

**Smith-Taylor Cabin:
Shelter Island, NY**

**4.0 CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT &
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TREATMENT**

4.1 General remarks

The overall condition of the cabin is relatively good despite its exposed location and seasonal pattern of use, both of which have evidently resulted in a history of deferred maintenance and repair. While the building is essentially only one story in height, its massing and architectural detailing are relatively complex due to its evolution from a simple, rectilinear picnic pavilion into a habitable cottage with a three-story tower and two bedrooms, kitchen, two bathrooms, and mechanical systems. Close analysis of historical photographs reveals that the conversion of the picnic shelter into a dwelling actually took place in two stages, a fact that further complicates the morphology of the building and, more than likely, affected the present condition of its architectural features [see: **3.3 Alterations & repairs**].

There are two distinct types of conditions that warrant assessment and treatment in the context of the future restoration, interpretation and reuse of the cabin. The first type of condition is attributable to normal wear, rot, loss, damage or breakage of architectural features; these factors are due to the detrimental but natural effects of aging and exposure to the elements. The second type of condition that may warrant treatment has resulted from a variety of alterations or repairs that are not consistent with the historical appearance of the building. The latter “condition” is of special concern to the Taylor’s Island Preservation and Management Committee, which plans to restore the building to its period of significance in the Smith-Taylor era [i.e., pre-1958].

The following conditions assessment and recommendations for treatment will help to guide the committee’s restoration and adaptive use of the cabin.

4.2 Conditions assessment

4.2.1 Exterior

Foundation

The original structure is supported above grade on large natural pebbles and lacks a true foundation. The poured concrete foundation underlying the additions appears to be in very good condition, and by supporting the building by 2 feet or more above grade, it serves to protect the wood fabric of the walls from contacting the ground and perimeter vegetation, thus minimizing or eliminating opportunities for rot.

The opening for the cellar hatchway, which is continuous with the foundation masonry, has a rebuilt staircase that is in good condition. The hinged batten doors that cover the opening, however, are in need of repair.

(Due to the inaccessibility of the crawlspace beneath the structure, a thorough assessment of the condition of the poured concrete foundation was not undertaken.)

Roof

The “architectural” type asphalt shingle roof covering is relatively new and with one important exception, appears to adequately protect the walls and interior fabric from deterioration. Although the asphalt shingle material is not historically accurate, its simulated wood shingle color and variegated texture approximate the appearance of the cedar shingle roof that once covered the original picnic shelter. It is therefore a satisfactory substitute for the authentic roofing material. The new roof covering appears to have been installed directly on the board under layment, thus preserving the pitch and profile of the original hipped roof.

One important area of roof failure has been identified at the base of the larger chimney. Patches and layers of flashing reveal an attempt to correct the problem, which has resulted in water penetration into Room 102, and staining and bio-growth on the interior chimney. The problem area was originally created when the building was enlarged and the tower constructed; the resulting massing of the building forms a series of complex roof forms and valleys. In short, the expanded building was not engineered for the long term success and functionality of the roof, which has failed because of inadequate water drainage. Periodic patching of the roof in the area of the stone chimney has stabilized the condition, which now warrants a more permanent solution.

The evidence of yellow bio-growth on the roof surfaces matching that on the main chimney is an indication that water does not drain quickly enough from the roof.

Chimneys

The main chimney is associated with the original building. It is constructed of various sized, rounded pebbles and is discernibly out of plumb; furthermore, its concrete cap is cracked. Neither condition appears to jeopardize the essential viability of the chimney or the integrity of the building, and the water penetration that is evident on the interior face of the chimney appears to result from the failure of roof flashing, not from the masonry. The build-up of bio-growth on the concrete cap and on the face of the chimney is an indication of excessive moisture, however, no doubt due in part to the cracks that have appeared on the top of the cap.

The smaller brick chimney is associated with the later period of construction and appears to be in good condition.

Porch and deck

The porch and deck surrounding three sides of the cabin have been rebuilt in the past year for reasons of safety, using existing fabric and historic photographs as a guide in the reconstruction. The structural fabric – cedar posts and rafters, roof boards, deck flooring and supports – is all new and its condition is therefore excellent.

Walls

The most significant area of exterior deterioration is found in the log wall construction at the northeast corner of the original structure. Here, total loss of the log fabric has occurred due to prolonged water penetration and resulting decay. Another, lesser problem is the loss of nogging or fill between the logs. This cementitious material appears to be backed by a green steel wool type material, areas of which have fallen out leaving the inner surfaces of the logs exposed to water penetration.

By contrast, the cabin siding associated with the later additions is in good condition. The vertical board siding attached to the bedroom and kitchen extensions is associated with the non-historic repair of the building and warrants restoration to match the pre-1958 treatment of the exterior walls.

