

# The Private Villa Retreat of Thomas Jefferson

TRAVIS McDONALD

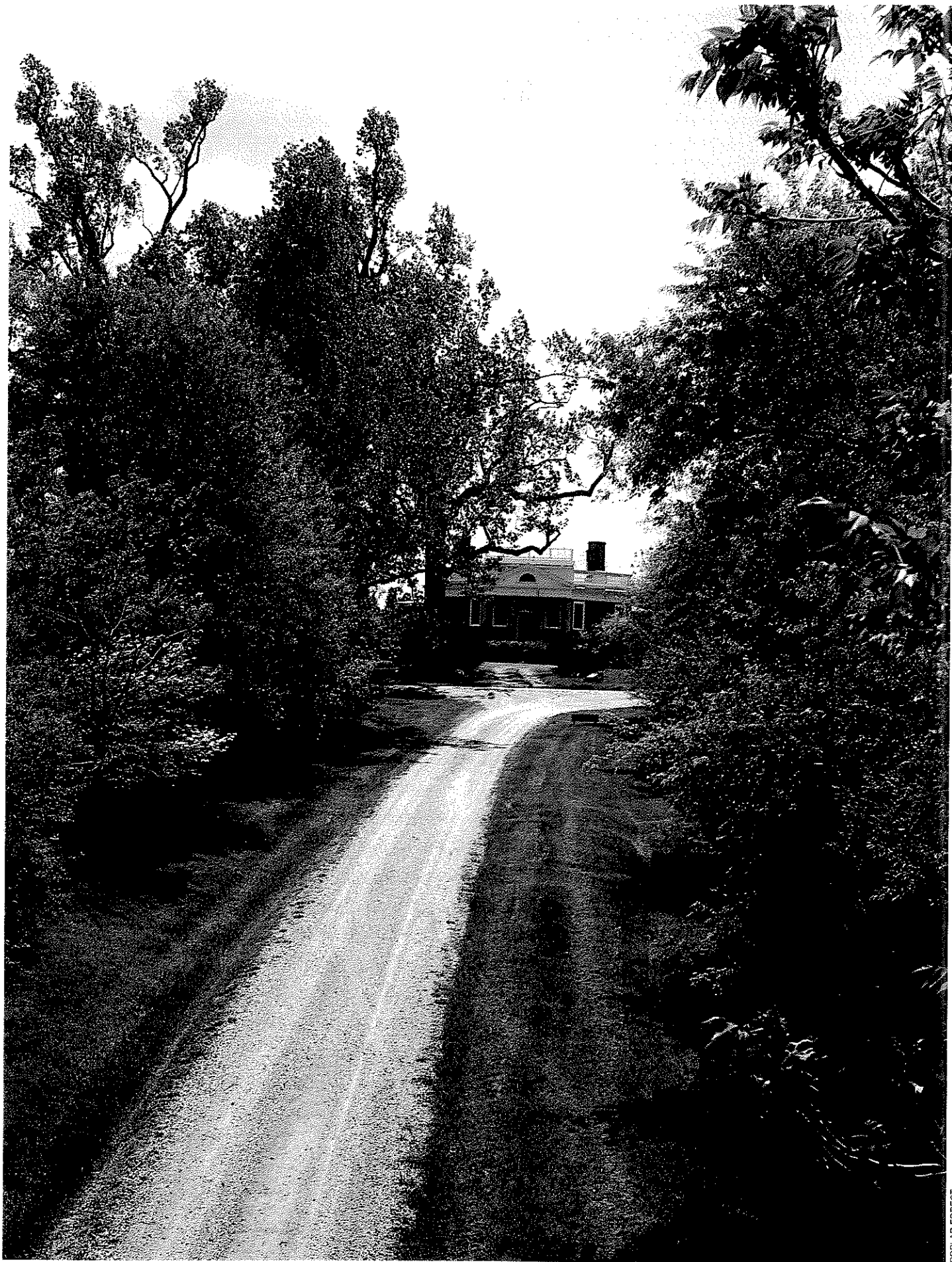
**P**residents are likely to pause from the labor of office to dream of where they might spend their retirement years. President Thomas Jefferson did more than pause and dream. In June 1806, he wrote from Washington to his daughter Martha at Monticello that he would have to delay his summer break with 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 multitalented 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>



## Man and House

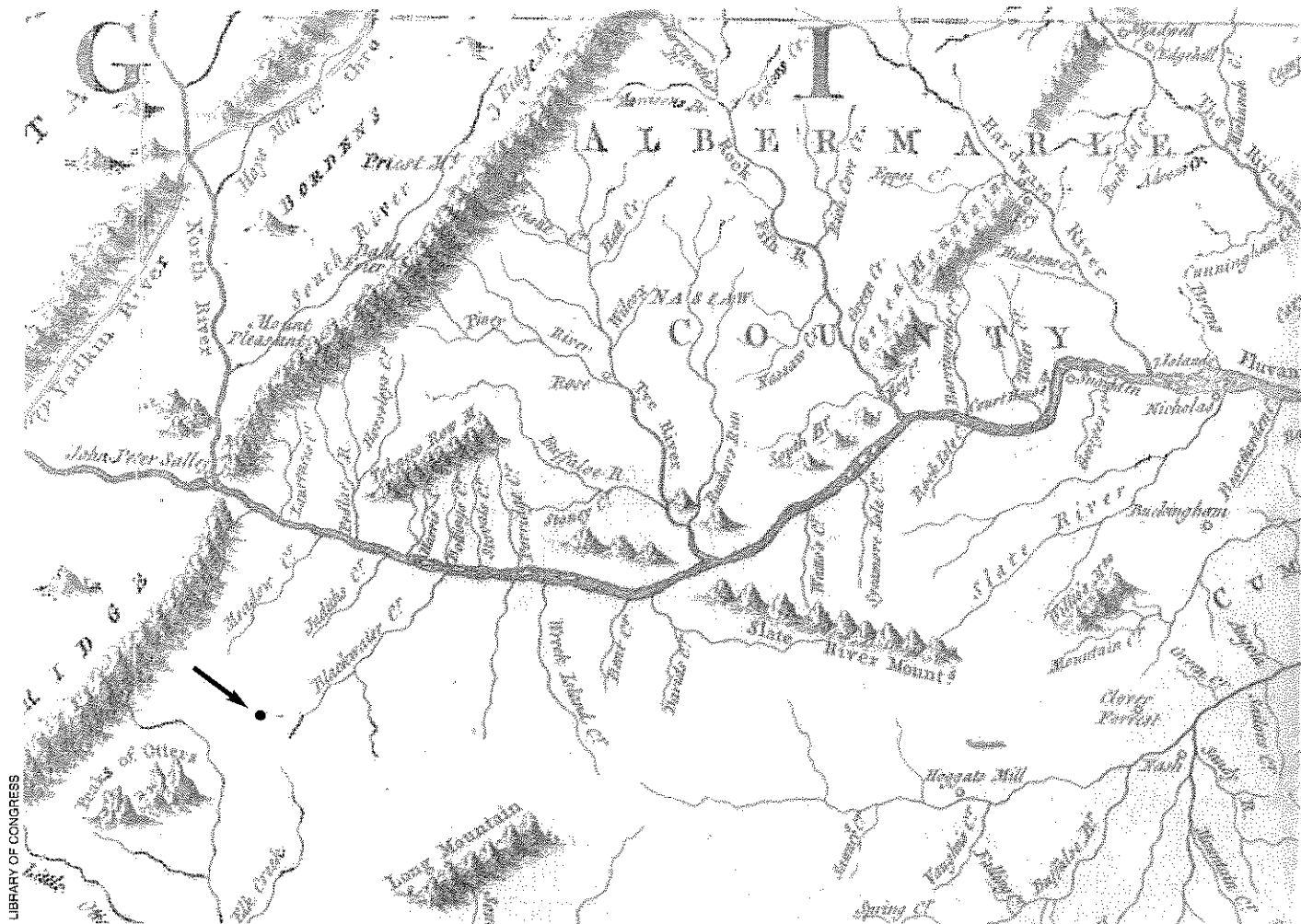
Poplar Forest provides a unique perspective from which to “see” Thomas Jefferson. The retired president happily returned to a private life that included a new, private retreat as well as his home, Monticello. Jefferson used makeshift retreats when he was governor in Richmond, and when he was ambassador in Paris, and when he was secretary of state in Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> While still in Paris, Jefferson proposed building a retreat at Natural Bridge and spending part of the year there. Privacy and private life were instilled in his nature, and his copy of *Villas of the Ancients* (1728) provided the conceptual model for how to achieve it. In March 1809 he wrote to Madame de Corgay, “I at length detach myself from public life, which I never loved, to retire to the bosom of my family, my friends, my farm and books, which I have always loved.”<sup>5</sup>

