



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*



The Plantation at Poplar Forest

"In Bedford I have two plantations, adjoining, of 16 hands each, uplands of the first quality, where I cultivate both tobacco and wheat. In point of soil, climate, and a substantial thrift and good neighborhood I think it the finest part of Virginia."

Thomas Jefferson

January 20, 1815, Age 71

Thomas and Martha Jefferson inherited the 4,819 acres of land at Poplar Forest in Bedford County, Virginia from Martha's father in 1773. Jefferson, age 30, visited Poplar Forest for the first time that year.

Jefferson considered Poplar Forest "the most valuable of my possessions." A working plantation, Poplar Forest produced most of its own food; tobacco and wheat grown there supplied Jefferson with a significant portion of his income. By 1790, seven extended families of enslaved workers lived on the plantation and worked its various farms. Later years saw nearly 100 slaves at Poplar Forest.

Jefferson considered farming to be his profession and was intimate with every aspect of the plantation, providing overseers with instructions for planting, harvesting and selling crops. A progressive farmer, he was perpetually interested in new crops and machinery.

Jefferson managed his vast estate using a traditional Virginia plantation system. He divided the land into separate farms, each with a different overseer, work force, dwelling houses and farm buildings. By the time Jefferson was in part-time residence at Poplar Forest, there were two active farms: Tomahawk and Bear Creek.

Skilled and unskilled laborers and managers, both enslaved and free, lived at Poplar Forest. Seven extended families lived on the plantation and worked the farms. Some workers learned specialized crafts such as blacksmithing, coopering, spinning and weaving, carpentry, and bricklaying. There was a spinning house at Poplar Forest by 1814, and women made clothes from hemp, flax and wool produced on the plantation.

Hogs, cattle and sheep were raised at Poplar Forest for internal consumption or fattened and then driven to Monticello for butchering. Many crops—corn, pumpkins, potatoes, oats and barley—were grown primarily for internal purposes. Butter, milk, meat, grains and peaches produced in Bedford supplied people living at both Poplar Forest and Monticello. Wagons and carts carried goods back and forth between Jefferson's two estates for more than 20 years.

Tobacco and wheat were the cash crops. Getting tobacco to market required eighteen months of hard labor. Most of Jefferson's tobacco was hauled to Lynchburg by wagon and shipped down the James River, sometimes to Richmond where cash crop brought higher prices.

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