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## “Two Tracts of Land at the Poplar Forest”

A Historical and Archaeological Overview  
of Thomas Jefferson’s Plantation Retreat

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Introducing Poplar Forest or any site that has been inhabited for generations is a challenging task. How do we define a place whose physical size, population, landscape, and use have changed dramatically over time? The authors in this book offer varied responses, focusing on written and archaeological evidence of former residents’ relationships to the environment, using analysis of buildings and landscape modifications, and using analysis of acts of consumption and the display and use of consumer goods. Together, these studies provide insights into the specific culture of one plantation and the broader culture of which it was a part during the century that stretched from the eve of the American Revolution to the Civil War.

Today Poplar Forest is a National Historic Landmark, owned and administered since 1984 by the Corporation for Jefferson’s Poplar Forest, a nonprofit private preservation organization. Dedicated to preserving, restoring, researching, and interpreting the period from 1806 to 1823, when Thomas Jefferson owned the property and used it as a private retreat and profitable plantation, the administrators of this site attribute its significance to its association with this important figure in American history. However, Jefferson’s postretirement use of Poplar Forest is just one part of a multifaceted story that spans thousands of years. While we focus on the property’s historic plantation past in this volume, archaeology has demonstrated that native people used this landscape as early as the Paleo-Indian period and as recently as the Late Woodland (Adams 2008). In the twentieth century, families lived and worked at Poplar Forest into the early 1980s.

## Historic Poplar Forest

Legally defined by patent in 1745, when colonial minister and planter William Stith joined 4,000 acres of land in what was then Albemarle County, Poplar Forest had become part of newly formed Bedford County by 1754 (figure 1.1). The land apparently remained unoccupied during Stith's ownership and its subsequent possession by his daughter Elizabeth Pasteur and her cousin Peter Randolph (Chambers 1993, 3–4; Marmon 1991, part 1, 5–7).

In 1764, Randolph sold the property to attorney, planter, and businessman John Wayles. An absentee landowner living in Charles City County, Wayles acquired 819 acres of additional land abutting the original tract during the 1760s (Chambers 1993, 4) and developed the property through the use of enslaved labor. Following his death in 1773, the property passed to his daughter and son-in-law, Martha and Thomas Jefferson, along with land in Amherst, Cumberland, Charles City, Goochland, and Powhatan counties and 135 enslaved men, women, and children (Bear and Stanton 1997, 329–332; Jefferson in Betts 1987, 7–9; Chambers 1993, 4).

The Jeffersons were also absentee owners and infrequent visitors to the property. They were engaged in developing their home estate ninety miles to the northeast at Monticello in Albemarle County, raising a family, and pursuing Thomas Jefferson's political and legal career. After Martha's death in 1782, public service called Jefferson away from Virginia. From the mid-1780s through the early nineteenth century, overseers under the overall direction of a steward managed Poplar Forest's labor force, which produced annual crops of tobacco and wheat after 1790. These products were a significant source of income for their employer.

As he planned for his retirement from the presidency in 1809, Jefferson envisioned the property as a retreat from his personal and public responsibilities at Monticello. While still in office, he oversaw the construction of a unique retreat house and the creation of pleasure grounds near the center of the plantation (Brown 1990; Chambers 1993; Heath 2007; McDonald 1994; Trussell this volume).

Jefferson combined elements of ancient Roman architecture with contemporary design from England, France, and the United States in his house at Poplar Forest (McDonald 2000, 190–192). Two stories tall, the structure boasted an upper floor of living space and a lower level of service and storage rooms. Porticos dominated the north and south façades, and stair pavilions to the east and west provided interior access between floors (figures 1.2 and 1.3). Jefferson designed his home in the shape of an octagon, with four elongated octagonal rooms surrounding a central cubical room used for dining. Bedchambers were located east and west of the dining room, the south room served as a parlor,





Figure 1.2. Aerial view of Poplar Forest house and east dependency wing, looking north. Used by permission of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Bedford County, Virginia. Photograph by Les Schofer.

mestic servants.<sup>1</sup> Jefferson used the square room beneath the dining room for storing wine and other goods.<sup>2</sup>

From 1813 to 1816, a dependency wing off the east side of the house was constructed that Jefferson called a “Wing of Offices.” It contained an unheated store-room; a kitchen; a room occupied by Hannah, Jefferson’s cook and housekeeper; and a smokehouse. The structure was covered by a 100-foot-long flat roof that served as an outdoor room when the weather was mild. It connected to the east side of the house and was accessible from the east bedroom (figures 1.2 and 1.3) (Chambers 1993, 81; Kelso, Patten, and Strutt 1991; McDonald 2000, 179).

