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Scientific Research Uncovers One of Hagerstown, Maryland's Oldest Standing Structures

Dendrochronology confirms 417 N. Jonathan Street built with 18th-century timbers

[December 14, 2020] Hagerstown, MD – Preservation Maryland, with the assistance and generous support of the Maryland Department of Transportation and State Highway Administration, is pleased to announce the findings of a recently completed dendrochronology report which confirms 417 North Jonathan is constructed with some of Hagerstown's oldest timbers.

The findings, which were made public in a new report today, found that the timbers used in the historic structure now located at 417 North Jonathan Street were felled (i.e. cut down) in the winter of 1739-40 and 1740-41 in the vicinity of Hagerstown, Maryland. It was not until the 1830s, that the timbers, which then were already in use as building material for nearly 100 years, were recycled to construct the cabin on Jonathan Street.

The research was summarized in a technical report prepared by Michael J. Worthington and Jane I. Seiter of the Oxford Tree-Ring Laboratory, a scientific historical research firm based out of Baltimore, Maryland. The researchers were able to confirm the date of the logs' felling using a process known as dendrochronology which can date a log's date of felling by using the characteristic patterns of annual growth rings in timber and tree trunks. Core samples from logs in the Jonathan Street cabin were taken in September 2020 and were compared against a master tree-ring sample for the region – determining the precise date of felling as the winter of 1739-40 & 1740-41.

In addition to being able to determine age, the process also is able to identify the region of felling, and the new report notes that *"the sampled timbers matched particularly highly with reference chronologies from Washington and Frederick Counties in central Maryland. Its highest match...was with a log house that formerly sat on the banks of the Antietam River in Hagerstown, suggesting that the original log house these timbers were cut from was in all probability standing somewhere in Hagerstown before being demolished and reused for the log cabin at 417 Jonathan Street."*

Although researchers and historians may never be able to determine the precise structure in which these logs were first used – it is interesting and worthwhile to note that very few structures stood in Hagerstown in 1739, save for two cabins built by town founder Jonathan Hager in the late 1730s prior to the completion of his stone dwelling. The date of Hager's construction and the likelihood that a Hager heir owned the plot of land at 417 N. Jonathan Street around the period of the current cabin's construction seems to suggest the potential that these logs once housed Hager himself – making the structure one of Hagerstown's most historic.

Remarkably, all of this could have been lost as the cabin was headed to demolition before Preservation Maryland deployed emergency funding to acquire and now rehabilitate the building and secure its future. Preservation Maryland is actively working on the rehabilitation of the property through the organization's Revolving Fund – the project team includes: Maryland Department of Transportation and State Highway Administration, Western Maryland Community Development Corporation, Habitat for Humanity Washington County and others.

Nicholas Redding, Executive Director of Preservation Maryland, underscored the value of the research, explaining, “The legacy of this building and its layers of unique, diverse, and significant history speaks to the value of preservation – and the need to continue to invest and support the revitalization of the historic Jonathan Street community.”

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Preservation Maryland is the state's first and foremost historic preservation non-profit organization founded in 1931 and dedicated to preserving Maryland's historic buildings, neighborhoods, landscapes, and archaeological sites through outreach, funding, and advocacy. Visit our website at: presmd.org.