

Historic Gem in Valentines, Va.

By *Lea Beazley*

Tucked away down a dirt road in Valentines, Va., is a historic gem badly in need of restoration. Called the Edward Dromgoole House, it is the only remaining United Methodist Church, Virginia Conference, circuit rider home. It was built in 1798 by Edward Dromgoole (1751 – 1835) and today sits on 16 acres of land. (For many years, it was thought to have been built circa 1784, but a recent dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, of the support beams in the house revealed it was actually built in 1798.) In 2008, it was purchased by The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation so it could “preserve and restore the house and grounds and to add a structure for meetings and retreats in this quiet natural setting,” says the Foundation’s website (<http://oldbrunswick.org>). The Foundation is a historic preservation organization affiliated with the Methodist Conference of Virginia.

E. T. Malone, Jr., author, researcher, and former editor with the N. C. Division of Archives and History, wrote an article about Edward Dromgoole for NCPedia (www.ncpedia.org). In it, he called Dromgoole, born in Sligo, Ireland, a “pioneering Methodist circuit rider” who was ostracized by his family after he came under the influence of Methodist missionaries and renounced Catholicism. “He came to America in 1770 and entered the Methodist ministry in Maryland in 1772, later becoming a merchant, preacher, and planter in Virginia. He continued preaching for over 60 years, until his death,” wrote Malone.

While preaching on the Brunswick Circuit, “Dromgoole met Rebecca Walton, daughter of John Walton, a respected citizen and man of much substance, of Brunswick County, Virginia,” says the Foundation website. The two married on March 7, 1777. Malone, who also wrote a book entitled “Dromgoole, Twice-Murdered,” said “it is not known where the couple lived before they built the Dromgoole House 21 years later, which they named ‘Canaan.’ Canaan was continuously occupied by the Dromgoole family from 1798 until about 1921.” It was also the boyhood home of Peter Pelham Dromgoole, Edward’s grandson, whose mysterious disappearance from the campus of the University of North Carolina in 1833 gave rise to a popular legend that he was killed in a duel. The Order of Gingham, a student secret society inspired by the Peter Dromgoole legend, constructed a stone castle in 1925 in the woods near Chapel Hill. Malone’s book is a study of the legend and of the actual fate of young Dromgoole.

According to the Foundation’s website, [Edward] “Dromgoole was also a magistrate and a member of the County Court for 45 years. He rode the circuit until about 1784 then located, preaching at Woolsey’s Barn, Mason’s Chapel, and Olive

Branch Church which was established by 1801 near the Dromgoole home.”

American Bishop Francis Asbury visited in and around the Dromgoole House many times over a period of years. He preached at Canaan a number of times, and in 1801, Asbury held the Methodist Conference there. In his third journal, written in February 1815, Asbury wrote “I ordained Edward Dromgoole an elder in the Church of God.” Dromgoole was one of only a few men ordained by Asbury. (The link to his journal is

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The chimney in the woods near the Dromgoole House. King thinks original building attached to this chimney may have been moved to add on the room on the eastern end of the house.

- Photo by Lea Beazley



found at: <https://babel.haithitrust.org>.

In addition, "It was at Canaan that Asbury, Reverend Peter Pelham and Dromgoole met to organize Ebenezer Academy, which was the first Methodist school in America," says the Foundation's site. "Edward Dromgoole, Jr., married a daughter of Pelham, who moved to Ohio because of his opposition to slavery," added Malone.

"Canaan was also the home of Edward's youngest son, George Coke Dromgoole, who served in the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate; in the U.S. Congress for nine years where he was serving at the time of his death in 1847," adds the Foundation's website.

According to Malone, "The home and property were inherited by Mary Virginia Bradley (Mrs. Edward Dromgoole IV) after the death of her husband, Edward Dromgoole IV, in the fall of 1920." Dromgoole IV was the great-grandson of Dromgoole, Sr. (Dromgoole IV and Mary Virginia had no children). He had one full brother and two half-brothers, all three of whom died without descendants. Edward IV and Mary Virginia sold two tracts of land, of 100 and 108 acres respectively, in August 1920, shortly before his death. Carol Corker, Foundation secretary, said "In February 1924, the plantation was 1,423.99 acres. At the time, it was owned by Mary Virginia Holt [Mary Virginia Bradley Dromgoole had remarried by this time W.B. Holt]."

Corker continued, "It was subdivided into 29 tracts by Atlantic Coast Realty Company. The house was on tract # 5 which

was sold to R.J. Clary, Jr. with other tracts totaling 230.76 acres, on February 25, 1924. In 1947, Mr. Clary sold the same amount of land to Madeline Hutcheson. It was conveyed to William Grady Pearson from Madeline Hutcheson December 20, 1949."

