



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*



Poplar Forest: America's First Octagonal House

"When finished it will be the best dwelling house in the state, except that of Monticello; perhaps preferable to that, as more proportioned to the faculties of a private citizen."

Thomas Jefferson

September 18, 1812, Age 69

Poplar Forest is the first octagonal house in America and considered Thomas Jefferson's most personal and mature architectural masterpiece. Inspired by the classicism of Palladio, Poplar Forest fused ancient and modern to create a distinctly American architecture.

Jefferson began construction at Poplar Forest during the second term of his presidency. He was involved in every aspect of architectural and landscape design, writing numerous letters from the White House to his workers in Bedford County. Construction began in the spring of 1806 and was ongoing until Jefferson's death in 1826.

Poplar Forest illustrates Jefferson's attraction to the precision of mathematics. Its exterior walls form an equal-sided octagon. Inside, the space is divided into four elongated octagons surrounding a perfect cube, measuring 20 feet in all directions. The soaring two-story cube space is brightly illuminated by one of the largest skylights in America at the time of construction. Twenty feet above the floor, the opening is 16 feet long with 32 panes of glass. At Poplar Forest, he designed four symmetrical chimneys to serve fifteen fireplaces.

During his five years as America's envoy to France, Jefferson encountered new stylistic and convenient architectural ideas to inject into his New World classicism at Poplar Forest; including floor-to-ceiling windows, alcove beds, the skylight, polished floors and an indoor privy.

In 1814, Jefferson added a one hundred foot-long "wing of offices," which included a kitchen, a smokehouse, one room likely used as a cook's room and laundry, and a storage room. Its innovative flat roof, called a terras roof, also served a recreational purpose: "About twilight of the evening, we sally out with the owls and bats and take our evening exercise on the terras."

Poplar Forest is highly idealistic in concept with only a few concessions to practicality – it was so perfectly suited to Jefferson alone that subsequent owners found it difficult to inhabit. The amount of glass, the quality of light and the way the house connects to the surrounding landscape was strikingly modern for Jefferson's time and clearly expresses the fundamental idea that house and grounds should be joined into a seamless whole.

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