

The Mystery of Mount Aventine's West Wing and the Chapman Point Fishery

Linda Dyson



The Mount Aventine manor house, located in Chapman State Park in Indian Head, is considered one of the most significant antebellum houses in Southern Maryland. The house, including the viewshed, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996. The oldest section of the house is the stone “west wing” located on the left end of the structure. Photo by Chris Platt.

Continued on next page 



Nathaniel Chapman, a wealthy Virginian with plantations and extensive business interests in Northern Virginia, purchased “Grimes Ditch” in Charles County in 1751. The family operated large and lucrative fishery and ferry boat businesses here on the Potomac from mid-1700 into the early 20th century.

Nathaniel built a large brick home on the Potomac shore about a quarter mile from the location of today’s Mount Aventine. An inventory of the property made by William Eilbeck and Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer in 1761 shows the family as one of the wealthiest in the county. There is evidence that this house continued to be occupied by members of the family into the first quarter of the 19th century, when it fell into disuse.

In 1800, George Chapman, grandson of Nathaniel, moved back to the family plantation “Thoroughfare” in Virginia, but continued to oversee the Potomac enterprises in Maryland. The “Chapman Fish Books,” attributed to him, document the fishery at Chapman Point from 1814 to 1824 and are still used as a reference from which the productivity of the Potomac is measured.



Pearson Chapman (*portrait displayed at Mt. Aventine*), who inherited the Maryland estate in 1829 and lived there until his death in 1877, was the architect of the antebellum manor house which he named “Mount Aventine.”

Mount Aventine evolved over a period of 70 years from an existing 1½ story stone cottage now called the “west wing.” Built of quarried dressed stone of a type not found in the area, the cottage is thought to be the only cut stone structure of its age in Charles County, and, perhaps, in Southern Maryland. Its location, as well as the costly building material used in its construction, raise several intriguing questions. When was it constructed? What was its original use? Where did the stone come from?

In 2007, the state undertook a project to stabilize the exterior of Mount Aventine. The entire structure was stripped of white paint, exposing the dressed stone construction and its field-stone footings of the old wing. (The one story brick addition on the front was added in the 1930's.)

With support from the Maryland Heritage Area Authority and the Charles County Commissioners, the Friends of Chapman State Park commissioned an architectural review of the house to help guide their renovation efforts. One aspect of the study was to unravel the mysteries of the west wing’s age and use.

The study, conducted by Barton Ross Associates, a historic architecture firm, suggests that the cottage was built sometime between 1810 and 1815.

The architectural study included inspections of construction elements such as the rafters and ceiling and floor joists. Plaster samples were also evaluated. Findings include heavy horse-hair plaster, early saw-cut lath and blacksmith hand-wrought nails. The collar ties in the attic are mostly saw cut with few hewn examples found. All these elements are consistent with early 1800’s construction.

The cottage’s original front door and a 12 over 12 window still exist and are incorporated into the 1930’s brick addition as interior openings. Although the woodwork surrounding these openings has been altered, the door and window design are also consistent with an early 1800 construction date.

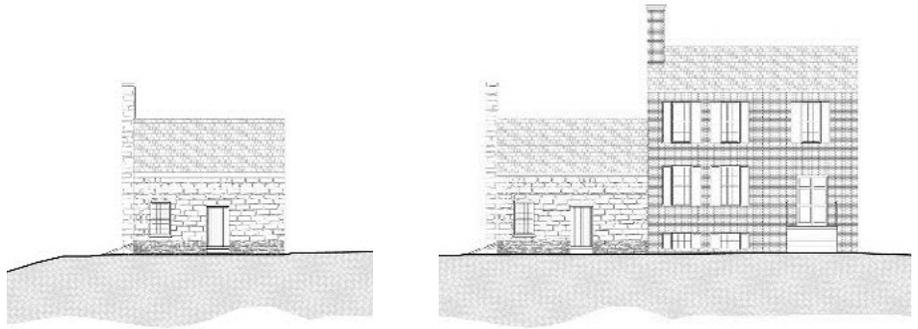
The working theory of the cottage’s original use is that it was built as a commercial building associated with the plantation’s Potomac businesses. Supporting arguments include the expensive stone construction and the lack of a storage cellar, which would not have been typical of a small farm house of the period. The location, on a prominent hill overlooking the fishery, would have provided a good vantage point for monitoring the shoreline, as well as providing access to customers and officials visiting the businesses by land routes, which were supplanting river transport during this period.

As to the source of the stone, it is known that the Chapman family operated a quarry in northern Virginia, so a reasonable assumption, which may be tested in the future, is that the stone originated there near Aquai Harbor.

The evolution of Mount Aventine from a small stone cottage to the formal center hall design that exists today took place in two documented building periods, circa 1840 and circa 1860. The 1840 design, a “side-passage” house typical of that period, included a 2+ story brick addition with a parlor, dining room, and stair hallway on the first floor. It was added directly to the pre-existing cottage. As the family’s fortunes and needs increased, the house was expanded to its current design in the 1860’s. The garage on the east end and “shed” addition to the west end were built in the 1930’s.

