

# Tusculum: The History of a House



Tusculum at its original site. Photo courtesy of the Tusculum Institute.

Whitley Gallery  
Sweet Briar Museum  
Sweet Briar College

March 7, 2012-March 1, 2013

## Curator's Acknowledgements

I would like to personally thank everyone who has helped me to put this exhibition together. Without their knowledge and guidance this project would not have been a success.

Thank you, Dr. Rainville for sharing your knowledge of Tusculum and its families.

Thank you, Maddie Hodges '13 for tours of the dismantled Tusculum House.

Thank you, Keith Adams, Vera Schooler '12, and Perry Tourtellotte for your help in the archaeology lab. I would not have been able to get any artifacts without your guidance and knowledge.

Thank you, Karol Lawson for your support, guidance and your help in providing me with good resources.

Thank you, Nancy McDearmon, Ashley Rust '13, and Sweet Briar's physical plant office carpenters, for helping to put this exhibition together. This could not have been done without you.

Ann Roach '13

Guest curator



Guest curator Ann Roach '13 (center, rear) measures a Tusculum door in storage at Sweet Briar for possible inclusion in the exhibition, December 2011.

She is assisted by Nancy McDearmon (left) and Maddie Hodges '13 (right).

There is a stack of window frames in the center and to the far left several mantelpieces.

## Director's Acknowledgements

An exhibition such as *Tusculum: The History of a House* does really “take a village” to get organized and installed. Guest curator Ann Roach '13 discovered this first-hand as she began plotting an exhibition prospectus as her fall 2011 Arts Management practicum project. I would like to add my thanks to hers to the array of hard-working and talented people who study, conserve, and look after the remarkable house known as Tusculum.

The list must begin with Lynn Rainville, director of Sweet Briar College's Tusculum Institute. Much of the historical and genealogical information included in this document comes from sources authored by Dr. Rainville. Her on-going work researching this house as well as the people, both white and African American, whose lives were intertwined with the Tusculum and Sweet Briar estates is an invaluable resource for the College community as well as scholars of Virginia history. Her faithful partners in caring for the house are the good people of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) and most particularly Dr. Robert Carter, the DHR representative who heads its satellite office here. The DHR has, indeed, been a close partner of the College for a decade, working with Sweet Briar and Preservation Virginia to transfer the property in 2003 and supporting many of the Tusculum Institute's outreach efforts since then.

In the College's archaeology lab, the project benefitted greatly from the supervision of archaeologists Keith Adams and Perry Tourtellotte, while lab assistant Vera Schooler '12 generously provided indispensable help to Ms. Roach in reviewing and selecting artifacts. The lab's information on Tusculum artifacts is itself based on excavations carried out at the house site in 2006-2007 by the College of William and Mary's Center for Archaeological Research (on behalf of the DHR), and by field work done by Sweet Briar College archaeology classes under the direction of Professor Claudia Chang in 1991 and 1992.

Over the past few years Tusculum has been the subject of several small displays at the Sweet Briar Museum, supervised by then-director Christian Carr. An exhibition about the house and the Tusculum Institute organized by Dr. Rainville was also featured in the College's Benedict Gallery in the fall of 2009.

Tusculum's timbers and architectural elements are currently stored at Sweet Briar. The inclusion of a mantel, window, and assorted timbers in the current exhibition is due to the hard work of the specialists with Lone Jack Contracting. The Lone Jack crew has spent fall 2011 and winter 2012 repairing the house's beams, sills, and wall studs. Ms. Roach and the Museum staff are particularly indebted to David Duggan of Lone Jack Construction for his patient explanations, generous help identifying interesting features to include here, and his restoration work on the mantel and window frame in advance of this exhibition. This work has been made possible by a grant from The Roller-Bottimore Foundation and matching private donations. In particular, William and Sherrie McLeRoy (Sherrie Snead '74) and The Community Foundation of North Texas supported restoration of the mantelpiece.

This year's work by Lone Jack Construction was preceded in the fall of 2010 by an inventory of a majority of the framing by Gardiner Hallock of Arcadia Preservation. The house was deconstructed and moved in 2006 by Timothy Robinson of Heartland Restoration. The house model on view here was made by Ezra Hitzeman of Lost Industries.