In that year the retired president began a custom of using Poplar Forest between two and four times a year

*Opposite: This portrait of Thomas Jefferson was made in 1821, during his retirement, by Thomas Sully.*

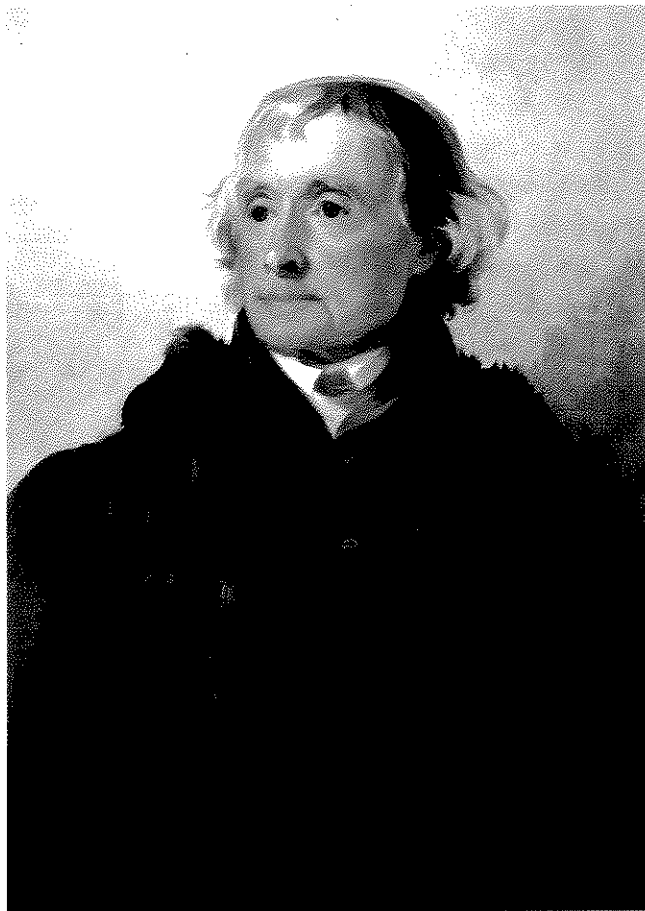
*Below: Detail from the Frye-Jefferson Map, drawn by Jefferson’s father. The arrow points to the location of Poplar Forest.*

*Opposite below: Natural Bridge, Virginia, oil on canvas by Frederic Edwin Church, 1852 (detail).*

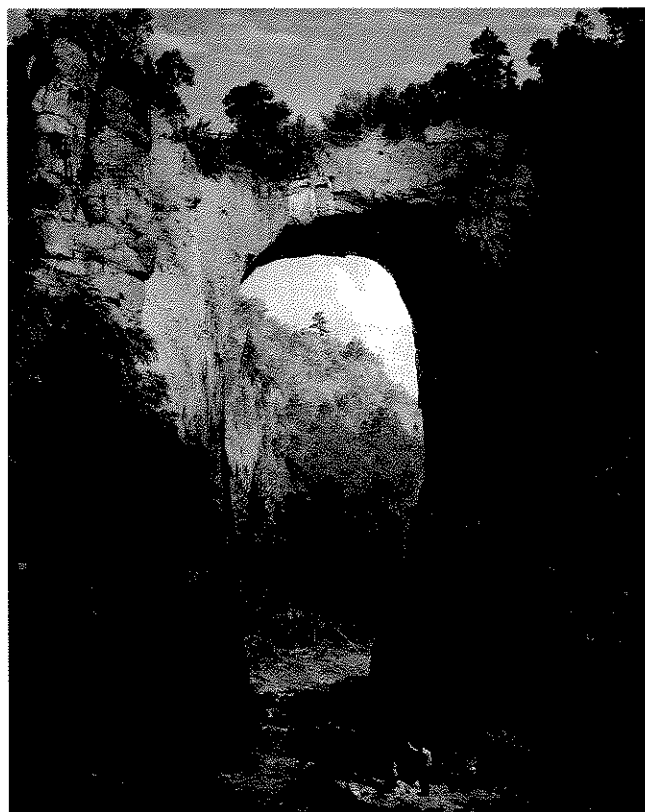


and from two weeks to two months at a time, for 14 years. The 70 miles from Monticello on horseback or in a carriage took three days. Most often Jefferson traveled with only one servant. At his destination he was “comfortably fixed and attended, have a few good neighbors, and pass my time there in a tranquility and retirement much adapted to my age and indolence.”<sup>6</sup> Later he would bring along two granddaughters, Ellen and Cornelia Randolph. One later recalled, “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.”<sup>7</sup> Poplar Forest was more than simply a hideaway; it was another chance for the amateur architect and experienced builder to construct yet another version of Roman neoclassical architecture that was so personal it would later be distinguished as “Jeffersonian” classicism. Poplar Forest was perhaps Jefferson’s most idealistic work of architecture, his only other home, and one of the few houses built to his designs that survives.

Frustrated with living in the British Georgian President’s House, Jefferson poured his accumulated architectural ideas and details into his private domestic work. His initial study of architecture came from books purchased while he was a college student in Williamsburg. British Palladian designs by James Gibbs, Robert Morris, and William Kent provided many examples of octagonal buildings that inspired Jefferson to adopt the shape he would frequently use in his drawings for the rest of his life, mostly in unbuilt designs. Poplar Forest became the ultimate octagon and the first house with that shape in America. Andrea Palladio’s *Four Books of Architecture* (1716), so often cited as Jefferson’s “bible,” was certainly evident in the Poplar Forest design, providing the classical proportions for all moldings, orders, and elements. Mixed into the architectural melting pot were features Jefferson saw and liked during his European years, mostly French characteristics of light-filled airy spaces using skylights, sash doors [glass], floor-to-ceiling windows, and alcove beds.<sup>8</sup> Englishman George Flower, one of the rare visitors to Poplar Forest, described the house as “built after the fashion of a French chateau, Octagon rooms, floors of polished oak, lofty ceilings, large mirrors betokened his French taste.”<sup>9</sup>

