

Almost every biography of Thomas Jefferson reveals a sad, regrettable ending to a long, productive life. It was a life of sacrifice to his country and his countrymen. It ended with debt and Jefferson's knowledge that his family would suffer the consequences of this debt after his death. His beloved Monticello and many of the furnishings were indeed auctioned off after he died. Yet he also died knowing that his other house, Poplar Forest, was safe from the creditors, having been given

of architectural ideas. By looking at these themes we can hope to uncover some architectural meaning of what was found and what Poplar Forest represents to Thomas Jefferson and American architecture.²

THE EDUCATION OF A REFORMER

Jefferson's education cannot be overlooked as the most important aspect of his life. Historian Merrill Peterson has said that Thomas Jefferson was a product of the Age of Enlightenment and cannot be understood apart from the "assumptions of enlightened thought."³ This period of intellectual excitement and optimism was dominated "by faith in rational thought and in the ability and intelligence of man."⁴ Free inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge, or in other words, education, is at the core of this philosophy and of Jefferson's life. This spirit of the Enlightenment was instilled in him through his formal education with tutors and in college. The second major educational influence was his lifelong, self-styled classical education in which Jefferson studied the ancient world through his library. A third, worldly education, was enhanced by five years in Europe. These three educational arenas led, in their own ways, to his overall ideas and ideals regarding architecture, especially at Poplar Forest.

Jefferson's own account of his education at the College of William and Mary, and with mentors in Williamsburg, is testimony to the sparks which fired him. In fact, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson gave us an autobiographical reference when he said "perhaps a spark may fall on some ... subjects of natural taste, kindle up their genius, and produce a reformation in this elegant and useful art" of architecture.⁵ This is exactly what happened. Educated and infused with the Enlightenment spirit through mentors William Small (professor of natural philosophy), George Wythe (professor of law) and Francis Fauquier (British governor), Jefferson singlehandedly attempted to upgrade the taste, and therefore virtue and morals, of his new republic. Peyton Randolph recognized this spirit in Jefferson and remarked that he "...panted after the fine arts, and discovered a taste in them, not easily satisfied in a colony..."⁶

POPLAR FOREST: SYNTHESIS OF A LIFETIME

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to his grandson Francis Eppes in 1823 and legally transferred through his will in 1826. It is only when we consider the relationship of Thomas Jefferson and Poplar Forest that Jefferson's end is not so sad. For it was at Poplar Forest that he indulged himself with many of his architectural dreams, creating a personal masterpiece in many ways as autobiographical as his other house. He also indulged himself at this villa retreat with peace and quiet for fourteen years. It was an indulgence well deserved.¹

Since 1986 teams of professionals have been unraveling the mysteries contained within the "secret site." Investigations into Jefferson's letters, into the landscape and into the buildings themselves have yielded insights into what Jefferson wanted to do with Poplar Forest in an ideal sense and how much of that ideal was realized. In many ways the significance of the site has been overlooked or misunderstood. Changes to the house occurring for more than one hundred years have obscured the personal fabric of what Thomas Jefferson had collected throughout his lifetime, both intellectually and architecturally. It's important to examine some of the most prevalent threads which weave themselves into Poplar Forest: his education as the foundation for his architecture; his lifelong desire to create a retreat; his love of octagons; and his lifelong collection

