Brief Assessment
for the
Pitt House in Robertson County, Tennessee

November 2020

TENNESSEE CIVIL WAR
NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA
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Introduction

On November 12, 2020, staff from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area and the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) visited the historic Pitt Farm and Distillery at the request of the Guthrie family, owners and caretakers of the property. Much of the visit focused on the Pitt House. The home was built during the early 19th century with additions from the mid-19th. The distillery officially began operation in the 1840s.

Discussions included specific architectural details of the home, preservation issues, and potential future plans. After these conversations, the Guthrie family indicated needing guidance on basic preservation steps they could start working on themselves, while other projects, such as the work on the cistern are ongoing. Additionally, after noticing the 1973 National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination omitted several architectural details, a request was made to document those details in order to have a more comprehensive picture of the home’s architectural features and current integrity.

Thus, this report is not meant to be a comprehensive conditions assessment and architectural description, nor does it seek to expand current knowledge on the history of the property. Though a general timeline, succession of ownership, and basic information about the family’s distilling business are known, more research is needed to establish a better understanding of this particular property’s full story. The following information is instead tailored to the Guthries’ current needs. This report was prepared with support from the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a partnership unit of the National Park Service, which is administered by the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.
Brief History Note

As historian Teresa Biddle-Douglas discussed in her entry on “Historic Distilleries” in the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* (1998):

“Distilleries in Robertson County date back to the early 1790s, when settlers Thomas Woodard and Arthur Pitt established small stills on their property. Their sons continued the operation and developed whiskey production into a prosperous business. Wiley Woodard inherited his father’s farm and distillery in 1836 and had doubled his whiskey sales by 1841. Soon he was shipping large quantities of whiskey throughout Tennessee and other southern states. Wilson Pitt, Arthur’s son, experienced similar success. As the whiskey industry soared, competition increased. Charles Nelson’s distillery in Greenbriar became Woodward and Pitt’s largest competitor, producing over eight thousand barrels of whiskey per year. Business began to decline in the 1880s as tobacco surpassed whiskey in production, and anti-whiskey pressure rose from temperance groups. State and then national prohibition stopped the production of whiskey altogether, and the industry never resurfaced in Robertson County. Several extant buildings of the Pitt Distillery are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.”

These buildings date to the distillery works of Wilson Pitt and operated from the 1840s to the Civil War period. The property’s National Register nomination dates the Wilson Pitt House c.1800, c.1856.
Central Hall Section of the House

The Pitt House is a brick, Greek Revival style, central hall (also called a central passage plan) building, with ell addition to the northeast corner. The original portion of the house is one room deep, with a room flanking each side of the center hall. The earliest examples of this form of house in Tennessee date to the 1790s. By the 1820s and 1830s, the plan became more commonplace, making the Pitt House an early surviving example of the central hall plan in northern middle Tennessee. The bricks are laid in the common bond pattern, meaning single row of headers alternates with several rows of stretchers. This portion of the home has interior end chimneys. Each chimney originally had two fireplaces, one which served the ground level rooms on either side of the central hall and one that served the basement rooms directly beneath.
The Greek Revival portico dominates the façade. The front-facing gable roof is finished with a pediment and plain tympanum. The portico is supported by four square, Doric columns with two square, Doric pilasters on either side of the entrance. The original door and surround has been replaced with a single-leaf, mid-20th-century door. Wood siding was placed around this door to infill the new door’s immediate surrounding. Despite these changes, portions of the paneling around the entrance can still be seen. The trim around the original opening for the door remain. The horizontal piece above the door slightly mimics the portico in that it is shaped like a pediment, though the peak of the pediment is much shorter creating more of an obtuse triangle. At either end of the pediment are square shaped with an inverted L-shape panel in the middle.