Arts Management student Maddie Hodges '13 spent the fall of 2011 working with Lone Jack Construction to document their restoration work. She proved to be an enthusiastic and very helpful guide to her classmate as Ms. Roach began to explore for features to include here. Ms. Hodges' project video, "Conserving Tusculum," can be found via a link at <http://www.tusculum.sbc.edu>.

The photos shown in conjunction with this exhibition in a digital photo frame were taken when the house was still standing at Clifford (New Glasgow), and were taken by (in alphabetical order): Sheila Alexander; Jackie Beidler; Suzanne Ramsey; Tim Robinson; and Adair Williams. The older sepia-toned photos in the digital display were taken by an unidentified photographer ca. 1905. The photos are provided courtesy of Dr. Rainville.

The staff of Sweet Briar's physical plant office, under the direction of Steve Bailey and Rich Meyer, deserves much appreciation for their tireless assistance, both in preparing space to store the house and for their most recent help moving selected elements here to the Sweet Briar Museum and installing them. In particular, Ms. Roach and the Museum staff would like to thank Jeff Moore, Ronnie Staton, Darryl Campbell, and Steve Woody for their help and advice. Vincent Rose merits our appreciation, too, for his careful handling of display pedestals.

Finally, my colleague Nancy McDearmon and her very able student assistant Ashley Rust '13 deserve endless rounds of applause for their efficient, inventive, and thoughtful design of this exhibition.

Karol A. Lawson  
Director, Art Collection and Galleries  
Director, Sweet Briar Museum  
Visiting Assistant Professor, Arts Management Program



Tusculum during deconstruction by Heartland Restoration, 2006.  
Photo courtesy of the Tusculum Institute.

## Introduction

“Tusculum” refers both to a house—parts of which are on view here—and to an estate property in the nearby community of Clifford (formerly called New Glasgow), a few miles north of present-day Amherst.

Both the house and the property on which it once stood have a direct family tie to the Fletcher family who owned the Sweet Briar property before it was a college. Sidney Fletcher (1821-1898), the brother of Sweet Briar College founder Indiana Fletcher Williams, was deeded the property by their father Elijah Fletcher (1789-1858) in 1850. Tusculum was the childhood home of Sidney and Indiana’s mother, Maria Antoinette Crawford, and she also spent some time in her later years visiting Sidney Fletcher and is thought to have died there. Her husband, Elijah Fletcher, had purchased it from his in-laws in the 1830s. Tusculum was enjoyed as a home-away-from-home by Indiana’s daughter, Daisy, in whose memory Sweet Briar College was established. Sidney Fletcher, his brother Lucian, their mother Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher, and their grandfather William Sidney Crawford are buried at the Tusculum property.

As a dwelling, Tusculum exemplifies traditional Georgian and Federal wooden frame house construction. Its earliest portion, the northern section comprising two rooms and a hall, is thought to have been built in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century and as such is one of the earliest extant houses in the far western Virginia piedmont. At the time the house was built this part of the state, far from Richmond in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was very much a frontier.

The original structure rose two stories and the total footprint of the house would have been 30’ x 30’. The house was enlarged in 1802-1805 with the addition of a two-story dining room wing, stairhall, and covered porch, making the new dimensions of the house 30.5’ x 67’. Originally, a cook house and office were located in separate buildings outside of the house. These were both removed sometime around 1936. Electric lighting was not installed in the house until 1945.

It is believed that the house was built by David Crawford (ca. 1697-1766), who had moved westward, leaving his prominent family’s roots in Hanover and New Kent counties in the Tidewater, to seek land and fresh opportunities in what we now know as Albemarle, Nelson, and Amherst counties. There is disagreement among scholars about when exactly Tusculum was constructed, though it is generally thought to date to the 1750s or 1760s. One of David Crawford’s grandsons, William Sidney Crawford (1760-1815), inherited the house.

