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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

University College

“Tranquill Pursuits”: Thomas Jefferson’s
Quest for Privacy at Poplar Forest
by
Elizabeth Wolfson

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
Master of Liberal Arts

May 2019
St. Louis, MO

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Elizabeth Wolfson

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2019

Introduction

In June 1781, the threat of impending British forces threatened both Thomas Jefferson's government and his life. Fearing an attack by the British on the capital at Richmond, Jefferson and the Virginia legislature relocated to Charlottesville. Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, commanding the British forces followed and attacked the new location. Located nearby, Jefferson's plantation at Monticello became the next target. Jefferson sent his wife and daughters with associate William Short by carriage to his remote Bedford plantation at Poplar Forest. Jefferson followed after moving the government again to the town of Staunton, fleeing the British on horseback. This would not be the only time Poplar Forest provided an escape for Jefferson.

Jefferson spent more than thirty years in public office as Governor, member of the Continental Congress, Foreign Minister, Secretary of State, and President of the United States, while at the same time believing "nature intended me for the tranquill pursuits of science, by rendering them my supreme delight." Seeking relief from the burdens of public office and the management duties of his Monticello plantation, Jefferson periodically anticipated retiring from public service "But the enormities of the times in which I have lived, have forced me to take a part in resisting them, and to commit myself on the boisterous ocean of political passions."¹

Jefferson searched for islands of solitude throughout his years of public service, anticipating a return to private life as each career stage ended. As early as 1781, when

¹ Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, 2 March 1809, *Founders Early Access*.

his second term as governor of Virginia ended, Jefferson imagined retiring to Monticello. Instead, he was elected to the Continental Congress, serving until his appointment as United States Minister to France in 1784.

Seeking personal comfort while abroad, he extensively remodeled the Hôtel de Langeac, the three-story building he rented in Paris. “This became his Parisian Monticello... It was lavish and expensive... but what he required to feel at home abroad... and it afforded him the same physical and emotional protection that he had enjoyed on his Virginia plantations.”² Given the social responsibilities of his post however, the Hôtel offered only a partial solution. He found more complete relief with occasional visits to Mont Calvaire, a nearby monastery. Lay brothers ran a boarding house where guests could live silently and enjoy walking through the gardens. Jefferson’s Account Book recorded several visits to the retreat between 5 September and 12 October 1787. He referred to the monastery as “my hermitage,” a term resonating with his early name for the Monticello plantation, “The Hermitage.”³ The recurrence of this descriptive, defined as “the dwelling of a hermit; especially when small and remote,” underscores his reclusive self-image.⁴

On his return to Virginia after five years abroad, Jefferson again anticipated stepping down from public service. Dismayed by the state of disrepair he found at

² Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: the Character of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 82.

³ Jefferson to Madame de Corny 18 October 1787, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. James P. McClure and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008-2019), (herein after cited as *PTJ*), 12:246 in Notes.

⁴ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hermitage>.

Monticello, he undertook extensive renovations and remodeling, expecting to supervise the work personally. His appointment as Secretary of State however, necessitated living at the capital as it relocated from New York, to Philadelphia, and finally to Washington.

With his election as Vice President under John Adams, Jefferson renovated his rented Philadelphia lodging: “The object... was that I might have a place to retire & write in when I wished to be unseen & undisturbed even by my servants, & for this purpose it was to have a sky-light & no lateral windows...”⁵ When these efforts proved unsuccessful, he found ways to leave Philadelphia and return to Monticello for months at a time.

Throughout his years of public service, Jefferson always envisioned retiring to Monticello and enjoying a peaceful life surrounded by family. The combination of his growing family and the noise and disruption of the ongoing construction however, made this an unrealistic dream. At Monticello, quiet personal space was scarce and exacerbated by the steady stream of uninvited guests dropping by to meet the celebrated Thomas Jefferson. He realized the need to look elsewhere in his quest for a retirement sanctuary.

In 1804, at the end of his first presidential term, retirement was finally within sight. As in 1781 when the Poplar Forest property provided physical escape, Jefferson looked to the same land to provide his emotional escape. He envisioned building a small villa house at Poplar Forest that he could visit at will and find solitude. [See Fig. 1] This thesis explores how Poplar Forest answered Thomas Jefferson’s lengthy quest to

⁵ Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, 16 December 1792, *PTJ*: 24:746.

create his ideal surroundings for those “tranquill pursuits.”

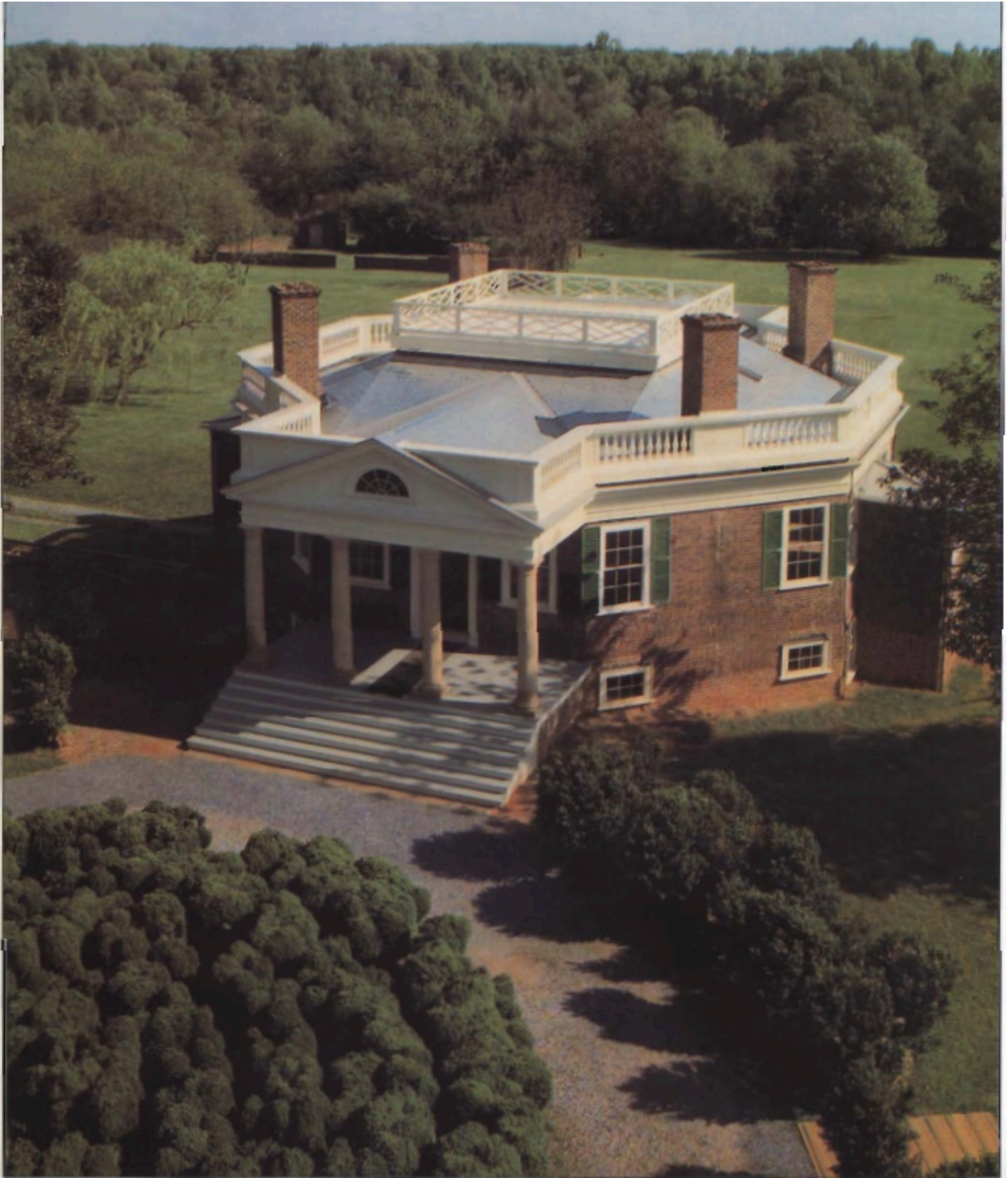


Figure 1. Artist Rendition of Reconstructed Poplar Forest Villa
(*Virginia Calvacade*, Winter 2002).

Unlike earlier failed attempts to re-design existing space, Jefferson's vision for Poplar Forest was a complete design from inception. Built on undeveloped land at his remote Bedford plantation, the isolated location and Jefferson's need to remain in Washington challenged construction. Chapter One concerns the material demands of construction. It begins by examining the prerequisites Jefferson overcame before beginning construction: determination of a desirable site and identification of a workforce sufficiently trustworthy to supervise through the mail. It then addresses the construction process, focusing on the challenge of acquiring the desired building materials. Overcoming these challenges, Jefferson succeeded in creating a personal sanctuary indicative of his unique aesthetic vision.

