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# LYNCH'S FERRY



POPLAR FOREST: ITS RESCUE AND RESTORATION • M. W. THORNHILL JR. AND HIS STATUE • I WAS A MOLE IN THE MORAL MAJORITY: OR HOW THE ACADEMY THEATRE GOT SAVED • HERMIT CAKE: A LYNCHBURG HOLIDAY TRADITION

# from the editor

This year, Poplar Forest completed the dazzling architectural restoration of Thomas Jefferson's villa.

It takes two to perform Restoration Tango. And, in this case, the task of interpreting and responding to Jefferson's every move fell to architectural historian Travis C. McDonald, who not only choreographed the intimate, all-consuming, thirty-four-year-long dance, he did so in full view of visitors—tens of thousands a year—while also taking time to teach archeology, give presentations, and write a book.

However, McDonald is quick to deflect praise toward the local visionaries who stepped up to save the deteriorating landmark, the myriad expert advisors he relied on for guidance, and the highly skilled craftsmen who meticulously and authentically executed the work. And, in this issue, he recounts the remarkable rebuild in a photo essay: "Poplar Forest: Its Rescue and Restoration."

The year 2023 also marked another celebration, this one in downtown Lynchburg, at the Fifth Street roundabout where hundreds gathered for the dedication of a statue honoring M. W. Thornhill Jr., the city's first Black mayor.

Moments before the unveiling, Ted Delaney, Lynchburg's chief public history officer, extolled the generosity and courage Thornhill displayed throughout his life as a businessman deeply rooted in his community, as a civil rights leader searching for justice, and as a seasoned politician determined to serve the Hill City.

Delaney also emphasized the rarity of the occasion, informing the audience that "The last time our community gathered like this, with public and private sectors in partnership, to unveil the statue of a local resident, was over a century ago in 1915." A full transcript of Delaney's remarks can be found on page 22.

Another Lynchburg landmark, The Academy of Music Theatre, was revived with great fanfare in 2018. Some mature *Lynch's Ferry* readers will recall that the journey to save and restore the structure was hampered by numerous storms—both figuratively and literally—and that the project's first director, the late James M. Elson, weathered many of them himself.

In Elson's lively personal essay, "I Was a Mole in the Moral Majority: Or How the Academy Theatre Got Saved," the historian provides a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges he faced during his tenure and reveals how he used his precarious position to research two of his books: *Academy of Music: The Golden Age of Live Performance* and *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years, 1786–1986*.

Very few of us have the talent, drive, discipline, and luck required to leave a lasting architectural legacy, merit a statue, or contribute to the city's historical archives. Instead, our remembrances are often embodied in more fleeting forms. As author Judy C. Caldwell discovered during her Auntie Jean's memorial, an old Lynchburg family recipe for hermit cake has the power to evoke happy memories in a way no other tribute can match.

*...the generosity and courage Thornhill displayed throughout his life as a businessman deeply rooted in his community, as a civil rights leader searching for justice, and as a seasoned politician determined to serve the Hill City.*



# Poplar Forest

ITS RESCUE AND RESTORATION

BY TRAVIS C. MCDONALD



**T**his year marks two significant joyous occasions at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest: the fortieth anniversary of its rescue and the inaugural celebration of its completed architectural restoration. It is the story of good people who passionately believed in their goal but at first failed, and then stubbornly tried and failed again. Finally, it came down to a handful of people who made it work, becoming the little nonprofit that could, and did. Against all odds they made it the most professionally respected and idealistic architectural restoration in the country. This is the story of saving and restoring Thomas Jefferson's most intimate retreat, arguably his most perfect architectural work, and recovering a large missing chapter of his late life.



This short history is focused on the architectural milestone, but many more significant features remain to be discovered and restored in the ornamental and plantation landscape that will convey the entirety of Jefferson's lost personal world.