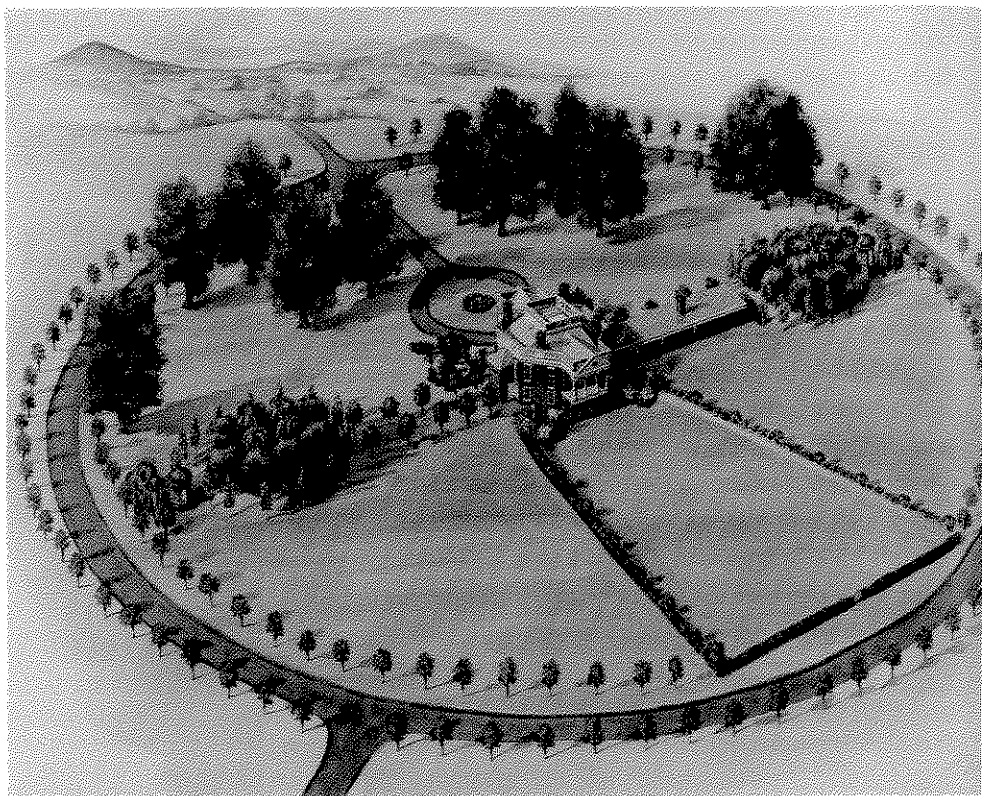


AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY



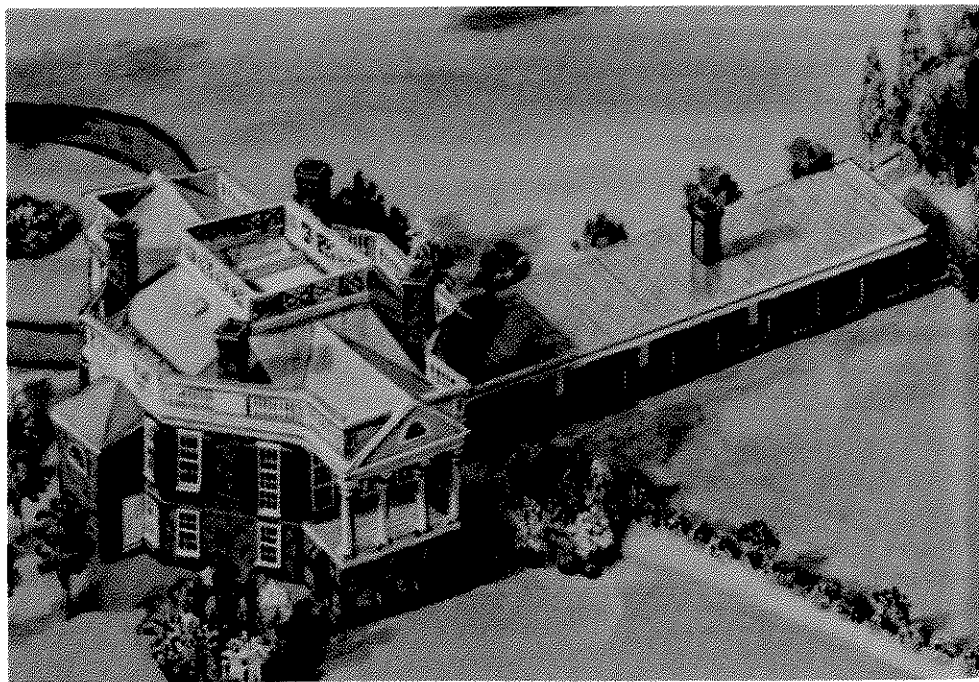
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*The core of Jefferson's Poplar Forest estate consisted of a ring road enclosed by trees, which in turn enclosed the five-acre composition on a hilltop using both natural and man-made parts. On the north, the house was placed against a natural, mature grove of tulip poplar trees (the Poplar Forest). On the south, Jefferson had the earth dug-out for a terrace-grade bowling green bordered by flowers, shrubs, and trees. In between the natural and man-made landscapes, the symmetrical tree-planted mounds acted as pavilions or wings, connected first to the house by a double row of trees and then on the east by the service wing.*



POPLAR FOREST, PAINTING BY DIANE JOHNSON

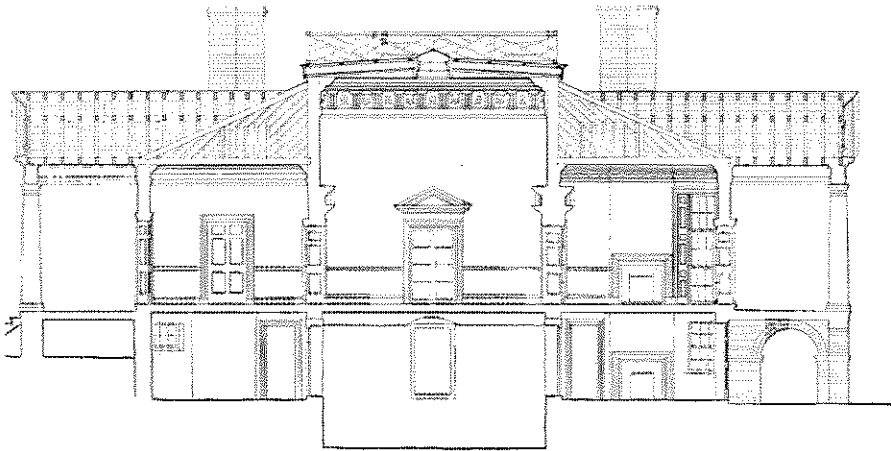
*Jefferson's service wing of four rooms was constructed on the east side of the house at Poplar Forest in 1814–16. It consisted of an unidentified room (storage?), a kitchen, laundry, and smokehouse. Jefferson saw similar service wings in Andrea Palladio's books on architecture from the 16th century but innovated the concept with a flat roof for strolling. Unlike his earlier examples, at Monticello and the President's House, Jefferson never balanced Poplar Forest with a symmetrical wing.*



POPLAR FOREST, PAINTING BY DIANE JOHNSON

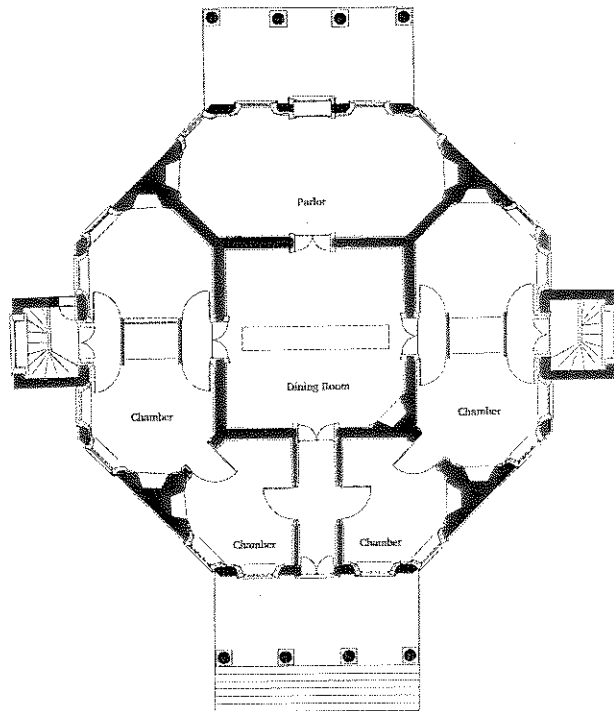



Top left: North elevation. Jefferson set the house into the crown of a hilltop so that the front appeared lower. This is similar to the same effort to make Monticello look lower on the front, which most likely refers to the fashion of Parisian houses of the 1780s.



Center: Building section looking east. In section Poplar Forest reveals an important architectural feature that represents both a nod to Jefferson's architectural mentor Andrea Palladio and a delayed desire of his own. Twice Jefferson had unsuccessfully proposed a copy of Palladio's Villa Rotunda for public office residences he would inhabit: for the governor's house in Richmond and for the President's House in Washington. At Poplar Forest the tall central room fulfilled his Palladian rotunda dream.

Right: Floor plan. Poplar Forest became the ultimate octagon in Jefferson's long-time use of that form. The geometry of internal octagon rooms around a central cube room was a mathematical pleasure for a president who loved mathematics. Four chimneys were placed to accommodate 15 fireplaces on the nearly identical upper and lower floor levels. Poplar Forest is still considered to be the first octagon house in America.



For the flat roof over the Hall at Poplar Forest.  
Let the skip light run from East to West, 16 panes long,  
and only the length of 2 panes wide.  
groove the upper end of the pane  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. into the ridge bar  
and let the lower end lap 1 in. on the lower bar  
the ridge-bar of the sash (if in one piece) must be 2 in. sq.  
but if in 2 pieces they must be 1 in. by 3 in.   
the lower bar or rail of the sash 1 in. wide.  
the end stile of the sash 1 in. wide.

For the frame.

Lay 2 girders, 10 by 4 in. across the walls from East to West  
let them be  $32\frac{1}{2}$  in. apart & project 3 in. beyond the walls.  
then on 2 over trimmers into these girders  $8-2$  from the center  
the clear opening of the skylight will then be  $16-4$  by  $32\frac{1}{2}$   
the inside faces of these girders & trimmers must be planed.  
on the North & South sides of these girders lap on gutter joists dovetail  
these gutter joists must project over the wall 2 in.  
they are 10 by 8 in. admitting gutters 4 in. wide, & 2 in. margin.  
they will be  $29\frac{1}{2}$  in. from center to center.  
then on these 2 girders lay 2 others 4 by 6 in.  
on these upper girders lap the ridge-joists, dove-tail,  
letting them project 3 in. over the wall.  
slope both ridge & gutter joists from end to end 6 in.  
from each corner of the skylight to the corresponding cor-  
ner of the wall, lay on a hip-ridge-rafter, and from  
these hips & the trimmers lay rafters towards East & West.  
on the North & South ends the rooflets are to be.  
the moulding which masks the ends of the rooflets is to be  
nailed to the ends of the ridge joists, which projecting 1 in.  
more than the gutter joists, leaves space for the water to pass off.

