Preserving the Heart of the Grounds: The Rotunda

The year was 1973. Richard M. Nixon was the nation’s president, a first-class postage stamp cost eight cents, and the average price tag for a new home was $35,500.

At the University of Virginia, the year held great significance, as it marked another milestone in the history of the Rotunda, the centerpiece of Thomas Jefferson’s Academic Village. The University launched its first major interior restoration of the Rotunda since Stanford White’s 1898 reconstruction, which had resurrected the building after a catastrophic fire in 1895 had gutted the interior and destroyed the dome.

The 1970s project returned the Rotunda’s main floor to its originally designed oval rooms and hourglass-shaped hall and the Dome Room once again occupied only the third floor.

The renovation project will address the efflorescence — or white stains caused by salt from moisture — that mars portions of the Rotunda’s brick exterior.

Since the completion of these renovations, time and the elements have had their way, leaving the Rotunda and associated grounds in critical need of extensive repairs. Jefferson’s and White’s architectural masterpiece is poised for the next milestone in its nearly 200-year history.

The Rotunda as it stands today generally appears from the Lawn much as it did when the original construction was completed in 1828; however, as early as the 1830s, new architects began to put their own stamps on the buildings in the Academic Village. Now U.Va. has embarked on a comprehensive effort to preserve the architectural legacies of Jefferson and the finest of his successors to ensure that these historic environs continue to inspire the pursuit of knowledge. A Historic Structure Report, completed in 2007, documents each phase of the Rotunda’s history and evolution — from the Jeffersonian era through the Stanford White period of the late 1890s and into the twentieth century.

Slated to begin in 2011–2012, the Rotunda renovation will span two multiyear phases of work. Phase One will address conditions that threaten the building’s integrity and its ability to serve its current program as well as some associated cosmetic issues. In addition to a roof replacement and column capital restoration, Phase One work will include masonry repairs, water infiltration repairs, removal of the acoustical panels in the Dome Room ceiling, improvement of lightning protection and other repairs for superficial damage and aging. The current estimated cost of Phase One is $22.95 million, with a projected completion date of 2014.

Phase Two renovations will entail significant changes to the Rotunda’s interior and restoration of the surrounding landscape. The aging systems will be improved to enhance operations, with repairs and replacements of electrical, data, plumbing, fire detection and suppression, and heating, ventilating and air conditioning equipment.

Barrier-free access will be provided to the first-floor doors, which will be restored to use as the main building entrances. Portions of the building may be adapted to allow for classroom use. The current estimated cost of Phase Two renovations is $27.69 million, with a projected start date of 2014 and completion in 2016.

This past September, the University’s Board of Visitors approved the program for Phase One of the Rotunda renovation. With the board’s approval, the project now has been added to a list of capital projects that will be submitted to the state in April 2011 for funding. The University currently seeks $12.95 million from the state, with the remainder matched by private funds and donations. The board has not yet reviewed detailed plans for the renovation’s first or second phase.
Lost and Found

WHEN PROJECT COORDINATOR James Zehmer was rummaging under Pavilion IX’s back porch in preparation for renovation work on the building, he discovered an artifact from its past: a J-shaped metal tool with a twisted handle. According to Zehmer, the tool was a meat hook that would likely have been used in the kitchen in the early days of the Academical Village.

“Through most of the nineteenth century, the kitchen was not in the house itself. It was located outside,” said senior historic preservation planner Brian Hogg. As he explained, the meat hook would have been used for moving an animal carcass or a large chunk of meat from the butcher’s cart to the outdoor kitchen.

Zehmer found other artifacts in Pavilion IX’s attic sections, namely, a large meat hook that would likely have been used in the kitchen in the early days of the Academical Village, including the Rotunda, all ten pavilions, eight hotels, and other buildings. The software, which will be integrated with other U.Va. information systems, will contain historical and current data about the structures and can be updated as changes occur. Users will be able to access the composite database through a Web portal and see, add, and update information depending on their clearance permissions.

Because the BIM model for the Academical Village will allow for live connections among data sources, the software becomes a living document of tremendous import. It will not only serve immediate maintenance and repair needs — say, that of fixing a leaky pipe — but also further academic research and public outreach related to the historic structures of the Central Grounds.

MODELING THE ACADEMICAL VILLAGE

IT’S 10:30 ON A SUNDAY EVENING, and a pipe in Pavilion IX’s plumbing system springs a leak. Before any repairs are made, the on-duty Facilities Management supervisor consults the BIM — or Building Information Model — software recently developed for the University. In so doing, he can access a complete view of the pavilion’s components, systems, and history. With these data at his fingertips, he can determine the appropriate actions to take in preserving and maintaining this historic structure.

