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**Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest**

**Franklin, Rachel Elaine, M.A.**

**Middle Tennessee State University, 1989**

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THOMAS JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST

Rachel Franklin

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### THOMAS JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST

by Rachel Franklin

This thesis examines Jefferson's use of Poplar Forest, a secondary plantation located in Bedford County, Virginia. It explores the functional and symbolic roles of the plantation from 1774 to 1824. Jefferson gained Poplar Forest through inheritance from his wife's father, John Wayles. He used its land primarily to raise wheat and tobacco. After Jefferson retired from the presidency, workmen built a new, octagonal house on the property. Designed by Jefferson, this house represented his philosophy of architecture and the proper use of classical orders. Interior arrangement of space denoted Jefferson's purpose for his Bedford house as a comfortable, private dwelling.

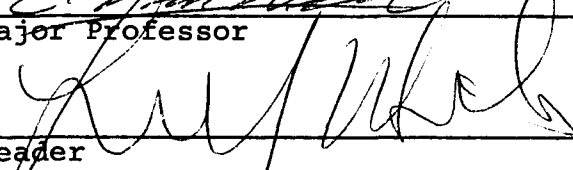
Jefferson deeded the property to his grandson, Francis Wayles Eppes, in 1824. Eppes sold the plantation in 1828, two years after his grandfather's death. Subsequent owners valued the property's historic ties to Thomas Jefferson. Their care of Poplar Forest guaranteed the survival of this national landmark and historical resource.

THOMAS JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST

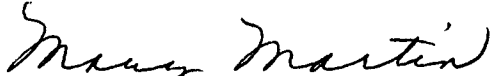
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Many people have contributed to the success of this project. I appreciate the kindness and assistance of all of the faculty and staff of the History Department and Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University. Dr. Carroll Van West taught me new ways to look at historic structures and landscapes, incorporating new research techniques which broadened more traditional approaches to history. His suggestions on the research and writing of this thesis improved it tremendously. Dr. Lewright B. Sikes, as second reader, also helped clarify interpretations of Jefferson's domestic life and express them in a concise manner. I would also like to thank Dr. Sikes for allowing me to research agricultural and slave activity at Poplar Forest as a class project.

Dr. William Kelso, Chief Archaeologist at Monticello and Poplar Forest, provided the idea which developed into a viable research topic. Research began in earnest in Dr. David Rowe's class. I would like to thank him for early guidance as the thesis took shape. Dr. Sarah Howell kindly allowed me to present a paper on the design and construction of the octagonal house at Poplar Forest. Her comments, as well as those of Lyles Forbes, helped me place the house in a broader architectural context.

Staff of The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest

aided in the research conducted at the site on May 19, 1989. Dorsey Bodeman, Interpretation Coordinator, graciously spoke with me late in the afternoon at the end of a long work week. I would also like to thank her for allowing me to take photographs of the site. Anonymous individuals at the National Park Service, Virginia Landmarks Commission, and Prints and Documents Division of the Library of Congress also assisted my efforts by providing unpublished reports, including the National Register nomination and Historic American Building Surveys.

Michael Magri started me on this path to freedom through higher education. Joseph Douglas has sustained me through the process and continues to be an unwavering source of encouragement. I also appreciate the support that my family has given me during the past two years. My parents, Joe and Mary Franklin, taught me to strive for excellence in every endeavor. I dedicate this effort to them.

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## INTRODUCTION

The author first became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson's Bedford plantation in the summer of 1986 during a tour of the house and grounds as a student in the Monticello Archaeological Field School under the direction of William Kelso, head of the Archaeology Department at Monticello. Members of the field school conducted preliminary archaeological test pits at Poplar Forest to determine potential sites for further, more comprehensive, study.

Most residents of Lynchburg, Virginia, like myself, had heard of this historic site but rarely visited or inquired about the significance of Poplar Forest. After working in the field school, however, the author became more interested in the plantation and was amazed to learn that there was a dearth of secondary source material on this plantation. Architectural historians had recorded and studied the unique octagonal brick house built in the early nineteenth century. But, the use of the plantation and its meaning for Jefferson had not been explored.

This study seeks to rectify the situation by exploring the personal importance of the Bedford plantation to Jefferson. Although many scholars have explained Jefferson's domestic life, little has been written about



his attachment to Poplar Forest. This work draws heavily on primary source material, including the physical remains of the site, as well as documentary evidence in Jefferson family letters and memoirs. The project explores the acquisition of the property and subsequent development as one of five working family plantations.

Thomas Jefferson acquired the property through his marriage to Martha Wayles Skelton. The farm initially served as a working plantation that produced a tobacco cash crop. But upon the development of the estate as a second family home, Poplar Forest became a symbolic outlet for Jefferson's creative talents in architecture and landscape gardening. More importantly, the estate became a retreat where Jefferson could escape the continual stream of visitors that plagued him at Monticello. Poplar Forest thus served both functional and symbolic roles in Jefferson's life. These roles and their manifestation in Poplar Forest's architecture, landscape gardening, and home life provide key insights into Jefferson's mind.

Research methods employed in this project follow those of standard historical methodology. The first step, formulation of hypotheses and inquiry, involves the presentation of the project, as outlined in the above statement of objectives for this thesis. It traces the development of Poplar Forest under Thomas Jefferson's supervision, and defines its significance as a working

plantation, intellectual diversion, and personal retreat.

Research involved both primary and secondary sources material, documentary and artifactual in nature. Useful primary sources are available for Jefferson's personal life, family relationships, and his actions as a plantation owner. The most valuable primary source is the site, itself. The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest owns the property and maintains it as a valuable historic resource. Although damaged by fire in the nineteenth century, much of the house remains intact. The site, consisting of over 400 acres, retains a great deal of historical integrity despite suburban growth nearby. Photographs, taken by the author on 19 May 1989, document the condition of the property and enhance textual explanations in the thesis.

Documentary evidence used includes archival collections of Jefferson's letters and personal papers, as well as published editions, such as: Edwin Betts's Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book; Betts and James Bear's The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson; Julian Boyd's The Papers of Thomas Jefferson; Frederick Doveton Nichols's Thomas Jefferson's Architectural Drawings; Saul Padover's The Complete Jefferson: Containing His Major Writings, Published and Unpublished, Except His Letters; and Sarah Randolph's The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson. Fiske Kimball, Frederick Doveton Nichols, Noble E. Cunningham, Jr.,

Merrill Peterson, and Dumas Malone have also written secondary works on Jefferson's domestic life and architectural pursuits.

Newer social histories and psycho-social works, explore Jefferson's personal life and interest in an effort to determine motivations, emotions, and sentiments of this philosopher-tinkerer. Fawn Brodie's much-discussed work, Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History, provides one of the first descriptions of life at Poplar Forest. Jack McLaughlin, in Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, explores construction and slave activity at the Bedford plantation. Gisela Tauber recognizes Jefferson's penchant for privacy in "Reconstruction in Psychoanalytic Biography: Understanding Thomas Jefferson," but mistakenly credits a house in Philadelphia as his retreat and ignores the importance of his Bedford plantation. Elizabeth Langhorne was the first writer to devote an entire chapter to Poplar Forest in her work, Monticello: A Family Story.

Future scholars may devote more attention to this plantation, but at present no one has written exclusively about Poplar Forest. "Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest," therefore, will add to scholarship about the domestic life of Jefferson at his second-favorite plantation from 1774 to 1824. Much of the material covered in Chapters 3 and 4 appeared in a paper entitled, "The Symbolic Role of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest," presented at the Phi

Alpha Theta Regional Conference held at Carson-Newman  
College in Jefferson City, Tennessee on 1 April 1989.  
The language, spelling, and phraseology of quotations used  
in this thesis have been left in their original forms.

CHAPTER 1  
THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF POPLAR FOREST

Students of American history know Thomas Jefferson primarily as a statesman, revolutionary, and author. During his life, however, he considered himself to be a farmer. Jefferson owned five major plantations located in central Virginia. Monticello, however, served as his primary home and operational base. Poplar Forest was his second favorite plantation. It was a working plantation that primarily produced tobacco. Although the new plantation house later became a retreat and creative outlet for Jefferson, Poplar Forest provided valuable income, food, and durable goods for his vast agricultural holdings from 1774 to 1824.

Jefferson acquired the property through his wife, Martha Wayles Skelton, a widow who had lost both her first husband and son. Located in Bedford County, it lay approximately eighty miles from Monticello, southwest of the James River in the Southside area of Virginia. Most of this region originally belonged to Lunenburg County. Bedford County, created in 1754, comprised the northwestern corner of the former Lunenburg County with the James River forming its northern border (see Figure 1-1).<sup>1</sup> Martha's

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<sup>1</sup>Richard R. Beeman, The Evolution of the Southern

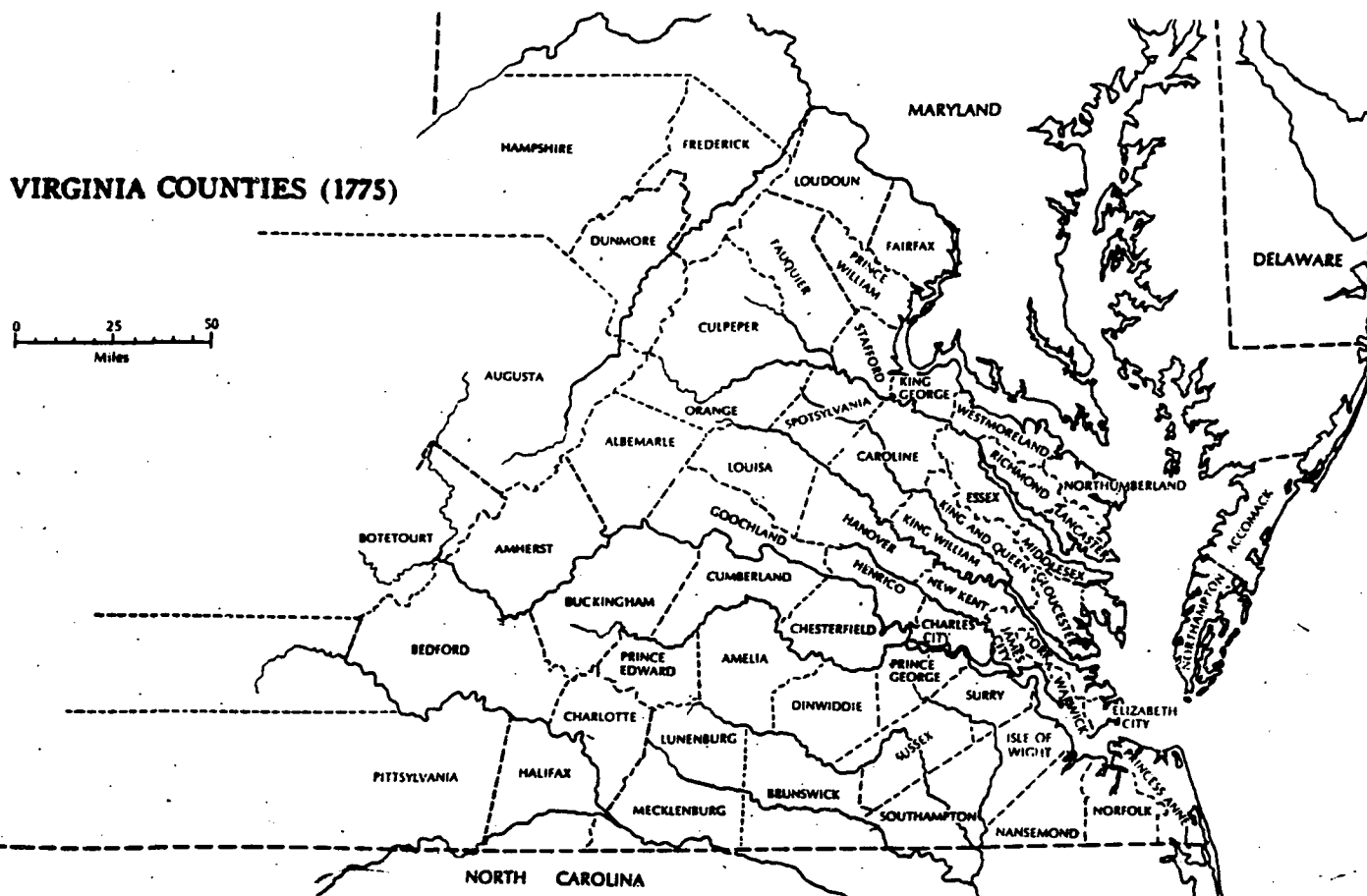


Fig. 1-1. Map of Virginia (1775). Please note locations of Albemarle and Bedford Counties. (Source: Mullin, Flight and Rebellion).

father, John Wayles, had originally purchased the land on December 21, 1764. He constructed his primary home at "The Forest" in Charles City County, Virginia but developed Poplar Forest as one of several supporting plantations.

Wayles's practice exemplified large landholders, William Byrd II being the largest, who kept primary residences in counties in the Chesapeake region but owned profitable tobacco plantations in Southside. Most farmers in this backcountry struggled through the lean times of the Southside economy on subsistence levels until shifting to more profitable tobacco production.<sup>2</sup>

John Wayles used Poplar Forest as a tobacco plantation. His daughter, Martha, may have visited as a child, but little information exists about Wayles's use of the property. A plat map drawn in 1790 shows the existence of an "old plantation house" but no description accompanies it (see Figure 1-2).<sup>3</sup>

Upon John Wayles's death in May of 1773, Martha Jefferson inherited approximately 11,000 acres of land,

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Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746-1832 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 61 and map on 62.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 60-80.

<sup>3</sup>Boyd, Julian P., ed, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), XVI: 190.

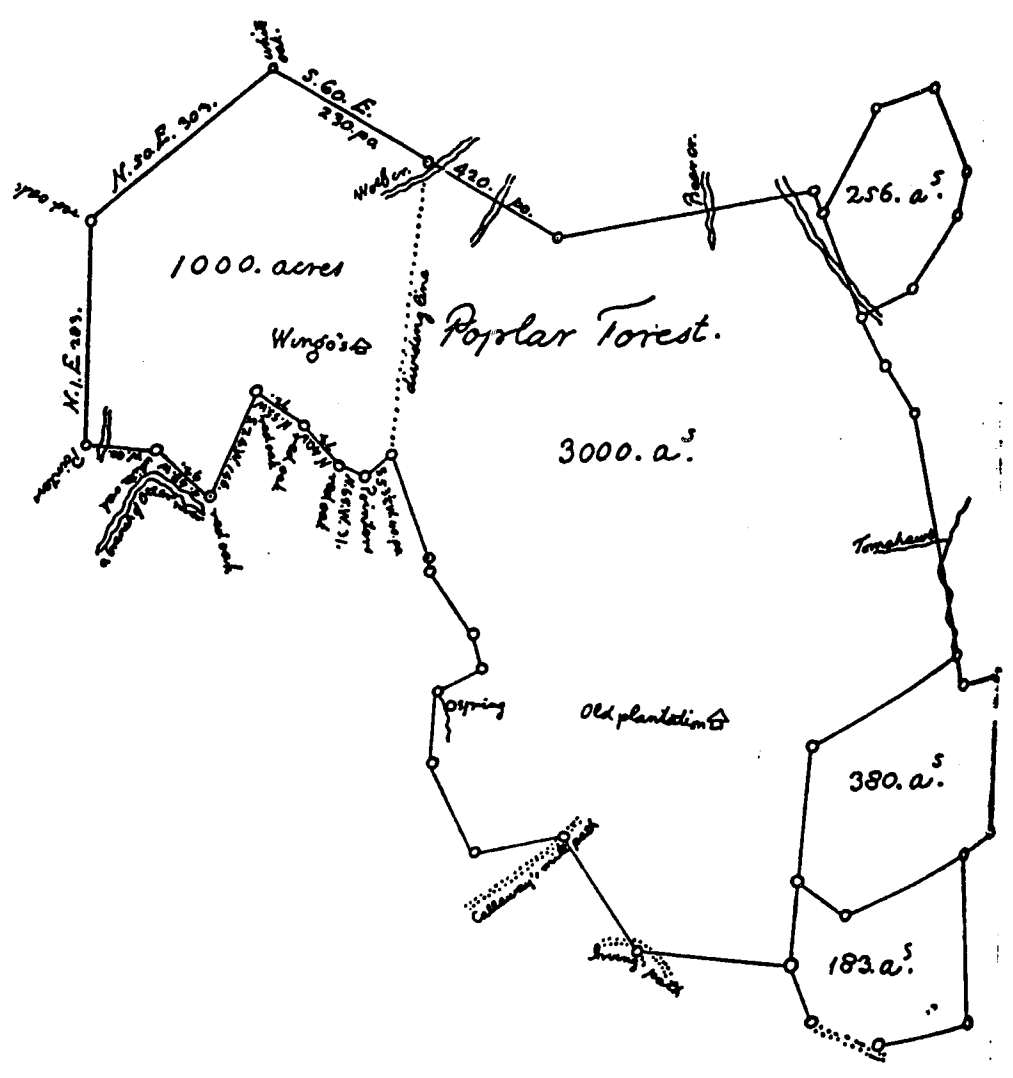


Fig. 1-2. 1790 Plat map of Poplar Forest.



including nine farms and 135 slaves.<sup>4</sup> Before this acquisition, Jefferson possessed approximately 5,000 acres and owned 50 slaves. The Wayles bequest virtually tripled his wealth but it also brought him considerable debt, amounting to £ 3749, which contributed to his later poverty.<sup>5</sup>

It is ironic that Wayles, himself, could not escape the debt-ridden credit system that accompanied tobacco production in colonial Virginia because he acted as an agent for English merchants. Wayles collected payments from his neighbors and saw first-hand the perils of indebtedness.<sup>6</sup> He once commented, "no man of any Account makes a Mortgage here but 'tis soon known his Credit is at an end and it affects him like an Act of Bankruptcy."<sup>7</sup> Regardless of his insight and experience, John Wayles left a financial burden for his daughter and her husband.

Jefferson sold half of the inherited acreage on January 14, 1774, in an attempt to pay his wife's share of

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<sup>4</sup>Fawn Brodie, Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 96.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>T. H. Breen, Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 106, 131, and 169.

<sup>7</sup>John M. Hemphill, II, ed. "John Wayles Rates His Neighbors," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 66 (1958): 304.

her father's debt.<sup>8</sup> He kept three of the Wayles plantations, Poplar Forest (4819 acres, Elk Hill (266 acres), and Elk Island (330 acres).<sup>9</sup> When Jefferson received payment for the sale of the Wayles acreage, he deposited the paper money in the treasury of the state of Virginia and planned to send it to Wayles's English factor later.

Unfortunately, this turned out to be a major mistake because the Revolutionary War had begun. "This money was used in the conduct of the war, he said; he might have said that it went down the rathole," comments Dumas Malone.<sup>10</sup> Jefferson, in effect, paid the Wayles debt at least twice during his lifetime because interest accrued as long as payment remained due. Jefferson gradually raised funds to pay the required £ 4544, consisting of the original amount plus interest, largely through the mortgaging of his tobacco crop and the sale of slaves from Poplar Forest.

Despite this shaky start, Poplar Forest became a profitable plantation, contributing foodstuffs, goods and

---

<sup>8</sup> See Edwin Morris Betts, ed, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, plantations, Poplar Forest (4819 acres), Elk Hill (266 1953), 7, for "a Roll of the Slaves of John Wayles which were allotted to T.J. in right of his wife on a division of the estate Jan. 14, 1774."

<sup>9</sup> Precise acreages taken from Dumas Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, Jefferson and His Time Series (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948), 442.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 443.

income to the Jefferson estate. The trip from Bedford to Albemarle County took approximately three days to complete (see Figure 1-3). Located approximately five miles southwest of the city of Lynchburg, Poplar Forest borders County Route 661. The drive leading to the house remains virtually as it appeared to Jefferson (see Figure 1-4). Wooded areas line the roadway, occasionally opening up to fields (see Figure 1-5). The promenade proceeds up to the plantation house which sits atop a small hill (see Figure 1-6). Jefferson built a new manor house in the early-nineteenth century (see Figures 1-7 and 1-8), but used the old Wayles plantation house until that time. When in residence at Poplar Forest, Jefferson could look out over tobacco and wheat crops growing in the nearby fields (see Figures 1-9 and 1-10).

From 1774 to 1824 Jefferson recorded production levels, land rolls, slave rolls, and supplies provided to the slaves in his Farm Book.<sup>11</sup> He received full title to the property upon his wife's death in 1782. Poplar Forest abutted two lesser plantations, Bear Run and Tomahawk (note locations on plat map, Figure 1-2 and map of Tomahawk in Figure 1-11). Jefferson kept separate records and overseers for each of the three plantations. Throughout his life, he also referred to Poplar Forest as his Bedford

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<sup>11</sup>See Betts, Farm Book.

