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Photo: Robert Lautman

JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST RETREAT

A Phoenix Rises from the Ashes

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“I was much disappointed to see the destruction by fire [in 1845] of Poplar Forest, my house in Bedford County, Virginia, and the ill-conceived manner in which it was rebuilt.

I delight, tho', in observing the present satisfactory restoration of the house according to my design. Both scholarship and workmanship are of the first order.”

No, Thomas Jefferson didn't really say that. After all, he died in 1826. But he very well might say it today if he could see the ongoing extraordinary restoration of Poplar Forest—the personal villa retreat he designed and built on his plantation in Bedford County, Virginia.

What Jefferson actually said in an 1812 letter was, “When finished, it will be the best dwelling house in the state, except that of Monticello; perhaps preferable to that, as more proportioned to the faculties of a private citizen.”

When building began at Poplar Forest in 1806, Jefferson was in his early sixties, serving his second term as President. Although known for his hospitality at Monticello—his home in Charlottesville, Virginia—Jefferson craved quiet and privacy.

In Poplar Forest, Jefferson combined architectural ideas gathered over a lifetime. Trained as a lawyer, he had matured from a

self-taught amateur architect to the renowned architect-builder of Monticello and the Virginia State Capitol, among other structures. His retreat reflects his love of Palladian architecture as well as design features he admired in Europe, especially France. Jefferson's design is based on his favorite shape, the octagon. The 2,000-sq. ft. octagonal main floor contains four lozenge-shaped octagons (four bedrooms and a parlor), which surround a dramatic 20-ft. cube—the dining room—lit by a long skylight. A lower floor with five utility rooms opens to the “sunken” south lawn. Jefferson also built a separate service wing covered with a flat oak deck.

Although both exterior and interior walls were brick, Jefferson specified wood for much of the remaining structure. His signature New World Classicism is exemplified by the triangular pediment above the south portico and the 2ft. 10in.-high