Arisha Notta

Professor Moore

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Regional Identities in Colonial Architecture

In the context of colonial America, architecture served a deeper purpose other than just shelter. It served as a representative of the diverse identities taking form in America's evolving landscape. The various materials, styles, and forms of architecture reflected the beliefs, lifestyles, and heritage behind those who built them.

Two structures in particular, the Parson Joseph Capen House, built in 1683 in Topsfield, Massachusetts, and Mount Airy, built in 1758 in Richmond County, Virginia, allow us to witness the various identities of architectural expression over the course of less than a century in the United States. The Parsons Joseph Capen House was originally built for a Puritan minister, and its architecture reflects the modest and community-centered values of late seventeenth-century New England through a simple timber frame, steep gable roof, central chimney, and lack of ornamentation. On the other hand, Mount Airy portrays the opposite. It showcases wealth and the ambitions of the Virginia plantation elite. This is accomplished through Palladian symmetry, grand stone façade, hipped roof, and flanking hyphens that connect the main house to outbuildings. Both houses reflect the personality, values, and status of their owners. These specific choices in frame, roof, etc., underscore the extent to which architecture can be an expressive vessel. And as we examine each building, we take a closer look at the different cultural values, building traditions of their respective regions, and their relationship to the built environment in which they are constructed.

Before analyzing these individual structures, it is important to understand the very different contexts in which they were built. By the mid-eighteenth century, most of Virginia's tidewater region was shaped by plantation culture and generated wealth due to tobacco production and slave labor. Wealth plantation owners and Virginia elites still viewed themselves as English and not American. Wealthy planters such as Tayloe imagined themselves as provincial members of the British aristocratic world, and their architectural choices reflected this self-image. They embraced European designs and utilized expensive materials. Their homes weren't attempts to form an American identity, but rather a way to exhibit their English heritage.

Mount Airy was constructed in 1758 and commissioned by Colonel John Tayloe II. It is one of the earliest Palladian structures in the American colonies. Being one of the wealthiest men in Virginia at the time, Tayloe created his home in a way that reflects not only his economic power but also his cultural ambitions. The estate's architecture is defined by its Palladian symmetry, which is inspired by the work of an Italian Renaissance architect, Andrea Palladio. This style was and is still very popular in England. The house is mainly constructed with a stone exterior, which, for Virginia, is considered unusual. It is also constructed on top of a hill, which establishes its presence within its built environment. In terms of architectural design choices, its hipped roof gives it a monumental, almost temple-like form, while flanking hyphens link the central house to symmetrical outbuildings, reinforcing the sense of order and hierarchy.[1]

Unlike the Capen house, which responds directly to the harsh New England climate, Mount Airy displays Virginia's warmer, more comforting environment. The raised basement allows air circulation, which helps cool the house during the hot summers, while the open plan and grand entryways are designed for hosting guests and entertaining. This serves as a demonstration of Tayloe's social role as a member of the plantation elite.[2] And with that, we see

that Mount Airy not only functions as a home but also as a statement. Each design choice is intentional, from the symmetry to the materials, intending to show off Tayloe's wealth and his connection to elite British culture.

The plan of Mount Airy holds equal significance. The central block, which is flanked by dependencies, creates clear divisions of space and function. The layout mirrors that of British estates and, in turn, reinforces Tayloe's view of his own role in the social hierarchy. The main rooms for receiving guests are on the upper floors, while work and service areas are on the lower floors or in the connected outbuildings.[3] And with that, we see that Mount Airy not only functions as a home but also as a statement and symbol of control.[4] Each design choice is intentional, from the symmetry to the materials, intending to show off Tayloe's wealth and his connection to elite British culture.

The Parson Joseph Capen house was built in 1683 for the local Puritan minister in Topsfield, Massachusetts, and is a strong example of New England's early timber-framed domestic architecture. The architecture reflects the religious and social values of the Puritan community. The house is a two-story timber-frame structure with a steep gable roof and central chimney, a common design and layout for its time period.[5] The central chimney is just a design choice, but it also has a more practical function. It serves multiple hearths, providing heating to multiple rooms during Massachusetts's harsh winters.[6] The architecture was designed in response to the built environment of New England, but it also shaped the entire plan of the house.

