

Poplar Forest

A Masterpiece Rediscovered

TRAVIS C. McDONALD, JR.

Designed, constructed, and immensely enjoyed by Thomas Jefferson, Poplar Forest is emerging as one of the most extraordinary works of American architecture. For almost twenty years, beginning in 1806, Jefferson lovingly crafted the house and grounds as a villa retreat. Moreover, in its ideal conception, its unencumbered site, and its systematic coordination of parts, Poplar Forest ranks in architectural significance with Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia. Simply stated, Poplar Forest is one of his most consummate architectural works. It was also a house as personal to Jefferson as was his beloved Monticello. And yet it remains one of his most unknown works—one, however, that after a four-year detailed and rigorous investigation by a team of archaeologists, architects, architectural historians, conservators, researchers, and advisors is being meticulously deciphered.

The plantation known as Poplar Forest came to Jefferson through his wife, Martha Wayles Skelton, who inherited the property from her father in 1773. A working plantation of almost five thousand acres in Bedford County, it consisted of two separate farm operations known as Bear Creek and Tomahawk Creek, each with its own set of outbuildings, overseers, and slaves. In addition to the crucial cash crops of wheat and tobacco, the plantation furnished livestock

and vegetables for both the local plantation community and Monticello. Poplar Forest was also one of the sites at which Jefferson experimented with new practices in animal husbandry and agriculture, such as crop rotation to combat tobacco's harsh effects on the soil.

After visiting the property for the first time in 1773, Jefferson did not return until forced by the British to flee Charlottesville in 1781. During that stay, cooped up in a crude overseer's house, Jefferson wrote much of his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and idly calculated how to solve the mounting national debt. The uninterrupted respite probably helped convince him of the advantages of a private villa, a retreat away from the demands of a more public life. While in his second term as president, in 1805, Jefferson after many years of dreaming and sketching ideas of various retreats, began plans for the site.

There is no better early-American example than Poplar Forest of a rural villa in the centuries-old definition of the term. When creating his Bedford retreat, Jefferson, in fact, characteristically reached back to classical literature to study Roman examples of the first villas. James Ackerman, a professor of fine arts, has defined a villa as

a building in the country designed for its owner's enjoyment and relaxation. Though it may also be the center of an agricultural enterprise, the pleasure factor is what essentially distinguishes the villa residence from the farmhouse and the villa estate from the farm. The farmhouse tends to be simple in structure and to conserve ancient forms that do not require the intervention of a designer. The villa is typically the product of an architect's imagination and asserts its modernity.

Mr. McDonald serves as restoration coordinator for the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest. The house, a National Historic Landmark, is located in Forest, Bedford County, near Lynchburg, Virginia.

Poplar Forest fits this definition perfectly. There, Jefferson could escape the visitors and activities that so often crowded Monticello. Equally important, Poplar Forest's design provided him with a pleasure and personal satisfaction that he obviously could not receive from Monticello alone.

That Jefferson in the midst of considerable financial troubles made such a heroic and patient effort to construct Poplar Forest indicates that he considered it an essential, not a secondary, concern. As Ackerman has also noted, "the villa accommodates a fantasy which is impervious to reality." The effort, detail, and expense devoted to Jefferson's seventeen-year building project symbolize its psychological importance as an ideal, private environment where he could retain complete control of his innermost intellectual desires. It is therefore his conception of the site that offers the clue to its significance. And it is the recent research and physical investigation that merge the conception with its final execution.

By 1809, Jefferson was visiting the site as many as four times each year, each visit usually lasting from a

few weeks to several months. Jefferson remarked in 1811 that he had "fixed myself comfortably, keep some books here, bring others occasionally, am in the solitude of a hermit, and quite at leisure to attend my absent friends." His books actually consisted of approximately six hundred and fifty volumes of his favorite works, including his "petit format library," the smallest editions he could obtain. His granddaughter Ellen remarked that at Poplar Forest "he found in a pleasant home, rest, leisure, power to carry on his favorite pursuits—to think, to study, to read—whilst the presence of part of his family took away all character of solitude from his retreat." Jefferson also found time to visit with neighbors and to invite them over for "simple plantation fare." These were guests of Jefferson's choosing, not the unexpected visitors he felt compelled to entertain at Monticello.