Chapter Two considers Poplar Forest's aesthetic design, examining first the origins of Jefferson vision: his self-study of architecture and his introduction to the work of Andrea Palladio. The next section describes the design properties of Poplar Forest attributable to Palladio's villa style. The last section considers the impact of Jefferson's five years in Europe on his design choices in the context of both his personal aesthetic and his future vision for the United States.

Poplar Forest embodied the idealistic vision of the mature Thomas Jefferson, reflecting his character and life experiences. The story of its construction explores his strategy for relieving the tension between his public and private identities. The story of its design reveals his conflicting efforts to align European norms with American realities. Far less well studied than Monticello, the story of Poplar Forest's creation makes an important biographical addition to Jeffersonian scholarship.

Chapter One

The Construction of Poplar Forest: Overcoming Obstacles to Realize a Vision

Thomas Jefferson acquired the Poplar Forest property in May 1773 when his father-in-law, John Wayles, bequeathed the property to his daughter Martha, Jefferson's wife. In addition to the almost 5,000 acres at Poplar Forest, the bequest included 2,000 acres at Judith Creek. Both properties were situated in a remote part of Bedford County and contained working plantations. Unfortunately, at the time of his death, Wayles left behind a sizeable debt that Jefferson was forced to assume. To lessen this burden, Jefferson sold the Judith Creek property, keeping the Poplar Forest land he considered the more valuable. After initially visiting the property, there is no evidence Jefferson returned until his flight from the British on 4 June 1781.¹

Shortly after that historic night, Jefferson suffered a fall from a horse that stranded him at Poplar Forest until 26 July. As no permanent structures existed on the property, most likely the family crowded into a primitive overseer's dwelling. It is here Jefferson first may have imagined constructing a permanent structure on the property. A diagram Jefferson drew, dated circa 1781, denotes a small house plan with five rooms labeled in Anglo Saxon: ladies room, parlor, bed chamber, children's room, and dining room. [See Fig. 2] Although not octagonal in shape (the design he eventually selected), it is

¹ Edwin Morris Betts, *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book 1766-1824*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 42.

composed of five rooms with the largest an eight-sided parlor room, all distinct elements in Jefferson's final design.

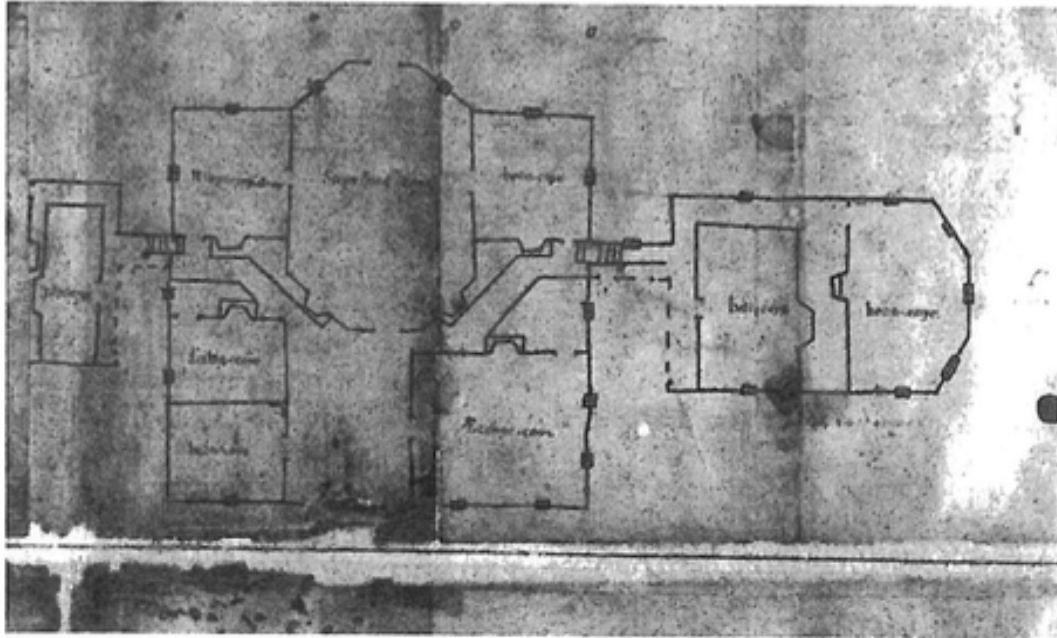


Figure 2. Plan for House at Poplar Forest, c. 1781, (Albert & Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia).

Jefferson's first stay at Poplar Forest was driven by his need to escape from the British. Over the years that followed however, the nature of refuge Jefferson sought at Poplar Forest evolved from one of physical escape to one of emotional respite. The undeveloped land located there presented Jefferson with an opportunity to finally create a refuge designed to meet his personal needs.

It was over twenty years before Jefferson brought that idea to fruition. In 1805, at the age of sixty-two, he began work on a permanent retreat at Poplar Forest. His timing made this a particularly bold decision as he had just begun serving his second presidential

term. The choice to build the retreat at this time in his career, and at this location, significantly complicated the construction process.

Jefferson's choice of the Poplar Forest site for his retirement home was deliberate and deeply personal. As Jefferson was raised on the western edge of settled Virginia, its remote rural setting resonated with his youth. While its inaccessibility promised the solitude Jefferson was seeking, at the same time it complicated the delivery of men and materials to the site.

Jefferson's required presence in Washington made direct supervision of the project impossible. Overseeing construction from Washington posed three significant challenges Jefferson needed to overcome to realize his vision. He had to effectively communicate his building plans, he had to identify a trustworthy workforce capable of executing his directives, and he had to identify sources for the necessary materials and arrange their transportation to the isolated location.

The Site

Choosing the Poplar Forest location combined associations with important times in Jefferson's life. It was set in the familiar rural Virginia countryside of his youth, it offered physical refuge for him and his family in 1781, and it promised the personal retreat Jefferson sought for his retirement.

Poplar Forest was nestled at the eastern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Located near the westernmost extent of white settlement, it was nonetheless familiar to him as he had explored the surrounding hillsides as a boy. His father, a surveyor, had made the first accurate map of Virginia in 1751 and told the young Jefferson tales of the

hardships he encountered in the process.² Late in life Jefferson recounted these tales to his grandchildren. Jefferson included his father's map in his only published book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, much of which was drafted during his initial Poplar Forest stay in 1781.

Jefferson's principal residence – the plantation at Monticello – also bordered the Blue Ridge mountains but was located near the growing city of Charlottesville. Monticello's accessibility contrasted with the far more remote location of Poplar Forest in Bedford County. Located 100 miles - three days by horseback – from Monticello, its relative inaccessibility offered a quiet escape from the constant activity there. At the same time, Jefferson believed it was not so far removed to prevent the movement of workmen and supplies between the two properties.

Both homes were situated on mountaintops, affording Jefferson vistas of the surrounding countryside he loved. Visible in the distance from Poplar Forest were the Peaks of Otter, one of the landmarks noted on his father's survey map. Jefferson originally believed they were the highest mountains in North America. Also nearby was the Natural Bridge, one of two known natural phenomena in America at the time (the other being Niagara Falls). So taken was Jefferson with what he called “the most Sublime of nature's works,”³ that he purchased the site from King George III one year after inheriting the Bedford County land.⁴ Perhaps foreshadowing his eventual

² R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 26.

⁴ Jefferson to John Trumbull, 20 February 1791, *PTJ*, 19:298 in Notes.

construction of a second home at Poplar Forest and evidence of the pleasure he gained from being alone there, he wrote to William Carmichael “I sometimes think of building a little hermitage at the Natural bridge (for it is my property) and of passing there a [part] of the year at least.”⁵

Although rich with meanings for him, the isolation of Poplar Forest, while in theory a personal blessing, would hinder its construction.

Remote Supervision

Jefferson began construction during his Presidency, and as a result was unable to directly supervise construction. Jefferson sought to overcome this problem by relying on his proven capacity for written expression to communicate all elements of his design plan. Communication relied upon the flow of letters from Jefferson, in Washington, to his craftsmen working at Poplar Forest and Monticello. Jefferson in turn, relied upon their responses to apprise him of problems and of progress made. Given the distances, terrain, and reliance on horse drawn conveyance, any delays in the exchange of letters complicated communication.