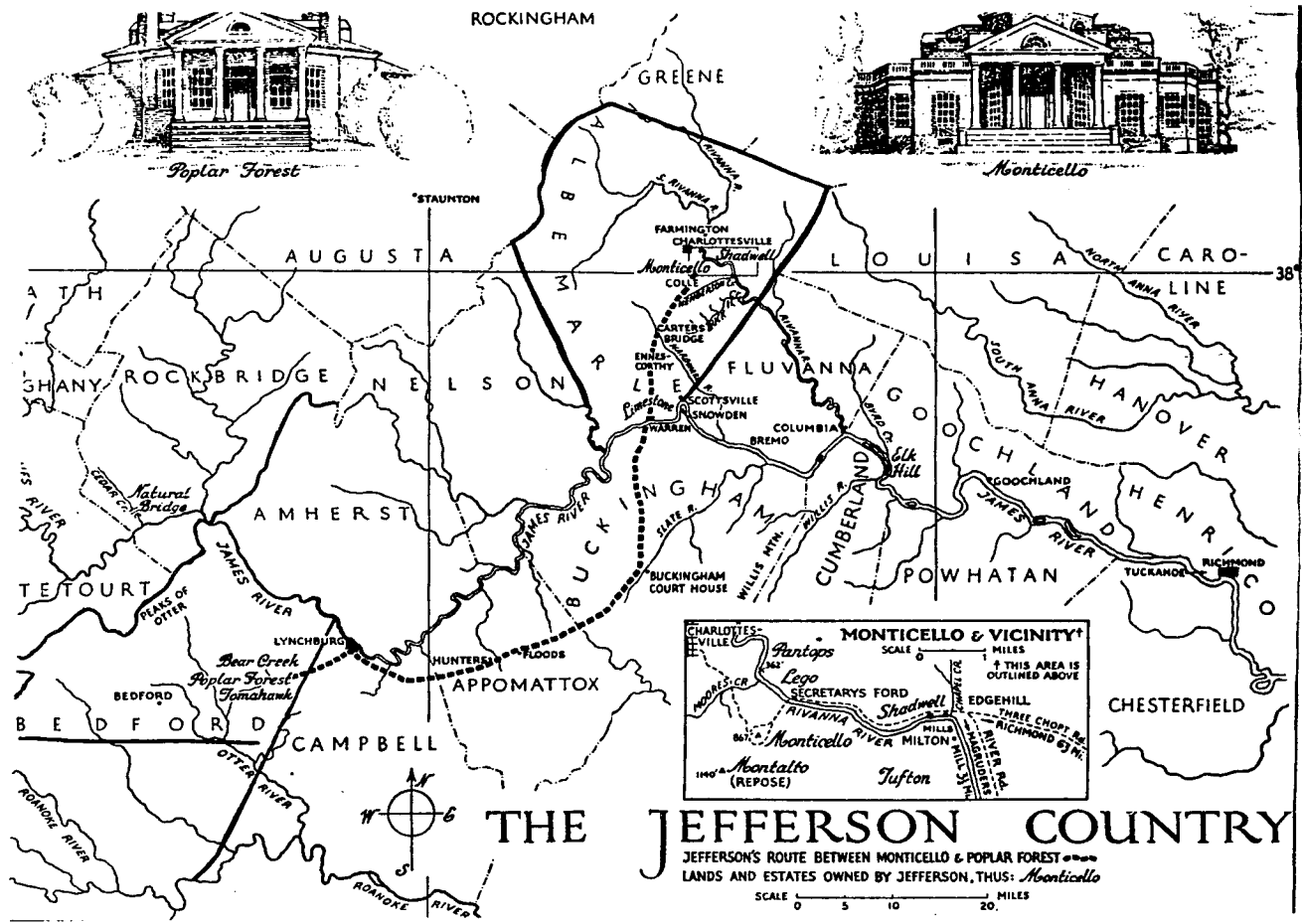


Fig. 1-3. Map of route from Monticello to Poplar Forest.  
 (Source: Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book).



Fig. 1-4. Ceremonial drive leading from Route 661 to plantation.

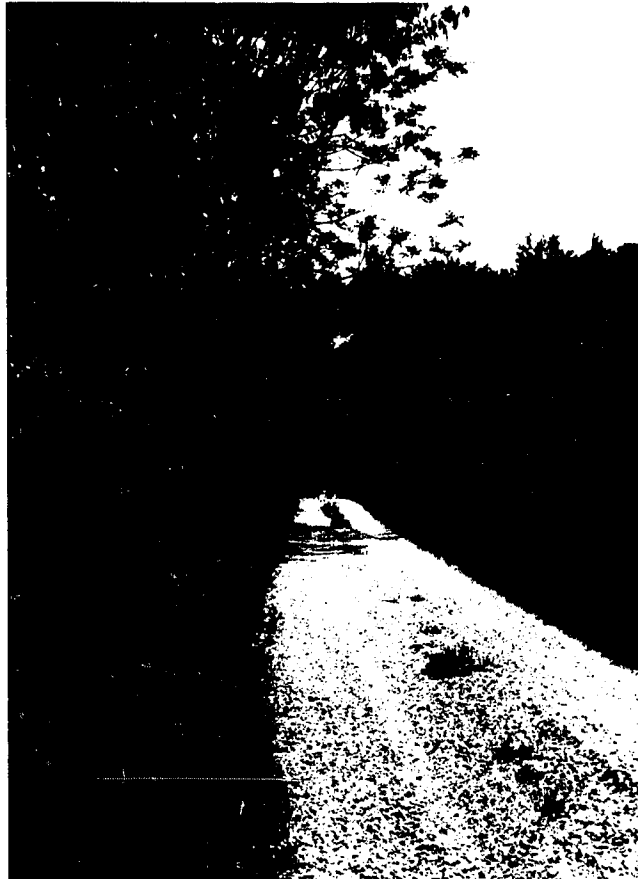


Fig. 1-5. Plantation drive.

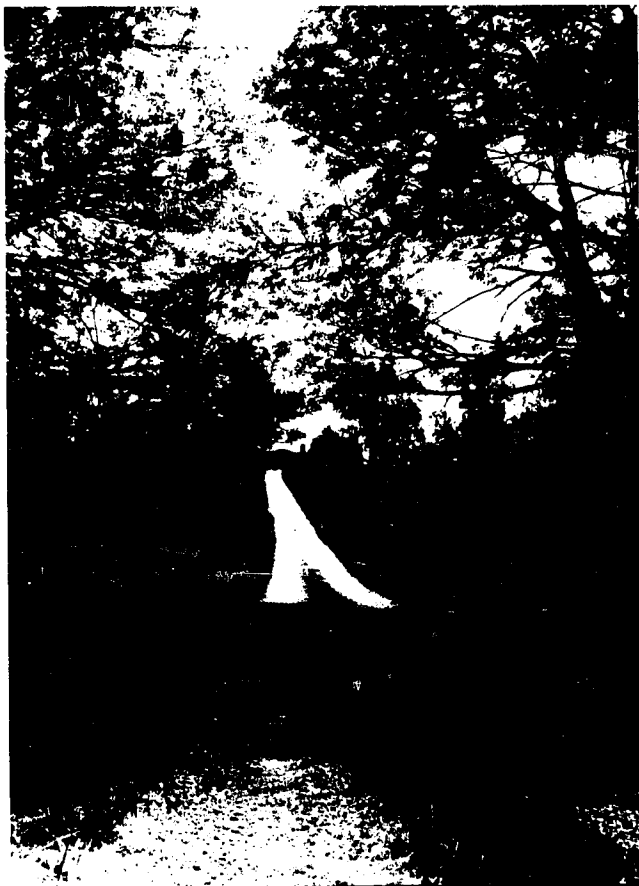


Fig. 1-6. Drive ending at the main house.



Fig. 1-7. Front facade of new plantation house.



Fig. 1-8. Western facade of new plantation house.





Fig. 1-9. Northern view from house.



Fig. 1-10. Eastern view from house.

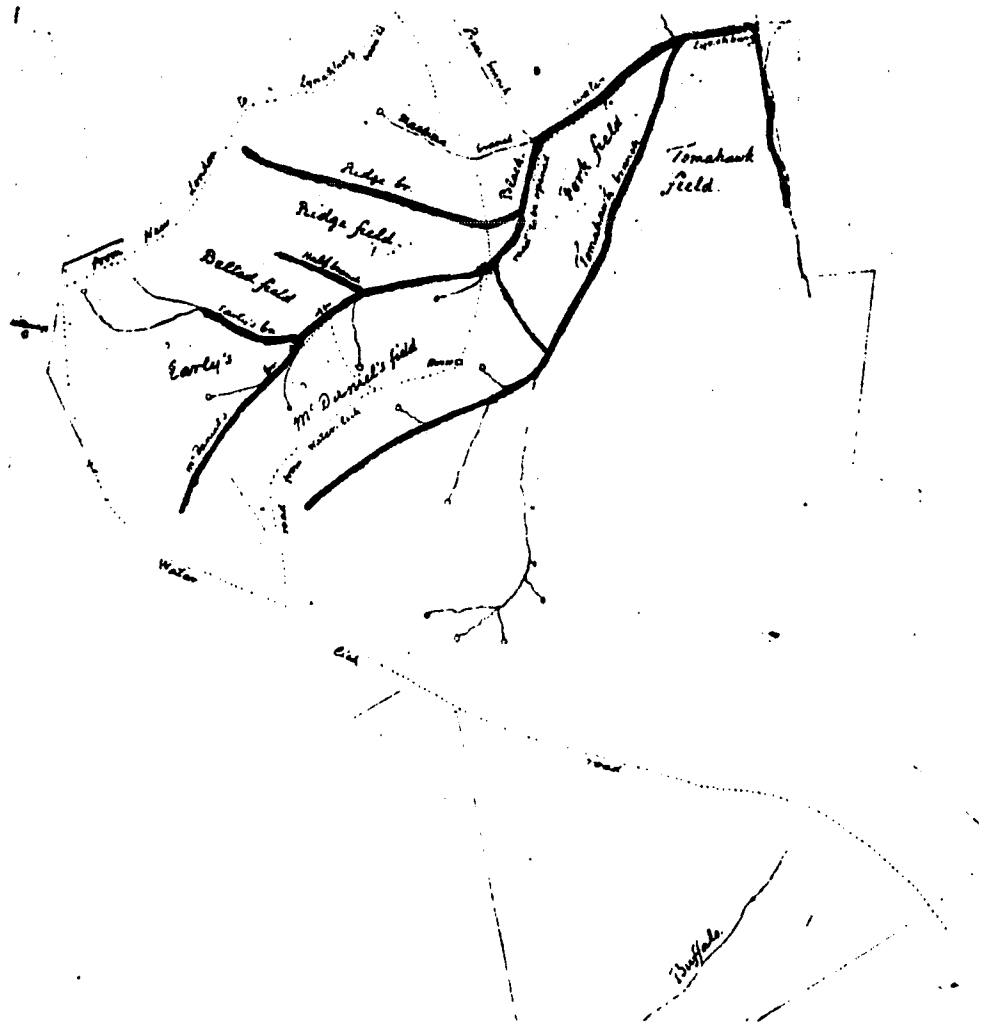


Fig. 1-11. Plat of fields and streams at Tomahawk Plantation. (Source: Betts, Farm Book).

plantation. This term usually excluded Bear Run and Tomahawk although they were also located in the county. In 1790, Jefferson reduced his Bedford acreage by giving 1000 acres to his daughter, Martha, as part of her dowry when she married Thomas Mann Randolph on February 23 of that year.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this loss, Jefferson recorded ownership of 4627 and one-half acres in Bedford in his "Land Roll for the year 1794."<sup>13</sup> Jefferson recorded a lower figure of 4164 and one-half acres in the "Land Roll" of 1810.<sup>14</sup> The size of the Bedford lands fluctuated between four and five thousand acres. During his ownership, Jefferson sold small amounts of land from Poplar Forest when he needed to raise cash to keep his credit system viable.

Forests covered most of the lands in Bedford County and only selected areas were cleared for cultivation.<sup>15</sup> The plantation contained six fields and crops were rotated from one to another on a fixed schedule. The six fields included Tomahawk field, Forkfield, Ridgefield, Beltedfield, Early's field, and McDaniel's field. Figure 1-12 consists of a page taken from his Farm Book which

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<sup>12</sup>Boyd, Papers of Jefferson, XVI: 189-190.

<sup>13</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 32.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 127.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., xvi.

lists the crop rotation schedule for the period, 1816 to 1822.<sup>16</sup> The schedule included plantings of wheat, clover, corn, peas and oats.

He became more directly involved in his farm operations after resigning from his position as Secretary of State in 1793. He complained about the poor conditions into which his farms had fallen during his absence and set out to remedy the situation. Jefferson adopted George Washington's program of crop rotation and met with good results. He altered the system to suit his needs and devised a plan to partition each plantation into seven fields of forty acres each.<sup>17</sup> The plan may not have been used precisely because the rotation schedule shown in Figure 1-12 records only six fields for each plantation.

Tobacco became the primary cash crop of the Bedford plantation. Jefferson often remarked on the superiority of the Bedford lands for growing tobacco and kept a close eye on the fluctuating price of tobacco.<sup>18</sup> Edwin Morris Betts reports that "From 1773 until his death in 1826, Jefferson's chief source of money for paying his debts came from the Bedford tobacco."<sup>19</sup> Jefferson disliked the

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>17</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 314-317.

<sup>18</sup>Boyd, Papers of Jefferson, II: 639-642 653.

<sup>19</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 256.

	1816	17	18	19	20	21	22		1816	17	18	19	20	21	22
Tipton								Poplar Forest							
Meadowfield	wh.	cl.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	Tombacco	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.
Poggio	p.o.	wh.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	Fork	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.
Barn	*	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	Ridge	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.
Indian	*	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	Belted	corn	p.o.	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.
Morgan	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	Early's	wh.	corn	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn
Hillon	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	M. Daniel's	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.
Lego								Bear creek							
Mountain	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	Halloway	corn	p.o.	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.
Culpeper	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	Haltend	wh.	corn	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn
△	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	△	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.
Oblong	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	Upper	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.
Barn	corn	p.o.	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	Middle	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.
Hickman	wh.	corn	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	Lower	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.
Monticello								candors, spinning, weaving, porcelan							
Ragged	p.o.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	hour	corn	spinn	weav	porcelan			
Meadow	wh.	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	Jan.	9.	10.05	1 1/2	3 3/4	Dec.		
Cooper's	corn	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	Feb.	10.	12.	1 1/2	4 1/2	Nov		
Knob	wh.	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	Mar.	11.	12.	1 3/4	5 1/4	Oct		
North	cl.	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	Apr.	12.	16.	2.	6	Sept.		
Belfield	cl.	wh.	corn	p.o.	wh.	cl.	cl.	May	13.	18.	2 1/4	6 3/4	Aug.		
								June	14.	20.	2 3/4	7 1/2	July		

Fig. 1-12. Crop rotation schedule.  
(Source: Betts, Farm Book).

credit system associated with tobacco cultivation and its reliance on factors, or merchants who sold the crop in England. He once described tactics used by factors to M. de Meusnier,

A powerful engine for this purpose was the giving of good prices and credit to the planter till they got him more immersed in debt than he could pay without selling his lands or slaves. They then reduced the prices given for his tobacco so that let his shipments be ever so great, and his demand of necessaries ever so economical, they never permitted him to clear off his debt.<sup>20</sup>

Jefferson followed the same routine of most Virginia tobacco growers. This crop, unlike others that could simply be planted and harvested, required close attention throughout the year. Skillful overseers gauged cultivation schedules according to weather conditions, soil quality, and their ability to control pests and diseases. In general, slaves prepared planting beds and sowed seeds during late-December and early-January. They fertilized the beds with manure, and occasionally potash. Jefferson recorded the dung output of his farm animals in order to estimate his supply of manure for fertilizer. Instructions in his Farm Book note, "Dung hill should be on a level, paved, with a vell round it, shaded, channels at bottom to

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<sup>20</sup>Boyd, Papers of Jefferson, X: 25.

leed off superfluous moisture."<sup>21</sup> By the end of May, most plants had been taken from the beds and re-planted in hills.

Overseers determined the timing of transplantation according to the warm spring weather and early growth. "According to common eighteenth-century wisdom," states T. H. Breen, "the tobacco leaves were supposed to be 'as large as a dollar.'"<sup>22</sup> The process required the utmost care because the tender plants could easily be damaged. Slaves tended the crop through the summer. This routine maintenance included topping the plants to prevent the production of flowers and encourage growth to the leaves, removing worms, bugs and suckers. Overseers determined the maturity of the crop and appropriate time to cut the leaves off of the plants. This normally occurred in September, when planters had to be wary of early frosts which might damage tobacco leaves before they could be cut.

After successful cutting, leaves were cured in open fields or barns. Slaves then stripped, stemmed, and "prized", or packed, the crop into wooden hogsheads which were made on the plantation. Poplar Forest lacked direct access to roads or rivers which led to markets in the Chesapeake region. Slaves took the hogsheads by wagon to

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<sup>21</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 82.

<sup>22</sup>Breen, Tobacco Culture, 47.

Lynchburg and put them on bateaux, a type of flatboat, to sail down the James River to Richmond where they were sold by agents at auction.

Jefferson felt Richmond scales were more accurate, in his favor, than those in Lynchburg. He, and his primary agent George Jefferson, also believed that auctions in Richmond brought more potential customers and higher prices. George Jefferson wrote to Jefferson in 1811: "You certainly have lost considerably by the sale of your last crop of Tobacco in Lynchburg, and would continue to lose by making sales there, unless by mere accident you might happen to make an advantageous one."<sup>23</sup> Jefferson echoed the message to Samuel J. Harrison in 1812, "another reason, I acknolege, induced me to make no offer of it at Lynchburg. from the very small competition at that market, the prices there are far below those at Richmond."<sup>24</sup>

Problems occasionally arose, however, that prevented the crop from reaching Richmond. Natural disasters, unseasonal weather, early frosts often complicated Jefferson's production schedule. After the crop had been harvested, the trip downriver might be delayed because of low or high water in the James River. Bateaux captains sometimes suffered mishaps and lost hogsheads overboard, as

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<sup>23</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 299-300.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 300.



happened in 1805.<sup>25</sup>

The War of 1812, with its embargoes, caused the cost of tobacco supplies to climb and tobacco prices to drop. Ironically, Jefferson instituted the first Embargo Act in 1807 while serving as President. After his retirement in 1809, he suffered losses because of political problems between the United States, Great Britain, and France. On May 1, 1809, Jefferson wrote to his agent, George Jefferson,

the accomodation with England only opens her market, & unless the French decrees are revoked (which may be doubted) we shall still be excluded from the continent.<sup>26</sup>

Prices fluctuated according to market demand and supply, product quality, competition from other growers, and timing, in terms of the appropriateness of getting the crop to Richmond. Planters often projected future returns on their tobacco harvest and calculated their anticipated earnings against previous debts in the on-going credit system. One exchange between Jefferson and his overseer at Poplar Forest, Joel Yancey, illustrates the usual result of this practice. On April 23, 1820, Jefferson wrote,

After the departure of our mail of yesterday I recieved a letter from mr Yancey at the Poplar

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 289. On this occasion, three hogsheads were ducked in the James River when the bateaux carrying the crop to market hit a rock and sank.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 297.

Forest dated on the 12th saying that on that day or the morrow a boat would leave Lynchburg with 7. hhds of my tobo. weighing about 10,000 lb. he speak of 6. of them of excellent quality for which he could that day have 8 1/2. D. in Lynchburg.<sup>27</sup>

A letter written on May 22, 1820 reveals,

Since my letter by mr Burwell I have recieved from mr Gibson an account of the sale of my tobo. he says 3 hhds were refused, the others very much stained and the quality of the tobo. inferior. it averaged 5.82 and deducting carriage it will be 5 1/2<sup>28</sup> D. on this trial of the Richmond market. . .

Agents in Richmond might also discover inequalities in weighing and prizing of the tobacco. Jefferson's records reflect an average of 1500 pounds packed into each hogshead. Each hogshead differed in weight ranging from a low of 1190 to a tightly packed 1798 pounds in two separate hogsheads shipped from Poplar Forest in 1809.<sup>29</sup>

The amount of tobacco grown varied from year to year. In 1774, after one full year under Jefferson's ownership, 35 hogsheads of tobacco were grown at Poplar Forest, and in 1775, 26 hogsheads were recorded.<sup>30</sup> Yearly totals for 1804, 1805, and 1806 ranged from 21 hogsheads containing 36,509 pounds to 29 containing 46,402 pounds.<sup>31</sup> Tobacco

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 305.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 306.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 298.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 289, 290, and 293.

prices usually ranged from \$5.00 to \$10.00, with \$7.00 being the normal price for the crop. Jefferson's Farm Book contains a cornucopia of information about his farm operations but sometimes the letters and accounts are incomplete or inconsistent. Prices recorded in the Farm Book usually relate to the sale of the entire crop. They do not correlate directly with specific quantities over time, such as pounds or hogsheads, because the size of the crop fluctuated yearly. Broad generalizations become more difficult to make because the prices and quantities change from year to year.

Wheat became a second money crop at Poplar Forest. The sale of flour complemented Jefferson's production of tobacco. Poplar Forest also supplied flour to the Albemarle plantations. Jefferson grew mostly winter wheat, with the slaves typically sowing the crop from August to December, depending on the season's climate. Harvesting began in late June and continued into August. After cutting, slaves gathered the wheat and stacked it around a granary. Jefferson specified that "in the center of each field is a granary of 2. rooms of 12. f. sq. each . . . and an open passage between them of 12. f."<sup>32</sup>

Threshing occurred in the passage. Wheat, comprised of chaff and grain, remained in one room until winter.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 314.