At Poplar Forest, Jefferson also enjoyed being closer to the natural wonders of Virginia. In 1815, at age seventy-two, he led an expedition of friends to the nearby Peaks of Otter to measure the two mountains accurately and lay to rest the debate over which peak



The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest. Photo by Travis C. McDonald, Jr.

was taller. He also took the occasion to visit his landholding in the close-by Valley of Virginia: the Natural Bridge, which he called “the most sublime of Nature’s works.”

In 1823, Jefferson settled his grandson Francis Eppes and his wife at Poplar Forest. It was his last visit there. When Jefferson died three years later, the property—the first item in his will—legally passed to Eppes. Unfortunately, neither Francis nor Elizabeth Eppes cared much for the house’s idiosyncratic nature or its remote location and in 1828 moved to Florida after selling the villa and an accompanying 1,074³/₄ acres to a neighbor, William Cobbs. His daughter, Emma W. (“Emily”) Cobbs, in 1841 married Edward S. Hutter. The Hutter family owned the property until 1946 when James O. Watts, Jr., a Lynchburg attorney, purchased the site.

The villa had by then undergone considerable transformation. A century earlier, in November 1845, Poplar Forest had suffered the effects of fire. William Cobbs and his son-in-law Edward Hutter decided to repair the damaged portions and by the following August had already put everything back in order. Their quick rebuilding is a tribute to Thomas Jefferson’s decided preference for permanence in building. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson indicated that the perishable nature of Virginia’s many undistinguished wooden buildings was perhaps not such a bad thing after all. Having consistently used superior brick construction and thereby provided what he considered to be preferable and proper examples of design and construction, Jefferson ensured that his own efforts would not perish so easily. Yet from the moment of the fire onward, the true genius of his creation became only a memory in the minds of the Cobbs-Hutter family. While Jefferson’s unique and thoughtful design guided their rapid and economical alterations, an opportunity for change had presented itself.

After the fire, a Pennsylvania relative wrote to Edward Hutter: “I have no doubt that you have been able to make some valuable improvements in the rebuilding of your mansion, and that in some instances it is now more commodious than it was before the unfortunate fire occurred.” The key to those “improvements” is the description “commodious.” What Jefferson had found to be commodious and delightful in his house was perhaps a little too personal for both the Eppes and the Cobbs-Hutter families. They used the house for different purposes and found it awkward. Jefferson’s plan was very specific to its purpose: an occasional house used by

Facing page: *Poplar Forest, 1955, with the remains of the ornamented landscape of the early villa compressed by the agricultural landscape of the later farm*

a limited number of people. More than that, it represented an architectural ideal. The Cobbs-Hutter family set out to improve the house to meet its own needs and life-style. The altered house, with its simple Greek Revival features, signified a basic conceptual shift from Jefferson’s aesthetically designed villa retreat to a practical, mid-nineteenth-century farmhouse. Similarly, Jefferson’s ornamental landscape slowly faded into a typical farmyard setting.

Thus, until recently, the appearance of Poplar Forest was something Jefferson might have recognized only in a passing glance. Moreover, the house was further obscured, inside and out, by various twentieth-century alterations. It was this heavily altered structure that for so long stood as one of the two major—and misleading—sources for our knowledge of Jefferson’s original house.

The other source has been two drawings first widely published in Fiske Kimball’s 1916 monograph, *Thomas Jefferson: Architect*. They are the only finished drawings of Poplar Forest known to exist: an elevation from the south and a plan of the principal floor. The date of the drawings unfortunately is unknown. Both are often—and incorrectly—attributed to Jefferson’s granddaughter Cornelia Jefferson Randolph. Although it has not yet been documented that he ever visited the site, it is far more probable, indeed likely, that they are the work instead of John Neilson, one of Jefferson’s workmen. The drawings have proved crucial in the physical investigation of the house. Some of the drawings’ elements are extremely accurate when compared to the house; others are incredibly inaccurate. Thus, they nevertheless still do not reveal the complete story of Poplar Forest’s design and construction.

