



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*

A Masterpiece of Human Creative Genius

By Travis McDonald

The significance and universal values of Thomas Jefferson's architecture are well documented in the 1987 World Heritage Jefferson Precinct listing, as sampled by these following statements. "Thomas Jefferson was one of the geniuses of eighteenth century neoclassical architecture. His architectural works were an integral part of the neoclassical movement, but their adaptation to the convenience, ideals and requirements of the new nation made them uniquely Jeffersonian.... Jefferson's architecture is an integral part of his views of man, society, and the infinite possibilities offered by the new nation.... Jefferson's taste in architecture far transcended notions about beauty or style.... Jefferson's accomplishments...have guaranteed him a starring role in world history...however his greatest intellectual energies and original talents were devoted to architecture...." That the "legacy of Thomas Jefferson's creative genius survives in his buildings" (W.H. Adams) is also true of his most personal and intimate house, Poplar Forest. William Pierson's statement on Monticello as "one of the most civilized houses ever built" extends to Poplar Forest as well because "it was built by and for one of the most civilized, sensitive and complex intellects who as a self-made architect became his own client."

The three most personal works of architecture by Thomas Jefferson are Monticello, Poplar Forest, and the University of Virginia. These works best reveal his mind and creative genius. Poplar Forest was not understood or restored at the time of the earlier listing and is now considered an essential part of understanding any of Jefferson's works. This was recognized by historian David McCullough: "More and more it is becoming clear how very important Poplar Forest is to our enlarged understanding of Thomas Jefferson and the reach of his imagination. That Jefferson was, along with so many other things, one of the premier American architects, has been long appreciated, but the originality and ingenuity of Poplar Forest—especially now that it is being so superbly restored—raise his standing still higher. This is an American masterpiece by a great American artist who happened to be The President of The United States." Roger Kennedy characterized it this way: "Poplar Forest is for Thomas Jefferson what 'Falstaff' was for Verdi: the consummate final work of the mind of genius."

The architectural nature of Poplar Forest is familiar in its vocabulary of parts, comprising one of the best definitions of a Jeffersonian style, yet very different from Jefferson's other works. This difference stems primarily from its private nature as a highly personal retreat. It is also distinguished by being one of Jefferson's most mature works, begun when he was 63, and an idealistically modern house for its time and place. Jefferson's satisfaction with this unique house and landscape led him to comment that it was "the most valuable of my possessions," and "when finished, it will be the best dwelling house in the state, except that of Monticello; perhaps preferable to that, as more proportioned to the faculties of a private citizen." This last statement refers to Thomas Jefferson's need for privacy and the freedom that privacy afforded the design of an occasional villa. James Ackerman's definitive

history, The Villa, describes the attributes of a true villa as not only an ornamental country retreat for the owner's enjoyment and relaxation within an agricultural setting, but also a modern product of an architect's imagination and creative aspirations. Ackerman described Poplar Forest as an "excessively rational" building, inconvenient in some ways. This inconvenience betrays its function and use by one man, and echoes Ackerman's assertion that "the mythical nature of villa ideology liberates the type from mundane restraints of utility." It would be difficult to find a more apt description of Poplar Forest. Jefferson's use of the octagonal shape, the first octagon house in America, made this his ultimate use of that shape seen in many of his drawings going back to the 1770s. While Jefferson stated that Palladio was his "bible" when learning to design, his early assimilation of the octagon came from the British Palladian books by James Gibbs, Williams Kent, and Robert Morris. An adherence to the octagon's ideal symmetrical shape makes it difficult to accommodate conventional domestic plans but it fit the need for one man perfectly. The plan's symmetry and shape give it an unmistakable purity consistent with Jefferson's wish to please himself with something as perfect as he could make it, perhaps his most perfect executed work. Fiske Kimball remarked of Poplar Forest: "In the matter of pure form the house is especially satisfactory." Gary Wills: "The house is elegant, like all of Jefferson's buildings, but minimalist at the same time. A gem in the wilds."