Servants then used a wheat fan, which replaced the threshing machine in the passage, to separate the chaff from the grain. As the fan cleaned the wheat by separating chaff from grain, it moved the crop from one room to the other. Jefferson, an obsessively practical man, also used the granaries as feed stations for cattle. He described his plan in the Farm Book, ". . . our cattle have a moveable shed fixed up at the same granary, are fed with the straw and the manure is used in the same field the ensuing spring. . ." <sup>33</sup>

After cleaning the wheat, slaves transported the grain to a mill in Lynchburg, eleven miles away, to be ground into flour. Wheat flour had four grades of quality, superfine, fine, middling, or unsalable. Sometimes ground flour was sold in Lynchburg, but was most often taken to Richmond, where prices were better. George Jefferson handled the sale of flour as well as tobacco.

Prices ranged from a low of \$3.00 per barrel to \$15.00 per barrel, and fluctuated yearly. A receipt from 1817 provides details of a sale, "93 Bbls Superfine & 9 Bbls Fine to Mr. McLeslie the Superfine at 13 3/4 \$ & the Fine at 13 1/4 \$ on 60 days credit." <sup>34</sup> Flour brought much lower prices when Jefferson needed payment in cash. In

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 314-315.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 215.

1814, he wrote that his overseer "accordingly made sale of it for 2. D. 61. c. a barrel which netted me for my wheat 48 cents a bushel."<sup>35</sup>

Overseers marked flour barrels with insignia which designated the source of each. P. F. indicated flour produced at the Bedford plantation. Wheat production at Poplar Forest averaged 500 bushels per year. Problems that interrupted tobacco production also endangered profitable wheat crops. Insects and diseases, including Hessian flies, weevils, smuts, and rusts, damaged crops routinely.

In 1811, the Lynchburg mill which ground Jefferson's Bedford flour washed away. He spent several months seeking remuneration for damaged and lost flour from its owner.<sup>36</sup> Political matters also affected production schedules. Jefferson referred to problems associated with the War of 1812 in a letter dated April 25, 1813. "I have between 4. and 500. barrels of flour caught at Richmond by the blockade, not a barrel of it sold."<sup>37</sup> Excess or unsalable grain, however, went to Monticello for the production of whiskey, malt liquors, and ale.

Agricultural diversification at Poplar Forest represents changing economic trends in the late-eighteenth

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 214.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 206-210.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 213.

century. Jefferson grappled with the credit system that accompanied tobacco production, while moving away from dependence on one cash crop. Joyce Appleby reports that increasing population rates in Europe which led to additional demands for foodstuffs contributed to the changing economy in America.<sup>38</sup> "The first and most conspicuous response to these economic changes," Appleby notes, "came in the prerevolutionary South where large planters and small farmers alike began planting wheat instead of tobacco."<sup>39</sup> The extent to which the War of 1812 interfered with Jefferson's production schedules, and income, indicates his reliance on foreign markets. His diversification into food crops also typifies the growth of a broader economy.

Jefferson's description of himself as a "farmer" rather than a "planter" further emphasizes his desire for agricultural diversification. As Robert E. Shalhope points out, the term, "planter," meant one who raised tobacco exclusively.<sup>40</sup> Jefferson, as an enlightened gentleman farmer, who experimented with crop rotation, imported varieties of plants and animals, and modified farm

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<sup>38</sup>See Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic." Journal of American History 68 (1982): 833-849.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 839.

<sup>40</sup>See Robert E. Shalhope, "Agriculture," in Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography, ed. Merrill D. Peterson

implements to suit his purposes. Indeed, his invention of a plow with a mould-board of least resistance brought fame in his own lifetime.

Jefferson, and others of his generation, associated the ownership of land, and farming, with the ideals of republican government. As Drew R. McCoy states, "American republicans valued property in land primarily because it provided personal independence."<sup>41</sup> Republican government was supposed to protect one's rights to property, personal independence, and freedom of commerce. The eighteenth century mentality tied this political economy to social development.<sup>42</sup> Many feared that expansion of commerce would lead to a fully industrialized, and socially corrupt, nation. Americans of this era felt that a predominantly agricultural nation could avoid problems associated with large-scale manufacturing; such as overpopulation, poverty, a class of landless poor people, and a corrupt class of wealthy citizens who pursued luxury at the expense of the laboring class.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these fears, individuals saw "home

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(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), 385-398.

<sup>41</sup>Drew R. McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 68.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 105-113.

manufacturing," that involving the production of domestic commodities for individual use, as being acceptable. The development of light industries would further relieve American dependence on foreign markets and provide a favorable balance of trade for their young nation.

Although Jefferson opposed Alexander Hamilton's economic programs in the Washington administration, he later became involved in the expansion of American markets overseas.

European markets both needed American produce and aided farmers in pursuing the republican ideals of property and commerce. McCoy points out,

Although Jefferson never explicitly stated the matter in these terms, republican farmers were in fact dependent on foreign markets to sustain their industry and full employment on the land; as a necessary cure for potential idleness and degeneracy, foreign commerce supported the virtuous character of America's rural population.<sup>44</sup>

Jefferson delved into light industrial manufactures in an attempt to relieve his debt situation and to provide more steady income to his estate. Manufacturing also provided goods for Jefferson's farms, increasing their self-sufficiency. Jefferson established rudimentary textile operations at Poplar Forest and Monticello for these purposes.

The trade embargo of 1808-1809 and War of 1812 forced

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<sup>44</sup>Drew R. McCoy, "Political Economy," in Thomas Jefferson, ed. Peterson, 106.



many Americans to produce their own cloth. He purchased a Spinning Jenny and a loom with a flying shuttle in 1811, and arranged for selected slaves to be taught how to spin thread and weave cloth. Suppliers in Richmond provided cotton and Merino sheep raised at Monticello and Poplar Forest supplied wool for cloth production. In 1813, he purchased a hand-carding engine for carding cotton so that the spinners did not fall behind production schedules.

In enlightened fashion, Jefferson researched all aspects of textile manufacturing. He knew of improvements in the field, namely Arkwright's more advanced machine, but continued to use the Spinning Jenny, saying "I have therefore used the Jenny, because our workmen can make them, and any body can repair them."<sup>45</sup> By 1814, he had four Spinning Jenny machines in operation, run by young girls and women. Cloth production proved somewhat profitable and remained an important occupation at Poplar Forest to 1826.

Jefferson's farming activities at Poplar Forest exemplify characteristics of an enlightened gentleman farmer who straddled two ages, the idealistic eighteenth century, where agriculture served as the foundation of the new republic, and the burgeoning industrial growth of the nineteenth. Jefferson continued to rely on tobacco as the

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<sup>45</sup> Betts, Farm Book, 490.

major cash crop at Poplar Forest, but used other crops, and products, to supplement his income and provide food and supplies for the Albemarle plantations. All of these farm and industrial pursuits rested on the foundation of slavery. Slaves became an American version of the European class of landless poor who supported the economy of Jefferson's Virginia and allowed him to pursue the diverse interests of an enlightened gentleman farmer.

CHAPTER 2  
SLAVERY AT POPLAR FOREST

Despite his eloquent speeches regarding the life of a farmer, Jefferson rarely touched the soil. He relied on slaves to produce his crops and manufactured goods. Accounts left by Jefferson and his numerous overseers document slave activity at Poplar Forest and exemplify the operation of the "peculiar institution" in eighteenth century Virginia. He also instituted industrial slavery in the early nineteenth century at the plantation, through spinning and weaving projects and cloth production.

John C. Miller summarizes Jefferson's views on slavery and race most concisely. He writes, "Whether free or slave, the black man represented to Jefferson a menace to the established order."<sup>46</sup> Jefferson outlined his most lengthy plans in Notes on the State of Virginia. Slavery represented a social evil that had become perpetually intertwined with the economy of the nation. He believed, however, that members of the black race lacked sufficient intellectual capabilities to provide for themselves and advance in a white society. In 1781, Jefferson argued, "I advance it . . . as a suspicion only that the blacks,

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<sup>46</sup>John C. Miller, "Slavery" in Thomas Jefferson ed., Peterson, 422.

whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the endowments both of mind and body."<sup>47</sup>

Jefferson promoted gradual abolition of slavery despite his personal views on race. He wrote to Benjamin Banneker, a black mathematician and surveyor, "Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, . . . [or] more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition of both of their body & mind to what it ought to be."<sup>48</sup> Because of the tremendous acreage he farmed and his heavy debt load, Jefferson could not afford to free slaves whose usage, leasing, or sale could provide income. Activity at Poplar Forest exemplifies Jefferson's feelings towards slaves through his close relationships with a selected few and treatment of the majority, both by himself and his overseers. Jefferson's Farm Book records slave personnel who worked at Poplar Forest, as well as provisions given to them, namely bread, beds, and blankets.

One family remained with the plantation when it passed

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<sup>47</sup>Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 143. See John Chester Miller, The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery (New York: The Free Press, 1977) for a more thorough discussion of Jefferson's attitudes towards blacks.

<sup>48</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 11.

from John Wayles to Martha in 1774.<sup>49</sup> Guinea Will and Betty worked in the fields. Their three children, Hall, Dilcy, and Suckey, ages seven, five, and three gained responsibilities as they grew. Tables 1 and 2 provide population totals and sex distribution of slaves at Poplar Forest from 1774 to 1822. Jefferson often moved slaves from one plantation to another which makes following their progress and family development more difficult. He relied on natural population increase to fill his labor needs and made few purchases.

Jefferson continually emphasized the importance of stabilizing his work force through maintenance of nuclear family units. He usually listed his slaves by family group in his Farm Book and included birth dates when possible. Between 1783 and 1794, the trend had changed from using single individuals in the labor supply at Poplar Forest to developing family units which would provide a steady supply of laborers in future generations.

Slave population sharply increased between 1805 and 1822, reflecting the success of a stable environment on population growth by natural increase. Tables 3 and 4 provide the age distributions of slave populations in 1805 and 1822. For both years, over two-thirds of the total population was less than 30 years old. Philip D. Morgan

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 7.

TABLE 1  
SLAVE POPULATION TOTALS FOR POPLAR FOREST

Year	Adults	Children*	Males	Females	Total
1774 . . .	8	4	7	5	12
1783 . . .	14	18	17	15	32
1794 . . .	25	25	26	24	50
1805 . . .	26	45	36	35	71
1822 . . .	55	79	76	58	134

\*Children are defined as those between 0 and 18 years.

TABLE 2  
SEX DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVES AT POPLAR FOREST

Males			Females		
Year	Adults	Children*	Year	Adults	Children*
1774 . . .	4	3	1774 . . .	4	1
1783 . . .	9	10	1783 . . .	7	9
1794 . . .	13	13	1794 . . .	12	12
1805 . . .	11	25	1805 . . .	15	20
1822 . . .	36	50	1822 . . .	29	30

\*Children are defined as those between 0 and 18 years.

TABLE 3  
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVES, JULY 1805

Ages	Males	Females	Total
71 - 80 . . . . .	0	1	1
61 - 70 . . . . .	1	0	1
51 - 60 . . . . .	1	3	4
41 - 50 . . . . .	0	0	0
31 - 40 . . . . .	7	4	11
21 - 30 . . . . .	3	6	9
11 - 20 . . . . .	10	8	18
0 - 10 . . . . .	14	11	25

\*\*The ages of two slaves could not be determined.



TABLE 4  
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVES, 1822

Ages	Males	Females	Total
70 - 79 . . . .	1	3	4
60 - 69 . . . .	1	1	2
50 - 59 . . . .	5	2	7
40 - 49 . . . .	5	5	10
30 - 39 . . . .	4	9	13
20 - 29 . . . .	11	8	19
10 - 19 . . . .	26	16	42
0 - 9 . . . .	22	15	37

found that the slave population in the piedmont area of Virginia contained a high proportion of children, indicating "a relatively high rate of natural increase among that region's slaves."<sup>50</sup> Natural replenishment of the labor supply reduced Jefferson's reliance on purchasing slaves and provided potential income through the sale of slaves from Poplar Forest.

He tried to maintain slave contentment on his plantations by allowing some latitude in acceptable behavior and by providing them with basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Pork became a staple of the slave's diet. Jefferson raised fine breeds of imported hogs to supply his needs, such as the Chinese, or Parkinson breed, Guinea, and the Calcutta and kept yearly records of their meat production.<sup>51</sup> Slaves were allowed to tend small gardens in their free time but could not duplicate crops raised by Jefferson. He commented to his grandson Thomas Mann Randolph in 1798,

I have ever found it necessary to confine them to such articles as are not raised for the farm. there is no other way of drawing a line between what is theirs & mine.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Philip D. Morgan, "Slave Life in Piedmont Virginia, 1720-1800," in Colonial Chesapeake Society, ed. Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 436.

<sup>51</sup>See Betts, Farm Book.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 144.

Overseers supplied them with whiskey during harvest and times of sickness.<sup>53</sup>

Families probably lived in one-room, wooden structures with a wooden or wattle-and-daub chimney and earthen floors. Typical vernacular dwellings, of log or plank construction, resemble those shown in Figures 2-1 and 2-2.<sup>54</sup> These impermanent structures represented a blend of African and colonial Virginia traditions, "Africans widely used earthfast methods of construction, light pole siding, and roofs in which the beams were light and the covering was a structural element."<sup>55</sup>

Slaves in colonial Virginia often dug root cellars, positioned in front of the fireplaces, in the earthen floors of their cabins. Wooden or earthen steps led down to the cellar. They covered the opening with a wooden board and spread dirt over it, hiding it and maintaining

Archaeologists at Monticello have excavated slave work areas, domestic areas, and cellar remains from slave

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<sup>53</sup> Jack McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello: A Biography of a Builder (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Mechal Sobel, The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 114-115.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 119. Please see Cary Carson, Norman F. Barka, William M. Kelso, Garry Wheeler Stone, and Dell Upton, "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies," Winterthur Portfolio 16 (1981): 135-196 for a more comprehensive study of impermanent, vernacular houses. the appearance of a solid earthen floor.



Fig. 2-1. Typical log slave dwelling of eighteenth-century Virginia. (Source: Sobel, The World They Made Together).



Fig. 2-2. Typical plank slave dwelling.  
(Source: Sobel, The World They Made Together).

dwellings. Their findings may pertain to tenant houses at Poplar Forest. Slave root cellars contain an interesting array of objects, indicating their use as storage areas and trash pits. Archaeologists found animal bones which are not typical of foods provided to slave families. Other trash included broken dishes resembling those used in the plantation house by Jefferson's family, links of metal chain, and sets of shackles. These artifacts disclose unique information not found in documentary evidence.

The tenant houses at Poplar Forest differ from the typical slave dwellings of the period and were probably built after Jefferson's period of occupation (see Figures 2-3, 2-4, and 2-5). These permanent two-story brick structures, probably built in the early to mid-nineteenth century, provided more spacious and comfortable accommodations than slaves normally received. The American bond brickwork represents a later period of construction and differs from the Flemish bond brickwork of the plantation house (see Figures 2-4 and 2-5).

Located near the eastern privy, these buildings do not conform to Jefferson's octagonal theme for the property (see Figure 2-6). Preliminary archaeological excavations at Poplar Forest have located a root cellar in one of the tenant houses.<sup>56</sup> Accurate dating of these structures

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<sup>56</sup>Dorsey Bodeman, Coordinator of Interpretation at Poplar Forest, Interview by author, 19 May 1989 (Forest,



Fig. 2-3. Southern tenant house.



Fig. 2-4. Detail of southern tenant house.





Fig. 2-5. Detail of northern tenant house.



Fig. 2-6. View showing position of tenant houses and eastern privy.

depends on analysis of more conclusive information gained through further archaeological investigation. If they date to Jefferson's occupation, they may have served as very fine slave dwellings, overseer's quarters, or spinning and weaving houses.

Documentary evidence fails to provide clear evidence as to the locations of slave dwellings at Poplar Forest. Mechal Sobel remarks that, "Jefferson is known to have ordered his overseer to build the Negro houses close together so that the fewer nurses may serve & that the children may be more easily attended to by the superannuated women."<sup>57</sup> He provided housing for each family and for single women with children. In November, 1810, he directed his overseer, Joel Yancey,

. . . Maria having now a child, I promised her a house to be built this winter, be so good as to have it done. place it along the garden fence on the road Eastward from Hannah's house.<sup>58</sup>

Jefferson encouraged individuals on his plantations to remain "in the family" by marrying members on the same plantation. He rewarded this behavior by building the young couple a house and giving them a pot and a bed. In 1815, after recognizing Phill Hubbard's marriage to Dick's

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Virginia).

<sup>57</sup> Sobel, The World They Made Together, 111.

<sup>58</sup> Betts, Farm Book, 41.

Hanah, Jefferson wrote to Jeremiah Goodman, "I would wish you to give to Dick's Hanah a pot, and a bed, which I always promise them when they take husbands at home and I shall be very glad to hear that others of the young people follow their example."<sup>59</sup>

Letters between Jefferson and his overseers also provide information about the treatment of slaves and their behavior. Like other eighteenth-century plantation owners, Jefferson maintained a hierarchy among his workers. The overseer supervised the slaves on the plantation. At Poplar Forest, the following served in this position; Bowling Clark (1789-1801), Burgess Griffin (1801-1811), Jeremiah Goodman (1811-1815), Joel Yancey (1815-1821), and Mr. Gough (1821- ? ).<sup>60</sup>

Figure 2-7 provides the details of the overseers contract.<sup>61</sup> In addition to these duties, Jefferson expected each Bedford overseer to correspond frequently, providing details about production schedules, personnel and maintenance problems. Jefferson complained about Burgess Griffin's reluctance to maintain a steady correspondence. He had to gain information about Poplar

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<sup>59</sup> Edwin Morris Betts, ed Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766-1824: With relevant Extracts from his other Writings (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1944), 540.

<sup>60</sup> Betts, Farm Book, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 76.

## Overseers.

## Articles for contracts with them.

the employer to have his share of grain at a fixed price at the end of the year if he chuses it.

not to share till seed grain is taken out, & then of what is sold or eaten by measure only.

allow 1/2 a share for every horse, & the same for a plough boy.

a share for every 8. hands as far as 16. but never more than 2 shares.

provision 100. lb. pork if single 500.lb. if married.

to be turned off at any time of year if his employer disapproves of his conduct, on paying a proportion of what shall be made accordingly to the time he has staid.

to pay for carrying his share of the crops to market.

to pay his own taxes & levies.

to pay his share of liquor & hiring at harvest.

to exchange clear profits with his employer at the end of the year, if the employer chuses it.

not allowed to keep a horse or a goose, or to keep a woman out of the crop for waiting on them.

Fig. 2-7. Overseers' contract.  
(Source: Betts, Farm Book).

Forest through secondary sources; namely, agents in Richmond and Bedford neighbors. In 1809, Jefferson commented to George Jefferson, "Griffin is a good overseer, but has the fault of never writing to me; so that I never learn the amount of my crop of tobo. till it gets to your hands."<sup>62</sup> Jefferson later implied that Griffin had overworked his slaves during his tenure at Poplar Forest.<sup>63</sup>

The extant letters, particularly those from Jeremiah Goodman and Joel Yancey, provide great detail about activity on the farm and offer some information about the overseers themselves. Jefferson hired Jeremiah Goodman on August 4, 1811. He agreed to supervise sixteen hands in exchange for \$200 and a percentage of the crops as outlined in the general overseers' contract.<sup>64</sup> Goodman wrote dutifully, but produced low yields of wheat and tobacco.<sup>65</sup> His wife also worked on the plantation. She taught the Bedford women to spin and weave, and wove cloth for Jefferson's use as well. In a memorandum to Goodman in 1811, Jefferson stated

. . . as a compensation for teaching Aggy and Edy to weave, I propose to give her the

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 297.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 42. Jefferson commented on Griffin's habit of overworking the slaves in a letter to Joel Yancey, dated 17 January 1819.

usual price for all the weaving she may do for me, the first year, considering it as her apprenticeship: and that after-wards she shall have the same proportion of her time as she is to have of the spinners.<sup>66</sup>

Joel Yancey replaced Goodman in 1815. Jefferson gave Yancey additional responsibilities and allowed him to supervise subordinate overseers at Bear Creek and Tomahawk. In 1815, Jefferson wrote, ". . . with respect to the overseers, you know I placed them absolutely at your command. do as you please on that subject without waiting to consult me."<sup>67</sup> Yancey served Jefferson well and corresponded frequently about yearly yields and problems at Poplar Forest. Yancey left the plantation in 1821 when Jefferson transferred management of his lands to his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Apparently, the transaction upset Yancey, who felt it indicated a failure by himself in the conduct of plantation affairs. Jefferson assuaged his fears, however, and commented on Yancey's fine service.

. . . I beg you to be assured; that I have been ever so impressed with the assurance of your zeal, care, & direction of my affairs that I should have considered your withdrawal at any time as a misfortune. . .<sup>68</sup>

Thomas Jefferson Randolph appointed Mr. Gough to

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<sup>66</sup> Betts, Garden Book, 466.

<sup>67</sup> Betts, Farm Book, 154.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 156.

complete the remaining year on Joel Yancey's contract. Subsequent letters make no further mention of Mr. Gough's service on the farm.

