

## History

One of only two homes Thomas Jefferson designed for his personal use, Poplar Forest was the place Jefferson “came to indulge in the life of mind and renew his personal creativity.”

In the 1760s, John Wayles, a land speculator living in Charles City County, Virginia, purchased a well-watered tract of land in Bedford County, Virginia, called Poplar Forest. He sent a small group of enslaved people to settle the land and clear it for cultivation. His daughter Martha and her husband, Thomas Jefferson, inherited the Poplar Forest plantation, along with the 11 enslaved men, women and children living and working there, upon Wayles' death in 1773.

The 4,819-acre plantation provided the Jeffersons with a significant income from cash crops of tobacco and wheat. During the early years of his ownership Jefferson focused on his law practice and served the Commonwealth of Virginia and fledgling United States government in various capacities, managing the plantation through letters to his trusted overseers.

In the summer of 1781, Thomas Jefferson and his family spent six weeks at Poplar Forest when they left Monticello to evade capture by British Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton and his troops. As there was no “plantation house” on the property at that time, they probably stayed at an overseer's house. While there, Jefferson compiled much of the material for his only book – Notes on the State of Virginia. It is probable that during that time, Jefferson discovered that the tranquil setting provided a perfect environment for pursuing his passions of reading, writing and studying.

When Thomas Jefferson entered his second term as president, he recognized his desire for a quiet place to which he could retire, where he could do the things that made him happiest. And in 1806, he began directing both free and enslaved workmen in the construction of such a retreat at the heart of his Poplar Forest plantation. He traveled from Washington, DC, to oversee the laying of the foundation for the octagonal house on a hill between two branches of Tomahawk Creek. The villa was Thomas Jefferson's own design, inspired by the neoclassical architecture and Palladian structures he had encountered while serving as the American ambassador to France, a style that was radically different from the typical Virginia farmhouses of the day. Jefferson modeled his design for the formal landscape that surrounded the house on those found at rural Roman villas.

When his presidency ended in 1809, Thomas Jefferson visited Poplar Forest three to four times a year, staying from two weeks to two months at a time. The plantation provided a crucial part of Jefferson's livelihood, and his visits often coincided with the seasonal responsibilities of the working plantation. He also oversaw the ornamentation of the house and grounds, and the planting of his vegetable garden. He continued to tinker with the house and grounds – adding the Wing of Offices and experimenting with new farming techniques to increase the yield of his crops.

The world of Jefferson's private retreat was distinctly different than the public and political world of Monticello. His most frequent guests at Poplar Forest were his grandchildren; and his library here was primarily composed of literary works including Shakespeare and Molière.

Poplar Forest's slave quarters housed as many as 94 enslaved people during Jefferson's lifetime. These enslaved men, women and children labored in the fields, built roads, tended livestock and served as domestic staff in the house. They were skilled brickmakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, woodworkers, masons, weavers and spinners, and Jefferson relied upon those skills to create, adorn and maintain the plantation and to support his lifestyle.

Jefferson made his last trip to Poplar Forest in 1823 when he settled his grandson Francis Eppes on the property. Ill health prevented further visits. In 1828, two years after Jefferson's death at age 83, Eppes sold Poplar Forest to a local man, William Cobbs.

In 1845 a fire led the Cobbs-Hutter family then living at Poplar Forest to rebuild Jefferson's villa into a practical farmhouse. Jefferson's design of Poplar Forest is highly idealistic in concept, with only a few concessions to practicality – it was so perfectly suited to his needs alone that subsequent owners found it difficult to inhabit and altered it to suit their needs.

Poplar Forest was privately owned until December 1983, when the nonprofit Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest was formed and began the rescue of the landmark for future generations. Poplar Forest opened to the public regularly for the first time in 1986.

The restoration of Thomas Jefferson's villa retreat, its surrounding ornamental landscape and the plantation grounds began in 1989, and is ongoing today.