The four-year-long investigative work at Poplar Forest has proceeded cautiously. Preliminary probes indicated that the several interior adaptations and alterations from 1846 and as late as the 1940s had in many cases not obliterated but rather encapsulated Jefferson’s design features. The investigation involved visual evidence such as drawings and early-twentieth-century photographs, written evidence consisting primarily of detailed letters between Jefferson and his workmen, physical evidence “read” in the house and in the ground, and the body of prototypical evidence found at other sites such as Monticello and the



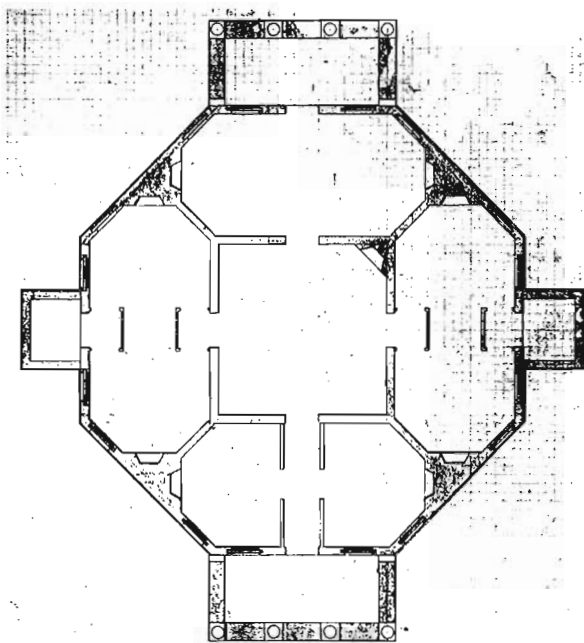
University of Virginia. All the diverse elements have been combined in several drawings, thus on paper re-creating Jefferson's house in such detail that perhaps as much as 90 percent of the architectural puzzle is complete.

The process of sifting the evidence and making sense of Jefferson's reliance on the system of classical orders in the end confirmed that Poplar Forest is one of the clearest, most mature expressions of an architectural ideal—fitting together house, landscape, and details in a coordination of parts to whole such as is found in few other examples of American architecture.

From his earliest sketches in the 1760s, Jefferson was apparently fascinated with the octagonal and semi-octagonal designs found in English architectural handbooks by James Gibbs, Robert Morris, and William Kent. Later, during his years in Paris

(1784–1789), Jefferson admired the use of octagonally shaped rooms in the latest French hotels and pavilions and became especially enamored with the design's use of floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights as well as the deceptive volume of interior space, with bed alcoves and water closets efficiently tucked away. A German garden book by Wilhelm Gottlieb Becker, purchased by Jefferson in 1805, includes a surprisingly similar, octagonal plan that might also have served as an inspiration for Poplar Forest.

And although the work of the seventeenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio does not include octagonal forms, his strong influence is evident in the building's classical proportions and details, in the relationship of the service buildings to the main house, and in the landscape. Jefferson uniquely coordinated the architecture and the landscape so that together they form a five-part Palladian plan of