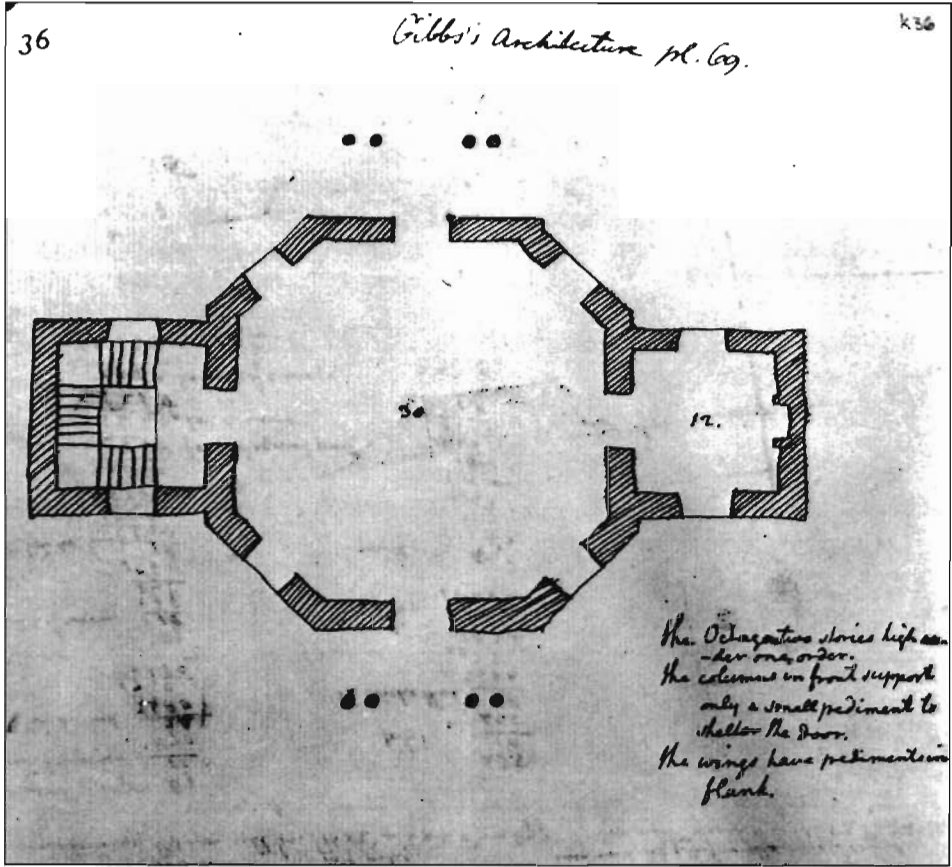


Figure 1. Jefferson traced this octagonal plan from James Gibbs's *A Book of Architecture* (1728), one of the first books of architecture he purchased while living in Williamsburg. Except for the internal room division, and the size of the two pavilions, it bears a remarkable resemblance to the final Poplar Forest design. (Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society)

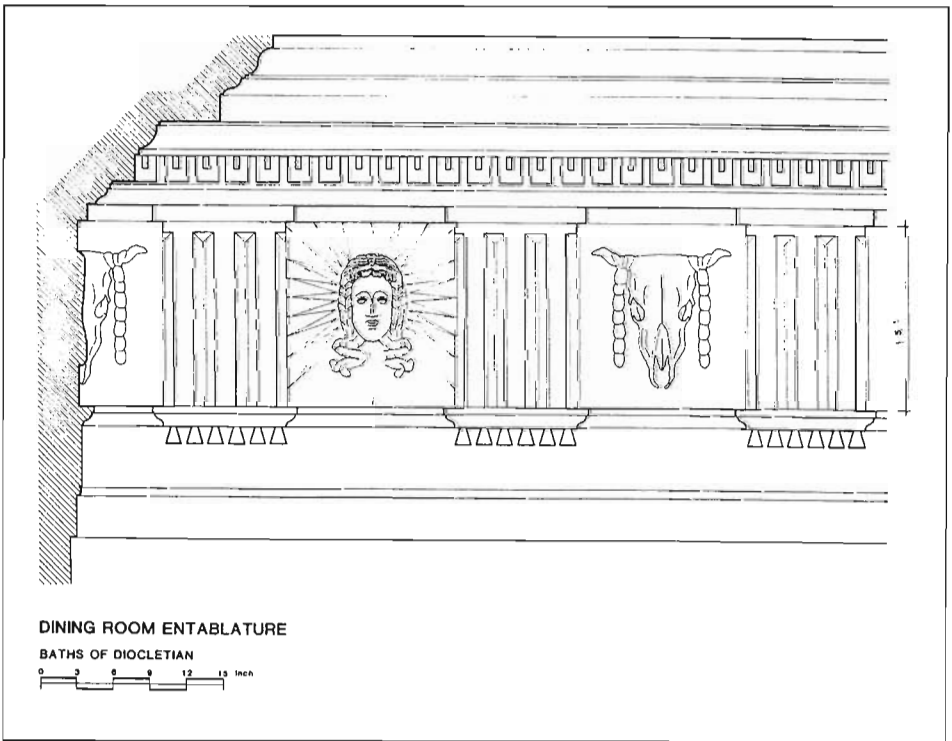


Figure 2. The Doric Order entablature from the central dining room at Poplar Forest. Jefferson chose to add the ox-skulls to the frieze of this example, a liberty which indicated the private nature of Poplar Forest. (Courtesy of Mesick Cohen Waite, Architects)

