

Clermont: Portrait of an Evolved “Virginia” House

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Scratch the surface of almost any of the surviving substantial 18th-century houses in Virginia, and a complicated story of expansion and reinvention is likely to emerge. Many of the state’s most revered residences, such as Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and George Washington’s Mount Vernon, fall into this category. The construction histories of these famous houses epitomize the broader trend, found throughout Anglo-America, of owners expanding their structures, upgrading furnishings, and rearranging the surrounding landscapes, to follow the changing dictates of fashion, and according to their means. As members of the highest level of Virginia’s planter elite, Jefferson and Washington had the knowledge, the resources, and the inclination not only to alter their homes in this way, but they also followed international design models and strove to meld the phases of building behind the now iconic neo-classical façades. Less prominent owners erected less pretentious houses, like Thomas Wadlington’s Clermont, which nevertheless underwent many of the same types of changes that occurred at the homes of their more famous neighbors.¹

Over the years, the subsequent owners of Clermont made a variety of changes – such as adding a kitchen in the 1770s and a dining room in the late 1780s, and erecting a partition and moving doorways to create a central passage a few years later, as well as repurposing interior spaces and attaching two generations of porches, then adding on even more rooms -- all according to evolving needs. These changes mimic the general trends in the region, all aimed at creating a more comfortable, up-do-date, and fashionable home, appropriate for its owners’ role in polite society – either actual or only aspired. But where others worked to incorporate the

additions and other changes to create a unified whole to belie the additive nature of the building campaigns, Clermont's complex construction history is laid bare, readily apparent to anyone inclined to view it with a critical eye. It was only in 1970, when the last owners of the property built the final major addition onto the house, that there was an attempt to blend the many disparate elements into a cohesive whole. Moreover, even with the many changes that were made over the years, abundant evidence for the earlier conditions remains intact, and the entire house is a remarkably well preserved palimpsest of architectural evidence and a fascinating cultural artifact. As a result of closely examining the well preserved structural elements, and by conducting a program of dendrochronological testing that is unprecedented in its success, it has been possible to assign precise dates for the various phases of construction, generally to within a given year.²

Built in 1755-56, Wadlington laid out his house in a traditional two-room plan, and with an overall appearance and method of construction that would have made it right at home in Washington's Fairfax County, or almost anywhere else in the Chesapeake region, for that matter. The 1779 account of Thomas Anburey, an English army officer stationed in America, testifies to the ubiquity of the basic building style that by that time had been adopted from one end of the colony to the other: "[Virginia] houses are most of them built of wood, the roof covered with shingles, and not always lathed and plastered within, only those of the better sort that are finished in that manner, and painted on the outside; the chimneys are often of brick, but the generality of them are wood, coated on the inside with clay; the windows of the better sort are glazed, the rest have only shutters." With brick nogged walls and at least one brick chimney, five attic dormers and glazed window sash throughout, a clipped gable roof, and plastered interior walls, Clermont was a house that Anburey would likely have considered appropriate for the "better sort."³

Evidence in the form of a sample of almost 300 houses that were advertised for sale in the *Virginia Gazette* between 1736 and 1780 provides more detail to this image. Buildings made of wood with masonry components were by far the most popular type of construction found in the ads, consisting of almost 77% of the total. At roughly 600 square feet in size, Wadlington's house was almost exactly in the middle of the range, with 52% of the houses listed below 620 square feet; with only two main floor rooms, Clermont again followed the norm, with 50% of the houses listed having two (31%) or three (19.4%) rooms. Even though Clermont falls comfortably within the mid-range of Virginia houses in terms of size and room number, this does not disqualify the Wadlingtons and their successors from occupying a higher stratum of class and status, as many relatively well-to-do home owners of the period lived in similarly sized and configured dwellings.⁴