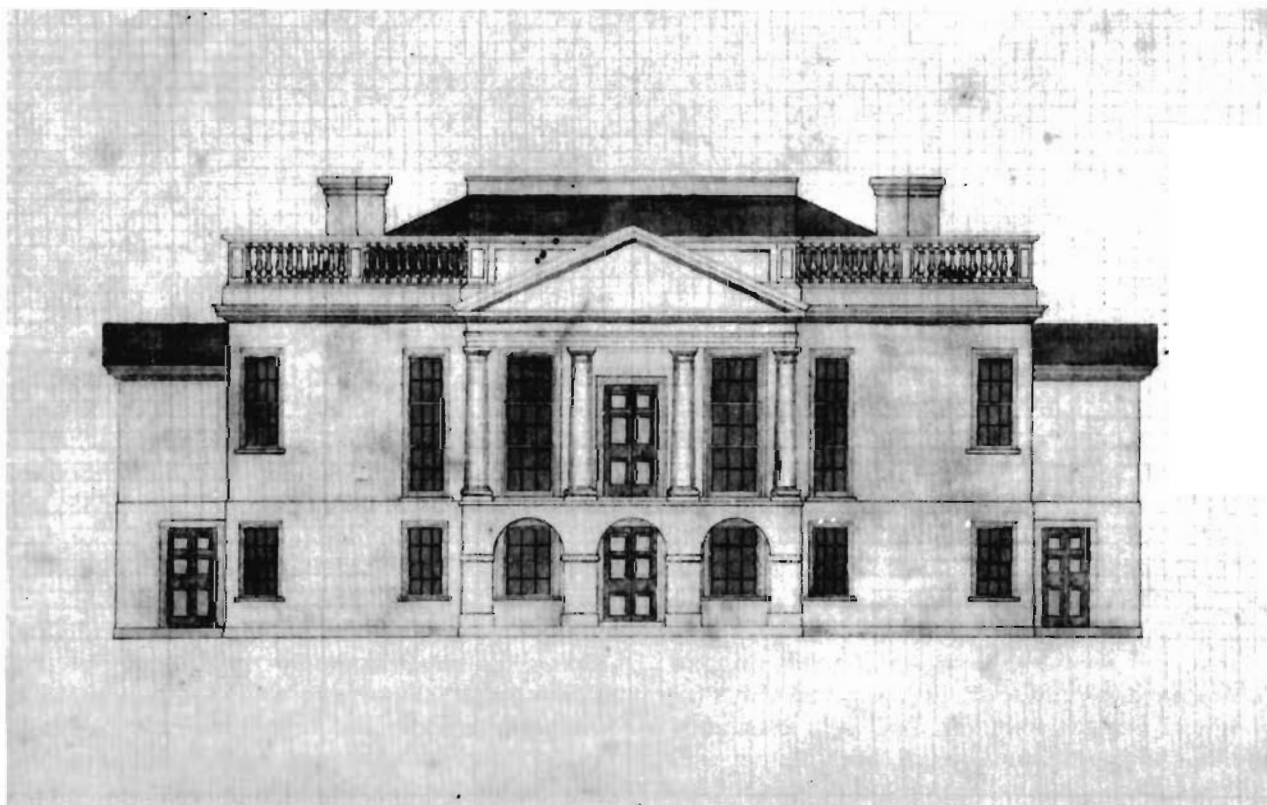


Two ca. 1819 designs for Poplar Forest are probably the work of John Neilson, one of Jefferson's craftsmen. While not accurate in every detail, the drawings are nevertheless important restoration documents.

house, hyphens of trees, and earthen mounds. Made from soil removed from the terraced lawn south of the house, each mound was planted with three rings of trees. A double row of paper mulberry trees formed the hyphens extending between the mounds and the house. By also including the octagonal necessities, or privies, beyond each mound, the symmetrical design becomes a seven-part Palladian plan.

The house represented the ultimate octagon: an overall octagonal form with an interior of octagonal rooms set around a central square. The north entry passage led directly into the nucleus of the house, a two-story-high central dining room measuring twenty feet square and surmounted by a skylight twenty feet above the floor. Jefferson deliberately created the appearance of a one-story house on the north front, thereby providing a surprise when one entered the unexpected two-story central room. He had observed the concept in several fashionable French houses he had known in Paris and had incorporated it into the rebuilding of Monticello as well.

On either side of the passage were two small semioctagonal rooms referred to as bedchambers. Adjacent to these side chambers, stair pavilions provided access to both the ground floor and the exterior. To the east and west of the central room were



Both: Thomas Jefferson Papers (N-351 and N-350), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library



A mound and octagonal privy flank both the west (above, in 1943) and east sides of Poplar Forest.

two larger bedchambers, each divided in half by a central alcove bed. To the south of the central room, Jefferson placed the parlor, with five floor-to-ceiling window and door openings. The lower floor followed a similar design, with a subterranean wine cellar as the central room.

