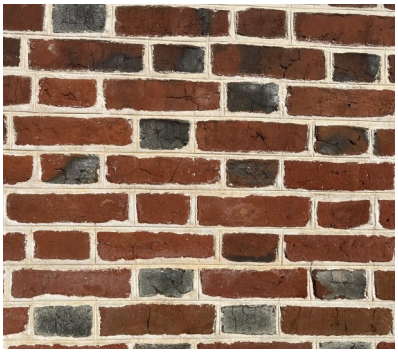
Colonial Bricks by Randy George
Part 2—Reading the Bricks

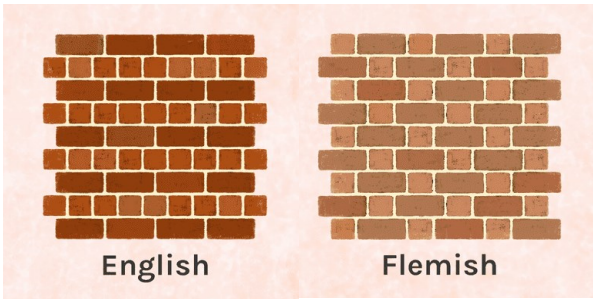
Someday, stand in front of one of our many colonial brick homes and spend a few minutes studying what you see. Though no two buildings are exactly alike, they do have enough similarities in their construction to make them distinguishable at a glance from our modern houses.

In Somerset County the oldest colonial buildings were English, drawing their style and construction almost entirely from the mother country. Brick manufacturing techniques and masonry styles on the Eastern Shore reflect traditions which had evolved over centuries in England, with contributions from other countries in Europe, especially Holland. All our 17th century houses have faded back into the earth, but many 18th century examples persist to make this region exceptional for the number of its hidden treasures.

Buildings and garden walls were constructed for durability. The arrangement of their bricks determined their character, but also their longevity. In the Middle Ages, bonding — the way in which bricks are laid — was haphazard, but in Tudor times a consistent practice was generally adopted where bricks were laid in alternating courses of headers (brick ends) and stretchers (longest edges). This arrangement was called **English Bond** and was the primary construction technique of our earliest colonists.



Headers and Stretchers



During the 17th century the **Flemish Bond** appeared, and in the 18th century became standard. Here, every course was made up of alternating stretchers and headers. The vertical joints were never laid exactly over another, for reasons of strength, but this allowed an added aesthetic advantage.

The traditional process of brick making resulted in approximately 15% of the bricks being glazed, where the oven heat literally melted the sand into a glassy surface of various colors. Ornamental detail was achieved by alternating glazed and unglazed brick headers and stretchers. Square and diamond-shaped patterning of glazed bricks, called diapering, was used to distinguish some early gable ends (some Somerset examples are Beauchamp House and Makepeace).

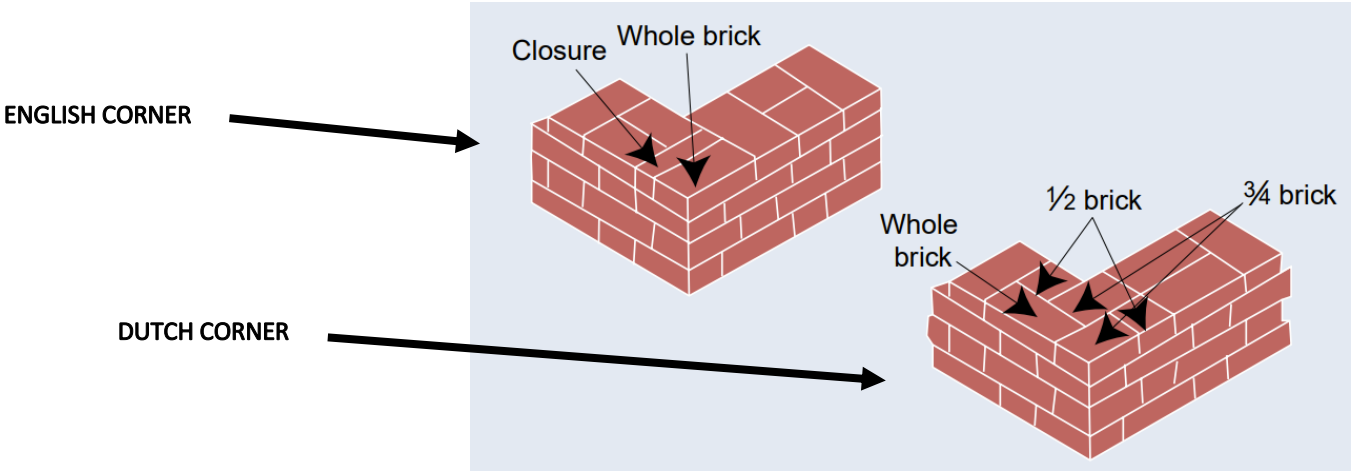
Sometimes, just beneath the gable shingles, a barge board was dressed by a diagonal row of glazed headers. Occasional finer homes sported walls with all headers glazed (Waterloo is an example), but typically the glazed headers were placed randomly. Gradually, after about 1800, glazed headers were retired from use.