*Opposite: The remoteness of Poplar Forest necessitated that Jefferson superintend the construction by detailed letters, constituting some of the most intimate written descriptions of construction in early American architecture.*

*Right: Jefferson flooded his central cube room through one of the largest skylights in America, measuring 16 feet long. Its summer light was so strong that louvered blinds were used, functioning to control the heat in the same way as the window blinds. This model of the Doric entablature shows the frieze ornaments Jefferson mixed in an unorthodox way.*



POPLAR FOREST

### Construction and Design

Jefferson sent bricklayer Hugh Chisolm to the remote site in 1805 to start the brick making, following careful instructions from the President's House.<sup>10</sup> The detailed letters that sped between Washington and Bedford County survive and constitute one of the most complete sets of documents on the construction of a particular house in early America. Chisolm knew Jefferson's construction preferences, having worked at Monticello since about 1800. Carpenter John Perry, another regular Monticello worker, was hired to frame the house. His brother Reuben, a Lynchburg carpenter, also joined in.<sup>11</sup> These men and their crews had Poplar Forest closed in by 1809, but when Jefferson first went there the interior presented

bare brick with exposed ceiling framing and no interior doors. With the exception of Jefferson's own bed alcove, the house would not be plastered for another five years.

Living in unfinished houses did not bother Jefferson. Monticello had been a 44-year project, and he even added to the unfinished state of the President's House by starting his own architectural improvements. For the 14 years he used it, Jefferson slowly finished Poplar Forest inside and out. The long construction process leaned heavily on workers and workshops at Monticello, where complete units such as windows and doors were made and sent to the site via wagon, cart, or boat. Fragile items came by boat from Monticello or to the port of Richmond, both necessitating an arduous trip upriver on the James via



shallow batteau boats poled by hand against the current or the rocks. Classical moldings, louvered blinds, sash doors, and finished trim were executed on the site by craftsman John Hemings, one of Jefferson's slaves, who had apprenticed with Irish-born carpenter James Dinsmore, principal craftsman of much of the finished trim at Monticello. At times Jefferson sent Hemings, now a master of his work, along with one or two helpers, to Poplar Forest, fully trusting in his abilities. Master and slave corresponded through detailed letters in the language of the three classical orders of Roman architecture used in the building: Tuscan for the exterior and secondary passage and chamber rooms; Doric for the central dining room; and Ionic for the parlor.

The octagonal exterior, about 50 feet in diameter, protruded on its north and south with porticoes and to the east and west with stair pavilions. Jefferson sited the house due north so that its shape acted not only as a compass but even as a theoretical seasonal sundial. In locating the house Jefferson cut out the crown of a hilltop so that the north front might appear lower and resemble the modern Parisian one-story houses he admired, of the *ancien regime*. The taller back facade made an ancient reference with its Roman arcade supporting columns and pediment, an ensemble seen in the British Palladian books. This portico was more a balcony or loggia, inaccessible from the ground and in its situation not unlike the elevated platform outside the oval parlor of the President's House, from which Jefferson took in the surrounding landscape he was characteristically molding to accompany the architecture.

The plan, similar on the upper and lower floors, followed Palladian symmetry with octagonal and semi-octagonal rooms wrapping around a square at the center. One entered the house from the north portico into a narrow passage. Doors on either side led to two small semi-octagonal chambers. One's sight would have been drawn ahead through fully glazed doors, called "sash doors" by Jefferson, and even beyond through two more sets of sash doors to the outside.<sup>12</sup> One stepped from the dark, narrow passage into a grand luminous central space, the dining room. The centrality and initial sequence of entering a dining room indicated this was no usual house but an idiosyncratic, occasional house without the social patterns expected in a typical gentry house. The central room was a perfect 20 foot cube.

One of the largest skylights in America, 16 feet long, flooded the space with light unless dampered from the summer heat by louvered blinds on the flat roof deck above. This was the literal center of Jefferson's private world. More than that, this 20 foot high central space, surrounded by rooms with 12 foot ceilings, finally gave its owner his own rotunda house modeled on Palladio's Villa Rotunda.<sup>13</sup>

Sash doors on the east and west sides of the dining room lit vestibules that gave access to mirror-image chambers. French-style bed alcoves positioned in the center of the elongated octagonal rooms created two smaller semi-octagonal rooms. Presumably Jefferson used one side of the room as his "cabinet" or inner sanctum, likely filled with books, papers, and plants. The outer vestibule of each alcove opened to a stair pavilion lit with an oversize lunette window and containing the tight, winding stairs to the lower floor or outdoors. It was under the west stairs off of his own chamber that Jefferson retrofitted an indoor toilet, which, while convenient, was not as modern as the water closets he had installed at the President's House.

Jefferson arranged the four chimneys of the house between the rooms, where they served 15 fireplaces on both levels. The geometry of the outer octagon allowed a fireplace at the semi-octagonal end of each room. The central room featured a corner fireplace with only a triangular masonry shelf above, made possible by a diagonal flue. These were all modern fireplaces following Benjamin Thompson's (later Count Rumford) innovation of splayed sides, shallow back, narrow throat, and smoke shelf. Two stoves at Poplar Forest undoubtedly usurped two of these less efficient, although modern, fireplaces. Jefferson had installed large stoves in the entrance hall niches of the President's House.

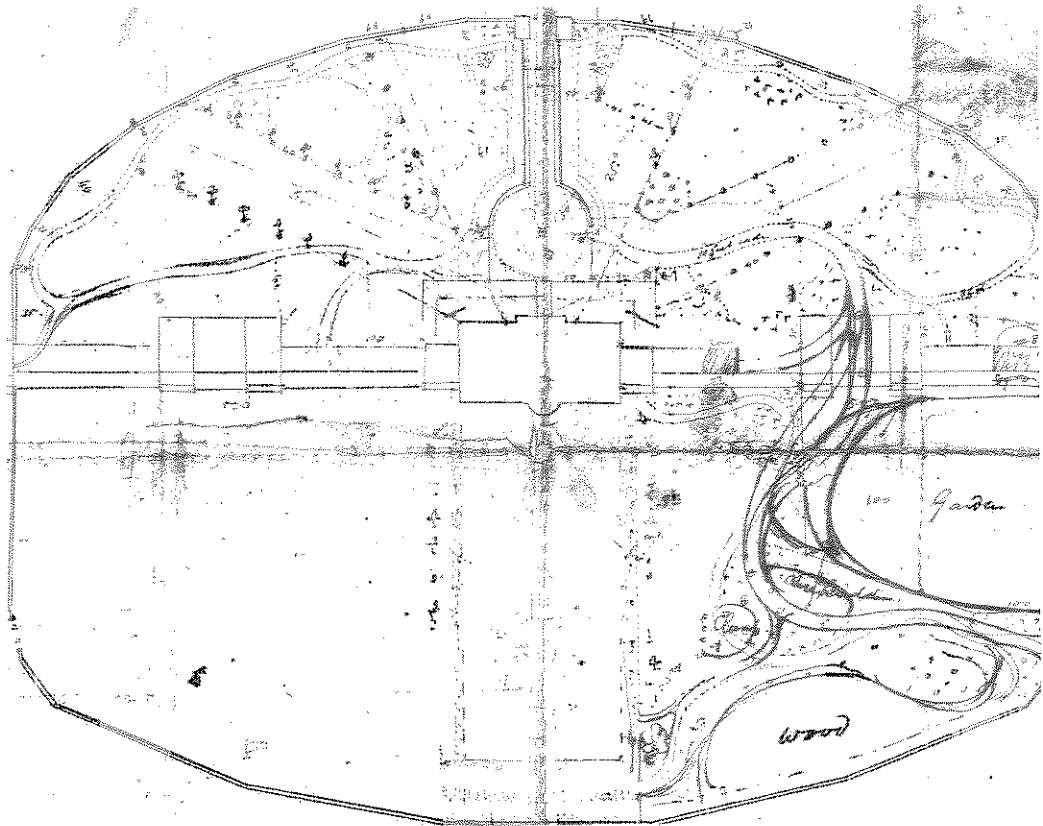
A sash door on the south of the central room led into the brightest room, the sun-filled south-facing parlor that doubled as the library. While arranging the rooms at Poplar Forest, Jefferson sat in his sunny southeastern office/library in the President's House. This arrangement was his preference, having filled the southern walls of rental houses in New York and Philadelphia with windows that brightly served book rooms.<sup>14</sup> At Poplar Forest he made the south wall as transparent as reasonably possible, with a central sash door flanked by four triple-sash windows extending from floor to ceiling.<sup>15</sup> Like the central south parlor (Blue Room)