After Jefferson's first visit to the construction site in 1806, he wrote to brickmason and carpenter Hugh Chisholm and added the two porticos, the two stair pavilions, and six doorways. His curious revision indicates that his initial design was even more of an ideal: seeing the actual construction must have jarred Jefferson into adding the practical features. Without the stair pavilions, for example, food from a detached kitchen could only be carried through the front door. Even with the addition of the stair towers, one had to carry food through a part of the east bedroom. While strange, the route indicates much of the intimacy of the design.

The entire plan at Poplar Forest represents, in essence, a conceptual enlargement of Jefferson's

private suite at Monticello. At Poplar Forest there was no need for the usual conventions of socially separated spaces for family, visitors, and servants. As intended, Jefferson's unconventional design enforced the exclusion of strangers. But being unique, the plan underwent later changes when the conceptual intention of the designer and builder conflicted with its adapted use by later occupants.

Although Jefferson designed Poplar Forest as a hideaway, he nevertheless sought refinement in its specific parts. For the dining room and parlor, for example, Jefferson in detailed letters ordered specific composition friezes for each room's decorative entablatures from New York sculptor William J. Coffee. (At the same time, Coffee made similar plaster friezes for the pavilions at the University of Virginia.) In the dining room, Jefferson took liberties with a classical design from the Baths of Diocletian as illustrated in a seventeenth-century architectural study by Roland Freart, sieur de Chambray. He mixed the faces and ox skulls, telling Coffee he could do so because it was "a fancy which I can indulge in my own case, altho in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly." Despite the change, the proportions nevertheless properly followed the Doric order.



For the parlor entablature, Jefferson used another classical design, one from the Temple of Fortuna Virilis as described in a translation of Palladio's works by Giacomo Leoni. The other rooms had less-elaborate decorative work, most likely similar to the wooden Tuscan entablatures found at the University of Virginia and in secondary rooms at Monticello. There were other interior details as well. Ghost marks left by wood trim removed in later years and the associated nailing blocks in the brick walls provide evidence throughout the house for bases, chair rails, mantels, door and window casings, staircases, and even a necessary squeezed under the stairway leading from Jefferson's bedchamber.

Absent during much of the work, Jefferson relied greatly on correspondence to communicate his wishes. Fortunately for researchers, he copied his letters to workmen and suppliers and, in turn, retained theirs, thus providing the identities of the craftsmen for all parts of the house, his detailed instructions for what they were to do, and the workers' own thoughts

as well. Letters, for example, from Jefferson's slave carpenter, John Hemings, paint an amazing and rare picture of early-nineteenth-century building practices and the frustrations of design and construction that so often plagued Jefferson. As luck would have it, many of the same craftsmen worked with Jefferson on other projects, such as at Monticello and the University of Virginia, thus providing a wonderful opportunity to compare similarities and differences in Jefferson's work.

Frequently innovative with roofs, Jefferson first specified chestnut shingles for Poplar Forest, with rolled sheet-iron for the valleys and built-in gutters. After a severe hailstorm in 1819, John Hemings replaced a portion of the roof with a flat, serrated covering of Jefferson's own design. And seven years later, after minor fire damage, Jefferson decided to replace the wooden shingles with tin ones similar to those at Monticello and the university. Although much of the original roof configuration is therefore missing, letters between Jefferson and Hemings leave no doubt

A 1926 "Afternoon of Retrospection." The large Greek Revival doorway was among the many changes made to Poplar Forest after Jefferson's death.

as to its appearance. Moreover, markings found on the chimneys have provided information as to its pitch as well as the balustrade at its edge, one much like the Doric balustrade used at Monticello. The roof, in fact, is the most documented part of the building; only the exact design of the decorative Chinese railing remains conjectural.

In one instance, Jefferson decided to tinker with what otherwise was a finished design. In 1814, probably with his grandson's eventual residency in mind, he removed a line of trees between the house and the east mound and added a service wing. As asymmetric as it seems, the one-hundred-foot wing was never duplicated on the opposite side. Archaeological evidence confirmed the original plan of the wing and its probable uses: the four-room addition contained a storage area, cook's room, kitchen, and smokehouse. Recent evidence also reveals that a doorway in the stair pavilion led directly from the east bedroom to the wing's flat-roofed terrace on which, Jefferson remarked, one could "sally out with the owls and bats, and take our evening exercise on the terras." The doorway was probably added in 1817 during renovations to the east bedroom alcove. The chamber may have been altered to provide for a pantry, or passageway, through which servants could bring food from the new wing without having to keep intruding on any occupants of the bedroom. A later description of Poplar Forest by Ellen Randolph Coolidge mentions a pantry on the first floor of the house at that location.