"The 16 acres was deeded to The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation by Susie C. Pearson and Christine P. Rivas [daughter]. Suzie's husband was William Grady Pearson who died in 2000," said Corker.

When the Foundation purchased the home in 2008, it was in terrible condition. "Borderline salvageable," is how Tom King, the contractor who is currently restoring the house, described it. Vines and trees had practically overtaken it, the plaster walls and ceilings were crumbling, the foundation was falling in, there was at least eight inches of water in the basement, the tin roof was leaking, termites had eaten many of the support beams under the house, the floors had caved in all the way to the ground in the basement, and the back of the house was slowly collapsing, according to King.

In 2009, the home was wrapped in a weather-resistant house wrap to try to prevent further decay. In 2011, when King began working on the home, the first thing he did was clear a little over an acre to "try to get ahead of the wisteria jungle surrounding the house," as he put it.

In 2013, when funds were available to do more to the Dromgoole House, King began waterproofing the basement and foundation of the single room. "The original foundation was

The Edward Dromgoole house today. It was wrapped in a weather-resistant house wrap to try to prevent further decay.

- Photo by Lea Beazley



stonework laid on top of the ground. The basement was dug after the house was built, with bricks laid against the cut earth to hold it up," said King. "The bricks didn't work as intended, and as you might expect, this wasn't a long-lasting design. As the dirt eroded away from under the stone wall of the foundation, it completely caved in over the years. Stones have been added back on top of the pile of rubble."

"Different pictures (of the house) over the years show various parts of the foundation with missing stonework. Most of what you see today is these replacement stones," said King. "There was only one section of the foundation on the back of the house that remained as original."

"The original stone foundation looked different than the foundation under the house that you see now. That still-standing back portion was supported by an intersecting wall in the basement. Even that original part has been undermined by tree roots, so none of what remains is a long-lasting foundation for any house. It's on borrowed time. I'm hoping that the next earthquake is not larger than the last one (in 2011)," said King.

King has a proven system of waterproofing old house basements. "This situation was a little different, however, because the foundation was so fragile. If the excavation was dug close to the existing foundation, there was a good chance that everything would collapse," said King. For the Dromgoole House, King said, "The excavation needed to descend at about a 45-degree angle down and away from the base of the foundation to leave that part of the red clay to hold the house up." He first used a mini-excavator to dig a "grade establishing" ditch around the house where he wanted the bottom of the excavation to end.

"If this grade establishing ditch was not dug, it would have taken a lot of time with a more expensive, large piece of equipment there to be guided while doing the major part of the excavation," he said. Next, a large excavator was used to finish the digging, sheets of waterproofing membrane were laid down on the earth, and King said he "layered washed crushed rock on top of the waterproofing membranes, so any water could quickly drain down to the perforated pipe at the bottom." He then placed textile fabric between the



King using the tractor to fill the drainage ditch for the waterproofing system with rock.

- Courtesy of Tom King



This is the Dromgoole house in the 1950s after the porch had been added to the front of the room that was built in the early 19th century. The Pearson family was living in the house at the time.

- Photo by Carstairs Bracey, courtesy of The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation.

drainage stone and the fill dirt. "Long story shortened, the basement has been completely dry since," said King. (Check out King's website at www.historichousepreservation.com and click on "Basement Waterproofing" to see photos and learn more about this process.)

In 2017, King jacked the whole house up to "level everything out" and get ready for the next phase of the project (when the funds are available) ... rebuilding the stone foundation. "Estimates for this run from \$70,000 to \$220,000," said King. "The steps needed to accomplish this task are: disassemble what remains of the current foundation, dig down deep enough to pour concrete footings, and rebuild the dry-stacked stone walls."

After the foundation is finished, work can commence on the outside of the house. First, the very old tin roof will be replaced with cypress shingles, like the home had originally. One of the original cypress shingles was found on the home site. Second, the siding will be repaired by "having some new siding milled to match the original, molded edge siding." Much of the remaining siding is still in good shape.

Windows will follow the siding, and then the house will finally be weatherproof again. King said the lost window panes will be replaced with hand blown cylinder glass from Germany, made the same way it was back then.

"I've made exact reproduction sashes, even out of the same type wood as the originals, to replace ones that don't have enough structural parts to remain viable," he added.

After the outside is restored, work will start on the inside. "Missing doors will be made to match the originals that remain, the floors will be repaired, any 20th century trim or decoration will be removed, and the walls and ceilings re-plastered with lime plaster," said King.