Houses with two first-floor rooms served as a popular choice for Virginia home owners from all levels of society for much of the Colonial Era. In most instances, one of the rooms – known as the hall – was larger than the other – known as the parlor or the chamber. The hall served as a multi-purpose living space, accommodating cooking, eating, sleeping, and a variety of other household chores like sewing, food preparation, and the like. In contrast with the hall, which was accessible directly from the outside, often with doorways on either side of the building, the smaller parlor most often was only accessed via a doorway in the partition separating it from the hall, and it was thus a more private space. The hall was invariably heated by a single fireplace that also was used for cooking, although detached kitchens had become the norm by the mid 18th-century; the parlor may or may not have been heated. If the second level of the structure was occupied, the stairway leading to that space most often was placed in the

hall, either running along the partition wall or tucked into one of the corners flanking the fireplace.⁵

Beginning in the second decade of the 18th century, and accelerating in frequency over the succeeding decades, a novel space – known as the passage – was introduced as an important feature in Virginia houses. The passage was a narrow room running the width of the building that separated at least two main ground-floor rooms – the hall and parlor -- and thus restricted access to those spaces. Scholars have represented this addition as reflecting “a growing desire on the part of planters to distance themselves, in a ceremonial way, from persons outside their closely knit circle of family and social peers.” There were practical advantages as well, as the passage acted as a breezeway and made the space a more pleasant living area during the warm summer months, and it became the typical location for the stairway leading to the second floor. The first recorded mention of a central passage in Virginia dates to 1719; over the succeeding decades, passages were inserted in many existing houses that had been erected following the two-room plan.⁶

A second space often was added along with the passage; this was known as the dining room, which was usually positioned toward the front of the house, and acted as a further buffer between the passage and the other rooms. The appearance of the dining room was related to changing uses of the other two main rooms, the old hall and the parlor or chamber. The hall became a formal public space, where visitors were entertained, and the old mixture of household activities such as cooking, eating, and sleeping, were now accomplished elsewhere. The dining room took on the role as the “heart of the family’s house, as opposed to the hall which was the center of the family’s social landscape.” The third room, the old parlor or chamber, became the most private space of all, often used solely as a bed chamber. The central passage acted as the

entry point into the house and, since all three rooms often could only be reached by visitors via doorways in the passage partitions, thus controlled access to the other, more private spaces.⁷

Clermont's original two-room plan exhibited an unusual feature that sets it apart from the great majority of the other hall-and-parlor houses for which detailed information exists. In most known cases, single doorways are positioned in both the front and rear walls providing direct access into the hall, with the parlor usually only accessible via the hall. Some hall-parlor houses exhibit an exterior doorway entering onto the parlor, but those openings either are later additions or are positioned to the rear and to the side of the house and thus were clearly meant to be private entrances. At Clermont, one doorway was roughly centered on the north façade, penetrating the outer wall and entering the hall just east of the partition that divided it from the parlor. But instead of a second exterior doorway on the south façade, roughly aligned with the opening on the north, the south door was positioned west of the center line and entered into the parlor. Because of the placement there of the doorway, there was no space to accommodate a window to match the one found to the east on that façade, or the one on the north façade to the west of the doorway. Presumably a doorway was located in the partition providing direct internal access between the hall and the parlor. A free-standing winder stairway with an open hand rail was located in the northeast corner of the hall, leading to two rooms in the attic, one of which probably was heated and presumably served as a bed chamber.⁸

The presence of the mis-aligned doorways on the north and south facades, and the highly asymmetrical south façade that resulted, provides support for the interpretation that the north side of the house served as the front. With the doorway there roughly centered on the wall, and with two flanking regularly spaced first-floor windows and three dormers in the roof above, this arrangement gives the north façade a more or less symmetrical appearance of the kind that was

likely meant to mark the structure's formal face. The south façade, in contrast, was extremely idiosyncratic with its single doorway positioned well off-axis, only one first-floor window, and two dormers on the next floor that fail to align with any of the openings below. As the earliest of the three existing outbuildings dates more than 20 years after the first phase of Clermont was constructed in 1755-56, it is likely that earlier service structures were located to the south of the house. This may help explain the unusual placement of the door in the parlor, in the southeast quadrant of the house, perhaps to provide easier access to these service buildings and functions.⁹

Several significant additions were made to the house and the site over a period of roughly 25 years beginning in 1777, which together served to completely reconfigure the layout of Clermont and in turn significantly altered the dynamics of its use. A timber-framed, nogged structure traditionally identified as a kitchen was erected circa 1777, located about 65 feet west and with its south wall lining up with the north wall of the original house (east frame). Its placement seems odd, given that the north façade undoubtedly was to have been the more formal of the two approaches, and it is also somewhat farther removed from the dwelling than was usual for kitchens during this period. But the overall character of the building is in keeping with a kitchen function.¹⁰

Eleven years later, a substantial room was added to the west gable of the house, which enlarged the structure by roughly two-thirds; this space has been traditionally called the dining room, a function that was often added to Virginia dwellings during the second half of the 18th century. The new dining room has a fireplace on the west wall, which shared a chimney with the fireplace in the adjacent parlor (currently it is not known whether the parlor, and the room above, had fireplaces previous to this). The attic above the new room was unheated and without windows, but it still might have served as a bed chamber. In 1794, the plan of the house was

reconfigured, when a second partition was installed to create a central passage, and the south doorway (into the parlor) was blocked up and another door was installed in the new passage, just a few inches to the east. The original west partition seems likely to have been rebuilt at this time, probably replacing a thin board barrier with a fully studded and plastered wall. Seemingly to accommodate the wider partition, the opening for the north doorway was shifted slightly (four inches) to the east, and thus aligning fairly precisely with the new south door. Porches also were added to the south façade, in two phases, with the east frame porch added some time after 1776 (very likely in 1788 when the west frame addition was built), and the west frame porch erected in 1802.¹¹

The placement of the west frame was a rather idiosyncratic solution to the challenge of adding a relatively large space to an existing two-room house. The existing doorway through the east gable of the addition dates to the original construction, but the doorway that now is set in the southwest corner of the east frame was a much later addition – probably dating to circa 1849 based on the evidence provided by a combination of dendrochronology and other physical investigations. Thus, it was not possible to pass from the new “dining room” into the east frame without walking outside the building itself. It may well be that the appearance of the porch running along the south front of the east frame dates to this period, as an important function that it served probably was to allow a person to at least pass under cover between the two spaces. As the doorway on the south wall of the east frame was originally positioned within about 15 feet of the dining room door, this relative proximity may have been viewed as sufficiently convenient to make the exterior pathway between the spaces acceptable. If so, the situation was exacerbated after 1794, when the parlor doorway was shifted to the north to conform with the new central passage, and the distance between the rooms was thus lengthened by a few feet. A second

doorway is likely always to have been positioned in the south gable of the dining room addition, shortening the distance between the presumed kitchen and the house by 20 feet.¹²

The interpretation that the south side of the house was the service area throughout the building's history is reinforced by the appearance of two additional features in 1802-1803. These are the smoke house, dendro-dated to 1803, located approximately 65 feet southwest of the west doorway into the dining room, and the porch running along the south wall of the west frame (1802). A timber-framed room, roughly 6x10-feet in dimension, was an original feature built into the far southwest corner of the porch, suggesting some type of service function – possibly as a semi-detached privy. At least one log duplex cabin for housing enslaved workers also was erected in 1822, located another 75 feet to the west of the smokehouse and the kitchen.¹³

On the inside of the east frame, the new partition wall that created the passage joined with a second wall that bounded a second narrow passage leading to the winder staircase that had been positioned in the northeast corner of the old hall. This served to separate the stair from the hall, allowing the room to become a truly private space. Interestingly, a window was installed in the new partition wall that created the stair hall, to allow light to penetrate from the original window in the north façade into the hall. Finally, after the doorway was closed up in the south wall of the parlor, a window was inserted there to balance both the other window on the south façade and the second window on the north, which originally had provided the only source of light into the parlor.