### THE RESCUE

When James O. Watts Jr. decided to sell Poplar Forest in 1972, he first offered it to Monticello, without luck. When the property was put on the market in 1974, and again in 1976, the Lynchburg Historical Foundation tried and failed to rescue the property. After a brief ownership by Dr. James Johnson of High Point, North Carolina, in 1980–1981, it again went on the market. This time the Lynchburg Historical Foundation, under the direction of Lydia Daniel, and the Bedford Historical Society, under the direction of Clara Lambeth, joined forces under a new nonprofit to buy what had been reduced to a 49.5-acre property. This concerted effort also failed, and by late 1983, a small group rallied by Lynchburg newspaper publisher T. George Washington tried one more time, enlisting the financial backing of Anne R. Worrell, wife of the paper's owner. This time it worked, and the house with 49.5 acres, along with an additional 255 acres, was purchased and a new

nonprofit created. The local core group consisted of Washington, Peter Ward, Robert Lambeth, and Chris Hutter. After enlisting the help of George Stewart of First Colony Life Insurance, an expanded board started a statewide campaign to raise \$5 million to retire the \$1.8 million mortgage and to start the restoration. Stewart, who reluctantly agreed to step in for a year and then stayed as board chairman for ten years, stated: "Surely it is no exaggeration to say that this is one of the last exceptionally important restoration projects that we can undertake for future generations." In the first of many subsequent wise decisions, in 1986 the board hired their first employee, Lynn Beebe, as executive director. Beebe, with graduate degrees in architectural history and business administration, knew how to quickly secure the best professional advice for the best possible restoration project, and the restoration slowly started to come together.

### THE RESTORATION

The success of this project can be attributed to the right things, done in the right order, by the right people. Lynchburg native and architectural historian S. Allen Chambers Jr. had already gotten the Historic American Buildings Survey, for whom he worked, to record Poplar Forest in 1985. Beebe

sought advice from two of the best professionals: Hugh C. Miller, chief historical architect of the National Park Service, and Nicholas A. Pappas, chief historical architect of Colonial Williamsburg. In the fall of 1986 Miller and Pappas submitted their professional guidelines, stating: "We will only have one chance to do this restoration right—and Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest is simply too important a national treasure to restore it in any other way." Their report called for a master plan to protect resources, including land protection, and to begin historical and archaeological research. They warned that restraint was needed to prevent a premature restoration, that a professional advisory panel should be formed, that a permanent professional staff should be recruited, and that the best possible architectural consultants should be found. Under Beebe's leadership the board adopted each of these recommendations, setting the project on the best possible course. Al Chambers was engaged to search national records for any references to Poplar Forest (which resulted in his 1993 published history of Poplar Forest); Bill Kelso was lured away from Monticello from 1988 to 1990 to start archaeological investigations; a stellar architectural advisory panel of national restoration professionals was assembled in 1988;

## There's More to This Story!

Architectural historian Travis C. McDonald spent thirty-four years opening what he calls "a type of portal" into a "sizeable portion of Thomas Jefferson's life," a portion that had essentially remained unexplored until now. The author, among the first to enter this new realm, takes readers along with him as he journeys through the many questions surrounding Poplar Forest, a masterpiece displaying not only the depth of Jefferson's creativity but also the exquisite workmanship of his enslaved "shadow family."

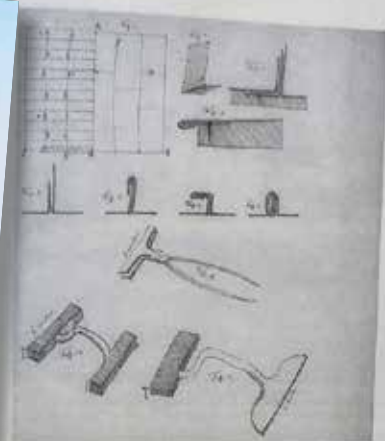
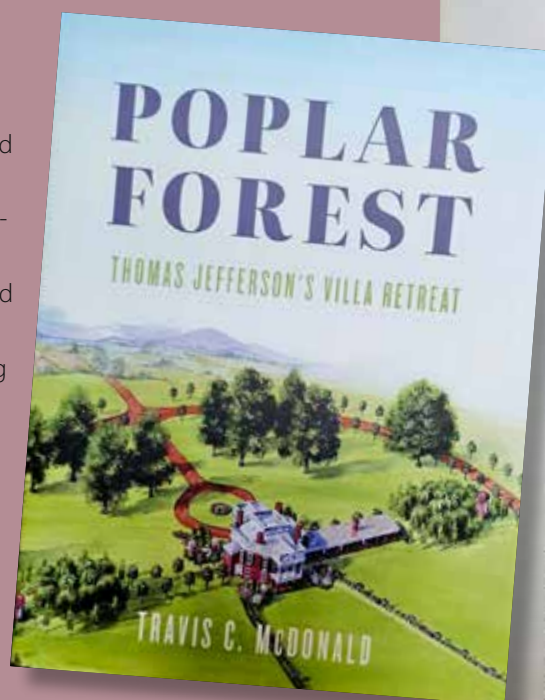


Fig. 84. Jefferson drawing, laid out, for the record of heights, costs, and directions for installation.

set into motion once again the distant movement of imported materials that had long been the custom for Poplar Forest.