Figure 2. Greek Revival portico of the Pitt House
The door and window trim found in the two interior rooms flanking the central hall mimic the obtuse pediment of the exterior façade door. The primary doorways in this section of the house retain their original wood paneling and also indicate the thickness of the home’s brick walls. The mantle in the northern room is likely original, while the mantle in the southern room (seen in Figure 3) is from a later period. The walls of these three primary interior spaces (central hall and flanking rooms) are finished with plaster over wood lathe.

Figure 3. View from center hall into south room. Interior door trim in foreground and closet door trim in background both mimic the shape found above the main entrance of the house.

The basement’s layout replicates the central hall plan directly above it. The basement is fully finished in its brick floors laid in a herringbone pattern, door trim (though less elaborate than what is found upstairs), and doorway paneling. There is also evidence, particularly in the south room, that the walls were once plastered due to scoring found on the brick. Penciling found between the bricks on the chimney in the south room further indicate the care with which the basement was finished, since pencilling is a decorative treatment. The National Register
nomination states the basement contained the dining room and kitchen. It is likely the south room functioned as the dining room, as it would have been received better natural sun for light and warmth.

Figure 4. View from the center hall of the basement into the south room. Notice the door trim that is slightly less elaborate than that found upstairs, the paneling in the threshold, and the herringbone brick pattern.

Figure 5. Scoring on brick suggests the south room’s wall may have been finished in plaster at some point.
The Log/Weatherboard Section

Figure 6. Photographer facing north at the south elevation of the ell

Figure 7. Photographer facing northeast at the southwest corner of the ell’s limestone foundation
The ell section of the house has an entirely separate foundation from the brick, central hall portion of the house. The ell has a continuous, block-cut limestone foundation; the different sizes of the cut limestone suggest the foundation (See Figure 7) may have been modified at some point. The ell section of the building has a partial cellar with brick masonry work once used for shelving.

![Figure 8. Photographer facing west in the cellar](image)

At least a portion, particularly the easternmost section, of the ell addition’s walls are log. Though the exterior walls are now covered in weatherboard, a common 19th century technique used to “upgrade” the appearance of an existing building, there are visible sections that reveal the size of the logs as well as the V-notches used to pull and hold the logs together.

![Figure 9. Exposed section of log wall at cellar entrance. Notice the V-notching.](image)
A box staircase is located in the back room of the ell addition. It leads to a finished living space with low ceiling that runs the length of the ell. Before the Civil War, this space was likely used as slave quarters for the enslaved people that worked within the house, and possibly servants’ quarters or a space where children slept after the Civil War.\(^1\) Newspapers from the 1890s, as well as layers of 20\(^{th}\) century wallpaper, can be seen on the walls in this space.

\(^1\) According to the 1820 Federal Census, Arthur Pitt enslaved 9 people. In 1830, this number decreased to 5 people. The 1850 Federal Census indicates Wilson Pitt, Arthur’s son, enslaved 5 people in 1850. This number tripled to 15 people by 1860.
Penciling between brick is found on one of the fireplaces in the ell, specifically the south wall of the closet in the “first” room of the ell – closest to the central hall portion of the house (see Figures 13 and 14). This brick section served as the north side of the brick chimney located in the room. The decorative function of penciling between bricks suggests this chimney could have been originally exposed at one time before it was covered up by later modifications such as subsequent additions to the house.

![Figures 13 and 14. Closet located in the first room of the ell (closest to the façade of the house).](image1)

At some point in the 20th century, the residents of the home added two rooms and a bathroom to the north side of the ell. Signs of this modification can be seen both on the exterior and interior of these spaces. For example, there is a clear building seam on the west elevation of the ell (see Figure 15). Directly beneath this seem, the foundation changes from block-cut limestone to cinder block.

On the interiors of these newer rooms, the presence of wood siding is the most obvious sign of the 20th century addition. A portion of a square, Doric column is still visible in the northwesternmost room (see Figure 16). This is the same style column located on the exterior of the ell’s southwest corner.
Figure 15. Photographer facing southeast to capture the north elevation of the ell. The red arrow is pointing to the building seam where the 20th century additions begin. Also notice the change in foundation materials.