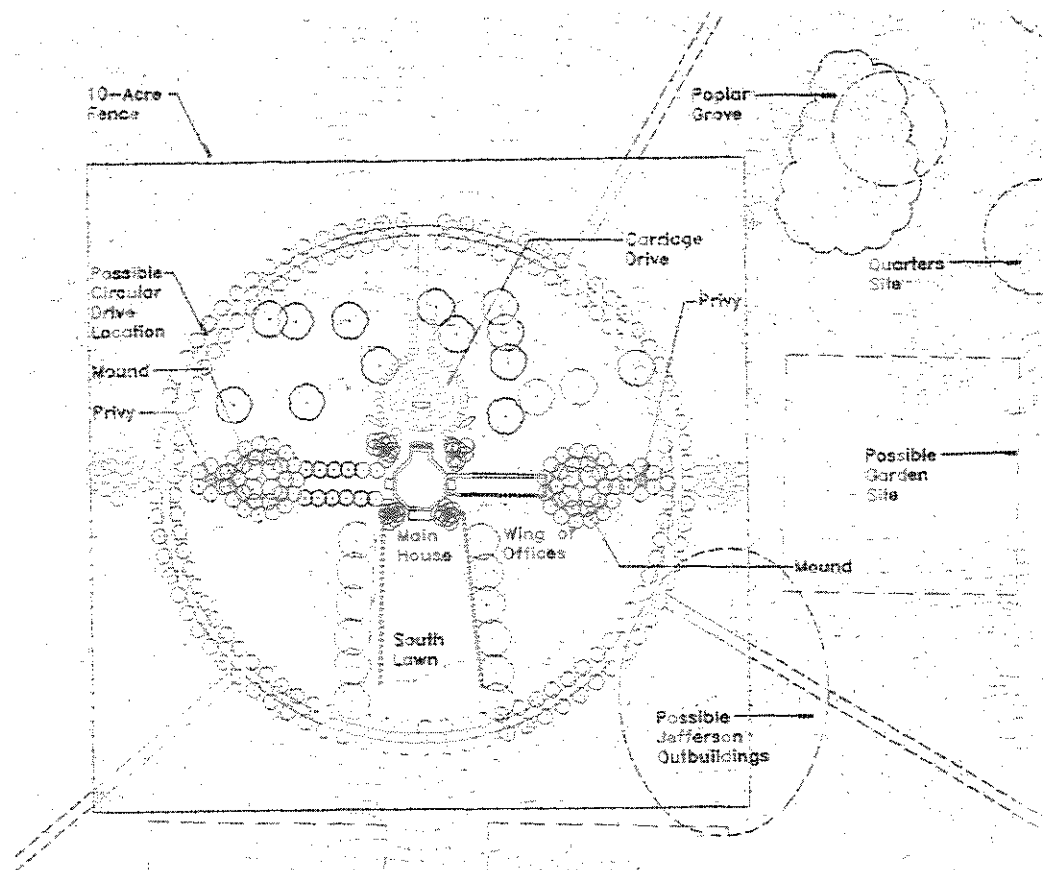
*Left: Jefferson's bed-chamber included a place for his alcove bed.*

*Above: The sunny south-facing room at Poplar Forest served as parlor and library. Jefferson's love of light can be seen in his architectural solution to create large window openings by stacking three window sashes, each hung with weights. The transparency of the wall helped bridge the interior with the exterior.*

*Drawing of the President's House grounds, c. 1804, showing Jefferson's proposed landscape designs. With the exception of a later sequence of proposals shown in heavier lines in the lower right quadrant, this plan displays remarkable similarities with the Poplar Forest site plan, where many of these ideas reached fruition.*



*This site plan for Poplar Forest reveals the rational workings of Jefferson's mind as well as his idealistic vision of melding the natural world with the man-made. Jefferson sited the house on a hilltop against the natural "Poplar Forest," while on the south and around the house he planted trees, bushes, and flowers. The two mounds, planted with three rows of trees and connected to the house by trees (and later a wing on one side), acted as wings to the house and a separation of the two different landscapes.*



windows at the President's House, the two lower sashes of each window could be raised, opening the wall as doorways to the south portico, which extended into the landscape like an outdoor room. The lower floor replicated the plan above with four octagonal rooms surrounding a 20-foot square deep cellar, where ample stores of wine, cider, and beer awaited. Three of the lower octagonal rooms had fireplaces on their ends, while the unheated north room, partially buried into the earth, probably functioned as a storage area. Use of the lower level is undocumented other than as lodging for the workers and at one time for an overseer's family.

### Poplar Forest and the President's House

Jefferson's designs for remodeling the President's House landscape took similar expression at Poplar Forest.<sup>16</sup> At both places an axial road on the more public north entrance side turned into a circular carriage turn-around, each 50 feet in diameter. Jefferson used this 50 foot module at Poplar Forest for designing the other features in the ornamental core. Rectangular double-square bowling green lawns, bordered by flowerbeds or bushes and rows of trees, extended southward from both houses, the one at Poplar Forest being sunken and flanked by Kentucky coffee trees. Jefferson fenced in a 5-acre yard around the President's House adjacent to a 60-acre President's Park to the south. At Poplar Forest he defined a nearly 5-acre ornamental yard using a circular road lined with paper mulberry trees, beyond which was a 61-acre curtilage, or outer yard. At the President's House, Jefferson designed thick groves of trees on the north. At Poplar Forest, he placed the house on a small hill right up against a dense natural grove of tulip poplars called "the Forest," or "the Poplar Forest"; the name was borrowed for the house and plantation. Rather than the divided public-private landscaped sides as at the President's House, at his retreat Jefferson cleverly separated the natural world in the front from the man-made garden in the back with a symmetrical ensemble of architecture and landscape resembling a five-part Palladian plan. A double row of paper mulberry trees connected the house on its east and west sides to earthen mounds formed by dirt excavated for house and lawn. The trees acted as "wings," and the mounds stood in for pavilions, as in the President's House wings. The mounds became more vertical and impressive when planted with four weeping willows on top, a central row

of golden willows, and a row of aspens circling the base. Extending the ensemble even further, Jefferson placed his artfully designed domed and octagonal Palladian privies to the outer side of each mound. Intriguing is Jefferson's tree-clump design for the President's House south yard, which appears as a tree-planted mound in an 1827 watercolor drawing. A mound still on the South Lawn of the White House is referred to as the "Jefferson mound," even though it dates from 1855.

Jefferson could not live even in someone else's house without remodeling it. He had previously left his architectural mark on three rented houses. In Washington his ideas for improvement seem to have found beautiful form in Benjamin Latrobe's masterful drawings.<sup>17</sup> It stands to reason that the drawings Latrobe presented to James Madison in 1817, having a notation that they were copied from ones done in 1807, were Jefferson's ideas for how he could alter the inside of the Georgian house to suit his own traditions and taste. Latrobe's plan featured a first floor suite very familiar to Jefferson: four adjoining rooms containing a chamber with bed alcove, dressing room, cabinet, water closet, and private stairs. Jefferson's three-room suite at Poplar Forest, with adjacent stair and privy, echoed both this Washington plan and his private suite at Monticello. The porticoes seen in the remodeling drawings, whether originating with James Hoban, Jefferson, or Latrobe, were added to the President's House in the rebuilding after the 1814 fire. In 1806 Jefferson did have porticoes on his mind. After his expedient trip that year to lay the foundations of Poplar Forest, Jefferson wrote his bricklayer directing him to add two porticoes, two stair pavilions, and six interior "doors of communication," altering the idealistic octagon shape.<sup>18</sup>

Poplar Forest shared with the President's House its most Jeffersonian addition: attached service wings that Jefferson called "offices." There were two at the President's House, one at Poplar Forest. Jefferson borrowed this concept from plates in Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* and had used it first at Monticello in the 1770s. Jefferson improved upon Palladio's design by creating a walking deck, or "terras" as he called it, on top of the wing through a clever use of ridge and gutter joists forming a repeating series of miniature rooflets situated between the ceiling and roof of the rooms. Jefferson was fascinated with this deck system and used it for a wing of four service rooms added to the east side

of Poplar Forest in 1814 and again in 1819 when he put the same flat terrace over the central cube room. It reappeared again in his designs for the student rooms at the University of Virginia and for wings at Montpelier, where Jefferson guided James Madison's renovation. Contemporary unsuccessful attempts at making flat roofs used tarred canvas, for example at the irregular-shaped Octagon House in Washington that the Madisons occupied during the President's House rebuilding.

Jefferson might have seen this roof system in Europe, or as Latrobe sarcastically suggested about the wings, "out of old french books, from which he fishes everything."<sup>19</sup> Rainwater passed through the deck boards, falling on wooden shingles beneath that spanned the high and low joists and delivered the water into pitched gutters that emptied out through the entablature on either side of the wing at Poplar Forest, or into hidden gutters that probably filled cisterns at the President's House, as at Monticello. At the President's House Jefferson spared no expense with the government's money and used the more expensive method of covering the gutters and shingles with sheet metal, borrowed from the Capitol construction.

