James Zehmer, a historic preservation project manager with UVA’s Facilities Management Department; and Mark Kutney, then a conservator in the Office of the Architect, are walking under the Rotunda’s south portico when they notice a small pile of what appears to be sand. It turns out to be a piece of one of the marble capitals that had dropped the 23-foot height of the columns and shattered on impact. Closer inspection reveals that the 110-year-old capitals are crumbling beyond repair.

The Rotunda’s Corinthian capitals are shrouded with black netting to prevent pieces of the stone from falling and injuring passersby. The Board of Visitors unanimously approves a multimillion-dollar plan for the project’s first phase to renovate and repair the Rotunda—the first major work performed on the building since the mid-1970s. The University seeks funding from the Commonwealth, with the remainder to be matched by private funds.

The General Assembly approves $2.69 million toward replacement of the Rotunda’s roof. The total cost is $4.69 million, with the remainder coming from University funds. UVA Facilities Management workers begin conducting probes of the domed roof to conduct visual inspections and testing of the underlying materials.

Just how do you care for a masterpiece like the Rotunda? With an abundance of forethought and an eye toward future generations. As our bicentennial year approaches, the University of Virginia is completing one of the most ambitious undertakings in our history. The multiyear effort to restore the Rotunda to the center of academic life at UVA is scheduled to conclude this summer. The Commonwealth funded about half of the renovation, and private donors are funding most of the remainder. Thanks to them, we are only $1.3 million away from the original $50.6 million goal. Here’s how the project has progressed.

2009

The Jeffersonian Grounds Initiative provides long-term stewardship by raising funds to restore and repair the buildings and landscape of the historic Grounds, which are recognized as an architectural masterpiece and UNESCO World Heritage Site. JGI also builds an endowment for future needs. The University must still address the extensive and urgent repairs required, including the following:

• Restoring the columns of the Colonnades
• Replacing Lawn and Range roofs
• Renovating the pavilions and hotels
• Caring for the gardens and landscape

2010

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2016
It’s spring, and Mary Hughes, who oversees the University’s Jeffersonian landscapes, is naturally focused on the gardens. “When the weather is nice in Virginia, people want to be outside,” said Hughes, who has served as UVA’s landscape architect since 1996. “These gardens provide opportunities for reading, conversation or as places to meet for lunch. The UVA gardens are well used and loved.”

Although the walls for the pavilion gardens were finished by 1824, Thomas Jefferson left no plans as to how the gardens should be used. As a naturalist, gardener, farmer and scientist, Jefferson kept meticulous notes in his Garden Book. Following his belief that “the greatest service which can be rendered by any country is to add a useful plant to its culture,” Jefferson cultivated plants from around the world, including species collected during the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Jefferson viewed the landscape of the Academical Village as a link to the scholarly and contemplative life. He described the University as a set of buildings “arranged around an open square of grass and trees.” Over the years, the natural settings have provided beautiful spots to converse, contemplate and study.

“The gardens we have now were designed by landscape architects working for the Garden Club of Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s,” Hughes said. “The Garden Club gave the restored gardens to UVA as a gift with new walls, walks and plantings that opened the gardens to the public. Before that, they were private gardens used only by the professors and their families.”

UVA’s garden designs reflect Jefferson’s overall approach to landscape. Although professors and their families continue to reside in the pavilions, countless visitors stroll through their gardens. The flowers, shrubs and trees they find reflect the gardens’ rich history while drawing inspiration from Mount Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg and Jefferson’s own Monticello.

“The spirit which Jefferson wanted the pavilion gardens to provide was similar to that of the Academy in Greece, where scholars would converse with one another or sit in contemplation,” Hughes said. “Now professors can hold class outdoors in the quiet privacy of the walled gardens, and many of these spaces can be reserved for events at no charge. The gardens are in the spirit of what Jefferson was trying to achieve in the UVA community from its very beginnings.”

The pavilion gardens are open to the public 365 days a year from dawn to dusk. The gardens are featured each year in April as part of the Garden Club of Virginia’s Historic Garden Week. To learn more, please visit virginia.edu/jgi/garden-week.