Doors & windows

There are five exterior doors and doorways on the main level: a side door now serving as the principal means of egress (D1), two pairs of “French” type doors leading from the porch to the main living space (D2 & D4), the former front door on the north façade (D3), and another side door that leads from the porch to the east bedroom (D5). Broken window panes and missing hardware were observed in D5. A sixth door (D6) provides access to the tower balcony on the third level. These exterior doors are in

reasonably good condition.

There are thirty-two windows in all, twenty-five on the main floor and seven in the tower. Of these, it appears that none are associated with the original picnic shelter, which appears to have had diamond pane casement type windows flanking the front door (D2). The existing window sash and frames are in good condition overall with several exceptions; the casement window at the base of the tower (W14), for example, is badly deteriorated. There are also examples of window units that have been replaced; several need tightening or gluing, and many of the window panes require reglazing. Three of the tower windows have been removed (second story) and their openings boarded up.

Finishes

The exterior of the building preserves paint finishes on the simulated log siding as well as evidence of paint on the ends of the logs associated with the original structure. Paint finishes – red, green, white and dark grey – are also found on doors, windows and trim. Historically, it appears that the building was painted red prior to its acquisition by S. Gregory Taylor in 1937 and that it continued to be red in color, perhaps with green trim, after his expansion of the building. Currently, much of the exterior fabric is unpainted but preserves traces of finishes, while other areas are painted a dark grey. A majority of the doors and windows are unpainted.

4.2.2 Interior

Floors

Floors throughout the building are of narrow pine or fir; they are in good condition and may require only light sanding and refinishing with a protective clear coating (i.e., varnish). One area of the floor that requires special attention is located at the base of the tower; evidently a heating grille was removed from this location, resulting in a non-historic plywood infill to the floor.

Walls & ceilings

Walls and ceilings are generally in good condition. A majority of the walls and ceilings are lined with V-jointed, knotty pine boards measuring 7 ¼” wide. This material is tongued and grooved, clear-coated for protection, and survives in relatively good condition throughout the cabin. Traces of a “pickled” or pale green wash finish are in evidence as well, and further analysis may be warranted to determine the extent of this wood treatment that was typical of the early 1940s when the building was enlarged.

The ceiling of the large, all-purpose room (102) is composed of painted boards that also serve as support for the roof fabric. They are painted a light turquoise. Nails

from the application of roofing material as well as staining from water penetration are evident, but neither condition requires repair. Evidence of a composition board having been used to cover up the ceiling boards – now removed – was observed. This appears to have dated to an interim period, but the original ceiling boards are exposed and only additional cleaning of nails and fragments of the later material is needed.

A condition requiring treatment occurs in the east bedroom, where wallboard is used for the walls and ceiling. Water penetration has occurred in this area, resulting in failure of the ceiling and at the corner joints.

Fireplace

The exposed rubble stone chimney, firebox and hearth are in relatively good condition but show symptoms of water penetration and cracking. The cracking in the mortar joints is most probably due to a natural settling process. Bio-growth is evident in areas associated with water that has seeped in through the chimney column or from the failed flashing on the roof.

Doors, windows & trim

Doors, windows and trim are in good condition throughout the building. The former front door (D3) has been modified with an interior layer of boards that match the wall treatment of the room; this appears to date from the expansion period, and is therefore not a “condition” that requires treatment.

Hardware & fixtures

Much of the hardware and fixtures survive from the 1940s. These include simulated “colonial” thumb latches, surface-mounted strap hinges, and lighting devices designed to look like 18th century style wall sconces. Additionally, there are natural twig hooks that reinforce the rustic “cabin theme” of the original building. Hardware and fixtures are well preserved overall.

Finishes

The interior fabric of the building is either unfinished or treated with clear coatings with a low luster. Very little paint was applied to wood surfaces, which are for the most part left natural, consistent with the rustic style and setting of the building. Traces of a “pickled” finish may be observed on sections of wall and ceiling boards, however, and require further analysis to determine their original appearance. Some of the door hardware is painted black (“japanned”). These finishes show signs of aging, including wear and rust.

4.3 Recommendations for treatment

4.3.1 Exterior

Foundation

Check poured concrete foundations and footings for cracks or other signs of failure in the crawlspace. Repair or reinforce as required.

Roof

The two conditions of the roof – that it was enlarged, resulting in valleys that are not correctly engineered, and that its low pitch encourages bio-growth – require immediate attention. It is recommended that the entire roof covering be removed, that the wood substrate be studied for evidence of its original treatment(s), and that a new roofing system be installed. The new roof structure may require a minimal re-engineering in order to correct the design flaw in the area of the stone chimney where inadequate drainage occurs. The specification for the new roof covering should be based on physical and historical photographic evidence. A system for collecting and carrying water to the ground (i.e., gutters and leaders) may also be considered to ensure the roof's longevity.