William Sidney Crawford first appears in public documents as the owner of the property in a 1787 tax record, when he would have been in his late 20s and recently married. He is noted as the owner on an 1802 insurance document and next in 1805 when the house was reappraised at a higher value due to the addition of a two-story wing and a breezeway. A lawyer educated at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), he may have named the house after the home of the school’s president, itself named after a town in the Italian *campagna* famed for residents such as the Roman statesman Cicero. A community leader as well as a farmer and lawyer, William Sidney Crawford served as the fourth county clerk of Amherst for over twenty years. Although Tusculum was his primary residence, Crawford owned many other parcels of land throughout Amherst County. He and his wife, Sophia Penn Crawford (also the descendant of land-owning gentry prominent in

Amherst County), had 13 children at Tusculum. One of their daughters, Maria Antoinette Crawford (1792-1853), was the mother of Sweet Briar College founder Indiana Fletcher Williams.

By 1813 the Tusculum property had grown to about 379 acres and was a busy, productive farm. It was in this year that William Sidney Crawford's daughter Maria Antoinette married Elijah Fletcher (1789-1858), a Vermont schoolmaster who had accepted an invitation to teach at an academy in New Glasgow (now called Clifford), near Tusculum. Crawford was one of the school's benefactors and trustees. While teaching at the New Glasgow Academy, Fletcher boarded with the Crawford family at Tusculum and described it, as well as the young ladies who caught his attention there, in letters to his family:

“They live in a two story, upright house, painted white. They have their carpets on their floors and every thing in the genteelest style. Mr. C is a man between fifty and sixty, quite grey headed, educated at Princeton, formerly a distinguished Lawyer. Mrs. C. is a most amiable woman, the young Ladies distinguished for their sense and accomplishments. They dress in their silks daily but have too much good sense to be proud. The young Lady I anticipate making my future companion [Maria Antoinette Crawford] is devoid of all the affectation and common prudery of modern girls. She is sincere, candid, intelligent, and sensible.” (Elijah Fletcher, New Glasgow, Virginia, to his father Jesse Fletcher, Ludlow, Vermont, 7 February 1813)

After the death of his father-in-law in 1815, Fletcher managed the property on behalf of his mother-in-law—the schoolmaster proving to be an adept businessman and progressive farmer—even after he and his young wife moved away from Tusculum to settle in Lynchburg. Tusculum remained Sophia Penn Crawford's residence until she and her son William S. Crawford Jr. moved to Kentucky in the 1830s. At this juncture, Fletcher bought the house and agricultural properties from his in-laws.

Elijah Fletcher's son Sidney Fletcher (1821-1898) oversaw the property successfully for his father and was eventually given it in 1850. Public records from 1850 and 1860 document Sidney Fletcher's management of the estate, noting that he grew a variety of crops on the property, including wheat, corn, oats, tobacco, hay, and clover, and also kept orchards of apple, peach, plum, cherry, and pear trees. Livestock on the property included cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry. Sidney Fletcher died in 1898 and bequeathed Tusculum to John Jay Williams, a cousin descended from his aunt Lucy Fletcher Williams. The house would remain in the Williams family until 1989.

When the house passed out of the Williams family it faced an uncertain future. Recognizing Tusculum as a notable example of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Virginia domestic architecture and an integral part of the history of Amherst County and Sweet Briar College, scholars, preservationists, and educators, as well as Crawford family descendants, joined together to purchase the house (2003) and move it to campus (2006). Tusculum was accepted for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (National Park Service, Department of the Interior) in 2004 and that same year was placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register. Now, well over two hundred years after it was built, Tusculum provides fruitful opportunities for undergraduate study in architectural preservation, archaeology, and cultural history.

When Sweet Briar College became the custodian of Tusculum, it was decided that, in order to learn as much about the house and the families who lived there, an archeological study should be done of the property. This work was done by archaeologists from the College of William and Mary, on

behalf of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Although the area to be excavated had been somewhat disturbed by the demolition of the house, the results still turned up many interesting artifacts. These range from tiny fragments of glass, pottery, and bone, to broken dishes and storage jars, to medicine and perfume bottles, to building parts such bricks and an aluminum gutter. A considerable amount of architectural debris was also found, leading scholars to surmise that much of Tusculum's construction materials were created or assembled on site.\*

The Tusculum Institute, an administrative office of Sweet Briar College, was established in 2008 to provide educational outreach to the students and faculty of Sweet Briar College and the wider community. The Tusculum Institute's mission is to serve as a catalyst and partner for College faculty across a wide range of academic disciplines to develop courses of study to deepen our understanding of Virginia's historic places and to encourage their sustainability.



