

Inside the Governor's House

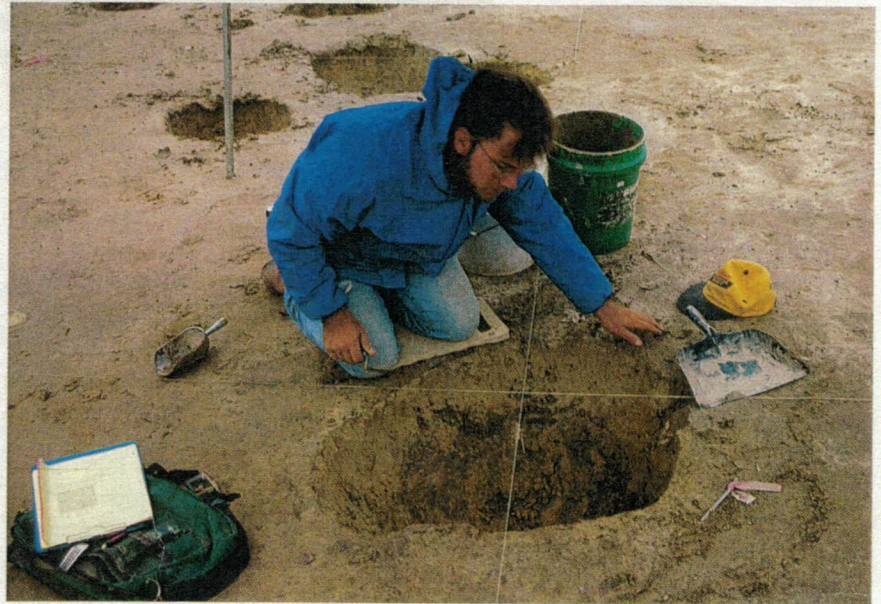
The Conservancy's first preserve in North Carolina includes the manor house site of two important governors.

Along with almost everyone else in the town of Edenton, landowners Billy and Wanda Bell have long suspected that the section of their farm north of Route 17 held the remnants of Edenhouse Manor, a house once occupied by two of North Carolina's first governors, Charles Eden and Gabriel Johnston.

When archaeologist Loretta Lautzenheiser discovered two 17th-century house foundations during her excavation in 1996, she was determined to learn how they related to the better-known 18th-century site on the Bell farm. What she found surprised everyone and underlined the significance of this site, which the Bells have donated to the Conservancy.

In 1663, a grateful King Charles II gave a vast tract of land to eight of his friends who provided funds or troops toward the king's restoration to England's throne. This act of staggering generosity (or hubris, depending on your point of view) established the "Royal Proprietorship," the first representative government of what are today the states of North and South Carolina.

Still, the settlement of North Carolina lagged 50 years behind that of Virginia. This late start may have been the source of disrespect for North Carolina by its neighbors to the north and south. Statements by William Byrd, a visitor to Edenton in 1728, are typical of an outsider's reactions to North Carolina's frontier towns: "A citizen here is counted extravagant if he



(Above) Brian Overton, an archaeologist with Coastal Carolina Research, inspects one of the postholes for the stockade fence that once encircled the 17th-century houses at Edenhouse.

(Insert) Part of a wine glass found at the site. The glass was likely given to Gabriel Johnston on his appointment in London as the Royal Governor of North Carolina in 1733.

has ambition enough to aspire to a brick chimney. Justice herself is but indifferently lodged, the Court House having much the air of a common tobacco house."

Lautzenheiser and her firm excavated the two earliest house sites ever discovered in the state, which were in the path of a road expansion project for the North Carolina Department of Transportation. The so-called Edenhouse site dated to 1663, and contained the remains

of two dwellings, a barn, and a defensive stockade.

"When Governor Eden moved from Bath in 1718 and bought the property on the Chowan River, this earlier site became part of what we know as Eden's plantation," explains Lautzenheiser. "In fact, Eden probably lived here as he was building the manor house. Our research shows that the earlier houses were renovated at the time Eden bought the property."

Queen Anne appointed Charles Eden governor of North Carolina in 1713. He was the second most recognizable citizen of Bath, a town south of Edenton on the banks of the Pam-



History on the Web

The North Carolina Department of Transportation has produced a fascinating Web site detailing the excavations at Edenhouse. Explore the Web site at www.doh.dot.state.nc.us/preconstruct/pe/archaeology/edenhouse

lico River. The most recognizable was Edward Teach, alias Blackbeard. It was widely known that the governor benefited greatly from his business relationship with the pirate. Historical records indicate Eden officiated the marriage ceremony between Teach and his only known wife, the daughter of a Bath planter. For his part, Blackbeard relied on the protection that Eden afforded him.

In 1718, however, Virginia's governor Alexander Spotswood—who was understandably less sympathetic to Blackbeard's predations than his North Carolina counterpart—sent a ship to capture the brigand. Teach was killed in the ensuing sea battle off Ocracoke Island, ending the “golden age of piracy” in Southern waters. Soon after Blackbeard's death, Eden decided to leave Bath, whose residents were resentful of the governor's association with the pirate. By 1719, Eden had moved himself and the seat of government 60 miles north, purchasing land and two aging but respectable houses along the Chowan.

Around 1720, Eden completed the large manor house in which he would live three more years until his death. Two decades and an impressive string of coincidences later, Eden's stepdaughter, Penelope, married Gabriel Johnston, the new governor of North Carolina. Penelope soon persuaded her husband to re-

locate himself and the governorship to Edenhouse from his home in Wilmington. Johnston's 18-year reign as governor saw North Carolina grow from a frontier territory to a colonial powerhouse.

“Edenhouse manor was built at a time when North Carolina as a colony was growing rapidly,” says Lautzenheiser, who has performed only remote sensing and field surveys at the Conservancy preserve.

Lautzenheiser's work has dispelled the notion that North Carolina was backward compared to the other colonies.

“During the time of both Eden and Johnston,” she observes, “the finest things that were available in the world were available at Edenhouse, including Dutch ceramics, gold, crystal goblets, and fine glass. This gives you a picture of a people that were carrying on a very brisk trade despite all the embargoes.”

North Carolina State Archaeologist Steve Claggett thinks that Edenhouse holds the potential to answer many nagging questions facing historical archaeologists. “With what Loretta has done at the smaller, earlier sites, coupled with the big house on the property that the Bell family has donated, we now have the whole package,” he says. “Having the Conservancy preserve the archaeological component of this history is just fantastic.” —*Rob Crisell*