The second major educational influence was Jefferson's strong love for, and study of the ancient classical world. Henry Commager remarked that "The Founding Fathers knew the ancient world better perhaps, than they knew the European or even the British world, better, in all likelihood, than they knew the American outside their own section." Even though classical education was typical, Jefferson took the classical world to heart, never ceasing to be its student throughout his lifetime. In decorative arts, Jefferson can even be considered the father of a major movement which swept America in the early nineteenth century.⁸ "Classicism in America" it has been said, "was not a style, it was a cultural movement."⁹

In addition to a love for antiquity, Jefferson's classical education instilled in him his love for book learning.¹⁰ Architectural books, in particular books from the English Palladian movement, gave Jefferson his first architectural direction and his love of octagons. Books by William Kent [1727], Robert Morris [1755], and James Gibbs [1728] provided a fresh, interpreted look at the achievements of ancient Roman classicism. (Figure 1) Their inspiration was chiefly that of sixteenth century architect Andrea Palladio who had himself reinterpreted ancient Roman forms. The first Monticello reflects this book influence, especially the octagonal shapes from the British handbooks and in the Palladian service wings which were meant to harmonize with the architecture and the natural landscape. In fact, the appeal of Palladianism was the connection to earlier Vitruvian principles which made a case that architectural forms could be linked to nature and natural forms. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson had remarked that "the first principles" of architecture were unknown in Virginia. His attention to "first principles," was just the system that Palladio and the first century B.C. Roman architect Vitruvius had advocated. Natural forms led to a rational system of architectural orders and a formula for proportions which had been tested for centuries and had achieved an objective form of beauty. This strict attention to the rules of architecture revealed Jefferson's Enlightenment inter-

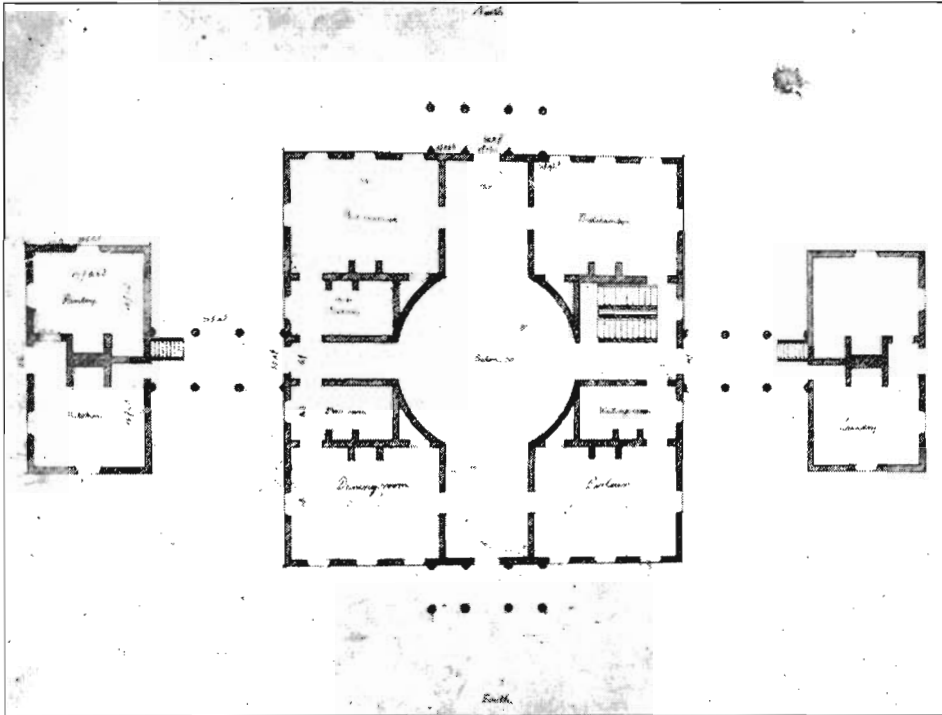


Figure 3. Jefferson's design for the Governor's house in Richmond, Virginia, ca. 1780, based on Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotonda. A drawing by Jefferson for two similarly situated service wings for Poplar Forest indicates that he contemplated a similar symmetrical arrangement as seen here. (Courtesy of the University of Virginia)

est in the natural and rational order in the world, and in his love of mathematics, which he said "provided precision and certainty instead of the fancies and fables of other self-styled sciences."¹¹