Sweet Briar College archaeology students excavating at Tusculum, ca. 1991-1992, under the supervision of Professor Claudia Chang (purple shirt).  
Photo courtesy of Perry Tourtellotte.

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\* When the house was still occupied and well in advance of plans to deconstruct it, Professor Claudia Chang and students from Sweet Briar archaeology classes excavated some portions of the grounds in 1991 and 1992.

## Checklist

This checklist follows the exhibition installation in a clockwise direction around the Whitley Gallery, as a visitor stands in the gallery doorway looking directly ahead at the mantelpiece. Unless otherwise noted, all objects are loaned courtesy of the Tusculum Institute, Sweet Briar College.

### Case One (center of room)

This is a model of Tusculum, made by Ezra Hitzeman of Lost Industries. The scale is one quarter inch to one foot.

### Case Two

Portrait of Sidney Fletcher

modern reproduction of an original photograph (location unknown)

Sweet Briar Museum collection, provenance unknown

A Yale-educated physician, Sidney Fletcher (1821-1898) began managing the Tusculum property in his early 20s. His father proudly wrote to Sidney's uncle:

“Sidney continues his zeal for farming and so far has managed very well, equal if not better than any Overseer I ever had.” (Elijah Fletcher, Tusculum, New Glasgow, Virginia, to his brother, Calvin Fletcher, Indianapolis, Indiana, 12 June 1843)

In less than a decade, Elijah Fletcher gave the Tusculum property, along with several nearby parcels, to Sidney:

“... in consideration of the love and affection the said Elijah Fletcher bears to his son Sidney Fletcher... Elijah Fletcher doth give and grant unto the said Sidney the Tusculum plantation conveyed...by the heirs of Wm. S. Crawford...” (deed of gift, 20 February 1850, Amherst County Deed Book, vol. BB, 70)

Sidney Fletcher was the brother of Indiana Fletcher Williams (1828-1900), the founder of Sweet Briar College. He was the beloved uncle—“Uncle Sing”—of her daughter Maria Georgiana “Daisy” Williams (1867-1884), in whose memory the school was established. Sidney lived at Tusculum most of his adult life and is buried at the property in the family cemetery with his mother Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher, his brother, Lucian Fletcher, and his grandfather William Sidney Crawford.

The round, brown object next to the portrait of Sidney Fletcher is a porcelain doorknob, decoratively glazed to resemble stone or wood.

The selection of glass bottles and jars in this case is a representative sample of the sorts of household detritus excavated by archaeologists at the original Tusculum property in the vicinity of the house. Ranging from ink wells to perfume and medicine bottles these humble fragments are reminders of the daily routines of the many people who called Tusculum home across three centuries.

The ceramic fragments, likewise excavated at the original house site, also tell the story of their lives. The green-bordered scallop-edged fragment is part of a transitional “pearlware” plate, perhaps from the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the style of this piece’s feathered edge and embossing, Sweet Briar archaeology instructor Keith Adams suggests it could be dated to 1820. The larger green fragment is probably from a vase or similar decorative item, probably from the late 1800s or early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Hand-stitched Sampler

unknown maker, unknown date

cotton, wool, or silk thread on linen

found in the attic of Tusculum in the late 1980s

Tusculum was the home of several generations of Crawford, Fletcher, and Williams families for over two hundred years. When Vermont schoolteacher Elijah Fletcher came to New Glasgow in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to teach he boarded with the Crawford family. It must have been a crowded household, as William Sidney Crawford and Sophia Penn Crawford had 13 children, eight of them daughters. This sampler, probably from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shows off its maker’s ability with the alphabet and numbers and is typical of the sort of fine needlework that a girl from a socially prominent, well-to-do family would have been taught.

#### Case Three

In addition to the household items uncovered by archaeologists, the Tusculum property also revealed a variety of objects associated with its long history as a working farm—spanning the ages of both horsepower and gasoline engines. In this case are two iron bridle bits for horses, a rusted gas cap, a variety of nails and fence staples, a broken flowerpot, and the ceramic connector for an electric livestock fence.