Into this geometric shell Jefferson put some of his most personal thoughts and desires for architecture. The twenty foot cube at the center of the house represented Jefferson's third and only successful attempt (after the Governor's House and the President's House) to build a rotunda house after Palladio's Villa Rotonda. This special center room was brightly illuminated by one of the largest skylights in America. The cube shape took expression on the roof above by a Jeffersonian flat "terras" deck that accentuated the Chinese rail like a crown. To personalize the center of his private world, Jefferson detailed a Roman Doric entablature with additional frieze ornaments. When English sculptor William Coffee, the ornaments' maker, questioned this unusual mix, Jefferson explained that in this private house his inventive design was "a fancy which I can indulge in my own case, altho in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly." Jefferson's statement and intention were borne out by the fact that outside of family, he invited very few friends to share his most private place.

The modernity of Poplar Forest results from its inner and outer shape, its low horizontal Parisian house look, the rotunda volume, its European-style polished oak floors, the alcove beds, the skylight, the manner of decoration, the flat "terras" roof, the use of metal shingles, Rumford fireplaces, the service wing, the use of landscape, the amount of glass and the quality of light, and the way the house connects to the surrounding landscape. Few American houses could boast of more than a couple of these features. It was the Glass House of its time, especially in the transparent affect and luminosity of the large openings. The triple sash windows of the parlor and its glass door served to make the solid wall disappear. Through the windows of this indoor-outdoor room you stepped onto the elevated portico which was an outdoor room. Poplar Forest was, as Vincent Scully described, "as wholly open to nature as creature comfort will permit..." Further, the 100-foot walking deck over the wing created a more expansive connection to the landscape. This innovative feature of Jefferson's, to place a walking deck over a flat hidden roof of the Palladian-inspired service wings, was one of his most inventive features that he used at Monticello, the University, the President's House, and at Poplar Forest. This concept of wings that extended the floor of the house out into the garden is "perhaps the most universally

satisfying aspect of the design at Monticello” and of Jefferson’s modern concept merging architecture and landscape. (Beiswanger 2002). At Poplar Forest this synthesis with nature and landscape was even more unique.

Thomas Jefferson chose to integrate his villa house and garden with a distinct regional natural feature, known as early as the 1740s as the Poplar Forest. Rather than rising above nature on a mountain as at Monticello, this low hilltop site was dwarfed by the majestic old growth forest. A ring road, bordered on each side by paper mulberry trees, inscribed a 540-yard circle, within which Jefferson defined an idealistic and geometric five-acre ornamental core. Jefferson’s landscape design clearly expressed his fundamental idea that house and grounds should be joined into a seamless whole. Using the 100-foot diameter of the mounds as a module, he interpreted a five-part Palladian plan: central house flanked by wings that terminated in a pavilion. However, Jefferson substituted landscape elements for bricks and mortar: double rows of paper mulberry trees formed the “wings” or “hyphens,” and earthen mounds replaced the pavilions. Mounds were a feature of landscape design in Europe at the time but Jefferson used them in an unusual way. Three rows of trees at the base, middle and top of the mounds gave them a more vertical architectural form. Beyond each mound was an octagonal domed privy, or outdoor toilet, of Palladian detail and proportion.

The Palladian ensemble formed an east-west axis, separating the ornamental core into distinct areas which Jefferson designed to reflect two opposing sensibilities: on the north, or front of the house, he created a landscape that appeared natural, even wild, making use of the existing forest of Tulip Poplar trees. Passing through the grove and rounding the carriage turnaround in front of the house, visitors would have seen tree clumps and shrub beds at each corner of the house containing Athenian and Balsam poplars, common and Kentucky locusts, redbuds, dogwoods, calycanthus and liriodendron. Though carefully chosen to look attractive together, the trees and shrubs were densely planted, appearing to be a wild thicket. This landscape style, mimicking the natural world, was then the most modern trend. It harmonized with the north façade of the house, which was also modern in form. Jefferson had seen such gardens in England and wrote that their beauty “surpasses all the earth.” Behind the house to the south Jefferson created a more ordered, rational and geometric landscape. A carefully delineated sunken lawn of a double-square size 100 x 200 feet long stretched from the south portico of the house. On each bank of the lawn were lilacs, Althaeas, Gelder roses, Roses and calycanthus. Along the upper terraces on each side was an allee of Kentucky Coffee trees. Here landscape and architecture expressed a classical sensibility: the south façade of the house with its Roman-style arcade topped by a classical portico and pediment reflected Jefferson’s look back to ancient times. While some landscape features have not survived, archaeological excavations have confirmed all the features of this unique landscape documented by Jefferson where he blended natural and man-made features into an integrated setting.