That summer in 1825 John Hemmings found himself back at Poplar Forest and writing to Jefferson once again. He started his letter with: "Dear Sir I hope this few may find you well and in good health. we begin to tin the west side of the house . . . the roof [roof] is so ruff that I am foor [forced] to employ both of the boys." The "boys" were young men now but still learning from their uncle, who was a forty-nine-year-old man wearing spectacles. Eppes faced the old persistent problem of getting a bill of lumber cut. Hemmings reported: "The owners of the saw mills wont agree to cut their timber trees at this season for feare of the worms [killing] three trees. Mr. Hiko tells me thurs [sic] a man 25 miles off that says he will let him have it if he lets him have the haling and then says he would deliver it for 1 dollar pay a hundred." In his next letter, the follow-

the director of architectural restoration was hired in 1989; an architectural conservator came in 1990; and with the selection of the consulting architects in 1990, the restoration team was in place.

I was hired to start the restoration in 1989, and looking back, I am stymied to adequately convey and describe what has been an extraordinary thirty-four-year experience. I can only hope that the process, which has been on display from the beginning, and the photographs accompanying this article, will do the story some justice until a more extensive restoration history can be published. A month or so after being hired I was quoted in the Poplar Forest newsletter under the title “An Architectural Historian’s Dream.” My prescient comment was: “I eagerly await all the nuances which will begin to appear during the investigation phase of the restoration. If the tantalizing bits from the current archaeological excavations are any predictable indication, we’re in for some wonderful discoveries.” In hindsight that proved to be a wonderful understatement as the investigation slowly revealed what Thomas Jefferson had actually designed and constructed, major portions of which had not been seen since 1845 when a fire drastically altered the house.

The three-part restoration team of staff, advisors, and consultants ensured the board and donors that the project would use the most professional philosophies, processes, and techniques toward the most authentic restoration. But, the team cautioned, physical investigations, called architectural archaeology, must first reveal and verify—in addition to the documentary record—that we had enough solid evidence to faithfully restore Jefferson’s retreat. The positive conclusion to that challenge came in 1992 when the team announced that the house could honestly be restored, and moreover, it had to be done using the same techniques, the same materials, and even the same historical sequence of construction that Jefferson used.

Adding to the documentary and on-site physical evidence, the consulting



The ad hoc committee 1986; L-R: Robert Lambeth, Peter Ward, Chris Hutter, George Washington, Lynn Beebe

architects, John Mesick and Jeff Baker, brought unparalleled expertise to the project. They had been hired because they were restoring both Monticello and the Jefferson buildings at the University of Virginia. It also helped that the advisory panel consisted of Monticello’s director of restoration, Bill Beiswanger, and their architectural conservator, Bob Self. Initial consultants Hugh Miller and Nicholas Pappas transitioned to the advisory panel where they were joined by Lee Nelson of the National Park Service (who had restored Independence Hall), Edward Chappell of Colonial Williamsburg, Orlando Ridout from the Maryland Historical Trust, and John Larson from the Old Salem Museum.

When the historical construction sequence turned to the interior wooden elements—elements originally produced by the enslaved highly skilled carpenter John Hemings and his three nephew apprentices (Jefferson’s bi-racial sons)—our own craftsmen made these authentic classical parts using Jefferson-era wood and tools. This careful process was always open to visitors, who started coming back each year to see the house unfold as Jefferson had.

National accolades and awards attest to what we have achieved, and how well we achieved it. Though I performed as the conductor of this complex restored ensemble, conductors do not make the music. Poplar Forest has been a team effort that required many skilled craftsmen to put their heart and soul into the endeavor. They can be proud of restoring this national, even international, treasure—an exceptional project that George Stewart long ago realized would be our gift for future generations.



*When writing about the significant occasions that took place at Mr. Jefferson’s retreat this year, Travis C. McDonald, director of architectural restoration at Poplar Forest, failed*

*to mention two additional milestones that took place in 2023: his retirement after thirty-four years of dedicated service to the project and the publication of his book Poplar Forest: Thomas Jefferson’s Villa Retreat. He plans to take full advantage of his new status by continuing his work on Poplar Forest and completing a second book.*

SEE THE RESTORATION PROGRESSION ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

1983



South elevation 1983

North elevation 1983

1986



Board members, front L-R: Eliza Thomas, Anne Worrell, Gina Christian; rear L-R: Robert Lambeth, Al Chambers

1986



Advisors Nicholas Pappas (L) and Hugh Miller (R)



Attorney General Gerald Bailles at ceremony retiring the first mortgage; L-R: George Washington, Doug Cruickshanks, Chris Hutter, George Stewart

1988



George Washington and Lynn Beebe



L-R: Lynn Beebe, George Stewart, Senator Elliot Schewel, Robert Lambeth



Bill Kelso and Travis McDonald, 1989

1989



Bill Kelso and Governor Douglas Wilder



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# 1990



Travis McDonald, Virginia governor Gerald Baliles, and Lynn Beebe



Restoration team: rear L-R: Andrew Ladygo, Jeff Baker, John Mesick, Travis McDonald; front L-R: William Beiswanger, Lee Nelson, Nicholas Pappas, Robert Burley

Consulting architects with Travis McDonald L-R: John Mesick, Andrew Ladygo, Travis, and Jeff Baker

# 1991



Travis McDonald and Andrew Ladygo investigate the dining room



Travis McDonald and Andrew Ladygo investigating the stair pavilion



Travis McDonald investigating the walls of the east room



Restoration team L-R: Andrew Andygo, Travis McDonald, William Beiswanger, Robert Burley, Nicholas Pappas, Orlando Ridout, Lee Nelson, 1991



Board Members, front L-R: Peter Ward, Eliza Thomas, Anne Worrell, T. George Washington, Robert Lambeth; rear L-R: George Stewart, Gina Christian, Chris Hutter, David Brown, Al Chambers, Dot Saunders, Mary Deny Wray, Joe Logan, 1992

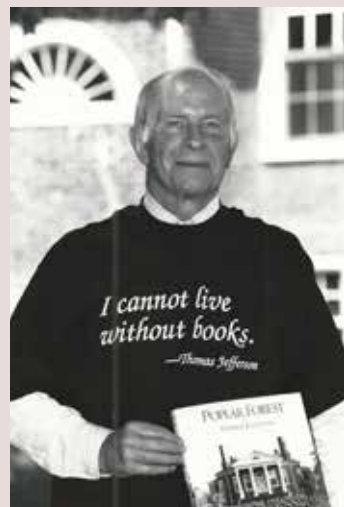
1993-1995



South portico during repairs to arches and columns, 1993



Outer brick walls underpinned with concrete footings and a drainage system during stabilization phase, 1993



Al Chambers with his published history of Poplar Forest, 1993



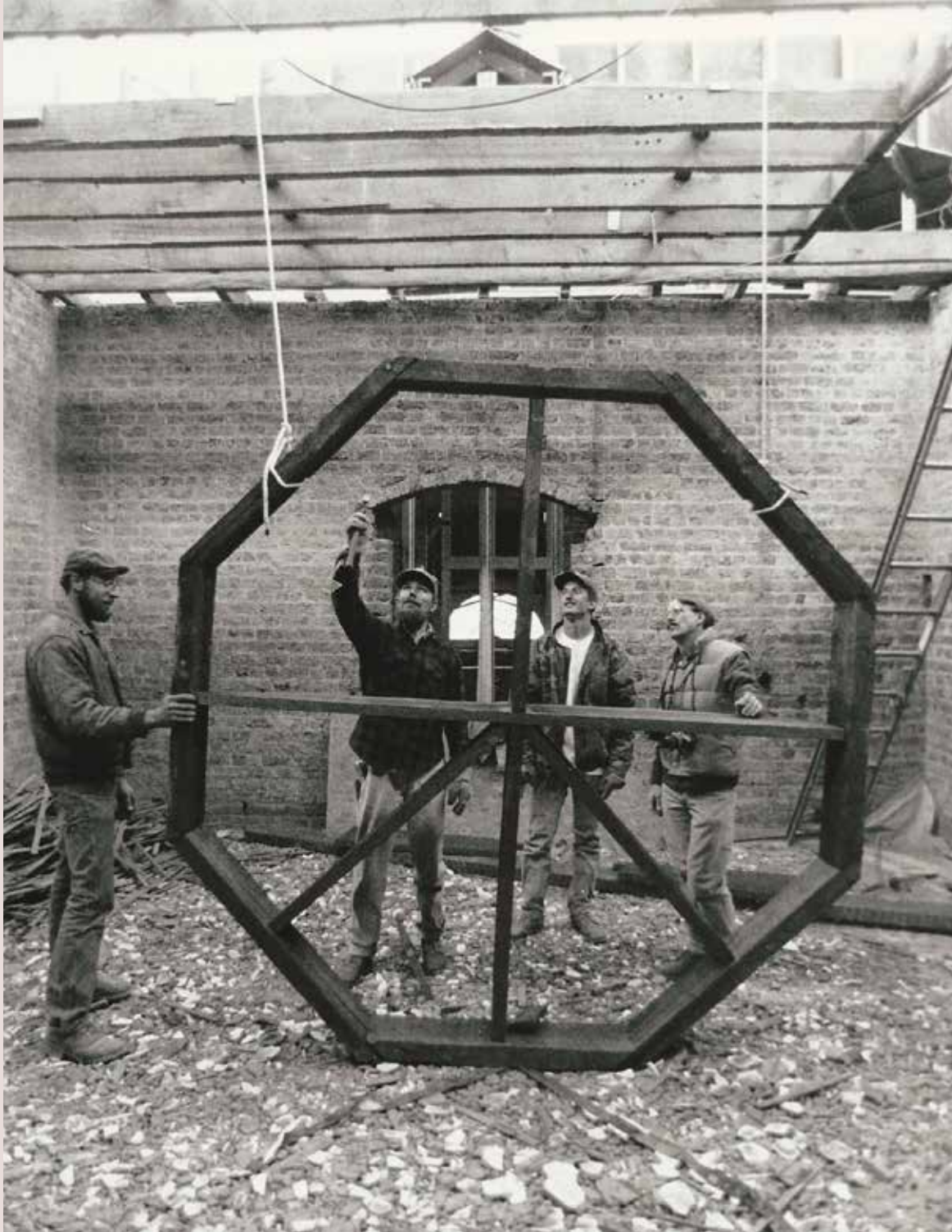
1846 Staircase inserted in the middle room to access the attic and lower level, 1995



1846 attic inserted above the middle room which reduced the lower middle room from a 20' ceiling to a 12' ceiling, 1995



Enclosures around the house to allow for winter use of lime mortar; structure on top to allow for the removal of the 1846 roof, 1995



Crown of the 1846 roof; roof removed to build the center room walls back to 20', 1995

Douglas Rideout carving oak lintels for the windows and doors, 1995



Investigation and brick repair on the lower level: L-R: Henry Cersley (mason), Travis McDonald, Douglas Rideout (restoration supervisor), 1995



Douglas Rideout and Travis McDonald in the stair pavilion, 1995



Vince Fastabend (left) working on roof joists, 1996

Parlor walls restored with their triple windows (right) and dining room walls restored to their 20' height (left), 1996

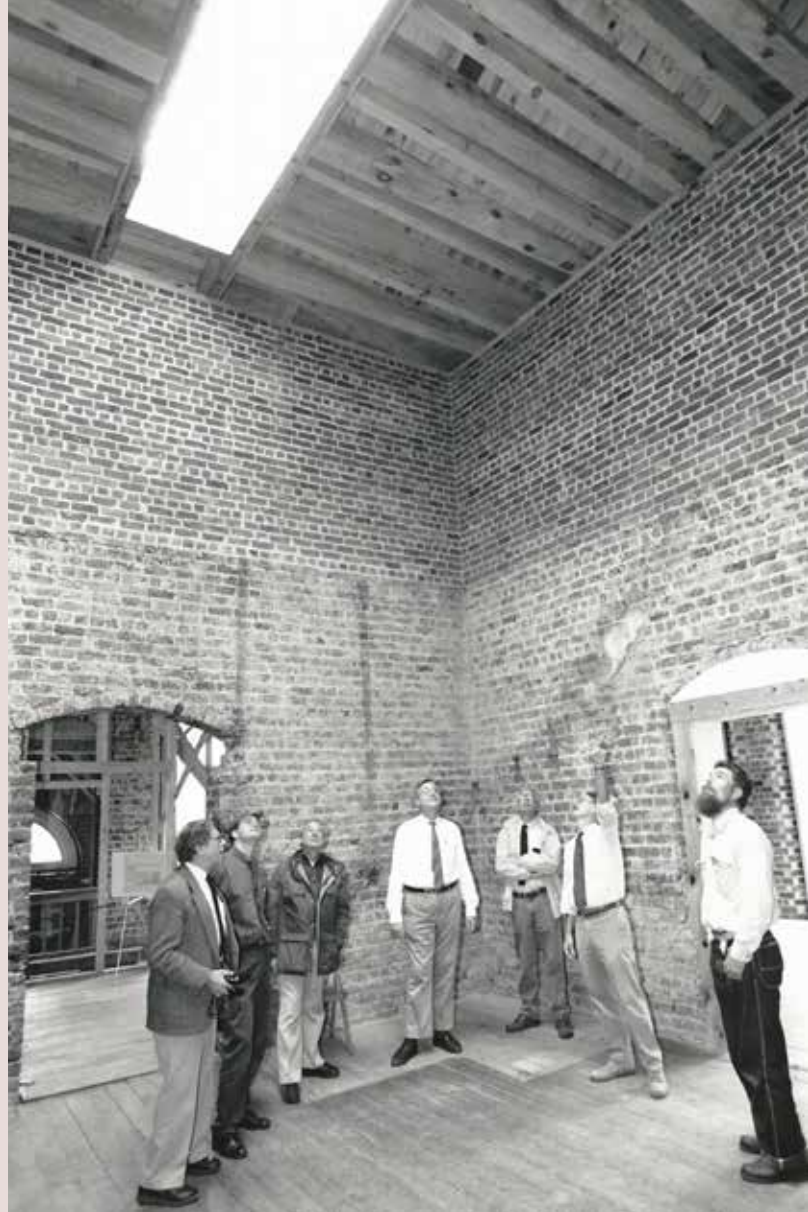
Examination of terra roof and skylight; L-R: Travis McDonald, John Mesick, Jeff Baker, 1996



1996-1997



Wayne Mays repairs brick joist ledge, 1997.



Architectural advisory panel examines the dining room after its return to a 20' cube, 1997.



Fitting skylight blinds: L-R: Jeff Baker, Travis McDonald, John Mesick, 1997



Tour given to historian David McCoullough (left), architectural historian Vincent Scully (center), Catherine Lynn (center right), 1997



Mason Jimmy Price applies lime render to brick column capitals, 1998



Craftsmen install classical balustrade, 1998



Installation of Chinese Railing on upper terras roof deck, 1998



New oak floor joists installed in the center dining room, 1999



Craftsmen scraping the herringbone oak floor of the dining room, 1999

## 1998-2006



Walls of the east service wing reconstructed and restored, 2004



Above: Oak joists for Jefferson's special terras roof of the east service wing, 2005



Left: Vince Fastabend uses an adze on the east service wing joists. 2006



Right: Dave Claus installs pine shingles for Jefferson's terras roof on the service wing, 2006





Governor Tim Kaine on a tour with Travis McDonald, 2009



Dave Clauss installs the large Tuscan Order entablature molding in the passage, 2016.



The restoration team L-R: Vince Fastabend (restoration supervisor), Jeff Baker (consulting architect), William Beiswanger (advisor), Robert Self (advisor), Edward Chappell (advisor), John Larson (advisor), Hugh Miller (advisor), John Mesick (consulting architect), Robert Burley (advisor), Dave Clauss (senior restoration craftsman), 2014



Craftsman C. J. Frost hand planes an entablature molding using antique plane, 2021

## 2009-2022



Historic Painters L-R: Brad Stewart, Ginna Stillwell, Chris Mills in the dining room after applying the historic distemper paint to the plaster walls, 2022



Handmade distemper paint goes on the parlor walls, 2022



Senior craftsman Dave Clauss applies varnish to the entablature of the dining room; this molding was made up of 1,700 hand-made parts, 2022



Craftsmen C. J. Frost and Dave Clauss install one of the six classical doorway pediments, 2022



Craftsman Austin Englund installs one of the dining room's entablature moldings, 2022.



View from above of the completed dining room, 2023

Aerial view of the completed north landscape with restored carriage turnaround and clumps of trees, 2023



2023



View of the completed parlor, 2023



South elevation with wing, 2023