Jefferson admired the precision and system of executing the orders of architecture yet he was not above changing some of the ornaments to suit his own "fancy." This happened to one of Jefferson's favorite examples of the Doric Order from the Roman Baths of Diocletian. (Figure 2) In the middle dining room at Poplar Forest Jefferson directed the New York sculptor William Coffee to combine an ox skull with the face which normally adorned the frieze of that order, telling Coffee: "... 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."¹² Jefferson did not dare take this liberty with the same example on the public Pavilion I at the University of Virginia whereas he felt free to do so at his private residence.

Jefferson also borrowed from Palladio his love of the central, rotunda house, based on Palladio's Villa Rotonda. Jefferson knew this house

from his copy of Giacomo Leoni's first edition of *The Architecture of A. Palladio* (1715), which Jefferson acquired for his library before 1769. On his tour of English houses and gardens with John Adams in 1786, Jefferson even had a chance to see Chiswick, Lord Burlington's copy of the Villa Rotonda. Poplar Forest was Jefferson's only successful attempt out of several to create his own rotunda house. He had proposed a rotunda house for the governor's house in Richmond (Figure 3); he had proposed a rotunda house for the president's house in Washington; and he had designed at least two more for unidentified locations. Until building Poplar Forest with its central cube room, the rotunda house represented an unfulfilled ambition of Jefferson's.

Along with the theory of the Enlightenment, and studies of classical times, Jefferson's five year experience in Europe is the third most important factor in his intellectual make up. A ministerial assignment to France in the 1780s provided a major influence on Jefferson's architectural thinking: that of first hand exposure to both ancient and modern European buildings. More importantly, it exposed Jefferson to the

excitement of Paris in the 1780s, not only its political excitement, but that of innovative design theory and practice in all manner of subjects. Jefferson wrote of Paris: "Were I to proceed to tell you how much I enjoy their architectural sculpture, painting, music, I should want words."

Jefferson's European experience had given him an intellectual fund from which to draw thereafter, both figuratively and literally. Howard Adams has admirably stated that Jefferson "...sailed with remarkable skill through the confusing and often contradictory currents of artistic expression in Europe..." and that "Jefferson's freedom from tradition, combined with his frontiersman's bold imagination, allowed him to roam, with an innocence that we can admire, through the studios and galleries, picking and choosing with confident abandon, not as an academic connoisseur but as an 'enthusiasm on the arts.'"¹³

As several distinguished architectural historians have pointed out, the fashionable, intimate French townhouses of the time, called hotels, had a major impact on Jefferson. His favorite was the Hôtel de Salm. In addition to the general qualities of light and air, the specialization, use, shape and character of rooms producing the apartments within the hotels had become a French specialty. The more radical and so-called Visionary architecture of the time was not of as much interest to Jefferson as the practical things such as skylights, indoor toilets, methods of framing domes, floor to ceiling windows, and the placement of beds. Jefferson also paid attention to the mixture of formal and picturesque styles seen in many gardens throughout England, France, and the continent. While he did not get close enough to see any of Palladio's buildings in northern Italy, he did get to see country retreats such as Désert de Retz and ancient Roman buildings like the Maison Carrée.

THE VILLA RETREAT

The ancient Roman villa was an early source of Jefferson's desire for a retreat. His classical education included Roman authors who spoke of such rural retreats. Jefferson's own library included Robert Castell's book *The Villas of the Ancients*

Illustrated, published in 1728, as well as Andrea Palladio's own designs for villas in the sixteenth century. Another term for an isolated retreat is "hermitage." This was a common name for a solitary and secluded house or structure, first used many centuries ago in reference to the habitation of hermits. In 1770 Jefferson referred to the mountain he was clearing for his house site as "The Hermitage," before choosing the name Monticello.¹⁴ Perhaps this brief, earlier name sprang from his use of the site even as a boy. His daughter Martha recalled: "I have heard my father say that when quite a boy the top of this mountain was his favorite retreat, here he would bring his books to study, here would pass his holiday and leisure hours: that he never wearied of gazing on the sublime and beautiful scenery that spread around, bounded only by the horizon, or the far off mountains...."¹⁵