Although not preparing for state dinners, Jefferson installed the Poplar Forest wing with the same modern kitchen devices, oven, set kettle, and European stew stoves. The wing's other three rooms consisted of a smokehouse, a laundry, and an unheated room, probably for storage of some kind. Service functions would have expanded had Jefferson, then in his 70s, built the corresponding and balancing western wing on Poplar Forest. Consequently, the Palladian symmetry was skewed with a 100-foot wing connecting the house to a mound on only one side. Ironically Jefferson's plans for extended wings at the President's House took shape on the east with the Treasury fireproof vault but never on the west. One wing was sufficient, as Jefferson described a typical activity with Ellen and Cornelia: "About twilight of the evening, we sally out with the owls and the bats and take our evening exercise on the terras."<sup>20</sup>

### Jefferson's Retreat

By 1816 Poplar Forest looked more like a finished house. Its exterior would still get a revised flat roof crowned with Chinese rail, and later tin shingles would replace those of chestnut that partially burned in a

chimney fire. On the interior several tones of pigmented lime-wash colored the plaster walls. Interior trim had yet to be installed on the plain plaster grounds, but the house had become more comfortable as it filled with furnishings. The full array of furnishings is unknown. Ellen Randolph later remarked: "It was furnished in the simplest manner, but had a very tasty air; there was nothing common or second-rate about any part of the establishment, though there was no appearance of expense."<sup>21</sup> The one-time Federal Luxury Tax of 1815, imposed to help pay for the recent war, mentioned only a few "luxury" items at Poplar Forest in addition to 46 slaves, 12 horses, and 39 cattle: four mahogany bookcases, a three-part mahogany dining table, and four mahogany Pembroke "tea" tables.<sup>22</sup> The large French mirrors George Flowers mentioned seeing in 1816 were most likely gilt, the kind of luxury item that was taxed but perhaps they had not yet arrived. Letters mention other items that made their way from Monticello: two stoves, a Campeachy "hamock" chair from Louisiana, a harpsichord, and a chest of drawers. From the Monticello joinery, mostly by John Hemings, came a Campeachy "siesta" chair, a round cherry revolving-top table, Jefferson's stacked bookcases, a wall bracket, a dumbwaiter, and the taxed mahogany bookcases and dining table. Jefferson also designed his own Windsor "stick" chair painted black with imitation bamboo rings in gold and had 36 made for the house in Richmond.<sup>23</sup>

Any description of a Jefferson house would be incomplete without mentioning books. As Jefferson told John Adams in 1815: "I cannot live without books but fewer will suffice where amusement, and not use, is the only future object."<sup>24</sup> While still in Washington, Jefferson started collecting petit-format books (3 by 5 inches to 4 by 6 inches). These small books, which constituted 37 percent of his nearly 700 books at Poplar Forest, were housed in the four small mahogany cases listed in the tax inventory.<sup>25</sup> Most notable among the small volumes were 108 volumes of John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* (1781–99). Published in five languages, the majority of books were poems, plays, or literature. Absent were the law books or those used in constructing government, and, in fact, even current news. Jefferson had confided to Adams: "I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier."<sup>26</sup>

Dear Sir

ngton Mar. 10. 09

By a vessel just departing hence for Richmond I send  
a number of packages as by the inclosed, in which however I be-  
lieve there may be an error or two, for I have not yet got the  
bill of lading. I must pray you to procure for me 3 dozen  
stick chairs, of the kind marked in the margin, painted black with  
yellow rings, & forward them for me to Lynchburg. Couch's, boats  
are, I believe the most to be depended on. I inclose you 100. D. to  
cover that & other expences, being all hurry on my departure  
I must here close with the assurances of my constant affection

Mr. G. Jefferson

Wm. W. Wood



Top: Jefferson designed his own Windsor or "stick" chair for Poplar Forest and had 36 made in Richmond for the house. In this letter dated March 1809, Jefferson places the order and specifies what the chairs should look like.

Bottom left: The reproduction chair shown here is based on Jefferson's specifications and a drawing by Cornelia Randolph. Jefferson loved the Campeachy chair, calling it his "siesta chair," and had one made for Poplar Forest. Shown is a modern industry reproduction.

Bottom right: Jefferson's use of dumbwaiters to facilitate more private dinner conversations remained his preference even when dining at his private villa retreat. The reproduction piece shown here was based on the original made in the joinery shop at Monticello for Poplar Forest.

*Opposite: Jefferson's mature design for Poplar Forest was another chance to use the many architectural ideas he had accumulated, merging ideas of an idealistic as well as a practical nature. This view shows how the octagonal house proudly wore its crowning rail enhanced by the unusual flat roof.*

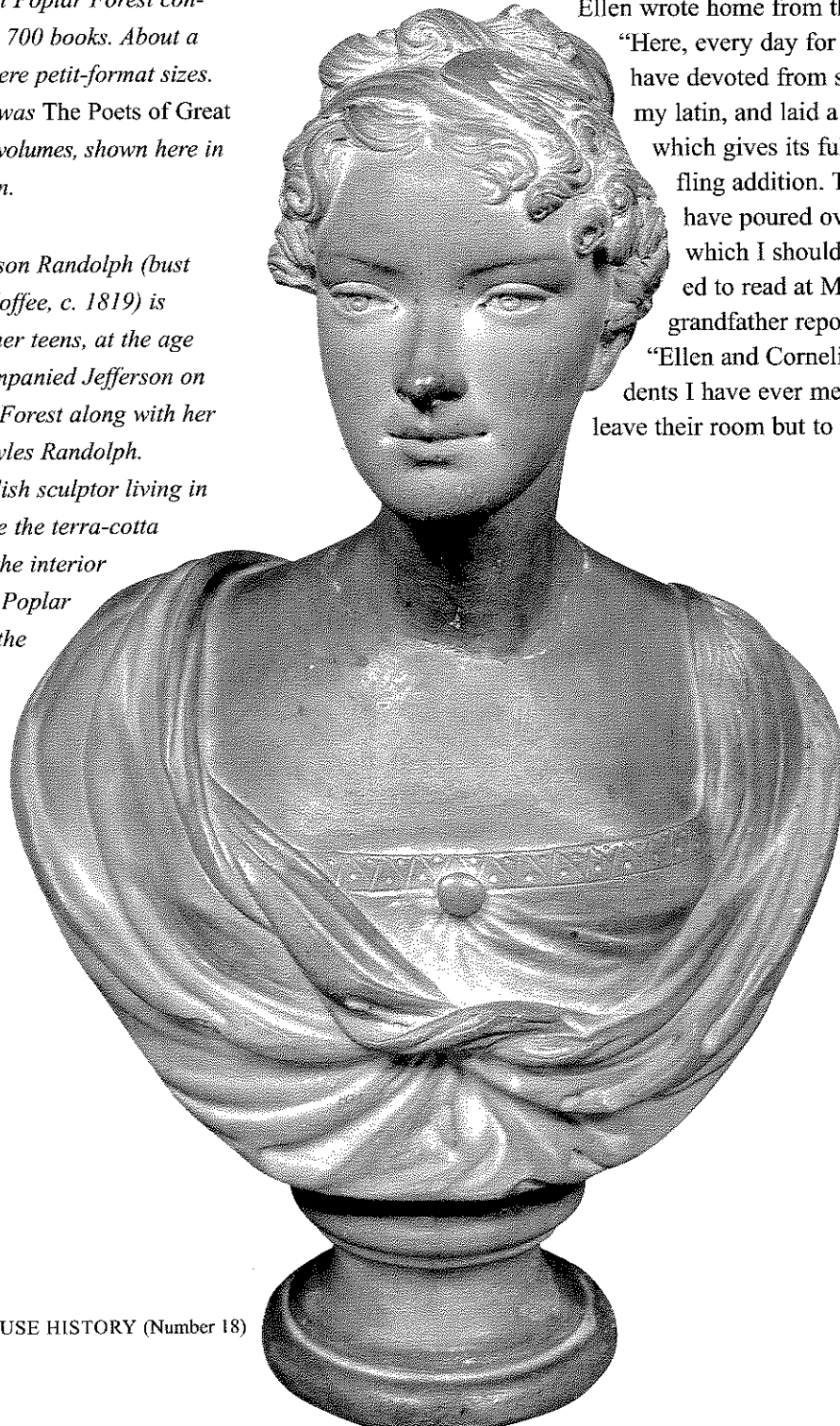
*Opposite below: Jefferson's "retirement library" at Poplar Forest consisted of almost 700 books. About a third of these were petit-format sizes. The largest set was The Poets of Great Britain, in 108 volumes, shown here in a similar edition.*

*Cornelia Jefferson Randolph (bust by William J. Coffee, c. 1819) is shown here in her teens, at the age when she accompanied Jefferson on trips to Poplar Forest along with her sister Ellen Wayles Randolph. Coffee, an English sculptor living in New York, made the terra-cotta ornaments for the interior entablatures at Poplar Forest and for the University of Virginia.*