BIM is a Web-based, visual database that will serve as a central source of information about Pavilion II. The University’s Preservation Master Plan calls for the creation of a fully functioning BIM model for the entire Academical Village, including the Rotunda, all ten pavilions, eight hotels, and other buildings. The software, which will be integrated with other U.Va. information systems, will contain historical and current data about the structures and can be updated as changes occur. Users will be able to access the composite database through a Web portal and see, add, and update information depending on their clearance permissions.

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Pavilion IX: Restorations for the Next Half-Century

WHEN A STUDENT or faculty member moves out of a historic building on the Lawn, but before new occupants move in, the University makes necessary repairs and renovations to the structures. Currently, crews are installing new electrical wiring and plumbing as well as new central heating, air conditioning and technology systems in Pavilion IX. In addition, the crews will install a new kitchen and three and a half bathrooms, make exterior repairs, refinish the floors and repaint the ground-floor rooms in historic colors.

Once the renovation is complete, Pavilion IX will be the first Thomas Jefferson-era building at the University to conform to LEED standards. LEED, the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design program, is the construction industry standard for environmentally responsible and sustainable construction. Built in 1823 as part of Jefferson’s original design for the Academical Village, Pavilion IX hasn’t had much work done on it for the last thirty to forty years, according to Brian Hogg, senior historic preservation planner for U.Va. “This is a general kind of freshening up to make the building ready for another fifty years of service,” he said.

Along with this freshening up, work is also being done on the Pavilion IX colonnade and the roof spanning the walkway between Pavilions IX and VII. Jefferson’s design for these structures included a system of flat roofs forming a private walkway on which professors could move from one pavilion to the other. The original design called for the colonnades to run the entire length of the Lawn.

In the 1830s, after fissures in the roofs had caused serious water leakage, workers replaced Jefferson’s design with hipped slate roofs. The current restoration will stabilize the flat roofs with modern materials to prevent leakage. Workers will also replace the stairs between the pavilion and the student room roof section and add new railings that more closely resemble the original Chinese design.

The University’s Historic Preservation Endowment will fund this $2.1 million restoration of Pavilion IX and the roof system.

Garden Highlights

URING THE EXTENSIVE RESTORATION of Pavilion X earlier this year, the Office of the Architect determined that the pavilion’s lower garden needed some attention, too. Designed around 1908 by landscape architect Warren Manning, the garden included a rectangle of boxwoods surrounding an open lawn. Over the years, however, those boxwoods had grown large and unwieldy, making the garden dark and creating an undesirable enclosed effect.

The Garden Club of Virginia, whose mission is to preserve and restore historic gardens throughout the Commonwealth, generously offered to remedy what had become an unsafe situation in the garden. Rather than remove these 100-year-old plantings, the Garden Club hired Lynn Bardorf, a leading boxwood authority from the U.S. Botanic Garden, who determined that the historic shrubs could be limbed up to look more like trees, thus bringing more light and space into the garden.

“This is a miliyriar project,” said University landscape architect Mary Hughes. “Drastic pruning of these very old plants causes them a great deal of shock, so between pruning episodes they have to be allowed to recover.”

Once the trees have been sufficiently shaped and have recovered from the trauma, a new garden plan will be created to include perennial plantings and reconfigured paths.

With the renovations this year of Pavilion IX, the Facilities Management team is taking the opportunity to spruce up this garden as well.

“The turf area outside the back door is supposed to be defined as an oval,” said Hughes. “The bed edge has been lost over time, and it’s become this amorphous, undefined shape.” Gardeners will follow the original plans for the space as they reestablish the oval, reconstruct bed edges and add some additional plantings.

The Historic Gardens and Grounds Endowment is funding the maintenance of the Pavilion IX garden.
Kenan Scholars Study the Academical Village

Increasing our understanding of the Academical Village is the focus of the University's annual Kenan Awards. With funds from the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment Fund of the Academical Village, the grants provide $4,000 each to two U.Va. students to conduct their own summer research project.

Brian Cofrancesco, one of the 2010 Kenan Award recipients, wanted to study his new neighborhood: The fourth-year architectural history major with minors in architecture and historic preservation was selected as a Lawn resident for the 2009–2010 academic year. Under the guidance of Richard Guy Wilson, Commonwealth Professor of Architectural History, Cofrancesco explored the historic buildings of the central Grounds and created self-guided walking tours.

