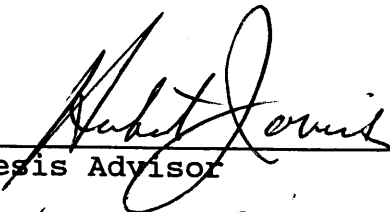


POPLAR FOREST
THOMAS JEFFERSON'S ULTIMATE RETREAT

A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

by
Teresa Ann Stramiello

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS



Thesis Advisor



For the Graduate Division

December 1, 1991

ABSTRACT

Thomas Jefferson's public life was long and intense. As a member of the Virginia House of Burgess in 1769, and as representative to the Second Continental Congress in 1775, he was instrumental in securing independence for the colonies from England. Four decades of almost constant political office in the new nation was to follow, culminated by two terms as President (1800-1809). His devotion to public service and concern regarding the welfare of the United States kept Jefferson, except for brief intervals, from leading his preferred personal life style, close to the soil as a Virginia farmer.

Though often slighted by historians, the third president's private life was marred by tragedy and financial pressure. The death of his father, when Jefferson was fourteen, forced him to assume responsibilities at an early age. The death of his wife Martha, after only ten years of marriage, proved the most devastating tragedy of his life. This was compounded by witnessing the death of five of his six children.

The burden of outstanding debt, which came with

inheritance of land and slaves, often placed Jefferson in a position of financial strain. This was manifested by his craving for architectural expression, a passion for collectibles, and gift giving. His ultimate downfall was an inability to properly manage his money. Indebtedness followed him throughout his life and was passed on to his only surviving daughter and several grandchildren.

Thomas Jefferson found release from his public concerns and private misfortunes in the creative art of building. His design for the Virginia Capitol, constant rebuilding of Monticello, and legacy of the University of Virginia are his most honorable architectural accomplishments.

Physical structures provided a safety valve from the pressure of public life. Whenever the cares of government or the intrusion of society became too much to bear, Jefferson sought the solitude of a remote retreat.

While attending the third meeting of the Continental Congress in June 1776, Jefferson, admired for his felicitous writing style, was chosen to create a document declaring the colonies desire for independence. He took rooms in a local home which provided solitude, avoiding the chaos of hotels and meeting halls.

A place of solitude and retreat was essential to Jefferson and his family five years later as the British

advanced on Monticello. Narrowly escaping capture, he and his family hid at Poplar Forest, his estate in Bedford, Virginia. Safe, and free from distraction, he took advantage of this opportunity and spent several months in retreat at Poplar Forest, writing his only published book Notes on the State of Virginia.

In 1784, as a part of the negotiating team sent to France, Jefferson again captured a life-style which sheltered him from interruption. He rented rooms at a Carthusian Monastery on Mount Calvary, outside of Paris. The monastery, shrouded in silence, served as a retreat from the callers which besieged him at his Paris home. Here he was free to indulge in the design of an architectural plan for a new capitol building in Richmond, Virginia.

Upon his return to America in 1789, Jefferson became Secretary of State in the new government. He withdrew to a peaceful home outside the bustling capital city of New York.

Jefferson served the nation as Vice President and President for the next two decades. Throughout this period in his life, he continued to redesign Monticello, and in 1804, the construction of Poplar Forest began.

After forty years of public service, interrupted by only a few years of private life, Jefferson retired in

1809. His house at Monticello became an attraction to curious visitors, and he relished each opportunity to visit this retreat home at Poplar Forest, a three day carriage ride from Monticello.

Poplar Forest fulfilled Jefferson's personal need for aesthetic release and physical solitude. He used it as an escape from the constant interruption, and responsibility which was overly demanding at Monticello.

This paper will discuss Jefferson's passion for architecture and craving for privacy that called Poplar Forest into being. This modest home is an expression of the hidden side of Thomas Jefferson, shown through his design and living patterns.

After Jefferson's death, Poplar Forest was severely damaged by fire in 1845. The house was ultimately altered to accommodate the needs of later inhabitants, and fell into disrepair. The nonprofit Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest was formed to begin the process of restoring this structure. This thesis concludes with a report on the status of the restoration.

Modern guests visiting Virginia to witness Jefferson's architectural expression in public buildings will be reminded, by Poplar Forest, of the private Thomas Jefferson.