The first documented use of a more conventional retreat occurs during Jefferson's term as governor (1779-1781). In 1773 Martha Wayles Jefferson inherited roughly 11,000 acres from her father John Wayles. In addition to the Poplar Forest tract, this inheritance included the 266-acre Elk Hill plantation in Goochland County, which Martha acquired through a land trade.¹⁶ In his memoirs, Isaac, a Monticello slave, says of Elk Hill: "Old Master had a brick house there where he used to stay, about a mile from Elk Island on the north side of the James River. The river forks there: one half runs one side of the island, tother the other side. When Mr. Jefferson was Governor, he used to stay thar a month or sich a matter; and when he was at the mountain, he would come and stay a month or so and then go back again."¹⁷ During the Revolutionary War in 1781, Lord Cornwallis camped at Elk Hill for ten days, and in what Jefferson described as a spirit of "total extermination," he destroyed the entire Elk Hill plantation.

While Cornwallis was destroying Jefferson's Elk Hill plantation retreat, Jefferson and his family "retreated" to Poplar Forest to avoid capture by Colonel Tarleton. This was only the second time Jefferson had visited the Poplar Forest property since inheriting it in 1773. On this visit Jefferson and his

family lived in a simple overseer's house. An injury resulting from a fall from a horse necessitated a longer stay than Jefferson had planned. Fortunately he had brought along the rough notes he had been compiling for the only book he wrote: *Notes On The State Of Virginia*. Despite the circumstances and lodging, Jefferson managed to make good use of his time writing a portion of this important book.

While it might be suggested that his forced visit had planted the seed of Poplar Forest as a genuine retreat, another episode eighteen years later, on his next visit to the property, has been considered as the impetus. Henry Randall, writing in an early biography of Jefferson in 1858, described the scenario of Jefferson couped-up in an overseer's house by rain for three days computing how to pay off the national debt. He then says: "The three days among the overseer's dogs and children, were therefore not unfruitful ones. And they suggested a more conventional resort from long rain storms, and an uninterrupted retreat for the solitary study of high problems."¹⁸ There were, however, other clues to Jefferson's love of retreats between these two visits to Poplar Forest.

Jefferson's four years in Paris were exciting. So exciting in fact, that he found the need for a peaceful retreat even there. In October 1787 he wrote to a friend, "The sky is clearing and I shall away to my hermitage!"¹⁹ This was a real habitat of hermits, but of a different kind. An order of lay brothers had established a community on the mountain of Mont Calvaire and kept "a boardinghouse for paying guests who, as Mercier says, 'enjoyed good air, a magnificent view, and found comfort for body as well as for soul.'"²⁰ Jefferson's daughter Martha later recalled that Jefferson would spend a week or more at the hermitage 'whenever he had a press of business.'²¹ Jefferson obviously enjoyed the company of other regulars and became well acquainted with the brothers, who in return visited him in Paris.

His positive experience at a French retreat might have influenced Jefferson to think of something similar at home. We find him writing to an acquaintance

from Paris the day after Christmas in 1786: "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."²² One year after inheriting the Poplar Forest tract in 1773, Jefferson had purchased Natural Bridge, which he described as "the most sublime of nature's works."²³ This connection of sublime, untamed nature and a retreat had evidently first surfaced in regard to the Monticello mountain but was thereafter transferred closer to the edge of the Virginia frontier. But it would still be some time before he could put any plans into action.

In 1789 Jefferson returned from Paris for a visit to Virginia. Upon his return he found correspondence from President Washington who, despite Jefferson's protests, convinced him to be Secretary of State. After a brief time in New York city in 1790, Jefferson moved to Philadelphia, following the seat of government. There he tried to achieve a miniature retreat in the back yard of the urban Market Street tenant house recommended to him by Benjamin Franklin's grandson William Franklin. In addition to extensively altering his rental house to suit his needs, Jefferson designed a special kind of garden house: "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...."²⁴ Alas, Jefferson returned from a trip to Virginia and found that the workmen had mistakenly installed two window-doors and no skylight in the structure. Jefferson found the structure to be useless as his private retreat.

It is after this time, and about the same time as the rebuilding of Monticello, that Jefferson executed a number of plans for a retreat. Some of these are roughly dated 1789-1794 and depict idiosyncratic plans which could only have been meant for retreat purposes. One in particular is that of a circular retreat which might have been suggested by the famous country estate outside of Paris, Désert de Retz, designed to resemble a ruined column.

