If these walls could talk

In 200 years of service, Havens Wharf stands as a major part of Washington's history. Thanks to three renovation projects, the Main Street building returned to commercial operation recently, after 30 years of sporadic use.

Built in the early 1800s, Havens Wharf was once of the most active buildings in North Carolina's early history.

In heyday, the two-story structure served as a port for sailing ships from England and barges from Rocky Mount.

"Once the railroads came, this place, like a lot of others, suffered as shipping traffic died," Havens Wharf co-owner Kent Fulton said. "When shipping died other uses had to be found for the building."

Among the uses were a cotton gin, a military office and a makeshift museum; it currently is being used for offices.

According to Fulton's partner, David Norwood, Davie Street started the renovation project in 1979, when John Havens Moss donated the building to the Historic Preservation Commission.

"We were fortunate to be the ones to finish up and make the building usable again," Norwood said.

Havens Memorial Building.

The building that served the shipping industry of early Washington was built in the 1800s by Jonathan Havens (1784-1855), its restoration in 1979 was made possible by a gift from Jonathan Havens Moss in memory of the Havens family. It is in memory of Benjamin P. Havens (1835-1880) and his grandson Jonathan Havens (1853-1929).

Both owners believe Havens Wharf to be the oldest commercial building still in use in North Carolina.

According to Michael Hill with the state Historic Preservation Society, there is no documented proof as to when the building was originally opened; therefore, it is hard to prove or disprove the validity of Norwood and Fulton's claim.

"It's hard to say it's the oldest building in the state, because there are buildings like 1816 State Bank Building in Raleigh and other buildings in the Fayetteville area that were built during the Federal Period," Hill said. "However, I would say that it is one of the oldest in the state — probably in the top five or 10."

Quoting from the "Guide to Historical Architecture in Eastern North Carolina," Hill said, "...it is a big two-story building similar in form to the Fowl Building. It's an early mercantile style building (like those that have not survived in other parts town).

Hill explained Federal Period buildings are "among the earliest and oldest in the state, dating from the establishment of the federal government."

He said most of buildings also had large columns, like those at Hope Plantation and the original Bank of Washington building.

In the early 1900s, the Havens family, which built a house across the street from the wharf, installed a cotton gin inside the structure.

"This was for a cotton gin, and there were bunk marks show where the cotton was kept," Fulton said, pointing to a room that had been used for the gin and showing where the posts were left.

If you put your hand on them they would turn black from soot.

Fulton said part of the renovation project was to clean the soot from the posts, but he and co-owner David Norwood wanted to leave the marks.

"You can see the fire burned down to where the cotton was kept," he said. "Amazingly it didn't burn any further."

Fulton said, "We tried to keep as much of the old building as possible."

In addition to the posts, the project also left joists, or slots along the ceiling.

Fulton explained how 2 x 4's were nailed together to make temporary walls, which were slid into the joists to separate the building into smaller rooms, which would house tobacco, cotton, corn or other types of produce waiting to be shipped.

Both owners believe Havens Wharf to be the oldest commercial building still in use in North Carolina.

According to Michael Hill with the state Historic Preservation Society, there is no documented proof as to when the building was originally opened; therefore, it is hard to prove or disprove the validity of Norwood and Fulton's claim.

"It's hard to say it's the oldest building in the state, because there are buildings like 1816 State Bank Building in Raleigh and other buildings in the Fayetteville area that were built during the Federal Period," Hill said. "However, I would say that it is one of the oldest in the state — probably in the top five or 10."

Quoting from the "Guide to Historical Architecture in Eastern North Carolina," Hill said, "...it is a big two-story building similar in form to the Fowl Building. It's an early mercantile style building (like those that have not survived in other parts town).

Hill explained Federal Period buildings are "among the earliest and oldest in the state, dating from the establishment of the federal government."

He said most of buildings also had large columns, like those at Hope Plantation and the original Bank of Washington building.

In the early 1900s, the Havens family, which built a house across the street from the wharf, installed a cotton gin inside the structure.

"This was for a cotton gin, and there were bunk marks show where the cotton was kept," Fulton said, pointing to a room that had been used for the gin and showing where the posts were left.

If you put your hand on them they would turn black from soot.

Fulton said part of the renovation project was to clean the soot from the posts, but he and co-owner David Norwood wanted to leave the marks.

"You can see the fire burned down to where the cotton was kept," he said. "Amazingly it didn't burn any further."

Fulton said, "We tried to keep as much of the old building as possible."

In addition to the posts, the project also left joists, or slots along the ceiling.

Fulton explained how 2 x 4's were nailed together to make temporary walls, which were slid into the joists to separate the building into smaller rooms, which would house tobacco, cotton, corn or other types of produce waiting to be shipped.