

The Mystery of the Shoe in the Roof

**In 2017, workers repairing
the Trent House cornice
found this shoe inside!**



**This discovery presented us with several
mysteries.....**

When was the shoe made?

Who might have worn it?

Why was it in the roof?

When might it have gotten there?

Our thanks to:

**M. Chris Manning, Author of The
Material Culture of Ritual
Concealments in the United States**

Read her Master's thesis here:

<https://www.academia.edu/9491012/>

**The_Material_Culture
_of_Ritual_Concealments_in_the_
United_States**

**Valentin Povinelli, Master
shoemaker, Colonial Williamsburg**

**Nancy Rexford, Author of Women's
Shoes in America, 1795-1930,
published by Kent State University
Press, 2000.**

How was the shoe found?

**In late 2017, a piece of the cornice of the Trent
House fell.**

**The cornice is the decorative part of a
building where the roof meets the walls and is
constructed of the vertical fascia board and
the horizontal soffit board.**



**The arrow indicates the missing cornice.
The shoe was discovered in this area.**



**The fallen cornice is
original to the house.**



**These nails held the
cornice in place and
are original to the
house.**

When was the shoe made?

We consulted two experts about the shoe – Valentin Povinelli, master shoemaker at Colonial Williamsburg, and Nancy Rexford, author of Women’s Shoes in America, 1795- 1930.

According to Ms Rexford, dating a shoe depends on its style and shape. The shoe found in the roof was a “split vamp” shoe.

The opening of the shoe passes through the quarters (sides) before slitting or splitting the vamp (the top of the shoe).

Below is an example of shoes worn by upper class women in the 18th century and would have been the type of shoe worn by Mary Coddington Trent, and was very different that the shoe found.



Heelless, square toed shoes dated to between 1835 and 1850 and were very common in the 1840’s, according to Ms. Rexford. Most surviving examples were made from tan kid leather and had three to five lace holes. Those made of heavier leather were used for work. Our shoe has three lace holes and is made from such leather.

These shoes are closer in style to the shoe that was found and would have been worn by a middle or upper class woman in the 1850s. While similar in style, they were much more fashionable.



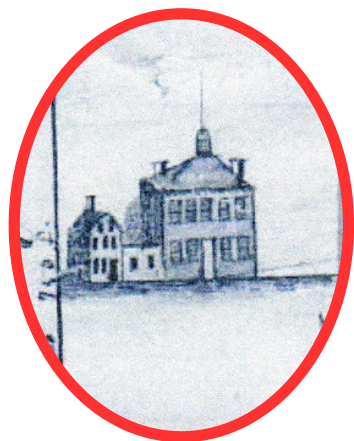
This shoe dated around 1848 is also similar to the shoe found in the Trent House, but for men.

Mr. Povinelli noted that dating shoes also depends on who was wearing them. “The shoe [found at the Trent House] was not terribly stylish, more suitable for someone doing domestic work, possibly a farm girl’s shoe.” If it was a man’s shoe, he would date it to the 1820s-1830’s. If was a woman’s or a child’s shoe, it could date until the 1850’s.

When was the shoe placed in the Trent House roof?

Since the shoe found in the roof was from the first half of the 19th century, it was clearly not placed there by workers who originally built the house for the Trents in 1719. But we know that the cornice where the shoe was found was original. So how did a shoe made around 1830-1850 get into a building constructed in 1719?

The answer lies in the renovations made over the centuries to the house's roof.



Note the high pitch of the roof in this 1804 depiction of the Trent House with the 1742 kitchen wing.

The roof of the Trent House circa 1850 is relatively flat. Alterations to the roof were likely made in 1815-1850.



The tenon of the mortis and tenon joint of the roof have been cut and the section repositioned.



Here the rafters have been repurposed. Saw marks and construction methods indicate that these particular wood elements are of 19th century construction.

Was the shoe left deliberately, and if so, why?

Even if a workman's shoe, it seems likely that it would have been noticed or retrieved if lost during construction or repairs.

Why might it have been placed in the roof deliberately?

We learned about concealed objects from M. Chris Manning.

Her master's thesis, *The Material Culture of Ritual Concealments in the United States*, describes the history of this practice in Europe and documents findings in our country.



It was a common custom to hide talismans, such as shoes and written charms, in a building, to protect occupants from evil.

It is a long tradition, dating back to ancient times when people were sacrificed. The shoe replaced the person. Some think the tradition comes from the 13th century legend of John Schorne, who supposedly conjured the devil into a boot.

Where else have concealed objects been found?



...in fireplaces, chimneys, in roofs, around doors and windows, and elsewhere.



...in many types of buildings including cottages, hospitals and factories.

We Continue to Discover History at the Trent House!

