

# Colonial Bricks by Randy George

## Part 1

In Somerset County, Maryland, in the late winter of 2021, an ancient structure burned to the ground [see *article in TrustTribune Newsletter Issue #3*]. Panthers Denn was arguably the oldest extant house on the eastern shore of Maryland and met its final demise in a matter of an hour or two.

For years the old relic had been abandoned and had already decayed beyond any hope of repair. The fact that it had persisted at all made it a rarity, but much of its survival lay in its origins ... the early colonists had decided to make it of brick.

The historical record is somewhat vague about the exact date of construction but places it at around 1710. The first stage was the erection of two brick ends, each with a fire stack. In 1746, the home was slightly expanded and its wooden walls were replaced by masonry in Flemish bond.



After the 2021 fire, all that were left were the remnants of labors long forgotten. Sad, but not entirely a loss, the destruction of Panthers Denn opened an unusual opportunity for study and for preservation of a portion of the materials for future restoration projects. Within the building's bricks were traces of the brickmaker's art, and evidence of the work and determination of individuals building lives in the first days of our country's history.

Brick manufacture began millennia ago. In Mesopotamia, along the banks of the Euphrates River, the Sumerians built temples of adobe bricks which have gradually melted back into the earth. Greeks and Romans made harder materials by firing, and became master brick makers and architects. Compared to stone materials, bricks could be produced locally from commonly occurring sandy loam and clay, thus reducing cartage costs.

Roman bricks were thin (18" x 12" x 1-1 ½"), tile-like (*tegulae*), and hard. Their greatest virtues were non-combustibility and durability. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe turned to wood construction until the 16th century, when England, the Netherlands, and the Hanseatic States began making bricks on a regular basis. The French called them *briques*.

Brick size was ultimately dependent on the size of the human hand, and eventually a standardization in proportion was found to reduce costs and allow for increased production. Between 1200 and 1220, bricks were uniformly 12 x 6 x 1 ¾ inches. From 1260 to 1280, they were 9 x 4 ½ x 2 ¼ inches. By 1625 the English statute brick was 9 x 4 3/8 x 2 ¼ inches, and this was the size that colonists used in their first brick production in 1611. By 1621 their bricks were being exported from Virginia to Bermuda [*Claiborne 1957*].

Brick molding has little changed from its time-worn traditions. Material is naturally occurring in most temperate climates and lies just beneath upper layers of roots and forest duff. Locally, the sandy loam and clay "brick earth" lies at depths of 3-4 "spits" (shovel depths). Deeper, more plastic clays were less preferred because they required weathering and leaching of harmful salts, crushing before use, and tempering with stone, shell or bone (*Feister & Sopko 1996:51*). The more superficial "soft clays" required none of these efforts and were clearly more efficient to use.



Clay Pit at Colonial Williamsburg (1)

The brick maker gathered the brick earth into a central clay pit, softened it with water, and then children and adults mixed it with bare feet. The material then would be gathered and shaped by hand into a malleable loaf, which was rolled in sand or water (rarely oil) and tossed and pressed into a bottomless rectangular mold set on a flat surface or table.



Wooden brick mold (2)

The brick mold was made of boards with one to four compartments and with wooden handles at the ends. This process was called "slop molding". The molds also were wetted or sanded, and this coating aided in removal of the wet brick blocks.

After the mold was filled, excess material was scraped across the top with a straight edge, leaving "screed marks."



# Colonial Bricks (cont'd)



The brick maker often kept count by marking a wet brick with a symbol scribed by stick or finger, resembling an O, possibly representing a 100 count.

Other interesting inscriptions must be left to our imagination.



A particularly valuable find was a 1746 date brick from Panthers Denn's second building phase.



After a brick had been fashioned, the form was slid off the edge of the molding table, tipped on its side, and carried to a bed of

sand or straw. If shaking were insufficient to allow the soft material to drop from the mold, it was forced out with fingers or bits of wood, leaving their tell-take marks along the edge.



As the wet brick dropped from the mold it often slumped in the middle, leaving elevated rims. The underside retained the irregular marks of straw or sand even after baking. Because the molds were bottomless, some soft material squeezed outward and left a lip at each lower edge.

As the soft bricks were adjusted on the sand bed, finger prints of the workers were left imbedded in the surface. In Colonial and pre-Civil War America many fingerprints were clearly those of women and young children, some of whom were presumably enslaved.





One child left a footprint neatly centered on a piece of his work.

Left on the sand bed, and while still wet, the upper surface of the bricks were subject to weather conditions such as rain, which left a speckled surface.



During this stage, farm and household animals and birds often walked over the soft bricks, leaving their distinct impressions.



Bricks drying (3)



When sufficiently dried in the sun and firm, the bricks were carried to a nearby lean-to shed for “hacking” (stacking) on edge for further drying (*Charles Thomas Davis 1895: 92-93*).

There they were left for a week or more until they could be fired.

## ***Part 2—in next Newsletter***

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### References

(1) (2) (3) <https://www.dailypress.com/virginiagazette/news/va-vg-wbgmag-brick-yard-1110-story.html>

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