

PETERSBURG — *Fixing a building more than 200 years old is no easy task. But it can be made a little easier with science and the knowledge that all the materials for the building probably didn't come from very far away.*

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PETERSBURG — Fixing a building more than 200 years old is no easy task. But it can be made a little easier with science and the knowledge that all the materials for the building probably didn't come from very far away.

"Buildings that were built before the Civil War, generally reflect local geography and history," said John Lee, of the John Greenwalt Lee Company that hosted a workshop on lime at Battersea on Saturday.

Lee has already started an investigation to determine the best way to carry out a preliminary stabilization project. His visit Saturday and the workshop kicked off the efforts to preserve the 1768 home of Revolutionary War Col. John Banister, first mayor of Petersburg.

Battersea Inc. executive director Tempy Barbru said the stabilization program will likely begin in the spring after identifying a qualified contractor for the job.

Bill Rhoades, a former bricklayer from Richmond, said he came to the workshop Saturday to listen to Lee, a nationally recognized figure in the field of historic restoration and preservation.

"It's sort of like coming to learn at the feet of the master," Rhoades said with a laugh. "I had no idea that the workshop would be this technically sophisticated."

Rhoades said the workshop really got into the chemistry of the use of lime in restoration work and the challenges that go with trying to match and restore old plaster, stucco and mortar.

"It kind of reminded me of something like out of one of those crime scene investigation shoes because he went into the technicalities of investigating it," Rhoades said.

Lee himself said the field is referred to as a field of above-ground archeological forensics that look at the original configuration of a building and what went into building it.

"You track every single alteration and addition and what happens is, you can begin to figure out what the original building looked like and that most of the repairs were to treat symptoms, they don't really treat the cause," Lee said. He provided the example that peeling paint on the outside of a home might be scraped away and the surface repainted to preserve the visual enhancement of the home.

"But the real cause might be that there's a leaky gutter, and that doesn't get fixed, so the paint peels again in time and it gets repainted," Lee said. "This is really the history of how we take care of buildings."

He added that most buildings constructed before the civil war used materials that could be obtained very locally. Using modern building techniques and materials to repair such homes, Lee said isn't always the best idea.

"The materials are incompatible," Lee said. He added that's why it's important to try to use the best possible match in the form of a lime mortar that will mimic the original. The lime mortar and limewashes Lee advocates help keep moisture out of buildings as just one benefit.

Lee, who is also the conservator of Battersea located on the far western end of the city, said that he's excited by the prospect of repairing the house, partly because of how unique the house is.

"The size of the outside and the size of the inside... they don't appear to be the same," Lee said.

Barbru described the house as both expansive and yet intimate.

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