Thomas Jefferson’s correspondence was extraordinary, consisting of more than 18,000 letters during his lifetime. From his early days in Congress he showed a preference for written communication over direct confrontation. As Joseph Ellis has observed “Jefferson’s most comfortable arena was the study and his most natural podium

⁵ Jefferson to William Carmichael, 26 December 1786, *PTJ*, 10:632.

was the writing desk.”⁶ The combination of his written facility and familiarity with architectural techniques allowed him to remotely direct the construction process.

Remarking on his supervision of the Monticello reconstruction in 1796, Duke de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt noted that Jefferson “orders, directs and pursues in the minutest detail” every aspect relative to his building.⁷ For the Poplar Forest construction however, this degree of oversight was impossible. Jefferson’s only means of supervision was written correspondence, often including highly specific directions and occasionally enhanced by drawings. An 1806 letter to Hugh Chisholm following one of Jefferson’s few visits demonstrates the degree of detail he provided. His instructions included “a sketch in ink, wherein you will find the following alterations.”

1. 4 doors of communication between the rooms below.
2. 2 d. between the rooms above.
3. The two porches which I told you I should add
4. Two stairways necessary for communication between the upper and lower floors without going from under cover.

The porticos & stairways will require some more digging: you must make the space between window & window, on the East & West sides, exactly 10 f. so that the stairway may be placed between without blocking up the windows. Everything is drawn so plainly that no further explanation is necessary.⁸

As the letter suggests, Jefferson carried an image of the finished structure in his mind, even as he modified the details.

With Jefferson directing construction from Washington, he relied upon the written responses of his workers to apprise him of their progress as well as any problems or delays. But in contrast to Jefferson’s detailed instructions and inquiries, the

⁶ Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Vintage Books), 45.

⁷ Travis McDonald Jr., “The Brickwork at Poplar Forest: Mr. Jefferson Builds His Dream House,” (*Journal of Preservation Technology*, 1996), 37.

⁸ Jefferson to Hugh Chisholm, 7 September 1806, *Founders Early Access*.

communication from the craftsmen on site was often sparse and difficult to decipher as in John Hemings' 1819 progress report "I am now about the shutters I have pine enough for sties and reals of 6 windowrs I have got them al radey to put togatehear that is the motison and tenionten I am now giting the in sid. Suff reddy..."⁹

Postal delays added another obstacle to the construction process. Chisholm suggested as much in 1807, writing "Your letter of Nov. 17 did not come to hand till the last weeks post, & that of Dec. 4. Came last night. This is the first post by which either could be answered."¹⁰ Reliance on mail delivery between Washington and Poplar Forest was horse driven and subject to delays caused by rough terrain or inclement weather. Interruptions in the information flow between Jefferson and his craftsmen sometimes delayed construction progress.

Workforce

Essential to successfully directing the project from Washington was the identification of trustworthy workers. Jefferson relied upon the relationships and practices he had established at his Monticello plantation to conduct construction at Poplar Forest. Over the years of directing renovations at Monticello, Jefferson developed relationships with key craftsmen he trusted to implement his instructions and communicate their progress in his absence. He also relied upon them, in conjunction with the plantation overseer, to direct the plantation's slave workforce.

⁹ John Hemings to Jefferson, 20 October 1819, *Founders Early Access*.

¹⁰ Jefferson to Chisholm, 8 December 1807, *Founders Early Access*.

The inaccessibility of Poplar Forest made reliance on the slave populations on site and at Monticello essential for providing the extensive manual labor construction required. As manpower needs demanded, slaves could be brought in from the fields to perform manual tasks. Some of the approximately eighty-six slaves working at the Poplar Forest plantation worked under the direction of the craftsmen.¹¹ While most often responsible for the physical labor, a few slaves, mentored by a craftsman, acquired sufficient skills to contribute finished pieces to the construction. By these means, Jefferson acquired semi-skilled slave labor that alleviated the need to hire additional freemen. In another effort to efficiently utilize his slave labor force, Jefferson located a nail factory at Monticello where young male slaves produced nails for sale as well as for his construction projects.¹² Utilizing the relationships and the practices he established at Monticello enabled Jefferson to acquire a workforce capable of meeting the challenges of Poplar Forest's construction.

From Jefferson's perspective, Hugh Chisholm was the central figure in the early construction of Poplar Forest. Aided by a separate crew of carpenters, Chisholm supervised the work and served as the primary conduit to Jefferson. Like most construction supervisors of his era, he emerged from the technical trades that went into building a house. He was a brick maker, bricklayer, stoneworker, and plasterer who had worked at Monticello from 1796 to 1797 and again from 1801 to 1814. He had been the primary bricklayer at Monticello for the five years prior to the Poplar Forest

¹¹ Robert C. Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson*, (Golden, CO: Fulcrum), 394.

¹² <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/blacksmith-shop>.

construction.¹³ Chisholm, sometimes joined by his brother, also a bricklayer, directed the enslaved workforce responsible for the majority of the unskilled labor tasks.

Recommending Chisholm to James Madison Jefferson wrote in 1808 “He is a very good humored man, works as well as most of our bricklayers, and has had the benefit of becoming familiar with many things, with which they are unacquainted.”¹⁴

A series of artisans served under Chisholm’s general supervision. John Perry was a general carpenter who began working at Monticello in 1806 and the following year at Poplar Forest. His brother Reuben joined him in 1809. More refined carpentry such as ornamental pieces was crafted by James Dinsmore, an Irish master joiner who worked at Monticello from 1798 to 1809. Poplar Forest slaves worked under the direction of these craftsmen. Slaves showing promise could develop skills and direct others. The most striking example is John Hemings who advanced from felling trees and building fences in his youth to becoming an accomplished master joiner later in life under Dinsmore’s tutelage.¹⁵

Edmund Bacon, the Monticello overseer from 1806 to 1822, provided another layer of management, supervising workers and reporting progress to Jefferson. The interactions between the layers of skilled and semi-skilled workers, and unskilled slaves at both Monticello and Poplar Forest were essential for the construction of Jefferson’s retreat.

¹³ <https://www.monticello.org/mulberry-row/people/hugh-chisholm>.

¹⁴ Jefferson to James Madison, 5 September 1808, *Founders Early Access*.

¹⁵ <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/john-hemings>.

Construction

In the September 1805, Jefferson signaled the start of construction by instructing Hugh Chisholm to prepare a site for brickmaking on the property. His decision to commence construction at this time imposed a number of building challenges. The complexity of Jefferson's presidential responsibilities during his second term required his near constant presence in Washington, making his direct supervision of construction impossible. Further complicating the project was an ambitious timeline that allowed only four years until the end of his second term to prepare the house for occupancy. Finally, the specific feature that Jefferson most valued at Poplar Forest – its seclusion – created the additional challenge of sourcing and transporting the necessary building materials.

Construction required an enormous quantity of bricks. Jefferson stipulated the bricks be fabricated at the new site, alleviating the difficulty of transporting their tremendous weight and quantity to the hilltop by wagon. In an undated entry in his Farm Book, Jefferson calculated the parameters of brickmaking onsite including how many bricks could be made from a four foot cube of earth, how many cubes a man could turn up in a day, the weight of a cubic yard of earth, the number of bricks a man could mold in a day, and so forth.¹⁶ Given Jefferson's familiarity with the process he could reasonably project the manpower and timetable required.

The production of bricks required three ingredients: an abundance of clay soil that the Poplar Forest site provided, a source of water, and sand. Archeological investigation indicates that Chisholm chose a suitable area approximately 300 yards south of the house

¹⁶ Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books*, 352.

near a small creek, from where he could acquire the necessary water.¹⁷ With the first two criteria met on the property, sand was the only component requiring transportation to the site. The sand for the early construction was likely sourced from Lynchburg as suggested by Jefferson's 1812 letter to overseer Jeremiah Goodman "...make the necessary preparation for mr Chisholm's beginning to plaister by sending for a wagon load of lime, and having sand brought by the wagon returning from Lynchbg..."¹⁸

Despite the simple components, brickmaking was a multi-step process requiring action across the changing seasons. The process began in the fall with the selected area dug and cleared of stones. Over the course of the winter the pulverizing action of frost assisted the soil preparation. Jefferson's instructions to Chisholm noted the process should be repeated. "About midwinter it should be turned over a second time and again well cleaned of stone."¹⁹

The fabrication of the bricks by Chisholm and his workforce took place in the Spring and Summer. After the winter weathering, the clay was tempered by the treading of either animals or humans, then mixed with water to form a dough-like consistency. The clay was rolled in sand, packed into wooden molds and allowed to air dry. "After air-drying the bricks for a week or more, the bricks would be stacked together making a kiln or clamp and fired for five days or more with hardwood."²⁰ "Kilns were unfired bricks stacked oven-like with fire tunnels running through to distribute the heat. The

¹⁷ McDonald, Jr. "The Brickwork at Poplar Forest," 38.