Jefferson carefully designed the five-acre grounds immediately surrounding his house, drawing on published accounts of and visits to contemporary landscapes in England, France, and the United States. This information was filtered through his personal aesthetic sensibilities and the realities of plantation life in rural Bedford County (Brown 1990; Heath 2007; Trussell this volume). During the period of house construction, he ordered workmen and enslaved laborers to excavate a sunken lawn south of the house and to build earthen mounds to the east and west. Enslaved gardeners planted trees and flowering shrubs along the length of the lawn, on the mounds, between the mounds and the house, and

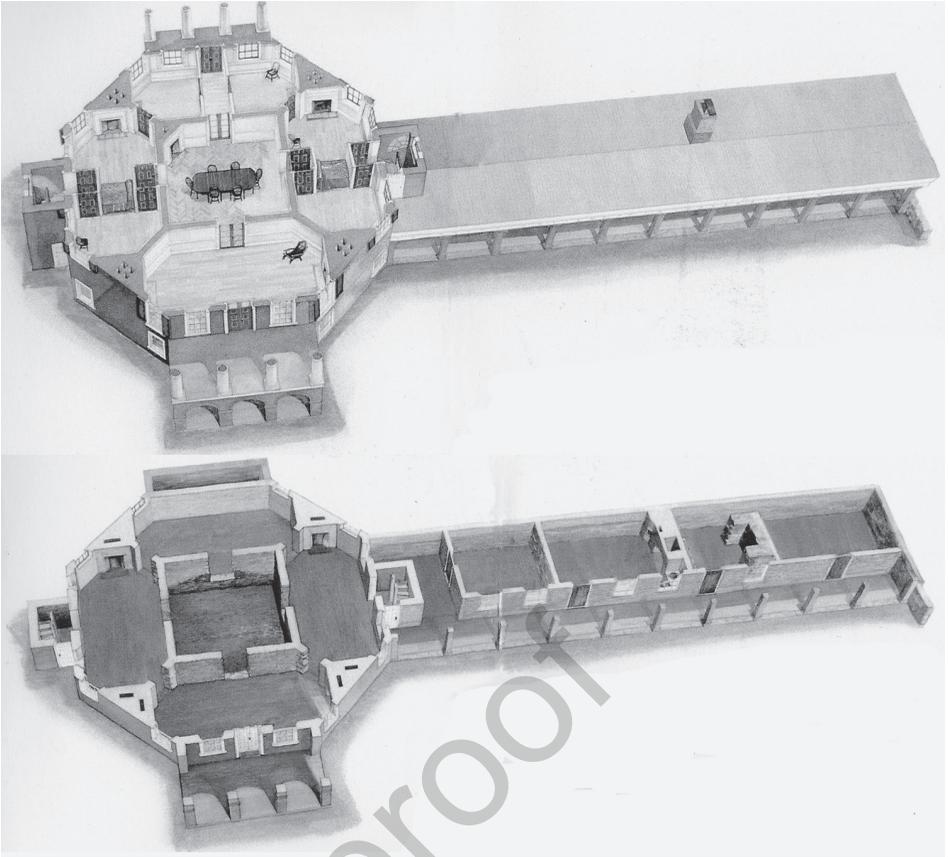


Figure 1.3. Watercolor painting showing sections through the upper and lower levels of the mansion house and the layout of the Wing of Offices. Jefferson's dining room is the cubical room surrounded by four elongated octagonal rooms in the center of the upper level. Used by permission of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Bedford County, Virginia. Gail McIntosh, artist.

in the grounds. To the north of the house, a circular carriage turnaround stood within a lawn shaded by young tulip poplars. It was bounded near the north face of the house by oval beds of flowering shrubs. The entire composition was encircled by a road that served as a hub for plantation routes entering from the north and south (figure 1.4). A 61-acre curtilage surrounded the house, containing ornamental plantings, fruit and vegetable gardens, a nursery, orchards, and workspaces related to the household (Brown 1990; Gary 2008; Heath 2007; Trussell 2000; Trussell this volume).

