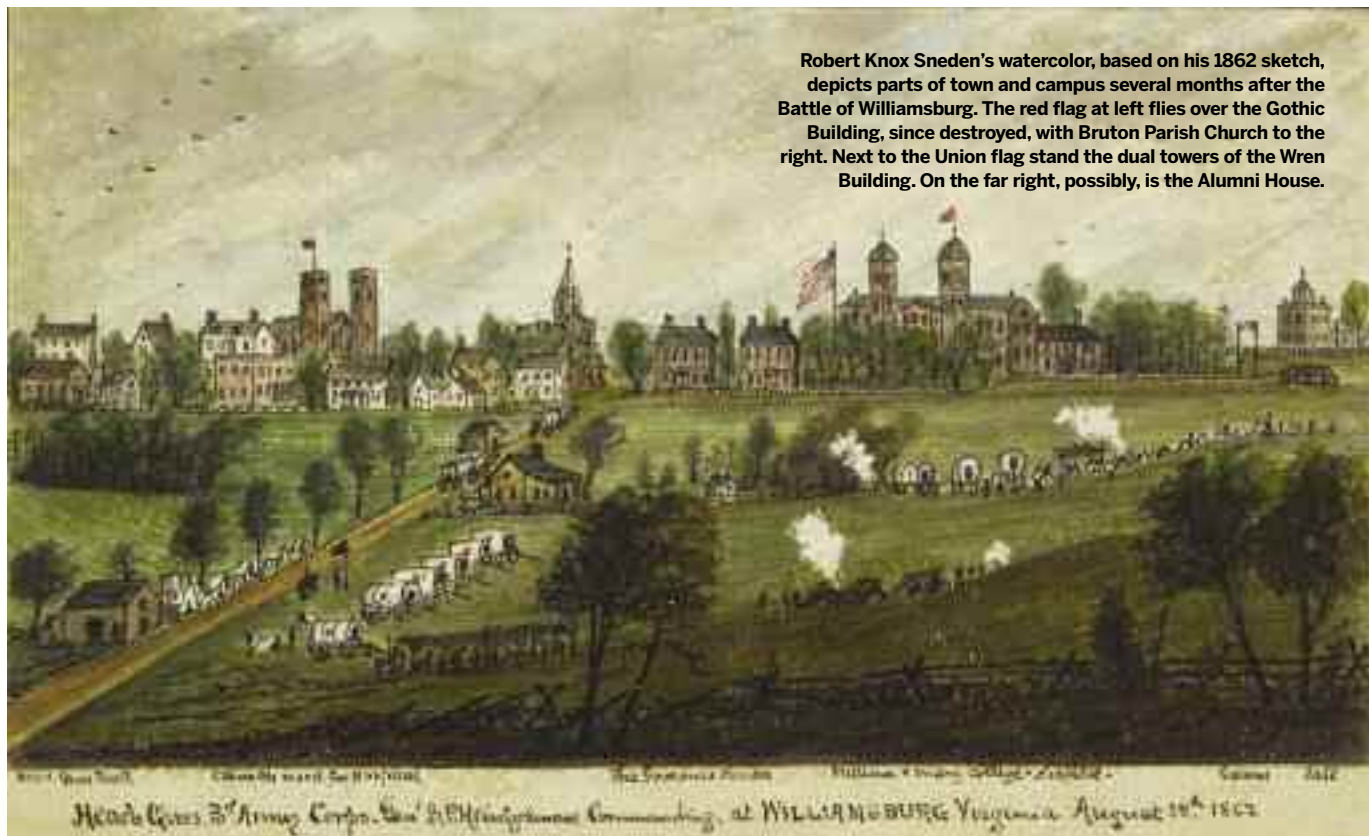


Robert Knox Sneden's watercolor, based on his 1862 sketch, depicts parts of town and campus several months after the Battle of Williamsburg. The red flag at left flies over the Gothic Building, since destroyed, with Bruton Parish Church to the right. Next to the Union flag stand the dual towers of the Wren Building. On the far right, possibly, is the Alumni House.