¹⁸ Jefferson to Jeremiah A. Goodman, 18 October 1812, *PTJ:RS*.

¹⁹ Jefferson to Chisholm, 15 December 1807, quoted in McDonald Jr., "The Brickwork at Poplar Forest," 38.

²⁰ McDonald Jr., "The Brickwork at Poplar Forest," 38.

fires burned constantly until the bricks hardened.”²¹ The brickmaker determined their readiness by closely examining “the release of steam from the bricks and the changes in their color as they baked.”²² Jefferson urged Chisholm to begin molding and burning the bricks “as soon as spring will possibly permit.”²³ The bricks at Poplar Forest feature at least seven different color ranges as a result of variances in the firing and curing processes. As the construction process was also tied to the seasons, the sooner finished bricks were available, the longer the time for laying bricks before winter interrupted construction. Jefferson stipulated in his Farm Book “a man moulds 2000 bricks a day. his attendance is a man to temper, one to wheel the mortar to him & a boy to bear off.”²⁴ A later entry noted that Chisholm, with help from two apprentices, could lay 1,600 bricks in a day.²⁵ Approximately 250,000 bricks were used in the construction of Poplar Forest.²⁶

In addition to the customary rectangular shaped bricks, the unique design elements of Poplar Forest necessitated creating wooden molds in six special shapes, each serving a particular design element. Five sided “squint” bricks formed the corners of the octagon requiring a forty-five degree angle at one end. Although designed to look like stone, the columns at the front and rear of the house were actually composed of bricks covered with plaster. This process alleviated the difficulties associated with transporting and erecting stone columns that Jefferson had encountered at Monticello. To create the

²¹ <https://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter05-06/bricks.cfm>.

²² McDonald Jr., “The Brickwork at Poplar Forest,” 39.

²³ McDonald Jr., “The Brickwork at Poplar Forest,” 38.

²⁴ Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books*, 352.

²⁵ Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books*, 353.

²⁶ McDonald, Jr. “The Brickwork at Poplar Forest,” 38.

columns, the bricks forming the shaft had a semi-circular side with angled edges that allowed them to fit together to form a circle. Pie shaped bricks in two different radii were required. Lastly, four additional special molding shapes for the bricks at the bases and capitals of the Tuscan columns were created. [See Fig. 3]



Figure 3. Four of the Six Brick Shapes Used in Poplar Forest Construction (photo taken on 18 November 2018).

The volume and seasonal dictates of brickmaking necessitated repeating the process from 1806 to 1809. A letter from Jefferson to Chisholm in 1807 suggests the quantity completed in a single cycle: “As I am anxious to get my South pavilion done early in Spring... I propose that we shall make a kiln at once which may be relied on to yield 40,000. good well burnt bricks. they are to be as follows:

8,000.	circular bricks on a radius of $42\frac{5}{8}$ I. headers & stretchers
8,000.	circular bricks on a radius of 7. f. headers & stretchers.
<u>24,000</u>	bricks of our usual size of the neatest make ²⁷
40,000	

More than simply another example of Jefferson’s explicit instructions, this letter is further evidence of Jefferson’s detailed knowledge of the construction process.

Using the bricks he fabricated, Chisholm, with help from his brother John, directed the slave workforce as they completed the walls of the octagonal house and the two octagonal freestanding privies. With both the inner and outer walls composed of eight-inch bricks, the completed walls were 16 inches thick. The secure infrastructure they created is evidenced by their survival for more than 200 years.

With Chisholm’s brick foundation and plasterwork completed, the next stage of construction, carpentry, began. Perry may well have produced the various wooden molds used in Chisholm’s brickmaking. Working at Monticello, he crafted window units, solid exterior and interior doors, and interior sash doors that were transported to Poplar Forest for installation.²⁸ As much as possible construction utilized poplar and oak from trees located on the property. Timber, sawed into planks at a sawpit, was stacked with spacers separating boards, and dried with the aid of small fire. Once prepared, the carpenters roughed out the wood to create joists, sleepers, and finished flooring. Writing from Washington in March 1808 Jefferson specified, “The floor at poplar forest being intended for an under floor must be laid with oak. Poplar would not hold the nails, and pine is too distant & dear.” In another example of specificity of his offsite direction, Jefferson,

²⁷ Jefferson to Chisholm, 15 December 1807, *Founders Early Access*.

²⁸ Travis C. McDonald Jr., “Constructing Optimism: Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest”, (*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Vol. 8, People, Power, Places, 2000), 183.

suggesting the use of a herring bone pattern, specifies “your sleepers should be but 14. I. from center to center, in order that the plank maybe cut into two feet lengths.”²⁹ This floor, and one like it at Monticello, constitutes the earliest finished-oak floors in America.³⁰

The carpentry process reflects the inextricable links within the multiracial labor forces at both Monticello and Poplar Forest. James Dinsmore completed most of his work at Monticello in conjunction with ongoing work at Poplar Forest. The sashes for Poplar Forest are one such example. Although constructed along side those for Monticello, for Poplar Forest Jefferson stipulated walnut for the upper level sashes, with varnish on the inside and paint on the outside for a more finished appearance.³¹

The principal assistant to the white carpenter Dinsmore was John Hemings, one of the enslaved people at Monticello. Hemings, the son of enslaved Betty Hemings and Joseph Neilson, a white housejoiner working at Monticello, began working as an “out-carpenter,” felling trees, cutting logs, and building fences. At seventeen he was put to work under a succession of skilled white woodworkers employed at Monticello, eventually becoming Dinsmore’s principal assistant. In 1809, he succeeded Dinsmore as head joiner crafting much of the interior and design woodwork at Poplar Forest including the door, window, and wall trims, the Doric entablatures, the louvered exterior window blinds, and the classical balustrade and Chippendale-style Chinese rail gracing the roof.³²

²⁹ Jefferson to John Perry, 29 March 1808, *Founders Early Access*.

³⁰ Travis McDonald, Jr. “Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest: Privacy Restored,” (*Virginia Cavalcade*, Winter 2002), 32.

³¹ McDonald Jr., “Constructing Optimism,” 182.

³² <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/john-hemings>.

Hemings also trained other family members who joined the enslaved workforce at Poplar Forest. Unlike the vast majority of the slaves who labored to build Poplar Forest, John Hemings eventually secured his freedom. He was among the handful of slaves who Jefferson freed in his will, and in one of his final acts as an enslaved carpenter, John Hemings built the coffin in which Jefferson was buried.³³

Given the specificity of Jefferson's vision, the Monticello craftsmen were not able to complete all the elements of the house design. In 1805 Jefferson brought Richard Barry, a Washington painter and glazer, to Monticello to fashion doors and glaze window sashes.³⁴ He instructed Barry to use faux graining on the principal exterior doors suggestive of the inlaid wooden doors he had seen in Europe. Jefferson also hired New York sculptor William Coffee to create the frieze elements for the dining room entablature.

By the time of his retirement in 1809, Poplar Forest, although unfinished, was inhabitable and Jefferson began regular visits there. The building process succeeded, despite the isolated location and Jefferson's presence in Washington, because of the hierarchy formed within the workforce. Jefferson had identified trusted craftsmen to supervise each principal stage of construction: brick fashioning, carpentry, and decorative joinery. Each craftsman directed a small number of slaves removed from fieldwork to assist in construction. John Hemings exemplifies how, when functioning at maximum efficiency, this system benefited both the project and the worker.

³³ <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-funeral>.

³⁴ S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *Poplar Forest & Thomas Jefferson*, (Forest, VA: The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1993).

Transporting Materials

The final challenge to construction resulted from the remoteness of the Poplar Forest site. Poplar Forest's isolated setting and its promise of greater privacy than Monticello were key factors in Jefferson's decision to build there. Congruently, its remoteness complicated delivery of building materials. With the exception of the bricks fabricated on site and the availability of local wood for construction, transportation of some kind was necessary for most other materials. The nature of the material dictated the method of transportation as well as the delivery hurdles faced.

