings, belonging to Mr. Eward Langley, on Square No. 651 in the City of Washington” by Nicholas King, July 14, 1798, Collection of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection.
 22. Mutual Assurance Society Records, vol. 12, no. 12; vol. 13, no. 238, Richmond: Library of Virginia. The rear addition was removed and the store returned to a dwelling by Parrot’s heirs in 1804.
 23. Patricia Kent, “1300 Caroline Street: A Brief History of the Structure and Early Owners,” in “Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. Research Committee Historic Marker Program,” 1991, unpublished report, Archives, Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. My thanks to Gary Stanton for this information and help in measuring and discussing the building and to Carl Lounsbury for this close scrutiny and completing the drawing.
 24. For example, see the examination of Vina Nash, a free mulatto woman on suspicion of theft from the store of James William Latouche, Aug. 5, 1805, Petersburg City Hustings Court Minute Book 4, 1800–1807, n.p.
 25. This theme pervades the study of Chesapeake domestic architecture. See, for example, Dell Upton, “Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 2–3 (summer/autumn 1982): 95–119.
 26. Estimates of square footage of Virginia dwellings comes from newspapers and tax lists. For advertised properties, see Camille Wells, “The Planter’s Prospect: Houses, Outbuildings, and Rural Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 1 (spring 1993): 6. Rare tax information on house size from Virginia is described in Pamela L. Higgins, “Lands, Houses, and Slaves’: The 1798 Federal Direct Tax in Spotsylvania County, Virginia,” *Journal of Fredericksburg History* 1 (1996): 59, 65.
 27. Eliza Barksdale diary, Charlotte Courthouse, May–August 1836, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.