The house follows a hall-parlor plan with two main rooms on the first floor on either side of the chimney, one for more public use, while the other is for more private uses, such as family functions.[7] The upstairs rooms functioned as bedrooms. This compact layout, along with small windows and thick timber walls, helped keep the house warm during their winters. The

steep roof made it easier for snow to slide off, and the overhang of the second floor, known as jettying, gave extra protection to the lower walls from rain and snow.[8]

Visually, the Parson Joseph Capen house is simple and unornamented, which aligns with Puritan ideals of modesty and moral restraint. However, there is a decorative trim, and the facade is symmetrical but plain. The house's structure places a priority on function, community value, and environmental adaptation over personal display.[9] It's possible to view this house as a reflection of the community itself, disciplined, practical, and influenced by shared beliefs over individual wealth. Even though the house was built for a respected minister, the design doesn't make a statement as a luxurious structure. The statement displayed by the Capen house is one achieved by morals within the community.

When comparing these structures, their visibly different architectures reveal how architecture reflected the diverse landscapes and cultures present within colonial America. While both homes were built for prominent figures within their respective communities, they express identity and status in completely different ways.

While both homes were built for prominent figures within their respective communities, they find a way to express identity and status in completely different ways. Along with different styles, these two buildings had individual ways of labor and materials. The Capen house was constructed using local timber, which reflects the abundance of wood in New England. In contrast, Mount Airy was built using stone and, as mentioned, was considered a rare and expensive choice for Virginia. This required skills and craftsmanship, and the use of enslaved labor. These choices weren't made just for practicality or aesthetics but served as reflections of the social and economic worlds in which these buildings lived.[10]

The climate and layout also set these homes apart. The Capen house's compact structure, steep roof, and central chimney were designed to handle New England's cold winters, while its hall-parlor floor plan reflected the modest and practical needs of its owner during that time. Mount Airy was built for Virginia's warmer weather and plantation lifestyle. As mentioned, the layout allows the house to stay cool, and inside the Palladian layout creates a clear sense of order and division. This organization reflected the importance of social hierarchy that played a large role in his life and structured plantation life.

Finally, the symbolism and social role of both houses are almost opposites. The Capen house fits into the community as a moral and communal anchor, making a statement by choosing to blend in rather than stand out. On the other hand, Mount Air is on an elevated landscape and dominates it. Its symmetry, materials, and overall scale were meant to impress visitors and connect Tayloe to elite British culture. These contrasts show that architecture in colonial America does not have just one single definition; it can be a statement, emphasizing power and control, or it can be an establishment made simply for its practicality, and identities that coexist within the American landscape.

The Parson Joseph Capen's house and Mount Airy reveal the display of different cultures, beliefs, and lifestyles with their individual forms of architecture. The Parson Joseph Capen House reflects the practical needs and community values of Puritans in New England, while Mount Airy embodies wealth and the cultural ambitions of Virginia's plantation elite who aligned themselves with British aristocratic ideals. These differences in architectural expression highlight the distinct identities shaped by the environment, economy, and world views. Overall, these two houses show that colonial America was not defined by a single architectural narrative but by multiple ones that coexisted with ways of living and building.



Figure 1. Mount Airy, Warsaw (Richmond County), Virginia — South elevation. Photograph by Charles E. Peterson, 1934. HABS VA-72. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/va0892.photos.165289p/