The carpentry of Dinsmore and Hemings is only one example of the off-site work at Monticello. Equally important was the nailery Jefferson had built at Monticello around 1796. Supervised by enslaved blacksmith George Granger Jr., slave boys aging from ten to sixteen formed nails in seven different sizes made from nailrod shipped from Philadelphia. Their production averaged 5,000 to 10,000 a day. These nails, along with other durable goods such as wooden components and roofing materials required a three day journey by wagon from Monticello to the Poplar Forest construction site. Surprisingly, only one wagon, "Jerry's wagon" was available to delivery materials between the two locations. Early in the construction process Jefferson instructed his Monticello overseer that: "Jerry and his wagon are to go to Bedford before Christmas, and to stay there till they have done all the hauling for my house there."³⁵ As the wagon primarily serviced Monticello, a tension soon emerged between the needs of the two properties: "we are in great distress for Jerry's wagon at Monticello. I pray you therefore to press the finishing what is for him to do at Poplar forest" while at the same time

³⁵ Jefferson to Edmund Bacon, 29 September 1806, quoted in Chambers, *Poplar Forest*.

stipulating that he should not be sent away “till he has completely done every thing necessary for the building...”³⁶ This indication of Jefferson’s preference for the needs of Poplar Forest over those of Monticello suggest his eagerness to avoid construction delays.

Jefferson ordered materials such as sheet iron, lead, paint, hardware, tin, marble, and glass from New York, Philadelphia, and Washington. These were shipped to Richmond, the port closest to the site. From there, the journey continued by boat to Lynchburg. Durable goods then made the ten mile trip to Poplar Forest overland. Fragile elements such as glass and the entablature ornaments made the entire trip by water. Writing Dinsmore about a shipment of 8 boxes of glass he sent from Alexandria, Jefferson explains he “considerably enlarged the quantity called for, in order to have a supply for breakage...”³⁷ Unfortunately, as Poplar Forest lay above navigable waters, the final part of the journey necessitated shallow-draft, flat bottomed boats poled by hand against the current.³⁸

Weather added another variable to the delivery of materials. When rainfall was sufficient to fill the rivers, material transport was possible as Jefferson informs Dinsmore “I expect what things of yours are at Richmond will be Brought up shortly as there is a tide in the River at present.”³⁹ Conversely, delays occurred when river levels were low as Jefferson notes to Dinsmore in February of 1808 “the glass for the Poplar Forest sashes

³⁶ Jefferson to Chisholm, 5 June 1807, *Founders Early Access*.

³⁷ Jefferson to Dinsmore, 20 March 1808, *Founders Early Access*.

³⁸ Travis Macdonald Jr., “The Private Villa Retreat of Thomas Jefferson” *White House History* Vol. 18, 12.

³⁹ Jefferson to Dinsmore, 9 November 1807, *Founders Early Access*.

cannot leave Philadelphia till the Delaware opens.”⁴⁰ Jefferson had ordered larger than usual window glass for Poplar Forest. Dinsmore had to await the Spring thaw before receiving the glass to complete the window glazing.

Jefferson left Washington for Monticello shortly after James Madison succeeded him as president in March 1809. Although much work had been completed at Poplar Forest, it was more of an empty shell than a comfortable home. Walls and an unshingled roof were completed, but the rooms were unplastered, the doors unhung, and some of the windows not yet installed. Jefferson wrote his kinsman George Jefferson in June 1809 suggesting a trip to Bedford (Poplar Forest) “towards the end of this month, but am not bound to any fixed time.”⁴¹ It was not until November that he made the trip and stayed at Poplar Forest for the first time.

Even in its unfinished state, Jefferson was pleased with his new home, writing to Gideon Granger in 1810 that Poplar Forest was “the most valuable of my possessions.”⁴² In the years that followed, Jefferson followed a pattern of three or more trips a year to his new retreat in spring, late summer, and early winter until 25 May 1823 when, at age eighty, he was no longer physically able to make the journey.⁴³ Two years later he proclaimed it “the best dwelling house in the state” even preferable to Monticello as it was “more proportioned to the faculties of a private citizen.”⁴⁴ Designed and built with his own needs in mind, the home he created was an intensely personal one. Jefferson’s

⁴⁰ Jefferson to Dinsmore, 6 February 1808, *Founders Early Access*.

⁴¹ Jefferson to George Jefferson, 12 June 1809, quoted in Chambers, *Poplar Forest*.

⁴² Thomas Jefferson to Gideon Granger, 20 September 1810 in Chambers, *Poplar Forest*.

⁴³ S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *Poplar Forest & Thomas Jefferson* (Forest, VA: The Corporation for Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, 1993), 152.

⁴⁴ Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, 18 September 1812, *PTJ*, 5:347.

Poplar Forest may be characterized as a retreat, a villa, a refuge, a hermitage, a sanctuary and an escape. While his need for a personal space may have been the impetus driving his decision to construct Poplar Forest, other personality traits provided the means for its completion. Successfully meeting the challenges of its construction had required his intimate understanding of the charms and challenges of the site, the relationships he had developed over his lifetime of “building and tearing down,” and his facility for written expression.⁴⁵

At the end of his second presidential term, Jefferson wrote: “Within a few days I retire to my family, my books and farms... Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power.”⁴⁶ By 1809, as his presidential term ended, Jefferson was able to begin staying at Poplar Forest. His success in overcoming the challenges of distance, labor, and location are a testament his talents as a communicator, a designer, and a builder. Its unique character mirrors that of its creator.

⁴⁵ Margaret Bayard Smith, *A Winter in Washington; Or, Memoirs of the Seymour Family* (New York: Bliss and White, 1824), 2:261. B. L. Rayner, *Sketches of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Francis and Boardman, 1832).

⁴⁶ Jefferson to Peirre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, 2 Mar 1809, *Founders Early Access*.

Chapter Two

The Aesthetics of Poplar Forest: Building a Villa for a Retiring President

During his lifetime Thomas Jefferson built two homes for his personal use: the acclaimed Monticello and the lesser known Poplar Forest. Jefferson was twenty-six when he began construction of Monticello in 1769. Work continued for most of Jefferson's active political life as he built, rebuilt, and later expanded this family home. In a frequently quoted remark attributed to Jefferson "Architecture is my delight and putting up and pulling down one of my favorite amusements."¹ Remaining a work in progress for more than thirty-five years, Monticello exemplified Jefferson's devotion to building.

The design formulation and construction process at Poplar Forest differed markedly from the slow evolution of Monticello. At age sixty-two Jefferson had a complete architectural vision of the house he planned to create for his retirement when he instructed Hugh Chisolm to begin brickmaking in the fall of 1805. Three years later, at the end of his presidency, he began periodic visits to Poplar Forest. Its realized vision reflected the perspectives of the mature Thomas Jefferson and embodied his life experiences.

As a young man, Jefferson's extensive study of the classics sparked an interest in architectural history and an appreciation of the villa designs of Palladio. Later in life,

¹ S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *Poplar Forest & Thomas Jefferson*, (Forest, VA: The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1993) x.

Jefferson's five years in Europe embellished his artistic education with physical experiences. Visiting homes built by members of the aristocracy he witnessed contemporary interpretations of Palladian villa design as well as other design innovations. Jefferson's mature aesthetic vision for Poplar Forest emerged from the fusion of these influences.

Although formally educated at William and Mary, the breadth of Jefferson's knowledge and resulting values came from his lifelong dedication to reading and self-education. His studies of Latin, Greek, and classical literature likely spurred his interest in classical architecture. While formal education in architecture did not exist in the United States until 1865, Jefferson studied books on classical and Renaissance architecture. Through them he developed an appreciation for the sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio whose work resurrected design elements originating with the Roman architect Vitruvius. With its emphasis on symmetry and functionality, the influence of Palladio's villa architectural style is evident in Jefferson's Poplar Forest design.

The five years Jefferson spent abroad significantly broadened the aesthetic values he had acquired through self-study. While based in Paris he visited Europe's major cities and witnessed sights he had only read about. The Paris infrastructure was rapidly expanding during this time, creating a juxtaposition of classical era buildings set amid new, innovative architectural designs. Jefferson absorbed many ideas from his daily walks through the city and visits to town and country homes. Combining ideas borrowed from these years Jefferson created his own unique juxtaposition of classic and modern elements evident in his construction and interior design choices.

The cultural and artistic advancements Jefferson so admired in Europe grew out of a society at odds with his own. Much of Europe's cultural growth was derived from a patronage system perpetuated by aristocracy. Jefferson regarded raising the artistic standards of the United States a priority but wrestled with the best means to accomplish this without abandoning his commitment to republican self-government. As he wrote to James Madison, he wished "to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world, and procure them its praise."² Jefferson understood that cultural advancement would happen gradually and held definite opinions about which artistic disciplines were most deserving of the young country's focus. His biases are evident in the artistic areas he championed and those he dismissed.

The Villa

James Ackerman defines a villa as "a building in the country designed for its owner's enjoyment and relaxation... filling a need that never alters... not material but psychological and ideological."³ This describes the emotional respite Jefferson had searched unsuccessfully for throughout his public service career. Through the choice of the villa style for his retirement home at Poplar Forest he finally achieved it.

