

THE ARCHITECTS

# THOMAS JEFFERSON



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AMERICAN HERITAGE • NEW WORD CITY



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Long before Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, fifty years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, he composed the epitaph that would be inscribed on the granite obelisk that would rest atop his grave:

Here was buried

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Author of the Declaration of American Independence,

Of the Statutes of Virginia for Religious Freedom,

And Father of the University of Virginia.

The last of these memorable achievements, the designing and planning of the university's buildings and campus, was the final project of his old age. This architectural triumph was a manifestation of Jefferson's deepest personal convictions, of his vision of the future as it might be realized in this land of freedom. "This institution of my native state," he once wrote with pride, "the hobby of my old age, will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind to explore and expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation."

This ambitious statement summarized Jefferson's principles and his approach to life throughout his eighty-three years. In the course of this nation's history, few people, of his generation or since, have questioned the nature and meaning of the world we live in as intently or as thoroughly as Jefferson - and certainly no other who has held the office of president of the United States.

Among Jefferson's wide and varied passions was a love of the arts. "I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts," he wrote his friend James Madison. "But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world, and to procure them its praise." In this endeavor, he succeeded, both directly and indirectly, through his official acts and his private enterprises.

Jefferson's enthusiasm embraced virtually all the arts, among them, music, sculpture, and painting. As his friend and fellow

statesman Edmund Randolph observed, Jefferson "panted after the fine arts and discovered a taste in them not easily satisfied with such scanty means as existed in a colony, for it was a part of Mr. Jefferson's pride to run before the times in which he lived." But it was architecture, the most practical of all the arts, that remained his principle preoccupation. The Marquis de Chastellux, who had served as a major general in Rochambeau's army during the American Revolution and who visited Jefferson at Monticello in 1782, concluded that (although the building was then far from completed) Jefferson was "the first American who has consulted the Fine Arts to know how he should shelter himself from the weather." By this, he meant that Jefferson's home was the first he had seen in the new republic that adhered strictly to the "rules" of architecture as laid down by the Renaissance interpreters of the classical styles.

Jefferson himself held a dim view of the liberties colonial builders in various parts of the country took in regard to those rules. One of his great disappointments was the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg, Virginia, which he called a "rude, misshapen" pile that might have been mistaken for a brick kiln, except that it had a roof. "The genius of architecture seems to have shed its maledictions over this land," he wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ". . . the first principles of the art are unknown, and there exists scarcely a model among us sufficiently chaste to give an idea of them."

Not many of his contemporaries would have agreed with his appraisal, but as Randolph had observed, Jefferson was ahead of his time. While we of the twenty-first century admire many of the colonial structures he disparaged, Jefferson's preference was for architecture based on the classical - the ancient buildings of Rome and Greece - reinvented to embody the spirit of the New World.

Though he harbored a vast knowledge of the subject and engaged in a variety of architectural ventures, Jefferson was never considered a professional, but instead, the quintessential American gentleman-architect of his time. As he once said to a visitor at Monticello, "Architecture is my delight, and putting up, and pulling down, one of my favorite amusements." It was to this pursuit that he devoted much of his energy and thoughtful contemplation. Accordingly, he was constantly asked by friends,

architects, and associates - even by the Congress of the United States - to offer his advice.

The number of houses he is reputed to have designed for friends, relatives, and acquaintances is no doubt an exaggeration; who, if given the opportunity, would deny him authorship of their residence? But there is ample evidence that he provided plans for a variety of buildings in Virginia - private homes, churches, and courthouses - all of which bear the imprint of his particular taste. While these are, for the most part, relatively modest examples of his ingenuity and imagination, they nevertheless demonstrate the attention he paid to details - specifically, the problems of accommodation and style - in every structure he conceived.

In architectural matters especially, Jefferson was always willing to facilitate the requests of his friends. In 1794, future president James Madison wrote Jefferson asking for counsel on behalf of his brother-in-law, who was planning to build a new residence. "In general," he wrote, "any hints which may occur to you for improving the place will be thankfully accepted. I beg pardon for being the occasion of this trouble to you, but your goodness has always so readily answered such draughts on it, that I have been tempted to make this additional one." Madison sent the builder of the house to Monticello, "not only to profit of examples before his eyes, but to ask the favor of your advice on the plan of the House." The house, Belle Grove plantation in Middletown, Virginia, is still standing, now one of the properties maintained by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

But Jefferson's influence on American architecture can more readily be seen in the development of the nation's capital during his years as president, and later, as an elder statesman: the design of the Virginia State Capitol; the aerie he built for himself at Monticello overlooking Charlottesville; and the University of Virginia, which he could see from his mountaintop home.

But by far, Jefferson's primary architectural concern - certainly his most intimate - was with Monticello, the evolution of which changed as he matured and his horizons expanded. He first built a perch upon his "little mountain" in 1767 when he was twenty-four and continued "putting up, and pulling down," until

his death almost sixty years later. At Monticello, as with every other house he ever lived in (including the White House and his diplomatic headquarters in Paris), Jefferson's designs kept pace with his never-ending quest for knowledge and understanding.

During his tenure at William and Mary College – he graduated in 1762 – his mentor, Dr. William Small, sparked in Jefferson a fascination for the sciences, an interest that he pursued all his life. Small introduced him into lofty circles: the “familiar table” of the colonial governor, Francis Fauquier, and to George Wythe, Virginia's foremost teacher of law. “At these dinners,” Jefferson recalled, “I have . . . heard more good sense, more rational and philosophical conversations, than in all my life besides.” He studied law with Wythe, a man he referred to as “the Cato of his country” and “my earliest and best friend” and shared his passion for music with Fauquier, who invited him to play the violin in string concerts at the governor's palace.

His true father, Peter Jefferson, a self-made Virginia frontiersman, died when Thomas was fourteen, leaving him an eventual share in a fairly substantial estate. In 1772, when he was twenty-nine years old, he married Martha Wayles Skelton, a young widow he took home to Monticello, then merely a one-room dwelling. Only a year earlier, he had written a friend, “I have but one room, which like the cobblers, serves me for parlor, for kitchen and hall. I may add, for bedchamber and study, too. . . . I have hopes, however, of getting more elbow room this summer.” In the next ten years, he and Martha had six children, only two of whom, both daughters, reached maturity. Martha herself died in 1782, long before Jefferson had completed their mountaintop home.

The most important books in Jefferson's architectural library were Giacomo Leoni's four volumes of *Architecture of A. Palladio*. He may have been the first colonist to acquire these seminal books, and they remained his most prized references as he built and rebuilt Monticello over the years. Most Virginia plantations were erected along the rivers, where the land was flat and fertile and where transportation by water was accessible. To construct a sizeable homestead on a mountain far from civilization was virtually unprecedented in Jefferson's time and not terribly practical for a farmer, which he was.