

Clay Chinking

Monroe's 1799 Main House at Highland was built on a stone foundation with wooden walls. The space between inside the wooden walls contained brick infill, providing insulation against heat and cold, and sound, and protection against fire. The walls were covered in plaster applied on strips of wooden lath. The joints in some of the construction were filled with clay-rich-mud, also called daub or chinking. In Madison's, Jefferson's, and Joseph Jones' correspondence regarding the panning and supervision of construction at Highland, mention of enslaved individuals is conspicuously absent. This fragment of clay chinking shows the presence of a builder, likely an enslaved man, whose fingers, swiped across the wet clay in pushing it against the house's framework, left a permanent record on the building. To run your fingers in these traces is to feel a compelling connection to someone who may not appear at all in the written record.



Figure 1. The marks of the builder's fingers in this piece of clay chinking provide a physical link to a person who many not be known from the documentary record. *(photo credit: Sara Bon-Harper, James Monroe's Highland)*

Artifact Based Questions

1. What was clay chinking used for?
2. What can be learned about the enslaved workers at Highland from this artifact?
3. How does this clay chinking contribute to the historical record in a way that a written source cannot?