Jefferson typically read mornings and evenings at his retreat and expected the same from his teenage granddaughters Cornelia and Ellen Randolph, who occasionally accompanied him after 1815. Cornelia recalled: "He would take his book from which he would occasionally look up to make a remark, to question us about what we were reading, or perhaps to read aloud to us from his own book, some passage which had struck him, and of which he wished to give us the benefit."<sup>27</sup> Reading was not all leisure for the girls. Their mother Martha

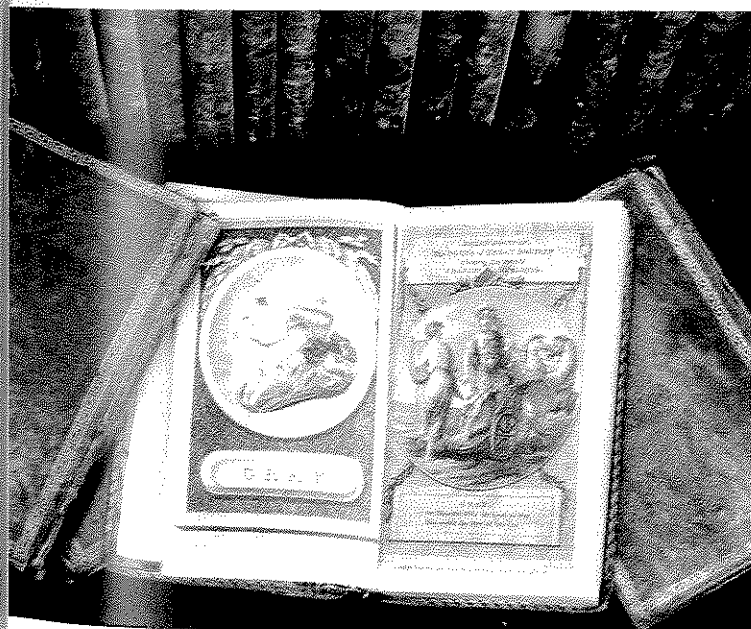
Randolph must have read with satisfaction the letter Ellen wrote home from the retreat in 1819:

"Here, every day for six weeks at a time I have devoted from seven to eight hours to my latin, and laid a solid foundation which gives its full value to the most trifling addition. There hour after hour, I have poured over volumes of history, which I should in vain have attempted to read at Monticello." Their grandfather reported to their mother: "Ellen and Cornelia are the severest students I have ever met with. They never leave their room but to come to meals."<sup>28</sup>





POPLAR FOREST



### Heritage

Jefferson's future use of Poplar Forest and the future of his grandchildren seem to have united in his mind as he built the house. As construction began in 1806, he confided to a friend: "I am preparing an occasional retreat in Bedford, where I expect to settle some of my grandchildren."<sup>29</sup> In 1810, a year after he began using the house, he again stated: "It is the most valuable of my possessions and will become the residence of the greater part of my family."<sup>30</sup> Beginning in 1790, Jefferson started giving portions of Poplar Forest to his daughters when they married, the first to his daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph. Maria married in 1797, but by the time of her premature death in 1804 the promised land had not been conveyed. Jefferson thereafter referred to the gift as something intended for Maria's son Francis, born in





HABS/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



POPULAR FOREST

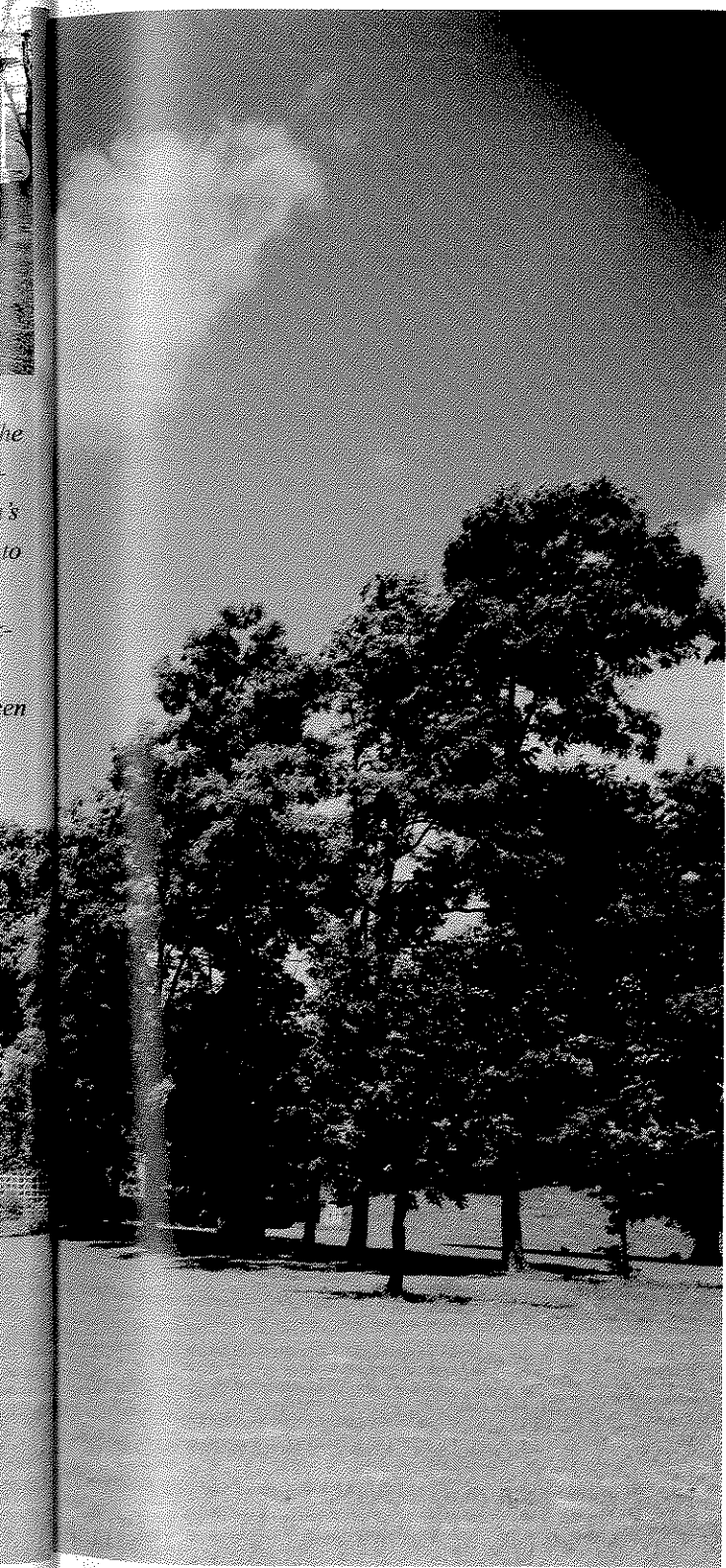
*Above: A fire in 1845 was an opportunity "to improve" Jefferson's masterpiece. By this they meant it could become a more typical farmhouse. Wall space was evidently valued more than light since eight windows were closed with brick. Photograph c. 1900.*

*By the 20th-century both the architectural and the landscape features of Jefferson's villa retreat had been lost to view. In this photograph dated 1940, the trees flanking the south lawn have matured but were never seen by Jefferson in their full form.*

1801, to prevent his widowed son-in-law from selling the land.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually Jefferson influenced Francis to study at the New London Academy near Poplar Forest, where the two could enjoy visits together. So close had they become that in 1823 Jefferson gave up the use of his special house for Francis and his bride. Three years later, in his final year and struggling with an overbearing debt, Thomas Jefferson wrote as the first item in his will that the Poplar Forest property and house would go to Francis. Jefferson acknowledged that his other properties, including Monticello, might have to be sold to unburden the debt his family would inherit. He wrote to James Madison that should a proposed national lottery fail to relieve his debts, Monticello would be sold and he would remove his family to Bedford, "where I have not even a log-hut to put my head into."<sup>32</sup> Thomas Jefferson died thinking Poplar Forest would remain safely in family hands. He was spared the knowledge that Francis and his wife Elizabeth did not like the house and had already tried to sell it to his cousin Jefferson Randolph. When the truth could no longer hurt her father-in-law, Elizabeth unleashed her feelings that the house and "gullied worn out fields . . . have become more than ever distasteful to both Francis and myself, and we needed little before to render them altogether odious."<sup>33</sup> In 1828 Francis sold the house and the remaining 1,074 acres for about a quarter of its assessed value and, with his wife, infant daughter, slaves, and furnishings, moved to Florida. Neighboring farmer William Cobbs became the new owner, and descendants through his daughter Emily Hutter would continue to own the property until 1946, when the James O. Watts Jr. family became the last owner-occupants of the house.