Figure 16. Remnant of a square, Doric column that once decorated the northwest corner of the original section of the ell
Preservation Guidance for the Pitt House

The Pitt House is in relatively good condition overall. The asphalt shingle roof is sound, the floors are level and sturdy. The ground around the foundations is relatively firm and does not appear to hold excess water near the masonry for long periods of time. Structural issues found in the central hall portion of the house, as detailed in the 2012 Conditions Assessment Report written by Exoterra Architects, should be remedied before finishes such as interior plaster work are repaired, and before the reconstruction of the front porch. The Exoterra report also detailed the issues and upgrading needs of the plumbing and mechanical systems. As of November 2020, portions of the back porch along the ell wing are being stabilized and rebuilt, mortar repair and replacement work has already been competed around windows where needed, area of the fascia and soffits have been repaired, and new wooden window lintels have replaced failing ones.

The following preservation guidance is meant to help the property owners regarding drainage, biological growth on bricks, and peeling paint.

Figure 17. Example of potential structural issues seen above the mantle in the northern room of the central hall house
Three Golden Rules of Preservation and Restoration Work

- Regular maintenance is the best insurance against costly repairs and replacement
- When possible, repair damaged historic features and materials rather than replacing them
- If replacement is the most feasible option, make sure that the replacement matches the original as closely as possible in scale, material, design, and detail

Drainage

Much of the ground surrounding the foundations of the home feel firm underfoot, and there are no signs of rainwater entering the basement or the cellar. However, the ground along the north elevation of the house (See Figure 15 and 18) appears moist and the lack of sunlight on this side of the building is contributing to biological growth creeping up the foundations.

According to the National Park Service “Preservation Brief 39: Holding the Line: Controlling Unwanted Moisture in Historic Buildings,” ground moisture can cause significant damage to historic structures. The following excerpt from that work explains:

“Proper handling of surface rain run-off is one of the most important measures of controlling unwanted ground moisture. When soil is saturated at the base of a building, the moisture will wet footings and crawl spaces or find its way through cracks in foundation walls and enter into basements. Moisture in saturated basement or foundation walls – also exacerbated by high water tables – will generally rise up within a wall and eventually cause deterioration of the masonry and adjacent wooden structural elements.”

Consider doing a visual survey of the north elevations after a heavy rainfall to understand specifically where and to what extent rainwater is pooling in this area. The gutter system that once served the house was removed sometime after 2012 to work on deteriorating fascia and soffits. Because much of the home’s foundation is surrounded by a historic brick sidewalk, the installation of a French drain, or other on-the-ground interventions that allow water to drain naturally away from the house, could be potentially damaging to this particular historic feature. It is important to continue with the repair work on the fascia and soffit as called for in Exoterra’s conditions report, so a gutter system can be reinstalled and thwart any further ground moisture issues that may arise.
Once gutters are reinstalled, they should be inspected on a regular basis to ensure they are not clogged with leaves and debris. Consider adding flexible drainpipes to the downspouts of the gutters to extend their length and carry water away from the foundation.

Though the historic brick sidewalk may prevent invasive measures to control water on the ground, inspect the foundation after a rainfall to ensure there are no low spots where water pools. If there are, consider grading the area at angle to shed water away.
Cleaning Historic Brick

There is substantial biological growth on the brick walls in the basement. There are no signs of rainwater entering the basement, but the lack of sunlight and air circulation creates an environment conducive to this type of growth. Historic masonry can be damaged by harsh and inappropriate cleaning techniques, particularly removal of surface materials by abrasive methods. Low pressure water and non-acidic ingredients is the best method to clean historic brick. We encourage the use of soapy water and soft, natural bristle brushes. Take care to test the cleaning solution on a section of the soiled brick to ensure unwanted discoloration or other damage does not occur. Only clean areas that are covered in mildew. There is no need to clean brick walls that are not soiled.

