

# The Private Villa Retreat of Thomas Jefferson

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residents are likely to pause from the labor of office to dream of where they might spend their retirement years. President Thomas Jefferson did more than pause and dream. In June 1806, he wrote from Washington to his daughter Martha at Monticello that he would have to delay his summer break with her in order to lay the foundations of a new house in Bedford County, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> From his worktable in the President's House this multitasking man drew plans, elevations, and details necessary for constructing the house. This was not to be a house of ordinary design; Jefferson's experienced bricklayer would prove incapable of laying the geometry of the octagonal brick foundation. This house was to be a new type for America, though long a favorite of Jefferson's and one he felt increasingly necessary to have in addition to his principal residence. For five days President Jefferson was "so much engaged" laying out the site, beginning the fulfillment of his longtime dream to create a permanent retreat from the social hustle and bustle at Monticello, which was as distracting as the same of a political nature at the

*After taking leave of the presidency and public duties in 1809, Thomas Jefferson eagerly hurried to his long-awaited retreat that had just been built in a remote part of Virginia. The fact that it took another 17 years to complete the house was of no consequence. Finished or not, the highly personalized occasional retreat afforded Jefferson a peace and quiet to reinvigorate his active mind through the pleasures reserved for a retired citizen.*

President's House in Washington. Construction of this new house, which Jefferson called Poplar Forest, was supervised by mail from the President's House until 1809, when the third president retired from public life and began his occasional sojourns there.<sup>2</sup>

Jefferson first knew the land in 1773, when he rode several days southwest from Charlottesville to examine 6,861 acres his wife Martha had recently inherited upon the death of her father John Wayles. Along with the property Jefferson and his wife had inherited 135 slaves and considerable debt. After selling some of the land to satisfy debtors, the remaining Poplar Forest tract consisted of 4,819 acres. This rolling, wooded property on the eastern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains was in a sparsely settled area of Virginia, today not far from Lynchburg. Jefferson was so taken with it that the following year he patented 157 acres in the nearby Shenandoah Valley in order to own what he called one of nature's most sublime works, the Natural Bridge.

This natural wonder of early America, together with the nearby Peaks of Otter, Jefferson described in his important scientific work *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). Portions of this were written at Poplar Forest during the summer when the Jefferson family retreated there to avoid capture by the British in Sir Banastre Tarleton's raid on Charlottesville in 1781. Jefferson wanted to make the tobacco plantation more productive and eventually considered it one of his most profitable. The few slaves initially resident on the Poplar Forest property increased in number. By the time of Jefferson's death in 1826 the Poplar Forest fields produced wheat as well as tobacco, with 94 slaves attached to the property.<sup>3</sup>