Special attention should be given the tower roof and its narrow balcony, which is currently covered with asphalt material as if it's an extension of the roof. While this material may be historically accurate, it is not an appropriate surface and cannot withstand foot traffic. The structure of the balcony requires extensive repair and recovering with a more durable material.

Chimneys

The larger stone chimney requires a new concrete cap and repointing. It may also benefit from the installation of wire screening to prevent the intrusion of birds or small animals. Appropriate flashing at the base of the chimney is a function of the roofing system described above.

The smaller brick chimney appears sound and no treatment is warranted at this time.

Walls

The walls, like the roof, suffer from two “conditions” – the first being that of deterioration due to weathering and rot, and the second being the replacement of original fabric with non-historic materials – and each needs extensive treatment at this time.

The most severe area of loss is the northeast corner in which the log construction

has rotted away due to water penetration. The protective porch roof above this area has now been rebuilt, thus enabling reconstruction of the wall below it. All additional areas of log construction affected by rot will need to be removed. Using the existing log walls as a guide, these areas should be restored using materials and techniques of construction that match the existing. Following reconstruction, rebuilt areas and the remaining sections of log wall require restoration of the cementitious nogging that fills their joints. Care should be taken to match the color and texture of this material.

Areas of surviving cabin siding associated with the 1940s expansion of the building appear to be well preserved. Sections of the building in which the siding has been removed should be restored; these include the bedroom and kitchen wings, as well as the tower. The specification for this siding is readily available (pieces have been saved and stored in the basement). New siding should be milled to match the original, and installed using historic photographs as a guide.

Doors & windows

Doors with window panes need checking for broken glass; hardware requires repair or replacement with equivalent materials, and all locking devices should be made operational. Windows present several conditions warranting treatment; several casement units have been replaced, while others have deteriorated and many window panes lack adequate caulking. Each window unit requires individual assessment; at a minimum, all existing window glass should be removed and the window units restored and primed prior to the reinstallation and caulking of the window panes. Units that are non-historic such as the casements that have been replaced, and those that are significantly deteriorated, require restoration with windows that match the historical evidence.

Finishes

The exterior of the building appears to have been painted red throughout its “period of significance.” Paint evidence survives in traces in various locations and on several building elements: on the ends of logs and on the cabin siding, for example, and under the eaves, on window trim and sash, and on the doors. It is recommended that a scientific paint analysis be undertaken to determine the precise shade of red that was utilized as the exterior finish prior to the modern era, and that the building be repainted accordingly.

4.3.2 Interior

Floors

Interior floors require a light sanding and the application of a protective clear

coating. The patched area at the base of the tower should be infilled with an appropriate floor grille.

Walls & ceilings

Walls and ceilings are well preserved, except for the sheetrock in Room 103, where water intrusion has caused staining and failure of seams. This fabric will need to be removed; examination of the substrate should be conducted at this time to see if wood material had been used in this room like that of the other rooms. The walls and ceiling in Room 103 should be restored according to the physical evidence found in this inspection.

The ceiling of Room 102 needs the remnants of later fabric fully removed.

Fireplace

The bio-growth that is evidence of water intrusion can be cleaned from the surfaces of the exposed chimney column (repair of the exterior chimney and associated roof flashing should prevent further water damage). The cracks that have appeared between the large pebbles, in the brick of the firebox and in the cast concrete hearth can be filled, with care being taken to match the color and texture of the existing mortar. Inasmuch as this condition appears to have occurred due to gradual settling, any surface treatment such as tuck pointing is essentially cosmetic in nature and will not be permanent, thus the chimney column will require periodic maintenance.

Doors, windows & trim

Doors, windows and trim are well preserved on the interior. Door D6 between Rooms 101 and 102 requires minor repair of its applied twig decoration, and others may need light carpentry to ensure that they fit properly to their openings.

Windows that require treatment have been noted under exterior treatments, above. The tower window openings of the second story require reconstruction of interior frames and trim.

Hardware & fixtures

Much of the hardware and fixtures remain intact and require little treatment. Door hardware (hinges, thumb latches) needs cleaning and repainting, as required. The drop bolts ("cremones") on the "French" style doors in Room 102 (D2 & D4) need cleaning and repair. Window hardware has not survived as well as that of the doors; several of the extension arms of the casement windows are broken or have missing parts, all conditions that require appropriate repair or replacement.

Lighting fixtures appear sound, but wiring should be checked or replaced for reasons of safety or code compliance.

Finishes

Interior finishes are minimal. All wood surfaces need cleaning; clear coating, where there is evidence of its historical application, should be restored. The “pickled” finishes found on wall and ceiling woodwork should be analyzed professionally and restored, if consistent with the objectives of the committee.