Jefferson considered schemes other than the fully developed octagon for

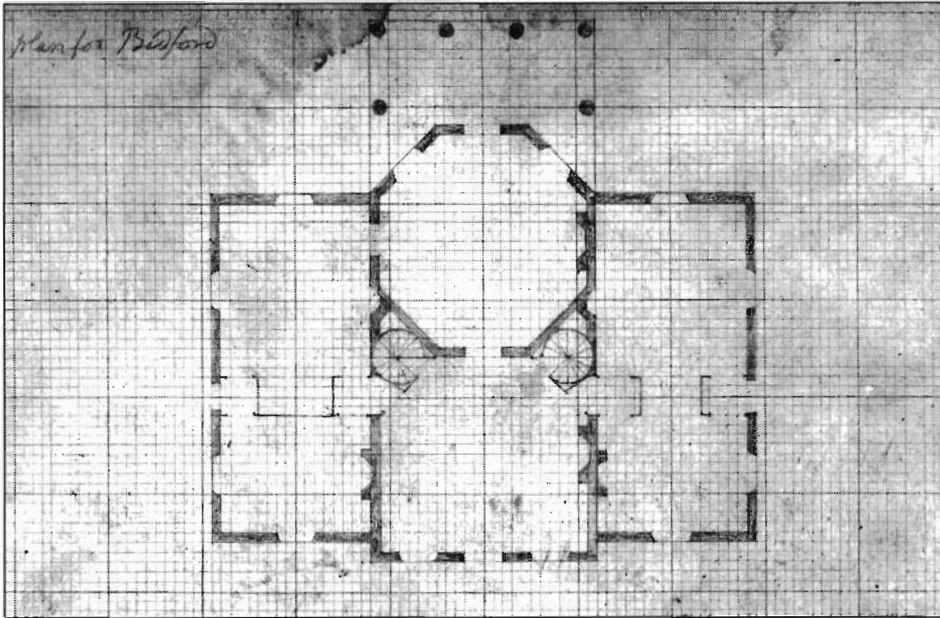


Figure 4. Jefferson's plan labeled "Plan for Bedford," ca. 1804. This is one of the earlier schemes proposed for Poplar Forest. (Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society)

Poplar Forest, all roughly dated to about 1804. (Figure 4) The sequence and intended location of some retreat designs are unidentified. However, an undated plat which shows two different house plans proposed for the Poplar Forest property does confirm a sequence of non-octagonal plans. One of these on the plat is similar to figure 4 and the other one resembles the full octagon as finally executed.²⁵ This might suggest that the non-octagonal plan had been proposed first and was then followed by a successor plan, the one which was eventually built.

A LIFETIME OF OCTAGONS

The full-blown octagon form used at Poplar Forest was by no means the beginning of an octagonal theme. It was, in fact, the culminating octagon in a lifetime of octagons, although most occurred only on paper. As early as his Williamsburg days in the 1770s, Jefferson began taking the octagon form from British architectural handbooks and merging it with the other forms. For instance, round temples found in a book were transformed into octagonal ones. Square room shapes in most other houses were expanded out, as if by centrifugal force, into octagonal projections. The semi-octagonal bay and the embedded octagonal room occur over and over in the many houses Jefferson designed. At Monticello he employed semi-octagonal

bays, an octagonal room and proposed octagonal pavilions. Barboursville had an octagonal parlor. Even a proposed addition to his Elkhill house contained an elongated octagonal form not unlike the room shapes at Poplar Forest. The same is true of Farmington. As early as 1789 a full octagon house, referred to as "plan for an urban dwelling," appears in his drawings.²⁶ It has also been suggested that a German garden book that Jefferson acquired in 1805, with an octagonal garden house design, might have been the inspiration for the final Poplar Forest plan.²⁷ So many octagons in so many combinations run through Jefferson's work that it is nearly impossible to decipher the exact lineage of the final Poplar Forest scheme. Regardless, the octagon shape was a favorite of his and it culminated as a final, personal indulgence.