While it is true that the 1846 rebuilding took place within the surviving framework of the original walls, the so-called improvements were considerable and affected every room, altering spatial volume, window and door openings, and decorative details. On the exterior, the changes affected each of the house's eight sides and the entire roof. Even before the 1845 fire, probably in the 1830s, the east wing had been partially demolished and its two most distant parts substantially rebuilt in a different form as a kitchen and smokehouse.

Just how did the second family of occupants change Jefferson's house? At the entrance, what had been a dark, narrow passage in Jefferson's design became for the Cobbs-Hutter family a wider, Greek Revival doorway with transom and sidelights. At the same time, the centered doorways on the passage walls were

moved toward the front door so as to furnish more uninterrupted wall space for the small rooms. To add even more wall area, six windows, two doorways, and a fireplace—all on the main floor—were bricked up, considerably changing the ambience of the light and airy octagon. There were still other changes. Every window not bricked in on the main floor was lowered a foot. The bed alcoves had never impressed the Cobbs and Hutter family and were not rebuilt. Jefferson's own bedchamber received a partition wall, dividing it into two separate rooms.

In the most dramatic change to the house, the family radically altered the impressive twenty-foot-high central room by lowering the ceiling eight feet and installing an attic level above to accommodate both stored items and overflow visitors. A staircase added at one corner of the central room further altered the feeling of Jefferson's special place. Jefferson's use of the space had reflected the traditional, multipurpose halls of seventeenth-century Virginia buildings, but after the Hutter family moved the area's dining-room function to the lower floor, the central space took on the general characteristics of a stair hall.

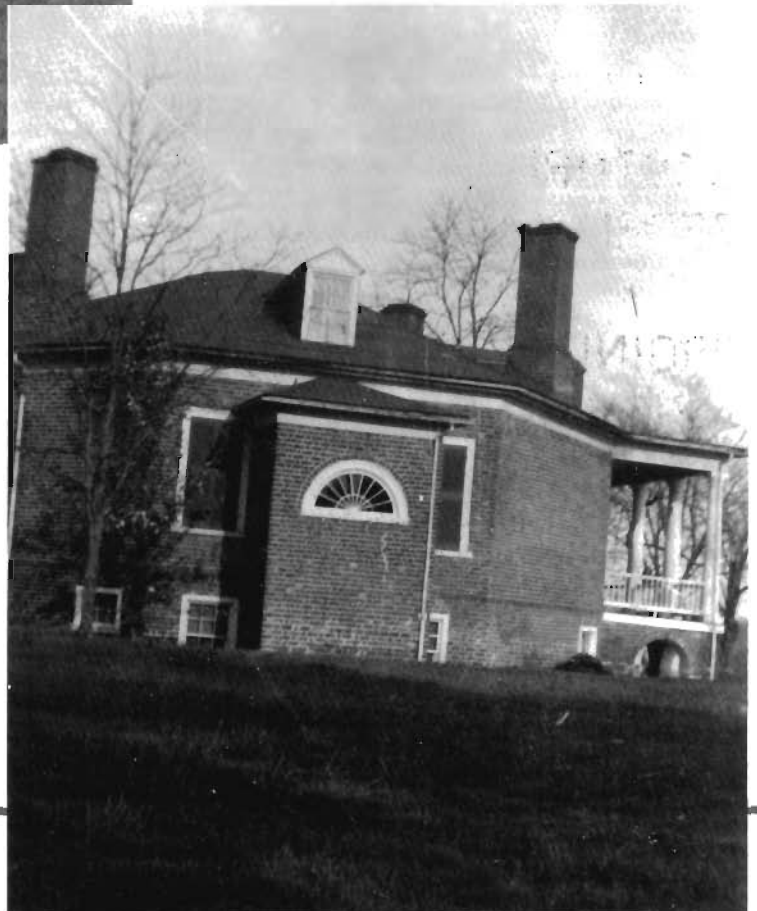
Not much is known yet about the use of the basement level in Jefferson's time. Archaeological investigation has revealed that the basement's east, south, and west rooms had wooden floors, while the north and central rooms had brick. During the Hutter family's occupancy, however, several windows and doorways were selectively blocked up just as on the floor above; the wine cellar was no longer accessible; and the east room became the dining room, the south room a kitchen, the unheated north room a pantry, and the others bedrooms.