Cofrancesco studied patterns, trends, and styles in early American architecture, beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing through the Victorian period of the late-nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on the architecture of Thomas Jefferson.

"This fellowship allowed me to continue my study of the Academical Village and Thomas Jefferson, while expanding my knowledge of the other buildings within the historic precinct," he said. "It presents a great opportunity for me to practice the research and investigative skills that are central to the work of architectural history."

Professor Wilson lauded Cofrancesco's dedication to his subject, saying, "He is in many ways just what Jefferson envisioned as the type of student the University should attract." Cofrancesco's accomplishments also include receiving the A.G. Goodrich Distinguished President Award and a $28,900 grant for the conservation of the 1926 World's Fair model of the Academical Village. In addition, he is a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, Student Council's Diversity Initiatives committee, and both the U.Va. Concert Band and Cavalier Marching Band.

The other 2010 Kenan Award scholar is Matthew Jones, a third-year graduate student in musicology from Jasper, Georgia. With the Kenan support, Jones planned to research music education, both formal and informal, in the Academical Village during the University's first century, from 1819 to 1919.

"I am interested in finding out who taught music at U.Va., where they were trained, how they were hired and brought to the University, and as much information about their living and teaching conditions as I can gather," he said. "I am also interested in the students themselves: who received music instruction, were trained, how they were hired and brought to the University, and as much as I can." In addition to producing an academic paper detailing his historical research, Jones planned to stage a concert of early Lawn music. Before coming to U.Va., he received a bachelor's degree in music and a master's degree in musicology from the University of Georgia. After completing his doctoral degree, Jones plans to become a professor of musicology.

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Inspiration for his project came from "Soundscapes in Jefferson's America," a course he took with associate music professor Bonnie Gordon. In the class, Jones learned that before the creation of the McIntire Department of Music around 1920, the historical record of music education at U.Va. is spotty.

"Sounds, both musical and nonmusical, are an important part of how we understand experience, yet sounds often fall out of histories because they are ephemeral," he said. "I want to fill in the blanks in the historical record and make some informed speculations about the role of music and sound in the Academical Village."

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Kenan Scholars Study the Academical Village

A Life-long Love for the Academical Village

Richard K. Ernst (College '43, Law '50)

As a student, Richard K. Ernst had a unique perspective on the University’s Academical Village. He lived in West Lawn 35 in his fourth year and later, as a law student, in the basement of Pavilion X and then on the East Range in the Crackerbox, a two-story dwelling that was once the kitchen and cook’s quarters for Hotel F.

His daily immersion in some of the University’s most historic spaces left an indelible impression on his mind and heart. “He loved U.Va.,” said his friend and neighbor June McLernan. “He loved his time there, and loved the friends he made there. Those were the best times in his life.”

Throughout his life, Ernst would return to the University and liked to stroll among the historic surroundings of Jefferson’s Academical Village. To keep the Grounds he loved beautiful, he gave more than $1 million to support the preservation of historic buildings at U.Va. during his lifetime.

When Ernst passed away last spring, he bequeathed another $4.9 million to support this effort.

“This gift, the largest ever to historic preservation at the University, will make an exceptional contribution to the life of the Academical Village,” said Brian Hogg, senior historic preservation planner in the Office of the Architect. “It will generate income that will help preserve and restore Jefferson’s architectural legacy so future generations can share Mr. Ernst’s appreciation of it.”

Ernst’s gift will count toward the $400 million bequest goal the University has set for the current $1 billion Campaign for the University. Thanks to his generosity, students, faculty, and visitors will continue to enjoy the living classroom of the Academical Village and the rest of the University’s historic treasures.
Sustaining the Jeffersonian Legacy

JEFFERSON’S CIRCLE recognizes donors who provide significant support to historic preservation efforts on an annual basis. The following donors have given at the level of $1,000 or more in the past year. Mary Helen Detmer and Don Detmer, M.D., served as co-chairs for 2009-2010.

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For more information on how you can help preserve the University’s historic architecture, call Jenny Wyss at 434-924-4419 or e-mail her at jwyss@virginia.edu.

When designing the University, Thomas Jefferson gathered a “circle of friends” to be “subscribers, contributors, and founders” of the institution. Today Jefferson’s Circle is a group of friends that supports the preservation of the Academic Village. Jefferson’s Circle is co-chaired by R. Foster Hamilton (’75) and Shaun S. Duncan (’77).

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