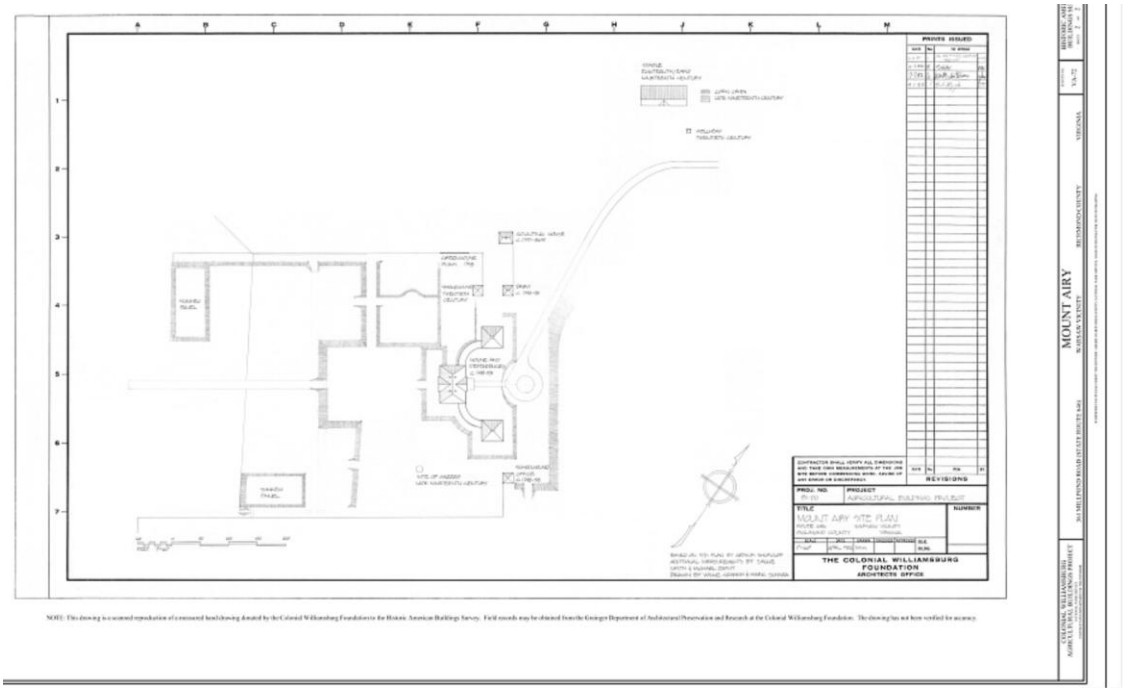


Figure 2. Mount Airy — floor plan. HABS VA-72, measured drawing sheet 2. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.va0892.sheet/?sp=1



Figure 3. Parson Joseph Capen House, Topsfield, Massachusetts — front façade. HABS MA-214. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/item/ma0170/

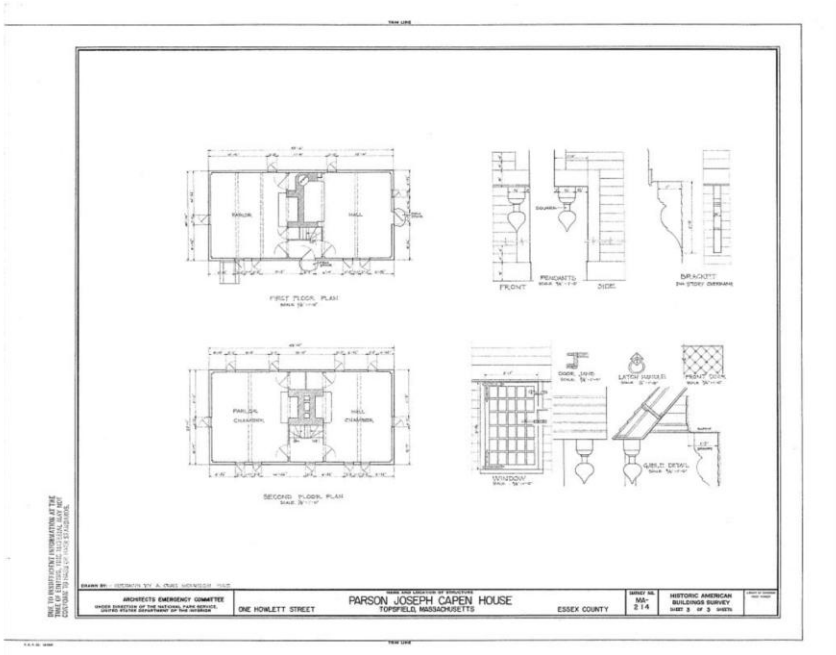


Figure 4. Parson Joseph Capen House — floor plan and elevation. HABS MA-214, measured drawing sheet 3. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ma0170.sheet/?sp=1

Endnotes:

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5. Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), “Parson Joseph Capen House, Topsfield, Essex County, MA,” Library of Congress, accessed September 30, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/item/ma0247/.
6. Abbott Lowell Cummings, The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625–1725 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 114–135.
7. Cummings, The Framed Houses, 128.
8. Cummings, The Framed Houses, 132.
9. Fred Kniffen, “Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 55, no. 4 (1965): 549–577.
10. Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia, 45.