The villa style derives from ancient Rome where it was reserved principally for people of wealth, prestige, and/or power. Villas were located apart from the town, offering relief from urban concerns. In agricultural areas like Colonial Virginia, villas relied on the institution of slavery for their existence. The isolated locations made the

² Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 20 September 1785, *PTJ*, 8:536.

³ James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9.

attraction of sufficient free labor difficult while slave labor was less costly and easier to manage.”⁴

The distinguishing design elements of the Palladian villa style resonated with Jefferson’s personality in a number of ways making it an ideal design choice for Poplar Forest. Intellectually, it combined his interests in the classical age, mathematical precision, and architectural design. Aesthetically, Jefferson appreciated the way in which classical forms were reimagined in new ways that focused on symmetry, functionality, and integration with their surroundings.⁵ More subjectively, the villa style held emotional appeal for Jefferson, resonating with his desire for solitude.

An important component of villa style is its relationship with the natural environment. The villa structure interacts with its setting rather than merely being placed upon it. Raised locations such as hilltops are often chosen, allowing viewers to look up at the structure as well as out from it to the surrounding landscape. Geometric forms within the body of the house contrast with the organic world integrated around it.⁶

Jefferson’s understanding of villa style emerged from his study of classical architecture and its reinterpretation by sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio. Palladio had been influenced by the Roman architect Vitruvius and had illustrated Daniele Barbaro’s commentary on Vitruvius’ *The Ten Books on Architecture*, the only architectural book surviving from antiquity. The Classical language of architecture evolved from the ideas in these books and consists of the five Greek and Roman column

⁴ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 10.

⁵ Robert Tavernor, *Palladio and Palladianism*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 37.

⁶ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 22.

orders, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan, and Composite, in combination with the Roman geometrical rules for the semi-circular arch, the vault, and the dome. Palladio supplemented these ideas in his own work, *The Four Books of Architecture*, a book Jefferson owned and held in high regard.”⁷

Using these elements, Palladio created a new building style in which the architect expressed himself by adapting classical forms to functional, domestic architecture. His designs stressed balance and proportion, often with component geometric shapes arranged symmetrically. Frequent use of temple fronts and classical orders blended with innovative ways to maximize light that became known as Palladian windows.⁸

Previously architectural designs had been limited to public buildings, whereas Palladio designed homes for his patrons. Palladio’s own description of the benefits of a villa home illustrates how closely the style matched Jefferson’s vision for Poplar Forest: “... by means of the exercise that one can get in the villa on foot or horseback, the body may more actively be made to preserve its health and robustness, and there the spirit tired of the turmoil of the city may be greatly restored and consoled and may peacefully attend to the pursuit of letters and of contemplation.”⁹

Palladio provided the architects who followed him with guidelines, open to the interpretation, rather than with strict rules. His method encouraged blending classic elements with modern innovations to achieve a cohesive design appropriate to the owner’s personal needs. While guided by Palladio’s ideas, Jefferson gave the

⁷ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 189

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_window.

⁹ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 13.

characteristic villa elements his personal expression and created the unique Poplar Forest design.

Geometric shapes and the symmetry between them are important characteristics of the villa. Throughout his life, Jefferson made architectural drawings, often experimenting with octagonal shapes.¹⁰ The structure of Poplar Forest afforded him the opportunity to utilize them in their purest form. (See Fig. 4)

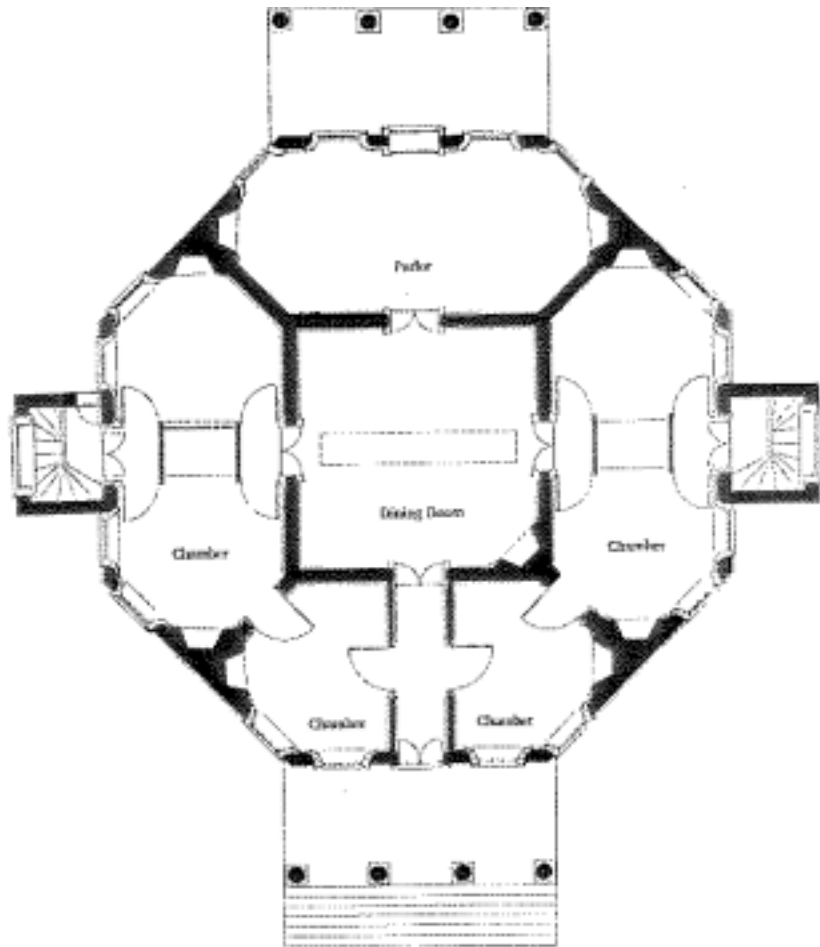


Figure 4. Schematic of Poplar Forest 1st Floor (*Arris*, 28:2017).

¹⁰ Hugh Howard, *Thomas Jefferson Architect: The Built Legacy of our Third President*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2003) 119.

The octagonal shape of the outer walls is mirrored by the symmetry of four semi-octagonal interior rooms arranged around the central dining room, a perfect twenty by twenty by twenty foot cube. This windowless space is lit from above by a 16 foot skylight running horizontally east to west across its ceiling. While intricate in the mathematical formulation necessary for construction, the executed design is pure simplicity. Although the living space was composed of only five rooms, Poplar Forest served as a practical solution to Jefferson's reclusive lifestyle. Unlike the extravagant homes many Tidewater Virginia planters were erecting as demonstrations of their prestige and wealth, and unlike Jefferson's own Monticello, Poplar Forest was designed solely to meet Jefferson's personal needs rather than those of a conventional household.¹¹

Jefferson oriented the house on an exact North South plane. The North portico entrance leads to a short, narrow hallway dividing the North room into two smaller rooms on either side. The passage continues through to the distinctive dining room in the center of the house lit by the long, rectangular skylight set into its high ceiling. Beyond that the South facing parlor room is Poplar Forest's most private, and most dramatic interior space. (See Fig. 5)

¹¹ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 186;
Travis McDonald, "Poplar Forest: A Most Palladian Villa," (*ARRIS: Journal of the Southwest Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians*), 28:2017.



Figure 5. South Parlor Room (photo taken on 18 November 2018).

Four triple sashed windows on either side of a doorway constructed mostly of glass flood the room with light. The doorway opens to the South portico that expands the dimensions of the room by blending the inside and outside boundaries of the room. This portico is not a second entrance however as it is raised well above ground and there are no stairs down from it. Instead it functions as an extension of the parlor and provides a vantage point for viewing the landscape beyond it. Jefferson spent many hours reading in this room and housed his considerable library estimated at two thousand volumes, many in miniature format, in this room.

Palladio's holistic approach to architecture strived for a seamless integration of building and landscape, allowing the structure to emerge from its site rather than appearing placed upon it. The North South siting of Poplar Forest offered Jefferson a creative way to meet this challenge. Excavating soil for the manufacture of bricks placed the foundation of the house below ground level creating the illusion, when viewed from

the North, of a one-story house built into the hilltop. Named for the forest of native poplar trees surrounding the site, Jefferson deliberately left as many of them intact as possible and at least three trees on the current site were standing in his time. The North portico faces these trees and with the addition of other naturalistic landscape features creates a sense of the house emerging out of the native woodland of the New World.