A NEW AND PERSONAL ARCHITECTURE

In a very real sense, Thomas Jefferson's architectural works could be called a meeting ground of ancients and moderns. Jefferson's love of antiquity and of the classical world was strong. When he chose an architectural example for the Virginia State Capitol, knowing that it would be a prototype for the country, he chose the *Maison Carée*, a Roman temple in Nimes, France. He called this ancient building the "most

perfect example of cubic architecture." When he designed the focal point for the University of Virginia complex, he chose as a model the Roman Pantheon, calling it the "most perfect example of spherical architecture."²⁸ Yet in these models Jefferson only borrowed the forms from the ancients. What he did with those forms was completely modern and prototypical both for legislative as well as university institutions. The same marriage of ancient forms and modern progress is true for domestic architecture. Jefferson was always interested in the latest advances and technologies which could be applied to everyday practical things, whether they be innovations in farming, science, record keeping or housekeeping.

After a lifetime of collecting favorite forms and features, and turning some of them into reality when he rebuilt Monticello in the 1790s, Jefferson began again at the Poplar Forest site in 1806 with a clean slate. (Figures 5,6) It was a chance to accomplish one last personal achievement for his own enjoyment. Poplar Forest provided him the chance of seeing his "melting pot" of ideas reach its most ideal, mature and personal fruition. From the English and European architectural books had come his love of octagons and of architectural orders. From the ancient Romans and the Renaissance architect Palladio had come his specific thoughts of villa retreats and rotunda houses. The unique landscape design at Poplar Forest was a marriage of many things, particularly a combination of Palladian forms mixed with British and French formal and picturesque garden designs. The fashionable French apartments and townhouses had a great influence regarding modern, convenient living. At Poplar Forest the French influence was strong, including: the low, horizontal look of the house set into the hillside, the large skylight over the central room, the alcove beds, the floor-to-ceiling windows of the parlor, and the possible evidence of an indoor toilet under a stairs. From his native land, Jefferson had fashioned the bricks and wood which made this unique creation unmistakably Virginian. What Jefferson had also created was uniquely American.

Poplar Forest was the personal epiphany of Thomas Jefferson's archi-



Figure 5. Cross section through Poplar Forest on a north-south axis as seen in this research drawing. Note the higher central dining room with its entablature, skylight and upper Chinese railing; the parlor on the right with its entablature and triple sash windows; and the lower central wine cellar. (Courtesy of Mesick Cohen Waite, Architects)

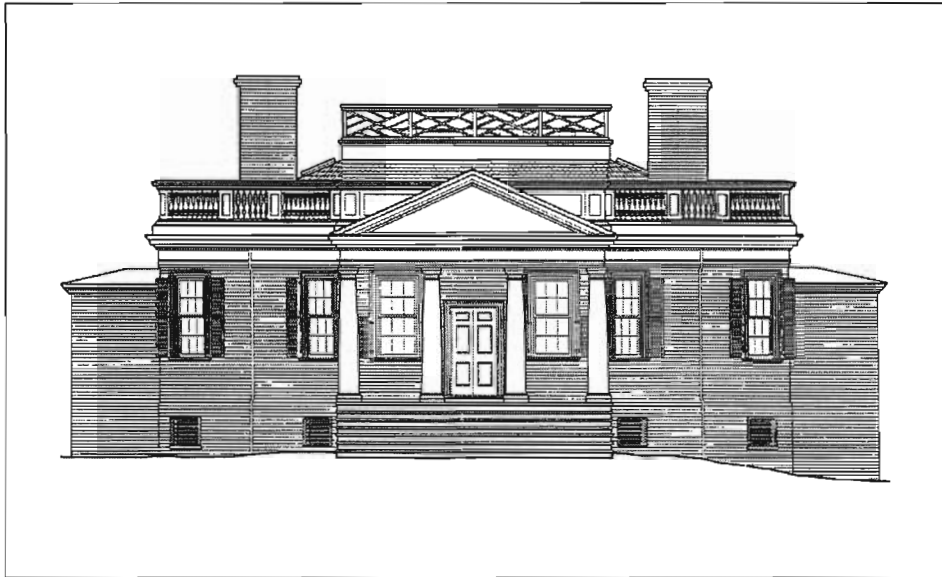


Figure 6. Restored front elevation drawing of Poplar Forest based on the recent project of research, investigation and analysis. (Courtesy of Mesick Cohen Waite, Architects)