Do NOT:

- Use sandblasting. This cleaning method can do irreversible damage to historic brick by removing its external later and introducing new, microscopic fissures that invite moisture retention.
- Use high-pressure cleaning
• Use acidic or harsh chemicals to “eat” away grime and dirt. These solutions will remove grime and dirt but will also “eat” at the historic brick itself, introducing more deterioration and problems down the road.

• Clean the historic masonry in cold or freezing temperatures, or during a time when it may freeze overnight. Introducing liquid to historic brick in cold temperatures presents the potential of the liquid to remain in the brick and freeze before it has the chance to evaporate. When liquid freezes, it will expand, causing new fissures and widening old ones.
Paint Issues

*Paint on Exterior Brick*

It is unclear when the Pitt House was painted its current color, though evidence suggests the home was originally intended to present its common bond-patterned brickwork unobscured by opaque paint. The area of unobscured brick underneath the back porch (*Figure 20*) suggests the exterior brick walls were originally “washed” with a transparent solution, likely containing iron oxide or similar pigment, that soaked into the mortar and bricks to create a uniform red color. This was often done to conceal color variations of the bricks. In the same area under the porch, there is also evidence that the mortar between the bricks was then penciled with a white or light-colored pigment to create the illusion of a finer masonry finish. Though this area is obscured by the porch, it is important that it remains unpainted as the red-tinted color washing and penciling of the brick, as well as the common bond pattern in which the bricks are laid, are important features and provide the best evidence of what the original exterior of the brick home may have looked like.

*Figure 20. Color washed brick and remnants of penciled mortar between the bricks*
While the house was not intended to be painted its current color, removing the paint would most likely damage the historic brick underneath, doing more harm than good. Though there are some areas on the exterior where the paint is beginning to wear off, it may be best to let the paint deteriorate naturally and neither repaint or try to remove the paint by force. If areas of exterior paint begin to peel or bubble due to moisture issues, the paint in that specific area could then be removed, the source of the moisture identified and solved, and the brick repaired as needed.

The same principle applies to the paint on some of the bricks in the basement rooms. It may do more harm than good to try to remove the paint, unless there are obvious moisture issues causing the paint to bubble and peel.

*Paint on Wood Siding, Columns, Cornice, and Fascia*

Preparing to repaint the wooden elements of the home's exterior is also a good time to replace any broken, deteriorated, or missing weatherboards or the beadboard on the porch ceiling. The majority of the weatherboard siding appear to be in good shape, but there are places on the back porch that are missing ceilings boards, leaving the space between the porch roof and ceiling open to the elements and animals. The missing boards should be replaced with new or recycled pieces of beadboard that are similar in size and shape.

*Figure 21. Missing and loose ceiling boards on the back porch*
Unlike the brick portion of the home, the weatherboard, or wood siding, on the ell section of the home was intended to be painted as both a decorative and protective measure.

Figure 22. Peeling paint on the south elevation of the ell

Though it is not an immediate concern, much of the paint on the weatherboard is scaling or peeling and should be removed prior to repainting. Before painting, it is important to remove any loose and flaking paint. The National Park Service advises removing damaged paint down to the first “sound,” or intact layer you encounter. Removing damaged layers can provide insight into the integrity of the weatherboard underneath and is necessary before sanding, applying primer, and repainting the area.

Methods to remove paint include mechanical stripping and hand-scraping tools designed to mitigate damage to materials underneath, chemical stripping, and stripping with applied heat. Each of these methods have advantages and disadvantages and should be used with caution. The same principles of removing the peeling and damage paint down to the next sound layer before sanding and priming can also be applied to interior wood finishes that have peeling paint.
APPENDIX

Preservation guidance in this report was largely derived from the following sources, each of which can be found online through the provided link:

