

Photo: Robert Lautman

# JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST RETREAT

*A Phoenix Rises from the Ashes*

*Kathryn Hensley*

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“I was much disappointed to see the destruction by fire [in 1845] of Poplar Forest, my house in Bedford County, Virginia, and the ill-conceived manner in which it was rebuilt.

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I delight, tho', in observing the present satisfactory restoration of the house according to my design. Both scholarship and workmanship are of the first order.”

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No, Thomas Jefferson didn't really say that. After all, he died in 1826. But he very well might say it today if he could see the ongoing extraordinary restoration of Poplar Forest—the personal villa retreat he designed and built on his plantation in Bedford County, Virginia.

What Jefferson actually said in an 1812 letter was, “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.”

When building began at Poplar Forest in 1806, Jefferson was in his early sixties, serving his second term as President. Although known for his hospitality at Monticello—his home in Charlottesville, Virginia—Jefferson craved quiet and privacy.

In Poplar Forest, Jefferson combined architectural ideas gathered over a lifetime. Trained as a lawyer, he had matured from a

self-taught amateur architect to the renowned architect-builder of Monticello and the Virginia State Capitol, among other structures. His retreat reflects his love of Palladian architecture as well as design features he admired in Europe, especially France. Jefferson's design is based on his favorite shape, the octagon. The 2,000-sq. ft. octagonal main floor contains four lozenge-shaped octagons (four bedrooms and a parlor), which surround a dramatic 20-ft. cube—the dining room—lit by a long skylight. A lower floor with five utility rooms opens to the “sunken” south lawn. Jefferson also built a separate service wing covered with a flat oak deck.

Although both exterior and interior walls were brick, Jefferson specified wood for much of the remaining structure. His signature New World Classicism is exemplified by the triangular pediment above the south portico and the 2ft. 10in.-high



Photo: Les Schofer

- 1 Aerial view from north, showing pediment, entablature, balustrade, Chinese railing. Shutters were added later and construction of Jefferson's terras-roofed service wing on the east side will begin soon.
- 2 Antique heart pine parlor door, assembled with mortise and tenon joints and hand-hewn pins, then painted with a faux-mahogany grain in the fashion of the early 1800s. Note the triple-sash window at left and painted antique pine portico floor. Door and window trim is also heart pine.
- 3 North view, showing heart pine Tuscan entablature, pediment, mahogany Doric balusters, and corner of mahogany Chinese railing around central terras roof.

Tuscan entablature. An ornate classical balustrade surrounds the octagonal roof, topped by a Chinese railing above the terras (flat) dining room roof. Interior wood details include deep entablatures in dining room and parlor, decorated with clay ox skulls and human faces. He also designed bivalve solid wood and glass doors, triple-sash parlor windows, and an oak herringbone floor for the dining room. And it all went up in smoke.

That's what makes the Poplar Forest restoration so remarkable. A catastrophic fire in 1845 consumed all the original wood, except in two privies. Most of Jefferson's design was lost when the owners rebuilt and modified the house drastically, with more alterations made in the 1940s. The house was rescued when the nonprofit Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest bought it in 1984 and opened it to the public in 1986. The monumental restoration began in 1989.

### Restoring a Dream

The restoration, still in progress today, is based on meticulous detective work. Research centered on the house itself as well as Jefferson's extensive correspondence from Washington and Monticello, instructing his workers in every detail of design and construction. Restorers also have a floor plan and elevation drawn by one of Jefferson's best joiners at Monticello. In addition, wood details and even paint composition have been detected from "ghost marks"—evidence on masonry walls and chimneys. Ghostmarks reveal the placement of original wood chair rails, entablatures, alcove beds, ceiling joists and the roof balustrade. Some details of Jefferson's wood design were extrapolated from his Monticello home.

The restoration team, led by Travis C. McDonald, Jr., Director of Architectural Restoration, has peeled back layers of the structure to its brick skeleton. Beginning with the exterior, they are rebuilding Jefferson's wood design using antique wood matching his specifications, traditional tools, and techniques whenever possible. Most of the joinery is mortise and tenon, with dovetail work and unusual bird's mouth joints where rafters meet joists.

McDonald says they obtained antique pine from three vendors who had salvaged boards from large mills, such as cotton mills. "Heart pine is very resinous and dense, making it hold up against rot and bugs," he explains. Obtaining the oversized new white oak timbers for joists, rafters, and wall plates "was an ordeal—it came from five vendors," says McDonald. "No regular modern mill will cut timbers over 16 ft. long," he explains, and they needed 20 ft. timbers. The oak beam over the portico alone is 12" x 12" x 22 ft. long.



4 Restoration craftsman Doug Rideout uses adze to hand-hew white oak window lintel.

5 Pediment framing, showing 12x12 white oak beams and typical mortise and tenon joint with posts.

6 South view of the house, facing "sunken" lawn. Note wood pediment, entablature, balustrade, Chinese railing on roof.

7 Pediment framing, showing 12x12 x 22-ft. long white oak beam over portico. Note the bird's mouth joint at left.



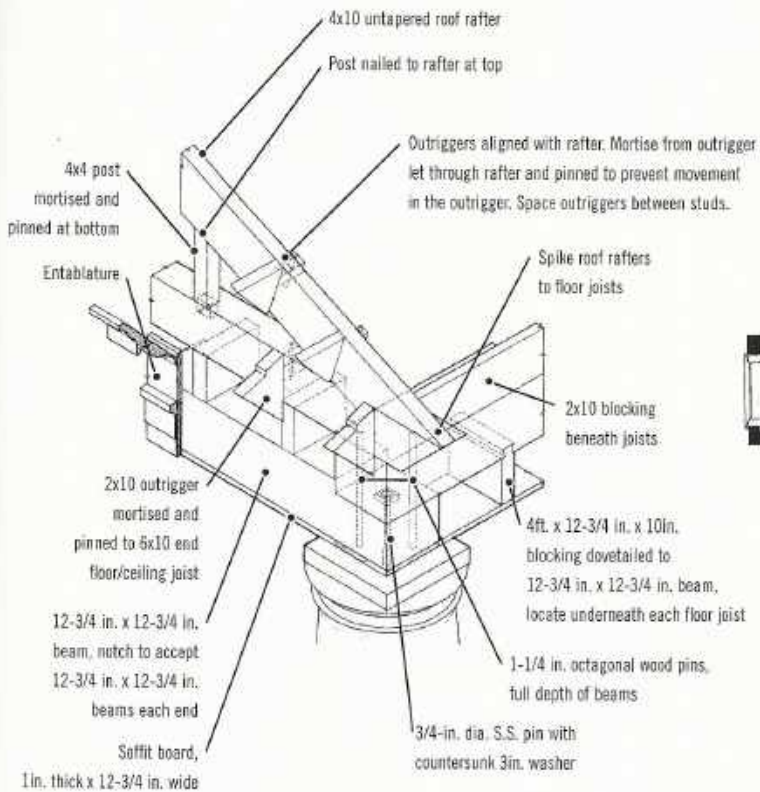
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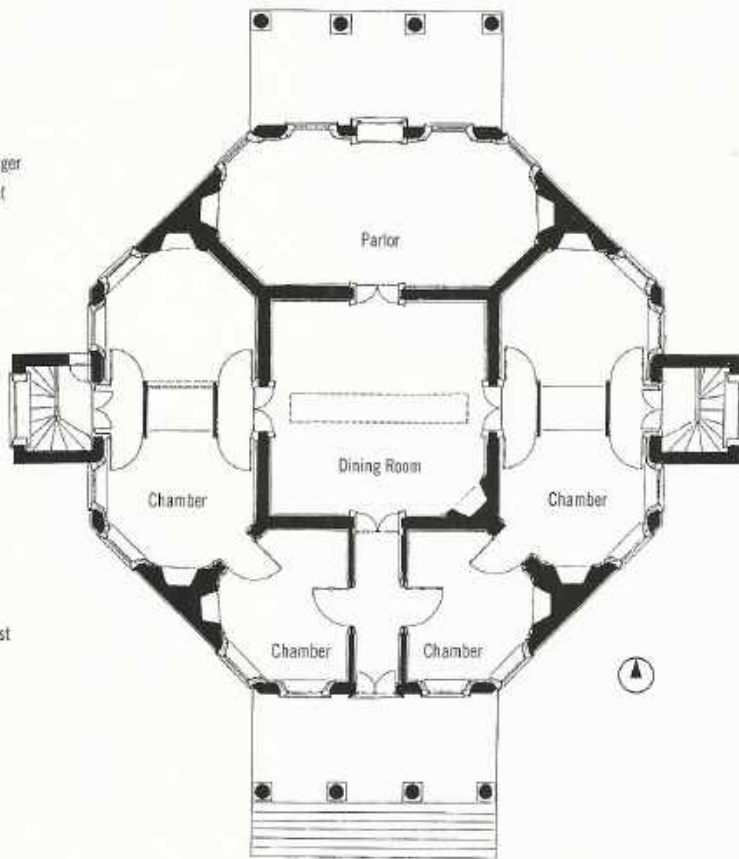
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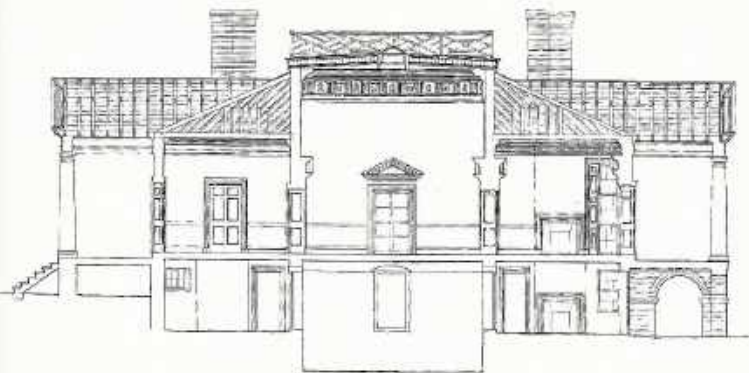
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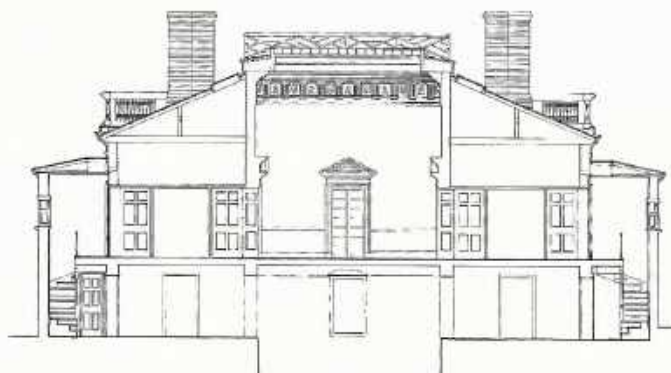
**Portico/main roof intersection framing axonometric**  
[Mesk-Cohen-Wilson-Baker Architects, LLP Albany, NY]