The renovations equally affected the outside: the central room's lowered walls altered the roof's shape and pitch as did the addition of dormer windows and the removal of the balustrade; a cornice replaced the exterior entablature; wider doors, lowered windows, and altered Tuscan columns completed the change. Even though the Cobbs and Hutter families had taken the opportunity to become stylistically up-to-date by using Greek Revival details, the classical syntax and genius of Jefferson's design had been lost in the rebuilding. Gone were the detailed elements and design—interior chair rails, entablatures, doorways, windows, and floor plans. Gone was the proper classical relationship of architectural parts to both interior and exterior.

The original five-thousand-acre property with its two separate plantations had been reduced to a



Poplar Forest was among thousands of sites included in Virginia's depression-era Historical Inventory Project, a program funded by the federal Works Progress Administration. Whereas the Civil Works Administration's Historic American Buildings Survey employed architects and draftsmen to record the structural details of significant landmarks, the inventory sought information on a far-wider variety of pre-1860 structures and employed people chosen for their knowledge of the local community such as underemployed shopkeepers, teachers, clerks, or farmers. Each file included histories, anecdotes, sometimes folklore, a record of deed transfers, a brief analysis of construction elements, and snapshots—often reflecting the field-workers' unfamiliarity with framing and exposure but nevertheless leaving a superb record of Virginia in the 1930s.





thousand acres by 1828, to fifty acres by 1979. In the 1940s a new owner turned attention to Poplar Forest's long-neglected landscape and to several of the house's original features, in some cases even reopening original window spaces and adding appropriate trim to the parlor. In effect, the house came full circle, from farmhouse back to villa. In 1983, a group of concerned local citizens formed a nonprofit corporation dedicated to the preservation of Jefferson's Poplar Forest. Since then the organization has assembled a staff, recruited volunteers, acquired an additional four hundred acres of Jefferson's original tract, thus further protecting the house from encroachment, and is now—after years of research—poised to embark on the detailed restoration of Jefferson's retreat.

In summary what can be said about Poplar Forest? The importance of the site to a knowledge of Jefferson cannot be overstated. It represents the portrait of a private man. Stripped of all the public and political implementations inherent in Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia and of all the preexisting physical and domestic constraints found at Monticello, Poplar Forest stands as a clear architectural expression of what Jefferson wanted to build for his own pleasure. It is probably the best American example of a villa in the classic sense. Perhaps most significant, Poplar Forest represents one of the earliest, clearest—yet often unrecognized—examples of a distinctly American architecture.

Fiske Kimball pronounced Jefferson the father of American architecture. Poplar Forest exemplifies this. Jefferson attuned himself to the classical origins of the villa, adapted the best of Palladian design, and borrowed from the English a fascination with octagons. He found inspiration in his travels through Europe, especially France. He may even have drawn upon German garden designs. And, finally, he looked to the traditions of vernacular Virginia building styles—combining them all in a new, American form.

In his biography of Thomas Jefferson, Dumas Malone remarked that Jefferson's political philosophy was never more pure than when he was in his thirties and in the midst of national turmoil. His architectural ideas, on the other hand, were never more clear than when he was in his sixties. In 1805, Jefferson knew precisely what he wanted at Poplar Forest. Research has revealed what he designed and built. That knowledge and the house itself together shed new light on his ideals and on his later life. It is especially fitting that the material restoration of Poplar Forest will begin in 1993, the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth. 🍷