



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*



The Landscape at Poplar Forest

"I have engaged a workman to build offices, have laid off a handsome curtilage connecting the house with the Tomahawk, have inclosed and divided it into suitable appendages to a Dwelling house, and have begun its improvements by planting trees of use and ornament."

Thomas Jefferson

April 13, 1813, Age 70

At Poplar Forest Thomas Jefferson created an ideal environment that integrated manmade and natural features. His design reflects his mature genius as an architect and landscape designer.

Jefferson's design for Poplar Forest was greatly influenced by Andrea Palladio. The retreat is his interpretation of a five-part Palladian plan: a central villa, flanked by two wings, each ending in a pavilion. The villa combined the best of classical and modern design through landscape and architectural elements. At Poplar Forest, Jefferson substituted landscape elements for bricks and mortar: double rows of paper-mulberry trees formed both of the first wings and earthen mounds replaced Palladio's end pavilions.

The house was built into the crown of a hill so that the two-story house would appear to be a single story from the front. On the north, or front of the house, he created a landscape that appeared natural, even wild. On the south, the landscape was more formal with an open sunken lawn serving as the centerpiece.

In 1813, Jefferson established a sixty-one acre space, which he called the curtilage, to contain ornamental plantings, kitchen gardens, orchards and support buildings. Beyond its boundary were the grounds of the working plantation. The octagonal house sits in the center of a 540-yard circular road within the ornamental core of the curtilage.

Inspired by visits to French and English gardens, Jefferson incorporated tree clumps and oval shrub beds into his planting scheme. The tree clumps contained balsam, tulip and Athenian poplar as well as sweet shrub, redbud, common and Kentucky locust, and dogwood. The oval beds contained calycanthus and a variety of roses.

Archaeological discovery continues at Poplar Forest today and has the potential to reveal Jefferson's landscape vision, both ornamental and functional. Archaeologists continue to study botanical evidence to help develop an accurate interpretation of gardens, farm fields and the broader environment in which they are situated.

Jefferson inherited Poplar Forest's 4,819 acres from his father-in-law in 1773. In 1983 the land at Poplar Forest had been reduced to less than 50 acres. Today the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest has reclaimed 671 acres of Jefferson's original landscape. There is still much to learn, preserve and restore.

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