Jefferson developed a close relationship with the house servants at Poplar Forest. The new plantation house, used after 1809, was very open and had little physical privacy. Rooms on the main floor lacked doors and space remained open for easy traffic circulation (see Figure 3-1). Jefferson used the house as a retreat and entertained only selected friends and family members during his stays at the plantation. House servants at Poplar Forest enjoyed closer contact to Jefferson than did slaves at Monticello because of the house's design and purpose.

Hannah oversaw domestic duties in the house when Jefferson visited. She learned to read and write, either by her own perseverance or through instruction by one of Jefferson's family members. A letter written by Hannah on November 15, 1818, to Jefferson reveals the concern and friendship that she felt towards her master. He could not make the seasonal trip to Poplar Forest due to ill health, and Hannah writes

Master I write you a few lines to let you know that your house and furniture are all safe as I expect you will be glad to know I heard that you did not expect to come up this fall I was sorry to hear that you are so unwell, you could not come it grieve me many time. . . .<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 41.



Her letter lacks punctuation, but concern over Jefferson's health comes through clearly. Hannah continues by encouraging Jefferson to recognize the grace of God. She witnesses to him as an equal, but falls back to her subordinate social position in her closing statement.

Master I do not my ignorant letter will be  
much encouragement to you as knows I am a  
poor ignorant creature, this leaves us all  
well

adieu, I am your  
humble servant  
Hannah<sup>70</sup>

Hannah's words express concern of a friend who also served as a domestic servant, and bound slave. She recognized her social position and tactfully maintained it.

No other slave at Poplar Forest held such a close relationship with his master. After house servants, slave artisans stood next in the labor hierarchy of the plantation. Jefferson specified skill levels of his workers only in the slave roll for 1774. In that year, six of twelve slaves worked as laborers, and one titheable slave worked at a skilled trade. Titheable individuals served as apprentices to white craftsmen until they learned their craft. They often acquired a last name reflective of their skill, such as Phill Shoemaker or Davey Carpenter.

John Hemings, who was a mulatto carpenter and joiner from Monticello, worked periodically on the construction of

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 42.

the new house at Poplar Forest and built furniture for it. Hemings made commodes, chests of drawers, chairs, tables, and anything else that Jefferson might require.<sup>71</sup> John received special recognition because of his birthright, as Betty Heming's son. She had been John Wayles's mistress before his death, and had conceived her son, John, with a white carpenter named Joseph Nelson.

John Hemings also could write and often corresponded with Jefferson and Jefferson's granddaughters about progress on the house constructed between 1806 and 1823. He wrote to Septimia Randolph, Jefferson's granddaughter, from Poplar Forest on August 28, 1825 and mentioned work in progress to repair fire damage on the house.

I shoul gite don the house on tusday that  
is tining it we have all the Tarrste [terrace]  
to do yet which is one hundred feet Long and  
22 feet 8 inches wide yesterday we just hade  
one Lode of the stuff brought home fore the  
gutters and that is 25 mile off where it came  
from I am in hope I shal be able to com home  
by the 25 of Nomenber Ef Life Last

I am your obediente seirvant

John hemmings<sup>72</sup>

Letters frequently circulated between Poplar Forest Monticello. Jefferson instructed his overseers to send young boys to Monticello where they would work in his nailery, making hand-wrought and machine-cut nails. In

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<sup>71</sup>McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 365.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 122.

1807, four Bedford slaves arrived at the nailery, Moses, Bedford Davey, Bedford John, and Phill Hubbard.<sup>73</sup> After reaching age sixteen, some of these boys became apprentices to craftsmen or went into the fields as laborers.

Wagons regularly traveled between Albemarle and Bedford Counties carrying workers, plants, foodstuffs, letters, construction materials, and supplies from one plantation to another. Overseers usually trusted slaves to find their own way on these journeys. They carried written passes to assure other travelers that the slaves had received permission to make the trips.

Young girls engaged in textile crafts, like spinning and weaving. Sometimes these girls went to work at Monticello, but as instruction improved at Poplar Forest, they often remained on the Bedford plantation. If they failed to learn their crafts, Jefferson instructed overseers to send the girls into the fields as common laborers. Jefferson wrote to Jeremiah Goodman in 1813 about one worker who lagged in her duties.

. . . of Sally we can make nothing at all. I never saw so hopeless a subject. she seems neither to have the inclination nor the understanding to learn. . . I have given her notice that she shall have some days trial more and if there be no improvement she must cease to spin more cloth and go out to work with the overseer. . .<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Betts, Garden Book, 357.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 483.

The field workers ranked lowest in the slave hierarchy recognized by both blacks and whites. Small children sometimes worked in the fields with others who could not, or would not, learn a skill. They also helped sow seeds in gardens in Jefferson's enlightened landscape plan for the lawn.<sup>75</sup>

Jefferson also used adult slaves, referring to them as his workmen, on construction and landscaping projects. Slaves graded the back lawn, creating a large, rectangular central depression (see Figure 2-8). They terraced it by building hillsides with the redeposited soil. Slaves used some of this soil to build earthen mounds which concealed the privies (see Figures 2-9 and 2-10). These individuals moved a tremendous amount of earth in order to create a clear vista from the southern portico of Jefferson's new octagonal house. They developed the octagonal border which encompassed the grounds near the house. Jefferson sent written instructions which directed plantings of trees, shrubs, and bulbs on the mounds and near dependencies (see Figures 2-9 and 2-10).

Additional letters and memoirs allow closer inspection of daily activities at Poplar Forest through descriptions of specific instances of approved and disapproved behavior among the slaves. Jefferson relied on his overseer to

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<sup>75</sup> Betts, Garden Book, 487.



Fig. 2-8. Southern lawn.



Fig. 2-9. Eastern mound, note location of octagonal privy.



Fig. 2-10. Western mound.

maintain order on the plantation. These men found themselves in the role of disciplinarian while Jefferson played the role of benevolent master. Slaves often went to Jefferson for reprieve from the overseer who, unbeknownst to the slaves, was actually carrying out Jefferson's orders.

Hannah's son, Billy, created some problems for his masters. He grew up at Poplar Forest and moved to Monticello at age nineteen to learn the cooper's trade. Billy's stay ended quickly, and Jefferson wrote to Joel Yancey that Billy would return to Poplar Forest "'as soon as he can make a good [barrel] band' because 'he is too ungovernable.'"<sup>76</sup> Billy arrived sooner than expected because he had continued to resist the cooper's efforts. He became a field laborer, signifying a demotion in the slave hierarchy.

Billy's attitude did not improve. He rebelled because the overseer forced the slaves to work on Sunday, normally their only free day during the week. Yancey changed the work schedule because frost threatened the tobacco crop.<sup>77</sup> Jack McLaughlin reveals the episode and says that Billy got into a fight with the overseer, bit his thumb severely, and ran to Jefferson at Monticello to redress his grievances

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<sup>76</sup>McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 116.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 117.

against Yancey.<sup>78</sup> Upon close reading of the letters from October, 1819, however, it seems that Yancey reported on two Billy's, Hannah's Billy and Moses Billy. The fight actually involved Moses Billy because Yancey clearly states that "Hannah's Billy has not made his appearance yet" in the same letter in which he reports the fight.<sup>79</sup> Yancey had placed Moses Billy at Tomahawk because of behavioral problems. He planned to send him to Monticello "as soon as I can get any person that I can depend to take charge of him."<sup>80</sup> Six days later, Yancey writes that [Moses] Billy had been taken to jail in Charlottesville and "Hannah's Billy arrived here on Friday last."<sup>81</sup>

In this same series of letters, Yancey complains that "They run from here to you, and from you to here, I know of only one remedy. . ."<sup>82</sup> Rebellious slaves often served jail terms for their misdeeds and were sold as soon as possible. Jame Hubbard, Hannah's brother, became noteworthy for his escapes. In April, 1812, Jefferson discovered that Hubbard "had been living in Lexington

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 44-45.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.



upwards of a twelvemonth."<sup>83</sup> He sent a man to capture Hubbard and Jefferson states, "I had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions, and committed to jail . . ."<sup>84</sup> Reuben Perry purchased Jame Hubbard for \$300 plus court fines and transportation costs. At this time, Perry worked on the construction of the new house at Poplar Forest and Hubbard joined him there.

Soon after the sale, problems arose with another slave, Hercules. He ran away and served time in jail before returning to the Bedford plantation. Jefferson instructed Jeremiah Goodman to accept Hercules without further punishment because "it is his first folly in this way."<sup>85</sup> He encouraged Goodman to handle the situation, "letting him receive the pardon as from yourself alone, and not by my interference, for this is what I would have none of them to suppose."<sup>86</sup>

Despite Jefferson's wishes, the slaves knew that the master of Monticello intervened in their punishments and reprieves. Hercules later became involved in a serious situation involving other slaves. Joel Yancey reported the incident to Jefferson on July 1, 1819.

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

we have had no deaths since Heath, but a good many sick and complaining, they charge Hercules with Poisoning, and the cause of all deaths here for the last 12 months, he certainly has been intermate with<sup>87</sup> a Negro Doct. and have got physic from him.

Yancey failed to prove the charges, but believed that Hercules could not be trusted. "The evidence in his opinion was not strong enough to send them to jail but I am satisfied he has done a great deal of mischief, and ought to be hung. . . ."88

Hercules's fate remains a mystery, as Yancey and Jefferson make no further mention of him. Overall, Jefferson had good relationships with his slaves, based upon concern for these individuals under his care. He advised overseers to favor them when non-threatening grievances arose. Phill Hubbard, of the Poplar Forest plantation, married a slave named Hanah, from Bear Creek, apparently without the overseer's permission. Jeremiah Goodman refused to let the couple live together and Jefferson interceded. He judged the case, as he had done with others, on an individual basis.

I would by no means have Phill punished for what he has done; for altho I had let them all know that their runnings away should be punished, yet Phill's

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

character is not that of a runaway.<sup>89</sup>

Phill and Hanah moved in together, resolving the situation which had led to Phill's disobedience.

Jefferson and his overseers allowed the slaves a certain degree of personal freedom in their homes, if it did not threaten order on the plantation. He believed that slaves who possessed some sense of personal freedom and responsibility were more content, and thus worked and behaved better. Slaves continually traveled between Albemarle and Bedford to work or carry supplies. These individuals, usually male, traveled alone. They bore responsibility for their conduct and cargo.

Often families became separated and members worked in Bedford or Albemarle. Jefferson continually promoted family unity and allowed slaves extended visits to re-establish contact between their relatives. He also respected friendships, as that between Moses, from Bedford, and his Monticello friends, "I have given Moses leave to stay a day with his friends."<sup>90</sup> Jefferson encouraged men and women marry within the plantation group in an attempt to avoid tension and unhappiness among the ranks. When an individual married an outsider, however, Jefferson often sought to purchase the mate. Jefferson recognized the

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<sup>89</sup> Betts, Garden Book, 540.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 482.

importance of family relationships in the slave's life. By satisfying this need, he benefitted by maintaining harmony and a degree of contentment with plantation life.

Economic matters sometimes interfered with enlightened ideals of promoting harmony within the "family." Jefferson sold slaves to gain cash to pay his own debts and those inherited from John Wayles's estate. He mentioned both practical and idealistic goals to justify his sale of Dinah and her family in 1792.

Finding it necessary to sell a few more slaves to accomplish the debt of mr Wayles to Farrell & Jones, I have thought of disposing of Dinah & her family. as her husband lives with you [Randolph Jefferson] I should chuse to sell her<sup>91</sup> in your neighbor-hood so as to unite her with him.

Jefferson sometimes took the slaves's wishes into consideration when selling them. He sold Lucy to Joel Yancey only on the condition that "she is willing to be sold."<sup>92</sup> Slaves who had runaway or stolen materials from the plantation received no such consideration. Sale also became an easy way to rid the plantation of rebellious individuals who swayed others to disobedience.

When overseers sold slaves, however, Jefferson avoided any public association with the arrangements. He protected his reputation as a governmental leader, and promotor of

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<sup>91</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 14.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 158.

liberty and equality. In 1792, while serving as Secretary of State in George Washington's administration, Jefferson remarked ". . . and indeed I do not (while in public life) like to have my name annexed in the public papers to the sale of property."<sup>93</sup> He either handled the sales privately or arranged for agents to conduct the auctions for him, avoiding any possible perceptions of hypocrisy in his treatment of slaves. "From 1784 to 1794," John C. Miller reports, "Jefferson sold about fifty slaves and applied the proceeds to the payment of his creditors."<sup>94</sup>

Many historians portray Jefferson as one of the most benevolent slave masters of his period. Miller calls Jefferson an "exemplary master" in terms of his attitude towards his slaves. He goes on to say, "If he were a party to the conspiracy against the natural rights of man implicit in slavery, he could at least, as he put it, place his own slaves 'on the comfortable footing of the laborers of other countries.'"<sup>95</sup> Jefferson's letters reveal a high regard for the happiness and well-being of his laborers. Economic concerns, however, came first. The fact that slaves represented a valuable financial investment of high income-producing potential led Jefferson to take good care

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>94</sup>Miller, The Wolf By the Ears, 107.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 104.

of them. Dr. Steptoe, who lived at Federal Hill in nearby Campbell County (see Figure 3-28), cared for the Bedford workers when necessary.<sup>96</sup>

Jefferson's concern for female workers also reflected an emphasis on care of the slaves for economic purposes. An 1819 letter to Joel Yancey explains the proper use of young women.

I consider the labor of a breeding woman as no object, and that a child raised every 2. years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man. in this, as in all other cases, providence has made our interests & our duties coincide perfectly. women too are destroyed by exposure to wet at certain periodical indispositions to which nature has subjected them. with respect therefore to our women & their children I must pray you to inculcate upon the overseers that it is not their labor, but their increase which is the first consideration with us.<sup>97</sup>

Jefferson rarely invoked the name of God, or Providence to the Deist, but here Jefferson reassures himself that he follows the natural order of the universe in his use, and care, of his black women. On average, females at Poplar Forest began bearing children at age nineteen (see Table 5). It is not known whether overseers discouraged early pregnancies for health or economic reasons, or whether women simply chose to delay childbearing.

Jefferson's Farm Book, Garden Book, family letters,

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<sup>96</sup>Betts, Garden Book, 467.

<sup>97</sup>Betts, Farm Book, 43.

TABLE 5  
AGE OF FEMALES AT BIRTH OF FIRST CHILD, 1805

Slave	Age
Rachael	21
Maria	20
Eve	18
Sal	18
Flora	21
Hanah	21
Suck	17
Dinah	19
Nanny	20
Lucy	22

\*\*Average age when first child delivered, 19.7

and instructions to his overseers, allow us to understand some aspects of slave life at Poplar Forest. He treated his slaves fairly well, providing for their physical and emotional needs as a careful farmer would in order to preserve a valuable economic commodity.

Despite his practice of the institution, Jefferson continually warned against the injustice of slavery and dangers for future generations. Robert McColley states that "Accepting with pleasure, and sometimes with fervor, most of the assumptions of the Enlightenment, Virginia's leaders must necessarily denounce slavery as an evil institution."<sup>98</sup> But, Jefferson either could not financially afford to free his slaves, or did not want to give up the amenities of gentry life which depended upon their labor.

He made their servitude more bearable by respecting their family units and individual lifestyles. Jefferson developed close relationships with some of his slaves, namely house servants and skilled workers, through respect of learned abilities and family relationships. Overseers deterred unfavorable behavior by their own actions and upon Jefferson's instructions. He maintained a public persona at the same time he conducted normal farm operations via correspondence.

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<sup>98</sup>Robert McColley, Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 115.



Above all, these individuals helped Jefferson attain personal goals for himself and his nation. With slave labor, he built a unique octagonal house at Poplar Forest which served as a second home in the later years of his life. Jefferson combined architectural elements from many sources in a unified plan that was then set within a thematic landscape design also based on the octagon. This house stood as an example of Classical proportion and embodied republican ideals. It became an ironic symbol of freedom built by men bound in a life of servitude.

### CHAPTER 3

#### JEFFERSONIAN PERFECTION IN ARCHITECTURE

"Architecture is my delight," Jefferson once said, "and putting up and pulling down one of my favorite amusements."<sup>99</sup> In fact, Thomas Jefferson's enthusiasm went beyond being a mere "amusement". As Frederick Doveton Nichols has noted, Jefferson "found time to become our first great native-born architect. He was the first to make complete working drawings as well as architectural designs, and some five hundred of his architectural drawings and surveys still survive."<sup>100</sup> Monticello represents the best-known example of Jefferson's talent. His lesser known house built at Poplar Forest, however, possesses greater architectural unity and precision in design.

As major construction ended at Monticello in 1809, Jefferson became involved in construction underway on a new plantation house at Poplar Forest. This project became an intellectual diversion after his retirement from the

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<sup>99</sup> Frederick Doveton Nichols, "Architecture," in Thomas Jefferson, ed. Peterson, 215.

<sup>100</sup> Frederick Doveton Nichols, "Jefferson: The Making of an Architect" in Jefferson and the Arts: An Extended View, ed. William Howard Adams (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1976), 163.

presidency and served as an outlet for Jefferson's creative talents in architecture and landscape gardening. The octagonal house design represents an extension of Jefferson as an Enlightened philosophe in this eighteenth-century Age of Reason, and serves both as a reflection of Jefferson's intellect and as an attempt to uplift and improve domestic architecture in America.

It further reveals Jefferson's interpretation of architecture. He took a formal plan, that of an octagonal church, from Classical masters and transformed it into a fairly rustic private residence. The plan retained formal perspective but interior spaces deviated from the formal intentions. Jefferson used formality for a strictly non-formal purpose. This marked him as an Enlightened philosophe who took the purest of form with all of its rational perspective but used it to his convenience and personal benefit. In this sense, form does not strictly follow function.

William H. Pierson, Jr. argues that Jefferson exemplifies the Idealistic Phase of American Neoclassicism in architecture. "More than any other man of his day," Pierson observes, "Jefferson understood the larger functions of architecture in society and used it as a symbol of political and social values."<sup>101</sup> Poplar Forest

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<sup>101</sup>William H. Pierson, Jr., American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles,

became a social statement through which Jefferson proclaimed the validity of using formal spaces for non-formal activities. This served as an example of "chaste architecture" to uplift and inspire those who saw it. Jefferson had earlier commented to one of his housejoiners, James Oldham, regarding a project of formal architecture which Oldham completed in Richmond. "I observe you are fitting up a Corinthian room for mr. Gallego. . . I am glad to learn it, because a single example of chaste architecture may guide the taste of the city."<sup>102</sup> Jefferson felt that significant examples could guide the young nation on the uses of proper architectural forms. He had earlier helped design Washington, D.C. and provided input in the designs and locations of the Capitol and the President's House. Now, he turned to domestic architecture.

Following the two-term precedent set by Washington for service in the presidency, Jefferson began planning for his retirement in 1806. After 1809, construction of a new house and landscaping of the gardens at Poplar Forest provided projects to occupy Jefferson's time and intellect during his retirement from public office. He had originally designed the octagonal house for his daughter,

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Volume 1 (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 213.

<sup>102</sup>McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 290-291.

Maria Jefferson Eppes, and her family for use at Pantops plantation in Albemarle County, but after her death in 1804, he decided to use the plan at Poplar Forest. Even though Jefferson intended to use the new house at Poplar Forest for his own enjoyment, he instructed the family that Maria's son, Francis, would ultimately inherit the property. As Fiske Kimball notes,

Jefferson wrote Eppes: 'I shall still do there what I had always proposed to you, expecting it will some day become the residence of Francis,' the grandson. Years later he said in writing to Eppes: 'on that [part of the lands in Bedford, 'Poplar Forest'] I have built a house exactly on the plan once thought of for Pantops, and intended from the beginning for Francis. . . ."<sup>103</sup>

By this time, the extensive modifications to his home at Monticello neared completion. He had redesigned the house after his diplomatic term in France, from 1784 to 1789. During these years, Jefferson became enchanted with French architecture and discussed the topic with leading French artists and architects, particularly C. L. A. Clerisseau. He adopted many French beliefs and practices, such as grounding the practice of architecture in a study of mathematics and geometry as natural laws, de-emphasizing stairways because they used too much interior space, designing one-story structures, and employing rotundas and

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<sup>103</sup>Sidney Fiske Kimball, Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Original Designs in the Coolidge Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 182.

domes as on Palladian buildings.<sup>104</sup> Jefferson wrote that in France,

All new and good houses are of a single story. That is of 16. or 18 f. generally, and the whole of it given to rooms of entertainment; but in parts where there are bedrooms they have two tiers of them of from 8. to <sup>10</sup><sub>10</sub>.f high each, with a small private staircase.<sup>105</sup>

These French influences led Jefferson to modify his views on architecture. He first became acquainted with architectural theory while attending the College of William and Mary in 1767. He obtained a volume on architecture from a carpenter located near the gates of the College. Through the years, Jefferson studied influential architectural treatises, including Andrea Palladio's Four Books of Architecture (1570), James Gibbs's Book of Architecture (1728), and Robert Morris's Select Architecture (1755). Jefferson regarded Andrea Palladio as the ultimate master on Italian architectural theory and the five Roman classical orders. Gibbs and Morris also read the Four Books of Architecture and popularized Palladio's ideas through their widely distributed pattern books.<sup>106</sup> Jefferson used a modified Palladian villa plan

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<sup>104</sup>Nichols, "Architecture" in Thomas Jefferson, ed., Peterson, 219.

<sup>105</sup>William Howard Adams, ed, "Domestic Architecture" in The Eye of Thomas Jefferson, Exhibition catalogue (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1976), 274.

<sup>106</sup>Walter Muir Whitehill and Frederick Doveton Nichols, Palladio in America (New York: Rizzoli

for his plantation house at Monticello.

Since Jefferson always regarded Palladio as his master, as he told his friends who were engaged in building, it is not surprising that his philosophy of architecture paralleled that of the Venetian architect. His ideas on integrating the house and landscape, proportions of rooms and details, and the uniting of the house and its service buildings into one organized complex are all strictly Palladian.<sup>107</sup>

In his redesign of Monticello, Jefferson used the octagonal form to define interior space on the northern and southern ends and in the dome on the Western Front of the house. Jefferson liked this geometric shape for many reasons. The octagon proved to be a utilitarian design that also had roots in the architecture of ancient Rome. Leonardo da Vinci used the form in his design of the ideal church.<sup>108</sup> Francesco di Giorgi Martini used the shape in two plans for an ideal city, one located on a plain and the other on a hill.<sup>109</sup>

Francis D. K. Ching explains the theoretical bases of the octagonal form in his work, Architecture: Form, Space, & Order. The octagon represents a centralized organization of interior space. He defines this type of spatial

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International Publications, Inc., 1978), 101.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>108</sup> Francis D. K. Ching, Architecture: Form, Space, & Order (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979), 208.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 277.

organization as being "a stable, concentrated composition that consists of a number of secondary spaces grouped around a large, dominant, central space."<sup>110</sup> These secondary spaces may be used for a variety of activities, but attention within the structure remains on the central space. The octagon also allows for a radial path configuration which "has paths extending from, or terminating at, a central, common point."<sup>111</sup> Therefore, traffic patterns concentrate on a centralized location, but also provide easy access to the secondary spaces surrounding it.

Palladio's rotunda also adhered to a centralized spatial organization. Palladio based his designs on the circle and the square which represented perfect mathematical forms valued in the Greek and Roman civilizations. The octagonal form basically squared the circle.<sup>112</sup> "Its virtue is that it gives the illusion of carpenter and bricklayer."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 206.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 271.

<sup>112</sup>McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 61. Also see Ching, Architecture. Ching's discussions on centralized organizations (206-211), path configurations (270-277), the golden section (300-303), radiating lines (304-305), symmetry (342-343), and hierarchy (350-351) provide theoretical analyses of various aspects of and elements involved in the octagonal form.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.



Jefferson liked the historical origins, classical uses, and mathematical precision of the geometric form as well as its practical applications. Octagonal rooms provide more wall space for the location of windows, allowing more ventilation, better light for reading, and a broader view of the surrounding landscape. They also accommodate furniture better.<sup>114</sup> He achieved architectural perfection in this geometric form by combining utilitarian uses with proper theoretical foundations in a rational, unified design. In an architectural sense, Poplar Forest succeeded where Monticello failed. Jefferson modified and rebuilt Monticello to such an extent that, in his lifetime, it represented a collection of design schemes. The house in Bedford possesses greater unity in design and purpose. It exemplifies Jefferson's maturity as an architect.

The plan for Poplar Forest, although original, drew upon influences from several sources, including Andrea Palladio's instructions on the proper use of Classical orders, and from James Gibbs's and Robert Morris's pattern books. In this particular design, Jefferson followed Robert Morris' plans for octagonal structures in Select Architecture more than any other source.<sup>115</sup> He used

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>See Robert Morris, Select Architecture: Being Regular Designs of Plans and Elevations Well Suited to both

Palladian orders for decorative details but used Morris's fundamental plan for a country summer house.

Jefferson found the ideal plan for his new second home and retreat on Plate XXXII in Morris's Select Architecture. In this pattern book, Morris provided dimensions, estimated cost of construction and suggested specific uses for his structures. He refers to the design on Plate XXX, a plan for a summer house, in the following manner:

The Situation for this Structure should be on an Eminence whole Summit should overlook a long extended Vale, and, if attainable, quite round the Horizon, so that each Room is an easy and quick Transition to some new Object, such a Spot would be habitable only a Part of the Year, Summer's extream Heat, or disagreeable Residence; nor is it indeed any way suited but for a very small Family, and a few Attendants, though Offices under the Ground, and a Foss [?] round the House might be very easily attained.<sup>116</sup>

Jefferson rearranged and modified Morris's ideas and plans, adapting the purpose of one to the plan of another. He combined the purpose of the design of Plate XXX with the plan of Plate XXXII (See Figures 3-1 and 3-2).

The design and construction of a new home at Poplar Forest became one of Jefferson's major projects during the final years of his presidency. His extensive library contained forty-three books on architecture which he drew

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Town and Country (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973; originally published in 1755).

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 5.

Pl. 32.

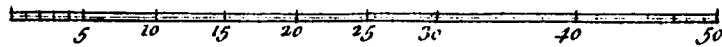
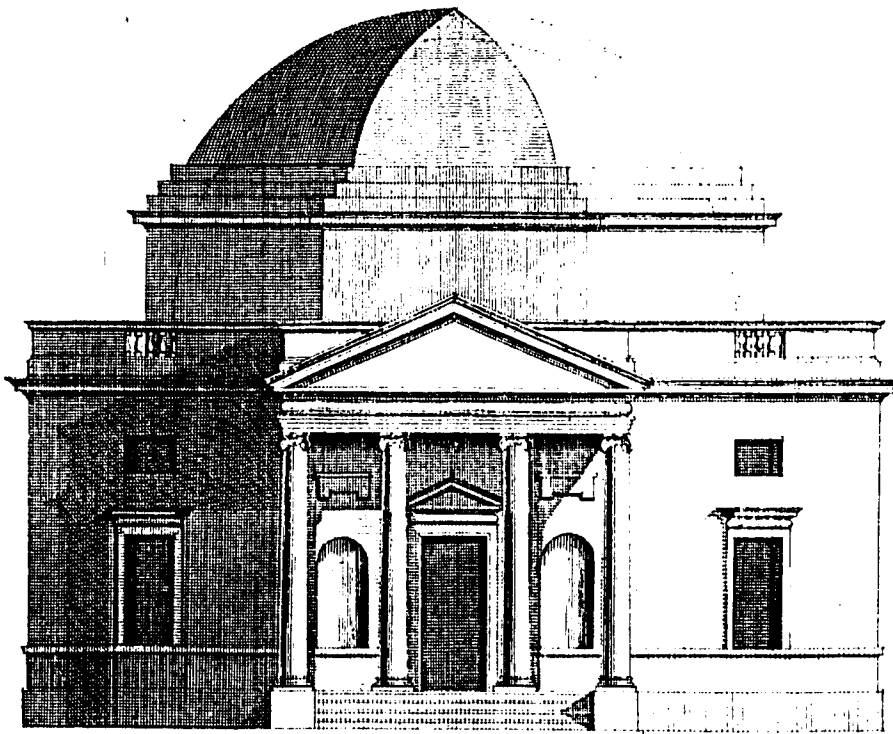
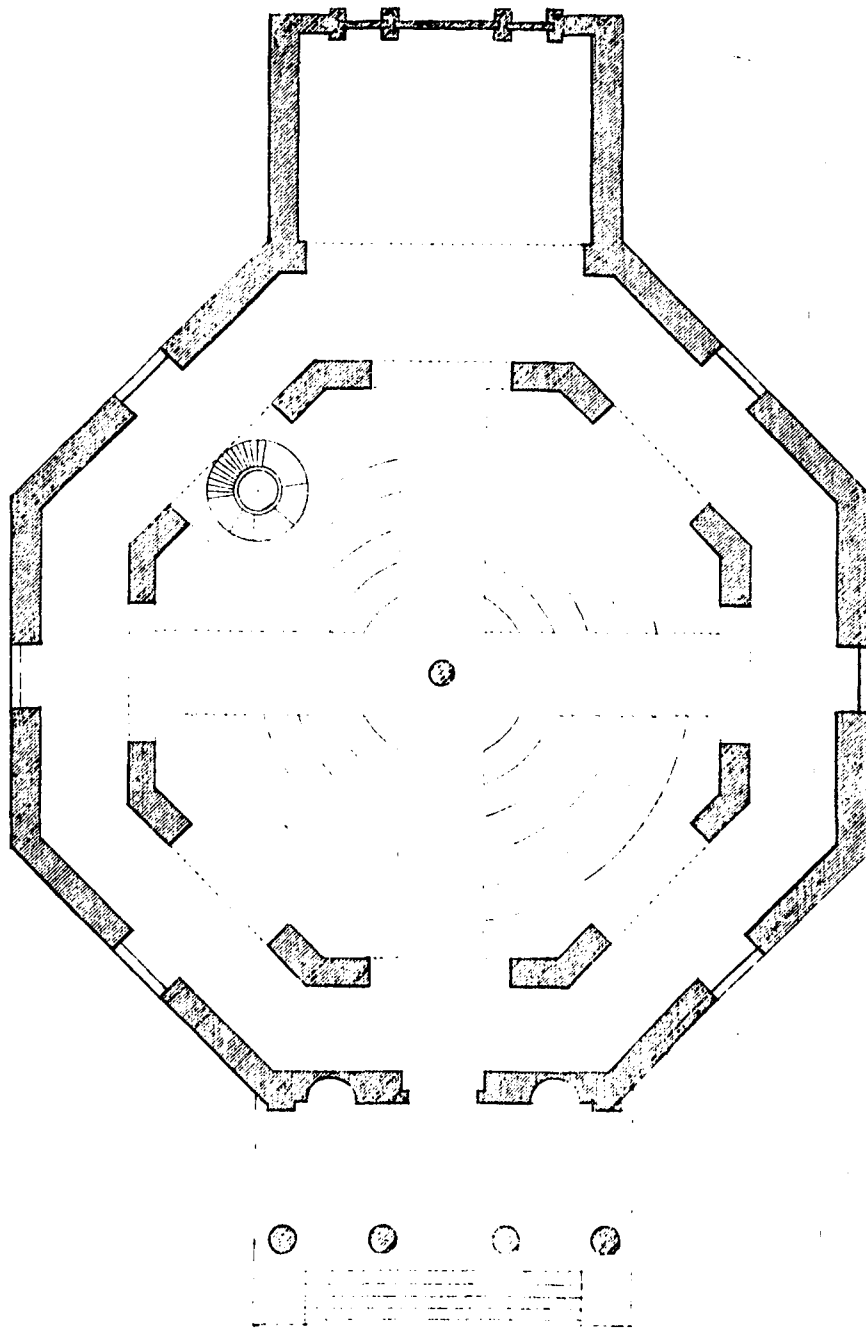
*Robt. Morris inv. & del.**Parr Sculp*

Fig. 3-1. Plan XXII from Morris's Select Architecture.  
(Source: Morris, Select Architecture).

Fig. 3-2. to face 11-32.



10 20 30 40 50

Mott, Morris, arch. & engs.

Plan Scale

Fig. 3-2. Diagram of plan XXXII.  
(Source: Morris, Select Architecture).

upon in an attempt to create the perfect architectural design.<sup>117</sup> Jefferson was now sixty-three years of age, but he closely supervised the construction and detailing of the house.

The building project began in 1806. In a letter to his daughter Martha, dated June 16, 1806, Jefferson states, "I find by letter from Chisolm that I shall have to proceed to Bedford almost without stopping in Albemarle. I shall probably be kept there a week or 10. days, laying the foundation of the house, which he is not equal to himself."<sup>118</sup> Chisholm served as one of Jefferson's carpenters on the project. Edmund Bacon, overseer at Monticello, also contributed to the construction of the new house. Jefferson usually remained in Washington during this time and sent written instructions to Bacon concerning many projects, including that at Poplar Forest. In one such memorandum, he directs Bacon to

Get from Mr. Perry and Mr. Dinsmore, an estimate of the nails we shall want for the house in Bedford; and when you have no orders to execute for others, let the boys be making them, and keep them separate from all the others; and when the wagon goes up at Christmas, send what then shall

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<sup>117</sup> Charles B. Sanford, Thomas Jefferson and His Library (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1977), 94.

<sup>118</sup> Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr., eds, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 284-285.

be ready.<sup>119</sup>

On June 7, 1808, further "Directions for Mr. Bacon" addressed the on-going project in Bedford.

As soon as the sashes are ready for Bedford, furnish Mr. Randolph 3 of your best hands, instead of his watermen, who are to carry the sashes, tables, and other things up to Lynchburg. In the mean time, they must be lodged at Mr. Brown's, at Lynchburg.<sup>120</sup>

The mulatto slave John Hemings worked as joiner and carpenter on the project and made furniture for the house after its initial completion in 1809.<sup>121</sup>

Construction continued at Poplar Forest until 1824 but the house became habitable by 1809. The floor plan, shown in Figure 3-3, contains four octagonal rooms situated around a central square room. Occupants had to move through the central area to enter the three primary octagonal rooms, being two bedrooms and a parlor. Jefferson arranged all rooms on the main floor of Poplar Forest to be easily accessible in accordance with his purposes for using this house. The new design of the house, being very open, represented the essence of a comfortable, private, home. Its private nature eliminated the need for physical barriers which artificially

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<sup>119</sup>James A. Bear, Jr., ed., Jefferson at Monticello (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), 56.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>121</sup>McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 122.

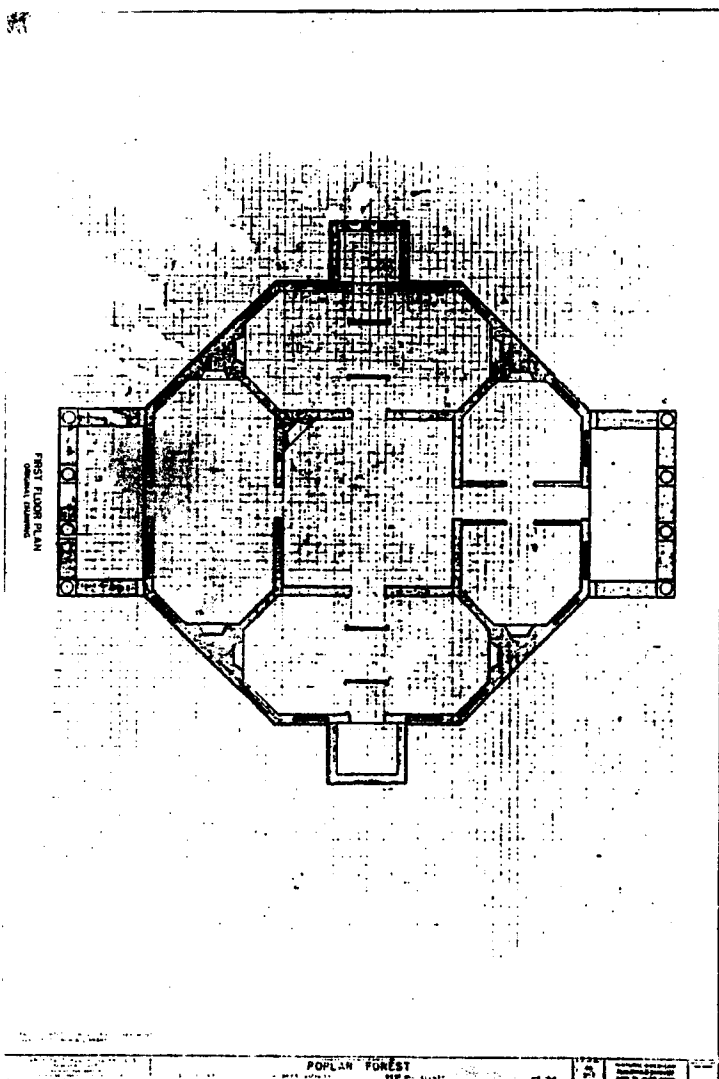


Fig. 3-3. Plan of octagonal house.  
(Source: HABS drawings, 1985).

designated public and private spaces. Jefferson allowed only favorite slaves and close family members to share time with him in this secluded spot.

Interior detailing continued even though Jefferson designated public and private spaces. Jefferson allowed only favorite slaves and close family members to share time with him in this secluded spot. began using the house. John Hemings completed interior woodwork. Hugh Chisholm, who had worked on the second building of Monticello, constructed the columns for Poplar Forest out of hewn stone.<sup>122</sup> William Coffee, a New York artist and sculptor, carved friezes to adorn cornices and fireplace mantles in the house. One of Jefferson's written instructions to Coffee stated, "In my middle room at Poplar Forest I mean to mix the [decorative motifs of] faces and oxskulls, a fancy which I can indulge in my own case, although in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly."<sup>123</sup> This illustrates Jefferson's intent for his Bedford home to be a private abode for his enjoyment alone.

There has been some discussion as to whether Coffee actually installed the friezes in the parlor. The room currently features friezes of this style, but they were added by occupants living in the house in the twentieth

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<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 332.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 251.



century. Dorsey Bodeman, interpretation coordinator for Poplar Forest, doubts that Coffee ever installed friezes in the parlor. At the time, Jefferson was also engaged in building the University of Virginia. Building materials earmarked for a one project often ended up at the wrong location. She believes that the friezes became misplaced in transit and never reached Poplar Forest.<sup>124</sup>

Unfortunately, a fire gutted the house in 1845 and destroyed any possible physical evidence of interior detailings in the parlor. The friezes, if installed by Coffee, were destroyed in the fire along with evidence of his work.

"Jefferson, who had three times proposed Palladio's model for others without success," noted Fiske Kimball, "finally built for his own retreat at Poplar Forest a house which was a perfect octagon."<sup>125</sup> Upon completion, Jefferson's new house closely resembled a blend of Robert Morris's designs and practices already used by Jefferson at Monticello. It featured Palladian orders on the exterior, particularly the northern, front, facade. One of his granddaughters described it in the following manner:

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<sup>124</sup>Dorsey Bodeman, Interpretation Coordinator for Poplar Forest. Interview by Rachel Franklin, 19 May 1989. Poplar Forest, Forest, Virginia.

<sup>125</sup>Fiske Kimball, American Architecture (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1928), 106.

The house at Poplar Forest was very pretty and pleasant. It was of brick, one story on the front, and, owing to the falling of the ground, two in the rear. It was an exact octagon, with a centre-hall twenty feet square, lighted from above. This was a beautiful room, and served as a dining-room. Round it were grouped a bright drawing-room looking south, my grandfather's own chamber, three other bedrooms, and a pantry. A terrace extended from one side of the house; there was a portico in front connected by a vestibule with the centre room, and in the rear a verandah, on which the drawing-room opened, with its windows to the floor.<sup>126</sup>

The plantation house has survived the years since Jefferson's occupation with a high degree of historical integrity. Subsequent owners made some changes, which will be noted later, but strove to retain the structural integrity of Jefferson's unified design. A hipped-roof currently tops Poplar Forest. Four dormer windows and four brick chimneys protrude through the composition roof, alternately spaced in the eight angles that meet in a central peak in the center of the roof. Brickwork follows a uniform Flemish bond pattern throughout the structure. It is broken only by a line of headers and stretchers which delineate the water table on the cellar level of the house (see Figure 3-4 and 3-5).

Each side of the octagon possesses three bays. Seven of the eight sides of the house contain four windows, two

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<sup>126</sup>Henry S. Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. III (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1857), 342-344.



Fig. 3-4. Front facade.



Fig. 3-5. Rear facade.

on the main floor which contain four lights over four and two smaller windows on the cellar level which also contain four lights over four. Front and rear facades, facing the east and west, also contain centrally located doors. A horizontal transom and sidelights frame the doorway on the front facade, whereas the doorway on the rear facade is only delineated by a horizontal transom. The woodwork, painted white, stands out against the red brickwork.

The front facade, seen in Figures 3-4 and 3-6, is framed by a classical wooden pediment and four Tuscan columns. An elliptical fan-light window breaks the pediment. The four Tuscan columns stand on a wooden porch which has six steps descending to the ground level. The rear facade is distinguished by a porch framed by four Tuscan columns and situated over a brick portico at the cellar level (see Figure 3-5). A wooden balustrade extends around the edge of the porch, enclosing the space between the house and columns.

Six brick piers extend from the ground to the bottom of the first-story porch. The brickwork continues from one pier to another, forming five arches which delineate the portico. Two projecting rows of bricks mark the level of the water table on each pier (see Figure 3-5). Bricks line the floor of the portico area. A central doorway, composed of two wooden doors, provides access to the cellar area of the house.



Fig. 3-6. Detail of classical portico on front facade.

The northern and southern sides of the octagon contain protruding stair towers (see Figures 3-5 and 3-7). Each stair tower contains an elliptical fanlight on the main floor. A wooden door, located on the southern side of each tower, opens on the cellar level of the house and leads to the stairway which rises above to the main floor. An angled pent-roof tops each stair tower.

During Jefferson's occupation, the main floor of the house contained the primary living areas, including an entry area, two bedrooms, a parlor, and dining room. The central dining room served as the focal point of the house. The plan of the house shows clearly that this central, square, room represented the heart of the house (see Figure 3-3). All path configurations bisect this room. Individuals had to walk through this room to get to the surrounding rooms. It deviated in shape and purpose from the surrounding octagonal rooms, which served as bedrooms and parlor. These rooms actually shielded the dining room in a honeycomb effect, symbolically protecting it from direct intrusion.

Dell Upton, in his study on "Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth Century Virginia," remarked on the social hierarchy of space usage in homes of this period. Although Poplar Forest dates from the early nineteenth century, its design reflects Jefferson's maturity as an architect through the late eighteenth



Fig. 3-7. Detail of eastern stair tower.

century. Upton notes that the dining room served as "a semipublic space that mediated between outside and inside."<sup>127</sup> He further explains that "in this sense, the dining room was the heart of the family's house, as opposed to the hall which was the center of the family's social landscape. The most private first-floor room was the chamber, often only accessible through the dining room."<sup>128</sup> Jefferson arranged his living space at Poplar Forest according to this vernacular tradition. The square dining room conformed in shape and function to contemporary houses of more conventional design.

This room did not form only a square, as the granddaughter had reported to Henry Randall, but represented a perfect twenty-foot cube. Jefferson had designed his dining room at Monticello as an eighteen-foot cube and repeated the pattern at Poplar Forest. Skylights provided natural light for the central dining room but these were not replaced after a fire destroyed the roof in 1845. Here Jefferson may have used Palladio's instructions "Of the Atrio Testugginato, and of the private houses of

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<sup>127</sup>Dell Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth Century Virginia" in Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture, ed. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 323.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.



the antient Romans" in his Four Books of Architecture.<sup>129</sup> Palladio described that "In the inter-columniations there were windows, from which the part in the middle received light."<sup>130</sup> A notation for the diagram in plate XXIV designates "P, uncovered place, over which the light comes into the Atrio"<sup>131</sup> (See Figure 3-8). The skylight over the dining room represented a large window which allowed light to come into the central space from above, as if it were uncovered.

The southern drawing-room, also called the parlor, became the second most important room in the house. It, alone, received attention to interior decorative detailing as discussed earlier. Triple-sash windows on the southern, rear, facade mark the distinguished nature of this room from the exterior. Double-sash windows dominate the rest of the house. The parlor windows provide more light, air, and attention to this room (See Figure 3-5).

Octagonal rooms located on either side of the dining room, to the east and west, contained alcove beds situated in the center to provide access to either side of the room. Jefferson had previously arranged his private bedroom and study suite at Monticello in such a manner. At Poplar

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<sup>129</sup> Andrea Palladio, The Four Books of Architecture (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), 43.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., Plate XXIV, located between 44-45.

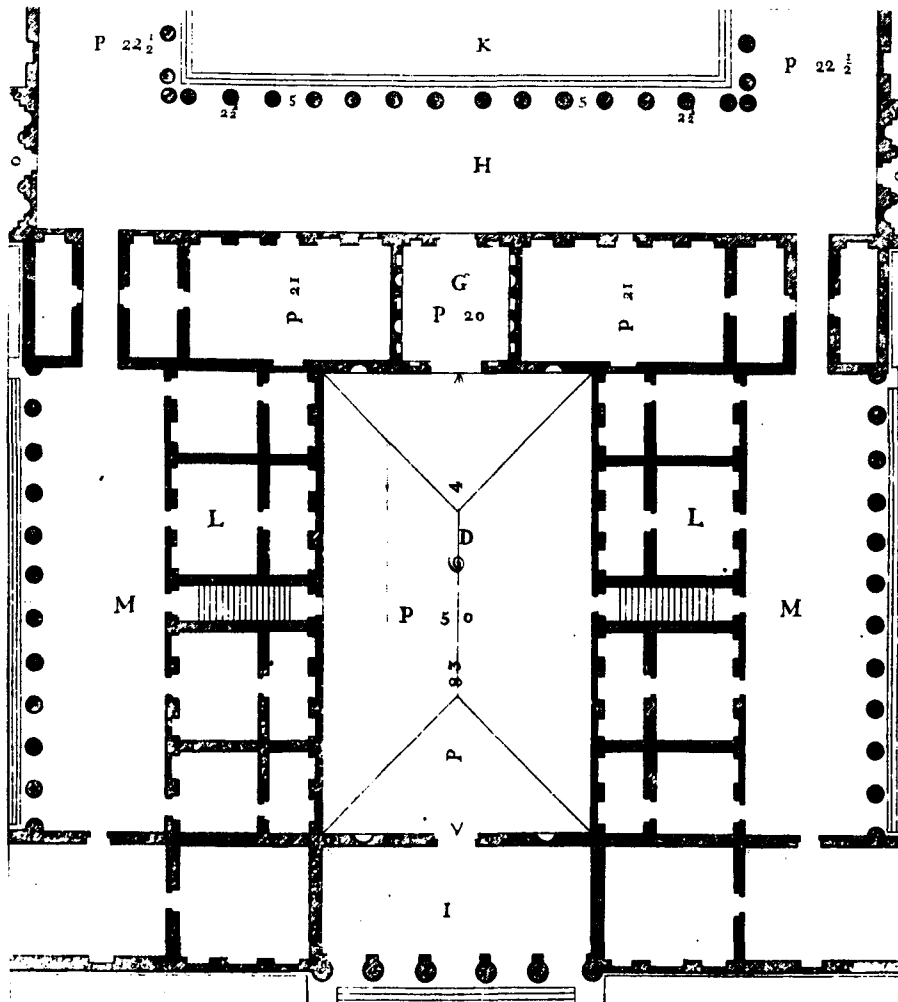


Fig. 3-8. Plate XXIV of Palladio's Four Books of Architecture, showing open, central atrio (labeled P). (Source: Palladio, Four Books of Architecture).

Forest, however, the bedrooms lacked doors. The placement of the alcove beds blocked a clear view from the central dining room. The open arrangement, however, allowed light, air, and individuals to move easily from one room to another.

In the first design, Jefferson omitted stairways connecting the main floor with the cellar level, further isolating his private living space. This proved impractical for domestic service and he had two stair towers built on the eastern and western sides of the house (see Figure 3-7).

A flat roof with balustrade topped the house and caused structural problems later. Jefferson's grandson, Francis Eppes, reported the extent of water damage that the house had suffered in a letter dated June 23, 1826.

Our roof here was perfectly close until about mid winter. It then began to leak not in one but a hundred places: and from that time I have endeavoured to discover the cause without effect. . . The plastering of the parlour is so entirely wet every rain, that I begin to fear it will fall in. Large buckets of water pass through it. Your room is nearly as bad and the others leak more and more every rain. The hall is in fact, the only dry room in the house.<sup>132</sup>

A multi-angle hip roof replaced the flat roof after the 1845 fire destroyed it (see Figures 3-4 and 3-5).

Builders added one wing of offices to the house in

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<sup>132</sup> Betts and Bear, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 478-479. Also see note regarding sagging gutters in McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 446.

1814. Construction on dependencies, slave quarters, stables, and barns continued to 1825.<sup>133</sup> The design of the dependencies at Poplar Forest may have resembled those at Monticello. Jefferson gave a brief description of the service wing in a letter to John Wayles Eppes on July 16, 1814. He says "I have this summer built a wing of offices 110. feet long, in the manner of those at Monticello, with a flat roof in the level of the floor of the house."<sup>134</sup> This row of offices extended from the eastern side of the house and contained the kitchen and smokehouse/dairy (see Figures 3-9 and 3-10). Figures 3-11 and 3-12 show plans of a washhouse and kitchen drawn by Jefferson. The detailed plan of the kitchen/washhouse calls for the dependencies to be built on a north-south axis, but they were actually built in an east-west direction on the eastern side of the house.

Fiske Kimball, a noted architectural historian, has studied Jefferson's architectural plans extensively and concludes, "The notes make clear that this [the kitchen] and the corresponding building [a wash house] were intended to be placed in balancing positions on either side of the house, of which merely the position is seen to have been

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<sup>133</sup> Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, 338.

<sup>134</sup> Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 534.



Fig. 3-9. Kitchen and smokehouse/dairy.

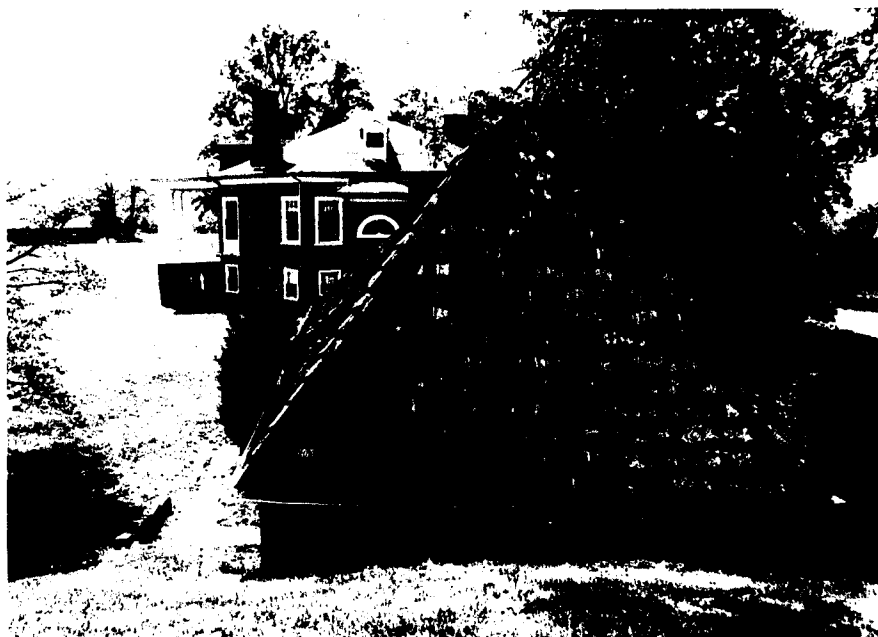


Fig. 3-10. Smokehouse in relation to house.

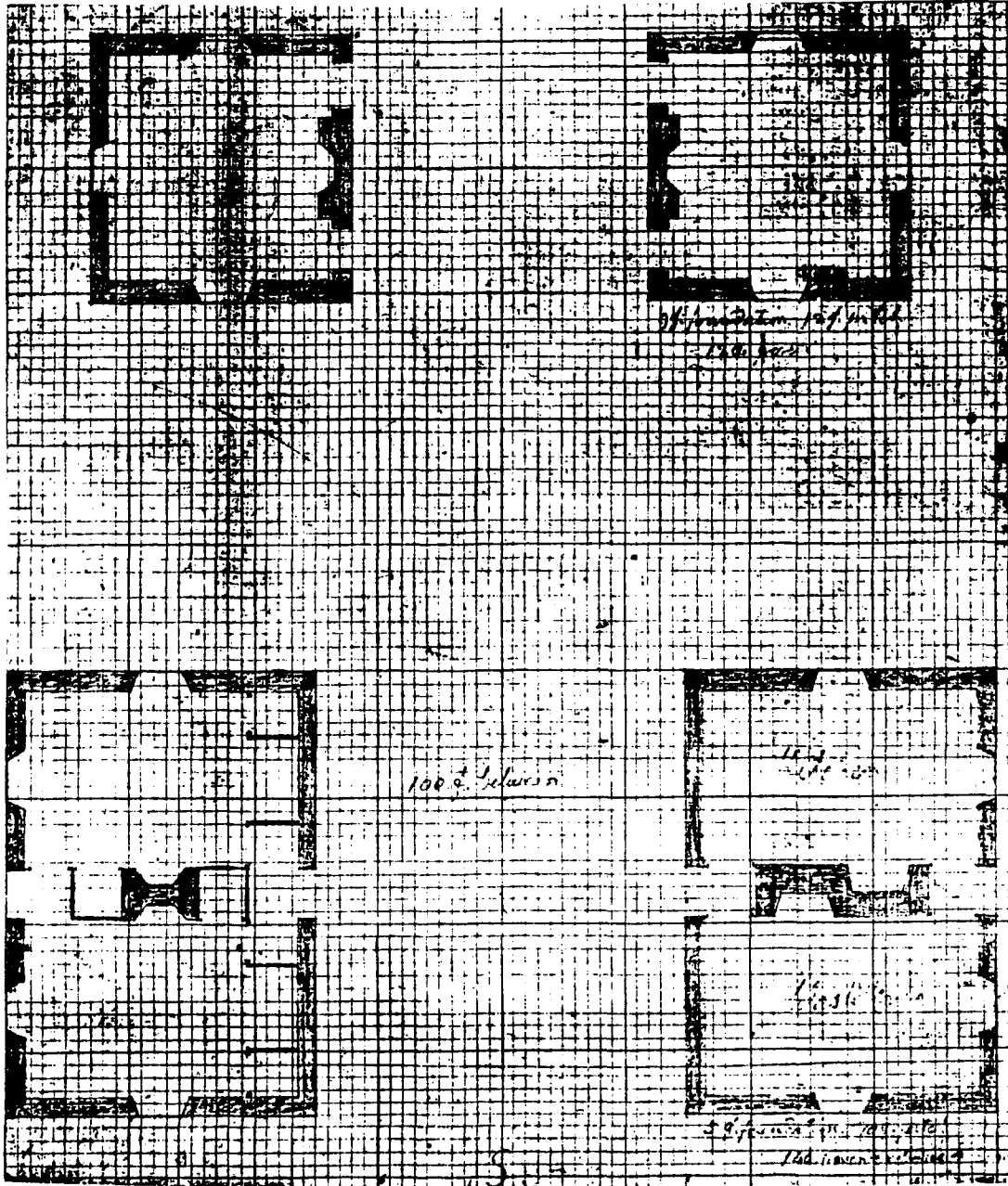


Fig. 3-11. Plans for dependencies at Poplar Forest.  
 (Source: Kimball, Thomas Jefferson, Architect).

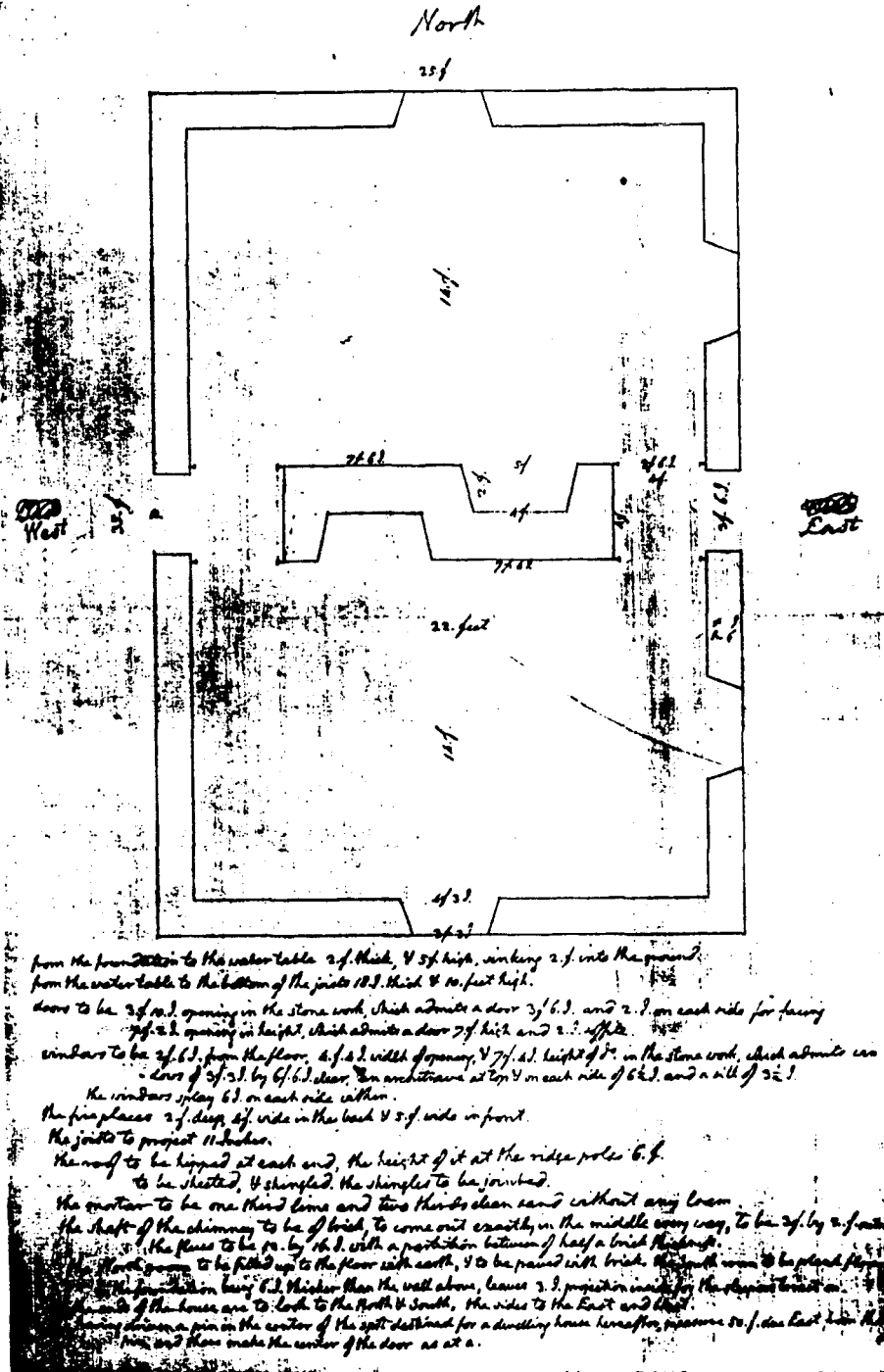


Fig. 3-12. Plan and directions for construction of kitchen/washhouse at Poplar Forest. (Source: Kimball, Thomas Jefferson, Architect).

determined."<sup>135</sup> The remaining structure at Poplar Forest, however, lacks any "corresponding building", or row of offices, to the west of the house. The lack of physical evidence indicates that a row of dependencies never existed on the western side of the house.

Only the kitchen and smokehouse/dairy remain from the eastern row of offices. An original barn lies adjacent to the property (see Figure 3-13). Twentieth-century inhabitants built an additional barn near the two earlier ones (see Figure 3-14). An icehouse once stood on the southeastern side of the rear lawn (see Figure 3-15). Original dependencies near the house fit into Jefferson's elaborate English-style garden scheme.

Jefferson followed Robert Morris's specifications for the proper setting of a summer retreat in his landscape plan. Jefferson's granddaughter had recalled that the "falling of the ground" allowed for the construction of a second story level to the rear of the house.<sup>136</sup> Jefferson landscaped the rear yard to provide such a slope and to allow for the two-story portico (see Figure 3-16). I. T. Frary reports "There having been no natural drop in ground level to make this possible, the ingenious Jefferson graded a depressed lawn back from the house, on the flanking

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<sup>135</sup>Kimball, Thomas Jefferson, Architect, 184.

<sup>136</sup>Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson, 342.



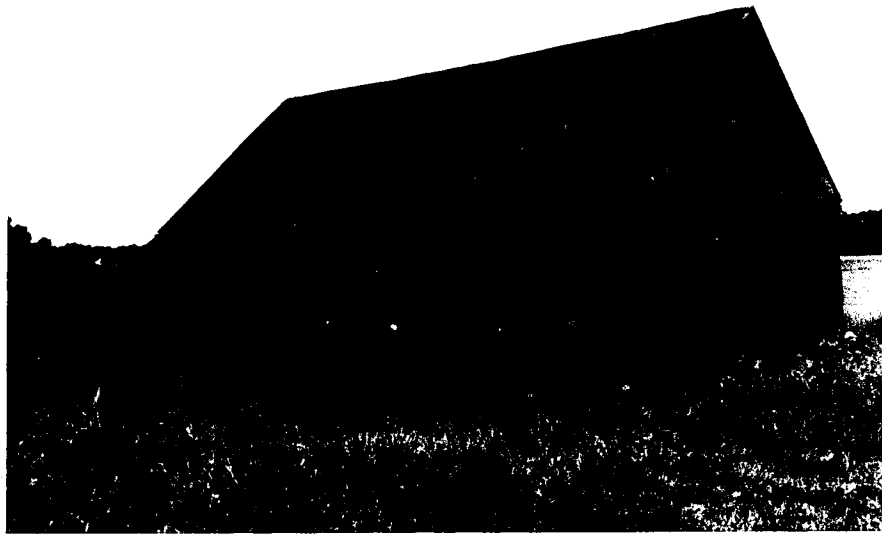


Fig. 3-13. Original barn.



Fig. 3-14. Twentieth century barn.



Fig. 3-15. Darker area indicates former location of icehouse.

terraces of which were planted rows of trees.<sup>137</sup> The rows of trees have been removed since Jefferson's day, but the lawn retains its sloped terracing (see Figure 3-17).

Slaves at the Bedford plantation actually carried out the work. They removed the soil and used it to build earthen mounds, located on each side of the house, which hid flanking octagonal brick privies.<sup>138</sup> (see Figures 3-18 and 3-19). Figure 3-20 shows the eastern mound in relation to the house, giving some idea of the effect achieved in hiding the privies. In this way, Jefferson maintained an unimpaired vista from the house and avoided confrontation with one of life's indelicacies in the eighteenth-century manner. These two octagonal privies fit into the design scheme of the house, however (see Figures 3-21 and 3-22). Their fine craftsmanship and architectural detail confirm Jefferson's enlightened rationality and unity of design scheme.