The new floor plan that was in place after the additions and changes that were made in 1794 thus achieved what architectural historian, Dell Upton, and others have identified as the

ascendant spatial arrangement for households of middling to upper-level status in the second half of the 18th century. With a hall and parlor now buffered from outsiders by the central passage, and with a dining room providing a third space for carrying out a variety of activities, what Upton calls the “social molecule,” or the structure of social space, at Clermont matched well with the developing norm. However, the fact that the dining room remained a semi-detached structure certainly marks it as at least a slightly unusual configuration. This situation was not resolved until 1849 when the doorway was inserted in the southwest corner of the east frame; the area between the two structures also was covered over by an extension of the porch roof and a siding wall was erected to create a small lobby, with a doorway onto the porch, connecting the east and west frames.¹⁴

The very contrived steps undertaken during another round of construction, carried out in 1831, serves to raise the question whether it was undertaken in preparation for an even more ambitious addition that was effected a few years later. The original fireplace that had been positioned on the east gable of the kitchen was removed and replaced by the existing stone fireplace, now located at the other end of the building. This repositioning of the fireplace allowed the kitchen to be lengthened several feet by the addition of a pantry.¹⁵

But even with this change, the next phase of construction followed the tradition of adding rooms to the house without making accommodation for creating interior connections between the old and new spaces. In 1836, about a dozen years before the dining room finally was joined to the east frame, a substantial, two story stone structure was added, positioned between the gable end of the west frame and the recently enlarged kitchen. The building consisted of a single first-floor room with a large fireplace and a winder stair in one of the opposite corners, and a single heated room above. The second floor room undoubtedly served as a bed chamber, while the first

floor space has been traditionally known as the dining room. If this latter identification is correct, then with its construction the distance between the presumed kitchen and the dining area had been reduced to less than a dozen feet. However, there was no direct interior access between the new stone building and either of the other structures (west frame and kitchen). By the 20th century, a porch had been installed on the west end of the west frame/old dining room, which mimicked the earlier condition marking the relationship between the east and west frames: a person moving between the west frame and the stone section would have been forced to walk outside the building, but at least would have been covered from the elements.¹⁶

The gap between the stone section and the kitchen was infilled many years later (ca. 1947), finally providing direct access between it and the presumed dining room. It would be another two decades (1970) before a frame addition was erected that infilled the area between the stone section and the west frame. With this final major addition to the dwelling, all of the earlier building phases – east frame, west frame, stone section, and kitchen/pantry – were incorporated into one quite long and rather complex structure. Needless to say, the social molecule that was thus created is a highly unusual one, bearing little resemblance to structures that were erected in a less idiosyncratic manner.¹⁷

While a great deal of time and effort already has been expended in documenting Clermont's complex structural history, much more work remains to be done. Another round of investigations will continue over the next year, with the goal of preparing a comprehensive report that will serve as the platform for subsequent interpretation and plans to preserve the historic structures. At least a preliminary round of archaeological investigations are envisioned as part of that effort, both for research and management purposes. On the most basic level, there is no doubt that a range of outbuildings dating from the 1750s throughout the mid-19th century

existed, but whose sites have yet to be identified. Documenting the locations and character of those structures and associated activity areas will be crucial to developing a credible interpretation of the uses of the Clermont homelot, and associated structures, as well as preparing a plan for their preservation.

A number of other questions must be addressed in the near future in order to assess Clermont's significance as an historic site and educational resource. These include understanding how Clermont fits within the local context of the 18th-century architecture of Clarke County and of the Upper Shenandoah Valley. Maral Kalbian already has begun to make major contributions in addressing this issue, but much additional research will be required. Similarly, the chronological developments of construction outlined above have a clear relationship with broader trends that have been identified as occurring throughout the Chesapeake region during the 18th century. But in order to allow Clermont's architectural history to make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of these trends, they will need to be folded into a detailed portrayal of the specific events and personalities of this particular site. While Clermont fits well with the broad themes that have been identified to date, it is the anomalies – such as the unusual placement of the original parlor doorway – that give rise to research questions that may prove to be of interest.

Finally, the remarkably rich body of evidence relating to Clermont's architecture, which is directly related to the outstanding level of preservation of the historic fabric, offers enormous scholarly and interpretive potential. How best to use those resources for educational purposes, while preserving them for future generations, is probably the single most pressing question that has arisen from the recent investigations. While other Virginia houses may have associations with individuals and events that elevate their historic significance above that of Clermont, it may

not be stretching the point to say that Clermont is an unparalleled example of an evolved 18th-century house for which more precise dating evidence has been found than anywhere else to date. The remarkably high level of preservation and the resulting precise chronological data allows Clermont to serve as both a unique class room for the study of Virginia architecture over more than a 200-year span, and a case study for the trajectory of the region's social development as illustrated by associated structural change.

