

# Where Thomas Jefferson Went to Get Away From It All

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THE archeologists have unearthed the foundation of a long-lost addition, an afterthought grafted on by an owner who just could not stop tinkering with his original design. The historians have read through reams of letters, uncovering a telling paragraph here, a helpful sentence there.

Thomas Jefferson's other home is beginning to give up its secrets. This is not Monticello but Poplar Forest, a compact house near Lynchburg, Va., the city he called "the most interesting spot in the state."

With its distinctive octagonal shape, Poplar Forest is a two-story house laid out by a man who once declared that "all the new and good houses are of a single story." Not one to contradict himself, Jefferson tucked Poplar Forest into the side of a knoll, making the lower level invisible from the long driveway.

He had ideas about windows, too. He sized and spaced them according to his own mathematical formula for what he considered the right amount of light in a room.

Jefferson designed Poplar Forest as a retirement retreat, a comfortable house on a more personal scale than Monticello. How Poplar Forest turned out the way it did is one of the secrets slowly being revealed, for the paper trail Jefferson left behind is maddeningly thin. Unlike Monticello - and the thousands of other inspirations and inventions described in meticulous detail by Jefferson - Poplar Forest was given relatively little mention in the records of the third President.

But now Poplar Forest is getting some attention. A nonprofit group, the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest, raised \$1.8 million - some of it from a bank - to buy the house and some of the land around it six years ago from Dr. James A. Johnson. The group has repaid all but \$539,000 of the loan and has been making needed structural repairs, plugging leaks and shoring up masonry that deteriorated over the years. In all, the corporation has raised more than \$5 million, including more than \$1 million in state grants earmarked for structural stabilization and restoration.

Last year, more than 40 archeologists, including some from Monticello's Archeological Field School, began excavations that yielded the foundations of the row of flat-roofed rooms, as well as a building on the lawn and the wine cellar.

The house itself remains empty, because as far as furnishings and interior details are concerned, there is not much to go on. The few architectural drawings of Poplar Forest are not even by Jefferson. They were probably done by one of his workers, John Nielson, who was based at

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Monticello and most likely relied on Jefferson's description. That could be why the drawings show the fireplace in a different corner of the dining room than the one where it was built.

Jefferson focused on Poplar Forest after realizing while he was President that his retirement at Monticello was not to be idyllic. Burdened with visitors and debts, he created a house for the private person, not the public figure.

"He went out of his way not to invite people here," said Dorsey Bodeman, the interpretation coordinator at Poplar Forest. "He didn't want to start that stream of people. It wasn't like Poplar Forest was on the way to Williamsburg and they'd say, 'Let's just stop in.' "

Poplar Forest took a decade to finish, not a whole generation, as Monticello did. It was habitable by the time Jefferson's second term as President ended in 1809, but continued to evolve, even after Jefferson moved in books and began visiting there periodically.

He wrote in 1814 that he was adding a wing of offices "in the manner of those at Monticello, with a flat terraced roof." In contrast to the rest of the house, which remained in relatively good condition, the office wing deteriorated by the time Jefferson died in 1826. After his heirs sold Poplar Forest in 1828, the offices either collapsed or were destroyed.

From Jefferson's letters, the archeologists knew what to look for: a rectangular shape 110 feet long. And from a slave's letter, they knew how wide the rectangle was: 22 feet, 8 inches. After several weeks of digging, the foundations turned up.

"For so many years we thought there was nothing Jeffersonian left," Ms. Bodeman said. "This is almost like an untapped gold mine. He gives us clues, so it's not like a needle in a haystack, even though there are things we'll never have the answers to."

Sometimes Jefferson's letters are intriguing for the answers they do not provide. When Jefferson added the office wing, the construction chief, Hugh Chisholm, sent his boss a letter asking if he wanted "the pillars with circular brick or with square bricks." Instead of replying in writing, Jefferson traveled to Poplar Forest and apparently gave Chisholm his orders face to face. After studying the evidence, the archeologists now say that Jefferson's decision was curved bricks for a colonnade.

Now the researchers are reading letters from the families who lived in the house after buying it from Jefferson's heirs. The archeologists plan to dig for evidence of early roads and outbuildings on the property, which once covered 5,000 acres. "That information will give us a starting point to work backward," Ms. Bodeman said.

Artifacts found in the office wing and in a wine cellar under the main house are being indexed by computer. "I think he'd probably love it," said Drake Patten, the archeology laboratory supervisor. "He was ahead of his time in so many ways.

The archeologists are studying some of the pottery that they have unearthed. By cross-mending, joining parts of different pieces of pottery, they hope to get a sense of what a single plate or jar

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must have been like. "This is where the computer will minimize the hand work," Ms. Patten said. "Jefferson would have loved that. He invented all those things to cut down on leg work."

The researchers continue to uncover letters by and to Jefferson. "We thought we'd probably seen everything," Ms. Bodeman said. But several boxes that turned up at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg hold hope of "those elusive one or two lines that are just what we are waiting for. Just when you think you've exhausted everything, something else turns up."