For all its importance to Thomas Jefferson, Poplar Forest has remained relatively unknown to historians, architectural historians, and the public. The house was continuously occupied and its land farmed until 1979. In 1984 a group of local citizens formed a nonprofit organization and rescued the house along with 48 acres, opening it to the public in 1986. Since that time Jefferson's Poplar Forest has secured more than 600 acres of open land around the house. Visitors have been able to watch the ongoing process of archaeology and architectural restoration, the latter winning national awards for the idealistic approach to conservation and restoration that is recapturing the lost private world of Thomas Jefferson.



## NOTES

1. Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, June 16, 1806, Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
2. For an extensive history of Poplar Forest, see S. Allen Chambers Jr., *Poplar Forest and Thomas Jefferson* (Forest, Va.: Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1993); Joan L. Horn, *Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest: A Private Place* (Forest, Va.: Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 2002).
3. For a history of slavery at Poplar Forest, see Barbara J. Heath, *Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).
4. Jefferson used his Elk Hill plantation as a retreat while governor; he used a monastery outside of Paris to get serious work done; and he tried to build a windowless freestanding room in the backyard of his Philadelphia townhouse for uninterrupted time.
5. Thomas Jefferson to Madame de Corgay, March 2, 1809, Thomas Jefferson Papers, 43, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
6. Thomas Jefferson to William Short, November 24, 1821, Coolidge Collection.
7. Ellen Randolph Coolidge to Henry S. Randall, 1856, in Henry S. Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1958), 3:342.
8. For a discussion of the architectural influences at Poplar Forest, see Travis McDonald, "Poplar Forest: Synthesis of a Lifetime," *Notes on the State of Poplar Forest* (Lynchburg, Va.: Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, 1994), 1-7.
9. George Flower, *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois, Founded in 1817 and 1818, by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower*, Chicago Historical Society Collections, vol. 1 (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1882), 43.
10. A detailed account of the brickwork at Poplar Forest is found in Travis C. McDonald Jr., "The Brickwork at Poplar Forest: Mr. Jefferson Builds His Dream House," *Association for Preservation Technology Bulletin* 27, nos. 1-2 (1996):36-46. For the construction story of Poplar Forest, see Travis C. McDonald Jr., "Constructing Optimism: Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest," in *People, Power, Places*, ed. Sally McMurtry and Annmarie Adams (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 176-200.
11. Despite some sloppy brickwork and mistakes at Poplar Forest, Hugh Chisolm would continue to work at Monticello and proceed to construct the first pavilion, Pavilion VII, at the University of Virginia. John Perry also worked at Monticello before Poplar Forest, and he, too, later worked on Pavilion VII, as well as selling the land upon which the university would be built.
12. One could look through three sets of sash doors at Monticello, and Jefferson altered the grand western staircase at the President's House for a sight line through the long axis of the first floor and through sash doors that led to his terrace.
13. Jefferson had proposed a more literal copy of this Renaissance villa for the Governor's House in Richmond and supposedly for the President's House competition in Washington.
14. Jefferson's rental houses are discussed in Mark R. Wenger, "Thomas Jefferson, Tenant," *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, no. 4 (1991): 249-65.
15. Jefferson found a clever way to have his south door glass, or wood, or open. By use of a deep jamb, the bivalve outer wooden leaves could fold into the jamb and look like panels, or the glass leaves



*During the restoration in 2005, a carpenter crafts the ridge and gutter joists of Jefferson's flat roof at Poplar Forest. Two layers of wooden shingles spanned the high and low joists, creating a series of miniature roofs that directed water into the pitched gutters and out each end on two sides of the building.*

could fold into the jamb under the wooden ones. This same type of jamb received the four sash door leaves around the dining room.

16. C. Allan Brown, "Poplar Forest: The Mathematics of an Ideal Villa," *Journal of Garden History* 10, no. 2 (1990): 117-39.
17. Architectural and other information about the President's House has been researched in William Seale, *The President's House: A History* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, with the cooperation of the National Geographic Society, 1986), and Seale, *The White House: The History of an American Idea* (Washington, D.C.: AIA Press and White House Historical Association, 1992).
18. Jefferson added two doors on the upper level that communicated between the large east and west chambers and those on the north. The one on the northwest would have given Jefferson the opportunity to expand his suite to three rooms. The four doorways added on the lower level were in the diagonal walls between the rooms to alleviate the necessity of traversing the sunken wine cellar through doors on each of its four walls. Like the addition of porticoes and stair pavilions, these additions seem to be a realization of Jefferson's that his idealistic shape was not practical in reality. For instance, before the stair pavilions were added there would have been no connection between the upper and lower floor, and food would have had to come in the front door to reach the central dining room. As it was, food then had to come through the east bedchamber to reach the dining room. After the granddaughters started using the east chamber, at about the time of the wing construction, they described their room as being torn down. By that they probably meant that the south side of the bed alcove was closed up so the slaves or Jefferson would not have to pass through a private room to bring food from the wing, or to the terrace deck through an upper door put in the stair pavilion. Ellen Randolph Coolidge later, in describing the house, said that the south side of the east room was a pantry, confirming the speculative change. Ellen Randolph Coolidge to Harry S. Randall, 1956, in Randall, *Life of Jefferson*, 3:342.
19. Quoted in Seale, *President's House*, 1:115.
20. Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, August 31, 1817, Coolidge Collection.
21. Quoted in Randall, *Life of Jefferson*, 3:342.
22. Bedford County (Northern District) Personal Property Tax Books, 1815, Virginia State Library and Archives, Richmond.
23. Thomas Jefferson to George Jefferson, March 10, 1809, Coolidge Collection.
24. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, June 10, 1815, in Douglas L. Wilson, "Thomas Jefferson's Library," *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), 175.
25. The bookcases accompanied his library when grandson Francis Eppes moved from Poplar Forest to Florida in 1828. In 1873 the library had found its way to an auction house in New York, where, along with three of the cases, it was listed and sold as "The Late Thomas Jefferson's Library, Offered by His Grandson, Francis Eppes, of Poplar Forest, Va." The sale catalog provides a good glimpse of what Jefferson read in retirement at Poplar Forest. Of the nearly 700 volumes known to have been there, 37 percent were petit-format books, 59 percent were medium size, and 4 percent were folio size. Only 11 titles were single volumes; the rest were in sets, such as 52 volumes of Georges Louis Leclaire Buffon, 35 volumes of French authors, 25 volumes of Italian poets, 38 volumes of Jean Jacques Rousseau, 38 volumes of William Shakespeare, 10 volumes of Helvetius, 10 volumes of Horace, and 16 volumes of ancient moralists. In subject, 56 percent were poems, plays, or literature; 16 percent were history and geography; 16 percent were math, science, astronomy, natural history, or encyclopedias; 11 percent were philosophy; and less than 1 percent pertained to religion and recreation. Jefferson preferred books in their original language and sometimes compared translations, perhaps using the revolving top table as he did his revolving bookcase at Monticello. The Poplar Forest books were published in five languages: French (39 percent), English (30 percent); Latin (27 percent); Greek (3 percent); and Spanish (1 percent). The majority were published in Paris and London, probably acquired during his stays there, and only 10 titles were published in the United States. Jefferson did not frequent only new booksellers but acquired antique books as well, owning 12 volumes published in the 16th century and 145 from the 17th century. Nor did his retirement slow the acquisition of books, since more than 100 volumes postdated the construction of Poplar Forest.
26. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 21, 1812, in Wilson, "Jefferson's Library," 176.
27. Quoted in Randall, *Life of Jefferson*, 3:342.
28. Ellen Wayles Randolph to Martha J. Randolph, July 18, 1819, Coolidge-Jefferson Family Correspondence, acc. no. 9090, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Thomas Jefferson to Martha J. Randolph, August 18, 1817, Ellen R. Coolidge Correspondence, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.
29. Thomas Jefferson to Elizabeth Trist, April 27, 1806, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
30. Thomas Jefferson to Gideon Granger, September 20, 1810, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
31. Martha and her husband Thomas Mann Randolph had received 1,000 acres in 1790, and they in turn deeded one-third of this land, which had expanded to 1,441 acres, to their daughter Anne Cary Randolph Bankhead as her dowry in 1808. To his other daughter Maria, Jefferson planned to give his Pantops plantation near Monticello and to build a house there after her marriage to Francis Eppes in 1797. Jefferson even stated that the house built at Poplar Forest was one he had intended building on Pantops for Maria, but this seems unlikely since its design was not meant for conventional living. Thomas Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, June 30, 1820, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. By 1801, after the birth of Maria's son Francis, the proposed gift shifted to Poplar Forest land. Jefferson and his son-in-law Francis Eppes cordially competed for control in how the younger Francis would be educated. Jefferson eventually won out, and Francis studied in nearby Lynchburg and New London.
32. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, February 17, 1826, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
33. Mary Elizabeth Randolph Eppes to Jane Randolph, April 1, 1827, Edgehill-Randolph Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

# WHITE HOUSE HISTORY



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