¹ For an overview of both Washington's and Jefferson's building campaigns at their homes, see Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., "Constructing Independence: Monticello, Mount Vernon, and the Men Who Built Them," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 26, no. 4 (1993): 543-580. For in-depth treatments of the construction of Mount Vernon and Monticello, see Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., and Lee Baldwin Dalzell, *George Washington's Mount Vernon: At Home in Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998), and Jack McLaughlin, *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder* (New York, 1988).

² The results of the dendrochronological investigations are presented in Dan Miles, *The Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm, Berryville, Clarke County, Virginia* (Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory, 2010).

³ Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1923) vol. 2, p. 187, quoted in Camille Wells, "The Eighteenth-Century Landscape of Virginia's Northern Neck," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine* vol. 37 (December 1987), 4242.

⁴ Camille Wells, "The Planter's Prospect: Houses, Outbuildings, and Rural Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Winterthur Portfolio* vol. 28, no. 1: 1-31. The size of the

Clermont property (350 acres) also argues for Wadlington's having been relatively affluent, as it most likely placed him well within the upper quadrant of property owners: the tax assessment entered for landowners living on Virginia's Northern Neck in 1782 reveals that 78.2% of the 1,558 households owned 300 or fewer acres, *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Dell Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Winterthur Portfolio* vol. 17, nos. 2/3 (1982): 95-119; Jan K. Gilliam, "The Evolution of the House in Early Virginia," in Eleanor McD. Thompson, *The American Home: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and Family Life* (University Press of New England: Hanover, New Hampshire, 1998), pp. 177-196. On the development of kitchens, see Donald W. Linebaugh, "'All the Annoyances and Inconveniences of the Country': Environmental Factors in the Development of Outbuildings in the Colonial Chesapeake," *Winterthur Portfolio* vol. 29, no. 1 (1994): 1-18; Michael Olmert, *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies: Outbuildings and the Architecture of Daily Life in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2009), pp. 23-50.

⁶ For detailed studies on the development and significance of the central passage, see Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture," 102-107, and Mark R. Wenger, "The Central Passage in Virginia: Evolution of an Eighteenth-Century Living Space," in Camille Wells, ed., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, II* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, 1986), pp. 137-149.

⁷ Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture," 102-107; Mark R. Wenger, "The Dining Room in Early Virginia," in Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman, eds., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, 1989), pp. 149-159.

⁸ For a number of examples of houses with hall-parlor plans, see Dell Upton, "Early Vernacular Architecture in Southeastern Virginia" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1980). For an example of a relatively nearby hall-parlor plan house that has been dendro- dated to 1764, and which

exhibits the more usual placement of doorways, see The Hollow, Fauquier County, Virginia, National of Historic Places Nomination (2003). This interpretation of the layout of Clermont's initial construction phase is provided by physical evidence revealed during intensive investigations undertaken by the author and others in 2010.

⁹ The practice in the 18th century of creating a more balanced, roughly symmetrical façade to serve as the formal front of the house was a standard feature at a great many structures that were much more humble than Clermont; for readily available examples, see Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture," and Marcus Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg* (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation: Williamsburg, revised edition 1984),

¹⁰ Miles, *Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm*; Olmert, *Kitchens, Smokehouses, and Privies*, pp. 23-50.

¹¹ Miles, *Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm*.

¹² Ibid. The doorway in the southwest corner of the east frame could not be dendro-dated, but the materials from which it was created match those found in the west partition wall, which was dated to 1849.

¹³ Miles, *Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm*.

¹⁴ Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture," 106-109. Miles, *Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm*.

¹⁵ Miles, *Tree-Ring Dating of Clermont Farm*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Maral Kalbian, Douglas C. Reed, Allen Kitselman, Tim Painter, Margaret T. Peters, *Clermont: Main House, Slave Quarters and Smokehouse, Phase 1 -- Partial Historic Structures Report* (June 2008).