Then comes the final phase of the project ... reproductions of 18th century furniture could potentially be built for the house "so we won't have to rope off rooms" and "people can sit and study early American history and Methodism."

"We hope to eventually build a caretaker's house and offer use of the house to a retired Methodist minister or other qualified individual in exchange for looking out for the place and occasionally offering tours of the Dromgoole home," said Corker.

There are so many interesting features in the Dromgoole House ... the original heart pine floors made from the heartwood of the southern longleaf pine, the nogging (brickwork that fills the spaces between studs or fram-



The current state of the inside of the Edward Dromgoole House. This is the original plaster. King said he would like to reuse as much of the lath (thin, flat strips of wood providing a foundation for the plaster) as he can.

- Photo by Lea Beazley



"The Spinning House," next to the house on the eastern side, was Congressman George Coke Dromgoole's office in the 1840s.

- Photo by Lea Beazley

ing members) that was put there to keep mice from chewing through the walls, and the huge corner posts with a 90-degree angle that were hewn out of a single log, just to mention a few. In addition, the 18th century windows still have two of the original panes, the unique staircase is built with a landing half-way up, and the two large bedrooms upstairs may have originally been one large room used as a chapel.

The house has two front doors, one that originally opened to the hall, for the public; and one that opened to the parlor, for family. The room on the eastern end of the house was added in the early 19th century. Smaller things to see include the hand-forged wrought-iron nails used to build the original structure, and the H & L hinges on the doors.

On the exterior of the home, there are two chimneys. The one on the western end of the house was "rebuilt from the firebox up in the 19th century," said King. "They may have used the bricks from the original chimney to build the foundation for the room that was added in the 19th century," he added. Unusually large bricks with a decorative diamond design near the top were used to build the chimneys.

"The Spinning House," next to the house on the eastern side, was Congressman George Coke Dromgoole's office in the 1840s, where Dromgoole descendant Bruce Cotten discovered a valuable cache of family papers in the 1920s. He divided them between the manuscript collection at Duke University and the Southern Historical Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill, according

to Malone.

In the woods near the house there is a chimney that has no signs of a foundation associated with it. King's theory is that the original building attached to this chimney may have been moved to add on the room on the eastern end of the house. He thinks so "because the chimney in the woods fits in the original opening for a chimney in the end of the single room addition," he said.

King has a favorite saying about preservation ... "Protect what remains. Recreate what is lost." He said the goal for the Dromgoole House is to "put it back like it was in the 18th century, and not to make changes to suit personal preference."

The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation is a tax exempt 501 (c) 3 organization formed in 2004 to identify, preserve and interpret significant sites on the old Brunswick Circuit—the first Methodist circuit in Virginia and one of the oldest in America. Anyone interested in making a donation to the Edward Dromgoole House restoration project should visit the Foundation's website at: <http://oldbrunswick.org/Edward%20Dromgoole%20House> and click on the "Donate" button near the bottom of the page. Donations may also be mailed to: The Old Brunswick Circuit Foundation, P.O. Box 385, Lawrenceville, VA 23868. Memo to "Dromgoole."

King said if anyone is interested in touring the Dromgoole House, contact him through email at HistoricHousePreservation@gmail.com.

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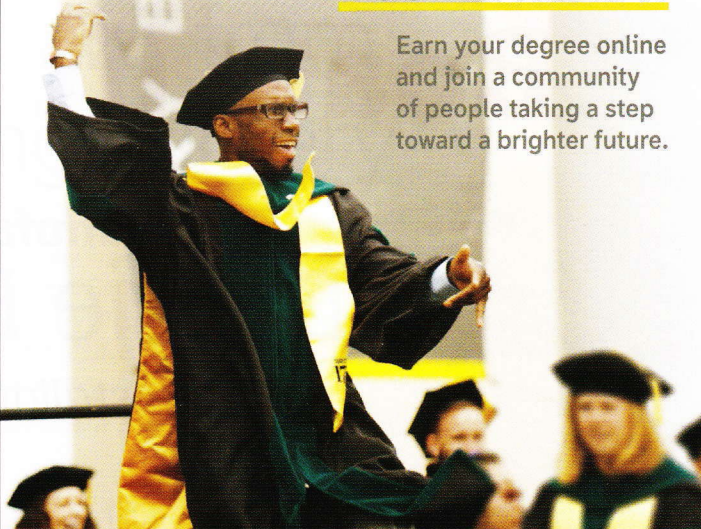
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