# THIS *Old* HOUSE

A Civil War Watercolor Casts Light on the  
True Age of the Alumni House

BY PROFESSOR TERRY MEYERS

PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA



**W**illiam and Mary's Alumni House (once the Bright House) may be older than the 1871 date generally ascribed to it. Built as a home to the Bright family, owners of the farm called "New Hope," the building has housed faculty members and — not at the same time — the Kappa Alpha fraternity. The construction date of 1871 derives from misreadings of several documents, including the program notes by William and Mary biology professor J. T. Baldwin Jr. '32 for the 1975 dedication of the Alumni House. Those notes include Baldwin's intimation that the house might possibly date to before the Civil War.

And now comes evidence to justify Baldwin's guess: a long-lost panoramic watercolor of Williamsburg painted by a Union mapmaker, Robert Knox Sneden. Sneden visited Williamsburg after the Civil War battle for the city and his watercolor (pictured on page 44) shows what must be the Bright House standing in August 1862. This image and others appear in *Eye of the Storm* and *Images from the Storm*, recently published by the Virginia Historical Society.

The Battle of Williamsburg (May 5, 1862) had been intense. That evening, a soldier, Randolph Abbott Shotwell, 8th Va, described the Wren Building fitted out as a hospital: "wounded, dying, and dead — here, there, everywhere — halls, recitation rooms, dormitories — all were crowded with bloody bodies!"

In one of the larger rooms, Shotwell saw two or three surgeons "busy at low tables, sawing off, or binding up limbs of poor fellows who lay upon the tables in such a way that the ghastly hue of their distorted faces showed all the more horribly from the flickering glare of the tallow candle at each corner." He tripped on "a pile of legs and arms that had been amputated and thrown on the landing of the stairway, that being the only place unoccupied by the wounded."

The carnage inside the Wren was apparent outside the next day, May 6, when Sneden depicted his first view of the College (not pictured), surrounded by shattered cannon and fences. But it is a slightly later watercolor (on facing page) by Sneden that may push back the date of construction for the Bright House. Sneden's sketch of Williamsburg on Aug. 18, 1862, his second visit, has been lost, but his watercolor made from it years after the war's end, despite some errors and conflated details, is intriguing.

We see a military encampment north of town, perhaps along Boundary Street. An enormous Union flag flies in the Wren Yard and dominates the town — to remind one and all that Federal forces now occupied Williamsburg and William and Mary. The point is rein-



**Above left: The Bright House, standing in 1941, serving as home to the Kappa Alpha Fraternity. Note the brick triangle in the center. Above right: The Alumni House today, with the 1997 extension in the background. Substantially renovated in the 1970s, the new Alumni House no longer has the porch or the triangle shown in the earlier photo. Immediate left: Union mapmaker Robert Knox Sneden in an undated photograph.**

forced by suggestions of military justice at the right of the picture — a jail and, ominously, a gallows.

Sneden's panorama includes a number of identifiable buildings, including the Asylum's "Gothic Building" (no longer standing, but identified by the red hospital flag on its eastern tower). The Brafferton and the President's House are misnamed (Sneden confused them with the front buildings at the Governor's Palace), but apparent.

Most intriguing is what appears to be the Bright House, on that distinctive rise west of campus. The building differs a bit, in that it has a one-story extension or shed at its rear and a distinctive cupola.

But the building could be the Bright House, for the shed could easily have been removed over the years, and the cupola may have been Sneden's belated guess at an obscure or ambiguous detail.

Keep in mind that Sneden painted from a sketch he had made years before. My guess is that, sketching rapidly in 1862, Sneden recorded a feature on the Bright House that decades later he could no longer recall. I think he converted a squiggle in his sketch to a cupola in his watercolor.

And there's some evidence behind that guess. A 1941 picture of the Bright House (above, left) shows an architectural flourish at its center front that it now lacks: a prominent brick triangle thrusting above the roofline.

If the building to the far right of Sneden's Williamsburg panorama is the Bright House, as I believe (and as J. T. Baldwin's words allow), the Alumni House is an antebellum structure, one of only a few buildings on campus to have witnessed Civil War Williamsburg. ■

*Terry Meyers has taught English at the College since 1970. Swem Library is publishing online his edition of the "Daybook and Ledger" of Richard Manning Bucktrout, a document richly informative about Williamsburg life in the mid-19th century.*