

# The Privy Council

by  
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One cannot be a member of the Athenæum for fifty years without receiving, for better or worse, a liberal education. There have been papers on almost every conceivable subject from rabbit traps to numerical sequences to aerobatics. The only subjects forbidden are, as you know, religion and politics, and we even had one impassioned campaign speech which was patiently tolerated. Since each member can choose his own topic, the variety is kaleidoscopic. When I learned I would be responsible for one of the papers in September, I immediately began wondering what topic I might know something about that all the other members, or at least a majority of them, would not know more than I. Not an easy task.

I have always been fascinated by and a great admirer of the Official County Historian's (and fellow Athenæum member's) vast knowledge of the business buildings and homes of the area—a knowledge which he always shares unselfishly and one which has been ably supplemented and enlarged upon lately by another Athenæum member, Jim Coursey, who has an excellent knowledge of architectural styles. I had thought I would like to present something in this field, but when I contemplated their expertise I realized I would quickly become a lost ball in high weeds. Then, out of the blue, I had a moment of apotheosis. I was talking to a relative who is almost sixty years of age and he admitted he had never ridden on a train. Now I have no intention of writing about trains since I would be as far out of my league as I would be in most architectural studies, but I did realize there is an area in which I have vast experience and most who

are younger than I have had little or none. That's when I decided to favor the Society with a learned disquisition on Outhouses. Generations to follow who have had no experience or first-hand knowledge at all will rise up and call me "Blessed" for sharing what I learned the hard way. The first seventeen years of my life we had no indoor plumbing, so I learned whereof I write. The need for this subject was emphasized when I learned that the children who visit the Beverly Academy are more curious concerning the Outhouse than they are about the schoolhouse.

We will consider the Outhouse, or "Privy" as it is commonly called, under three headings: Location, Construction, and Furnishing. There are nuances in all three of which the amateur may be totally unaware and that to his dismay should he ever need to avail himself of the facility. You can't just hastily throw up a few planks and call them a proper Outhouse (though some have tried in an emergency) any more than you can throw up a few and call them a proper dwelling. What is worth doing is worth doing right and the careful individual will always bear in mind the axiom: Form follows Function."

### CONSTRUCTION

Construction should begin with a trench approximately two feet by four feet and two feet deep. Failure to do this will result in a clean-out job having to be done before even

one generation has passed and anyone who has ever had to clean out a cow shed in the Spring knows that is no pleasant job for a gentleman. With a proper trench, a clean-out should not be necessary for several generations if at all.

The basic framework should be of newly rough-sawn oak if possible. A rough-sawn two by four is two by four and not one and 5/8 by three and 5/8 and is therefore stronger. If it is newly sawn, oak is easy to drive a nail into and when cured it is hard as a rock. The Outhouse has to be sturdy since it is vulnerable to being upset at Hallowe'en even when it has an occupant busily engaged in the business at hand. It should also be bolted to a concrete footing which extends below the frost line. This is necessary to keep the wind and various creepy, crawly things out of its interior. Rough-sawn planks are sufficient everywhere except the floor and the seat, which should be smoothly planed and tongue and groove. Splinters in bare feet or buttocks(as Forest Gump calls that area of the anatomy) are not conducive to the kind of serenity sought within the building.

The roof should be a simple shed type. In this instance the demands of style have to be surrendered to practicality. It is a fact of life that wasps, dirt daubers, and other stinging insects love to establish their dwellings in angles and corners and the shed roof has fewer of these than any other style. Besides, it is easier and faster for the amateur carpenter to handle.

Some architects feel it necessary to have a half-moon or star window in the door. I do not feel this is wise but I suppose, like all things it is a matter of taste. The modest or somewhat shy individual is not anxious to be observed when occupying the throne.