**First floor plan. Note: Alcove beds divide east and west chambers.**

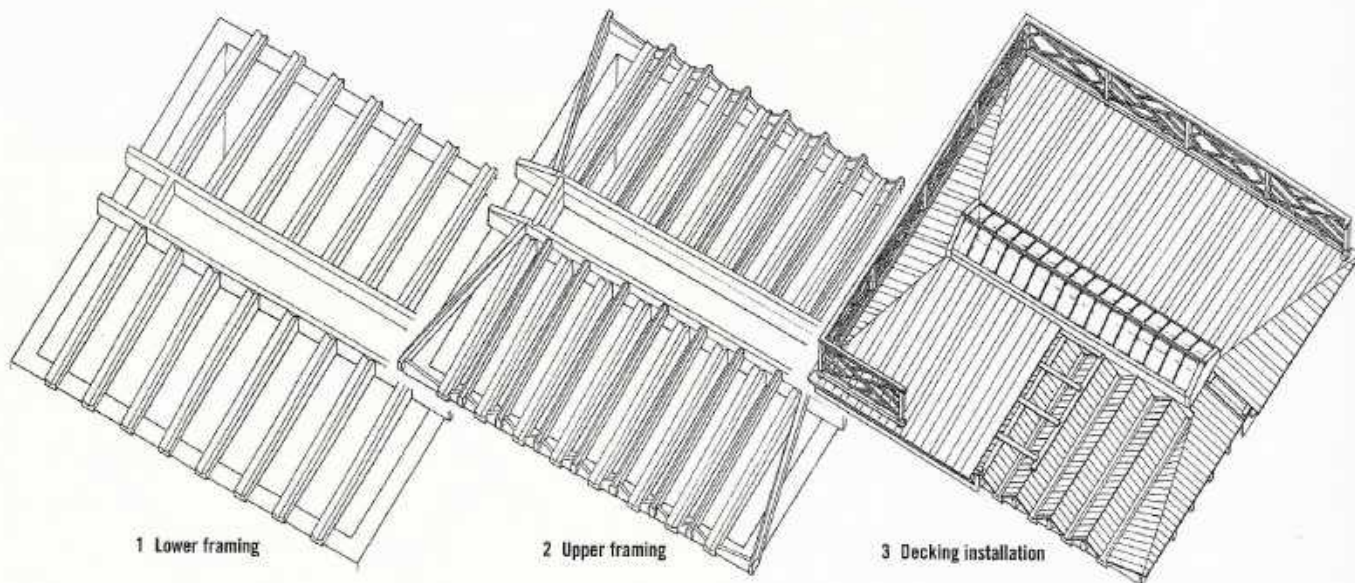


**East-west section**



**Building section looking north. Note the wood entablature set with clay ox skulls and human faces in the central 20 ft.-cube dining room.**

Sequence of terras roof construction



1 Lower framing

2 Upper framing

3 Decking installation



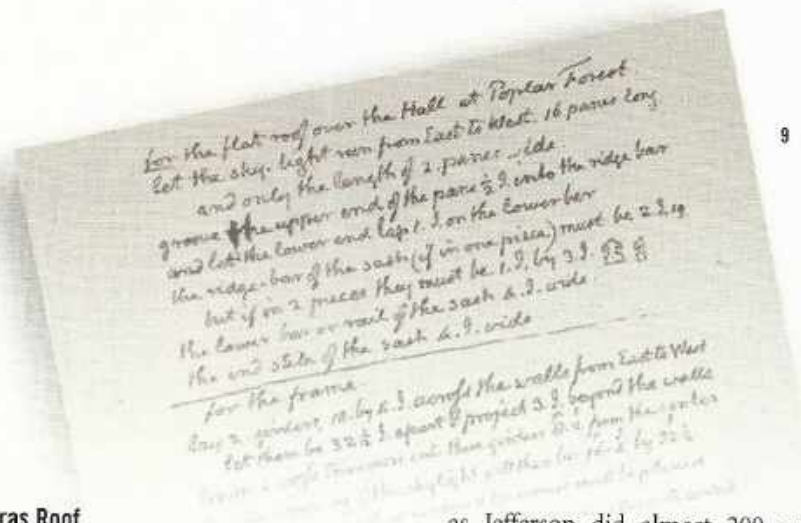
8 Roof framing showing white oak joists, posts, rafters. Note "rooflets" beneath flat central terras roof, at top of photo. In a rare divergence from the original design, the restoration team covered the rooflets with a rubber membrane to guard against leaks.

9 Excerpt of Thomas Jefferson's specifications for the skylight and flat terras roof over central room at Poplar Forest. Reproduced, with permission, from originals in the University of Virginia Library.

Terras Roof

The toughest challenge so far, according to McDonald, has been construction of the terras (flat) roof over the dining room. The restoration team built the roof in two parts in a shop, then took it apart and reassembled it over the "cube" room. A unique and favorite Jeffersonian device, the terras roof consisted of accordion "rooflets" with gutters between them, covered with a flat plank deck. Jefferson also used the roof on the service wing and in structures elsewhere. He said flat roofs were "vastly handsomer and cheaper than the common roof. They need no rafters, no tin covering, and the gutters are better of wood than of tin or any other metal."

Restoration of the house's exterior is complete and interior work is beginning. Visitors are able to see the villa emerge just



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as Jefferson did almost 200 years ago. Poplar Forest, near Lynchburg, VA, is open daily from 10-4, April through November (closed Thanksgiving Day). For more information, call 804/525-1806 or visit their website at [www.poplarforest.org](http://www.poplarforest.org).

Kathryn Hensley is a freelance writer for publications specializing in building design, codes, and engineering.

More photos, drawings and material specifications can be found in the on-line version of this article, issue #10, [www.wood.ca](http://www.wood.ca).

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