tectural life. The spirit of the Enlightenment was reflected in his use of the house as a place where he continued to educate himself and his family. The influence of the ancient classical world was present not only in the villa itself, but also in the classical architecture reflected in the building's design and details. The landscape and the architecture also reflect, as previously outlined, what he had "collected" all through his life. While Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia was his last great, mature public work, Poplar Forest was its private equivalent. While Monticello's design and furnishing

ings have been called an autobiographical work, Poplar Forest is an autobiography in which we can read between the lines. Poplar Forest contained features and ideas Jefferson intended only for his own enjoyment without the glare of public scrutiny. It represented a welcome escape from some of the financial difficulties of Jefferson's later years. The villa retreat provided quality time for educating and getting to know some of his grandchildren. It is the most personal of his creations and one which has the promise of meaningful insight into Jefferson's life and work for some time to come.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For the first extensive history of Poplar Forest see S. Allen Chambers, *Poplar Forest and Thomas Jefferson*, (The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1993).
- 2 For information on the early phases of investigation, see *Notes on the State of Poplar Forest: Initial Investigations* (The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1992); Travis C. McDonald, Jr., "Poplar Forest: A Masterpiece Rediscovered," *Virginia Cavalcade*, 42 (Winter 1993), 112-121; and Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, "Historic Structure Report," 1992.
- 3 Merrill Peterson in Susan Stein, *Worlds of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York: Abrams, 1993), p. 12.
- 4 Merrill Peterson in Stein, *Worlds of Thomas Jefferson*, p. 12.
- 5 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes On The State of Virginia*, (Boston: 1802), p. 211.
- 6 Peyton Randolph, in Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 297.
- 7 Henry S. Commanger in William H. Adams, *Eye of Thomas Jefferson*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), p. xxxix.
- 8 Wendy Cooper, *The Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993).
- 9 Richard Bushman, lecture given at "Classical Taste in Maryland and America, 1800-1840," Symposium Baltimore Museum of Art, September 17, 1993.
- 10 For architectural books in particular, see William B. O'Neal, *Jefferson's Fine Arts Library*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976).
- 11 Jefferson to John Wood, January 11, 1810 (Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress).
- 12 Thomas Jefferson to William Coffee, July 10, 1822, Coolidge Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- 13 William H. Adams, *The Eye of Thomas Jefferson*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), p. xxxix.
- 14 Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944), p. 21.
- 15 Martha Jefferson Randolph in Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, Gaillard Hunt, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1906), p. 387. This was called to my attention by Ann Lucas.
- 16 Elk Hill had not gone directly to Martha Jefferson but was acquired in 1774 in a land trade from Anne and Henry Skipwith.

Jefferson added to the acreage, selling the whole tract of 669 acres in 1793. Elk Hill had been the residence of Martha Jefferson and her first husband Bathurst Skelton. Elk Island was included in the lands Jefferson and Martha owned.

- 17 Isaac, "Memoirs of a Monticello Slave" in James A. Bear, Jr., *Jefferson at Monticello* (Charlottesville: 1967), p. 17.
- 18 Henry S. Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 3 vols. (1857), 3:341. Randall presumably received this information from his interviews with Jefferson's grand-daughter Ellen Randolph Coolidge.
- 19 Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 3:341.

- 20 Thomas Jefferson to Mme de Corny, 18 October 1787, Julian Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols. (Princeton, 1950), 12:246-247. For more on Jefferson in Paris, see Howard C. Rice, *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*, (Princeton, 1976).
- 21 Rice, *Thomas Jefferson's Paris*, p. 105.
- 22 Thomas Jefferson to Mr. Carmichael, Paris, December 26, 1786, Jefferson Papers (Princeton, 1950), 10:633.
- 23 Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (Boston, 1802), p. 32.
- 24 Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, December 16, 1792, Coolidge Collection,

Massachusetts Historical Society. This was called to my attention by Mark R. Wenger.

- 25 Fiske Kimball, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* (New York: DaCapo, 1968), p. 220.
- 26 Kimball, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect*.
- 27 Wilhelm Gottlieb Becker, *Neue Garten-und Landschafts-Gebaude* (1798-99) this was suggested by Allan Brown, "Poplar Forest: The Mathematics of an Ideal Villa," *Journal of Garden History* 10 (1990): 117-139.
- 28 Thomas Jefferson, "Account of the Capitol in Virginia," in Fiske Kimball, *The Capitol of Virginia*, ed. John Kukla (Richmond: Virginia State Archives, 1989), p. 13.