Needless to say, battens are necessary on the outside walls. Intemperate winter weather and the incursion of stinging insects are not pleasant additions. It is not necessary to decorate the interior by painting. That would fall in the category of “gilding the lily” though some fastidious souls might wish to do that. The inside generally remains unfinished. I am aware of one outhouse located in the middle of downtown Herndon, which was sealed inside with flattened pasteboard boxes which seemed to be a nice, if not necessary, touch. It also provided my uncle with a base for a sign he constructed saying “A Clean Seat Is Hard to Beat.” I took his philosophy to heart. In fact, I may have been the inspiration for it since I had considerably more water pressure at the age of twelve than I possess now.

#### LOCATION

The prevailing wind in this area is out of the West and Southwest. Therefore, for obvious olfactory reasons, the optimum location is downwind (or to the North or Northwest of the main residence). It should also be at the end of the path which contains the coal house and the wood pile so that on cold Winter mornings one trip might suffice to provide personal relief and also material for household warmth in the

form of wood for the kitchen stove and coal for the fireplace.

Since the function of the structure is essentially private, it should be inconspicuously hidden behind a smokehouse or garage if at all possible. The door should face the West. There is a very good reason for this. In the Summer it will provide ventilation and in the Winter the cold breeze will strike the seated occupant where he is clothed rather than that portion of the anatomy that is exposed. The amateur, being unaware of these elements, can unknowingly make some egregious errors and suffer from them for whole generations. It takes only one or two wintry days to drive these points home.

### FURNISHING

Far and away the most important furnishing (other than the seat) in the structure is the Sears and Roebuck catalog, or at least it was for a number of years until they got wise and quit using soft, newsprint-like pages and substituted slick coated paper instead. The older Outhouses all had a box for corncobs but as soon as the mail order catalogs began to appear, these were abandoned. The catalogs could furnish reading material, a "want list," and an education in female undergarments to simple country lads. They were also a whole lot more comfortable than cobs. You've heard the expression "rough as a cob." Well, I can tell you where it came from.

In addition to the ubiquitous catalog, there was always a small bucket and dipper

for the slaked lime. Since there was not much air circulation in the small building, the lime was an essential deodorant as well as sanitizer.

On occasion, human nature being what it is, some style-conscious souls went farther in the decorating area. A chaste shelf with a few artificial flowers could be tolerated, but I remember one experiment in carpeting that was a dismal failure. The users had bought a lot of new shag carpeting and had enough left over to carpet the floor and seat of the Outhouse. It was cozy. Too cozy. Just about every life form that crawls or creeps found a home in that rug's pile and whatever portion of the human anatomy that was placed upon it. The carpet was soon torn out, to the relief of the users.

That brings us to the most important interior element: the seat. Should the ideal be a single seater, a two-seater, or a two-and a half-seater? Any more than that would be showing off. A single-seater will suffice except in the event of the relatively rare Springtime green apple two-step. After all, the privy is just that and not to be considered the scene of a communal gathering. An additional seat may prove the owner is bountiful and not hard up and a half-seat might keep the tykes from falling through. So we will say the ideal is a two-and a half-seater. The full seats should be about eighteen inches high and the half seat nine inches. The hole should not be more than eight inches wide and rasped smooth along the edges. Comfort is always important.

I am fully aware that I am not breaking entirely new ground on the privy. Joe Dorris, the Editor (and more especially, the Privy Editor) of the *Kentucky New Era* established himself firmly as the authority on the subject. However, Mr. Dorris is no longer in a position to provide current insights and, to my knowledge never did provide an ideal arrangement by which to judge all other examples. However Mr. Dorris, skilled as he was, did receive a commemorative manhole cover from the city marking his considerable contribution to privy lore, thus putting him on a par with the stars in Hollywood who have their footprints at Grauman's Chinese. Since I doubt that many of the younger generation will pore through old copies of the *New Era*, I do not feel that I am usurping his realm with this paper nor do I expect him to object to the standards I have set. I am, however, forever indebted to Mr. Dorris for demonstrating that a true scientist should be judged by his methodology and not by the fame of his subject.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the members of the Society for so eagerly lapping up my contribution this evening and for the standing ovation they will probably give it.

*Exeunt Omnes.*