The view from the South portico contrasts dramatically with that of the North featuring a defined landscape more associated with Old World design. In place of natural woodland, two rows of manicured plantings extend outward, separated by an expanse of lawn. They end at a single ring of trees surrounding the entire property that is not evident from the North exposure. The South portico is raised well above ground level, contradicting the appearance of a one-story house from the North. The below ground level, containing the service functions, becomes visible only when viewed from the South lawn.

Jefferson used additional plantings along the East and West sides of the house to further differentiate the contrasting landscapes of the North and South. The excavated earth removed from the foundation was built into mounds located a short distance from the East and West sides of the house. These were planted with three distinct rings of trees graduated in size from tallest at the top to shortest at the bottom. An octagonal brick outdoor privy, built just beyond each mound, added substance to the demarcation effect, mimicking Palladio's practice of building horizontal wings that extend from the villa's central structure. Jefferson accomplished the same spatial dynamic with his use of landscape elements.¹²

¹² McDonald, "Poplar Forest: A Most Palladian Villa," 12.

The integration of building and landscape are central to Palladio's notion of holistic design. Having incorporated geometric elements in his house design with its octagonal shape and interior spaces, Jefferson carried the theme outside to the grounds themselves. Viewed from above, the entire layout of the property is distinctly geometric. (See Fig. 6) A single row of trees forms a circle denoting the outer boundary of the landscaped property. That circle is bisected from East to West by the mounds and landscape elements separating the woodland and landscaped areas on the North and South sides. The house rests in the center of the circle with the access road from the hilltop bisecting the North semi-circle. The lawn expanse between the two manicured garden rows serves the same purpose on the South side.

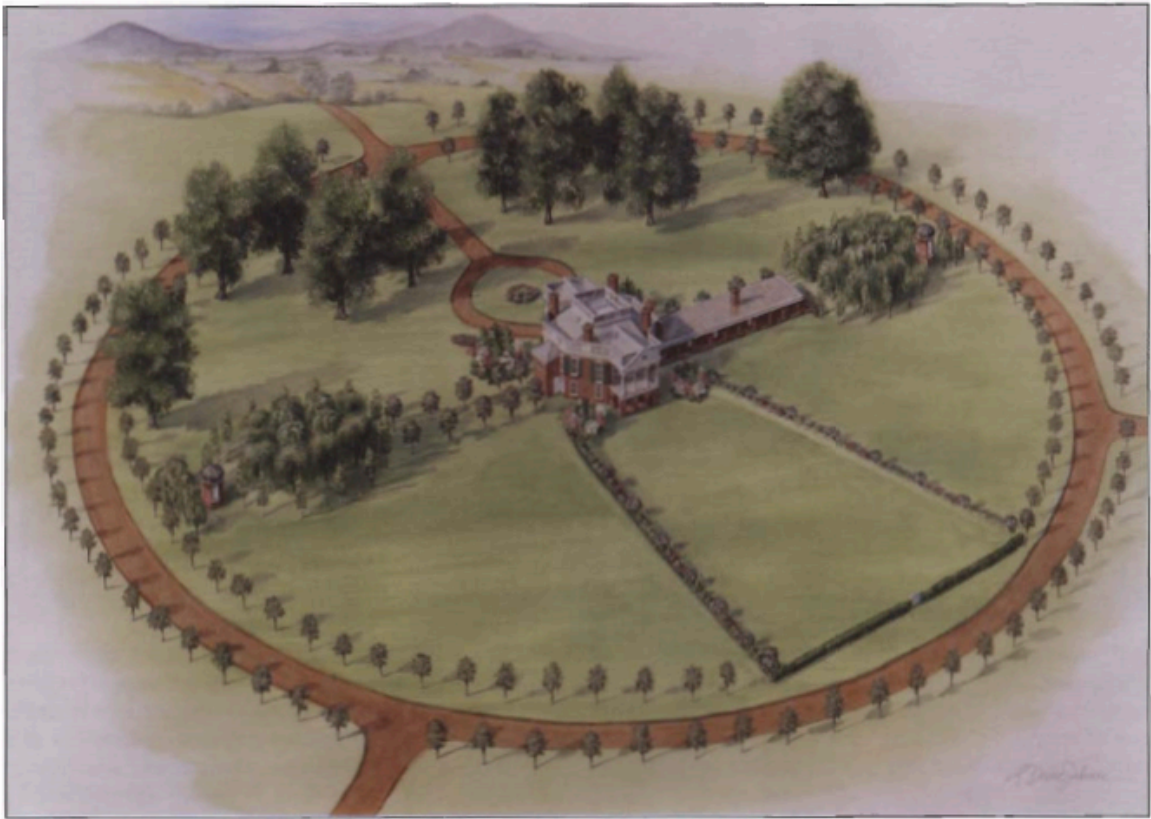


Figure 6. Artist Rendition of Jefferson's Landscape Design
(*Virginia Calvalcade*, 2002 Winter).

Jefferson's enthusiasm for classic architecture and its expression in villa architecture is evident both in his choice of elements as well as in the manner in which he used them. Jefferson used the first three classic column orders of Tuscan, Doric, and Ionic and recreated their progression from Tuscan, the simplest, to Doric, and then to Ionic, the most elaborate of the three. Following the classic order established by the ancients, Jefferson assigned each to increasingly prominent locations within the house.

The North portico features plain Tuscan columns constructed using Palladio's technique of using proportioned bricks covered with plaster to mimic solid stone. Jefferson chose this simplified method to alleviate the expense and handling difficulties he had experienced when using stone columns at Monticello.

For the central cube room Jefferson chose the more detailed Doric entablatures, using designs taken from the ancient Roman Baths of Diocletian. While adhering to the authentic proportions specified by the ancients, Jefferson added his own creative element by alternating the Classic faces with ox heads in tribute to his successful Lewis and Clark expedition. [Fig. 7] Explaining his decision to depart from Classic design to the sculptor, William Coffee, he wrote "...in my middle room at Poplar Forest I mean to mix the faces and ox-skulls, a fancy which I can indulge in my own case, altho in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly."¹³

¹³ Jefferson to William Coffee, 10 July 1822: *MHi*.



Figure 7. Dining Room Entablature (photo taken on 18 November 2018).

As the most dramatic space in the house, the spacious, light filled parlor room earned the most decorative Ionic treatment. The ordering of these Classic elements mirrors the increasing brightness of the rooms as they progress from North to South, a further example of Jefferson's meticulous planning.

Rather than simply an architectural template, Palladian villa style consists of a set of intellectual principles. Jefferson chose this style for Poplar Forest because its attributes resonated with his personality. The significance of the natural setting, the

emphasis on precision and geometric form, and the adaptation of Classical forms to modern construction reflected his lifelong interests.

European Influence

Jefferson's time abroad greatly enhanced his cultural knowledge, previously limited to his years of self-study. His Paris stay coincided with the city's rapid expansion, affording him the opportunity to experience both its rich cultural history and the new building innovations taking place there. A keen observer, Jefferson returned home anxious to introduce new ideas into the renovation of Monticello and more fundamentally into his Poplar Forest construction. A visitor to Poplar Forest described the house as "built after the fashion of a French chateau, Octagon rooms, floors of polished oak, lofty ceilings, large mirrors betokened his French taste."¹⁴ While certainly less grandiose than a French chateau, Jefferson's European exposure contributed to a number of his design decisions.

Jefferson was sensitive to the cultural divide separating the rich cultural history of Europe from the United States, a country just beginning to establish a cultural identity. His interest in European innovations extended beyond his own projects. He considered which disciplines most helpful to the country's artistic development and recommended specific styles for construction of buildings under development in the United States.

¹⁴ George Flower, "History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois, Founded in 1817 and 1818, by Morris Birbeck and George Flower," *Chicago Historical Society Collections*, (1:43).

Before embarking for Europe, Jefferson had never lived in a city for any extended time.¹⁵ His five years aboard broadened his aesthetic horizons, exposing him to Europe's most sophisticated cultural centers. His official obligations and social interactions brought him to the court of Versailles as well as into the town houses and country estates of the French aristocracy. While the stratified society collided with his republican sentiments, the artistry it embraced had a lasting effect on his aesthetic sensibilities. Inspired by what he saw, Jefferson incorporated a number of architectural, landscape, and interior decor ideas into his Poplar Forest design.

Jefferson's two residences at Hôtel Taitbout and Hôtel Langeac were both located in the newly settled quarters of Paris. With the building explosion taking place around him in Paris, he witnessed the melding of classical features with modern techniques, an important tenet of Palladian design. He was "violently smitten" with the Hôtel de Salm, a grand private home of neoclassical design and followed its construction over the course of his five year stay.¹⁶ He took particular note of the way the house was being built into, rather than on top of the hilltop, giving the appearance of a single story. This integration of building and landscape became a popular architectural feature of fine homes built at the time. The Palladian combination of the Classic columned entrance with the modern single story appearance inspired Jefferson's similar design at Poplar Forest.