As a UVA student, William Anderson (Col ’71) would walk the Grounds, lost in contemplation. He never tired of spending time in the gardens, admiring their changing beauty. The impact of the gardens on his student experience stayed with Anderson throughout his life. Recently, he decided to make a generous endowment gift to support the gardens in the Academical Village in honor of his parents.

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“Landscapes and gardens are the means by which we bring the natural environment into our daily lives,” he said. “As someone who was raised to appreciate the beauty and importance of the environment, I have always framed my vision of the world in the context of nature. It is essential that we keep that connection.”

Private support such as Anderson’s helps maintain garden entranceways, repair deteriorated masonry steps and replace brick edging around plant beds.
The Restoration Ball began in 1962 when Mary Betts, then hostess of the Rotunda, came across 19th-century lithographs of Rotunda dances. With the help of the University Guide Service and the Jefferson Society, the Restoration Ball was born. Fourteen years later, the 1976 ball was intended to be the final official fundraiser, but by then it had become such a popular annual event—eventually outgrowing the Rotunda itself and spilling to the Lawn—that it has survived to this day. It sells out every year.

Q. What are the origins of the Restoration Ball?
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Q. What's the purpose of the ball?
A. In addition to raising funds, the ball helps students and alumni forge a deeper bond with the centerpiece of the Grounds, building lasting memories of the Rotunda for years after they’ve departed the University.

Q. Who else has been central to keeping the Restoration Ball going?
A. Not many student-led events have been held for 53 years straight without a lot of help. Dean of Student Affairs Allen Groves, and many others, make the Restoration Ball a success each year. They play an important role in enabling students to direct this event. We’ve co-sponsored the ball with diverse student groups, ranging from fraternities to the Student Council to the Salsa Club.

Q. How has your own UVA experience found expression in this specific fundraising event?
A. As a public policy student, the Rotunda represents something very special to me. I want to help students and alumni everywhere feel that same powerful connection to this place that I feel. Recently, I spoke to Richard Bradley (Col ’66), who chaired the third ball in 1966. He said that he and his fellow organizers never expected it would still be going so strong today. He and many others who care about the Rotunda are helping us complete this modern renovation at the heart of our University.

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—Brendan Maupin Wynn

The 53rd Annual Restoration Ball is a black-tie affair that dates to 1962. We learned a bit more about this historical event from Brendan Maupin Wynn (Col ’14, Batten ’17), Wynn is the current Restoration Ball chair for the Jefferson Literary & Debating Society, which co-hosts the ball along with the Honor Committee.

TRADITION & LEGACY
ince 1908, St. Elmo Hall has been a fixture along the row of fraternity houses that line Madison Bowl. By 2013, like many of those stately houses, it needed repair.

Frank Shea (Col ’72), president of the St. Elmo Club of UVA, the alumni board that oversees the fraternity, wanted to explore ways to support larger University initiatives in addition to funding repairs to the house. He naturally thought of the Rotunda, which was in a similar state of need and undergoing a major renovation. He helped launch a $500,000 fundraising challenge to benefit the fraternity, the Rotunda and the Jefferson Trust.

It also helped that James Zehmer (Arch ’02) is both a St. Elmo alumnus and a historic preservation project manager in UVA’s Facilities Management Department. “He was a motivating factor in our commitment to the Rotunda project,” said Shea.

Zehmer said he hopes he’ll inspire others to “support this important milestone in UVA history and help show future generations that Elmo Makes the World Go ‘Round!”

The project has resonated with alumni and is nearing its fundraising goal—positioning the fraternity to be recognized alongside other U200 members (who have contributed $100,000 or more to the Rotunda renovation) on a permanent plaque in the Rotunda. St. Elmo is the first fraternity to join the U200. The group hopes that its example will encourage other fraternities to contribute to the Rotunda renovation.

“I’m very proud of our efforts toward the Rotunda renovation and our association with the Jeffersonian Grounds Initiative,” Shea said. “I’m envious of today’s students in a way. I love the idea of sitting in the Rotunda with a laptop, studying. That’s very cool.

“We’re doing a great thing for the University,” he said. “I hope it inspires our younger members to give, to make it a tradition.”

For more information on how to support the Rotunda and Jeffersonian Grounds, please contact:

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