He even carried the octagonal theme to the landscape plan for the site.<sup>139</sup> He defined the lawn area around the house as an octagon. Inside this octagon, Jefferson

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<sup>137</sup> I. T. Frary, Thomas Jefferson: Architect and Builder (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1950), 98.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Frederick Doveton Nichols and Ralph E. Griswold, Thomas Jefferson, Landscape Architect, Monticello Monograph Series (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 124.



Fig. 3-16. Lawn area modified  
for two-story rear portico.



Fig. 3-17. Note bilateral  
slope of rear lawn.



Fig. 3-18. Mound shielding western privy.



Fig. 3-19. Artificial mound and eastern privy.



Fig. 3-20. House in relation  
to western mound.



Fig. 3-21. Western octagonal privy.



Fig. 3-22. Eastern octagonal privy.



developed an English garden bringing some plant varieties from Monticello and ordering others from fellow naturalists. He enjoyed English formal gardens which allowed some freedom in planting within an organized scheme. Jefferson had begun planning the landscape at Monticello before construction had begun on the house. Over forty years later, he began working on the grounds at Poplar Forest. Jefferson instructed his daughter, Martha, to send several plants and bulbs in a letter dated November 10, 1816.

Tell Wormley also to send some Calycanthus plants well done up in moss and straw, and about a bushel of Orchard grass seed out of the large box in the Green House. Would it be possible for you so to make up some of the hardy bulbous roots of flowers as to come safely on the mule? Daffodils, jonquils, Narcisouses, flags and lillies of different kinds, refuse hyacinths &c. with some of the small bulbs of the hanging onion. I think if wrapped and sowed up tight in two balls, one to come in each end of a wallet with nothing else in it to bruise them, they would come safe.<sup>140</sup>

Jefferson had trees and shrubs planted on the eastern and western mounds.<sup>141</sup> Three oval beds of roses adorned the area in front of the house. Later occupants replaced the rose bushes with boxwoods, as shown in Figure 3-23. Historians know little more about the design of the gardens at Poplar Forest. Current archaeological investigations

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<sup>140</sup>Bear and Betts, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 416.

<sup>141</sup>Dorsey Bodeman interview, 19 May 1989.



Fig. 3-23. Boxwoods in front lawn.

will provide more specific information about their arrangements. Figure 3-24 shows the landscape as surveyed and recorded by the Historic American Building Survey in 1985. Natural growth and individual preferences of subsequent owners has diminished the octagonal design scheme.

The new house at Poplar Forest became a showplace for Jefferson because of its architectural uniqueness and progressive landscape design, both dominated by the octagonal form and classical proportion. He hurriedly finished a letter of November 4, 1815 to his daughter, Martha, saying "I am at this moment interrupted by a crowd of curious people come to see the house."<sup>142</sup> Jefferson estimated that his Bedford home "could not be valued at less than 10,000. D."<sup>143</sup>

Jefferson's new plantation house exemplified the architectural principle of hierarchy. Francis D. K. Ching comments, "For a form or space to be articulated as being important or significant to an organization, it must be made visibly unique."<sup>144</sup> Poplar Forest possessed an internal order of importance through the distinctions given

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<sup>142</sup>Bear and Betts, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 411.

<sup>143</sup>Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 534.

<sup>144</sup>Francis D. K. Ching, Architecture: Form, Space, & Order, 350.

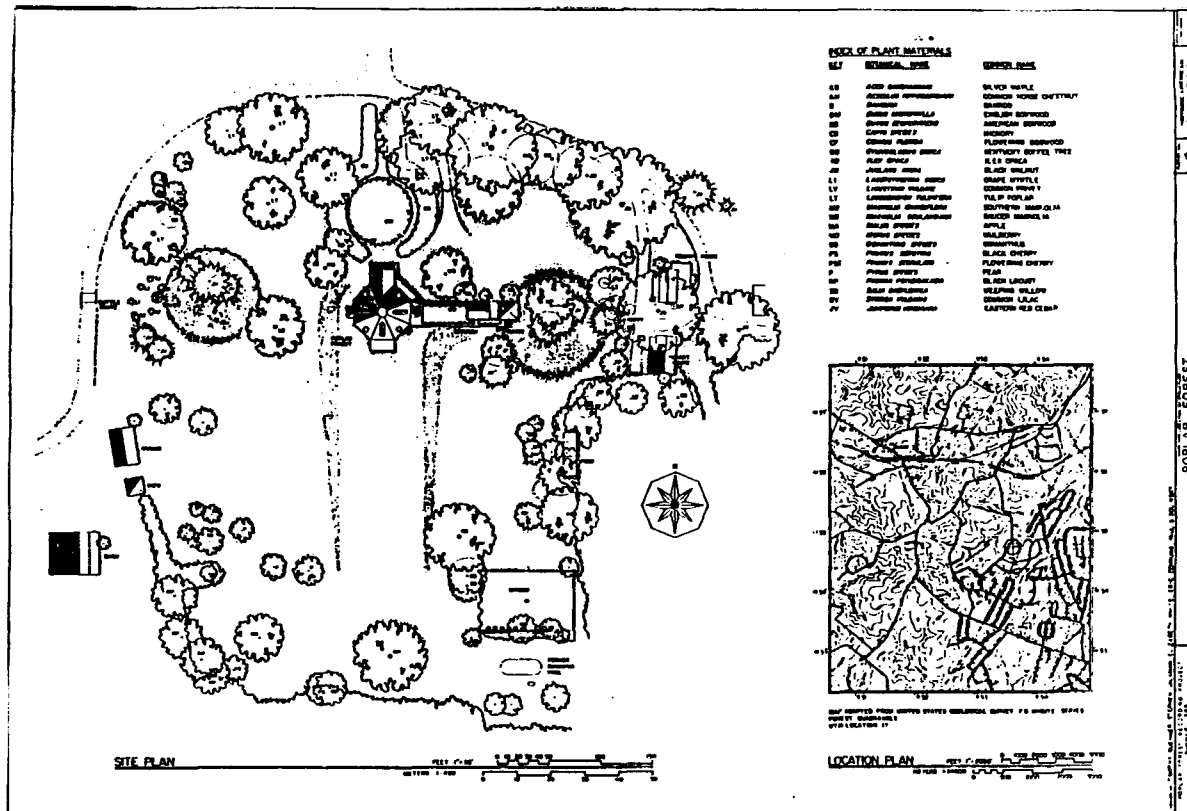


Fig. 3-24. HABS Drawing of grounds, 1985.  
 (Source: HABS No. 303 HABS VA 10. Bed. V.).

the central dining room and parlor. On the exterior, its octagonal shape and landscaping aroused interest from Jefferson's contemporaries as well as from architectural historians in the twentieth century. Jefferson believed that architecture could benefit the cultural temperament of the nation. In order for his structures to achieve this purpose, they had to gain the public's attention.

In architectural theory, "The hierarchically important form or space is given meaning and significance by being an exception to the norm, an anomaly within an otherwise regular pattern."<sup>145</sup> An octagonal home in rural Bedford County, Virginia certainly stood out as a regional anomaly. No other octagonal structures existed. Most of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century structures in the surrounding area conformed to the standard Georgian plan. Jefferson's influence can be seen in some manor houses in Bedford and Campbell Counties in their Neoclassical detailing.

Woodbourne, built in stages from the 1780s to the 1820s, stood on a tract of land once owned by Jefferson and included in the Poplar Forest acreage.<sup>146</sup> This frame and stucco house represents the Federal style of the piedmont

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Calder Loth, ed., The Virginia Landmarks Register, Third Edition (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 55.

region in Virginia. Its classical pediment on the center section and bilateral symmetry denote its Georgian stylistic origins (see Figure 3-25).

Fancy Farms, also located in Bedford County, "ranks with Virginia's best examples of late Georgian domestic architecture."<sup>147</sup> Constructed in the 1780s, its five-bay facade and pedimented gable ends characterize most of the comparable plantation manors of Jefferson's era (see Figure 3-26). Neighboring Campbell County contains a third example of late-eighteenth century architecture. Federal Hill, built in 1782, served as the residence of James Steptoe, close friend of Thomas Jefferson.<sup>148</sup> A broken pediment mounted over a two-story portico dominates the front facade of this house (see Figure 3-27). Jefferson's use of Palladian designs at Monticello may have influenced Steptoe in his use of Neoclassical elements at Federal Hill.

Builders in the Piedmont region of Virginia accepted the use of Neoclassical elements on standard Georgian plans. Poplar Forest's octagonal design remained unique, however. The house became a well-regarded design in architectural histories of the twentieth century.

The Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South:

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<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid., 73.



Fig. 3-25. Woodbourne.  
(Source: Loth, The Virginia Landmarks Register).



Fig. 3-26. Fancy Farm.  
(Source: Loth, The Virginia Landmarks Register).



Fig. 3-27. Federal Hill.  
(Source: Loth, The Virginia  
Landmarks Register).



1927-1943 featured the home in its survey of significant southern architecture.<sup>149</sup> The Historic American Building Survey also recorded the house in 1940.<sup>150</sup>

In 1954, Poplar Forest again received attention as a "Stately Home of Bedford." Lula Eastman Parker's notes the eloquent landscape design in her Bedford County bicentennial review.

As Mr. Jefferson was torch bearer in education and statecraft, so did he lay the stepping stones of asceticism. There is nothing at "Poplar Forest" to mar the beauty of its surroundings. Even the kitchen, smoke house and slave quarters are screened from the house by two immense mounds - one on either side of the rear, and from the porch is seen a wide expanse of green lawn, broken by neither tree nor shrub. This beautiful vista merges with the distant forest and nowhere is there even a suggestion of another habitation. Surely Jefferson's "retreat" has continued to fulfill its purpose.<sup>151</sup>

The new house at Poplar Forest remains a tribute to the architectural genius of Thomas Jefferson. It represents enlightened perfection in architecture through its symmetry, proportion, and octagonal form. Gentlemen architects of the enlightenment revived Andrea

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<sup>149</sup>Janet M. Gwaltney, ed., The Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South: 1927-1943 (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healey, Inc., 1985), microfiche VA8, frame A3.

<sup>150</sup>United States Department of the Interior, Historic American Building Survey, C. O. Greene, Photographer (Washington, DC: Prints and Documents Division, Library of Congress, 1940), HABS No. VA-303. HABS VA 10-BED.V, 1-1 to 1D-1.

<sup>151</sup>Lula Eastman Parker, The History of Bedford

Palladio's work and others, such as Robert Morris, who emphasized the value of classical proportion and exemplary buildings of ancient Rome. Jefferson's architectural pursuits represent his activities as one of these enlightened philosophes who sought rationality and symmetrical perfection. The house at Poplar Forest and its landscape design exemplify the rational order that citizens of the eighteenth century sought to impose on Nature.

In this pursuit, Jefferson successfully combined architectural practices he had seen in France with Classical designs and plans obtained from pattern books. The unique design remains an outstanding example of the octagonal form, used also in the outbuildings and plan for the grounds near the house. After retiring from public office in 1809, Jefferson occupied his time with the development of Poplar Forest as his second home. At Poplar Forest, Jefferson showed that formal architecture could be used without intruding on personal taste, convenience, or diversity in use. The architectural unity of design and purpose created a harmonic setting for self-renewal.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF POPLAR FOREST

In addition to being a profitable plantation, Poplar Forest served as a second home for the Jefferson family. Thomas and Martha Jefferson brought six children into the world, but only two daughters, Martha and Maria, survived past infancy. The eighty-mile trip to the plantation took three days, an adventurous trip for a young family. One of the Monticello overseers, Edmund Bacon, recalled this seasonal family vacation. "About once a year Mr. Jefferson used to go in his carriage to Montpelier and spend several days with Mr. Madison; and every summer he went to Poplar Forest, his farm in Bedford, and spent two or three months."<sup>152</sup> Details about the original Wayles house remains elusive. The only mention of the house appears on the plat map included in the "Marriage Settlement to Martha Jefferson." A single notation, "Old plantation," with a symbol representing a house designates the location of the home. The actual site of this residence on the property has never been determined. Jefferson may have razed the Wayles house and built his octagonal home on the same spot.

While Martha Jefferson lived, this structure on the

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<sup>152</sup>James A. Bear, Jr., ed., Jefferson at Monticello (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 62.

plantation also served as a place of security for her young family. The house provided safety from the British in June, 1781 after they fled from Monticello during the Revolutionary War.<sup>153</sup> The British, including their new general Benedict Arnold, concentrated on securing Virginia in 1781. They sought to capture Jefferson because he had actively participated in the Revolutionary movement, written the Declaration of Independence, and currently served as governor of Virginia. Martha Jefferson took her two daughters and family valuables and left for Poplar Forest as the British soldiers approached. Jefferson waited until he had sighted them before leaving. Isaac, a slave at Monticello at the time, later remembered the storming of Monticello.

They formed in line and marched up to the palace with drums beating; it was an awful sight--seemed like the Day of Judgement was come. When they fired the cannon, Old Master called out to John to fetch his horse Caractacus from the stable and rode off. Isaac never see his Old Master arter dat for six months. When the British come in, an officer rode up and asked, "Whar is the Governor?" Isaac's father (George) told him, "He's gone to the mountains."<sup>154</sup>

The British left Monticello virtually intact, but took thirty slaves with them to Yorktown. After Cornwallis's surrender to Washington on October 19, 1781, Jefferson

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<sup>153</sup>Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 72.

<sup>154</sup>Bear, Jefferson at Monticello, 8.

arranged to return his surviving slaves to Monticello. "At that time Old Master and his family was at Poplar Forest, his place in Bedford. He stayed there after his arm was broke, when Caractactus threw him."<sup>155</sup>

While at Poplar Forest in June, 1781, Jefferson suffered a riding accident and remained at his summer home for six additional weeks until his arm could mend. In his correspondence with Jefferson, François de Barbé-Marbois had posed twenty-one questions on various aspects of Virginia. Jefferson responded to these questions during this forced rest period.<sup>156</sup> His responses became lengthy and resulted in a long essay on the subject, later published as Notes on Virginia.<sup>157</sup>

During the years of his marriage, Poplar Forest served as a secure and restful summer home for his small family. Martha had closer ties to the plantation than did Thomas. It had belonged to her family, and she had visited there as a child. Jefferson did not develop a personal tie to the farm until his retirement. He worked on the landscape somewhat during these early years and recorded these efforts in his Garden Book.

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>156</sup>Cunningham, In Pursuit of Reason, 76-77.

<sup>157</sup>See Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

He received full title to the property when Martha died in 1782. Martha Jefferson had born six children and struggled through her final pregnancy. She bore her seventh child, sixth to Jefferson, on May 8, 1782. The daughter, Lucy Elizabeth, survived until 1784. "Martha Jefferson never regained her health," Noble Cunningham tenderly states, "and Jefferson watched helplessly as her life slipped away."<sup>158</sup> She died on September 6, 1782.

After recovering from his depression over his wife's death, Jefferson resumed his political career on a national scale. Jefferson's new duties provided an escape from a domestic life which was haunted by memories of Martha and interrupted his scheduled vacations to Poplar Forest. He served as minister to France from 1784 to 1789, leaving his property under the supervision of Colonel Nicholas Lewis and Francis Eppes.<sup>159</sup> Jefferson formulated a plan to rent out portions of his plantation holdings to tenant farmers, in order to provide a steadier income than tobacco production. Lewis failed to provide adequate management of the estate, and merely collected rent payments in Jefferson's absence. Production lagged, reducing tenants' abilities to pay rent, and property fell into disrepair

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<sup>158</sup>Cunningham, In Pursuit of Reason, 80.

<sup>159</sup>Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), IX: 389, XI: 10, 256.

during this period. Luckily, Jefferson never rented lands from the Poplar Forest plantation. Slaves there continued to produce tobacco, wheat, pork, and cloth under the more direct supervision of Francis Eppes.

As Thomas Jefferson re-entered the political arena to avoid memory of his late wife, he also ignored their summer home for many years. It seems that Jefferson involved himself in politics to escape the memory of his wife, Martha. Poplar Forest had been too closely associated with her and did not provide a restful, or comforting, home for Jefferson during the years between 1782 and 1806. In fact, it had become a disturbing reminder of happier times during his marriage. During this period, Jefferson seldom visited his Bedford plantation, corresponding by mail with his overseers and using it primarily as a working farm.

He gave 1000 acres of the plantation's holdings and twenty-seven of its slaves to his daughter, Martha, and her heirs as part of her dowry when she married Thomas Mann Randolph on February 23, 1790.<sup>160</sup> Despite losing this tract, Jefferson recorded ownership of 4627 and one-half acres of land in Bedford in his Land Roll for the year 1794.<sup>161</sup> He owned 47 slaves on the plantation according to the "Roll of the negroes Nov. 1794. and where to be

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<sup>160</sup>Ibid., XVI: 154, 189-190.

<sup>161</sup>Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, 32.

settled for the year 1795."<sup>162</sup> Thomas Jefferson continued to pursue his political career, serving as President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. He regained interest in Poplar Forest as a second family home in 1805. He mentions a planned visit to the farm in a letter to his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, dated June 10, 1805. "I count about this day five weeks (July 15.) to set out for Monticello, and after a few days rest to proceed to Bedford."<sup>163</sup> Bedford could provide a privacy that eluded Jefferson in Washington, D.C. and increasingly at Monticello.

By this time, the number of visitors to Monticello had increased due to Jefferson's personal generosity and fame as political figure. Edmund Bacon, a Monticello overseer, recalled his employer's temperament.

He knew that it more than used up all his income from the plantation and everything else, but he was so kind and polite that he received all his visitors with a smile and made them welcome. They pretended to come out of respect and regard to him, but I think that the fact that they saved a tavern bill had a good deal to do with it with a good many of them. I can assure you I got tired of seeing them come and waiting on them.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>163</sup>Betts and Bear, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 272.

<sup>164</sup>Bear, Jefferson at Monticello, 114-115.



Following the two-term precedent set by Washington for service in the presidency, Jefferson, now sixty-three years of age, began planning for his retirement in 1806. In her work on Jefferson, Fawn Brodie reports that "Since his retirement Jefferson had built a second house at his Poplar Forest plantation, a refuge from the unmasked and offensively curious visitors who flocked to Monticello."<sup>165</sup>

At this stage of his life he seemed ready to face Poplar Forest and its memories. Significantly, Jefferson built a new house rather than use the old plantation house that he and his wife had shared during her life. This action corresponds to other actions where Jefferson sought to break emotional ties to the past. Just as he burned his correspondence with Martha after her death, he destroyed the Wayles family home where they had enjoyed their yearly vacations with their young family. He created a new home which lacked memories of earlier happiness and destroyed a link to a past which he could not regain.

Jefferson not only found refuge at Poplar Forest, it became a place for family get-togethers and specifically for developing close relationships with his grandchildren. "From 1809 on, Jefferson's habit was to visit the house four times a year, often accompanied by children and

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<sup>165</sup>Fawn Brodie, Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 602-603.

grandchildren, for visits of two or three weeks."<sup>166</sup> In 1799, he remarked to his daughter, Maria Jefferson Eppes, ". . .I feel not that existence is a blessing, but when something recalls my mind to my family or farm."<sup>167</sup> Thomas Jefferson made his new house into a home by engaging in activities that he enjoyed, such as farming, reading, and spending time with his grandchildren. Monticello no longer served as a private home after 1809. Jefferson used Poplar Forest to fill that role.

An unnamed granddaughter wrote to Henry Randall in 1856, upon his request, and described the family visits to Poplar Forest during her childhood.<sup>168</sup> She reveals some details in the following statement:

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. His young grand-daughters were there to enliven it for him, to make his tea, preside over his dinner table, accompany him in his walks, in his occasional drives, and be with him at the time he most enjoyed society, from tea till bed time.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup>Adams, The Eye of Thomas Jefferson, 279.

<sup>167</sup>Sarah N. Randolph, The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1958), 256.

<sup>168</sup>Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson, III: 342-344.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 342.

This granddaughter also discussed the personal nature of these visits.

It was a pleasant change for us, a variety in life and manners. We saw, too, more of our dear grandfather at those times than at any other. He was most desirous that we should find congenial occupations, and we had books, drawing materials, embroidery, and never felt time heavy on our hands. He interested himself in all we did, thought, or read. He would talk to us about his own youth and early friends, and tell us stories of former days. He really seemed to take as much pleasure in these conversations with us, as if we had been older and wiser people.<sup>170</sup>

Jefferson had collected duplicate copies of approximately seventy of his favorite books to carry with him when traveling and called this collection his "petit-format library."<sup>171</sup> He carried it to Poplar Forest for his own enjoyment as well as that of his grandchildren.

Other children belonging to Martha and Maria also have fond memories of time spent with their grandfather at Poplar Forest. He served as a paternalistic figure in the lives of his grandchildren, particularly for Francis Eppes and Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Jefferson attempted to add to their educations by corresponding with each grandchild on various topics, including literature, philosophy, and

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>171</sup> Charles B. Sanford, Thomas Jefferson and His Library (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1977), 42-43. A granddaughter gives a more complete description of the "petit-format library" at Poplar Forest in Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson, III: 342-344.

social decorum.