Many of the buildings Jefferson saw in Europe demonstrated new ways to introduce light into their rooms. Taking inspiration from European skylights, he designed

¹⁵ Douglas Wilson, Lucia Stanton, eds., *Jefferson Abroad*, (New York: Random House, 1999), *viii*.

¹⁶ Howard C. Rice, *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 10.

the large skylight for his cube room to light an otherwise windowless space. In his Poplar Forest bedrooms, Jefferson accentuated natural light by using oversized windows. His most dramatic use of light however, came from his adoption of triple sashed windows in the parlor room. From Philadelphia he ordered “oversized glass of twelve by eighteen inches” specifying Hamburg or Bohemian glass of the middle thickness.”¹⁷ Across the room’s South wall, Jefferson incorporated the glass into two triple sashed windows on either side of the mostly glass door. The result brought maximum light into the room making it his preferred location for reading. The blurred the boundary between the interior and exterior space added another Palladian feature to the design. [See Fig. 2]

Combining formal gardens with natural landscape was another idea Jefferson brought back from Europe. The formal, well-manicured gardens of the French style were giving way to the more natural style of the English.¹⁸ Visiting Versailles, Jefferson saw the magnificent formal gardens surrounding the king’s palace while nearby, the Petit Trianon featured both a formal French-style garden with clipped hedges and trellised trees as well as a natural English style garden. Jefferson saw a particularly noteworthy example of the combination at the hillside estate of Simon-Charles Boutin.¹⁹ There, a formal Italian garden was supplanted farther up by an English garden featuring natural planting. Inspired by these ideas, Jefferson created the juxtaposition of natural and formal landscape that distinguishes the North and South sides of Poplar Forest.²⁰

¹⁷ Jefferson to James Donath, 9 October 1807, *MHi*:5.

¹⁸ Ackerman, *The Villa*, 24.

¹⁹ Rice, *Thomas Jefferson’s Paris*, 43.

²⁰ McDonald, “Poplar Forest: A Most Palladian Villa,” 12.

Jefferson incorporated several European inspired ideas into the interior rooms at Poplar Forest. Perhaps the best known of these was the practice of placing a bed lengthwise across a room to create a private sleeping space. Jefferson used the alcove bed at Poplar Forest to delineate a personal dressing space from the rest of the room he used as his study. It had the added benefit of saving exterior wall space necessary for the oversized windows he favored. In Europe, the fabric hangings dividing the beds sides were often composed of elaborately draped damask.²¹ Adopting the idea but not the execution, Jefferson's interpretation was far simpler using plain cloth.

Another innovation recently introduced in Paris was the interior water closet. While Jefferson did not attempt to duplicate one, it may have influenced his decision to create an indoor privy for himself. Early in Poplar Forest's construction, Jefferson added a staircase at either end of the house connecting each bedroom with the service area below. Midway down the stairs of his room he added a wooden privy for his own use, alleviating the need to exit the house to use one of the two freestanding brick octagonal privies.

Jefferson introduced other European inspirations in the dining room. Jefferson was firm about his decision to have oak flooring stating in a letter to John Perry "all the flooring in Europe is in oak."²² Another dining room innovation resulted from the observation of dumbwaiters in use at a Paris restaurant. Food was placed on its shelves, eliminating the need for servants to attend the diners. Jefferson had several made at Monticello for Poplar Forest. Their use removed slaves from the physical view of diners,

²¹ Joan DeJean, *The Age of Comfort: When Paris Discovered Casual – and the Modern Home Began*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 172.

²² Jefferson to John Perry, 29 March 1808, *Founders Early Access*.

insured the privacy of dinner conversations, and represents another example of his preference for less formality.

Optimizing his exposure to Europe's rich artistic culture, Jefferson collected books, pictures, busts, scientific instruments, wine, and household furnishings that he shipped to the States on his departure. Thinking beyond his own uses however, he considered which artistic pursuits would best advance American culture. He felt our country's cultural development too fledgling to pursue the decorative arts and disapproved of the patronage system that supported them. Rather he believed the country needed to focus in its infrastructure. A country with predominately wooden buildings "can never increase in its improvements" however when constructed of durable materials "every new edifice is an actual and permanent acquisition to the state, adding to its value." After critiquing inaccurate proportions in existing public buildings, Jefferson bemoaned: "the genius of architecture seems to have shed its maledictions over this land... there exists scarcely a model among us sufficiently chaste to give an idea of them."²³

In his walks through Paris, Jefferson collected architectural ideas he believed applicable to projects at home. He watched the transformation of the Palais Royal into a commercial destination with shops and theatres and suggested a similar concept for Richmond.²⁴ He envisioned utilizing a domed roof like the one he admired at the Halle aux Bleds for either the U.S. or Richmond capital. Aware that plans for the new DC capital were underway at home, Jefferson collected ideas he thought adaptable. Admiring

²³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (New York: Penquin Books, 1999), 159-160.

²⁴ Jefferson to James Currie, 14 January 1785, *PTJ*, 7:604.

the columned façade at the Galerie du Louvre, he sent a plate of it to the planners of the new DC capital city for consideration. On a larger scale, he sent Major L'Enfant a roll of city plans and engraved plates as suggestions. For the Richmond Capitol he chose Charles-Louis Clérisseau, “an architect whose taste had ben formed on a study of the antient models of this art.”²⁵ European inspiration was reflected in Jefferson’s own design for Christ Church in Charlottesville that resembled the new parish Church Saint-Philippe du Roule.

Jefferson’s ability to absorb new ideas enabled his aesthetic sensibility to grow throughout his life. While his readings of the Classics and his self-guided study of architecture provided the foundation, his exposure to the sophistication of Europe’s largest cities and the innovations taking place there broadened his artistic perspective. Jefferson’s design of Poplar Forest attests to his openness to innovative ideas and his ability to implement them, despite the hurdles along the way. The mature work of a mature man, Poplar Forest began as a solution to Jefferson’s need for solitude. Once built however, it stands as an embodiment of Jefferson’s very character.

²⁵ Jefferson to James Buchanan and William Hay, 13 August 1785, *PTJ*, 8:366.

Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson believed his Poplar Forest home would remain in the family after his death. The first item in his will left the property to his grandson, Francis Wayles Eppes. Only two years later, however, Eppes sold the house and left Virginia. In 1845, a massive fire destroyed all but the original brick structure. The owners rebuilt and over the next 150 years of private ownership Poplar Forest was modernized and extensively remodeled until it bore little resemblance to Jefferson's design.

Unlike Monticello which maintained its historical relevance through the years, Jefferson's retirement villa was lost to the public until the formation of the nonprofit Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest in 1983. The Corporation's stated mission is "to rescue and restore Jefferson's plantation and octagonal retreat for the educational and cultural benefit of the public... inspiring visitors to live lives of curiosity and creativity, as Jefferson did."¹

The Corporation's ongoing restoration of Poplar Forest today is feasible only because of the challenging circumstances of its original construction. Although much of the plantation acreage was sold over the years, the relative inaccessibility of the house may have saved the original brick structure from commercial development. Much more significantly, the exchange of some 1,500 letters between Jefferson in Washington and his workforce at Monticello and Poplar Forest created a detailed record of the

¹ <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/54-1258296>.

construction process, providing historians with one of the most complete accounts of late eighteenth century building practices in the early United States.²

The information in Jefferson's letters is supplemented by a team of archaeologists, architects, architectural historians, and researchers seeking to accurately reconstruct Poplar Forest as it stood in Jefferson's day, using period techniques and tools wherever possible. [See Fig. 8.]



Figure 8. Assortment of Period Planes in Poplar Forest Workshop
(photo taken on 19 November 2018).

With the exterior construction more or less complete, reconstruction currently focuses on interior elements such as entablatures, hearth and fireplace finishes, and similar furnishings. Landscape and grounds reconstruction are in the earliest stages. Archaeological studies of the carriage drive to determine the original depth, placement, and surface material are underway. [See Fig. 9]

² Howard, *Thomas Jefferson Architect*, 123.



Figure 9. Archeological Study of Carriage Drive with Three Original Poplar Trees Remaining (photo taken on 18 November 2018).

With the process continuing to this day, current visitors witness Poplar Forest's construction much as Jefferson did in his later life. In future years, when reconstruction is complete, Poplar Forest will stand on a par with Monticello, each revealing its distinct side of the Thomas Jefferson story: "At Monticello he was President. At Poplar Forest he was himself."³

³ <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/54-1258296>

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