Colonial Bricks *(cont'd)*

Bricks also were laid in various patterns at corners and at window and door edges and arches. In more elegant houses, arches displayed **rubbing and gauging**, a technique originally developed in the Netherlands.

Bricks were polished by rubbing them on brick or stone, and were deliberately tapered to create a precise fanning effect with tight mortar joints. This refinement began to disappear around the time of the American Revolution.

Corners and opening margins were laid in either the **English** or **Dutch** fashion.



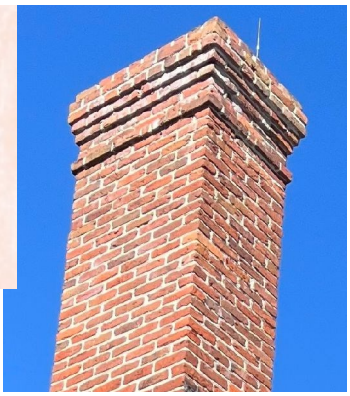
Laying of courses required considerable artistry and calculation. Where a course of headers and stretchers ended too soon or too late at an edge, shortened stretchers or small partial bricks called **closers** were used to adjust the finish. Closers used just before the end of a course were deemed **Queen closers**. Frequently, in the panels between window or door openings or between these openings and corners, the adjustment was made with shorter bricks at mid-panel. Closers were deliberately <u>not</u> placed at edges.

Queen closers installed **CORRECTLY**

Queen closers installed **INCORRECTLY** at edges

Colonial Bricks *(cont'd)*

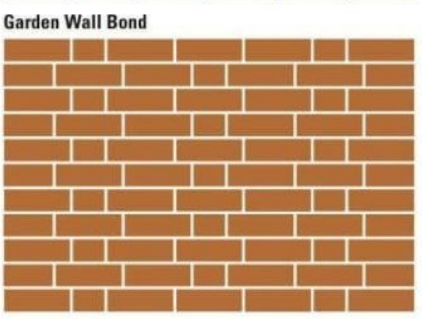
Chimneys were predominantly laid in **Running bond** where only stretchers were used, staggered to prevent overlapping vertical joints.

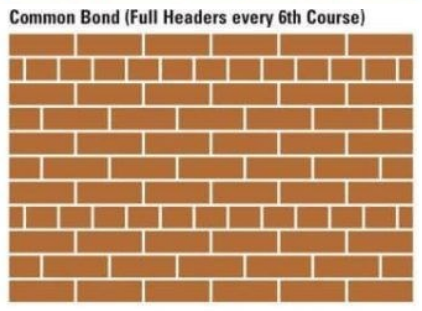


For decorative effect, a horizontal **belt course** with one or two rows of protruding bricks were often placed between the floor levels.

For reasons of strength, walls were made thicker at their base. Bricks were laid in a woven pattern one-and-a-half to two bricks in depth (12 to 16 inches). Several courses above ground level, the remainder of the wall was stepped back a half brick. This abrupt change was moderated with one or two courses of beveled, concave or convex headers, either molded or cut to shape. This row is called the **water table**, below which the bricks were laid in Flemish or English bond.

After the American Revolution, the Flemish bond was gradually replaced by newer styles. These included the **English garden wall** and **American (or Common)** bonds.





As the 20th century approached, brick and mortar materials became stronger, walls became thinner, and the American bond — which originally had 3 stretcher courses for each header course — morphed into 5 and eventually 7 stretcher courses per header course.

In the 20th century, the strength of building materials — stronger bricks and harder mortar — permitted use of a single layer of the simpler Running Bond in most construction.

And so, what do you see as you gaze at the old house wall? The materials and patterns begin to make sense and to take on personalities of their own and of the masons that made them. And of their place in time.

Part 3—in next Newsletter