Throughout his life, Thomas Jefferson had commented on his desire to provide for his grandchildren after his death. He commented about this to his daughter, Martha, as early as 1808.

So far otherwise has it turned out that I have now the gloomy prospect of retiring from office loaded with serious debts, which will materially affect the tranquility of my retirement. However, not being apt to deject myself with evils before they happen, I nourish the hope of getting along. It has always been my wish and expectation, that when I return to live at Monticello, Mr. Randolph, yourself and family would live there with me, and that his estate being employed entirely for meeting his own difficulties, would place him at ease. Our lands, if we preserve them, are sufficient to place all the children in independence.<sup>172</sup>

Martha's family, including her husband Thomas Mann Randolph, lived at Monticello as Jefferson wished. Randolph had suffered financial failure with subsequent mental breakdowns and his family's subsistence remained at a fragile level. With these grandchildren at least temporarily provided for, Jefferson continued to grapple with his own financial problems and turned to his other grandchildren. He sought to provide land for Maria's children, particularly her son Francis Eppes.

Maria Jefferson had married John Wayles Eppes, a cousin from her mother's family, in 1797.<sup>173</sup> After

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<sup>172</sup> Betts and Bear, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 319.

<sup>173</sup> Dumas Malone, Jefferson the Virginian, Jefferson

Maria's death in 1804, Jefferson increased his interest in Francis's upbringing. In 1821, Jefferson appointed him administrator of the Poplar Forest plantation and accepted the resignation of the current overseer, Joel Yancey.<sup>174</sup> When Francis Eppes married in 1823, he and his wife became the first permanent family inhabitants of the farm.<sup>175</sup> Jefferson's will, executed in 1826, granted Eppes ownership of the Bedford property, thus keeping it in the Wayles family.<sup>176</sup>

Income from all of Thomas Jefferson's plantations declined after he placed his estate under the direction of Colonel Nicholas Lewis during his term in France, from 1784 to 1789.<sup>177</sup> The effects of Lewis's poor management, compounded with continually low tobacco prices, excessive spending by Jefferson during his stay in France, and the subsequent financial panic of 1819, contributed to the cumulative decline of Jefferson's estate. During the early years of his retirement, Jefferson continually referred to the availability of the Bedford lands as collateral which

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and His Time Series, Vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948), 434.

<sup>174</sup> Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, 155.

<sup>175</sup> Adams, The Eye of Thomas Jefferson, 279.

<sup>176</sup> See Bear, Jefferson at Monticello, 118-122, for Jefferson's complete will and codicile. The reader may also find it in Randall, III: 665-667.

<sup>177</sup> McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello, 240-241.

he could liquidate at any time to pay his accumulating debts. He struggled to maintain a clear title to his properties. Speaking to Martha, he stated "My only reason for anxiety to keep my property unimpaired is to leave it as a provision for yourselves and your family."<sup>178</sup>

Jefferson echoed this message in a letter to his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Speaking about the frequency of bankruptcies among Virginia's farmers, he said "Under this possibility it is provident and comfortable to possess some resource within ourselves some means by which we can get a living if reduced by misfortune or imprudence to poverty."<sup>179</sup> Despite his apprehensions and attempts to forestall bankruptcy, Thomas Jefferson's estate had become thoroughly embroiled in debt by 1825. Land that he valued as a final resource had been mortgaged repeatedly. By 1826, his debts exceeded \$100,000.<sup>180</sup> Thomas Jefferson Randolph attempted to relieve the debt pressures by arranging "a lottery to dispose of his property."<sup>181</sup> The state of Virginia approved the request but few lottery tickets sold and Randolph cancelled the lottery.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Betts and Bear, The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 327.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. 467.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

Jefferson remained optimistic about his debts and said "But for these last, I am confident my debts might be paid, leaving me Monticello and the Bedford estate."<sup>183</sup>

In 1826, Francis Eppes offered to return the Bedford property so that it might be sold, saying ". . .I write as well to express, My unfeigned grief, as to assure you, that I return to your funds with the utmost good will, the portion of property which you designed for me; and which I should always have considered as yours, even had it been, legally secured to me."<sup>184</sup> Jefferson refused the offer and wanted the Bedford plantation to remain in the family.

After his death on July 4, 1826, Jefferson's descendents finally had to face the reality of bankruptcy. Francis Eppes sold Poplar Forest in 1828 to William Cobb. The family never regained possession of the property.<sup>185</sup>

From 1772 to 1826, Poplar Forest's role changed from being purely an economic endeavor to being a place of solace and a home where Jefferson could privately enjoy the company of his children and grandchildren. Although originally acquired through his marriage to Martha Wayles Skelton, Jefferson's personal associations with the property grew after 1806. He used Poplar Forest as a hobby

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<sup>183</sup>Ibid., 469.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid.

<sup>185</sup>Adams, The Eye of Thomas Jefferson, 279.

during its reconstruction and later enjoyed it as a retreat. The new design of the house, being very open, represented the essence of a comfortable home. Poplar Forest's private nature eliminated the need for physical barriers which artificially designated public and private spaces. Although Poplar Forest served both functional and symbolic roles throughout Jefferson's life, his emphasis on its usage for family enjoyment and its philosophical meaning represented in the architecture, superceded its role as an economic endeavor.



CHAPTER 5  
LIFE AFTER JEFFERSON

Poplar Forest bridged past, present, and future generations of the Jefferson-Wayles family. Jefferson gave the property to Francis Eppes in 1826. Eppes and his wife remained on the plantation for two years. They sold it with most of its contents in 1828 and moved to the Florida territory. Neither the Wayles nor the Jefferson families ever regained title to the property. Others maintained the legacy for them.

William Cobbs, a gentleman who already lived in the area, was the first non-family owner. Cobbs's daughter, Emily, also lived at Poplar Forest with her husband, Edward Sixtus Hutter.<sup>186</sup> Ownership of the plantation passed through subsequent generations of the Hutter family. The Hutters changed the interior of the house somewhat, due to the rebuilding needed after a fire in 1845 and interior modernization throughout their 118 years of ownership. They added a kitchen in the basement of the house, interior bathrooms on the main floor, and a stairway extending from the main dining room to the attic floor.<sup>187</sup> The family

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<sup>186</sup>Dorsey Bodeman, Interpretation Coordinator, Interview by Rachel Franklin (Poplar Forest, Forest, Virginia), 19 May 1989.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid.

removed the flat roof, which had leaked terribly when Francis Eppes lived in the house and had been damaged by fire, as well as the balustrade, replacing them with a multi-angled hip-roof.

Jefferson's unique octagonal landscape design became obliterated by natural growth. The Hutterers continued to farm the land and probably built brick slave/tenant houses near the eastern privy (see Figures 5-1 and 5-2). The row of dependencies extending from the eastern side of the house may have been torn down during the Hutter occupancy. It had disappeared by 1940.

The Historic American Buildings Survey agency of the Interior Department conducted an inventory of the property on July 11, 1940, with Eugene Bradbury serving as the Architect-in-Charge. This study produced fourteen photographs and one data page. Some of the photographs show a trellis in the location of the former row of offices, or dependencies.<sup>188</sup> Only the kitchen and smokehouse remain from Jefferson's original plan (see Figure 5-3). One original barn had been covered with board-and-batten siding and painted to protect the Jeffersonian-period structure (see Figure 5-4).

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<sup>188</sup>United States Department of the Interior, Historic American Buildings Survey, Eugene Bradbury, Architect-in-Charge and C.O. Greene, Photographer (Washington, DC: Prints and Documents Division of the Library of Congress, 1940), HABS VA-303, 10 BED.V, 1-2 and 1-3.



Fig. 5-1. Southern tenant house.



Fig. 5-2. Northern tenant house.



Fig. 5-3. Remaining kitchen and smokehouse.



Fig. 5-4. Surviving barn.

By 1946, the C. S. Hutter family had moved their primary residence to Lynchburg, a city located approximately five miles from Poplar Forest, and used the octagonal house only as a summer home.<sup>189</sup> James Owen Watts, Jr., who also lived in Lynchburg, purchased the house and grounds from the Hutters.<sup>190</sup> The Watts family made additional changes to the interior, adding the decorative friezes to the parlor located on the southern side of the house. Current historical interpreters believe that the friezes made up of faces and oxskulls ordered by Jefferson from William Coffee became misplaced, or misdirected to another location, en route to Poplar Forest.<sup>191</sup> This cannot be confirmed, however, because of the fire in the mid-1820s and a second one in 1845 which gutted the interior. Irregardless, the Watts sought to correct the situation and place the friezes where Jefferson intended them.

The Watts family also added a small garden to the southeastern corner of the rear lawn in the mid-twentieth century (see Figure 5-5). This garden contains overgrown flower beds with brick borders and a square brick garden

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<sup>189</sup> Lula Eastman Parker, The History of Bedford County, Virginia: Bicentennial Edition, 1754-1954 (Bedford, VA: The Bedford Democrat, 1954), 106.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Dorsey Bodeman interview, 19 May 1989.



Fig. 5-5. Southeastern garden.

house (see Figure 5-6). The Watts tried to maintain the Jefferson touch by constructing a serpentine wall on one side of the garden (see Figure 5-7). This family also prized the heritage of their unique home and shared its history with others. In 1969 the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission surveyed the property and nominated it as a National Historic Landmark in the areas of Art and History.<sup>192</sup> The property also became a Virginia Historic Landmark in the same year.<sup>193</sup>

The decade of the 1970s brought rapid change to the land surrounding Poplar Forest. A modern housing subdivision encroached on much of the original acreage, which had amounted to approximately 5,000 acres. "Jefferson Forest" became an attractive suburban location for residents who worked in the vicinity of Lynchburg, Virginia. Subdivision planners built these homes within site of Jefferson's former home (see Figure 5-8). They also added a clubhouse and golf course for the enjoyment of their residents. Unfortunately, this golf course severely broached the vista from the front and western side of

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<sup>192</sup>United States Department of the Interior, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, prepared under the direction of James W. Moody, Jr., Director of the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1969).

<sup>193</sup>Calder Loth, ed., The Virginia Landmarks Register, Third Edition (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 54.



Fig. 5-6. Garden house.





Fig. 5-7. Serpentine wall.

Poplar Forest (see Figure 5-9).

Efforts to save the historic site began in earnest in the face of the expanding housing development. The property became a National Historic Landmark in 1980 in an effort to promote the importance of the property and encourage its conservation. The Watts family sold Poplar Forest in 1980 to a Lynchburg resident, Dr. Johnson. He only kept the home for four years, ultimately selling it to The Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest in 1984. This organization saved Poplar Forest from ruin by transforming it from a private home into a preserved historic site. Volunteer efforts and individual donations contribute to the Corporation's goal of saving this national landmark.

Poplar Forest survives as an important historical asset of this nation. It contributes to America's heritage through its exemplary Neoclassical architecture and landscape design, its association with one of our nation's early leaders, and its successful continuation as a working farm and private home from the mid-eighteenth century through the third quarter of the twentieth century. The property passed out of the Jefferson and Wayles families in 1828, but subsequent owners shared their love of the unique home and its beautiful setting, which retained its value primarily as a creation and one-time possession of Thomas Jefferson.



Fig. 5-8. Note houses to the left of the main drive and house.



Fig. 5-9. Golf course located northwest of the house.

This particular plantation held great importance for Jefferson for many reasons. Martha and Thomas Jefferson used the plantation as a working farm and vacation home from 1774 to 1782. When Martha died in 1782, Jefferson stopped visiting the plantation. It continued to provide income and products for his other estates, but stopped serving as a second home. For this period of his life, Poplar Forest retained too many memories of happiness with his beloved wife for Jefferson ever to feel comfortable there.

As Jefferson prepared for his retirement from the presidency, he decided to build a new house at his Bedford plantation for occasional use. From 1806 to 1823, hired workmen and slaves built a radically new octagonal structure. For this design, Jefferson drew upon the influences of Andrea Palladio and Robert Morris but compiled parts of their designs in a new way. He blended architectural features from these masters and characteristics he had observed in French and Italian structures while he served as minister to France from 1784 to 1789.

Architectural historians and scholars emphasize Jefferson's use of Palladian orders in his new home, but actually he drew more heavily from Robert Morris's pattern book, Select Architecture. As shown in Chapter 3, Morris gave his readers specific settings and purposes for his

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structures. Jefferson often used pattern books in his designs and adapted one of Morris's structures designed as a summer home which overlooked a prominent vista. In usual fashion, he created a vista to suit his most perfect architectural work by having slaves landscape the rear lawn within an octagonal border design. Andrea Palladio had emphasized the goal of harmony through a unity of proper form and setting. Jefferson achieved this at Poplar Forest.

Monticello and Poplar Forest served different purposes for Jefferson as their architectural designs and functions make clear. Jefferson worked for over fifty years on the design, building, and re-building of Monticello. It never had a unified plan, but underwent continual revisions and alterations through the last half of the eighteenth century. Jefferson created a definite thematic plan for Poplar Forest based on the octagonal form and Classical orders. Although construction of the house took seventeen years, the plan remained unchanged. Jefferson achieved a level of perfection in this architectural design - perfection which he sought through the re-designing of Monticello but never achieved.

These two houses also varied in their respective functions. Monticello, built as a primary residence, remained open to numerous family members and all visitors who trekked to the mountain top to see the great statesman.

On the other hand, Jefferson allowed only specific family members and well-regarded slaves access to his home in Bedford. The house interior remained open, allowing cool summer breezes and relaxed conversation to flow from room to room. Bedroom doorways even lacked doors which could be closed although Jefferson positioned alcove beds to block a clear view into these rooms, providing at least some personal privacy. The interior could remain open in this way because of the nature of the structure's use - that of a private, and thus exclusive, home. Jefferson provided for his own privacy by restricting access to himself and his chambers located on the western side of the house. Individuals who accompanied him to Poplar Forest received strict orders to entertain themselves and stay away from his side of the house during specific times of the day.

Jefferson began to use the new house while work progressed. His first visit occurred in 1809 after his retirement from the presidency. Thereafter, until 1823, he made approximately four visits per year. Perhaps late in life, Jefferson could sit under the trees on the lawn and happily remember experiences with Martha. He at least no longer avoided this place where he shared time with her. The house became a home through its use as a retreat where Jefferson could enjoy his privacy or the company of his granddaughters. In 1812, Jefferson said of Poplar Forest, "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."<sup>194</sup>

Jefferson also valued the Bedford property because it brought needed income through the production of tobacco. He kept careful records of fluctuating production levels and market prices in his Farm Book. Slaves also raised wheat and produced cloth at Poplar Forest, but tobacco remained its staple crop. It exemplified tobacco production in Southside Virginia in the late-eighteenth century and industrial slavery in the early-nineteenth. Jefferson disliked his economic dependence on tobacco production and ended the practice at his Albemarle County plantations, but he also realized that the tobacco crop brought at least some profits to his debt-ridden estate.

Poplar Forest, therefore, served economic functions in Jefferson's life. He remarked to his daughter, Martha, more than once that his Bedford lands could be sold to forestall debt if his credit system collapsed. If at all possible though, Jefferson wanted the Bedford plantation to remain in the hands of the Wayles family. The property served as a legacy for his grandson, Francis Wayles Eppes, Maria's only surviving child. It linked Francis Eppes to

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<sup>194</sup> Betts, Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 594.

his grandfather, John Wayles, and also provided a link between Jefferson and his deceased wife, Martha.



CHAPTER 6  
LOOKING AHEAD

In 1987, the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest opened the property for tours. Current interpretation of the site, however, slights several areas of significance. While interpreters stress stories about Jefferson and worry about the house's lack of furnishings, they fail to use the site as a unique artifact providing insight to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's use of the house and its design provide the focus for current interpretations. Poplar Forest as a working farm, with light industry complementing tobacco production, eludes explanation. Docents also fail to comment on slave activity on the property, either in the construction of the house or production of farm crops.

The Corporation has met more immediate needs, such as stabilizing the structures on the property, regaining land near the house, conducting archaeological investigations, and conducting additional documentary research. The Corporation purchased the property in 1983 and lacked funding to immediately transform it into a broadly based historic site. Instead, charitable contributions, matching grants, and assistance by local volunteers aided in the development of Poplar Forest as a historic house museum.

As financial backing stabilizes and a professional staff supplements the ranks of volunteers, the Corporation should move away from its impulse to create another historic house museum and move toward the development of a diverse historic site which reflects the multi-dimensional personality of Thomas Jefferson. The octagonal house can best illustrate his architectural genius and maturity over time if it is left unfurnished. Monticello provides an excellent representation of Jefferson's domestic life and personal tastes. Curators of Poplar Forest should stay away from any attempts to create another Monticello. The unique quality of the octagonal house at Poplar Forest merits appreciation on its own and can best exemplify Jefferson's architectural talent by itself, without the detracting of excessive decoration. In addition, better utilization of limited financial resources would include stabilization and preservation of structures on the property, acquisition of land, increased salaries, support services, and educational programs rather than on furnishing the interior of the house.

Poplar Forest can illustrate many more dimensions of Jefferson and interpretation should go beyond the scope of the house as a residence, or a retreat. While this was an important function of the property after 1806, Jefferson continued to use his Bedford plantation to provide income and goods for his entire estate. The Corporation has

steadily purchased land beyond the immediate grounds around the house. In order to represent the original purpose of the property as a working farm, the fields should be leased to local farmers and put into production. This activity would help stimulate the local economy, provide limited income for Poplar Forest, and present a more complete interpretation of the plantation.

Emphasis on slave activity in farming, manufacturing, and construction will complement current presentations of Jefferson's use of the property and add historical verity to current interpretations. The kitchen, smokehouse/dairy, and tenant houses may serve as architectural and cultural resources. Docents may recreate activities which illustrate aspects of plantation life in these structures, including food storage, cooking, and candle-making. The tenant houses would provide adequate space for demonstrations of light industrial manufacturing, cloth production, or recreations of slave quarters and slave domestic life.

By implementing a more comprehensive interpretation that included the farming and slave activities at Poplar Forest, site administrators would improve the quality of presentation, enhance historical accuracy, decrease repetition for visitors and docents, and increase visitor appeal. Education directors could focus on seasonal plantation activities, as well as on Jefferson's seasonal

occupation of the house, in the development of programmed excursions for area school systems in Bedford County, Campbell County, and Lynchburg.

Diverse and varied presentations create broad appeal and attract repeat business. Given the rural location of Poplar Forest and the close proximity of Monticello, visitors must be enticed to find the site and allocate time to spend there. The appeal of a historic house museum is quite limited in comparison to a working site where the full historical picture receives attention. The theme of Poplar Forest as Jefferson's retreat can be overdone and must be placed in chronological context with the property's economic functions.

Until recently, Jefferson biographers have largely ignored the existence, much less the importance, of Poplar Forest. It survives as a magnificent research tool for archaeologists, architectural historians, and Jefferson scholars. Dr. William Kelso recently joined the staff at Poplar Forest and began intensive archaeological investigations of the house and grounds. The first summer field school, held in 1989, attracted a diverse group from across the United States. Their work is two-fold. These individuals contribute their energies to on-going research investigations at Poplar Forest and take home a more intimate, and probably more accurate, view of this Jefferson plantation. Teachers who attend the field school

extend their newly-gained knowledge of the site to their students and peers. Students in archaeological field schools often serve as one of the best forms of advertising for the sites in which they have worked. Hopefully, archaeological investigations will continue at Poplar Forest, and thereby provide valuable information not found in documentary sources and attract visitors from a broader geographic area. Archaeological investigations, themselves, serve as interesting "live" exhibits for visitors who stumble upon them unawares and those who come specifically to catch a glimpse of these professionals at work.

Architectural historians have performed extensive studies of Poplar Forest throughout the twentieth century because of Jefferson's stature as one of America's first native-born architects. The Department of the Interior conducted a second Historic American Buildings Survey in 1985. This study provides detailed architectural drawings, photographs and additional data pages. At present, the personnel of the Prints and Documents Division of the Library of Congress have not catalogued the photographs and data pages. The fine architectural drawings provide important structural information and should be made more widely available.

This thesis offers a new perspective on Thomas Jefferson to current scholarship. It is not another

biography of the statesman. Instead, it explores the roles that a particular plantation played in Jefferson's life. Scholars have concentrated too much on his political career and neglected to give a complete view of his domestic life. The study of Poplar Forest provides insight into Jefferson as a farmer, slaveholder, and family man. His extensive records of production levels and agricultural pursuits create a picture of an eighteenth century farm that was important to Jefferson throughout his adult life. After 1806, however, it became especially important as a hobby and second home.

Although not now a working plantation, Poplar Forest retains a sense of privacy and seclusion. He crafted the landscape well, indeed the fundamental vista, terraced lawn, and mounds remain. The house and grounds still evoke feelings of peacefulness and serenity from its visitors (see Figure 6-1). As one drives down the narrow lane to the house, the surrounding landscape opens to rural farmland and woods. The "Jefferson Forest" subdivision does interrupt the view, but enough remains to escape the present and explore one of America's most famous citizens in a highly personal setting. Jefferson almost kept Poplar Forest too secluded, since it and its wonderful secrets were all but lost by the mid-twentieth century.



Fig. 6-1. Scenic view from southern portico.

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