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For one man, house's age is much more than just a number

By MARC DAVIS, The Virginian-Pilot

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VIRGINIA BEACH

Finding the historic Adam Thoroughgood House is the first trick.

For starters, it's not on the beaten track, like the Francis Land House on Virginia Beach Boulevard. It's in Bayside, in the Thoroughgood neighborhood - no duh! - but way back, on the water, at the end of a long road.

And it is gorgeous. The view up Thoroughgood Lane, seeing the house through a long block of pecan trees, takes you back 300 years.

Or is it 400?

See, that's the real problem. How old is the Adam Thoroughgood House? Did old man Adam really build it?

Is it really the oldest English brick house in America?

The city used to claim it was, for decades. Just think: Jamestown was founded in 1607; the Adam Thoroughgood House was supposedly built only 29 years later. The city even gave the house an address to match its alleged birth date, 1636 Parish Road.

It didn't last.

In the 1980s, experts decided the Thoroughgood House wasn't really the oldest English brick house in America. They decided it was built about 50 years later, around 1680.

And that was that.

For a while.

Then the ground shifted again. Last year, experts finished a study that put another date on the Thoroughgood House. This time, they said it was built around 1720 - about 80 years after the original estimate.

They based their analysis on an archaeological dig, a wood analysis and an architectural evaluation.

And that's where the whole messy business would stand today, except for one nagging old man with a contrarian's streak wider than the house itself.

His name is W. Paul Treanor. He is 81 and lives in Richmond. He is a small, thin man with a pack of Marlboros in his shirt pocket and a battered brown briefcase full of documents.

He has no special background in historical research and only a high school diploma. But he is a 10th-generation descendant of Adam Thoroughgood, and he has spent 15 years pulling together every scrap of paper he can find on his ancestor.



W. Paul Treanor is a 10th-generation descendant of Adam Thoroughgood. MARC DAVIS | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

He doesn't mind being a pain in the neck, sticking it to the historical Establishment fuddy-duddies in Williamsburg. He kind of likes it. If he were a baseball man, he'd be Earl Weaver, the Orioles manager who was legendary for kicking dirt on umpires' shoes.

"I love history, and I love to read, and I have a very good memory for an old man," he says.

Treanor is the last true believer in the oldest-English-brick-house theory.

He loves to proselytize, but he expects to die before he convinces the experts they are wrong.

The headline 20 years ago ticked him off. It said: "Historic house not a first after all."

The story, published in The Virginian-Pilot on Oct. 1, 1987, talked about a friendly rivalry between two old houses, 54 miles apart: the Thoroughgood House in Virginia Beach and Bacon's Castle in Surry County.

For a while, both claimed to be the oldest brick house. Bacon's Castle was built in 1665. Thoroughgood supporters said their house was built in 1636.

But then, the rivalry ended abruptly. Keepers of the Thoroughgood House acknowledged in 1987 what some had suspected for a long time.

"It was not built in 1636," said Patrick Brennan, the house's administrator at the time. "Architectural historians in the '60s knew that. We're saying it's circa 1680. We're being a little more realistic."

Treanor began studying the house a few years later.

By then, he had become convinced the experts were wrong. Among the documents he carries in his briefcase is the 1987 Pilot story, to which he has added a note: "This article contains no basis for being 'a little more realistic' about anything. WPT"

That was Treanor's first tangle with the experts.

The second came last year when new experts in Williamsburg completed a report. It found that the Thoroughgood House is even newer than previously suspected, that it was built around 1719 or 1720. Treanor was ticked off all over again.

"Sheer ignorance!" he declared.

Both sides have their evidence.

In Williamsburg, Nicholas Lucchetti is one of the nation's foremost experts in Colonial archaeology. He is a principal investigator with the James River Institute for Archaeology, and he wrote the 2006 report on the Adam Thoroughgood House.

It lays out in excruciating detail why the house could not have been built in the 1600s. The evidence comes from three places:

- Artifacts - A 2004 dig found plenty of old American Indian artifacts in the ground around the house, plus Colonial artifacts from the 1700s, but no artifacts from the 1600s.

"There are simply none at the Thoroughgood House," Lucchetti said. "They can't just go away. There is no way to explain it away."

- Wood - A study received last week by city administrators found that wood samples in the house came from trees cut down no earlier than 1716. This is based on an analysis of tree rings in the wood.
- Architectural features - The 2006 report found several features in the Thoroughgood House consistent with similar homes built in Virginia in the early 1700s. It found some features that, experts say, were not introduced to the area until after 1710.

Mark Reed, the Beach's historic resources coordinator, says he thinks the report is right.

"To me, it's fairly scientifically established," he said. "It's not just one piece of evidence. It's a number of threads of evidence tied together."

Willie Graham, curator of architecture at Colonial Williamsburg, agrees. The pieces of evidence "do really come together nicely - within a couple of years. Of all the evidence, I'd say the archaeological evidence is the best," he said.

Treanor is unimpressed. He has his own evidence.

In a series of essays published in *The Chesopiean*, a historical journal based in Gloucester, Treanor has argued that the house was built in 1645.

Mostly, he cites documents from the life of Adam Thoroughgood and his family - wills, deeds, maps, inventories and such.

Treanor's newest essay, to be published this summer, cites a 1689 inventory of Thoroughgood's estate. It refers to a survey of 1685 or 1686 that pinpoints the location of Thoroughgood's house. Treanor believes this location - near something called Scull Neck - is the house we know today.

Treanor is amused by people such as Lucchetti and Graham who refuse to admit their error. "I told Nick, 'You're still a nice guy, but you don't listen,' " Treanor said.

The experts, in turn, shake their heads at Treanor's persistence.

They think Treanor has latched onto the wrong house - that all those references in maps and wills are of a previous Thoroughgood house.

Nevertheless, Treanor often calls the experts to criticize their work. Lucchetti, a good sport, acknowledged Treanor in his report as "an indefatigable Thoroughgood researcher who challenges every easy conclusion."

Treanor knows he ticks off the experts in Williamsburg. He smiles at the thought. "I frankly don't give a damn," he said.

Back at the house, tour guides leave the birth date vague.

"We say we're not sure," site manager Starr Donlon said. "All indications point to early in the 18th century. So it's one of the earliest English brick homes in America."

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