Accompanied by a small retinue of enslaved men and women based at Monticello and occasionally by family members, Jefferson visited the property annually from 1810 to 1823, staying for days or weeks at a time. When the house was near completion in 1816, he began to bring his granddaughters, particularly

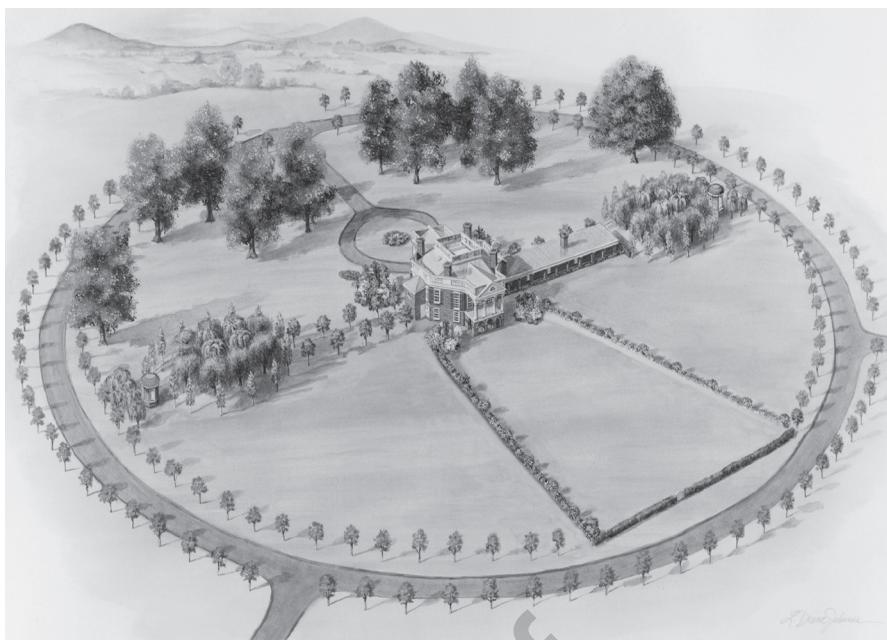


Figure 1.4. Watercolor painting showing conjectural view of the development of the Poplar Forest landscape between 1810 and 1820, looking north. Used by permission of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Bedford County, Virginia. Diane Johnson, artist.

Ellen and Cornelia Randolph, to Bedford, where they provided companionship and served as hostesses for local callers during his visits (Chambers 1993, 104–5, 128; Gary this volume).

In 1790, Jefferson gave 1,000 acres of Poplar Forest land to his daughter Martha and her husband Thomas Mann Randolph as part of a marriage settlement, along with six enslaved families living on the property (Boyd 1961, 189–191). His hope that future grandchildren from their union would take up residence on that portion of the property were never realized, although he had more success settling the only surviving child of his younger daughter, Maria Eppes, at his retreat. Shortly after they were married in 1823, grandson Francis Eppes and his wife Mary Elizabeth moved to Poplar Forest. When Jefferson died three years later, the Eppeses inherited the house, nearly 1,075 acres of land, and several enslaved men and women. In the 1820s and 1830s, Martha Randolph's son Thomas Jefferson Randolph divided and sold the remainder of his grandfather's landholdings, and in 1827 and 1828 he sold many of Jefferson's slaves to settle debts (Chambers 1993, 167; Marmon 1991, part 2:40–42).

Relatively little is known about Eppes's ownership of the property, as Francis and Mary Elizabeth lived there for only five years (Chambers 1993, 174–175; Proebsting this volume). They sold Poplar Forest in November 1828 to local

planter William Cobbs, whose family included his wife, Marian, and daughter, Emma. Following Emma's 1840 marriage to Edward Hutter—a naval officer from Pennsylvania whose brother owned an adjacent plantation—Cobbs turned the property management over to his son-in-law (Chambers 1993, 177; Lee 2008 this volume) (figure 1.5).

A catastrophic fire in 1845 caused substantial damage to the octagonal dwelling. The flames worked slowly, and the Cobbs and Hutter families, who shared the house, escaped with their lives and many of their furnishings. They decided to rebuild, refashioning the dwelling in the popular Greek revival style. They also added an attic story for sleeping and reconfigured the interior plan of the house (Chambers 1993, 181–190).

Just before the fire, William Cobbs had ordered that Jefferson's east dependencies be torn down and had overseen the rebuilding of a smaller detached kitchen and smokehouse on the site of the earlier kitchen and smokehouse (Kelso, Patten, and Strutt 1991).

In addition to rebuilding the house and dependencies, the Cobbs and Hutters made extensive changes to the Poplar Forest landscape during their lives. Among other alterations, they abandoned the southern third of the circular



Figure 1.5. Mid-nineteenth-century photograph of Emma and Edward Hutter. Used by permission of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, Bedford County, Virginia.