#### Case Four

On the top shelf are panes of glass from Tusculum windows that, in themselves, constitute a history of the house’s 200-plus-year occupation. They range from a very rare original pane—hand blown and slightly imperfect—to a mass-produced example from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the middle shelf are several bricks. Two are inscribed—“EHC” and “MEM”—with what scholars assume are the initials of masons or other craftsmen who built Tusculum. One bears the paw print of a large dog. A curved, wedge-shaped brick excavated by archaeologists at the property may have been part of chimney or basement course. The three tapered pins are typical of hundreds that held Tusculum’s walls, windows, and floors together. The wedge-shaped piece of wood is a “floor dog,” used by carpenters to ensure a good fit when laying floor boards. The three metal hinges seen here represent three stages of restoration—from the weathered and rusted condition of the deconstructed house, to a hinge stripped and cleaned, to one primed and ready for reinstallation. There is also a selection of hand-wrought nails from the dwelling. It is likely that the bricks were made at the site or very nearby and it is assumed that the beams, flooring, windows, doors and the like were made by carpenters on site or very close by and from lumber harvested locally.

On the bottom shelf is a selection of “cripple studs” used throughout Tusculum’s walls to secure doors and windows. Their sturdy girth and the fineness of the joinery are typical of the quality materials the Crawford family could afford and the exemplary construction skills of the house’s original builders. Also on the bottom shelf is a variety of stones used in the foundation.

The colored plastic tags seen on a number of the architectural elements here, as well as on the window frame, were affixed when the house was deconstructed in 2006 in order to keep track of the various parts and their original locations.

### On the Wall

Portrait of William Sidney Crawford, Jr.  
unknown artist, ca. 1830  
oil on canvas

Collection of the Sweet Briar College Art Collection and Galleries; bequest of Indiana Fletcher Williams

This young man, the son of Tusculum’s owner William Sidney Crawford and Sophia Penn Crawford, was born at Tusculum in 1803 and grew up there. He was the brother of Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher—he would have been a child of 10 at Tusculum when she married Elijah Fletcher—and therefore the uncle of Sweet Briar College’s founder Indiana Fletcher Williams. Elijah Fletcher obtained Tusculum from William Sidney Crawford Jr. and his mother in the 1830s when they moved to Kentucky.

Mantelpiece  
unknown craftsman, ca. 1802-1805  
wood (possibly oak, poplar, and/or pine)

This impressive mantelpiece originally graced the Tusculum dining room. As part of on-going restorations, it has recently been stripped of accumulated layers of paint. The mischievous doodlings of some family member—one might imagine a bored child—can be seen faintly in the lower part of the flat center section.



The Tusculum dining room, in which the mantelpiece included in the exhibition can be seen *in situ*.  
Photograph courtesy of the Tusculum Institute.

## Window

unknown craftsman, ca. 1750-1805

wood (possibly oak, poplar, and/or pine)

This window, from the second floor, allows the modern viewer to see details of the solid, carefully crafted construction otherwise hidden by the house walls. Of particular note are the marks of hand planing along the edges of the vertical sections, the use of wooden pins (two can be seen at the corners of the bottom horizontal element) to secure the various parts, and the intricate joinery. Following the removal of layers of accumulated paint, the face of the window was recently primed to aid in preservation. The original metal hinges for shutters have also been recently stripped and primed.

## On the open pedestal

A rotating selection of photographs

The photos were taken when the house was still standing at Clifford (New Glasgow), and were taken by (in alphabetical order): Sheila Alexander; Jackie Beidler; Suzanne Ramsey; Tim Robinson; and Adair Williams.

In the selection, a ca. 1905 sepia-toned photo of a young man with two women in a carriage depicts John Jay Williams (1876-1945), who inherited Tusculum from his cousin, Sidney Fletcher, in 1898. In the background of the photo one of Tusculum's out buildings, possibly the kitchen, can be seen just next to the main house. The same structure can be seen in another of the early photos that shows an African American woman with three small children. It and other out buildings were taken down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Tusculum during deconstruction by Heartland Restoration, 2006.

Photo courtesy of the Tusculum Institute.

## Suggested Reading and Resources

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Sweet Briar College Cochran Library Archives at <http://www.archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege>

Sweet Briar College Tusculum Institute at <http://www.tusculum.sbc.edu/>

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Tusculum at its original site.  
Photo courtesy of the Tusculum Institute.