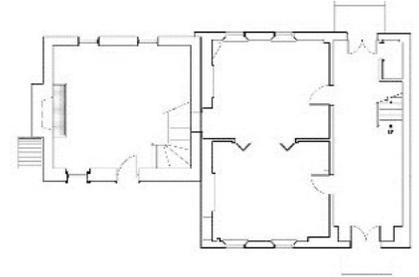
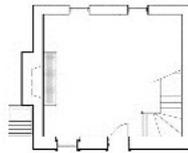
More study and scientific testing would undoubtedly add to the story. To date, there has been no archeological investigation of either the Mount Aventine site or the grounds of the original house on the Potomac — not to mention Chapman Point and Chapmans Landing. Additional study would provide a fascinating look into the history of this historic place, and the important role the Potomac played in the economic development of Charles County in the early 1800’s.

These drawings show how Mount Aventine evolved from the stone cottage to the five bedroom mansion that exists today. The home's unique series of planned architectural additions adds to its significance as an important historic structure.



Mr. Aventine
Circa 1805-1815

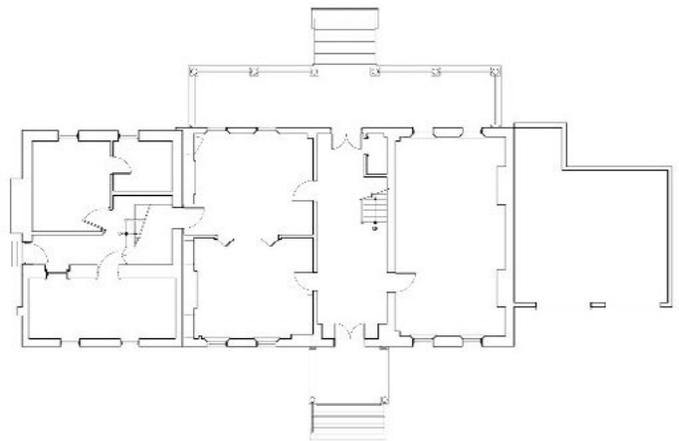
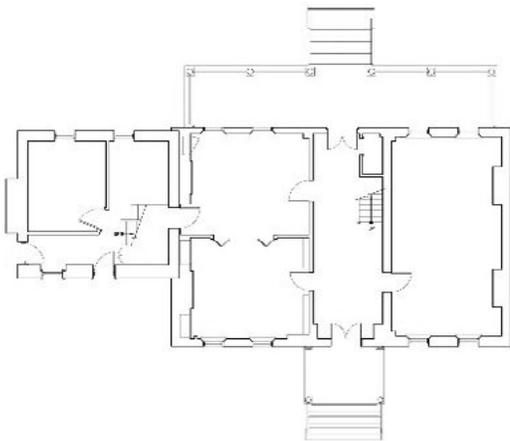
Mt. Aventine House
Circa 1830-1840



Mt. Aventine House
Circa 1850-1860 "Period of Significance"



Mt. Aventine House
Circa 1930-1940



Information drawn from the application for National Register status compiled by R. Rivoire, and Mt. Aventine Preservation Study by Barton Ross and Associates LLC.



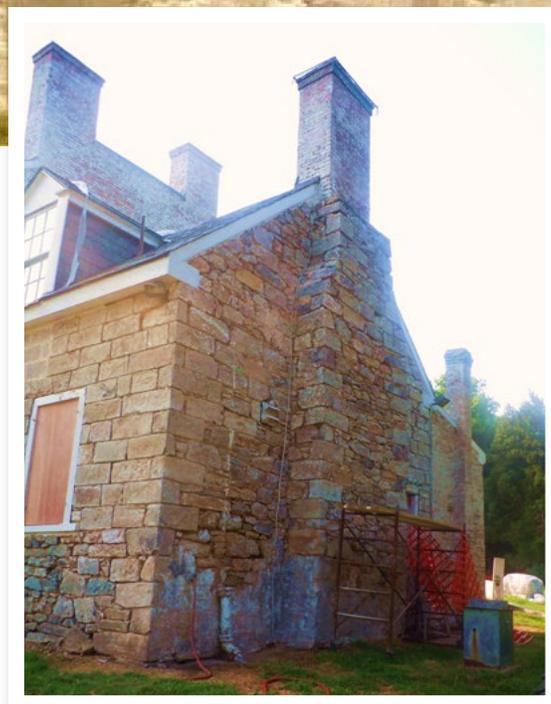
Mt. Aventine... *The West Wing*

The Friends of Chapman State Park are working on a plan to use the west wing, a main interpretative area of the mansion, with focus on the foodways of the period of private occupancy of the house. Evidence suggests that the wing has always served as the kitchen as the house evolved.

PROJECTS SCHEDULED FOR 2017		
Creating a working kitchen space for the house for use and demonstrations	Restoring the original 1800's hearth and fireplace to the extent possible.	Creating a museum display of kitchen technology for the period of occupancy between 1800-1984.

Work is underway, and volunteers are always needed and welcome.

Mount Aventine is open Sunday afternoons during the park season, April through October, and when special events are scheduled. Details are on the website at www.friendsofchapmansp.org.



Pictured: West Wing restored. The inset depicts the West Wing with paint removed showing the cut and dressed stone construction and the fieldstone foundation.